The Secular in South, East, and Southeast Asia

Edited by
KENNETH DEAN
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Global Diversities

Over the past decade, the concept of 'diversity' has gained a leading place in academic thought, business practice, politics and public policy across the world. However, local conditions and meanings of 'diversity' are highly dissimilar and changing. For these reasons, deeper and more comparative understandings of pertinent concepts, processes and phenomena are in great demand. This series will examine multiple forms and configurations of diversity, how these have been conceived, imagined, and represented, how they have been or could be regulated or governed, how different processes of inter-ethnic or inter-religious encounter unfold, how conflicts arise and how political solutions are negotiated and practiced, and what truly convivial societies might actually look like. By comparatively examining a range of conditions, processes and cases revealing the contemporary meanings and dynamics of 'diversity', this series will be a key resource for students and professional social scientists. It will represent a landmark within a field that has become, and will continue to be, one of the foremost topics of global concern throughout the twenty-first century. Reflecting this multi-disciplinary field, the series will include works from Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology, Law, Geography and Religious Studies. While drawing on an international field of scholarship, the series will include works by current and former staff members, by visiting fellows and from events of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. Relevant manuscripts submitted from outside the Max Planck Institute network will also be considered.

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Introduction

Kenneth Dean and Peter van der Veer

Despite the fact that there is no evidence of the decline of religion in Asia the problematic of "the secular" in Asia is very important, especially in its communist variant but also elsewhere. This introduction discusses a wide variety of interactions between "the religious" and "the secular" in Asia that are highlighted in the contributions to the volume.

Studies of secularism have primarily concentrated on Northern Europe and North America. The philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) has written a detailed account of the centuries-long historical development of a secular age in the Western Christianity of Euro-America. The anthropologist Talal Asad (1993) had earlier provided a genealogical account of the

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concept of religion and ritual, noting the legacy of Christian theological understandings. In a subsequent work, he called for an ethnography of multiple forms and consequences of secularism beyond Euro-America (Asad 2003). In a study of Europe and the Americas the sociologist Jose Casanova has outlined three elements in the so-called "secularization thesis" and shown that these are not in any necessary relation to one another.

For South Asian societies and some Southeast Asian societies, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Burma, two of the three elements of the "secularization thesis" of Jose Casanova (Casanova 1994) cannot be found at all. Firstly, a "progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices as a concomitant of levels of modernization" is absent. There is no doubt that these societies modernize their economies, go through fast urbanization, and have developed eminent institutions for scientific and technological research, but there is no decline of religion to be witnessed. A second element, namely "privatization of religion as a precondition of modern and democratic politics" is also totally absent. However, importantly, the third element can be found in these societies, namely "the institutional differentiation of the so-called secular spheres, such as state, economy, and science, from religious institutions and norms." But even here one finds in the public sphere in Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka constant references to "the rule of Shari'a" or "the Hindu Rashtra," or the "Rule of the Buddhist Dharma." These can be taken as merely polemical references that do not really destroy religion's differentiation from religion, but they are still important to the extent that they mobilize people around religious issues.

In Communist Vietnam and China it is hard to say whether there is a decline of religion, since the Communist Party controls public manifestations of religion heavily. These societies do not have democratic politics, so one cannot address that part of the secularization thesis. If there is a possible privatization of religion (for example in Christian house-churches) it may only be a result of repression. In these societies one can speak about atheist secularism as a "project" to remove religion from society rather than a historical "process" that gradually leads to privatization of religion.

The picture in the large urban centers of Asia is varied (van der Veer 2015). In South Asia, mega-cities have religious processions every day,

while in Chinese mega-cities such processions are forbidden, despite their importance in Chinese religion. Urban centers like Seoul and Singapore seem at first sight totally secular with their extremely modernist city planning and shopping malls, but when one looks more closely one finds Christian mega-churches and an even closer look will enable one to find all kinds of religious practices happening in street-corner society.

