

*Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia.* By Susan E. Ackerman and Raymond L.M. Lee. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988. Pp. x, 201.

This very useful study of religion in Malaysia highlights Malaysian specificity in the case of three of the supposedly “world” religions: Hinduism, Chinese religion, and Christianity. Chapter by chapter the authors show how *Malaysia-specific* forms of these “great traditions” have developed, and also the degree of local distinctiveness which has now been reached in Malaysia by what is sometimes loosely referred to as “Chinese religion”. An important question which this study, like some others, implies (although the question is not raised directly) is how long the *common element* in a “world” religion can remain more significant than the national or local features which *differentiate* it.

As elsewhere, so also in Malaysia, from the evidence of this study there appears to be a strong case for speaking of “country-specific” Hinduism, and certainly of country-specific Christianity. (Just as from other evidence one could speak of country-specific Islam. Indeed, even from the *indirect* evidence provided here.) More precisely, this seems to mean that grand titles such as “Hinduism”, “Christianity”, and so on are philosophical or theological abstractions which have little heuristic, local value, if left unqualified.

The three religious traditions which are dealt with here in their *Malaysian* forms are non-Muslim; in that context they are minority religions. *One* of the associated factors in each case, and possibly the most important, is ethnicity. The three specific cases described are the *Christian* charismatic movement, the *Hindu* Satya Sai Baba movement, and the *Chinese* movement initiated by Zhao Chongming known as Baitiangong. Each of these, according to Ackerman and Lee, represents “an innovative aspect of an established religious tradition in Malaysia” (p. ix). The three movements share certain features: “a quest for spiritual renewal”, and the way in which, in each case, the quest was “irrevocably determined by events in the larger sociopolitical environment”. The first two movements originated outside Malaysia and have developed their own local, Malaysian identity; the third originated in a predominantly Chinese middle-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur.

With regard to the first, the Christian charismatic movement in Malaysia (to which Chapter Three is devoted) is seen by the authors as, in the first place, a reaction by Malaysian Christians to secularization and to Islamization: "Christians [in Malaysia], who include Chinese, Indians and Eurasians, perceive themselves collectively as non-Malays deprived of political power and prestige", but through "the charismatic movement, a new sense of Christian and non-Malay identity is emerging" (p. 62). The movement has spread "among mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics in Malaysia" and this has happened "outside the organizational structures of the classical Pentecostal denominations", having started through "interdenominational revival meetings held in first-class hotels in Kuala Lumpur", and subsequent "international revival meetings" which "attracted large numbers of middle-class Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and members of other established Protestant denominations" (pp. 72 ff.). However, in this as in other respects, Catholics are distinguishable from non-Catholic Christians in that "Protestant charismatics tend to enjoy more autonomy from church authorities", whereas "Catholics are relatively more constrained in their actions". But even so "they continue to experiment" with their own groups and "interdenominational Protestant charismatic groups" (p. 77). And in the Catholic case this means deriving some of the guidelines for their movement from *outside* Malaysia; for example, from the "Life in the Spirit Seminar, a seven-week series of lectures and discussions that serve to recruit and initiate new participants to the movement". The Life in the Spirit Seminar mentioned here is one which originated from a Catholic charismatic community in Ann Arbor, Michigan (p. 80).

The Hindu society in Malaysia differs in certain respects from that in India, the authors point out, and M.N. Srinivas's account of the significance of the Sanskritization of rituals in order to claim a higher position in the caste hierarchy does not apply so readily to the Hindu society in Malaysia, where "the complexities of the caste system . . . are considerably different from those in India", and where, in the absence of Brahmin domination, it is more convenient to "speak of a two-tier system with the non-Brahmin [castes] as 'high' castes, and the untouchables (Adi Dravida) as 'low' castes" (p. 95). For Malaysian

Indians “upward social mobility . . . does not necessarily imply caste mobility”. What it does imply, rather, is individual achievement. Added to this, the authors point out, is the importance of ethnic identity, and by this is here meant Tamil identity: “many Indians turned inward to rediscover their ethnic identity during the Tamil cultural revival of the 1950s”, when the “Tamilization of Hinduism became the order of the day” and contributed to the reinforcement of Tamil ethnic boundaries (p. 97). All of this is said to have led to the growth of the Satya Sai Baba movement, which centres upon the South Indian *guru* of that name (albeit not from Tamil Nadu but from Andhra Pradesh in South India).

