

Lessons from ALFP 2016: Secular Religious Practices and Common Visions in Asia

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Introduction

Secular religious practice demotes to the devoting to self religions without any threat and respecting to other religious faiths. Secular religious practice emphasises both the inner and outer peace for one and all with a strong tie for harmonious living. It promotes reciprocal respects, affectionate and cooperation among all religious believers either in a common or multi-cultural society. Secular religious practice also considers one's relationship with other community (Elkins and et. al., 1988). Tony (2007) viewed that the aim of secular religious practice and spirituality is living happily or helping to each-other. Asia is the most populous continent having 4 billion people (60% of the world's current populations). Its area is about 17,139,445 s.m. The Asians speak diverse languages and most of the Asian countries have more than one language.

Throughout the history, many orthodox people have perpetrated religious violence not only in Asia but also other parts of the world in the name of safeguard of their religious faith such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and so forth. A diverse number of factors¹ are combined that perpetuate religious extremism (Neil, 2012). Naturally, every child's anatomic composition differs from regions to regions based on ethnic and genetic identity. This paper argues that all human beings are equal in performing their own believes without any ethnic persecution or death-threat by other followers. This paper advocates a common standard of democratic values and strict principles by which a congenial atmosphere could be secured in Asia to achieve our future vision—so that we can expect to reach out our goal as to “Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How Can We Create Visions for the Future.”

Religion and Its Origin

In retrospect, the origin of the religious faith dates back from billions of years. This Earth is 6,000 years old and the religions have been evident to be 4.5 billion years old. According to Judaism, the creation is far older than many people realized about their faith. It would be fascinating to mention that the ancient Kabbalist's determined that the earth was 4.5 billion years old based on secrets contained with the ancient text of the Hebrew Torah although Dan (2007) argued that the definition of Kabbalah² varies according to the tradition for those following it. Religion has been defined differently by many experts. Some argued as a cultural system of practice and behavior while others viewed as a comprehensive worldview or a

¹ Such as psychological, political, historical and theological.

² Kabbalah is a mysterious method, discipline and school of thought that originated in Judaism.

moral education by church. Scholars, like Smith (1962) tried to correct a perceived Judeo-Christian and Western bias in the study of religion. Durkheim (1964) defines religion as follows:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practises which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them (Allan, 2005; Taves, 2009: 176).

Max Stackhouse, Professor of Princeton Theological Seminary defines religion as “metaphysical moral vision” (Robert, 2010: xi). Religion is a system of beliefs and practices illustrating a code of morality and humanity’s place in the world (Dawes and James, 2013: 15). A religious denomination is a collective spiritual community for a grouping or congregation (Doe, 2011: 90). Religion is a cluster of cultural beliefs, process and world views that establishes symbols and transmit humanity to spiritual activity and to moral values. The pedagogical spirit of all religions is almost the same i.e., to lead simple life, honest-beliefs and moral principles as well as peaceful coexistence. Religious discourages selfishness, evil attitudes/ugly conduct, illegal and corrupt materialistic gain. It advocates for salvation for all. Clifford (1966: 1–46) simply called it as a cultural system while Asad (1993: 27–54) categorized religion as an anthropological category. Many religions have traditions, symbols and sacred histories that are intended to provide meaning to life and death. They tend to derive honesty, moral values, ethics, divine laws or a restricted lifestyle within the human nature. According to some estimates, there are roughly 4,200 religions are existed in the world at present.³

Religious Extremism

Religious extremism can be termed as a person or group that takes the position that if others do not follow or obey their ways, they will be humiliated, insulted, beaten up or even tortured to death in different forms. Sometimes, the valuable properties, worship institutions and residing houses of inhabitants of different faiths are burned, ransacked and damaged, for instance, “a massive religious attack”⁴ held at Ramu in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh from September 29 to October 1, 2012. The extremists showing themselves as spiritual; normally

