De-Orienting Religious Studies: Four Genealogies of the Study of Religions in Modern Asia

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How and under what conditions is knowledge about religion produced? This special issue on religious studies in Asia presents work by scholars who examine the discipline of “Religious Studies” — resisting the temptation to preconceive exactly what that means — in four modern Asian settings: India, China, Thailand, and Singapore. The authors provide genealogical reflection on and historical analysis of the conditions under which the academic study of religion arose in each nation.

The scholarship collected here builds upon the contribution made by Religious Studies: A Global View (Alles 2008), which offered a comprehensive view of the study of religion at tertiary institutions worldwide for the first time. That work considered Asia in three chapters, covering Japan, Continental East Asia, and South- and Southeast Asia. He Guanghu, Chung Chin-hong, and Lee Chang-yick introduced the social conditions in nineteenth-century China and Korea that led to the rise of “religious studies” in the Chinese and Korean academies, but otherwise focused on a “state of the art” analysis of the field in China and Korea today (He, Chung, and Lee 2008). Similarly, Rowena Robinson and Vineeta Sinha presented key issues in “South and Southeast Asia” that shaped
the field in this vast region, ranging from the ideological legacy of Orientalism and its influence on the study of Asian religions within the Western academy to the political reality of inter-religious conflict and the abridgement of academic freedom, as in Sri Lanka (Robinson and Sinha 2008).

This special issue takes a comparatively restricted focus on particular modern national narratives (at particular moments in history) in order to deepen our framing of “religious studies” by revealing the highly distinct conditions that mark the development of the field in each national setting. As each author details, the discipline of “religious studies” is linked to unique engagements with modernity and educational reform in the four modern countries covered here. In all four cases, conceptions of religious studies were shaped within nascent narratives of modern nationhood, according to distinct historical and social circumstances. Consideration of “religious studies” was therefore built into each country’s program of educational reform which included the founding of national instantiations of the “modern university.” This was part of a global phenomenon in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which many ancient institutions of higher learning “converted” into universities as part of a state or polity’s encounter with modernity (Pinkney 2014:30).

In contemporary India and Singapore, religious studies is found in quite different ways within the national higher education landscapes. However, approaches towards modern educational reforms in both countries were deeply — and distinctly — influenced by the legacy of colonialism. Similarly, the shape of religious studies in Thailand and China today reflects the differing positions of each modern state towards religion. Yet historically, the field of religious studies arose in both countries under similar circumstances, through vigorous debate in the public sphere regarding new engagements with modernity, technology, and “the West” and the place of religion in public education.

The development of religious studies in Asia has certainly been inflected by notions of the “scientific study of religion” derived from the West. The mission statement of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) offers a paradigmatic example of such an approach. “[D]edicated to the scientific study of religion,” the IAHR is positively invested in “the critical, analytical and cross-cultural study of religion past and present” and is not engaged with “confessional, apologetical, or other similar concerns” (International Association for the History of Religions 2013). However, additional factors have shaped the ways in which religious studies is conducted in Asian contexts, including various aspects of lived religious experience. Perhaps most significantly, then, what the essays in this special issue give insight into are differing conceptualizations of religion and religious knowledge as found in Asian