

Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration: the political theology of development in Asia

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Scholarship on political theology has made important interventions toward deconstructing the official script of secularism and revealing the ‘secular conversion’ of a Christian ethos into the constitutional-judicial scaffolding of modern nation-states (Schmitt, 2005; Lefort, 2006). In the context of Enlightenment Europe, political theology developed a number of critical analytical tools to ‘unmake’ the secular fiction of political modernity. Recognising that political theology discourse emerged as a transgressive, deviant expression of modern thinking, we argue that the employment of these analytical tools outside of Europe is promising, including in contexts where the project of secularism has historically proved less effective, produced unintended consequences, and favoured the multiplication of alternative ‘theological secularities.’ It is for this reason that this volume focuses on Asia. But a shift beyond Western modernity is not simply a rejection of previous articulations of political theology. European and Asian modernities are bound together through genealogical, institutional, and theo-political entanglements and our analysis of each must take into account this long history of global interactions. Our focus on development – conceptualised here as a set of transnational networks of ideas and practices that connect geographically disparate locations in complex political and religious entanglements – seeks to resituate the objects and locations of political theological analysis within a more expansive horizon. As the chapters in this volume will demonstrate, just as political theology scholarship stands to benefit from new critical attention to development in Asia, so too the critical analysis of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ in Asia gains new traction through active engagement with political theology. We argue that a political theology of

development will especially benefit from careful examination of themes of transcendence, sacrifice and victimhood, and aspiration and salvation.

The theological foundations of the political

Scholarship on political theology has not only revealed the elusive character of the separation between religion and politics as has been thought to be characteristic of Western modernity, but it also addresses ‘the political’¹ as intrinsically and ontologically theological. Without providing any essentialist definition of ‘the political’, prominent scholars in political theology are mostly preoccupied with ‘perturbing’ the rationalistic framing of modern political theory through ‘theological’ considerations. According to scholars like Claude Lefort (2006), Paul Kahn (2011), and Harald Wydra (2015), for example, the political is not solely reflected by politics² – that is, administration, policies, and the various juridical-institutional arrangements which regulate political authority and state sovereignty. More fundamentally, ‘the political’ refers to the hidden symbolic principles and sources of ‘truth’ (the theological) that generate different forms of society; transcend the institutional fabric of everyday politics; and give normative meanings, shape, and stage to historically situated modes of collective life and individual experience. The theological foundations of politics enable the possibility of social coexistence by connecting power to the limits and finitude of human experience. The ‘transcendent’ legitimation of ‘immanent’ sovereignty – this is an important point to be stressed – might or might not refer to God or gods, even if traditionally religions have provided the kind of metaphysical assumptions political power is founded on, both within and beyond Christian Europe.

Weimar-era political theorist Carl Schmitt (2005) identified the theological foundation of the political in the fundamental binary distinction between friends and enemies, whereas the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998), drawing on Schmitt, has provided a reading of sovereign power as an historical production of ‘states of exception’ and *homini sacri*, the latter being an exceptional figure in Roman law that is set apart as both sacred and accursed. The theological foundations of the political inform questions related to the limits and ultimate ends of human conditions, what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) name ‘empty signifiers’. The ‘emptiness’ of the domain addressed by these questions – the fact that questions of salvation, death, life, or God are so large as to escape definitive and final closure – makes the theological an ontologically open and contested field. Across considerable differences of cultural

context and historical change, however, we observe processes through which – as Hent De Vries (2006: 46) points out – the anxieties of cosmic indeterminacy become ‘dogmatically fixated, socially reified, and aesthetically fetishized’ as ‘the only Universal Truth’ and source of authority. Or, as Wydra (2015: 10) puts it: ‘Voids of meaning have to be kept in check by transcendental signifiers, symbols and ritual.’ Indeed, ‘the extraordinary’ for Wydra plays a decisive role, such that people ‘require transcendent images that express the eternity of their collective groups and the world’. These might be ‘religious’ or ‘secular’. They might refer to God(s), ‘the People’ (*demos*), Dharma, science, civilisation, human rights, the market, or development – each taking on new valences when observed as elements of particular political theologies.

For Lefort (2006) the theological-political is located at the crossroads between the transcendent Other (the end of life and the realm beyond life) and the immanent One (the necessary illusion of the unity of the body-politic). The theological signifier of sovereignty, in other words, symbolically generates power as a mediator between the One and the Other, in ways that facilitate a certain configuration of political authority and general understanding of social reality to become experienced and accepted as legitimate and ‘natural’ by its subjects. Political theology thus requires us to consider a set of concepts that are commonly excluded from modern political theory but which nevertheless greatly contribute to shape our political imagination, such as faith, sacrifice, and the sacred (Kahn, 2011: 8). In analysing state violence against the enemy, war-making political rhetoric, and all the practices of legal exceptions related to the defence of modern sovereign existence, Khan for instance puts sacrifice, rather than social contract and reasonable agreement, at the origins of the (modern American) political community. The patriotic willingness to die, the ‘ultimate sacrifice’ (Kahn, 2011: 7) for the nation, is grounded on faith rather than policy.

We argue that an optic of political theology that recognises the sacred as fundamental to the establishment of worldly power can be useful in framing affective, aesthetic, and unconscious dimensions of socio-political imagination, including what political theorist Benjamin Arditi (2007), drawing on Freud, has called ‘the return of the repressed’, and Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) referred to as humanity’s ‘cosmic fear’. In these frames, elements such as desire, aspiration, hope, seduction, and existential anxiety are recognised as driving forces in the theological dynamics of political subjectivity – ranging from the hope for radical change and spiritual elevation informing nineteenth-century notions of progress, and the emotional fervour triggering ultra-rightist anti-migrant political rhetoric, to the outpouring of sentiment by Singapore’s citizens

during Lee Kuan Yew's national funeral in 2015. These can all be seen as modes of action, thought, and feeling that unveil the eruption of the theological-political into purportedly immanent and 'secular' everyday politics, including the politics of development.

Differently from conventional political theory, the use of political theology can reveal the ways in which, as Thomas Molnar (1988) expresses it, politics and the sacred work as 'twin powers'. This volume examines their complex entanglements in processes of governance and 'development' in Asia, illustrating the theoretical productivity of a decentralised, postcolonial political theology.

Our work here attempts to expand the framing of political theology outside of 'the West', pioneering analyses of the political-theological nexus in Asia. The chapters collected in this volume investigate historically situated, non-linear entanglements between religion, politics, and development through the lens of political theology, in contexts ranging from Thailand (Edoardo Siani and Eli Elinoff) and South Korea (Sam Han) to India (Sunila Kale and Christian Lee Novetzke) and Indonesia (Kenneth George), as well as in reference to wider transnational spaces and multi-vectored genealogies as the Islamic ecumene to the 'East of Westphalia' (Armando Salvatore) and Twelver Shi'a humanitarian networks across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Till Mostowlansky).

From a genealogical and historiographical point of view, the translation of political theology insights into analyses of Asian developmental modernities might be suspected of being yet another orientalist operation (Said, 1978). A few epistemological clarifications are thus in order. First, unlike some Christian theologians (e.g. Pieris, 2003; Kwok, 2016), for 'political theology' we do not exclusively or necessarily mean 'political Christianity' or 'Christian secularity' in Asia. Although we recognise the Euro-American and Christian genealogy of the concept as well as the valuable contribution of contemporary theologians to this increasingly plural field of scholarship, we are here proposing a decentralised and postcolonial political theology, to rethink its scope and analytical value beyond just 'Christendom'. Second, and relatedly, despite its etymological foundations, we are not bounded to any monotheistic formulation of *theos*. Instead, our 'theological' approach to 'the political' embraces polytheistic, monotheistic, animistic, as well as non-theistic and officially secular frameworks of power sacralisation, without requiring these to be mutually exclusive possibilities. This is particularly important in the context of Asian political and development formations, where it is often exceedingly difficult to draw sharp dividing lines between religion(s) and state institutions, supernatural forces and modernity, neoliberal capitalism and millennial cosmologies. Finally, a historiographical note on

political-geographical nomenclatures is needed. Although we refer to 'Asia' and 'Asian' political theologies out of convenience, we fully acknowledge the embeddedness of such categories in twentieth-century Western (confessional) imperialism and colonial imagination. Our take on political theology thus reworks normative, 'Occidental' historiography by re-tracing non-linear, multi-directional, and trans-confessional entanglements within 'Asia' and between 'Asia' and elsewhere (Hodgson, 1993; Duara, 2015). This volume, therefore, deliberately expands the analytical boundaries of conventional scholarship on 'political theology', 'development', 'religion', and 'politics', grounding these concepts in a variety of different areas of research. As we show, the theoretical space opened up by this expansion is empirically filled with historically deep, culturally rich, and illuminating cross-comparisons that provide innovative perspectives on the theo-political and the (re)making of Asia.

Asian political theologies?

