Proselytizing and the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Asia
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The Asia Research Institute (ARI) is a university-level research institute of the National University of Singapore (NUS). Its mission is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on Asia. The three themes of the ARI-Springer Asia Series – Cities, Religion, and Migration – correspond to three of ARI’s research clusters and primary research emphases. ARI’s logo depicts rice grains in star-like formation. Rice has been the main staple food for many of Asia’s peoples since the 15th century. It forms the basis of communal bonds, an element of ritual in many Asian societies, and a common cultural thread across nations and societies.
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Most mornings, a small group of Falun Gong practitioners sits under the Esplanade Bridge in Singapore’s city center. They meditate, study, and practice the slow-moving qigong exercises for which they are known. They distribute pamphlets in both Chinese and English, and they’re usually gone before the lunch crowds arrive. These activities might not surprise many observers, but as I jog by these six or seven practitioners every morning, I think about another Falun Gong practitioner who was sent to jail in Singapore in November 2010 for harassment. To be sure, Huang Caihua had some different ideas about advancing the cause. By carrying a poster in front of the Chinese embassy in Singapore, she had pushed past the limits of what the government deems “acceptable” proselytizing, and she had been punished accordingly.

The Singaporean government’s different treatment of these two examples of proselytizing—one quiet and discreet, the other loud and unavoidably public—poses some challenging questions about the freedoms of religion and speech in contemporary Asia. On the one hand are the quiet and unobtrusive Falun Gong proselytizers without big signs, but no less interested in pressing their religion on a curious passerby. On the other hand is an in-your-face proselytizer who refuses to be ignored in her quest to advocate for a minority group’s religious freedom in a way that engages highly public expressions of religious identity in addition to individual ones. The coexistence of these two different instances of Falun Gong proselytization in contemporary Singapore highlights some critical points around which the state determines the limits to acceptable proselytizing in its multi-religious society. Like Singapore, many other contemporary Asian states similarly frame issues of proselytizing in terms of a choice between allowing for individual religious freedom and/or maintaining religious harmony. Singapore tends to favor religious harmony over religious freedom, and thus highly visible acts of proselytizing are forbidden. But this is not the only metric, as surely the practitioners at the Esplanade would not fare so well if they attempted to distribute literature to Muslims or children, both of whom constitute “vulnerable populations,” toward whom the Singapore state takes an active role as “protector.” Falun Gong members advocate peace, but what if they promoted a more exclusivist message? What if the group were not part
of a transnational network that had antagonized an emerging global superpower? And what if Huang Caihua had carried a smaller banner?

As my co-editor, Michael Feener, and I were conceiving this volume, we could think of many such examples that highlight the uneven ways governments seek to establish and enforce limits to acceptable religious proselytizing. We could also think of many examples of the unpredictable ways religious practitioners seek to navigate this complicated terrain. Proselytizing—or the attempts by a group or individual to encourage the conversion of others—tests the limits of religious pluralism, as it is a practice that exists on the border of tolerance and intolerance. “I have a right to the free exercise of my religion,” as José Casanova has articulated this tension at the heart of proselytizing, “but this right will inevitably clash with the right of others to the free exercise of their religion(s)” (Casanova 2010). The practice of proselytizing presupposes not only that people are freely choosing agents and that religion itself is an issue of individual preference, but also that the choice one makes to adhere to a particular religion is one that can be clearly evaluated as being “right” or “wrong.” As such, conversations about religious responses to “others” in the global era have largely focused on groups that embrace an intolerant fundamentalism on the one hand or those that embrace a much more tolerant religious pluralism on the other. Yet a wide range of newly emergent religious groups and institutions occupy a grey area in between these two extreme positions. This volume brings together a range of focused studies that explore this grey area through a consideration of diverse cases of proselytizing and responses to it in contemporary Asia. While comprehensive coverage of this large and complex area is impossible, the studies collected here use concrete case studies to highlight important aspects of broader dynamics at work across the region.

In contemporary Asian contexts of hyperdiversity, questions about the limits of acceptable proselytization take on added urgency, both because of unprecedented situations of diversity and because of Asia’s legacy of European Christian missionary activity. Religious groups—both new religious groups, as well as traditional religious groups that take new globalized and transnational forms—respond to global processes through adopting new and creative ways of reaching out to non-member “others” and encouraging their conversion. Many invoke global human rights discourses to frame their claims to the freedom of religious belief and practice, and many more invoke this same language to argue for their freedom to be left alone. And yet, it is an assumption of this volume that governments retain singularly important roles in establishing and policing the contours of the national landscapes on which religious groups practice. The controversy that erupted in Sri Lanka over tsunami relief efforts by Christian groups reflects tensions felt across Asia and beyond, fueled as it was by the threat of an imperial bundle of values that are simultaneously Western, Christian, and capitalist. It is also a deeply national controversy, as much about accepting badly needed aid as it is about Sri Lanka’s identity and about the country’s position on religious freedom and religious harmony. Malaysian practitioners of the Buddhist new religion Soka Gakkai in Kuala Lumpur find it nearly impossible to be granted permits for interfaith events because of government fears that such events mask efforts at proselytizing. Chinese Buddhists
in the People’s Republic of China accept government funds to build and restore temples, while gamely accepting the inevitability that these temples will become more like museums and tourist attractions than sites of religious practice.

