

## Research article

# Strengthening Interreligious Studies and Interfaith Dialogue in Asia: A Preliminary Overview

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### Abstract.

This paper attempts to elucidate the future of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue in Asia's landscape, which deals with the critical phase of religion and politics relationship. Nowadays, Asia is moving along a dangerous track, as religion is actively involved in political contestation. Thus, the emergence of what is called ethnopolitics is defining Asia's trend. This article argues that the crisis in many Asian countries has crucial implications for inter-group relationships and coexistence. This paper also argues that the development and examination of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue in this situation is not solely an academic activity. Interreligious studies can produce productive tools and mechanisms for challenging and reducing the negative impact of the relationship between religion and politics.

**Keywords:** Religion; Politics; Conflict; Crisis; Interreligious Studies; Interfaith Dialogue; Asia

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## 1. Introduction

It is essential to understand the critical implications of the crisis of religion and politics in the context of international relations and politics (Haynes et al., 2013). The situation exhibits the emergence of ethnopolitics that attracts the domination and hegemony of majority groups over minority groups (Sharma, 2016). When ethnopolitics justifies an open competition between groups, certain religious groups find themselves objects of majority domination (Simpson & Yinger, 2013). Mainly, this situation can cause disharmony, conflict, and a violent atmosphere in society. The ethnopolitical is considered as a medium where certain groups monopolize social and political spaces (Maddy-Weitzman). Many experiences of the ethnopolitics movement remind us about a critical relationship between religion and politics. The emergence of the ethnopolitics movement formalizes a hegemonic patron in socio-political spaces (1). However, religion

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still shows a significant position in all socio, political, and cultural circumstances. Religion seems to have such an intention in determining the pathway of democratization. Faith distinctively takes the leading part in social and political dynamics and processes(2). Religious sentiment strongly influences and affects the dynamics and problems of politics in Asian society today.

It has been proven, for example, that Indonesia's political transformation is closely influenced and dominated by religious sentiment. It looks that the interference of this religious sentiment has massively determined social and political spaces. Indonesia has never moved only in a "secular trajectory"; it also deals with the crucial situation supported directly by various and diverse religious affiliations in the social and political sites (3). However, this new situation reflects ongoing changes in current global politics. One of the most critical moments that influenced and determined the international community's trajectory was the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, New York, USA. Since then, global politics have been affected by the crucial intersection between religion and politics. Certain social groups tend to be the targets of terrorist attacks. The world moves into the dark side of history. Religion and politics reach a frightening historical phase in many parts of our globe.

In this understanding, (4) elaborates on the interrelationship between religion and politics in a crucial meaning: *"...to think religion and politics are often to think violence. September 2001, suicide bombings in the Middle East, sectarian clashes in Kashmir, the civil war in the Balkans, bloodshed in Nigeria and Indonesia are prominent associations. In the cases and others, links between religion and violence—are not hard to find...."* By speaking about this issue, scholars should elaborate on effective ways to challenge this situation on behalf of academics, state actors, activists, and interfaith figures. In responding to the need for building a peaceful global atmosphere, a former general secretary of the United Nations, *Kofi Annan*, came together in a meeting with a thousand religious leaders from around the world for the Millennium Peace Summit of World Religious and Spiritual Leaders in New York (UN, 2000). The main objectives of the meeting were to identify the best ways in which religious leaders can initiate productive inter-religious activities to solve problems that endanger peace, justice, humanity, and the sustainability of the environment. In short, the meeting aimed to break up many barriers that prevent religious, social, and political leaders from working together to develop a supportive global atmosphere for humanity and social togetherness.

## 2. Literature Review

The need for interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue in Asia to be more prospective today must be related to a better understanding of the crucial relationship between religion and politics ((5). Scholarly debate on religion and political links with the fundamental question of whether religion is compatible with democracy (liberal) in the pluralistic context. This question links to a debate in political theory about secularism that defines the separation between religion and the state (politics). In its concrete and practical meaning, *secularism* describes "the absence of God" in social and political discourses. According to secularism, God has no place in social and political arenas. Thus, religion has no role in constructing "identity politics." The religious aspect, from this perspective, should move into "the private sector." In the western political context, secularism is colored by the decline of religious interest in the political sphere and contestation mainly in gaining power.

