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THE JAVANESE CONCEPTION OF THE DIVINE and THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper wants to show how the Javanese, the biggest ethnic group among the Indonesians, encounter the Gospel. In the first part, after an introduction into the Indonesian-Javanese religious landscape, the two seemingly contradictory ways Javanese experience the Divine is developed: the Divine as numinous, powerful ground of their existence, to be reached by turning to one's own inner depths, and the Divine as caring, protecting, saving presence. Especially important is Javanese stress on "feeling" the truth of religious teaching. In the second part, first, the typical Javanese religious tolerance is explained, then some subcutaneous relationships between this Javanese religiosity and Christian-Catholic teaching are pointed out, and thirdly it is shown that the attractivity of the

gospel does lie not only in the fulfillment it promises, but also in the call to conversion and to a new life. Javanese will feel at home in a Christian-Catholic community if discretion, freedom and distance are respected.



INTRODUCTION

The Javanese developed one of the great cultures of Asia still vibrantly alive today. "Javanese" in the proper sense of the word are the original, Javanese speaking inhabitants of Central and Eastern Java. Java is, with about 127.000 km², the smallest of the four Sunda-islands (the others being Sumatra, Kalimantan¹ and Sulawesi) which constitute, together with the Western part of Papua (New Guinea), the bulk of the land mass of the Republic of Indonesia. With about 130 million inhabitants Java comprises almost two third of the whole Indonesian population and is, with more than one thousand people per km², one of the densest populated places on earth. Therefore, Java has always been the political center of Indonesia. About 40% of all Indonesians, more than eighty million, are ethnically and culturally Javanese. They have always dominated Indonesian politics and culture (five of the six Indonesian presidents up to now have been Javanese). The Javanese language still strongly influences Indonesian (*bahasa*

¹ Kalimantan is the name of the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo.

Indonesia), the national language of Indonesia (which is based on Malay). The most important political and religious movements in Indonesia have been founded by Javanese, among them the two big Muslim organizations *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and *Muhammadiyah*. There are good reasons to believe that Indonesia owes it to the Javanese that she has not become formally an Islamic state, and that religious freedom is guaranteed.

87% of the Indonesians belong to Islam, 6% are Protestants, 3,5% Catholics, 1,5% Hindu (the Balinese), the rest are Buddhists, Confucianists and adherents of original indigenous beliefs. Most Christians are descendent from ethnicities that had not been Islamized and live in certain regions of Indonesia like the *Batak*-lands in North Sumatra, the Toraja in Central Sulawesi, the Minahassa in North Sulawesi, many people in the Molukkas, Flores, (West) Timor and the surrounding islands, and Papua. 150 years ago the Javanese belonged to almost 100% to Islam (the exception were the *Tenggerese*, Javanese that fled from Islamization in the 17th century to the almost inaccessible, 1800 or more meter above sea level lying, highlands between the Bromo and the Semeru volcanos in Eastern Java), although in very different degrees of intensity. It is thus the more astonishing that a strong Catholic community has sprung up from amidst the Javanese, now counting about one million members all over Indonesian, but

concentrated in the heartland of "classical" Javanese culture, the crescent around the Central Javanese volcano Merapi, with the royal cities of Yogyakarta and Surakarta (Solo) as their cultural gravity centers. They are fully integrated in the Javanese community and fully accepted by it and still growing. There are also at least half a million Javanese Protestants. As far as this writer knows, this the only place on earth where strong Christian communities have developed out of an Islamic social background.

In this paper I try to investigate the cultural background for the acceptance of Christianity, and specifically the Catholic Church, by so many Javanese. I want to show how Javanese experience the Divine and what elements in Catholic Christian preaching and life might connect to this Javanese experience. In the first part I try to raise some key characteristics of Javanese religiosity. I first sketch the cultural-religious landscape of Javanese society (1), then I focus on two quite different ways Javanese conceive of the Divine (2) (3) (4), and then on the way the Javanese experience the truth of religious beliefs (5). In the second part I bring Christian, especially Catholic belief, and life into the horizon of Javanese religiosity.



I. JAVANESE RELIGIOSITY

1. THE JAVANESE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

The Javanese have developed their very typical identity in an ongoing process of hybridization.² Among the Javanese one can find all shades of cultural and ideological orientations. There are people who belong to Islam, but never pray, then, of course, there are many others that are pious Muslims, some of them hard-liners like the *Mujahiddin* or the *laskar jihad* ("Jihad warriors"), then, in the midst of them, the more than a million Javanese Christians. And, mostly hidden under an orthodox surface, there flows a stream of orthodox and heterodox mysticism (*kebatinan*) which, in fact, still strongly influences Javanese patterns of religious and general communication and identity. Somehow, they all still form a religious-cultural whole, although extraordinarily complex and with many ruptures, which has withstood some terrible social disruptions. Here I must limit myself to some general remarks that have to suffice to give a social-cultural place to what is the

² For a general presentation of the Javanese world-view see: Franz Magnis-Suseno 1981, *Javanische Weisheit und Ethik. Studien zu einer östlichen Moral*, München-Wien: R. Oldenbourg; or, in English, *Javanese Ethics and World-View. The Javanese Idea of the Good Life*, Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama 1997.

main purpose of the paper, the "Javanese conception of the Divine".³

Originally Javanese beliefs could be characterized as a kind of animism. Behind what happened in nature were believed to be spiritual powers, often localized in sacred trees, stones, or springs. Behind all empirical happenings the Javanese sensed the power of the invisible world. Harvest, weather, and safety from natural disasters depended on these powers. Harmony among humans too, within the village and with people from outside, was perceived to relate to the spiritual world. Thus, it was important to cultivate positive relations with these forces. Javanese did this by observing certain taboos, by offerings of small incense, flowers, or money on crucial places, by celebrating the big happenings of the human life circle according to tradition (*adat*).