For all these reasons secularization is often regarded in Asia as a Euro-American phenomenon. The debate about the secularization thesis has not yet really excited scholarship on Asian societies. However, in Asia one cannot ignore the importance of the separation of modern state institutions from religion. Here, the discussion has mostly focused on legal arrangements regarding religious institutions and communal rights. Modernization theory in the 1960s addressed the challenges of creating modern nation-states after decolonization by focusing on the difficulties in creating citizenship to replace religious (communal) allegiance. In response to such political secularism in South Asia a critique of (Western) modernity has been developed that argues that demands to replace tradition by modernity are a legacy of the colonial period. The political philosopher Ashis Nandy and the anthropologist T.N. Madan formulated in the 1990s a defense of the tolerant and syncretic nature of Indian religions that in their view has been threatened by both a fanatical secularism, carried by Nehru's Congress Party, and a fanatical religious nationalism. Even the Communists in China and Vietnam have now gingerly started to explore the possibilities of salvaging "intangible heritage" which is often constituted by the very religious practices that they had tried to destroy for over a century. Whether one can call this a "revitalization" of religion depends very much on one's interpretation of what happened in the long period of outright repression. Certainly the discourses of nationalism have changed in Asia from a desire to transform societies from traditional to modern to an emphasis on the national character of civilizational traditions. Official state discourses run the full gamut from an emphasis on the superior nature of Hindu civilization (India) or the notion of a superior Pan-Asian alternative to the West (Singapore) to the notion of a "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

One can conclude that the problematic of "the secular" is in fact of great importance in Asia. Some initial attempts have been made to provide alternative Asian intellectual histories for Taylor's masterful presentation of Euro-American history (Bilgrami 2017), but one should not try to find in Asian histories the presence or absence of some historical essence that is the hallmark of modernity. Asian histories have their own problematics that should be explored on their own terms, but also through comparison. In the modern period the interaction with Western societies is crucial in those histories. Recently, van der Veer (2013) outlined the nineteenth-century formation of a "syntagmatic chain" of interconnected concepts—religion–magic–spiritualism–secularism—that was introduced to the rest of the world by colonial and imperial Western powers over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This book concentrates on comparisons and contrasts in the reception and local adaptation of this interlinked conceptual chain in India and China. The ways in which these concepts were interpreted, legislated and internally absorbed has led to strikingly different results: religious nationalism is on the rise in India, while China still insists that it is an atheistic state regulating limited religious freedoms.

In this volume we seek to explore a wide set of instances of the interaction between the secular and the religious. The chapters do not give an exhaustive account of the wide variety of such interactions but rather seek to respond to the question of why most of the world remains a realm of spirits and religious expression, making the Western story of secularism recounted by Taylor into the exception, rather than the rule. To understand the apparent "exceptionality" of the West better one needs to start with a closer look at Charles Taylor's argument. By examining interactions with the West Jose Casanova challenges in this volume Charles Taylor's account in several provocative ways. First, he argues that we should begin the account of the secular age not in 1500 with Luther but in 1492 with Columbus. By examining the role of colonialism and imperialism in Latin America, Africa and Asia, alongside the rise of secularism in the West, one can begin to see Western secularism as intimately tied to the increasing centralized power and rise of national(ist) states in Europe. Casanova views secularization as a process of confessionalization leading to national(ist) identity.

He discusses the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation not as a narrative of the buffering of the self, but as creating the conditions for nationalism through state-controlled religious confessionalization processes involving ethnic or religious communal "cleansing," where adherence to a national (or a territorially divided and nationally supervised) church was a prerequisite to full belonging.

Western hegemonic power to impose confessionalization on colonial subjects was rarely uncontested, but it did expand quickly in certain cases of rapid capture and control (Mexico, parts of Latin America, the Philippines). In his paper, Casanova outlines an earlier form of Western Christian universalism which preceded colonialism. The Jesuits explored the possibilities and limits of conversion through acculturation in India, China and Japan. As the first transnational corporation and the first mission society, they based their efforts on a belief in the universal salvation of the souls of all men through conversion. In order to achieve inroads in a highly unified and hierarchical political and cultural space (China), Jesuits like Matteo Ricci found ways to accommodate Catholic doctrine to local practices such as ancestor worship. By redefining religious practices as cultural practices, they opened the way to a relativistic understanding of cultures which could operate without a monotheistic god as the fulcrum of values. Deist conceptions of the Enlightenment were one response to these innovative understandings. Such conceptions were to play a major role in the rise and spread of secularism in the West.

