EXPLORING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND COVENANTAL PLURALISM IN ASIA

VOLUME II, SOUTH & CENTRAL ASIA

Edited by
Dennis R. Hoover
Exploring Religious Diversity and Covenantal Pluralism in Asia

This book examines the growing diversity of religions and worldviews across South Asia and Central Asia, and the factors affecting prospects for ‘covenantal pluralism’ in these regions. Going beyond banal appeals for mere ‘tolerance’, the theory of covenantal pluralism calls for a constitutional order of religious freedom and equal treatment combined with a culture of practical religious literacy and everyday virtues of engagement across lines of religious difference.

According to the Pew Religious Diversity Index, half of the world’s most religiously diverse countries are in Asia. The presence of deep religious/worldview difference is often seen as a potential threat to sociopolitical cohesion or even as a source of violent conflict. Yet in Asia (as elsewhere) the degree of this diversity is not consistently associated with sociopolitical problems. Indeed, while religious difference is implicated in some social challenges, there are also many instances of respectful multi-faith engagement, practical collaboration, and peaceful debate.

Volume II offers a pioneering exploration of the prospects for this robust and non-relativistic type of pluralism in South and Central Asia. (Volume I examined East and Southeast Asia.) The chapters in these volumes originally appeared as research articles in a series on covenantal pluralism published by The Review of Faith & International Affairs.

Dennis R. Hoover (D.Phil., Oxford) is Editor of The Review of Faith & International Affairs, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Global Engagement, and an advisor to the Templeton Religion Trust. His recent books include The Routledge Handbook of Religious Literacy, Pluralism, and Global Engagement, co-edited with Chris Seiple.
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The series welcomes books that use a variety of approaches to the subject, drawing on scholarship from political science, international relations, security studies, and contemporary history.

Books in the series explore these religions, regions, and topics both within and beyond the conventional domain of ‘church-state’ relations to include the impact of religion on politics, conflict, and development, including the late Samuel Huntington's controversial – yet influential – thesis about ‘clashing civilisations'.

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Luke Wagner is Lecturer in the International Studies program at California State University, Long Beach, USA where he also serves as the Assistant Director of the Global Studies Institute. His research is focused on religious nationalism, and Hindu nationalism in Nepal in particular.
According to Ronald Inglehart et al. (2004), 81 percent of Vietnamese do not believe in God and for that reason Vietnam constitutes an "anomaly" among Southeast Asian countries which "contain almost no atheists." In 2019 the General Statistics Office of Vietnam published similar findings which stated that more than 86 percent of Vietnamese people are classified as non-religious. The same demographic survey found that six percent of Vietnamese identify as Catholic, around four percent as Buddhist, and around one percent as Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Cao Đài and Hoà Hảo respectively.1 Indeed, when asked what their religion is the majority of Vietnamese people usually answer that they do not follow any religion, and most of them have indicated "none" under the rubric "religion" on their identity card.

These statements might come as a surprise, especially when one takes into consideration of thousands of Buddhist pagodas and spirit temples spread out across the country, or the fact that most Vietnamese engage in all sorts of ritual practices, such as ancestor worship at their home altar, or at the Buddhist pagoda. The reason for this "self-declared atheism" is not because the Vietnamese people are not religious or the Communist Part-State prefers the "no religion" declaration, but because they make a distinction between "religion" (tôn giáo) and "religious beliefs" (tín Ướng) based on membership in a...
FROM RELIGIOUS PLURALITY TO CIVIC SOLIDARITY
IN ASIA: AN INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME II

By Dennis R. Hoover

In the history of political theory and political theology there is no shortage of pessimism regarding the effects of deep religious diversity on a society. Lack of religious/normative uniformity has often been feared as a source of social disharmony and unrest, as well as spiritual and moral pathology. Many political regimes over the millennia have imposed some sort of religious (or quasi-religious) establishment within their jurisdiction. Dissent and diversity have often been met with discrimination at the least, and violent repression at the worst, all in the name of social stability and well-being.

