

Introduction:

Theologizing in Contemporary Malaysia – Prospects and Opportunities

Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan and Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan

When one thinks of Malaysia, the first thing that comes to mind is usually not the theological contributions of Malaysian Christians. Nevertheless, Malaysia features a growing and vibrant theological community if measured by the existence of its various seminaries and related educational institutions affiliated with the Asia Theological Association and the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia. On the global stage, one is able to observe an increasing number of Malaysians who have attained terminal degrees in the theological arena in North America, Europe (particularly, Britain), and Asia. While many of these PhDs in biblical and theological studies return to teach or work otherwise in Malaysia, a growing number are also living out their theological vocation around the world.

The wager of this volume is that, in a globalizing and postcolonial twenty-first century, Malaysian biblical scholars and theologians can contribute to a wide range of broader conversations out of the particularity of their own experience and perspective. Specifically, this volume brings together in one place for the first time leading Malaysian biblical scholars and theologians who seek, cumulatively, to advance the discussion on two fronts: one, centripetally vis-à-vis the specific opportunities and challenges confronting Malaysian Christians living in West Malaysia and East Malaysia, and two, centrifugally in relationship to the church evangelical-ecumenical and the theological academy writ large. It is driven by the gradual but palpable maturation of biblical and theological scholarship on the Malaysian ground as well as its various diasporic trajectories.

On the one hand, teachers and students in Malaysian institutions of theological education will benefit from a Malaysia-

centric set of analytical perspectives even as the church catholic and the broader biblical and theological guilds will also gain from the self-critical witnesses unleashed out of a postcolonial and diasporic Malaysian academy. On the other hand, although the works of Malaysian biblical scholars and theologians may not be as prominent and well-studied, compared to the contemporary biblical and theological scholarship from Latin America, Africa, or even India and the Philippines in Asia, nonetheless, they are just as useful for biblical scholars and theologians in Europe and North America who may be wrestling with the challenges and implications of the rapid growth in transnational migration transforming contemporary Europe and North America. Living in a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural, and pluri-religious society, Malaysian Christian biblical scholars and theologians have a wealth of experiences and insights which would be relevant for biblical and theological scholarship in contemporary Europe and North America where traditional Eurocentric Christianity is increasingly no longer the dominant or normative voice. Grappling with their theological worldviews, methodologies, and approaches in response to cultural diversity and religious pluralism, biblical scholars and theologians in Europe and North America could learn a great deal from how their Malaysian colleagues have responded theologically to the cultural diversity and religious pluralism in contemporary Malaysia.

In order to understand and appreciate the insights of Malaysian biblical scholars and theologians, the majority of this Introduction seeks to present the readers of this book who may not know much about Malaysia with a brief history of Malaysia, its diverse peoples and religions, as well as familiarize them with a discussion of the contemporary socio-political realities, so as to provide a context for understanding the discussions and analysis by the various Malaysian biblical scholars and theologians. The final section of this Introduction will introduce the readers to the specific Malaysian scholars and their contributions to this volume from diverse perspectives. Hopefully, the contributions by these Malaysian biblical and theological voices could become a major catalyst for a creative and constructive biblical theological scholarship for the church and the academy in Malaysia and across the world.

Malaysia: The Land and Its History

Located 4° north of the Equator in Southeast Asia, Malaysia comprises two distinct regions: West Malaysia or Peninsular Malaysia (*Semenanjung Malaysia*), which extends southwards from the Isthmus of Kra in Southern Thailand, and East Malaysia, which comprises the two states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo some 650 km across the South China Sea from West Malaysia. Strategically located between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, Peninsular Malaysia and the island of Borneo were historically havens from the monsoons for merchant ships plying the lucrative trade route between India and China.

Peninsular Malaysia

Long before the advent of the Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonizers, the two great ancient civilizations of India and China greatly influenced the region which encompassed modern-day Peninsular Malaysia and introduced Hinduism and Buddhism into the land. The earliest known kingdom was the Buddhist Kingdom of Langkasuka in Patani (Kedah), which existed during the fourth to the sixth centuries CE.¹ Langkasuka was a vassal state of the Fou-nan Empire which stretched from Annam (Vietnam) to the region that is now modern-day Peninsular Malaysia.² In the seventh century CE, the Buddhist Sri Vijaya Empire from Palembang (Sumatra) overran the Fou-nan Empire, conquered the peninsula some time during 689 to 692, and used it as a base to control maritime traffic along the Straits of Malacca.³ In 1025, the Sri Vijaya Empire was in turn overwhelmed by the Indian Buddhist King Rajendrachola I, and became a vassal of the Indian-Buddhist Chola empire.⁴ However, the final blow to the Sri Vijaya Empire came during 1338 to 1365 when it fell to the Malay-Hindu Majapahit Empire of Java.

Islam was peacefully introduced into Peninsular Malaysia as early as the thirteenth century CE by traders and missionaries from the Muslim port kingdom of Pasai (Aceh), who brought Islam as far inland as Terengganu, judging from a stone inscribed in 1326 or 1386

¹ Richard O. Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1962), 18, 24, 28.

² Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 28.

³ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 29.

