

## **Dialogue through the Arts. Towards an Aesthetics of Interreligious Encounter**

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From its very beginning Christianity has been a translation movement.<sup>1</sup> Crossing borders, leading to the encounter with other cultures and religions early on, was inevitable for adherents of a religion that proclaimed universal salvation in Jesus Christ. The wandering charismatic Jesus still represented an inner Jewish reformation movement. He felt himself sent to the Jews. At the same time his life world was affected by the Roman Empire and Hellenistic culture – the Via Maris passed the sea of Galilee, while cities like Tiberias, Sephoris and the Decapolis were within walking distance. Pagans like the Syrophenician women (Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28) and the Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10; Matthew 8:5-13) were not rejected but there was no mission agenda yet. This developed in the circles of Jesus sympathizers around Diaspora synagogues. In the early discussions about a suitable mission strategy Paul successfully defended his stance that non-Jewish converts did not have to become circumcised neither had they to obey the dietary rules of Judaism (Galatians 2,1-10; Acts 15,1-35). This opened the door to cultural diversity within Christianity. The emergence of a new religion parallel to the identity reconstruction taking place in Rabbinic Judaism at the same time, however, laid the foundation for Christian anti-judaism.

Islam and Buddhism share missionary zeal with Christianity and interact with local cultures and religions in their own ways. A good example for iconographic cross over along the silk road – travelled by

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Maryknoll, NY 1989 [revised edition 2009].

Nestorian Christians and Buddhist monks alike – is the gender switch of the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin from male to female, inspired by the iconography of local goddesses or the Christian Mother Mary. Later in the Jesuit period the iconography of Guanyin influenced the Asian look of Mary. With the exception of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> c. – 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> c.), Judaism and Hinduism have mainly spread as migrant religions, forming Diasporas. Yet they also have interacted with local cultures and religions as can be seen by looking at synagogue architecture<sup>2</sup> or the integration of local deities into the Hindu pantheon. The reception of modern themes in traditional art forms or the transposition of temporary sand paintings or murals on canvas shows that tribal cultures are open to iconographic exchanges as well.

Interreligious dialogue is a modern project mainly initiated by Christianity. Its root cause was Christian guilt and repentance with regard to the Holocaust. In a certain sense Jewish-Christian dialogue is the mother of all interreligious dialogues. Yet in earlier times there was interest in interreligious conversation from the Muslim side in Andalusia (8<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> c.) and at the Mughal court in India (16<sup>th</sup> /17<sup>th</sup> c.). In both cases also iconographic interactions took place, like Mozarabic elements in the architecture of Romanesque Churches or the Mughal miniatures that cover Muslim, Hindu and Christian themes.<sup>3</sup> In Christian mission history there is material evidence of interreligious encounter through the arts already from the 7<sup>th</sup> /8<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>4</sup>

This article is a first attempt to develop an aesthetic of interreligious encounter. After an historic overview (1), I sketch a typology of interreligious aesthetics (2), drawing on terminologies, concepts and theories derived from intercultural theology. In the concluding practical part, the theory is tested on a sample of Indonesian artists from Christian and Muslim backgrounds (3).

<sup>2</sup> The builders of the house church and the synagogue in Dura Europos have been making use of Hellenistic iconography in similar ways (3<sup>rd</sup> century).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jose Fernandez Arenas, *La Arquitectura Mozarabe*, 1972; Jaques Fontaine, *L'Art Mozarabe. L'Art Préroman Hispanique*, Vol. 2, La Pierre-qui-Vire 2<sup>nd</sup> 1995. J.M. Rogers, *Mughal Miniatures*, London 1993; Felix zu Löwenstein, *Christliche Bilder in Altindischer Malerei*, Münster 1958.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Volker Küster, Art.: Art and Religion: III.2.i. Asia, Africa, Latin America, in: *Religion Past and Present. Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion [RPP]*, Vol. 1, Leiden and Boston 2007, 411-413; id., Christian Art in Asia: Yesterday and Today, in: *The Christian Story: Five Asian Artists Today*, Museum of Biblical Art, New York and London 2007, 28-43.

## 1. Christian iconography in interreligious encounters through the ages

At the beginning there was an aniconic phase in Christian religion. Believers did not dare to depict the “mysterium tremendum and fascinans”.<sup>5</sup> The cross and the fish may have been the first cautious symbolic representations of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> When in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century some artists turned to familiar art forms to develop a Christian iconography, Hermes, the Hellenistic messenger of the gods, became a model for the Good Shepherd.

A few hundred years later in the East, the stele of Sianfu, founding document of Nestorian Christianity in China, bore on its top an engraving of a Syrian cross standing on a lotus flower. In Hindu and Buddhist iconography the lotus is the seat or rostrum of the gods and the Buddha. The Christian symbol is thus not superimposed on the lotus, as some suspicious postcolonial minds may suggest, but to the contrary the lotus is elevating the cross.

The Syrian cross is not so much a symbol of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, but of his resurrection. This cosmic symbolism combines well with the Taoist cloud ornaments to the left and the right. As the cross is *the* symbol for Christianity, so the lotus is for Hinduism and especially for Buddhism. Growing out of the mud, its beautiful flower symbolizes purity. This again compliments the accompanying lilies to the left and right. In Western medieval depictions of the annunciation, the angel often holds a white lily as a symbol of purity.<sup>7</sup>

The Jesuit mission in the 16<sup>th</sup> century initiated *accommodated* Christian art in China, India and other mission territories. A few silk paintings and miniatures depicting the Madonna with Asian features and costumes have been preserved. The child on her arms is often still reminiscent of the Western Renaissance models that were handed out by the missionaries to the local artists. The closer the painter gets to the holy, the more reluctant he becomes to accommodate, one could

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Breslau 1917 [Engl. 1923].