Casanova makes the highly provocative claim that the Japanese rejected Catholicism but absorbed Western modes of confessionalization even as they were banning the Catholic priests and their parishioners. Reconsidering the rise of nation states as a simultaneous process of confessionalization and secularization (increased state powers to determine the correct religious faith) presents a very different way to think through Taylor's account of the rise of the secular age. Casanova's vision of the role of confessionalization within the formation of the nation, in turn determining the limits of religion and the state, leads into Peter van der Veer's account of the enchantments of nationalism. He disputes Taylor's 3 Ds (Disenchantment, Disembedding and Disciplining) by arguing that nationalism has in fact succeeded in enchanting the world, and that this can readily take on the forms of a sacralized nation

(in its most extreme form in the Third Reich) in which there is no possibility of disembeddedness. His paper turns to the role of faith in state coinage and financial derivatives as further evidence of the continuity of the magical elements in state sovereignty. His account of the sacred and magical functions of nationalism resonate with recent political developments in the United States. There is no doubt that the magical powers of the state are a crucial element in the syntagmatic chain of religion–secularity–spirituality–magic that characterize nationalisms in India, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. Toward the end of his paper, van der Veer raises the complex issue of multi-ethnic communities in Southeast Asian nation-states, and the kinds of transnational religious affiliations that link groups across state boundaries throughout this region. One key example is the Chinese temple networks linking devotees of Chinese regional deities back to founding temples in southeast China. Here identity and affiliation is not readily reabsorbed into a national(ist) framework. As Dean points out in his paper, many of these networks preserve and evolve local ritual traditions that provide a central platform for spirit mediums.

As one step towards a genealogy of spirit possession and its powers in Asian societies, Dean's paper explores the *longue durée* history of the rise of regional gods and their spokesmen, the spirit mediums, within Chinese society. He argues that late-Imperial China saw the evolution of local autonomy at the village level. He points out the persistence and power of evolving ritual technologies to give expression to the powers of the local. These ritual technologies include the possession of spirit mediums as well as rites performed by ordained ritual specialists. Within the long history of immigration to Southeast Asia, one can trace the spread of many local ritual traditions, and note the key role played by spirit mediums.

Looked at in a broader perspective, the ritual technologies explored in many of the papers in this volume (including spirit writing, trance possession, exorcism, speaking in tongues, conversion and merit-making through donations and endowments) all suggest a power of ritual traditions to produce worlds of experience, in which identities can take shape and partial subjectivities can form, often relatively independent of the processes of capture of identity by the confessional

nation-state. Rather than generating alternative modernities or subjunctive realms of a make-believe world of perfect ritual order (as suggested in Seligman et al. 2008), these ritual traditions have positive power to extend into secular space and absorb affective communities by a process of contagion. They can and do transform social and economic relations, generating real social effects, creating the world "as-it-is" rather than "as-if." It is precisely the powers of these ritual traditions, in constant negotiation with the powers of the state and the powers of capitalism that are explored in many of the chapters in this volume.

Several chapters explore aspects of the transnational mobility of religious traditions, networks, specialists, artifacts and spirit mediums, while also showing the ways these evolving traditions respond to nationalistic formations. Two papers continue Jose Casanova's discussion of the historical and intercultural role of the Catholic Church in Southeast Asia and East Asia (China, Hong Kong and Taiwan). Peter Phan outlines the rise of the Catholic Church in North Vietnam from the earliest missions through the French colonial period, and the subsequent attacks on the Church under the communist government of North Vietnam. A great many churches and their communities moved to the south, where they continue to exist as formidable communities in places such as Phat Diem. Phan also outlines the evolution of the southern Catholic Church.

Richard Madsen's paper outlines the very harsh treatment of Catholic priests and bishops in China, and the division of the Church into a patriotic Church on the one hand, and a Church of martyrs on the other. He brings out sharp contrasts between the development of the Catholic Church in Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan, showing how each was embedded in a specific sociopolitical context, with consequences for the relative success or failure of the Church to flourish.