The Roman Catholic establishment in ancient régime France is a prominent historical example of this logic in practice. And the 18th-century criticism of this same establishment by the Enlightenment philosophe Voltaire is a prominent case of the precise opposite logic. Voltaire argued that it is actually the attempt to enforce uniformity that leads to religious wars and to societal stagnation, whereas religious tolerance, voluntary religious association, and liberty of conscience ultimately yield a flourishing society of sustainable peace and prosperity. In his Lettres Philosophiques touting the growing religious tolerance he observed among the English middle class, Voltaire famously summarized as follows: “If there were only one religion in England, there would be danger of tyranny; if there were two, they would cut each other’s throats; but there are thirty, and they live happily together in peace.”

Disagreement about the prerequisites of social harmony vis-à-vis religion remains politically salient today. Various forms of authoritarian, religious nationalist, and cultural populist movements are increasingly assertive around the world, while at the same time advocates for democracy and human rights generally, and religious freedom specifically, are increasingly vocal and sophisticated.

These issues and tensions come into especially bold relief in the case of Asia. According to a global study by the Pew Research Center (2014), Asia is host to a higher level of religious diversity than any other region of the world. Using Global Religious Landscape data gathered as part of the Pew-Teempleton Global Religious Futures project, the Pew Research Center estimated the percentage of each country’s population that fits into eight major religious categories: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, folk or traditional religions, other religions, or religiously unaffiliated. Pew then calculated a 10-point Religious Diversity Index (RDI). The closer a country is to having equal shares across the different categories, the higher its score on this index. On this measure, the top three highest RDI scores in the world
are all held by Asian countries: Singapore (9.0), Taiwan (8.2), and Vietnam (7.7). Of the top 20 highest scores, 10 are held by countries in Asia.¹

In some Asian countries, this religious diversity is unfortunately not accompanied by religious freedom but rather by severe government restrictions on religion. The officially communist states no longer attempt to completely eradicate all religions, but they only allow a select range of religious groups to operate legally, and only under highly monitored and controlled conditions. In other countries, resurgent religious nationalism is leading to discrimination and persecution of minorities (e.g., Hindu nationalism in India; Islamism in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Malaysia; Buddhist nationalism/protectionism in Myanmar; etc.). Still another model is that of Singapore, where religious plurality is officially valued but is also very tightly regulated, with the state retaining power and discretion to police and intervene in religious affairs.

Not surprisingly, religiously restrictive states in Asia come in for routine criticism from institutions that monitor and promote international religious freedom (most of which are based in the West). For instance, the US State Department’s 2021 list of “Countries of Particular Concern” for religious freedom violations names ten countries, six of which are in Asia: Myanmar, China, North Korea, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.²

Equally unsurprising is that Asian states routinely push back against the criticism. The response usually features accusations that the religious freedom monitoring/reporting process itself is inaccurate and biased. But at times the response goes deeper, arguing that Asian cultures have a different understanding of the definition and limits of religious freedom, and a more communal/communitarian set of values and priorities. This argument criticizes the West for excessive individualism at the expense of social cohesion and even physical security. In this view, peace and flourishing under conditions of religious/worldview diversity does not “just happen”; it is not self-actualizing, but rather may require strong social norms—enforced by a strong state (see Neo 2020).

The philosophy of covenantal pluralism maps an alternative path, one that avoids extremes of either anarchy or authoritarianism. First developed by the Templeton Religion Trust (TRT), a global philanthropic foundation, covenantal pluralism is a holistic approach to living with deep religious/worldview diversity. In 2019 TRT launched its Covenantal Pluralism Initiative, which seeks to identify and support programs that cultivate a resilient pluralism that goes beyond banal appeals for “tolerance.” In contrast to the well-meaning but sometimes thin rhetoric of tolerance, the concept of covenantal pluralism acknowledges the complex challenges presented by deep diversity and calls for structures and norms that are conducive to fairness and flourishing for all, even amid stark differences in theologies, values, and lifestyles (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020).

Covenantal pluralism is characterized by a constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment to engaging, respecting, and protecting the other—albeit without necessarily conceding equal veracity or moral equivalence to the beliefs and behaviors of others. The envisioned end-state is neither a thin-soup ecumenism nor vague syncretism, but rather a positive, practical, non-relativistic pluralism.

