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## **Religion and Social Communication in Asia: Towards a Research Agenda**

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

Religion and social communication have been the objects of study in the Western world for quite some time especially in their relation to Christianity. Kaspar von Steiler wrote already in the oldest German language book on journalism, *Zeitungs-Lust und Nutz*, published in 1697 about God as the first newscaster, “the all highest God is the first newscaster and followed by his messengers like the prophets in the Old Testament. The apostles in the New Testament are showing that He loved messages and wanted them to be spread throughout the whole world” (Eilers 2009,50).

### *Developments in the United States and Europe*

With the invention of new technical means of communication beyond the press at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, soon also studies on the relation between these means and religion/church were published like in the case of film which began in 1895. In fact, the initiators of film, the Lumiere brothers themselves, even tried making a film on the passion of Christ. Soon, studies on the ‘use’ of film for faith, on the impact and consequences of the new means for Christianity were done and published (Lindvall 2007; Jonston and Barsotti 2004; May-Bird 1982; Skinner 1993; Walsh 1993; Malone 2006, 2007, 2008). Many of them are more descriptive though some are also critical and of a more serious academic nature (Silk 1995, Mithcell 2007, Rolfes 2007). This trend of media critique continued with radio and television including studies on presentation methods and possibilities.

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Paul Soukup has tried to develop an overview of literature for communication and Christianity (1982, 1989). His 1989 presentation is organized into sections: issues and approaches, resources, communication theory including theology, Church documents and ethics, media education, history, rhetoric including proclamation and homiletics, orality and writing, interpersonal communication including group and organizational communication, liturgy, mass communication, intercultural communication and other media including also computers. The advisory editor of this volume, G.F. Gorman, rightly asserts in the foreword that “in its comprehensiveness, depth and detail this analysis of literature on Christian communication far exceeds anything attempted to date by any organization or scholar.”

Some studies present individual communication personalities, including autobiographies like Bishop Fulton Sheen (1980) or the communication dimensions of their lives like in the case of Pope John Paul II (Melady 1999; Blaney 2009). Official documents of the Church on social communication comprise another field for study and critical reflection (Eilers 1997, 2002, 2014).

Some Church communicators published their own experiences, ideas and reflection in their fields of interest like William Fore on Christian television (1977, 1990). There is further a whole list of “how-to-do” books for different (mass) media programming as well as public relations and communication handbooks for Christian communicators and organization like parishes and religious communities (Aycock and Stuart 2010, Vasallo 1998). A growing number of studies discuss the emerging role of religion in and for cyberspace (Dawson and Cowan 2004, Babin and Zukowski 2002, Campbell 2010, 2012, Campbell and Garner 2016, Hope Cheong, Fisher-Nielsen et al 2012). The relation between religion/faith and communication/media was approached in different studies as a developing field (Buddenbaum and Mitchell 1998, Mitchell and Marriage 2003, Baderacco 2005, Hoover 2006, Geybels 2007, Stout 2012).

Robert Fortner has developed a *Christian Theory of Communication* in a very thorough study placing Christian Theology into the overall developments of communication studies (2007). Most of the books and studies originate from the United States and refer to Christianity but there are also a growing number of studies for Jewish traditions (Cohen 2006) as well as Islam starting with Mowlana (2003).

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media* edited by Daniel A. Stout in 2006 and republished as a paperback in 2010 contains 124 entries from some 100 different contributors giving an overview of the field including communication relations of the main religions though some general considerations like one on *religion and communication* seem to be missing. Existing ones like the one on ‘religious marketplace’ refers only to sociology of religion and “what people can do to make their own religious and spiritual meanings” (2006, 2010:378) but does not relate to a deeper theological understanding or refer to other fields like philosophy, anthropology or the science of religion. This encyclopedia is later complemented by the editor with his own *Media and Religion. Foundations of an Emerging Field* (2012).

### *Professional Organization and Study Centers*

There are at least two academic organizations for communication with special sections on communication and religion. They are the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). While the AEJMC has a Religion and Media Interest Group with some 200 members, IAMCR has two religion-related work groups—one on Islam and Media and another one on Media, Religion and Culture which was later renamed Media, Culture and Religion and is now proposed to delete ‘Culture’ from their title which seems to exclude culture based religious organization and confine itself to ‘official’ established religions thus limiting their field of concern.

The Islam and Media workgroup of IAMCR, which was founded after the 9-11 experience, described their concerns in the following words: The Islam and Media workgroup looks at the communication phenomenon such as human interaction with a view toward contributing toward mutual understanding and peace and justice, it seeks to engage in research and organizational development efforts geared towards strengthening the global societal structures based on personal responsibility and mutual cooperation in social, political and economic relations. The goal of this working group is to contribute to the advancement of research and evaluation in the media and communication related fields from an Islamic point of view (the TAWHIDI perspective).

The Media, Culture and Religion group does not relate to any specific religion and described itself in the following way:

This working group has a special interest in religious aspects of communication. It tries to foster international cooperation in the field, discussion and exchange of ideas and common research projects.

This working group considers important topics around the interaction between religion and the media including the way religious groups are brought into political alliances, special groups and their uses of the media, the complexities of religious agencies, with regard to public opinion and in community building. To proclamation and the expression of faith, apologetic and propagandistic media use at reception.

Analyzing these two descriptions show that both groups seem to be mainly American-European oriented. They also seem to be mainly concerned about *media* but not the broader field of *social communication*, which goes far beyond technology. A deeper understanding of social communication also considers the so-called traditional and interpersonal communication as well as group communication processes in religion.

The AEJMC Religion and Media group described their activities in the following way: “We encourage the analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, of this interaction in three areas: 1. religion portrayed in secular media; 2. The manner in which religious institutions and organizations use the media to propagate their message, and 3. The impact of religion and/or religiosity of media consumers and its impact on their media use.”

Since 2006, there exists at the University of Colorado a Center for Media, Religion and Culture. It is related to privately-financed international conferences on media, religion and culture which started in 1994 in Uppsala, Sweden. The center describes itself as an inter-disciplinary research team and acts through:

- Public conferences on media, religion and culture;
- Fellowship for doctoral students; and



- International study commission on media, religion and culture.

The website of the center features a whole list of publications, origination from this initiative but also links to websites and people in the field. Directed by Stewart M. Hoover (1988, 1990, 2006) the center is part of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication of the same university. The last of their conferences was held in Toronto from 9-13 August 2010 where it was proposed to create a new and independent International Association for Media, Religion and Culture.

In 1977, the Jesuits started in London a Center for the Study of Communication and Culture which was moved in 1993 to Saint Louis University in the United States. After the university decided to end its relation with the center, the latter was transformed into a somehow ‘virtual’ entity but still keeps their publication *Communication Research Trends* as a quarterly review of communication research under the auspices of the California Province of the Society of Jesus. It is jointly edited by Emile McAnany, William Biernatzki, sj and Paul Soukup, sj. The journal publishes abstracts of contemporary studies and reviews mainly from American and sometimes European authors and attempts to consolidate research outputs under certain themes but also offers reviews of important books in the field.

### *Asia*

Against such a wealth and variety of studies and publications on religion and social communication in the west—and this is only a small part of the whole picture—the situation in Asia is quite different: there seem to be not many specialized studies on Christian communication or on the communication of Asian religions.

The conference “Religious Change and the Media” in Monterey, California in 1989 was the triggering factor for an early publication in the field for Asia with the title: *Media and the Transformation of Religion and South Asia* (Babb, Wadley 1995/1997) dividing the contributions of 10 authors into “printed images, audio recordings, visual media.” Like the conference itself the book is also a product of the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council in the United States.

Pradip Ninan Thomas published a study on the role of Christian fundamentalism in India under the title *Strong Religion, Zealous Media, Christian Fundamentalism and Communication in India* (2008, 58) sees here a mainly “health and wealth gospel” like with movements where “religion appears as a source of images, concepts, traditions and practices that can allow individuals and communities to deal with a world that is changing around them. The study is an exploration of new Christianity in Chennai, India and in particular the communication strategies adopted by Christian fundamentalist groups” (p. xi).

Some Buddhist and Confucian concepts have been occasionally related to Asian studies and communication theory (Dissanayake 1998, Wang 1985, 2011). The relation between religion and communication, however, never seems to have become a major part of individual studies. In fact, the Asian Media Information and Communication Center (AMIC), a professional organization founded in Singapore in 1970 and now in Manila, never touched religion in any of their annual or other conferences. For the first time in 2010, a panel was offered on “Religious Broadcasting Bombardment 24/7: Search for Analytical Paradigm.” Later, additional considerations in the field were offered and in 2018 even an award was given for the first time in the field of religion.

Beside these few examples of academic approaches, there are, however, now quite a number of ‘how-to-do’ publications of religious organizations and publishing houses for Christianity especially in the Philippines, and also in India and Indonesia (St. Paul’s, Asian Trading, Kanisius etc.). They are mainly concerned about Church practice and ministry. For a few years (1995-2010) the Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) organized several conferences in the field which are reflected in respective publications, to make insights and experiences available to a broader public (Logos, Manila).

Communication in ministry and mission as well as planning (Sunderaj 1998) in Church perspective and for Asian conditions have been at the center of a special master’s program in pastoral communication at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Since 2003, qualified students also receive a Licentiate in Sacred Theology in addition to the Master of Arts degree. As of 2018, the program had fifty-five (55) graduates from eight (8) different Asian

countries. For this program a series of textbooks have been developed which go far beyond a single university. They are beside a general introduction to social communication from Church perspective (*Communicating in Community*) a collection with full text of all Church documents on social communication—including all World Communication Day messages since 1967—under the title *Church and Social Communication, Basic Documents 1936-2014*. This is accompanied by another volume *Communicating Church: Social Communication Documents* as a social background. The main book for the whole program is *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* which is now on its fourth edition (2018) and to be extended with another text on Communication Theology (Anh Vu Ta, Eilers) (All publications with Logos Publications, Manila).

Despite some progress, it seems that up until now religion and social communication is not a major concern for communication studies in the region and special studies and research on the digitization of the field are still to be developed under the perspective of religion. Here, studies from the United States and Europe might be an incentive, though there is still a growing number of young students developing in the continent to take up their own challenges including students of theology.

Asian cultures have strong communicative elements and dimensions in their use of symbols, in their ritual celebrations, community structures and values based very often on non-verbal communication. James Carey's studies on communication and culture have special value here. Many anthropological studies and ethnographic contributions say something about the communications of people in their societies.

Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions. In all Asian cultures, religion plays an important role. How is this expressed and 'communicated' in word and deed, in rituals, but also in the daily life of peoples and their celebrations? Religious beliefs and practices 'dictate' in many ways behavior and customs. This has been the case over hundreds of years and is still alive in many ways today. Do modern ways and means of communication especially also the digital developments change, endanger or even promote such practices? If yes, how? It will be further important to see the communication dimensions of religion in general but also the specifics of holy books like the Bible, Qur'an, Upanishads, etc. which are in themselves already

communication instruments for proclamation and religious practices. What does all this mean for people of today being “permanently online, permanently connected” (Vorderer 2018) and part of a digital world? Can religious beliefs and practices also be transmitted or even ‘performed’ in and with digital means? How are religions presented and treated in the still existing general, big, also in the individual religion-owned and operated media like Christian, Buddhist, Moslem channels? And beyond single ‘means’: what could and should be the role of communication in interreligious dialogue for countries like Indonesia with a big Moslem population, Christian-majority Philippines or in a Buddhist country like Thailand? All this should be one way or another a special concern for serious social communication research which seems to not yet exist

*Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication*

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) at Saint John’s University in Bangkok stands for such concerns though it still lacks the financial and personnel strength for bigger initiatives. It was originally founded in 1999 by an initiative of the Office of Social Communication of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences. In 2002, ARC started publishing a bi-annual academic journal, *Religion and Social Communication*, followed by a book series in 2015 with the same name published by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House in Manila. Annual roundtables, with a limited number of participants presenting academic papers, are partly reflected in the journal. A network of interested researchers is to be developed to slowly create a group of interested and capable specialists in the field of religion and social communication. From these initiatives, a certain basis will be created, which needs however, more personnel and financial support for this is the only initiative of this kind in Asia.

The recent developments in digital social communication bring opportunities and create a worldwide web without any limits in time and space. What does this mean for the communication and practices of religion? Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner speak of Christianity as a *Networked Theology, Negotiating Faith in a Digital Culture* (2016) where they present a “theology of technology” from where they also ask “who is my neighbor in digital culture” (p. 79 ff.) and propose a faith-based community response to new media (p. 97 ff.). There is a growing literature in the field not only for Christianity but also for Islam which shows not only a concern but also a need for integration

and respective research which also has to be inter-disciplinary. Besides social communication, insights from ethnology, sociology, theology and religion should be considered and developed especially in Asia as a continent of great opportunities and also a variety of religious experiences.

### *Research Agenda*

As part of an immediate agenda for religion and social communication studies in Asia, one might consider the following fields:

1. Study of interrelations between religion and communication in different academic fields within Asian contexts which could refer to some of the following fields:
  - a. Communication and religion in Asian cultures: relations, role and functions;
  - b. Religious practices and the role of communication in the process;
  - c. Ways, means, results and effects of communicative practices in religious teaching and life: group communication, traditional media, new media and internet;
  - d. Local theologies and their communicative dimensions and experiences;
  - e. Culture and communication (Carey) in religious realities of Asia;
  - f. Intercultural communication in religion;
  - g. Interreligious dialogue in Asia: the communication dimension, experiences, possibilities and needs;
2. Study of the use of means of communication—traditional and modern—by religious groups in Asia
  - a. Content of programs;
  - b. Presentation and design;
  - c. Style;
  - d. Frequency;
  - e. Impact;
3. Study of recipients/audience of and for religious communication in Asia:
  - a. Composition and style;

- b. Age;
  - c. Expectations;
  - d. Interactivity
  - e. Priorities in use = forming habits;
  - f. Effects;
  - g. Ethics and human dignity;
4. Academic programs and scholarships in universities and centers of study in the field of religion and communication:
    - a. Research needs and methods;
    - b. Teaching programs;
    - c. Interdisciplinary and inter-university cooperation

These are only some of the categories and directions to be considered according to the needs and possibilities as well as the availability of respective researchers. A roundtable conference of the ARC in 2010 listed some areas for research like studies of cultural influences on religious practices/communication, content or effects analysis of means of religious communication, content or effects of analysis of means of religious communication, online and offline communication of and for religious groups, ways of communication between Church/religious leaders and members.

Asking who are the ones to take up these special concerns and studies in Asia, one might first think of Christian, Moslem or Buddhist institutions like universities, specialized schools of higher studies in theology and also other academic institutions with a certain interest in the field. There could be also specialized conferences, academic study groups and specialized publications with respective programs. A listing of such institutions and their special interests in religion seem not to exist but would be of great help to anybody interested and committed to this field.

Christian Church documents (Cf. Eilers 2014) like the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* which was demanded by the Second Vatican Council already called in 1971 for a “rigorous program of scientific research” (No. 184) which seems to have never been developed since. The different faith-based universities in Asia could and should take up this concern and even cooperate in respective studies for the good of people and communities.

Also, *individual researchers* should be encouraged to go into this field,

which might be also sometimes part of a special program of groups of fellow researchers on the national or international level.

Professional and academic *periodicals* and *publications* are another “market” to develop and deepen the concern.

For all this, the concern of ARC could be a home providing also a specialized library with books mail from the 1970s-1980s which used to be part of the Jesuit Communication Center in London. Another some 4000 volume specialized library for the field, belonging to the Divine Word Missionaries, is also at the Saint Joseph Freinademetz Communication Center at the Radio Veritas Asia Compound in Quezon City, Philippines.

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## **The Way, the Truth and the Life: Asian Religious Communication in the Post-Truth Climate**

*Anthony Le Duc, svd*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The term “post-truth” has in recent years been widely applied to the state of Western society, especially in Europe and the United States. Post-truth is an adjective describing circumstances where emotions and personal beliefs rather than objective facts play the dominant role in shaping public opinion. A consequence of this disregard for objective facts is the dissemination of misinformation and untruths in order to influence public perceptions, especially in political matters. Although the focus has been primarily on the United States and Europe, the reality of a globalized, hyper-interconnected world means that Asian society is also susceptible to post-truth dynamics. Because Asia is extremely diverse in terms of cultural and religious landscape, the post-truth mentality and practices can potentially bring great harm to interreligious relationships in the region. This paper proposes that Asian religions can address the challenges of the post-truth mindset by resorting to powerful images within their traditions to communicate within and across traditions in order to promote religious unity and harmony. It asserts that the images employed by Jesus to refer to himself, namely, the Way, the Truth, and the Life are images that hold not only rich spiritual significance for Christians but can also resonate deeply with the Asian religious and spiritual outlook. These images may be explored by religious traditions in their own particular contexts and communicated to adherents (intrareligious communication).*

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*These images can also serve as the foundation upon which Asian religions can enter into dialogue with one another to build mutual understanding and collaboration (interreligious communication). The thesis is when Asian religions are able to employ shared images to communicate within and across religious traditions, they are able to reaffirm the important role of religion/spirituality in the present social milieu, at the same time resist the negative impact brought about by trends of thought that seek to degrade and relativize religious and spiritual truths.*

**Keywords:** Post-truth, interreligious dialogue, religious communication, Asian religions

### **Fake News and the Post-Truth Mindset**

It has become somewhat of a trend within the philosophically minded community to describe the contemporary intellectual climate as the “post-truth” era. Oxford Dictionaries designated it 2016’s word of the year, which was an uncontroversial decision because its usage was increased 2,000 percent in 2015.<sup>1</sup> It must be said at the outset that the term “post-truth,” which is used as an adjective to describe the present political mindset originated in the West and probably is most relevant to the climate observed there. Because it is an English word, we can safely assume that its usage takes place mostly in English speaking countries like the United States and Great Britain. The term is defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>2</sup> This definition suggests that although truth or what is judged to be truth remains, its relevance to and import on people’s thinking have been gravely diminished. This was conspicuous in the Brexit affairs in Great Britain where false information was fed to the public on a daily basis in order to affect the final outcome of the referendum.<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of tailoring reality to fit one’s opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Boston: MIT Press, 2018): Kindle

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth> (accessed September 1, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Ashley Kirk, “EU referendum: the claims that that won it for Brexit, fact checked,” *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/0/eu-referendum-claims-won-brexite-fact-checked/> (March 13, 2017)

rather than vice-versa seems to be the trend in many Western countries where information presented for public consumption is selective, skewed, exaggerated or even falsified in order to advance a particular narrative.

