

FOREWORD

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It is timely for the University of Pittsburgh Press to start a new series on Contemporary Asian Catholics and it is most fitting to inaugurate the series with this rich collection of essays, *Asian Catholicism and the Remaking of Contemporary Families*. It is timely because the relations between Asia, the most populous of continents, and Catholicism, the largest and most global of religious organizations, have historically been and are likely to remain relevant not only for the transformation of both, Asian societies and global Catholicism, but for the direction of global human history.

The volume is also most fitting because, as the editors, Michel Chambon and James Ponniah, show convincingly in their illuminating introduction, Asian kinship structures and the family have served and continue to serve as a “problem,” that is, as a problematic and contested issue through which to explore best the ways in which Catholicism is produced, contested, and shared in Asian societies. This is the case because the inculturation of Catholicism in Asian societies takes place primarily in and through the family and, in turn, it is through this inculturation that Catholicism contributes to the remaking of Asian families.

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Although the collected essays deal mainly with contemporary transformations, the introduction offers a very instructive *longue durée* historical overview of the complex ways in which the family has served as a problematic issue in the contested historical encounters between Catholicism and Asian societies from the sixteenth century to the present. For me, it was striking to observe how much their historical analysis of the changing perception of the family as a problem for Asian Catholicism fits neatly with my analysis of the three phases of globalization in the long formation of Asian Catholicism (Casanova 2023).

In the First Globalization, in the initial encounter between European Catholicism and Asian religions and cultures from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, before the consolidation of Western colonial hegemony in Asia, the “problem” of the family and Asian kinship structures became manifested paradigmatically in the so-called Chinese rites and Malabar rites controversies. The cult of ancestors presented itself as a problem for Chinese Catholicism because it constituted the foundation of intergenerational kinship bonds, the core of Confucian ethics, and the most sacred of kinship rituals. The first generation of Jesuit missionaries found a way of accommodating the ancestral kinship ritual by characterizing it as a civic ritual grounded in the natural morality of filial piety, rather than as an idolatrous religious rite incompatible with the monotheist religion of the Lord of Heaven.

Without this accommodation, the conversion to Catholicism and its inculturation in the Chinese family system was nearly impossible. But such a Jesuit accommodation encountered fierce resistance among other Catholic orders, among officials of the Roman Curia, particularly within the newly created *Propaganda Fide*, and among theologians and scholars at the Sorbonne. Ultimately, the long-lasting controversy was put to rest by the papal definitive prohibition of the “Chinese Rites.” But the prohibition also put an end to the imperial toleration of Catholicism in China. Paradoxically, it was the successful inculturation of Catholicism within the Chinese family that made possible its survival after its prohibition, even in the absence of priests and foreign missionaries, by migrating into the secrecy of family life. Confucian filial piety now demanded that sons remained intergenerationally loyal to the “rituals” of their own Catholic ancestors.

As Chambon and Ponniah indicate, “during anti-Christian persecutions in China, Korea, and Vietnam, the privacy and trust usually shared among family members allowed Catholics to maintain some

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form of collective rituals that were essential for their religious identity.” Yet diverse traditional Asian family structures also learned eventually to accommodate Catholic family norms. “Through the rejection of marriage between cross-cousins, the condemnation of premarital sex, polygamy, repudiation, and eugenic practices,” Catholic missionaries and Asian Catholic converts “diffused, promoted, and gradually institutionalized a normative ideal of family that challenged local customs.”

The dynamics of the encounter between Catholicism and Asian societies began to change in the second phase of globalization, from the end of the eighteenth century onward, with the consolidation of Western colonial hegemony throughout Asia. As Chambon and Ponniah point out, “it is not surprising that anti-Christian persecutions were often motivated by concerns related to kinship norms.” Catholicism at first and Christianity at large, with the expansion of global Protestant missions in the nineteenth century, were viewed by most Asian groups as a threat to “traditional” Asian families.

