

LAW & RELIGION SPEAKER SERIES

Why Religious Supremacy Clauses Don't Work: Buddhism, Secularism and the Pyrrhic Constitutionalism of Sri Lanka

Associate Professor Benjamin Schonthal
University of Otago

Chairperson: Dr Dian A. H. Shah, NUS Law

DATE: 2 November 2017, Thursday

TIME: 12.30pm – 2.00pm

VENUE: Lee Sheridan Conference Room, Eu Tong Sen Building
NUS (Bukit Timah Campus)

Recent scholarship on religion and constitutional law tends to characterize religious supremacy clauses – clauses that give special status or protections to one or more religions – as either regressive or unjust. They are considered regressive because they seem to refuse the presumed secularity of modern law; they are considered unjust because they seem to give unfair political or economic advantages to members of the preferred religious group(s). Yet, are these characterisations accurate? Are religious supremacy clauses always unequivocal boons for the majority religious groups? Moreover, when it comes to religion, do religiously preferential constitutions function differently from non-preferential ones? Drawing on his recent book, and ongoing research, the speaker explores these questions in the context of Sri Lanka—a country that, for the last four decades, has given Buddhism special constitutional status. Though an analysis of Buddhist doctrine, monastic practices, legal theory and methodological trends in comparative constitutional scholarship, the speaker hopes to complicate existing wisdom about the effects of religious supremacy clauses and to challenge the assumed binary opposition between secular constitutions and religious preferential ones.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Benjamin Schonthal is Associate Professor of Buddhism and Asian Religions at the University of Otago, in New Zealand. His research examines the intersections of religion, law and politics in late-colonial and contemporary Southern Asia, with a particular focus on Buddhism and law in Sri Lanka. His work appears in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Modern Asian Studies*, the *International Journal of Constitutional Law* and other places. Ben's first book, *Buddhism, Politics and the Limits of Law*, appeared with Cambridge University Press in 2016. His current project, supported by the Marsden Fund of the Royal Society of New Zealand, examines the lived practices of monastic law in contemporary Sri Lanka and their links with state-legal structures.

REGISTRATION

There is no registration fee for this seminar but seats are limited. Light refreshment will be provided on a first-come, first-served basis.

Please register by **30 October 2017, Monday**.

For enquiries, please contact Alexandria at cals@nus.edu.sg

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