

**THE ROLE OF RELIGION
IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY:
FOCUS ON SOUTH ASIA
*THE DELHI WORKSHOP***

A Roundtable Discussion
Practitioners and Academics
India International Centre, Delhi
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“During the 13th and 14th centuries, Aquinas and his followers brought philosophy and rationality into the fundamental notion of Christianity. Philosophy was brought into spirituality and theology, which means a critical approach to religion. That brought some control over the power of religion. That is where we have to go one more step...this is only an interim step of bringing reason and a critical approach to religion and religious phenomena.”

— *John Chathanatt*

WORKSHOP GOALS: Focus On Timelines Not Headlines

What is really going on with the religious politics and the religious societies of South Asia in ways that affect civil society? Are there substantial changes—a kind of politicization of religion—or are the current religious politics in South Asia grabbing headlines, but not affecting the timelines of South

Asian society? In his introductory remarks, Orfaela Center Director and workshop co-convenor, Mark Juergensmeyer, suggested that participants focus their analyses on deeper cultural and historical trends. He wondered, for instance, if India's political reality had recently been “obfuscated by

sensational journalistic reporting. Not long ago in the West, there seemed to be ‘an animated concern’ over the rise of the BJP. Many were convinced that India was going the way of Ayatollahs and Iran and now, the BJP has been voted out office. Things look quite different.”

A Reluctance to Link Religion and Social Movements

An example of the reluctance to link religion with social movements was provided by Marshall when she recounted a conversation with Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in which he explained to her that while Bangladesh is an “extraordinary laboratory for organizations,” he was leery of

getting involved with the religious elements prominent in Bangladeshi society. Marshall found it fascinating that the vibrant social entrepreneurship field in Bangladesh has “almost no religion in it,” even though faith appears often. “There is a perceived tension between social entrepreneur-

ship and the new social movements and religion.” Marshall expressed hope that continued projects, such as the one fostered by this workshop and other similar initiatives like the Henry Luce Foundation initiative on Religion and International Affairs, will play a role in alleviating this tension.



Religion Absent From Important Social Changes in Bangladesh

In terms of bringing about social transformation for the empowerment of women in Bangladeshi society, Rounaq Jahan felt religious institutions have not played a visible role. "Most of the work done during the 1970's and

the 1980's was carried out by non-religious civil society groups. In certain periods, some of the mosques have been regarded as obstacles to women's empowerment. Non-religious institutions came in and played

a major transformative role in women's empowerment. [Local religious institutions] are part of civil society, so... you cannot negate their role, but what role are they really playing?"

“When I asked Sir Fazle Hasan Abed founder and Chairperson of BRAC a couple of years ago how he dealt with religion, his answer was, "as little as possible.”

— Katherine Marshall

The State and Religion Interact in Pakistan

"In the Pakistan experience, it is difficult to define which are the religious institutions. The state itself is a religious institution, because Islam is the state religion in Pakistan," said I.A. Rehman. The Pakistani model of "blending religion and

education" can limit opportunities for students. Rehman explained how the state has merged religious teachings in school: "If a student or candidate for admission to a medical college secures an average of 95% marks in medical

subjects, but fails in Islamiyat, he cannot gain admission into medical college." The cumulative effect of these religious based institutions, Rehman concluded, has been "somewhat negative."

Comparing the Role of Religion in Civil Society in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India

"Unlike in other countries where the local religious-based organizations-the madrassas or Islamic organizations-have moved forward first in response to disasters, in Bangladesh these types of organizations really have not been active," noted Rounaq Jahan. While such organizations can be effective in carrying out their missions,

they are "not in the forefront" of humanitarian and community-based activities. Jahan explained that there are positive examples of religious groups performing humanitarian activities in Bangladesh, but most of these are in the form of large international organizations providing health and basic services."

While religion and civil society may not have mixed well in Pakistan and Bangladesh, T.N. Madan pointed out this was not necessarily the case with their mutual neighbor, India. He reminded the group not to forget the "long history of religious-based institutions playing a significant role in modern education."



THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING AN ISLAMIC STATE

“I find it difficult to find an example of an Islamic State. Pakistan promised that they are an Islamic State, but they have not been able to successfully draft a constitution for an Islamic State. Iraq and Afghanistan tried to do this too, and they, similarly, were not able to produce an Islamic constitution. All they could say was that no law would be passed [which] is against the spirit of Islam. They did not specify what the spirit of Islam is.

