

THE DEBATE | SOCIETY | SOUTHEAST ASIA

Catholicism's Overlooked Importance in Asia

Catholicism – whether embraced or rejected – has played a crucial role in defining identity in Asia.

By **Bernardo Brown** and **Michel Chambon**
February 04, 2022



Balide church, Dili, East Timor.

Credit: Flickr/ Kok Leng Yeo

Many people believe that the Philippines is the most Catholic country of Asia. But this has not been the case since the 1990s; Timor-Leste now has a higher percentage of Catholics. How do we explain that this shift has attracted so little attention? What is this telling us about our geopolitical and modern biases? And why does it matter to get a better sense of Asian Catholicism?

The Philippines' population is 83 percent Catholic today, compared to Timor-Leste and its 97 percent of Catholics. Casual observers might assume that the prevalence of Catholicism is due to Timor-Leste's past as a Portuguese colony. But when Portugal left in November 1975, less than 20 percent of the Timorese population was Catholic. It was only during the brutal Indonesian colonization (1975-1999) that the Timorese became massively Catholic.

Download The Late

The Best Practices: Cloud Data Er guidance. Download it now.

Entrust

In other words, Catholicism in Timor-Leste is not merely a byproduct of Western colonization. It is something more recent and linked to inter-Asian dynamics. While the papal religion in Asia is dismissed as a cultural import at best, and often decried as a tool of Western colonization, such views ignore the

many instances in which Catholicism stood as a shield of the oppressed. During the period of violent occupation and starvation, Catholicism helped to attract international attention to Timor-Leste. Once independence was secured, also helped favor reconciliation with the enemy: in this case, Indonesia.

Furthermore, the relatively recent conversion of Timorese people suggests that religious affiliation can shift quickly, even today. And this questions a modern truism which sees religion – and Catholicism in particular— as fixed, conservative, and declining.

To minimize this puzzling shift, people often respond that Timor-Leste is a small and peripheric island of Asia. We would point out that Timor-Leste is still a territory 20 times bigger than Singapore and located at the nexus of important geopolitical tensions, located between Australia and China. But even moving beyond Timor-Leste, Catholicism across the entire Asia-Pacific region deserves more attention than it receives.

[Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

Observers often claim that the papal religion is a tiny religious minority in the region. Setting aside the Philippines and Timor-Leste, Catholics represent less than 5 percent of the population in most Asian countries. Yet these national statistics hide the significance of Asian Catholicism at the local scale. For instance, while only 3 percent of the whole Indonesian population is Catholic, the island of Flores and parts of Papua are overwhelmingly Catholic. In these locales, Catholics are the majority; as a result, Indonesia's national cohesion and territorial integrity depends on this "minority."

Download The Late

The Best Practices: Cloud Data Er guidance. Download it now.

Entrust

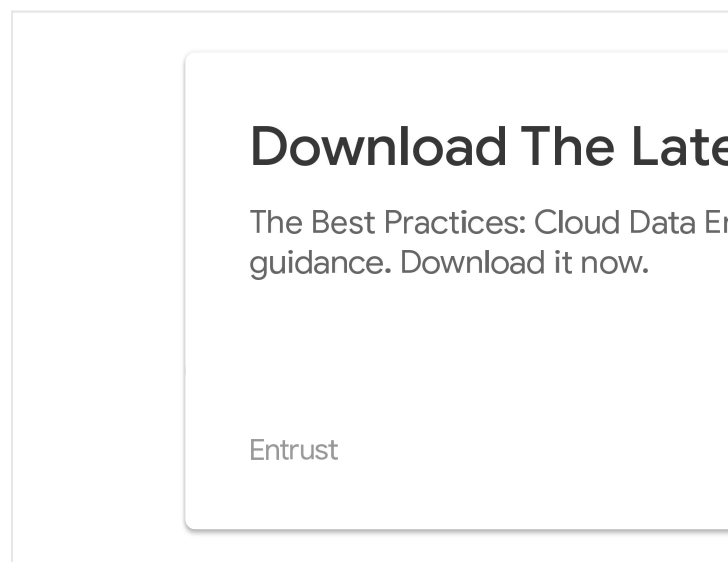
Similarly, in countries like India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Myanmar, Catholics are not evenly represented across the country. Some regions and cities can host a much stronger proportion of Catholics. Thus, Asian Catholicism cannot be understood just as a religious minority group. Its local footprint varies tremendously and impacts the construction of Asian nation-states.

Nonetheless, the importance of Asian Catholicism cannot be understood only through the numbers. For instance, when it comes to defining the most Catholic countries of the continent, scholars have argued that Japan and Thailand are essential to consider.

These two countries have long history of encounters with Catholicism. During the late 16th century, hundreds of thousands of Japanese people converted to Catholicism. This newly introduced faith acted as a tool to define the self-conception of the extremely diverse societies of the archipelago. Yet, in the face of this sudden fascination with a foreign religion, competing elites imposed an alternative path on Japan. During the Edo period (1600-1868), Japan's rulers relentlessly worked at instigating a homogenous ethno-religious identity – in which Catholicism stood as a silent and invisible counter-model. In the making of modern Japan, Catholicism thus

operated as a powerful imaginary Other, instrumental to constructing the unity of the modern state.

