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ORTHODOX MISSION PROFILE

Archimandrite Daniel Bambang Dwi Byantoro
and the Indonesian Mission

Indonesia is the fifth largest country in the world with a population of some 220 million. With ninety percent of the population claiming to be Moslem, it has the largest Islamic majority of any country in the world, and it seems almost a miracle that Christianity is now taking root here, particularly Orthodox Christianity. Indonesia was first missionized by seventh- and eighth-century Antiochean Syrian Christians and later by Non-Chalcedonians, but as their clergy died out these politically and geographically isolated converts decreased in number. In the eleventh century, a Catholic missionary-bishop to Indonesia found descendants of these believing Christians, who had survived nearly three centuries in relative isolation. Unfortunately, there are no surviving records from these early centuries, although tradition records three of the original bishops as Mar Yaballaha, Mar Abdisho, and Mar Denha. Later, the Roman Catholic missionary Francis Xavier worked on Indonesian Malacca from 1544-1547, the Dutch Reformed Church established a colonial Indonesian mission in their territory of “Dutch New Guinea,” and after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution many Russian refugees fled to Indonesia where, for a short time, they set up their own Orthodox churches before emigrating elsewhere. Thus, despite the current Islamic majority, there are Christian roots, slender but deep. Most Indonesians are not aware of these roots but Fr. Daniel, the first Indonesian Orthodox priest and missionary to his people, emphasizes that it was Eastern Christianity that first took hold in his country.

Although Christianity is one of the official religions of Indonesia, Islamic fundamentalism has provoked several decades of violence, particularly against Christians. The providential conversion of Fr. Daniel Bambang Dwi Byantoro and his missionary call to bring traditional Eastern Orthodoxy to his people is all the more fascinating to Christians who generally think

of Orthodoxy in an East-West context, but as one confined to the northern hemisphere.

Fr. Daniel was born into a Moslem family in 1956, in the remote Islamic Indonesian town of Mojokerto in East Java. Like many in the East, he was raised by his aged grandparents, particularly by his grandfather who lived to be 104. As a youth, he recalls, he struggled with ideas about God and the relationship between God and man. Although he was immersed in Islamic tradition and was an avid student and lover of the Koran, he wasn't able to find answers to many of the questions that arose in his soul.

Fr. Daniel's first encounter with Christianity occurred when he was still a teenager, his views of Christianity formed by the teachings of Islamic apologists who viewed Christianity as a heresy. "According to Islam," he says, "the unforgivable sin is to associate God with non-God, which means to identify the creature with God and, according to Islam, Christians do exactly that." Contrary to his Islamic elders who often had an almost superstitious fear of Christians, he purposely contacted the charismatic Protestant husband of one of his teachers, not out of a youthful questioning of Islam, but to challenge the Moslem apostate. The Christian explained Christ from a Protestant point of view, but young Bambang was not convinced. Nevertheless, a spark had been kindled. Although he challenged the man's poorly formed arguments about the Trinity, the Christian's daring witness intrigued his young mind. As an Islamic idealist, he was troubled by the hypocrisy he saw among the Islamic faithful (which he understood did not disprove Islam, but demonstrated that many people were not Moslems by faith but by culture, something he would later object to in Christianity as well.) He was also intrigued by the possibility of receiving answers to the many questions he had about Christianity, questions that had long been brushed over with Moslem slogans.

Although Bambang didn't agree with his Christian acquaintance's explanation of the nature of Christ and the Holy Trinity – a great stumbling block to the Islamic mind – he began to read the Bible along with the Koran, looking for truth in relation to the two scriptures and their meanings. One day while reading the Koran, he was inspired in a manner that only Christ can bring about, Who meets each person on his own level of understanding and experience. "I was reading the Koran," he said. "It lay open on my lap. I was reading Chapter 3:45, about when the Angel Gabriel said, 'O Marjam, God gives you glad tidings with a Word from Himself. His name will be the

Messiah, Isa, the son of Marjam. He is great in this world and in the hereafter. He is one of those who are near God.¹ I had been reading this and it was like an answer from God.” Bambang began to see Christianity differently through the Koran itself, which, although denying that Christ is God, treats many points of New Testament history with reverence. His accounts of his first visits to local Christian churches highlight both the difficulties encountered by Moslems wishing to learn about Christianity in an Islamic environment and his own thirst for Truth. Gradually, Bambang became a believer, his faith building gradually under adverse circumstances.

