

## Unit 6: Religion and East Asian Politics

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

#### Be aware of the following

- Prevailing influence of Buddhist practice in Southeast Asia politics
- Impact the Sangha increasingly plays in Southeast Asia politics
- Disestablishment of monastic orders in Laos and Cambodia over the past 20 years
- Variety of educational means Confucius used to instill values within the Chinese people
- Five cultural visions of Confucian thought
- Worldwide composition of Islam
- Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia/Indian sub-continent
- Sunni and Shia school of thought, makeup/differences
- Sufi practice within Islam
- Complexities of Islam when applied to society
  - Three Islamic political responses to the West

#### Identify

- Ashoka
- Stupa
- Dharma
- Sangha
- General Joseph W. Stilwell
- Te
- Syncretism, Dar al-Islam
- Sharia, hadith
- Ulama, imam, kethib, muezzin, mufti
- Mujahidun, mullahs, ayatollah
- Caliph, marabout
- Sunni, Shia, Sufi, Twelver
  - Husayn, Karbala

## Realize

- Nature of political leadership in Taoist thought
- Taoist ideal of passivity, yielding and adaptability
- Importance of cultural excellence, political engagement and personal character in Confucian thought
- Current influence of traditional Chinese Folk/Taoist/Confucian practice in the Peoples Republic of China internal politics
- Syncretistic nature of SE Asia Muslim practice
- Differences of leadership by nation/group within Islam
- Percentages of Sunni/Shia practitioners
- Fundamentalist, traditionalist and reformist trends of Islamic thought within Southeast Asia

## I. Buddhism

*"Buddhists must pursue 'not a will-o'-the-wisp Nirvana secluded in the cells of their monasteries, but a Nirvana attained here and now by a life of self-forgetful activity...'"*

-- D. Wijewardena, The Revolt in the Temple, (as quoted in M. Eliade, The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. II, p. 586).

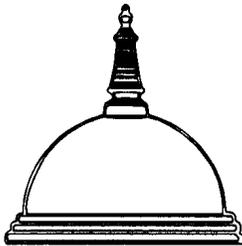
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The "life of self-forgetful activity" referred to by Sri Lankan Buddhist D. Wijewardena includes that of political involvement. From King Ashoka (uh-SHOH-kuh) to the present, state leaders in Buddhist countries readily apply the Dharma to their national constituencies. The Sangha adds a significant political and social dimension.

Emperor Ashoka (274-236), in what might be seen as one of history's first recorded cases of "post traumatic stress syndrome", turned from "Ashoka the fierce" following his conquests during the Kalinga war.

During this series of battles in northern India, Ashoka's forces slaughtered 100,000, deported 150,000 and spread famine/pestilence. In part, the emperor's guilt or perhaps post trauma stress led him to embrace Buddhism. King Ashoka's positive example as "Ashoka the righteous" continues to influence political leaders in Buddhist countries today.

In Southeast Asia, leaders capitalize on the use of Buddhist symbols and influence.



For example, seats of power are often located near stupas (commemorative burial mounds), so that these memorials do not only give reverence to past spiritual leaders, but endorse present day leadership.

In carrying out their duties, Buddhist leaders experience the tensions inherent in using power and authority while living up to the ideals of Buddhist practice. Even if they do not espouse distinctly Buddhist precepts, leaders are aware of its prevailing influence.

When asked why nations with large Buddhist populations so often have violent rulers, Myanmar's dissident Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi answered: "...it is very difficult for us to explain why we should have violent governments in Buddhist countries because the governments themselves claim to be Buddhist!...[T]he conclusion one would have to come to is that perhaps [generals, government officials] are not practicing Buddhism anything like enough." ("The Passion of Suu Kyi", by Claudia Driefus, The New York Times Magazine, 7 Jan. 1996.)

The Sangha (Buddhist monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen), possessing numerical strength and respected by the laity, increasingly is called upon to exert political influence. In classic Buddhism, kings protected the Sangha, took an active role in promoting its welfare and sought to maintain high standards for those called to monastic life. In turn, the monastic orders gave formal and informal support for government rulers.

Today, especially in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma), frustration aroused by injustice leads to more active Sangha social involvement. In Cambodia (Kampuchea) and Laos, political leaders determined monastic orders to be either reactionary or developmental hindrances and, within the past two decades, disestablished them. Observers wonder how this will affect the long term survival of Buddhism in these countries.



Scholar Donald Swearer notes that throughout Southeast Asia, whether "the monk can continue to symbolize values of lasting significance embodied in the ideals of Buddhism and at the same time speak to the needs of societies in radical transition is a fundamental issue [for]...the very survival of this religious tradition as we have known it." (Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia, p. 64.)

