

# The *reformasi* of Ayu Utami

## Attacking the monopoly of the great religions

KAREL STEENBRINK

### ABSTRACT

In eight novels, Ayu Utami has presented critical attacks on doctrines and practices of the major religions in Indonesia. The two books, that describe the spiritual struggle of the Catholic priest *Saman* (1998–2002), call for a religion that is more active in the political arena, but leaves sexual rules to the individual people. The novel *Bilangan Fu* (2008) condemns the monopoly of the great religions in favour of local and individual spirituality. This is developed in a series of novels of which two more have already appeared. A third cycle of three more or less autobiographic novels (2003–2013) sketch her personal quest from atheism towards a critical but positive spirituality condemning a clerical and monopolist trend in Catholicism. Utami's criticism of the great religions is external (more players in the field should be recognized) and internal (religious leaders should have more modest claims towards their faithful and leave more space for personal choice).

### KEYWORDS

Ayu Utami, modern Indonesian literature, feminism, religious pluralism, Javanese traditions, Catholicism.

In the description of Javanese culture by the author of the *Negarakertagama* (ca 1365) a plurality of religious traditions is presented. Various different and sometimes competing variants of Buddhism and Hinduism lived side by side. Lay people, including the ruler, were the “clients” of the specialists, *pandita* and *bikkhu*. The population could seek their fortune and approach their favourites at a large number of shrines, and Javanese authors could easily mix Hindu and Buddhist ideas in one writing, even mix it with local Javanese lore. (Pigeaud 1960–64, IV: 2–5) Local religious traditions, especially hermits in the mountainous regions, are mentioned as respectable and honourable figures.

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The arrival of Islam and Christianity in the region changed this pluralistic image of religiosity, because both religions claimed exclusive truth and a full religious commitment. During the colonial period, there was some kind of mutual understanding between the administration of the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) and the Muslim rulers of the archipelago. These agreements held that the status quo should be respected, that conversions were not wanted and that a nominal recognition of a global religion was the common rule in the archipelago, with local religions as a phenomenon that would not stand the rise of modernity (Steenbrink 2003).

At the start of the independent Republic of Indonesia, religion was formulated in two ways: it was one of the five pillars of the state ideology of Pancasila with a wording *Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa* or 'belief in the Great and One Divinity' and secondly in the Constitution of 1945 where freedom of *agama dan kepercayaan* is guaranteed. The translation and interpretation of the two words *agama* (religion) and *kepercayaan* (belief/faith) is still under dispute. It can be seen as a pleonasm or two words with a single meaning, but also as a duality of a global religion and some cultural, spiritual expressions that are acceptable within such a global religion, or even as a global religious orthodoxy versus personal faith. In the political reality of the Suharto administration, since 1966 the definition of religion has been restricted to five global religions only (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism), with Confucianism added in 2003 (Steenbrink 1999).

There have been efforts to break the quite limited understanding of religion because of the monopoly of the "big five". This was done by local spiritual traditions, mostly in Java, who received, from the 1950s on, some formal recognition as *aliran kepercayaan*, 'spiritual movements', controlled through the Department of Education and Culture, not seen as religions. Especially within the Catholic community, there have been several thinkers who defended a liberal view about local religions. The Jesuit priest Jan Bakker (1919-1978) published in 1979 a book with the title *Agama Asli Indonesia* (The original religion of Indonesia) that became very popular and described the traditional religions of the country. The hidden agenda of Bakker was to declare that religions that arrived later like Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam had never reached the heart of the Indonesian people. These religions were only accepted as official global religions, but underneath the "pagan" practices continued. Only the Catholic faith with its lenient policy of inculturation is able to lead the traditional Indonesian religions to their fullness by corrections and additions from the full Catholic doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

A much more modest voice is heard from another Catholic priest, Y.B. Mangunwijaya (1929-1999) who wrote several booklets on spiritual education, avoiding a one-dimensional affinity to one specific religion. There is no book of Mangunwijaya, which has a preface by any bishop, cardinal, or prominent Catholic, but his *Menumbuhkan sikap religius anak-anak* (How to develop the

<sup>1</sup> Bakker (1972, 1979). A first version of *Agama Asli Indonesia* was published in 1969 in the *Seri Puskat* as vol. 95.

