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**Hegemony without conversion:  
religious nationalism in modern Malaysia**

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In his extensive exploration of the place of religion in International Relations, Jonathan Fox has overlooked one important perspective: religion as a contributor to the generation of national identity. This oversight is symptomatic of a much broader marginalisation of religion in International Studies, except in particular fields like terrorism and genocide studies where it is generally regarded as an exotic and negative force. To correct this shortcoming, we are beginning a study of religion as a force in International Relations, using the concept of religious nationalism as a value-free prism of analysis.

In this paper we intend to introduce just one case study: the use of Islam to construct national identity in Malaysia. We focus particularly on the recent moves to reconstruct the school History syllabus along religious nationalist lines. We also draw a limited comparison with ethno-nationalism in neighbouring Singapore to demonstrate that religious nationalism and ethno-nationalism are essentially variations of the same phenomenon.

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Jonathan Fox is a leading scholar of the place of religion in the study of International Relations and has contributed an immense volume of literature since he started publishing in 1999.<sup>2</sup> As well as being possibly the most prolific scholar in this field, he was also among the first who self-consciously set out to consider approaching religion through the prism of International Relations.<sup>3</sup> Since he opened this door the field has become crowded,<sup>4</sup> partly because of his influence but more directly because religion thrust itself into the mainstream of international politics through extreme acts of violence and terrorism. It is a tribute to Fox's perspicuity that he had already established himself in this field when 9/11 brought Al Qaeda and political Islam into

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Fox, 'The Influence of Religious Legitimacy on Grievance Formation by Ethno-Religious Minorities', *Journal of Peace Research*, 36, 3 (1999), 289–307.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Fox, 'Religious Causes of Discrimination against Ethno-religious Minorities', *International Studies Quarterly*, 44, 3 (2000), 423–50; 'The Effects of Religious Discrimination on Ethnic Protest and Rebellion', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 20, 2 (2000), 16–43; Jonathan Fox, 'Clash of Civilisations or Clash of Religions: Which is a More Important Determinant of Ethnic Conflict?' *Ethnicities*, 1, 3 (2001), 295–320; Jonathan Fox, 'The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars, 1945–2001', *Journal of Peace Research*, 41 (2004), 715–31, and; Jonathan Fox, 'World Separation of Religion and State into the 21st Century', *Comparative Political Studies*, 39 (2006), 537–69.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger, 'Does Religion Make a Difference? Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29, 3 (2000), 641–74; Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (eds), *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York and Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (New York and Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and; Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York and Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

our living rooms, so it is a little surprising that he give every appearance of being bound by the politics of confrontation, violence and terrorism.<sup>5</sup> He argued for years that religion needed to be retrieved from the margins of International Relations,<sup>6</sup> but his first serious attempt at composing a theoretical statement of its impact was not a ‘theory of religion and International Relations’, but a ‘theory of religion and conflict’.<sup>7</sup> It is ironic that Fox is struggling to move beyond this analytical trap for two reasons: first that it comes despite his acknowledgement on more than one occasion of the role that religion routinely plays in bestowing political legitimacy and its consequent influence on decision makers;<sup>8</sup> second, and more significantly, it seems to be a failure to follow the logic of his own argument that ‘religion in international politics is overlooked [because] the social sciences, including international relations, have their origin in the rejection of religion’, which formed the intrinsic core of the Enlightenment Project.<sup>9</sup> Since then he has extended this line of analysis with a section of his 2006 co-authored book in which he elucidated on ‘The Profound Rejection of Religion in International Relations Theory and its Western Roots’ and ‘The Anti-Religious Origins of Major International Relations Theories’.<sup>10</sup> One might think that

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<sup>5</sup> See the titles listed in footnote 2.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Fox, ‘Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations’, *International Studies Review*, 3, 3 (2001), 53–73.

<sup>7</sup> See his chapter titled ‘A More Comprehensive Theory of Religion and Conflict’ in his *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late Twentieth Century: A General Theory* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Fox, , ‘Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations’, 59–71, and Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 35–61.

<sup>9</sup> Fox, ‘Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations’, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 14–24.

this background would have provided him with a very clear roadmap out of this dead-end, and that few Westerners could be better placed to stand aloof from the impulse that pigeonholes religion as a problem to be overcome, yet clearly he is struggling to break free of this conflation of religion and ‘problem’.<sup>11</sup> The last pages of his most recent book show that he is aware of the nature of the narrowness of the street on which he has found himself, and demonstrates his desire to find a way forward. He even suggests a methodology: exploring the relationship between religion and other elements of International Relations like ethnicity and nationalism. He identifies this new path as an attempt to integrate religion into ‘General International Relations Theory’, and suggests it as a path for future research.<sup>12</sup> Fox’s dilemma is without doubt substantially attributable to the fact that his path into this field started in the violent politics of the Middle East and passed through the rise of ethno-religious violence of the last decade of the twentieth century, but it is one that highlights how far International Relations theory and its academic practitioners still have to go before they can say that they have properly accommodated religion into their analysis.

The power of the blinkers on International Relations is highlighted by the reaction – or lack of it – among practitioners of cognate disciplines to International Relations’s recent proliferation of interest in religion’s articulation with politics. In short, there has been minimal discernable reaction, even from scholars whose own

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<sup>11</sup> The temptation to conflate religion and ‘problem’ by International Relations practitioners has been described by Hatzopoulos and Petito thus: ‘[Since Westphalia] politics with reference to religion became the ultimate threat to order, security and civility, and could not inhabit both the practices of international relations, and subsequently, the discipline of International Relations.’ See Pavlos Hatzopoulos and Fabio Petito, ‘The Return from Exile: An Introduction’, in Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 166–79.

study engages them deeply in the intersection of religion and politics. It has made no difference to the work of sociologists of religion such as Bryan Turner, or to political scientists who specialise in religion and politics, such as Jeff Haynes. In fact, the private reaction of many political scientists, sociologists and historians has been patronising bemusement. After all, they have always recognised the central role of religion in society, politics and the construction of ethnic and national identities. This has been particularly true of those scholars who study virtually any society that lies geographically between the Eastern extremities of Southeast Asia (Philippines and Indonesia) and the Western extremity of North Africa, where it is nearly impossible to ignore the impact of religion. The journals and books of these cognate disciplines are overflowing with scholarship on religion, society and politics (both in the general and the particular) from which International Relations scholars can and should draw, but at this stage International Relations has offered the cognate disciplines little in return.<sup>13</sup> The tentative beginning of an interdisciplinary dialogue appears to be emerging with the appearance of scholars from cognate disciplines accepting invitations to contribute to International Relations and International Studies edited volumes,<sup>14</sup> and scholars from cognate disciplines writing and editing books on

