Muslims, the New Age and Marginal Religions in Indonesia: Changing Meanings of Religious Pluralism

The author examines the changing meanings of religious pluralism in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority country, Indonesia. She demonstrates the paradoxical viability of three new organizations—Salamullah, the Brahma Kumaris, and the Anand Ashram—that challenge normative conceptions of “religion” embodied in national law since the 1960s but nonetheless attract substantial numbers of cosmopolitan Indonesians, including religiously well-educated Muslims. The high modern construction of “religions” that underpins existing law is being reworked in the actual religious practice of cosmopolitan Indonesians. With their patronage they are expanding the sphere of internal dialogue within Indonesia’s Muslim community, effecting a new permeability in the boundaries of the nation’s official religions, and contributing to the emergence of an arena of unregulated “spiritual” groups that now exists alongside the highly regulated, rigidly denominational religious market structured by the New Order Government (1966–1998).

Key words: Indonesia · Islam · New Age · religious pluralism

L’auteure traite de l’évolution des significations du pluralisme religieux dans le pays comptant la plus forte majorité musulmane au monde, l’Indonésie. Elle décrit la viabilité paradoxale de trois nouveaux mouvements—le Salamullah, le Brahma Kumaris et le Anand Ashram—qui remettent en question les conceptions normatives de la “religion” introduites dans le droit national depuis les années 1960. Cela ne les empêche pas d’attirer un nombre important d’Indonésiens cosmopolites et, parmi eux, des musulmans très cultivés. La conception très moderne des “religions” dans la loi en vigueur est transformée par les pratiques religieuses de ces Indonésiens cosmopolites. C’est grâce à eux que s’ouvre le dialogue au sein de la communauté musulmane indonésienne. Ils introduisent ainsi une nouvelle permeabilité des frontières qui existent entre les religions officielles et ils contribuent à l’émergence d’un ensemble de groupes “spirituels” sans règles, qui co-existent avec le marché religieux confessionnel rigide qui a été mis en place par le Gouvernement de l’Ordre Nouveau (1966–1998).

Mots-clés: Indonésie · islam · Nouvel Age · pluralisme religieux
The Indonesian Government’s policy on religion stands out as a significant example of the diversity that actually exists in the Muslim world in the handling of religion–state relationships, notwithstanding the ideal that, for Muslims, God’s truth as revealed in the Qur’an should shape every aspect of social life. Since Indonesian Independence, approximately nine out of ten Indonesians have been Muslims, and Islam was important in mobilizing resistance to the Dutch colonial power. This was recognized obliquely in the 1945 Constitution, which commits the state to supporting religion. It was also indirectly acknowledged in the Constitution’s famous Preamble where the Panca Sila (loosely, the five fundamental Indonesian values) features as its first principal belief in One God (keTuhanan Yang Maha Esa). Acknowledgement of a “religion” thus became a basic obligation of citizenship at the founding of the Republic. However, due to the country’s very considerable ethnic and religious diversity, Indonesia’s founding fathers did not establish an Islamic state, as some of their number had wished. Respecting their fellow freedom fighters who were non-Muslims, they held back from using the Arabic term “Allah” to refer to God in the Constitution, using instead the Indonesian word Tuhan, “Lord”. Secularist Muslims also joined with non-Muslims to excise from the Preamble a phrase that would have required Muslims to follow Islamic law. Those championing an Islamic state were left with the prospect of later changing the Constitution through legislation if they could win the necessary numbers in support, but they never did.

In the absence of fundamental constitutional change, the concept of “religion” (agama) in the 1945 Constitution was gradually concretized over the first couple of decades of the Republic as referring to just five named religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism (PenPres 1, 1965; UU No. 5, 1969). Indonesia’s authoritarian New Order Government (1966–1998) then stifled any dissent from the Panca Sila ideology, suppressing both Islamist and supposedly atheistic Communist challenges to its control. Thus, since the beginning of Indonesia’s New Order, the country has had a policy of what might be called “delimited pluralism”, circumscribing what officially counts as religion by imposing on its citizens an obligation to acknowledge one of a limited number of “world religions”, only one of which is Islam.

The resignation of New Order President Suharto in 1998 cleared the way for democratic reforms and the possibility that proponents of the Islamic state concept, long silenced by the former president’s authoritarian regime, might once more openly champion their cause. Among the several hundred political parties launched in the early days of reformasi were indeed numerous specifically Muslim parties, a number of which began calling for a constitutional amendment to make Indonesia an Islamic state by requiring Muslims to observe Islamic law (syari’ah). When in 2002 such an amendment was proposed, it failed. The amendment was opposed by both Indonesia’s major Muslim social organizations (the “traditionalist” Nahdlatul Ulama and the “Modernist” Muhammadiyah) as well as by the secularist and Christian parties.
Since the failure of that amendment, the surviving small Islamist parties have adopted an incrementalist approach to achieving an Islamic state, supporting a series of specific changes to criminal law and laws regulating education, health and religious tolerance. If passed, these would have the effect of restricting the scope for interpretation of Islamic law (shari’ah), requiring the state to enforce certain syari’ah-inspired laws, and restricting interaction between Muslims and people of other faiths.

A new legislature with a slightly increased Islamist presence was voted in through the 2004 elections. As it prepares to consider the raft of Islamist draft bills, scholars struggle to divine the longer-term prospects for Indonesia’s once-famed religious tolerance and commitment to religious pluralism. Some leading commentators have continued to signal their confidence in the strength of the moderate middle ground of Indonesian Islam (e.g. Fealy, in USINDO, 2004: 2). Others, apprehensive about the political manoeuvrings of Islamist parties and sensing growing popular support for Islamist agendas—even for violent jihadist groups—fear that a radical minority may succeed in further circumscribing Muslims’ discretion in the exercise of their faith and in limiting the social space available to other religious groups (e.g. Assyaukanie, 2004: 1; Barton, 2004). They fear, in short, a growing rigidification of boundaries around the presently recognized religions and the imposition of increasingly narrow constructions of Islam.