From the second century after Christ on Hinduism and later Buddhism seeped into the Indonesian archipelago. The marvelous Borobudur temple mountain and the Prambanan complex close to Yogyakarta today still give witnesses of this glorious period. Hinduism and Buddhism became one spiritual

³ An article which details the complex process of the development of the Javanese religious-cultural landscape, especially of Javanese Islam, here understood as an ongoing process of hybridization, up till today's situation after the fall of the Soeharto regime, "Java Past And Present: History Of A Hybridization" will be published in the journal *Oasis*.

medium through them which original Javanese religious attitudes reasserted themselves, such as belief in the power of ancestors, or that the king concentrated within himself supernatural powers, uniting spiritually Shiva, Vishnu and Buddha. From the tenth century on the Indian epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata were translated into Javanese and became extremely popular among the Javanese up to today, in spite of them becoming Muslim in the mean time, while Sanskrit script evolved into the Javanese alphabet.

From the twelfth century on Islam began its slow intrusion into Indonesia, beginning from what is now Aceh at the North-Western tip of Sumatra. Its bearers were traders from the Gujarat, from Arabia and, later, also from China. In the 15th century Islam had reached the North coast of Java. During the next 200 years Islam, mostly peacefully, came to overlay the whole of Java. Islam did so in quite different degrees of intensity and under varying shades of cultural expressions. It not so much replaced the old religious mix than added to it, thereby stimulating it into growing into a new religious-cultural landscape of much greater complexity, definitely Javanese, but sometimes antagonistic, a process that is still underway today.⁴ While Islam thoroughly penetrated the cities and

⁴ For a case study of the interaction of traditional Javanese beliefs with Islam see Headley, Stephen C. 2004, *Durgas's Mosque. Cosmology, Conversion and*

fishing villages on the North coast of Java, the Javanese hinterland was for a big part only superficially touched by it. In many Javanese villages there was no mosque, people did not say the five daily prayers, didn't keep the Islamic fast and looked for moral guidance more to the Hindu heroes of the Javanese *wayang*-shadow-play than to the teachings of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Following Clifford Geertz⁵ I call these low-intensity Muslims *abangan* ("the reds"). At the courts, the nobility, while regarding themselves very much as Muslims, avoided expressions of intensive Islamic piety and cultivated traditional court culture inherited from Hindu times.⁶ They were imitated by the *priyayi*, the lower administrative nobility in the cities. This was the environment where the famous Javanese culture flourished, with its exquisite, polite language and rules of behavior, with *gamelan* orchestras and beautiful dances, while both the courts, *priyayi* and the villagers enjoyed *wayang* shadow plays (whose plots originate from the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*). This typically Javanese culture was officially taboo for the stricter Muslims. At the same time pious *kiai* (Muslim

Community in Central Javanese Islam, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; see also from the same author *From Cosmogony to Exorcism in a Javanese Genesis. The Spilt Seed*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000.

⁵ *The Religion of Java*, New York: The Free Press 1961; Geertz did his research in the early 50th of last century.

⁶ See f. i. Ricklefs, M.C., 1974, *Jogjakarta under Mangkubumi 1749-1792. A History of the Division of Java*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

sages) settled deep in the countryside, together with some pupils (*santri*). From these *pesantrens* (Islamic boarding schools) which could grow to units of fifty persons, sometime to more than 1.000 if the *kiai* was famous, Islam radiated into the surrounding villages, deepening Islamic life and identity in the otherwise still *abangan* countryside.

Thus, we find among the Javanese a hybrid Islamic society of very different relief and intensity. There was the strongly Islamized North coast from Cirebon to Surabaya. In the interior we have the kings, regarding themselves as protectors of Islam, with the higher and lower nobility, often not really practicing Islam and cultivating pre-Islamic ceremonies and arts. The villages in the interior were very superficially Islamized, except around the *pesantrens*. For the sake of analysis I follow the division, by Geertz, of the Javanese into the less Islamized *abangan* and the consciously Islamic *santri*.⁷ In reality, these two blocks have many shades of different ways to see religion and are mixed up with each other. Thus, the two

⁷ Both concepts have been rightly criticized both for some simplifications and for some inexactness. *Santri* in Indonesia only means pupils of the *pesantrens*, the qur'anic boarding schools and not all people feeling themselves as Muslim. Geertz's *santri* in fact fall into two quite distinct groups, the lightly *Wahabi*, city based "modernists" whose big organization is the *Muhammadiyah*, and the "traditionalists" whose basis are the *pesantrens* in the countryside, organized in the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). On the other hand, Geertz distinguishes *abangan* from *priyai*, mixing up religious and social categories. Religiously the *priyai* are *abangan* too, while Geertz's *abangan* are only the *abangan* villagers.

blocks should be understood as Weberian *ideal types*. Although the 20th century brought great social and cultural upheavals – the *abangan* are now, generally, much more Islamic than 50 years ago; and Geertz's *santris* are clearly split into traditionalist *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) and "modernist" *Muhammadiyah* – the deeper cultural structures of *abangan* and *santri* are still clearly in evidence now.⁸

When I speak in this paper of "the Javanese", I focus, for methodical reasons, on the *abangan*. This does not mean that cultural-religious characteristics of the *abangan* cannot be found with *santris* (which are, of course, also fully Javanese), especially the traditional real *santris*. But since their "Javanism" is a hybrid with Islamic orthodoxy I do not take them explicitly into consideration.