⁴ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 30.

with the oldest known specimen of Malay-Arabic script.⁵ Islam was firmly entrenched during the era of the Melaka Sultanate when Parameswara, who was the first ruler of Melaka, embraced Islam in 1414 and adopted the name of Megat Iskandar Shah. In 1445, Muzaffar Shah assumed the title of *Sultan* and decreed Islam to be the official religion of the Melaka Empire. Under the patronage of successive *Sultans*, Islam spread throughout the peninsula as well as the island of Borneo. Much of the Islamic missionary work was done by Indian Gujarati missionaries, who bequeathed the Sufi form of Islam to the region.

The early years of the sixteenth century saw successive flotillas of warships bringing the European colonial powers and Christian missionaries: the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1786. In 1511, Alfonso d'Albuquerque captured Melaka for Portugal. However, Portugal lost possession of Melaka to the Dutch in 1641. The English influence began in 1786 with the arrival of a British expedition led by Sir Francis Light, who hoisted the Union Jack in Pulau Pinang (the island of Penang). The British took control of Singapore in 1819, Melaka in 1824, and Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, and Pahang in the 1870s–1880s.⁶ With the transfer of the four northern states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu from Siamese suzerainty to Britain in 1909, as well as Johor which sought a British adviser in 1914, the entire peninsula came under both *de jure* and *de facto* British domination.⁷

Under British colonial rule, Chinese coolies were brought in to work in the ports and tin mines, while Indian indentured laborers were brought in to work in the rubber plantations. The Malays were kept out of the bustling economy and were encouraged to remain as

⁵ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 32.

⁶ The British imposed direct colonial rule over Pulau Pinang, Melaka, and Singapore, all of which were Crown Colonies that comprised the Straits Settlements, while the four states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were, strictly speaking, Malay states under the protection of the British Crown, which organized these states as the Federated Malay States (*Negeri-negeri Melayu Bersekutu*).

⁷ Unlike the four states of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang, which were, legally speaking, protected states (or protectorates) that made up the Federated Malay States, the northern states of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu, together with Johor, collectively known as the Unfederated Malay States (*Negeri-negeri Melayu Tidak Bersekutu*) remained nominally autonomous although they came under *de facto* British colonial influence with the appointment of British advisers to the various sultans of these states. For further discussion, see Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 53–95.

farmers and fishermen as a result of an “Edwardian nostalgia” which argued for the preservation of the “simple life of the Malays.”⁸ Adopting a paternalistic policy of *divide et impera* in order to maintain absolute political and economic control, the British colonial administration deliberately promoted ethnic divisions and encouraged the creation and entrenchment of multiple ethnic ghettos, each looking after its own interests vis-à-vis the others. Politically, each ethnic community was governed by its leaders who reported to the British colonial administration: the Malays by the *Sultans* and the Chinese and Indians by their *Kapitans*. The Malays were forced to share political power with the British, but had no role in the economy, while the Chinese shared economic power but had no role in politics, and the Indians remained at the bottom of the table, with minimal economic and political influence.

Sabah and Sarawak

Sabah and Sarawak formed part of the ancient Brunei Sultanate which at one time controlled the entire island of Borneo. Sabah came into existence as a commercial venture when the U.S. Consul to Brunei, Claude Lee Moses secured a 10-year lease for part of Sabah from the Sultan of Brunei in 1865. He sold his rights to Joseph W. Torrey, who in turn assigned his rights to Gustavus Baron de Overbeck, the Austrian Counsel-General in Hong Kong in 1875. In 1880, Baron de Overbeck assigned his interest in Sabah to Alfred Dent of the British North Borneo Company and Sabah became known as British North Borneo. The British North Borneo Company embarked on several land acquisition ventures from the Brunei Sultanate until 1905, when the State reached the boundaries which exist to the present day. In 1946, British North Borneo was turned over to the British Crown. Sarawak was given by the Sultan of Brunei to the English explorer and adventurer, Sir James Brooke, in 1844 as a reward for pacifying the marauding pirates who plundered coastal settlements. Sir James Brooke made himself the “White Rajah” and founded a dynasty which lasted three generations. Sarawak remained the private fiefdom of the Brooke family until 1946 when Sir Charles Vyner Brooke, the last “White Rajah” of Sarawak, abdicated and surrendered the state to the British Crown.

⁸ David Lim, *Economic Growth and Development in West Malaysia: 1947–1970* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), 60.

The Peoples of Malaysia

Contemporary Malaysia is a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural, and pluri-religious society. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia, the population of Malaysia is 28.3 million, of which 94.32 percent live in Peninsular Malaysia, 3.21 percent in Sabah and 2.47 percent in Sarawak. The main ethnic groups are the Malays and other indigenous peoples, collectively classified as “Bumiputeras” by the Malaysian government and comprising 67.4 percent of the total population, followed by the Chinese at 24.6 percent, Indians at 7.3 percent, and 0.7 percent others.⁹

The Malays

The Malays (*Melayu*) were the earliest migrants in Malaysia, arriving in a series of migratory waves from the Yunnan province in southern China between 2500 and 1500 BCE.¹⁰ They are by culture Indian-Hindu and by religion Muslim. Much of the Indian-Hindu influence on the Malay culture came through the Hindu Majapahit Empire and elements of Indian-Hindu influence can still be seen today in the Malay language or *Bahasa Melayu*,¹¹ customary rituals,¹² court ceremonies,¹³ and the *wayang kulit*.¹⁴ With the Islamization of

⁹ Malaysia Department of Statistics, “Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010,” released July 29, 2011, accessed February 11, 2021, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=117&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTk1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09#.