However, with the expansion of “modernizing” ideologies toward the end of the nineteenth century, the contested role of kinship in the negative perception of Catholicism in Asian began to shift. European colonial elites as well as modernizing local elites began to present the monogamous family, along with changing ideologies about hygiene, reproduction, and patriarchal gender relations, not as a foreign Christian tradition but rather as a “modern” norm conducive to social reform that would contribute to the modernization of Asian societies.

Throughout the anti-Western, anti-colonial struggles, Catholicism was still linked to the West and its hegemonic colonial projects. But the tension with Catholicism in most Asian societies no longer revolved around “the family.” In post-colonial Asia, “the nuclear, monogamous, and patriarchal family associated with modernity and scientific development remained the implicit norm.” Catholicism in Asia no longer had a family problem. “Foreignness” had become “the new original sin of Christianity in Asia.”

However, in our contemporary global age, as we enter a third phase of globalization after Western hegemony, the family problem has shifted anew. Now that the “traditional” Christian family is “under duress” in the secular, liberal West, Catholicism no longer has a family problem in Asia. On the contrary, Asian Church leaders have become vocal defenders of the “traditional” Asian family against Western secular and liberal norms. Chambon and Ponniah write that “political tensions

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around family change, contraception, divorce, and same-sex union became a new opportunity to highlight the protective and ancient nature of Catholicism in Asia.” Contentious issues over gender and sexual mores are at the center of raging contemporary global culture wars, which present a fundamental challenge to all the religious traditions (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). The contested debates over such issue among Asian Catholics reflect contemporary global debates with specific Asian accents, which the essays in this volume help illustrate.

In this respect, the book offers an important contribution, both to Asian studies and to the study of global Catholicism. In fact, its most important contribution may be to challenge the tendency within the field of Asian studies to neglect the study of Asian Catholicism—because it is still perceived as a foreign colonial import, shaped by Western authorities in Rome, that plays at best a marginal role across Asia—as an insignificant religious minority.

Moreover, the volume challenges equally Eurocentric perceptions of the global Catholic Church, as a Western European institution, centered in Rome, wherefrom it tries to radiate its influence upon non-Western Catholic peripheries. Such a perspective remains anchored in a world system perspective, characteristic of the second Western hegemonic phase of globalization, when Western colonial and post-colonial centers dominated non-Western peripheries. But, as was stressed frequently by Pope Francis, as we enter a new phase of globalization after Western hegemony, the globe no longer has the characteristic shape of a two-dimensional polygon, with a few Western centers dominating non-Western peripheries. Its shape can be better conceptualized as a three-dimensional polyhedron with myriad centers and peripheries.

Paradoxically, this is most evident within the global dynamics of a supposedly highly centralized and uniform Catholic Church. Certainly, Rome is still the center of world Catholicism and most Catholic roads lead still to Rome. However, not only are there more and more transnational Catholic networks linking all continents, which frequently bypass Rome, but the character of the Roman center itself has dramatically changed. Global Catholicism is becoming increasingly less Roman, insofar as Vatican Rome has become a new transnational center, which is less Italian and European and more “catholic” and global (that is universal), with increasing representation and participation from Asia and from the entire Global South.

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Pope Francis, well aware that he came from the furthest periphery of the Global South, accepted his nomination of bishop of Rome with the clearly stated intention not to occupy the Holy See but to open Rome to all the global Catholic peripheries. This became evident through his papal visits to remote corners of the world, to internal as well as external peripheries, and through the nomination of cardinals from what had been considered until now insignificant ecclesial locations. In both instances, Pope Francis paid special attention to Asia, recognizing that it was no longer a foreign and remote periphery of the Roman Church. I expect Pope Leo XIV, the second pontiff from the Americas, equally at home in the United States and in Peru, to continue the same “catholic” trend, albeit with a more moderate tone. Moreover, as an Augustinian who served as prior general of his order in Rome for twelve years from 2001 to 2013, he is well aware that most Catholic religious orders, male as well as female, may have their headquarters in Rome, but most of their members come from non-Western countries, increasingly from Asia, and are spread as missionaries all over the world.