It is typical for Javanese religiosity that it found expression in two ways that are complementary, even opposed to each other. They are to be found both among the peasants of the villages and among the upper classes, but the first is more

⁸ There is really a need for new research of the depth of what Clifford Geertz and his team did in the fifties in order to refresh our understanding of deep lying cultural-religious patterns among the Javanese. It is remarkable that in the free general elections of 1999 and 2004 Islamic oriented parties got less votes than in the only earlier free elections, in 1955 (then Islamic parties receives 43% of the popular vote, in 1999 it was 37% and in 2004 40%). This means that the now praying children of the old *abangan* still do not like political Islam.

typical of the latter while the second one has its original place in the life of the village.

2. THE NUMINOUS GROUND OF THE I

Many Javanese find the deepest truth about the relationship between humans and God expressed in the story of Dewaruci which is one of the most sacred of the stories of the *wayang* shadow play.⁹ The story is about Bima, the second of the five Pandawa brothers of the (Indian) epic of Mahabharata, and how he finds the water of life. As a prelude to the great Bratayuda war, the opponents of the Pandawa, the Kurawa, want to eliminate Bima. To achieve this, Durna, a former teacher of Bima and now spiritual advisor of the Kurawas, orders him to look for the water of life in a dangerous forest. Unafraid of the obvious dangers, and oblivious to the warnings of his suspicious brothers, Bima starts off on the quest. But instead of the water of life Bima encounters two murderous ogres which he finally kills. He returns to Durna who now sends him to the bottom of the ocean. Again Bima, although now suspicious himself, obeys, ready if necessary to die for the water of life. After he enters the floods a huge snake attacks him, but with his magical fingernails he tears it to pieces.

⁹ I use Soebardi 1975 (*The Book of Cabolek*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1975); for the parts of the story not contained in Soebardi I use a Javanese prose presentation of the Dewaruci story by Imam Supardi (*Dewa Rutji Winardi [Andaran, gantjaran lan surasaning tjarita]*, Surabaya: Penyebar Semangat 1960).

Exhausted, he lets himself be tossed about by the waters. It becomes incredibly quiet around him.

Suddenly he finds himself opposite a tiny figure that looks exactly like Bima himself. It introduces itself as the god Dewaruci, an incarnation of the Almighty. He invites Bima to enter his body through his left ear. Although filled with doubt, Bima obeys. Without difficulty he manages to fit his own huge body into the inside of Dewaruci. He now loses all sense of direction. After a few moments, however, he recognizes again the sun, the land, the mountains, and the sea. He realizes that within the tiny body of Dewaruci the entire outside world is contained in an inverted way. Now different phenomena show themselves. A picture of the divine principle of life (*pramana*) reveals to Bima the unity of his innermost being with the Divine. Through an eight colored flash he understands that he has now become one with the Divine. He has achieved what the Javanese call "unity of servants and Lord" (*manunggaling kawula Gusti*). Bima has now consummated "death in life" and thereby achieved "life in death".¹⁰ In possession of invincible power, Bima leaves Dewaruci and returns, with peace in his heart, to his brothers. He conceals what happened to him and will fulfill the duties destiny has thrust upon him.

¹⁰ Soebardi, 51.

For Javanese, this story is full of deep symbolics and truth. There is, to begin with, the insight that a person who wants to get the water of life must risk everything. Only readiness to die frees the person from her attachment to external things and renders her capable of penetrating true reality. Therefore, Javanese endeavor to achieve control over their passions by meditation and exercise of concentration, supported by moderate mortifications, and so to align themselves to true reality.

Added is the decisive insight that the water of life cannot be found in the exterior world, but only within the person herself. Dewaruci, the tiny god who looks like Bima, is Bima's own interior essence. Javanese religiosity is deeply convinced that a person can reach the divine all-ground (*Hyang Suksma*) at the deepest ground of her soul (*suksma*). By penetrating to his or her true self the searcher achieves the goal of his or her life, the unity with his or her own origin, the Divine (*sangkan paraning dumadi*), the "unity of servant and Lord".

In the story of Dewaruci this insight finds its expression in numerous symbolic pictures. The initial darkness and loss of orientation Bima's in the interior of Dewaruci makes one think of the cloud and the smoke which in the Bible function as symbols of the presence of God. That the outside world is within the interior of Dewaruci shows that true reality is to be found

in the interior dimension of a person. There is the origin of all forces of the exterior world.

Becoming aware of unity with the divine ground is, in the first place, an act of knowing. But this knowing is more than just taking cognizance. It is a happening that changes the person from within, gives her existence new depth which now becomes her permanent reality. The content of this experience is the unity of the I and God. Thus, a today still much read text from the 19th century reads: "Truly, man is my secret and I am the secret of man", and in the same text we find the daring inversion of the Islamic *syahadat* (creed): "I give witness that, truly, there is no God except myself!" For the hour of death when people lose their power and are no longer able to do anything the same text counsels to just cling to the three letters A – I – U, the three holy mystical initial letters of the Javanese sentence "*Aku Iki Urip*", "I Am Life", namely divine, immortal life, in my true reality.¹¹

Javanese mystic clearly understands, as does all genuine mystics of unity, how outrageous this claim is. In comparison with the insight that the macrocosm (*jagad gedhé*, the outer world) is comprised by the microcosm (*jagad cilik*, the human body) the unity between man and God is the greater paradox.

¹¹ R. Ng. Ranggawarsita, *Wirid Hidayat-Djati*, kabangun R. Tanoyo, Surabaya 1966, p. 8, 10, 39.