<sup>6</sup> Due to the mysterium religions usually go through an aniconic phase. Christianity started up with symbols like the cross and the fish, Hinduism has the lingam and yoni, and Buddhism the eight-spoked wheel of teaching and the footprint of the Buddha. Religions that follow a prohibition of images like Judaism and Islam remain aniconic and ornamental at least in official religion and in public.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the St. Thomas Cross in India from the same period, both reprinted in: Küster, *Christian Art in Asia*, 29f.

presume. The resurgence of the missionary movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century initially rejected things indigenous out of a strong Eurocentrism. Nevertheless there was some indigenized Christian art even in Protestant circles. Yet it was mainly a Catholic renaissance starting in the 1930s that produced a kind of neo-accommodation, flourishing around art schools established by missionary orders.

In Indonesia e.g., the Dutch plantation owner and Catholic lay theologian Prof. Dr. Joseph Ignaz Schmutzer (1882-1946) drew sketches for sculptures of Mary and/or Jesus in Hindu-Javanese style. They were realized by the Muslim sculptor and woodcarver Iko. On his plantation in Ganjuran, Schmutzer also built a Sacred Heart shrine in the style of the nearby Hindu temple Prambanang. Schmutzer was convinced that the Hindu imagery was better suited for the accommodation of Christian faith in Java than that of its kindred religion Islam.<sup>8</sup>

For the creation of two statues of Mary, Schmutzer followed closely the iconography of the originally Buddhist queen of wisdom Prajnaparamita, who occasionally is also called princess Dedes (*Putri Desi*) and is very popular on Java.<sup>9</sup> As the first queen of Singhasari, she became the mother of the kings of Singhasari and Majapahit. Accordingly, Mary sits on a throne dressed like a Javanese queen, surrounded by a halo. She wears a crown on her head and precious jewels around her neck and at her ears. On her lap sits baby Jesus depicted as a small adult, following the western model. Jesus also wears Javanese royal dress. His crowned head is encircled by a halo. The index and middle fingers of his right hand join to point upward in a gesture of benediction, while, the tips of thumb, ring and little finger are brought together to form a circle, the symbol of the Trinity. In his left hand, Jesus holds a sphere, reminiscent of the orb in western iconography, which obviously could not be assigned a new function in the foreign context.

With the emancipation of Christian churches and theology after World War Two a contextual Christian Art developed. When I speak of "Christian" art here, I take into consideration a certain "non-simultaneousness of simultaneous phenomena (*Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen*)". The Christian identity reconstructions through the arts in Africa, Asia and Latin America are, however, more comparable

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Joseph Schmutzer et al., *Europeanisme of Catholicisme*, Utrecht and Leuven 1928.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., fig. 9-11.

to Early Christian or medieval art in the West than to modern art. We will have a closer look at the Indonesian case in the third part of this article.

## 2. Typology of aesthetics of interreligious encounter

The two extreme positions in interreligious encounter are the total rejection of the religious other in *fundamentalism* and the mingling with other religions in *syncretism*. The discussions around the relationship between Christian faith and culture as well as other religions have produced a terminological framework on which we can rely.<sup>10</sup> The *accommodation model* tries to keep form and content, Christian faith and culture, apart, like kernel and husk of a nut. Proponents of the *inculturation model*, however, are aware of the inevitable exchange that is taking place wherever cultures and religions meet. The relationship between Christian faith and culture is accordingly compared to an onion. If one peels off the layers nothing is left in the end. *Syncretism* describes the phenomenon of interreligious exchange, when one religion takes over elements of another religion. As long as it is able to integrate them creatively in its own system this is a matter of intra-religious change. Yet there are also cases in which the elements of the other religion transform the receiving religion in a way that a new religious movement develops.

A *theology of religions* reflects on the role of other religions in the Christian frame of reference. Basically it is torn by an exclusivism-inclusivism dilemma. The religious other is either lost if he or she does not convert or they are already included by the grace of God. The postmodern pluralist theology of religions aimed to break through this dilemma but ended up in a sort of meta-inclusivism that saw all religions converging at some point of salvation. Most evangelicals today are well-behaved exclusivists in this respect. Inculturation can be regarded as a form of inclusivism or integrated syncretism. In *interreligious dialogue* the partners encounter each other in mutual respect and make themselves vulnerable to one another by crossing the borders of their own community. They try to understand the other in a way that he or she can recognize him or herself in that perception, while at the same time the dialogue partners give witness to their respective tradition. What does all this mean for interreligious aesthetics?

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Volker Küster, Who, with whom; id., *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Christology*, Maryknoll, NY 2001, 1-36.