Over one-third (37 percent) of all the members of the Society of Jesus, the largest and most global of all the Catholic religious orders, come from Asia and the Pacific. The majority of these Jesuits, over one-fourth (27 percent), come from South Asia, primarily India. Indeed, the number of Jesuits from India is larger than those from any other continent: Europe, North America, Latin America, or Africa (Society of Jesus 2022).

Per se, most chapters in the volume are not written from a global perspective, yet they all illustrate “glocal” dynamics, which are representative of global Catholicism. General global processes manifest themselves everywhere glocally; that is, they assume diverse and particular local forms and characteristics. In this respect, the dynamics described in those chapters are simultaneously locally Asian and globally Catholic. Moreover, the term “Asian Catholics” should not obscure the fact that, within Asia, Catholics manifest the most diverse and particular local characteristics, which nonetheless also maintain some global Catholic form.

Most of the chapters offer thick ethnographic descriptions of diverse family Catholic dynamics, which one could say are typically Asian. Yet they resonate with similar dynamics one finds in Catholic communities around the world. The chapters are organized around

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three sections that focus on different aspects of Asian Catholic kinship relations: interfaith marriages, the formation of celibate religious cadres, and intergenerational dynamics in the transmission of Catholicism.

Asia always has been the continent of religious diversity and pluralism. As a minority religion, Asian Catholics had to learn how to negotiate marriages in an interfaith world. Today, when the entire world is becoming through global migrations and individual conversions ever more religiously diverse and pluralistic, interfaith Asian dynamics are gaining relevance for global Catholicism. It is not surprising that Asian Catholics are at the forefront in developing theologies and practices of religious pluralism (Phan 2018, 2023).

Throughout history, celibate religious orders, male and female, have been the primary carriers of Catholic missions throughout the world and the key to the transnational structure of Catholicism. Today Asian Catholic religious orders are the carriers of missionary work, not only throughout Asia but increasingly in Europe, in Africa, and in the Americas.

Religious and moral pluralism are manifesting themselves as an irremediable fact of global humanity. Of all new forms of contestation over religion in the public sphere, the most conflictive and of greatest relevance, analytically as well as pragmatically, are the ones dealing with issues of sexual morality and gender equality in all their diverse manifestations. This is the preeminent social and moral question of our age, in the same way as the social question of class inequality had been preeminent since the middle of the nineteenth century. Gender issues have become the source of political, religious, and moral conflicts in practically all societies of the world, because they concern what is perhaps the most radical, rapid, and significant moral transformation in the history of humanity.

All religious traditions and all contemporary societies are forced to confront this issue. They must discern which aspects of the present sexual and moral transformation represent positive elements of the moral evolution of human societies that reinforce the dignity of the human person and which aspects may be put into question as the expression of anomic egoist individualism, which may satisfy one's pleasure at the expense of the dignity of others and the cohesion of the moral community.

Pope Francis's response was a traditional Catholic one, namely, to convoke the Synod on the Family in Rome, the name given to the

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2014 Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops and the 2015 Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. But the discord and the polarization around family and gender issues was such that the Synod of Bishops was unable to offer any recommendation to the pope. Apparently, the lesson Pope Francis took from this experience was that the entire Catholic Church—bishops, religious orders, priests, and laity—should undertake first a learning process on synodality, “walking together” and “listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other” with respect. Thus was born the Synod on Synodality, a multi-year process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021, focused on improving the communion, participation, and mission through a synodal approach. It involved a series of consultations at the diocesan, national, and continental levels, culminating in two global assemblies at the Vatican.

The Synod on Synodality suggests that perhaps the convocation of universal councils in order to decree orthodoxy and condemn heterodoxy may no longer be the most appropriate way to govern a global Catholic Church, at least not on issues of gender and family morality, which are so culturally embedded. The Synod on Synodality could become institutionalized as a permanent process of continuous communicative interaction between all Catholic centers and peripheries, walking together while listening respectfully to one another in communion with the bishop of Rome. It could become the normal way of governing a plural and diverse global Catholic Church.