¹⁰ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 14.

¹¹ Examples of Hindu-Sanskrit words which are a part of modern Malay language or *Bahasa Melayu* include *agama* (religion), *upacara* (ritual), *dewa* (god), *dewi* (goddess), *karya* (creation), *puja* (worship), *naga* (dragon), *negeri* (state), *negara* (nation), *bangsa* (race), *sabda* (divine word or testimony), and *raja* (king).

¹² For example, the *bersanding* or matrimonial ceremony in a Malay wedding blends both Islamic and Hindu elements and has its parallel in Indian marriages and its origins in the Hindu concept of kingship. See Richard O. Winstedt, *The Malays: A Cultural History*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 28–30.

¹³ The Malay enthronement and royal ceremonies of Perak and Negeri Sembilan, “though covered today with a decent Muslim veneer, still retains all the elements of the Hindu ritual.” In Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 26.

¹⁴ The *wayang kulit* was introduced by the Majapahit rulers of Java. Its plots are taken from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Before each performance, the *Tok Dalang*, who wears a yellow scarf and claims to be an incarnation of Vishnu, makes offerings to Siva, the patron deity of the actors, as well as the demigods of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 28.

the Malay community from the beginning of the thirteenth century, Islam superseded the former Hindu and Buddhist civilizations.

Islam has shown itself to be remarkably flexible in inculturating itself with animistic and Hindu elements among the Malays. Notwithstanding their Islamic faith, the *bomoh* and *pawang* who, as shamans and mediators with spirits, ghosts and demons, and performers of magic rituals which affect the passages of birth, life, love, and death, as well as the agriculture cycle of rice-planting and harvesting, continue to exert great influence on the lives of the Malays, rustics and urbane city dwellers alike. In this regard, many Malays continue to believe in the *semangat* (spirit) as the vital life force which is present in all living as well as inanimate objects such as leaves, stones, branches, and metal, and is the basis for the continuing belief in spirits and demonic possession.¹⁵ Related to the doctrine of *semangat* is the doctrine of *keramat*, which is a corruption of the Sufi practice of “veneration of the saints.”¹⁶

According to the definition of a Malay person in the Malaysian Federal Constitution, Islam is the defining essence of the Malay identity.¹⁷ Mixed marriages were common in the past when the Islamic laws were not stringently enforced. This resulted in the Eurasian Portuguese-Malay community in Melaka and the Sino-Malay *Peranakan* or *Baba-Nyonya* community in Malaysia and Singapore. In practice, the contemporary Malay ethnic tradition is embodied in the Islamic religion, the Malay language or *Bahasa Melayu*, and the *Adat*¹⁸ or customary traditions and usages of the

¹⁵ Winstedt, *The Malays*, 19–20. See also M.M.A. Rauf, *A Brief History of Islam with Special Reference to Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1964), 86–89.

¹⁶ “A Malay *Keramat* is not only a saint or the grave of a saint who can interfere in the life of men and intercede on their behalf; *Keramat* can also be a tiger, a crocodile or an object endowed with certain magical powers.” In Rauf, *Brief History of Islam*, 89.

¹⁷ Article 160(1) of the Malaysian Federation Constitution defines a “Malay” as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, and conforms to Malay custom.”

¹⁸ The *Adat* regulates the behavior and actions of the Malay community. Its origin is rooted in the pre-Islamic ancestral tradition and was originally brought by the Malays to the Malay Peninsula when they emigrated from Sumatra. Because of its pre-Islamic origins, there are areas of conflict between the *Adat* and *Syariah* Law as embodied in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*, especially in the area of property inheritance. This conflict between *Adat* and *Syariah* Law is clearly seen in the matrilineal prescriptions of the *Adat Perpatih* among the Minangkabau Malays of Negeri Sembilan, which vest proprietary rights in the womenfolk and stipulate, *inter alia*, that all ancestral property belongs to the tribe and descend *via* the female issue. This

Malays.

The Chinese

The earliest reference to Chinese migration to the region that is now Peninsular Malaysia is in the *Sejarah Melayu*, which narrated the marriage between Sultan Mansur Shah (1456–1477) and the Chinese princess, Han Libao (漢麗寶 Wade-Giles: Hang Li Po). As dowry, the Sultan bestowed on her entourage a hill outside Melaka town called *Bukit China*.¹⁹ Many of these early Chinese intermarried with the Malays, giving rise to the *Peranakan* or *Baba-Nyonya* community. However, the bulk of the Chinese immigrants came in the nineteenth century during the era of British colonial rule to escape civil war and starvation in the waning years of the Qing Dynasty and worked mainly as coolies in ports and mines. Subsequent generations of Chinese became successful at commerce and largely controlled the economy during British colonial rule. In an alien setting, the Chinese immigrant communities rallied around their native clan associations and shrines.