It means that the reality in which "we live, move and exist" (cf. Apostle. 17, 28) is contained by the person it contains. Javanese express this unity through paradoxical formulas like "the dagger enters the sheath and the sheath enters the dagger" (*warangka manjing curiga*) or "the hole contains the frog, and the frog contains the hole" (*kodhok angemuli lèngé*).¹²

But there is one thing to be noticed: The Javanese are not interested in mystical speculation as such. Mystical speculations are valued in as far they prove themselves to be meaningful life-praxis. For the Javanese, the experience of the unity with the Divine has pragmatic value: Through it the individual self achieves the perfection of its endeavor to control all aspects affecting its existence. Thus, eventually the important thing is not a theory about the I and the Divine, nor is it necessarily a religious act of surrender to the Divine, but both elements, theory and faith, serve, in the end, the completion of the power of one's existence. The purport of mystical endeavor proves itself to the Javanese in the experience that everything fits together, that he or she is correctly fitting into the order of reality, in experiencing that one's existence is

¹² Ranggawarsita p. 62, 65-67; for such paradoxical formulas see: P. J. Zoetmulder 1935, *Pantheïsme en Monïsme in de Javaansche Soeloek-Litteratuur*, Nijmegen: Berkhout, p. 321ss.

succeeding, it is measured by the inner peace, the feeling of inner power, the freedom from upsetting feelings which it yields.

3. THE DIVINE AS PROTECTING PRESENCE

The second form of Javanese religiosity is rooted in a quite different fundamental human experience: its exposure. This is the Javanese experience firstly through nature. While the group presents itself for the Javanese as refuge offering safety and security, nature is experienced as the power determining their weal and woe. All demanding work of the peasant is only the precondition for a good harvest. Whether it will be good in effect depends on the forces of nature, on sunshine and rain, wind, and pests. Natural calamities such as flooding, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions let Javanese feel their powerlessness.

But this is only outside. For Javanese, all happenings in the visible world come from the invisible interior world behind. The forces that show themselves in the outer world are rooted in the mysterious dimension of the interior (*batin*), they are expressions of the numinous cosmic-divine energy penetrating everything. For the Javanese, the empirical is always also the experience of the met-empirical. The numinous character of nature becomes concrete for the Javanese in the working of innumerable invisible, unpredictable, and there-

fore uncanny and menacing forces they personalize as spirits. They can, indeed, be manipulated in many ways, and tradition and customs of their village – in which the experiences of previous generations with the world of the spirits have been sedimented - show the Javanese a relatively safe path. But the permanent fundamental experience remains that of being exposed to threatening unpredictable powers.

This is a quite different experience than that of Bima. Humans here do not, by their internal power, try to penetrate the Divine, but they feel in need of protection. Exposed to these invisible threatening forces, the Javanese experience the Divine as a positive, protecting, caring and even loving power. Javanese have expressed this experience in many different forms of religiosity. Here belongs the belief in different protecting spirits as for instance the rice-goddess Dewi Sri who not only bestows fertility to the ground, but also to the wife.¹³ Another figure is the often-legendary founder of a village (*cikal-bakal*) who now watches over the welfare of the

¹³ Dewi Sri is actually a much more complicated figure. She is connected to the threatening, but also protection bestowing goddess of the South sea, Nyai Rara Kidul which is also connected with the Merapi volcano North of Yogyakarta and with whom the Sultan of Yogyakarta has a mystical relation; Dewi Sri and Nyai Rara Kidul are both incarnations of Shiva's cursed wife Durga who resides also in other places (f. i. in the former forest Krendhawahana, North of Surakarta, where the (Muslim) kings of Surakarta every year still offer a white buffalo), see Stephen C. Headley 2004; Headley traces the complex dialectical relations between Islam and traditional Javanese religiosity through history.

village as its guardian spirit (*danyang*). To these and many other local spirits small offerings of incense, flowers or food are made at certain times.

Of special significance for this form of Javanese religiosity is Semar. Semar is a figure from *wayang*, the Javanese shadow play. The scripts of the Javanese *wayang* are mostly taken from old Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata.¹⁴ When these stories are played by the *dhalang* (puppeteer) the pre-history of Java is mystically re-enacted as a myth that re-establishes salvation and protection. The *wayang* has stayed, up to date, highly popular among the Javanese and its importance for the understanding of the Javanese themselves and their cosmos can hardly be exaggerated.

Who is Semar? Semar is fat like a ball, has a strange way of walking and usually looks a bit worried. Together with his three quite strange sons Gareng, Petruk and Bagong he is the faithful servant of the respective hero of the story, most often of the noble knight Arjuna. With their pranks they delight the spectators and their noble lords. They are simple, unrefined folk.

¹⁴ Semar himself is said to have no parallel in the originally Indian texts, see Sri Mulyono 1978, *Apa dan siapa Semar*, Jakarta: Gunung Agung.

But this is only the surface. The Javanese spectator knows that Arjuna will only be able to fulfill his respective assignment when Semar is with him. If Arjuna neglects to head Semar's advice, he will experience serious problems. Semar shows his real essence when he must intervene with the upper-god Shiva (in Javanese Bathara Guru). While Semar talks to his knightly lords, always in the most respectful language of a servant, he talks to Shiva as from above, as the lord. When Semar gets angry the gods tremble. Thus the humble, never impatient, or offended servant of a noble knight is actually the mightiest of the gods. At the same time Semar is the most loved figure of the *wayang*.¹⁵

An unfathomably deep wisdom of the people is expressed here. There the Javanese people render their reverence to the noble world of the courts, full of admiration for the supernatural power that manifests itself there, in order only, twinkling their eyes, to put a simple man from the people at the side of the noble lords since without him they would come to harm. Thereby thoroughly relativizing the elite mysticism of the courts under manifestations of perfect humility.

¹⁵ Many Javanese likened former Indonesian President Abdurrachman Wahid to Semar.