Without gainsaying the dramatically increased salience of Islamist politics in Indonesia since 1998 (i.e. since the beginning of the democratic reform era), this article calls attention to changes in the religious practice of cosmopolitan Indonesian Muslims that suggest an actual broadening of religious tolerance among moderate middle-class and elite urbanites and a rejection of the rigid limitations conservatives would place on their understandings of their religion. This article focuses on three organizations, Salamullah, the Brahma Kumaris and the Anand Ashram, which in an etic analysis might be identified as religious groups or New Religious Movements. However, their status as religions in the Indonesian legal context is highly problematic. None are, or have remained, safely situated within the category “religion” (agama) as defined by Indonesian law, having in various ways infringed the high modern construction of religion that has informed national law since the New Order. However, they have also avoided closure by the Justice Department (a fate suffered by numerous “new religions” or agama baru, in the past). Nor have they attracted close supervision by the Department of Culture and Tourism, which is now responsible for a second-class category of “faiths” (kepercayaan), established in 1973.

A close examination of these organizations and the followings they attract helps to decipher the actual scope, in practice, of Indonesian religious pluralism and the understandings of “religion” that underpin those practices. Not only do they exemplify a new phenomenon, the unrestricted functioning of legally anomalous religious groups outside the bounds of the official “religions” and “faiths”, but each group has contributed to the popularization of a new understanding of religious “universalism” (Indonesian: universalisme), namely, that all the major religions have many broadly similar messages. Salamullah and the Anand Ashram have even championed the
concept of perennialism (Indonesian *perenialisme*) that is, that there is a common core experience of the divine accessible through the esoteric traditions of the great religions. As used in these organizations, perennialism is a notion particularly corrosive of rigid religious boundaries.

The Brahma Kumaris and the Anand Ashram, whose meditation courses have featured prominently in lifestyle magazine articles on health and stress management since the 1990s, have also helped introduce urban publics to a de-confessionalized and partly scientized notion of “spirituality” (using the English borrowing or Indonesian cognates such as *spiritualitas*) as an attractive alternative to devalorized but conceptually overlapping concepts such as *kebatinan* (literally “inwardness”, but more broadly “spirituality” or “mysticism”). This usage keys into the international growth movement and New Age literature that is now well represented in major bookshops in Indonesia and variously puffed or critiqued in local publications. The term “New Age” is used also by journalists and critics to refer to local spiritual groups and activities that do not conform to high modern conceptions of proper religiosity but have a certain cachet derived from their similarities to international New Age activities. In major cities Brahma Kumaris and Anand Ashram meditation courses are now part of a broad array of loosely “spiritual” training programs alongside Reiki, Celestine Prophecy, Spiritual Quotient (*Kecerdasan Spirituil*), Satori, Parent Effectiveness Training, AsiaWorks and numerous domestic versions of spiritualized stress relief and leadership and management training (Burhani, 2001).

While the reasons for the ongoing and, in some respects, growing acceptance of religious pluralism are indeed numerous, they can be traced in part to the weakening of state controls in all arenas of national life following the dissolution of the authoritarian New Order regime. More importantly, the spread of liberal attitudes to religious pluralism can be attributed to the rapid growth of a new middle class (Dick, 1985; Tanter and Young, 1990) that has become enthusiastic about Islam but is also closely involved in global technical, popular and intellectual culture. A portion of this “new Muslim middle class” (Hefner, 2000: 119–121; 2003), to be sure, has gravitated towards Salafist and other ideological constructions of Islam based on literal interpretations of scripture (Fox, 2004; Jamhari and Jahroni, 2004). However, the vigorous Neo-Modernist movement launched in the 1970s by such figures as Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Madjid (heirs of the mantles of, respectively, the “traditionalist” and “modernist” Muslim movements) has offered popular liberal alternatives (Barton, 1994; Hefner, 2000).

This article shows how three organizations now operating in the unregulated spiritual marketplace—Salamullah, the Brahma Kumaris and the Anand Ashram—have contributed to the popularization of the notion of non-denominational, eclectic “spirituality” that can be appropriated from diverse sources to enhance one’s declared religion or adapted as a primary commitment over which the practitioner asserts autonomous control. It is argued that this style of spirituality represents a rejection of the high modern construction of religion that underpinned the formulation of Indonesian law and the administration of religion in the 1960s and 1970s. That
construction, derived from Enlightenment Protestantism and early Modernist Muslim belief according to which religions ought to be doctrinally explicit, rational (non-ecstatic and non-magical), exclusive, congregational and firmly bounded, is being softened through cosmopolitan Indonesians’ awareness of diversity within their own religious traditions, appreciation of commonalities with other religious traditions and engagement with “spiritual” products in the global religious marketplace.

To demonstrate these points, I begin by briefly recapitulating older meanings built into the concept of “religion” (agama) under national law through legislative and administrative refinements in the first three decades after Independence. I then turn to the cases of the three religious groups, that, through their ongoing unfettered operation and attractiveness to well-educated Muslims, suggest substantial changes have occurred in the meanings of pluralism and the nature of Muslim religious practice among cosmopolitan Indonesian urbanities. Where not otherwise indicated, the case material comes from interviews with the groups in Jakarta between 2001 and 2005.

Delimiting Indonesian “Religion” in the First Decades of the Republic

While, from the perspective of the most radical Indonesian Muslims aspiring to some form of Islamic state, Indonesia’s present policy of delimited pluralism is heinously broad, it is nonetheless narrower than many Indonesians in times past have wanted. Atheism has never been an option for a person who wishes to be considered a citizen of good character and free of associations with Communism, and few have made an issue of this. But many religious traditions and innovated religious identities passionately advocated by Indonesians have been excluded from full legitimacy through legislation and the evolving policies of the Department of Religion since the founding of the Republic. What has gradually been excluded, and what identities other than Islam and Christianity have managed to gain legitimacy after all, reveal the meanings attached to the term “religion” in New Order (1966–1998) representations of the Panca Sila. The record of exclusion from, or elevation to, the status of religion suggests the normative pattern to which each of the recognized religions were meant to conform by the time of the transition from the Old to the New Order.