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<sup>13</sup> One modest offering from International Relations is found in: Lorraine Elliott, Mark Beeson, Shahram Akbarzadeh, Greg Fealy and Stuart Harris, *Religion, Faith and Global Politics* (Canberra: Department of International Relations, The Australian National University, 2006), available at <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/ir/pubs/keynotes/keynotes-06.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, 'Islam and the West: Muslim voices of Dialogue', in Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*, 237–69.

religion and politics that self-consciously straddle International Relations and International Studies.<sup>15</sup>

### **Religious nationalism**

This paper intends to accept Fox's (and his recent co-author, Schmucl Sandler's) challenge to continue the integration of religion into the International Relations framework, and takes for granted their hesitant and heavily qualified suggestion that 'it will be done in a similar manner to the way political science and international relations has adopted the study of nationalism, or to be more precise ethnonationalism'.<sup>16</sup> To be precise, we posit that religion should be regarded as an ordinary and routine aspect of ethnic and national identity and its relationship to politics can be interrogated in these terms, as did Jerry Z. Muller in the lead article in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>17</sup>

We are adapting the concept of religious nationalism as it has been used by scholars such as Fox, Peter van der Veer, Mark Juergensmeyer and many others.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); and, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, 178. Accepting this challenge seems natural since Barr is a political historian by training and Anantha is a political scientist. Both have academic interests in ethnicity, religion and nationalism in Southeast Asia.

<sup>17</sup> Jerry Z. Muller, 'Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2008, 18–35.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Fox, 'The Rise of Religious Nationalism'; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994); Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1993), and; Sikata Banerjee,

One of the more concise definitions of religious nationalism as we understand it can be drawn by threading the critical elements of an exposition given originally by van der Veer in 1994: ‘that religious nationalism articulates discourse on the religious community [and “religious identity”] with discourse on the nation’, treating both as ‘products of changing forms of religious organization and communication’ rather than as “‘primordial attachments” inculcated by unchanging tradition’.<sup>19</sup> We also note his more recent rider that ‘religious traditions can be reshaped by [both] nationalism and transnationalism to become ... vehicles of political movements.’<sup>20</sup> Though it is not central to this paper, we might add the further rider that we distinguish between the constructed religious community and identity on the one hand, and the faith taught by the religion on the other, and fully recognise the potency of personal faith and personal agency in causation.

Our concern in studying religious nationalism is therefore with the national or transnational religious community per se, rather than with any essentialised notion of the religion itself, since the constructed community is the element that articulates with national and international power and has the potential to contribute to national and ethnic identity.

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‘Warriors in Politics: Religious Nationalism, Masculine Hinduism and Shiv Sena in Bombay’, *Women and Politics*, 20, 3 (1999), 1–26.

<sup>19</sup> van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, x. The emphasis on the ‘construction’ of religious communities and identities makes this analytical approach a direct genealogical descendent of Benedict Anderson’s discourse on ‘imagined communities’. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Peter van der Veer, ‘The Imperial Encounter with Asian Religions’, *Radical History Review*, 99 (2007), 254.

Whereas religious nationalism has been used almost universally to date in the context of violent conflicts, we intend to apply it to peaceful societies and use it to conduct analysis through the prism of hegemony rather than conflict. We are not necessarily using ‘hegemony’ in a sophisticated Gramscian sense (though sometimes it does take such forms). Rather, we use it in the simple sense of the elite of a dominant community in a state using its political and social power to establish its mores and values as the dominant cultural and social force in the country.<sup>21</sup> Instead of treating religious nationalism as code for extremism, militancy or ‘fundamentalism’, we intend to treat religious nationalism as an ordinary dynamic that is routinely associated with building ethnic and national identity. The legitimacy of treating religious nationalism in this non-sensational manner is demonstrated by the fact that, understood in this fashion, it opens new opportunities for studying the dynamics of religion in nation building, not only in cases involving communal violence, genocide and persecution, but also in cases where high or significant degrees of national cohesion have been achieved in contexts of relative peace, thus allowing more nuanced analysis of its role. In taking this approach we are consciously linking our own established approaches to research on ethnicity and national identity with

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<sup>21</sup> We also allow for the likelihood that those outside the dominant group will retreating into their own constructed ethnic identities as a defence, though this is not our primary concern in this paper. The defensive nature of ethnic identity is highlighted by David Brown in his *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 13–15. Since this paper will be focussing on the situation in Malaysia it is useful to note that Andrew Willard’s recent book posits the thesis that the contemporary Hindu revivalist movement is a direct and defensive response to the increasing public hegemony of Islamic religious nationalism in Malaysia. See Andrew C. Willard, *Cage of Freedom: Tamil Identity and the Ethnic Fetish in Malaysia* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007).

established research on religion and society<sup>22</sup> in such a way that they contribute to the mainstream International Relations concerns such as domestic and international political power, nation-state formation and dismemberment, strategic culture, and security. By treating religious nationalism in this fashion we hope to demonstrate our central argument: that religious nationalism is a commonplace, though not a necessary part of ethno-nationalism, and should be treated just as routinely in the study of International Relations.

We intend to achieve this by engaging in a case study of religious (Islamic) nationalism in Malaysia, and drawing a limited comparison, based primarily on a comparison of school textbooks and schooling environments, with the results of Barr's established research on (Chinese) ethnonationalism in neighbouring Singapore. The linkages between these two phenomena will establish beyond reasonable doubt that in each case we are dealing with variations of the same phenomenon, thereby establishing religious nationalism in its proper, uncomplicated place in International Relations theory. It should also show that investigating the character of particular cases of religious nationalism is much more significant and interesting than theoretical debates about the place of religion in International Relations – a debate

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, José Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Roger Friedland, 'Money, Sex and God: The Erotic Logic of Religious Nationalism', *Sociological Theory*, 20, 3 (2002), 381–425; Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values*; Craig R. Prentiss, *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003); Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003); Lucian N. Leustian, 'Towards an Integrative Theory of Religion and Politics', *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion and Politics*, 17 (2005), 364–81, and; Jeff Haynes (ed.), *Handbook on Religion and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2008).

that is only needed because so many International Relations scholars are reluctant to let the real world interfere with their orthodoxies.

