The existence of multiple religions and expressions of faith make Asia a colourful and complex religio-cultural entity. Asia Pacific is the world region with the most religious diversity. Its breadth of religious forms is matched by an expansive geographical landmass. Accompanying the territorial stretch are the histories of communities, travel, exchanges, the struggles for independence from colonialism, and more recently the economic growth and possibilities that shape the contours of this continent. Considering the wide array of issues, and for the purposes of brevity, I will restrict my discussion to a few exemplary entanglements that are entwined with social progress in a way that brings to the forefront the relationship between religion and individual and societal flourishing.

Religion is ever changing; it lives in everyday life and is shared in state, national and transnational politics that the ‘religious’ cannot be parsed out from the ‘secular’. In any meaningful analysis, we can only say that the many religious claims and practices co-opt a wide array of norms that promote early marriage, thus, Muslim customs have a special relevance given the fact that many religions enfold all decisions and negotiations related to marriage. The resulting tenacity of norms that promote early marriage, thus, require various levels of intervention, including those that speak to religious/Muslim family law, social practices and customs that operate according to a certain authority as ‘religious’. Yet, however, is no easy task; bringing changes to family laws, especially on women’s issues, touch the nerves of too many people, with too many histories.

Another recent case in India, involving legal reform to ban the Muslim triple Talaq (divorce after the triple pronouncement of divorce by the husband) bears testimony to the politics, in this case of a Hindu majoritarianism, that legal reform carries in its wings. However, just as secular and religious forces globally are active in reducing human suffering and promoting human rights and (gender) justice vis-à-vis early marriage, there are also groups in Asia who work on bringing about changes in religious, family law. Notable amongst these are Majlis in India, and Musawah in Malaysia. However, their encroachment into the ‘religious’ realm also means that many obstacles are placed in their way, ranging from objections from conservative religious groups, state forces and post-colonial critics who feel that attempts to change religion (even if through religious law) risks of colonial practices and privileges a top-down approach to change, that seldom serves the target envisioned effectively. Such attempts to change ‘religious’ ideas are thus labelled as ‘modernist’ and are consequently discredited as privileging modern notions of the individual good over more traditional ideas of individuals in collectivities. Groups such as Musawah dispute the allegations and argue that their claims are very much grounded in the everyday reasoning of women for whom local customs and laws exert tremendous pressures that are difficult to overcome without a concerted effort. Groups such as Musawah argue that their work carries no easy task either.

In situations of more pronounced conflict, religious communities with ideational conflicts even more intensely, giving rise to debates around citizenship, and causing displacement and even gang warfare entwined with territories, neither exclusively an Asian phenomenon, nor unique to any religion in particular. In fact, the symptom has been present in all religions and across many historical periods. A recent case is point is the plight of the Rohingya, where conflicts over resources and power are deeply intertwined with conflicts over values and identity, leading to the forced displacement of very large numbers of Muslim Rohingya. This crisis of citizenship is rooted in partition realities after the British left the region subcontinent, in which groups who has systematically privileged a Burman nationalism, in the failed post-colonial attempt at democracy, and in the country’s economic interests as it opens its doors to the external world. In addition to the existing humanitarian crisis, it is feared that one of the effects of Myanmar’s tyranny against the Rohingya could be the intensification of groups such as Asia, with their increased links to other radical groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS.

Religion’s use of violence to resist state encroachment spans across Asia, from the Middle East to China. Much of this violence, which also often�religious majoritarianism, can also be attributed to deep-rooted cultural clefs. In 2015 in Aceh Indonesia, Muslim democrats threatened to burn churches, which they alleged were operating without permits, resulting in the shutting down of many churches. While incidents such as these are fuelled by Islamists, there are also deeper cultural clefs once fostered by colonial processes that still plague the imaginary of religious communities. In Indonesia, Dutch wielded their secular authority to demand the recognition of religious groups, according to religion. Therefore, the presence of churches outside of their ‘appropriate location’ Incarnates the ‘righteousness’ of state authorities. In many of these places, ‘religious’ violence is entangled with questions of religious and political rights to religious freedoms. Studies suggest that in addition to colonial legacies and enduring cultural clefs, the manner in which dispensing religious freedom is also important for an assessment of how ‘religious’ violence is encircled under modern-day conditions, both of which is framed by the self-professed values of a secular modernity. Whether in India or Egypt, modalities and legalisms around religious diversity and freedoms are political questions, not only religious. The law’s role in adjudicating religious conflicts is thus partisan to religious politics, but through the manner in which the law has thrived through the long course of secularism, religious critics have argued that the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in India, because it stood on the Hindu Rama’s birthplace, served to ‘free’ India right through secular tenets of tolerance and right to religious freedom. Others also argue that religious majoritarianism is driven forward by the religious right exclusively, but in how they are placed either within secular law or within other non-statutory governance regimes. In explaining the conflicts between Coptic Christians and Muslims in Egypt, Saba Mostafa argues, “secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions ... hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious differences”. Digging through many layers of political and cultural history to ascertain the role that religion, politics, and violence play for social progress in Asia, may be discouraging, however, there are on-the-ground initiatives where faith-inspired actors engage actively for social change and progress. These initiatives involve attempting to advance development goals as well as through inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. Some notable organizations in Asia engaged in religious peacebuilding are Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute, Global Village, and the Mennonite Commission. In the Middle East, where religious values have been exported political and social reasons, there are there attempts to mobilize religious values to break peace by groups such as the Iraq Religious Congress, Jerusalem Peacemakers, the Mosques Protection Committee in Palestine and many others.

Many of these groups argue for religious values over ‘sectarianistic values’. A change will require a constructive conversation with people as less of a divide between the religious and secular worlds.

In Asia, the tides that bring in rapid economic changes on the one hand, and ethno-religious conflicts and marginalization on the other, are a reminder of religious modernity as its morphs under current global conditions of millennium capitalism, a re-orientation of secular polities through legal frameworks and constitutionalism, and a bringing together of religious as well secular polities in the everyday lived realities of religion in revitalizing religion and placing it in a dynamic conversation with the various approaches that underlie the meanings of social progress in the 21st century.

Notes

3 See Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Religious and Secular: The Imaginary of Religious Communities’. In the Focus.
5 https://tinyurl.com/3jz3y5n
7 For a discussion of how religious majoritarianism is carried forward by the religious right exclusively, but in the everyday lived realities of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
8 www.musawah.org
9 For a discussion of the Global Lifestyles Project that grounds Musawah’s work not in some abstract modernist approach, but in the everyday lived realities of Muslim Women across the Muslim world, see the Global Lifestyles Project.
10 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
11 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
14 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
15 See Edroos, F. 13 September 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
16 Muslim majoritarianism.
17 www.almajlis.org
18 See Aljazeera, 15 September 2017; ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
19 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
20 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
21 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
22 For a discussion of how the law ended serving Hindu majoritarianism, see Edroos, F. 2017. ‘Who embargoed the Rohingya Camp in Cox’s Bazar’. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Mohammad Tauheed on Flickr.
23 Religion and social flourishing in Asia