

THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY ASIA: COLONIALISM AND BEYOND

Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre, eds. *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. 368 pp.

Russell Kirkland

In 1989, the Islamicist Bruce Lawrence suggested that, in a global context, the term *fundamentalism* should be replaced by the term *antimodernism*, which, to Mark Juergensmeyer, "suggests a religious revolt against the secular ideology that often accompanies modern society."¹ The papers in this volume are similarly concerned with the social implications of "religious revolt," i.e., of continued religious vitality in lands that had presumably adopted "modern" patterns of secular nationalism. Such thinking, however, raises deeper issues about the very notion of "modernity."

What is notable about this volume is an internal critique by Jean Comaroff that raises precisely such issues. Comaroff's potent reflections on the problematic nature of categories like "modernity" force us to question some of the editors' unexamined assumptions, as well as our own. The problem is not that the studies collected here are weak. To the contrary, it is precisely because they exemplify "good scholarship" that this book raises questions about the assumptions that shape our approaches to issues like "tradition" and "modernity." The fundamental problem is the degree of self-awareness with which first-world scholars, who define themselves as "modern" and "objective," position themselves to explain the realities of third-world societies in which "tradition" is valued differently than modernists assume it should be. Ultimately, the issue is one of unconscious intellectual colonialism.

¹ Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 5. His reference is to Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).

Asian Visions of Authority originated in a series of workshops in the 1980s, intended "to compare types of religious resurgence in East and Southeast Asia" (p. vii). The editors selected eleven papers from a 1989 conference to publish here. Part 1, "State Authority and Religion," includes articles by James Foard on rites at Hiroshima; Charles Keyes on the Buddhist past and communist present in Cambodia; and Robert Hefner on Muslim education in East Java. Part 2, "Reshaping Religious Practice," includes contributions by Shamsul A. B. on the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, Jean DeBemardi on Chinese popular religion in Malaysia, Robert Weller on amoral cults in Taiwan,² and Laurel Kendall on changes in wedding traditions in Korea. The final section, "Modes of Resistance," presents papers by Kwang-ok Kim on shamanism in Korea, Ann Anagnost on ritual and politics in mainland China, Dru Gladney on Muslim and Chinese ethnicity in mainland China, and Chaiwat Sathaanand on the Islamic resurgence in Thailand. These papers are too diverse to be assessed fully here. Suffice it to say that they are all stimulating and informative works of solid scholarship that wrestle with issues of ethnic identity, social change, religious resurgence, and concomitant political problems.

Unlike most conference volumes, this book has a clear, if needlessly complex, thesis: "The essays in this volume examine various religious facets of what we term a crisis of authority that has emerged as a consequence of the modernization and nation-building projects of Asian states" in the twentieth century. Those projects "have not only failed to subordinate religious authority to state authority but have generated... [a] 'deficit of legitimacy.' As a result, many people in these countries have fumed to religious visions of authority other than those sanctioned by their states."³ The papers in the volume only partly share this thesis, a point significant for assessing whether there is really a "crisis of authority" in contemporary Asia.

A stated goal of this book was to disprove the conclusion of a 1963 conference, "Cultural Motivations to Progress in South and Southeast Asia." The editors state:

² Weller's article essentially duplicates his book *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

³ Page 1; emphasis in the original.

In our conference and in this book we demonstrate that the thesis of the earlier conference that as Asian states 'progress', they will increasingly be secularized—has not been borne out in practice. On the contrary, as these states have modernized, religion has become more, not less, significant.⁴

This statement is clearly true, and we can be grateful to all the contributors for bringing the situation in various lands to our attention. But problems arise when the editors attempt to explain the continued vitality of religion: "The varieties of Asian religious experience considered in this book all relate to a 'modern' crisis of authority" (p. 3). They concede in passing that "religious challenges to the authority of the past are not distinctively modern phenomena" (ibid.), but insist that recent Asian developments result from "modernity," which they carefully define:

It is the experience of having a problematic relationship with the past, of being alienated from traditional certainties..., of being offered and often pressured to accept an identity with one particular version of one's heritage rather than another that constitutes what we term the modern crisis of authority....The crisis has become particularly acute in the late twentieth century. (pp. 4, 6)