Two explanations are offered regarding the place of religion in politics from the perspective of liberal democratic theory. First, the concept of citizenship within the framework of liberal democracy does not depend on the individual or social group's adherence to the official religion or what, in the specific context, is called state-approved and recognized religion. Religion, therefore, is not a constitutive element of the concept of citizenship. Second, in liberal democracies, the government does not punish citizens with religious affiliations other than those most citizens hold. This principle is universally accepted in the Western political tradition (6). In his several studies, Bader discusses secular politics as an ideology (7) and a system that provides legal and political guarantees for all citizens to enjoy freedom in expressing their religious views (8). This involves establishing an institution consistent with this view without fear of social and political discrimination (9). It is universally accepted that the state, in the context of the theory of liberal democracy, cannot impose religious actions on specific individuals or religious groups except by consensus (10). States cannot force individuals and groups to participate in some form of religious activity.

Some scholars argue that, in the line of secular politics, the firm demarcation between state and religion (11) is becoming a significant issue that must be addressed comprehensively about the complex dynamics of relations between state and society, between social groups, and between individuals and society (12). The strict demarcation of these two sectors distinguishes liberal democracy from religious fascism or religious totalitarianism (13). Consequently, in this context, the religious activities of individuals and religious groups, especially religious minorities, are guaranteed political protection from

the state in absolute terms. This means that either as a legal issue or a political tradition, religious and communal religious activities must be protected by the state's protective rules. This principle shows, among other things, that citizens can create a community or institution in which aspects of their religion are constitutive. The government is forbidden to create religious institutions or communities (14).

Many studies conclude that secularism no longer exists in the dynamic of global politics today. Religious consideration plays a critical role in determining political matters. The separation of politics and religion ends when people's religious orientations shape their attitudes towards everything in political complexity. We struggle to determine how likely this is to matter to peace and stability ((15). The end of secular politics brings religion into public policy, regulation, government policy, and law, triggering the clash, tension, and conflict between groups (religious) (16). Academics, scholars, activists, and pro-harmony defenders face a big question: Where can interreligious studies be placed in responding to the crisis of religion and political intersectionality? While interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue countering the vicious effect of the relationship between religion and politics, we should put the issue in the interdisciplinary meaning and field.

Thus, as Leirvik (2016) argued, interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue will cover various perspectives and points of view in developing an alternative pattern for the positive relationship between religion and politics on the one hand and for reducing the negative impact of the connection on the other side. Interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue are not static academic and social projects but movements to educate potential actors (such as scholars, religious leaders, educators, politicians, activists, students, and related actors) in various landscapes. Interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue are not limited to academic programs but are mainly related to a broader audience. Thus, interreligious studies and dialogue focus on social and political problems. Scholars in the field of religious studies and all activists for peace and interfaith leaders should come together to initiate interreligious studies that have a significant and prospective impact on the peaceful coexistence and socio-political atmosphere. It is also well said that interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue are challenged by the dynamic and tension between religious diversity, civil society, and world politics. Interreligious studies are needed to be contextual and effective in reducing tension, conflict, and violence raised by the influence of religion in politics.

### 3. Methodology

The chosen method is also considered a challenging task in conducting this preliminary research. The purely internal analysis and perspective of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue theory and perspective—isolated from any societal, political, and cultural contexts that remain an option—is felt by many scholars to be insufficient. We can say that the perspective of global politics in exploring, analyzing, and explaining interreligious studies has been torn between two sides. First, it relates to the expanding reality of interreligious studies—interfaith dialogue and its prospect. Second, it also connects to challenging the violent impact of the critical relationship between religion and politics. Consequently, many attempts have been made to conceive research differently. This preliminary research study mainly uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research investigates "why" and "how" questions. This approach contrasts with the focus of the more measurable "what, where, and when" in the quantitative approach (17). Qualitative research aims to conclude by explaining. However, the information harvested from qualitative research cannot be measured or displayed readily in graphs or formulas. In contrast, one of the primary strengths of quantitative analysis is that the resulting data can be measured. These two approaches will be applied complementarily to obtain data for this study.

