

Summary of International Conference

“Religion and Rule of Law in Southeast Asia: Continuing the Discussion”

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Distinguished guests and colleagues!

I am honored to be chosen to give a conclusion for the conference. We have been working hard in last two days and now I believe that we are all satisfied with the results of the conference.

Now let's all applaud for the success of the discussion that we have been looking for from the beginning of the year.

In December 2006 in Oslo, Norway, we (Đỗ Quang Hung, Chris Seiple, Cole Durham, a representative of the Vietnam –USA society and some distinguished scholars) have shared this idea: to continue the discussion initiated at the first conference in September 2006 it is necessary to find out some new panels, and at the same time replace some old ones.

That is why today at the conference hall, you may find out the absence of some scholars last year. Yet many new scholars and colleagues from different countries have come here with us. They have been very actively and efficiently participating in our discussion. Wherever we might be, I think, within this world so connected, we can still “in communion” as sharing professional and academic ideas.

Unfortunately, I am very sorry to learn that two scholars cannot come to the conference for objective reasons. I wish I could directly listen to their presentations.

Within 8 panels this year, we have some new ones, i.e. *Financial and tax issues related to religion or religious charity*. These issues of law on religion, to many Southeast Asian countries including Vietnam, are the future considerations. But I do not say that they are too much far away.

Hereunder, I would like to propose an overview on academic issues that we have discussed. I will make it according to “group of issues” rather than each issue in turn.

I, however, must say that these following assessments are rather similar to what a “photographer” does at a conference!

1. *Religious pluralism in the Southeast Asia at the present* is the first issue of interest. Despite certain gap between Eastern and Western scientific worlds as dealing with the concept of *religious pluralism*, we all see that this trend in the religious life of Southeast Asia is keeping pace with development of world religions at the beginning of the 21st century. We have discussed this issue from many angles, including diachronical and synchronic approaches, but synchronic approach is more preferred because it is necessary for an effective research method. We have made great efforts to find out dynamics, characteristics and arisen issues of this trend in the religious life of Southeast Asia.

Religious system in each nation in the Southeast Asia, which has already been plural, within the current context of religious globalization, now becomes more and more open along with changes in spiritual life, in faith and other social elements. This system has made changes in relationship between the state and churches. What we can all agree is: whatever models of secular or quasi-secular state each nation in Southeast Asia has chosen (Singapore, Malaysia or Vietnam); the unity between religions and the nation must be ensured. In nations which follows the model of state religion (or Ethno – Religion), which means the state relies on a mainstream religion, it is essential to consider the harmonious relations between the state and other non – official religions. *Religious pluralism* also requires responsibilities of secular states in ensuring equality among religions, ideologies and freedom of religion and beliefs in general. We have heard some warnings of “state interference” with religious organizations, which seems to increase in some countries in Southeast Asia.

2. We have also paid attention to new issues of “religion and rule of law” such as: *finance, tax and charity activities of/and religious organizations*. Most papers in this panel represent reality of religious life in European and American societies. Experiences of these countries, however, are truly meaningful for the building of law on religion in Southeast Asian countries. Issues of finance, tax and charity activities of religious groups related to the rule of law reveal social and technical elopements which are dedicate and complicated. But the most important thing is that we have generated philosophical ideas which surpass the mere money matter. State measures such as tax reduction, financial support, etc. are absolutely not to promote mission work of religions but to first of all and mainly ensure interests of society, community, human beings and of human values. Those measures cannot be taken advantage to unfairly bind, hinder, or support one religion over another. This is also a field which the legal system on religion must go hand in hand with relevant state control via policies and civil codes, even including law to prevent corruption.

Via examining activities of religious groups in fields discussed above, we can one more assert that the religion's function in carrying out charity work in modern civil society is still essential and even more and more popular with various forms of activity. Charity work of religions goes along with transnational trend of religions and their organizations all over the world. Of course we will not fall into technical perspective in taxation here because it is very complicated.

3. The issue of *religion and education* discussed in this conference is mostly *religious education* (or *education about religion*?) at school (mainly public schools). Although we do not have many papers for this panel, we can still learn about *typical case studies* in religion and education in the US, Western Europe and also the post-atheist situation in Russia. It is clear that religion and education is a hot issue in many European and American countries which have, long time ago, separated state's political power and the church, and separated *state public education* and *churches' religious education*.

On one hand, we recognize philosophical and social foundations for the need of religious education for children in those societies. On the other hand, we see clearly that the state and religions should adjust themselves to carry out new policies on education. But first these questions must be answered: What to teach? How to teach? and Where to teach?

4. We have also enthusiastically participated in discussion on the issue of *religion and security*. This is also a global issue of religion at the present. All papers have asserted the urgent need of human beings for stability, open dialog, social harmony and development. We think about *religion and security* on that background. We have gone from case studies such as conflict in South Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and from research on terrorism, religious extreme (mostly relates to Islam); from experience of Singapore, Vietnam or Malaysia in making policies that ensure harmony relation between religion and the nation, to examine fundamental issues such as tolerance, respect and religious freedom which are already phrases of *peace, understanding* and *dialog*. Moreover, we appreciate thoughts on "strategy of harmony" in policies of some nations in Southeast Asia to basically solve the conflicts in religion and race, or terrorism.

What often challenges Southeast Asia today is how to maintain and develop religious and ethnic identities in the context of globalization. The issue of religious, social and personal identities has never been as critical as today. Despite having exchanged ideas from many different points of view, from theory to reality of religious life, we foremost agree with the rule of the United Nations: *unity in diversity*.

5. The last issue of concern is *Comparative Models of Religion-State Relationship* in Southeast Asia.

Firstly, I could say that, by result of the last conference, we can come up with two secular state models in Southeast Asia: *secular state* (Vietnam) and *quasi-secular state* (Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and even Thailand). This result is relevant with reality of history and contemporary religious life in Southeast Asia – a region of diversity in culture, race and political institutions. We ofcourse need more case studies, and especially more comparative methods in religious studies in order to prove the choice of these two models in Southeast Asian countries.

We are more interested in the implication of the option of secular state model, which we call *philosophy of secularism*. On one hand, we admit that this model is one of achievements of mankind in thoughts, philosophy and society that it must be used. On the other hand, we should avoid the doctrine that promotes for an *extreme secular state* (a “cold” and neutral state or a secular state which interferes too much in religions’ internal affairs). Discussing on the secular state model, we have to deal with various forms of separation between politics and religions, and with complicated and rather ambiguous relations of religion and politics. Experience of many Southeast Asian nations shows the need for roles of religious persons or organizations in social and political life as long as those entities respect the rule of *social harmony* or of *religions should go on the same road with the nation*. Is this an exclusive characteristic in the relationship between the state and the church, politics and religions, or in other words, a typical feature of the secular state model in Southeast Asia?

Besides, we also have some other remarkable contents of the conference: new stages, most up-to-date developments of nations in Southeast Asia in particular and Asia in general in the field of making religious policies. All tell us that the evolution of religious policy in every country in the region always goes along with the progress of relations between state and rule of law.

Esteemed guests and colleagues!

I think that in academic world, nothing is more precious than new ideas, thoughts and research methods. One can only influence others if he has the ability to inspire them to think and work.

For myself in this conference, I have learnt many new ideas from Vietnamese colleagues as well as international scholars from many continents and regions. Those news thoughts and ideas will surely inspire me in academic work in coming years.

With this thinking, I now would like to end my summary.

Thank you very much!