A set of papers treat different dimensions of the impact of secularization on Chinese religions. Wang Xiaoxuan's paper on the contradictory effects of state regulation of religion up to the Cultural Revolution (which seems to have had the unintended effect of enabling the proliferation of Christian churches while limiting the activities of local Chinese communal religion) also discusses recent reframing of local communal religion as "popular belief." This new conceptualization is a concession

to the strong growth of local communal religion as local communities have regained economic strength and the ability to express themselves.

Chiu's essay on the range of observance of Vinaya regulations amongst Buddhist nuns in Taiwan and Mainland China suggests that the traditional religious institutions still retain a strong appeal to younger people, and that they provide nuns with a disciplined corporate lifestyle dedicated to religious ends. Nevertheless, there is a very wide range of institutional contexts for the training of Buddhist nuns in contemporary China. Her comparison of the Taiwanese (democratic) and Mainland Chinese (communist) regulatory contexts shows important differences in the minutiae of religious practice.

These trends help contextualize the impact of the severe restrictions on religious institutions mentioned by Madsen and summarized through successive historical phases by Palmer and Winiger. The schematic account of increasing secularization of Chinese society in their essay presents a sharp contrast with some aspects of the essays by Wang, Chiu and Dean. One may debate the "profane" nature of popular religion in contrast to the "sacred" imperial cult in late imperial times, as well as the assertion that contemporary Chinese (urban) society is completely materialistic, profane and separated from earlier religious traditions, and the assessment that the Party has become the absolute transcendent (sacred) power in the contemporary era. There is a great deal of regional variation across China, featuring different relations to the powers of the nation and the Party. For example, over 120 popular god temples and Buddhist monasteries have been opened in the city of Xiamen over the past few years, reintroducing religious rituals to urban dwellers.

The local village temples described by Wang and Dean point to the continued power of local communal religion to negotiate the powers of the state and maintain a degree of autonomy. The importance of spirit mediums in local communal religion across the Chinese temple networks of this region suggests a different trajectory for Chinese religion than that outlined in *The Religious Question in China* by Goossaert and Palmer (2011). There, the projected evolution towards individualistic, voluntary participation in religious activities set off from other sectors is more reminiscent of Taylor's vision for religion in a post-secular society.

The next pair of papers addresses the complex role of spirit possession in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Vietnam. Vietnam has seen a widespread expansion of spirit possession in recent decades, in major religious movements such as the Dao Mau, or in more specific manifestations such as the increasingly frenzied search for the lost bones of the nearly 3 million MIA Vietnamese soldiers (out of 5 million dead). Ngo's paper explores a range of cults dedicated to spirit possession by Ho Chi Minh. Uncle Ho possesses middle-aged housewives in North Vietnam, who speak out forcefully against corruption in government and the decline of the revolutionary spirit. But Ho Chi Minh also possesses highly elite spirit mediums in South Vietnam, manifesting in a séance composed of leading scientists and political leaders, eager to carry on Uncle Ho's teachings in a turbulent period in Vietnamese history. This illustrates the pervasiveness of spirit-possession cults across social classes and educational levels, and the degree to which such practices infuse everyday life in contemporary Vietnam. This paper also raises intriguing questions about the links between spiritualism and nationalism in Southeast Asia.

Neena Mahadev's essay discusses the competition between evangelical Christians and revivalist Buddhists in Singapore with comparative reference to a similar competition in Sri Lanka. Mahadev shows how the secularizing educational policy of the Singapore government has left Singaporeans bereft of knowledge about their own Buddhist traditions. A special role in filling this knowledge gap is played by Anglophone Buddhist literature and proselytizers targeting Singaporean Western-educated elites. Another aspect of Singaporean secularization policies is the removal of cemeteries in the context of urbanization. Mahadev provides a subtle discussion of beliefs in ancestral spirits and the presence of ghosts in Chinese religion which are affected by this secularization and the ways in which they are addressed in the Buddhist revival.