In Thailand, the encounter between local populations and Catholicism went through a different yet comparable path. The efforts to build a modern and homogenous Thai identity, the systemization of a Theravada ethos, and the divinization of the sovereign were in many ways inspired by and a response against the West and its archetypal religion, Catholicism. In Thailand and Japan yesterday, but also in India and China today, Catholicism operates as an existential question that cannot be easily dismissed, an often overlooked but powerful means of alternative identify formation.



Download The Late

The Best Practices: Cloud Data Er guidance. Download it now.

Entrust

Clearly, studying the significance of Catholicism in Asia cannot be limited to counting the number of believers. The influence of the papal religion is deeper and subtler than what quantitative statistics suggest. For many societies and ethnic groups of Asia who strive to define their collective identity and political model, Catholicism is a powerful player that generates a whole range of direct and indirect answers at local and national levels. Whether across the Japanese islands, around the Gulf of Thailand, in Central Asia, or throughout the Indian subcontinent, Catholicism may be perceived as an

uncomfortable other, but it influences the ways modern governance, economic exchanges, and systems of knowledge and collective health are defined.

Indeed, education and medicine are two dimensions to carefully consider in any investigation of Asian Catholicism. Over the past centuries, Catholics have built countless educational and medical institutions across the many subregions of Asia. Those schools and hospitals play an important role in the local social fabric and in their assertion within global networks. In addition to the new knowledge and techniques they bring, these institutions spread alternative narratives and connect local populations to distant resources and partners. It is not surprising that elites and governments have often been monitoring closely Catholic schools and hospitals – if not taking them by force. Therefore, investigating the lived realities of Catholic social institutions spread across the many regions of Asia, as well as their occasional absence and disappearance, is a valuable way to understand local societies and politics, as well as the nation-states that encompass them.

Still, Asian Catholicism is not only about Asia. Numerous Catholics from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka have migrated to non-Asian countries in search of new opportunities. They contribute to the economy of their adopted countries and forge bonds of interconnection with Asia. Furthermore, Asian dioceses and religious orders do not hesitate to send clergy members – seminarian, priests, and nuns— to study and serve in non-Asian countries. In Europe, Indian and Vietnamese priests constitute a growing part of the local clergy. Despite the little attention they receive, they allow European Catholicism to maintain some of its operations and to reimagine itself.

Present all around the globe, Asian Catholics are a vibrant component of the global networks that shape our contemporary world. In North America, they sustain numerous ethnic parishes and influence the way American Catholicism positions itself in regard to world affairs and the Sino-American competition. In Dubai, it is Filipino, Malayali, and Konkani churchgoers who represent the largest Catholic communities. Together, they show how the number of Catholics in the Middle East is not simply declining but in the midst of intense reconfiguration.

Finally, with a growing number of Asian Catholics accessing high responsibilities within the Catholic hierarchy, their specific concerns and sensibilities are most likely to reshape the priorities of the Catholic Church.

Simultaneously, the increasing importance of the Asia-Pacific region is going to give more weight to their voices even though Asian Catholics are still numerically fewer than African and Latino Catholics. Thus, either within or outside the Church, Asian Catholics are an important force to consider.

[Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \\$5 a month.](#)

In conclusion, there is an urgent need to overcome modern prejudices and carefully scrutinize the ways in which the world's most populous continent – Asia – and the world's largest religious organization – the Catholic Church – intersect. While Catholicism is neither on the decline nor limited to religious affairs, a social scientific study of Asian Catholicism will provide a unique window not only on how Asian societies and the Catholic Church evolve, but also on how they influence each other and shape global affairs.

Investigating Asian Catholicism will not only question prevailing discourses on colonialism, national identity, and globalization but

provide an analytical tool less pliable to economic ideologies and national interests.

Asian Catholics stand at the nexus of most pressing geopolitical questions. While other religions of Asia have been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny, it is now time to recognize the global significance of Asian Catholicism.

You have read **2** of your **5 free articles** this month.

Subscribe to Diplomat All- Access

Enjoy **full access** to the website *and* get an automatic subscription to our magazine with a *Diplomat All-Access* subscription.

**SUBSCRIBE
NOW**

AUTHORS

GUEST AUTHOR

Bernardo Brown

Bernardo Brown is an associate professor of anthropology at International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, Japan, and a coordinator of ISAC, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics.

GUEST AUTHOR

Michel Chambon

Michel Chambon is a research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore and a coordinator of ISAC, the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics.

TAGS

[The Debate](#) [Society](#) [Southeast Asia](#) [Japan](#) [Philippines](#)

[Thailand](#) [Timor-Leste](#) [Catholicism in Asia](#)

[Catholicism in Southeast Asia](#) [Catholics in the Philippines](#)

[Catholics in Timor-Leste](#)