religious feelings of children, 1991) has a very sympathetic preface, written by Kiai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, General Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest organization of Muslims in Indonesia. In the first chapter, Mangunwijaya makes a sharp distinction between Religion and Religiousness. Religion is by him related to the overall organization, with its juridical aspects and its stress on the revelation from outside. For this, he also uses the German terminology of *Gesellschaft*. Religiousness is connected with the German word *Gemeinschaft* 'community', it starts from within, and it has also a far more universal character than religion in its narrow sense. *Religiositas* is expressed in many forms such as "standing upright, bowing, kissing the earth as an expression of devotion towards God;<sup>2</sup> closing one's eyes as means of concentration on confidence and willingness to listen to God's word in one's heart, all this is human bodily exercise with deep and authentic religious meaning, in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, as well as in other religions."<sup>3</sup>

Also in other writings, Mangunwijaya tried to avoid concentration on Catholicism alone. He always realized that he wrote for a readership that was in majority Muslim. His trilogy on the "maidens of Mendut" [*Roro Mendut, Genduk Duku, Lusi Lindri*] shows this pluralist approach like many of his other writings (Steenbrink 1998).

There is a strong tradition of philosophical thinking in the Catholic Church, besides a strict biblical and hierarchical discourse. The great example here is Jesuit Nicolaus Driyarkara, a strong supporter of a *Pancasila* philosophy for modern Indonesia. This trend can also be seen in the translations of Western philosophical works by Jesuit priest Dick Hartoko, who also was the editor of the general cultural magazine *Basis*, later succeeded by fellow Jesuit Sindhunata who further developed an opening to Javanese traditional wisdom. The German born Jesuit Franz Magnis-Suseno has developed into a position of *budayawan nasional* or nationwide respected intellectual who since the mid 1990s has given his opinions on matters like corruption, democracy, and honest politics. This started with his doctoral dissertation on the outlines of a "Javanese ethics" as a common ground for Indonesians of all denominations.<sup>4</sup>

This contribution aims to give an analysis of the discussion of religion in the major writings of Ayu Utami, as far as they have appeared up to mid 2013. Until now, most attention has been given to Utami as an author who gave a new impulse to the style of novel writing in Indonesia, and especially related with the image of women.<sup>5</sup> There have also been very important views on her use of Javanese mythology (Marshall Clark 2004). Laurie Sears (2007) has written about Utami as an important interpreter of the traumatic events of the killings of 1965-1966, and other effects of the repressive rule of General Suharto. Besides these perspectives, there is a strong argument

<sup>2</sup> The series of standing upright, bowing, "kissing the earth" looks like the sequence of the *salat*, the Islamic ritual prayer, but in that ritual the deepest bowing does not have the character of "kissing the earth".

<sup>3</sup> Mangunwijaya (1991: 4).

<sup>4</sup> More on these prominent liberal Catholics in Steenbrink (2000, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Hatley (1999); Campbell (2007); Paramaditha (2007); Marching (2007a, b).

to pay special attention to Utami's position towards religion. The character of the Catholic priest Wisanggeni/Saman plays a major role in her first two novels. She wrote a special book about the first native Indonesian Catholic Bishop, Soegijapranata, and as we will see below, in the three novels of the series *Bilangan Fu*, Monotheism along with Militarism and Modernism is one of the three elements that are denounced as very negative factors in society.

#### SAMAN AND LARUNG; THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION FOR SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALS

In 1998, the novel *Saman* was published by Ayu Utami. The novel is about a young priest Athanasius Wisanggeni who serves a parish in the inland regions of South Sumatra where poor farmers are chased away from their forest and farmland by a coalition of plantation owners, helped by army people who want to make a profit in agricultural business.<sup>6</sup> The young priest joins the poor farmers in their protest against the greater capitalists. He is warned by a Dutch missionary, Westenberg:

[The old Dutch priest,] an expert in Malay languages, continued to talk about duties in the parish. Wisanggeni listened quietly. He knew that he would be reproached for neglecting his duties. Or at least, for being absent when he was needed. "I know that you plan to improve the fate of the poor planters in that region. That is good. But serving and supporting the faith of your parish is also an important mission." So he concluded his introduction. Wisanggeni remained silent. Then he offered his apologies. "It is not my purpose to neglect the ecclesiastical work. But I cannot get asleep since I visited that village." He wanted to say that he felt it a sin to sleep on a soft mattress and enjoy good food. It even felt as a sin if he only would pray. He could not stand seeing economic disaster without doing anything, though it could be repaired with some of his proposals. In a humble way he asked for an opportunity to carry out his plans.<sup>7</sup>

It took some time, but finally the priest Wisanggeni could continue his struggle for the poor farmers. However, the army supported the illegal occupation of territory, burnt the village, killed some activists and the priest Wisanggeni was arrested and accused of "preaching theology of liberation".<sup>8</sup> Father Westenberg defends him, but asks also for understanding, "we should not expect support from the leadership in our church. The church is in a difficult position. It has terrified many people that we are accused of being infiltrated by the Communists."<sup>9</sup> Wisanggeni takes a new identity and calls himself Saman. He falls in love with one of the female activists fighting for the rights of the poor farmers and leaves the priesthood.

