

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 17 November 2017

Christian Evangelical Organisations in Global Anti-trafficking Networks

Podcast with **Elena Shih** (27 November 2017).Interviewed by **Giuseppe Bolotta** and **Catherine Scheer**.Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/christian-evangelical-organisations-in-global-anti-trafficking-networks/>

Giuseppe Bolotta (GB): *Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. We are Giuseppe Bolotta*

Catherine Scheer (CS): *And Catherine Scheer*

GB: *And this is the fourth instalment in our series on religion and NGOs. Since the turn of the twenty-first century there has been a remarkable surge of interest among both policy makers and academics into the effect of religion as an international aid in development. Within this broad field the work of religious NGOs, or faith-based organisations, has garnered considerable attention. This series of podcasts for the Religious Studies Project seeks to explore how the discourses, practices and institutional forms of both religious actors and purportedly secular NGOs intersect, and how their engagements result in changes in our understanding of both religion and development.*

CS: *Since the turn of the twenty-first century, North American Christian NGOs have become increasingly visible actors in the humanitarian sector. One particularly prominent area of attention and interventions for such organisations has been in the global movements against human trafficking. In this interview we talk with [Elena Shih](#) about her multi-sited research on US Evangelical NGO's involvement in the global anti-trafficking movement, and specifically on their projects in Thailand and China. She will explain how her findings contribute to our understanding of the role of US-based Christian actors in this specific field of rights, advocacy and development. Before introducing our guest for today's interview we would like to thank the [Henry Luce Foundation](#) for supporting our research on this topic and the production of this series. So speaking with us today is Dr Elena Shih, Assistant Professor of American Studies and Ethnic Studies at Brown University, also Faculty Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Slavery and Justice. Dr Shih is a Sociologist specialising in gender and*

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sexuality, transnational race and ethnicity, social movements and labour in the Global South.

Giuseppe would you like to go ahead with the first question?

GB: *For sure. Thank you very much Elena for being here with us. So in your book, Manufacturing Freedom, you shed light on the role played by Protestant NGOs in the Global anti-trafficking movement, looking at long-term fieldwork in the US where the NGO's are headquartered as well as in China and Thailand where they have projects. So, what led you to specifically focus on these Christian organisations, and how do you position yourself as a researcher in relation to both these organisations and those that you work with in the aid projects?*

Elena Shih (ES): Thanks so much for inviting me to be a part of this podcast and for the wonderful introduction and really provocative first question. I actually didn't begin this project hoping to understand the role of Christian organisations, and I think that understanding the genesis of the methods that led to this project, maybe, sheds light on some of its ultimate findings. So I began this project in 2007, having just begun graduate school in Sociology at UCLA, and having also just returned from three years of living in China; first working with a women's legal aid organisation in Beijing and subsequently working with ethnic minority youth on the China-Burma border. And at that time I was very concerned with how the growing American interest and investment in trafficking, globally, didn't really resonate on the ground in China. And so, when I returned back to the United States for graduate school I wanted to understand some of the gaps between the global and the local in manifesting things like the 2000 [United Nations Palermo Protocol](#) and [2000 United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act](#). So I began by attending a series of anti-trafficking conferences and anti-trafficking fairs that were increasingly prevalent in Southern California around 2007. And we saw an enormous response by American civil society, responding to what the United States had called over and over again a “growing scourge” of human trafficking (5:00). And, week after week, I would go to these different fairs and I started to see a pattern of numerous organisations that were working in different parts of the world, but had centred on social enterprise as their way of intervening. And by social enterprise, what I mean is that they were trying to turn to the markets and sell goods – often what they termed “slave-free” goods – as a way of raising funding around human trafficking, but also bringing money and jobs back into the very communities that they claimed people were trafficked from. I happened to get to know two organisations very well – one that was working in Thailand and one that working in China. Both happened to have offices and activist home-bases in Los Angeles. And I began volunteering with them, doing everything from helping them sell jewellery – which was the good that they were selling – to liaising with customers, to processing inventories, and to just