That any religions other than Islam should be accorded legitimacy was established at the declaration of Independence in 1945 by Article 29 of the Constitution that guarantees freedom to practise one’s chosen religion. However, what those other “proper” religions might be was not specified. That left the Department of Religion (founded principally to advance Muslim interests, but established from the beginning with small directorates for Protestantism and Catholicism) to encourage or discourage claimants to the status of religion, either by extending them limited financial support or targeting for mission work those groups it branded “animists” (Steenbrink, 1972). As it happened, targets for mission work included not just practitioners of tribal religions but also the Balinese and Indonesian Chinese.
Others, like the “mystical groups” (golongan kebatinan; later officially identified as golong kepercayaan or “faith” groups), were placed under surveillance. These loosely Sufi groups had become increasingly disassociated from Islam since Muslim Modernists began to repudiate Islam’s Sufi traditions at the turn of the century. Under the greatest pressure to dissociate from Islam were the heterodox, independent-minded mystics who increasingly incorporated elements of the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist heritage, Christianity and Theosophical representations of other religious traditions into their teachings.

While the majority of ethnic groups associated with non-state societies in past times could do little to resist the discrediting of their religious traditions, the Balinese and Indonesian Chinese, as well as Javanese proponents of heterodox mystical and other metaphysical groups, organized to promote their traditions and identities, and even to claim the status of “religions”. Those that succeeded in gaining recognition as religions formed organizations that constructed their traditions with a number of common features strongly resembling Islam and Christianity: highly rationalized (that is, codified) beliefs relating to a transcendent deity; exclusive membership open to people of any ethnic background; congregational organization with regular weekly services in a public place of worship; and formally organized governing and representative bodies.

The successful groups included the Parisada Hindu Dharma, which represented Balinese religion as a monistic, congregational kind of Hinduism (Ngurah Bagus, 1970; Bakker, 1993; Howell, 1978, 1982), and a number of Buddhist organizations born out of the Chinese, Balinese and Javanese communities. The Parisada fixed on “Sang Hyang Widi” as the identity of the Ultimate Being (despite its previous lack of ritual importance), published a Hindu Bali creed, and advocated the simplification of purportedly wasteful rituals. The Buddhist organizations, struggling to accommodate, behind a unified public stance, Chinese folk traditions, newly imported Theravada teachings, and resurrected Javanese Vajrayana manuscripts, agreed to recognize a figure from an ancient Javanese Buddhist text, the Adi Buddha, as Indonesian Buddhism’s creator God (Howell, 1978, 1982; Suryadinata, 1998).

Confucianism, which was acknowledged as a legitimate Indonesian religion by Sukarno’s 1965 Presidential Decision, also had been articulated as a “religion” (Agama Khonghucu) by activists in the Indonesian Chinese cultural nationalist movement along with Buddhism. Confucianism’s inclusion in the 1965 list of legitimate Indonesian religions probably owed much to its (by then partial) reconstruction on a congregational model and promotion by politically well-placed Indonesian Chinese. However, its fortunes reversed with the ascent of anti-Communist forces and the installation of Suharto’s New Order regime in 1966. Confucianism was demoted from the status of legitimate religion soon thereafter (Suryadinata, 1998) and public practice of its rituals was suppressed until after the fall of Suharto’s New Order. This can be attributed not just to the New Order’s phobia about Communism, but also to the negative evaluation placed on ethnic heritages that appeared, through their lack of systematization, to be mere collections of “superstitions”.

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As the high modern constructions of religion coloured by Enlightenment Protestantism gained increasing influence in public discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, the mystical and other “spiritual” groups (variously known as golongan kebatinan, kerohanian, kejiwaan and kepercayaan) came under intense pressure. Founded mostly by Javanese Muslims, particularly those Geertz (1960) identified as priyayi and abangan, but with links to the more Javanized Sufi orders, they often revealed miraculously inspired teachings suggestive of influences from several major religious traditions (Subagya, 1976). With growing numbers, organizational capacity and some government influence, the mystical groups asserted their own claims to legitimacy as “religions” or spiritual activities compatible with Islam and Christianity. Nonetheless, the disparagingly named “new religions” (agama baru) faced intense disapproval, particularly from Modernist Muslims.

That pressure had its intended result when Sukarno’s Presidential Decision (No. 1, 1965) recognized just six religions and explicitly directed the mystical groups to return to their “origins” in the recognized religions. The mystical groups, already under surveillance by the Justice Department, along with spirit mediums and healers of questionable religious credentials, then faced abolition for posing as religions.

In 1973 those groups willing to give up claims to the status of a “religion” won a partial reprieve. The parliament established for them a separate but hypothetically equal status as “faiths” (kepercayaan) administered not by the Department of Religion but by the Department of Education and Culture (Howell, 1982: 530; Stange, 1986). “Faiths” were to be credal and exclusive, except for possible joint affiliation of adherents with a recognized “religion”. This nominally extended the limits of Indonesian religious pluralism but subjected the “faiths”, like the “religions”, to administrative rationalization and pillarization. In any case, a certain opprobrium remained attached to the “faiths”, and their attractiveness to modernizing elites declined.

Religious Marginality Recontextualized in the Global Market

Since the 1990s, and particularly since the advent of the reformasi period in 1998, there has been a marked growth in cosmopolitan modulations of Indonesian cultural life and a refiguring in more open terms of what it is to be a Muslim in the modern world. Indonesian Muslims growing up in the New Order period have enjoyed increased opportunities, through government support for education and spreading affluence (Hefner, 2003), to develop the intellectual equipment of the international marketplace of ideas and skills. This, in turn, has qualified the new middle and upper strata for work in occupations drawing on globalized knowledges, and often places them physically alongside colleagues from other backgrounds, whether in local offices of multinational companies and NGOs or overseas. Overseas experience of work and travel for pleasure, vastly more common in the 1990s than in the 1970s, have made increasingly common the experience of
pluralistic cultures and the Western “spiritual marketplace”, whether in New Age bookshops, alternative health sections of Sunday supplements, or TV yoga classes for stress release. Moreover, all these de-confessionalized and psychologized expressions of contemporary spirituality have been enthusiastically interpreted and retailed in the domestic media, and are in any case widely available through satellite television and on the Internet.