Religion and religiosity “on the ground” take on new and complex forms in the contemporary world, whether we describe that world as secular, post-secular, modern, or global. The boundaries and interfaces among and within different religious groups seem simultaneously more blurry and more fixed, and what it means to reach across these boundaries—peacefully or coercively—is a source of contestation across Asia. Of course, “the ground” itself has also shifted in the global era. Nation-states reckon with new sources of authority as they mold the contours of these religious landscapes and manage these boundaries and interfaces. Contributors to this volume explore these contours—and fault lines—across a range of diverse settings by drawing them into the larger social, political, and legal context of lived religion in contemporary Asia.

While it is beyond the scope of this volume to consider whether there is something essentially “Asian” about the contemporary Asian context, a few words are in order about our decision to focus these studies in Asia. On one level, considering proselytizing in Asia is, descriptively speaking, interesting in its own right given the rapidity of social and political change across the continent and the reorganization of religious authority that has come alongside these changes. On a more profound level, the decision to focus on Asia acknowledges that Asian nations are relative newcomers to discussions about the limits of proselytizing, at least in the ways we’ve grown to recognize these discussions in the United States and Europe. The contemporary valorization of the inalienable rights to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion is rooted in the wars of religion in early modern Europe. The genealogy is familiar; it traces a path through Europe’s colonization of America and then the colonization of much of Asia and Africa. The same belief in the inalienable right of an individual to religious self-determination led the colonists to seek religious freedom in the New World and led missionaries to fan out in search of new converts in Asia and Africa. At a national level in Europe and the United States, regulatory regimes developed on the premise that religion is a matter of personal choice about which—ideally—governments should be neutral.

These genealogies are somewhat different in Asia—a difference that arises as much from the fact that Asian countries have been on the receiving end of colonial projects as from a continuing deep suspicion of Christian missionaries and other religious outsiders. These histories form a crucial context in which debates over proselytizing take place today. And yet, Asian nations are at the vanguard of forming new frameworks to regulate what Michael Feener describes as the “points of friction and rupture” that characterize these situations of religious diversity, frameworks in which it might not be contradictory for a government to be “democratic” while simultaneously favoring a specific religious tradition. These emergent regulatory frameworks are situated in a broader international context in which sovereign nations commonly invoke the common language of rights and law to justify their national regimes. At the same time that they invoke the language of universal rights, they question a primary assumption about proselytizing that is carried in this very
language—namely, that the world has been constituted primarily by self-determining and discrete religious actors since the fifteenth century. Believers in China and Japan may give famously convoluted answers to the question, “What religion do you adhere to?” But it is not only they for whom religious communities are more than merely voluntary associations. Situating these studies in Asia, then, is not a conclusion as much as it is another way of asking these questions from a different vantage point.

We approach these questions about proselytizing and religious pluralism at a number of different levels, bringing to bear a range of disciplinary backgrounds on these pressing questions about religious freedom, religious self-determination, and religious expression—and their limits—in increasingly crowded public spaces in Asia. The essays collected in this volume are organized thematically around the central theme of proselytizing and cover a broad range of national and confessional contexts across Asia. In general, we have tried to work our way from the most macro-level papers, that is, papers that engage these questions at the level of government and legal frameworks, to the most intimate micro-level, that is, papers focused on the practitioners and in which the state is a spectral presence. Thus we start with Michael Feener’s introductory essay, which serves as an overview of the main tensions and fault lines in these debates across Asia and offers a critical intervention in theoretical conversations about proselytizing in the global age. At the same time, we recognize the organization of the volume’s contributions is somewhat artificial, as all papers engage a common set of questions and concerns about proselytizing—both in terms of the practice of proselytizing and in terms of the contours of the national landscapes upon which proselytizers act. Thus we encourage readers to read the essays—which are not subdivided into separate sections—in the spirit of these common questions.