Despite the fact that misinformation and deception is hardly new in human history, the post-truth context presents some unique characteristics. In the post-truth climate, it is not simply a matter of false information being presented, but rather about people's attitudes towards these falsehoods. First, on the part of the distributors of falsehoods, they continue to hold on to and promote them even though they have been presented with hard evidence to the contrary. President Donald Trump is notorious for spouting and refusing to recant information that has been proven untrue, including about the number of illegal ballots in the election or the number of people who attended his inauguration ceremony. The second distinctive characteristic of the post-truth climate relates to the attitude of the public towards the facts presented. There seems to be willful self-deception and delusion taking place because people continue to accept an untruth that has been definitively demonstrated to be so. Many very intelligent, highly educated people continue to go on television declaring that they have never heard Trump say a lie even though nonpartisan fact-checking organizations have listed untruths or half-truths spoken by Trump to be in the thousands over the last few years. Surprisingly, when leaders are found to have spoken untruth, they seem to suffer very little if any consequence for their action. In this information age, ignorance is not due to lack of facts, but due to widespread denial over very basic facts. People are urged not to come to conclusions based on credible facts, but based on how they feel or should feel. In reality, enablers of post-truth mentality not so much lack any respect for facts; rather they do not embrace facts that are counterproductive to their agenda. Lee McIntyre comments that the "corruption of the process by which facts are credibly gathered and reliably used to shape one's beliefs about reality...undermines the idea that *some things are true irrespective of how we feel about them*, and that it is in our best interests (and those of our policy makers) to attempt to find them."<sup>4</sup> The promotion and reinforcement of certain feelings irrespective of facts can cause dire local and global consequences—irreversible environmental degradation, increase in religious extremism, and more widespread inter-ethnic conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> McIntyre, *Post-truth*, Kindle

One may dismiss the post-truth political and social mindset as characteristic of the West and bears little relevance to the Asian cultural and religious discourse. Nonetheless, the globalized digital age where anything done and said in any part of the world could be instantly seen and heard thousands of kilometers away has essentially done away with purely isolated localized politics. When Trump declares on CNN, “I think Islam hates us... There’s a tremendous hatred... There’s an unbelievable hatred of us,” one can be certain that Muslims around the world will have heard of this statement whether in its original form or in a translated or summarized version.<sup>5</sup> In the same manner, fake news stories on social media portraying Muslims to be rampant criminals<sup>6</sup> can easily reach Asians, thus promoting and reinforcing the perception that Muslims are a violent and hateful people. It is not uncommon to hear Vietnamese people comment openly to one another both online and offline about how dangerous Muslims are based on what they read in the news originating from overseas. It is notable that there are only about 90,000 Muslims, mostly from the Cham ethnic minority, living in Vietnam, making up a mere 0.1 per cent of the total population.<sup>7</sup> Most Vietnamese Muslims reside in rural areas peacefully making their livelihood through farming, fishing and trade. Therefore, negative perceptions about Muslims among the Vietnamese hardly come from any direct experience with the Muslims themselves, but partly from depictions about Muslims in Western media. This in turns affects how Vietnamese perceive Muslims that reside in their own country. As an internet user named Nguyen Viet Ha Hanh commented in an online forum, “To a [sic] average Vietnamese person, Muslims are associated with terrorism.” For Vietnamese who live in regions far from the Muslim ethnic minority, they are too small to be of concern to them. Muslims can live as they like “as long as you do not create any threat of instability and do not get in the way of ‘our’ way of life.”<sup>8</sup> Although Vietnamese Muslims

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<sup>5</sup> Jenna Johnson and Abigail Hauslohner, “I think Islam hates us: a timeline of Trump’s comments about Islam and Muslims,” *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f216c2c4f3f7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/05/20/i-think-islam-hates-us-a-timeline-of-trumps-comments-about-islam-and-muslims/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f216c2c4f3f7) (May 20, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Amy Sherman, “Misleading headline says 412 Muslims busted,” *Polifact*, <http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2017/nov/21/freshmedianewscom/misleading-headline-says-412-michigan-muslims-bust/> (November 21, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> “Regards from Vietnamese Muslims,” *IHH*, <https://www.ihh.org.tr/en/news/regards-from-vietnamese-muslims-2262> (accessed October 1, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> “What do Vietnamese think about Muslim Chams,” *Quora*, <https://www.quora.com/What-do-Vietnamese-think-about-Cham-Muslims> (accessed October 1, 2018).



live peacefully in the country, the negative perceptions of Muslims and the fear that some might be radicalized would hinder the ability of Muslims to practice and develop their religious tradition in a country where religious freedom is already severely limited, and where Muslims are reported to be lacking physical, material and virtual opportunities to learn and preserve their religion. If content from overseas plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of Muslims in Vietnam, it could be safely assumed to also be the case for other countries in the region such as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. The post-truth mentality in the West is able to affect Asian society thanks largely to the reality of a hyperconnected world which produces a mind boggling amount of data. In 2016 alone, humanity produced the amount of information equaling all of human history up to the year 2015. For the next decade, it is said that information will double every two years.<sup>9</sup> Just Facebook alone is responsible for 510,000 comments, 293,000 statuses, and 136,000 photos per minute.<sup>10</sup> If this exponential rate of increase in knowledge presents a huge challenge for even the most developed countries to control and evaluate information, it is the more difficult for the less developed countries of Asia where fact-checking mechanisms are severely limited in press institutions. In the case of Indonesia, for example, with its tremendous cultural, linguistic and geographical diversity, any effort to fact-check and correct false information proves to be a hugely difficult and costly endeavor.<sup>11</sup> This takes place in the context where Indonesians rank fourth in the world in terms of number of social media users—behind only China, India and the United States. Three other ASEAN countries—Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand—are listed among the 15 countries with the highest number of social media users.<sup>12</sup> According to a report released by Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University, fake news spanning a wide spectrum of categories is more conspicuous and impactful because Internet technology with its numerous applications has made it much

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<sup>9</sup> “Data is expected to double every two years for the next decade,” Quartz, <https://qz.com/472292/data-is-expected-to-double-every-two-years-for-the-next-decade/> (August 5, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> “The top 20 valuable Facebook statistics—updated October 2018,” Zephora, <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/> (accessed October 10, 2018)

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Azali, “Fake News and Increased Persecution in Indonesia,” *Perspective*, no.61 (August 7, 2017): 7.

<sup>12</sup> “Number of social network users in selected countries in 2017 and 2022 (in millions),” Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278341/number-of-social-network-users-in-selected-countries/> (accessed October 1, 2018).

faster and less inexpensive to produce, circulate and re-circulate content. In addition, when there are no humans at work to propagate content, there are artificial intelligence agents set up to automate the task.<sup>13</sup> The World Economic Forum warns that our hyperconnected world can suffer from “digital wildfires” due to “massive digital misinformation.”<sup>14</sup> Just as radio listeners jammed the police station telephone line in 1938 due to the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*, thinking that earth was being attacked by Martians, episodes of panic could take place in societies where the Internet is a relatively new medium and users are not yet savvy enough to make informed judgments on content.

An example of a digital wildfire could be seen in the conviction of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) for blasphemy in Indonesia in 2017. Ahok, a Chinese-Indonesian Christian, was running for re-election as governor of Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital city. Things were going well for the candidate until he decided to tell a small audience not to be fooled by those who cite the Qur’an that Muslims should not vote for a non-Muslim to be their leader. Ahok’s opponents seized the opportunity to attack him, uploading various doctored versions of excerpts of his speech onto social media, and called for charges to be brought against him. Several large demonstrations were organized, with the one taking place in December 2016 attended by an estimated 500,000 Muslim protesters, mostly men.<sup>15</sup> From a speech 6,000 seconds long, a mere 13-second clip was uploaded onto Youtube and other social media outlets; and even this out-of-context clip was hardly watched by those who felt that Ahok was guilty of blasphemy. One survey indicated that only 13 percent out of the 45 percent of respondents who thought Ahok was guilty had even seen the excerpt. In the end “mobocracy,” as characterized by the Indonesian political magazine *Tempo*, prevailed, and Ahok was convicted of blasphemy in May 2017. The Ahok episode was a digital wildfire started by Ahok’s opponents and fueled by Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. The consequence of

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<sup>13</sup> Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu et al., “Countering fake news: a survey of recent global initiatives,” RSIS, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cens/countering-fake-news-a-survey-of-recent-global-initiatives/>, (March 7, 2018): 2

<sup>14</sup> “Digital Wildfires in a Hyperconnected World,” World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/> (accessed October 2, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Ross Tapsell, “Post-truth politics in Southeast Asia,” Inside Story, <http://insidestory.org.au/post-truth-politics-in-southeast-asia/> (February 7, 2017).

this digital fire is that a well-liked governor of Jakarta was convicted of and jailed for blasphemy, ethnic and religious tensions were inflamed, and others also became victims of the “Ahok effect.”

Another wildfire that involved digital technology is the case of Ronghinya genocide in Myanmar. In this once closed off country, internet penetration galloped from 1 percent in 2012 to 26 percent in 2017. This explosion of Internet usage took place thanks to the plethora of cheap mobile phones in the country.<sup>16</sup> As the people increasingly take to cyberspace to engage in academic, social and political activities, individuals and groups also take advantage of the platform to incite ethnic and religious hatred among the people. After the ultranationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu was forbidden by Myanmar’s government to preach in public in 2016 due to inflammatory speeches that helped fuel violence against the Ronghinya Muslim minority, the monk took to Facebook. Through this social media platform, Wirathu presented a narrative that aimed to portray the Ronghinyas as violent and aggressive outsiders. He characterized them as troublemakers and compared them to mad dogs. The monk also posted photos and videos of decaying bodies which he claimed were victims of Ronghinya attacks.<sup>17</sup> Proudly calling himself a “radical Buddhist,” Wirathu declared, “You can be full of kindness and love, but you cannot sleep next to a mad dog.”<sup>18</sup> Despite such hateful speech, Facebook was not censoring the monk. Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch in Asia says, “Facebook is quick on taking down swastikas, but they don’t get to Wirathu’s hate speech where he’s saying Muslims are dogs.”<sup>19</sup> UN human rights experts in their investigation of the matter concluded that Facebook played a part in the Ronghinya genocide. The reason the social media platform was singled out is because in Myanmar Facebook is virtually synonymous with the Internet. Smart phones bought at the store usually come

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<sup>16</sup> Aim Sinpeng, “Southeast Asian cyberspace: politics, censorship, polarization,” New Mandala, <http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-cyberspace-politics-censorship-polarisation/> (November 1, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Ashin Wirathu on comparing Ronghinya Muslims to dogs in Myanmar,” The Berkley Center, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ashin-wirathu-on-comparing-ronghinya-muslims-to-dogs-in-myanmar> (accessed October 7, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, “A war of words puts Facebook at the center of Myanmar’s Ronghinya crisis,” The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-ronghinya.html> (October 27, 2017).

with the application already installed. Most of the users are familiar with Facebook but are not able to navigate the wider Internet.<sup>20</sup> As Facebook took steps to address the problem of hate speech in Myanmar by removing some of the posts, even restricting the monk's page at different times, Witharu simply got around by creating new accounts. Even if Facebook were able to restrict hate speech from this one particular monk, there are also others. Even posts from official government accounts contain false or misleading information about the Rohingya crisis.

The Internet, as much as it has been a source of tremendous knowledge and medium for enriching mutual cultural, religious and social interactions, has unfortunately been partially responsible for creating and sustaining a post-truth climate and serving as a source of deep division in society. The effectiveness of the Internet's ability to create spaces where like-minded people could meet, exchange ideas and reaffirm one another's thinking is a double-edged sword. Even though people could certainly engage with those who hold contrasting perspectives, most prefer to visit forums where they feel most comfortable and affirming. To add to the intensity of the division, people can now, with the help of algorithms, spend their time in cyberspace bubbles, where information that does not mesh with their perspectives is automatically filtered out. Consequently, a Hindu fundamentalist's online experience will largely be one of reassurance and reinforcement that his stance is a proper one. Anti-Catholic communist supporters in Vietnam will have no trouble finding an echo chamber for their perspective that Vietnamese Catholics are reactionaries who should be eliminated, and Christianity erased from the country. Such is also the case for supporters and opponents of President Donald Trump in the United States and President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Thus, a person can go online without having to be confronted by anything that challenges them mentally or emotionally. As people choose to only engage with those who share their worldview and consume news (fake or otherwise) that only reinforce that perspective, social, political and religious polarization becomes more intense. As Cass Sunstein stated:

The Internet makes it exceedingly easy for people to...read reams of material that support their view... [and] exclude any and all material that argues the other way... A key consequence of this kind of self-sorting is what we might call

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

enclave extremism. When people end up in enclaves of like-minded people, they usually move toward a more extreme point.<sup>21</sup>

Asian society is just as prone to political, social and religious polarization as any other part of the world. As Internet penetration increases in Asia, the danger of polarization also increases, making the post-truth climate more conspicuous in the region.

### **Religious Communication in the Post-Truth Climate**

Despite lamentations about the general post-truth mindset permeating modern society, the term itself reveals that “truth” still holds as the primary point of reference. The fact that fake news, misinformation and outright falsehoods seem to distract and sometimes even determine the general public opinion on various important matters has not effectively displaced the notion that truthfulness remains a criteria in evaluating information. The term post-truth, while does reflects a certain negativity in intellectual attitude, also draws attention to the fundamental assumption that reality ought to be considered and reflected upon in light of its relation to truth. Therefore, the term is not simply evidence of intellectual cynicism and defeatism pervading human society, or a nostalgia for the sense of certainty that authoritative resources were once able to provide, but also a reminder that the value of what is deemed as truth ought not be completely erased from individual and collective human life. Notwithstanding that there are many kinds of truths which need to be understood in their own particular domains, our intuitive grasp about the nature of truth is not far from Aristotle’s definition of truth: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”<sup>22</sup>

My interpretation about the post-truth climate, therefore, is that not that it reflects a situation in which truth has either become completely relativized or that it has been completely stripped of any power to affect human mental deliberations. Rather the post-truth climate more accurately

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<sup>21</sup> Cass R. Sustein, “Sustein on the Internet and political polarization,” University of Chicago Law School, <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/sunstein-internet-and-political-polarization> (accessed October 1, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1011b.

points to a conundrum where people are uncertain about the legitimacy of the truth presented to them and the trustworthiness of the source of information. The problem lies in the process of establishing the truth and the individuals involved in that process. People's disenchantment with truth does not mean they have no need for truths or that they dislike truths, but that due to a variety of reasons the ability to distinguish between genuine truths and bogus truths have been impaired, so that anything that appeals to them emotionally gets the upper hand. As Baggini observed:

The same data that shows a century-and-a-half decline in the use of the word "truth" also points to a twenty-first-century revival in the concept. We wouldn't even be talking about post-truth if we didn't think truth mattered. The world is neither ready nor willing to say goodbye to truth, even in politic where it sometimes seems as though it has already taken its leave.<sup>23</sup>

The role of religion in responding to the post-truth climate can be easily determined when the primary dilemma is not a total disregard for truth but confusion about the reliability of truth. As religion is concerned with the well-being of humanity in all of its dimensions, religion arguably has the most to lose if what an official religious institution has to say has as much weight as a blogger or a social media celebrity. The task for religion is to deeply understand the tremendously complex contemporary milieu where orthodoxy and traditional authoritativeness are increasingly being challenged. Modern scientific knowledge for a greater number of people seem to contradict in irreconcilable ways with traditional beliefs. Local ways of thinking and being are more and more being brought into question due to globalization. Freer or more difficult-to-control communication channels brought about by technological advancement also expose deception at seats of power that once seemed beyond public scrutiny. Even scientific orthodoxy such as the consensus on climate change and global warming can be refuted by the few entities and individuals who have vested interest in its denial. Religion needs to humbly accept that religious orthodoxy is equally susceptible to rejection as any other type of orthodoxy on the market. With the present mentality, all traditional social pillars have the same opportunity for being knocked down by

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<sup>23</sup> Julian Baggini, *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World* (London: Quecus Editions Ltd, 2017): Kindle

those who feel that they would prefer to build modern society upon different construction materials. In short, the most defining aspect of the post-truth climate is that any version of truth, even those coming from once considered unquestionable authority, can be challenged by anyone at any time.

## **Religious Communication in the Post-truth Climate**

In the face of the post-truth climate, religions may choose to resign themselves to fate, to accept this reality as part of the ongoing global democratization process, or religions can reassert and articulate about themselves in ways that distinguish religion from the rest of the smorgasbord. In this age of information overload, of contradictory voices, and inconsistent messages from and about religion, Asian religious traditions can also confront the situation with a clear and concise articulation about who they are and what they stand for. In this regard, we can find an excellent example in the presentation by Jesus Christ about himself and the reason for his being. In the Gospel of John, when Thomas, also known as Thomas the Doubter, asked, “Lord we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (John 14:5-6). This concise answer by Jesus assured Thomas that any uncertainty and apprehensions he might feel towards the future could be resolved when trust is placed in him. Jesus’ three-fold depiction of himself as “the way,” “the truth,” and “the life” is remarkably harmonious with the Asian religious and spiritual outlook and sensibility. In the following paragraphs, I will unpack these three images and relate them to the Asian religious traditions. I propose that these images can individually and collectively communicate the nature and function of religion for people in the modern world. Each tradition, however, has to explore and develop these images in its particular context, and also be able to communicate across traditions to build a unified and trustworthy voice.

