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Introduction

Religious Philanthropy in Asia

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Special Focus Editors

Territorial porosity has fostered religious globalisation in the 21st century. Religious global flows have increased where different religious groups have moved across territorial boundaries with ease and positioned themselves in the various spheres for a myriad of religious activities. These religious flows include a multitude of forms and styles that involve traditional missions, televangelism, as well as increasingly cyber-spatial religious interactions. These flows are accompanied by an explosion in the array of religious services, activities and products for the consumption of both religious and non-religious individuals and the wider public. These activities include the delivery and the consumption of varieties of spiritualism, ritualism and, as the papers in this special issue show, religious philanthropy.

But at the same time, what we hear most in the media today that clearly trouble the public are the ruptures brought about by religious fundamentalism, militancy and terrorism. More specifically, the concern is with Islamic militancy and terrorism that has aimed to disrupt world order, and in particular, that of the developed world. Territorial porosity and religious global flows have thus led to the rise of social fear and risk associated with acts of religious fundamentalism and terrorism.

In this special issue on “Religious Philanthropy in Asia”, we attempt to redress the negative views generated by the growth of religious militancy and religious terrorism with religious philanthropy and religious acts of humanitarianism. While religious militancy and terrorism grab international and local news headlines, we must continue to study all other aspects of religion that thrive in modern society. But in paying attention to these intersections of religion and philanthropy, scholars and observers must also be willing to confront tough questions concerning their politics, ideologies and social impact (Fountain et al., 2015).

Instrumentality and Religious Philanthropy

In all religions, the notion of compassion and doing good are typically seen as essential principles. Members of a faith are often extolled to observe and practice these two aspects of their teaching. Be it Christianity, Buddhism or other religious faiths, compassionate acts and the act of giving have featured prominently. In all religions, there are both regularised mandatory contribution in the form of the Christian tithe, Islamic *zakat* and Jewish *tzedakah*. Other religions have adopted a more informal approach to giving and individuals give voluntarily either on a regular basis or needs basis.

For many faith-based individuals, giving is part of their moral religious responsibility to help the poor and the underprivileged. It is also to redress the social injustice of the society that they live in. These faith-based individuals contribute to either religious institutions or secular organisations or both. Also, gender features prominently and women have started playing a more active and significant role in both contribution and actions, thus elevating their socio-religious status among the members within the religious organisations they are part of.

While giving conveys a sense of compassion for others and religious altruism, in fact this act is often mediated by both spiritual and non-religious considerations. Surfaced here is the instrumentality of religious philanthropy. It is commonly acknowledged that among faith-based givers, religious giving is a means towards their end goal, i.e., ultimate salvation in the Christian world or enlightenment in the Buddhist world. Hence, from this perspective, along the Weberian line of argument, this-worldly pursuit has to do with other-worldly interests (Weber, 2003; Stark and Finke, 2000). So, in effect, there is no religious altruism. Alleviating suffering in this world is a conduit to the salvation and enlightenment in the other world.

From another perspective, religious giving could also be seen as an act of obtaining non-spiritual gains. It is a method to gain social status, establish social relationships and expand social networks. It is not uncommon to see competition among individuals vying for the attention of the chief religious abbot by making substantial contributions so as to become part of the inner circle of the religious organisation and even to obtain a higher socio-religious status within the religious community. For others still, philanthropy establishes social networks that ultimately benefit business, political and social interests. Nevertheless, irrespective of the motives for religious giving, the contributions have enabled religious organisations to embark on religious philanthropy and provide humanitarian aid to disaster-stricken regions locally and globally, as well as a variety of special care services for the marginalised at the local and global levels.

The Dynamics of Religious Philanthropy in Asia

Indeed, religious institutions with progressive and charismatic monastics, armed with resources from individual contributions, have embarked on greater philanthropic work around Asia (King, 2005; Laliberté et al., 2011). As the papers in this special issue show, some of these religious institutions are increasingly at the forefront of social engagement, exploring various social welfare and humanitarian niches to carve a new role and cater to the new demands of their followers. Some are more successful than others in the delivery of philanthropic activities for a variety of reasons.