Today, the Malaysian Chinese are predominantly Buddhist with a sizeable Christian minority. Chinese Buddhism tends to be a syncretism of Confucianism, Daoism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Many Chinese Christians continue to observe Chinese festivals and customary usages in births, marriages, and deaths.

The Indians

Historically, Indian merchants visited the region that is now modern-day Peninsular Malaysia on the way to China as early as the fourth century CE. Indian merchants were also involved in the lucrative spice trade at the Melaka port during the Melaka Sultanate.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, Indian indentured laborers were brought in by the British to work in rubber plantations. Malaysian Indians are mainly Hindu, with a sizeable Sikh and Christian minorities. Around 3 percent of the Indians in Malaysia are Christians, comprising sizeable numbers of Syro-Malabar Catholics, Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Christians, and Mar Thoma Syrian Christians.

violates the general *Syariah* prescription that all property passes *via* the male issue. For an in-depth discussion, see F.H. Sianipar, "Religion and *Adat*," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (1972): 28–32.

¹⁹ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 18.

²⁰ Winstedt, *Malaya and Its History*, 20.

The Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia

The indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia are collectively known as *Orang Asli*. By virtue of their ethnicity, they are classified as *Negrito*, *Senoi*, and Proto-Malays. The *Negrito* community is the smallest but oldest of the *Orang Asli* communities. They are believed to have migrated to the peninsula some 25,000 years ago and are found mainly in the mountainous and densely forested regions in the northern central states of Kedah, Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang. The *Senoi* are the second wave of migrants who arrived some 6,000 to 8,000 years ago and are mainly found in the jungles of Perak, Kelantan, Pahang, and the coastal areas in Selangor. The Proto-Malays are the last wave of migrants who came some 4,000 years ago from Sumatra and the various islands in the Indonesian Archipelago. They are the nomadic or semi-nomadic inhabitants of Pahang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, and Johor.²¹ Despite various government development programs, some 80 percent of the *Orang Asli* population live below the poverty line and are threatened with disintegration of their social and communal fabric caused by the encroachment of modern society on their customary lands as well as rapid deforestation and industrialization.²²

The Indigenous Peoples of Sarawak

The three largest communities of indigenous peoples of Sarawak are the *Iban*, *Dayak Darat*, and *Melanau*. Other smaller communities include the *Bidayuh*, *Kayan*, *Kenyah*, *Kajang*, *Kelabit*, *Murut*, *Punan*, and *Penan*. The *Iban*, who are predominantly Catholics, are the largest indigenous community, forming about 30 percent of Sarawak's population. They have largely been assimilated into the modern society and many young Ibans have become political and community leaders, teachers, doctors, and public officials. The *Dayak Darat*, who are also predominantly Catholics, number about 9 percent of Sarawak's population. They continue to lead a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle mainly in the interior of Sarawak. The *Melanau* comprise about 9 percent of Sarawak's population and are mainly found in the coastal areas of Sarawak.

²¹ Iskandar Carey, *Orang Asli: The Aboriginal Tribes of Peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²² Jojo Fung Jee Vui, "An Indigenous-Serving Missiology: Models, Methods, Mission Strategies: Orang Asli Mission in the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples" (STL thesis, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, 1994), 11-21.

Many modern *Melanau* are Muslim and have adopted a Malay lifestyle.²³

The Indigenous Peoples of Sabah

The principal indigenous peoples of Sabah are the *Kadazan-Dusun*, *Bajau*, and *Murut*. The *Kadazan-Dusun* are believed to have migrated to Sabah from Southern China some 15,000 to 21,000 years ago.²⁴ They are predominantly Catholics and form about 30 percent of the population of Sabah. Originally farmers who inhabited the West Coast and the interior of Sabah, the contemporary *Kadazan-Dusun* are very well educated, with a vocal intelligentsia and strong middle-class. They have maintained their own distinctive language, culture, and a strong sense of ethnic consciousness which is centered on the *Tadau Tagazo Kaamatan* and the *Kadazan-Dusun* Cultural Association.²⁵ The *Kadazan-Dusun* are politically very active: they were at the forefront of the fight for Sabah's independence from Britain in the early 1960s and the fight against the Federal government's increasing encroachment on Sabah state rights and privileges in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁶ The *Bajau* constitute about 10 percent of Sabah's population. They are a sub-category of proto-Malays who are predominantly Muslim and are further subdivided into *Bajau Darat* and *Bajau Laut*, the former being skilled equestrians and cattle raisers while the latter are mainly fishermen living in houses built on shallow coral reefs. The *Murut* are a small community numbering about 3 percent of Sabah's population and predominantly Christian. They live in longhouses by the river banks deep in the mountainous regions of Sabah and practice shifting cultivation, supplemented by hunting and fishing.²⁷

²³ Thu En Yu, "'Muhibbah': The Church's Ministry of Reconciliation in the Pluralistic Society of Malaysia" (DMin diss., San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1995), 35-37; and David Bingham, "The Iban Experience of Religion: As Pagans, As Christians," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 20 (1983): 117-24.