Before proceeding, however, we need to make two important distinctions. First, even though we will be arguing that religious nationalism is akin to ethno-nationalism and is routinely interwoven with it, we are drawing a sharp conceptual distinction between the two. Second, for the purposes of this article we are also drawing a sharp conceptual distinction between the constructions of supposedly ‘primordial’ nationalisms – religious nationalism and ethno-nationalism – and modern, ‘civic’ nationalism, based on modern concepts of citizenship and the quid pro quo of rights and responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> It is not that we are suggesting that ‘civic’ nationalism is completely unrelated to the ‘primordial’ forms of nationalism, but simply that in this article we have nothing to say about civic nationalism.<sup>24</sup>

### **The logic of assimilation**

We have already mentioned that most studies of the phenomenon of religious nationalism have focused on violent examples. In fact the term came into academic parlance through Mark Juergensmeyer and others’ studies of Hindu nationalism [*Hindutva*] in India. Hindu nationalism in India was a near-perfect inspiration for such a conceptualising of religious nationalism because the religious divisions in this society are utterly free of racial and other fault lines, making it an ideal-type

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<sup>23</sup> See David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural and Multicultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> For an exploration of the blurring of ethnic and civic nationalism, see E. Kaufmann, and O. Zimmer, ‘Dominant ethnicity’ and the ‘ethnic-civic’ dichotomy in the work of A.D. Smith’, *Nations and Nationalism* 10, 1–2 (2004), 63–78.

example.<sup>25</sup> With this in mind we have drawn on established research to on Hindu nationalism in India to highlight the main point about Malaysian religious nationalism that we wish to draw forth in this article, which is the logic of assimilation. This logic, which we argue is central to both religious and ethnic nationalism, is manifest in two elements of *Hindutva* in India: the central role of the land as home of the religious nation; and the impetus to establish the *Hindutva* as the core of the social order, so that citizens outside the religious nation are left in an ambiguous and uncomfortable relationship with the core religious nation.

As to the former, India is not merely the homeland of Hindus, but in the ultimate statement of religious nationalism, it is the home, literally, of the Hindu pantheon of gods – ‘the stage for the gods’, to adopt David Mandelbaum’s neat descriptor<sup>26</sup> – where the Hindu epics and legends were played out. The concept of India as the stage of the gods is given political and religious currency by ordinary Hindus and Hindu nationalists alike through ritual and political pilgrimages that embed the religious nation into the soil and especially into the rivers, which have a special significance in the *Hindutva*.<sup>27</sup> The second element derives directly from the first: according to the mythology of Hindu nationalists, Hindus form the core of the Indian nation and others – notably Muslims, but also Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians – are regarded as foreigners who are tolerated and even notionally welcomed, but only insofar as they accept their subordinate, contingent status in the

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<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that there are no racial or other fault lines in India; just that they do not coincide with the religious fault lines.

<sup>26</sup> van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–7, 120–5.

hierarchy of nations.<sup>28</sup> An expressive descriptor of this mythology was provided by Hindu nationalist leader Bal Thackeray in a research interview with Abhik Roy and Robert Rowland: ‘sugar dissolves in milk’, meaning that Muslims are welcome only if they are so thoroughly integrated into the Hindu-generated national identity (in which milk has a special place) that they are indistinguishable from Hindus, except for the private practice of their religion.<sup>29</sup>

The thread of commonality in these two elements is the logic of assimilation – but significantly it is the logic of social assimilation into a religious nation without the presumption of religious conversion. Ethno-nationalism, of course, can and routinely does impose elements of ethnic identity on subordinate ethnic nations – especially language, mores, and acceptance of traditional leaders and monarchs. At its most inclusive this can turn members of outside groups who are willing to be assimilated into de facto or even actual members of the dominant nation. Thailand’s national identity is constructed in these inclusive terms, and is thought to have successfully assimilated around 90 per cent of the population.<sup>30</sup> It might have been thought that

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 10, 25–9, 68; Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, ‘Sikh Rebellion and the Hindu Concept of Order’, *Asian Survey*, 29, 3 (1989), 326–40; Ian McDonald, ‘Hindu Nationalism, Cultural Spaces, and Bodily Practices in India’, *The American Behavioural Scientist*, 46, 11 (2003), 1566.

<sup>29</sup> Roy and Rowland, ‘The Rhetoric of Hindu Nationalism’, 233.

<sup>30</sup> Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, ‘The Thai state and ethnic minorities: from assimilation to selective integration’, in Kusuma Snitwongse and W. Scott Thompson (eds), *Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Security and International Studies; and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 151–66, and; Charles F. Keyes, ‘The politics of language in Thailand and Laos’, in Michael E. Brown and Sumit Ganguly, *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 193. Please note that the authors are aware of the element of religious nationalism in Thailand’s ethno-nationalist agenda, but in this passage we are suspending our consideration of this element for the sake of making a tidy and very limited comparison. We do not

religious nationalism must differ from ethno-nationalism on the matter of assimilation because it is presumed that assimilation into a religious nation must involve conversion. Not so.

The model of ‘sugar dissolving in milk’ provides a formula that allows at least notionally for assimilation without conversion. Even if this is not likely to be a very comfortable or safe fit for Muslims in Bal Thackeray’s India, the principle has the potential to be applied benignly. Note that we say ‘benignly’ and refrain from using more value-laden terms such as ‘fairly’ because even though the creation of this hegemonic structure creates a place for ‘outsiders’ in the national society, without full conversion the outsiders must remain outsiders to the core nation, and are strictly speaking in a relationship with the nation, rather than in the nation proper.

Does this not create a significant dissonance between religious nationalism and ethno-nationalism? We think not. It is all too easy to find examples of ethno-nationalism – free of any hint of religious nationalism – that display the same characteristics of hegemony, limited assimilation and implicit exclusion. A prime example is found in Malaysia’s near-neighbour, Singapore, which is a ‘multiracial’ society in which ‘race’ (mainly the Chinese majority, and the Malay and Indian minorities) is said to be in a ‘one-to-one correspondence’ with ‘culture’ and language and in a much more limited and incidental way, religion.<sup>31</sup> In this case, hegemony is imposed through the prism of supposed ‘Chinese values’ that are said by Singapore’s

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believe that this restricted perspective has impacted or undermined the validity of the point we are making.

<sup>31</sup> Lai Ah Eng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1995), 183.

leaders to be the basis of Singapore's prosperity.<sup>32</sup> These values are regularly identified by the ruling elite in terms of 'be[ing] modest, hardworking, thrifty, filial, loyal and law abiding',<sup>33</sup> though these prosaic descriptors do not do justice to the social codes hidden in this language, which is indicated by the practice of describing materially successful members of minority races as being 'like a Chinese'.<sup>34</sup> In this paper we need not concern ourselves with the mechanics by which the Singapore elite imposes its hegemony, nor what it means in practical terms to be assimilated into this culture,<sup>35</sup> but we do need to note that like Hindu nationalism in India it is a very limited form of assimilation in which the minorities remain outside the core nation.<sup>36</sup> Barr has elsewhere characterised the Singapore model of ethno-nationalism as 'incomplete assimilation', which he describes as 'a balancing act between the imperative that minority members need to strive to act "like a Chinese" in order to succeed and the insistence that at the end of this process they will continue to be relegated to a minority status'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore they are routinely educated to accept

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<sup>32</sup> Michael D. Barr and Jevon Low, 'Assimilation as Multiracialism: The Case of Singapore's Malays', *Asian Ethnicity*, 6, 3 (2005), 161–82.