We highlight four reasons based on the papers in this special issue. The ability of these organisations to encourage greater contribution and voluntary participation is one crucial element in amassing resources for such activities (see Huang, 2009). To this end, charismatic leadership and organisational credibility, as seen in the case studies in India and the Philippines, are crucial. A second reason is the ability to institutionalise such philanthropic acts as an important part of the religious goal and mission. This institutionalisation is particularly important as philanthropic acts often take up more resources and energy, in contrast to ritualistic or spiritual activities. The success of engaged Buddhism around Asia exemplifies this institutionalisation (Kuah-Pearce, 2009). Third, the operation of religious philanthropic services often involves tacit or overt support of the state. Sometimes, there is a collaborative partnership between the state and the religious institutions. At other times, the state initiates and shapes philanthropic acts by actively providing resources to sympathetic religious institutions (Kuah-Pearce, 2008; Cornelio, 2013). Hence, the state might provide regulatory control in order to ensure that philanthropic resources, in particular donations from the community, are put to strategic uses. Open-book accounts with proper accounting and auditing are standard practices for many charitable organisations and religious charitable organisations are not exempted from the regulatory framework. In societies with an authoritarian government, such as Communist China, tight control over religious philanthropy, while systematically encouraged, is exercised. Thus, religious organisations continue to be under heavy surveillance as they seek to improve the life of the underprivileged groups, the poor and those affected by natural calamities. Finally, public interest and participation in religious philanthropy seems to intensify in different Asian societies, such as Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong. Individual religiosity might very well buttress such public interest and participation. However, we would like to highlight too the role of social mobility in enhancing the virtues of mercy and compassion, with intriguing implications on international humanitarian work. Indeed, the more successful reli-

gious movements in more advanced societies in Asia have begun to make their presence felt in developing parts of the region. Calamities in the region have also placed many of them in the spotlight.

Religious philanthropy has now become the new religious modern, taking its place alongside the more traditionally-oriented religious spiritualism and ritualism and superseding it as the world that we live in look for social and economic returns of the resources that they have put in and the accountability of the use of those resources. Religious organisations that have established various types of humanitarian projects and welfare services are seen as social contributors not only by their members, but also by the wider community (Deneulin and Rakodi, 2011). In this regard, many of these religious organisations increasingly ground their religious pursuit in religious philanthropy to fulfil the demands placed upon them by their members, the general public and the state. In so doing, we are also seeing the emergence of religious non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the 21st century in Asia. Religious NGOs could be seen as becoming the new religious mode of operation. Hence, this mode of engaged religiosity increasingly visible in Asia reinforces the ethic of humanity that defines world religions.

Outline of the Special Issue

In this special issue, six papers explore in different ways the intersection between religion and philanthropy in Asian societies. The papers were first presented at the 2013 conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion in Finland. The first three are empirically-grounded papers that unravel the operation and impact of religious philanthropy on the ground, while the latter three survey the religious scene for its philanthropic role in different regimes. Covered in this issue are empirical data from India, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China and Japan. Analytical approaches vary too, ranging from assessments of the social impact of religious philanthropy to the political contexts of religion and philanthropy in Asia.

The first empirically-grounded paper by Kuah-Pearce examines women in the micro-politics of delivering compassion and religious volunteering and seeks to understand the motivation behind women's participation in religious volunteering. This paper uses the feminist "thealogy" framework that focusses on goddess worship and charts their interpretation of the transformation of this-worldly women, namely the female founder of their religious organisation from a religious monastic to become a "divine supreme master" akin to a "goddess". Likewise, there is also the transformation of these women volunteers

into “divine individuals” as they address each other as enlightened beings, *bodhisattva* in Buddhism. Along with this transformation, this paper explores how individuals are engaged in the micropolitics of the volunteering at the everyday level.