The novel *Saman* attracted much attention, because of the open discussion

<sup>6</sup> For a very detailed interpretation of the name Wisanggeni from the world of the *wayang* stories see Clark (2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Utami (1998: 81).

<sup>8</sup> [...] *dituduh mengajarkan teologi pembebasan* (Utami 1998: 111).

<sup>9</sup> *Tapi kami, atau kita, tidak bisa terlalu berharap pada hirarki. Gereja sendiri dalam posisi terjepit. Tuduhan kita disurupi komunis menimbulkan ketakutan umat* (Utami 1998: 113).

of the cooperation of the army and corrupt officials with agro-business. Besides, the quite explicit description of sexual relations made it a bestseller that sold more than 100,000 copies. In March 1998, the *Dewan Kesenian Jakarta* gave Utami an award. The priest and novelist Mangunwijaya, himself also the author of a book on a priest in trouble (*Romo Rahadi*, 1980), praised Utami with great enthusiasm. He had, however, also some criticism, because he found the last section of the book, a long exchange of emails between Saman and his lover Yasmin about sex and theological issues, "unconvincing [...] forced and sensationalist".<sup>10</sup>

In 2001, Utami published a sequel to *Saman* with the novel *Larung* where similar themes, such as corruption, the internal relations within NGOs that fight for human rights, are discussed in the central part of the novel. Another theme in *Larung* is the traditional spirituality of Java and Bali. In the first section of the book, one young man, Larung, a medical student, helps his mother, a *dukun* or traditional healer to die. This is a mild introduction of the theme of euthanasia. In what follows we move from Java to New York and to the relations of the ex-priest Saman with four women, about personal matters, often about sexual desires and practices.<sup>11</sup> In the novel *Larung* there is still a third theme: the repression of activists by the secret service. In the somewhat unrelated third part of the book *Larung* and *Saman* try to bring three other activists out of the country. It seems as if the three lines of the novel are unrelated stories, only loosely connected in the last sequences. This may have caused the lesser appreciation of this book. Also in other novels, the different sequels are somewhat unrelated. In *Larung* the Catholic theme has nearly totally disappeared, but the magic world of Javanese beliefs has been given much place, although no modern interpretation is given and less even some positive defence.

#### *BILANGAN FU* AS A PROTEST AGAINST STERILE MODERNITY, LIMITED MONOTHEISM, AND CRUEL MILITARISM

The three main parts of the large novel *Bilangan Fu* are given the titles of the three dangers of our time: Modernism, Monotheism, and Militarism. Modernism has destroyed our naïve and innocent view of our world, annihilated our ability to see miracles. This is represented by one of the main figures of the novel, Parang Jati. He wants to promote a spirituality that accepts the ruler southern ocean as a goddess without neglecting the formal Muslim prayers. Parang Jati has six fingers on each hand: TWELVE is more perfect than TEN! Parang Jati is circumcised at the age of twelve and his father wanted that he should live in celibacy, but that is (initially) rejected by the son. However, there is no spouse for Parang Jati. He resembles also Jesus, because his central doctrine is formulated in a "Sermon on the Mount" with many references

<sup>10</sup> After Hatley (1999: 458), in a summary of a reaction by Mangunwijaya in *Kompas*, 5 April 1998.

<sup>11</sup> At one moment I wrote in the margin of my copy "just desperate housewives".



to the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>12</sup> Like the two other main parts of the novel, also the first has a short essay attacking the main theme. Here the “Critique of Modernism” states that modernity has not destroyed the lack of knowledge. Instead, we should respect traditional spiritual stories and concepts:

The traditional spirituality (*takhayul*) is a method to preserve our common interests. Belief in the guardian spirits for the forests to defend the world that is our common legacy. Modernism has a straight direction, but not the right goal. Traditional spirituality seeks the right goal, but not along a straight road (Utami 2008a: 186).

Monotheism has reduced the rich variety of spiritual ways to six only, the officially recognized international religions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. These great global religions are especially damaging the rise and development of true spiritual life when they express themselves in a fundamentalist way. This part has some “notes from the diary of Parang Jati” about the number zero as opposed to one.<sup>13</sup> Zero was invented by people from India and is representative for the eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, while monotheism began in the Jewish tradition. Utami retells some episodes of the Jewish people until only two tribes survived and ten had disappeared. These ten are a combination of one and zero. Like in other section of her writing, she does not touch Muslim monotheism.