Even though political theology as a body of scholarship was born in Europe and has focused primarily on the relationship between sovereignty and Christianity, we argue that the genealogical, functional, and cosmological interrelation between politics and Christianity is just one of the possible arrangements that the theological-political can take. Within European history itself the theological-political has undergone radical re-articulations with the passage from its incarnation in the king's 'two bodies', as argued by Ernst Kantorowicz (1957), to its modern disincorporation, migration, and reincarnation into 'secular' notions such as 'democracy', 'the Law', 'progress', or 'the people'. Even when political theology scholarship has been used on more explicitly 'confessional' formations, such as in the analysis of political-religious movements of Latin American liberation theology (e.g. Sobrino, 2002; Bolotta, 2017a), it can still shed light on particular configurations of the theological-political that might analogously be tracked in non-Christian political religions, such as in various historical and contemporary strands of socially engaged Buddhism (Queen and King, 1996) and political Islam (Turner, 2002).

As in medieval Europe, also in pre-modern Southeast Asia political power was derived from a hierarchy taken as the earthly manifestation of a cosmic order (Keyes, 1994). Well before the appearance of significant encounters and interactions with European influences, Asian political theologies presented varying degrees of historical distinctiveness, and encompassed differently situated articulations of symbolic processes, economic practices, and ethno-linguistic forms of life. While the theological

foundations of European political orders have been symbolically and ritually filled with different strands of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian themes, in pre-modern Southeast Asia the king's 'two bodies' were spiritually and politically animated primarily by Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies.

Stanley Tambiah (1977) famously coined the notion of 'galactic' or 'mandalic' polities to represent the design of pre-modern Southeast Asian kingdoms, a design that coded in a composite way cosmological, topographical, and politico-economic features. The gravitational centre of Indic galactic kingdoms was the *devaraja* – a 'God-King' – as the incarnation of the Hindu deity Indra, located between the heavens and the world of men.³ For Clifford Geertz (1980), this Brahmanic conceptualisation of kingship was a fundamental source of political legitimacy and charismatic power in pre-modern Southeast Asian 'theatre states'. In the case of Siam, the king was not only the Hindu 'world-conqueror' (*devaraja*) but also the Buddhist 'world-renouncer' (*dhammaraja*), the embodiment of the Dharma (Tambiah, 1977). The double nature of the king as both 'world conqueror' and 'world renouncer' in turn provided the 'theological' bases for the socio-economical and geo-political organisation of the kingdom.

It should be noted that the diversity of cosmological groundings of state formations in pre-modern Southeast Asia encompassed not only Indic, but also indigenous and Abrahamic conceptualisations. For example, Anthony Milner (1983) characterises the Muslim states of Southeast Asia in the pre-modern archipelago as 'an expanding galaxy of Persianised Muslim Sultanates whose rulers exercised a system similar to that of the region's pre-Islamic "sacral kings" paired with Sufi theological conceptions such as the "Perfect Man" (*insan al-kamil*)'. Michael Feener (1994) has argued for an even wider range of ways in which Islamic cosmologies were interpreted and deployed across the region in the early modern period in association with forms of contractual, as well as absolutist Muslim polities in the eastern islands of the Indonesian archipelago.

Over more recent history, Western political theologies have come to exercise a remarkable influence outside Europe, including across Asia. These theological-political doctrines constitute fundamental dimensions of the West's colonial and post-colonial interventions in (and beyond) Asia. Among post-colonial actors, development organisations, humanitarian agencies, and NGOs represent one set of important vectors of interaction (Fountain et al., 2015). Flows along these developmental routes are not, of course, unilateral or uncontested. Instead, modern development discourse and practice has afforded space for multiple and non-linear pathways of global encounters. Through development, a range of religious traditions have provided cross-cultural networks of historical

connection, confrontation, and intervention. Rather than producing political homogeneity, local (re)interpretations of Western modernity rooted in particular Christian historical trajectories ultimately gave rise to a multiplicity of diverging 'secularities', 'modernities', 'developments', and political theologies.

Several chapters in this volume provide historically informed analyses of these hybridising encounters between local and global political-theological formations, revealing the multi-polar genealogies and heterogeneous characterisations of modernity and development in both 'Asia' and the 'West'. Salvatore's chapter offers a ground-breaking political-theological analysis of modern state formations by examining the roles of religious knowledge, symbols, and charisma in the production of political modernity from a radically de-centred sociological position – the 'Islamic ecumene in the East of Westphalia'. His interrogation of 'the religiopolitical nexus' since the late Middle Ages de-centres Eurocentric, Latin-Christian historical accounts and revisits the ontologies of historical sociology by way of a critical focus on Islam's different – and neglected – political-theological contributions to modernity. By looking at the religiopolitical nexus from this de-centred position, Salvatore reveals the intertwining of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial realities, as well as the entanglements of diverse historical experiences across Western, Central, and Southern Asia. His contribution helps us to recognise the relationship of historical (dis)continuity and exchange between an 'Asian, Muslim political theology', grounded on a 'saintly charism' and providing cohesion to relatively independent religiopolitical networks, and the European, centralised, 'Leviathan-model of sacral sanctioning of sovereignty'.

