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Nghiem, Thao

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ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary

Young Religious Leaders in Modern Asia: Beyond Secularism, Online and Offline

By Thao Nghiem

SYNOPSIS

The younger generation in Asian societies no longer simply accept that being modern and distant from religion means a better form of governance and the way forward. It is necessary to rethink the role of religion in public life and to harness technology for more conversations and experience-sharing among different communities and faiths to celebrate diversity and forge social cohesion for the common good.

COMMENTARY

[Classic secularisation theory](#) predicted the inevitable decline and irrelevance of religion. Informed by European Enlightenment thought, religion was deemed a toxic factor for human decision-making, while “secularism” was viewed as a civilised alternative celebrated as one of the main models of governance in modern democracies.

This “secularist bias” has been challenged in recent years. German scholar Jürgen Habermas [said](#) that the exclusion of religion from the public domain has placed an “asymmetrical cognitive burden” on religious citizens, for they are required to justify their political participation distant from their religious persuasion. Others emphasize important shortcomings of secularist assumptions, such as its tendency to link religion to violence, intolerance, and sectarianism in global politics.

The exaltation of secularism also entails a Eurocentric prejudice. [Anthropologist Talal Asad](#) traced the genealogy of the rigid religious-secular divide, with its socio-political implications, showing it was a product of Western European Christendom, later

exported globally with colonialism. The particularities of socio-religious scenarios in Asia call for a more informed translation of the secularist project in local contexts and question the universality of these categorisations.

Restoring the Role of Religion

Young people in Asia no longer live in a world where secularist norms are indicative of modernity. Religious revival and the continuous presence of religion in Asian societies push us to rethink the role of religion in public life. Religious populations are growing amidst industrialisation and urbanisation across Asia. Religion has exceeded its secular allocation as solely a private matter of personal belief, and religious groups are negotiating their legitimate contribution to the public domain.

The central question, therefore, no longer revolves around the debate pertaining to the relevance of religion in politics, but how modern states can maintain a dialogic relationship with religious actors and create spaces accommodative for religious and non-religious citizens alike.

Speakers at the International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) 2022 reiterated the significance of engaging with religious communities in social, political, and/or economic initiatives. For instance, [Professor Katherine Marshall](#) shared from her rich experience at the World Bank that, for several years, world leaders tended to avoid the question of religion in development for fear of tapping into societal complications or potential sources of conflict. In fact, religious groups could offer certain values to their communities' ethics and behaviors, and in many cases stimulate actual changes and on-the-ground transitions.

Religion Online

Experiences shared by ICCS 2022 participants show that the traditional religious-secular divide is being actively renegotiated. [Father Fiel Pareja](#), a Catholic priest in the Philippines with more than two million followers on TikTok, extends his pastoral services online by receiving prayer requests and attending to his flock via his social media platform.

[Reverend Chris Lee](#), an Anglican priest in West London, delivers sixty-second sermons on Instagram. Such sacred ministries are no longer confined to physical church buildings and pulpits, and social media is not, purely, a profane space. This binary distinction became particularly outdated during the COVID-19 crisis, when religious communities moved their worship online.

Religious leaders at the ICCS 2022 session on "Faith Overcoming COVID-19 Pandemic," explained how their respective communities made creative changes in their worship and ritual practices during periods of strict social distancing to contain the COVID-19 virus. Apart from theological expertise, technical skills to host online Zoom meetings and other virtual platforms were suddenly a necessity for religious ministries.

Although there are still occasional [disagreements](#) around the actual theological connotations of virtual sacraments, these new developments have broadened our

conventional understanding of the sacred-profane binary, and complicated an easy differentiation between the secular and the religious.

Technology as a New Lingua Franca

Technology, as shared by many during ICCS 2022, has emerged as a lingua franca bridging cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic barriers. Social media can be used across religious traditions and cultural boundaries to enhance a sense of community and belonging, work to prevent religious radicalism, and/or foster interfaith cooperations in crises. Digital platforms provide unprecedented possibilities to religious groups in connecting and caring for their congregations, and can serve as a joint channel for people from different backgrounds in addressing pressing global issues, such as the environmental crisis, social injustice, or violent extremism.

“Being Guests,” an award-winning initiative by interfaith entrepreneur Don Basil Kannangara, was introduced during ICCS 2022. Participants were invited to visit a variety of local worship sites in Singapore through a Virtual Reality (VR) device. Technology created a bridge for interfaith hospitality and offered a channel by which the mutual understanding of others’ places of worship and ritual practices could be strengthened.

The aesthetic replication of a wide array of churches, mosques, temples, pagodas, and shrines created a deep appreciation for the diversity of the local religious landscape. This facilitated a space for genuine dialogue and curiosity about our neighbour’s faith. Technology transcended physical and linguistic constraints and was harnessed excellently to reinforce mutual respect, social harmony, and cohesion.

The Power of Youths Centralised

A large population of today’s youths embrace intersectionality as the basis of their identities. That is to say, the way that different parts of their identities overlap. Many have lived outside of their country of origin. Utilising a sociogram activity during an ICCS 2022 Young Leaders Programme (YLP) workshop, [Rabbi Shoshana Boyd Gelfand](#) illustrated the reality that, increasingly, younger generations share the life experience of global mobility.

Mass migration and mobility has witnessed an unparalleled growth in scope and scale. Modern identities are formed by extensive and complicated webs of social, educational, cultural, economic, and religious fabrics. The shared cross-cultural experiences can offer rich commonalities and good starting points for young leaders to celebrate diversity and forge cohesion.

United by their intersectionality and empowered by modern technology, leaders of future generations should also recognise the enormous [threats](#) these platforms pose – youth radicalisation and the rapid spread of violent rhetoric. In fact, YLP participants recognised that tensions are not only found between religious and non-religious or other religious groups, but also increasingly amongst members of the same faith. Attacks can come from within one’s own tradition.

Forums like ICCS 2022 provide a great opportunity for dialogue, to detect and prevent

violence, eradicate myths and misperceptions, and to develop strong networks of emerging community leaders with knowledge, sympathy, and deep commitment to the shared goal of social harmony, and peaceful coexistence.

Next Steps

States in Southeast Asia and beyond should recognise the historical particularity of political secularism, and adapt it appropriately to the specific religio-cultural context of each country. Twenty-first century faith leaders, particularly the young, are finding creative ways to engage.

With rituals, meetings, and pastoral care administered online, the question should be less about the authenticity and legitimacy of these acts, but rather how religious communities can organically transform concomitantly with modernity, to serve the common good while being faithfully committed to their core convictions. A blending of online and physical exchanges is a path trod by many at the ICCS 2022 YLP.

Thao Nghiem is a PhD Researcher in History and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. Thao is passionate about interfaith dialogue and religious literacy amongst youths.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg