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

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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.[1] 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."[2] 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.[3] The phenomenon of tailoring reality to fit one's opinion

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[1] Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Boston: MIT Press, 2018): Kindle

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

[3] 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-brexit-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 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."[4] 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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[4] 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.[5] In the same manner, fake news stories on social media portraying Muslims to be rampant criminals[6] 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.[7] 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."[8] Although Vietnamese Muslims

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 hyperconntected 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.[9] Just Facebook alone is responsible for 510,000 comments, 293,000 statuses, and 136,000 photos per minute.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12] According to a report released by Singapore's Nanyang Tachnological 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

[5] 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 (May 20, 2017).

[6] 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).

[7] "Regards from Vietnamese Muslims, " IHH, https://www.ihh.org.tr/en/news/regards-from-vietnamese-muslims-2262 (accessed October 1, 2018).

[8] "What do Vietnamese think about Muslim Chams," Quora, https://www.quora.com/What-do-Vietnamese-think-about-Cham-Muslims (accessed October 1, 2018).

[9] "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).

[10] "The top 20 valuable Facebook statistics—updated October 2018," Zephora, https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/ (accessed October 10, 2018).

[11] Kathleen Azali, "Fake News and Increased Persecution in Indonesia," Perspective, no.61 (August 7, 2017): 7.

[12] "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.[13] The World Economic Forum warns that our hyperconnected world can suffer from "digital wildfires" due to "massive digital misinformation."[14] 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.[15] 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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[13] Gulizar Haciyakupoglu 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

[14] "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).

[15] 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 Ronhinya 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.[16] 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 Rohingya Muslim minority, the monk took to Facebook. Through this social media platform, Wirathu presented a narrative that aimed to portray the Rohingyas 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 Ronhingya attacks.[17] 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."[18] 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."[19] UN human rights experts in their investigation of the matter concluded that Facebook played a part in the Ronhingya 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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[16] Aim Sinpeng, "Southeast Asian cyberspace: politics, censorhip, polarization," New Mandala, http://www.newmandala.org/southeast-asian-cyberspace-politics-censorship-polarisation/ (November 1, 2017).

[17] Ibid.

[18] "Ashin Wirathu on comparing Rohingya Muslims to dogs in Myanmar," The Berkley Center, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ashin-wirathu-on-comparing-rohingya-muslims-to-dogs-in-myanmar (accessed October 7, 2018).

[19] Megan Specia and Paul Mozur, "A war of words puts Facebook at the center of Myanmar's Rohingya crisis," The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.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.[20] 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

enclave extremism. When people end up in enclaves of like-minded people, they usually move toward a more extreme point.[21]

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."[22]

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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[20] Ibid.

[21] 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).

[22] 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.[23]

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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[23] 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."[24] 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".[25]

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

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

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[24] Randall L. Nadeau, *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective* (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014): Kindle.

[25] Ibid.

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.[26]

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."[27]

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.[28] *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."[29] 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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[26] 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.

[27] Tu Weiming, "Beyond," 19.

[28] 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 , no.10

[29] 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, 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."[30] 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."[31] In 1981, Pope John Paul II characterized RVA as the "voice of Asian Christianity."[32]

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.[33]

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.

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.[34] 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."[35] 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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[30] "History," Radio Veritas Asia, http://www.rveritas-asia.org/index.php/about-us/history (accessed October 1, 2018).
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Anh Vu Ta, "Challenges of the Digital World for the Church in Vietnam," *Religion and Social Communication* 13, no.2 (2015): 188

[34] 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.
[35] "Peter C. Phan – being religious as being interreligious," Rumiforum, 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."[36]

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.[37] 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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[36] 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, 45.

[37] 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."[38] 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 a 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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[38] 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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