In this cultural environment, it should not be surprising if the formula of delimited religious pluralism (Indonesia’s five religions policy) is now once again being stretched in decidedly liberal directions. The three cases presented below show how the field of choice both within the official “religions” (agama) and outside has widened since the inauguration of the New Order.

The cases also demonstrate that participants in non-mainstream religious activities today include not just non-Muslims and casual, Javanist Muslims such as have supported the mystical groups of the past, but highly committed, self-consciously “modern” Muslims. For these modern Muslims, unlike the Modernist Muslims of the mid-20th century, experiential spirituality and a judicious eclecticism (albeit not identified as such and carefully distinguished from “syncretism”) are the natural outcome of a self-directed search for religious fulfilment rather than markers of an outmoded irrationality.

The Case of Salamullah: New Prophecy Carries Sufi Piety Beyond “Religion”

Sufi mysticism, both within and decoupled from its traditional base in the Islamic religious orders (tarekat), has attracted the interest of cosmopolitan urbanites since the mid-1980s (van Bruinessen, 1995; Howell, 2001). Those not attracted to the tarekat have turned to a variety of other loosely Sufi institutions, particularly weekend workshops and new-style foundations placed both within and outside the recognized religions. One example of such a foundation, initially identified with Islam but manifesting distinctly non-normative characteristics, is Salamullah. Salamullah illustrates how cultural forms associated with Sufi piety have recently drawn middle-class urbanites into the spiritual dramas once associated by well-educated Indonesians with Javanist mysticism and the devalued “faiths”. Yet Salamullah has resisted reassignment into that weaker social category, even after its principal figure was inspired to proclaim an actual “new religion” (agama baru) that boldly asserts its own “perennialist” belief in the shared higher truth of all the major religions.

Salamullah began in the mid-1990s as an informal prayer gathering of Jakarta Muslims, many of them from the prestigious State Islamic University and cultural sophisticate circles. In most respects the group’s devotions were entirely conventional, if especially intense. They performed the obligatory Islamic prayers and undertook strenuous ethical introspection to purify the spirit, much as keen traditionalist and Sufi-oriented Muslims do. Perhaps
reflecting Modernist Muslim suspicions of more flamboyant Sufi practices, they avoided the ritual repetition of the names of God (dziñir, lit. "remembrance") that can be used to stimulate religious ecstasies and instead strove to sanctify everyday actions with the recollection of the Divine. However, the Salamullah gatherings were decidedly non-standard in one respect: they had formed around the socially prominent Jakarta matron, television personality and charity worker, Lia Aminuddin, who acted as a medium for the Angel Gabriel.

Mrs Aminuddin ("Ibu" or "Bunda" Lia) actually came from a Muhammadiyah family herself, from Makassar on the island of Sulawesi. She had not been especially pious in her early life, nor had she any special religious training. With a secular high school education behind her, she married an engineer and while he pursued his career teaching at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta, Bunda Lia enjoyed the role of mother and modern-style housewife, with hobbies and a busy social life. It was one of her hobbies, dry flower arranging, that eventually launched her into television.

Her life was otherwise unremarkable, except that she did have a most unusual experience in 1974. One evening, when she was sitting on her terrace, a round yellow light spiralled down from the sky, pointed towards her, came to rest above her head and then disappeared. She was mystified. Such visible manifestations of divine presence or supernatural power, called wahyu, had awesome historical precedents. They figure in legendary tales of Javanese kings receiving divine election and mystics receiving a charge of supernatural power that publicly marks a new spiritual elevation. But the significance of this wahyu in Bunda Lia's life was unclear.

Twenty-one years later that was revealed. The miraculous once more began to intervene in her life in October of 1995 when she was performing the late night prayers, sholat tahajud, which devout Sufis wake to perform when all is quiet. All of a sudden, her body began to shiver and she felt a presence. At first, she was afraid it might be mischievous spirits, but she was calmed when the presence identified itself as Habib Al Huda, a spirit initially thought to be a jin who had befriended the Prophet Muhammad. He revealed that it was he who had been present in the mysterious wahyu that had visited her so many years ago. Now he had returned to warn her that the Day of Judgement was at hand. But he also conveyed to her many extraordinary gifts. She was given the ability to heal people by massaging them while uttering short Islamic prayers such as the Alif lam mim or the Al-Fatihah. The spirit also blessed Bunda Lia with the ability to write poetry and songs with great fluency.

As this became known, many people came to join her devotions and to receive blessings conveyed by the spirit. The internationally acclaimed Sufi poet Danarto and his wife were among them. Non-Muslims also started to attend and they received healings with appropriately adapted expressions such as "Hallaluya" for Christians and "Yaa Asvin" for Hindus and Buddhists. But most of those who came were Muslims with university-level education; and many were actually students and graduates from the State Islamic University (UIN—then IAIN—Syarif Hidayatullah).
A new revelation was received in July 1997: the spirit Habib Al Huda announced that he was actually the Angel Gabriel (Malaikat Jibril) who had transmitted the words of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad. A crucial boundary had been crossed. A somewhat quirky but socially respectable Muslim prayer group had started infringing on understandings of prophecy crucial to Muslims’ understanding of the unique pre-eminence of their faith. Bunda Lia’s channelling had broken, as it were, the seal of prophecy fixed by the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The Indonesian Council of Ulamas (MUI) issued a fatwa repudiating her claims to speak with the voice of Jibril/Gabriel and pronouncing Salamullah a purveyor of deviant teachings.6

Nonetheless, Lia and her following have been able to continue functioning, very much in the public eye, without being shut down as an agama baru ("new religion") or being forced to re-identify as a second-class “faith” (kepercayaan or kebatinan). This is so despite the fact that the group actually embraced the designation “new religion” in 2000 and announced yet more challenging new revelations from God. These included: teachings about reincarnation (reinkarnasi or regulasi roh) previously hidden as secret meanings in certain passages in the Qur’an; a fundamental recasting of the Day of Judgement from the life after death to our present, catastrophe-wrenched epoch; and a radical extension of Muslim understandings of monotheism (ketauhidan) to embrace, and even move beyond, all the major religions.