This is not merely a defect in any particular political system, or Islam; the European Union is having the same problem. Again, the question is of sovereignty, of territory, of pluralism, of distribution and separation of power... Islamic law applies in different degrees in different fields.

— *J.P.S. Uberoi*



Galta Temple near Jaipur where the sage Galav is said to have performed penance and been cleansed in the waters that flow near the temple.

Religion and Philosophy as Knowledge System

There is “common ground between religion and philosophy as knowledge systems,” noted Manindra Thakur, but he cautioned that the “academic emphasis on ‘religious communities’ runs the risk of missing a lot of what is called the ‘[religious] knowledge system.’” The ability to reclaim religion as a knowledge system can provide autonomy to engage with the subject in different ways and open new paths to thinking about old questions. “Why, for instance, did most of the major religions emerge from Asian societies, and what is the consequence of that?” Thakur expressed hope that new approaches coming out of the study of international

development will allow scholars “to engage with religion as a knowledge system” much more easily than they have in the past.

Developing new categories, “particularly from the point of view of these new religious movements as they engage with a social reality,” would be helpful, commented Jahan. One of the major things that these religious movements have in common, she has found, is “the philosophical discourse that they are creating, which is one of the problems that the West is facing at the moment.” Jahan continued: “These new movements base their arguments on this idea of the unity of

mind and the body,” and that, she suggested, is what is making them very hard for policy makers and academics to understand.

When you open the can of religion, you see it as a box of religious movements and sects that have a lot of turmoil and churning taking place between them. We need to take that seriously.

— *Anindita Chakrabarti*

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN PRESENT DAY INDIA

From his research, **Manindra Thakur** has identified five kinds of religious movements in India. These include:

1. Movements where the major intervention is at the level of a philosophy. (i.e. the Rajneesh Ashrams and the Krishnamurti Foundations)
 2. Devotional movements where major emphasis is on complete surrender to the God. Some of them also mobilize resources and address social needs through a religious lens. (i.e. ISKON and RK Mission movements)
 3. Yoga and knowledge-based movements that use traditional knowledge to help people. (i.e. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Ramdev)
 4. Interpersonal relational movements that start and place the locus of their energies on the family and other interpersonal relationships. (i.e. the Ashram Bapu and the Murari Bapu)
 5. Social relational movements that place a high priority on meetings and social circles. They are mainly addressing the social aspirations of the lower strata of society with the help of religious discourses. (i.e. Shiv Guru and Dera movements)
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Rowena Robinson outlined the distinctions between some of the movements currently active in India:

1. Movements or religious organizations that are explicitly political and radical and want to engage directly with the State or perhaps even take over some of the functions of the State
 2. Those who want to be distinguished from religious institutions, or groups that want to engage with civil society in the sense that they don't see a divide between themselves and civil society
 3. The last group seeks to spread religious values throughout society and create a way of life. They see a divide between themselves or religion per se, and civil society or anything outside of religion. This group tends to take the view that religion is a private practice of the individual
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“How religion interacts with civil society depends on how one views religion,” stated **John Chathanatt**. Religion can be seen in several ways:

1. Religion as cultic element
2. Religion as one that has a creedal element
3. Religion as one that is based on a normative element
4. Religion as one that is based on a community element

“I have a problem thinking of a religious community as a faith-based community only. I would like to exist as Hindu and as [a member of] an epistemic community — Hindu as an epistemic community. So, I have a problem with institutions and organizations.”

— **Manindra Thakur**



**“CLASH OF
CIVILIZATIONS”
— A SELF-FULFILLING
LABEL**

This war against terror and the mistake made by some politicians to describe it as a ‘clash of religions’ and a ‘clash of civilizations’ has also affected the faith-based organizations and made them more militant and less tolerant of other people’s points of view.

— **I.A. Rehman**



Job Interviewer: “What has been the impact of Islam on India?”

Job Seeker: “None?”

When I was first interviewing to be a professor of sociology, a philosopher on the selection committee asked me why I was interested in Islam. I replied, “I was born in Lahore and grew up there. Why does it need an explanation?” The philosopher wasn’t satisfied.

At the end of the interview, he came back to that question and asked, “What do you think of the impact of Islam on India?”