³ <http://www.adherents.com>

⁴ Islamic extremism at Ramu refers to a series of attacks on Buddhist inhabitants and their monasteries, shrines and houses in Ramu, the eastern part of Bangladesh by the local Muslims (ABC News, September 30, 2012). They destroyed 12 Buddhist temples and 50 houses in reaction to a tagging of an image depicting the Quran in a fake Face Book account of a Buddhist male’s name (Daily Star, October 1, 2012). The violence later spread to Ukhia and Potiya in Cox’s Bazar District (BDNews24, September 2, 2012) in Chittagong. An estimated of 25,000 people (ABC News, September 30, 2012) participated in the violence and over 300 people were arrested in connection to the attacks (Ahmed and Manik, October 3, 2012).

religious fanaticism emerges not from devoted faith rather from a fake sense. Religious fanaticism demonstrates by the fake dogmatic militants as because their brain is watched with tactful religious detergent by the extremists' guru. The extremists' mentors convince the militants by assuring paradise soon after their death—if they could sacrifice their lives for the protection of religious spirit. They are derailed by contaminated religious messages. The extremist followers are religiously misguided and misinterpreted irrespective of any religions. Extremists believe to hurt and kill to assure paradise after a suicidal attack to other believers. In such, Neil (2007) ascertains same beliefs and characterise of extremists across a variety of religious traditions. The religious extremists are often aggressive, seeking to dominate their own views on other believers. They often preach intolerance against all who disagree with their own religious viewpoints.

Secular Religious Practice

The British writer Holyoake (1896: 51) first expressed the term secularism in 1851. The purposes and arguments in support of secular religious practice are indispensable for the exercise of democratic rights. In “French Laicism,”⁵ secularism is a movement toward modernization and away from traditional religious values. According to Madeley and Zsolt (2003: 14) “secular state is a concept of secularism, whereby a state is or purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion.” A correct secular state should persistently preserve national governance without sway from religious groups. Secular states do not emphasise to a particular state religion though the absence of a state religion does not essentially term that a state is entirely secular. A secular state should treat all its citizens equally regardless of religion. Spiritual religious practice clarifies to allow religious people to perform their own religious activities without the fear or threat to death. Van Peter (2009) argues some important aspects of secular religious practice: promotion of community, creation solidarity through shared “universal truth.” Dalai Lama (1999) emphasises some attributes of humanistic qualities as secular religious practice such as affectionate, kindness, loving approach, patience, forgiveness, responsibility, harmony, and equal concern for others.

Common Democratic Values

The core democratic values are deemed to the fundamental beliefs that should be constitutional principles of a state for the sake of peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnicities.

⁵ French secularism is called French laicism that denotes to the absence of reciprocal influence i.e., religious link in government affairs or the government involvement in religious affairs. Both are prohibited to influence each-other.

The term first comes from a work of “Thomas Jefferson”⁶ which explicitly indicates the security of life and liberty for all in a state territory. **Life** defined to have the right to live without the fear of injury or being killed by others. Everyone should have the right to live but simply enough; there are still many countries around the Asia where the basic rights are yet to establish. **Liberty** is the only thing we cannot have unless we are willing to give it to others. Liberty defines as our right to think, act without any interference from our government. According to American society, the common democratic values are the fundamental beliefs and constitutional principles that unite all Americans irrespective of their religious identity. These include: fundamental beliefs i.e., “we trust in God,” life and liberty, and pursuit of happiness, justice for all, equality and diversity, truth and sovereignty and patriotism.

Religious Extremism in Asia

In recent years, one of the most critical problems we face is religious extremism in Asia and beyond the world. While certainly Islamic extremists are leading in most of the Asian states. However, Islamic extremism is not only a threat and the believers of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism are also involved in some degrees of extremism. The Asia is the composed of 50 states and it has many religious faiths from diverse ethnic groups. Pertinently, Asia is the labour-room of many prophets who were the idol of many followers following a wide-range of religions. Most of the world’s “mainstream religions”⁷ and many other beliefs emerged from Asia. Religiously, many faiths exist in this region but some extremist groups influence to dominate their own faiths on others or they rarely tolerate any comments, arguments and criticism pressed by other followers of faith. Religious extremism is acute in most of the Asian countries. Some examples of selected countries are briefly noted as evidences:

Afghanistan: Afghanistan is the most vulnerable state in Asia for an unprecedented Islamic extremism. It became a terrorist training ground after 1989, when Soviet withdrawal it support. The occidental community alleged that the Pakistan has been providing assistance to Afghan terrorists as a transit area between the Middle East and South Asia. Since its emergence in 1994 (1996–2001 was Talibani regime), it was trained in Pakistan, sponsored by the United States to protect Russian aggression in South Asian region. The bombing on the World Trade Center (1993), and after 9/11 (2001), the western world led by the United States gradually demolishing Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was a founding father and the 3rd President (1801–1809) of the United States of America. He was also the principal author of the United States Declaration of Independence (1776).