However, to base a thesis exclusively on primary sources is probably impossible. Data for this study were obtained from mainly secondary sources. Such a thesis would fail to consider the results of research done by others and, as such, would not have a sufficient base (18). On the other hand, to base information gathering only on secondary sources would fail to bring new facts to bear on the issue and would have less chance of producing new insights. Additionally, it is necessary to use primary sources to check the accuracy of references. When no primary sources are available, care must be taken to examine more than one secondary source. Until recently, many questions about methodology in interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue have been mainly confined to understanding the role of doctrinal and textual research as a scholarly discipline. On the other hand, this study aims to measure the overall issue in a complementary way by using previous data about the issue, making a qualitative assessment, collecting quantitative information, and producing a wide-ranging anthropological reflection and institutional reports. This study may also require additional data collection such as textual analysis, field research, statistical analysis, and historical research to support new knowledge and information about interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue in Asia (19).

## 4. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Defining Asia as a Site of Conflict

Asia is currently becoming a site of religious violence and security threats. We can provide some examples: continuous terrorist attacks and religious radicalism in Indonesia, the Islamic State's (IS) invasion in the Philippines, violence against Rohingya in Myanmar, and the emergence of the cyber-security threat (20). It is essential to look at Freedman's opinion (2017). Freedman identifies this trend by referring to "*non-traditional security threats*." This region has been known for social and religious tolerance and should be left behind by considering increased insecurities. It has been proven that the interrelationship between religion and politics has moved into a "conflicting model".

It is well said that concerning the discourse on secularism, Asia itself has had a unique experience. Asia is known as the land of religions. Some scholars claim that the relationship between religion (mainly Islam) and democracy (secularism) is one of the most essential and challenging themes of Asian politics today (21). In some countries, although one religion is a majority group, it never proclaims a "religion-based state." Some countries in Asia are openly and historically based on secular values in terms of implementing democratic mechanisms in their political systems. Regarding this landscape, Riaz presents a comprehensive analysis of the religion and politics in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. He describes the fact that, although the specific circumstances of each country have become different in recent decades, religion, religious and political parties, and religious rhetoric have become dominant features of all of these countries. His book offers a thorough examination of these developments by presenting a political system and the socio-economic environment in which the interactions occur.

Moreover, in his study of Islam and politics in central Asia, Khalid argues that the changing contour of the political sphere of religion plays a key role (22). The Pew Research Center (PRC) (2003) reminds us that religion and politics have two interconnected sides in Asia: *consensus* and *contention*. The first term refers to a constructive correlation between religion and politics in providing a peaceful landscape for human beings. This defines the persistent favorable circumstance in which religion and politics can actualize their potential for guaranteeing achievement and enjoyment. But, the other deals with the emergence of clashes and conflicts between religion and politics. The trend critically threatens a landscape where diverse social groups might equally enjoy peaceful social relationships.

This trend has been understood as a chance for many actors—such as state actors, pro-democracy activists, academics, and scholars—to determine a productive mechanism to challenge it. Specifically, scholars and scholars in religious studies are interested in connecting the trend with the prospect of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue in Asia (20). Making a significant reflection on the future of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue is considered a fundamental step for dealing with the emergence of the destructive relationship between religion and politics. Interreligious studies and dialogue may provide a chance to strengthen cohesion between individuals and groups in social and political settings (23). In the Asian case (for several countries such as Indonesia), as democracy influences Islam, Islam, in turn, offers a distinct character to the trajectory of democratization. Many political opportunities have been interpreted and claimed differently by each group, stream, and faction within Islam (24). Islam (religion) has undergone a significant shift from the view that it can manage democracy to the critical idea that Islam (faith) is in conflict and tension with other factions.

## 4.2. Interreligious Studies and Interfaith Dialogue

One of the main targets of this academic effort is to propose solid interreligious studies and interfaith dialogues for developing, promoting, and maintaining peace in challenging the crisis raised by the relationship between religion and politics. Thus, interreligious studies and dialogue need to be focused on creating and strengthening 'tolerant attitudes and behavior' (25) to define a peaceful atmosphere in Asia's society. Arguably, tolerance is viewed as the main achievement of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue. Both refer to the 2008 Annual Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue: *"Interfaith dialogue is a necessity at every level: international, regional, and local; working groups on different levels . . . should be established with an emphasis on issues such as education, peacebuilding and the promotion of solidarity and understanding among different communities and cultures."*

