

Introduction II

Secularization, Religion and the State:

Reflections on a Joint University of Tokyo / National University of Singapore Workshop

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For the past few years, two groups of scholars—based at the University of Tokyo and the National University of Singapore (NUS), respectively—have been independently engaged in ongoing discussions under the rubric of “secularization, religion, and the state.” When, in conversation with Professor Haneda in 2009, I learned that he had been directing a University of Tokyo seminar on the subject with exactly the same title as that of an interdisciplinary faculty reading group that I had organized at NUS, we began talking about ways that we could bring together colleagues and graduate students working on this timely subject at both of our institutions. The aim of this interaction is to develop possibilities for future research on religion and society in modern Asia from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy.

With generous support from both sides, we were able to hold a joint workshop at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) in Singapore on 21 January, 2010. The event was jointly organized by ARI, the NUS Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences Religion Research Cluster, and the University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy.¹ Although the material presented by the workshop participants was very diverse, the papers engaged with each other in developing discussions around three prominent themes of; 1)

1. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the colleagues at both the University of Tokyo and the National University of Singapore who helped to make the workshop such a success, and particularly Masashi Haneda, Prasenjit Duara, Daniel Goh, Ian Harris, Juliana Finucane, Chiara Formichi, Julius Bautista, Mariko Naito, Sharon Ong and Rodney Sebastian.

changing definitions of religion in modernizing societies; 2) new models of social engagement in the public sphere; 3) legal transformations and state intervention and the modern management of religion.

Changing definitions of religion in modernizing societies

Processes of secularization are complex, and involve dynamics that are productive of new concepts of “religion” while at the same time resituating it within new social and political configurations.² As William Connolly has recently put it, “Secularism [...] can itself be a carrier of harsh exclusions. And it secretes a new definition of ‘religion.’”³ Several of the presentations at the workshop explored such redefinitions of religion in modernizing societies. Yoichi Isahaya’s tracing of the “Vicissitudes of *Nouruz* (New Year) Festival in the Iranian Context” critically interrogates broader trends toward the secularization of festivals in the early modern period by tracking the increased integration of *Nouruz* within Islamic traditions through accumulative processes of the “enlargement” of tradition around the subject.

Two of the workshop papers examined intellectual developments in modern Japanese thought on religion. Mariko Naito’s work does so through the comparison and contrast of two turn-of-the-twentieth century works on the subject of “heart” (心) by Natsume Soseki and Lafcadio Hearn, respectively. In her critical reading of these texts she demonstrates how they each developed their own conceptualizations of religion as “abstract,” and in the process developed new dichotomies to structure thought on religion and society in a rapidly modernizing Japan. Noriko Kanahara brings the discussion into more direct engagement with the state in her discussion of the complex project of the Christian scholar Tadakazu Uoki’s attempts at redefining “Japanese Spirit” (日本精神) during the Second World War.

2. Talal Asad. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

3. William E. Connolly, “Europe: A Minor Tradition,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford University Press, 2006), 75.

Other twentieth-century attempts at redefining religion outside Japan were also examined at the workshop. Shoko Watanabe's paper deals directly with the development of differing conceptions of both "religion" and of "politics" among the *ulama* and secular nationalists in Algeria with an emphasis on the diverse motivations and contextual factors influencing their positioning within overlapping but still disparate discourses in the mid-twentieth century. The dynamics of these emerging demarcations between the spheres of "religion" and "politics" also inform the frameworks for discussions of the way in which various movements and organizations re-conceptualize their role in the public life of modernizing societies.

"Secular" constitutions or one form or another were adopted by most of the new Asian nation-states that were formed in the mid-twentieth century. The forms that such state secularisms have taken are extremely diverse—ranging from the forced abandonment of state Shinto in the American-modeled constitution of post-war Japan to the ideological framework of *Pancasila*, which stipulates "belief in God" as a founding principle, but refrains from the establishment of any single religion in the Indonesian constitution. In addition to state frameworks that reflected such particularistic local concerns there were of course also a number of Asian communist states that attempted to regulate religion out of the public sphere in places like Laos and Vietnam. Thus over the course of the twentieth-century many new nations in the region introduced secularizing conceptions of distinct spheres for the activity for religion vis-à-vis the state. This did not, however, automatically lead to the diminished importance of religion in the cultural and social dynamics of those countries.

New models of social engagement in the public sphere

Martin Riesebrodt has recently emphasized the important point that, "neither disenchantment nor de-institutionalization is a trend that necessarily follows from secularization."⁴ Indeed in many modern Asian

4. Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion*, trans. Steven Rendall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 180.

nation-states the promulgation of secular constitutions has by no means signaled that the populations of these countries abandoned religious beliefs and practices. Rather we find several cases in which “religion” has even come to take on increasing importance with relation to a now more clearly delineated and autonomous “religious” sphere in some societies that have experienced various degrees of institutional secularization. Particular manifestations of this broader trend are examined in productive ways by several of the papers in this collection.

Tay Wei Leong, for example, discusses the early twentieth-century Chinese reformist Kang You Wei’s campaign to define a new mode of Confucianism for the modern nation-state. This project involved not only intellectual reformulation, but also the mass destruction of ritual cult centers and organized campaigns to stamp out rampant “superstition.” All of these measures are characteristic of broader trends in the ‘modernization’ of belief and practice in religions elsewhere in the world as well. Goh Yu Mei’s paper looked at another movement for the reform of Chinese religious traditions, that of the adaptation of “moral books” by two contemporary Buddhist movements: the Singapore Amithaba Buddhist Society and Penang City Home Services. These organizations present different strategies for appropriating classical texts into contemporary religious thought and practice—from inserting annotations and explanations to inculcating particular patterns of social engagement.

