

# Interreligious Conflict and Compromise in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Singapore

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by

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The latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a number of changes which affected the religious environment in Singapore and the perceptions which members of different religious groups had of each other.

Among Muslims the rise of Islamic modernism as promoted by Muhammed Abduh began to be widely discussed, and gradually became the dominant force for religious reform and renewal in the Muslim community. This took shape as an intellectual movement by the 1890's with the rise of the *Kaum Muda* in Singapore and Malaya. Purity of religion was not, however, the only interest of the *Kaum Muda*. Their links to Islamic centres in the Middle East made it possible for them to see social change from a broader perspective. Colonialism and modernity together with the Christian missionary movement, could be seen as world-wide social forces and not merely an experience of some Malays in urban centres. Associated with the reform movement was the establishment of new types of social organisations among Muslims, beginning with study clubs and welfare societies. After 1900 there developed a lively journalistic culture devoted to the same themes. And changes in colonial policy leading to a firmer establishment of schools for Malays began to create a new generation of leaders among Muslims. As activist Muslim groups, whether reform-minded or orthodox, took a higher profile they not

only shaped Muslim society, but also European understandings of Islam within Singaporean society.

Among Christians there was an increasing pace of missionary activity, particularly with the coming of J.B. Cook of the Presbyterian Mission in 1882 and William Oldham of the Methodist Mission in 1886. In addition to their efforts to convert Singapore's Asian population these men also sought to change the nature of Singaporean Christianity. They brought with them a conviction that real Christianity was a missionary religion, not a social convention. They vocally opposed many activities tacitly or openly accepted in Singaporean society, such as gambling, opium smoking, drinking, and prostitution.

Associated with the expanding work of the missionaries was the growth of Christian schools in the last quarter of the century. In that period changes in colonial support of private schools and increasing interest in English language education by wealthy Chinese made it possible for Christian schools to take the lead in English language education, with the enrolment of the Anglo-Chinese School alone surpassing the long established Raffles Institution in the 1890's. These new schools, particularly those of the Presbyterians and Methodists, could serve as a focal point for rivalries among Europeans regarding the social role of religions. At a time when Methodists were particularly outspoken regarding public morality an official of the Raffles Institution questioned the government's wisdom in giving them grants for their schools.<sup>1</sup> As importantly the predominance of Christian schools in Singapore raised questions among non-Christians about which religious and moral teachings would shape Singapore's youth.

Finally, among the Chinese a rising tide of Chinese nationalism was bringing with it the desire for the strengthening of social values and personal ethics in the Chinese community. These desires brought with them, however, the question of which institutions could provide the basis for a renewal of Chinese identity and community strength. The problem was particularly acute among the Chinese diaspora, for whom the agents which traditionally created cohesiveness and reinforced values were either absent or greatly modified. It was also intensified by the growing influence of Christianity. These factors would lead to concrete efforts for a religious reform which would involve all classes of Chinese, and would be independent from the imperial system. Such reforms did not ignore the issue of defining a Chinese religious identity in the midst of the competing claims to possess religious truth in colonial Singapore.

In the midst of these social changes two incidents highlight the changing understandings which followers of different religions had of each other in

late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Singapore. The first of these was an attack on the Anglo-Chinese School in the Singapore Press in 1896. The second was an attack in the Malay press on the Christian mission among Muslims at Pasir Panjang in 1913.

### 1. AN ATTACK ON THE ANGLO-CHINESE SCHOOL

The first of these incidents centered around the efforts of Methodist missionaries to both westernize, and evangelize, the sons of Singapore's well-to-do Chinese merchants. Among Singapore's missionaries, as opposed to those Christian pastors serving expatriate churches, attitudes toward traditional Chinese religions were generally negative. They were characterised as chaotic, or superstitious, or simply "heathen". Missionaries were overtly evangelistic in their approach to followers of these religions, with their major methods being street preaching, visitation of homes (particularly in contacting women), and preaching to the students in the schools. During the early 1890's the *Malaysia Message*, a Methodist magazine published in this period, appealed for "aggressive evangelism" and the preaching of the gospel. As Elizabeth Ferris said in 1893, "Our aim is to get into as many of the homes as possible, and while we teach faithfully English subjects, we want to teach also about the Christ life."<sup>2</sup> There were parents who objected to religious teaching, but as Sophia Blackmore reported "usually the missionary had her own way."<sup>3</sup> At the same time the missionaries believed that Chinese culture was backward and unsuited to the modern world or the Christian faith. The English medium schools, even with a secular curriculum, were thus an important indirect evangelistic tool. The Methodist Education Committee report of 1897 aptly captures this spirit.