⁴ See p. 3. Note that the 1963 conference included South Asia but not East Asia, while the present volume does the opposite. The editors do not adequately address the significance of that fact. One might imagine that one could better evaluate religion in Indonesia and Malaysia by a comparison with South Asian nations than with China or Japan. Another problem is that the editors present this book as a groundbreaking study, although there have been several analogous collections: Bardwell Smith, ed., *Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976); Carlo Caldarola, ed., *Religions and Societies: Asia and the Middle East* (Berlin: Moulton Publishers, 1982); Emile Sahliyah, ed., *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); and Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupa, eds., *Secularization and Fundamentalism Reconsidered* (New York: Paragon House, 1989). Most specifically, one wonders how – if at all – the putative Asian crisis of authority differs from crises in other regions today – especially formerly colonized regions of Africa and Latin America. And in the formerly Soviet nations – never “colonialized” in the traditional sense – one also sees problems of ethnic identity and political authority as “modernization” occurs and “nations” are created. See most recently John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and Michael Bourdeaux, ed., *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995). Readers interested in broader questions will need to turn to other publications, such as Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War?* (See above, note 1), and Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *The Political Dimensions of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993). Arjomand’s essay “Religion and the Diversity of Normative Orders” will be of great interest to readers of the present volume.

Ironically, Comaroff's Epilogue (to be discussed more fully below) denounces this idea of "modernity as the alienation from traditional certainties," calling it a "myth" of modernity that we need to rethink (p. 303). Nonetheless, the editors, and some contributors, generally equate signs of religious vitality and change with "religious questioning of the social order" (p. 1), which they then equate with a challenge to political authority. That interpretation may strike historians and religion scholars as dubious. But to the editors it seems to be not only a logical possibility, but an inevitability. It is upon this issue, and the editors' lack of self-awareness concerning their assumptions about "modernity," that I will focus here.

It should first be noted that the term *modern* is used in this book to mean what most of us would term *contemporary*: the papers focus primarily on the 1980s. There are only scattered references to earlier times, usually couched in such broad terms as "Confucian society" or "the colonial era." The reason is apparent: of the thirteen contributors, ten (including the senior editor) are anthropologists. (Two scholars of religion and a lone political scientist round out the field.) Much of the volume thus exhibits a temporal myopia born of a methodologically dubious extension of the ethnographical perspective. Ethnographers traditionally concerned themselves with living subjects in societies that had little or no written history. When an ethnographer wanted to study, say, the Trobriand islanders, he/she went there to observe; there were no indigenous textual sources, and no native historians, much less social scientists, from whom to learn. Though many anthropologists today do work in historically informed ways, the editors of the present volume did not consider the broader history of the societies in question.⁵ Though hundreds of historians have studied pertinent topics (and in East Asia that study includes a long indigenous tradition), these editors generally do not just ignore history, but act as if it were irrelevant for understanding Asia today.

⁵ The scholarly "discourses" that peremptorily dismiss historical realities are not always so egregious: *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, Ed. Stevan Harrell (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1995) also focuses on contemporary realities, and its contributors are again virtually all anthropologists, but they give more consideration to historical realities.

The results are profound. Writers may struggle to find "reasons" for the current state of affairs in a given society never realizing that the lines might become clearer if they considered 'pre-modern" parallels and long-term historical patterns. Let us consider, for instance, the presence of "religious minorities" in China today, the topic of Gladney's article. Have there ever before been such minorities? Well, how about the Buddhists of the Han and Six Dynasties period? The interplay of religion, state, and society in that context has been well studied, and if the issue is how Chinese people and the Chinese state struggle to define "Chineseness," the Buddhist example should shed some light upon contemporary events, and vice versa. But this volume contends that what occurs in a post- 1970 Asian society is inevitably the result of "new" factors that did not—indeed could not —exist in earlier periods. That assumption is debatable. Chinese minorities today force the Han to struggle with the issue of "Chineseness," but the same has been true for 3000 years.⁶