Another comparison of religious organizations in Singapore and Malaysia is developed in Allan Lee’s study of two post-colonial heirs to the Boys’ Brigade founded in British Malaya, noting the different trajectories along which they have developed: one maintaining a strong emphasis on its Christian roots, while the other publicly downplays its religious orientation in favor of broadcasting an image of a more secular mission and vision of education and social engagement. Norshahril Bin Saat’s contribution calls attention to the complex parallels and tensions between Islamist and state interests in contemporary Malaysia, as well as some of the ways in which the gathering momentum of Islamization in contemporary Malaysia has been both increasing the power, and raising the stakes, of internal competition among different groups of *‘ulama* in the country.

Other papers presented at the workshop address these issues of

modern receptions of religiously-based social activism from the perspective of intellectual history. Chikara Uchida discusses the way in which the Japanese Marxist Amino Yoshihiko deployed the category of 'religion' in developing his discussions of class struggle in Japanese history to produce critiques of both capitalism and of modernity, with its rampant trajectory of the extension of state power. Akiyoshi Ono's paper presented a critique of Victor Hugo's position on religious segregations Jews and Muslims in French Algeria as an entry into the exploration of the often conflicting positions of modern thinkers on issues of secularization and the state regulation of religion. In the process he raised some troubling issues surrounding the relations between enlightenment, colonialism and human rights in modern discourses of religion and social justice.⁵

Legal transformations and state intervention and the modern management of religion

One major arena in which conceptions of religion and social justice are brought into the public sphere is that of law. As already mentioned, many of the Asian nation-states that have been formed since the mid-twentieth century introduced secular constitutions that established legal and administrative apparatus that were formally distinct from any religious ideology or institutions. The historical roots of these developments were even deeper in some societies, and two of the papers presented at the workshop focused on examples of such earlier developments.

In his contribution to this collection, Naofumi Abe uses Persian legal documents from nineteenth-century Iran to present a picture of the first developments toward both modernization and secularization. His particular focus is on how the unequal treaties with European powers at that time facilitated the separation of "religion" and "law" into separate spheres. Developments in Siam during this same period are the subject of Siriporn Dabphet's paper. Her discussion of the re-definitions of religious kingship from *devaraja* to *dhammaraja* that were accomplished during the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–1868) demonstrates

5. This paper is not included in the booklet.

how the new laws promulgated in connection with these reforms served to further advance both moralizing and modernizing agendas.

Other Asian nations have followed different trajectories in developing their own administrative instruments to regulated activity deemed appropriately restricted to the category of “religion.” In some cases this has involved the ongoing adaptation of regulatory systems to deal with shifting trends in the social roles of different religions over time. Rodney Sebastian’s review of Singapore’s secularization model presents a schematic mapping of the state’s models of religious management within a matrix defined by the axes of social order and economic prosperity. Thus framed, he presents a field of four quadrants reflecting the respective strategies of state approval, promotion, monitoring, and repression. The model he proposes here could be usefully developed further by tracking movement across and between these domains over time, as well as expanded to facilitate comparative discussions of evolving patterns of state intervention into religious affairs in other societies.

Secularization, religion, and the state in modern Asia

The diverse case studies explored in the papers presented in this collection each provide their own particular insights into the broad and complex transformations of religion, and culture and politics in modern Asian nation-states. In closing here, I would like to comment briefly on the relevance of such discussions of secularization, religion, and the state in modern Asia.

While most of the Asian nation-states formed since the mid-twentieth century had constitutions that could be described as “secular,” subsequent developments have reflected increasing social pressures for the official re-establishment of religion in the legal bases and state structures of many countries. In their attempts to deal with issues of religious identity and communitarianism over recent decades, a number of modern Asian nations have provided stipulations concerning an “official religion” within their state constitutions. This is something most frequently commented upon in discussions of the religious politics of Muslim-majority nations such as Pakistan and Malaysia. However this

is by no means something unique to Islam in the modern world as, for example, Buddhism has also been designated the official religion of the nation in the current constitution of Cambodia. Moreover the power of the idea of a constitutionally-established official religion for the nation even appears to have be exercising increasing appeal in many Asian societies over the past two decades, with the rise of movements to establish an official religion even in formerly “secular” states. In 1988 Bangladesh passed a constitutional amendment making Islam the official religion. In 2007 an attempt was also made to add a constitutional provision for Buddhism in the constitution of Thailand, and when this last measure failed to receive the support of the Constitutional Assembly, Buddhist monks and Thai political activists took the streets in protest.

Developments all across Asia and the broader world since the late twentieth century have thus made it abundantly clear that processes of modernization have not carried with them any monolithic secularizing impact upon religious life in contemporary societies. Herein is found one of the most valuable ways in which studies such as those in this collection can contribute to our evolving understandings of these critical contemporary developments. The type of detailed case studies produced by the contributors here comprise important foundations for the future work of developing revised theoretical frameworks for the discussion of the dynamics of interplay between secularization, religion, and the state in Asia and beyond.