²⁴ Thomas Rhys Williams, *The Dusun: A North Borneo Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1966), 3-4.

²⁵ Francis Loh Kok Wah, "Modernisation, Cultural Revival and Counter-Hegemony: The Kadazans of Sabah in the 1980s," in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 243.

²⁶ See discussion in Loh, "Modernisation, Cultural Revival and Counter-Hegemony," 225-53.

²⁷ Thu, "Muhibbah," 37-40.

The Religions of Malaysia

Around 61.3 percent of Malaysia's population is Muslim and 19.8 percent Buddhist. Malaysian Christians are exclusively non-Malays and hover around 9.2 percent of the population, followed by Hindus (6.3 percent), and followers of Chinese religions (1.3 percent).²⁸ Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and the majority of Malaysians are Muslims, freedom of religion in Malaysia is guaranteed under article 11(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution,²⁹ subject to the constitutional prerogative of federal and state governments to pass laws against the propagation of other religions among Muslim Malaysians.³⁰

In response to the Malaysian Muslim majority's relentless pressure against Malaysian Christians, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM)³¹ was established in 1986 as an umbrella organization for Malaysian Christians comprising the Roman Catholic Church, the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) representing the mainline Protestant Churches, and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) representing the Evangelical, Brethren, and Pentecostal churches. The CFM consists of around 5,000 member churches and encompasses around 90 percent of the total Christian population of Malaysia. It seeks to present a united Christian front to negotiate with the Malaysian government on contentious religious issues generally, and Muslim-Christian matters in particular. The CFM is also an active member of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism (MCCBCHST). The MCCBCHST was established in 1983 to promote understanding, mutual respect and cooperation among the different religions in Malaysia, resolve

²⁸ Malaysia Department of Statistics, "Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010," released July 29, 2011, accessed February 11, 2021, https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemByCat&cat=117&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTK1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09#.

²⁹ As article 11(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution makes it clear: "Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it."

³⁰ According to article 11(4) the Malaysian Federal Constitution, "State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam."

³¹ CFM was formed in January 1984 as the *National Christian Assembly of Malaysia*. It adopted its present name in 1986.

interreligious issues, and make representations to the Malaysian government on religious matters.³² In practice, the MCCBCHST has become an organized channel for dialogue between the non-Muslims and the Malaysian government on issues of religious freedom and the impact of encroaching Islamization on the rights of the non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their faith without interference or fear.

Christianity's Minority Status in Postcolonial Malaysia

With the exception of the Philippines and Timor-Leste, the Christian presence across Asia generally, and in Malaysia in particular, is characterized by Christians comprising a significant minority religious community in the midst of dominant and resurgent religious majorities, which, in the case of Malaysia, is the Islamic revival in Malaysia. Here, the term "minority" is used as a convenient category to classify a community which is numerically small in comparison with other larger groups in its midst in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, culture, religion, or other categories. One should also note that this term often highlights the *imbalance* of power dynamics between a minority group vis-à-vis the dominant majority group, with the latter occupying positions of power and harassing the minority group to conform to its norms and expectations,³³ as we will see in the context of religious majority-minority dynamics in contemporary postcolonial Malaysia.

Under the British colonial policy of divide and rule, the Malays were given political power while control over trade and economy was given to the Chinese. This political-economic division continued after Malaysia gained its independence from Britain on August 31, 1957. Not surprisingly, this fired up many Malays who were unhappy with the continued Chinese control of the Malaysian economy. The built-up tensions exploded in a series of violent racial riots by extremist Malay nationalists against the Chinese community on May 13, 1969.³⁴

³² Paul Tan Chee Ing and Theresa Ee, "Introduction," in Tunku Abdul Rahman, et al., *Contemporary Issues on Malaysian Religions* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1984), 13.

³³ For further discussion, see Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations* (New York: Wiley, 1967); and Edna Bonacich, "A Theory of Middlemen Minorities," *American Sociological Review* 38 (1973): 583-94.

³⁴ Goh Cheng Teik, *The May Thirteenth Incident and Democracy in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971); and Leon Comber, *13 May 1969: A*

In the aftermath of these riots, the Malaysian government instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP) to promote racial reconciliation and bridge the economic inequality between the Malays and the Chinese in an effort to rebuild a shattered civic society. Unfortunately, the NEP also institutionalized racialized politics, communalism, Malay dominance in nation building, and Malay sovereignty (*Ketuanan Melayu*) over the other minority communities in all matters political, social, and economic, leading to widespread economic inefficiency, corruption scandals, cronyism, and nepotism as a small Malay elite controlled the political and economic levers of powers to the exclusion of ordinary Malays and other races.³⁵ As the tangible economic benefits of the NEP failed to trickle down to the ordinary rural Malays, the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), a Malaysian Islamist political party capitalized on widespread rural Malay discontent to champion Islamization as the alternative to the cronyism and corruption of the NEP.