A pluralism that is covenantal aims to be genuinely plural—i.e., as inclusive as possible of the religious/worldview diversity that actually exists globally. There is room at the table of covenantal pluralism for more than just self-selected cosmopolitans. The invitation is comprehensive, ranging from secular to religious, fundamentalist to modernist, Western to Eastern, and so on.
This is a pluralism that is inclusive of some religious communities that make exclusive theological truth claims. At the same time, however, covenantal pluralism is not unconditional. It demands that such communities respect the parameters and norms of a pluralist covenant—which include, for example, fairness for all (not special pleading for some) and the right of individuals to opt out of their community without fear of violence (Hoover 2016).

A sociopolitical environment of covenantal pluralism exists when there is a mutually reinforcing interaction of favorable legal and cultural conditions. These enabling conditions can be grouped into at least three major categories.

1. **Freedom of religion and belief**, which includes (a) individual liberty of conscience to choose, change, share, or reject any belief, and (b) equal treatment of religions/worldviews under the rule of law.
2. A holistic form of **religious literacy** that emphasizes not just abstract, textbook knowledge of comparative religion but rather practical competencies and skills of multi-faith engagement.
3. **Embodiment and expression of character virtues** that a positive ethos of nonrelativistic pluralism requires—i.e., the praxis and continual cultivation of virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, courage, fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction, all of which help sustain engagement between people of sometimes radically different religions/worldviews.

Covenantal pluralism recognizes that laws protecting freedom of religion and belief, while essential, are insufficient on their own to ensure genuine fairness and flourishing for all. The “top-down” of religious freedom law needs to be matched with a “bottom-up” culture of civic solidarity, in which practical religious literacy and pluralist character virtues are manifest in real-world engagement across lines of religious/worldview difference.

The hoped-for result is a low (or at least moderately low) level of government regulation of religion combined with a low (or at least moderately low) level of religion-related tensions in civil society. It may be tempting for Westerners to assume that such a combination is really only possible in their own societies, given the prominent place that religious liberty and diversity hold within liberal democratic values. However, the Pew Research Center’s global comparative studies of government restrictions on religion and of social hostilities involving religion demonstrate that the reality is much more complicated than that.

Pew produces two key global indices on religion—a Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and a Social Hostilities Index (SHI) (Majumdar and Villa 2021). For each index Pew also categorizes each country’s index score into one of four standard ranges, labeled “Very High,” “High,” “Moderate,” and “Low.” Tables I.1 and I.2 below compare Asian countries to Western countries on these two indices for 2019.

Table I.1 does show a stark contrast at the “Very High” range of GRI scores. No Western countries had “Very High” levels of government restrictions on religion, whereas 11 countries in Asia did. However, there is less of a contrast at lower levels of the table. Most countries in the West (including the United States, the global leader in religious freedom advocacy) ranked in Pew’s “Moderate” category, not “Low.” Also, three European Union (EU) member states ranked “High.” Six Asian states (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Japan) ranked “Low,” and another three (Cambodia, Mongolia, and South Korea) ranked “Moderate.”
Table I.1  Government Restrictions Index (GRI) 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Very High”</td>
<td>China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Singapore, Tajikistan, Brunei, Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Bulgaria, Romania, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“High”</td>
<td>Vietnam, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Laos, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Moderate”</td>
<td>Cambodia, Mongolia, South Korea</td>
<td>Austria, Greece, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Iceland, Poland, Cyprus, Germany, Norway, United Kingdom, United States, Slovakia, Italy, Luxembourg, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden, Switzerland, Finland, Czech Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Low”</td>
<td>Hong Kong, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Timor-Leste, Japan</td>
<td>Croatia, Malta, Canada, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Ireland, Estonia, Australia, Portugal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table I.2  Social Hostilities Index (SHI) 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Asia</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Very High”</td>
<td>India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka</td>
<td>Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, Bulgaria, Belgium, Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“High”</td>
<td>Bangladesh, Afghanistan, South Korea, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Tajikistan</td>
<td>Bulgaria, Belgium, Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Moderate”</td>
<td>Nepal, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Kazakhstan</td>
<td>France, Switzerland, New Zealand, Cyprus, Greece, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Slovakia, Netherlands, Poland, Australia, Austria, Canada, Italy, Romania, United States, Norway, Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Low”</td>
<td>Brunei, Mongolia, Singapore, Turkmenistan, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan</td>
<td>Czech Republic, Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Liechtenstein, Malta, Lithuania, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Portugal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Pew Research Center