After Feener’s introductory essay, we have another set of essays whose primary focus is these broader contexts. Melissa Crouch explores state-level dynamics in Indonesia through the lens of democratic legal reforms that make it an offense to proselytize children through dishonest means. Crouch uses the example of the “Proselytization Case,” in which three teachers were found guilty of this offense, to explore these legal dynamics. She concludes the chapter with a consideration of the extent to which the state and the courts are responding to conservative Muslim demands for greater regulation of proselytization activities, potentially narrowing the limits of pluralism, and argues that it is unclear whether limitations on proselytization in Indonesia—the largest Muslim-majority democratic country in the world—have led to the promotion of pluralism while still ensuring protection for religious minorities.

Sophie Lemière explores similar dynamics in Malaysia, where the free exercise of religion is protected, even as severe restrictions exist when it comes to proselytizing the state’s Muslim majority. Because “religion” is an ethnic label in Malaysia, Malays are and must remain Muslims, by definition. Christians as well as other missionary groups are seen as a threat to the Muslim community by most Islamic or Muslim groups. As is true in Indonesia, the state has an interest not just in preserving social harmony, but also in maintaining the religious and political dominance of
the Muslim majority. By exploring the management of religious diversity by the
government, Lemière ultimately concludes that both the political regulation and
social perception of proselytizing are sources of recurrent tensions between reli-
gious groups, and are jeopardizing the social balance of this plural society.

Exercising control over the legal definition of “religion” is a significant way
states seek to regulate religious practice. Francesca Tarocco explores some of these
regulatory strategies in China, where the government exerts tight ideological and
administrative control over the religious sphere in its quest to create a “harmonious
society” (hexie shehui/和谐社会). In spite of strict regulation and occasional
government crackdowns, religious groups in many parts of China have been actively
reassembling networks of practitioners and reconstructing religious sites over
the past 25 years. Tarocco argues that contemporary practices must be seen in the
context of earlier Buddhist attempts to recontextualize cultural heritage in the face
of nation-builders. Having acquainted themselves with the emerging modern voca-
bulary of religion, elite Buddhist activists negotiate a legitimate place for Buddhist
practices and worldviews in relation to proselytizing in the context of the prevailing
secular and nationalist agendas in China.

The Singapore context offers many examples of the struggle on the part of the
government to seize control of the signifier “religion” and codify it into legally
enforceable regulatory frameworks. Like Tarocco, Daniel Goh also shows that
describing a governmental regime as “secular” with respect to proselytizing often
obscures as much as it illuminates. Goh analyzes the contemporary struggle of
evangelical Christians in Singapore in order to explore the imbrication of secular-
ism with religious pluralism in the making of this postcolonial, capitalist society.
While Christians—and especially Evangelical Protestants—constitute the fastest-
growing religion in contemporary Singapore, they still face two main obstacles to
further growth: state regulation and religious pluralism. In response, evangelicals
attempt to Christianize the secular public sphere and bolster flagging revivalism by
redefining—or “displacing”—the boundary markers between the secular and the
religious. Singapore’s Evangelicals have effectuated these displacements in the are-
nas of the mass media, capitalist markets, and civil society, and have faltered against
the state-enforced, self-regulating secularity in these public spheres.

Rodney Sebastian’s chapter presents an in-depth study of how Singapore’s gov-
ernment regulates the religious practice of the International Society for Krishna
Consciousness—a group more commonly referred to as the Hare Krishnas—
through denying the group legal status as a religion. In arguing that ISKCON has
adjusted its proselytization methods to gain acceptance in Singapore, Sebastian
argues that religious groups in Singapore that do not enjoy the favor of the state have
limited fluidity and religious freedom. The Yiguan Dao discussed by Francis Lim
has also adjusted its incursions into Singaporean public space in order to effectively
proselytize. Unlike ISKCON and Evangelical Christians in Singapore, however, the
Yiguan Dao has moved inward in an attempt to secure the freedom to practice. The
group has utilized the modern social distinction between the “private” and “public”
spheres to effectively propagate itself through the establishment of “house temples.”
This strategy minimizes competition with other religions in “public” spaces while
at the same time ensuring close surveillance of its members. It also serves to reassert the group’s religious character to its members, while presenting itself as a spiritual group to outsiders.

Another way in which religious groups challenge governmental regulatory strategies is through the elision of the “cultural” and the “religious,” as discussed in my study of the Soka Gakkai in Singapore. Members of this lay new Buddhist group embrace a “both/and” approach to proselytizing, in which they promote pluralist values about religious tolerance while gently encouraging the conversion of others. They do this in part through their commitment to interreligious dialogue, though they have redefined “dialogue” in a Buddhist light. The line between “religion” and “culture” in Asian contexts is similarly blurry in the case of Tzu Chi, another Buddhist new religious movement that is the focus of C. Julia Huang’s chapter. Tzu Chi operates with a strong mission of international humanitarianism and local social welfare, two main avenues by which it has sought to develop beyond the Chinese diaspora. The group maintains its policy of not deliberately missionizing and at the same time emphatically features proselytization of non-Chinese in its media. This reorientation of its proselytizing efforts comes as members redefine the appropriate means and targets of proselytizing through these extensive service projects, which facilitate initial and significant encounters of non-members with devotees.