The higher education of these Settlements, as in India, is destined to be through the medium of English. It was a great victory won for the cause of Christianity when Dr. Duff and Governor Bentinck defeated the orientalist in the great controversy which determined that the English language and literature, impregnated with Christian thought, was to supplant the effete oriental literature. Government is therefore, perhaps unconsciously, doing a great missionary work. It may be said that the result is scepticism toward all religion, rather than a true faith in Christianity, but some one has said that scepticism is an impossible condition for any people. The human heart cannot rest in unbelief; so that however discouraging the situation may be at times, the ultimate result must be the triumph of intelligent faith.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1890's there was much to confirm the missionary attitude. The Anglo-Chinese School was founded by the Methodist missionary William Oldham in 1886 and had steadily expanded to become one of the most important schools for Singapore's well-to-do Chinese community.<sup>5</sup> His explicit intention was that the school should provide the means by which the Methodists would have access to, and evangelise, the cream of Chinese

youth in Singapore. His aims and methods gained the confidence of both Chinese businessmen and the government. By 1896 the total enrolment of ACS for the year exceeded 1000 students, and its average attendance was over 600.<sup>6</sup> Although few of the students had converted to Christianity, there was little question as to the school's effectiveness in making Christianity a respectable religion, and in creating a generation of increasingly westernised young men. Nor were the Methodists apologetic about their ultimate intentions. The principal of ACS wrote in 1896,

That Christian teachers in a mission school should exert such an influence upon their pupils as to induce some of these to become Christian is inevitable, and so we have never attempted to conceal our satisfaction that this should be so.<sup>7</sup>

What the Methodists did not realise was that even as the school was growing in stature it was becoming a symbol of the crisis of identity felt by a growing number of young Chinese scholars and professionals. In a time of what C.M. Turnbull characterises as "confused loyalty among the Singapore Chinese" it is not surprising that the Methodist Mission's education efforts should eventually come under attack.<sup>8</sup>

Among some Chinese the kind of Westernising education which was so beloved by the missionaries was bearing a somewhat different fruit from that which they expected. Dr Lim Boon Keng had returned to Singapore in 1893 after receiving his medical degree at Edinburgh University. Upon his return he continued to dress in the English fashion. He joined the Straits Philosophical Society and with prominent European and English speaking Asian leaders discussed philosophical questions of the day. He had been baptised in Edinburgh, and the missionary establishment regarded him as an ally. Yet there was another side to his return. Apparently spurred in part by the embarrassment he suffered in front of students from China when he admitted he did not read or write Chinese, and in part encouraged by his father-in-law, a Confucian scholar, he plunged into a study of both Chinese and Confucianism when he arrived back in Singapore.<sup>9</sup> Even as he was actively engaged in the European side of Singaporean society, he seems to have been searching for his own distinct identity, not the least in the matter of religion.

His unorthodox reflections on his own religious identity and his attitude toward Christianity were probably encouraged in the European, but notably not missionary, circles in which he moved. The members of the Straits Philosophical Society were men with a liberal education who held prominent positions in Singapore society. The institutions at which they were educated: Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh, were alive with the latest anthropological approaches to understanding religion, and critical approaches to evalu-

ating religious teaching. Early in 1895 Rev. G.M. Reith, pastor of the expatriate Presbyterian Congregation, could suggest before this group that, "what is wanted, both for Christianity and Mohammedanism, is the rise of a sound historical criticism. . ." and be assured that he would not offend anyone's religious sensibilities. A broad minded humanism had come to characterise religious thinking in this milieu.<sup>10</sup> The missionaries, of course, would hardly tolerate such views, but they were unaware or unconcerned about what effects they would have on the thinking of Lim Boon Keng and others like him.

Eight months after Reith held forth on the convergence of Christianity and Islam, Lim Boon Keng expressed his own reflections about Christianity, his adopted faith, and Confucianism, a birthright he had never previously claimed. He put these forward in a paper presented to the Straits Philosophical Society on October 12<sup>th</sup> of 1895.<sup>11</sup> He began his reflections with a theory of the genesis of religion in China which in both content and tone differed little from the approaches of the European scholarship to which he had been exposed in Edinburgh. Lim suggested that all religions, including traditional Chinese religions, had common sources and common aims, although he distinguished between high ethical philosophies and the religion of the "ignorant masses of mankind" who are "always ready to have their own work done for them by others."<sup>12</sup> Popular Christianity and Chinese Buddhism he believed shared common roots in Mithraism, with both the Buddha and Kuan Yin, and Jesus and the Virgin Mary, being transformations of Mithra the Sun God and Alitta, a Syrian goddess. He believed that Chinese Christians "are essentially Buddhist in thought". Both religions succeeded because they "gave the savage hordes a religion suitable to their understanding".<sup>13</sup>

For Lim Christianity, taught by the missionaries as a religion of personal salvation, had nothing to offer the Chinese which they did not already have. It was "an exotic thorn in the side of China, the cause of rebellion, - e.g., the great Taipeng revolt, - the excuse for foreign aggrandisement, the object of detestation by patriotic men."<sup>14</sup> Christianity, if it was to succeed in China, must "adapt itself to the needs of the Chinese" because "a Chinaman can scarcely become a Christian in China without becoming almost completely de-nationalised. The very social fabric of China must be broken up if the Chinese as a whole become Christian."<sup>15</sup> Lim hoped that missionaries in particular would change their ways and see "the common basis on which all religions rest, and that all human creeds have a common object in view."