These dramatic developments began in August 1998 with the Angel Gabriel’s initiation of Bunda Lia as none other than the Imam Madhi, the Caliph long hidden from earthly perception, whose reappearance will herald a new divine order. The angel also revealed that her son, Ahmad Mukti, was in fact Nabi Isa (the Prophet Jesus; to Christians: Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ). The Imam Madhi was incarnating, the angel explained, not just to save Indonesia from its egregious sins, but to save the whole world. A leading news magazine Gatra brandished the story before the public when reporters got wind of the new identity of the former television personality (n.a. [1]).

The Salamullah group themselves went public, sending copies of the Angel Gabriel’s revelations to thousands of addresses all over the country. They urged people to desist from patronizing dukun (traditional healers and black magicians), who, they charged, manipulate the spirit world and “made seconds to God” (syirik) in violation of His Oneness. In doing so, the group contrasted the supernatural events that had occurred in their own circle with the supernatural benefits people seek through dukun. In Salamullah, God spoke through the Angel Gabriel. The pious were blessed with freely-given gifts from God (barakah). In contrast, practitioners of the heterodox esoteric sciences (ilmu kebatinan) violate the Oneness of God: sundry spirits speak through them or are coerced by the dukun’s offering gifts, fierce asceticism or mental concentration to lend their powers to mortals.

The Salamullah letter campaign also urged self-purification by renouncing corruption and doing good works. They explained that the Angel Gabriel had arrived to act as guide for those who would purify themselves and as
judge for those who would not, predicting imminent disasters to befall the earth as punishment. Furthermore, Gabriel was a guide for people of all faiths. Christians also were corrected for casting Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Roh or Ruhul Kudus) as God, and Hindus and Buddhists were told that their dewa (gods) and bodhisattvas were not God Himself but forms that the Angel Gabriel was now taking to transmit true knowledge of God’s oneness to their communities.

The work of justifying these teachings for people of Muslim backgrounds was considerably assisted by one of Bunda Lia’s early and closest spiritual companions in Salamullah, Abdul Rahman. He was a student at the State Islamic University, Jakarta, when he first met her in 1996. He was also an activist in university and Muhammadiyah student groups, including some that in 1998 mounted the fateful demonstrations against President Suharto. When he first came to Bunda Lia’s circle he had been going through a spiritually unsettled period, seeking in various Sufi orders (tarekat) answers that his formal religious studies and Muhammadiyah associates had not satisfactorily provided.

In time, Abdul Rahman himself began to receive revelations from the Angel Gabriel/Jibril. This prepared the way for the angel to transfer the role of Imam Madhi to Abdul Rahman and then to shape a new role for Bunda Lia in March 2000. She was to be a vehicle for Gabriel in a new identity as “Jibril—Ruhul Kudus” (Gabriel—Holy Spirit) and guide of a more fully universal monotheism, transcending all religions.

Thus, in 2001, Bunda Lia, now to be known as “Lia Eden”, was told to “free herself from all bonds, including the bonds of family and her religion . . . because upon her was descending God’s [Allah’s] teachings for all religions” (n.a. [2]). She was not even to be affiliated with Salamullah. “Salamullah” was henceforth to designate those followers of Jibril—Ruhul Kudus who wished to maintain their Muslim identity and ritual observances. They would be guided by Imam Madhi Abdul Rahman (now identified as the Prophet Muhammad reincarnated). Those who wished to let go that identity (or any other religious affiliation) and follow Lia Eden on her “Perennialist path” (jalan Perenial) would practise only the remembrance of God (dzikir) and good works under the guidance of Jibril—Ruhul Kudus as manifest in Lia (Anwar, 2004). Both clusters of followers, as well as those holding to the rituals and identities of other religions (Christianity, Buddhism, etc.) under Jibril—Ruhul Kudus’s direction, thenceforth were to be known collectively as the “Eden Community” (Kaum Eden). Then, in February 2005, Jibril—Ruhul Kudus called all those who accepted his guidance, including those who still clung to Islamic practices and identity, to embrace fully perennialist Eden.

This case provides one example of the interest cosmopolitan Muslims, even those from Muhammadiyah Modernist circles, are evidencing in experiential religiosity, and shows the preparedness of some to be adventurously independent in seeking out satisfying forms of emotional connectedness to the Divine. Those who have stayed for any length of time with Salamullah have been there not merely as voyeurs in a show of old-time magic or as
recipients of healings, but as Muslims keen to amplify the devotional resonance of their piety by regular, intense communal prayer, private “remembrance” and regimes of demanding spiritual purification. In short, they have a serious spiritual practice that in a broad sense can be called “Sufi” (Mufid, 2003), although they now retain only tenuous links with that Islamic tradition.