The cases of Soka Gakkai and Tzu Chi show that proselytizing has important religious dimensions to practitioners, a dynamic highlighted also by Samia Huq. Huq’s chapter focuses on Bangladeshi Muslim women who actively cultivate piety by coming together in religious discussion circles to engage in da`wa, or inviting others to the “correct” way of life. These women see da`wa as a meaningful way to take their piety beyond the confines of the private realm. These women articulate the relevance of da`wa in their lives by employing different approaches towards different groups of Muslim and non-Muslim targets, thereby showing how da`wa, when understood as a type of proselytizing, straddles a fine line between the tolerance of different ideas and practices and the need to have others espouse a standardized faith.

While Huq and Huang focus on the ways in which practitioners have understood the importance of proselytizing for their own religiosity, Neena Mahadev and Farish Noor instead focus primarily on the ways in which non-members have responded to proselytizing. In particular, the studies presented by both Mahadev and Noor are marked by outsiders’ fear of being proselytized. In his study, Noor explores the proselytizing strategies of the transnational lay missionary movement Tablighi Jama’at in West Papua. The group has been remarkably consistent in its proselytizing strategies across the world, and this constancy has resulted in its making few inroads among the ethnic population in West Papua. However, Noor suggests that the fear that Christians will be more successful at proselytizing tribal peoples may force a reorientation, or at least may encourage the Tabligh to embrace a kind of “politically correct” respect for religious pluralism.

Neena Mahadev also highlights fears of being proselytized, especially by Christians, in her chapter on post-tsunami relief efforts by international faith-based charities. Christian organizations conducting relief work in predominantly Buddhist
areas raised suspicions among many nationalist politicians and Buddhist religious authorities that Christians were facilitating “unethical conversions” of vulnerable Sri Lankans through charity. Unlike the Tabligh in West Papua, the Sri Lankan Christians have developed practices that are seen as unfairly “attractive” to potential converts. By focusing on the ways in which outsiders appraise these efforts, Mahadev explores the criteria by which proselytizing is deemed ethical or unethical. Though these struggles take place in a range of everyday settings, Buddhist nationalists and Christian evangelists see their respective religious legacies on the island as the work of salvational missions, albeit ones of dramatically different sorts.

As a whole, this volume demonstrates that focused empirical studies are crucial for understanding how these complicated practices and ideas operate in contemporary societies. Tad Stahnke has argued that there are no “general solutions” to the problem of proselytizing (Stahnke 1999). We might claim that it would be just as true to say that there are few generalizations we can make about the nature of the problem itself. The efflorescence of religious propagation on the ground in Asia exceeds categorization, as it is not clear that “proselytizing” refers to a single, mutually agreed-upon category of behavior. Is it fair to similarly describe the distribution of aid in Sri Lanka and the building of a church in Indonesia as both types of proselytizing? And if so, what are the implications for a government’s ability to regulate these practices? Rosalind Hackett’s useful definition of proselytizing—“propagation of one’s religion with the intent to convert others”—is one starting point (Hackett 2008). Yet even this inclusive definition does not reflect the entire range of behaviors associated with proselytization across Asia today—as, for example, in the case of the ruling by a special commission of India’s supreme court to differentiate the act of “conversion” from the right to “propagation”.1 Regardless of the multivalent nature of the term, however, “proselytizing” continues to have strongly normative overtones, both among scholars and among religious practitioners. We cannot but help having an opinion on proselytizing.

At stake in these conversations is a global concern about the proper place for religion in rapidly changing public spheres. As legal scholar John Witte claims, proselytizing is “one of the great ironies of the democratic revolution of the modern world” (Witte 2001). Religious pluralism in a secular context is not a mere descriptor of empirical diversity. Rather it is a normative claim about the kind of harmonious coexistence among diverse religious groups that secularism is intended to make possible. Like proselytizing, religious pluralism in this normative sense is also something that one can be “for” or “against,” as the cases in this volume make clear. Contemporary Asian contexts complicate the situation even further, as talk about secularism is often bundled with a host of other values, including liberalism, humanism, democracy, modernization and, often, Westernization. The ways in which these projects of religious pluralism are instantiated in Asia makes clear that projects of religious pluralism do not always carry all the values in the bundle. In offering these

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1 The context of this distinction is discussed in Michael Feener’s contribution to this volume.
focused empirical studies, we hope our volume can contribute to vibrant discussion of these globally important questions about the dynamics of religious proselytizing at the limits of religious pluralism in contemporary societies.

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