The final set of papers examines practices in India, looking into the relationships between economy and religion. Leilah Vevaina continues the discussion of the treatment of the dead and the worship of the ancestors, a crucial element of the secular regulation of religious life in Asia. She focuses on the legal arrangements concerning endowments for ancestral worship among the Parsis (Zoroastrians) in Mumbai and Hong Kong. Her paper addresses the fundamental legal question of

what is deemed to be religious and charitable in endowments and what is not. She shows convincingly how "religion" is produced through the application of colonial law to property, with enormous consequences for the welfare of the communities involved.

Stefan Binder examines the fascinating case of the recently formed province of Telangana. Here discursive formations have rejected earlier secular–religious divides and largely replaced these with progressive–reactionary distinctions. One could argue that this is the product of quite local circumstances, including the importance in the region of communist political parties and lack of a religious nationalist discourse. The latter is much more prominent in current proclamations of the BJP. Indeed, this equation of the party with the state and with a purified religious tradition relates very closely to Peter van der Veer's comments on sacred nationalism and its continued powers.

What do these essays contribute to the debate on the forms and impacts of secularist projects in Asia? In many respects, they carry forward Asad's critique of secularism and modernization theory and link up with Chatterjee's work on multiple modernities (Chatterjee 1993). In each instance we need to ask what are the relations of secular states to indigenous local communal ritual traditions? Recently, Peter Berger (2014) has reversed his earlier commitment to teleological secularization theory and argued that one should study religious plurality under imposed conditions of modern secularism—what does this do to understandings of religion and ritual in the Asian context?

Casanova's hypothesis on the impact of Jesuit policies of acculturation on the evolution of Enlightenment secularism on the one hand, and his suggestion of the adaptation of techniques of Christian confessionalism in nation-state building in Japan (alongside rejection of the Catholic faith), showcase the significance of this first international missionary order to have operated on the global scale. His comments on the impact of confessionalism on nation-building in South America and the Philippines provide another counter-instance to Taylor's account of the secular age. Both China and India had earlier forms of political secularism that enabled Imperial or princely elites to arbitrate over orthodoxy and heterodoxy without undercutting the profusion of religious diversity. Neither India nor China underwent the Western European

processes of confessionalization. As Casanova points out "the dynamics of secularization outside the West cannot be understood as the result of functional differentiation, but rather as the outcome of historical colonial encounters … (through which) the secular immanent frame enters into contact, becomes superimposed, or is transformed by the encounter with other forms of structuring the sacred-profane or immanent/transcendent boundaries and relations in non-Western societies."

van der Veer's rejection of Taylor's account of the disenchantment of the world as evidenced by the sacred features of the nationalist state form is applicable not only to the European case, but to India, China, and Southeast Asia as well. As several chapters in this volume explore, the sacralization of the state is contested by reappropriations of the powers of the state by local and religious communities. van der Veer's focus on the magical power of the market within conditions of financial capitalism reveals the abyss underlying the platitudes of the economists and the speculators. Learning to stare into that abyss is perhaps the beginning of a new understanding of the forces of nationalism. Following the reworking of the powers of capital within local but mobile ritual traditions allows us to think capitalism differently.

If there are frightening tendencies towards totalitarianism under nationalistic movements in the current era, there is still some resistance to these tendencies in movements that escape nationalist confessionalization, unification and identification. The trans-regional and trans-national networks that transect Southeast Asia, from India on the one side to China on the other, as well as all kinds of intra-Southeast Asian networks, syncretic movements and hybrid ritual formations, illustrate the continuing power of rituals of different traditions to generate different worlds, and their ongoing role in the formation of layers of individual subjectivity in this region.