Kale and Novetzke's chapter on the political theology of yoga provides another compelling, de-centring analysis of modernity and development, in this case through the optic of Indian Vedic thought and – in particular – the enduring legacy of Gandhi's political reading of yoga. Through a critical analysis of the changing political-theological expressions of the concept of yoga since its first appearance in the Rg Veda (c. 1900 BCE) to its contemporary value as part of Indian Prime Minister Modi's political economy, Kale and Novetzke clearly show how 'the connection between yoga, power, and politics is as old as the practice of yoga itself'. While Modi has coupled yoga with Western-style development and capitalistic expansion, the political theology of Gandhi's karma yoga represents a 'theological alternative' to the project of Western development as grounded on the collective. As the authors argue, 'The karma yogi's philosophy of development is to return to the sovereignty of the self – wherein development begins with the freedom of the individual. This is not only an Indic extension of the idea of yoga, but it is

also Gandhi's political resistance to colonial and postcolonial Western developmentalism.' Here, transnational development imaginaries become entangled in both practices of adoption and rejection via the reworking of the ancient practices of yoga.

Both these chapters look at non-Western conceptions of development through the lens of political theology. At the same time, they look at political theology from the perspective of particular historical experiences in 'Asia' – an operation of 'decentring' which opens up innovative theoretical possibilities as well as new critical understandings of established analytical categories. Like Salvatore's analysis of Islamic political theology, Kale and Novetzke's approach reveals an inversion of the linear paradigm (religious to secular) as established in classic political theology literature insofar as, in their reading, yoga was originally formulated as a 'secular', warrior doctrine and has only recently become a mode of 'spirituality'. Moreover, both these chapters, among other contributions to this volume, examine development and developmentalist state projects as particularly important sites in which to analyse historically situated political-theological formations in Asia.

Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration

Development has not yet become a significant locus in debates about political theology. Indeed, the possibility of such an analysis has been largely neglected by both scholars of development and political theology alike. Against this disinterest, we argue that the political theology of development represents a particularly productive field of exploration for critically analysing contemporary conjunctures of religion and politics. Building on a series of earlier forays in which we have sought to analyse religion and development in Asia, this volume seeks to establish the political theology of development as an invaluable analytical approach in the study of development.⁴ Our concern in this section is to outline the key three political theological themes that are interwoven throughout this volume: transcendence, sacrifice and victimhood, and aspiration and salvation.

Genealogically, modern 'Big D' development as it emerged in the wake of the Second World War built on the theo-politics of European empires, in which violent and exploitative relationships were justified by religious ethics and divine mandate. During decolonisation and the institutionalisation of the modern nation-state across Asia, development – including its relative presence, absence, and potentiality – emerged as a central category shaping geopolitical imaginations. The extraordinary

power of development, as Jonathan Crush (1995) has argued, is in its capacity to imagine new worlds, and thereby reshape the present. To a remarkable extent, we all now live in the shadow of a developmentally-infused cosmos. European imperialism involved complex entanglements of political control, economic expansion, and the pursuit of Christian missionary agendas. Though this was often a fraught and contested relationship, the association itself is not insignificant. Michael Barnett (2011), Peter Stamatov (2013), and Thomas Davies (2014) have each argued that the practices of contemporary NGOs were born out of missionary movements of the earlier centuries, in which a universal humanity became imaginable and then made practicable through vast networks and flows of ideas, information, and people. Missionaries were influential political actors across Asia, including in all kinds of interventions that would come to be recognised within the rubric of secular ‘development’ (Scheer et al., 2018).

These early religious influences have had an enduring and significant effect on parts of the contemporary development sector (Fountain, 2015). But with the rise of development through the long twentieth century, religion has also been profoundly reconfigured (Feener and Fountain, 2018). In the age of development, diverse religious formations across Asia have undergone broad transformations along a number of new trajectories. Institutionally, we can witness the rise of the NGO as a major organisational innovation. Accompanying these new organisational practices came a slew of new logics about what kinds of interventions should be made as well as how they should be enacted and assessed. Indeed, development has inspired new forms of agency, with humanity being endowed with enormous power, as well as heightened expectancy, to bring about a better life in this world. Development thereby also has inaugurated new temporalities as diverse traditions came to reimagine their own pasts while constructing new visions of the future. These changes can be traced from the personal and affective through the communal and national to the global.

Such long-standing and mutually transforming entanglements are highly influential for our analysis of the political theology of development. Such an investigation is based on the assumption that diverse religious traditions and diverse developmental formations, practices, and imaginations are always already intermeshed. Our discussion of three key themes for a political theological analysis of development – transcendence, sacrifice and victimhood, and aspiration and salvation – builds on this understanding of a complex history of entanglements.