(Anti) Militarism is presented in a somewhat nuanced way: not all military are bad people. They are very powerful and so it may be wise to seek the cooperation of good officers and try to do good things with them. This will not work always. This section of the novel has the longest essay also quoted as an “article by Parang Jati” about “Three enemies of the post-modern world”.<sup>14</sup> Here we find one of the few references to Muslims. This section concentrates on the negative sides of the army and summarizes that the “military must return to the barracks”, like the previous can be reduced to “the *ulama* must return to the barracks”, because they also want to rule over society.<sup>15</sup>

The book has many references to biblical passages that give it a more or less religious flavour. This book can be seen as an Indonesian counterpart of the magico-realistic novels by Haruki Murakami. Because of the biblical references and the notes about recent Indonesian political and cultural history, it is even a much more lively experience. Because of these detailed references to recent events as well as to a great variety of biblical and (other) mythical stories from the *wayang* tradition, I find it even more appropriate to compare it here to Salman Rushdie who uses this combination in novels like *Midnight children* and *The ground beneath her*. Utami studied Russian language and literature in Jakarta, but direct influences of the Russian novel writers seems

<sup>12</sup> Utami (2008a: 74–84).

<sup>13</sup> Utami (2008a: 320–332).

<sup>14</sup> Utami (2008a: 470–480).

<sup>15</sup> Utami (2008a: 478).

to be absent.<sup>16</sup>

As companion to the book *Bilangan Fu*, Utami wants to write twelve novels. Two have already been published: *Manjali dan Cakrabirawa* (2010) and *Lalita* (2012). They present not only elements of Javanese traditional and modern culture, but refer to international themes in spiritual or religious-magical stories like the Dracula saga and the developments in religious psychology from Sigmund Freud to Karl Gustav Jung, loosely connected to the main figures of the *Bilangan Fu* novel. The latter is related to Indonesia through a connection with the Indonesian branch of the Theosophical Society. These two novels are adventure stories in the same style of the leading book with many new elements but still connected through some leading figures who reappear here and through the themes of human rights, privileges for individual choices especially in the field of religious choices. It is a literary endeavour of the scale that has not been undertaken since the monumental works of Malay literature *Bustan as-Salatin* ('The garden of kings', an encyclopaedic work consist of seven books) by Nuruddin ar-Raniri in the 1630s or the *Serat Centhini* written by the scribes of the crown prince of Surakarta, the later Paku Buwana V (ruled 1820–1823), an encyclopaedic Javanese work (in print more than 3000 pages). Also these "satellite books" give the individual person the authority to design a distinct style of spirituality, against government or religious influence.

#### ANOTHER SERIES OF THREE BOOKS ON LEAVING RELIGION AND A CRITICAL RETURN

The first publication by Ayu Utami which I could find was from 1994 in a book she edited with the short title of *Bredel*, or 'Censorship', on the problem of an independent and free press in Indonesia. Since then there has been a continuing stream of columns, short articles, interviews, and performances that have drawn attention. This is not specific for Utami alone. Garcia (2004: 27) wrote in a somewhat nasty comment; "Part of the new attitude towards literature in Indonesia has been to popularize it by making authors public figures. Ayu, Dee, and Djenar all actively promote their books, with frequent book launchings and other appearances. They have even been interviewed by the popular men's magazines."

Out of the shorter publications, I will highlight four examples that illustrate her sentiments about religion, sexuality, democracy, and other basic values that are defended in her novels. The first is about columns she wrote for the newspaper *Kompas* in the period preceding the national elections of 7 June 1999. One of the five columns that were reprinted later in a separate book shows her absurdist style through word plays like a do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-si-do row for the political parties, lead by Gus Do, Mas Re, Mbak Mi, Bung Fa, and

<sup>16</sup> In a letter to this author, 6 July 2013, Utami writes that she "didn't want to pursue any Russian studies at all. My heart had been with the visual arts. It was my father who asked me to enrol to Russian studies. I agreed to do it as the last and minimum *bakti* of a child to the parent. I went on studying linguistic and not literature".

others. She plays with the terminology for the elections as *Pesta Demokrasi*, the Festival of Democracy in an imagined Mini-Country, *Taman Mini*, where the one and only citizen feels so lonely because he has no other people to join in festivities. The author's wisdom is here that only a variety of opinions and convictions can create a sound and fruitful democracy.<sup>17</sup> There is no reference to more religious themes in this collection.