His inclination towards Christianity was soon challenged in a way that reshaped the course of his life. Fear of reprisal had caused him to be secretive about his spiritual search and he spoke to no one of his contact with Christian believers – particularly hiding it from his pious and venerable grandfather whom he both feared and respected. One day, after he had returned from a secret visit to church, his Bible fell from under his clothes at the feet of his 100 year-old grandfather who promptly beat him. Bambang ran out of the house, but later returned to face the elderly Moslem, who demanded to know why he had left Islam. Only half-converted himself, Bambang defended faith in Christ as true Islamic belief; that is, the belief of one who truly submits to God. Fr. Daniel relates the dialogue:

“Grandpa, you are very old. If you die any time soon, are you sure that you will go to heaven?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“It depends on my works. It depends on the scale – if there are more good deeds on the scale then I will go to heaven and if there are more bad deeds then I will go to hell.”

“Are you sure that your good works outweigh your bad works?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, that means that you do not submit to God. You are depending on yourself, on your own effort. What kind of Moslem is that? Now Grandpa, let me tell you . . . God has sent His Word, and you can only really know God through His Word. His Word can be called His Son and His Son is called

¹ Chapter 3:45 from the *Koran* (English trans. H.M.Shakir): When the angels said: O Marium, surely Allah gives you good news with a Word from Him (of one) whose name is the Messiah, Isa son of Marium, worthy of regard in this world and the hereafter and of those who are made near (to Allah).

Isa, and it is through His Son that we are saved. So salvation is through God's Word. You know the Prophet Isa's name in the Koran is 'the spirit of God.' This prophet Isa is not just a man. The Koran says that he was born without a father, which means He was born directly through the power of God. It is the Word of God Himself who became man, "Isa." So God's Word came down to the world in order to restore it, to release us from the power of evil. Religion is not just a matter of doing good works but is meant to gain us eternal life. This eternal life cannot be attained only through good works, but by submitting oneself to God."

At this moment, Fr. Daniel says, he expected a reprimand for being so outspoken. There was a long pause, but instead of becoming angry, his grandfather quietly asked, "Can I too become a Christian?" After a short time he was baptized by the same Christian man who had befriended his grandson.

God's providence surrounded the death of Fr. Daniel's grandfather. Although he was a relatively new Christian, he foresaw the hour of his death and had a vision of heaven as he died in peace surrounded by his family. He was 104 years old and had outlived three wives. This was also a sign to the young Bambang, who was confirmed in his new faith and became an active member of the Protestant charismatic movement in Indonesia.

After finishing high school, Bambang spent three years travelling and teaching as an itinerant lay preacher on Java, Sumatra, and neighbouring islands, where he became the founder of a prayer group called "Siloam." This close group of young Indonesian students remained his core support as he deepened his faith in search of historical Christian roots. Although he was a preacher, he still had difficulties with his new faith and longed for the rich tradition of Islam where every aspect of life was permeated with prayer. He recalls, "As a child I was taught how to pray at set times. In the Pentecostal churches, there is no such thing – when you pray, how you pray, it doesn't matter. I had to make up my own times because there is no regulation on when and how to pray. I told myself, "If God is a God of order, He must have a rule, a rhythm – you can't just choose whatever you like." "Besides that," he continued, "in my mind I had begun to despise Christians. Christians were supposed to be people full of love and they were not. I was disappointed and scandalized over and over again, as I did not yet understand that human beings are much the same, no matter what religion. I became so weary that I stopped going to church. I longed for some deeper

Indonesia, located in Southeast Asia, is the largest Muslim country in the world with a population of 220 million. It consists of more than 13,677 large and small islands, including Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Irian Jaya, etc. The country has an ancient history of diverse religions, kingdoms and empires such as the Hindu Mataram Kingdom (8th-10th century), the Buddhist Sriwijaya Kingdom, the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire, and since the 15th century, the Islamic Kingdoms of Java, Sumatra etc. During the Sriwijaya-Majapahit periods, eastern Christians of the Antiochian Syrian tradition came as missionaries to Indonesia and were later followed by the Non-Chalcedonians. However, they were an isolated minority and soon disappeared from the Indonesian landscape. The country was occupied by the Dutch in the 16th century who brought Western Christianity. It was later occupied by the Japanese, and finally gained its independence on August 17, 1945, as the modern Republic of Indonesia. Since its independence, the state of Indonesia recognizes only those religions that took an active part in the struggle for independence: Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Religions that came later, including the Orthodox Church, must be registered under one of these five recognized categories.

feeling and experience, and it was just at this time that I had a dream that influenced me greatly.”