The transcendence of development has recently begun attracting scholarly attention. Stephen Hopgood (2013) argues that the notion of

universal humanity underpinning human rights must be accessed via a political theological analysis. Nick Cullather (2010), discussing America's 'green revolution' in Asia, suggests that the 'miracle of modernisation' was not mere rhetoric – it constituted a thoroughgoing apotheosis of technology as the means for achieving mass material salvation. While scholars including Philip Quarles van Ufford and Matthew Schoffeleers (1988), Gilbert Rist (1997), and Oscar Salemink (2015) have all argued that development itself constitutes a new religion, and can be productively analysed with the methodological and analytical tools deployed in the investigation of religion. Analyses of the enchanted and magical cosmologies of development thus open new ways to understand how development works (Fountain, 2013).

In the twenty-first century new attention has also been given to development's dark shadow, as the climate change crisis has increasingly assumed a central role in global concerns about our collective future (Northcott, 2013). Accelerating environmental threats place new demands for urgent political action against the backdrop of an apocalyptic futuristic imaginary. The challenge of the changing climate can be met by either utopian or dystopian visions (Hjerpe and Linnér, 2009), with the former placing great faith in technological solutions to save us from this time of trial and the latter imagining the climate as a malevolent transcendence, imbuing an increasingly dismal sense of foreboding and dread.

In this volume, a number of the chapters advance nuanced new analyses of the 'religion of development'. Sam Han's assessment of South Korea's developmental politics pays close attention to reconfiguring notions of citizenship, which he argues should be understood as a form of 'spiritualised nationalism'. These dynamics are traced through emergent South Korean media discourses and television shows that proffer 'therapeutic' solutions to proliferating problems that have arisen out of Korea's remarkable achievement in development. In Han's study, a spiritual turn is in large part produced by economic success – which is here discussed as epiphenomenal to East Asia's 'compressed modernity'.

Just as religion has been multiply configured as a locus of transcendence, development has also been anything but static and fixed. Instead, both terms should be understood as 'moving targets' (Feener et al., 2015). They are shape-shifters, being reconfigured as they journey across time and space. Development, like religion, is multiple. While the IMF's Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), Amnesty International's advocacy for LGBT rights, Tzu Chi's Buddhist humanitarianism, and China's industrialisation can all be seen as participating in the nebulous world of 'development', it is equally clear that not all

development is the same. And yet emphasising disjuncture can be overlaid. For development is a compelling site of analysis because of the ways in which it ‘crosses over’, intimating toward the universal. In so doing, it has become a space in which cultures and religions meet, and where they are reconfigured. This aspirational universality is, itself, a matter for political theological analysis – for it points to multiple and shifting transcendent horizons.

Tending the light of development’s transcendence is a vast army of bureaucrats, scholars, and managers that collectively compose a powerful ‘priesthood’. Joseph Stiglitz (2002) and Robert Nelson (2001) have described economists in precisely this language; they are a new ‘priesthood’ with fundamentalist proclivities. Divine powers are also attributed to technocrats to engineer society in desired directions. Timothy Mitchell (2002: 15) has identified them in the form of modern ‘experts’ who come to voice the truths of the transcendent ideals of modernity and progress. Development is rendered transcendent via the rituals, discourses, and practices enacted by this priesthood.

Sacrifice, similarly, has been recognised by Susan Mizruchi (1998: 100) as a ‘preoccupation of moderns’ – defining a central trope in nineteenth- and twentieth-century social science discourse, as well as in the literary works of major American authors ranging from Melville to Henry James. In his recent comparative study of sacrifice, David Weddle (2017: 208) emphasises that: ‘Its usefulness as the justifying rationale for violence in religious conflicts and political contests is invaluable.’ The powerful idea of sacrifice has, however, been understood and deployed in an astoundingly wide range of different ways.⁵ For example, Didier Fassin (2012) has argued that Western humanitarianism is permeated by a ‘politics of life’ and a ‘politics of suffering’. Both are reconfigured Christian political theologies, as well as secular spheres of responsibility, authority, and redemption. The sacrifice of the crucifixion has, for Fassin, been transmogrified into a valuation of compassion for those suffering, and this helps assuage the guilt of the wealthy in a profoundly unequal world. In a somewhat different vein, sacrifice is often associated with war-making, and the remembrance of war dead. The role of the state in enacting and legitimating violence – including in the name of development – is a crucial feature of contemporary politics. Sacrificial language is also evoked for economic and developmental purposes. This is particularly striking in diverse contexts across Asia, as echoed in the appeals by leaders of Singapore’s People’s Action Party to the necessity of sacrifice for Singapore’s economic advancement, and the national valorisation of overseas Filipino maids hailed for their ‘sacrificial heroism’ – making them, in Julius Bautista’s (2015) terms, ‘export-quality martyrs’.