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generating different kinds of awareness around their cause. And it wasn't until maybe eight months of volunteering with these organisations – when I travelled to Asia to see their production sites in Beijing and Bangkok – that I began to understand how important Christian faith was for these organisations. What that looked like on the ground is that for sex workers who are recruited to become jewellery makers in this project, across both organisations, Christian worship – an hour of Christian worship or Bible Study – was a mandatory and populated part of their wage, as were different kinds of spiritual and moral rehabilitation. So, I had workers comment to me that they often-times felt like maybe their promotions or salary bonuses were dependent not so much on their labour output making jewellery, or how they were doing on the shop floor, but more in terms of their spiritual growth and how much they had grown to accept Christianity in their lives. So I think, looking back now, in over a decade that I've been working on that project, it still is fairly striking to me that, a lot of times, when this jewellery is sold, a consumer or slavery activist doesn't necessarily know that it's attached to highly missionary goals. And, for many people, even the fact that it is a Christian organisation or it is a missionary organisation would not be problematic because it is ultimately serving a development goal in the end. Which is that of bringing jobs and economic alternatives to sex workers in Asia.

GB: *Right.*

CS: *Wow. That is a very long-term engagement and it is fascinating to hear how you have really encountered, or kind-of bumped into the religious aspect of these organisations, and how your own experience reflects what the customer sees or doesn't see in a very interesting way. Now, a question more specifically about these American Evangelical organisations. They comprise a significant contingent of the global anti-trafficking movement and mobilise considerable financial resources around the moral objection to prostitution, as you point out in your research. Can you tell us a bit more about the ways in which these organisations situate themselves within this global movement of anti-trafficking, for instance, in relation to non-faith-based organisations? And also how do they influence the movement's lines? And how are they influenced by this more general global anti-trafficking movement?*

ES: Yes, I think that there's a really fascinating and particularly American history of the Christian Right, in particular, in the formation of anti-trafficking protocols in the United States and there are definitely scholars who are far better positioned to talk about that than I (**10:00**). So I would definitely direct listeners to work by two scholars in particular: that of Yvonne Zimmerman, who has a book under the title [Other Dreams of Freedom](#), and then one of my own advisers, [Elizabeth Bernstein's](#)

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[work](#) on what she called the sexual politics of neo-abolition, that documents a really interesting strange-bedfellows-coalition between Evangelical Christian and radical feminists, particularly on the issue of trafficking. But inasmuch as my work is concerned, I think that this actually is a good opportunity to talk about how the work fits into your wonderful volume on [religion and the technopolitics of development](#), because I've really seen that religious organisations used the secular politics of rights and development alongside evangelical goals of proselytisation, so that the two are almost mutually interchangeable.

GB: *Right*

ES: And I think that vocational training has become a really, really popular technical solution for human trafficking, and particularly around something like prostitution, which is framed as a hugely moral problem, and which is framed as an absolute worst choice for a woman in the Global South who has no other options. And so, you see everybody from [USAID](#) to these grassroots religious organisations trying to think of ways to retrain people, to provide vocational training, as way of offering other alternatives to sex work. The main problem around it is that when you're still training people in menial and manual low-wage labour, it still is not much of an alternative. So jewellery is one such menial low wage job, but it's just one of the numerous commodities that's now sold as a part of the anti-trafficking movement. You see everything from bedspreads to silk pyjamas being made in India, to traditional Henna craft and silk scarves coming out of Mongolia. And I think these are all part of a concerted attempt among anti-trafficking organisations to, what they call, “leverage the marketplace”, to raise funds and awareness around the issue of trafficking. And I think one of the reasons why religious organisations have had to turn to social enterprise is, for the United States as an example, faith-based organisations are often excluded from certain kinds of federal or government funding when religious proselytisation is a core goal of theirs. And also, as religious organisations, they're able to tap into huge bases of church-goers, parishioners, who see social justice goals as inextricable from Christian theology. And so I think that there's been a real turn, on the part of churches, to recognise social justice in a reasonably complicated world. And – in a more shrewd, market-based, calculated turn – to find ways for faith-based organisations to fund themselves when they can't seek other sources of funding.

GB: *Right. So we've been talking about faith-based organisations, Evangelical movements in the United States, but it's interesting to see what is happening in the other two field sites you chose which are Thailand and China. And Thailand and China provide two very different legal contexts for the*

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work of Christian NGOs. So, Elena, how do these different juridical and policy frameworks influence the ways in which these NGOs implement their projects on the ground, and how do local perceptions of the articulation between aid and Christianity take shape in these very different contexts?