To support this standpoint, Leirvik's (2014) view of "interreligious studies as a relational approach" is considered a prospective framework. He introduces the idea of a "relational approach" to interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue. This is developed into the three main elements of interreligious studies. The first element is recognizing religious diversity and developing respect (26). This element requires the investigation of religion and religious identity. This needs a sharing idea about self and belonging with others from different religious and cultural backgrounds. It is crucial to identify and describe wide-ranging religious groups to which individuals, people, and communities

belong and how they communicate in different religious affiliations. One of the most substantial steps is seeking a comprehensive understanding of religion and politics' role in formulating and formatting identities. It is also needed to explain how religious groups change over time in a different context. The influences of local, national, regional, and international in shaping religious identities also have a dominant issue in the strengthening peaceful atmosphere.

Moreover, this element deals with exploration and various religious knowledge, beliefs, and practices. People need to identify, explore, and compare religiously diverse activities and objects. The understanding of the dynamics of how people live and communicate with others in different and complex religious settings, places, and times has been required as a strategic way of strengthening a peaceful atmosphere. It is also essential to add this mechanism by adding a descriptive comparison of a range of religious stories, events, and artifacts. The last aspect of this element regards the development of a respectful approach to religious diversity. Third, this focuses on the development of respect for religious diversity. This links with some main targets, including discussing ideas about religious diversity in many contexts. This step can be achieved by describing various ways in which religious diversities present and offer opportunities for new experiences, shared feelings, and understanding between people and religious communities. This also needs to find effective ways to understand the importance of maintaining and celebrating religious and cultural traditions to develop individuals, groups, and national identities. In promoting religious exchanges and collaboration, this process also needs mutual respect between people and religious groups.

Furthermore, the second element of this strategy links with empathic interaction with other religious groups. Some details need to be pointed clearly in this line. The second element is interacting and empathizing with other religious groups (27). There are three main points here. Practical and constructive communication across religions requires the arrangement of contextual guidelines. People use different ways of expressing and communicating their beliefs and needs. This should be understood. They are searching for the meaning of the use of words and body language in interactions with others. Identifying factors that contribute to developing a good understanding of intercultural communication is a better strategy. The third element involves reflecting on interreligious experiences and taking responsibility (28). This strategy needs continuous reflection on various interreligious affairs. This strategy links with the text belonging to a specific religion and connects to so-called 'memorable' interreligious experiences. People have also learned about others from interreligious encounters and relationships. People know



and describe themselves from such intensive virtual and authentic connections with others. The position of media is also essential in accelerating and rapidly proposing the representation of various religious groups that also need mutual responses.

Moreover, interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue focus on challenging stereotypes and prejudices within society. In interreligious activities, reducing stereotypes and intolerances can be seen as a targeted effort. It is based on the understanding that these two terms can harm individuals and people. (29) concept of an "undemocratic moment" is considered a valuable framework for understanding the involvement of religion in political spaces. Mookherjee, referring to Banchoff, discusses the challenge posed by contemporary democracies. In a harmonious situation, the issue challenges how secular majorities should respond to minority religions. Another question concerns how religious minorities should react to a secular state. Unfortunately, the interlinked nature of religion and politics causes inter-group clashes and tensions. It is based on the trend that belief on the one side performs as a source of existential comfort and a basis for tolerance. The other side becomes the ground for discrimination against those who distinguish outsiders from representatives of the majority. Mookherjee defines the last thing as an "undemocratic moment" of religious belief.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has a set of aims. First, this study aims to understand the dynamics of the critical impact of religion and politics and the prospect of interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue producing counter-discourse and practices. Second, this study aims to offer a theoretical contribution to interreligious studies and interreligious dialogue. It also provides a framework whereby policymakers can effectively challenge the clashes and conflicts raised by the intersection of religion and politics. Third, this study intends to highlight ongoing and emerging academic research in interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue. Thus, this paper also provides a space to promote collaboration between academia, industry practitioners, and government. In this regard, this study explores new ways to translate the results of research on interreligious studies and interfaith dialogue for multiple audiences, agencies, and communities in national and regional contexts. Specifically, this study aims to enlighten the situation of the Asia region by providing theoretical insight into previous studies on security governance.

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