

# Asia Journal of Global Studies

## FOREWORD

What has often been said of the Devil is, in paraphrase, true of religion over this last century: Its best strategy has been to lull liberal, secular souls into believing the spiritual no longer mattered. Certainly, most academics and journalists were caught off-guard by the post-9/11 rise of religious rightwing politics and geopolitics - most pointedly, tensions and terror involving the usual Abrahamic suspects: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Still today, oft-aghast confusion over this resurgence of zealotry remains intense among the worldly and the scholarly.

It is true that awareness of globalization's awesome complexity has gone mainstream. As the millennium got underway, even business publications grew aware (if dimly) that globalization could not be narrowly equated with its economic facts. Much ink has been spilt trying to conceptualize the global in "cultural" terms - whether as dawning cosmopolitanism, proliferating hybridizations, creeping McDonaldization, or an end-game civilizational clash. Yet even now, when the rule of religion over most minds has become impossible to ignore, too little scholarship on globalization exercises due concern with the sacred - or the apocalyptic - as a central (and immemorial) aspect of "the world becoming one place."

A timely corrective to that theoretical gap is offered by the main articles comprising this edition of *AJGS*. These three papers address fully disparate subjects, upon which the authors bring to bear wholly distinct perspectives. But each in their own way, our main contributions all illuminate the "mystical" mindset - whether militant or meditative - as a crucial element absent from most global scholarship. A review essay which concludes the issue takes a different but relatable tack to correcting the conflation of globalization with modern and/or Western mentalities - this piece emphasizes the agency exercised by Asians, historically and to date, by which Western inflows have been rejected or mastered.

Magdalena Karolak, at the Bahraini branch of the New York Institute of Technology, writes about globalization-related political paradoxes and problems in Bahrain, perhaps the most liberal of Arab countries: home to its own Formula One Grand Prix, Michael Jackson's 2005 choice for a "relaxation" refuge, and nearly half populated by migrants of all classes.

Increasingly, however, many Arab and Muslim natives associate Bahrain's burgeoning foreign population with socio-economic problems - from job scarcity and downward pressure on wages, to a spread in those crimes and vices distinct to the poor and the globe-trotting elite. Recent political liberalizations in this kingdom are putting into play a vicious irony, one seen increasingly in Islamic nations, and across the Christian West: Fundamentalists are proving happy to avail themselves of liberal-democratic institutions - in hopes of replacing them with theocratic rule. Bahrain's Islamist agitation threatens to overshadow more hopeful developments, such as a recent raft of policies aimed at advancing the rights of women, including their placement in high political office. Karolak's window on Bahrain presents a prism through which to apprehend globality, one in which she places due emphasis on piety, politics, culture, and class. Her paper closes with an admonition for Bahrain's elites: "Progressive economic reforms are surely needed to prevent a further sectarian split within Bahrain's society." This warning is equally applicable to rulers the world round, liberal or autocratic, who fear social unrest fomented by rightwing, religious and racist ideologies.

In another finely-grained study of globalization as refracted through religion, Silke Bechler at the University of Heidelberg reminds readers that not all is worrisome with the renascence and roamings of world faiths. She describes how *yajña*, a Hindu ritual of sacrifice, has hybridized peacefully across the globe. In its journey, those handling this oblation are melding custom with new cultural contexts, both throughout the Indian diaspora and among host nation converts.

Bechler prefaces her study of *yajña's* contemporary permutations with a broader historical discussion exemplifying how Eastern traditions have long synthesized with Western principles, religious or otherwise. This backgrounding rightfully contravenes tendencies to frame such issues in terms of cross-cultural incommensurability and naked cultural imperialism. Bechler reminds readers that, as far back as the early 1800s, Indian reformists embraced liberal British ideas, but while rejecting both Christian conversion and conservative Hinduism. Enlightenment ideals were re-cast in a nativist mould - as resurrecting a Vedic heritage, purer than intervening Brahmanic aberrations, such as caste structures or widow-burnings.