4. A LITTLE REFLECTION

Here we witness a quite unique experience of the Divine. It does not manifest itself through an impressive, noble exterior as Arjuna, Shiva or Krishna, but under a grotesque form that entices to contempt (and that Arjuna's enemies usually do treat Semar with contempt in the course of the story always turns out to be literally a deadly stupidity). Here humans no longer appear as the rulers of the world of the interior, but as exposed and need protection. The Divine is here experienced as saving presence. In the center there is no longer self-salvation, but the experience of dependence and of being lovingly protected by the Divine that is close in a simple figure.

But this not all. The first way of experiencing the Divine, namely in one's interior and through mystical experiences, is certainly a high way of humans to try to be united with the Divine. In the three Abrahamic religions, and also in Hinduism and Buddhism, meditation, mortification and the readiness to concentrate totally on "the water of life" are highly regarded.

But Javanese know that this way is not without grave dangers. First, it is only for strong people, like Bima. Strong bodily, but especially strong spiritually. Unflinchingly purposeful, free from the fear of death, capable to meditate and do works of abstinence and mortifications, they do not take a way open

for the many, for normal people. That way is for the spiritual elites. Only great humbleness – such as Bima demonstrates – can avoid the danger of becoming arrogant. But, secondly, as Mangkunagoro VII, second king of Surakarta, points out in his teaching on the *wayang*,¹⁶ meditation (*semadi*) can be used to strive for three goals. The first goal is "the desire to achieve knowledge of one's own origin," thus to unite with the Divine (this is what Bima was after). A second motivation is the wish to attain "invincible power" and to use it to "abolish the suffering of great injustice," thus too achieve power to promote the good in the world (here the hero is Arjuna who, according to the story "Arjuna Wiwaha", meditates in the depths of a wild forest to become so powerful that he can help the gods to fight a demonic ogre). The third goal is sinister: "Someone practices *semadi* for less noble and less selfless goals and, to this end, enters the danger-filled forest of Setra-Gandamayuh where the goddess Durga reigns over a host of demons."¹⁷ Here we have a symbol for black magic. He who practices *semadi* can attain the temporal satisfaction of his desires" (Mangku-

¹⁶ K. G. P. A. A. Mangkunagoro VII 1957, *On the Wayang Kulit (Purwa) and its Symbolic and Mystical Elements*, translated from the Dutch by C. Holt, Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University, p. 16.

¹⁷ Krendhawaha, see note nr. 13, is conceived as lying in this dangerous forest; there this same Mangkunagoro VII, second king of Surakarta (the first king is the Pakubuwana) made the yearly offering of a white buffalo for the Mangkunegaran palace.

nagoro doubtlessly thought of the evil, demonic king of Ngalengka, Rahwana).

Thus, the mystical practices recommended to apply in order to achieve the unity with the Divine are fraught with dangers. Bima desires this unity for its own sake, with a pure heart. Arjuna already instrumentalizes it – in the *wayang* story after being asked by the gods – in order to become powerful which, he becomes. But he will use his powers to help the good side and fight for justice. But Rahwana, by meditating for many year, becomes evil incarnate and so powerful that even the gods tremble. Javanese, in fact, easily suspect a person that meditates intensively as wanting to become capable of magically harming somebody. Other more innocent instrumentalizations are still widespread. Geertz remarks that "boys *semadi* before school examinations in order to pass with high marks; girls who want husbands sometimes fast and meditate for them; and even politicians are held to meditate for a higher office."¹⁸

¹⁸ Geertz 1961, p. 319; during the fateful night from September 30 to October 1 1965 when a military coup took place in Jakarta which was crushed by general Soeharto and eventually brought him to power in Indonesia, while resulting in the death of at least half a million "communist" Soeharto was said by the people to have been sitting in a river, meditating; most probably Soeharto did nothing of the kind.

The interesting thing is that these mystical magical endeavors come to nothing when Semar enters the fray. And Semar is always on the side of the good people, he himself is good, honest, and just and whoever has him as servant and guide will not come to harm. Thus, the two ways of experiencing God in Javanese society are not simply two different ways, but they are on different levels. On the first level, much reflected in Javanese *kebatinan* circles (*kebatinan* are groups who through meditation and teachings want to deepen their interior life) people are advised to clean their hearts from inordinate desires, to do some mortification and meditate. The reason is that the Divine can only be found if one does not stay at the surface. But this "classical" Javanese piety rests, and gets its dignity from the second, more fundamental level where people experience themselves as weak and in need of help and believe that the Divine cares for them. There they do not have to make a show of interior strength. They just pray and feel their dependence on the divine as something comforting. This is the piety expressed in the figure of Semar. Thus the deeper, safer and in a sense truer way is the experience of God as saving presence, and only on this basis mortification and meditation can achieve their goal, namely, to bring the person closer to the mystery at the bottom of their existence which is at the same then their origin and their final goal (*sangkan paraning dumadi*).

