



America's Interfaith Problem Isn't Denominational: Learning from Southeast Asia

By C.D. Cunningham

DIALOGUE

August 27, 2025

What lessons can global pluralism teach? Youth-led and policy-driven models can guard religious freedom.



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As I've previously discussed, there is an ascendant civic religion in the United States. This religion puts expressive individualism at its epistemological and moral center, with Rogerian humanism as its soteriology.

The effort to establish this as the de facto social religion at the exclusion of others is one of the long-term challenges that people of those other faiths and those who prioritize religious freedom face in the United States. These movements, like other

forms of secular extremism (such as French *Laïcité*), can seek to exclude or delegitimize religious expression in public life. That these acts are often done in the name of neutrality constitutes one of their risk factors.

As we consider ways to approach these long-term risks, we would be wise to look at the lessons and experience of our religious friends around the world.

Southeast Asia, while vastly different in its historical and religious background, is also wrestling with their own versions of pluralism, secularism, and religious conflict—and have been since long before the American experiment began.

The region is home to many robust, mutually exclusive faiths, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and indigenous religions. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have had competing religious populations since the seventh century.

Today, countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, and Malaysia are learning how to embed these principles in young democracies. To be clear, their story is not one of uninterrupted success. But it is one that offers important lessons to a West that is staring down a threat to religious freedom, unlike one it's faced before.

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Today, the threat to religious freedom in Southeast Asia often comes from state control or nationalist movements seeking religious conformity. Coalitions like the Asia and Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN) and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) have emerged in response to these developments.

The APIYN is a regional initiative that is part of the larger Religions for Peace group. APIYN brings together young people from diverse religious backgrounds. They engage in interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding exercises. The group and its actions are youth-led.

The KAICIID is much more of a top-down organization. It was established in 2012 by Saudi Arabia, Austria, Spain, and Vatican City. They have focused much of their efforts in Southeast Asia.

Lesson 1: Fostering Inclusive Interfaith Dialogue

KAICIID's Dialogue Cities Southeast Asia initiative, launched in 2024 in Davao, Philippines, exemplifies how interfaith dialogue can bridge divides between distinct worldviews, without resorting to erasure. Bringing together religious leaders, city officials, and civil society from diverse hubs like Yogyakarta and Bangkok, the initiative uses a "5Cs" framework—collaboration with media, connecting generations, creative arts, common spiritual values, and environmental conservation. In Davao, participants visited temples and churches, building trust without compromising their beliefs. This practical, community-driven approach produced media campaigns and art projects that celebrated shared values, reinforcing religion's relevance in public life.

For American believers, this model offers a powerful antidote to erasure attempts. Too often, U.S. interfaith efforts remain academic or symbolic, failing to engage grassroots communities. Imagine faith leaders in cities like Nashville or Minneapolis—where religious diversity meets cultural tension—organizing forums with local schools, businesses, and immigrant groups. These could produce campaigns highlighting faith's role in community service, countering narratives that paint religion as divisive. Such dialogue, rooted in shared moral commitments like charity or justice, would affirm religious identity while engaging the broader public, challenging the secular push to force faith into the private sphere exclusively.

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Lesson 2: Empowering Youth to Counter Extremist Narratives

APIYN's 2024 youth camp in Manila showcases the power of young people in countering extremist narratives, both religious and secular. Gathering Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and others, the camp trained participants in interfaith literacy and digital storytelling, fostering relationships across faith lines. Youth-led media

campaigns highlighted religion's role in peacebuilding, challenging secular ideologies that dismiss faith as irrelevant. In a region where urban diversity amplifies tensions, APIYN equips young leaders to advocate for pluralism while staying true to their beliefs.

In the U.S., where many young people view religion through a lens of skepticism or polarization, APIYN's approach could be useful. American youth, often distanced from organized faith, are hungry for meaning and community. And at this moment where teens are beginning to return to traditional religion, a U.S.-style interfaith youth network, modeled on APIYN, could host retreats or online platforms where young Christians, Muslims, as well as those who adhere to the new religion, can explore issues like mental health or racial justice through their faith's moral frameworks. Picture a digital campaign showcasing stories of faith communities aiding hurricane victims or supporting refugees—narratives that counter secular tropes of religion as outdated. By empowering youth to articulate faith's public value, such initiatives could shift cultural perceptions and strengthen religious freedom.

Lesson 3: Advocating for Inclusive and Sustainable Policies

KAICIID's 2023 partnership with the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation trained Southeast Asian officials to navigate religious diversity, ensuring policies respect faith without favoring one tradition. Similarly, APIYN's Southeast Asian Youth for Humanity (SEA Y4H) network empowers young activists to engage legislators, proposing inclusive policies that protect religious minorities. These efforts embed religious perspectives in governance, as seen in advocacy against restrictive laws in Indonesia.

In the U.S., where religious freedom debates often center on legal battles over exemptions or public displays, this proactive approach offers a fresh perspective. Rather than being reactive, faith communities could advocate for proactive measures: curricula that teach religious literacy, local ordinances protecting religious gatherings, or healthcare policies respecting conscience. Training programs, inspired by KAICIID, could equip state legislators or school boards with an understanding of faith's civic contributions, ensuring policies reflect America's religious diversity. By including secular and new religion voices in these discussions, as KAICIID does, such efforts would demonstrate that religious freedom strengthens, not threatens, pluralistic democracy.

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A Call to Action for American Believers

While the West has long dealt with denominational disputes, we do not have nearly as much experience handling fundamental worldview differences. If we are going to learn to navigate such profound differences, we would do well to look at those who have experience navigating these more fundamental problems. Southeast Asia, with its robust religious diversity, can serve as a lesson in how to effectively bridge these differences.

Southeast Asia's interfaith coalitions remind us that religious freedom thrives when faith communities engage the public square with confidence and collaboration. APIYN and KAICIID show how dialogue, youth empowerment, and policy advocacy can counter erasure efforts while honoring diverse beliefs.

For American believers, this means building local coalitions, inspiring young advocates, and shaping policies that affirm faith's role in public life. Resources from KAICIID (www.kaiciid.org) and Religions for Peace Asia (rfpasia.org) offer practical guidance. As we struggle with the emergence of these distinct worldviews and how to integrate them into our religious landscape without letting them take over, these lessons can be helpful.

About the author



C.D. Cunningham

C.D. Cunningham is the managing editor of Public Square magazine. After graduating from BYU-Idaho, he studied religion at Harvard University Extension.

He serves on the board of the Latter-day Saint Publishing and Media Association.