

#### **44. Anthropological Approaches to Religious Change – A Re-Assessment (Roundtable)**

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*AG Religion*

The understanding of the actual and ideal place of religion in the public sphere has been highly contested over the past decades: classical authors like Weber and Durkheim noted a decreasing importance of religion in modern society following its emancipation from ecclesiastical control. Others sought to nuance this understanding of “secularization” by distinguishing between secularization as religious decline, as differentiation and as privatization (Casanova 2001: 7), or by highlighting that religion had simply withdrawn to the private sphere (Luckmann 2000).

The discrepancy between a persistence of religious beliefs and declining rates of institutional attachment has been interpreted as ‘believing without belonging’ (Davie 2003), leading to two contradictory reactions: 1) a tendency where consumerism extends into the sacred sphere and people “shop around for [...] spiritual needs” and 2) a pattern where the sacred is perceived as an alternative and different way (Davie 2003: 39–40).

More recently, religious transformations received increased attention in diverse contexts: scholars are making sense of these developments through new concepts such as ‘secular’ and alternative ‘spiritualities’ (Fuller 2017, Huss 2014), post-secularism (Parmaksız 2018, Rosati & Stoeckl 2012), re-enchantment (Partridge 2005, Isnart & Testa 2020), invented religion (Cusack 2010), cultural religion (Demerath III 2000), civil religion (Margry 2012), vicarious religion (Davie 2007), humanist rituality (Rejowska 2020), or de-sacralised religions (Visca 2011), among others.

What can we as anthropologists offer to nuance and precisely describe and analyze these developments? What do they mean for religious belief and practice, religious identities and the role of religion in other spheres of society? How can we interpret the place of religion in the public sphere

today? In this panel, we would like to discuss these trends and look for opportunities for joint publications and projects.

**The emergence of the *Asapu* tradition versus the forest-dwelling tradition in Sri Lanka**

***Dhammika Herath, Heidelberg University***

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Sri Lanka society has witnessed the emergence of a new monastic tradition, the *Asapu*, involving a conspicuous attempt to mirror the age-old *Forest Dwelling* tradition, which known for its emphasis on staying away from the mundane life and ordinary Buddhists in forest monasteries. These monks devote considerable time for the deep study of Buddhist scriptures and the practice of meditation. Anthropologists like Tambiah (1992) and Obeyesekere (1988) have tended to regard the forest dwelling tradition as 'genuine' Buddhism. The emergence of the *Asapu* tradition as a 'genuine' form of Buddhism is an important anthropological development. However, the *Asapu* tradition is an orientation which is very different from the forest dwelling tradition. *Asapu* monks claim to emphasize meditation and study of scriptures but are exuberant in the performance of attractive rituals. The monasteries in which these monks live are luxurious palace-like temples built with donations from wealthy and perhaps educated urban and semi-urban patrons and therefore, are not closely connected to ordinary village Buddhists. The *Asapu* tradition is, in effect, a new religious 'cult' driven mainly by some charismatic monks with greater appeal on the youth. I critically examine its claims on the deep examination of Buddhist scriptures and values.

**Changing the Immutable: Anthropological Approaches to Divine Agency and Legal Change in Catholic Canon Law**

***Anna-Lena Wolf, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg***

The Catholic Church has been criticized for concealment of sexual abuse, gender inequality, homophobia, outdated sexual morals, and authoritarian hierarchical structures. The institution of the Catholic Church appears to some as being incapable of change despite public criticism. In some Catholic anti-modernist positions, however, the steadfastness of the Catholic Church

in the face of social transformations has been interpreted as a guarantor for the continued existence of the oldest global institution in the world, which from a global point of view records an increase in membership to date.

This paper looks at explanation models for transformations in the part of the Catholic tradition that is most unlikely to change: divine law. The essential feature of divine law in Catholic canon law is its postulated immutability. Based on ethnographic research and an analysis of canonist literature, the paper, first, investigates the question of how catholic canon lawyers justify past and present changes of divine law without compromising the claim to divine law's immutability. For instance, some canonists have argued that concrete legal provisions based on divine law must always be formulated and fleshed out by human beings. The principles (e.g., papal primacy) are divine, the concrete regulations (e.g., how the supremacy of the pope is operatively shaped) are human and therefore subject to change. Secondly, the paper investigates how canonists relate divine agency to legal change. Do they see god merely as the creator of divine law or is god also seen as an actor of legal change? The third and final part of the paper discusses possibilities and limitations of different anthropological conceptualizations of and positionalities toward divine law and divine agency in matters of legal change and beyond, thereby contributing to questions of contested knowledge more generally.

### **Pencak Silat, religious conservatism, (New) Animism and new subjectivities in Indonesia**

***Patrick Keilbart, Goethe-University Frankfurt***

***Gilang Maulana Majid, University of Surrey***

Despite nationwide protests, on 6 December 2022, the Indonesian parliament banned sex outside marriage with a punishment of up to one year in jail, which can be seen as one of the effects of a rise in religious conservatism in the country. Recent literature has identified current trends in Indonesian Islam such as a conservative turn, post-traditionalism, post-Islamism, Arabization, cultural and political Islamization. However, one of the essential characteristics of the emic concept *Islam Nusantara* (Islam of the Archipelago) is the peaceful coexistence of Islamic religion and culture with local culture and tradition. This paper investigates *Pencak Silat* as

embodied, spiritual practice and belief system in Indonesia that predates Islamization, and – despite local appropriation of Islamic religion and culture – currently experiences a revitalization. Based on two case studies, the Islamized *Pencak Silat* school “*Persaudaraan Setia Hati Terate*” from East Java and the Balinese *Pencak Silat* school “*Bakti Negara*”, spiritual practices and beliefs will be analysed and compared in terms of the religious identity they provide for practitioners in the context of increasing cultural Islamization in Indonesia. We argue that, as a response to religious conservatism and cultural Islamization, pre-Islamic practices and beliefs that can be categorized and analysed as (New) Animism create new subjectivities in Indonesia, both for Muslims and non-Muslims. Using this analytical frame, that has so far mainly been applied to religious practices and beliefs in mainland Southeast Asia, we contribute to a more precise analysis and nuanced understanding of religious dynamics in Indonesia.

