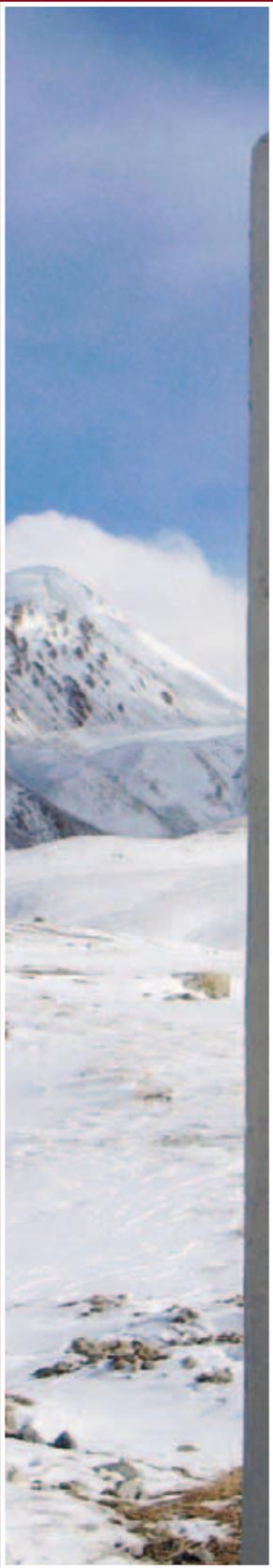




**THE ROLE OF RELIGION
IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY:
A FOCUS ON SOUTH &
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A Roundtable Discussion
Practitioners and Academics
Loma Pelona Center, UCSB
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Sponsored by the
Henry R. Luce Initiative on
Religion and International Affairs



INTRODUCTION: Workshop Goals

In his opening remarks, Orfaea Center Director Mark Juergensmeyer explained that this series of Luce-sponsored workshops is meant to raise “large issues of religion in public life... and what we are describing loosely as global civil society: the world of citizen efforts to try to improve human dignity, social rela-

tions and living standards of people around the world.” Juergensmeyer went on to say that in South and Southeast Asia, as in other parts of the world, efforts at humanitarian services and human rights protection can involve “a clash of cultural assumptions,” and that people and agencies carry with

them “the familiar baggage of religious and ideological positions.” He concluded by saying that the purpose of the workshop was to “explore the issues that emerge in these conditions of cultural confrontation, and show their relevance for academic programs of study in global and international affairs.”

Is Human Rights Activism “Intervention”?

Workshop participants addressed complex questions around Western intervention in South and Southeast Asian affairs, acknowledging that intervention can take social and cultural forms as well as political and military ones. Richard Falk pointed out that Western “alleged humanitarian intervention” tends to

take the form of “coercive undertakings” to liberate societies suffering from persecution, but, he continued: “The real question is to focus on how you translate empathy for those who are being victimized by repression of various forms, including religious, without engaging in interventionary behavior.”

Victoria Riskin responded: “The answer, at least in the big picture, is that we must not do this alone. We also have to insure human rights inside our own tent—and by ‘our own tent’ I mean not only the United States, but all countries who would adhere to these principles—and set a good example.”



Sidebar image, pages 2 & 3:
Due to its high elevation (15,297 feet) and the difficult conditions in which it was constructed, the Karakoram Highway (KKH)



Inequality is an Underlying Problem

Growing “fundamental inequality” in South and Southeast Asia is a matter of serious concern for Elizabeth Collins. She noted that in Pakistan and Cambodia, 30% of people do not own the land on which they work and live. An associated problem is with military or political leaders appropriating land farmed by poor peasants, selling it to international and sovereign investment funds, “which then turn these areas into plantations.”

According to Caroline Meyer White, the 30% of the Pakistani population who are “tenants to landlords... are not free to move, not free to choose whether their children should be put in school or not, not free to save money to buy their own land or house. The landlords are the powerful people. There is a Tenant’s Act which should provide basic rights for tenants, but since there’s no one to enforce it, it’s not necessarily followed.” To

Meyer White, these practices are “very important to understand” if one seeks to get a better grasp of the underlying dynamics in the region. Continuing on this theme, UCSB faculty member Jan Pieterse ascribed the illiteracy rate of 70% in the Punjab to “structural, profound inequality.” He concluded, “When geopolitics is at stake, who really cares about illiterate peasants?”