⁷ Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Slavic neo-paganism, Celtic polytheism, Heathenism, Semitic neo-paganism, Wicca, Egyptian paganism, Hellenism and Roman neo-paganism.

Bangladesh: Since 1975, Bangladesh has been suffering from Islamic extremism. Here, Muslim extremists attack on other believers and even onto non-practicing Muslims, transgender, atheists and progressive peoples. Recent phenomena show that some progressive bloggers, professors, journalists, foreigners as well as Buddhist and Christian spiritual leaders were killed by Islamic terrorist groups. The Cabinet Committee President for Law and Order (A. H. Amu) stated that among the recent 37 killings, the Jamaatul Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) involved in 25, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) in 8 and other Islamist groups executed rest 4 including an Italian (Cesare Tavella, September 28, 2015) and a Japanese, Hoshi Kunio on October 3, 2015 (Prothom Alo, May 22, 2016).

India: In some states of India are accused for the religious attack by the Hindu extremist groups. For instance, minority Muslims (Gujarat riot in 2002), Christians (New Delhi in 2015, Orissa in 2008) and other believers were severely killed and tortured by the Hindu extremists. The *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) i.e., National Volunteer Organisation (linked with the BJP) and Saffron Terror are (based on saffron colour that appears in many parties' flags of India) blamed to promote Hindu extremism on various minorities living in India.

Indonesia: Indonesia is the largest Muslims country in the world with more than 200 million Muslims. A series of terrorist attacks have been held in Indonesia by the Darul Islam, Fretilin (East Timorese militia) and by others. It has been found that the recent terrorism is attributed to the Al-Qaeda linked with the Jemaah Islamiyah Terror group and the ISIS/ISIL.⁸ Indonesia is considered one of the world's largest suppliers of IS fighters, with more than 500 Indonesians having joined in Syria and Iraq reported by the BNPT.⁹ Since 2000, a number of targets have been attacked in Indonesia and the most terrible attack held in 2002 that killed 202 people including 164 foreign tourists (AAP, 2006). Total 34 religious attacks were held in Indonesia from March 28, 1981 to January 14, 2016 that caused many lives.

Japan: Japan was deadly attacked on March 20, 1995 by a religious extremist group in the Tokyo subway system. The group, Aum Shinrikyo,¹⁰ launched five coordinated explosive with a heavy use of chemical attack (sarin gas) that injured 6,000 and killed a dozen people. The United States, Canada, and the EU termed it as a terrorist organization. According to the US Congress, Aum Shinrikyo is the first terrorist group to have used WMD in Japan

⁸ Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

⁹ BNPT: *Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme* (i.e., National Counterterrorism Agency). Cf: <http://www.indonesia-investments.com/>

¹⁰ Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese cult founded by Asahara Shoko in 1984. It follows a "dangerous religion and strict practices" that reflect a "twisted blend" of Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Taoist elements. Its aim is to control Japan and the world, creating a global utopian society (Japanese White Paper, 2009).

(Japanese White Paper, 2009). A report from late 2014 suggests that several young men were radicalized either online or at a bookstore in Tokyo to join the ISIS.

Myanmar (Burma): Since 1962 (General Ne Win regime), the minority (only 4%) Rohingya Muslims were under severe attacked by the majority Buddhist in Myanmar. The EU Development Committee (2003) reported that the Rohingya Muslims are the most persecuted minority in the world. According to Myanmar Times (2013) “Amnesty International and the American Association for the Advancement of Science have repeatedly documented and condemned widespread human rights violations in Burma.” Consequently many of them have fled to Bangladesh. The fact is that from 1997 to 2014, they were under severe attacked in Myanmar.