*Fundamentalism* leads to internal and external iconoclasm. Even the Bible and Qur'an relate such incidents.<sup>11</sup> In Byzantium the Christian iconoclasts were not least inspired by the Muslim prohibition of images. In the West the radical wing of the reformation wanted to make visible its dissociation from Roman Catholicism through iconoclasm. Interreligious iconoclasm took place in the mission field, when wooden sculptures of primal religions were burned and stone statues and temples of Hinduism and Buddhism were torn down. Even today fundamentalist Korean Christians smear paint on Buddha statues or even damage them. Radical Muslims attack Hindu temples and Christian churches in India and blow up Buddhist sculptures in Afghanistan. Hindu fundamentalists attack churches and mosques alike. While images of Jesus in Hindu temples are mere *syncretism, inculturation* produces images of the dancing Christ influenced by the dancing Shiva (*shiva nataraja*) or Jesus the teacher, inspired by the Buddha.<sup>12</sup>

“*Dialogue through the arts*” finally opens up several perspectives in accordance with the classic hermeneutic patterns: behind the image, in the image and in front of the image, or dialogue of the artists, dialogue of the images and dialogue of the viewers. In a similar way the iconoclasts argue in their polemics that the artist replaces God as creator, the artwork replaces God, or the viewer venerates the artwork instead of God. Catholic missionaries commissioned local craftsmen and artists who were adherents of other religions, whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam or primary religion to build churches or create Christian sculpture and painting. These artists brought their own iconographic repertoire with them, which influenced the Christian imagery introduced to them by the missionaries. Some of them converted through their engagement with Christian themes themselves. Other artists started to paint Christian themes after their conversion but drew on their cultural knowledge nevertheless. Besides this inner dialogue of the individual artist, artists were also influenced by each other's work. Through this encounter non-Christian artists might well get inspired to depict Christian themes out of curiosity for the subject. The artists might even engage in a direct dialogue with each other. Secondly the artworks themselves can enter into a dialogue while hanging next to each other, or, for that matter, inspire the viewer. The curator

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Judges 6,25f; 2 Kings 18,4 and 23; 2. Chronicles 34; Sura [19,44ff], 21,58ff.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the images of Christ by Nyoman Darsane and Solomon Raj in Volker Küster, “... and foolishness to Gentiles”. Images of Christ from Africa and Asia, in: *Mission Studies* 12, 1995, 95-112.

has of course a certain maeutic function in this process in terms of selecting and hanging the paintings. How do artworks of different religious affiliation address issues of human life and its transcendence? To what extent are they expressions of faith through the arts? Finally, artworks – not necessarily only religious ones – create a “third space” for viewers of different religious affiliation to get into a dialogue about what they see and feel. In all three forms of aesthetic dialogue translation, questioning and exchange are the basic patterns.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Contemporary Religious Art on Java

The rise of Islam on Java in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was a setback for the visual culture of the Hindu-Buddhist Religion. Still this visual culture eventually made its inroads into the Javanese branch of Islam that started to develop. With the rise of modern Indonesian art in the 1930s, artists of Muslim background also entered the scene. Aniconic aesthetic expressions like calligraphy have a certain affinity to modern abstract art. In contemporary art this has led to hybrid developments.

After the pioneering initiative of Schmutzer in the 1930s, it took a few decades for a Christian art scene to develop. Interestingly enough Sudjojono (1914/17-1986), the father of modern Indonesian painting, was a Christian himself and also painted some Christian motifs. The 1993 book *Many Faces of Christian Art in Indonesia*, published by the National Council of Churches, counts some 48 artists, most of them working on Java or Bali.<sup>14</sup>

Muslim, Christian and Hindu artists had earlier shown their work in joint exhibitions on Java.<sup>15</sup> Yet for the first time in the Yogya exhibition on the occasion of the conference of the Indonesian-Dutch Consortium on Muslim-Christian Relations (March 26-30, 2012) this took place under the explicit theme “Dialogue through the Arts”. Several of the artists were present during the opening ceremony and debated the subject during a panel in the auditorium of Duta Wacana Christian University. In what follows I will briefly introduce the artists personally and interpret one painting by each of them.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Volker Küster, A Dialogue in Pictures. Reformbuddhism and Christianity in the Works of Ven. Hatigamma Uttarananda / Sri Lanka, in: *Exchange* 39, 2010, 6-28.

<sup>14</sup> *Many Faces of Christian Art in Indonesia* [Beberapa Wajah Seni Rupa Kristiani Indonesia], ed. by Communion of Churches in Indonesia [Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia], Jakarta 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Catalogue Asian Spiritual Art Exhibition, Yogyakarta 2001; Dia Sang Kasih Buah Expresilmam. Pameran Seni Rupa Religius, Jakarta 2006.

*The Christian Art Scene in Yogyakarta*<sup>16</sup>

Yogyakarta, Java's youth-full university city and one of the two remaining sultanates in Indonesia, is second only to the scenic island of Bali as the site of a flourishing Christian art scene. With a population that is ca. 95 percent Hindu, Bali remains a haven for Hinduism, while Yogya today, like the rest of the country, is dominated by Islam. The Hindu-Buddhist past remains present, however, in the impressive, partly restored temple ruins of Prambanan and Borobudur not far from the city. Similar to Balinese Hinduism that not only absorbed Buddhism but also is a syncretistic amalgamation of traditional religion and culture (*Agama Hindu Bali*), Javanese Islam is at the same time drenched in traditional mysticism and the Hindu-Buddhist heritage. The iconography of the pillars in the entrance hall of the sultan's palace (*kraton*), already reflect this in their symbolism. The pillars are green – the color of Islam – with their lower parts decorated with a red and white lotus flower (Buddhism) and stylized elephant feet (Hinduism). The sultan has so far opposed fundamentalist tendencies within Islam and has also shown a tolerant attitude towards Christianity. Traditionally the *kraton* provides a space for art and crafts and the sultan officiates as patron and sponsor.