Salamullah also demonstrates the willingness of well-educated Muslims and other Indonesian cosmopolitans to extend the conventional boundaries of their religion and even move beyond them. The members’ mere acceptance of mediumship in the midst of otherwise conventional Muslim devotions has to be regarded as an unusual openness and preparedness to exercise independent judgement. That they did not simply suspend judgement is evident in the formation by the UIN students of a Salamullah discussion group and in the exegetical defences the group members put forward for the religious legitimacy of a new revelation from the Angel Gabriel. The importance of reflexivity and critical judgement in justifying religious boundary transgressions is also evident in accounts members have given of their struggles to accept the teachings as they unfold and square them with their previous beliefs—or modify the old beliefs. A particularly poignant account of such a struggle with religious heritage and “modern” common sense can be found in Sumardiono’s apologia to his mother, Loving You (2003). In it, he tries to justify to her how he could accept the new, perennialist revelations of Salamullah after prevailing upon her, in his student days, to give up her tolerant, traditionalist Islam in favour of a narrowly exclusivist Islamism. As with Abdul Rahman, he is able to redeploy his academic training (in Sumardiono’s case, from his studies at the top technical university, Institut Technologi Bandung) to create a plausibility structure for contemporary channelled revelations and to use his knowledge of Islamic scriptures, gained through the campus Muslim study groups (tarbiyah), to lend them legitimacy.

Accepting channelling or mediumship as an adjunct to proper Muslim religious devotions, of course, led on to the crossing of theological boundaries and to what social scientists would regard as eclecticism. However, this has not been allowed to appear as mere “syncretism”. Apparent borrowings from other religions, such as the doctrine of reincarnation, are not simply appropriated into a pastiche. Abdul Rahman and others have helped Bunda Lia struggle with the heretical implications of the revelations as they have appeared, and the revelations themselves contain detailed argumentation and citations from the Qur’an. This is so both for the teaching on reincarnation and for the novel reconstruction of the Last Judgement as occurring here on earth now, and centred in Indonesia.

While Salamullah was able to protect itself against the charge of syncretism, as long as some members retained their Islamic identity, they were nonetheless open to the charge of bid’ah (heretical innovation). The most challenging innovation, as charged in the MUI fatwa, was breaking the seal of the Prophet Muhammad’s prophecy (as it were) and presuming to correct Islam, along with all the major religions. For those who have now
accepted the loosening of their ties with Islam, however, this is not a concern. In their view, they answer to a higher power than MUI.

The Case of the Brahma Kumaris: From “Religion”, to “Faith”, to “Spirituality”

Along with the Anand Ashram and various Reiki healing centres, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU, or “BKs”) has been one of the most frequently featured groups in magazine and newspaper lifestyle articles on religion, health and “spirituality” (spiritualitas) since the 1990s. Indeed, the group’s self-designation in their title and elsewhere as “spiritual” has helped popularize that term in Indonesia. The very salience of the concept of “spirituality” in up-market Indonesian periodicals suggests the inadequacy of the terminology of mid-20th-century religious reform and government administration to accommodate the liberal end of the new religious spectrum into which the Brahma Kumaris fit.

The Brahma Kumaris movement was founded in Karachi in 1937 by a Sindhi diamond merchant, Dada Lekhraj, who, then in his later years, experienced the living presence of the Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu, followed by horrifying visions of world destruction. Acting thereafter as a medium for Shiva, Lekhraj guided a growing company of aspirants in using a particular style of meditation they called “Raja Yoga” and a regimen of spiritual purification through vegetarianism and celibacy. Through these means, the BKs cultivated “inner peace” and prepared to be the elect who will be reborn into a new Golden Age after the imminent millennium (Chander, 1983).

Through the channelled messages it became clear that Shiva was not to be understood as one of many Hindu gods, but in monotheistic terms as “The Supreme Soul”. In this and other respects, the movement distinguished itself from Hinduism, and indeed from all religions. Its knowledge, gyan, the true knowledge, was thus identified as “spiritual” rather than “religious”, and the movement as a whole was cast as a “university”.

The successful implantation of the Brahma Kumaris movement into Indonesia has required accommodation to domestic legal categories that ill fit it. As in London (the first overseas home of the BKs in the early 1970s [Howell and Nelson, 2000; Walliss, 2002]), the movement in Indonesia was initially established among expatriates from the Indian subcontinent. Sister Helen Quirin, an Australian who had “taken the knowledge” in India, was sent to Indonesia to start the BK branch. Her employer in the Gandhi School in northern Jakarta cautioned her not to try to broadcast the teachings in the general society out of respect for Muslim sensibilities, but just to give the BK teachings at religious gatherings of the resident Indian ladies group. Mindful of the legal environment of religions, her employer also encouraged her to call on the nearby office of the Ministry of Religion and advise the Balinese head of the Hindu section of her activities. That office encouraged Sister Helen to form a “foundation” (yayasan) and provided it with suitable board members, largely from the Indian community. When processing the foundation documents, Sister Helen then consulted an official
at the Department of Social Affairs, asking whether the foundation should be registered with the Department of Religion or the Ministry of Education and Culture. The advice was, “Your yoga is from India, is it not? Well, then you’re virtually Hindu, are you not?” Thus began a warm association with the Department of Religion that lasted until 1989.

In the meantime, the “Raja Yoga Foundation” began to offer classes in meditation to the general public, in association with its standard introductory Seven Day Course on the nature of the soul, how it connects with God in meditation, and the importance of “purity”. These classes attracted the attention of Indonesians, both Christian and Muslim, of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Very soon the classes also attracted the interest of the press, who reported that the Foundation “teaches the theory and practice of yoga . . . [and] . . . is not a religion”. This clearly expressed the position of the international BK movement, as well as the local chapter’s felt need for care in offering its teachings to Indonesian Muslims and Christians. Thus, then as now, Sister Helen stressed in her comments to the reporter: “One thing we never touch is a student’s religion . . . They are free and have no formal commitment [to the BKs]”.8

This accommodation of meditation students with limited or no interest in BK eschatology and purity rules and who might have other ongoing religious commitments was in evidence in other countries to which the BK movement had spread by the 1980s (Howell and Nelson, 2000; Walliss, 2002). One result was that the international movement began to generate a wealth of programming for the general public, responding to widely held interests in non-denominational “spirituality”, ethics and holistic health. These and local adaptations, such as “Positive Thinking”, “Understanding the Mind”, “The Art of Communication”, “Concept Total Health”, and “How to Change”, were offered in Indonesia. Thus, Sister Wendy told a women’s magazine in 1984 that “Yoga is a form of psychological therapy (terapi psikologis)” (n.a. [3], 1984: 34).

