Beyond the Spirit of Bandung: Secular West - Religious East?

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Introduction

This year it is 70 year ago that the Asia-Africa Conference was held in Bandung in a time that countries were resuming their power. The Bandung conference introduced the idea that secular and religious knowledge systems can coexist and share a process of national unity. For instance, in the cases of the first participants Egypt and Sri Lanka. Or later Tanzania where the philosophy of unity has been both secular and religious because the concept of Ujamaa combines secularism with a strong civil religion. In the case of Indonesia, the philosophy of Pancasila has been more religious pluralistic by recognizing six official religions.

It is assumed that the Spirit of Bandung is still relevant but needs to be adjusted to the post 9/11 era, where political and economic repressions have been influenced by the religious factor, particularly in the relation between the West and the Muslim world. The objective for our coming together is to explore how in today's context religion can contribute to postcolonial solidarity and ecological responsibility, while offering space for dialogue and research exchange. National unity and ecology are connected, from natural phenomena such as mountains as national symbols up to human interactions with ecology. Also here religious and secular orientations play their roles.

Today religion and secularization are identity markers with a potential conflictual impact on national unities. National belonging and religious identity are experienced in various intensities. For instance Indonesia, Kenya and Nigeria are countries where people attach great importance to this connection. In Western Europe the connection religion - national belonging is mostly important as an retro-topian dimension in the strategies of radical right-wing politicians such as the French Marine le Pen and the Dutch Geert Wilders (Bauman, 2017).

As world-religions Islam and Christianity are transnational. Many nations consists of citizens with a diversity of identities, religious or secular. Religions inspire people to unite in dialogues but religious relations are also marked by (inter)national disunity. This is shown by the war between Jewish Israelis and Islamic Palestinians, affected by Evangelical Christians with a voice in U.S. politics. Influenced by the religious factor the international order seems determined by power.

Decolonial thinking: Asad - Mignolo

The influence of power on the conceptualization of religion and secularism is studied by the post-colonial thinker Talal Asad (1983). As part of the process of colonialism, secularism gained political preference for governing public affairs and it became a highlight of a modernity separating state and religion. The Saudi born religious anthropologist concludes that throughout history discourses about religion and secularism have been produced and distributed in a dynamic between centre and periphery. Western states used and uses its' power to define the discourses of secularism and religion.

The Argentine Mignolo (2018) criticizes the colonial discourse of secularism, as being it an instrument for displacing religion. As colonialism still influences the understanding of knowledge, Mignolo suggests people to de-link themselves from colonial thinking by appreciating other perspectives. Epistemic de-linking aims to challenge the established knowledge productions and power. The de-colonial thinker rejects colonial thinking completely rather than redefining it via dialogues.

Asad agrees that within dialogues the emphasis is on Western secular interpretations of issues such as human rights and ecology while for an understanding of these orientations internal perspectives from religions are needed. Asad promotes internal perspectives as the road to de-coloniality within the current power structures. The process of internal perspectives constructs de-colonial knowledge productions, whereby societies regain their intellectual autonomy, have debates and reaffirm their worldview, unhindered by colonial oppression. But Asad advocates the presentation of internal perspectives for a dialogue which focus on de-colonial interpretation of concepts. In a globalized world and with a globalized history it makes no sense to de-link from dialogue between knowledge productions.

Thereby, stating continents a-historically as secular or religious, creates a static view of the participants involved in dialogue. When a narrative claims that Asians and Africans are religious and Europeans secular, dialogues become a clash of stereotypes. According to Asad the historical colonial influence of discourses remains but nowadays participants have a growing power in dialogues to speak back and re-position their perspectives from margin to centre.

Religious East/South – Secular West?

Decisive in this post-colonial dialogue is how the terms 'religious' and 'secular' are defined. Questioning the secular or religious status of Asia, Africa or the West is a matter of which discourse, sociological or religion scientific, is in the centre. While the sociological – religion scientific debate on religion and secularism has been conducted on the basis of data and historical experiences from Western countries, more and more the research includes Asian and African facts. If secularization is defined in sociology terms as leaving religious institutes as church, mosques and temples, Asian countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, India, etc. are very religious and Japan and Vietnam are secular. The sociological interpretation shows a decline of religiosity but within religious sciences it is assumed that we should speak not only in terms of reduction of participation in religious institutes but also in terms of transformation of religion.