In contrast to his treatment of either Christianity or the popular Chinese cults Lim suggested that the fundamental teachings of Confucius were consonant with the best of Greek and Roman ethical thought. It was to Lim a "spiritualistic monotheism" which appealed "principally to our reason and

reflection."<sup>16</sup> He acknowledged the philosophical appeal of Taoism, but felt that its ideals, like those of Jesus, would "ever remain a lofty but impractical conception" while on the other hand "the universal usage of mankind has conformed to the Confucian aphorism [i.e. "return justice for injury"] and thus confirmed the wisdom of it."<sup>17</sup> Ultimately he concluded that "the world requires a new religion, that will give us peace and happiness in life without creating disputes and discussions which make living less endurable than before."<sup>18</sup>

Given what Lim was thinking in 1895, it isn't difficult to see that, for him, the proselytising efforts of the Anglo-Chinese School were the promotion of a backward religion little better than the superstitions already prevalent among the Chinese. Moreover they were linked hand in hand with an explicit agenda of Westernization. While neither his Christian friends, nor the missionaries, were aware of it, he had begun to see the Methodist schools as a threat to his own efforts to find ways to revive traditional culture and values among the Chinese in Singapore.<sup>19</sup> Less than a year after presenting his views to the Straits Philosophical Society, he expressed these convictions in a more active form.

On July 25th of 1896, just as subscriptions were being taken among wealthy Chinese for the building of a new Anglo-Chinese boarding school, anonymous letters appeared in two Singapore newspapers accusing the Methodist missionaries of forcing boys to become Christian. The letter writers urged parents to withdraw their children from the Anglo-Chinese School. The effect was immediate. Not only did attendance drop, but donations for the ambitious building project almost completely ceased. It was a new experience for the missionaries. They had encountered, and expected to encounter, some personal resistance to and even animosity toward their evangelistic efforts. Such opportunities to suffer for the gospel only increased their fervour. But an attack on a key missionary institution at a vulnerable moment was a political act which they had never anticipated. In order to respond to the letters in the press William Shellabear, who at that time headed the Methodist Mission, and C.C. Kelso, the principal of the school, sought the help of Lim Boon Keng. As a Christian they felt he might help them deal with the letter writers and restore the image of the school. When they visited him, they were surprised to find that he was among those who had instigated the agitation against the school.<sup>20</sup>

Faced by this rebelliousness on the part of one so central to their vision of the Christianization of Singapore, as well as the immediate threat to the well-being of the school, the missionaries were forced to retreat somewhat from their previously aggressive stance. Letters were written in the local press by Kelso claiming that the Methodists did not compel students to attend

religious functions. Promises were made to provide alternative activities for boys who preferred to stay away from chapel services. B.F. West, in the midst of developing a school in Penang, asserted publicly that "Protestant Christianity has no compulsion in its methods, but seeks always and only to reach the intellect and heart, and leaves everyone to make free choice of the truth for himself."<sup>21</sup> Lim and his companions had succeeded in giving notice to the missionaries that they would no longer "have their own way" against Chinese objections to using English medium education to promote conversion. For their part missionaries became more particular about those with whom they entrusted their institutions. When some of the trustees of the school admitted being involved in the agitation they were forced to resign. They were replaced by a group under Song Ong Slang, who had more sympathy for orthodox Christian beliefs and missionary methods than did his friend Lim Boon Keng.<sup>22</sup>

In many respects the agitation against the Anglo-Chinese School marks the beginning of a new era in Chinese - Christian relations. Lim Boon Keng would go on to take an even higher political profile, first in his leadership of the Confucian Revival beginning in 1899, and then in the Anti-Opium movement. Lim and his supporters had learned that accepting a western education need not entail accepting the Christian religion, or even making oneself open to pressure from Christian evangelists. With the Confucian Revival they would go a step further, and by distinguishing between modern education and a Christian world-view they would attempt to create their own distinctively modern, yet also indigenous, religion and educational system. The temporary setback suffered by the Anglo-Chinese School did not, in the long run, open a larger place for Chinese education in Singapore. However, for the missionaries the social contract had been redrawn. If they did not respect the Chinese religious heritage out of theological conviction, they would at least respect Chinese religious and cultural sensitivities out of a realistic fear of further agitation.

## 2. AT ATTACK ON A CHRISTIAN MISSION TO THE MALAYS

The missionary understanding of Muslim responses to evangelistic efforts was very early determined by the fairly high level of resistance Muslim communities in Singapore offered to any missionary effort to carry out evangelistic work, particularly outside of town in the Malay villages. Early accounts of street corner evangelism in Arab Street tell of rowdy youths who hurled verbal abuse, and occasional rotting vegetables, at the missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

Sophia Blackmore relates,

"... a party of us used to go out to kampong Bugis to talk to the nationals there. After the singing in Malay and a short talk we would

visit some of the homes. We remember an old woman sitting by her charcoal fire whose fried plantains we generally bought. The people in this kampong at first received us kindly, but later owing to their Islamic prejudices they would have none of us. Once when our backs were turned we hear the cry "tengoh api" (see the fire), and looking round saw that the leaflets which we had distributed were ablaze."<sup>24</sup>

In another case she tells us,

"In Kampong Bahru the Malays who lived in that locality tried in many ways to drive them [the missionaries] off. . . . Stones and filth were piled on the veranda where we met, once a full line of clothes was stretched across."<sup>25</sup>