In 2002 she gave a very open interview to the prominent liberal Muslim intellectual Ulil Abshar-Abdalla where she defines her religious education. She agrees with Nurcholis Madjid that most Indonesians adhere to their religion "by accident and as a consequence of history", because they just follow the tradition of their family. Her mother was a devout Catholic, but still very attached to traditional Javanese *abangan* rules. On special days of the Javanese calendar (*Selasa Kliwon* and *Jum'at Kliwon*) she would not go to bed before midnight. Utami defines her own Catholic spirituality as "matrilineal" with a father who was more indifferent or *abangan* than her mother. Between the ages of 19 and 25, Utami was quite uncertain about the value of religion and gave special attention to the failures of religions. About the doctrine of the Trinity she reproduced the image of the sun as warmth, light and waves (as below also quoted from the book on Soegija), but repeats that it is not found in the text of the Gospel. She takes the Muslim distinction between Meccan and Medina verses of the Qur'ān, according to the doctrines of Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im who gives more importance to the prophetic Meccan period where the great rules for ethics were formulated. In the Medina period, Muhammad was a politician and the concrete rules of this period were often a compromise according to the mixed population of the town. In the same sense, she makes a distinction between the visionary texts of the Gospels against the rules in the writings of the apostles.<sup>18</sup>

In 2003 Ayu Utami published a book with a title *Si parasit lajang: Seks, sketsa, & cerita* (The bachelor parasite/Bloodsucker; Sex, proposals, and stories). It is the most challenging, provoking, angry, and daring series of columns, short stories, and opinions ever published by Utami. It has a quite funny and realistic piece about problems in using a condom. The most famous text is the "epilog" under the title "10 reasons not to marry". In detail she discussed polygamy as a bad habit and denounced famous singer Rhoma Irama and Muslim politician Hamzah Haz, and prefers the retired general and ex-president Soeharto, but her major argument is about the separation of sex and marriage. In a country where sex education is very limited and serious free talk about the subject nearly nihil, the gentle and humoristic discourse of Utami is quite liberating. Perhaps in retrospect this "first parasite" book was seconded by two longer novels and can be seen as one personal series of autobiographic stories.

The second autobiographic novel is *Cerita cinta Enrico* (Enrico's love story, published in 2012). Utami is no less controversial than Rendra was in the 1950s and 1960s as a "Catholic author". The two first sections of the Enrico-book are

<sup>17</sup> Utami (1999: 17–21).

<sup>18</sup> Utami (2008b: 60–63).



about the conversions of a father (from *abangan* Muslim to Jehova Witness) and a mother (from Catholicism to Jehova Witness). In the third part, the further social and spiritual journey of their son Enrico is told. Enrico wants to be free. He does not like to be like the broiler chicken, raised by his mother who earned much money from her farm. He wants to be free as a distinct individual. Initially Enrico studied engineering in Bandung, but after some time he decided to become a professional photographer. He had numerous love affairs but did not pursue a permanent and stable relationship. However, immediately after the death of his father, at the age of 41, he felt the need of a permanent partner in love and he also soon found a nice and gentle lady, the artist and painter A (the reader easily identifies this woman as Ayu Utami in person, because the final note of the novel is also signed by A). Enrico and A both do not want to have children and do not want to marry. The relationship develops for both in a very positive way. They feel free in the presence of the other. They talk much about sex. For A sex is not sacred (*sakral*). "I never met a woman who was so down-to-earth about sex. She said that sex is not the same as love, although there is a link between the two [...]. Sex gives us joy, but we can be in a better condition of satisfaction and happiness when we do not need to have sex."<sup>19</sup> Their talk about sexuality also involves criticism of the (Catholic) Church by A:

I no longer attend church services for various reasons. I am angry about the sermons of the priests who are patriarchal and condescending. And I cannot receive communion, which is the eating of bread that is blessed and considered as the Body of Christ, because I live adulterously and do not feel it as a sin.<sup>20</sup>

This is even developed in a quite intellectual discourse about Saint Augustine as the inventor of original sin and his condemnation of sexuality as wrong in itself. But Augustine is not the only male who has unsound ideas about sex. He found his modern equivalent in Sigmund Freud who defined *libido* as a dark and negative power in mankind. This is definitely not the pious Catholic novel as is found in the series of stories in the Catholic weekly *Hidup*.<sup>21</sup> Utami is in her novels a sharp critic of the Catholic reality in modern Indonesia, as appears from the *Saman* books and also in this book. Nevertheless, as we will discuss below, she was invited to write a book on the first Indonesian Bishop, Soegijapranata: there is some positive overtone in her ambivalent appreciation of Catholicism.