ES: I think that one of the greatest empirical paradoxes of this project is still that you could have the exact same American Evangelical Christian jewellery project operating in both Thailand and China, which we understand to be vastly different in terms of their political economic regimes. And so, one might classify as Thailand officially as a democratic monarchy, whereas China is more often understood as post-socialist authoritarian (**15:00**). The way that this plays out is that concretely, on the ground, Thailand offers over three hundred missionary visas to foreigners every year. And that means that foreign missionaries constitute one of the largest sources of tourist income – expat populations – and that their comings and goings are very rarely monitored. But it's completely legal to be a foreign missionary in Thailand and it's absolutely prevalent. You know, if you show up to any of the large cities there are public gatherings, churches, Christian churches that foreigners can attend. You contrast that to China which is notoriously restrictive of religious practice and which absolutely would see the presence of American Christians as a threat of imperialism. There are very few places for Chinese Christians to practice. They are almost completely relegated to what are called “home churches”. And as a foreigner, there are like single-designated places where Christian who are foreigners can practise in China. So that’s just the religious atmosphere. Combined with their atmosphere towards foreigners, it’s vastly different from China in Thailand. How this plays out within vocational training organisations for sex workers is, in Thailand sex workers who've chosen to work as jewellery makers are able to treat that more as any other kind of job that they might choose. So they're not required to live on site. They rent an apartment, in Bangkok. A lot of them have part-time jobs, or are actually on full-time jobs working up to forty hours a week because of the pay cut that they have to take from being sex workers to becoming jewellery makers. It just doesn't provide them with a living wage. And by contrast, in China, because the organisation has to be more careful about the scrutiny of the local police and government censorship, they require all workers to live on site in a mandatory dorm and there's no way that any of those workers would be able to have a part-time job. And workers definitely feel a bit more stifled in China. And I think one larger difference in how this affects workers’ experience of religion is that in Thailand, given that freedom – or relative freedom – of religion, about 30% of people under rehabilitation have actually converted to Christianity. Whereas in China, where a history of conversion isn't as prevalent, there are very, very low – it may be one or two people converted in the decade that I've studied these organisations.

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GB: *Right.*

CS: *Well, thank you very much for these very insightful and precise answers that can give us a grasp of what is going on in those countries. Just, maybe, a last question that is more general: is there anything that you would like to add, as a kind of concluding note, about what we have learned about faith-based activism in this field?*

ES: I think the takeaway that I would love listeners to have is hopefully *not* that faith-based organisations in particular are flawed in their approaches, but that it really is anti-trafficking or human trafficking or sex trafficking as a concept that is flawed and misunderstood, and needs to be interrogated more clearly. Because, ultimately, my work argues that by transforming sexual labour into low wage manual labour these organisations are able to meld Christian ideas around good morals and salvific evangelism within secular development goals around decent work. But these should not be satisfying because we're living in a world without decent work options (20:00). And I think the last thing that I'll say about this, or that I'd further caution, is that there's a growing trend moving away from the Palermo Protocol and definitions of human trafficking, shifting to an increasing number of people wanting to use the term "modern day slavery". And I think what modern day slavery signals is a gesture towards pinpointing extreme and absolute cases of human suffering. Faith-based organisations and secular rights-based organisations both need to expand their purview of work into maybe taking a little bit of morality out of what we understand is good work, and listening to migrant workers, sex workers around the world who are telling us the different conditions that they're looking for. So I think what I was saying was that by looking at, and fetishising these extreme cases of human suffering – the one-off cases in brick kilns or in full sexual slavery – we don't get to understand the hundreds of people who are seeking to have better lives, working in those areas, where there can be incremental changes for worker health, safety and better access to labour rights and working conditions across the board.

GB: *This was really inspiring. Thank you very much, Dr Shih, for joining us at the Religious Studies Project.*

CS: *Thank you, Elena.*

ES: Thank you so much to both of you, and for all of your hard work. And I can't wait to hear the rest of the series.

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GB: *Thank you Elena.*

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