Toward actual Muslim converts to Christianity the attitude of the Malays could be even more resistant. A Malay man named Haji Abdul Shukur confessed himself a Christian after meeting with William Shellabear several times. In 1895 he was baptised in the Methodist church and renamed Andreus.<sup>26</sup> However, he suffered some physical abuse and was eventually forced to leave Singapore because of threats to his life from a Muslim religious leader.<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to these negative experience the missionaries found that under certain circumstances the Malay people could often be particularly open and friendly. In the kampong where the missionaries had so much difficulty finding a site for their Sunday Schools the Malay teacher of a government school finally provided them with space to give more secular lessons. Malay literature printed by the missionaries, including Bible stories, sold well both in Singapore town and its environs. Bible classes held in an Arab street shop house by a Malay speaking Chinese convert to Christianity attracted continual, and polite, interest from both the Jawi Peranakan and Malays.

The idiosyncratic nature of contacts between Christian missionaries and Malays would appear to have two causes. Firstly, the contacts were primarily individual, and were not part of a long term plan or strategy by the missionaries to convert Malays. In fact a continual missionary complaint of the 1890's was that they had no such strategy. Nor does there appear to be any organised Malay resistance to such missionary efforts as there were. Secondly, the work of the missionaries was of some value. The visits of women from the Women's Foreign Missionary Society to the kampongs were straightforward attempts to initiate girls' schools as had been done in Chinese neighbourhoods. Missionaries who brought inexpensive story books to outlying areas of Singapore, and even to Johor and Riau, made available a product otherwise not available to the Malay population. The missionaries themselves noted that local religious teachers usually could exercise discernment concerning which missionary literature should be avoided by Muslims.<sup>28</sup>



Given the mixed experience on both sides it is not surprising that missionaries saw Muslims primarily through the eyes of Christians working in the dominantly Muslim societies of the Middle East or sub-continent. William Shellabear, who had specific charge of the mission to the Malays, published in the *Malaysia Message* from 1893 onwards a number of articles by missionaries about the "problem" of Islam. Most of the presentations centred around the question of whether Islam in some way prepared people to hear the "higher" message of the Gospel. Shellabear and most of the other missionaries answered in the negative. Their analysis was determined primarily by two ways of thinking. The first was their close identification of Christian ideals with the individualism and rationalism of Anglo-American culture and its dichotomising view of the material and spiritual dimensions of reality.<sup>29</sup> Their views were reflected in articles by Samuel Zwemer which Shellabear published in the *Malaysia Message* along with his own. Zwemer's major complaint was that popular Islam was irrational, an amalgam of traditions and legends.<sup>30</sup> Ordinary Muslims he regarded as largely ignorant of whatever intellectual treasure Islam might possess.<sup>31</sup> Secondly he criticised Islam itself as being overly formal and ritualistic, lacking a true ethic.

G.M. Reith, who seems representative of the liberally educated Singapore establishment, took a different view. He argued that true Islam was identical to true Christianity and true Judaism. He excluded from the true forms of all these religions the bulk of their scriptures and virtually all of their practices, seeing each as fundamentally a means of entering an unencumbered spiritual relationship with the one true God. True to the tenor of his enlightenment belief in progress, his one criticism of Islam was that unlike Christianity it "left itself no scope for healthy development". In the tradition of earlier Deists he praised Islam for denying the divinity of Jesus. Ultimately he felt both Christianity and Islam needed "the rise of a sound historical criticism" so that the job of the Christian missionary was "to rouse a spirit of inquiry and to instil the principles of true criticism, in order that the Mohammedans themselves may be enabled to rediscover Islam - the vital principle of faith which is common to the three great religions of the world"<sup>32</sup> Reith had supporters in Singapore society. The *Free Press* ran extracts of his various lectures, and defended him against his detractors.<sup>33</sup> Yet his congregation, with the majority of Singapore's missionaries, could not accept his views. At this point in the religious life of the colony ordinary Christians found his opinions troubling, resulting in his eventual dismissal.<sup>34</sup>

The second missionary approach to analysing Islam was to examine the issue of revelation. The missionaries were predisposed to find fault with any belief-system outside Christianity on the basis that only the latter possessed

divinely revealed truth. Men educated in the liberal tradition, such as Reith, believed in the universality of God's natural revelation, and attributed to Islam the ideals of an enlightened Englishman while regarding its faults as historical accidents. Shellabear and his fellow missionaries stressed the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and the way in which humanity's innate sinfulness distorted any "natural" or universal revelation.<sup>35</sup> They regarded the faults they found in Islam as indications of flaws in its merely human doctrines. Different as they were both parties fit into the general pattern of attitudes toward Islam in the Victorian era. These attitudes were a product of theological presuppositions about the possibility of finding truth anywhere outside Christianity, rather than either knowledge of or great personal experience with Muslims.<sup>36</sup>

What little evidence we have of Singaporean Muslim opinion about missionaries comes through the writings of the missionaries themselves, but suggests that Malay Muslims of the period were dependent for their views on those of Muslims in other colonial societies, mediated through the Arab and Jawi Peranakan population. In the 1890's Muslim reform movements in Singapore were focused primarily on the need for literacy and literary reform, and were just becoming conscious of the need to establish a new Muslim identity in the face of modernisation and colonialism. Missionaries, as representatives of these forces, did not appear to have been a matter of specific concern.

