

3rd Asia Future Conference Roundtable Discussion
“Religious Responses to Changing Environments in Southeast Asia”

In the post-colonial period and then again in more recent years under the influence of globalization, Southeast Asia has struggled with a wide variety of issues, including nation-building, environmental degradation, religious and ethnic conflict, as well as growing social inequality. Many observers have identified religion as a negative factor further exacerbating these issues. The aim of this panel was to redress this perception by drawing attention to the ways in which religion can and does provide important contributions to solving these problems.

The panel consisted of four short papers given by scholars from different countries in Southeast Asia, followed by a round of discussion among the presenters and the panelists before the floor was opened to questions from the audience. The invited presenters were Achmad Munjid from Gadjah Mada University (Indonesia), Jayeel S. Cornelio from Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines), the independent scholar Vichak Panich (Thailand), and the Yangon-based French researcher Carine Jaquet who works on Myanmar.

In the first paper, Achmad Munjid provided an overview of state-religion relations in postcolonial Indonesia, focusing in particular on the period of the New Order (1966-1998) and the time since democratization in 1998. He pointed out that while the New Order era was characterized by a de-politicization of Islam, post-1998 periods saw a re-politicization of Islam. The period after the fall of Suharto also saw an increase in inter-religious strife, which has continued – although at a reduced rate – until today. On the extreme fringes, the same period also saw the emergence of jihadist organizations. Against these highly problematic trends, there have also been efforts to de-confessionalize politics, as symbolized by the politics of the former president and Islamic scholar Abdurrahman Wahid. Munjid closed by discussing a number of organizations that are currently engaged in fostering inter-religious dialogue and alliances of progressive religious thinkers in

Indonesia.

The next paper by Jayeel Cornelio shifted the focus away from inter-religious conflict to environmental issues, addressing the contributions made by the Catholic Church in the Philippines to the alleviation and prevention of the effects of climate change. Cornelio drew attention to the position of the Catholic Church to foster a sense of stewardship for the planet among the people and thus ingrain in them a sense of responsibility for the environment. The Catholic strategy on the Philippines is centered on grass-roots activities and educating and training community members, hoping to change society from the bottom up.

In his paper, Vichak Panich cast a critical look at the collusion between state and religion in contemporary Thailand, where prominent Buddhist monks frequently condone cruel acts against persons perceived to be enemies of the state, such as communists or criminals. For Panich, this dangerous alliance between the state and institutionalized Buddhism (i.e., the monastic establishment) has come at the cost of the vanishing tradition of forest renunciants, which had been closer to the actual spiritual needs of the people. Thus, this pact between Buddhism and the modern state marks a deviation from a focus on compassion and humanity that ought to be the concern of Buddhism.

The last presenter, Carine Jaquet, analyzed the politics of aid and religion in Myanmar. She focused on two instances of aid giving – one following cyclone Nargis and one in the context of the civil war between the central government and the Kachin. In the case of cyclone Nargis, Jaquet showed how Burmese Buddhism was quick to respond, opening monasteries as emergency shelters and using the Buddhist concept of *dana* (donations) to create financial support for those affected by the disaster. The second case discussed was that of religious aid organizations – mainly Christian in this instance – active in Kachin State. While religious aid organizations are particularly trusted and welcomed by locals and thus able to operate in the conflict areas, Jaquet pointed out that this dynamic of conflating aid with religious identity has further strengthened religio-ethnic divides and contributes thus to the prolongation of the conflict.

The four presenters were then joined by six further panelists from the region and Japan for a first round of discussion. Subsequently, questions were taken from the floor and the audience showed a strong interest in the panel topic, creating a lively discussion that was only brought to an end after time ran out.

It might seem a little ironic that much of a panel dedicated to a discussion of the positive contributions religion can make to the various issues faced by the world today spent much time talking about the negative aspects of religion, but this probably does reflect realities around the globe. While religion can be part of the solution, it is also a fact that it often forms part of the problem as well. The concluding comments picked up on this issue, providing some thoughts on the relationship between religion and the nation-state that all papers touched upon. When a religion allows itself to be drawn too closely to the nation-state and its accompanying identity politics, it can further escalate tensions. At the same time, cases such as climate change show that the assistance of nation-states is urgently required to solve problems that go beyond the capabilities of local communities. There is thus the need for religions to reconfigure their relationship to the nation-state in order to avoid being drawn into numerous local conflicts and be able to have a positive impact on ongoing problems within a country, region, or even on a global scale.