<sup>33</sup> Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Michael D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 2000), 161.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Kuan Yew in Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings and Times Editions, 1998), 184.

<sup>35</sup> For details see Barr and Low, 'Assimilation as Multiracialism', and; Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, forthcoming in 2008).

<sup>36</sup> It is also important to note that unlike Hindu nationalism in India, Singapore's ethno-nationalism does not appear to contain impulses towards violence. The comparison being drawn is strictly limited to the logic of hegemony and assimilation.

<sup>37</sup> Barr and Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore*, Chapter 5; Barr and Low, 'Assimilation as Multiracialism'.

their subordinate status through the skewed presentation and selection of role models, and the perpetuation (if not the instigation) of stereotyping in the public domain,<sup>38</sup> including in school textbooks.

Since this article focuses on the imposition of hegemony through Malaysian textbooks and schools, we might conduct a very brief review of Barr's findings on Singapore's education system and textbooks. Regarding the school system as such, we find that since the beginning of the 1980s Chinese children have been privileged in systemic and public ways, with the introduction of special kindergarten facilities, special schools and special programmes just for them. The best teachers have been systematically and publicly channelled into these schools and programmes, all of which have been given extra funding to ensure the success of the Chinese section of the population. In case they should still be struggling, they were also, for nearly a decade, given privileged access to pre-university schooling and to university itself. The result has been to place make Chinese ethnicity the central element in educational success, which in Singapore, is tantamount to worldly success.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that this has all been done publicly, and without any serious effort to hide the intent, has contributed directly to the creation of an environment where the quarter of the population who are not Chinese have a subordinate status, are fully aware of the hegemony of the Chinese, and of their own subordinate status, as the normal state of affairs. This is the logic of assimilation under a sophisticated and successful form of ethno-nationalism.

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<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>39</sup> Barr and Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore*, Chapter 5, 7, 8, 9, 10.

Perhaps the extent to which this subordination has been internalised by the minority populations (let alone by the majority Chinese) can be demonstrated by a brief reference to the history of ethnic stereotyping in primary school textbooks over this period. In his study of primary school English textbooks from the 1970s to the 2000s, Barr found ample evidence of derisive racial stereotyping of minorities, balanced with a continuous pattern of uplifting stereotyping of Chinese. On the one hand the study revealed, for instance, that in the 1980s and 1990s teachers were almost universally depicted in these textbooks as being Chinese, as were the civic-minded community leaders and the business owners. On the other hand over the same period non-Chinese were routinely portrayed in more menial roles, as street sweepers, domestic workers, policemen, drivers and – oddly – zoo attendants. Chinese school children were portrayed as polite and studious, whereas non-Chinese school children were portrayed as rowdy, temperamental, distracted and distracting.<sup>40</sup>

Singapore can never claim to represent itself as anything comparable to India as the ‘stage of the gods’, and so has no equivalence to this in its mythology, but the Chinese ruling elite has nevertheless made an effort to paint Singapore into a grand ethnic history – using, for instance, the tentative connections between Singapore and China’s nationalist hero, Dr Sun Yat Sen, to depict the island as a city with a grand Chinese heritage, and linking its own history with the civilisational history. Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa have characterised this mythmaking as creating a ‘big Singapore’.<sup>41</sup> This effort has been commensurate with reforms of History textbooks

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<sup>40</sup> For a detailed study of the marginalisation and stereotyping of minority races in Singaporean school textbooks see Michael D. Barr, ‘Racialised Education in Singapore’, *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 5, 1 (2006), 15–31.

<sup>41</sup> Huang Jianli and Hong Lysa, ‘History and the Imaginaries of “Big Singapore”’: Positioning the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35, 1 (2004), 65–89.

and other official constructions of history that have increasingly turned the story of Singapore into a Chinese story, thus marginalising the Malay and Indian communities from the core of the national identity.<sup>42</sup>

Singapore's programme of Chinese ethno-nationalism has been a systematic and society-wide effort to impose hegemony, much of which is more subtle than the examples portrayed above. These examples have been selected simply because they are such graphic examples of the phenomenon we wish to demonstrate, and because they are already in the public domain, and so can be introduced without, we hope, derailing this article from its intended direction.

In placing the Singapore example in the context of our study of religious nationalism, let us note that the Malay and Indian minorities are not expected to dissolve like sugar in milk, but they are certainly expected to become less distinctive and to fit into a subordinate role in a social hierarchy dominated by the dominant Chinese. The Singapore model contains no element of religious nationalism and yet it displays a similar reluctance towards complete and unconditional assimilation of ethnic minorities that Indian Hindu nationalism displays towards religious minorities. This provides us with a template of non-civic nationalism that incorporates both ethnic and religious nationalism, and provides a set of critical markers by which we can judge the religious nationalism we find in Malaysia.

## **Malaysia**

The case of Malaysia is a particularly good example by which to develop an understanding of the nuances of religious nationalism. On the one hand it is a stark case of the forceful imposition of a dominant (Islamic) religious culture – symbolised

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<sup>42</sup> See Barr and Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore*, Chapter 2.

by then Prime Minister Mahathir's 2001 declaration that Malaysia is an 'Islamic state' – on minorities who made up 39.6 per cent of the population in the 2000 census.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand it does this within the context of its Islamic religious nationalism having a very close, but highly ambiguous relationship with the ethnic (Malay) nationalism around which the country's nation-building project was originally constructed. Being Malay is itself the original foundation (since partially superseded) for the Malaysian concept of bumiputera [indigenes, literally 'sons of the soil'], which is the basis for membership of the core of the Malaysian nation ('bangsa Malaysia' [Malaysian race/nation]).<sup>44</sup> Thus even in the earliest preliminary stages of our exploration of Islamic religious nationalism in Malaysia, we find it impossible to proceed without engaging with two concepts – being 'Malay' and being 'bumiputera' – that are deeply grounded in ethnic nationalism but are each (particularly the concept of being 'Malay') related to Islamic identity.

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<sup>43</sup> Peter G. Riddell, 'Islamization, Civil Society, and Religious Minorities in Malaysia', in K.S. Nathan and Mohammad Hashim Kamali (eds), *Islam in Southeast Asia: Political, Social and Strategic Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2005), 163. Dr Mahathir's Islamisation programme is itself an attempt to outflank a long-established Islamic opposition party, the Parti al-Islam se-Malaysia (Malaysian Islamic Party – PAS) which became a serious force for religious nationalism in the late 1970s, just before Mahathir became premier.

<sup>44</sup> Bumiputera is a Malay-generated political term for indigenes, though even within the bumiputera, there is a hierarchy, with Malay-Muslims at the centre, followed by the indigenes of East Malaysia, and the non-Muslim peninsular indigenes, called Orang Asli [indigenous people]. Arabs and most Indonesians can become accepted as bumiputera because they are Muslims supposedly akin to Malays. The practical point of distinction seems to be the social and political relationship of the group to the core Malay nation. For explanations and explorations of *bumiputera* see, for instance, Virginia Matheson Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia: Linking East and West* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 226–8, 247.

This complexity is highlighted by the fact that part of the legal definition of being ‘Malay’ is being Muslim,<sup>45</sup> but there are also Chinese and Indian Muslims who are clearly and pointedly excluded from the core of the national identity because of their ethnicity. This is particularly the case with Chinese Muslims who, despite expressions of sympathy and support from some Malay leaders, to this day are denied permission to build mosques to serve their communities.<sup>46</sup> Even the Indian Muslims, who are treated somewhat better than their Chinese co-religionists, are still formally and legally excluded from the privileges enjoyed by the dominant Malays because they are not bumiputera. The significance of being classified bumiputera is this – that being a bumiputera is the key point of entrée to political and economic privilege in Malaysia. This is, in fact, the rationale by which Malays justify their political dominance, and this remains the case even though the definition today extends beyond the Malay nation. The marginalisation of Chinese and Indian Muslims by the dominant Malay Muslims highlights the problematic relationship of ethnic and religious nationalism in Malaysia, and the question of whether Islamic religious nationalism is anything more than a cipher for Malay ethnic nationalism.

### **Islamisation of education**

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<sup>45</sup> Other elements include speaking the Malay language [Bahasa Melayu/Malaysia] and following Malay customs.

<sup>46</sup> See many press reports, for instance the following, all from *New Straits Times* in 2007: ‘Chinese Association wants to build mosque’, 29 January; ‘Perlis Mufti comes under fire’, 30 January; ‘Group: It’s difficult to get approval’, 31 January; ‘Islamic complex for Chinese in Seremban’, 1 February; ‘Perlis mufti ready to raise funds’, 1 February; ‘Don’t patronise us, Tajol Rosli told’, 2 February; ‘Malacca CM: It’s just not appropriate’, 2 February; ‘Making Chinese feel at home’, 5 February; ‘No need for Chinese Muslim mosques’, 1 May, 2007.

Although it is admittedly difficult to completely separate Malaysia's religious and ethnic nationalism, it is possible to isolate the elements for the purpose of analysis, and indeed it is necessary to do this if there is to be any chance of understanding the relationship between them. It is also problematic to isolate one institutional aspect of this process from all the others, but in a short article such as this there is little choice. With these qualifications in mind we will devote the remainder of this article to a survey of current developments in just one central aspect of Malaysia's Islamic religious nationalism: that of the education system.

As if to demonstrate the difficulty of isolating different institutional elements, let us start our survey not in education proper, but at a display presented in Malaysia's Museum of National History as it was described by Virginia Hooker in the opening pages of her *A Short History of Malaysia*. The feature of this display that is of significance to our study is that it represented the history of Malaysia as beginning with the coming of Islam.<sup>47</sup> The peninsula's pre-Islamic history was not denied, but it was effectively discarded. For instance, the Srivijaya empire, which ruled both the peninsula and what is now East Malaysia from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, is only admitted to have left behind historical remains that show its 'influence'.<sup>48</sup> This 'influence' was put into sharp relief by a nearby map with flashing lights showing the spread of Islam throughout Southeast Asia, and a replica of what Hooker describes as 'the famous Terengganu Stone'. This archaeological artefact is a stone pillar dated from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, which uses Jawi script (Malay written in Arabic script) to say that Islam was at that time already the local religion of the peninsula. Hooker tells us that 'The Terengganu Stone is the earliest record of the presence of Islam on the

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<sup>47</sup> Hooker, *A Short History of Malaysia*, 4–6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Peninsula and is cited [in the museum display] as evidence that Malaysia has one of the oldest links with Islam in Southeast Asia.<sup>49</sup> It is also the centre piece of both Malay and Islamic nationalism on the peninsula, providing the basis for Malay and Muslim claims to have a special relationship with the place.

Hooker was making the point that the display was presenting a skewed, Islamised version of Malaysian history that overplayed the place of Islam in the peninsula's history, but as distorted as the Museum's display might have been, it was much less Islamised than what has been taught secondary school students in their History lessons since 2003. In that year a new History syllabus and a new series of History textbooks were introduced in all secondary schools across Malaysia. The only significant point of difference between the old and the new versions was in the Form 4 syllabus and textbook.<sup>50</sup> Form 4 is the year when schools teach the history of civilisations under the title 'World Civilisations', but since 2003 this has not so much been a course in World Civilisations as a course in Islamic civilisation.

The old textbook, used until 2002, was titled *Sejarah Peradaban Dunia-Tingkatan 4* [*World Civilisation History Form 4*],<sup>51</sup> and is a broad civilisational history of the world. It contained six chapters titled (in English translation)<sup>52</sup>: 'Early

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> The history text books for Form 1 to 3 are designed to provide a basic overview of Malaysian history. They have a significant bias towards Malay nationalism but are free of any Islamist bias. See *Sejarah Tingkatan 1 Buku Teks* [*Form 1 History Textbook*], KBSM, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2004; *Sejarah Tingkatan 2 Buku Teks* [*Form 2 History Textbook*], KBSM, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2005; and *Sejarah Tingkatan 3 Buku Teks* [*Form 3 History Textbook*], KBSM, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> *Sejarah Peradaban Dunia: Tingkatan 4*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> All translations by Anantha Raman.

Human Civilisation’, ‘Islam Changed Human Civilisation’, ‘The Transition of the European Society and its Impact’, ‘Revolution and New Phase of Human History’, ‘Western Imperialism and Local Reactions’, and ‘Moving towards International Cooperation’. In this textbook Islamic history was presented conceptually as having a central place in world history as the religion that ‘changed civilisation’ by contributing to an improvement in world civilisation, but this conceptual centrality was not allowed to overwhelm the syllabus: it was studied in only one chapter out of six, with other chapters studying, for instance, Indian, Chinese and European civilisations. The syllabus also discussed in detail the pre-Islamic period in Southeast Asia, with much emphasis on Hindu-Buddhist influence in the Malay world. Overall, the old textbook and syllabus for Form 4 adequately addressed major aspects of civilisation without giving special attention to Islam or Islamic civilisation.