Let us return to the editors' definition of the "modern crisis of authority" in Asia: "It is the experience of having a problematic relationship with the past, of being alienated from traditional certainties... of being... pressured to accept an identity with one particular version of one's heritage...." Question: In what regard does this situation differ from the situation in China 2200 years ago, when Qin Shi huangdi eradicated most of the pre-existing social, political, economic, and cultural traditions? He endeavored, quite successfully, to destroy previous "certainties"— especially "traditional conceptions of the moral basis of the social order"— and pressured the inhabitants of all the subjugated lands to accept a new identity, not merely as subjects of Qin, but as subjects of an unprecedented new type of social and political order, a new "nation." The editors argue that "the modern crisis of authority... is a consequence of the efforts by Asian rulers to reshape political orders in the mold of the nation-state....Although the models varied, all entailed the establishment of political orders under strong central governments administered by trained officials... who followed what were by Western measures rationalized laws and regulations" (p. 4). But such a "molding of a nation-state" sounds very much like what Qin Shi huangdi did: there had never

⁶ A beginning point for the consideration of such issues is H.G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*. Vol. 1, *The Western Chou Empire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), chapter 9, "The Barbarians" (pp. 194-241).

before been a strong central government in what we now call "China," and the "Legalists" had long pressed for precisely such a government, run by functionaries who followed "rationalized laws and regulations."⁷

Keyes and his colleagues also assert that in twentieth-century Asia, "The modern state was—and this was probably the most innovative characteristic for those Asian countries—to represent and promote the interests of a 'nation,' a 'people' " (ibid.). But again, Qin Shi huangdi did something quite analogous: instead of permitting people to conceive of themselves as people of Qi or people of Chu, he labored—again, quite successfully—to homogenize the populations of those lands. He not only instituted new "national" standards (in government, commerce, and script), but strung together the protective walls of the northerly states to construct the "Great Wall," which both locked his subjects in and defined them all as subjects of a new social and political order—"China."

The Qin empire even seems to compare with Asian nations today in terms of "resistance" and "religious resurgence." Keyes et al. say: "By seeking to regulate, control, or even suppress religious practices, states have stimulated people to look to religion for authority in criticizing, resisting, and challenging those who control state power" (p. 15). Qin Shi huangdi did attempt to control religion, but the rebel who eventually supplanted his regime sought authority on the basis of a claim to the "spiritual efficacy of Heaven."⁸ Indeed, the eminent historian Michael Loewe writes of the "crisis" of early Han times as the conflict between the "Modernists [who] derived their tradition from Ch'in [Qin]" and the "Reformists" who "harked back to a tradition which they traced to the kings and ethical ideas of Chou [Zhou]...and...worshipped Heaven, as the kings of Chou had done before them."⁹

All these factors seem worthy of analysis when postulating a "crisis of authority" in Asia today. Issues of "religion and authority" were not only present in earlier ages, but were at times a clear indicator of

⁷ See for instance H.G. Creel, *Shen Pu-Hai: A Chinese Political Philosopher of the Fourth Century B.C.* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁸ See Homer H. Dubs, trans., *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1938), I, p. 131.

⁹ Michale Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), p. 11.

how changing social realities posed problems for governments, and vice versa. Are the dynamics of that process in Qin or Han China, or in Yarnato or Heian Japan, inherently different from the dynamics of the process in the late twentieth century? This book not only fails to address that question, but it leads the uninformed reader to imagine that such questions are unworthy of asking.