5. FEELING THE DIVINE

A third characteristic of Javanese religious experience lies in the way the Divine is perceived. In a text from the 19th century the strange, phallus shaped mystic *Gatoloco*, involved in an argument with pious *santris*, brings it to the point: "My religion is called religion of feeling."¹⁹

The Javanese word for "feeling" is *rasa*. It is a Javanese key word. *Rasa* can mean bodily feeling, empathy for others, and interior understanding of truth. Through *rasa* the real meaning of what is felt openness up. *Rasa* is not a practice that I direct at certain objects but a condition I achieve. The intensity and refinement of *rasa* is co-extensive to the density of my existence. A shallow existence means a shallow *rasa*, while a *rasa* capable of "feeling" my inner essence means that I have achieved a richer reality. Thus, the existence of a refined *rasa* shows how far a person has penetrated to true reality. Through *rasa* true reality appears. Whoever develops his or her *rasa* will become growingly able to find his or her place

¹⁹ "Agamaku kang aran agama rasa," see: Ph. van Akkeren 1951, *Een gedrocht en toch de volmaakte mens*. De Javaanse Suluk Gatholotjo, uitgegeven, vertaald en toegelicht, S'Gravenhage, stanza V, verse 73.

in the cosmos and in society. Therefore, deepening one's *rasa* is of overriding importance for the Javanese.²⁰

What is meant by a "religion of *rasa*" can be seen from what the mystical hero *Gatholoco* attacks. *Gatholoco* attacks the obsession of ordinary Muslims with bodily prayer movements, with the alignment (*kiblat*) of the body in a certain direction (the direction of the Kabah in Mecca), with voicing of loud prayers and the fixing of certain times for prayer as "you do not think of the mystery of your origin" ("*tak mikir rasa asalmu*"). He gives the advice: In order to know yourself, venerate your own prophet, thus your life" ("*Mrih weruha marang raganira, nembaha rasulmu déwé, iya marang uripmu*"), thus not a prophet outside of yourself, and about himself *Gatholoco* says: "My religion is the religion of feeling. Religion of feeling means to follow the feeling in one's heart" ("*Agamaku kang aran agama rasa. Tegesé agama rasa, nuruti rasaning ati*").²¹

What *Gatholoco* here says is that all the external aspects of religion are relative. They are not wrong, but they have only

²⁰ A well-known line in a famous Javanese song from the 19th century, *Wedhatama*, runs: "*Mangka nadya tuwa pikun – yen tan mikani rasa – yekti sepi asepa lir sepah samun*", meaning: "Although some one is already old, but if she doesn't know *rasa*, she is empty and faded like old refuse," K.G.P.A.A. Mangkunagoro IV, *Wedha-Tama*, Surakarta: Yayasan Mangaged 1975, stanza I, 2.

²¹ Stanza IV, 36 s.; VII, 4-6, 44, see note nr. 19.

limited importance. They can be regarded as a ladder to achieve the real feeling. One can hold on to the ladder, but one can also throw it away when one has reached the goal. The important thing is never to regard external things as goal or value in themselves. The only goal is the Divine, and the Divine is within to be found in the human person, thus one better bow to one-self instead of in the direction of Mecca. We carry the Divine within ourselves; therefore we carry It every where. The decisive question is: Is our *rasa* so refined that we can feel the Divine within ourselves? Thus, the religion of feeling is something affecting our whole life: We do not have to concentrate our attention specifically to the Divine. We may be busy with all kinds of things, the Divine is within us. Javanese also speak of "remembering" (*éling*). A person with a deepened feeling always "remembers" the Divine.

This feeling of the Divine has two dimensions. For people of the villages, it is the awareness of the mysterious powers behind the forces of nature. The more sophisticated people become, the more their feelings lead them to mystical endeavor to achieve the "unity of servant and Lord". The awareness of oneself itself has two sides, intertwined with each other: The feeling of the fullness of one's existence and the feeling of the radiation of the Divine. Thus, for Javanese religion only means something if its quality and message is felt in

the heart. The power of a religion is measured by the authenticity of the feeling it evokes. Elements like its internal logic, the theoretical foundation of its beliefs, the completeness of its pointers, the glory of its celebrations are not the decisive factor. The decisive factor is whether those following that religion can feel its genuine powers in their heart. And then, what religion you are following is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is to follow the genuine feeling of the heart.

II. JAVANESE RELIGIOSITY AND THE GOSPEL

After having seen some central elements of Javanese religions I want to inquire whether they can help to understand why Christianity, and especially its Catholic variant, has been so very well accepted in Javanese society. After some remarks on Javanese tolerance I shall first show where there is a subcutaneous relationship between Christian-Catholic and Javanese religiosity (2), then point to essentials of the Christian message that liberate by demanding conversion and bringing something new (3), then raise again the question of "feeling religion". I end with a short *caveat*.

1. JAVANESE TOLERANCE

What directly catches the eye in Javanese religiosity is the implication of the significant role of *rasa*, "feeling". Religion for Javanese is only true if it is "religion of feeling". Thus, people

must follow their feelings; they should trust their feelings. This is also true in Javanese morality. People "know" how to behave if they have refined their *rasa*. Of course, they will under normal circumstances follow the rules of polite behavior and the directives of their communities. But a person will follow these rules not slavishly, but according to her inner awareness. Thus, she would also know when circumstances demanded not to follow the rules of normal behavior. Your religious belief is right, and you should stay with it when you feel that it makes you whole, harmonious with yourself, clear in your heart and strong in doing what life demands of you. External elements like (Islamic) rites or older "animistic" traditions may be helpful, even important, to feel closer to the Divine. But they have no absolute value. Right feeling means you feel at one with yourself, internally free, your life becomes clear. And these feelings you should always follow.

Therefore, Javanese feel repugnance towards fanaticism, extremism and all exclusivism. They like to say, "all religions are the same", not meaning that you should chose your religion at your leisure, but that if you feel right with your religiosity, you need not to worry that others feel right in a different religiosity. And therefore, the Javanese are essentially

pluralistic tolerant towards different religious ways of life.²² Therefore the Javanese, especially the *abangan* majority, did not object of Javanese being baptized and becoming Catholics, of having Catholics as members of their families, of having Catholic churches in their midst which three times a day would ring the bells for the *Angelus* and to invite people to come to mass and during consecration. There seems to be little doubt that this Javanese tolerance was the decisive factor for Indonesia not becoming an Islamic state but adopting the five principles of *Pancasila* as philosophical basis of the state which guarantee the same duties and rights to all Indonesian citizens without discriminating on religious grounds. Thus, the Javanese way of experiencing religion made it possible that out of an Islamic community grew, and still grows, a Christian community.