### **The Anthropology of Religious Change – Lessons from Latin America**

***Tobias Reu, Universität Bielefeld***

Latin America has a special place in the academic discussion on secularization, religious change, and religions in the twenty-first century. After WWII, the continent became a test case for the elevation of the notion of the disenchanted modernity, which was derived from European and US American history and entered international social science via Weber and Parsons, to a prescription for development. In this context, the expectations that academics associated with the secularization of traditionally Catholic societies and the activity of Protestant missions promoted by U.S. actors formed the two complementary sides of the transformation of the historical narrative into a modernization paradigm. On the other hand, the continent is also at the forefront of the post-secular processes of the present. Both the Catholic Church and globally networked evangelical institutions find in Latin America a place of theological renewal; the increasing participation of religious actors in the political process resonates with similar tendencies elsewhere; and some of the most poignant critiques of secular and Western modernity are formulated in Latin America. Based on fieldwork in several contexts of religious practice, this presentation explores what the continent teaches regarding religious change and post-secularism in the twenty-first century.

**'Why should I run around and tell everyone?' Non-Identification of Atheists in Bangladesh**

***Mascha Schulz, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology***

This presentation explores why many nonreligious people in Bangladesh attempt to conceal non-belief, and often non-practice, rather than seeking atheist or agnostic identities. These people exchange their religious views with a limited number of like-minded people but avoid being identified as atheists otherwise. This tendency of concealment cannot simply be attributed to the role of religion, of Sunni Islam or Hinduism, in the public sphere. Especially as people conceal their non-religiosity not only in the public but often in the private sphere such as to their parents. Anthropologists can provide nuanced perspectives on this situation through long-term ethnographic research that observes actual interactions and thereby understands underlying normativities of shifting positionings but also accounts for national histories and the relevance of globally – but unequally – circulating phenomena, such as New Atheism. The case of Bangladesh may not be easily slotted into the Western-derived vocabulary such as secularization or post-secular. Yet, it provides a good starting point to think about related issues: Rather than being simply a 'deeply religious society', Bangladesh has a long history of strong attachment to secularism. However, the hegemonic understanding of the secular stipulates respect for all religions - with consequences for those who do not practice religion.

**The Great Pumpkin and Anthropology as Secularism's Doubt**

***Francesco Della Costa, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München***

In 2001, *Social Anthropology* published a dossier about the relationship between secularism and anthropology. In his contribution, Bruce Kapferer argued the radically secularist structure of anthropological discourse and its fieldwork method. I find that his famous phrase "anthropology is secularism's doubt" (342) was recently misunderstood as a renounce to the possibility of overcoming secularism (Furani and Robbins 2021). Actually, Kapferer appealed to apply to anthropological knowledge the same "demythologising" distrust it had used to interpret others' beliefs. The idea of tempering Cartesian radical doubt with the phenomenological suspension

of disbelief opens the paradox “that there are limits to the rationality of the demythologised and secular realities integral to its very invention” (Kapferer 2001: 342). More than secularism, rationality is in doubt here. In front of today’s complex religious landscape, its global redefinitions and local revivals, an anti-rationalist approach works better than categories as secularism (Asad 2003), neo-secularization (Yamane 1997), desecularization (Berger 1999), or post-secularism (Rosati 2015). I propose to redefine the secularist paradigm as anti-rationalism, according to Kapferer’s suggestion, without falling into the mysticism of some extreme phenomenologists. Anthropologists will strive to understand how both religious and secularist rhetorics and practices work, not to explain their meaning or describe them as self-evident experience. Borrowing from Schulz his “peanuts” metaphor, to understand the “Great Pumpkin” belief anthropologists will question both Linus’s faith and the rationalism of his incredulous friends mocking him.

### **Religion, Health, and Secularism: An Ethnographic Reflection on Islamic Medicine in Turkey**

***Müge Akpınar, Freie Universität Berlin***

Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Istanbul on a “religious and holistic health network” (Schneirov and Geczik, 1996) which offers an interpretation of Islamic medicine denoting an epistemological and ontological difference to the biomedical paradigm, I will inquire into how Islamic dispositions are reflected in therapeutic practices of my interlocutors at the intersection of the private sphere and the public sphere. I argue that my interlocutors’ interest in Islamic medicine are reflective of the health concerns of “hyperindividuals” of reflexive modernity (Webster 2021), where validity claims of religion can coexist with modernity in its “enchanted” (Deeb 2006) modes and fundamentalist interpretations of religion can be considered “authentic” (Klinkhammer 2017). Drawing from the concept “healthworlds” developed by Germond and Cochrane (2010) in line with Habermas’ (1984) “colonization of the lifeworld” thesis, I will show how health and religion are perceived by my interlocutors as integrated to each other in the secular(ized) medical landscapes of Turkey. I will proceed to discuss that the unity of health and religion is linked to an all-inclusive notion of Islam, which shapes the truth and knowledge claims involved in

my interlocutors' "historicities" (Silverstein 2005) and interacts with  
reviving Islamic medical practices in the public sphere.