

***Religious Pluralism in Democratic Societies: Challenges and Prospects for Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States in the New Millennium.* Edited by K.S. Nathan. Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Malaysian Association for American Studies, 2007. Softcover: 315pp.**

In a globalizing world, linked in so many ways by economic, political, and security concerns, it is important to recognize the local impact of the global and the global impact of the local. This is a sufficient justification to focus on the promises and challenges of religious pluralism, which has implications for the democratic governance of multi-religious societies. Peaceful democracy depends on people's willingness to cooperate with one another, which in the final analysis depends on a shared sense of community.

The 20th century bears witness to the fact of people doing unspeakable things to those for whom they lack community feeling. This is especially true of people who see themselves threatened by: outsiders, economic forces, or things they do not understand. Thus, conflict wracks Sri Lanka, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia. Both Sri Lanka and Rwanda were once peaceful, even progressive, but now they are aflame. Former Yugoslavia has seen four wars or quasi-wars in eight years: Croats against Serbs (twice), both against Bosnians, and now Serbs against Albanians. Whatever their causes, they have eradicated pan-Yugoslav society and set its inhabitants at odds along ethno-religious lines. India and Northern Ireland continue to suffer religious strife, while many of the various former Soviet Republics have split ethnically. Simultaneously, there is a growth of religious fundamentalism in several traditions. Though different in scale and scope, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other faiths have found new vigour in a self-conscious return to "tradition". Various authors have charted this resurgence and noted their similarity to inter-ethnic strife. They have suggested the creative shaping of a social order that encourages people to value their stake in each other's lives.

The book under review is an excellent endeavour in that direction. It is essentially a product of an international conference organized by the Malaysian Association for American Studies in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in late August 2002. The 14 chapters of almost equal length, revised and updated with the inclusion of a section on Europe, present a variety of views from both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars on the nature and impact of religious pluralism on the way of life of people in Southeast Asia, America, and Europe. This is analysed in the larger context of the region's relationship with modernity, democracy, and globalization.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, containing seven chapters, deals with the problems and challenges of religious pluralism and coexistence in Southeast Asia and the United States. Common to both regions is the phenomenon of immigration that has contributed to multi-culturalism and religious coexistence. Part II is devoted exclusively to the examination of religious diversity in Europe and the form it has taken in recent decades. Part III contains four chapters analysing the linkage between democracy and the notion of separation of church and state with reference to Southeast Asia, Europe, and America. Islam and Southeast Asia looms large in all the chapters and in the discussion on Southeast Asian pluralism, Malaysia and Indonesia consume more space than other countries. As expected, the editor has provided a lengthy introduction and a meaningful concluding chapter.

The purpose of this volume is not to explain the prevalence of ethno-religious conflict, nationalism, and fundamentalism in the twenty-first century. Its objective is to underscore the importance of equality and interconnectedness for a secure world order for the prosperity of humanity at large. Leonard Swidler (Chapter 1), drawing upon the experience of Western civilization, sees peaceful world order possible only if religion is separated from the power of the state. It is also essential to be engaged in “deep dialogue” within each community and between religious communities to learn and to grow in the perception and understanding of reality and to act accordingly. The dialogue can take place between equals and on the basis of mutual trust and sincerity.

Almost all the contributors emphasized the need for dialogue. Lee Kam Hing (Chapter 3) claims that the Christian missionaries in Malaysia made early efforts at inter-cultural dialogue and that the recent efforts to promote inter-civilizational dialogue are the offshoot of earlier Christian efforts. Tan Chee-Beng maintains that Buddhism is known for its tolerant spirit and hence “a very relevant religion for our world in the new millennium” (p. 117). He prefers the scholars and community leaders to “articulate the Buddhist teachings to bring about a more harmonious and peaceful world” (p. 118). N. Kanthasamy (Chapter 7) traces the origins of Hinduism and its diffusion from India to Southeast Asia. He argues that Hinduism, as the oldest religion in the world, eschews violence of all kinds and is a religion of peace and tolerance. Azyumardi Azra, arguing that pluralism and diversity are a striking reality in Southeast Asia and particularly in Indonesia, stresses the need for cooperation among groups in culturally heterogeneous societies. To him religious pluralism has strong Islamic roots and is manifested in at least eight cultural realms representing “a distinctive cultural expression of its Muslim population” (p. 227). Similarly,

Shamsul A.B., in his heavily loaded yet informed and informative chapter (Chapter 11), argues that Islam is plural. Using the “embedded thesis”, he points out that Islam in the Malay world has been moulded by local ontologies and sociological conventions and in the process it became pluralized, tolerant, and accommodative. He suggests a similar embedization process of Islam and Muslims in the larger European community and culture.

