



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Indonesia

Dear friends,

In 1405 Cheng Ho, the Chinese trader and soldier who seems to have succeeded at everything he set his adventurous hand to, sailed into the port of Semarang in Indonesia. Three centuries before, Islam had been brought here by his fellow-countrymen. This is an inconvenient fact for modern Indonesian politics which is still shaped by the twist given to ethnic Chinese identity by the Dutch who used the Chinese as a buffer between themselves and the Indonesians. Despite discrimination, the Chinese (the 'Jews of Asia') prospered, losing their language in the process. Not much can stop the industrious Chinese from prospering in their diaspora. But in Indonesia they became associated with the western colonisers and perhaps for this reason gravitated away from Islam towards Christianity.

This was told me by way of context to a visit to the large red-pillared temple and grounds dedicated to Cheng Ho. His swashbuckling story is told in a series of reliefs around the temple's outer wall. Arriving from Jiang Su in China he brought neither ideas nor religion but the irresistible arts of making wealth. Clearly his famed exploits are remembered because they created the political stability necessary for trade and investment. Sailing the Straits of Malacca he discovered that Malaysia and Siam were in conflict. He arbitrated a peace and was allowed to build storehouses for his merchandise. In Sumatra he hunted down Chen Zhu Yi, the terrible pirate and killed, it is claimed, 5000 others of the same profession. He resolved a civil war in Java, quelled a dynastic rebellion in Sumatra on behalf of the incumbent ruler and in a more light-hearted mood brought wondrous beasts – lions, leopards and giraffes – here as gifts from the King of Persia. One of the last reliefs refers to a kidnapping in Indonesia of a Chinese ambassador whom Chen Ho successfully ransomed after three years of negotiation. The commentary says: "This reflects that 600 years ago there was a good friendship between China and Indonesia." The Chinese point out the damage on the wall showing where the plaques telling this part of the tale have sometimes been removed and replaced as foreign policy changed.

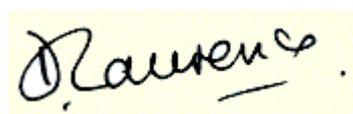
Walking round the temple in such a heavy heat that it could only be a peaceful place, I

wondered 'why a temple?' – what was the religious significance of the versatile Cheng Ho to whom people still come to pray today? The anchor of the boat he arrived in is preserved there as a relic. But had he performed miracles, raised the dead, died a holy man? No such claims. Eventually the penny dropped. The Chinese come here, as they come to all temples, to pray for health, prosperity, long life and related needs such as marriage and fertility. Cheng Ho is simply a saint of success and unabashedly he doesn't wrap it in any metaphysics or supernatural stories. It felt quite refreshing, if a little two-dimensional.

But religion is always more complex than it seems. Exploring the temple further I found a doorway into a dark cave-like space. As I stepped over the threshold I was intercepted by a temple attendant, all of whose colleagues had been fast asleep elsewhere in the temple precincts. I was told that only those intending to pray were allowed to enter this truly sacred space and I obviously didn't match the profile. My Indonesian friend did and was able to enter. He told me the room was in fact a cave. It predated the temple by many centuries and represents the interiority and mystical side of Javanese religion. I saw why I was being told so often by bishops 'yes, they will understand meditation here'.

Later, after this exposure to the natural syncretism of religion, I was speaking in a chapel to seminarians, using the image of the cave of the heart, when the neighbouring mosque started up. It startled me and my surprise amused them - who were long resigned to the regular intrusion. How could a call to prayer be so loud, such a mixture of rasping roughness and languorous lament - and so prolonged? When two other mosques joined in the cacophony I faced a decision that Christians here have long confronted. Retreat or stand your ground. Afterwards, I was told that the loudspeakers are intentionally directed towards churches. But, if so, it was competition of a clerical and perhaps nationalistic kind. I had not sensed any of this among the ordinary people who seemed happy to pray and let pray. Religion has so many strata, interior and eternal, that conflicts are inevitable. Maybe in time a trader from China, a new Cheng Ho, will sail in and resolve this one too.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, followed by a period.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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