Victimhood is likewise a central concept for development, from a framing of victims as suspects to one in which their suffering ‘excites sympathy and merits compensation’ (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009). This shift in the moral economy of suffering has reshaped the discourses and practices of development, legitimating new forms of governmentality. Importantly, not all victims are equal, and some categories of victimhood assume a sacred character that demands intervention (Bolotta, forthcoming a). The new moral salience of victimhood also changes relationships between givers and receivers.⁶ Although the victim is endowed with a potent valence, it is the givers – humanitarians, celebrities, individual donors, wealthy benefactors, and communities – who are bestowed with the agency to ‘save’ others. This salvific capacity, vividly described by Peter Redfield (2008, 2013) in his analysis of the logics and practices of humanitarian triage, is a god-like power to make decisions over life and death.

Sacrifice and victimhood are key themes that percolate throughout the chapters in this volume, where they emerge as highly contested domains of valuation and loss. Such concepts resonate in Sam Han’s discussion of precarity and loneliness in South Korea where ‘development citizens’ are demanded to become self-reliant and resilient in the face of increasing anxiety and loneliness for the sake of national development. Likewise, debates that Kenneth George addresses around the artistic uses of the Qur’an in Indonesia, the charitable legacies of the Battle of Karbala in contemporary Shi’a practices as analysed by Till Mostowlansky, and Sunila Kale and Christian Novetzke’s discussion of Prime Minister Modi’s deployment of yoga as a technique for self-discipline and progress in contemporary India all speak to the place of sacrifice within development.

Both Edoardo Siani and Eli Elinoff discuss the ‘sacrifice’ of the Thai monarch for his people’s development and, vice versa, the sacrifice of the Thai people for their nation. The substance of blood becomes especially potent in Elinoff’s discussion of sacrifice in blood demonstrations by ‘Red Shirt’ protesters in Thailand. For Elinoff, blood is infused with an excess of meaning within Thai society. Blood is a ‘powerful substance’ oozing with potency and danger. It is polluting and its use subverts social mores and transgresses medicalised notions of hygiene. But in so doing, these protests highlighted the ‘irreducible violence’ at the heart of the Thai political order; including in its pursuit of dreams of development. As a sacrifice, the giving of blood also indicates the passion and commitment of the protesters and it conveys the self-giving as necessary for the re-congealing of a unified Thai people. In these blood protests the sacrifices of development are cast in a new and illuminating light.

Siani's take on sacrifice unveils the ambiguous political-theological relationships between Buddhist eschatology, Thai royalism, popular sovereignty, and neoliberal capitalism. Focused on the mourning activities organised after King Bhimibol's death at Golden City, a luxury shopping mall in Bangkok, Siani's ethnography pinpoints the Thai military junta's symbolic manipulation of the deceased King's Buddhist divinity, which is reconfigured as a 'political theology of the People' demanding consumers'/citizen's self-sacrifice and submission to the market and the 'enlightened' leaders ruling the country. Once a Buddhist leader who promoted sufficiency and moderation, the deceased monarch is here transformed into a 'god of prosperity' for the purpose of particular political-theological rearrangements between state governance, royal Buddhism, and development.

The transmutation of the Thai King into a deity of future wealth can be seen as one instance of the temporal momentum of development. Development is a compulsively future-oriented ideology – propelled forward toward a promised land that is Newer, Bigger, and Better. As argued by Monique Nuijten (2003), reworking James Fergusson's classic metaphor, development is a 'hope-generating machine' which ignites collective aspirations. Modern development imagines the promise of a better future that can be delivered on demand and within budget. The teleology of modern development, both in its socialist and capitalist iterations, has deep resonances with Judeo-Christian eschatology. Though, of course, in Asia developmentalist aspirations are resourced by a range of other ideologies and theologies, and the ways these combine and/or contrast with Christian genealogies is a pivotal topic for conversation.

The question of genealogy is central to Till Mostowlansky's chapter on Twelver Shi'a humanitarianism. In contrast to the 'nebulous' role that Christianity plays in Fassin's genealogy of Western humanitarian reason, and arguing against Fassin's 'genealogical and spatial linearity', Mostowlansky argues for an approach that treats the details of specific histories of humanitarianism with attentiveness and care, rather than as foregone conclusions or mere cosmetics. His exemplary study of Shi'a humanitarian and development networks shows what such an exploration may accomplish. Kabir, one of Mostowlansky's key informants, is a Twelver Shi'a Muslim and managing trustee of one of the Pakistan's numerous aid organisations. He organises financial transactions according to both Shi'a tradition and neoliberal discourses of meritocracy. Rather than drawing linearly on genealogies of political-theological significance, 'Kabir bundled the genealogical strings of Shi'a tradition and giving, global humanitarianism and managerial discourse, thereby weaving together their contents beyond chronological recognition.'