Jean Comaroff's comments appear inconspicuously at the end of the book. Ironically, her cogent observations serve as an indictment of the interpretive failures of the book's editors. Comaroff notes that in recent years many scholars of various disciplines, have become intensely self-critical and increasingly aware of our methodological and theoretical preconceptions; others, however, have not, and still work with antiquated conceptual frameworks. The editors of the present book seem unaware of these issues, for they express amazement (notably in their thesis statement) when elements of an outdated conceptual framework turn out to be inadequate. In this sense, the book constitutes both a contribution to the sociology of religion and an indictment of it. Comaroff, unlike the editors, seems to appreciate that irony. For instance, she astutely observes that "our scholarly sense of 'religion' is a function of the modernity [that] we [ought to] seek to analyze" (p. 302). In particular, the "discourse of social science," and its traditional assumptions about "religion" and "secularity," is itself the product of a specific Western intellectual heritage, which privileges the latter both as "rational" and as "modern." Comaroff argues persuasively that such traditional assumptions of the social sciences "must be the subject, not the terms, of scholarly analysis..." (p. 301). Yet the editors cling stubbornly—and in light of Comaroff's internal critique, inexplicably—to what Comaroff calls the modernistic fallacy that "modernity [is] a sociohistorical break [thereby] reifying its opposition to 'tradition'." (p. 303) This book's theme, according to the editors, is that religion in Asia today is not doing what we thought that it would be doing, i.e., succumbing to the inevitable march of modern secularism. But that thesis demonstrates a lack of self-awareness about modernist assumptions that is common even among otherwise fine scholars.

The editors show little awareness of some of the fundamental issues in the study of religion, specifically the issue of overcoming colonialistic assumptions. When, for instance, an ethnographer entered the Trobriand village, he/she was expected to become an instant expert on every aspect of an alien society:

politics, religion, economics. Yet, he/she may have had little or no real training in the theoretical issues involved in the study of such subjects. The logical course for the editors here would have been to enlist the participation of scholars who specialize in the cross-cultural study of religion, and to have relied upon their theoretical expertise. Regrettably, they did not: although a few religion scholars were involved, their participation in shaping the overall project appears to have been negligible. Armed with colonialistic assumptions, un-self-conscious social scientists here posed as the proper definers of both subject matter and modes of investigation and presumed upon their own interpretive expertise to resolve a problem that, as Comaroff shows, is inherent not to the subject matter but rather to the interpreters' own paradigmatic assumptions.

Comaroff notes, for instance, that until "quite recently" the sociology of religion, especially as practiced by anthropologists, "was resolutely Durkheimian," and that ritual "was fetishized in this scheme." In fact, anthropologists, she notes, often use the term *ritual* "as a loose synonym for religion itself" (p. 312; ironically, she herself is no exception). Of course, when we consider the ethnographer's traditional methodology, such would naturally be the case: "ritual" equals "religion" because there is an inherent bias in favor of what is taking place in front of the observer's eyes. And traditionally, he/she would then ask the participants to explain what they were doing and why, and would duly report the response, though generally *not* as a valid explanation of the act. It is that fact, an un-self-conscious devaluing of the indigenous culture's interpretive categories, that is deeply colonialistic.

During the colonial period, Westerners invaded the lands of other peoples, exploited and controlled them, suppressed indigenous traditions, and justified their actions as those of an enlightened, superior culture. In most cases, the conqueror also indulged in various forms of "intellectual colonialism." That is, he engaged in a one-sided intellectual activity: convinced of his own cultural superiority, he undertook to "explain" the cultures that he had conquered, ignoring the indigenous people's explanations of their own lives and cultural traditions. Just as the colonial authorities could ignore the wishes of the subject people, intellectual colonialism presumptuously ignores indigenous explanatory frameworks, dismissing them as the fatuous imaginings of "primitive" and "unenlightened" minds. So the colonialistic interpreter imposes

instead a framework that suits his own sensibilities. For instance, when studying natives' religion, anthropologists would often define the "meaning" of a ritual as lying not, e.g., in a transcendence of the moment (as participants themselves might say), but rather in the social dynamics of the group. But if the participants can easily explain the "meaning" of their own ritual, by what right can an alien interpreter simply dismiss that explanation? Today, such assumptions strike many of us as relics of a paternalistic colonial era.

Let me give one example of how imposing explanations can hamper true understanding. In his article on Muslim education in East Java, Robert Hefner maintains that pre-modern East Asian societies did what Europe and the Middle East could not do—resist the challenge of the world religions.¹⁰ They did so, he argues, because of "the influence of high ethnicity on popular identity....high ethnicity was a form of 'imagined community'....In East Asia the cultural influence of high ethnicity was so strong that it made conversion to a foreign religion tantamount to the repudiation of one's ethnicity" (p. 76). But if Hefner were right, there should be no Buddhists in East Asia. Clearly, the situation is much more complicated than he implies. It seems quite true that participation in a religious tradition involves the individual in "a form of 'imagined community'," but Hefner is incorrect that such an imagined community is necessarily distinct from—much less at odds with—the natural community. Throughout history, men and women across the globe have been immensely creative at blending the two, and at fashioning rationalizations on the basis of which any perceived discrepancy between the religious reality and the local reality can be thoroughly "explained away."