Horizontal and Vertical Embeddedness: An Effective Strategy

Reflecting upon his observation that many religious institutions are horizontally and vertically embedded within societies, William Headley noted how this gives such institutions a unique abil-

ity to command real world power on a day-to-day basis. Catholic Church authorities, for example, benefit from a relatively effective chain of command while also moving fairly seamlessly among

various strata of society. The Catholic Church, in particular, is globally integrated horizontally and vertically, such that “religious bodies... are the envy of the CIA—and maybe major international NGOs.”



is also referred to as the “Ninth Wonder of the World.” This border sign is located along the Khunjerab Pass, connecting Pakistan and China.

On front cover, left to right: floating market near Ayuttayah, Thailand; two woman from Laos kneeling on the ground, praying in front of a small buddhist temple; Eleos Foundation director, Andy Lower, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This page, above: Catholic church in Thailand. Left: young monks in Cambodia.



Bayon Temple at Angkor, Cambodia. Built around 1190 AD, Bayon is a Buddhist temple but it incorporates elements of Hindu cosmology.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Sharing a lesson she learned while working with an NGO building sanitation systems for a Christian community in Indonesia, Elizabeth Collins recounted that her group had been “oblivious” to the poor Muslim community living in the same region. “We were actually increasing the tensions between these two religious groups and we very quickly had to move to initiate a dialogue in which we began to attend to the needs and demands of the local Muslim community that was poor. We learned that we can’t work with one refugee community without looking at the surrounding situation.”

Also pointing to an example of unintended consequences, Thomas Uthup shared a story with more positive results. He explained how the keeping of cows in India was once a useful strategy for mitigating the human health impacts from crop failure and famine in India. “Now that Hindu values have become so deeply embedded in India’s political culture, cow slaughter is banned. The interesting side effect is that raising cattle for slaughter happens to have negative implications for the environment. Thus, India’s religiously-inspired prohibition on beef slaughter seems to be yielding unintended benefits.”

One case study in Southeast Asian inter-faith cooperation that Katherine Marshall said would be interesting to research further is the relief efforts carried out after the 2004 tsunami in Aceh. The prevailing narrative relates “how fantastic the inter-faith cooperation was, how Islamic Relief and Catholic Relief Services, the Salvation Army, NU, everybody was working together, and how Aceh, clearly, is much better off today than it was after the tsunami and during the period of conflict.” But an alternative narrative contends that “these outside groups came in, siphoned off all of the moderates, and paid them large salaries, and that these events account, in part, for the growing extremism in Aceh. So again it’s unintended consequences. On the one hand it’s a case study of inter-faith cooperation and action and results. But it’s also a rather complex story of how these things actually play out when you look at them on the ground.”

Secularism as a Constitutional Principle vs. Secularism as a National Culture

Workshop participants agreed that secularism is a complicated and even paradoxical concept in South Asia. “Muslims in Pakistan despise secularism, and Muslims in India like it. How can that be true?” asked Mark Woodward. His answer was that there are “different kinds of secularism” on either side of that border. Indian secularism means religious equality before the law and state support of all religions. In Pakistan, secularism is “identified with a kind of Westernized elite.”

When Bangladesh became independent from Pakistan in December 1971, under the quasi-nationalist Awami League party Bangladesh was a secular state. “However,” Lamia Karim pointed out, “the term ‘secularism’ and how it translated at the level of the public was never really addressed. So, what it meant for the citizens of Bangladesh to call themselves secular subjects or subjects of a secular state remained unanswered.”

“If we just stand back and look at the issue of changing political systems [in South Asia], they clearly differ,” observed Philip Oldenburg.

According to Oldenburg, the countries of South Asia are not all changing in the same sorts of ways. “These countries are very large and they have discreet changing political systems within each country.”

In his home country of Indonesia, the topic of secularism “is still quite controversial and debated,” said Muhamad Ali. “What is Indonesia? Is it a secular state or an Islamic state?” Ali described the diversity of opinions and movements on both sides of the debate and how “faith-based movements influence the state, and then the state chooses a political compromise of common ground at a national level... I think it’s quite unique to this idea of secularism.”