The third autobiographical novel was published in February 2013, *Pengakuan eks parasit lajang* or 'The confessions of a former single parasite'. The book is divided in three different parts that are much more connected than in her earlier books. The first part is about Ayu in the age 20–22, a student in Bandung with her first boyfriends. She lost her virginity and became quite fond of sex, but she kept control of her body by the natural method of birth control,

<sup>19</sup> Utami (2012b: 197).

<sup>20</sup> Utami (2012b: 200).

<sup>21</sup> Published by Yayasan Hidup Katolik, Keuskupan Agung Jakarta

strictly looking after her menstruation and the short period when pregnancy might start. Part 2 is about her birth until adolescence: much about the sisters in the Catholic school, the parish, the two aunts who live in the pavilion in the compound of their house, about her parents. The major theme is that she lost her faith. Part 3 (the longest from 167–306) has the title *Seorang wanita di jalan pulang*. It tells about the various steps (like levels in a computer game) through which she found her way back to Catholic faith. From lust (*birahi*) she must come to true love (quotes from 1 Corinthians 13), she must destroy the fortresses of marriage, patriarchy in society and church, she must free herself from *kemelekatan* or addiction to many things of daily life, accept the monster in herself and find a balance. On 17 August 2011 she marries Erik in a Catholic ceremony. On 21 November 2011 she finished the book: on the 1000th day after her father died, on her 44th birthday and on the Catholic day of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Her marriage is without a choir, without exchange of rings, in a simple style. She was dressed in a nationalist style: white *kebaya* and red *kain*. She writes on p. 307, that “A is afraid that she did not in fact marry Rik, but the person whose body she eats when she receives the Eucharist.” Before this *Catatan akhir* ‘final note’, she already indicated that she considered marriage as a second Baptism, a second ritual to indicate the religious community where she belongs. Is this a total surrender to one of the six monotheisms of Indonesia? Not really, she remains critical, although less cynical than in earlier books. Marriage is a *tanda solidaritas*, an expression of solidarity with the Catholic community where she no longer finds ontological mistakes (p. 292). It is not 100%, still a *spiritualisme kritis* (p. 290), but in a positive way. In another of her many publications she suggests that this event had a relation with the story of the Good Shepherd of the Gospel who was seeking one lost sheep, while leaving the 99 orderly sheep.<sup>22</sup>

She does not like the priests, according to earlier statements. They are the bones not the flesh of the community. But she likes the biblical stories and the most interesting chapters are probably those about Abraham, Sarah, David, and Bathsheba. The story of Sarah and Abraham in Egypt is not so well known: Pharaoh sees that Abraham has a good-looking spouse and therefore Abraham declares that she is not his spouse but his sister. Pharaoh gives rich presents to Abraham, but Pharaoh falls ill, because he has taken a married Sarah in his bed (p. 202): “Probably good old Abraham had a coffee with Pharaoh and Sarah, with the sad (or bad?) conscience that Pharaoh had an intimate knowledge of his wife and that his wife knew both men very well.”

This section is full with this outspoken religious meditation. Although she is much closer to common Christian doctrine, she does not repeat traditional theology. In the Catholic Church there is no formal “man as head of the woman” (at least not in the formula of the Canon Law; she leaves the New Testament texts of Ephesians 5:23 aside, where Paul the Apostle writes that

<sup>22</sup> Utami (2012b: 235). The 99 sheep are a reference to the Gospel of Luke 15: 3–7.

"wives should submit to their husbands in everything!") and therefore she could marry in this community.

#### UTAMI ON SOEGIJA

Although the novel *Bilangan Fu* was a long statement and attack against the Monotheisms (besides two other bad Ms, Militarism and Modernity), Ayu Utami did not write much in detail about the great religions in *Bilangan Fu*. Still, there is in *Bilangan Fu* the commemoration for the death/murder of the *kepala adat*, traditional leader Semar, attended by some 12 national figures, among them Goenawan Mohamad, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Ibu Oka, Dawam Rahardjo, also two Jesuit priests: Magnis Suseno and Sindhunata (Utami 2008a: 461). Their presence can be seen as support for alternative spirituality by representatives of major religions. Apart from Goenawan Mohamad who is more a humanist than a prominent liberal religious leader, all these prominent people are known as representing a major and recognized religion. Almost in contrast to the critical style of the books discussed above, Utami wrote a quite pleasing book to accompany a truly Catholic project: the movie with the life story of Albertus Soegijapranata (1896–1963), first Indonesian nominated (arch)bishop of Semarang in 1940. The movie was launched in mid 2012 under the title *Soegija*. Director was the well-known Garin Nugroho.

