Conversion Economies and Ontologies of Religious Difference: *Karma*, Grace, and Adversarial Political Perception in Sri Lanka

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**ABSTRACT** At the heart of many conflicts over conversion and religious proselytism are divergent logics of righteous religious persuasion. This paper demonstrates how, in South Asia, lines of inter-religious enmity have been drawn along points of political economic and religious convergence, and what I call differential “economies of religious persuasion.” In the mid-2000s, tensions mounted between Buddhists and Christians over the issue of conversion in Sri Lanka—a major concern for the island nation. Even as conversion in Sri Lanka has often been characterized as a “pragmatic,” political move, in the growing inter-religious rivalries in Sri Lanka it is clear that conversion is considered to generate a profound ontological change in the person. These perceived moral and ontological changes relate to concepts of *karma* and grace in important ways. From the vantage point of majoritarian nationalists, the economic accoutrements of Christian grace are seen as effectively estranging one from capacities to recognize one’s righteous karmic inheritances. The relationship between religion and the political economy, and how this relationship articulates with majoritarian political perception about the ontological changes that conversion is believed to inaugurate, sheds light upon some of the processes through which religious difference can serve to intensify inter-religious antagonism. I demonstrate how a historically bifurcated set of religio-economic affinities tracks with partisan politics in Sri Lanka, thus conspiring to deepen the conflictual interplay between evangelical conviction and nativist skepticism.


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**TIME** 3.00pm to 4.30pm

**VENUE** Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS

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