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2

Asian Catholicism, Interreligious Colonial Encounters and Dynamics of Secularism in Asia

José Casanova

As indicated by my title, I am going to deal with three different things, but I'm going to address them in the opposite order; one cannot discuss secularism in Asia without discussing religious–secular dynamics. In fact, in an attempt to challenge some of our ingrained modernist assumptions, I propose that we go back to early modernity in order to understand both the birth of secularism within Europe and the parallel process of global colonial encounters in the early modern era. Then I will address more specifically interreligious encounters in Asia, using the Jesuits as a prism. In particular, I'm going to focus on Japan and China to see what kind of secularism may have emerged in both places out of these encounters. Finally, I'll conclude with some comments on Asian Catholicism today. Obviously, Catholicism is a very "un-Asian" religion. Other than in the Philippines, where it is a majority religion, Catholicism is a tiny minority religion throughout Asia. None the less,

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pan-Asian Catholic networks have become an interesting phenomenon since the 1960s, and it's worth looking into them, as a point of entry in understanding contemporary processes of globalization.

So let me start with the confession that in recent decades I've been trying to free myself from my own modernist assumptions as a European sociologist. Basically, sociology was born as a theory of modernity, and modernization theory, which was the dominant sociological theory in the 1970s when I became a sociologist, is the theory of how European modernity became globalized. This may be a simplification, but it is an accurate one. For sociology, history begins with modernity. Everything that came before is tradition, to be superseded by modernity. This is the central, binary distinction dividing history before and after modernity.[1]

Here, I would like to start my narrative a bit earlier with early modernity, but I would like to set as the symbolic date not 1500, as does Charles Taylor in his genealogical narrative of *A Secular Age*, but rather 1492. Taylor uses 1500 as the imaginary line dividing the premodern, enchanted world of Christendom from the emerging modern, disenchanted world of our secular age.[2] In this respect, his is still a narrative of modernization. For me, 1492 offers a much more interesting date because it serves both as the beginning of the Westphalian model of confessional states and as the beginning of the process of global European colonial expansion. The Westphalian confessional state was based on the principle *cuius regio, eius religio*—that is, the sovereign (Leviathan) determines the religion of the subjects within his realm. In order to establish a homogeneous Catholic realm, the Catholic kings in 1492 decreed the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain. Similar processes of ethnoreligious cleansing accompanied the process of European state-formation in early modernity and the consolidation of the Westphalian system of sovereign territorial states. Everywhere one finds similar processes of state-led confessionalization.

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[1]José Casanova, "From Modernization to Secularization to Globalization: An Autobiographical Self-Reflection," *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 2 (2011): 25–36.

[2]Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Northern Europe becomes homogeneously Protestant, Southern Europe becomes homogeneously Catholic and in between one finds three bi-confessional societies—Holland, Germany and Switzerland—unable to eliminate the other religious half, having to coexist, and developing their own patterns of Protestant–Catholic confessionalization: confessional pillars in the case of Holland, confessional *Länder* in the case of Germany, and confessional cantons in the case of Switzerland.

But parallel to this process of confessional state formation within continental Europe, one finds the beginning of the Iberian global colonial expansion which was legitimated by the juridical fiction of the Pope's jurisdiction over all non-Christian lands. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas gave Spain possession of all the newly "discovered" lands within the western hemisphere, while Portugal claimed possession of all the lands to be discovered within the eastern hemisphere. Of course, no other country accepted such a juridical fiction, and other European powers would soon follow the Iberian powers in their competitive global colonial expansion. But nonetheless, it was on the basis of such a fiction that the colonization of the "New World" or the formation of the Portuguese *Estado do India*, a vast primarily maritime empire—extending from Brazil, throughout Africa, all the way to Goa and Macau—took place.

In order to understand the genesis of European secularization, rather than begin with theories of modernization, one should begin with theories of state confessionalization. The so-called premodern religion, before European secular modernity, was by no means a "traditional" kind of religion. Rather it was a modern type of religion, the product of a process of disciplinary confessionalization by early modern confessional absolutist states—whether Calvinist, Lutheran or Catholic. Irrespective of whether we are talking of Protestant Christianity or Counter-Reformation Catholicism we are not talking of traditional medieval, enchanted religion, but of religions which are the product of state disciplinary processes. I would argue that the European process of secularization can be best understood as a process of deconfessionalization—that is, European states becoming deconfessionalized and becoming secular and individuals becoming deconfessionalized, that is, leaving their national state churches and becoming secular. The concept of "unchurching" captures best the process of deconfessionalization and secularization in Europe.