Religion and Nationalism in Asia: Perspectives on Japan and the Muslim World

Convenors: Prasenjit Duara, Duke University
Levi McLaughlin, North Carolina State University

Today, appeals to nativism and political mobilization rooted in religious ideals are motivating systemic change and fomenting social upheaval across the world. Scholars have taken heed of these patterns and have shed light on how both "religion" and "politics" have coalesced as influential categories. They investigate histories behind religion/politics intersections formulate political action and suggest ways the genealogies of these entangled concepts determine social belonging in the twenty-first century. Dilemmas over the definitions and applicability of "religion" and "politics" are particularly fraught in the context of Asia. Framed by contentious border, Asia is a place in which colonial-era religio-political imports redefined centuries-old traditions in ways that inform praxis, legal systems, conceptual frameworks, understandings of the transcendent and engagement with the practicalities of peace, violence, and other dimensions of global issues in the present.

In this one-day symposium, participants in two panels will draw on their ethnographic investigations and historical research to stimulate conversation on the Asian religion / politics nexus. They shall present case studies from Japan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and other Asian nations to discuss contentious and frequently under-examined dynamics that shape the region today. The morning panel, "Buddhist Networks and Shinto Nationalists: Religion in Japanese Trans-Asian Relations and Contemporary Electoral Politics," discusses the modern history of trans-regional networks forged by influential Buddhist practitioners as a means of contextualizing religious forces that underlie the political coalition that dominates Japan's national government. The afternoon panel, "The Politics of Modern Islam: Legal and Ideological Frameworks" broadens the symposium's geographic scope as it presents discussions of Islam's role in law systems in colonial India, the place of Islam in post-colonial Asian nation-states, and challenges to religious and secular understandings of modern and contemporary Turkey.

Discussion inspired by the detailed case studies offered by this symposium's presenters will further inquiry into the religious underlay of nationalisms that are taking shape in Asia today.

Morning (10:30 to 12:30): Buddhist Networks and Shinto Nationalists: Religion in Japan's Trans-Asian Relations and Contemporary Electoral Politics

Richard Jaffe (Duke University)
"Buddhist Pilgrimage, Nationalism, and Japanese South Asian Strategy"

Mark Mullins (University of Auckland, New Zealand)
"Contemporary Japanese Nationalism as a Shinto Response to Imperialist Secularization"

Levi McLaughlin (NC State)
"Strange Bedfellows: What Tensions within Japan's Ruling Coalition Reveal about Contemporary Japanese Religion"

Discussant: Prasenjit Duara (Duke University)
Afternoon (1:30 to 3:30): The Politics of Modern Islam: Legal and Ideological Frameworks

Cemil Aydin (UNC-Chapel Hill)
“Inventing ‘The Muslim World’: Geopolitics, Religion and Race”

David Gilmartin (NC State)
“Religion, Nationalism, and the Legacies of Empire in India and Pakistan”

Armando Salvatore (McGill University)
"The Impossible Leviathan: Islam, Islamism, and the Postcolonial Nation-State"

Discussant: Anna Bigelow (NC State)