Re-focusing on the *yajña* ceremony in present times, Bechler explains how similar cultural cross-pollinations, plus the sheer re-scaling that comes with globalization - both migratory and "virtually" mediated - has transformed what was traditionally a sacrifice of narrow social scope focused on enhancing

the fortunes of self or family. Increasingly, *yajña* is performed as a communal spectacle, symbolizing the linkage of lives across diverse or diffuse diasporas. Moreover, both among host-nation converts and assimilated Indians, *yajña* has taken on Western, modern, and even - even decidedly - secular meanings. It has recently been invoked to ritually bestow *gravitas* upon "holidaying, personal care and leisure needs." Simultaneously, as part of its journey from "particularism to universalism," *yajña* is increasingly called upon to beseech and bless "the provision of healthcare, education, disaster relief, and other forms of social welfare."

In an age of increasingly bad press for religion, Bechler's paper serves the important function of framing faith in its best light - as offering an anchor of meaning and morality for those who otherwise could only respond (with all too much justification) to the fluxes of world-compression through feeling "alienated or even threatened by forces beyond their control."

Christian Etzrodt, at Japan's Akita International University, explicates the entwinements of religiosity and globalization with a truth regularly ignored by Western secularists of all political persuasions: The economic ideologies - the *faiths* - which we uphold, whether neo-Marxist or neoliberal, are culturally embedded in Judaeo-Christian beliefs about the true and the good: a transcendental absolutism (in tense amalgamation with the Greco-Roman exaltation of logic).

Etzrodt critiques the delusion - or rhetorical gambit - of most free-market fundamentalists: that they are arguing on the basis of reason, or purely in pragmatic response to the brute exigencies of economic reality. This article works to expose the moralist underpinnings - even, the mystic extremism - animating invisible hand neoliberalism. Etzrodt's deconstruction focuses on the seminal Bible of modern (neo)liberal economics, Adam Smith's 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*.

Etzrodt argues that "Smith's central economic thesis is not very reasonable from an economic point of view" - prioritizing as it did savings at the almost complete expense of consumption. But the essay's main point is that, not only in his anti-consumerism but in all regards, Smith - who was a moral philosopher, not an economist - propagated his free trade doctrine primarily to spearhead the global spread of neo-Calvinist asceticism: Economic actors unwilling to devote themselves to financial restraint and unstinting labor would prove unable to compete with those agents predestined for success and divine grace.

The 2008 collapse of global finance, and then of economies around the world, knocked from its pre-eminent perch the doctrine that unfettered trade leads naturally to economic equilibrium and the greater good. It now seems amazing that anyone really believed markets to be driven principally by the calculations of rational agents, and not equally so by animal spirits alongside fantastic imaginaries. However, old faiths never die; they just lie dormant. Work like Etzrodt's essay shows that no side can claim the high ground of disinterested logic in ideological wars already afoot again, between those struggling to establish the proper reach of government's visible hand. Shades of John Calvin, then, might account for a growing conservative consensus: Governments must impose fiscal austerity upon their stagnant economies, despite a historical record showing this strategy usually invites greater and prolonged recession - or outright economic depression. Perhaps, if subconsciously, this is the very end-game of such proponents: Through suffering (or at least, the suffering of the non-Elect) shall humanity be re-purified!

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, at New York's Pace University, reviews two book-length works - proceedings from a 2006 conference at Hong Kong Baptist University, and a published dissertation. The former piece compiles essays attempting to conceptualize a distinctly Asian modernity, and the latter studies the challenges foreign media companies face in selling content throughout Asia. Lee's evaluation of these works censures the tendency, among scholars no less than multinational corporations, to overlook the meaning-generative agency of everyday people, and to thereby be thwarted in their aims - whether these are to increase understanding or make money and entertain.

This empiricist critique of elite macro-misapprehensions - of obtuseness toward obvious micro-societal truths - links Lee with the other authors in this issue of AJGS. Those three compositions detail why globalization is imploding into Islamist rage; they exemplify how it can manifest more hopefully in holy East-West coalescences; and they excavate religion's living legacy from within neoliberal rationalizations. In so doing, such contributors advance our publication's mandate: To explain globalization, but through detailing the concept-phenomenon's complexities - in this case, illuminating its religious heart - rather than letting reductionist frameworks stand. Praise be!

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