As early as 1949/50, soon after the Republic of Indonesia was founded (1945), the government established an Art Academy in Yogyakarta (ASRI – *Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia*) that over the years has become the leading institution in the country.<sup>17</sup> After a merger with two other art institutions for music (*AMI – Akademi Musik Indonesia*) and dance (*ASTI – Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia*), in 1984 ASRI became Indonesia Art Institute (ISI – *Institute Seni Indonesia*). ISI maintains a vibrant, interactive relationship with the local art scene. Many of the artists portrayed in what follows have some kind of connection with it.

(1) *Bagong Kussudiardja*

The most charismatic representative of the Christian art scene in Yogya was the dancer and painter Bagong Kussudiardja (1929-2004). Born into a family of Javanese Muslims (*abangan*) belonging to the local gentry (*bangsawan*) of the Sultan's palace, he spent his whole life in his birthplace Yogyakarta. His wife being a Christian, Bagong

<sup>16</sup> For a full account cf. Volker Küster, *The Christian Art Scene in Yogyakarta*, Kampen 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of the Ministry of Education and Culture No. 32 Kebud, December 14, 1949.

converted together with his children in 1968/69. Other families in the *kraton* followed his example.

Before his conversion Bagong was experimenting with traditional styles and themes. As early as 1948 he had begun to study painting with leading artists like Affandi (1907-1990), Hendra Gunawan (1918-1983), Kusnadi (1942-1997) and Sudiardjo of the thriving local art scene. He soon started to teach at the Art Academy (ASRI) himself. He was not only a painter and Batik artist<sup>18</sup>, but also took lessons in traditional dance and became a well-known choreographer. Already in 1958 he had established a Dance Training Center (PTL). The artist himself once stated: "Art is a part of my life. I feel that one needs art just as one needs food, clothing and shelter."<sup>19</sup> Works with Christian motifs constitute only a small part of his rich oeuvre.

### *Christ and the Fishermen*

This painting marks a rupture with the classical accommodation and inculturation art that give the universal Christian message a local expression (fig. 1). The traditional Indonesian fishing boats in the background are nostalgic. They suggest that Jesus Christ has arrived at a beach in the Indonesian islands. Shadowy figures are on their way to go fishing, just as Jesus' disciples were, at the Sea of Galilee 2000 years ago.

The group of people in the foreground evokes a quite different impression. Jesus in a blue bathing suit and muscle shirt, shoulder-length hair, full beard and hip metal-rimmed sunglasses, spreads his arms in an all-encompassing gesture. He attracts the full attention of the fishermen standing and crouching around him. Some of the contours of these figures remind the beholder of shadow puppets. They are mainly dressed in shorts and T-shirts. Their skin-color ranges from black, brown and red to the white skin of the person at Jesus' back. Contrary to the common habit of claiming Jesus for the particular context, the artist plays here with the universal dimension of Christian faith. The casual clothes, the signature of global youth culture, symbolize at the same time the irruption of modernity into Indonesian society. Plural modernities, integrating the western hyperculture of consumer capitalism in a hybrid mix of different influences into their

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<sup>18</sup> It is said that using the batik technique to produce paintings was introduced in Yogya by Bagong in the 1970s.

<sup>19</sup> Masao Takenaka and Ron O'Grady (eds), *The Bible through Asian Eyes*, Auckland etc. 1991, 164.

own culture, have already developed. Jesus Christ is present amongst all of this.

(2) *Nyoman Darsane – A Balinese alter ego*

Nyoman Darsane<sup>20</sup> who received part of his art education on Java and in his early years kept close contacts with the art scene there is the Nestor of Balinese Christian art and in many respects Bagong's alter ego. Born and raised as a Hindu (\*1939) Darsane converted to Christianity at the age of 17. Like many Balinese rice farmers, his father was also a musician who played in the orchestra of the local ruler. Nyoman was brought up together with one of the princes and educated in the palace. That experience provided him with a deep knowledge of Hindu-Balinese religion and culture. It paved the way for him to not only become a painter but also a musician, dancer and puppeteer. His academic training at the college in Semarang, Java finally made him familiar with the western tradition as well. His early paintings are reminiscent of Gauguin, van Gogh and Nolde. Darsane thus belongs to the heterogeneous group of the so-called *academicians*, those artists who have studied at one of the country's art colleges. Although they are experimenting with western influenced style, they have continuously been searching for their own Balinese identity. In Darsane's case there is a special emphasis added to this: since he converted to Christianity, he has been trying to mold this religion into a Balinese-Christian form.