Pakistan: Pakistan is the most dysfunctional country in Asia for Islamic extremism. A total of 12 domestic, 32 transnational, and 4 Muslim extremist groups exist in Pakistan. Many experts alleged that Pakistani extremists are involved with global Islamic terror groups, such as ISIS, Taliban, Al-Qaeda and so forth. Most of the attacks in Pakistan are held either by “Shia or Sunni”¹¹ Muslims or vice-versa and on minority Hindu and Christians; even sometimes they attack on the Holy Mosques to kill to opposite Muslim believers for various reasons including politics.

Thailand: The *Ma Ba Tha* (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) is known across the world as a racist Buddhist organization in Thailand. Since 2004, sectarian clashes caused to death of 6,500 marginalised Muslims and the displacement of 140,000 peoples in the southern Thailand. Over 85% Muslims live in southern Thailand. The Malay and the Rohingya Muslim are under threat by the Buddhist extremists. The AsiaNews.it (April 11, 2015) reported that taking advantage of anti-Islamic sentiments, *the Ma Ba Tha* has promoted sectarian laws in order to persecute the Rohingya Muslims.

Lessons from Other Fellows and Japanese Counterparts

All the fellows—Fujioka Emiko (Japan), Lee Taeho (Korea), Phan Ngoc Diem Han (Vietnam), Kumar Sundaram (India), Criselda Yabes (Philippines), and Ayang Utriza Yakin (Indonesia)—were very talented and experts and thus, I have learnt enormous diversified knowledge and skills from their respective fields. All of them not only discussed their thematic research but also shared their own cultural phenomena and traditional norms and values. I indeed perceived various unfolded normative socio-economic, cultural and political milieu of their respective countries. On the other hand, I have gathered a vast of knowledge,

¹¹ Shia Muslims are majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Lebanon (5) while Sunni majority Muslims are in 43 out of 48 Muslims dominating states of the world.

especially on the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident, Japanese military training and education, cultural heritage, US military base in Okinawa, freedom of electronic media, civil society role, and so on from the Japanese counterparts. Most of them are distinguished Professors and experts in their own fields and they delivered their lectures in retreat, seminars and meetings as well as officials of different organizations e.g., National Defence Academy (NDA), National Theatre of Okinawa, seminar with Professors and students of Meio University, Okinawa, Okinawa museum and aquarium, Taketomi Island, NHK television, Asahi Shimbun Newspaper and so forth. In brief, I have learnt a huge experience from the Japanese counterparts during this program.

Common Grounds vs. Obstacles of Future Asia: Pros and Cons

There are huge common grounds and aspects that I have been observed from other fellows and Japanese counterparts during the fellowship period. I think there is a huge opportunity and scope on which the Asian academics, civil society members and intellectuals could concentrate to work together to reinforce the common vision of Asia. These include: Political leaders and leadership patterns are almost same in most of the Asian countries; Power conflict and incline to increase hegemony power, especially both Koreas, Japan vs. China, India vs. Pakistan; Religious liberalism (Meeting with Matsuyama Daiko, Deputy Priest, Taizoin Zen Buddhist Temple, Kyoto on interfaith dialogue, held on October 1, 2016); Water issues and marine boundary (e.g., India vs. Bangladesh and Japan vs. China); Adverse effects of climate change and disaster management (earthquake, floods, cyclone, typhoon, etc.); Common or equilibrium policies on Nuclear Power Plant to reduce the manmade risk; and, Fostering democratic norms and values in terms of power transfer and exercise.

Difficulties towards Common Ground in Asia

- Religious violence and extremism;
- Refugee and migration issues;
- Behavioral patterns and normative approaches;
- Infrastructural development and ICT management policies (cybercrimes);
- Terrorism against innocent people (violent vs. non-violent);
- Social interactions and administrative values (quick response and low power distance) etc.;
- and ● Economic inequality, cultural diversity and extinct of indigenous tradition.