I said, “That is something I have thought a lot about. I can summarize this impact on three fronts. Firstly, it took place on the front of the state, and there the impact was totally bad. Secondly, there is the front of the mullahs, of the clerics, of the so-called orthodox and the people who run the madrassas and the mosques. In my opinion, they had no impact at all, because they have no interest in non-Muslim institutions or philosophy. Their job is to make good Muslims out of nominal Muslims. Thirdly, the impact was on the Sufi heterodox front, which is an interior Islam, which puts the individual first and not the collectivity, but that has been entirely positive.”

Then I said, “Professor, you are a philosopher. Can I ask you how you add up 100% negative, 0%, and 100% positive? The natural result would be that it had no impact on India.”

That is the sort of ridiculous conclusion we get to when we say it should all be added up. Obviously though, the impact on the state level, on the clerical level, and on the Sufi heterodox level, cannot be added. That is the whole point!

— **J.P.S. Uberoi**

Diasporic Religious Movements

Highlighting the strong pull of religion’s ability to overcome political obstacles, Hilal Elver commented: “My country (Turkey) is very secular, and we do not have any kind of right given to religious institutions to work as a social provider. They can’t do education or any kind of public work. This all belongs to the state. If you look at those religious institutions outside of coun-

tries like Turkey, they became very important institutions. They are active and are openly promoting education. They have established networking around the world, which in Turkey would be looked upon very suspiciously, because they think that this institution has a political interest.”

“Denied a territory, what remains of religion and cul-

ture?” queried Ranjana Mukhophadyaya. “How does religion become one of many sources of identity? How do religious symbols and religious associations become new meanings? A temple in a refugee camp is not just a temple. It is also a center of food distribution, of donations; to get visas, you have to get a certification from the monks.”

RELIGION: BRINGING US TOGETHER, TEARING US APART

“All religions, at least most religions, start with common values like peace, like harmony, like love, forgiveness. Why is it that there is so much conflict between one religion and the other?”

— Ravi Bhatia

“An attempt was recently made to bring the two Punjabs together in Pakistan. A large number of people from Indian Punjab visited the Pakistani Punjab and vice versa. There were exchanges of writers, singers, poets, artists, companies, and of course, Sufis and Bakhtis. But it frightened the governments, so they put a stop to it. Governments moved in very ruthlessly and movements of people across the borders became more difficult. Today, India and Pakistan have more restrictions on visas than they had two or three years ago. Both governments are afraid of their own people, and they do not want to give them the opportunities of discovering [the shared interests] they have.”

— I.A. Rehman

ATTAINING POWER BY WHATEVER MEANS POSSIBLE

“Politics is the art of the possible. If communalizing societies brings success [in] politics, why not communalize? If foul play is the winning card, why not use that? The art of the possible will do anything to get to power... If religion will bring them more power, that's what they'll use. That is happening in our society, which means religious sanction is sought even by politicians, by the state. Religion has power. Religion can bring power to them.”

— John Chathanatt

Poverty is the Problem, Not Religion

Based on his experiences working in various impoverished regions where “communal tensions” have often turned violent, Raja Lingam

suggested that, even so, “more than religion, it is actually poverty which is dangerous and important. Religious institutions and religion, are

there forever and from the beginning. Poverty, more than religion, kills people.”

STATE AUTHORITIES VERSUS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES — WHO IS USING WHOM?

“There is a kind of linkage between state power and religion that is increasingly taking a very devious turn. Who is using whom, in fact? Perhaps before, political leaders thought that they were using religious sects, so they could garner votes. Today, the situation has been reversed. All these religious leaders know very well that state power has to negotiate with them.”

— Pralay Kanungo



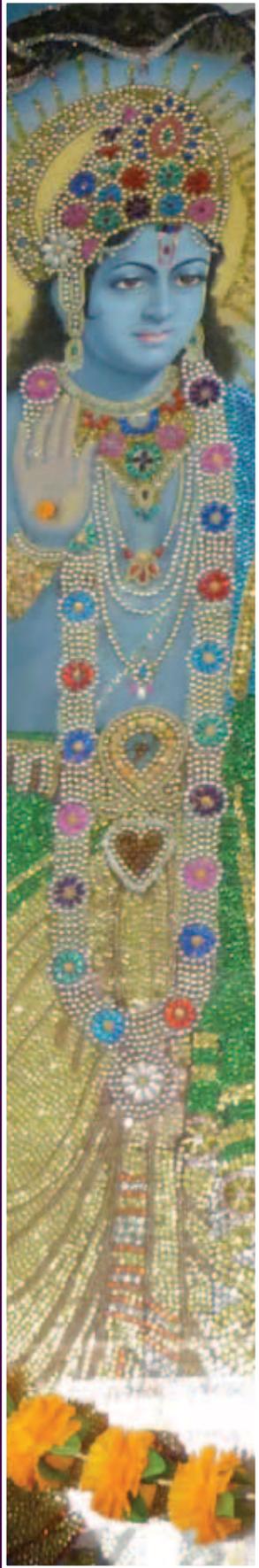


Image of Krishna eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu.