Despite heavy emphasis on tolerance and respect for diversity, Islam has been misunderstood. For various historical and political reasons, Irfan Omar points out, “Islam has a negative image in America. Even before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Islam was often portrayed in a bad light” (p. 84). Tan Chee-Beng concurs: “Following September 11, a significant population in U.S.A. has become less tolerant of other faiths and even hates Islam, linking it with terrorism” (p. 115). One can encourage tolerance by developing interconnected, globe-spanning communities, but in doing so one must simultaneously minimize the negative impact of this development on those for whom such globe-spanning could be a threat. This is the lesson that is implied in the three well-researched chapters under Part II. Martin Bauman (Chapter 8) documents bitter disputes that have taken place over the building of temples, mosques, and minarets in Germany and Switzerland. These cases serve as indicators of the fears and tensions generated by the diversity of faiths and cultural styles. Joergen Oerstrom Moeller (Chapter 9) explains the Danish cartoon episode by referring, among others, to globalization and to the failure of the traditional Europeans to be sensitive to the value system of the Muslim minorities and the negative image Muslims hold about the Europeans. Unless attempts are made at value integration, fundamentalism will surface and rend the social fabric (p. 173). In this regard, Bryan S. Turner makes a crucial observation: “The main plank of a successful multiculturalism must be the creation of overlapping social and cultural ties to create social capital and social bonds between groups” (p. 270).

While the contributors to the volume agree on the need to confront the challenges posed by religious pluralism, they disagree on the role of the state in this process. Hussein Mutalib’s analysis of the cases of Malaysia and Singapore indicate the desirability of state intervention in managing the challenge of pluralism (p. 52). Kathleen Anne Cavanaugh also notes the emergence of “a limited pluralist European model of regulating or ‘managing’ diversity” (p. 177). She also examines the church-state relationships that have emerged in Europe and the debate that has ensued on the protection and promotion of pluralism in the personal-public sphere.

The theme of church-state relationship has been discussed by many contributors to the volume. In a sense, Cavanaugh's chapter is an extension of the issue raised by Swidler in which he advocated disconnecting religion from the power of the state (pp. 18–20). Likewise, Paul David Numrich, in his essay on the experience of Asia-American Buddhists, suggests applying America's "lively experiment" with religious liberty to contemporary European and Southeast Asian contexts (pp. 102–3). Similarly, P. Ramasamy suggests learning from the American model of democracy and America's experience of religious liberty to successfully manage religious diversity (pp. 252–54). Although there may be some wisdom in advocating religious liberty, it is extremely difficult to substantiate Swidler's dogmatic assertion that "the separation of religion from the power of the state fosters both the flourishing of state and religion" (p. 21) or that "China, North Korea and Vietnam will always remain relatively 'backward' as long as they maintain a union of ideology and state" (p. 19). What cannot be doubted, however, is that without a framework of interaction in which groups show sufficient respect and tolerance towards each other, they will not be able to fruitfully coexist and interact without conflict and coercion. Equally valid is the claim by Moeller, Ramasamy, and Turner that the plural society will be doomed if the state fails to live by the principles of rule of law, equality, and justice in theory and practice.

The chapter contributors deserve our commendation for a job well done, as does the editor of this volume, Professor K.S. Nathan. He did admirably well in putting together a book which at the intellectual level has the tremendous potential of building bridges among the adherents of various faiths as they strive together to promote human dignity and global justice. His concluding observation captures the essential message of this volume: the experience of democratic societies in Southeast Asia, Europe and America "lends confidence to the notion that democratic social orders, founded on the rule of law and respect for fundamental human rights, are better equipped to address the various challenges of religious pluralism in the new millennium" (p. 291). The book will surely be well received by scholars and activists, and given its thematic importance and relevance, will likely generate demand for a second and improved edition.

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