Responding to the rising popular Malay support of PAS's Islamization platform, the ruling political elite likewise adopted a similar policy of Islamization to blunt PAS's tactics.³⁶ Unfortunately, the Malaysian government's heavy-handed program of Islamization has resulted in increased religious tensions between the Muslim majority vis-à-vis other religious minority communities in Malaysia. As a religious minority, Malaysian Christians often find themselves targeted by the Malaysian Government's Islamization program. For example, the Malaysian government prohibited *Bahasa Indonesia* translations of the Bible in 1981. When Malaysian Christians vehemently protested, this ban was relaxed in 1982 to permit the use of *Bahasa Indonesia* and *Bahasa Malaysia* translations for liturgical worship and personal devotions. However, current law prohibits their dissemination and circulation among Muslims in Malaysia.

Because of the constitutional definition of a "Malay" as, among other things, "a person who professes the religion of Islam" as discussed previously, the issue has arisen whether a Malay can renounce Islam to become a Christian. Pursuant to article 11(4) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution, the states of Pahang, Perak, Melaka,

Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relations (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, 1983).

³⁵ James Chin, "The Malaysian Chinese Dilemma: The Never Ending Policy (NEP)," *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies* 3 (2009): 167–82.

³⁶ For case studies and critical discussions, see Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, eds., *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

Sabah, and Terengganu have passed legislation criminalizing apostasy (*takfir*) by Malaysian Muslims, as well as the actions of non-Muslims who proselytize their faith to Muslims.³⁷ The strict apostasy laws attracted international condemnation in the case of Lina Joy, who sued in the Malaysian Federal Court in order to force the Malaysian National Registration Department to record her religious conversion from Islam to Christianity on her identity card. However, her case was narrowly dismissed by the Malaysian Federal Court³⁸ and she was forced to leave Malaysia.

An ongoing point of contention between Malaysian Christians and the Muslim establishment is the controversy over the use of the term *Allah* for God by Malaysian Christians. In 1991, the Malaysian Parliament passed legislation to prohibit the use in non-Islamic literature of, among other things, the term *Allah* for God. Malaysian Christians were outraged against this prohibition of the use of *Allah* for God, arguing that it impinged on their right to use the term *Allah* in the translations of the Bible into the national language (*Bahasa Malaysia* or *Bahasa Kebangsaan*), as well as in public worship and prayer meetings. The issue came before the courts in 2007 when the Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs prohibited the Malaysian Catholic periodical, *The Herald*, from using the term *Allah* in its *Bahasa Malaysia* edition. The then Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Murphy Pakiam, sought a judicial review of the Minister's decision before Justice Lau Bee Lan, who held that the term *Allah* is not exclusive to Muslims and the Minister of Home Affairs had no legal authority to prohibit *The Herald* from using the term *Allah* in its *Bahasa Malaysia* edition.³⁹ Justice Lau's decision was overturned by the Malaysian Court of Appeal upon appeal by the Minister of Home Affairs.⁴⁰ Ultimately, the Federal Court refused leave to the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur to appeal against the Malaysian Court of Appeal, thereby affirming the Court of Appeal's judgment upholding the Minister of Home Affairs' original 2007 blanket ban

³⁷ Rita Camilleri, "Religious Pluralism in Malaysia: The Journey of Three Prime Ministers," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, no. 2 (2013): 231.

³⁸ Lina Joy v. Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan dan lain-lain [2007] 4 MLJ 585 (Federal Court).

³⁹ Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur v. Menteri Dalam Negeri and Kerajaan Malaysia [2010] 2 MLJ 78 (High Court).

⁴⁰ Menteri Dalam Negeri & Ors v. Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur [2013] 6 MLJ 468 (Court of Appeal).

on the use of *Allah* by non-Muslims.⁴¹

On the one hand, we see how minorities generally, and the Christian minority in Malaysia in particular, come under pressure all the time from the Malay Muslim majority in Malaysia, which possesses the political clout to enforce its vision and values in the contemporary Malaysian society. We also see this in action where the Malay Muslim majority feels that its dominance in society and politics is under siege from the Christian minority, even though the Malaysian Christians would argue that they often experience insecurity and vulnerability from rising Malay nationalism and Muslim fanaticism. But on the other hand, being a minority also affords Malaysian Christians the opportunity to be the “little flock” who are able, paraphrasing Peter Phan, to take their “Malaysianness” seriously as the context of their being Christian.⁴²

Responses to the Experiences of the Malaysian Christian Minority Communities: The Volume

This volume, then, represents the contributions of the Christian minority scholars in Malaysia as well as Malaysians living and teaching and doing ministry in the diaspora. All the authors have roots in either East Malaysia or West Malaysia. They come from diverse denominational and theological backgrounds—Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Mainline. Many common themes run through the volume—multiplicities of ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions, hybridity, history of colonialism, resurgence of Islamization, faith and praxis of Christian minority, interreligious tensions and relations, and the *Allah* controversy. The volume is organized into three sections: Part I consists of four essays on Biblical Interpretation, Part II on Theology and Ethics with three essays, and Part III dealing with Missiology, Practical Theology and Christian Education with three essays.

The first essay on Biblical Interpretation, “Treatment of *Gēr* as a Guide to Interreligious Dialogue,” is by Fook Kong Wong, who is

⁴¹ Titular Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur v. Menteri Dalam Negeri & Others [2014] 4 MLJ 765 (Federal Court).