The book does not start with the birth date of Soegija (1896 or the same year as the arrival of Father Frans van Lith in Semarang, this coincidence is repeated several times), but rather with the year 1940 when the Jakarta bishop Willekens, a Dutch missionary, asked the Vatican to nominate a bishop especially for Central Java. It is not sure whether Willekens himself had proposed the name of Soegija. Maybe someone else suggested this name. "The Vatican is a quite closed institution and full of mystery. We do not know exactly what happened there" (Utami 2012a: 15). Soegijapranata was at that time the leading priest in the parish of Bintaran in Yogyakarta, while a Dutch priest, Jesuit A. de Kuiper was his assistant in this parish and this proves for Utami that the Catholic Church is not racist, like much of the colonial society. Willekens was a handsome man, full of elegance, while Soegija was not so attractive, not full of humour, a small and serious man.

Governor Karel Orie of Surakarta was a prominent Catholic. After the ordination as bishop, 6 November 1940 in Semarang, Soegija came to Surakarta and at the frontier of the residency, this Catholic governor knelt before the Javanese bishop and kissed his ring. This was another sign that Catholicism could erase the Dutch racism (Utami 2012a: 17)

In chapter 2 we go back to the year 1919 when Soegija came to Europe for his first period of study in the Netherlands (until 1926) and also visited the city of Rome. He travelled to Europe by boat starting in Tanjung Priok. Most of this chapter is devoted to the study period of Soegija in the Netherlands ("a cold country, Dutch people are not smiling so easily as Indonesians"). She also gives some basic information about the Vatican and the Catholic Church

in general (in the whole book one can feel that also non-Catholic readers are supposed as possible readers). On pages 32–33, she has a curious defence of celibacy: “if we compare the Catholic Church with the human body, the lay faithful are the blood and flesh, but the clergy are the bones. Blood and flesh can multiply itself, but not so the bones: they are inorganic, although from organic origin. The priests therefore cannot multiply themselves!”

Chapter 3 even goes further back in time: Muntilan in 1909, where Soegija was accepted as a high school student (after a crash course of Dutch, needed for the teachers’ training school that he wanted to follow). Dutch missionary Frans van Lith is depicted as a truly devoted and loving priest who started the school in Muntilan, without the obligation that pupils should become Catholic. He made it even difficult for pupils to embrace Catholicism: they had to ask permission from their parents before they could be baptized and become full Catholics. Soegija wanted to understand the background of his teachers, also the complex ideas of their religion like the doctrine of the Trinity. Pages 54–55, give two explanations for the Trinity. There is first the idea of Thomas Aquinas comparing the three qualities coming from the sun: radiation, heat and light. From Saint Augustine, Utami quoted the limitations of human knowledge compared to a child that wants to dig a hole on the beach and put the content of the ocean in that hole.

Chapter 4 has as its major theme the ordination to priesthood, amidst the birth of Indonesian nationalism. In the Netherlands Soegija met for the first time Muhammad Hatta. Later he remained in contact with his classmate Ignatius Kasimo, leader of the Javanese and later Indonesian Catholic Party. Chapter 5 starts with the Japanese attack to Indonesia of 1942. In respect to the position of the church towards National Socialism of Germany Pope Pius XI is praised as a brave leader, but Pius XII as a man with cool eyes, full of diplomacy, without any prophetic charisma. Soegija is pictured as someone like Pius XI, who wanted to safeguard the church (“in good contact with Japan; the Vatican as country is recognized by your emperor”), but who also defended all Indonesians against the brutality of the Japanese. Immediately after independence, there was a fight between the emerging Indonesian army and the allied forces. Soegija was a mediator between the parties and could reach a peace on 20 October 1945 after the “Fight of five days of Semarang”.

In 1946, Soegijapranata moved to Yogyakarta to show his support for the Republic. Here he was close to the leaders of the Indonesian Republic, although he stayed in the parish house of Bintaran. He remained in contact with Bishop Willekens by writing letters (Ayu adds for young people, “in former times people could not send an SMS and used to write letters!”). He was the first to introduce Javanese and Indonesian in parts of the Catholic liturgy instead of Latin, long before the Council of Vatican II.