In the revised version, however, Islamic history was given an unprecedented prominence, occupying fully half of the book. This textbook, titled prosaically *Sejarah Tingkatan 4 Buku Teks [Form 4 History Text book]*, consists of ten chapters, five of which focus on Islamic history: ‘Islamic Civilisation and its Contribution in Mecca’, ‘Islamic State in Medina’, ‘The Formation of Islamic Government and its Contribution’, ‘Islam in Southeast Asia’, and ‘Islamic Reform and its Influence in Malaysia before the Arrival of the Colonial Powers’.<sup>53</sup> The other five chapters survey the early development of civilisation *per se*, Indian and Chinese influence in Southeast Asia (in chapters 1–3), ‘Developments in Europe’(Chapter 9) and ‘The British Policy and Its Impact on the National Economy’(Chapter 10). The chapter on the British in Malaysia sits incongruously in a book on civilisational history, but its

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<sup>53</sup> *Sejarah Tingkatan 4 Buku Teks [Form 4 History Textbook]* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2002).

presence, along with Chapter 8 ('Islamic Reform and its Influence in Malaysia before the Arrival of the Colonial Powers') serves as to articulate the rest of the book very firmly into the history of Malaysia. These two chapters provide the direct link between the civilisational history studied in Form 4 and the Form 5 syllabus, which is explicitly a study of Malaysian history – which, by the way, is entirely devoted to a celebration of Malay nationalism, with barely a mention of Chinese or Indians.<sup>54</sup>

The output of this overtly Islamic textbook has shocked minority political leaders and prompted debates in Parliament,<sup>55</sup> but it would be a mistake to view the form 4 textbook in isolation. This outcome was not the result of a whim by the authors, but was determined at the time the authors were appointed. Fully half of the scholars (two out of four) are, in fact, Islamic scholars; Mohammad Bukhari bin Ahmad and Rosnanaini binti Sulaiman, who trained in Islamic civilisation and Islamic education respectively. Mohammad Bukhari bin Ahmad obtained his PhD from University of California and also studied in Ferdowsi University (Mashhad), Tehran University in Iran and Bosphorus University in Turkey. His scholarly writing includes *Qasidahs in Honor of the Prophet* (1983) and *The Ocean of Unity* (1993). Rosnanaini binti Sulaiman is a specialist in Islamic history and education and has been teaching Islamic history for two decades. Currently, she is attached to *Maktab Perguruan Perempuan Malayu* (Malay Women's Teachers Training College), in Melaka.<sup>56</sup> With half the authors Islamic scholars, no one should be surprised if half the textbook is on

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<sup>54</sup> *Sejarah Tingkatan 5 Buku Teks [Form 5 History Textbook]* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Speech by Lim Kit Siang, entitled 'Defend Secular Malaysia', at the 46<sup>th</sup> National Day Celebration, Tanjong Parliamentary Constituency, 31 August 2003.

<sup>56</sup> The information about the authors is derived directly from the back cover of the *Form 4 History Textbook*.

Islamic civilisation. The decision to appoint this panel of authors must have been taken at a high level in the Ministry of Education, suggesting that even though we are at this stage talking about only one year of the History syllabus, this is part of a broader programme of Islamisation.

If confirmation of the presence of this broader programme was needed, it could be found in a recent statement by the Datuk Alimuddin Mohd Dom, the Director-General of Education for Malaysia, when he foreshadowed the systematic promotion of *Islam Hadhari* [*Islamic Civilisation*] in the school curriculum.<sup>57</sup> At this point it is worth noting that *Islam Hadhari* is not just a generic term for Islamic civilisation, but is the official title of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's preferred approach to Islam. It is a programme intended to focus on the glories of Islamic civilisation at its height, and is in fact an effort to create an image of a 'big Malaysia' (a mirror image of the 'big Singapore' identified by Huang and Hong) that spiritually, if not actually, traces its roots back to the Prophet Mohammad in seventh century Mecca.<sup>58</sup> If we look at the form 4 History text book, it is, in fact, an exemplary manifestation of *Islam Hadhari*.

Yet despite the imposition of this religious nationalist construction on Malaysia's History syllabus, it is still ostensibly directed towards enhancing Malaysian unity, just as the old syllabus had been.<sup>59</sup> The 2005 National Education

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<sup>57</sup> 'Guidebook on Islam Hadhari for School', 18 February 2008, NSTONLINE, at <[http://www.nst.com.my/Current\\_News/NST/Monday/National/2161041/Article/ppul](http://www.nst.com.my/Current_News/NST/Monday/National/2161041/Article/ppul)>.

<sup>58</sup> Department of Islamic Development Malaysia, *Islam Hadhari: An Explanation* (Putrajaya: Department of Islamic Development, 2005).

<sup>59</sup> 'Sukatan Pelajaran Sejarah' [History Syllabus Itemisation], Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary School Curriculum], Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia [Centre for Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education Malaysia], 2000, p.

Policy has even elevated the teaching of History per se to the status of a ‘core subject at secondary school’, with the specific intention of using it in the promotion of ‘National Unity’.<sup>60</sup> The approach of the 2003 Form 4 textbook makes it clear that the conceptual basis of this unity has undergone a drastic revision and that in the new era this ‘unity’ is to be built around the centrepiece of Islam.

Even before opening the book the front cover confronts us with a picture of the same Terengganu Stone that featured in Hooker’s account of the National Museum’s display, set against a background that is dominated by pictures of Islamic architecture. Once this civilisational history book is open we find that the opening three chapters present an extraordinarily superficial overview of ancient civilisations, with accounts of the Mesopotamian, Roman, Greek, Mauryan, Gupta, and Chinese empires interspersed amongst each other, and rarely an entire page devoted exclusively to a single subject.<sup>61</sup> Islamic civilisation is absent from these chapters, probably because it cannot be easily construed as being ancient, but Islam itself is nevertheless treated in the final three pages of Chapter 2, which offer a cursory survey of world religions. These few pages are very significant in our study, consisting of less than a page for each of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, and Taoism.<sup>62</sup> The importance of this is that for Confucianism and Taoism, this is

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3, and; ‘Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan 4’ [Form 4 History Syllabus Itemisation], Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary School Curriculum ], Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan [Malaysia Centre for Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education Malaysia], 2002, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Education Malaysia, *The National Education Policy: Pre-School to Post-Secondary Level* (Putrajaya: Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2005), 40.