As a result of his conversion, Darsane had been excluded from his family and ostracized by the village community. The Hindu-Balinese religion originated from the encounter between Hinduism and Balinese tribal religions, and even today it retains many features of this primal religion. Religion and community are closely intertwined; whoever turns away from the common religion also renounces the solidarity of the community. Instead of the customary prearranged marriage Darsane made his own choice by marrying a Christian woman of Chinese descent. Their only child Yossy has become an artist himself. His constant effort to give Christianity a Balinese shape final-

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Volker Küster, Karel Steenbrink and Rai Sudhiarsa, Christian Art in Indonesia, in: Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (eds), *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, Leiden and Boston 2008, 925-949, 940-947; id., Accommodation or Contextualisation? Ketut Lasia and Nyoman Darsane – Two Balinese Christian Artists, in: *Mission Studies* 16, 1999, 157-172; id. / Theo Sundermeier, *Das schöne Evangelium. Christliche Kunst im balinesischen Kontext*, Nettetal 1991; *Bali ist mein Leib – Christus ist mein Leben. Der Künstler I Nyoman Darsane*, Karl-Christoph Epting (ed.), Karlsruhe 1999.

ly convinced Darsane's family and the community that he still is one of them. Today he is again well respected and his advice even in religious matters is highly appreciated. Darsane and Bagong were friends and certainly influenced each other. The latter even had a studio and gallery on Bali for some years.

### *Rain of Blood*

The composition is dominated by the presence of the crucified (fig. 3). The cross does not really look like a wooden torture instrument but is more a vague silhouette in the background. From the crossbeam red blood flows down in small streams that overlay another red that changes in intensity. The background colors vary from dark blue on the top and in the bottom corners to light pink in the lower part of the picture. Jesus does not so much hang on the cross as dance on it. His legs are disproportionately long. The feet are crossed, putting one in front of the other. His face expresses compassion with the suffering of the world. To his left, the contours of two *wayang* figures, traditional shadow puppets, are visible.

Until recently Darsane has very rarely depicted suffering or poverty in his pictures. He was the painter of the "beautiful gospel". The experience of the Bali bombings in the aftermath of 9/11 (2002 and 2005) and the tsunami (2004) however made him change his mind. The balance between good and evil that is crucial in Balinese worldview seems to be distorted. Both Darsane and Bagong show a clear tendency to move away from the inculturation mode of Christian art in Indonesia to a more hybridized glocal style that negotiates between the global and the local.

### *(3) Hendarto*

Hendarto was born 1951 in Bandung, where his father, who served in the army, was stationed. Most of his life, however, he spent in Yogyakarta close to the Sultan's palace (*kraton*). He has been raised in the sphere of Javanese Islam, and that mystical heritage still leaves traces in his work. The artist converted to Catholicism only in the early 1980s, yet he had already attended a Catholic school, where he was attracted especially by religious education. His family did not practice Islam; therefore his conversion to Christianity did not really pose a problem for them. His older brother and a younger sister followed his example, while the rest of the family remained Muslim. Hendarto is married and has two children.

In art education at school Hendarto, who had been painting since his early childhood, was always the best in the class. Later he dropped out of his architecture studies to work as a freelance artist. In the beginning he experimented with *wayang*-style, batik, ceramics and woodcarving. He chose his teachers from among the artists in his neighborhood. Autonomy is important to him. Since his conversion to Christianity, Hendarto also depicts Christian themes: first sketches, aquarelle and batik, later oil and acrylics. For him, painting is at the same time a theological learning process – he tries to grasp the deeper sense of the Christian faith. Painting a Christian theme may take a long time. The artist meditates and has to concentrate himself fully on the subject. Therefore the number of his Christian paintings is limited. He says himself that he cannot always consider such themes, because it is too hard on him.

#### *The resurrected*

Jesus sits in the center of the painting, solid as a rock (fig. 2). His body divides the picture visually into two color fields along the diagonal that runs from the lower left to the upper right. In the upper part waves of godly sunlight seem to glide over Jesus' body. In their epicenter glows the gold yellow ball of the sun. The breath of God's spirit brings the elements into motion. The seated figure seems to be supported from below by plant-like forms in green and grey that form a directional contrast with the curving lines of the sunlight.

Jesus appears as a Javanese youth with long black hair. His right shoulder is uncovered. Around his body a cloth plays loosely, seeming to flow into the colors of its surroundings. His lowered eyes suggest he is lost in deep thought. On his left foot one can identify the mark of the cross. Hendarto, due to his Muslim background, is still struggling with Christology. While the earthly Jesus is familiar to him – the Qur'an knows him as a prophet and predecessor of Mohamed – the godly side of Jesus Christ remains a mystery to the artist. Hendarto's Christian paintings are personal testimonies of faith, which express his aesthetic-theological struggle with the Christian message in the light of Javanese-Muslim mysticism.

#### *(4) Wisnu Sasongko*

The new shooting star on the scene is Wisnu Sasongko, the angry young man among Indonesia's Christian artists. Wisnu was born into a Christian family in Jakarta (\*1975), his parents having converted

from Islam to Christianity. They moved with their children to Yogya. The mother is a dancer and Gamelan player; the father works as a teacher at a school for mentally handicapped children. His sister Wiwik is also artist, specializing in design.

Wisnu relates to a personal born again experience he had in 1998, in the context of political upheaval provoked by the new order policy of President Suharto. The riots were also directed against the Christian minority. This experience had direct impact on his artistic work and from then on he painted Christian themes. He wanted to meet discrimination and violence with the spirit of hope.<sup>21</sup>

### *Laughing Jesus*

With his spectacles, beard and long black hair, Jesus looks like one of Sasongko's artist friends (fig. 4). The portrait's green background is full of icons of the brave new computer world. Jesus, anno 2012, is on facebook and twitter; e-mail is already obsolete. The artist himself once stated: "I don't want to paint biblical stories because I've never seen them, I've never touched them, and I've never seen what Jesus looked like. As an artist I can only imagine Jesus".<sup>22</sup> Sasongko can already look back on several solo and group exhibitions. He absorbs a varied mixture of stylistic influences from Indonesian artists like Widyayat (1923-2002), but also the Filipino Emmanuel Garibay (\*1962) and western artists Paul Klee or Pablo Picasso. His paintings go beyond traditional inculturation art. They represent a new "glocal" Christian art.