## II. Taoist Political Thought

"The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects...Hesitant, he does not utter words lightly. When the task is accomplished and his works done, the people all say, 'It happened to us naturally.'"

--Tao Te Ching, Chapter 17 (translated by D.C. Lau, p. 73).

"Those skilled in war cultivate the Tao and preserve the laws and are therefore able to formulate victorious policies.

Tu Mu: The Tao is the way of humanity and justice; 'laws' are regulations and institutions. Those who excel in war first cultivate their own humanity and justice and maintain their laws and institutions. By these means they make their governments invincible."

--Sun Tzu, The Art of War, p. 88.

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Society should emulate nature. Politically, the Taoist tradition, as identified in Tao Te Ching, took three metaphors and applied them to the nation.

**1. Valley** In patterning after nature's "valleys," Taoist rulers would look for the underlying principles, and the lowly individuals in their communities, rather than those who were prominent and impressive.

**2. Female** Traits identified with the Taoist ideal "female"--passivity, sense of yielding and adaptability--became government ideals.

Influence, not by direct assault but by indirection, nuance and suggestion became the model.

**3. Block of Potential** The "uncarved block," with its natural simplicity and capacity for infinite potential, pertained to society. Rather than 'fixing' society with confining rules, limiting regulations and excessive law, Taoists allowed society to realize its full capacity. "Te" (duh, "power") was to be conserved, and used efficiently, rather than with reckless inordinate abandon.

The Taoist ideal was not mindless docility or pacifism. It upgraded the position of women. It curtailed murder of female infants. It tolerated a regretful use of force in order to stop a greater evil.

Yet, underlying all was a sublime sense of the supernatural, an emphasis upon culture, and an allowance for all to pursue their inner space and natural attitude to life.

### III. Confucian Political Thought

*"Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government."*

-- Analects 5:26, (as recorded by Tu Wei-ming in Our Religions, p. 185.)

*"Self cultivation of each person is the root of social order and that social order is the basis for political stability and universal peace..."*



*There are those who use their minds and there are those who use their muscles. The former govern; the latter are governed. Those who govern are supported by those who are governed."*

-- Mencius III, A:4 (Our Religions, p. 187.)

## 1. Social Setting

Involvement in life, immersion in the world, and acceptance of the call to duty characterized the lifestyle of Confucius.

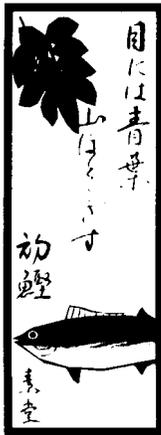
Confucius followed in the steps of Taoist thought. His concern with music, sensitivity to nature, and appreciation of simple life pleasures all continued the Taoist ideal.



Yet for Confucius, the problems his society faced--warring factions, social anarchy, people destroying each other--seemed to threaten the foundations of the body politic. Political engagement, rather than detachment, was necessary.

Alternatives propounded in Confucius' day--a utopian "love" ethic or realistic "life is hard" approach--advocated either pious proclamation or heavy-handed oppression and physical might. The dangers of oppressive rule are exemplified in the following narrative:

Confucius once heard a crying woman, uncontrolled in her sorrow. She wept because of the death of her husband's father, husband and now her son were killed by a voracious tiger. When asked by Confucius why she lived in such a dangerous place, the woman answered..." 'Because here there is no oppressive ruler,' ... 'Never forget, scholars,' said Confucius to his disciples, 'that an oppressive rule is more cruel than a tiger.'" (Huston Smith, The World's Religions, pp. 177-178.)



Confucius, obsessed with tradition, sought out the transcending values found in Chinese custom and practice. He identified procedures which developed correct attitudes.

Then, through a variety of educational means--temples, theaters, toys, proverbs, schools, history, stories, festivals and parades--he hoped to instill these values within the populace at large.

**2. Five Cultural Visions** Harvard professor of Chinese philosophy and history Tu Wei-ming identifies the following five Confucian cultural visions, each relating to political activity.

**a. Poetry** The collective feelings of a people are embodied in their poetry. Development of individuals and society at large is dependent on poetic expression.

**b. Social outlook** The importance of ritual, the concern for verbal and non-verbal communication within a society, must be taught through whatever creative means are available. That different behavior was called for in specific social and societal setting became a key perspective.

### c. History

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The historical memory, a long and strenuous process, is a part of the collective consciousness. Political and cultural decision must recognize this long-standing tradition.