2. SUBCUTANEOUS CONSANGUINITIES

If we ask what positively might be attractive in Catholic belief and practice there seem to be at least three elements where we could speak of subcutaneous consanguinities. Thus, not so

²² When Father Joseph van Lith SJ, at the beginning of the last century, opened a teachers college for Javanese in Muntilan, he did not think of converting them. When the first students asked for baptism, he was in a dilemma. He was afraid that if he baptized students, the parents, all of them Muslim, would pull their children out of his school. He finally decided to demand written permission for every individual wish of baptism and was positively surprised when most parents gave this permission after having assured themselves that their sons were serious.

This was the beginning of the Catholic Javanese community.

much "similarities", and certainly not "sameness", but ways of experiencing the Divine that are related, deep down below the level of day to day consciousness. These are the dimension of internality, the belief that God is with us on the way, and the centrality of the commandment of love.

We have already seen how central *rasa*, feeling, is for Javanese religiosity, and that this religiosity strives for unity with the Divine ("unity of servant and Lord"). In this sense Catholic piety compares positively with Islam. Catholics are encouraged to pray in their hearts and taught how to do it, to enter personal relations with Jesus, God the Father, and pray to Mary the Mother of Jesus and the saints. It is easy, and in Christian wisdom always regarded as central, to have God in one's heart. One can always and everywhere come to God without much ado. In typical Catholic churches where it is often a little dark, there is this atmosphere that feels sacred, peaceful, mysterious, quiet, where one can sit and come to one-self and somehow feel that God is close by, as an atmosphere.

The Catholic rites, both mass and of the many other kind of devotions, speak to the Javanese because Javanese are used to find the spiritual in external things, and there is always this dimension of spiritual depth. Here belong holy water and incense, rosary, holy pictures and statues, the stations of the

cross, novenas, and pilgrimages to grottos of Mary.²³ Of special "deep attraction" is the Eucharist which combines many of the elements smelling of sacredness and mystery, particularly because holy communion enacts the same kind of approach as the traditional Javanese *slametan* meal, a low key religious meal where everybody takes a bit from the rice cone and its surrounding meat, fish and vegetable, and maybe brings part of it home to the family, thereby partaking in the blessing, purification and pacification of the respective house and all who attend that is been sought by this *slametan* meal.

The second element is that for Javanese the figure of the Divine being close to us, even appearing as a human person, as one of us, is nothing alien. In Semar they have such a figure. Not that Semar in any way directly can be compares with Jesus or that referring to Semar would make Jesus more understandable. Javanese would not think of comparing Jesus and Semar. The similarity lies on a deeper level. Javanese have no

²³ With places of pilgrimage the Catholics have actually hit a niche in the spiritual marked place. Protestants have neither a devotion to Mary the Mother of God nor do they encourage pilgrimages. Same is true for official Islam (although traditionalist pilgrim to the graves of the *wali*, the nine missionaries that brought Islam to Java in the 16th century). But Indonesian love to make a pilgrimage. Catholics are opening places of pilgrimage, especially shrines of Mary all over Java and they are very popular, the most beautiful and popular one being Sendangsana close to the Borobudur, where in May hundredths of thousand pilgrims come, where in 1904 Father van Lith baptized 104 of the first Javanese Christians in a holy fountain far away in the mountains.

difficulty to believe that God is unobtrusively together with us, caring, protecting, that He is saving powerful love who is particularly close to the poor, the weak, the suffering and the suppressed ones, and who accompanies us on our pilgrimage through this world. In this connection the figure of the Catholic priest – who, for the Indonesians, in spite of the fact that most wear secular clothing while Protestant ministers sometime use the classical "clergyman", have a whiff of sacrality about them – and religious men and women are quite connatural to Javanese. They are regarded as "men and women of God", persons through whom lay people can get easier access to God, something that Sunni Islam does not have, at least not in the same intensity, although the traditional Javanese Islamic *kia*s come very close to this perception. In the *wayang* shadow play such pious people always appear. That they sometimes looked strange – huge Dutch priests, or a voluminous "Moeder" ("mother"), very paternal or maternal, very good hearted, but speaking a Javanese that sounded a bit different – was no problem because Javanese are used, from the *wayang*, that people with divine connections were often looked strange or even grotesque (Semar being number one of them).

The third element is, no doubt, and despite many opposite experiences with the Church, the commandment of love. I hear Muslims, real ones, not *abangan*, saying that the secret

weapon of the Christians is their first commandment, the commandment to unconditional love.

3. CALL TO CONVERSION

But the gospel is attractive not only where it connects to ways people experience the Holy and the Good, but also by its call to conversion. Following Christ means leaving old ways. The gospel becomes a liberating message because it brings something new. Three points seem to be significant.

First, it may be that many Javanese have opened up to the gospel not only because they found in it the fulfillment of their deepest yearnings, but because it liberated them from the ambivalence of Javanese mystical endeavor. Meditating, fasting, mortification, closing oneself up to the outer world, besides being ambivalent because they can be instrumentalized, seem to be looked at by the Javanese more from a perspective of self-redemption. This is a way for the strong ones, for people that control their interior, which have learnt to master their emotions, to concentrate. But in the gospel the unity with the Divine is a gratuitous present from the loving Father. The Father does not call the strong ones, but the weak. We can just surrender to Him. Even when we feel feeble, Jesus takes us on the hand (think of drowning Peter) – again, there are parallels with Semar – and leads us to the Father. The quest for concentration on our own interior becomes

secondary because the father knows already what we need, even before we ask for something. He even looks out for us.