The artists introduced here all have academic backgrounds. Most of them are connected in one way or the other to the local art academy ISI. But not everyone has finished his formal education. Learning from other artists and a certain autodidactic charm remains significant for them. Yet unlike traditionally trained artists, these so called "academicians" have been exposed to western art traditions in a formal way. Bagong and Hendarto are inculturation artists. In his later work, however, Bagong already tends toward glocal art as practiced by Wisnu Sasongko. All artists besides the Balinese Darsane have a Muslim family background. Some are converts themselves; others are already second- or third-generation Christians. Besides Hendarto, who is

<sup>21</sup> Cf. the title of the catalog Wisnu Sasongko, *Think on these Things. Harmony and Diversity*, New Haven, CT: OMSC publications 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Sasongko, *Think on these Things*, 5. This catalog contains many paintings that are drawn in a Christian spirit but do not depict biblical themes.

clearly influenced by Javanese-Muslim mysticism, this heritage has not left any traces in their work. In Bagong's case, dance and *wayang* of the Hindu-Javanese tradition have become decisive structural elements in his compositions. This plurality of religious influences mirrors the open atmosphere of the sultanate. Some of the artists show certain tendencies towards abstraction, most obviously Bagong and Wisnu, while for Hendarto, at least regarding the background. The trend goes in the direction of a glocal art that plays with traditional iconographies and is not afraid of political critique.

### *Muslim artists on Java*

Due to the prohibition of images, Muslim artists usually restrict themselves to calligraphy and ornamental art. The further away from the mosque, however, the more is possible in the private sphere of the ruling elite, who felt the need to decorate their houses for representative purposes and enjoyed the beauty of art. Illumination of manuscripts has been appreciated in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, even among the religious. Books can be easily closed to the suspicious eyes of fanatics. Generally speaking, in cultures that are image-friendly Islam is more receptive to visual arts as well. The miniatures in Persia and at the Mughal court in India are good examples. One can find images of Jesus, Buddha and even Muhammad that served liturgical and pedagogical purposes.

In modern Indonesian art, A.D. Pirous and Saiful Adnan are pioneers in turning calligraphy into abstract art. Among the participants in the exhibition in Yogya, Muhammad Satar and Azam Bachtiar followed the line that has been set out by Pirous and Adnan. Kaji Habe goes further into figurative painting, representing even the prophet Muhammad himself. Similar to their Christian colleagues, not all of them have finished a formal art education. They also have to work, again mainly in teaching, to support themselves.

Saiful Adnan (Saniangbaka, Solok, West Sumatera \*1957) places the calligraphy of Sura 49:15 in the center of his painting (fig. 7):

Only those are Believers who have believed in Allah and his Messenger, and have never since doubted, but have striven with their belongings and their persons in the Cause of Allah: Such are the sincere ones.<sup>23</sup>

He tries to give the impression that the text is written on a worn out parchment that already shows cracks and grazes. Adnan is widely ac-

<sup>23</sup> Quran quoted after the translation by Abdullah Yusufali.

cepted as a reformer of calligraphic art, who created his own style called “Syaifuli Arabic Calligraphy”. Basically he is producing paintings of calligraphies. The artist claims to be influenced not so much by other painters, but by religious teachers like Abdul Hamid Dimiyati of the Islamic State University in Yogyakarta and Sirajudin, an expert in calligraphy from Jakarta.

Pirous (Meulaboh, Aceh \*1932) had formal art education at the Bandung Institute of Technology, where he also taught after graduation in 1964 till 2002. In 1969 he spent some time studying graphic design at the Department of Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology in New York State. He served as the first Dean of the faculty of Arts and Design (1984-1990). In his works the artist goes a step further than Adnan. In our example, Pirous places the calligraphy in two times two rectangular fragments at the bottom of the painting (fig. 5). It begins on the upper right one, continues below, then on to the top left and down again:

Who has made the earth our couch, and the heavens our canopy; and send down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits of your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto Allah when ye know (the truth).

While reading, it turns out that there is a direct connection between Sura 2,22 and the composition, which seems on first sight to be abstract. The calligraphy on the bottom of the painting in a sense symbolizes the pillars of the earth. The two clusters are separated by a line that forms the vertical axis of the painting. Its green color symbolizes the fruitful rain that God sends from heaven. Where it reaches the ground it turns red. Gold is applied to the top of the painting in praise of the God of heaven. The main surface of the painting is kept in different shades of blue.

Mohammed Satar (Probolinggo, East Java \*1952) holds a bachelor’s degree from the Fine Art Department of the Teacher Institute Malang. He teaches Painting and Esthetics at the Surabaya State University. In his paintings geometric composition comes even more to the fore. He is not writing whole Sura verses anymore, but fragments or even concentrating himself on the name of Allah (fig. 8).

