

*Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict.* Edited by Julius Bautista and Francis Khok Gee Lim. London and New York: Routledge, 2009, 217 pp.

In comparison to current works on Islam, book publications on the interplay between Christianity and nation states in Asia have not been voluminous. Seen as a minority “foreign” religion coupled with European or American colonial legacies, scholarly interests on Christianity have largely tended to be anthropological, literary-historical, or theological rather than from a political analytical perspective. This volume partially redresses this lacuna by bringing together a number of established and emergent scholars in the field to provide an interdisciplinary inquiry into the subject matter.

The overarching aim of the book as framed by the editors is to contextualize and decentre a small but influential body of literature (*inter alia* the recent works of Alister McGrath, Lamin Sanneh, and Philip Jenkins) that optimistically paint “an explosive growth” of Christianity worldwide, particularly to the “global south”. This demographic expansion of Christians putatively brings about not only a host of discernible changes to society and culture but also concomitant reconfigurations of state power. While the experiences of Africa and Latin America are usually offered as empirical evidence of this trend, the editors caution that “it would be premature to project this autonomy from the state onto the experience of Asian Christians who are, in most cases, negotiating the challenges of existing as the minority faith” (p. 11). To put flesh to this premise, the editors have elicited representative case studies from South Asia (India, Tibet), Southeast Asia (Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam), and East Asia (South Korea, Japan), as well as two thematic essays on the politics of evangelism, conversion, and subjectivities. The Christian traditions examined include those of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

The dialectic of “complicity or conflict” between Christianity and the state and society is the recurring motif of the book. More specifically, the book’s “fundamental concern is over the conditions

under which Christian religious practices at various times either clash or converge with the mechanism of the state, in light of the challenges brought about by processes of modernization” (p. 1). Various chapters, thus, illuminate the ways the ethical force of Christian doctrines which invariably involve acts of voluntary conversion or proselytization and a subsequent repositioning of the convert’s plane of subjectivities and allegiance have played out to undermine or undergird the demands of secular nation-state citizenship and capitalist modernization. Conversely, other chapters in the book also examine how state authorities and political parties position themselves vis-à-vis Christian institutions in the light of political and religious interests of demographically more dominant non-Christians.

Space only allows me to comment briefly on three chapters to give a variegated flavour of the book. Oscar Salemink’s masterfully succinct chapter provisionally expands on the well-known thesis of Protestant conversion as a form of protest for marginal ethnic groups (typically hill tribes) in Southeast Asia onto dominant population groups with established religious traditions. Whilst there are still good grounds to support the argument that upland minorities typically underscore or fence off their cultural difference to the mainstream religion of lowland majorities through conversion, the inroads of evangelical Protestantism into the cities also point to a contrary movement in a different milieu. By becoming members of the same religious community that is “cosmopolitan, urbanized and de-ethnicised” (p. 53), the convert is also integrated more intimately into wider networks of market and state. In other words, instead of construing Protestant conversion as simply a “protest” against dominant culture, this same phenomenon has the potential also to index a willing embrace of the allure of modernity.

Bhagwan Josh, by comparison, re-visits the often vexed politics of conversion in India in legislative terms. He examines tensions that surfaced during the crafting of the Indian Constitution, in particular to clauses pertaining to the profession, practice and propagation of religion (Clause 16), and of unlawful conversion (Clause 17). As he

puts it, despite the opposition of various anti-Christian groups, the notion of conversion was finally included as a fundamental human right in the Constitution. However, Clause 17 and the subsequent tone of the Niyogi Report which presupposes that Indian Christians' profession of loyalty to India is not above suspicion has been the ideological fuel for anti-Christian groups "to harass, intimidate and demoralize the Christians in general and Christian workers in particular" (p. 102). Josh further argues that the Indian Congress Party has unfortunately allowed the passing of various regressive bills vis-à-vis the constitution in various states over the years to win over Hindu votes from the BJP despite their professed secular stance. In this case study, what is in evidence is an ideological complicity of the state with extremist religious groups against minority religious groups (like the Christians) for the sake of political expediency.

In the case of South Korean Christians, Chang-Won Park paints a different kind of complicity via a discussion of the churches' response to the government's promotion of cremation over burial of the dead in recent times. Up to the mid-1990s, burial had been the norm for several centuries because of Confucian teachings. Cremation was reserved for those who suffered bad deaths and was practised among only the urban poor. The introduction of Christianity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not see any significant conflicts arising over Confucian funerary practices. Instead, Park argues, "the Christian principle of burial has been culturally intensified by deep-rooted Confucian burial practice, and, in fact, many elements of Confucian funerary rites have been assimilated into Christian rituals" (p. 157). With this as cultural background, it is then understandable that the government's pragmatic decision to promote cremation because of a serious shortage of burial space from the early 1990s onwards became somewhat of a major national issue. By this time, however, Christianity had grown exponentially to become a major religious force in South Korea. Ecclesiastical leaders from both the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches conducted their respective theological examinations of the merits of cremation and, except for the conservative branches, have since supported

the government position through education and the setting up of columbia.

Taken all together, the chapters in the book provide much food for thought in the editors' claim that "there is much more fluidity in the ways in which Christians in Asia deal with their spiritual and civic obligations" (p. 2). Indeed, the collection illuminates well the notion that studies of Asian Christianity cannot be merely understood in reductionist frameworks that simply privilege the minority demographic status of Christians in Asia. Nor can the internal complexities within Asian Christianity be grasped in the absence of critical attention paid to contemporary efforts in promoting the ideals of reconciliatory ecumenism within the Christian faith, on the one hand, and to interfaith dialogue between Christianity and the major religions in the Asian region, on the other (p. 208). In sum, the analytical and theoretical challenge is to map and track carefully the variegated ways in which Asian Christianity has taken root in Asia vis-à-vis a host of mediating agents at different scales over time and locality. Not least in this spectrum of concerns are the regulatory and ideological agendas of the governments of modernizing nation states in Asia.

Yeoh, Seng-Guan