From 1900 to 1912 there was minimal interaction in Singapore between missionaries and Muslims. William Shellabear, who had been the driving force behind missionary outreach to the Malays, was in the Federated Malay States for most of this period. An attempt in 1902 to build a medical clinic for Malays was short-lived, due less to Muslim than missionary dis-interest. However, significant changes were taking place in both missionary and Muslim attitudes. These changes resulted in a confrontation of a wholly new type in Pasir Panjang in 1913.

The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was one in which the modernist movements in Islam which originated in the Middle East began to have an impact on Singaporean Muslims. The newspaper *Jawi Peranakan*, had, in the previous two decades, gradually begun to introduce to the literate Muslim community more news of events in the Middle East, and of intellectual movements there. Reformist newspapers in Arabic, such as *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa* and later *al-Manar* likewise circulated in the Muslim community in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the same period religious teachers and returning pilgrims brought with them both new ideas and broader perspectives on the challenges faced by Muslims world-wide. The rise of the *kaum muda*, or modernists, brought with it a new type of reform. It was aimed

not only at restoring religious purity, but also grappling directly with the impact of modern social structures and institutions on Muslims. The Muslim modernist press, notably *Al Iman* (founded in 1906) focused not only on Muslim weakness, but of the ways in which colonialism and modernity discouraged Muslim advancement. The problems of Malay Muslims were no longer treated in terms of personal weaknesses which could be overcome with religious resolve. They were treated, rather, as communal weaknesses manifested in social activities which detracted from the advancement of the community.<sup>37</sup>

In the same decade that Muslim modernism began to make its impact on Singaporean Muslims, the world-wide Christian missions movement began a long period of re-evaluating the relationship of Christianity to other religions, particularly with regard to practical efforts to evangelise their followers. This re-evaluation, which came into concrete form at the Cairo Conference in 1909 and the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, brought attention to two aspects of Islam which many missionaries had overlooked or poorly understood. The first was that Islam was in the midst of a period of ferment and renewal. Missionaries who had understood Islam primarily through 19<sup>th</sup> century analysis of Muslim religious texts, or through colonialist observations about Muslim customs, began to be aware of the modernist and pan-Islamist movements, and began to adjust their activities in response to these. In Singapore those Christians with an interest in Islam received this new awareness in different ways, depending on their own experience with the Malay community. One event in 1913 helped revolutionise Christian missionary perceptions about the power of modernist Islam among Malays in Singapore, yet because it affected only Christians it seems to have gone virtually unnoticed in colonial society at large.

### **3. THE CONFRONTATION AT PASIR PANJANG.**

By 1913 John Haffenden had been a resident of Singapore for over twenty years, serving faithfully as the agent for the British and Foreign Bible Society. When he retired from this service he chose to stay in Singapore and carry out directly the work which his publications had supported for two decades, the evangelization of the Malays. Like other missionaries before him, he had tried a variety of approaches, most notably the distribution of Bibles and tracts, without great success. In 1910 or 1911 he initiated a new approach, one which showed a keen awareness of developments in Malay society. He organised, in Pasir Panjang, a sports club for young Malay men. Sports clubs had grown very popular among Malays in the first decades of the century, with more than 40 existing in 1913.<sup>38</sup> Haffenden's club was, however, unique. In addition to team sports, particularly football, Haffenden gathered the

participants for discussions of contemporary issues, the viewing of magic lantern shows, and most notably a study of the Christian Bible. It was exactly the type of missionary initiative suggested by the Edinburgh conference. It built on the desire of Muslims to integrate themselves into modern society, while also linking that modern society with Christianity. And it used Islamic beliefs as a foundation for teaching Christianity as the fulfilment of genuine Muslim aspirations. It proved to be a success, consistently attracting a number of men and developing its own leadership. It also attracted the less favourable attention of the Muslim reformer and editor of *Neracha*, Haji Abbas bin Muhammed Taha.

For most of early 1913 Haffenden was ill and William Shellabear, who assisted him from 1912 onward, was out of Singapore. Their football club was therefore left to handle its own affairs. When Shellabear finally visited the football club in June of 1913 he discovered that the Malay men who had been meeting to study Christianity were in a state of fright and confusion. In March the Malay paper *Neracha* had spoken out against the "Christian club".<sup>39</sup> Haji Abbas had challenged its members to meet at the local surau,

Insya-Allah kita akan datang ke Pasir Panjang itu memberi ucapan di surau itu di mesjid-mesjid disana tentang perkara yang berkenaan dengan agama Islam dan sebagainya. Dan kita harap sekalian kaum kita Islam di sana hadir ke mesjid itu surau yang akan dinyatakan kepada tuan-tuan di sana dahulu dari hari yang kita akan datang ke sana. Dan jika penyeru agama asing ada usaha berulang-ulang pada kaum kita Islam maka kita yang beriman dengan agama kita tidak peka terlebih lagi patut memberi nasihat tentang yang berkata dengan agama kita.