### ***The Way***

The notion of religious and spiritual traditions as “the way” is prevalent in Asia. When Jesus Christ declared himself as the way that led to God, the true source of life, he was speaking out of a mindset that reflected the Asian cultural and spiritual sensibility. Although contemporary Christians neither refer to themselves nor are thought of as people of “the Way,” this indeed was the case with the early Church (Acts 9:2; 11:26; 19:9; 24:22). Paul, for

example, introduced himself to Governor Felix at his trial in this manner: “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets” (24:14). The depiction of early Christians as people of “the way” most likely originated in Jesus himself as seen in the declaration above. By referring to themselves in this manner, Christians highlighted a particular lifestyle that contrasted prevalent social and spiritual norms. For Christians, it was a lifestyle that included repentance of sins, loving God and neighbor (even enemies), and proclaiming the Kingdom of God characterized by harmony, peace and justice.

Religion then is not primarily a structured organization or an institution but a way of life, a way of being in the world. This is the fundamental Asian worldview when it comes to the religious and spiritual dimension of human life. The English word “religion” has been translated into Japanese and Mandarin Chinese as *shukyo* and *zongjiao*, respectively. However, most Japanese would describe themselves as *mushukyo* (non-religious) because in the Japanese understanding, “religion” refers to “institutional teaching” or “school of instruction.”<sup>24</sup> The same could be said of the Chinese who practice what has been called Confucianism. Confucianism is pervasive and diffused—it is the air that the Chinese breathe, as opposed to a ‘church’ that one joins. Chinese people reflect their Confucian selves in practice, emphasizing orthopraxy (right action) over orthodoxy (right belief). The English word “Confucianism” was invented relatively late (no occurrence found before 1687), and is a product of Western invention since the term itself does not exist in the Chinese language. The term misleadingly makes people think that the founder of Confucianism is Confucius (Kongfuzi) when, in fact, the values and behaviors outlined by Confucius were already part of the Chinese culture centuries before he collected, organized and expounded upon them. Confucius himself declared, “I transmit but do not create. I place my trust in the teachings of antiquity.”<sup>25</sup>

The notion of religion and spirituality being “the way” is most clearly seen in the word “dao” associated with Daoism/Taoism. For Chinese people, “dao” simply means “the path” or “the way.” Although Western scholars study “Daoism/Taoism” and “Confucianism” as separate religious philosophies and

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<sup>24</sup> Randall L. Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014): Kindle.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



traditions, people from China and from Chinese-influenced cultures neither make such distinction nor do they identify themselves as either one or the other, or even a combination of both. The totality of life is governed by the Dao, a mysterious but all-encompassing Way of Nature. The Chinese character for Dao (道) which depicts a running animal conjures up the idea that paths made by animals, especially in natural settings, are always spontaneous, ever evolving, transforming and adapting. Human beings serve themselves best when they act and behave in accordance with the Dao, harmonizing themselves to the processes of nature rather than asserting their positions above or against the natural order of things.

In Confucian societies, the dao determines how individuals act in their particular roles as leaders and citizens of a country or members of a family. In daily conversations, Vietnamese often employ phrases such as “đạo làm người” (the way of being human), “đạo làm chồng” (the way of being a husband), “đạo làm con” (the way of being a child). When Vietnamese discuss matters of religion, many argue that carrying out religious practices such as going to church and other obligations are secondary to “giữ đạo tại tâm” (keeping religion in the heart). Vietnamese have a saying: “Tu đâu cho bằng tu nhà. Thờ cha kính mẹ mới là đạo con” (There is no better place to undergo spiritual formation than at home. To venerate and respect one’s parents is the true way of being a child.)

### ***The Truth***

This essay would be much amiss if the discussion on religious communication is devoid of the aspect of “the Truth.” When Jesus declared himself to be the Way, he further reinforced the disciples’ confidence in him by confirming that he was “the Truth.” In life, paths to be travelled on are numerous and one could easily be led down the wrong path due to ignorance, delusion, and deception. A wrong turn could lead to suffering, imprisonment, or even eternal damnation. However, the path based on truth, said Jesus, will lead to freedom (John 8:32) and fullness of life (John 10:10). Jesus affirmed that he came into this world with no other purpose than “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37).

Religious and spiritual traditions are usually founded upon a set of tenets that are held to be truths. Asian traditions are quite assertive when it comes to affirming truths. The most notable is Buddhism with its teaching of the

Four Noble Truths about the reality of life in the world. The first noble truth of suffering (*dukkha*) states that suffering is a natural part of life processes of birth, aging, sickness and death. Suffering also comes from unfulfilled desires and cravings for momentary pleasures. The second noble truth of the origin of suffering (*Samudāya*) points to greed, hatred and delusion as the unwholesome roots or the poisons that bring about suffering in one's life. The third truth of the cessation of suffering (*Nirodha*) gives hope to a rather bleak reality by stating that this suffering could cease if one is free from negative detachments. The path that leads to the cessation of suffering (*Magga*), known as the Noble Eightfold Path, constitutes the fourth and final truth presented by the Buddha. The Buddha's enlightenment and emancipation from suffering was achieved when he understood these truths and saw reality for what it really was. This realization at age 35 concluded the Buddha's quest for truth and put him on a new path of trying to transmit these truths for the benefit of others, beginning with his former confreres at Deer Park in Banaras. The Buddha knew that the dhamma that he was teaching would not be easily understood and accepted by everyone, but his compassion towards humanity impelled him to "not keep this radiant truth a secret" but to "make it known everywhere, so that all people can benefit from it."

Religious and spiritual truths are always presented as something beyond human subjectivity. When Jesus declared that the reason he was born into the world, that the reason he was sent here was to bear witness to the truth, the implication is that the truth is not contingent of what the world thinks or what events are taking place in the world at a particular time. Human experiences could be understood and interpreted in terms of the espoused truths, but they have no power to affect or change those truths. The four Buddhist Noble Truths assert the same understanding. The truths presented by the Buddha reflect the reality of life in the world and must be grasped and internalized if spiritual progress and ultimate liberation from mundane existence is to be attained. The "Dao" in the Chinese spiritual consciousness is to be conformed to if human life is to achieve well-being.

In Asian religious traditions, knowing the truth is opposite of ignorance. Both Hindu and Buddhist traditions point to ignorance of the true nature of reality as the source of human suffering. The Buddha taught that it is the poison of ignorance or delusion that feeds the other two poisons of hatred and greed. These three unwholesome roots synergistically interact with one another causing

the individual to become attached to the fleeting pleasures found in impermanent things rather than searching for things that bring about enduring happiness and satisfaction. In the Indian traditions, sin brings about negative effects on human life; however, sin itself is rooted in a fundamental ignorance of our true nature. Although Hindu and Buddhist traditions hold different metaphysical stances about reality, they both agree that only through ridding oneself of ignorance can self-transformation and ultimate emancipation from mundane existence take place. Everything changes when we are able to see something *as it really is*.

### *The Life*

Jesus declared, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Although no doubt most religious traditions have a vested interest in eternal bliss (Christian heaven, Muslim Paradise, Buddhist Nibbana, Hindu Moksha, etc.), Asian religions also place great importance on the quality of human life in the present. Human flourishing and well-being is a preoccupation of these religions. They are interested in affirming the dignity and value of the human condition. There is a spiritual humanism integral to these systems. It is not an exploitative or anthropocentric humanism, but an expression about what being truly human means for the individual and for the world around them. It is no wonder that Buddhism holds that enlightenment can only be achieved by human beings, and to be born in the human realm is extraordinarily rare. According to the Chinese scholar of Confucianism Tu Weiming, from the Confucian perspective, human being is a complex evolving and transforming reality comprising of biological, social, political, historical and metaphysical aspects. He writes:

Learning to be human in the Confucian spirit is to engage oneself in a ceaseless, unending process of creative self-transformation, both as a communal act and as a dialogical response to Heaven. This involves four inseparable dimensions—self, community, nature, and the transcendent. The purpose of learning is always understood as being for the sake of the self, but the self is never an isolated individual (an island); rather, it is a center of relationships (a flowing stream). The self as a center of relationships is a dynamic open system rather than a close static structure. Therefore, mutuality between self and community, harmony between human species and nature, and continuous

communication with Heaven are defining characteristics and supreme values in the human project.<sup>26</sup>

The Confucian worldview holds that the degree of harmony between human being and Heaven reflects the degree of human realization, which in turn reflects the quality of all his/her relationships. A fully realized human being has no place for egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, chauvinistic nationalism or anthropocentrism in his/her life. “Self-realization, in the last analysis, is ultimate transformation, that process which enables us to embody the family, community, nation, world, and cosmos in our sensitivity.”<sup>27</sup>

If Confucian humanism is based on the unity of human being with Heaven, then Christian humanism is modeled on the incarnated person of Jesus Christ, who represents the perfect unity between God and man. Christians are called to be united to Christ, through whom they are united to God. Human moral, social, and spiritual development must be measured against Christ, who helps human beings to overcome the effects of sin, imbue the heart with fullness of justice, and make manifest the noble dimensions of human nature.<sup>28</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the most important documents of the Catholic Church, declares that Christian humanism is defined by “spiritual and moral maturity of the human race” and characterized “by responsibility to his brothers and to history.”<sup>29</sup> Lack of true development are on display when there is a “veritable structure of sin” and a “culture of death” characterized by a lack of respect for human life in all its stages, regional conflicts, poverty, and plundering of natural resources. Therefore, Christian humanism calls for an integral human development that reflects Christ in how one treats fellow human beings as well as Creation. Christian humanism insists that human flourishing and well-being, and the destiny of being truly human invariably depend on human actions towards self and others.

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<sup>26</sup> Tu Weiming, “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality,” In *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998): 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> Tu Weiming, “Beyond,” 19.

<sup>28</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html) , no.10

<sup>29</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), no.22.

## **Dimensions of Religious Communication**

Religious communication in the post-truth climate is a multi-dimensional task, which includes the intra-communication as well as the inter-communication dimensions. Intra-communication takes place within the religious tradition whereas the inter-communication is the communication that is done across religious traditions. Although religions can also implement communication with non-religious entities such as the scientific community, this essay only focuses on the *intrareligious* and *interreligious* dimensions.

### ***Intrareligious Communication***

On the intrareligious communication front, the post-truth climate demands religious institutions to present to adherents a more forceful and concise message about what it is that they stand for. In an age of information overload where people have to confront with innumerable points of view on any single topic, it is not helpful when leaders within a religious tradition cannot speak with one accord. The lack of a united voice risks turning religious teachings into a set of opinions where people can choose to agree or disagree as they see fit. In the absence of an authoritative voice which people can recognize as the measure of orthodoxy, an opinion of a bishop is no different from that of a popular blogger or comedian. The lack of a united voice also allows for extremist groups, even small in number, to exert influence upon the adherents in ways that are antithetical to the teachings of the religion and detrimental to the image of the entire religious tradition. Adherents who are not well-informed of the official teachings and positions may misunderstand that the opinions of minority groups with politicized agendas represent the outlook of the entire tradition.

Even if religious traditions manage to have a united voice of authority, they might not know how to communicate their message to believers, especially in this technologically advanced age where religious authorities often do not have the upper hand when it comes to communication channels. Therefore, in addition to traditional methods of communication, getting acquainted with new forms of communication to transmit the message to a modern, digitally inclined audience is imperative. An example of this attempt to catch up with modern channels of communication is the work of the Catholic organization *Radio Veritas Asia*, which produces programming in various Asian languages

from its base in the Philippines. By its name, it can be seen that at its inception, the program was a short-wave radio program broadcasted from the Philippines to countries such as Vietnam and Myanmar, where the ability to produce Catholic programming was not present. The Latin word “*Veritas*” means “truth” and represents the aim of the Catholic Church to proclaim the truth of Christ “from the housetops through the airwaves.”<sup>30</sup> When RVA was inaugurated in 1970, Pope Paul VI declared that “this great enterprise and such an important work should echo the teachings of Christ and lift hearts to God’s truth and love.”<sup>31</sup> In 1981, Pope John Paul II characterized RVA as the “voice of Asian Christianity.”<sup>32</sup>

While RVA’s mission and vision is clear, it cannot carry out its mission and vision well in this digital age if it continues to hold on to old models of operation, both in its content and method of transmission. The people in charge of the Vietnamese language programming for RVA recognized the need for change. In 2015, RVA Vietnamese began broadcasting its programs via the Internet 24/7 with a mix of news, Church teachings, biblical meditations, Mass, and gospel music. The streaming analytics indicate that in July 2015, the total number of listeners was 61,323. However, by January 2016, the number of listeners increased nearly five and a half times to 331,623. Although most of the listeners lived in Vietnam, Internet technology made it possible for Vietnamese listeners from all over the world to access the program.<sup>33</sup>

The communication work of RVA represents a model of work that must be imitated and expanded upon not only within the Catholic Church, but also within various Asian religious traditions so that age old wisdom of these traditions can be transmitted and applied in the modern age. Ancient wisdom can only find its relevance when it is able to address contemporary issues of political conflict, social inequality and environmental degradation. Religious traditions, for example, must undergo a deliberative process in order to formulate coherent ethical ideas appropriate to present ecological concerns. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Jim Grim suggest that this developmental process comprises of three aspects: retrieval, reevaluation and reconstruction.

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<sup>30</sup> “History,” Radio Veritas Asia, <http://www.rveritas-asia.org/index.php/about-us/history> (accessed October 1, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Anh Vu Ta, “Challenges of the Digital World for the Church in Vietnam,”

In retrieval, theologians and religious experts examine scriptural and commentarial sources in order to uncover and highlight aspects of the tradition that are relevant to human-Earth relations as well as identify applicable ethical codes for practice. Reevaluation involves the examination of traditional teachings, customs, and religious tendencies and models of ethics in order to discover their impact on the environment. Finally, reconstruction involves the creative effort by religions to adapt their teachings to address the contemporary circumstances.<sup>34</sup> This three-fold process can be done by religious traditions not only to address ecological concerns but also other issues relevant to the modern world.

### *Interreligious Communication*

The interreligious communication dimension takes place between and among religious traditions. The reality of the post-truth climate highlights the importance of interreligious communication being part of the religious agenda. According to Vietnamese American Catholic theologian Peter C. Phan, dialogue among religions is an imperative in the modern globalized world shaped by international migration, communication technologies, and political and social events. Phan commented, “Religion cannot function authentically and truly, and cannot achieve its goals without entering into dialogue with other religions.”<sup>35</sup> For Phan, religious traditions being in constant communication with one another through various forms of dialogue is a natural and essential part of being religious in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, it is a world fraught with dangers of religious strife. The post-truth climate characterized by the plethora of uncontrolled fake news requires that religions not only speak boldly to their own adherents but also to communicate openly with each other in order to create mutual understanding, resolve real or perceived conflicts, and prevent unwanted influence from fundamentalists and extremists. When it is in the interest of certain entities that there may be interreligious conflict and division, the common voice of religious traditions is necessary to achieve the noble goals that all religions lay out for their people. When Jesus inaugurated his mission, he declared that his mission and ministry was to proclaim the kingdom of God—calling

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “The Movement of Religion and Ecology,” in *Handbook on Religion and Ecology*, M.E. Tucker, W. Jenkins, and J. Grim, Eds. (New York: Routledge, 2017): Kindle.

<sup>35</sup> “Peter C. Phan – being religious as being interreligious,” Rumiform, <https://youtu.be/YrSCMZu47HM> (accessed October 1, 2018).

people to repentance, to make themselves suitable for the kingdom of God, and to work for that kingdom. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Catholic Church affirms that the Church's mission is to imitate the mission of Jesus. "The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and salvation of the human race may be accomplished."<sup>36</sup>

What is the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and that the Church continues to promote with such great ardor? First, it is a place where peace reigns over conflict and violence, as the prophet Isaiah beautifully illustrated with the images of the wolf living with the lamb and a small child leading the lion and the calf (11:6). In this kingdom, people and groups which previously only experienced encounters of strife and bloodshed could now come together in friendship and harmony. Second, the kingdom of God is a place where inclusion is valued over exclusion and elitism. Jesus demonstrated this preference for inclusion in the way he carried out his ministry—sharing meals with social leaders and sinners, conversing with ordinary people as well as members of the political elite, and going beyond cultural and religious barriers to converse with a Sumerian woman and to touch a man with leprosy. Third, the kingdom of God is a place where preferential concern is given to the poor and the marginalized. The Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris, S.J. asserts that between God and the poor there is a defense pact that helps ensure their ultimate freedom and victory.<sup>37</sup> It is because of this preferential care for the powerless that Jesus declared at the very outset of his ministry that he had been anointed and sent to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18).

Jesus' utopian vision of the kingdom of God as a place of peace, justice and compassion is served by the Church members when they dialogue with people from other religions through different forms—dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experience—depending on their expertise, responsibility in the Church, and their state of life. Whether it is through one, the other, or a combination of the four forms of dialogue, the primary aim of interreligious dialogue is

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<sup>36</sup> Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993): 151.



not conversion of people to one's religion, but the conversion of people to the common vision of peace, harmony and compassion. As Paul F. Knitter commented, "A Christian missionary who has no baptisms to report but who has helped Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians to live together and work together lovingly and justly is a successful disciple of Christ."<sup>38</sup> Knitter points out that dialogue is not simply listening to and learning from/about others; the other aspect of dialogue is speaking, that is, proclaiming and witnessing what we perceive to be the truth. Sharing one's conviction in what one believes to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life is equally an important task as patiently listening to others speaking about another person's own religious conviction. In the Asian milieu where peace, harmony, compassion and justice represent extremely important social and religious values, interreligious dialogue becomes the essential and characteristic way of being religious. The need for such definitive way of being religious is even more pronounced in a climate in which the dangers of factionalism, bigotry, religious fundamentalism and extremism remain imminent because of the galvanization created by campaigns of mean-spirited misinformation.

