

Rohingya Camp in Cox's Bazar. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.



Religion and social flourishing in Asia

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The existence of multiple religions and expressions of faith make Asia a colourful and complex religio-cultural entity. Asia Pacific is the world region with the most religious diversity.¹ Its breadth of religious forms is matched by an expansive geographical landmass. Accompanying the territorial stretch are the histories of communities, travel, exchanges, the struggles for independence from colonialism, and more recently the economic growth and possibilities that shape the contours of this continent. Considering the wide array of issues, and for the purposes of brevity, I will restrict my discussion to a few exemplary events that are entangled with social progress in a way that brings to the forefront the relationship between religion and individual and societal flourishing.²

Religion is ever changing; it lives in everyday life and is so embroiled in state, national and transnational politics that the 'religious' cannot be parsed out from the 'secular' in any meaningful manner. These imbrications do not suggest that the religious and the secular are indistinguishable, but rather that both are products of (state) regulation that produces what we understand to be in the realm of the religious and the secular.³ Thus when an event explodes as religious, there are many kinds of energies that fuel it, inciting different reactions from actors who are inspired by faith, as well as those who are not. Each event, thus, has different roots, different affective attachments and different kinds of solutions brought to it.

In 2017, the 'secular' Bangladesh government lowered the minimum age of marriage for girls from 18 to 16, supposedly to save girls who choose to marry early from the disrepute caused by elopement.⁴ Much of the ensuing uproar alleged that the government was pandering to Islamist forces, thereby allowing a Muslim majoritarianism to rise in an otherwise self-avowed secular country.⁵ Religious majoritarianism is not unique to Asia, however, the way in which it feeds into gender politics is quite unique to certain parts of Asia where domestic decisions are governed by religious law. Colonialism, which coded personal laws, left a legacy of ossified edicts that continue to pass in religion's name. The legitimacy or the lack thereof to the idea of 'child marriage', is thus linked to the validity of colonial/religious laws on the one hand and the effects of the politics of legal formulation and reformulation on the lives of young

Muslim adolescent girls, on the other. Studies show that practices of child marriage, more prevalent in Asia (and parts of Africa) than other places, causes an education-lag for women, thereby stifling their decision-making and political potential, and increasing poverty through frequent child birth, poor reproductive practices and bad health in general. While many kinds of religious norms have a bearing on early marriage, Muslim customs have a special relevance given the fact that family laws enfold all decisions and negotiations related to marriage. The resulting tenacity of norms that promote early marriage, thus, require various levels of intervention, including those that speak to religious/Muslim family law, social practices and customs that operate on a certain authority as 'religious'.⁶ This, however, is no easy task; bringing changes to family laws, especially on women's issues, touch the nerves of too many people, with too many histories.

Another recent case in India, involving legal reform to ban the Muslim triple Talaq (divorce after the triple pronouncement of divorce by the husband) bears testimony to the politics, in this case of a Hindu majoritarianism, that legal reform carries in its wings.⁷ However, just as secular and religious forces globally are active in reducing human suffering and promoting human rights and (gender) justice vis a vis early marriage, there are also groups in Asia who work on bringing about changes in religious, family law. Notable amongst these are Majlis in India,⁸ and Musawah⁹ in Malaysia. However, their encroachment into the 'religious' realm also means that many obstacles are placed in their way, ranging from objections from conservative

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religious groups, state forces and post-colonial critics who feel that attempts to change religion (even if through religious law) reeks of colonial practices and privileges a top-down approach to change, that seldom serves the target population effectively.¹⁰ Such attempts to change 'religious' ideas are thus labelled as 'modernist' and are consequently discredited as privileging modern notions of the individual good over more traditional ideas of individuals in collectivities. Groups such as Musawah disavow the allegations to argue that their claims are very much grounded in the everyday realities of women for whom religious customs and laws exert tenacious pressures that are difficult to overcome without a concerted effort. Groups such as Musawah argue that their work constitutes that very effort.¹¹

In situations of more pronounced conflict religion intersects with identity politics even more intensely, giving rise to debates around citizenship, and causing displacement and even genocide. Violence entwined with religion is neither exclusively an Asian phenomenon, nor unique to any religion in particular. In fact, the symbolic or physical deployment of violence has been present in all religions and across many historical periods. A recent case in point is the plight of the Rohingya, where conflicts over resources and power are deeply intertwined with conflicts over values and identity, leading to the forced displacement of very large numbers of Muslim Rohingya.¹² This crisis of citizenship is rooted in partition realities after the British left the Indian subcontinent, in the military who has systematically privileged a Burman nationalism, in the failed post-colonial attempt at democracy, and in the country's economic interests as it opens its doors to the external world. In addition to the existing humanitarian crisis, it is feared that one of the fall outs of Myanmar's tyranny against the Rohingya could be the intensification of groups such as Arsa, with their increased links to other transnational groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS.¹³

Religion's use of violence to resist state encroachment spans across Asia, from the Middle East to China. Much of this violence, which causes ethno-religious marginalization, can also be attributed to deep-rooted cultural clefs. In 2015 in Aceh Indonesia, Muslim opponents threatened to burn down churches, which they alleged were operating without permits, resulting in the shutting down of many churches. While incidents such as these are fuelled by Islamist politics, there are also deeper cultural clefs once fostered by colonial processes that still plague the imaginary of religious communities. In Indonesia, Dutch officials wielded their secular authority to demarcate areas according to religion. Therefore, the presence of churches outside their 'appropriate location' incites a sense of righteous indignation.