Chapter 6 is about Vatican II, the council he attended from its first session in 1962. In 1963, he made a trip by boat to Europe for the second session of the council, because his doctors did not agree with a trip by plane. In the presence of Y.B. Mangunwijaya (then going for study in Aachen with Habibie) and

another Indonesian priest he died. Curious: Y.B. is according to Ayu Utami an acronym for Juliana Bernard, the Dutch royal couple who married in 1937. But Mangunwijaya was born in 1929!<sup>23</sup>

There is not much in the book about the internal ecclesiastical initiatives of Soegija, not how he built and organized his church, continued the training for priesthood. In fact, the years 1950–1962 are more or less skipped here, as in the movie. On the whole, this is a book written without any criticism, with much warmth and sympathy about one of the first native Javanese leaders of the Catholics. Quite peculiar is the episode on pages 125–126 about the Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary. This section has no relation to the story of Soegijapranata or to Indonesian Catholics in general, because she takes only examples from foreign places of pilgrimage like Lourdes and Fatima in Europe and Guadeloupe in Mexico to show the deep sentiments that many Catholics, theologians but also simple lay people, cherish for the Virgin, Lady Mary. She emphasizes that Mary never appears to powerful and learned people, but to common faithful, *wong cilik*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Utami does not attack concrete monotheisms. She even has in several places quite sympathetic, romantic memories of Catholic traditions. She mentions the Balinese background of *Larung*. Fundamentalist Islam is mentioned in a negative way but never directly under attack. She mentions that she was in an "atheist period" between the ages of 19 to 26, but does not elaborate much more on this. In general she shows more sympathy towards popular than toward official religion.

Religion can be defined in a broad or narrow definition. Some Muslims claim that religion defines all aspects of daily life, from food to hygienic rules, from economy to politics and sexuality. Also in the Catholic tradition, the claim for the validity of rules for family life and sexuality has been quite strong. Utami is very robust in her statements about claiming autonomy for sexuality and denying any control by formal religions in this field. She is here quite exceptional in the modern sense, although it has for long been the practice in many regions of Indonesia, that youngsters live together and marry according to *adat* rules, but hesitate about a church marriage.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> My personal guess is that J.B. is a Catholic abbreviation for John the Baptist, but commonly it is written as Yusuf Bilyarta.

<sup>24</sup> Compare Father Peter Daly in the prominent weekly *National Catholic Reporter*, 20 May 2013, "The Church has lost control of marriage", stating among others about the modern Catholics in the USA and some other countries: "They live together before they are married. They have babies outside of wedlock. They get married outside the church, often in entirely secular settings. They don't stay married very long. They divorce with the same frequency as the general population. They remarry without benefit of annulments from the church. They often don't consult with us on whether they can go to Communion. And lately, in a dozen states and 14 countries, some very Catholic, they are marrying people of the same sex and bringing their babies to church for baptism." A very strong plea for a modest role of the Church in marriage, related to Flores is Prior (1988).



Ayu Utami shows that she has serious knowledge of religious traditions. She speaks with good arguments about the doctrine of the Trinity, about Saint Augustine and original sin, about the modern debate on *shari'a* by scholars like the Sudanese Ahmed Abdullahi An-Na'im, but she is a born writer who is able to mix serious writing about religion with humour, absurdist talk and a true sense for relativism.

Utami is not the fervent promoter of liberal interpretations of religion. She feels rather closer to popular religion than to rigid and intellectual visions. The free fantasy may expect much sympathy with her, both in the traditional Catholic communities, in Javanese and Balinese, even Papua/ Asmat practices, against fundamentalist dogmatism.

In the great variety of her themes and style of her writings, we can identify a consistent concern for a vivid, honest and personal spirituality. The values of respect for nature and environment, real democracy, non-violence and love for beauty and old traditions in a rural society are always present in her writings. She does not start with rigid dogmas but writes with humour, and loves the absurdist and shocking statements. Vested interests in the religious orthodoxy are put under criticism through her individual experience and the personal reflection receives priority over the mechanistically repeated truths. Against the uniform policy of Suharto's New Order development strategies, she truly represents the new agenda of *Reformasi*, not by the transfer of this policy to local rulers, but by a firm choice for personal experience and conviction.<sup>25</sup>

In the first readings, I was impressed by similarities to the magico-realist style, like that applied by Murakami. But the very detailed references to historical events, from the novel *Saman* to the G30S coup of 30 September 1965 and its aftermath, mixed with the precise Javanese mythical stories from the *wayang*, make a comparison with Salman Rushdie much more relevant. However, Utami is a writer in her own way. She defines her interpretation of modern Indonesian history with a deep sense for the mysterious, for the continuation of old magical powers and the need to cherish these traditional elements also against the brutality of the power of the global religions in contemporary Indonesia.

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