There is another difference between Christian and Javanese religiosity. The conception of salvation in the gospel is dialogical. It is God who addresses us and invites us to come back to Him. Our renewal in the Spirit is a gift of our Father in heaven. All we are asked to do is surrender to God. Salvation is not the result of internal power, but something we receive. Therefore, our weaknesses are no obstacle for our unity with the Lord, as the weakness of a child is not an obstacle to the love of her mother. While in Javanese mysticism the person redeems him or herself, the Christian God is an opposite person to who we can talk, express our feelings, to whom we can direct our hopes. Javanese mysticism is not completely blind towards the dialogical character of salvation. Bima f. i., after all his feats, needs a *guru*, a teacher, Dewa Ruci, to proceed to unity with the Lord (although Dewa Ruci in the end is nothing else than the essence of Bima himself). In the writings of R. Sunarto Mertowardoyo, the founder of one of the most important *kebatinan* (interiority) groups in Solo, we often find words like "love and grace" (*sih-nugraha*).²⁴

²⁴ See f. i. *Sabda-sabda Pratama inggih Sabda-sabdanipun R. Soenarto Mertowardoyo, Sabda-sabda Pratama*, Proyek Penerbitan dan Perpustakaan "Paguyuban Ngesti Tunggal" (Pangestu) Pusat, 2nd print 1974, p. 2.

Third, the dimension of grace of the gospel becomes apparent through the fact that God bestows His love on people that have fallen into sin. The grace of the Father unveils itself to us in forgiving love. In Javanese mystics the experience of guilt, this darkest dimension in human existence, is somehow obscured. It is not expressed and, therefore, stays suppressed, thus shackling from the inside. The gospel, instead, proves itself as a message of liberation: Humans do not have to cover up the fact that they are sinners, they can openly confess that they become guilty and do not have to fear that God will, therefore, leave them. Before God guilt is not an obstacle.

In this connection a third essential dimension of the gospel becomes relevant: In the gospel the offer to change one's life relates to the definitive sign of God's love to humanity: the cross. There is nothing corresponding to the cross as sign of the mystery of redemption in Javanese widespread belief. But this does not mean that the cross is something alien to the Javanese. Injustice, evilness, senseless suffering – and our guilty involvement in it – are also facts in their lives. The cross does not soften these realities, it does not shove away their accusations, it does not remove the suffering nor the determination to do something against where it is within human responsibility. The cross is much more. It is the offer of God to humanity to believe and get involved with Him, trusting that even that dark reality is a sign of His love. The gospel faces up

to this mystery in the most radical way; it does not cover it up in any sense. Only by facing up to the cross the message of the gospel becomes credible and is, therefore a glad tiding bringing hope.

But there is a test the message of Christ must pass repeatedly. Kind words or theoretical considerations will not impress Javanese. Javanese are metaphysical pragmatists in the sense that the truth of any teaching measure but the experience of real value it conveys. Teaching will only impress them when they can *feel* their truth. They do not question the theoretical consistence of the message of the gospel. What is decisive is whether they can experience the presence of the gospel in the Church as something "good" for their lives, as helping, empowering, healing. In other words, the Church preaching the gospel is under scrutiny. Javanese can accept the gospel as offer from God if they experience the community of the people who already live under the gospel as positive, trust inducing, enriching, strengthening, healing, protecting, warming, inspiring reality, as a community which brings joy and peace. The truth of the message of the gospel has its evidence in the goodness of the concrete Church.

7. FEELING THE DIVINE

Is there, then, a specific way Javanese experience the God of the gospels? Javanese are, as already said, in general not

interested in theoretical reasoning for its own sake. Thus, the fact that up to now nobody has come out with the conception of a "Javanese Christ" or Javanese Christology is not at all surprising. Since the arrival of Hinduism Javanese were always masters in adopting a new religion with all its trimmings, but filling it with their meaning from the inside. Islam is, of course, the best example. Although many mosques, especially in the villages, are built in a Javanese stile, still the religion with its strict observances, its Arabic language prayers (which most Indonesians do not understand), with the Islamic garb of the *kiai*, looks often a bit Arabic. But there can be no doubt that Islam has been really inculturated into Indonesian cultures and even renewed and developed these cultures. The very interesting fact that most *abangan*, although they now pray their daily prayers, fast during the month of Rammadhan, and go to Friday prayers, still show the same voting behavior as during the first and only free elections in 1955 is proof of the Javanese ability to look completely Muslim, but still keep their Javanese resistance to religious totalitarianism is still intact.

Thus, seeing Javanese Catholics not behave in any way different from European Catholics does not mean that their perception and experience of Catholic belief is not specific Javanese. Jesus, for instance, might be, like Semar, more seen as a way, namely the way to God the Father, than as the goal of the way. Very personal language – which even in Europe

sometimes sounds schematic – like "encountering God", "personal relation with Christ" might not really express what Javanese feel. They might experience God more as an atmosphere one enters. They certainly pray fervently to God and God is for them personal, but in an analogue way, different from a normal human person. Javanese might experience God as the one in which they "live, move and exist". Men and women do not so much encounter God, as live within God.

CONCLUSION

The considerations of this paper are, of course, not more than an attempt, precisely because Javanese themselves are reluctant to be nailed to a certain way of understanding. Openness, elasticity, a certain pluralism, and a certain reserve towards all attempts to put them into too explicit categories are typical for them. Thus, in religious things discretion, freedom and distance are important. The more the proclaiming Church respects this reserve of the Javanese the more they will feel at home in it. ■

