

**Closing Remarks on the International conference of
“Beginning the Conversation: Religion and Rule of Law in
Southeast Asia”** (Hanoi, September 8-9th, 2006)

Prof. Dr. ĐỖ QUANG HƯNG

Director, Institute of Religious Studies,
Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences

Dear honourable guests and distinguished scholars!

I think we scholars of religious studies have been looking for a long time for an international conference like this to exchange knowledge and learn about experiences in dealing with the matter of the relation between Religion and Rule of Law in our vast area of Southeast Asia, where religious life of each nation is significantly rich and diversified.

This is more useful when we have a chance to meet and exchange ideas with scholars coming from non-Southeast Asian regions such as North America, the EU and North East Asia where many countries have resolved well the relation between the state and church, successfully built laws on religion in particular, and completed the model of a secular state in general.

How wonderful our wish happened right here in the meeting hall of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences from September 8 - 9th. This opportunity is the outcome of a real effort of many parties, especially ideas and support from the Institute for Global Engagement (US), Institute of Religious Studies at the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, the Vietnam-USA Society, and co-sponsors such as Brigham Young University’s International Center for Law & Religion Studies, and Emory University’s Center for the Study of Law and Religion (USA).

We should applaud them all since without their enduring efforts in nearly a year this conference could not take place.

We would also like to give thanks to the scholars and colleagues from many related-research institutions and nations in the world. Our thanks should also go to religious dignitaries and intellectuals coming from various regions in Vietnam. They have without any hesitation accepted invitation to come here with us and actively participate in all activities of the conference.

Dear distinguished guests and scholars

In the last two days, in all six continuous sections exactly as planned, we have listened to and discussed with at least 26 scholars from 12 countries in Southeast Asia and out-side Southeast Asia. It is a pity that we cannot listen directly to two French scholars Prof. Dr. Jean Baubérot and Francis Messner, and a Russian scholar, Prof. Dr. Anaton Sokolov. Yet we can still learn their ideas via presentations by their colleagues who are attending the conference.

The first thing that makes the Board of organizers of this conference encouraged is that the content framework presented via 5 panels of discussion has basically met the need of each participant who attended this first international conference on Religion and Rule of Law in Southeast Asian countries in the region in general, and in Hanoi, Vietnam in particular.

We are all well aware that in many countries and regions in the world at the present, there are a lot of challenges in dealing with the matter of religion and the rule of law. Although all countries in Southeast Asia are making every effort to better ensure the right of religious freedom for each citizen, international convention's requirements on religious freedom and human rights are posing new challenges for the task of dealing with the matter of religion and rule of law in each nation.

Dear distinguished guests and scholars

A lot of attention has been paid to interesting and practical topics such as the impact of religion on social stability and development, evolution and current context of law on religion in Southeast Asia, challenges of "new religious phenomena" in ethnic minorities, or the issue of *religious juridical person*. All the topics of concern reflect the practical approach of our conference. More importantly, we believe that academic results from this historical conference in Southeast Asia basically make us feel *satisfied* and *confident*.

In all sessions, we have respectfully exchanged our ideas (whereas straightly) discussed on historical experiences, and current topical issues in each country.

Apparently, our new diversified and complicated issues reflect the particular situation of religious life in each country. Because those religious issues constituted by each country's political, social and cultural context, there are "gaps" among us as we build and perfect laws on religion. Interestingly, this ordinary problem itself inspires us to think about religion and rule of law.

I would like to emphasize that there are common grounds, this may be the most significant result of academics and thought, as our Southeast Asian member countries deal with the problem of Religion and Rule of law and the logical perspective of those grounds is becoming bigger.

In reality, I believe that specific experiences that we have openly introduced and discussed are really useful for each of us, and for responsible people who are working in institutions that manage religious life.

Even though we are not concerned where our scholars are from, please allow me to - on behalf of Southeast Asian scholars to sincerely thank distinguished scholars from Europe, America and other regions who have come and showed our conference many useful experiences and practical lessons from their countries after hundreds of years of building the model of a secular state!

At the core of the issues that we have just discussed ideas, once again we learn that nothing can strongly unite different people such as religion, and yet religion itself can be the factor that fearfully separates a community or even a country.

We social scientists in religious studies, however, have no reason to “separate”. In contrast, via our conversation, we have come closer and accumulated significant experiences to help our own country better resolve the religious issues which reinforce social stability and relate the need of each person’s progress with social and spiritual lives and this is our most important aim of this very international conference.

Dear colleagues

Frankly speaking, we organizers wondered if it could be a good idea to create a place in Hanoi for international academic meetings for the topic of Religion and Rule of law. In other words, should we continue international activity like this? (remember that the title of our conference starts with: “Beginning the conversation”). Of course the answer should firstly depend on each participant’s assessment, but we know that our conference is a great success. In academic perspectives, we have explored high-quality, up-to-date and practical professional knowledge. Moreover, we have for a first time sat together to discuss on a brand-new discipline in Southeast Asia: Law on religion! Therefore, we believe that you may all agree with us that Hanoi can be considered a destination for our in-coming academic conferences.

Now may I ask you for an applause, a bit longer, if you are not against our suggestion!

Finally, on behalf of the organizing board, I once again would like to give many thanks to our sponsors and organizers from the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, the Institute of Religious Studies, the Vietnam - USA society, and the Institute for Global Engagement (USA).

I now happily declare that our conference has ended.