### *Communicating the Way, the Truth, and the Life*

Despite the dire centuries-old prediction that scientific and technological modernization would eventually lead to the extinction of the *homo religiosus*, he has yet to appear on the list of endangered species. The *homo religiosus* continues to make his presence known and felt in academic institutions, the marketplace, and indeed in cyberspace. Even if we can detect certain mutations in the religious gene of people around the world, it has been far from being spliced from the human DNA. If anything, empirical evidence shows that human beings are as programmed for religion as ever, to use a terminology more consistent with the present technological mindset. Although secularization is undeniable in certain societies, the contemporary world, in particular Asia, is still overwhelmingly religious. The persistence of religion in human society seems to be inextricably tied to the human effort to strive to achieve change and transformation in all dimensions of life. The *homo religiosus* is not satisfied with only social and material transformation reflected in scientific and technological progress, but also aspires to an all-encompassing transformation that reaches the very core of the human being.

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<sup>38</sup> Paul F. Knitter, "Mission and Dialogue," *Missiology: An International Review* 33, no.2 (April 2005): 209

Religious traditions in Asia in their own unique ways all set out to facilitate this process of transformation for their adherents. In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that post-truth dynamics originating in the West are also manifested in some degrees in Asia. In the least, post-truth tendencies and practices elsewhere can still impact intercultural and interreligious relations in Asian society due to the highly interconnected nature of the modern globalized world. Certain characteristics of the post-truth climate, such as the abundance of uncontrolled fake news, the appeal to personal emotions and feelings, and the decrease in trust in authoritative sources of information can also be seen in Asian countries as well as in the West. In this ironic state of increasing social, religious and political polarization amidst tremendous interconnectivity facilitated by technological development, religions must find their individual as well as collective voice of authority. Consequently, I have argued that the voice of authority is brought into being when religions not only speak within their own group, but also speak with other religious traditions. I proposed that religions in Asia can employ shared images of “the way,” “the truth,” and “the life” in order to articulate and communicate the nature and function of religion to people in modern society. Only when religions are able to find a common voice, can they counter the instability and uncertainty caused by the post-truth climate, resolve past and present ill-will caused by interreligious conflict and misunderstanding, thwart tendencies towards segregation and extremism, and collaborate to address social issues that concern all humanity. If religions become lackadaisical in their intra and inter communication tasks, they put themselves in danger of becoming one of the countless versions of truths available on the market for which to pick and choose. By articulating the nature and function of religion through these images (as well as other possible images), Asian religions can affirm their continued relevance and importance in the life of the people in this continent despite the ever changing social and political milieu.

## **Thai Cultural Signs and Symbols for Pastoral Communication**

*Amornkit Prompakdee*

This paper provides a descriptive examination of Thai and Christian cultural signs and symbols. The aim of this study is to show that cultural signs and symbols can be used as powerful means for pastoral communication.

This paper attempts to analyze the following:

- What are signs and symbols? How can we use cultural signs and symbols as instruments in the field of communication?
- What are the main signs and symbols used by Thai Christians and Thai Buddhists in their daily lives?
- Do Thai Buddhist signs and symbols have a counterpart in Christianity?
- How far can Thai cultural signs and symbols “become” Christian and also be used in Christian worship and living?

### **Introduction**

The Decree of the Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Thailand in 2015, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Thailand (CBCT) states:

In Thailand, Catholics are a tiny minority who live in small communities. All of them have to face similar challenge. Their ongoing religious instruction is very limited. Therefore the faith that Thai Catholics receive in baptism is not profound. It is characterized by traditional religious practices rather than by a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. (No. 04)

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Christianity<sup>1</sup> is actually something foreign in Thai society because Buddhism is the predominant religion in Thailand with Buddhists comprising 95 percent of the population. Therefore, it is no wonder about the prejudice that all Thai people are Buddhist. Thai Catholic Church carries out her mission in context of multiple cultures and religious tradition. The Catholic Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue and Christian Unity has reported that seven in ten Christian couples enter into inter-religious marriage with Buddhists.<sup>2</sup> Thai Christians who are under this particular condition are still allowed to keep their own faith and practices. However, they need to adapt with the Buddhist customs and do their best to live harmoniously with them. These show that in order to live an authentic Catholic faith in Thailand, Thai Christians need to build bridges through inter-religious dialogue and inculturation.

This paper will help Thai Christians build inter-religious friendships particularly with Buddhists by giving an orientation about Catholic and Buddhist teachings and cultural expressions from the perspective of pastoral communication.

### **Signs and Symbols as Instrument for Communication**

**Sign** is an object, a word or an action which points to something else, that leads us to knowledge of a world beyond or communicates understanding about a reality hidden from us.<sup>3</sup> The word ‘*symbol*’ comes from the Greek term *symbolon* which literally means *a token, a pledge, or a sign* that serves as a hint, a suggestion, an expression or even as an evidence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity in this paper pertains to Catholic Christianity. The use of the word Christian here specifically refers to Catholic Christians. This clarification is being given because there are many Christian groups e.g. Born Again Christians. This does not mean that the researcher is discriminating against other Christians. However, the discussion of Christian symbols here are only limited to the ones being observed in Catholicism.

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue And Christian Unity, “ความจำเป็นเรื่องศาสนสัมพันธ์ (*Necessity of Inter-religious Dialogue*),” Catholic Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue and Christian Unity, <http://cidcu.cbct.net/homepage.html> (accessed August 20, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Champlin, Joseph M. *Inside a Catholic Church. A Guide to Signs, Symbols and Saints*. (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2009) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Peter M.J. Stravinskis, *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia*. (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1991), 913.

The differences can be seen in the table below:<sup>5</sup>

Sign	Symbol
A sign is a form of language that is descriptive in nature.	A symbol is a sign that represents something and its meaning is subjective.
A sign stands for something and it is mandatory to be followed.	A symbol represents something and it has different interpretations.
A sign has similar interpretation in different parts of the globe. It is descriptive and its meaning is shared by many people.	A symbol is a sign that is subject to different interpretation. It represents different things that can be interpreted differently by people from backgrounds.

Through signs and symbols, people are able to draw a conclusion from what they experience or form an understanding of a certain thing.

“Communication as a process is an ongoing dialogic relation between two or more persons exchanging signs for a common meaning and understanding.”<sup>6</sup> In this process, encoding and decoding take place. The social and cultural background of the participants affects encoding and decoding. Thus, in order to transmit messages and create meaning, communication needs to express itself through words and deeds.

Pastoral Communication is a communicative dimension of the Church to shepherd, build up, deepen the faith and maintain the Christian flock by using everything related to the methods, processes and contents of communication of the people.<sup>7</sup> Pastoral Communication is concerned about the members of the Church in their communicative needs under the perspective of communicating God’s care for His people. It is the communication dimension of all ministries of the Church. As good shepherds, pastoral communicators should present the communication content as shepherds who know well their flock.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in pastoral ministry, a pastoral communicator cannot communicate without signs and symbols.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/difference-between-sign-and-symbol/> Accessed April 30, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, Fourth Edition (Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications, Inc, 2009), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communication in Ministry and Mission*, Third Edition (Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications, Inc, 2009), 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 10.

## **Cultural Signs and Symbols as used in Christian and Thai Buddhist Culture**

The cultural signs and symbols that can be observed in daily life and worship represent the belief of the people. The use of signs and symbols in Christian and Thai Buddhist culture for this paper divided into five groups: the meaning behind the gestures; the use of simple objects from daily life as symbols for worship; the use of garments and colors to express important sacred messages; and the impact of sacred building's construction in the faith of the people.

From the very beginning Christian culture has used symbols such as bowing, kneeling, prostrating, sitting, standing, etc. to establish connection and communication between the spiritual and mundane attitudes of an individual. Thai Buddhist culture uses these gestures as well to show respect and to emphasize gentleness.

Thai Buddhists and Christians use familiar things in people's daily life such as media and objects like water, incense, candles, flowers etc., as instruments for worship. For Christians, these things also convey their relationship between God and nature. These help people understand the meaning behind their religion and tradition.

In Thai Buddhist and Christian culture, the different garments indicate specific roles of the sacred ministers. Those garments always help people to appreciate how magnificent the liturgy is and remind wearers of their identity and responsibility.

Thai Buddhist culture uses colors to indicate the nature of Thai environment, thoughts, feelings, belief, religion and way of life. The Catholic Church uses different colours to express her message of unique celebration, especially in the liturgy. These colors guide the people in their worship.

In Christianity, the way buildings are constructed is very important because it is the perfect place to approach God whenever they want. Hence, it must be well-organized. It must manifest dignity and holiness. In Thailand, the construction of buildings reflects Thai beliefs, mentality, and culture.

## Thai Cultural Signs and Symbols for Pastoral Communication

Thai courtesy is being demonstrated through the “*Wai*” (begging or clasped hands)’ gesture.

There are three different levels of begging in Thai Buddhist culture:

1. ***Begging to the Triple Gem<sup>9</sup> (Rattana Tri):*** For the monk, begging by putting the thumb at the forehead means giving wisdom and teaching people to overcome suffering. In ancient times, there were no schools in Thailand and so the temple was the place of learning place for Thai people.
2. ***Begging to parents, superiors and benefactors:*** In begging to a parent, placing the thumb at the tip of the nose means that the parents are the ones giving life to their children. Meanwhile, in begging to the teacher, placing the thumb at the mouth means transmitting knowledge and facilitating the learning process.
3. ***Begging to show respect to a normal person:*** In begging to somebody who is your equal, raising both of your hands (in prayer form) to the chest in the same position with the heart symbolizes friendship and heart-to-heart understanding.

**Buddhists in Thailand clasp their hands** to express respect, veneration, and attentiveness to the monk’s preaching. For Thai Catholics, this can be used as a sign of peace and paying respect to God in the liturgical ceremony. In the formation program for minor seminarians, the Diocese of Surathani trains the seminarians to clasp their hands while listening to the Word of God. This gesture reminds them to be self-aware while paying attention to the Word of God.

**Worship:** In Thai Buddhist culture, the Buddhist is the one who sets the altar table with the image of the Buddha. Candles and flowers are used before the start of their activities to express respect to the spirit. For Thai Christians, the setting of the altar expresses one’s respect and devotion to God. It is an invitation to God to be with his people.

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<sup>9</sup> Triple Gem or (*Rattana Tri* is a Pali word. “Rattana” means gem, “Tri” means three) means the three holy gems which include Buddha Gem (the Buddha image that people worship), Dhamma Gem (the teaching spoken by the Buddha himself) and Sangha Gem (Monks who are ordained in the Buddhist religion).

The important elements of Thai garments include cleanliness, modesty, timeliness and dignity. Thai culture has norms and codes in wearing garments. In special ceremonies or social activities, Thai people wear specific attires that would reflect their politeness to their fellowmen, royal family, guests, etc. Thai national costumes are unique, beautifully decorated, and delicate. Thai motif dresses are embroidered and woven into fine fabrics. In Catholic liturgical ceremonies, the garments used by the religious ministers and sacristans pertain to their specific roles and duties. People perceive the bishops, priests, and deacons as representatives of Christ. Therefore, pastoral communicators should be aware of their attires because these reflect their attitude and their roles in the liturgy.

In Thai cultures, different colors play a special part in their daily lives especially in wearing costumes (e.g. they wear black for mourning and yellow to represent loyalty to the king. They apply art in decorating their houses and temples etc.) The Catholic Church uses a diversity of colors to convey messages to the faithful. The Church express her message of celebration especially in the liturgy through the use of colors in sacred vestments (like violet during advent and Lenten season, green for ordinary periods).

Chapters 25 to 31 of the Book of Exodus detail about how the Israelites prepare the construction of sacred buildings and temples, liturgy, garments, and things about the celebrant. In Thai Buddhist culture, people give significance on how the sacred buildings are constructed. And so, they are very strict in choosing the materials necessary for such a construction.

### **The example on how Catholic Churches serve as a Channel for Pastoral Communication.**

According to Thai pastoral communicators there are three important steps that must be taken in order for the Catholic Church to be a means for sharing the Good News:

- (1) Preparation,
- (2) Dialogue and
- (3) Express the Christian message



**Preparation:** The Bishop carefully prepared the construction of St. Raphael Cathedral<sup>10</sup> by appointing the members of the Diocesan construction committee comprised of the *parish priest, religious, parishioners, expert theologians, architect, interior designers, fine arts accountants, and audio expert.*

When pastoral communicators designed the Cathedral, their objective was to have a dialogue with the local culture. They expressed this through the Contemporary Srivijaya Art.

Srivijaya art is represented by the color yellow, which is the symbol of wealth from trade and cultural exchange. It's characteristic in architecture is presented by pagoda in square shape, on the top is an octagonal pagoda. Srivijaya sculpture was made from stone opal white color, standing or sitting in *Thipphan style*

**In dialogue with local culture through the construction of the building:** For Christians, venerating the altar is an important element because it represents Jesus Christ, the main celebrant. To have a dialogue with local culture (Srivijaya art) and to express the Christian message that Jesus Christ is the center of Christian worship, pastoral communicators designed St. Raphael Cathedral in an octagon shape by putting the altar at the center of octagonal pagoda surrounded by parishioners. The ambo was also added and the seat for the celebrants and the Bishop. On the top of the cathedral they placed a cross

**Improve the conceptual idea of octagonal shapes.**

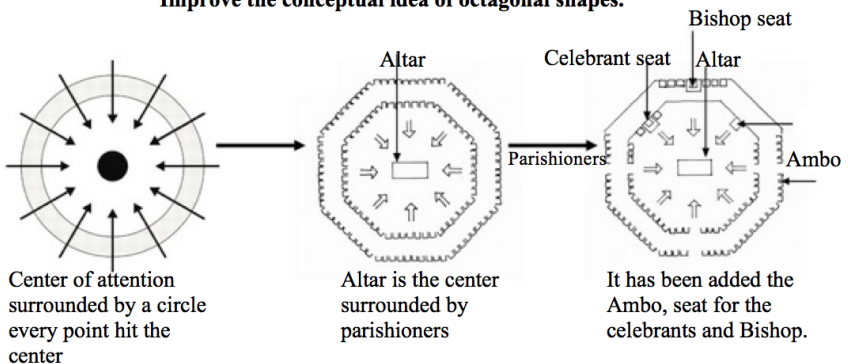


Figure 1: The ideas of St. Raphael's interior design

<sup>10</sup> St. Raphael Cathedral is located in Suratthani, a province in the southern part of Thailand. This province used to be the capital city of the Srivijaya kingdom (757-1257)

with octagonal pagoda. The main color used for painting was yellow because it represents the prosperity of the era. They also adapted the Srivijaya style to build Christian religious statues.

### Expressing and Sharing Christian messages through painting in the St. Clement Chapel



Figure 15: painting in St. Clement chapel, Pattaya

Father Matthew Allman, CSsR, a Redemptorist missionary priest shared his experiences about the painting in St. Clement Chapel. It looks like a Buddhist mural but when one looks closely, it does not show Buddhist, but Christian teachings: A stylized Thai Christmas story (i.e., three kings traveling on elephants, shepherds called by an angel to see the holy family and to pay respects (*Wai*) to the new born Jesus Christ, with a number of Thai style angel (*Thep*) above, singing and praising God and the Christmas star shining, shaped like a lotus flower.<sup>11</sup> This Christmas mural and many other murals depicting the Gospel can be found in this chapel. Not only are these designed like those in a Buddhist temple but also the whole chapel is designed like one. This kind of Christian art is rare in Thailand.

### Conclusion

The cultural forms contain the message of cultural values, norms, ethics, religious beliefs and the ideology of social life, law and way of thinking. Therefore, culture can be regarded as a means of communication. Without culture, there

is no communication.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the history of Thailand, cultural signs

<sup>11</sup> Lotus flower symbolizes Buddha because when he was born, intuit and nirvana lotus appear to support his body.

<sup>12</sup> Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating Between Cultures, An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, Fourth Updated Edition (Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications, 2012), 53.

and symbols can be found in Thais' belief, ritual and cultural celebrations, social convention, gesture, arts, and lifestyle. Through Thai cultural signs and symbols, the Catholic Church will also find the means of communication to share, to transmit the Christian faith and to present the Christian community. Aside from Christian and Thai Buddhist cultures, pastoral communication can be strengthened in cultural signs and symbols and effectively accompany people in their worship and everyday life.

The disposition of pastoral communicators in Thailand is vital in building a fruitful dialogue and in spreading Christian faith. Therefore, in the context of multi-cultural and multi-religious traditions in Thailand, pastoral communicators need to consider more inter-religious dialogue in their formation program and activities.

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## **Resilience as a Growing Field in Communication Research--Its Relation to Asian Religions**

*Jose S. Destura, Jr.*

### **Introduction**

It appears that there has been a growing interest to study the concept of resilience from a mere psychological concept of overcoming the challenges or negative experiences to an understanding of its nature and cultural relations as well as its consequence to our digital milieu. The range of literatures available point to the reality that the concept of resilience has been explored or anchored from Eurocentric Epistemology (Shaikh and Kauppi, 2010). There is therefore a need to enrich the concept of resilience by exploring other considerations by which it can be attributed, confronted and integrated to the different facets of human lives among non-Western cultures. Thus, this article is an attempt to map out the field and investigate how it may also concern the notion and practice religion particularly in the context of multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and hierarchical Asia.

### **Nature**

The concept of resilience is undeniably part of human nature as the capacity or ability to overcome negative challenges in all its forms through creative possibilities which may be available in one's context. There is however, an on-going debate on its very nature because some scholars of respective fields are divided in considering whether resilience is a process or simply an outcome of after an exposure to disastrous life events or forms of large scale adversities (Ogtem-Young, 2018). In fact, these scholars

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are at lost whether to consider resilience as “the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances” (Masten, Best, & Garnezy, 1990, p. 426).