“One night, I was dreaming and in my dream I was on a pilgrimage to Mecca. I was a real hadji, it was so real that I still remember it. I was sitting with all the other pilgrims, and right in front of the door of the Kaaba² I saw Mohammed. He was preaching to millions of people, and while he was preaching he looked at me and said: ‘Why are you here? I told you, I showed you the way. Why aren’t you there?’ I awoke sweating, I was so afraid. Why? Because in Islam there is a tradition that if the Prophet Mohammed appears to you, it cannot be the devil. It has to be the Prophet Mohammed. When I told other Moslems of my dream, they said it had to be the Prophet Mohammed. But how can the Prophet Mohammed tell you to become a Christian?! This was a mystery, but because of this dream I remained a Christian.”

With the help of a benefactor, Bambang travelled to Seoul, Korea where he entered a Protestant seminary, the Asian Center for Theological Studies

² Kaaba – the central cubic stone structure within the Great Mosque in Mecca, which is covered by a black cloth. Islamic tradition says it was built by Adam and rebuilt by Abraham and the descendents of Noah. Moslems around the world face the Kaaba in prayer. Located at one of its edges is a black stone, possibly meteoric in origin, which, along with the Kaaba, has been venerated in Mecca from before the arrival of Islam.

and Mission. There he studied English and Korean, New Testament Greek and Hebrew, Church history and theology. He delved into the differences between the various Christian churches and studied Latin and Greek patristic theology, but nonetheless remained homesick for the regular periods of prayer, ritual, and fasting of Islam. One day, as he gazed out his dormitory window, his eyes rested on a distant structure that he had seen many times before. The roof looked comfortingly like the dome of a mosque, and Bambang was overcome with a longing to return, if only for a brief period to rest his aching soul. A few days later he set out for the mosque, only to find when he arrived that it was not a mosque at all, but the cupola of a Greek Orthodox church! And so it was that the future Fr. Daniel met Orthodoxy for the first time. He still remembers that first Vespers service in Korean with great feeling, “The night I came, at the end of the service when everyone said ‘Ahmeen!’ my heart was pounding. It reminded me so much of the mosque. I said to myself, ‘I’ve come home. . .’ I knew that this was my home now. I could believe in Jesus as God and worship like a Moslem. I began to cry. This was the answer.”

Bambang began to read voraciously from the library of Archimandrite Soterios Trambas, the Greek priest of the church. He had difficulty with many Orthodox beliefs, such as the veneration of the Virgin Mary and reverence for icons, but he believed that Orthodoxy was the apostolic Church. Despite his reservations, he wanted to become Orthodox. He told Fr. Soterios of his desire, but the priest tested him, saying, “Why do you want to become Orthodox? Just stay Protestant.” They had many talks, and one by one his questions were answered. Again he asked Fr. Soterios about becoming Orthodox. “What is your reason?” the priest asked. “If it is money, we don’t have money. We are a poor church. If you want fame, our church has been persecuted for a long time.

If you want those kinds of things, it is better for you to become a Protestant pastor. Be a good preacher and you’ll be famous.” Frustrated and not a little offended, Bambang explained that he wasn’t interested in money. Fr. Soterios asked, “What, then?”

- “I found the truth in this church.”
- “If this is your answer, then come be a part of us.”

And so it was that in 1983, Fr. Daniel became the first contemporary Indonesian convert to Orthodox Christianity.

Fr. Soterios encouraged Bambang (now Daniel) to go to Greece to see Orthodoxy in a traditional setting. In Athens he studied Greek for six months and then spent another six months on Mt. Athos in the monastery of Simonas Petras. This was his real training-ground, where he first began translating liturgical books into Indonesian, and struggled with developing a terminology suitable to express the faith. He tested his first efforts in long letters to Siloam, the prayer group he had formed in Indonesia, explaining his new-found belief in Orthodoxy. At the end of his year in Greece, Daniel went to America where he completed the theological course at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Boston and earned a doctorate in sociology from the University of Ohio. He had been away from his homeland for years, and as his education came to a close he began to ponder on how he could best serve his people. After much interior debate and prayer, Daniel became a monk, feeling that this was the best path for a missionary, and he was ordained to the priesthood in 1988 by Bishop Maximos of Pittsburgh. That same year he returned to Indonesia.