Interests on Specific Ideas for Future Research: Motivated from ALFP 2016

After my two-month vivid participation in the ALFP 2016, I am now highly motivated and keen to conduct further research on some specific aspects, such as the impact of common programmes for different religious believers in order to reinforce reciprocal respects. This idea stormed and influenced me by the lectures of Matsuyama Daiko. I strongly believe that this type of social and religious programmes (marathon run and reciprocal dialogue to

perceive interfaith among the diverse believers) would create a congenial harmony in the Asia. The non-violent movement/protest against government policies and its effect; and in addition, I am encouraged to conduct study on the common principles of “Living Together, Working Together” irrespective of diversity on many issues of Asian countries. Particularly, this idea developed in my mind based on the public lecture of Professor Tariq Ramadan (Oxford University) on September 14, 2016, at the International House of Japan. In this public lecture, the concept of “3Ls” (Law, Language, and Loyalty) positively influenced my state of mind to conduct future research on how Bangladeshi could exercise this normative approach in order to live and work together irrespective of religious diversity, colour, creed, sex, and ethnic identity.

Causalities of Religious Attack in Asia and Beyond

It has been apparent that the religious extremism is now the key driving force of terrorism mainly in Asia. The US-based Global Terrorism Index assessed the number of terrorist attacks worldwide from 2000–2013. The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) recorded nearly 10,000 terrorist attacks and 18,000 deaths in 2013, a 60% rise from the previous year (2012). The increase was largely due to the ongoing civil war in Syria and the subsequent impact on Iraq. The vast majority of attacks (66%) were perpetrated by four groups: IS, Boko Haram, Taliban, and the Al-Qaeda. More than 80% of deaths from terrorism in 2013 occurred in just “five countries” (Shackle, 2014).¹²

Causal Factors of Religious Extremism and the Probable Way Out

There are many causes behind the religious extremism in Asia and beyond the world. Main causes are dogmatic misinterpretation of religious education, brain washing by religious guru, poverty and extreme frustration for economic disparity, ignorance about religious philosophy, occupation by the western forces and oil-based petro-dollar politics (middle east), revenge for reactive action, psychological damaged for eternal paradise-life after death, life is considered as valueless in this materialistic world, occidental oppression and domination to economically inferior states. In addition, lack of adequate knowledge on self-religion, funding by global conspirators to make unstable of a specific state, transnational brotherhood feelings and too much devotion on religions by keeping isolation from family, social network and state of affairs as a whole. The sense of absolutism and low level of tolerance to other faiths; sense of righteousness about own religion; refusal to concession with other religions debate, and lack of “philosophical education” and acute religious dogmatism are the major causal factors of existing religious extremism in Asia.

¹² Among the five countries, four belong to Asia such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria while Nigeria in Africa.

Executive Remarks: Way-out from Religious Extremism

This is the ultimate time whether we are committed to defend our humanity from religious extremism. We are desperately supposed to work together to ensure peace for all irrespective of religious boundary; otherwise this devastating conflict will cost all of us tremendously. The collective measures should be initiated immediately against religious extremism through education, knowledge, and information. We should be careful about religious discussion, gathering, organization, institution or in any setting that preaches an extremist view that encourages hatred, divides, creates tension and conflict, and provides anger and frustration. We should also watch our next generations as to whom they are accompanying, where they go, whom they are friends with, and how they spend their time because the extremist groups target the youngster to make their devotees. There are various alternative methods to safeguard society from religious extremism. These include deliberative discussion, social solution and use of media as well as strict application of “Rule of Law” by the national government and international community. Religious education should be unbiased, soft and humanity-based, assuring severe punishment to extremists, spiritual institutions should discuss the negative impact of the extremism, parents and guardians should provide humanitarian education to their children, and finally, the media (electronics and print) should broadcast about the adverse effect of religious extremism regularly by qualified scholars.

Keeping in mind the theme of ALFP 2016 “Seeking Our Commons in Asia: How Can We Create Visions for the Future?” this paper has advocated eradicating religious extremism to create a sound vision for future Asia, so that a strong harmony can be expected among the diverse nations of Asia. Common democratic values should be imposed to ensure a secular practice in Asia. Many people are attacked, such as Buddhists and Hindus are attacked by the Muslims in Bangladesh, Rohingya Muslims are tortured by Buddhists in Myanmar and Thailand, Muslims and others by the Hindus in India and so forth. Therefore, common values, norms and religious freedom as well as a strong unity among the Asian nations should immediately be accorded to reinforce our human solidarity. Our vision should ensure a common security for peaceful coexistence among the diverse believers of Asia and thus the ALFP’s attempt is praiseworthy and effective, indeed.

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