People are religious but not necessarily within mosque or church. The assumed secular societies of Asia have relatively high levels of spirituality together with a strong demand for religious ceremonies (PEW, 2025). Many Japanese and Vietnamese don't identify with a religion but do believe in ancestors' spirits and engage in ritual practices (PEW, 2025). Regarding Africa, John Mbiti's motto might be that 'Africans are notoriously religious' but also here the numbers of participation in religious institutes becomes smaller (Shorter & Onyancha, 1997). And the 2022 European Values Studies

demonstrates that despite the fact that less Western Christians and Muslims go to church or mosque, 50% or more of the Europeans find religion of importance in their lives.

While honouring both sociological and religion scientific perspectives, it is concluded that religion and secularism transcend geographical borders and are not restricted to continental labels. But despite stressing secular perspectives, especially religions determine the lives of a majority of the world's population and international relations. Religion is for many people a way of being modern (Davie, 2002). Modernity is not exclusively secular and Western. Religious ánd secular dimensions define multiple modernities including religious modernities.

To accommodate both secularism and religion, Peter Mandaville (2020), former director of the Abu Sulayman Center for Global Islamic Studies, advocates a route of rightsizing religion which means focussing on a power balance between the influence of religion in society and the need for secular governance. Mandaville's recommendation of 'not too little and not too much attention for religion' is in line with the Bandung Principles on religion, secularism and national unity. In their time the Bandung leaders gave space in this way for solidarity between fellow believers, other-believers and secular dissenters.

Networks and Consensus

But more intense than in the '50s, people's lives now are influenced by networks. Especially economic and social networks are stretching worldwide and affecting a process of de-colonial change. The social networks connect people around a topic across national, continental or imperial boundaries.

Typical for economic networks are the so-called Washington Consensus and Beijing Consensus. The Washington Consensus is characterized by a neo-liberal doctrine imposed on nations and international institutes such as the United Nations. So far the Beijing Consensus stresses nations and institutes in a less dominant way but it is clear that the Silk Road policy distances from the Bandung Principle of not interfering into the affairs of Bandung countries. Moving between the two superpowers, Indonesia, as fourth-largest gold reserve holder, makes interesting moves. Joining recently the BRICS group in which China has a leading role. At the same time buying fifty Boeing aircrafts from the U.S..

Typical for social networks is how social media is a game-changer in creating and maintaining power. Social media can be compared metaphorically to the double-faced head of Janus. One side presents the face of the state and market, whilst the other shows the connection with social movements of citizens. Throughout history, social movements have been dedicated to values such as community welfare and solidarity (Dokman, 2023). What illustrates the current social movements is the involvement, via social media, in de-colonial issues. For instance in contrast to Huntington's theory of lasting tensions between Islam and the West, today many Western millennials and Gen Z, influenced by social media, support the Muslim-Palestine case for

freedom (Harvard Caps Harris Poll, 2025). Worldwide people use social media to construct transnational political fellowships.

Calls via social media have resulted in mass protests and a main topic is the concern about ecology. Faces of the social movements addressing climate change are Melati (Indonesia), Vanessa Nakate (Uganda) and Greta Thunberg (Sweden). These leaders manifest a generational and gender shift in power. They mobilise people of all ages to define the international agenda. There are fierce debates around the impact of climate change but the presumably secularists Melati, Nakate and Thunberg demonstrate eco-responsibility and solidarity with all nations.

With a majority of humanity being religious there are on social media also religious movements. These movements are mostly not institutionalized and gather around a topic such as ecology. Here people express their conviction that nature consists of spirits and spiritual energies (PEW, 2024). These religionists, with labels as the Green Mosque, Green Church but also New Age Earth Matters, do see nature as the sum of all that exists, human beings included. The natural phenomena are subjects and not objects. A common feature between secularists and religionists is the care for ecology but especially the believes in spirits can be controversial for a dialogue.

Environmentalism

The social networks show that environmentalism is multi interpretative. Based on eco-centrism, humans are participating within nature. But from an anthropocentric perspective moral obligations to nature are derived from the ethics used in social interactions. Others recognize an era of Capitalo-centrism, meaning that capital is the driving force of an ecological crisis and an expression of power in the post-colonial world.

All though ecological questions have been discussed since the early seventies, politicians have postponed interventions. Not because of the absence of technologies or finances but because various stakeholders have various understandings and interests. The 1955 Bandung Conference agreed however that economic growth should not be at the expense of environmental degradation (Dokman & Kankindi). The conference agreed on the de-colonial resource sovereignty of nations and posed an early challenge to the dominance of secular Western frameworks by drawing on the lived spiritual traditions of the East and South.

