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Religion and Globalization in Asia: Prospects, Patterns, and Problems for the Coming Decade

John K. Nelson, Ph.D., *University of San Francisco*

Welcome to a special issue of *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* devoted to the intersection of religion and globalization in Asia. The articles that follow made their debut as presentations at a symposium held at the University of San Francisco in March 2009. Sponsored by the USF Center for the Pacific Rim, the genesis for this event came from Dr. Barbara Bundy, former executive director of the Center. Dr. Bundy was soon to retire but wanted to promote one more academic gathering to address a topic of critical importance. Thanks to her insight and support, the symposium invited ten presenters (five of whom have contributed to this special issue) and three keynote speakers: Mark Juergensmeyer (author of *Terror in the Mind of God* and *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*), Saskia Sassen (author of *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*), and Nayan Chanda (author of *Bound Together: How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers and Warriors Shaped Globalization*).

While the keynote lectures were fascinating for their breadth and expertise, it was the work and research of individual scholars that gave the symposium its heart, soul, and considerable 'brains'. The five papers presented here demonstrate a range of interests and methods that help to illuminate some of the most vital issues within contemporary Asian societies.

Few scholars or policy makers thirty years ago could have imagined that the first decades of the 21st century would be a time of explosive and wide-spread religiosity. As modernity progressed and societies became more secular and democratic, religion was supposed to loosen its hold on the ways men and women envisioned their place in the world. To the contrary, the dynamics of globalization—such as communication technologies, immigration and migration, capital flows, transnationalism, and identity politics—have contributed to social conditions in which religious belief and practice not only survive but, in many cases, also prosper and proliferate.

A growing body of scholarship and reportage has documented the phenomenon of globalization upon religious traditions in the western hemisphere, but the symposium wanted to explore its applicability within Asia. No longer can the study of religion in Asia (or the west) be considered a "side show" to the three-ring circus of politics, economics, and class. With an estimated 300 million religious adherents in China (home also to the world's fastest growing Christian population), the world's largest and most diverse concentration of Muslims in Indonesia, and the rise of a more assertive and nationalistic Hinduism among India's 1.3 billion people, the role of religion in globalizing processes in Asia requires sustained analysis and elucidation rather than a passing mention.

One of the key goals of the symposium was to better understand the dialectical tension of codependence and codeterminism between religion and globalization. With a focus on the populations of South and East Asia—densely concentrated, increasingly well-informed and technologically-sophisticated—the five papers here are positioned against a background of the following questions and themes:

- What is the relationship between a healthy democracy and religious pluralism in Asian contexts?
- Is religion in the context of globalization ultimately destined to become a symbolic marker of one's identity, rather than an institution promoting claims to divinely-revealed truths?
- In what ways is religion in Asia appropriated and exploited by politicians and activists intent on furthering their agendas and bolstering political capital?
- Does religious fundamentalism, especially the extreme kind that resorts to violence, indicate a stimulus/response "blowback" for secular societies and their democratizing policies?
- If the key to peaceful globalization is not secularization but pluralism and tolerance (as argued by Peter Berger), can the forces of globalization encourage diverse yet peaceful ways of being religious?
- What global trends and dynamics increase (or restrict) the range of choices for individuals to determine their own identities (religious, cultural, gender, ethnic, and so on) and communities?
- Can religious significance be imposed on the political trend towards multipolarity and the decline of American influence in Asia, or on creating solutions and policies that address environmental crises?
- Does the globalizing character of religion help to promote or impede human rights in Asia?
- Are there destabilizing forces at work in rural and urban communities of poverty and marginalization in Asia which, when interpreted via religious perspectives, pose a threat to economic development, democratization, and political stability?
- How can religious conservatism in Asia compromise the more positive characteristics of globalization that are egalitarian, diverse, hybrid, and potentially cosmopolitan?
- Is it intellectually and politically possible to articulate an alternative to fundamentalist and relativist positions concerning the role of religion in a globalizing Asia? (The Chinese politburo has stated, "We must take full advantage of the positive role that religious figures and believers among the masses can play in promoting economic and social development." Jan. 20, 2008).

We hope the following papers advance understanding about religion and globalization in Asia, not simply as subjects for investigation but as dynamic processes that actively involve several billion people. To ignore or neglect the importance of these influences on the contemporary world is not only shortsighted but also indicates a profound misreading of significant trends and currents that affect international relations, economic activity, and knowledge about the global community. Thanks to our contributing authors, the participants of the symposium, and to Dr. Bundy's initial vision, we are pleased to present these five papers as guides to topics that are fascinating and in many ways unique to the global moment we share.