Workshop on Religion, Secularism, and Modernity in Asia

Why did conversion to Christianity take place in some Asian areas and not others? What happened when sacred and religious texts from Abrahamic traditions, especially Christianity, were translated into Chinese? What were the effects when the secular and the religious were asserted to be separate realms? What were the consequences for ideas about the private, the public, and the state? How did religious leaders respond to these changes? How do we rethink the present and the past, in China and elsewhere, as we become more aware of the constructed and provisional nature of these categories fundamental to our perceptions of the world? These are the questions that the CRASSH workshop on Religion, Secularism, and Modernity in Asia will explore.

The workshop is the final event organized by the AHRC Network ‘Translations and Transformations: China, Modernity, and Cultural Transmission’.

Programme:

Thursday 18 February 5:00pm

Keynote lecture: Prasenjit Duara: Translating Religion and Secularism

Friday 19 February:

Session 1: 2:00pm

Alan Strathern: Transcendentalism, the categorization of religion, and the conversion of rulers in Early Modern Asia.

Christopher Clark: The Culture Wars of modern Europe

Amira Bennison: Transcendentalism, the categorization of religion, and the conversion of rulers in Early Modern Asia.

Tea: 4:00 – 4:30

Session 2: 4:30 – 6:30pm

Adam Chau: The impact of secularism and modernity on the five modalities of doing religion in China

George Mak: Bible translation in 19th Century China
Hildegard Diemberger, Between secularization and re-enchantment: the dilemmas of Tibetan modernity

6:30pm Reception

SYNOPSIS

Prasenjit Duara: Translating Religion and Secularism in China

Historically, the cluster of ideas and practices closest to 'religion', 'faith' and 'ritual' in imperial China occupied a very different historical structure and role from the Abrahamic traditions which gave the names to the above mentioned cluster. The paper will seek to outline the Chinese cluster with reference to the framework of Axial Age traditions. Rather than competition over scripture and faith, Chinese society has witnessed competition between the state, elites and popular groups over the issue of cosmological hegemony and access to cosmological power. The introduction of secularism and religion as social categories in 20th century China has involved the (modern) Christianization of the question of religion and continues to obscure the problem of religion both in academic analysis and political practice.

Alan Strathern: Transcendentalism, the categorization of religion, and the conversion of rulers in Early Modern Asia.

Why is it that the rulers of some societies could convert to monotheism and retain or even enhance their authority, while elsewhere rulers knew that conversion would spell the end of their political legitimacy? In Sub-Saharan Africa, Island Southeast Asia, and the Pacific, there was often the potential for rulers to convert and oversee the conversion of their subjects. In mainland Eurasia, by contrast, such projects of 'top-down conversion' were doomed to fail. I have suggested that this reflects the way in which the mainland Asian societies had deeply rooted 'transcendentalist' traditions. 'Transcendentalist' traditions are those which have as their objective an ultimate ineffable state of being; religious life thus revolves around the concepts of truth, salvation and ethics. These traditions seem to wind themselves so tightly around conceptions of political legitimacy that exclusivist conversion becomes profoundly problematic. Elsewhere, relationships with the supernatural sphere were conducted on a quite different basis, such that the term 'religion' loses some of its value - while conversion became a real possibility. I shall try to flesh this out a little with regard to South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa. It is more difficult to apply this schema to East Asia. Here, I think it may turn out to be crucial that China had an 'Axial Age' moment of philosophical revolution (generating a 'great tradition' of literacy, second-order thinking, and explicit ethics), which was yet not allowed to fundamentally restructure religious life.
Christopher Clark: The Culture Wars of modern Europe

The consolidation of nation-states in nineteenth-century Europe was accompanied by heightened conflict over the place of religion in public life. Schooling, marriage, burial rites, the confessional mobilization of women and the religious use of public space became bones of contention in an all-encompassing battle of words, laws and images that contemporaries rightly called a 'culture war’. This paper examines the relationship between secularizing enterprises and the waves of religious revival that swept nineteenth-century Europe. Can we really separate processes of secularization from the waves of revival that swept the European continent, or were they two faces of the same phenomenon?

Amira Bennison: Transcendentalism, the categorization of religion, and the conversion of rulers in Early Modern Asia.

In the Islamic world, the concept of 'religion' (din) was quite different prior to the creation of separate secular and religious spheres in the 19th to 20th centuries. Although it appeared to infuse all spheres of activity, it did not necessarily dictate social or political actions but rather provided an explanatory framework for them. This was intimately linked to the Muslim experience of revelation conjoined to empire. This paper will explore the pre-modern Muslim notion of 'religion' and then contrast it with the more conflictual modern framework which emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries as some reformers strove to make Islam 'modern' and others sought to relegate it to the private realm and secularise the public and political spheres.

Adam Chau: The impact of secularism and modernity on the five modalities of doing religion in China

Because of the wide variety of ways the Chinese were engaged in religious practices on the eve of the great transition from the traditional dynastic period to the modern period, it is often very difficult to make blanket statements about the exact impact of secularism and modernity on Chinese religious practices. Did religion decline generally? Did Buddhism suffer as much as Daoism? To what extent was Chinese Buddhism ‘Protestantised’? Why did all attempts to ‘congregationalise’ Chinese religious communities fail? Was the Communist party-state atheist or simply intolerant of rival social organisations (which religious organisations invariably were)? My paper examines programmatically the impact of secularism and modernity on the five modalities of doing religion (scriptural/discursive, self-cultivational, liturgical, immediate-practical and social-relational) that prevailed in late imperial China to see how differently each modality fared throughout the 20th century.

George Mak: The contributions of Mandarin Protestant Bible translation to the emergence of a modern Chinese national language

My paper examines how Mandarin Protestant Bible translation in late Qing era helped foster the standardization of Mandarin as modern Chinese national language. While
Elisabeth Kaske argued that the idea of a “national language” was coming to China only after the turn of the 20th century, since the mid-19th century, Mandarin Bible translators had indeed promoted the idea of tongxing Mandarin, i.e. Mandarin everywhere current regardless of social class, which could be viewed as a model of Mandarin developing into a national language. When translating the Bible, they adopted the standard form of Mandarin as their basis, blending it with words and usages of local forms of Mandarin, which helped smooth out differences between the varieties of Mandarin. Moreover, it is found that a number of Japanese kanji terms derived from Classical Chinese were employed by Mandarin Bible translators in the 19th century in ways close to the terms’ usages in modern Chinese. Given the wide circulation of Mandarin Bible versions in China since the 1870s, we should not overlook the contribution of the Mandarin Bible to the formation of modern Chinese lexicon.

Hildegard Diemberger: Between secularization and re-enchantment: the dilemmas of Tibetan modernity

The case of Tibet presents a particularly acute and often tragic instance of a radically and aggressively secularist modernity encountering a politico-religious Buddhist formation newly determined to re-enchant its world. The tension between secularism and the re-enactment of imperial legacies of politico-religious formations is reflected in a variety of contradictory government policies, from appointments of religious figures in government positions to the ruling over reincarnations despite the discouraging of religious practice. It also is revealed in popular responses, including the disorders of 2008 that grabbed the attention of the world. Since the idea of a 'new society' in contrast to the 'old society' is pervasively used in Tibet to characterize the modern era, to what an extent does this map onto an opposition between the secular and the religious? What are the confusions and ambiguities that these notions entail in current political practice? How do these notions relate to a sort of post-modern re-enchantment of many aspects of public life and the fact that Tibetan Buddhism is gaining ground among Han Chinese?