In any society, the "imagined community" of a religion involves two important elements: ideas about life and a tradition (a "history"). Religion involves the individual in living out the tradition's ideas about life. Insofar as others share those ideas, they all share in the religious community, which inherently involves them in something that transcends local identity. Religious activity is never just a matter of what

¹⁰ "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Buddhism, Islam and Christianity were all effectively domesticated or marginalized within these premodern societies" (p. 76). I confess that I don't see how the domestication of Buddhism in East Asia constitutes "resistance," as Hefner asserts, or why domestication and marginalization are effectively equated here, when they actually seem to be opposites.

people do in the present: it involves—some might say that it consists in—interpreting the present in order to understand it within a realm of meaning that transcends past and present.

That dimension of religion is seldom discernible in this book. What is missing is an awareness of the aspects of religion that are real to the participants but not visible to visitors from another culture, aspects that may be difficult for such visitors even to recognize, much less understand. I refer here most specifically to what is generally called "myth"—the set of ideas in terms of which people explain their lives to themselves and to each other. In my usage, the term "myth" is simply shorthand for "the believer's axiomatic assumptions about the true meaning of life." In this broad sense, it is thus a function not of "religion" per se, but of culture itself—including the culture of "scholars." In traditional societies—and, though seldom noticed, in modern society as well—it is the story, the "myth," that constitutes the reality of life, that both constitutes the "imagined community" and identifies it with what the outside observer might call the "real community."¹¹ The study of religion involves the study of such "myths," particularly a culture's traditional explanations of the meaning of life's structure and events. But to understand such matters, one must eschew colonial attitudes, and traditionally, many social scientists were uncomfortable doing so: in colonialistic fashion, the un-self-conscious social scientist paternalistically assumed his subjects to be not only ignorant of the true realities of their lives, but actually incapable of understanding those realities. According to this story, only the outsider who is trained in the modern West as a "social scientist" can truly understand those realities. Consequently, an un-self-critical social scientist can be hampered in achieving an accurate understanding of religion by her/his own self-definition as a "scientist."¹² The "scientist," we were told in the colonial days of the nineteenth century, doesn't deal with anything that is "unreal," i.e., that is not susceptible to empirical observation. But other cultures generally did not assume such a materialistic definition of "reality," and that is most clearly the case when "religion" is concerned. Un-self-critical scholars often fall victim to the colonialistic imposition of modernistic definitions, such as

¹¹ Similarly, scholars often consider themselves members of an imagined community – "the scholarly community" (called "academia" by outsiders) – as well as, or instead of, members of the local community in which they live and work.

¹² Of course, the concept of a "scientific" study of humanity has its own long and complex history, of which the practitioner is generally unconscious, as Comaroff indicates.

by assuming that "modernity" equals "secularity." The fact that the realities of Asia today disprove that equation—as the studies in this volume show—should challenge us not just to ask what is going on in Asia today, but also to re-examine our common assumptions about how we study non-Western societies.

Is there actually a "crisis of authority" today in East and Southeast Asia? Perhaps so. But Comaroff is right to challenge us to beware unexamined "stereotypes," such as that of "modernity as the alienation from traditional certainties." Crises of authority occurred in pre-modern Asia as well, in ways that sometimes resembled the "modernizing" and "nation-building" efforts of post-war Asia. We would certainly expect the contemporary crises to be distinct in some regards from those of earlier ages. But we moderns must beware the myth that we somehow attained a higher, clearer, truer perspective than "others," especially those whom we study. To privilege ourselves as "objective" interpreters of other cultures is to risk imposing our own myths upon them, thereby distorting their realities. The present book stimulates us to examine our methodological premises.