Islam and the Religious Diversity in Asia

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I have the privilege of being associated with the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, which includes Asia among its main focuses. The Center’s engagement in Asia is especially rewarding for me, because I spent most of my career as an American diplomat in the Islamic world. I suppose Americans do not necessarily think of Asia and Islam as being closely related. In the American mind Asians probably are supposed to be Buddhists or Hindus or (in the case of China) free–market communists.

Some Americans may know that there also are hundreds of millions of Muslims in Asia, as well as millions of Christians and pagans and animists and Jews. But keeping track is hard. I’ve met people in Asia who say that Confucianism is their belief but that they do not consider Confucianism a religion. And I’ve met people who say that they are Buddhists or Hindus but also, when the mood strikes them, they are something else. For Americans, who want religions to be neatly arranged in categories, Asia can be difficult. Perhaps this is because most Asian beliefs are not monotheistic. Of the three great monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—only Islam is found in Asia in big numbers. Huge numbers. The biggest Islamic population in the world, over 200 million, is in Indonesia. The second biggest is in another Asian country, India. In other words India is not only the biggest Hindu country in the world, it is the second biggest Muslim country. Bangladesh, India’s distinctly Asian neighbor to the east, is the third biggest Muslim country. But I won’t go on. I’m not sure I even know how many Muslims there are in all of Asia. There are millions of Muslims in China, for instance, but precise and accurate information about minorities in China is not easy to find. So there are millions of Muslims in China about whom millions of Americans know very little.

During recent weeks, while a complicated variety of rebellions and revolutions have swept across Arab countries, I have been disappointed to hear American television reporters refer to the Arab
region as the Islamic or Muslim “world.” This disturbs me not only because Arabs constitute a minority in the Islamic world, but also because not all Arabs are Muslims. I have lived and worked among many Arab Christians and Jews. In fact most of the Arabs I have known over the decades are neither Muslims nor Christians nor Jews. They are nothing in particular. They have no religion that they spend much time discussing, because they consider religious belief to be a personal choice. The same is true for most of the people I have gotten to know while living and working all over the world. This is because the people I meet usually are informed and open-minded. For them religion has more to do with culture than with faith, and they are able to live in Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or Christian societies without being religious. The culture that they share with their compatriots is what they care about, more so than any religion.

Such people usually use the word “secular” to describe themselves, to stress the fact that they prefer to keep religion out of their political and social lives. In Turkey, where an Islamic political party is currently in power, tens of millions of voters refer to themselves as “secular.” In most Muslim countries it’s okay to be secular, although in some it can be extremely difficult, even dangerous, as we’ve seen recently in Pakistan and Afghanistan. So, shame on people who commit crimes out of blind ignorance and hatefulness. But shame, too, on Americans who demonstrate against the building of mosques in their neighborhoods. And shame on the self-appointed “man of God” in Florida who set fire to a Koran. Such Americans know little about Islam beyond the terrifying things they’ve heard about Al Queda. They live in fear of Islam, because they don’t know or can’t believe that well over ninety-nine percent of Muslims have no connection whatsoever with the little band of psychopaths known as Al Queda.

American media and politicians attract audiences by keeping Al Queda in the spotlight to a degree that vastly exceeds whatever real dangers Al Queda might pose. Meanwhile we remain sadly ignorant of the vast, gloriously diverse, and exciting world of Islam. Since we depend on the countries of
that world for much of our trade and most of our energy, it seems to me that the least we can do is try to learn a little about these people, upon whom we are in fact deeply dependant. How do they think? What do they care about? How do they live? Who are they? You can learn some of the answers to those questions by being associated with the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center. And at the same time you can learn a lot about the billions of other people of Asia who don’t happen to be Muslims. Call 406 243 2988 and become involved.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of The University of Montana, I’m Charles Sam Courtney.