The curricula of educations initially followed secular Western frameworks. Enlightened thinkers viewed nature as an object of study, as a force to be controlled. Despite their richness the Western paradigms are not universal. The secular orientations make a separation between humans and nature, while for leading Asian and African philosophers, such as Soemarwoto and Bujo, the connection of human and nature is evident. Nowadays Asian and African philosophers have greater influence over the curriculum of their academia and their perspectives have rooted.

As counter-narrative to Capitalo-centrism and Western thinking, religious environmentalism brings an empowering discursive ideology. Islam and Christianity

have produced an abundance of spiritual texts about the human care for ecology. From traditional sacred texts to present eco-islamic books around Care for Creation and the WCC's programs on creation. The transformative influence of the religious texts is however ambivalent. Asian and African theologians see a history of exploitation of nature at home because of the churches' involvement with the colonial powers and its' focus on transcendence. Just as governing bodies, religious institutes were slow with interventions in the past. Today Islamic scholars have released the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change. Eco-Islam shows a growing activism of particularly younger Muslims (Ozdemir, 2022). Hindus and Buddhists fight against water wastage and pollution. But do the religious initiatives improve a de-colonial environmentalism?

Bandung Consensus

National unity and ecology are much connected. Nature's conditions, such as water shortages, can emphasise the national interdependence of regions, fostering cooperation. Also transnational religious networks, such as Islamic Relief, Caritas and ICCO, cooperate on national levels to respond to ecological challenges.

We have seen that religion and secularism are transnational orientations which concepts depend on definitions. Western Europe is sociological secular in its distance from religious institutions, but across society many people describe themselves as spiritual. Asia and Africa are predominantly religious but there is a transformation to secularism. These interpretations of religion and secularism contest continental stereotypes, also regarding ecology.

Recent confirmation of large-scale research by UIN Jakarta, using the so-called Human and Nature Scale (Bagir et al, 2025), demonstrates that in Indonesia respondents strongly agree with a more humanistic, secular, version of stewardship for nature. While in the Netherlands there is a spiritual undertone in the relationship between humans and nature. Old school would be saying: here religious East and secular West meet. But these terms are colonial categories. Now there is a growing fluidity between religion and secularism. Rather than analysing them as separate, religious and secular beliefs and practices include both orientations shared by humans.

The analyses of Talal Asad and Walter Mignolo emphasize the consequences of colonial discourses on secularism, religion and ecology. Namely the Enlightened separation of human and nature and Capitalo-centric exploitation. As colonialism did not construct a fair world order Asad and Mignolo advocate for an equal reassessment in terms of politics, knowledge productions and ecology. Religions emphasize also the ideal of equality of people and knowledge but in reality religions, and certainly Christianity, have also collaborate with those in power with all consequences for nature. But then again, today religions have taken up eco-responsibility via spiritual texts, research and reassessing religious actions.

Inspired by Prof. Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, the Indonesian minister of Religious Affairs, recent call for connecting religious views through eco-theology, I would like to suggest, for considerations by you all, the promotion of a Bandung Consensus via the Netherlands Indonesia Consortium for Muslim-Christian Relations.

The Bandung Conference represents principles of respect for ecology, cooperation, refraining of serving the interests of big powers. These principles express the ideal for reshaping power dynamics to a more equal reality (Kebebew et al, 2025). Contrary to the Beijing - and Washington Consensus, this Bandung Consensus presents a much-needed equal discourse, inclusive for religious and secular views of ecology. Consensus does not mean to the absence of debates. Via social media people are polarized but they are also in dialogue across national borders, moving away from colonial centre and margin frameworks. Their contacts challenge common continental and thematic approaches to decolonisation. A networked approach of movements around ecology offers a means of analysing points of connection and disconnections between activists, researchers, diplomats etc..

The Netherlands Indonesia Consortium, gathered here today, could provide a network structure to an equitable exchange between, possibly including African, researchers, professionals and students that fosters ecology, education and gender. Research teams, such as the consortium, do depend on staff and budget. Encouraged by the Spirit of Bandung a research by the NICMCR could offer programs for all interested, with researchers from all Bandung countries.

As regards to the budget? The economic and political importance of Indonesia increases even more. One precious gift to the world could be to present an non-aligned academic movement based on the de-colonial Bandung Consensus.

Thank you.

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