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**d. All-encompassing politic** No area of life is outside the dimension of political responsibility. Commonplace events of life--as well as matters of spiritual importance--all must include a collective political dimension.



Churches, temples and shrines likewise symbolize this involvement in the regular, everyday lives of the people. (See Our Religions, p. 195.)

**e. Philosophy** The interconnectedness of all human activity--language, politics, nature, the spiritual--is a central philosophical connection. All dimensions of the world (and the heavenly) are bound together in an interconnected whole.

**3. Te** (duh) Te, the virtue or power by which a ruler possesses authority, applies to political practice.

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Popular trust--the example set, character upheld, integrity demonstrated and authenticity employed--is critical for those who would lead. A head of state's influence is most profound. Through example and precept, he clarifies spiritual values and human virtues for both governed and governors.

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Another dimension of Chinese politics is the principle, summarized under the slogan "the mandate from Heaven," whereby the emperor (supreme ruler) and his family carry out heavenly policy.



Ordinary citizens thus see rulers as divine, semi-natural, semi-personal forces. The aura of the divine surrounds them. (See Stephen Teiser, "The Spirits of Chinese Religion," in Donald Lopez, Religions of China in Practice, p. 29.)

#### 4. Cultural Excellence As stated by Huston Smith:

The evidence of a highly esteemed state is the one that has *"the finest art, the noblest philosophy, the grandest poetry, and gives evidence of realizing that 'it is the moral character of a neighborhood that constitutes its excellence.'"* (The World's Religions, p. 180.)

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The six arts--ritual, music, marksmanship, horsemanship, calligraphy and mathematics--while practiced individually, combine to build a strong society. Victory, over the long haul, eventually goes to the state developing the highest culture.

**5. Current Influence** Harvard professor Dr. Samuel Huntington, in his book The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, describes the current, prevailing influence of Confucian values in the East Asian (Sinic) world.

Dr. Huntington recognizes differences among Asian societies and civilizations, yet sees the value system of Confucius--with attendant emphasis on thrift, family, work and discipline--as significant in the region.

In commenting on China's redefinition of its role in world affairs in the late 1970s, Dr. Huntington writes, China "set two goals: to become the Champion of Chinese [Confucian] culture...and to resume its historical position, which it lost in the nineteenth century, as the [supreme] power in East Asia." (The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order, p. 169; see also p. 108.)

## IV. Islam

*"How are the domains of spiritual and political authority delineated in Islam? This question approaches one of the most fundamental, most searing, most debated, and as a result, most embroiled issues in Islamic thought."*

-- Mohammad Arkoun, Rethinking Islam, p. 68.



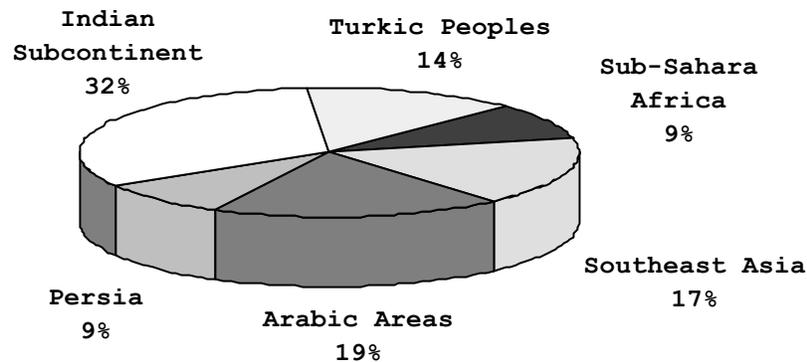
*"Islam is divided into various groups, each with its own interpretation of the Muslim holy book--the Qur'an--and the prophet Muhammad's sayings and deeds."*

--Lt.Col. David Kibble, Military Review, 1995, p. 40.

### 1. Islam Outside the Middle East

The presence of Islam amongst Arabic, Persian, and Turkic peoples seems commonly known. Less understood, but equally important, is the Muslim presence in the Indian subcontinent, sub-Sahara Africa and Southeast Asia. Also, Islamic influence in the West is increasingly felt.

# World Muslim Population



**a. Indian Subcontinent** Islam comprises a majority presence in Bangladesh, with minorities in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and India. Mission oriented Sufi orders and Muslim traders brought Islam to these areas in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Over 350 million Muslim adherents live in these areas.

**b. Sub-Saharan Africa** Since Muhammad's time, when Bilal, an African, called the Prophet to prayer, Islam has had an interest and presence in Africa. One hundred million followers of Muhammad practice Islam in this part of the African continent.

