**Religion and global early modernity**

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Over the past twenty years the concept of ‘early modernity’ has become firmly established in the lexicon of world history, both adopted by the individual historiographies of many societies outside Europe and presented as a global conjuncture from 1450-1800. Traditionally, in its original European context, religion played a major role in the grand narrative evoked by the term: the shattering of the medieval mind through Renaissance and Reformation, the changing relationship between church and state, and the first stirrings of certain forms of secularisation. If we take the recent globalisation of the term seriously and consider that the rest of the world – and Asia in particular – really was subject to equivalent economic, social, and political developments carrying the promise of modernity, it makes sense to ask whether these resulted in comparable changes in the sphere of religion. These might include the greater involvement of the state in managing and regulating religion and negating potential threats, the emergence of clearer identity boundaries, new concerns with textual purity or spiritual authenticity, or the expansion of the sensibilities associated with the world religions.

However, several conceptual challenges will best any such exercise: is it possible to pursue such questions while freeing ourselves from Eurocentric presuppositions as to what such ‘early modern’ features should look like? It may be, for example, that new philosophical bases for toleration were not required in much of Asia because important de facto structures of tolerance and accommodation were already built into the socio-cultural fabric. It may be that political authority tended to pursue its centralizing ambitions not through more secularized forms of rule but rather through an aggrandizement of sacred kingship. And how would this project deal with revisionist European historiography which has long critiqued the grand narrative of modernization? Lastly, we should bear in mind that the political use of religion must operate quite differently in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious empires that stretched across much of Asia than in the more homogeneous coalescing states of Europe.

The paper will refer in a general way to some of the theoretical issues surrounding these questions, then, but will also refer to more concrete trends in certain case-studies, especially including Japan, which presents us with an example of a large Asian realm which does not possesses the features of the multi-ethnic territorial empires of Eurasia. I will also refer to the Mughal and Ottoman empires, and European states and Iberian seaborne empires.