<sup>61</sup> *Sejarah Tingkatan 4 Buku Teks* [Form 4 History Textbook], 1–64.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–68.

their last mention in the book, while consideration of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity is thereafter restricted to contextual references in Chapter 3 (on ‘Ancient Southeast Asian Civilisations’) and Chapter 9 (on ‘Developments in Europe’).<sup>63</sup>

But turn to Chapter 4 and the reader faces an entire chapter just on the development of Islam in Mecca – before it even took the 200 mile journey to Medina.<sup>64</sup> It is obvious that this marks the beginning of a radically different approach, but the full significance becomes apparent only when we read the instructions to teachers conveyed in the Ministry Education syllabus about the teaching of this chapter. The purpose of this chapter, teachers are told, is to understand the development of the ‘ummah’ and the importance of leadership for its wellbeing.<sup>65</sup> The word ‘ummah’ is an exclusively Muslim term, referring to the ‘community of believers’ and its unqualified use in the context of Chapter 4 already carries the clear message that the Muslim perspective is being privileged in this history, a message that is reinforced by the stated purpose of the following chapter, which is to convey the message that ‘Muslim solidarity strengthens national prosperity’.<sup>66</sup> This is an explicit claim by the Malaysian ‘ummah’ to the centre stage of Malaysian society: claiming

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 71–97; 214–42.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 98–116.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan 4’ [Form 4 History Syllabus Itemisation], Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary School Curriculum ], Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan [Malaysia Centre for Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education Malaysia], 2002, 31.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan 4’ [Form 4 History Syllabus Itemisation], Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary School Curriculum ], Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan [Malaysia Centre for Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education Malaysia], 2002, 35.

that prosperity for the rest of the Bangsa Malaysia must be built around the solidarity of the Muslim centre. Moreover, after two chapters this coverage of Islamic civilisation still has not progressed beyond the lifetime of the Prophet or the borders of the Middle East. Students are served up two more chapters in which they follow Islam to Europe and Asia, and in Chapter 8 they finally get to read of Islam being established in Malaysia.<sup>67</sup> This chapter is the grand denouement of the arc of chapters on Islam: the ummah has arrived in Malaysia and is accepted by the Malays, beginning in Melaka and working through the peninsula. The word ‘ummah’ is never used in this chapter, but the anachronistic term, ‘masyarakat Melayu’ [Malay community] is used to great effect.<sup>68</sup> After four chapters of prelude there is no need to make explicit the assumptions of the centrality of Islam in the national history. It is nevertheless made explicit in the syllabus, which speaks at one point of the religious education system as ‘our national heritage’, and instructs teachers to impart an appreciation of the current national education system on the basis of this heritage.<sup>69</sup>

History is a compulsory subject, and all children passing through the education system are examined externally when they sit for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia [Malaysian Examination Certificate] at the end of Form 5. The imposition of an Islamic meta-narrative at this point can be neither accidental nor incidental. It must be

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<sup>67</sup> *Sejarah Tingkatan 4 Buku Teks [Form 4 History TextBook]*, chapters 6–8.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 8. The term is anachronistic because there was no conception of a Malay community until the twentieth century. See discussions on this matter in Timothy P. Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity across Boundaries* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> ‘Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan 4’ [Form 4 History Syllabus Itemisation], Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary School Curriculum ], Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum Kementerian Pendidikan [Malaysia Centre for Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education Malaysia], 2002, 49.

regarded as a deliberate attempt to impose a new form of identity on both the Muslim and non-Muslim children. The political factors that have driven this particular upsurge in religious nationalism in education are not the concern of this paper, but the reality of the phenomenon is difficult to deny. This conclusion becomes even more pointed if we look beyond the teaching of History, and consider that the Islamisation process has permeated the entire schooling experience for those students who attend national schools.

At this level there is no need to look very far to find an official statement of intent, since as recently as 2007 Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak declared explicitly ‘the government’s aspiration to empower Islamic education in the country’.<sup>70</sup> To this end the government is not only providing compulsory Islamic religious education for Muslims, but is also in the process of introducing Arabic language in primary and secondary school as a compulsory subject for Muslims and as an option for non-Muslims.<sup>71</sup> These programmes, along with training in Jawi script, Quranic recitation, and Fardhu Ain [Islam’s obligatory duties] are to be taught making full use of Information and Communication Technologies through a new RM150 million programme to build 1,666 special teaching laboratories in national primary schools across the country.<sup>72</sup> With a programme like this in the pipeline, it is no wonder that the Form 4 History syllabus asks teachers to present the traditional system of Islamic schools as part of the national heritage: by the time the upgrade is finished the national school system will have become a twenty-first century version of

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<sup>70</sup> ‘Institute for research in Islamic education’, *New Straits Times*, 26 September 2007.

<sup>71</sup> *The National Education Policy, 2005*, 16–7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, and; ‘Institute for research in Islamic education’, *New Straits Times*, 26 September 2007.

the old eighteenth-century madrasah, except, of course, for the increasingly awkward presence of non-Muslim children.

These are very contemporary initiatives, but they have not appeared in isolation. Since the early 1980s national schools have become increasingly Islamic in their ambiance and ethos, under the explicit direction of successive prime ministers and ministers of education. Islamic education is now compulsory for all Muslim children in national schools with five or more Muslim pupils (down from the previous threshold of 15),<sup>73</sup> and courts have recently confirmed that no consideration will be given for personal or parental wishes regarding the element of compulsion.<sup>74</sup> The general ambiance is now so thoroughly Islamic that even some Malay parents are keeping their children out of the national schools because so many of them are, in the words of one such parent who wrote a letter to the editor of the *New Straits Times*, ‘more like Islamic religious schools....’<sup>75</sup> According to this correspondent, some schools hold Muslim prayers during assemblies, while others refuse to organise school concerts for fear it might be unIslamic to make music.

At the moment non-Muslims are exempt from compulsory attendance at Islamic and Islam-related classes – and indeed non-Muslim children cannot attend an Islamic class without the written permission of their parents – but there are grounds to be concerned that this could change. It is suggestive that in a 2003 seminar on ‘Education and Religion’ the President of the Malaysian Muslim Lawyers Association felt confident putting the view that Muslims and non-Muslims should be taught ‘the

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<sup>73</sup> *The National Education Policy*, 16–7, and; *Report of the Cabinet Committee to Review the Implementation of Educational Policy* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Education, 1985), 48.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Muslim pupils must take “core subject”’, *New Straits Times*, 30 March 2007.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Why parents don’t opt for national schools’, *New Straits Times*, 19 October 2007.

same moral values' and that Islamic classes be opened to non-Muslims as an option 'just as you would choose another language as a subject because you would like to learn about it'.<sup>76</sup> The significance of this episode is not that this is a particularly strong indication of forthcoming change – it is not – but simply that this leading Muslim professional felt that this was an appropriate suggestion to put on the table. Even more worrying is the fact that this suggestion is very much in the spirit of a series of specific initiatives by former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad over the 1980s and 1990s designed to 'Islamise' education. In 1982 Dr Mahathir tried to introduce a new tertiary subject on Islamic civilisation and make it compulsory for all university students in Malaysian universities. He repeated the exercise in 1997, once again trying to make it compulsory for all students. Both moves faced political backlashes from non-Muslims and both were watered down – the 1982 course was quickly made optional for non-Muslims<sup>77</sup> and the 1997 course was superficially broadened to include a notional coverage of Indian and Chinese civilisations<sup>78</sup> – but the direction and spirit of the moves is clear. It is, in fact the direction and spirit of the whole religious nationalist project in Malaysia – placing Islam and the Muslim community at the centre and making it very clear to the minorities that their place in society is in a position of subordination: the establishment of hegemony without the need for conversion.