Just as technocrats play the role of priests, so too are religious specialists like Kabir becoming entrepreneurs, accountants, and advocates for capitalist accumulation. Witness the rise of prosperity theology within Christianity, influencing the likes of Joseph Prince's slick New Creation church in Singapore (itself both a mall and Church auditorium combined into a singular and striking amalgam), along with a diverse array of other denominations and movements (Wiegele, 2005). The blurring of conventional religious/secular categorisations appears to be an increasingly common phenomena across Asia in the proliferation of various types of hybridised public figures – such as the Indian consultant sporting a sandalwood paste *tilak* on his forehead who founded an NGO promoting new practices of financial accountability expressed in terms of Dharma and yoga profiled in Erica Bornstein's (2012) ethnography of philanthropy and religious giving in India (Bolotta et al., 2019).

As this last example makes clear, new aspirations for prosperity extend well beyond Christianity (Kitiarsa, 2008). Rachele Scott's (2009) account of the Dhammakaya Temple in Bangkok highlights the infusion of a prosperity doctrine within the heart of an upwardly mobile, middle-class Thai Buddhism. Daromir Rudnyckyj (2010) and James Hosterey (2015) have both investigated how innovative religious entrepreneurs in Indonesia are reconfiguring Islam into a prosperity-aspiring, market-serving, and revenue-producing capitalist religion. Priests of development can wear suits or robes, can thump Scriptures or tap calculators, and can simultaneously seek to serve both the market and God.

Visions of development differ, as do the mechanisms deployed for attaining the future; but each proffers a 'promise of salvation' (cf. Riesebrodt, 2010). Walt Rostow's seminal *Stages of Economic Growth*, which proposed a stadial process for capitalist ('non-Communist') accumulation that culminates in the eschatological 'age of mass consumption', has been a highly influential example of such a religious imagination transposed onto utopian visions of worldly prosperity. Remarkably, countries like South Korea and Singapore have attained these ends. Their economic success is materially manifested and performed in any major mall in Seoul or along Singapore's Orchard Road. And yet the 'East Asian Miracle', as exemplified by these two countries in particular, has been presented as a model of a different kind of modernisation, built on 'Asian Values' and Confucian ethics. At the same time, evangelical Christians in both these countries have pronounced their nations to be new Asian 'Antiochs' – beachheads for campaigns of Christianisation into neighbouring Asian states aspiring to developmentalist dreams of similar trajectories of economic growth.

Political theologies and development in Asia

Several scholars such as Charles Keyes (1978: 160–1) and Stanley Tambiah (1984: 344) have argued that the advent of Western modernisation and development has produced crises of authority and political instability as a result of new conceptual disjunctions between state sovereignty and religious cosmologies. Ian Harris (2013), however, has characterised Asian Buddhism as a ‘total culture’ that continues to provide both religious and secular actors with moral values and specific worldviews to engage with the political processes. In many Asian states today, religious authority and political power are complexly entangled – even in cases where constitutional provisions establish formally secular state structures (Feener, 2014).

We would argue that the historically heterogeneous system of discourses and practices that are today identified as ‘development’ have led both to increasing affinities and tensions between conflicting political theologies, and promoted the creative emergence of hybrid, if contested, theological-political formations. Barton Scott (2016: 7–8), for example, taking Gandhi as political theorist, sheds light on the conjuncture of Protestant and Hindu notions of asceticism, self-rule, and sovereignty, suggesting that the ‘Protestant ethic discovered an affinity for various practices of the self, associated with Hindu tradition’ while circulating along the cultural crosscurrents of empire. The politics of Gandhi and the circulations of Western ethics are taken up in this volume in Kale and Novetzke’s analysis of ‘the yogic ethic and the spirit of development’.

Within Southeast Asia, the example of contemporary Thailand is also quite instructive. The fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932 resulted in its temporary disappearance from the public scene. This political vacuum created space for the rise of a series of military juntas to govern the country. These regimes engaged in an ethno-nationalistic project grounded, ironically, on kingship metaphysics, with the latter being conceived as an essential ‘theological source’ of political legitimacy (Bolotta, forthcoming). Modern notions such as democracy and development have been symbolically inflected through Hindu-Buddhist cosmologies to produce what has been described as ‘Thai-style democracy’ (Hewinson, 1997: 266). In the modern refashioning of the monarchy’s theological-political role, secular notions and practices of development are central. Indeed, King Bhumibol’s moral perfection and divine stature were reflected in, and bolstered by, his engagement in development projects.⁷ As both Siani and Elinoff note in their chapters in this volume, the Thai monarch has been described as the ‘king of development, modernity, progress and democracy’ (Ivarsson and Isager, 2010: 2), and after the 1997 financial crisis, his

controversial 'sufficiency economy' (*setachid pho phieng*) – an economic philosophy which combines a Buddhist ethics of moderation, ideals of rural collectivism, and anti-materialism – was proposed as an antidote to the individualistic model of global neo-liberal capitalism. The king's sufficiency economy, also praised by the UN, was then inserted in the military designed 2007 constitution as an 'authentically' Thai mode of production.