*(God willing we will come to Pasir Panjang and give a speech at the surau of one of the mosques there concerning various matters pertaining to the Islamic religion. We hope that the our entire Muslim community there will be present at the surau of the mosque, which will be announced prior to the day we come. And if advocates of other religions are willing to return to our Islamic community then those of us who are faithful to our religion will not be so sensitive (or vigilant) any longer and, as is proper, will give advice concerning what is said with our religion.*<sup>40</sup>

The confrontation did not materialize. The Malay members of Haffenden's group interpreted Haji Abbas' challenge as a threat to them personally. They reported to Shellabear that Haji Abbas did come to the mosque with some two score of his followers and challenged either the missionaries or the participants in the sports club to make themselves known. The missionaries regarded this as little better than thuggery, but admitted that the intervention of *Neracha* and its confrontational editor did succeed in cooling the openness of the young men in Pasir Panjang toward their advances.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of Muslim understanding of Christian missions this intervention by Haji Abbas and *Neracha* is significant in two ways. Firstly it was an organized and publicized, rather than *ad hoc*, attack on an established

Christian missionary program among the Malays. Secondly it may have helped prompt a broader attack on sports clubs and other western type social organizations which was initiated in *Neracha* in June of the same year.<sup>42</sup> In any case, from this point onward the Muslim press would insure that Christian evangelism among Muslims in Singapore and Malaya would be scrutinized before the Muslim public and, when successful, would spur a communal response.

The publicised challenge to the members of the Pasir Panjang sports club likewise changed missionary perceptions about Islam in Singapore. In August of 1913 William Shellabear was asked to present a paper to the Straits Philosophical Society on "The Influence of Islam on the Malay Race". He used the invitation as a chance to expand his research into Islam among Malays, and to reflect on his own experiences. He read the works of Wilkinson, Blagden, and Skeat which he had not previously seen, as well as ordering Snouck Hurgronje's classic work "The Acehnese".<sup>43</sup>

Shellabear's presentation showed a still narrow perspective toward Islam as a religion. The knowledge Shellabear had of Malay society from reading the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* was primarily oriented toward practical information for colonial administrators about Malay customs and political precedents.<sup>44</sup> The same was true of the knowledge he gleaned from Wilkinson's *Papers on Malay Subjects*, which was intended for use by colonial administrators. Out of these and other sources Shellabear quoted the views of Raffles, Marsden and Skeat, as well as Wilkinson, on the nature of Malay society. Theirs were views weighted toward, and appreciative of, ancient customs and *adat* (customary law). From Samuel Zwemer Shellabear got his view of Arabian Islam. It was a view which was harshly negative.<sup>45</sup>

As a result Shellabear idealised the culture of the pre-Islamic Malays, particularly the Minangkabaus, and the civilisation of the great Javanese kingdoms which shaped that culture. He believed that these societies were somewhat democratic, were monogamous, and forbade slavery. Every subsequent change for the worse he attributed to Arab influences, which he blamed for polygamy, piracy, the slave trade, and (with an irony he didn't see), for a failure to encourage vernacular education by their insistence that the Quran be studied in Arabic.<sup>46</sup> Civilisation he defined primarily in terms of material and technological attainments, or in terms of high moral standards, as defined by Christianity. Thus he gave credit to his own people for stable government and material advancement. He found that Islam had not eliminated the vestiges of Hindu polytheism and magic in Malay culture, just as it had failed, in his view, to transform Arab culture. Being convinced

that it was a religion of ritual rather than the heart, he attributed to it little of religious value.<sup>47</sup>

Shellabear's definition of civilisation, and his understanding of morality, predetermined the conclusion of his paper that Islam had done little to advance the Malays. Three influences on his thinking caused him to also make a positive contribution to the debate on the role of Islam in Malay society. The first was his religiously based conviction that all races were equal. The second was his careful following of the Malay press in Singapore over a period of nearly two decades, and particularly the work of Haji Abbas and *Neracha*. This, in combination with the events at Pasir Panjang a few months earlier, had alerted him to the growing significance of Muslim reformist movements. The third influence was the views of R.J. Wilkinson and other civil servants of the "pro-Malay" faction.

Racism and Social Darwinism had justified both a laissez-faire attitude toward the Malays by colonial authorities, their exclusion from some aspects of the economy, and the view that British management of their political and economic affairs would need to be virtually perpetual.<sup>48</sup> Men like R.J. Wilkinson, E.W. Birch, G.M. Laidlaw, and others of their generation knew from experience that this understanding of the Malays was neither realistic nor in Malay interests.<sup>49</sup> They refused to regard Malays as 'devoid of usefulness', or 'hopelessly backward'.<sup>50</sup> These views were particularly reflected in Wilkinson's *Papers on Malay Subjects*. Wilkinson viewed Malays as a people who were becoming educated, who read newspapers and books, and who improved upon and were not bound by ancient customs. He saw Malays becoming involved in commerce, and learning from mistakes.<sup>51</sup> Most of all Wilkinson regretted that the positive aspects of Malay culture and language were being deprecated by those who wanted nothing to interfere with the spread of English education and the promotion of business interests.<sup>52</sup> While Wilkinson and his compatriots were less interested in the religious value of Islam than its social and political implications, their views of Malay culture enlarged and reinforced those of Shellabear. While there would be missionaries after Shellabear who continued to deprecate the Malay race, at least in Methodist circles a newer and more positive understanding prevailed.