In Malaysia the movement “revolves around *bhajan* performances” (p. 102). These are groups that meet regularly to pray or to sing. In this respect they bear some resemblance to the charismatic movement among Christians. In Malaysia the Satya Sai Baba groups “function essentially as discrete centers of worship” (p. 103), but efforts have also been made to organize a national council to co-ordinate the activities of the separate groups, some of which are engaged in missionary work (p. 103). The popularity of the Satya Sai Baba movement in Malaysia is increasing, and the authors conducted a survey aimed at discovering the reasons for its popularity. Their finding was that the main reason given (by 85.7 per cent of respondents) was what may broadly be termed *religious* (“salvationary”) rather than, for example, for health, or because of Sai Baba’s miracles, or to please one’s spouse (p. 107), although *some* responses indicated that kin-involvement was an important factor in recruitment (p. 109). There has also been a certain amount of disillusionment with Sai Baba, mainly on account of his alleged sexual irregularities (pp. 111 ff.). The significance of the growth of the movement generally in Malaysia is seen by the authors as having “brought into prominence the religious leadership of middle-class Indians in contemporary Malaysia” (p. 113).

The involvement of some of the Chinese in the Satya Sai Baba movement has been achieved, the authors point out, without any “evident realignment of their ethnic identity through their worship of Satya Sai Baba”. What these Chinese devotees have achieved is “a superficial pattern of assimilation that is related more to their thaumaturgical

needs than to a change in ethnic identity". From examples given by the authors it is apparent that "there is still a strong element of Chinese ethnicity in the approach of the Chinese devotees to Hinduism" (p. 118). Thus, Indian devotees of this movement in Malaysia "have accepted Chinese participation . . . without qualification", and some Chinese participants have even begun to place images of Chinese deities on their altars, as being "consistent with Sai Baba's teaching of religious universalism" (p. 118).

Broadly, this is seen as "the effects of urbanization on ethnic interaction in the post-war years". There appears at this point to be a slight hiatus in the argument, however, since a possible effect of urbanization in some other cases of ethnic interaction could be (and has been) to heighten tension and violence. What appears to be the crucial factor in this case, according to the authors, is that "total adoption of *Hinduism* [by the Chinese] is not stressed" (p. 119).

The Baitiangong movement described in Chapter Five provides the authors with the opportunity of examining "the changing notions of Chinese ethnic identity in Malaysia" (p. 120) in what is the longest chapter in the book. It is also a very important chapter, and it deals with a number of well-known aspects of the study of Chinese religion, such as the relationship between Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, from what prove to be some less familiar perspectives, including that of its *political* significance: ". . . Baitiangong can be considered a religious ramification of the Chinese political crises of the early seventies" (p. 150). This view of the movement is reinforced by the fact that its future "as a cultic alternative is uncertain because it is no longer in a position to conduct its activities without government consent". They add that the general implication of their discussion of Chinese religion in Malaysia is that it is "subordinate to the overall political system". What their study of the Baitiangong movement emphasizes is that it was declared *deviant*, and that this deviant status "was imposed by a high-ranking government official rather than by other Chinese religious groups". This need not, of course, imply that Baitiangong has to be defined as a political movement; rather it is a reminder of the perennial fact that religious belief and action can still, in the modern world, be anathema to certain types of government and therefore not to be

tolerated. As the French saying has it: "The more it changes, the more it remains the same".

Briefly, in conclusion this is clearly a well-researched, well-written, thoughtful book, containing much valuable data on the place and the social and political significance of religious movements of various kinds in modern Malaysia. The short, two-page "Conclusion" deals with the phenomenon of *secularization*, and includes (what discussions of secularization by sociologists do not always include) the important reminder that "secularisation is both a social *and a political* process" (emphasis added); it includes also an "understanding of the nature of state authority and its relationship to the growth of movements in various religious fields".

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