The second paper by Lau and Cornelio explores the role and participation of local Filipinos in the volunteering activities of Tzu Chi Buddhist Foundation in the Philippines. It argues that this is in contradiction to previous research that found only ethnic Chinese and, more specifically, Taiwanese Chinese were involved in acts of philanthropy in a transnational environment. It concludes that Filipino Catholics participate in Tzu Chi’s philanthropic activities in order to experience a sense of personal transformation and self-fulfilment brought about by Tzu Chi’s highly regimented acts of self-discipline. Ultimately, the paper argues that it is the inspirational teaching and not the religious teachings that drew the Filipino Catholics to engage in their philanthropic activities.

The third paper by Kalapura interrogates how a philanthropic organisation called Bettiah Parish Society managed by two faith-based organisations has impacted on the socio-economic transformation of an Indian community. The paper argues that through various religious and philanthropic activities, the disparate groups located in Bihar, eastern India, have been brought together through the Christian faith and become the Bettiah community that rejected the caste system so deeply entrenched in Indian society. As such, the paper argues that this has led to the formation of a Bettiah identity. Furthermore, through the provision of educational opportunities, the Bettiah community has also experienced an upward social-economic development.

The fourth paper by Laliberté explores the role of the state and the different political environments that have shaped religious philanthropy in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Communist China. It argues that while the three regions shared a similar culture, historical experiences such as colonialism, their approach to religious organisations and their role in philanthropic activities especially in the area of care-giving are completely different. In exploring the role of the state, Laliberté contends that the Taiwanese and Hong Kong states have adopted a policy of co-optation and allowed the religious organisations a relatively free hand in their religious activities, including involvement in philanthropic care-giving services. On the other hand, Communist China has been more stringent and only in recent years has allowed religious organisations to perform some form of philanthropic services. These religious organisations continue to be subjected to close monitoring.

The fifth paper by Terazawa probes multi-dimensional religiosity and volunteering in Taiwan based on the “Taiwan Social Change Survey”. By studying and analysing this data set, Terazawa concludes that different types of religios-

ity and multi-dimensional religiosity have varying effects on both religious and secular volunteering. This study also shows that religious participation has a significant impact on religious volunteering but not on secular volunteering; whereas spiritualism affects both religious and secular volunteering.

The final paper by Potter investigates the role of religious organisations in the delivery of welfare services and attempts to locate them as religious NGOs in Japan. It demonstrates that the Japanese state's categorisation of non-profit organisations has hindered the inclusion of religious organisations as part of the non-profit sector. But this situation has not detracted the religious organisations from assuming a philanthropic role to provide an ageing population welfare and care-giving services. By placing the religious organisation within the non-profit sector and the wider civil society, this paper examines the linkages that exist between religious organisations and their non-profit counterparts, thereby highlighting the religious philanthropic roles that take shape in Japanese society.

Conclusion

In exploring religion and philanthropy in Asia, the six papers in this special issue have interrogated different areas of interest and argued the complexity that surrounds the decision-making process of individuals and religious organisations in their involvement and promotion of religious philanthropy. For the individuals, there are a myriad of reasons ranging from how they perceive religious philanthropy as integral part of spiritual development to instrumental considerations that will expand their socio-economic and political networks. At the institutional level, considerations range from the religious teaching of compassion to the pragmatics of responding to the needs of believers and aid beneficiaries. Institutionally, religious organisations are involved in philanthropic work in response to the rapidly rising civil society in Asia and the changing socio-religious landscape in a globalised world. This means dealing with different political regimes in the region.

The study of religion and philanthropy has just begun and the various chapters in this issue have only covered a small segment of this broad theme. Future research direction into religion and philanthropy in Asia could take the arguments from the various chapters further. One broad theme for future research to interrogate is the individualisation of religious philanthropy; a second broad theme could explore religious philanthropy and the market economy; and a third broad theme could pursue comparative work on religious philanthropy and the various political regimes in Asia.

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