Thailand is in a period of “zero sum, winner takes all” politics. “State capture politics have a really serious impact on faith-based organizations,” said Surichai Wun’gao. A recent initiative to make Buddhism the

national religion failed and Wun’gao was thankful for that victory of secular politics. But the movement to blend religion and politics remains strong and “has begun to portray itself as a nationalistic movement.”

Contrasting his experiences in Asia and in the West, Thomas Uthup commented on the “many kinds of secularisms,” he has encountered. Uthup recounted that “France has something called ‘Assumption Day’ as a public holiday. I don’t think that’s a secular holiday! As a kid in India it was great because you get public holidays off for Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and also Buddhists and Jains—who are less than one percent of the population. Then I came to the United States and even the Baptist university, Baylor, didn’t have Good Friday off. So, to the extent that state holidays are representative of varieties of state secularisms, there certainly seems to be a broad range of interpretations for that notion.”

I resist the dramatic separation between religion and secularism. I think the polar separation of the secular and religious is really too simplistic, frankly.

— James Donahue

When I asked a friend what his understanding of the Taliban was, he said to me, ‘Caroline, you and me are Taliban. We both believe that we can create a better world and to have such idealistic beliefs and to study how to achieve that is to be a Taliban.’

— Carolyn Meyer
White

“In a wonderful book on the vernacularization of Indian politics, there is a discussion of the political mobilization of the Yadavs of Mathura city. The Yadavs are cow-herders by tradition and therefore vegetarians. In order to get Muslim votes they met with Muslim leaders, served them a non-vegetarian meal, and ate it themselves. Their need for votes trumped their vegetarianism.”

— Philip Oldenburg

Top Down vs. Bottom Up

There is often a disconnect between those making policy decisions and those responsible for implementing them. Mark Woodward shared his observations on top-down politics with the “bottom-up” impressions held by people working in INGOs on the ground in South Asia. Many policies crafted in New York or Washington seem to reflect “lack of understanding,” of real world cultural dynamics. Woodward likened the difference in perspectives to that between micro versus macro economists: “Both can have

valid analyses, but because their units of analysis differ, there is a tendency for them to talk past each other.”

Ria Shibata described how Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), a Japan-based civil society organization, seems to have established a successful model of rapid international expansion by allowing each local organization to have the autonomy to make its own programmatic decisions. Shibata noted that if, for example, the international body of SGI made a decision to pursue abolition of

nuclear weapons, each local organization would maintain the right to prioritize a different issue entirely.

“Local Indonesians,” Woodward pointed out, “often do not make really clear distinctions between international NGOs, UN-based organizations, and USAID. Instead, they put them all in the same box as outside organizations. Everyone knows that these various foreign entities fund local projects... it’s the funding that really matters.”

Religion and Politics: Uneasy Alliances

Lamia Karim mentioned a few incidents in Pakistan’s history that are emblematic of why Westerners can find it difficult to understand the intersection of religion and politics in South Asia. Religiously justified policy decrees, such as when the secular military dictatorship of Ayub Khan passed the Muslim Family Law or when President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared the Ahmadiyyas “not Muslim” in one of his

first acts upon taking power, “have been very much looked at as politics and democratization, because when you need to curry favor among different political parties, that is when you are forming alliances.”

Such is the complexity of the landscape of power in South Asia that top-down decrees can be interpreted as democratic gestures and that secular rulers make religious concerns a top priority.

Regarding Pakistan’s Family Laws decree, Philip Oldenburg found it interesting that those laws are still influential in Pakistani society despite being “very liberal” given their historical and cultural context. The lesson that Oldenburg takes away from this is that, in Pakistan, “once you implement something Islamic, it’s very hard to remove it—whatever the political practice and the law.”



Bangladeshi woman threading a needle as part of an eye exam during a visit from VisionSpring, an NGO that brings high-quality, low-cost vision care to neglected communities across the developing world.