It is important to bear in mind that, as Andrew Johnson (2013) has argued, 'contra a Weberian idea of disenchanting modernity, national development and the rise of image-making technology has increased the magical-divine aura of the [Thai] monarch'. Neo-liberal capitalist trends, social media, new technologies, and television have actually provided digital support and an unprecedented aesthetic poignancy to the supernatural (Morris, 2000; Jackson, 2010). The sacred aura of King Bhumibol was amplified, rather than demystified, by his active appropriation of modernity and development. This can also be observed in the theological-political relevance of images (as opposed to just verbal communication) and the visual dimensions of power in Buddhist polities. Indeed, as Christine Gray (1995, 234) has observed, the religious value attributed to silence in Theravada societies, makes 'the manipulation of sacred images' assume 'a disproportionate load of communicative functions associated with language in western societies'.

The priority of aesthetics noted here is also a turn to materiality. While material things have been analysed both in terms of development/humanitarianism and religion, rarely are these two domains brought into substantive conversation.⁸ In this volume material artefacts figure prominently within the analysis of Asian theo-politics. Indeed, far from peripheral, the materialisation of the theo-political emerges as a crucial space for critical analysis. Eli Elinoff examines the religious materiality of blood and concrete. These contrasting substances played very different roles within protest movements in Thailand, and Elinoff works with this materiality in forming his political-theological argument about modern Thai politics. Kenneth George's contribution examines the materiality of Qur'anic objects. His chapter focuses on two particular objects: a complexly illuminated manuscript of the Qur'an which went on display in 1995 in Jakarta, Indonesia, and a bustier embroidered with Islamic texts designed by Karl Lagerfeld and worn by Claudia Schiffer on a catwalk in Paris in 1994. Through attention to the ways these objects were articulated, imagined, and contested, George casts new light on Muslim theo-politics in Southeast Asia. While these objects are entangled within the theological imaginations of lived Islam in Indonesia, they are also embedded within the political manoeuvring of the final years of President Suharto's development-oriented New Order state. George's 'object-oriented political

theology' facilitates a critical analysis of the contested and dynamic religious materiality of the Indonesian public sphere.

Numerous commentators have pointed to the complex intersections of religion, politics, and neo-liberal capitalism in relation to the sacralisation of monetary prosperity and the on-going commodification of social life (Goodchild, 2009; Collier, 2012; Ong, 2006). In her analysis of Islamic charity in Egypt, for example, Mona Atia (2013) discusses 'pious neoliberalism', while Jean and John Comaroff (1999) document the rise of 'occult economies' in post-colonial rural South Africa, where the growing deployment of magical means for material ends underlines the contradictory effects of the encounters between popular religion and neo-liberalism. Hybrid and variegated political theologies continue to emerge, circulate, and redefine themselves as a result of these non-linear intersections, both in the West, and beyond.

In their chapters included in this volume, both Till Mostowlansky and Armando Salvatore provide sophisticated investigations into the non-linear intersections of globally circulating political theologies. Mostowlansky examines the complex entanglements that weave together long histories of Shi'a charity with the professionalised techno-political managerialism of contemporary humanitarianism in ways that eschew simplistic visions of the unfurling of history. Salvatore's insightful analysis of the Islamicate of Western, Central, and South Asia seeks to move beyond Eurocentric 'Westphalian benchmarks' for a fresh analysis of the 'religiopolitical nexus'.

While politics are intrinsically theological, development aspires to transcendence, and in so doing it mimics, encapsulates, and reconfigures the discourses and practices of religion as experienced and understood in diverse ways all across Asia. The framework of political theology thus provides rich possibilities for renewing and furthering the analysis of 'development', 'modernity' and governance in Asia. At the same time, the turn to exploring political theology in Asian contexts pluralises our theoretical horizon in ways that destabilise historical linearity and normative interpretations of the religiopolitical nexus. Critical approaches to development that interrogate operative notions of transcendence, sacrifice and victimhood, and aspiration and salvation offer rich possibilities for understanding crucial dynamics of contemporary political life across diverse societies. In advancing such new frameworks, this volume demonstrates the enormous heuristic potential afforded by de-centred, post-colonial approaches of political theology for thinking about development well beyond the West in multiple and complex global entanglements.