In order to clarify the nature of the concept, Shaikh and Kauppi (2010) tried to deconstruct Resilience by clarifying their definition and meaning. These scholars have identified eight phenomena associated with resilience which they have divided into two clusters based from their disciplinary origin. The first cluster is derived from the field of psychology which covers six themes including (1) personality traits, (2) positive outcomes/forms of adaptation despite high-risk, (3) factors associated with positive adaptation, (4) processes, (5) sustained competent functioning/stress resistance, and (6) recovery from trauma or adversity. The second cluster of definitions is rooted in the discipline of sociology and encompasses two themes including (1) human agency and resistance, and (2) survival. In the same paper, they have explored the inconsistencies of the varied definitions used within the published literature and describes the differing conceptualizations of resilience as well as their limitations.

As a personality trait, resilience is centered around the quality of the person to be properly disposed in the face any challenges or adversaries to be able to overcome them. This trait includes activity level, optimism, positive responsiveness to others, equanimity, perseverance, self reliance, meaningfulness and existential aloneness (Greeff & Ritman, 2005; Jacelon, 1997, In Shaikh and Kauppi 2010 ). This concept of resilience according to Marecek (2002), is quite limited since it construed resilience as a static individual trait implying that those who are not able to yield positive outcomes in the face of severe risk/adversity are responsible for their plight. In effect, one is not considered resilient if he is unable to yield positive outcome.

Resiliency as positive adaptation despite high risk or adversity will require the existence of significant risk or adversity and the quality of its acceptable adaptation. However, if there is only positive adaptation without significant risk or adversity, then it wont be considered as mark of resiliency (Shaikh and Kauppi, 2010). This somehow delimits the concept of resilience as a positive adaptation.

When viewed as factors that facilitate positive adaptation, resiliency must be associated to “two main factors including protective and compensatory factors (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003).”

Resilience can be viewed as a result of a process or may refer to the process itself. There are two accepted models which view resiliency as a process namely: the interactive processes and the main effect models. Interactive processes model involves intervention strategies which focus on altering the level of a particular risk or on enhancing the protective processes which mediate the risk and adaptive outcomes (Masten, 2001). Main effect model proposes that an individual is resilient because the weight of the stressor or adversity is counterbalanced by compensatory experiences or events (Shaikh and Kauppi, 2010).

Considered as coping process, resilience implies effective coping in the face of stressful experiences resulting in effective adaptation (Rolf, 1999). Perhaps this is the most common understanding of resilience where one is expected to resort to in times of adversities. The vast literature in psychology points resiliency as a form of coping mechanism of an individual, groups or community whenever confronted by any form of adversary.

From a *sociological* perspective, resilience is described as a form of an active decision making, resistance to structural conditions and survival. This perspective emphasizes the structural and material conditions which are influenced or shaped by resiliency.

Shaikh and Kauppi (2010) considered resilience as an existential human agency which refers to the capacity to make sense of one’s experiences, assign meaning to them and consequently make choices and take actions within a particular social and historical context. This sociological perspective of resilience implies that the person determines and decides for himself certain actions or situations which his particular context call for.

Viktor Frankl, a holocaust survivor and scholar, claims that individuals who demonstrate resilience in the face of multiple forms of psychological and physiological trauma are able to construct meaning and purpose of the human existence, of their personal sufferings, of their own lives and exercise their “free will” by making deliberate choices (In Shaikh and Kauppi, 2010). This concept of resilience is reflected a lot in Frankl’s logotherapy theory where he claims

that one can still find a meaning of life in the face of misfortunes and adversaries. Frankl himself attest to its effectiveness by virtue of his personal experience as a holocaust survivor.

Other social scientists and scholars like Hunter (2001) view resilience as a form of survival which may not necessarily lead to normative outcomes or positive adaptation. This view of resilience is particularly noticed among some drop out adolescents who participate in some illegal and not socially acceptable activities in order to survive. Resilience is not seen as adaptable process but may be characterized by a process of defensive tactics such as insulation, isolation, disconnection and violent responses required to survive the adversities (Hunter & Chandler, 1999). This notion of resilience as a survival is actually noticeable among developing Asian countries including the Philippines where young people from far flung places are recruited to join some para military groups like Abu Sayyaf, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) fighters, NPA (New Peoples Army) and (BIFF) Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. Recruited to embrace a certain ideology, these young people are lured to join these paramilitary groups and experience some sense of self-fulfillment by virtue of being armed and part of the military struggle. Yet, more than self-fulfillment, these young recruits who often belong to the financially deprived families may find their association with their respective paramilitary groups a sort of survival as well. It can be inferred further that their quest to overcome their social and financial difficulties are still primarily driven by survival. The same experiences may apply to other ASEAN countries like Myanmar, Indonesia and Cambodia which were also been rigged by insurgency or ideological problems.

Michael Ungar (2008) approach the concept of resilience by considering the works of Kurth Lewin (1890-1947) on the significant link between personal characteristics and the environment where one lives. Lewin's concept will be systematically developed by his student Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and be known as 'Ecological System Theory of Human Development.' Drawing out from the works of these scholars and relating them with the concept of resilience Ungar then proposed to describe *resilience as the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being, the capacity of individuals' physical and social ecologies to provide these resources and the capacity of individuals and their families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways of resources to be shared.*

Perhaps Ungar's contribution will provide a unifying concept of resilience in considering its nature and significance.

### **Resilience in Communication Research**

Resiliency has been discussed from various perspectives and approaches. It appears that this topic is one of the most widely researched and continued to be talked about concept in communication researches.

The different popular construct of resilience was the subject of a research article of Patrice Buzznell and Brian Houston (2018). The latter writes on the different popular construct of resilience namely; individual/relational resilience, family resilience, organizational resilience, community resilience and national resilience. In this article, Buzznell and Houston viewed resilience as a process or situation embedded in everyday life at the ordinary moments of loss or adversary.

At the individual/relational movements, resilience is viewed as a social relationship which has its strongest influence on whether some can adapt positively to adversity (Buzznell and Houston, 2018). Relationship dictates how and why persons may or may not be able to overcome some adversaries they may be facing. This line of thinking is in fact reflected in the concept of family resilience which Theiss (2018) have explored in her article on family communication and resilience. She further claims that "role modeling" technique promotes the concept of resilience among children since the family is the first school where children first learn how to socialize. Parental traits and characteristics communicate and cultivate the notion of flexibility, adaptability and resiliency. Walsh (2003) identifies specific family processes and structures that buffer stress and dysfunctions and bolster healing and growth after a certain crisis; firstly, the tendency to embrace a belief system that look for meaning in adversity and adopt positive outlook and integrate spirituality or transcendence. Secondly the tendency to have organizational structures that encourages flexibility, adaptability and foster connectedness. Together these form protective factors that help promote the concept of resiliency.

How can we validate this concept of family or relational resilience in the light of increasing suicidal ideation among digital natives? How do their digital worlds like social media and digital games contribute to the concept

of resilience? These are valid questions particularly if we take some alarming phenomena of cyber bullying and suicidal ideation among young people because of online games known as “Blue Whale challenge.” This game was invented in 2013 by Philipp Budeikin, a 21-year-old former psychology student who was expelled from his university. The game has already claimed a lot the lives of teenagers suffering from depression. Some of them e are subjected to self-harm by their “curators” or “admins” which will culminate with ending their lives. And while being subjected to these harmful tasks, young people are encouraged to post their tasks in social media or talk with their ‘admins’ via Skype. Social media platforms and other online communities are being utilized to perpetuate this crime. This phenomenon has already reached Asia particularly countries like India, China, Bangladesh and Iran. How do we then reconcile or equate the notion of family or relational resilience in light of these foregoing realities?

Organizing resiliency encompasses the process by which individual and organizations reintegrate and foster productive change during and after career setbacks, material and personnel losses, disasters, or other obstacles (Buzzanell, 2010). This type of resilience works at the micro, meso and macro levels which often intersect as people engage in sense making, adaptation to and transformation of their realities (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). It must be noted, therefore, that cultivating resilience under 1 organizational set up do entail plans for recovery and rebuilding. Buzzanell further indicates that communicative constitution of resilience also builds on the transformative struggle that can grow during the times of disruption and loss.

Foregrounding productive action while backgrounding unproductive behavior or negative feelings is the key to the communication theory of resilience (Buzzanell, 2018). It is considered key because negative feelings are not subjected to denial or coping and instead they are viewed as legitimate emotions expressed by individuals and organizations. Their legitimization affirms people’s dignity while encouraging different courses of actions. This further provides an atmosphere of inclusiveness among the members of the community. Resilience therefore, promotes community building and strengthening the bond of human relationship because empathy breeds connectedness despite the adversaries they may be experiencing.

For this scholar, communication theory of resiliency does not only focus on traits and characteristics but on how resilience is constituted through

storytelling, messages, routines, ritual, slogans, networks and other means, including the role of social media and new technologies (Chewning, Lai and Doerfel, 2012). This further implies that the mechanics of communicative disposition do matter since reconstituting resiliency through storytelling, rituals and others means of social communication necessarily call for such personal disposition.

Community resilience is specifically a collective effort focused on adaptation at the community level (Pfefferbaum and Klomp, 2013). A collection of people and groups who are able to interact successfully to facilitate adaptations of the whole. This type of communication resilience is often seen as a communitarian reaction after a disaster or adversary that may befall on their place.

On the concept of national resilience, Hamilton Bean (2018), conceptualizes resilience as ‘central trope,’ ‘shared social phenomenon,’ framing intended to soothe through a ‘psychic bond,’ that ‘evoke(s) solidarity’ and ‘shared feelings of resoluteness.’ This type of communication resilience requires a careful attention on the ‘meaning and consequence of the language we use’ because it will evoke not only national attention but only promote solidarity among the citizenry particularly in times of disaster and natural calamities. A concrete example for this type of communication resilience is our “Marawi Experience” where a city was controlled and ravaged by a group of extremists in the southern part of the Philippines. And while the government may not have played a proper role for promoting such resiliency, non-government organizations including various religious organizations have mobilized their respective units to communicate national resilience through programs and projects that help promote the concept of shared social phenomenon. Embedded in some particular countries are some sort of national concepts that help promote the concept of resiliency. In the Philippine context for example, we have a famous notion of “KAPWA” which refers to a ‘shared identity,’ a ‘shared inner self,’ a ‘self that is present in other.’ This concept implies a unique moral obligation to treat one another as equals. Perhaps banking on this kind of notion may help promote, if not propagate, the notion of national resiliency.



## **Resilience as a Cultural Concern**

Under the cultural lens, resilience is often seen as a confluence social and cultural texts resulting to process of overcoming adversities. Luthar, Cicchetti and Becker (2000) have defined resilience as dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation with the context of significant adversity. Other authors like Kim-Cohen (2007); Lerner (2006); Rutter (2005) and Ungar (2005) describe resilience as the trait of individuals, characteristics of the individual's environment as well as a set of processes and mechanisms through which internal and external assets are harnessed when diversity is present.

Shaikh and Kauppi (2010) have consistently affirmed the importance and significance of culture. These scholars have further claimed that Ungar's definition emphasizes how culture may inform the meaning of resilience.

Understanding which aspects of physical and social ecologies influence resilience depends upon an appreciation for how these aspects are valued by a particular culture. For instance, resources such as medical care, education and foster care might be adequate to protect against risks and stressors, but of little use to a particular individual if what is offered is not valued by the culture of the individual. Similarly, a pattern of resistance and survival through "maladaptive" means might not necessarily be a sign of disorder, but it may mean that there is either dearth of resources or that the available resources lack cultural relevance. Hence while defining risks, protective or compensatory factors, processes and outcomes in the study of resilience, researchers should take cultural perspectives into consideration. At the same time, researchers need to be open to the possibility of culture being resisted or rejected and an alternate culture being adopted as a pathway to successful adaptation (Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010).

This exactly the reason why some ethnic groups in the Philippines may have continued to engaged in some kidnapping activities despite the government enforcement of the law. For this groups, kidnapping is not just

a means of living but has been an integral part of their cultural make up to affirm their identity and sense of meaning.

Parallel to the abovementioned example, are there some maladaptive behaviors in our Asian cultures particular in our Asian religions that somehow contribute to our notion of resiliency?

Perhaps it would be nice to be reminded that embedded in the definition and description of resilience of Ungar is the concept of Social Ecology Model which originates with Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework for Human Development. Ungar associates such model to explain the fluidity of the concept of resilience as influence by culture. In fact, he will further claims that there are four principles that help better define and operationalize resilience namely; decentrality, complexity, atypicality and cultural relativity (Ungar, 2011). Decentrality in the sense that there must be an interplay between the physical and social ecology of the person involved; complexity in the sense that we cannot simply come up certain generalization to account resiliency because the context of the situations needs to be addressed or considered. Atypicality of resilience lies on that fact that process of resiliency may manifest in ways that we may not want to promote but are necessary because of the social ecologies in which the children survive (Ungar, 2011). The cultural relativity of resilience lies on the reality that the capacity of an individual to negotiate any adversity still being determined by cultural barriers.

*The ability to cope and how it is defined can be different across various cultures* (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008). Based on this premise, the Cultural Resilience Scale has been developed to examine how cultural factors relate to the development of coping and resilience.

Human agency can be manifested in the form of resistance to the established order or structural conditions. Therefore, the concept of resistance should be included in the conceptualization of resilience (Anderson & Danis, 2006; Marshall, 2000). Resistance can take place at the micro and macro levels (Raby, 2006). At the micro level it may involve overt or covert resistance to dominant social forces, while at the macro level it may include collective, progressive or revolutionary actions characterizing a social movement. At the micro level, resistance can take different forms including "deviant" responses of truancy and fighting to deal with a problem. This form of resistance overlaps

with the conceptualization of resilience as “survival” described in the subsequent section. Additionally, resistance may involve negotiation where the dominant cultures are both adopted and contested. At times resistance may take the form of ambiguity where a person may walk between the spaces of dominant and non-dominant social forces. Regardless of the form of resistance, it implies agency and resilience among individuals (In Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010).

### **Resilience As A Religious/Spirituality Concern In Asia**

It appears to be a common tendency to link or associate resiliency with religious concern. In fact, religiosity and spirituality are used interchangeably and often associated with resiliency. Various studies do indicate that religion is often seen as a means of adjustment and resiliency.

In the article of Ozlem Ogtem-Young (2017), faith is acknowledged as one of the resources that allows individual member of faith communities to draw on it as a tool of resilience. The study argues that resilience is something that is relational, subjective and contextual upon which faith plays an important role. The findings also indicate that faith is the source of the resilience in encounters of life adversities like discrimination and exclusion, migration related problems, emotions of separations and parting.

Richardson (2002) proposes that resilience is a process which begins at any point in time when a person has adapted to his/her situation in life. This condition is called ‘biopsychospiritual homeostasis’ where the body, mind and spirit are in harmony with one another as well as with the external circumstances of the individual. The biopsychospiritual homeostasis is routinely attacked by internal and external life prompts, stressors, adversities, and opportunities. Disruption in biopsychospiritual homeostasis may lead to the first stage of the resilience process wherein a person experiences self-doubt, hurt, guilt, fear, and confusion. With the passing of time, an individual begins to think about what he/she should do under the given circumstances. At this stage, the process of reintegration emerges (In Shaikh & Kauppi, 2010).

Religion is considered as a means of resilience and adjustment to chronic illnesses as indicated in the works of Avgoulas and Fanany (2013). These scholars considered the role of religion as one of the coping strategies for significant life events like chronic illnesses. It is because religious beliefs

may provide a source of meaning...beneficial side effects on self-esteem and in allowing individual a sense of control over their life (Diener and Diener, 2009). Faith in the superior being or God provides strength to adapt and manage one's condition...Although culture cannot be dissociated from discussing the concept of religion as in the case of the Greek participants for this work of Avgoulas and Fanany but the reality remains that religions may serve as lens for interpreting one's experiences and a framework for determining the meaning of life events.

Drawing out from the works of Michael Ungar on *resilience as the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain well-being, the capacity of individuals' physical and social ecologies to provide these resources and the capacity of individuals and their families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways of resources to be shared*, will it be appropriate as well to include Spiritual ecology in the composition of resilience as a capacity? The spiritual dimension of a person by all means dictates well how one can overcome adversaries.

Perhaps, a further study needs to be warranted as to how spiritual ecology contributes to the notion, development and integration of resiliency across cultures, particularly in Asia where religion is inseparable with culture. Michael Ungar's research note on "Resilience across Culture," indicates that among the domains of study for health resources that are culturally and contextually relevant is 'affiliation with a religious organizations.' What does this mean for us as a center of research for Religion and Social Communication?

From the account and presentations of Prof. Binod Agrawal and Prof. Chandrabhanu Pattanayak where the concept of "orality traditions" is discussed as a matter related to religious rituals, worship and the like do indicate the significance of resilience in the religious perspective concept. Orality tradition itself is a concrete manifestation of resiliency as to how to preserve, sustain and promote religious traditions itself. The ways and means of communicating these "religious rituals" and the like may be affected by digital revolution but it will be replaced the tradition itself. This notion is in fact, cited in the paper of Prof. Pattanayak (2018) on "the Resilient 'Tribal' and Mediated Orality."

Similarly, the masteral thesis of Amornkit Prompakdee (2018) indicates how integrating Thai culture to the signs and symbols of the Christian

expressions of faith and place of worship are indeed examples of resiliency. Adjusting to the culture of the people in order to communicate religious faith constitute to the very nature of resiliency as the capacity to navigate or negotiate culturally meaningful ways of resources to be shared.

### **Quo Vadis?**

Putting together these pieces of evidences and arguments on the significance, relevance and efficacy of resilience to the cultural and religious/spiritual aspects of our daily lives, what more can we do to pose as a challenge for us and other people of share our convictions and visions?