Precision of Terminology Matters

"I like the word 'faith-inspired' rather than 'faith-based.' I think that's a really good shift in terminology. Most of the groups that do large-scale, effective programming are either directly faith-inspired or they are composed of people coming from very deep-seated, and very powerful

personal faith commitments," stated Mark Woodward

Several participants stressed the importance of using the most precise terminology possible when discussing such sensitive and nuanced issues as faith, politics and identity. For example,

Barbara Metcalf instructs her students "never to use the word, 'religion,' but to say something more precise—if they are talking about the Islamic invasion of Iberia, then they should say that clearly, instead of the very broad term, 'Islam.'"



Night view of Pakistan Monument in Islamabad. The monument represents the nation's four provinces and three territories.

“Effective interfaith dialogues might not necessarily even be faith focused. Simply having Christians and Muslims talk across a table often neglects the more complex issues of the economic differences between communities and their histories, and how you can attend to those.”

— Elizabeth Collins



Security forces guarding a Roman Catholic church in predominantly Muslim Pakistan.

Health Delivery Services: An Entry Point for Religion

Even where overt proselytization is prohibited, FBOs are often able to find subtle entry points for religion. With respect to international civil society, “the most logical entry point for religion is health,” noted Katherine Marshall. This realm includes wide-reaching afflictions such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, and preventative measures such as vac-

inations. Since health issues affect such a large population “it is a big issue in religion, and some of the more interesting case studies—both faith-linked and interfaith—are coming out of health,” Marshall continued.

“Disturbing trends” involving “vociferously intolerant” FBOs linking social service provisions with “anti-pluralist

agendas” were pointed out by Mary Zurbuchen. There is a concern that such groups are “able to take advantage of a growing number of conflicts around perceived apostasy on the part of Christian evangelicals,” Zurbuchen noted. Similarly, she has found that “disaster relief can be used as an entry point for promoting political Islam.”

Inter-faith Dialogue

“Inter-religious dialogue is not a Kumbayah moment where people sit and talk about what they believe and what they don’t believe,” stressed Donahue. Graduating students “need

to understand what inter-religious dialogue is really about... Real inter-religious dialogue is layered. It has to do with religion, with culture, with values.” As someone who “hears that word about

ten times a day,” Donahue said that he finds the imprecision in the use of the phrase among people who should know better to be “extremely frustrating.”

Closing Remarks

In his closing remarks, Orfalea Center Director Mark Juergensmeyer concluded that this workshop challenged some familiar assumptions and encouraged us to ask different kinds of questions about the role of religion in South and Southeast Asian civil society. “Sometimes,” he said, “we get the wrong answers because we have asked the wrong questions.”

At the outset of the workshop, the questions were about “politics’ influence

on religion, and religion’s influence on politics. But then the conversation began to shift to the fluid interaction between political and religious cultures in South and Southeast Asia.” Juergensmeyer pointed out, for example, that notions of “religion” and “politics” were difficult to pinpoint in discussions about the role of state Islam in Pakistan and Malaysia, or in regard to the rise of the BJP in India. Even if one did use such categories, one would often find instances in which “religion

manipulates politics at the same time that politics is manipulating religion to manipulate politics.”

Juergensmeyer concluded that the discussion in this workshop showed that in South and Southeast Asia “these two things—religion and politics—do not exist in impermeable spheres; just as there is a mythological separation between religious and secular life, there is sometimes also an illusory separation between religion and politics.”



Boys study Qur'an. Karachi, Pakistan.



Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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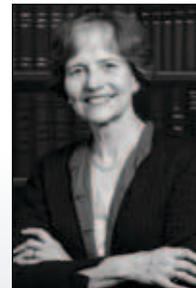
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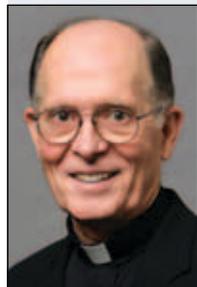
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ABOUT THE ORFALEA CENTER PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

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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The Luce Foundation's Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs, seeks to deepen American understanding of religion as a critical but often neglected factor in international policy issues.



The Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies at UCSB, inaugurated in the 2005-06 academic year, provides an intellectual and programmatic focus for the University's activities in global, international, and area studies. The Center provides financial support and arrangement facilities to sponsor public programs, seminars, publications, and research planning for units across the campus.