⁴² Responding to the challenges of being religious minorities in Asia, the birthplace of the great religions of the world which are experiencing massive revival and growth, Peter Phan writes, among other things, that Asian Christians have to “take their Asianness seriously as their context of being Christian.” In Peter C. Phan, “*Ecclesia in Asia: Challenges for Asian Christianity*,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37 (2000): 218.

professor of Old Testament at Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary. Wong's essay begins with a study of the concept of *gēr* (foreign resident) in the Pentateuch, suggesting that while the term may have different meanings in different historical periods, it most often refers to an outsider by the intended readers, the natives. Analyzing the Mosaic laws pertaining to the treat of the *gēr*, Wong argues that these laws can serve as guides for interreligious dialogue since they were intended to facilitate relationships of the local population with foreign residents who would likely have espoused different religious beliefs. Drawing on the work of Michael Wyschogrod, an Orthodox Jew and a strong proponent and active participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue, whom Wong considers as a theological inclusivist or a tolerant exclusivist, Wong argues that, in a more theologically conservative Christian context in Malaysia, a tolerant exclusivism or inclusivism is preferred over pluralism for interreligious dialogue.

The second essay by Elaine Wei-Fun Goh, who teaches Old Testament at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (Malaysian Theological Seminary), is entitled, "'Even If (God Does) Not, We Will Not': A Christian Reflection from Daniel 3." The essay is an attempt to read Daniel 3 for wisdom for Christian living and witness as religious minorities in the context of a majority Muslim country. Goh identifies such events as the unsolved disappearance of a pastor, the continuing prohibition of the use of the word *Allah* in the Bible and other publications in the national language, and offensive remarks directed against ethnic Chinese and Christian minorities as challenges to Christian witness. Doing an in-depth analysis of the Daniel text through three main points—challenge, persistence, and hope—Goh addresses such issues as the ethnic hostility perpetuated by a small and vocal group of radical Muslims against ethnic Chinese and Christian minorities, the enduring boldness and courage of the minorities in the face of religious harassment and racial aggravation, and their unwavering hope in midst of such social challenges.

The third essay in this section on biblical interpretation is "Populism and Nationalism: A Yahwistic Critique of Jonah's Religious Nationalism" by Philip P. Chia, who teaches at Chung Yuan Christian University, Taiwan. In this essay, Chia turns to the book of Jonah to discuss issues of populism and nationalism, of which the former concerns *the people* while the latter pertains to the attitude and actions of *the people* who shared a common national

identity, culture, and values. In Chia's reading of the book, Yahweh's concern is for the people stands in stark contrast to Jonah's subscription to a narrow religious nationalism, a "Hebrew" first mentality. Chia opines that such a reading has implications for the populist movement, *Bersih* ("clean" in *Bahasa Malaysia*), that began in 2007 in Malaysia and that helped bring down the ruling coalition after 60 years in power, which advocated for a simple human moral ethical consciousness of "cleanliness." Ultimately, at the heart of God's concern is that "the people's lives" matter.

Kar Yong Lim's essay, "For All of You are One in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28): Paul's Social Vision Beyond Inclusivity and Diversity," rounds out this section on Biblical Interpretation. Lim, who teaches New Testament at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, looks to Galatians 3:28 and other Pauline texts for Paul's understanding of ethnic, gender, and social relations in the Greco-Roman world to address the issue of equality. Lim suggests that scholarly research on Gal 3:28 have long overlooked two critical issues, namely, that (1) the triads of Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female must be taken as a unified statement and (2) that the Jerusalem and Antioch incidents foreground the statement. Analyzing these two issues in detail, Lim concludes that Paul's social vision goes beyond inclusivity and diversity toward the elimination of any form of discrimination based on ethnicity, social status, and gender. Such a vision can help guide the church in Malaysia to work toward challenging all forms of discrimination in the process of nation building.

Edmund Kee-Fook Chia's essay, "*Wawasan 2020* and Christianity in Religiously Plural Malaysia," begins this section of Theology and Ethics. Chia, who serves on the faculty of Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, examines why the problem of interracial and interreligious relations persists even in what is supposed to be the New Malaysia. Chia begins by introducing *Wawasan 2020*, a vision introduced in 1991 for Malaysia to be an economically developed nation, with a call for a united and ethical citizenry. He then reviews the Malaysia's history, focusing on the impact of European colonialism and the migrations of peoples to the Malaysian Archipelago. Within that geohistorical context, Chia proceeds to reflect on how race and religion intersect within the socio-political structures of the country's development as a new independent nation-state and, finally, turning his attention to discuss the place of Christianity in the Malaysia's religiously plural society, its involvement in interreligious dialogue and cooperation,

and how it has learned to live with grace as a minority religion.