The highly successful initiative of Western BKs in the international movement to translate their concern for “inner peace” into a force for world peace through the formation of a UNESCO-affiliated NGO also helped promote the association of the BKs in Indonesia with a socially engaged spirituality clearly linked with modernizers across the world. This was marked in Indonesia in 1988 by the President’s wife, Madam Tien Suharto, agreeing to serve on the International Advisory Committee of the BK’s UNESCO programme “Global Cooperation for a Better World” (Indonesian Times, 29 July 1988: 3).

As the general meditation, spiritual well-being and peace programmes of the BKs expanded and attracted increasing numbers of Indonesian Muslims and Christians, the inappropriateness of lodging the movement in the Department of Religion as “Hindu” was impressed on Sister Helen by the Director of Hindu Affairs. “You’d better move”, she was urged, “since you are teaching non-Hindus.” Thus, in 1989 the original foundation (the legal face of the movement in Indonesia) was disestablished and a new foundation, the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual Study Foundation (Yayasan Studi Spiritual Brahma Kumaris), was registered with the “faiths” (kepercayaan) office, then in the Ministry of Education and Culture.9 Sister Helen nonethe-
less still occasionally attends the national councils of the Parisada Hindu Dharma.

In other ways as well, the BK image was becoming more protean than designation as a “faith” was originally meant to suggest in 1973. Thus, in 1992, an article in the up-market Muslim women’s magazine *Amanah* referred to the BKWSU as “a university” (*sebuah universitas*) and “a spiritual school of thought” (*suatu school of thought dalam hal spiritualitas*) (Munawar-Rahman, 1992: 42–43, 106–107). Another article in the same issue represented Raja Yoga as a spiritual practice (*metode*) that has parallels with all the “religions” and, that, despite its provenance in another religious tradition, can be of value to Muslims. It went on to liken the BK purity practices to the Sufi *tadzkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the passions through ethical reflection and restraint) and the BK yoga to the Sufi practice of *dzikir* (meditative remembrance of God). The organization was even likened to “a kind of Sufi order (*tarekat*)” (Munawar-Rahman, 1992: 107).

This perennialist message was again reported in 1997 in a *Gatra* article (Mohammad and Anwar, 1997) entitled, remarkably, “Breaking Through the Boundaries of Religion” (“Menembus Batas Agama”). It covered talks by visiting senior BK Sister Didi Sudesh Sethi. Speaking at the liberal Muslim Paramadina Foundation, she is quoted as observing: “Religions are one and their foundation is spirituality. We don’t need religion that is organised and rigid.” Along with this was included a sympathetic audience comment from the prominent State Islamic University professor and former senior Ministry of Religion official, Dr Komaruuddin Hidayat: “Modern people”, he said, “want freedom from materialism and formalism.” To this the *Gatra* reporters added a quotation from the international best-seller *Mega-trends 2000* (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1990): “Spirituality yes, organised religion no!”

More recent media coverage presents the BKs as teachers of meditation for psychological and health benefits along with other providers whose connection to a “religion” or status as a “faith” appears to be of no interest. What is important, however, is scientific legitimation. Thus, the November–December 1999 issue of *Holistik*, a glossy health and lifestyle magazine, carried a feature on “Overcoming Stress with Meditation”, complete with references to current medical literature and a description of the BK practice. Similarly, BK yoga was described as one of a dozen local meditation institutes in the January 2000 “New Millennium” issue of *Nirmala* that did a cover feature on “Get off Antibiotics! This Century’s Vaccine, Meditation”. In this environment, the precise legal status of the Brahma Kumaris is of little concern to patrons, who come seeking minimally distinguished health and spiritual benefits and not a regimented affiliation.

The Case of the Anand Ashram: Multi-Faith Centre in a Delimited Pluralism State

The Anand Ashram, founded in Jakarta on 14 January 1991, brings experiential religiosity to cosmopolitan Indonesians in a markedly differently format: a multi-faith meditation centre. Despite the Hindu associations of
the organization’s name (ashram being a term commonly used to indicate a Hindu guru’s residential teaching establishment, both in India and the West, and anand referencing both the founder’s name and spiritual bliss sought by Hindu mystics), the organization is legally constituted simply as a foundation and not registered either with the Department of Religion or with the kepercayaan (“faith”) section of the Department of Culture and Tourism, which now administers the kepercayaan groups. Although reminiscent of the Theosophy Society, its cultural referents are to the New Age of the late 20th century, not the spiritualist scene of the late 19th century. Moreover, its founder, Anand Krishna, has himself resisted identification with a particular religion (leaving the relevant section of his identity card blank) and strictly eschews guru status, occultism, and any suggestion of himself as propounding a new, syncretic philosophy.

Anand Krishna, of Indian descent and Hindu background, was born in the Javanese court town of Solo in Central Java in 1956. However, he received his schooling in India, returning to Indonesia to pursue a business career only after finishing an MBA in his family’s home country. While undertaking his formal schooling, he met a Sufi master, Shah Abdul Latif, and under his tutelage studied Islam, reading the Qur’an first in Hindi and only later in Arabic with the help of his master. Despite this early spiritual training, however, his business career came first, until he was stopped short by a near fatal attack of leukaemia. Returning to India to look for alternative healing after his doctors had given up hope, he was able to pull back from the gate of death after an encounter with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher in the Himalayas. So dramatically did this change his outlook on life, that he gave up his business career and devoted himself to spiritual teaching. He encourages students at his centres to keep up their own religion (agama) but to explore its deeper meanings and appreciate the commonalities in the spiritual foundations of all religions.