CASE STUDY

Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya described the after-effect of a Buddhist-Muslim dialogue in Ladakh, an isolated high desert district in northern India. Roughly one month after the retreat, a flash-flood and mudslide caused severe damage in the area. Prior to the dialogue, there was tremendous antipathy between the two faith communities. Mukhopadhyaya was surprised by the amount of relief aid which came to the effected area from Muslim groups, “who would otherwise not have cared much for Ladakh, but for the attention that the interfaith dialogue garnered.”

Religion That Can Either Strengthen or Destroy the Social Fabric of Society

Religion may be part of the solution to social ills. Ravi Bhatia lamented that in India, “the social fabric is breaking up. You see this now not only in Western and European countries but also in India. The types of social structures we had are much less effective in maintaining peace and harmony among social groups, families, and neighborhoods.” “Perhaps,” suggested Bhatia, “it

is religion, which will present an alternative.”

Religion that strengthens social life should be distinguished from religion that destroys the social fabric. T.N. Madan warned: “We have to acknowledge that within religious traditions, there is a place for violence in the name of religion.” In the Hindu tradition, as in the Islamic, there is

the idea of destruction of the evil-doer—that God will punish the evil-doers, and enjoins upon the believer to go to war. Madan emphasized that it is important to make the distinction between this idea of removing the evil-doers and violence sanctioned for political interests, which invokes the sanction of religion to commit violence — as Al Qaeda and the Taliban are doing.

Complex Engagement Structured by Different Social Locations

“The role that religion plays within civil society organizations, in the provision of aid or the provision of human welfare, is very complex and the outcomes are at times unexpected,” noted Rowena Robinson. Sharing insights from her work with Christians

and Muslims in the unstable western region of India, Robinson added: “Religions are not socially based. Their social base varies, and the kind of engagement that they can have with civil society is therefore structured by their different social locations.”

In her view, understanding these interactions can only be arrived at through “the comparative study of religious structures and religious organizations... across and among different countries in the context of their role in civil activities.”

Encounters Between Agencies, Encounters Between Peoples

“The potential for dangerous miscommunication across cultural divides has not diminished despite advances in communications technology,” noted Juergensmeyer, referring to the dearth of research for the purpose of comprehending how religious notions can or do affect often tenuous and contingent relationships. “When a group of people from Europe or the United States try

to help out in Pakistan’s flood situation, no doubt their aid and relief [work] is welcome. But it is not only an engagement of agencies, it is also an encounter between people of different cultural backgrounds. Often, perceptions about the needs of people and about how to help and how to provide support are complicated, and are sometimes assisted by religious concepts

that can be quite different. It is difficult to know whether religion’s role in such a situation will ultimately be for good or for ill.” Like Robinson, Juergensmeyer suggested that “centers of excellence in different parts of the world are coming to understand that a re-thinking of the role of religion in the academic subject of international affairs seems appropriate.”

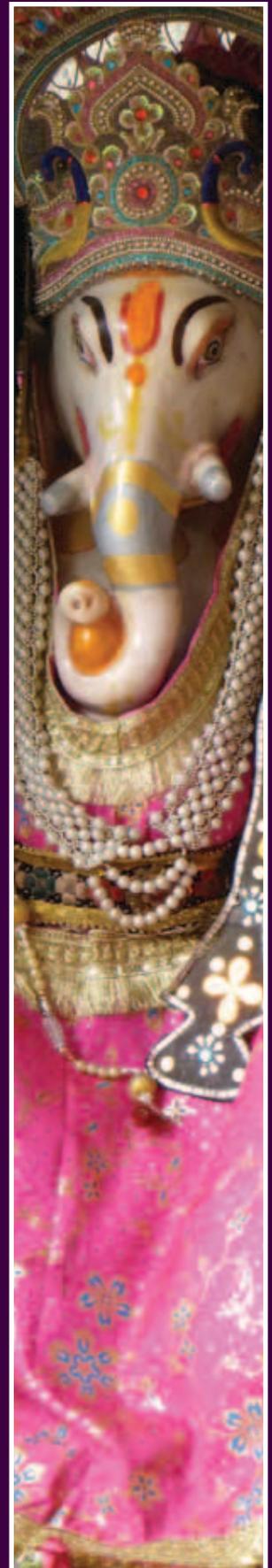
“What is religion? This is a question I encountered when I first came to the Punjab as a graduate student in the 1970s, armed with questionnaires for a study I was conducting on scheduled caste religions and social movements. It was a long questionnaire, because I wanted to grasp the way in which religion functioned within the Punjab villages.