Azam Bachtiar (Malang, East Java \*1961) started in 1984 as a street painter stationed near the main post office of Malang. He quit his studies at the ISI in Yogya after only one year, because he wanted to take care of his aging parents. He later studied psychology in Malang. With his diptych on the 99 names of God Azam combines the heritage of Adnan and Pirous (fig. 6 and 9). The right canvas he has

divided into nine by ten squares that are separated by a red pattern. The left painting is mainly covered in black. Nine squares, four and five in a row, seem to drift away from the right panel. Like dust they are surrounded by some red color on black ground. On the left side of the diptych is a big red calligraphy and a piece of paper under gauze in a red and golden frame that turns out to be a page of the Qur'an.

Kaji Habeb (Denmak, Central Java \*1969) studied at ISI and at the Faculty of Ushuluddin at the Islamic State University, Yogyakarta. He is not only a painter, but at the same time an actor, director and playwright. He also creates his own shadow puppets. Habeb is the most figurative among the Muslim artists introduced here. The last figure of his meta evolution series represents the prophet Muhammad himself (fig. 10 and 11). Only his face and hands seem to be covered with skin. The rest of the body is stripped to the muscles and nerves. The figure has neither mouth nor genitals.

The spiritual, sometimes even mystical, dimension of the paintings on display turned out to be a dialogical bridge for the artists during the panel discussion. Azam opened the conversation by stating: "Most of my paintings employ spiritual themes. They describe the struggle of my heart, the absolute struggle of the human being." Wisnu Sasongko has repeatedly stressed that he has never seen Jesus personally. Jesus is a "spiritual guru" to him, "a mental experience" that inspires his creativity. Habeb, who is rooted deeply in the Javanese mystical tradition, referred to his meta evolution series also as a "spiritual evolution". Darsane emphasized:

Even though I am a Christian, I do not feel a difference that bothers me. Human beings are created from dust endowed with breath of life by God. [...] After thinking it over I noticed that there is no difference in my face before and after I became Christian. I just felt a change in my life. In the end, I came to the awareness that Bali is my body but Christ is my life.

Azam seems not far from him, when he states: "There is only one creator who creates us all. A *hadith* says that if you relate yourself with your neighbor, you relate yourself with God." The kind of spirituality the artists are talking about is not otherworldly. For Azam "[a]n art work is a never ending dialogue as together we want to understand God." Wisnu pointed out the ethical dimension of visual arts: "The basic idea is to create a harmonious world. A world full of differences, yet also beauty and unity. The language of art is the most universal language."