The spiritual teaching actually began as small informal gatherings of members of the Jakarta international community and local friends and business associates in the cosmopolitan district of Kemang. For these gatherings Anand wrote short reflections on the teachings of the world religions that were circulated among the group. At the suggestion of one of the American participants, he pulled some of these together in book form. With that began his meteoric career as the author of, by now, nearly forty spiritual books. The books present the spiritual insights of all the major religions in a form easily digestible for the non-specialist but educated and spiritually engaged Indonesian, and emphasize what Anand sees as the common core of all religions. So popular have these books been that in bookstores across the country they commonly take up well over half of the shelf space in the general spiritual book section.

The warm reception of these works encouraged Anand to move to north Jakarta, to Sunter, where he could build a teaching centre onto his home and provide altars and grottos for worshippers of all the major religious traditions. This centre, the Anand Ashram, and a recently established retreat centre, One Earth One Sky, in the hill resort area of Puncak, now provide a programme of instruction in meditation five nights a week. They also serve as
meeting places for people who enjoy exploring the depth spirituality of different traditions, including their own, in each other’s company. Festivities celebrating the holy days of the major traditions are held in the centres and dramatize the commonalities in religions and the need for religious understanding. The Anand Ashram centres are places where cosmopolitan Muslims can go to cultivate, with guidance and support, a practical engagement with their own mystical tradition, Sufism, albeit wholly outside the system of Sufi orders (*tarekat*). Indeed, this is the attraction of the centre for a number of Paramadina past-patrons who resist the exclusivity of the *tarekat* and object to other reputedly old-fashioned features of many *tarekat*, such as the supposed authoritarianism of their *syekh* and their otherworldliness (Howell, 2001). The Anand Ashram’s non-denominational “Sufism”, combined with de-confessionalized and psychologized meditation and spiritual healing regimes from Hindu, Buddhist and other traditions, is also attractive to the considerable number of non-Muslim patrons.

Such publishing and teaching programmes would be entirely unremarkable in most Western countries. However, in Indonesia they have drawn fire from both Muslims and Catholics who see Anand’s teachings as presumptuous misrepresentations of their beliefs and, implicitly, a violation of the delimited pluralism formula for religious peace in the country. Vigorous attacks in the Muslim media in late 2000 accused Anand of insulting Islam and violating the principle that a non-Muslim may not presume to interpret Islamic teachings. *Media Dakwah* went so far as to accuse Anand of forming an *agama baru* (“new religion”), “like Salamullah” (*Gatra*, 23 September 2000: 66). For a short period his books were actually withdrawn from sale to avert violence.

Anand’s rejoinder was that his books only offered an “appreciation” (*Jawa Pos*, 18 December 2000: 2) of the various religions and that they were actually meant to promote urgently needed religious harmony. Further, he noted that his writings on Islam had been reviewed by scholars at the State Islamic University (UIN), Jakarta, and critiqued in seminars there before publication. Significantly, he received then, and continues to receive, support from leading academics at the UIN and in the Ministry of Religion. By 2001 his books had returned to the bookshop shelves and they continue to sell well.

**Conclusion**

Each of these cases exemplifies the popularity of forms of religiosity not readily accommodated within conceptions of normative religion (*agama*) that were embodied in law at the beginning of Indonesia’s New Order. The cases reveal the insistence of numerous self-confident middle-class Indonesians, including Muslims, on exploring diverse sources of spiritual enrichment, regardless of the providers’ formal legal status or the association of certain practices with once devalued traditionalism. Patronage of these groups by religiously well-educated Muslims, along with Indonesians of other religious backgrounds, is contributing to the expansion of the “spectrum
of internal dialogue” that other researchers have observed in Indonesian Islam and elsewhere in the Muslim world (Eickelman and Anderson, 1999: 13; Hefner, 2003). It is also making the boundaries around the authorized “religions” and even the “faiths” distinctly porous and is challenging the strictly delimited pluralism promoted by Indonesia’s New Order Government.

Whether, indeed, any of these expressions of cosmopolitan Indonesian religiosity are likely to flourish in the future, however, cannot be predicted. Their affinity with the social classes that drive economic development and social modernization, and whose members enjoy unprecedented exposure to global cultural currents, suggests that such forms of cosmopolitan religiosity are indeed the wave of the future. However, as Beyer (1994), Eisenstadt (2002) and others have pointed out, the information-age extensions of modernization that generate the social connectedness we now call globalization are just as likely to prompt radical religious denials of diversity and exclusivist rejections of pluralism as to promote cosmopolitan acceptance of them. Such polarization is already very much in evidence in Indonesia in the controversies over the incorporation of Islamic law into the law of the state, and in the small but recently growing popularity of jihadists. In a world where international conflict is being violently expressed in religious terms, both by states and “terrorists”, tolerance and inclusivism are fragile ideals.

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NOTES

1. Actually not five but six “religions”, including the “Confucian Religion” (Agama Khonghucu) were named in the original 1965 Presidential Decision, but thereafter Confucianism lost tokens of legitimacy. See below.
2. See, for example, the September 2003 issue of Panjimas, a glossy mainstream Muslim magazine carrying the cover theme “New Age [English]: The Phenomenon that Just Doesn’t Go Away”.
3. Here “Modernist Muslims” refers specifically to those Muslims associated with the 20th-century Islamic reform movement spearheaded by the Muslim voluntary association Muhammadiyah.
4. Where not otherwise indicated, this section is based on interviews with participants at the Jakarta centre and on the organization’s publications (e.g. Aminuddin 1998, 1999, and www.salamullah.org/Indonesia).
5. Note that wahyu (Indonesian, from the Arabic wahy) may also mean, in strictly Islamic contexts, the revelations from God recorded in the Qur’an and Hadiths.
6. Note that many Muslims cynically view MUI as a highly politicized body advancing Islamists’ agendas. In any case, its fatwa do not carry any legal sanctions that can be enforced by the state.
9. Other international movements such as Ananda Marga, Kekeluargaan (The Family) and SUBUD are also now lodged in this office.
10. Information on the Anand Ashram can also be found in Anand Krishna’s autobiography (2003) and on the Ashram’s website (www.anandkrishna.org/english/index.html).

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