In his homeland, Fr. Daniel was breaking fresh ground, building a foundation upon which Orthodoxy could be preached. He began in his hometown by converting family members – teaching them to bake prosphora and make vestments from the local batik fabric. Within a few months he moved to Solo and began giving lectures to the members of “Siloam” who had read his letters and followed his conversion with much interest. Bible studies began, and mission activities to several villages. He also gave a year-long series of classes on Orthodoxy at the University of Solo. Realizing that this could be a valuable tool, he recorded the lectures and distributed them throughout the country. The tapes gave many Indonesians their first contact with Orthodox Christianity in a language they could understand, by someone who was “from among their own.” Combining preaching and systematic religious education with the personal exchange that is characteristic of Indonesians, Fr. Daniel set up a house church in Solo like that of the early Christians.

Little by little people came to be baptized and Fr. Daniel’s mission now covers a dozen islands and many villages. Everywhere he encourages the incorporation of Indonesian culture: services in local languages; not wearing shoes in places of worship; modest traditional native dress in church. The

daily services of matins, liturgy, vespers, compline and hours are divided into seven separate services to provide continuity for converts who are used to the Islamic ritual of five periods of prayer each day. In catechizing and scripture classes Fr. Daniel often incorporates Arabic and Hebrew phrases to help newcomers make the connection between Semitic-based religions and Orthodoxy, emphasizing Christianity's eastern origins. Iconography and church architecture now incorporate Indonesian aspects as well.

In 1991 Orthodoxy was legally recognized by the State Department of Religion, classified under the Protestant sector of the Department. Fr. Daniel's mission is part of the newly-established Greek Orthodox Diocese of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, overseen by Metropolitan Nikitas.

The Orthodox Mission continues to grow despite early internal mission struggles and Indonesia's political turmoil. The current civil strife is both political and sectarian; the upheaval of a self-determined nation of great ethnic and religious diversity. The anti-Christian sentiments of many Moslems who consider Christianity a heresy have become apparent, and numerous building projects for churches have been held up or blocked by local Islamic protest. (In one town the half-built shell of a future Orthodox mission has been left unfinished and abandoned since the building permit was revoked.) In the 1990's, anti-Christian sentiment burst into violence: churches were set ablaze and there have been a number of Christian martyrs, including twenty-five Catholics who were killed by a Moslem mob as they gathered for mass in Haruku. Thousands have died in sectarian fighting in the Malaccas since 1998, and in 1999, a Moslem rally in Solo called for the destruction of the region's Christian churches. Christian homes, businesses and churches have been burnt on the island of Lombok and elsewhere. Christian clergy, including Fr. Daniel, have been forced to leave their homes periodically for fear of attack. In the winter of 1999-2000, Fr. Daniel met with the President of Indonesia, Abdurrachman Wahid, the first civilian president of Indonesia, who had been elected in 1999 by an historic nation-wide vote. Mr. Wahid expressed his concern and support for the Orthodox community of Indonesia.

In spite of on-going violence and unrest, Father Daniel continues to preach and remains positive and hopeful, enthusiastically relating stories of Christian converts from Moslem, Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds. After twelve years of missionary work there are ten Orthodox churches in Indonesia with nine priests and two thousand faithful, as well as seven

students studying abroad for the priesthood. Plans include an Orthodox Christian center in Jakarta, which will also provide social service outreach and continue publishing Orthodox apologetic works for Muslims. God's blessings are at work in the local parishes. God's blessings are apparent in the local parishes. In the village of Pandean, Boyolali, central Java, one of the first of Fr. Daniel's missions, a cement cross and several icons have begun exuding myrrh, and several people have seen apparitions of the saints and the Theotokos. Hundreds are flocking to the village and many have been healed after being anointed with the myrrh. Fr. Daniel is now leading pilgrimages to Java.

Father Daniel asks Road to Emmaus readers for prayers for his country, saying "With the recent burning of churches in Indonesia, difficulties in doing mission have escalated, but the Holy Spirit is still working so that the mission will not be halted. We don't know what the future holds for us, but we believe that the Lord will not allow that which He has created in Indonesia to be destroyed by any evil power. The Church will grow, and the mission will proceed. To God will be the glory. Amen." ✦