Though I thought the first question was simple, surprisingly it gave me trouble. I asked, “What is your name?” In scheduled castes, people sometimes have different names for different purposes — sometimes they adopt their village names, their employment names, and sometimes they would have a religious name.

But my survey stopped dead in its tracks with the second question: What is your religion? The respondents wondered what I meant by the question. Was I asking about ‘dharma,’ a kind of religious law or religious ethics or a particular belief, like Islam? Was I talking about, ‘qaum,’ a great religious nation of identity; or ‘panth,’ a spiritual movement; or ‘mazhab,’ a set of beliefs? What did I mean by religion?

What is ‘religion’ in India? There is no one word for religion in Punjabi or Hindi or any Indian language. What I thought of as ‘religion’ in the West did not exist in any simple way within the Indian religious context. What we learn about the role of religion and society, about strata and religiosity, and whatever we call the various faith communities with which we are associated, all these interact and intertwine within the Indian and South Asian context, and are increasingly a part of the pattern of global religiosity and global society as well.”

— Mark Juergensmeyer



A statue of Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles, deva of intellect and wisdom.

“Secularism, or aggressive secularism as some people in the room have described it, can create its opposite—aggressive religion. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the phenomenon of fundamentalist religion, of virulent strident politicized religion, is a relatively new thing, a creation of post-modernity that didn’t exist in an earlier period of time, and certainly didn’t exist in most parts of the world where people didn’t bother to think about whether they were doing things because they were religious or because they were secular. They simply did them.”

— **Mark Juergensmeyer**



Representatives from BRAC, Vision Spring, and the Eleos Foundation meet with a Bangladeshi women’s microfinance cooperative.

Gender, Development and Democracy

Gender is the major reason for the “gulf between religion and secular development,” suggested Katherine Marshall. Gender issues may also be the reason for the lack of engagement and the lack of a thoughtful discussion. Rounaq Jahan emphasized that, “women’s roles are so important, and they are very difficult to deal with.” “Furthermore,” Jahan said,

“This gap might be overcome by better processes. Many policies and agreements affecting women are really framed and negotiated between governments and donor agencies. Citizens have absolutely no role.” The solution might be found by allowing citizens to have a voice and by being intentional about bringing gender perspective to such discussions.

Bidyut Mohanty endorsed this idea. Mohanty has devoted decades to researching the development of the women’s movement and women’s rights in India, especially in the rural and agricultural regions of the country. According to her research findings, there is a close association between economic visibility and a rights-based culture for women.

Salvation Through Self-Sacrifice

“Religion can provide a compelling ideological framework for service and voluntarism,” suggested Anindita Chakrabarti. She remembered being told that when the leader of the Swadhyay movement, Pandurang Shastri, asked volunteers to come forward, “they were

there overnight.” That piqued her curiosity and she investigated, finding that “any humanitarian activity is not without a certain ideology.” The Swadhyay had a theory of salvation which was intertwined with service, she reported, “as though saving the self depends on saving

and taking care of the other.” She found “very interesting parallels” with another Islamic movement, Tablighi Jamaat. “Followers of this movement, have the motto that they serve their neighbors in order to save themselves,” Chakrabarti said.

Secularism in South Asia and the West

The rumors about the death of religion are greatly exaggerated, especially since the Second World War, when everybody expected that religion would decline in public affairs.