But Shellabear was not only prepared to take the Malays more seriously as equal partners in the development of modern Singapore society. He also took seriously the influence of Islam on the development of modern Malay society. Two decades earlier he had written of Malays that "for the great mass faith consists chiefly of a blind and unreasoning acceptance of certain dogmas, of which they know little and understand less."<sup>53</sup> He now saw Islam, particularly as understood and propagated by the reformists, as a potent

force in the world generally and Malay society specifically, and one whose influence was growing. Shellabear personally would devote the remainder of his life to the study of Islam and the appropriate approaches Christians should take to it.

Not all members of colonial society were so aware of what was happening in their midst. J.L. Humphries, who responded to Shellabear's essay, had a much different understanding of Malay society. If Shellabear was agitated by, and critical towards, Islam, Humphries was patronising toward both Islam and the Malays. Humphries praised the influence of Islam on Malay society to the extent that it gave "a noble creed, an enlightened form of monotheism, and sound habits of personal cleanliness."<sup>54</sup> Such sentiments echoed G.M. Reith's broad liberalism of 15 years earlier.<sup>55</sup> In contrast to Shellabear's concerns about the growing influence of Islamic reformers, Humphries stated that "the Malay is a sane and genuine Muhammadan, but no bigot and no fanatic", and that the influence of Islam was "broad rather than deep". He believed that the "Malay spirit" had not changed in five centuries, and was unlikely to change in the future. Such a dismissal of Islam as a social force reflected the wishful thinking of those whose vision of Malaya did not allow religion to interfere with government and economic development.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately it was a confirmation for Humphries that the Malays were inevitably bound in a primitive and superstitious world-view.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately the views of both Shellabear and Humphries were each in their way, too limited to account for later events in Malay society. At the same time Haji Abbas failed to see the extent to which Western social structures, and even missionary efforts, could be both accommodated and transformed by Islam. A year after the incident at Pasir Panjang the Methodist missionaries found a warm reception among Singapore Muslims when they began to establish Malay medium schools for girls. Although these schools were abandoned when their founder, Emma Shellabear, left Singapore, they ultimately gathered nearly 100 girls for a basic curriculum of reading, writing, and mathematics. Apparently many Malay parents believed Encik Abdullah, a former student of Benjamin Keasberry's school from the 1860\_s, Abdullah was invited to invoke God's blessing on the schools, and assured parents and girls, no doubt from his own experience, that they "had nothing to fear from missionaries, since only God can change a person's heart."<sup>58</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Neither the Confucian Revival nor the rise of the Kaum Muda, nor for that matter the ever growing presence of the Mission schools, would finally determine the shape of Singapore society. However their confrontations did, in many ways, determine the basis upon which the followers of the different

religions would relate to each other. When, in his later years, William Shellabear would call for a new "aggressive evangelism", one which would be "aggressive in doing good for others", it reflected not only a change in his understanding of the Christian faith, but an awareness of the social realities in which Christians worked. It was a change which emerged out of these, and other, encounters with both Confucianists and Muslims. Similarly, Muslims and followers of Chinese religions in part defined their relationship with Christianity, and particularly Christian missions, through these encounters. What missionaries offered was not rejected, but it was accepted with discernment. Non-Christians would accept Christian missions in their role of offering care and education, for this they could accept as being within the scope of human endeavour. However, the role of changing people's hearts, they finally made clear, should be left to God alone.



## Note

1. *Malaysia Message*, June 1893, p.91. The *Malaysia Message* refers to the Annual Report of the Raffles Institution, published in the Straits Times in May of 1893.
2. Sophia Blackmore, "Report on 50 Years of WFMS work in Malaya", unpublished typescript, chapter 2, p.11.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Minutes of the Malaysia Annual Conference, 1897, Report of the Education Committee, p. 40.
5. C M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 106.
6. Ho Seng On, *Methodist Schools in Malaysia*, Methodist Board of Education, Kuala Lumpur, 1964, p. 36.
7. *The Malaysia Message*, 1896, p. 105.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Yen Ching Hwang "The Confucian Revival Movement in Singapore and Malaya, 1899-1911", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No.1 (March 1976) p. 53.
10. Reith G. M., "Christianity and Mohammedanism", In Ridley, H.N. (ed.), *Noctes Orientales*, Kelly and Walsh Ltd., Singapore, 1913, p. 53
11. "The Confucian Revival Movement in Singapore and Malaya, 1899-1911", Yen Ching-Hwang, p. 52.
12. Lim Boon Keng, "The Influence of Religion in China", In Ridley, H. N. (ed.), *Noctes Orientales*, Kelly and Walsh Ltd., Singapore, 1913, p. p. 70.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
16. *Ibid.* pp. 64, 65.
17. *Ibid.* p. 69.
18. *Ibid.* p. 75.
19. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore*, pp. 106-107.
20. *Malaysia Message*, August, 1896, p. 103-104, *Minutes of the Malaysia Annual Conference*, 1897, p. 31.
21. *Malaysia Message*, Sept, 1896, p. 115.
22. *Malaysia Message*, August, 1896, p. 103-104, *Minutes of the Malaysia Annual Conference*, 1897, p. 31.
23. *Minutes of the Malaysia Annual Conference 1892*, p. 23.
24. Blackmore, "Report" chapter 2, p.4
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Malaysia Message*, January, 1895, p. 43.
27. *Malaysia Message*, March, 1895, p. 57. Exactly who threatened Andreus, or the seriousness of those threats, is not mentioned in the missionary records.
28. *Malaysia Message*, March, 1892, p. 42, 48.
29. Stanley, Brian, *The Bible and the Flag*, Apollon, Leicester, 1990, p. 160.
30. *Malaysia Message*, May, 1899, Article by S. Zwemer, p. 92. Samuel Zwemer, (1867-1952) was a missionary in Arabia from 1890-1905. After that he devoted his life to the promotion of missions among Muslims, and was a prolific writer about Islam and Christian missions. Much of his work was dedicated to developing effective strategies for communicating with Muslims.
31. *Malaysia Message*, August 1897, p. 128.
32. Reith, G.M. "Christianity and Mohammedanism" *Noctes Orientales*, ed. H.N. Ridley, Kelly and Walsh Ltd. Singapore, 1913, pp. 52, 53.

