Introduction:
Religious Syncretism and Everyday Religiosity in Asia

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This special issue is dedicated to the critique of contemporary scholarship on religion in Asia. While Asia is the cradle of the world religions, it is also well known that popular “little” or “folk” traditions form the dense undergrowth of everyday religious practices, thus giving depth and dynamism to Asia’s diverse religious mosaic. The evolving changes and creations produced by the interaction between religions, between “great” and “little” traditions within a religion, and between religion and modernity, whether conveyed by Western missionaries or secular state-builders, have given inspiration and career to many anthropologists. They have also given rise to the theory of religious syncretism that has heavily coloured the view of religion in Asia. Together, the authors here turn to the ethnography of everyday religiosity to question the utility and adequacy of this theory in explaining the religious changes and innovations we see in Asia today.

In its simplest sense of the word, syncretism refers to the fusion of different beliefs or practices. The accreted theoretical sense is, of course, far more complex, but the general view is that popular religion has a knack for absorbing and domesticating novel or alien influences, except that it falters when it comes to modernity and its secularising rationality. While focusing on different sets of interaction covering diverse religions in various locales stretching between South, Southeast and East Asia, each author here criticises a different aspect of syncretism, from its assumptions of symbolic unity (DeBernardi), bounded identities of essential differences (Sinha), harmonious interaction (Robinson), pure and authentic forms (Yeoh), to its dichotomies of “great” versus “little,” “canonical” versus “customary,” “modern” versus “folk,” which presumably spell decline of popular religion by way of “rationalisation” (Goh) or “fundamentalist” reform (Tschacher).

Reading across the essays would thus raise interesting questions more than it would solve the theoretical quandary. However, collective themes do emerge
to provide a map for further forays into the theories of syncretism and religious pluralism. Firstly, we emphasise dynamic processes of negotiation and performance of religious boundaries, as this places agency and everyday practice in the centre of analysis, thereby affording better accuracy and less dichotomous bias than the focus on bounded religious systems or institutions. Secondly, we highlight tensions of enmity and amity and power struggles in the negotiation of boundaries, thus locating the “great” and “little” traditions and modernity and popular religion in the same discursive space rather than privileging the vantage point of the “great” traditions or modern institutions such as the state. Thirdly, instead of analysing from positions of authority, authenticity or anxiety — from the vantage points of the nation-state, institutional religion or heritage conservation — which re-enacts the exoticisation of native cultures tinged with the pathos of disenchantment, we focus on how people caught up in the changing orders of existence deal with precisely these questions of authority, authenticity and anxiety. Syncretism, for us, does not end with the promiscuous blending of elements, but begins with the contentious forging of elemental forms and meanings to grapple with our intertwined history run amok.