Considering the dearth or shortage of literature on resiliency that explore beyond Europe or western cultures, perhaps it is a must that we try begin exploring how resiliency matter for us Asians whose culture indicates the inseparability of the spiritual or religious aspects.

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## Virtual Spaces and Inter/Intra-religious Dialogues

*Gnana Patrick*

### Interreligious Dialogue

Discourses on ‘inter/intra’ religious dialogues are with us for a considerable period of time now. There are those who trace the origin of these dialogues even to the birth of the Axial age (~ 800 – 200 BCE) when there took place in different parts of the globe a reflexivity over ritual practices leading to enunciation of different ‘philosophies’ or ‘theologies’ or ‘theoria’.<sup>1</sup> We have come a very long way from this ancient moment. The modern era, ensuing along with navigations and explorations of different continents, and inventions and technological advancement, brought about further levels of reflexivity against a heightened awareness of plurality. It was more cataclysmic rather than harmonious, intending more towards establishing oneself upon others rather than along with others.

A discourse intended towards mutual co-existence and appreciation, according to Leonard Swidler, seems to have emerged along with the conduct of the Parliament of World Religions in 1893 in which Swami Vivekananda’s speech on ‘the gospel of the harmony of all religions’ set the trend. It’s about 125 years since then, and much water has flowed down in the fields of interreligious understanding and dialogue. Today the term ‘dialogue’ has come to mean “a constructive engagement between religious texts, teachings,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Leonard Swidler, “The History of Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Corneille (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3 - 19.

and practices oriented toward the possibility of change and growth.”<sup>2</sup> It would connote a wide spectrum of meanings, as in the words of Catherine Corneille, a leading scholar in interreligious dialogue, “ranging from peaceful coexistence and friendly exchanges, to active engagement with the teachings and practices of the other, and from cooperation toward social change to common prayer and participation in the ritual life of the other.”<sup>3</sup> Jose Kuttianimattathil, yet another scholar in the field, names them as different forms of dialogue: dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, dialogue of religious experience<sup>4</sup> and so on. The ‘dialogue of life’ takes place in the day-to-day life-world of the people, where they exchange ideas, opinions, insights, etc of their respective religions in the context of actual life; ‘dialogue of action’ takes place in organised efforts by different religionists for goals of common good; ‘dialogue of theological exchange’ takes place in ‘dialogue centres’ or academic circles; and, ‘dialogue of religious experience’ takes place in centres or religious sites where a facility for sharing of different religious experiences or living together (like an ashram) is in place.

These ‘dialogues’ have grown with their own virtues and orientations. Corneille identifies ‘epistemological humility’, ‘hospitality towards others’, ‘commitment’, ‘interconnection’, and ‘empathy’ as virtues needed for interreligious dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Epistemological humility for a religion would mean becoming aware of the finitude/historical dimension of every religious tradition and being ready to learn from others; hospitality would mean a respect and openness towards others; commitment would mean involvement or commitment to a particular religious tradition which makes the dialogue an ‘engaged one’; interconnection would imply recognizing certain commonality between religions which, as a general rule, engage with questions of human existence, its future, etc.; and empathy would mean stretching one’s religious imagination beyond one’s own tradition to warmly *understand* and not explain away another tradition. These virtues, though very challenging, have been

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Corneille, “Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Corneille (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jose Kuttianimattathil, *sdb, Practice and Theology of Interreligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 1995), 588.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Corneille, “Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Corneille (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 21.



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attempted in the practise of interreligious dialogues in actual contexts of life.

### Virtual Spaces and Interreligious Dialogue

While all these practices and reflections on interreligious dialogue continue to grow, with their own ebbs and flows, we witness today to, at least for the past quarter of a century, yet another space, the virtual space, the computer mediated cyberspace, becoming the arena for the practices and reflections of interreligious dialogue. Virtual space is increasingly taking hold of human consciousness everywhere (according to the *Internet World Stats*, Internet penetration in India is 34.4%, in China its 52.7%, in the UK 89.9%, and in the USA 84.2%, etc) and is playing a vital role in the fashioning of selfhood as well as imaging of the other.<sup>6</sup> Virtually literate humanity has come today to practise religion too virtually. Scholars of ‘virtual religion’ generate material, which descriptively dwell upon rituals and symbols, explore roles and functions, analyse the forms of virtual religious communities and their relationship to offline communities and so on.

According to Brenda E Bashar, this communication is inaugurating a new era of “global interactive relations” which will connect humanity and fashion new communities beyond the existing boundaries.<sup>7</sup> This communication straddles between two worlds – the cyber and the physical, in a manner of creating a virtual world, which enjoys simultaneity of space and time. As Said Ali Reza, a scholar on virtual religion, surmises, virtuality is relentlessly endeavouring to collapse the actual into virtual, endeavouring to ‘drown the netizen in the virtual space’, by trying to annihilate the border between the real and the virtual.

Asia is taking to virtual religiosity in a big way. Several factors contribute to the phenomenon. According to the *Internetworldstat* survey in 2018, 48.1% percent of Asians are Internet users, and in terms of individual countries, Japan has 93.3%, South Korea 92.6%, Taiwan 87.9%, China and India – the most populous countries, 54.6% and 34.1% respectively.<sup>8</sup> 48.1% of internet penetration in Asia has its own impact upon the presence and dynamics of religion both in actual and virtual religious fields of Asia. When

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats14.htm#north> accessed on 04 Oct 2018

<sup>7</sup> Brenda E. Bashar, *Give me that Online Religion*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm> accessed on 05 October 2018

I typed phrases like ‘Hinduism in Asia’, ‘Buddhism in Asia’, ‘Christianity in Asia’, ‘Islam in Asia’ in Google, I found 20.9, 30.4, 34.3 and 140 millions of hits respectively.<sup>9</sup> These accounts are not strict representative samplings of the presence and dynamics of Asian religions in the digital space, but, certainly, an indication of the amazing intensity of their virtual presence.

In this context, it would do well to explore whether the virtual space could turn out to be an effective one for interreligious dialogue and understanding. In an age that speaks of potential ‘clashes’ centring round civilizations anchoring predominantly on religions, it would do well to explore whether the virtual space can serve as a site for interreligious understanding and harmony; and if yes, how?. My paper is an attempt at it. Based on a ‘virtual ethnography’<sup>10</sup> of websites of ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’, I reflect upon the features and possibilities of interreligious dialogues, drawing inspiration from the literature available on the subject in offline contexts.

### **Virtual Interreligious Dialogues: An Ethnographic Account**

A very relevant clarification to be made at the outset is with regard to the usage of the phrase ‘interreligious dialogues’ in relation to the kindred phrases like ‘interfaith dialogues’, ‘multi-religious dialogues’, etc. In my virtual ethnography, when I searched in Google ‘interreligious dialogue online forums’, it brought about 2.21 million hits.<sup>11</sup> And, a majority of these hits carried the word ‘interfaith’ rather than ‘interreligious’. It would then be more appropriate, I thought, to use the phrase ‘interfaith dialogue’. However, in one of the websites, I found a certain explanation which said interfaith dialogues stand for dialogues between the Abrahamic religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism, while the interreligious dialogue stands for dialogue extending to religions like Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism and so on. But in my continuous exploration I could not find this explanation being followed strictly. I found on the other hand the words ‘interreligious’ and ‘interfaith’ used interchangeably. Therefore I too would use it interchangeably in terms of their meaning, but be consistent with using the word ‘interreligious’ in the ethnographic account.

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed from google on 05 October 2018

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Accessed on 04 October 2018.

## *Virtual Dialogue Forums: Samples*

### *Forums – Type I*

There are websites which use the name ‘forum’, and are sponsored by particular religious traditions, giving information and space for practice of one particular religion only. Examples could be ‘Hindu Dharma Forums’ (<http://www.hindudharmaforums.com/>), ‘Forum for Hindu Awakening’ (<http://www.forumforhinduawakening.org/>), ‘Islamic Forum’ (<https://www.gawaher.com/>), ‘Christian Forums’ (<https://www.christianforums.com/>), ‘Worthy Christian Forums’ (<https://www.worthychristianforums.com/>), etc. They host materials on their particular traditions, include testimonies and apologetics, and are intended for presenting their tradition only. They are forums to the extent they are to some extent interactive, in the sense that a visitor can ask question, clarify matters, etc., but not expected or even disallowed to express a contrary view. Such forums are information rich, but lack the dynamics of conversation, characteristics of an interreligious dialogue.

### *Forums – Type II*

The second type could be forums which are sponsored by particular religious traditions, but, incorporate a space for dialogue, wherein a visitor is allowed to express a different or even opposite point of view. There is a level of dissent allowed. However, the different or opposite views will be arbitrated within the framework of the particular tradition that sponsors the forum. Examples could be ‘The Hindu Forum’ (<http://thehinduforum.com/index.php>), ‘Islamic City Forum’ (<https://www.islamicity.org/forum/>), ‘Christianity Forum--City Data Forum’ (<http://www.city-data.com/forum/christianity/>), etc.

### *Forums – Type III*

These are forums which openly name themselves as interreligious forums to involve in interreligious discourse and learning. It provides resources for understanding different others, and encourage to learn about one another. They carry ‘common’ names like ‘beliefnet’, ‘bridge-builders’, etc. There is a clear orientation in these sites to study religions comparatively or even do comparative theology with ongoing mutual learning. Following are some examples:

**Beliefnet** (<http://www.beliefnet.com>) is one of the foremost commercial websites for inter-religious discourse and learning. In the format of an online magazine, it provides an array of resources for anyone looking to learn about their own faith or another.

**Bridge-Builders** a top-flight social networking website for inter-religious leaders, professionals, academics, and students. Hosted by the Interfaith Youth Core, it aims to connect members of the emerging Interfaith Youth Movement.

**FaithWorld** (<http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2009/02/06/canada-and-the-niqab-how-to-go-public-in-the-public-square/>) is a blog hosted by *Reuters* and features brief articles on religion from reporters, activists, and leaders from around the world.

**Huffington Post Religion** (<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/section/religion>) is a section of the *Huffington Post* featuring a wide-ranging discussion about religion, spirituality, and the ways they influence our lives.

**Journal of Comparative Theology** (<http://www.comparativetheology.org/>) is an online publication in which scholars share articles that seek to understand a particular faith in theological dialogue with one or more other religious traditions.

**Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue** (<http://irstudies.org/>) is a forum for academic, social, and timely issues affecting religious communities around the world. Published online, it is designed to increase both the quality and frequency of interchanges between religious groups and their leaders and scholars.

**Multifaith World** ([www.multifaithworld.org](http://www.multifaithworld.org)) is a blog sponsored by the Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College that describes discourse and initiatives taking place between religious communities.

**On Faith** (<https://www.onfaith.co>) is a blog hosted by *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek Magazine* and features brief articles

from some of the top thinkers on religion and inter-religious work.

**Religious Information** (<https://www.religious-information.com/religion-world-statistics.html>) provides a concise description of the religions of the world with relevant statistics.

<https://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/current/forums.html>

## **Online Forums**

### Center for Christian-Jewish Learning

The Center sponsors these online forums in order to promote conversation on significant subjects for Christian-Jewish relations. Some forums consist of invited responses to papers or conferences. Others invite thoughtful contributions to moderated discussions from any Internet reader.

1. The Israeli-Hezbollah Conflict (July 2006)
2. The Upcoming 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*
3. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later

Christian Muslim Forum (<http://christianmuslimforum.org/blog/being-interfaith-literate-a-guide-to-online-interfaith-etiquette/>)

Interreligious dialogue online forums (<https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/blog/can-interfaith-dialogue-happen-online>)

Journal of Interreligious Studies (<http://irstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/McGuire.pdf>)

Interfaith.org (<https://www.interfaith.org/>) is a freely available and independent online publication, providing information on a comprehensive range of issues relating to religion, faith, and spiritual matters.

Many of these forums are sponsored by leading communication agencies like periodicals, newspapers, media houses, etc. There is a certain distancing from particular traditions, and an active advocacy to learn different religions systematically, even with research and academic studies. A special attention is given to the commonality between religions. Some of these sites openly project the idea that God or divine mystery is one and the same, and all religions lead to this one God or same mystery.

### *Contents: Samples*

Virtual ethnography of interreligious dialogue would require that we describe the content of the dialogue. I found that what are presented as ‘threads’ in a website or in hyperlinks titled as ‘Forum’ are the ones which present the content of the virtual dialogues. I searched for these threads, and found them to be countless, leading to further and further threads with multiple hyperlinks. Since it became impossible to describe the content of all these threads, I chose contents from just two threads for the purpose of this study. They are named ‘Help with Religion’ and ‘interfaith quotes’ found under the column ‘Belief and Spirituality’, in the website named interfaith dialogue—<https://www.interfaith.org/community/> Since the entire threads cannot be presented within the body of this article, I am attaching them as appendices, but give a summary description of them here:

#### *Thread 1*

‘Help with Religion?’ is a thread started by one ‘LOTR1993’ on March 26, 2018. The person introduces that she (gender identified during the course of the conversation) is new to the forum and wants to understand what religion she is in. She states that she is 24 yrs old, and spent the previous decade of her life as a “conservative follower of Christ, ... dedicated every word, action, thought, job, activity, etc. to serving God.” But over the past 4-5 months, due to several things that happened to her, she has decided that she doesn’t necessarily agree with the Bible and not sure if she believed in the God of the Bible. She has now come to a point of searching out as to what religion she will belong to. She goes on to narrate whatever she believes like believing in selfless care of others, virtuous life, honesty, sexual morality, etc. She speaks also of things she might believe but not quite sure, like belief in a soul, life-after death, etc. As regards the existence of God, she is unsure whether she

believes in God, but has a GUT feeling that there is some higher power; she firmly believes that every religion should respect each other. She goes then on to narrate a long list of what she thinks one should or shouldn't do in life... After a long narration of sorts, she ends with an appeal 'any help to enable her find her religion' would be appreciated.

There comes a response from another participant in the forum by name 'WIL' who welcomes her into the forum, not so much to find answer but to discuss matters openly. 'WIL' suggests that there is an online belief test which 'LOTR1993' could take to find her religion. 'WIL' too shares some of his beliefs and unbeliefs or difficulties with beliefs, etc. Before 'LOTR1993' responds to 'WIL', there comes a third participant by name Bhaktajan, who is rather critical of 'LOTR1993's' unbelief, and even chastises her for not believing in God. Bhaktajan writes as follows:

If God is a Person ---His person is real, His name and likeness and characteristics and pastimes are existing somewhere. It is arrogant that you need not search for His personage as it is --- esp whilst you know You are a person--- so God is His own Person. It is an explicit absolute personage. If we don't seek God in His own absolute personage ---then we seeks all sorts of other 'self-serving' things.

Before 'LOTR1993' responds, 'WIL' comes back and presents the Belief-o-matic he took again for himself and found himself to be 'Liberal Quaker'. He adds "I'm pretty much decidedly agnostic...which to me means "I don't know, what I don't know" in regards to deities and the hereafter (heaven/hell/rebirth etc)."

Now a new entrant to the thread by name 'Namaste Jesus' interacts in the following words:

Hi, LOTR1993. Religion can be overwhelming at times to say the least. Takes a while to soak it all in and put everything into perspective. I wouldn't worry though. Seems like you have a good head on your shoulders and are headed in the right direction. My late father-in-law once told me: "*Faith in God lie not in the words of man, but is born unto you and is contained in your*

*heart.”* Many’s the time those words from that simple farmer have brought me solace.

--Namaste Jesus, Mar 26, 2018

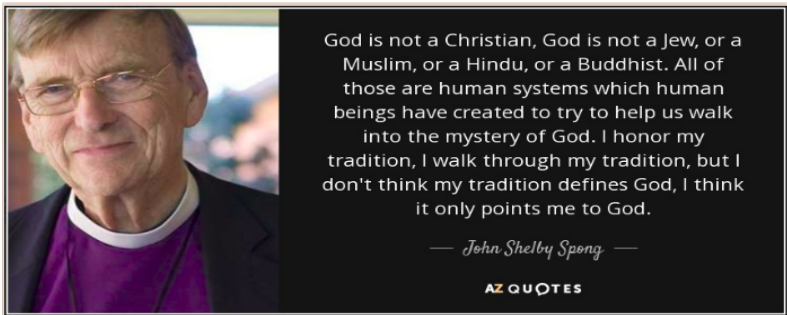
Now LOTR1993 comes back to the conversation, and says:

Wil- Thank you so much for your detailed responses. They were very helpful to me. I went to the link you posted and to the beliefs quiz. I got a 99% match for “Unitarian Universalism.” I had heard the term before, but knew absolutely nothing about what it was. So I looked at a few Universalist churches websites, where their beliefs are listed and stuff. I am of course still in my spiritual search, but I found that I agreed with almost all of these churches beliefs and claims. While I am not yet sure of my beliefs, I think that looking inside of my heart and my core beliefs and maybe branching out and experiencing spirituality through different groups...

The dialogue keeps growing ...

### *Thread 2*

The second thread that I studied was titled ‘Interfaith Quotes’. It presented materials like:



wil, Mar 17, 2018



I am looking forward to your contributions... and seeing this thread grow!

Khalil Gibran

“I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the spirit.”

wil, Mar 17, 2018

Great idea for a thread!