In many of these places, 'religious' violence is entangled with questions of religious diversity and rights to religious freedom. Studies suggest that in addition to colonial legacies and enduring cultural clefs, the modalities of dispensing religious freedom are also important for an assessment of how 'religious' violence is incited under modern-day conditions, much of which is framed by the self-professed values of a secular modernity. Whether in India or Egypt, modalities and legalities around religious diversity and freedoms are political questions, not only because of the law's failure in becoming partisan to religious politics, but through the manner in which the law has thrived through the legal discourse of secularism. Scholars have argued that the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India, because it stood on the Hindu God Ram's birthplace, served the Hindu right through secular tenets of tolerance and right to religious freedom.¹⁴ Others also argue that religious majoritarianism is not carried forward by the religious right exclusively, but in how they are placed either within secular law or in political systems governed by autocratic regimes.¹⁵ In explaining the conflicts between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt, Saba Mahmood writes, "secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions ... hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious differences".

Digging through many layers of political and cultural history to ascertain the role that religion, politics, and violence play for social progress in Asia, may be discouraging,

however, there are on-the-ground initiatives where faith-inspired actors engage actively for social change and progress. Much of this work involves attempting to advance development goals as well as through inter-faith dialogue and religious peacebuilding. Some notable organizations in Asia engaged in religious peacebuilding are Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute Foundation,¹⁶ CARITAS, World Vision and the Mennonite Christian Commission. In the Middle East, where religious values have exacerbated political and territorial conflicts, there are attempts to mobilize religious values to broker peace by groups such as the Iraq Inter-Religious Congress, Jerusalem Peacemakers, the Mosque Protection Committee in Palestine and Oz'V Shalom/Netovot Shalom in Israel. Many of these groups argue for 'religiorelative' values over 'religiocentric' ones.¹⁷ A change will require broad-based religious literacy as well as less of a divide between the religious and secular worlds.

In Asia, amidst the tide that brings in rapid economic changes on the one hand, and ethno-religious conflicts and marginalization on the other, perhaps a redefinition of secular modernity as it morphs under current global conditions of millennial capitalism, a re-evaluation of secular dispensations through legal frameworks and constitutionalism, and a bringing together of religious as well as secular communities, may prove productive in revitalizing religion and placing it in a dynamic conversation with the various contours, approaches and complexities that underlie the meanings of social progress in the 21st century.

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Notes

- <https://tinyurl.com/diplodivers>
- For a longer discussion of how religion may be defined in relation to social progress, see Davie, et al., 2018: 'Religion and social progress: Critical assessments and creative partnerships', *Rethinking Society for the 21st century* vol. 3. Cambridge University Press.
- See Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- <https://tinyurl.com/hrwage>
- <https://tinyurl.com/bdnage>
- For a discussion of religion's relationship with early marriage, see Karam, A. 2015. 'Faith-Inspired Initiatives to Tackle the Social Determinants of Child Marriage', *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*; <https://tinyurl.com/tandfage>
- See Khalid, S. 22 August 2017. 'What is Triple Talaq or Instant Divorce?', *Aljazeera*, <https://tinyurl.com/aljd divorce>
- <http://www.majlislaw.com>
- <http://www.musawah.org>
- For a critique of groups such as Musawah, see Abu-Lughod, L. 2015. *Do Muslim women need saving?* Harvard University Press.
- For a discussion of the Global Lifestories Project that grounds Musawah's work not in some abstract modernist approach, but in the everyday lived realities of Muslim Women across the Muslim world, see <http://www.musawah.org/global-lifestories-website>
- For a review of the current Rohingya crisis, see Abdelkader, E. 2017. 'The History of the Persecution of Myanmar's Rohingya', *The Conversation*, 21 September 2017; <https://tinyurl.com/conrohin>
- See Edroos, F. 13 September 2017. 'Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army', *Aljazeera*, <https://tinyurl.com/aljrohin>
- For a discussion of how the law ended up serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Kapur, R. 2014. "'The Ayodhya Case' Hindu Majoritarianism and the Right to Religious Freedom", *Maryland Journal of International Law* 29(1), article 14; <https://tinyurl.com/mjil14>
- Fox, J. 2000. 'Is Islam more conflict prone than other religions? Cross-sectional study of ethnoreligious conflict', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6(2):1-24. <https://www.mpiasia.net>
- For the place of religion in the Israel-Palestine conflict, see The British Academy. 2015. *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding*; <https://tinyurl.com/bapeace>