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<sup>76</sup> Zaitoon Othman, 'Zaitoon Othman' in Abdul Razak Baginda and Peter Schier (eds), *Education in Multicultural Societies: Perspectives on Education in Malaysia* (London: ASEAN Academic Press, 2005), 112–3

<sup>77</sup> D.K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne, 'The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia: Discipline through Islam', *Pacific Affairs*, 56, 4 (1983–4), 640–1.

<sup>78</sup> See, R.S. Milne and Diane K. Mauzy, *Malaysian Politics under Mahathir* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 89–90.

### **The logic of assimilation revisited**

‘Hegemony without conversion’ was chosen as the title of this paper because it encapsulates the limited but oppressive character of the assimilation programme being imposed in Malaysia. It makes it one of a type with both *Hindutva* in India and Chinese ethno-nationalism in Singapore.

The absence of a need to ‘convert’ is unremarkable in Chinese ethno-nationalism because no matter how much one acculturates oneself into Chinese mores or language, one cannot become a Chinese without having the racial characteristics. Yet the non-Chinese in Singapore are expected to assimilate into the Chinese-dominated society, and accept their subordinate role outside the core of the Singaporean ethnic nation with good grace – and they do. They have been acculturated into this social reality through myriad tools of state, one of the most important of which is the education system, where their status as tolerated outsiders made explicit.

The absence of a need to convert is more surprising in religious nationalism, and yet there it is. In both India and in Malaysia the role of the religious minorities is not to convert but to accept the hegemony of the core nation and their subordinate relationship to the core nation. Indeed judging by the lack of support given to Chinese and Indian Muslims in Malaysia it seems that far from being a goal of religious nationalism, conversion is not even welcome. This feature also raises serious doubts about whether Malaysia’s religious nationalist project is itself subordinate to Malay ethnic nationalism. We are certainly not the first to raise this question,<sup>79</sup> but this paper

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<sup>79</sup> Judith Nagata and Mauzy and Milne were among the first to raise this question, with each arguing that Islamic nationalism was a variation of Malay nationalism and ultimately subservient to it. See

is this is not the place to try to answer it. At this point we simply want to emphasise a point that we made earlier in the paper: that even within the Malaysian context it is difficult to separate religious and ethnic nationalism.

The reason for this ambiguity is that both religious and ethnic nationalism, at least in the three examples considered in this article, have a common concept of hegemony and assimilation. There certainly have been examples of religious nationalism that do require conversion; Catholic, Protestant and Muslim nationalism have all made this demand in particular places and at particular periods of history. There may be still some operating in this fashion today,<sup>80</sup> but we do not think we are at much risk of error in presuming that the Indian/Singaporean/Malaysia model of hegemony and assimilation is much more common and mainstream.

### **Religion in International Relations**

This exploration of religious nationalism in Malaysia is far from comprehensive, but even this narrow focus on its operation in schools in Malaysia is illuminating. It reveals religious nationalism to be so unremarkable in its form and force that it is difficult to distinguish it from ethno-nationalism, either in its own country or in its neighbour, Singapore. Far from being a force beyond the logic of International Relations scholarship we find that it uses similar techniques and has virtually identical objectives to ethno-nationalism. The one element that seemed, on the surface, to separate religious nationalism from ethno-nationalism – the question of conversion – has turned out to be a point of commonality, rather than a point of

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Judith Nagata, 'Religious Ideology and Social Change: The Islamic Revival in Malaysia', *Pacific Affairs*, 53, 3 (1980), 405–39, and; Mauzy and Milne, 'The Mahathir Administration in Malaysia'.

<sup>80</sup> Pakistan and Afghanistan come to mind as possible candidates.

distinction. Religious nationalism is, in fact, a commonplace, though not a necessary part of ethno-nationalism, and should be treated just as routinely in the study of International Relations.

This is not a remarkable conclusion, but unless it is accepted as a starting point for analysis one cannot hope to understand the process of nation building and the objectives of nationalism across much of the world. Its most obvious implications are in the arena of understanding national cohesion and ethnic hegemony, but it also has direct implications on international actions. Due to the constraints of space and time these were referred to only obliquely in this paper – when we noted Peter van der Veer’s most recent contribution, in which he spoke of ‘transnationalism’ in relation to religious nationalism<sup>81</sup> – but the existence of international implications of religious nationalism should not be controversial. We do not refer just to the obvious manifestations in international religious-inspired terrorism, since this would mark a significant retreat from our earlier declaration of wanting to move beyond the prism of violence and terrorism. Rather we refer to more mundane but still important impacts of religious nationalism on a country’s foreign policy and even on its foreign economic policy. Just to take our case study of Malaysia as an example – we are thinking of manifestations such as Malaysia’s attempts to establish niches in the global market for halal food, products and services, and its cognate attempts to cultivate special relationships with other Muslim-majority countries. These programmes are both reflections and drivers for the Malaysian elite’s domestic programme of religious nationalism; the international dimensions could not be pursued without the base provided by the domestic programme of hegemony.

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<sup>81</sup> van der Veer, ‘The Imperial Encounter with Asian Religions’, 254.

It is that domestic programme of religious nationalism that we have addressed in this paper. Its conclusions about the routine relationship between ethnic and religious nationalism are, as we acknowledge, unremarkable in themselves, but without them scholars of International Relations fail to articulate the necessary premises on which to build an understanding of the international manifestations of religious nationalism (religious transnationalism?).

Analysis of international religious violence and terrorism all too often begins by treating it primarily in terms of the religion itself, as if the answer lies within this sui generis entity that is only indirectly connected to the world of politics and people – hence the proliferation of books explaining the relationship between Islam and terrorism. Yet if religion is regarded as an ordinary and routine aspect of ethnic and national identity, then, and only then, can its relationship to politics – national or international; peaceful or violent – can be understood in a helpful way.

Ends.