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## **THE WORD OF GUEST EDITOR**

In the contemporary world of interconnected ideas and markets, religion has continued to play a critical role in politics and society. In fact, the theories of secularization have long been found wanting in light of the rise in religious influence in politics at a time when the societies worldwide are experiencing increased economic and political opening to varying degrees. Yet until the early twenty-first century, scholars working on religion often tended to be defensive about their works. This stemmed from the implicit bias in academia that the rise of religious influence in modern politics are probably aberrations and that these may not be properly studied as enduring social phenomena. That argument has now been buried for good under an avalanche of more recent studies on religious innovation. By that logic alone, this issue makes an important contribution to the literature.

This issue consists of five research articles, three shorter analyses, and three other much shorter reviews on books recently published in the general area of religion and politics.

The five research articles focus on the Roman Catholic Church and how it has reacted in recent years not only to the political opening but also to increased competition from other religions in the countries of North America, South America, Africa, and Asia. Several important arguments are laid out in these articles. First, we learn that the Catholic Church in Latin America is not as incapacitated as some critics might think. Despite the fact that it faces aggressive competition from the various Protestant denominations, its increased educational and social welfare activities in contemporary Latin America signifies a sound long-term strategy not seen earlier (Pattnayak). Second, many of the strategies, such as the use of *catechists* as cultural intermediaries, have been innovative enough to be construed not only as local and indigenous but also as Christian and Catholic, thereby maintaining the political influence of the Catholic Church on the indigenous populations in parts of South America (Orta).

Third, the Catholic Church has successfully used modern communication technologies to not only serve the demands of the poor and the needy for such services but also to successfully stabilize its cultural influence on the marginalized in Africa (Ihejirika). Fourth, the observed political orientation of the Catholic neo-pentecostals in the United States challenges the rationalistic voter-traits approach in political sci-

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ence. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that these Catholic charismatics are culturally and politically conservative, we now know that they indeed manifest a wide variety of political traits, many of which can be termed liberal or progressive (Hunt). In Asia, however, in particular in the Philippines, the Catholic Church has been noted to be rather insensitive to the rising political corruption and social injustice perpetrated by the elite. It is possible that such indifference is caused by both internal scandals within the Church and the current preference for political orthodoxy by the Vatican. But in a scenario of continued political inaction, the Catholic Church probably faces stiffer challenges in Asia than elsewhere (Aquino Rivas).

The three shorter analyses in the issue advocate a return to a world more committed to the universalistic values of pluralism (Oguntola-Laguda on Nigeria), tolerance (Jakovljevic on differences between Christianity and Islam), and respect for the humanity of all peoples (Maruyama on the applicability of Buddhist ethos). As the reader would notice, these analyses are a reaction to the contemporary world of globalized violence, aggression, and gross violation of human rights of those perceived to be different.

Finally, the three reviews expose the limitations of the current approaches to the study of religion and politics in general as well as in specific formations. For example, Carter's review appeals to an elevated human consciousness as a route to human liberation from religious prejudices. Vuković stresses the urgent need for a more developed field of the sociology of religion in the nations that previously formed part of the former Yugoslavia in order to better understand the interaction between religion and politics. And Moss makes a powerful argument that the continued negative portrayal of Muslims in western media has contributed to the creation of a perennially negative image of those who practice Islam. It is likely that such portrayal may have been a function of rising competition between organized religions worldwide for more popular and political influences.

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