Table I.2 on social hostilities involving religion also shows an obvious contrast in the “Very High” category, which includes three countries in Asia (India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) but no countries in the West. However, there is much less of a contrast across the lower levels of the table. Most countries in the West were “Moderate” or “Low,” but six were in the “High” category. (Note that again the United States falls in the “Moderate” category, not “Low.”) Ten countries in Asia ranked “Low,” and another eight ranked “Moderate.”

The “ideal” combination of low GRI and low SHI was found in both the West and Asia. Croatia, Malta, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Estonia, and Portugal boasted this combination. But so did Hong Kong, Taiwan, Timor-Leste, and Japan. Further, if we relax the “ideal” to include
countries that have either low or moderate GRI combined with either low or moderate SHI, three more countries in Asia met the threshold: Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, and Cambodia. Countries in the West that featured this combination in the 2019 data were: Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Greece, Netherlands, Iceland, Poland, Cyprus, Norway, United States, Slovakia, Italy, Luxembourg, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden, Switzerland, Finland, and Czech Republic.

For researchers interested in possibilities for covenantal pluralism in Asia, the key takeaway of the above tables is this: while there are obvious challenges to covenantal pluralism, researchers should also expect to find real precedents and potentialities, all of which will vary according to local conditions. Along with its companion volume on East Asia and Southeast Asia (Hoover 2023), this volume on South Asia and Central Asia takes precisely this balanced approach—one that is realistic, but not fatalistic—to the inquiry.

Both volumes are the product of a three-year series of articles in The Review of Faith & International Affairs, a leading interdisciplinary journal in the field of religion and world affairs. Supported via a major grant to the Institute for Global Engagement from TRT’s Covenantal Pluralism Initiative, the series commissioned original articles from a diverse array of experts, each focusing on a different country or set of countries. Select articles are republished here and in Volume I, grouped by subregions of Asia.

Each contributor was asked to examine the current status of, potential resources for, and major barriers to covenantal pluralism in their respective country/region of expertise. They were encouraged to examine prospects (whether good or bad) for the enabling conditions of covenantal pluralism—freedom of religion and belief, religious literacy, pluralist character virtues.

One of the key barriers identified by contributors to this volume is that opposition to the egalitarian principles of covenantal pluralism exists not just at the level of authoritarian political elites, but also the general public. For instance, in their chapter on Bangladesh, C. Christine Fair and Parina Patel provide sobering statistical detail from their nationally representative survey of 3,488 Bangladeshis. The survey finds high support for privileging Islam and for severely punishing conversion out of Islam, along with low religious literacy and low multi-faith relationships. On a more positive note, a large majority of Bangladeshis oppose Islamist terrorism.

Charles Ramsey’s chapter on Pakistan also paints a sobering picture, arguing that the status of, and prospects for, religious freedom and religious literacy are very low. However, Ramsey also finds reasons for hope vis-à-vis the character virtues of mutual multi-faith respect that are still evident among the Pakistani people. The tragic case of Afghanistan, discussed by Palwasha Kakar and Julia Schiwal, presents an even starker contemporary picture. Yet even here there is a rich history of religious pluralism in the country that one can hope will someday be reclaimed. Kakar and Schiwal argue that these antecedents of pluralism are linked with Hanafi Islam and are evident in various ways in the history of Afghan constitutionalism.

While anti-pluralist forms of political Islam are the major concern in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, other forms of religious nationalism are the principal worry elsewhere in South Asia. In his chapter on Sri Lanka, Neil DeVotta explains that, despite its status as Asia’s oldest democracy and its ample historical potential for ethnoreligious amity, the country has increasingly embraced Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. At the same time, however, DeVotta notes an ongoing rich associational life in the country, as well as valiant contemporary efforts by various civil society groups to build solidarity across
ethnoreligious lines (e.g., Sri Lanka Unites, a youth movement focused on reconciliation).