— J.P.S. Uberoi

“Secularism is primarily a European and American phenomenon,” explained Juergensmeyer. Drawing upon his involvement with a Social Science Research Council project on the topic, he continued: “The concept of secularism was an Enlightenment attempt to break society free of the excesses of religious authority. Unfortunately, it created something of a monster — the notion that life can be divided into a secular-

religious dichotomy. How can we go back? Is there a possibility of imagining a kind of secularism that is not so secular, that would be hospitable to a religion that is not so virulently, stridently polarizing in the way in which these two opposite entities have become today? Or, is it too late to put the genie back in the bottle? Secularism is, after all, a fairly recent phenomenon.”

“Scholars have a tendency to counterpose secularism with every religion,” responded Rehman. “We can have a religious experience, and we can all be secular in politics.” Rehman pointed to the work

of Allama Iqbal’s lectures in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* where Iqbal posits that “so long as religious thought remains moribund and is not adjusted to religions of the world, it will create divisions.” If you reconstruct and reinterpret it [Islamic thought], you can have a reformation; “then, you can move forward,” added Rehman.

“Sectarians have been given that name by the Church — when you protest against the Church, you are labeled a ‘sectarian’; therefore, a ‘sectarian’ is bad,” stated Chakhrabarti. Contemporary media have adopted this negative tone when talking about sectarianism, but Chakhrabarti stressed that those in the field of the sociology of religion must use the term more accurately.

WE ARE BOTH SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS

“The English language itself is a barrier to the understanding of secularism’s coexistence with religion in South Asia. This is a language that can’t understand us and it is a peculiar problem of the English language. It’s not a problem of the German language. Heidegger argued that thinking is a process. But the English language has this problem of talking of everything in either/or terms. Therefore, it fails to capture that we are both secular and religious.”

— Manindra Thakur



Elephant standing guard at the Jagdish Temple, a Hindu temple in Udaipur.

“Even if we throw religion out, religion will not throw us out. Religion is as someone jokingly mentioned, in our curry. Rather than try to exclude religion, its power could be used to remove poverty, racial oppression, or the caste system, and also, to purify politics.”

— **John Chathanatt**

Is It Appropriate to Distinguish Religion From Civil Society?

Religion is creating its own definition of society and congregation in India, though “more by Buddhism and by Islam, and not so much by Hinduism,” noted Uberoi. “If you look at religious reform movements of the last hundred and fifty or so years in India, everyone of these movements has the word ‘society’ in its self-understanding. It tells us that they have their own idea of society. Sometimes this idea can be quite ridiculous... but the idea itself is there in all these movements and it is to be taken seriously.”

Drawing upon lessons from the 20th century, Richard Falk cautioned against the impulse to find any universal ideal relationship between religion and secular society. “Each political community needs to discover the creative tension between religion and political order; there needs to be a creative

tension that gives space both to religious pluralism and to political pluralism.” In the same vein, Falk found that only in an accepting atmosphere can “the transformative role of religion perform constructively. In the extreme circumstance that a State seeks to exclude religion, as was the case in the Soviet Union, or seeks to impose religion, as is the case in contemporary Iran... one finds the role of religion to be very oppressive toward the potential creativity of civil society.”

Regarding religion as society rather than as an aspect of society, Uberoi raised the question of what religion is versus what society really is. “Some people think that we have religion and we have society, and then you can connect them... and discuss how they are interrelated.” To Uberoi’s way of thinking,

however, “society itself is a religious idea... and in fact, secularism has been invented by religion; it is not that secularism is opposed to it.”

Uberoi brought up the problem that scholars tend to think that they know what religion is and what society is. Juergensmeyer agreed, saying, that he too is not convinced that scholars actually do know. “In fact, I think the sense of certainty that there is such a thing as a secular society--which then by its very definition creates the illusion that there is a whole separate world of religion--is indeed part of the problem.”

“Why then,” asked Shrivatsa Goswami, “has religion been unilaterally thrown out of civil society?” Krishna and Mohatmas Gandhi both saw religion, as “inseparable from civil society.”

“I have been taken to task for twenty years for saying that secularism is a gift of Christianity. The secularists in my country consider that an abusive statement. All the founders of sociology, of the social science tradition, spoke about religion in the past tense. [They would write things like] ‘the role played by religion in pre-modern societies,’ but today, there is a paradigm shift in the sociology of religion. People in the West are talking about the exceptionalism of Western Europe. The paradigm shift today is not to explain the presence of religion in societies around the world, but the absence of religion.”