StevePame, Mar 18, 2018

“Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.”  
Thich Nhat Hanh

Thomas, Mar 19, 2018

### *Virtues for Virtual Dialogues*

Interreligious dialogue through virtual spaces could be more challenging and demanding. Julian Bond, a person cited as a leading figure in Christian-Muslim online forum, gives the following observations and instructive suggestions to build up the virtual virtues:

- Online dialogue is not easy—prepare to be challenged.
- Patience is essential, as (it) is not giving in to ego—**engage** rather than **compete** with those that disagree with you.
- As we are all equal when exchanging **plain text** (and sometimes hypertext) with each other we may be **less aware of our human differences**/inequality – be mindful.
- **Immediacy can be risky** – try not to respond instantly when the topic is charged.
- Take responsibility – ideally those in positions of religious, interfaith

or other leadership will see the importance of engaging pastorally, not antagonistically, and **take on a role of being shepherds.**

- Think of others (and **collaborate**) – as much as you speak up for your own community, reach out to others.
- Ask yourself what kind of exchange you are intending/seeking/having – **be aware of each other and your audience, especially the large silent majority.**
- You are a representative of your faith – **what values are at its core?** What values are you modelling to others through your exchange?
- **Be aware of evangelism** – people engaging in interfaith or dialogue online can be perceived as an open invitation to engage in negative evangelism/da’wah – this can range from inviting others to know more to rubbishing the other religion and being very provocative.
- Don’t give up – **The more difficult exchanges generate the most ‘life’**, as well as heat, and even when negative enable the group to grow in their relationships with each other and **affirm each other in a context of conflict.**<sup>12</sup>

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Yet another person, Sarita Agerman by name, gives in a blog the following as the ‘virtues’ of online dialogue:<sup>13</sup>

- **Be Prepared for Disagreement:** Disagreement is a natural part of interreligious dialogue. We need to be prepared for it. Disagreements make us humble and learn from one another. Though at times it is uncomfortable, it frees us from ‘self-congratulatory’ cocoon, and ensures new knowledge about one another
- **Be Positive:** We need to be positively affirmative towards one another. Blunt statements like ‘you’re wrong’ should be avoided.
- **Be Inclusive:** As interfaith participants we should recognise that no two individuals interpret religious doctrine or experience the world and/ or God in the same way. Therefore, we should avoid using sweeping statements like ‘we believe this’ or ‘you believe that.’ Both create and promote a counterproductive dichotomy of ‘Us and Them’. Rather, it is often more useful to speak about our own personal beliefs using ‘I believe’ or ‘I think.’

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/blog/can-interfaith-dialogue-happen-online> Published May 29, 2017 by Julian Bond & Alice Sandham.

<sup>13</sup> [@SaritaAgerman](#)

- Be Mindful: We need to be mindful about the words we use. ‘Deny’, ‘reject’, ‘infidel’, etc. can easily close the conversation rather than opening.
- Be Responsible: Becoming interfaith literate means that we develop an acute sense of responsibility when we interact with others. Whether we are in a closed group, private conversation or public space, we should conduct ourselves as if anyone can hear or read what we say.
- Be Clear: important to make it clear which aspect we’re commenting on during interfaith interactions. Are you challenging certain ideas or the way those ideas were expressed? This pre-emptive clarification is particularly useful in online conversations which are particularly prone to misunderstandings.
- Be Kind: We should be kind rather than pouncing on other person. They might not have realized how their words would be interpreted or they may still be getting to grips with the concept of Interfaith. Mistakes are an opportunity for everyone to learn: for the person who made it and for those who respond to it.
- Be Thankful: There’s always a part of us that wants to have the final word when we leave a discussion. Our ego creates a desire to ‘win’ at all costs and it tries to achieve this by putting others down. Instead, we should show gratitude and thank the other person for the opportunity of speaking together. We can also take the opportunity to apologize for any misunderstandings or wrong assumptions.

The observations or instructive suggestions given by Julian Bond are very meaningful and relevant for the practitioners of virtual interreligious dialogue. Though they correspond and complement in a large measure to the virtues enunciated by Catherine Corneille for offline interreligious dialogue, they highlight issues and dynamics specific to virtual dialogues alone. For example, he points to the fact that virtual interreligious dialogues are based on ‘plain texts’ devoid of a face-to-face interaction which is the experience in offline contexts. Plain texts have their own dynamics, evoking sharp cognitive/intellectualist responses, in contrast to the context-dependent multi-featured responses (audio, visual, physical, etc) in offline contexts. The cognitive/intellectualist salience of online ‘dialogues’, since it is blind to the status-differences of persons involved, may obtain extreme levels of intellectualist criticality towards others. They could be intellectually provocative, leading to emotional and physical reactions. Therefore the instructive suggestions

like ‘be patient’, ‘be mindful’, ‘be aware of the silent majority’, etc., given by Bond are relevant for virtual interreligious dialogue. Similarly the suggestions given by Sarita Agerman to ‘be kind’, ‘be inclusive’, ‘be thankful’, etc., are also relevant to cultivate the right mood and disposition to be involved in interreligious dialogue, especially in the virtual space.

Bond’s confidence in the virtual dialogue is by itself instructive. He goes on to share some of the virtues of Corneille, while observing that one has to be ‘engaged’, ‘responsible’, ‘committed’, ‘collaborative’, ‘reaching out to others’ in virtual dialogue. Similarly Sarita’s suggestions to ‘be prepared for disagreement’, ‘be responsible’, etc. are also meaningful in this context.

Bond, very meaningfully, brings in the necessity of being a representative of the ‘core values of a faith’ while being involved in online dialogue. Interreligious dialogue, therefore, is not just about religiosity, but also about morality and ethics which are generally integrally united with religions. And his instruction of ‘affirm each other in a context of conflict’ is very pertinent to online dialogue given the fact that online dialogues tend to produce more heat than light and one needs to sustain the confidence in online dialogues. I would, however, differ from Bond when it comes to ‘taking a role of a shepherd’ in online dialogues. Such a role, I surmise, whether in online or offline contexts can be condescending towards others and can be a source of self-assumed dominance over others.

### **Exploring Further the Significance of Virtual Interreligious Dialogues**

The brief ethnography presented above of the virtual interreligious dialogue and the virtues of virtual dialogues bring to our awareness the existence of different types of interreligious forums in the virtual space today. While types I & II go, in varying degrees, with a strong sense of particularities of religious traditions and even their apologetics or ‘evangelisms’, type III forums offer opportunities to explore commonalities between religious traditions and even upon the very experience of religion as distinct from a secular ethos. Having these different types of forums is perhaps the imprint of our post-modern era, wherein the very understanding of the scope of interreligious dialogue has undergone radical changes. For example, the modern era thought in terms of *universalities* even in the religious experience of humanity and it went with a certain legitimacy in looking for commonalities between religious traditions.

But today, the language-riddenness of our experience of reality or the cultural-linguistic framework of our experience are making us aware that there is no vantage point outside of our individual or particular viewpoints or stances. Such a post-modern approach to knowledge and reality is impacting upon our experience and expression of religion too. As a result, we have both the particularist virtual spaces as well as the modernist universalist virtual spaces for interreligious dialogue.

How we can understand the significance of these virtual spaces of interreligious dialogue to our actual life-world is an important question to be explored here. In a context wherein social conflicts and strife on account of religion keep rising, the question obtains crucial importance today.

### *Intra-Religious Dialogue*

I suggest that the virtual spaces of interreligious dialogue, besides their perceivable impact, have a deeper significance that goes into the very nature of interreligious dialogue being practised today.

Raymond Panikkar, one of the salient voices in the field of interreligious dialogue, had been engaged in reflection about interreligious relationship throughout his life. A person who tried with different models down through the decades came to speak of his journey as one that journeyed through different religious traditions, without however, giving up his original commitment. He famously said, "I came to India as a Christian, found myself a Hindu, and returned as a Buddhist, without however ceasing to be a Christian." The interreligious journey that he had undertaken, according to him, was one not only of *inter-religious* dialogue, but one that became a deep experience of *intra-religious* dialogue.

He was also an ardent searcher after the truth of interreligious visions and experiences, who began his journey with exclusive and inclusive realisations,<sup>14</sup> arrived at a point of realising the need of an mystical experience of seeing truth from more than one religious tradition. This mystical experience goes with the experience of sacredness that undergirds or informs every religious

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<sup>14</sup> One of his early works which showed an inclusive vision was *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, which, in the line of the Rahnerian proposal of anonymous Christians, reflected that Christ is found in a sincere Hindu seeker.

tradition. Taking a dip at this ocean of sacredness would mean immersing oneself into the paradigm of religion, which is an *intra-religious* seeking. It is indeed a substantive and fundamental manner of seeking to which interreligious dialogue is but only a pathway. It would otherwise mean that different religious traditions bring us to the point of a common intra-religious, which again, is not the end in itself, but a moment of faith which continues to renew itself through ever-occurring *metanoia*.

Panikkar reflects about the intra-religious dialogue as that which takes place at the bottom of a person's heart and as more indispensable and substantive. It is a moment of transformation that takes place in the innermost spaces of one's life; it is intrapersonal. When someone goes through an encounter of religious beliefs within oneself, the intrapersonal dialogue comes into play. As Panikkar puts it: "The real religious or theological task, if you will, begins when the two views meet head-on inside oneself, when dialogue prompts genuine religious pondering, and even a religious crisis, at the bottom of a Man's heart; when interpersonal dialogue turns into intrapersonal dialogue."<sup>15</sup> This "Dialogue is not bare methodology but an essential part of the religious act par excellence..."<sup>16</sup> It is an experience of loving the other as the other would love herself/himself/itself, and this act would become possible not from my own vantage point, but when I endeavour to adopt an vantage point between or over the other and myself, and this vantage point could be named as God, ultimate reality, Divine mystery, *Parabaran*, etc. "This is an experience in itself, not an experimentation, a "genuine experience undergone within *one's own faith*."<sup>17</sup>

In order for this to happen, Panikkar opines, that the person should make a fine distinction between 'faith' (ever transcendent, unutterable and open) and his belief (an intellectual, emotional and cultural embodiment of that faith within the framework of a particular tradition)..."<sup>18</sup> "Faith can only be lived, but living it may at times demand risking it in order to remain faithful. Moreover, this risk of faith must be understood as emerging from one's own faith itself; not from doubting what one believes, but deepening and enriching it. This risk should not be understood as an intellectual or religious curiosity but as a dynamic of faith itself, which discloses another religious world in one's neighbour that we

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<sup>15</sup> Raymond Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (Bangalore: ATC, 1978), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 50.

can neither ignore nor brush aside, but must try to take up, integrate into our own.”<sup>19</sup>

The question that pertains to us here is whether one can have the deep experience of the sacred, the moment of realisation of the *intra-religious truth*, and the ever-renewing demand for the metanoia in or through the virtual space. I suggest that the virtual space helps in this experience in an abiding manner. While there are several critiques about the role the virtual space is playing in relation to the experience of religion today,<sup>20</sup> one cannot brush aside the positive role too attendant upon the virtual religion. The experience of plurality of religion has taken a new dimension through the intervention of virtual religion. A virtual participant or visitor of virtual religious space is awakened to the depth of diversity of religious traditions, and such an experience brings in ability to go beyond the realm of religious beliefs and search for the deeper experience of faith. Such an ability to go beyond different religious belief-systems help gain a vantage point beyond particular religious traditions, an insight into the ultimate reality or divine mystery as pointed out to by Panikkar. This brings in the moment of *intra-religious* dialogue, which is but a moment of deep learning in interreligious dialogue.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>20</sup> Rowena Robinson, for example, has been alerting us about the kind of new religious terrorism taking place in the virtual world. She finds that the virtual space is aiding and abetting terrorism in the actual world. Cf. ; Moreover, there are several scholars who hold the view that the virtual world does not have any freedom of its own, but only reflects the offline context, and therefore the kind of competition between religions and the conflict attend with it in offline context get reflected in online space too. Cf. .; There are also those who have brought to our awareness the point that the organisation of communities done with the help of the virtual space are not open communities, but ones targeted along ideological lines. Cf. ; Binod Agarwal's 2012 study reinforces the critique: his empirical study “tends to support the view that those who watched religious television showed little sympathy and tolerance for other religions.” It is argued that television may not be able to influence strongly held beliefs. Also, in the multi-religious India, in spite of living together in physical proximity, it did not help increase interaction, religious tolerance and social interaction which could be explained by a whole host of structural, historical and political factors. Hence, there is a need for deeper analysis to understand the influences of religious television in the multi-religious context of India.” [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5c600f\\_f8e9eff85a8b4342abaaf2ec6879cade.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5c600f_f8e9eff85a8b4342abaaf2ec6879cade.pdf) 14, accessed on 21 Sep 2018.

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## **REPORTS**

### **Bishop George Yod Phimphan, cssr †**

Bishop George Yod Phimphan, cssr was over the years the person responsible for Social Communication within the Thai Bishops' Conference. His father was one of the co-founders of the English language daily *Bangkok Post* and it seems that this way communication was one way or the other also his family heritage. Born in 1933, he was the first Thai of the Redemptorist Order to become a bishop in his home country for the Diocese of Udon Thani in 1975 which he faithfully served for 34 years. In the Bishops' Conference he was over many years the bishop for communications but also for three three year periods president of the Conference. In this function, but also out of his personal interest, he promoted and opened in November 1999 the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication at St. John's University in Bangkok because he himself was convinced that without serious research and study, a responsible work in the field is not possible.

With his open mind and special ability to deal in a friendly and positive way with people, he supported many initiatives and was always open for fresh ideas including also seeing the need for their academic consolidation far beyond a simple good will. His theological studies in the United States enabled him to be very much at ease in both English and Thai which made him also the 'main' translator of important communication documents which this way became available also to local people, an activity he still continued even during his retirement. He was not only open to new ideas but rather actively supported them .

Because of Bishop Phimphan, Thailand also became somehow a favorite place for respective communication conferences, seminars and programs. He always found ways and also places for a positive and promotional environment in a welcoming attitude which is not everywhere. At the meetings themselves he brought joy and often had a joke or a story at hand to encourage positive developments.

Even after retirement he continued his translations and his interest in the field. He died on December 15, 2017 in Udon Thani. He will be greatly missed by many but his initiatives and his spirit will live on.

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

## ***Pastoral Communication***

In Jewish and Christian traditions the image of a shepherd plays an important role as an image of God but also as basis for religious service. The later King David was called from shepherding to become the King of Israel and the whole Psalm 23 is devoted to the Lord as Shepherd who “makes me lie in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul...”

In John 10 Jesus Christ calls himself the “*good shepherd*” and also gives the criteria: 1. He knows his sheep, 2. the sheep know him, and 3. he gives his life for his sheep. These are the basic demands also for every ‘shepherd’ in ministry. What are the communication dimensions of this? The emerging field of Pastoral Communication tries to consider this question far beyond simply the application of media and technology.

Pastoral Theology developed as a special field of Theology in the 16<sup>th</sup> century considering mainly the demands and needs for priests as ministers (“shepherds”). This changed already in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but especially since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). As part of such development also communication dimensions of this ministry and field developed far beyond the simple use of media. Communication as ‘*social*’ communication is much more than simply applying technical means (print, audio, video) to ministry: it considers first and foremost the people involved and their ways and means to relate and communicate with each other far beyond technical possibilities which change today in a “Permanent Online, Permanently Connected” (POPC) world with almost unlimited possibilities. For the Catholic Church in Asia, this is reflected also in the existence and growth of the field of Pastoral Communication as an academic field like the one at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila. It started at the beginning of the new millenium as an MA Program at the Graduate School and later also to the Theological Faculty of the same university. At present, there are doctoral degree candidates for the program.

Since 2003, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* has been the basic book for these studies (also translated into Italian, Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese and an Indian edition) which is now (2018) published in a 4<sup>th</sup> updated edition with some 320 pages. Here, the field is presented after 1. Common needs and conditions with 2. Ministries and structures within the Church and 3. Relations to the outside (“Mission”) like in including interreligious dialogue and intercultural communication.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

10<sup>th</sup> ARC Annual International Roundtable  
“Religious Communication in Multicultural Asia”  
Saint John’s University, Ladprao, Bangkok, Thailand  
October 8-10, 2018

The Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication (ARC) is preparing its 10<sup>th</sup> Annual International Roundtable to be held at St. John’s University in Bangkok with the theme “Religious Communication in multicultural Asia: Realities, Experiences, Challenges.” The subtitles of this theme suggest three groups of research possibilities:

1. **Realities** which describe but also analyze and project existing situations of social communication in and for religions in Asian countries.
2. **Experiences** refer to initiatives and situations of social communication by and in religions in Asia: how and when do communication activities in and for religion come into play with which effects and consequences? Do they influence religious activities and perspectives? When? How?
3. **Challenges** show the consequences from data and experiences and how to ‘respond’ to them like for special groups like refugees, political and moral pressures or other urgent situations.

We invite scholars to propose and present papers and studies taking up this concern in not only describing communication situations of religions but also evaluating them in view of population, cultural traits, history as well as in view of means, geographical and technical situations and personal experiences and challenges in a digital shrinking world.

This can be studies on communications needs, ways and means in their role and experience ‘ad extra’ as well ‘ad intra’ and reflected in the reality of the lives of the people. These ‘experiences’ are also to be placed and related to respective cultural diversities and realities of groupings and respective environments, social needs and challenges. They can also be related to different age groups of a population – from youth to senior citizens – but also their social/educational status and their communication role and possibilities and expectations of respective populations:

- They can focus on different ways, means and experiences of Religion as content, as way of living but also as determined by a cultural environment...
- How and how far does Communication influence or even determine the culture/ behavior of people and their interaction with each other?
- Who are the main communicators within a political/religious system and how do they 'enact' interpersonal, social, ritual communication?
- Do existing social structures promote or hinder religious communication of groupings or parts of society? Which means are 'used' with which success or failures?
- What are the roles and experiences in communication of (religious) institutions or groupings?
- Who are the main 'communicators' or representatives within a given group? Where do their main 'influences' lie? What communicative 'role' do they or should they play?
- Any relations between social communication of religion and political structures or other concerns of society?
- Any communication between different religions or religious groups? Any cooperation on and of common concerns to be expressed and lived as a joint 'activity'?
- Any existing or planned special academic research in the field and possible results?

#### Timings:

Abstracts are expected on or before May 22, 2018.

Final Papers should be submitted on or before August 28, 2008.