The second essay by Alwyn Lau, who teaches in UCSI University's Faculty of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is entitled, "From Fetish to Forgiveness: A Žižekian Intrusion on How the Church 'Enjoys' Herself for the Sake of the World." Grounding his work on Slavoj Žižek's theory of fetish and perversion, Lau contends that Malaysia continues its fascination with political fetishes, whereby self-deluding narratives are used to create an alternative reality to cover up a traumatic void. With much injustice and oppression remaining unaddressed, including the forced disappearance of individuals, there is an implicit national refusal to repair traumatic voids. In such a context, and subjected to injustice and oppression, Lau suggests that the Malaysian church can move forward by embracing such trauma of pain and forgiveness by means of the Lacanian concepts of *sinthome* and singularity, whereby the Church can remain authentic, prayerful, compassionate and resilient in the face of on-going challenges in the socio-political arena.

The final essay in the theology and ethics section, "Christian-Muslim Relations in New Malaysia: Overcoming Barriers, Building Bridges," is by Albert Sundararaj Walters, an ordained clergy of the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia and formerly Vicar-General of the Anglican Diocese of Iran. Walters's essay seeks to examine Christian-Muslim relations in Malaysia to ascertain whether the political manipulations of religion in recent decades have engendered a real threat to harmonious interfaith relations in the country. Beginning with a brief historical overview that led to a pluralistic country, Walters situates his readers within the contextual realities of pivotal events, like the May 13, 1969 racial riots and the Islamization policy, to discuss significant issues and challenges that have impacted Christian-Muslim relations, for example, the question of whether or not Malaysia is an Islamic state, the rise of political Islam, the privileging of *Bumiputera* in economic policies, the *Allah* controversy and the seizing of Bibles. Nonetheless, Walters points out that there have also been many attempts at building bridges in interfaith encounters. These encounters, for Walters, must go beyond tolerance toward seeking mutual understanding across differences and the common good.

John Cheong's essay, "Hybrid and Hybridising: Malaysian Identity, Presence and Mode in Theology, Theologising and Mission," leads off the final section on missiology, practical theology

and Christian education. Cheong, who teaches missiology in various colleges in Asia, uses anthropological-sociological frameworks to examine the hybridity of the Malaysian Christian identity, which is very much the product of their locatedness geographically between West and East Asia. He interviewed some Malaysian writers to understand their life stories, particularly socio-religious and cultural elements that influenced their identity, mode of theologizing, writings and/or leadership directions today. He then discusses the educational, social, and religious factors that shaped their double minority Christian migrant/diasporic status. The writers' hybrid identity in turn enables them to develop interreligious, intercultural, interethnic and/or international sensitivities that grounds their theologizing and missionizing as contributions to world Christianity.

The next essay is by Arch Chee-Keen Wong, who teaches at Ambrose Seminary of Ambrose University, Canada. In his essay, "What Might A Practical Theological Reflection on Religious Freedom and Social Engagement Look Like in Light of a Resurgence of Islamization in Malaysia?," Wong uses Richard Osmer's four core tasks of practical theological interpretation as a method to engage in theological reflection on the religious freedom and social engagement of the church in Malaysia as it relates to the resurgence and impact of Islamization. Using the lenses of the descriptive-empirical and the interpretive tasks, Wong examines the literature in the resurgence of Islamization in many sectors of Malaysian culture, referencing the historical antecedents and addressing the limits of religious freedom. He uses the normative task to engage theological concepts of justice and righteousness and to discuss proposed responses to Islamization's limits on religious freedom in light of political involvement and the *Allah* controversy. Finally, using the pragmatic task, Wong explores how the church might respond using the concept of trauma as a theological basis to move forward.

The final essay in this last section of the book is co-written by Joy Oy-Mooi Saik, who teaches at Sabah Theological Seminary, Malaysia, and Siaw Fung Chong, who teaches at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia. Entitled, "Does Learning Style Matter? Primary Lessons for Asian Theological Education from a Case Study of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Seminary Students in Malaysian Borneo Using the Felder-Soloman Index of Learning Styles," Saik and Chong begin this essay lamenting the fact that theological education in Asia has

generally not paid much attention to the issue of students' learning styles, especially of people groups in multicultural settings. To address this lack of attention, the authors conducted a preliminary investigation of the learning styles of indigenous and non-indigenous students through a survey administered at their seminary in Sabah, using the Index of Learning Styles (ILS) questionnaire developed by Richard Felder and Barbara Soloman. In addition, through the use of Pearson's Chi-Squared test, Saik and Chong, discovered that participants with similar learning styles from different ethnic backgrounds (indigenous or non-indigenous) may opt for different instructional or study strategies.

The volume ends with co-editor Amos Wai-Ming Yong's more overarching methodological considerations. His "Concluding Malaysian Diasporic Reflections from the Ends of the Earth: Contextuality and Marginality in Hermeneutical and Theological Method for the Third Millennium," considers how the book illuminates the changing landscape of biblical and theological studies in the twenty-first century when refracted through the lenses of Malaysian experiences and Malaysian diaspora perspectives. The dynamic and fluid character of contextuality and marginality describe not just Malaysian contributions but the ways in which they interact with the broader biblical and theological studies discourses.

On the one hand, of course, these wider discussions have impacted the essays in this volume; on the other hand, it is also our hope that our collaborative efforts will make a difference in the ongoing conversations. You, our readers, get to render the verdicts on these matters.

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