— **T.N. Madan**

AN INCIDENT

At the Parliament of World Religions there was one whole session that discussed some UN-based groups' plans to propose a "Decade of Religious Dialogue" beginning in 2011. A major area of controversy sprung up during the conference discussions when phrases like "value based," "faith based," "spiritual based," or "spiritually inspired" popped up. Some attendees asked why participants danced around the word religion and used euphemisms instead.

Semantics are important because they make up our world-view. When we say 'faith-based organizations' what we often in fact mean are formally registered organizations and NGOs. The whole idea of secularism or the state-religion separation has actually created a space for faith-based organizations, because they are not legally religious. They are NGOs, or voluntary organizations, or even schools and institutions run by religious groups; but they are registered not as religious groups but as institutions. We have a space that is being created because of this separation of state and religion, because of secularism.

That incident at the Parliament of World Religions was very interesting because it demonstrates how important framing is; when we are discussing these issues there are certain presumptions already involved.

— Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya

The (Lack Of) Study of Religion in India

Juergensmeyer noticed that "there is no program in the comparative study of religion anywhere in India with the exception of Punjabi University in Patiala. Why has there been such an extraordinary resistance to the academic study of religion in this one part of the world that has been the fount of so many religious traditions?" This neglect of religion as a subject at the university can be deliberately attributed to "a particular ideological understanding," Pralay Kunungo offered in answer

to Juergensmeyer's question. According to Kanungo, Indian elites, seeking to foster "religious-secular toleration and understanding," perpetuated this myth of secularism. Despite the mythologizing, Pralay suggested that "secularism is actually very limited."

Manindra Thakur has investigated and written about this question extensively. His theory is that the "Indian university system is a product of the colonial regime and is still suffering from that extremely

positivist colonial epistemological framework." Therefore, religion and even philosophy are not being taught in Indian universities. Thakur concluded that "this is a big problem." Mohanty agreed, suggesting that the time to rectify this "big problem" is now: "Very few religious studies departments exist in the third world. I think colonialism had something to do with this fear complex. But, now we have cultural and civilizational confidence in the third world."

The Nehruvian fear, that if you studied religion then you'd become sectarian and religious, had many generations of fear reinforcing it. It persists even now, but reality has indeed pushed us to understanding all the social sciences and humanities dimensions of religion now more directly. Therefore, the days are not too far off when we will have departments of religious studies [in India].

— Manoranjan Mohanty



Do You Best Study Religion Where It Is Most Visible, or Where It Is Least Apparent?

“We do not understand any religious tradition if we study [it] by itself or if we study religious traditions piecemeal.”

— *T.N. Madan*

Comprehending the state in society may be more in line with the practice of anthropologists than of sociologists. Uberoi commented that sociologists tend to believe that if they want to study something then “you go and study it.” Uberoi’s view, however, is: “If you want to study something you should study it in absentia... so if you want to know what the state does, you should look for a

society which does not have a state. If you want to know what religion does, you should look for a society which does not have religion. If you keep on looking only at the presences, you never get to the basics... and that is the commonality between the sociology of religion and political anthropology.

The point may be less about the disciplinary approach and

more about the fact that, as Kanungo suggested, “people are working on religion.” Whether it is under the auspices of political science or philosophy, people are doing their individual work. “The time is coming when the government or the state [has to acknowledge religion’s role in society] because there is also a kind of resurgence of research interest in this area.”

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CLOSING REMARKS

As co-convener, Manoranjan Mohanty concluded the “intimate and frank discussion on important issues” with his observation that society in general would benefit from the incorporation of religion into “the core of academic disciplines and the core of civil society initiatives.” From the workshop’s proceedings it was clear that religion has an increasingly powerful impact on political discourse and political action in the 21st century. Thus, religious forces would seem to hold the potential to reform society in a manner “that is democratic, harmonious, and fulfilling of the aspirations of individuals, groups, and regions.” “These important conversations will continue, as will the co-evolution of religion, civil society, and the state,” emphasized Mohanty.

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ABOUT THE ORFALEA CENTER PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

This workshop summary is one in a series that is part of a Luce Foundation Sponsored initiative on the role of religion and international relations.

The Orfalea Center project will host regional workshops to:

- bring scholars and practitioners together to identify and discuss issues relating to religion that are important in the field
- develop curriculum and resource materials that will be available as a teaching tool for programs training international NGO leaders
- infuse the study of religion in the curriculum of UCSB's own graduate program in global and international studies.



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