ARC Round Tables are limited to only 25 participants with their approved paper presentations. Accommodation and participation are free and papers presented might be published in Religion and Social Communication, the journal of the center.

#### Submission and contacts:

ARC Director: Dr. Franz-Josef Eilers, svd [arceilers@gmail.com](mailto:arceilers@gmail.com)

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ARC Secretary: Kenneth E. Rayco [arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com](mailto:arcstjohns.bkk@gmail.com)

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## BOOK NOTES

**Brandshaw, Paul. *The Online Journalism, Handbook*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Milton Park: Routledge, 2018. 358 pp.**

This publication is every else than the usual ‘How to do’ textbook in journalism. It starts with an overview of the rapid developments in the field from traditional journalism to the field being open to everybody who has the proper technical device. The traditional is reduced to a ‘specialization’ though basic journalistic principles still apply: now ‘journalism’ becomes ‘social’—meaning to become part of overall society, something nobody expected when the fathers of the Second Vatican Council in 1964 already with the concept of *Social Communication* which they proposed in their document *Inter Mirifica* for the approach of their Church which even up till today is not fully understood and realized even by the people concerned at a time where everybody speaks about *Social Media* which are actually much more than just *media* as mere technology.

While traditional journalism is concerned about words and texts, pictures as news and their proper placement on paper, online journalism does not deny this but covers other much broader dimensions with other platforms for communication like web, social media, apps and life blogging with mobile journalism as well as audio, video, data and interactive codes and also with user generated content. This book covers all these concerns quite extensively and in a well edited way. Every chapter starts with an overview of chapter objectives, followed by a listing of the respective content under factual subtitles and special themes in separate boxes concluding with a summary, proposed activities, further reading, online resources and a chapter related bibliography.

The role of online journalists is described as “the ability to connect individuals to provide a shared experience that helps to debunk myths and enlightens individuals, while also offering a platform for a variety of voices to reach the truth about news events” (p. 156).

The 12 chapters of the book present the changing listings, business and technologies of journalism followed by extensive chapters on finding leads, and resources, writing for the Web, social media and chat apps, live blogging and mobile journalism as well as online audio, video, data journalism,

interactivity, code and community, social media management and user generated content.

The book with a wealth of data is based on British experiences but will be of help far beyond also in other countries especially for Asia with some countries in the forefront indicated here though others are still to expect such developments. A special chapter on online media and law in the book can also be inspiring for scholars of other countries.

The book has also a companion website and an index (pp. 345-358) which makes the publication even more useful beyond the well organized chapters and for further developments. The publication must be considered as a ‘landmark’ in its field.

**Wyatt, Wendy N. (Ed.). *The Ethics of Journalism. Individual, Institutional and Cultural Influences.* Oxford: I.B. Tauris and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2014. 279 pp.**

This book is the result of a conference of some fifty journalists who were invited by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University which also signs as its co-publisher. The book presents 15 contributions divided into four parts with the introduction “Norms that Govern Journalism” as the first text.

The first part presents papers on the “Spheres of Influence: Fostering ethical Journalism” to followed by sections on “Accountability Mechanisms,” “Intersections: Theory and Practice” and “ Emerging issues in a Global and Digital Age.” Recurring themes of the book are treating descriptive and normative realms, the intersections of theory and praxis as well as international perspectives. According to the authors, newsrooms are important sites for investigation. The whole publication stands under the perspectives of individual, institutional and cultural influences as also suggested by the subtitle.

Beside several other articles the one of Thomas H. Bivins on “The Language of Virtue” in early journalism codes deserves a special mention

also in view of religion (pp. 165-184). The author from the University of Oregon states that the “relationship between belief, language and action can and should be revitalized”(p.168). Referring to Alasdier MacIntyre’s book *After Virtue*, (1984) he goes back to Greek philosophy with Aristotle stating that morality lies in the virtuous actor and not first and foremost in the action itself. Aristotle believes “in a *telos* common to human endeavor” and in “a relationship between moral words, moral acts and moral ends” which lead to virtue as an “acquired human quality” which is reflected in justice, courage, honesty” (p. 169 f). This Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics actually has been taken up and further developed in Christianity from its early days which means some 1,500 years before the Enlightenment and over 2,000 years till today. German Philosopher Josef Pieper treats this in his *The four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, 1966) a joint accomplishment of the Greeks with Aristotle and Plato, *Romans* with Cicero and Seneca, the *Jews* with Philon and *Christianity* with early thinkers like Clement of Alexandria, Augustine but also later Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century). These central virtues of prudence, justice, courage and temperance are the basis of every ‘virtuous’ action also in communication and journalism. They also have been a central element in Christian Moral Theology and should also play still today an important role in Moral Psychology as Patrick Lee Plaisance shows in his recent *Virtue in Media, The Moral Psychology of Excellence in News and Public Relations* (Routledge, 2015).

The volume on *Ethics of Journalism* is a substantial contribution to the concerns of not only of *journalism* ethics but also *communication* ethics in general. They should also help to develop broader and deeper foundations in the field which includes considerations and experiences as provided also by different religions beyond Christianity like Buddhism (cf. Guanaratne e.a.: *Mindful Journalism*, Routledge 2015).

**Chee, Lilian and Edna Lim (Eds.). Asian Cinema and the Use of Space. Interdisciplinary Perspectives. New York: Routledge, 2015. 233 pp.**

The Asian Research Institute of the National University of Singapore seems to be one of the most active institutions in the academic field for cultural but also somehow related communication studies which is reflected in this volume on the use of space in Asian Cinema. Actually the editors of

this volume, which is based on a workshop on *Performing Space in Asian Film* are related to the activities of this Singapore Center, both coming from literature and architecture which also gives a good example of interdisciplinary perspectives with presentations of 14 different authors, including the editors. These authors come from Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the US which presents a good international spectrum. The publication distinguishes beside others between ephemeral imagined and contested spaces in Asian Cinema.

The book is only one of several Asian related books of a Routledge series of *Advances in Film Studies* which contain several other Asian cinema related volumes like one on *Korea's Occupied Cinema* (Vol. 16), *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinema* (Vol. 11), *Narrative of Gendered Dissent in South Asian Cinema* (Vol. 12) but also *Japanese Horror Films and their American Remakes* (Vol. 27) followed by studies on *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinema* (2015), *Surveillance in Asian Cinema* (2017) and also *India's New Independent Cinema* (2016) and *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood* (2017).



## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Vorderer, Peter, Dorothee Hefner, Leonard Reinecke, and Christoph Klimmt, (Eds.): Permanently Online, Permanently Connected: Living and Communicating in a POPC World. New York: Routledge, 2018. 269 pp.**

The combination of traditional phones with audio-video programs into *one* handheld device as a smartphone has changed our communication possibilities and respective experiences completely. With it go the almost unlimited access and possibilities for a global and personal communication which makes us “permanently online and permanently connected” (POPC) creating a POPC world in which we live today. This situation and its consequence is the concern of this book.

The contributions of 44 scholars to this volume try to investigate and present the experiences of such a situation and its consequences with solid academic considerations. They describe “diverse manifestations, implications and consequences of the new and permanent opportunities of mobile online communication” (p. 4). The different chapters “are meant to describe and analyze the most relevant manifestations, implications and consequences of mobile online communications for individuals and for societies at large”. The book intends study individuals, groups and societies that are permanently online and permanently connected” (p. 8).

The 24 chapters of the publication are divided into six sections: after the introduction follow presentations on decision making, social dynamics, socialization, Politics and participation to conclude with “networked life and well-being”.

The “POPC mindset between empowerment and being empowered” is addressed in the “mapping the cognitive structures behind mobile Internet use” (Chapter 3) pointing beside others to a new mindset, determined by a “permanence in communication: permanently online” which needs a “permanent availability to communicate.”

For a POPC mindset, the book sees two levels: 1. Online vigilance and 2. Expectations which are determined by salience, re-actability and monitoring (p.20 ff.) The expectations (outcome) are: 1. Permanent accessability (“they

will be with me”) 2. Permanent observation by social network, and 3. “fear of missing out” (FOMO).

The consequences of a POPC mindset for the psychological functioning and social behavior of a user include examples like : “How does online vigilance affect consumption, involvement, and comprehension of and with daily news? How does the POPC affect preferences for and experiences with mediated entertainment? Which consequences do living POPC cause for persuasion, be it with advertising, propaganda, or political campaigning? How does the POPC mindset relate to psychological health, stress and well-being?” (p. 26f.) For the methodological challenges of POPC also the need for developing new ethical guidelines is mentioned (p. 35). Later also a “controlled use” is demanded for the process stating that half of the users seem not to have “no control” (p. 58f.) because media are also a “seductive temptation in every day life”, which call for self-control and proper education. A special chapter addresses “permanence of online access and Internet addiction” (p. 61 ff.) in more detail – which should be of special interest also for religions! “Multitasking” is another chapter with a sub- question “Does it actually exist?”

The section on “Social Dynamics of POPC” asks, “how does being permanently connected change the ways in which we narrate the events of our lives, experience their meaning and more generally experience meaningfulness?” (p. 98), (which appears also in Section II, p. 107). It might remind us also on the general philosophical and especially Buddhist concept of “mindfulness” – which, however, is not mentioned in this book under review.

Narrative experiences and group dynamics are treated as well as social relationships in some details including the “fear of missing out” (FOMO) (p. 145) which is mentioned also in other parts of the book and easily experienced in the new way of communicating especially in the so-called social media.

“Intimate relationships” in a POPC world are addressed in a special chapter on “Between Surveillance and Sexting” (p. 149 ff). The “Growing up Online” discussing “Media use and development in early adolescence and the challenges for adolescents living in a POPC world” are further concerns which also document the richness and broad approach of this publication which

includes also the cultural differences and intercultural linkages involved in the process by reflecting different timings, needs for proper technical equipment, language, cultural identities with possibly different values, habits and rules for participants.

The book concludes with a section on “Networked life and well-being as brave new world” of POPC (p. 231 ff.). There is no special section on the role of religion in this ‘new’ POPC world though some elements related to it can be seen in some contributions though not under that name. So when for example, “meaningfulness’ is mentioned but also ethics, personality formation, education, self and motivations. But one might also ask if there is place for God in a POPC world? If yes, how is it reflected and how does it impact the ways and means of communication – but also relationships – in such a world? If God is not ‘online’ and are we not permanently connected in many ways also to him, then an essential element seems to be missing along the lines of Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* about the “Holy” as essential element of human life and existence.

The publication is very well organized and all contributions of the 44 authors are kept short with a clear overview and especially also for all of them with an extensive list of resources which goes far beyond the somehow limited field of social communication considering also sources and publications from psychology, sociology and other academic fields related to the study.

Another special feature of this publication is the fact that all four editors and the majority of them are from different German universities like ones from Mannheim, Hanover, Mainz, Stuttgart but also including single authors from the Netherlands, Singapore, Sydney and only a few from the US.

The book, which must be considered as foundational for a new situation and field of study, concludes with a proper Index.

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

**Cohen, Yoel (Ed.). *Spiritual News. Reporting Religion around the World.* New York: Peter Lang, 2018. 418 pp.**

The nineteen contributions of this volume are divided into six subsections. Starting with “Newsgathering,” “Regional Patterns,” “Media Events,” “Influence of Religion Reporting” and “The Impact of New Media upon Religion” follows indicating the broad field to be covered. Most of the contributions are not from the United States but rather from around the world: Africa (Nigeria), Asia (China, Malaysia, India, Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia) Latin America (Brazil) and Europe (Vatican City and France) which makes the volume quite universal. It shows not only a certain geographical flexibility but also worldwide perspectives and concerns. With so many contributors, it has to be expected that also not all of the presentations are of the same quality and depth one would have liked. Some contributions are just case studies which sometimes would need a broader perspective to value them as examples and indications for certain developments.

The first two contributions as introductions by the editor and Steward Hoover indicate already in their titles a difference in talking about “Religious News” (Cohen) and “Religion in the News” (Hoover) which are not further explained.

The contribution of the editor starts with an example of media activities of the Vatican which unfortunately is not true at all: it states that Greg Burke, the present spokesperson, is the first layperson being called into this job. In reality, however, the first layperson in this position was already Joachimm Navarro-Valls who served from 1984 till 2006, thus some 22 years in this position under Pope John Paul II, originally being a medical doctor. The remark on the possibility of a woman in this position is unfortunately not any more ‘reporting’ but rather an opinion.

Another difficulty with this collection, which in itself will be quite helpful and enriching to the field is its overall title as “Spiritual News.” All contributions are on religion but hardly any on spirituality which quite different and seemingly broader. Spirituality and religion are not the same and might be only to a very small way be identical: all contributions of this volume are one way or the other on religion but not on spirituality like for example Buddhist spirituality, which could lead to “mindful journalism” (Guanaratne) or also

Christian Spirituality. There seems to be even a ‘spirituality’ not “needing” religion at all!

The introduction by the editor summarizes many of the contributions presented in this book and beyond. But it however seems, that the own publications of the different religions themselves—their own publication activities—are not part of this book. In countries like for example in Germany almost all of the different dioceses have their own weekly publications which together still quite a considerable circulation!

Unlike most of the other contributions of this book being somehow ‘case studies’ the contribution of Daniel A. Stout, the editor of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Religion, Communication and Media* and his more recent *Media and Religion, Foundations of an Emerging Field* does not just describe experiences but points to a paradigm shift in religious news from ‘media’ to ‘convergence’ which brings a new perspective to the whole field which goes far beyond ‘traditional’ views: “connoting the way people define and think about information” (p. 115 f.) he sees three perspectives: 1. The media industry, 2. The audience perspective, and 3. the marketing industry and in this approach a “key for sharing ideas across religions” (p.120). With this, Stout moves away from media in favor of a willingness to take personal responsibility for one’s actions and introducing the concept of “convergence” as substituting ‘Media’... It would be interesting to ‘match’ these ideas and relate them to the long existing Convergence Model of Communication as presented by Everett Rogers and Lawrence Kincaid in 1981 based on their studies in Korea (“*Communication Networks. Toward a New Paradigm for Research*”). Here seems to be a direction for religion and communication research which should be taken equally serious by scholars of religion and communication as well.

All chapters of the book begin with a summary indicating what to or not to expect and give at the end a list of publications and sources used and also inviting for further studies.

All in all, the book is a good contribution to the field but a more careful editing as well as verification of some facts presented would be appreciated.

*Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*

**Schedneck, Brooke. Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices. London: Routledge, 2015. xii+197 pp.**

Brooke Schedneck's monograph *Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices* investigates a unique case of promotion of spiritual practices by Thai Buddhists targeting non-Thai participants, particularly Western tourists. The increasing globalization that facilitates transnational economic and cultural exchanges serves as the background that enables this phenomenon. Schedneck charts the rise of Thailand's international meditation centers, which exist predominantly in the South, Central and Northern parts of the country, to its origin in the mass meditation movement that began in late nineteenth-century Burma. The Burmese method of Theravada *vipassana* meditation, which initially was meant to help Buddhists achieve spiritual transformation, was subsequently re-engineered in modern day Thailand to appeal to a non-Buddhist, Western audience.

The effort to attract Western participants who are as much interested in an island vacation as an opportunity to have an "authentic" religious and cultural experience while in Thailand means that international meditation centers are often intentionally situated near tourist hotspots, and promotional materials are usually found in guidebooks and booklets published by entities concerning with tourism, including the Tourism Authority of Thailand. The centers themselves also produce pamphlets that are printed in hardcopy as well as made available on the Internet.

Schedneck's thorough analysis indicates that the images employed to attract international meditators often play into the long held notions of Romantic Orientalism in which the exotic culture and spirituality of the East are seen as the antithesis of Western tendencies towards materialism and rationalism. Buddhist leaders, rather than offering resistance, often make representations that conform to the Orientalist mindset by employing images of people and natural sceneries in their promotional materials that affirm the notion of Thailand and its Buddhist tradition as an exotic and intriguing Other.

The book thoroughly recounts the discordance between the images

utilized to attract international meditators and the actual experience of the participants who have to deal with the nitty-gritty work of the actual meditation practice which can require long hours of daily meditation for ten days up to several weeks, in addition to the various restrictions placed on sleep, clothing, diet and talking. Although certain behavioral standards must be adhered to by international meditators, the program itself is significantly adapted for the benefit of international participants. While Thai Buddhists participate in the meditation program within an age-old cultural and religious matrix that include certain outward religious rituals and doctrinal adherence, Western meditators are usually allowed to skip any activity that expresses religious commitment or might present personal discomfort due to cultural unfamiliarity.

As a result, the course offered to Western participants reflect a decontextualized commodity that provides a meditation experience that resonates with aspects of modernism such as science, psychology, secularism and universalism. These translation strategies allow for international meditators to more easily engage with the program in Thailand and facilitates the export of the program to other countries in the West. The author writes that many international meditators have not only stayed on in Thailand to serve as volunteers or teachers in the centers, but have also invited teachers to conduct courses in their countries, or even open a center themselves.

Without addressing directly criticisms which some may have regarding translation strategies that divorce the meditation practice from its religious and cultural contexts, Schedneck seems to provide justification for this phenomenon by showing that translational activities were required even as Buddhism was initially introduced into countries outside of its birthplace, such as China, Burma and Thailand. The reconstruction of Buddhism for a non-Asian audience can be seen as part of the ongoing missionary effort at adapting Buddhism to different cultural sensibilities, which holds ramifications for the future of the religion in the world.

Schedneck's study, which presents ethnographic data within the framework of historical and textual analysis, is valuable for students of Thai Buddhism, and illustrates concretely the ongoing dynamics that maneuver between Romantic Orientalism and modernist global Buddhism. From the communication perspective, the book represents a thought-provoking

example of how extremely profound religious and spiritual insights are translated for an audience of a different religious and cultural background. However, as in any translation effort, there are both gains and losses that cannot be avoided.

*Anthony Le Duc, svd*



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