33. *Singapore Free Press*, April 17, 1893.
34. In the March 1896 issue of the *Malaysia Message* Shellabear noted that many differed widely with Reith's doctrinal views, which was apparently the reason he was asked to leave his Singapore post.
35. *Malaysia Message*, October 1893, p.1.
36. Clinton Bennett, "Victorian Images of Islam", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 1991, p. 119.
37. William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, University of Malaya Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1980, p. 57.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
39. W. G. Shellabear to Emma, June 11, 1913, No. 78294, Hartford Seminary Archives. The articles to which Shellabear referred in his letter appeared in the issues of *Neracha* dated 10 Rabiulakhir, 1331, and 17 Rabiulakhir, 1331, in the Islamic calendar. This would correspond to 17, March, 1913, and 23 March, 1913. The articles represent a remarkable breakthrough in Muslim expressions of discontent with Christian missionary activity. There had been many instances when Muslims had privately asked the government to prevent or forbid Christian activities or publications which were regarded as offensive. But never before had they invited a public confrontation with missionaries and their followers.
40. *Neracha*, 17 Rabiulakhir, 1331 (23 March, 1913) p. 1.
41. W. G. Shellabear to Emma, June 22, 1913 No. 78296, Loc. cit.
42. Roff, *The Origins*, p. 183. In June *Neracha* ran a series of broader attacks against the new sports clubs which were proliferating among working class Malays, and one must wonder whether Abbas's opposition was not based in part on his knowledge of what was transpiring at Pasir Panjang.
43. W.G. Shellabear to Emma, Sept. 3, 1913 No. 78306, Loc. cite.
44. C.D. Cowan, "Ideas of History in the Journal of the Malayan (Straits) Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1878-1941", pp. 282, 283. D. G. E. Hall (ed.), *Historians of South-east Asia*, Oxford University Press, London, 1961.
45. The series of articles by Zwemer reprinted in the *Malaysia Message* demonstrate this. They accuse the Muslim Arabs of every possible heinous social crime, from abuse of children, to easy divorce and slavery, *Malaysia Message*, Nov. 1915, p. 12, May, 1914, p. 70.
46. Shellabear, W.G., "Muslim Influence on the Malay Race", a paper read for the *Straits Philosophical Society*, p. 87. (A copy of this paper was provided for me by Dr Lim Teck Ghee of the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Malaya). The views Shellabear expressed in this regard follow closely those expressed by Wilkinson in his paper "Malay Mohammedanism", first published in 1906. (Wilkinson, R. J., "Papers on Malay Customs and Beliefs", *JMBRAS*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1957, p. 8).
47. *Malaysia Message* May, 1915, p. 67.
48. B. Andaya and L. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982, p. 176.
49. R. J. Wilkinson, (ed.), *Papers on Malay Subjects, 1907-1916*. Selected and introduced by P. L Burns, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1971. "Introduction", pp. 2, 4.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
51. *Malaysia Message*, November 1895, p. 20.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
53. *Malaysia Message*, November, 1895, p. 20.
54. Shellabear, "Muslim Influence ...", p. 100.
55. Clinton Bennett, "Victorian Images of Islam", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 15, No. 3, July 1991, p. 117.

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56. Moshe Yegar, *Islam and Islamic Institutions in British Malaya*. The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1979. Yegar documents well the dichotomy between British attitudes toward Islam and the practical effects of imposing organised administrative structures and legal codifications on the practice of Islam. on administration and economic development and to marginalise the political position of the Sultan whose powers were restricted to the administration of religious affairs. Thus when the Sultans used the constitutional powers which British rule made possible to codify and implement Islamic law they were resisted. (p. 193) And enforcement was avoided since Islamic law was regarded as "repugnant to European ideas". (p. 195).
58. *Minutes of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society Conference, 1916*. pp./ 142-143.