### c. Southeast Asia

In the thirteenth century, Sufi teachers, pious merchants, and members of the Prophet's family who married into Malay royalty spread Islam throughout Southeast Asia. The 180 million practitioners in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Philippines and minorities elsewhere often follow a more syncretistic (blended, including other beliefs or practices) strain of Islam.

Writes principal investigator Dr. Donald Weatherbee in The Political Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia, "*Heterodox Islam [in Southeast Asia] is represented by syncretic practices and beliefs deviating from the sunna, arising out of persistent pre-Islamic folk-belief and [indigenous] practices, the residuum of Hinduism and Buddhism, the overlapping of Sufi mysticism with indigenously-based Gnostic survivals, and other variants from universal Shafi'i sanctioned ritual and behavior.*" (p. 5)

## 2. Clergy/Leadership

Though Islam is a "religion of lay people without priesthood...a society in which all the members enjoy equal religious status" (Jacques Jomier, How to Understand Islam, p. 58), there are learned elites, community leaders, and public officials who promote and ensure good moral behavior in society.

**Ulama** (oo-la-mah) Leadership centers around the ulama. These learned men are responsible for interpreting divine law and administering Islamic society. Some of the ulama are experts in the study of sacred texts, the tradition associated with exegesis of the Qur'an, and the **hadith** (hah-DEETH, the tradition of what Muhammad and his companions said and did). Theology, law, and mysticism are also part of the curriculum for individuals desiring to become part of this select group.



Ulama personnel serve as teachers, preachers, market-inspectors, judges, notaries, and in various state positions--as scribes, secretaries, and royal counsels. Even in states where secular law is in effect, the cooperation of the ulama is necessary for successful government.

A wide variety of other titled men can make up the ulama. An imam (i-MAHM) leads prayers for the faithful. At times, imams also derive authority from their abilities in religious scholarship. A muezzin (moo-uh-TH-thin) is the crier who calls worshippers to prayer. Muftis (MUF-tees), scholars in Islamic law, present fatwa, formal decisions given on legal, moral, or doctrinal questions. Often the procedures for arriving at consensus are complex and intricate. Mujahidun (moo-ja-hid-OON) are present day activists who seek to revive Islamic society.

Mullahs (MUL-luhs) are local Shi'ite men of religion. An ayatollah (a-yat-ool-LAH) is a mullah who achieves the highest level of leadership in the Shia community through extensive academic study.

Historically, caliphs (KAY-lifs) provided religious and civil leadership to Muslim communities from A.D. 632 to the mid-thirteenth century. In practice, kings, sultans, and the ulama took over caliph powers from the ninth century onward.



"Friends of God" or popular saints are called wali or marabouts (MAHR-eh-boots). Locals often see these holy individuals as possessing spiritual/mystical powers and seek out their prayers and blessings. Though condemned in some orthodox Islamic circles, pilgrimages to these living saints or visits to the tombs of their dead still occur.

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In the Muslim world, two major schools of thought, the Sunni (SOON-nee) and Shia (SHEE-uh) are present. The origin of these groups centers more on political viewpoints than dogma. Early responses to the question "Who leads at the death of Muhammad? defined the differences in these two movements.

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### 3. Political Life

*"Beyond the minimum common structures of belief and practice in Islam in Southeast Asia...there [is] the ideal Islamic way of life ranging from the nominal profession of faith to strict compliance with all of the demands of the sharia; from syncretic accommodation to indigenous cultural heritage to the conscious adoption of the Arab model."*

--Political Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia, pp. 4-5.

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The relation between Islam and political life is complex. There is no compartmentalized secular/spiritual dichotomy within Islam. The entire world is a spiritual reality, permeated by religion.

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God is all powerful over human affairs. The Prophethood and Sharia are the basis for political life. Deputyship, an expression of the dominion humankind demonstrates over this world, is fulfilled through the religious leaders--the ulama.

The following questions address some of the religio-political tensions currently raised within many Middle Eastern countries.



- After experiencing some form of colonial rule for most of the twentieth century, how can Muslim dominated countries now oversee their own affairs, implementing some degree of Islamic government?
- How does an Islamic society react to or integrate the sweeping results of industrialization?
- In what ways do aggressively militant religionists fit in with more conciliatory fellow believers?
- Can authentic religious and cultural integrity be maintained through perceptions of loss--whether in status, dignity, belief, or lifestyle?
- What degree of tolerance is allowed for misbelievers when they rule over true believers?

## 4. Sharia/Hadith

Dr. Kamil Said, Naval Postgraduate School instructor in Islamic affairs, gives the following description of the Sharia (Islamic Law).