The ambiguities and paradoxes involved when a country exhibits both pluralism-affirming characteristics and religious nationalism are especially on display in the case of India, discussed here by Rochana Bajpai. Though Hindu supremacist authoritarianism is increasingly ascendant, Bajpai helpfully identifies six historical variants of political pluralism in India: segmented pluralism, multi-confessional pluralism, Hindu pluralism, religion-blind citizenship, inclusionary differentiated citizenship, and multicultural citizenship. Yet the essential task that was never successfully completed in India was “building notions of national identity that are inclusive of minority religions at the grassroots level,” a vulnerability that Hindu nationalists have exploited.

Another country where reactionary Hindu nationalism is a rising threat is Nepal. However, in their contribution, Luke Wagner and Ramkanta Tiwari present a guardedly optimistic analysis of the prospects for covenantal pluralism. They argue that “legal innovations—including the ambiguity of the definition of the term ‘secular’ in Nepal’s 2015 constitution—coupled with existing social resources offer critical sites of opportunity that can be leveraged in efforts to promote covenantal pluralism in Nepal.”

Across all of South Asia, as Nilay Saiya argues in his chapter, the stakes are high. A leading empirical scholar of the linkages between religion and peace/conflict, Saiya shows how repression of religious pluralism/freedom is associated with instability and violent conflict in South Asia. The irony is that many authoritarian leaders justify their repressive approaches on grounds of “security,” but in the long run these approaches are demonstrably counterproductive.

Authoritarian approaches are unfortunately also evident across the five Central Asian states: Uzbekistan (discussed here by Elizabeth Clark and Dmytro Vovk), Kazakhstan (Roman Podoprigora and Nargis Kassenova), Tajikistan (Tim Epkenhans), Turkmenistan (Victoria Clement), and Kyrgyzstan (David Montgomery). The Soviet legacy of tight state controls has continued in various forms since independence. Although in some cases religious pluralism is officially celebrated, actual state policies often continue to be highly top-down in nature—a kind of state paternalism.

In their chapter reflecting on the region as a whole, Martha Brill Olcott and Matthew Rappe note that “the modern republics of Central Asia have extended state control over Islam, continue to privilege it, and use security as a justification to persecute Muslim groups outside of their control in addition to some Protestant sects.” Still, Olcott and Rappe also note historical precedents in the region that were at least partially pluralism-affirming. Moreover, there are some contemporary signs of hope in a reformist direction. Uzbekistan, for instance, has in recent years taken measured steps toward improved policies on religious freedom and pluralism. Indeed, in December 2018 Uzbekistan became only the second country that the US State Department has ever removed from its Countries of Particular Concern list on account of the country’s voluntary steps toward reform (see Morgan 2018; Casper and Balgin 2021).4

This volume and its companion volume present some of the first-ever attempts to systematically analyze the prospects for covenantal pluralism in Asian contexts, many of which are among the most religiously diverse in the world. The contributors add path-clearing theoretical and empirical clarity to this relatively new area of inquiry, while also helping to reveal questions meriting further research. Beyond academic research, however, these volumes also bring to the fore the question of practical strategies for cultivating covenantal pluralism. In the final chapter of this volume, David Montgomery...
aptly summarizes this point in his discussion of experiential pedagogies of pluralism:

\[ \text{The call then is to move beyond an analysis of structures and implement practices that build new solidarities; to move from ideas to actions. It is a practical question of how we can proactively cultivate new forms of solidarity that facilitate living with difference.} \]

It is my hope that, taken together, these volumes help inspire and equip leaders not only for better analysis but also better action.

Notes
1 For a more detailed discussion of the RDI findings, see my Introduction chapter in Exploring Religious Diversity and Covenantal Pluralism in Asia: Volume I, East & Southeast Asia (Hoover 2023).
2 See www.state.gov/countries-of-particular-concern-special-watch-list-counties-entities-of-particular-concern/#Countries-of-Particular-Concern.
3 For purposes of these tables, the category of Western countries includes: United States, Canada, Western Europe/EU member states, Australia, and New Zealand.
4 The other country was Vietnam. Note that both Uzbekistan and Vietnam are countries where the Institute for Global Engagement and its local partners have long run educational and relationship-building programs on religion, law, and society. See https://globalengage.org/programs.

References