*Fig. 1*



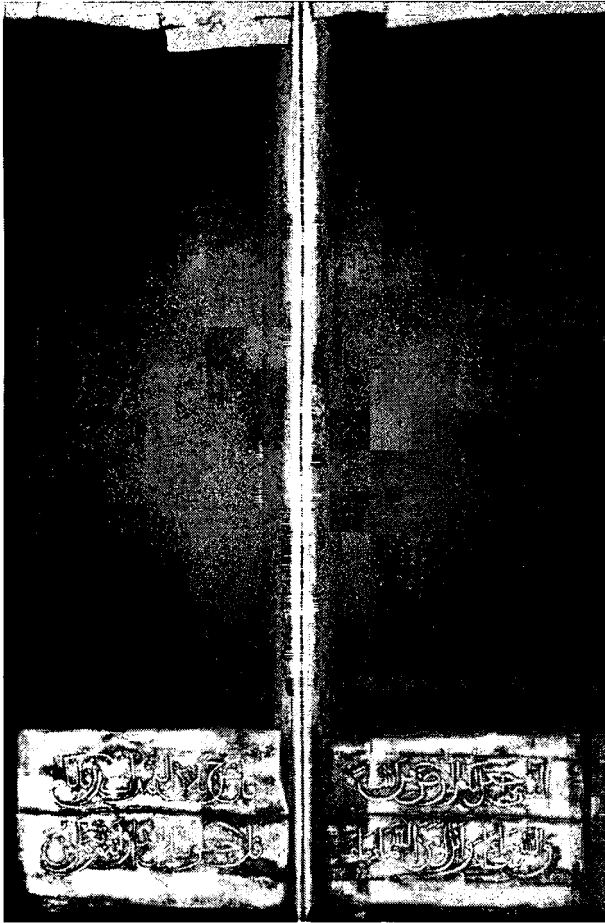
*Fig. 2*



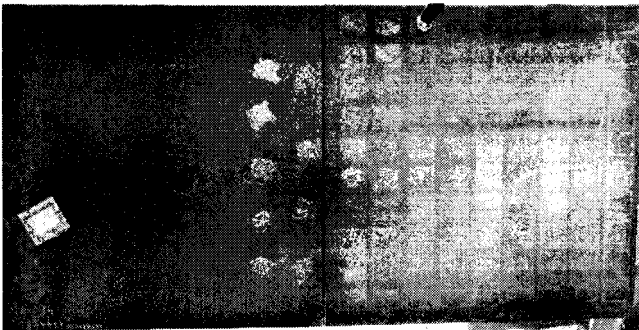
Fig. 3



Fig. 4



*Fig. 5*



*Fig. 6*

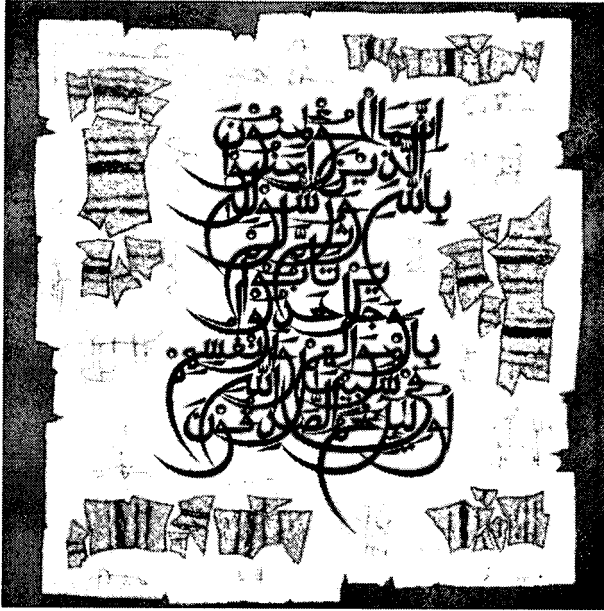
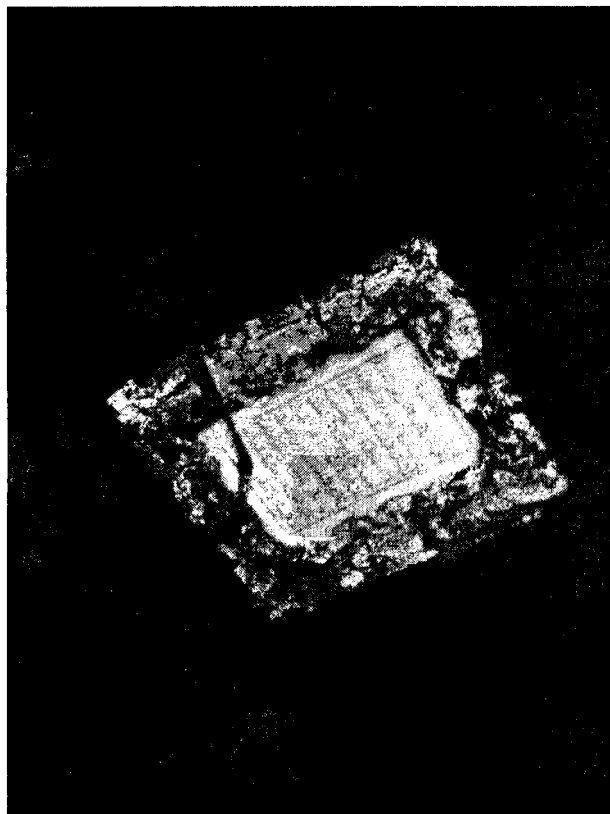


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



*Fig. 9*



*Fig. 10*

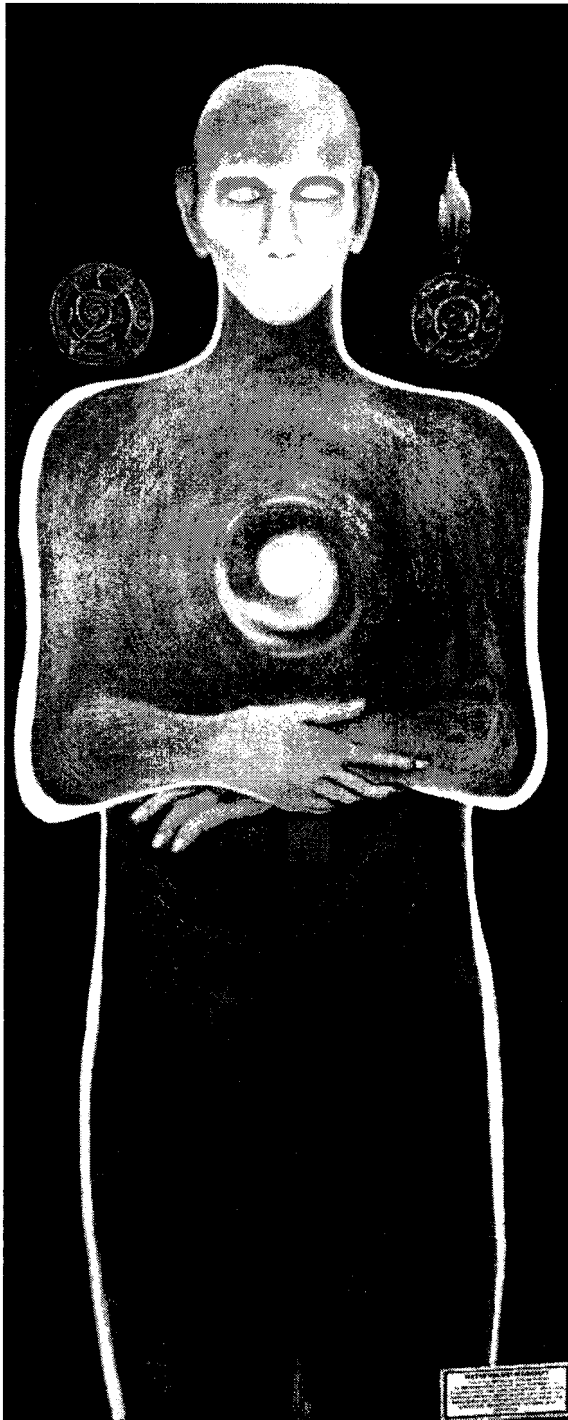


Fig. 11