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State, Society and Religious Engineering: Towards a Reformist Buddhism in Singapore. By Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng. Singapore: Eastern University Press, 2003. viii + 328 pp.

In 1976, Vivienne Wee published *Buddhism in Singapore*, her paper on the rituals and beliefs of the Chinese, her concern being mainly with the disparity between the canonical (the great tradition) and the practised (the little tradition) forms of Buddhism. Wee notes that the label "Buddhism" as used in Singapore then did not correspond with those found in the Buddhist canon (1976, pp. 157–88; quoted by Tong 2002, pp. 382). Up to that time, Buddhism was summarily classed by scholars and statisticians under A.J.A. Elliot's (1955) term "Shenism" (pp. 250, 266). In 1998, Michael Hill published his paper, "Conversion and Subversion: Religion and the Management of Moral Panics in Singapore", which gives a good background to religious engineering in Singapore.

Kuah-Pearce's *State, Society and Religious Engineering* is a very timely and insightful follow-up to Wee and to Hill, marking a new milestone in the history of Buddhism in Singapore. Kuah-Pearce's valuable contribution provides a comprehensive overview of "Reformist Buddhism" (though I would prefer the simpler term "Reform Buddhism") in Singapore, where it is now statistically the most dominant religion.

In her book, Kuah-Pearce focuses on the following: (a) "how Chinese religious syncretism was invented during the early colonial years and continued to be the main religious belief system of the Singapore Chinese until recent challenges by the Reformist Buddhists" (pp. 3–4); (b) "the role of the modern state in religious engineering", that is, the social control of religion (pp. 4–6); (c) "the role of religion in the life of modern individuals [specifically the Chinese in Singapore]" (pp. 6–11); (d) "the relationship between society and state in the process of religious modernisation" (pp. 11–12); and (e) "the impact of globalisation on the local Reformist Buddhist movement in Singapore" (pp. 13–14).

The keyword in Kuah-Pearce's book title is of course "religious engineering", which is synonymous with social control of religion. She begins her book with a long and useful socio-historical account of Chinese religions in Singapore, mainly summarizing the works of previous

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scholars on the subject. In chapter 4, she explains the reasons behind the government's efforts at religious engineering in cosmopolitan and multi-religious Singapore. These reasons could be summarized as aggressive Christian proselytism and racial riots, namely, the 1950 Maria Hertogh Incident and the 1964 racial riots that stemmed from religious-political reasons.

To prevent such incidents from recurring and to maintain social stability and political power, the government introduced various measures, such as the White Paper on Maintenance of Religious Harmony (January 1989) and the White Paper on Shared Values, and launched an ongoing policy of religious engineering.

In January 1990, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill was introduced in parliament, and passed in November. Its first main provision was the formation of a Presidential Council of Religious Harmony, containing a majority of representatives of the main religions in Singapore, its function being to monitor religious matters and to consider orders made against individuals. Its second main provision empowered the Home Minister to issue restraining orders against an official or member of a religious group who was suspected of causing antagonism between such groups, or engaging in activities to promote a political cause (under the pain of a fine or imprisonment or both). (Hill 1998, p. 20).

In view of space constraints, I shall now limit my main comments to two important notions presented by Kuah-Pearce. First, that the rise of Reformist Buddhism in Singapore is significantly the result of Christian proselytism and claims of modernity. Besides relating the various educational and welfare work of the Reformist Buddhists, the Mahayana order, the Buddha Sasana Buddhist Association, and the Soka Gakkai (now Singapore Soka Association), she provides a ground-breaking summary of the work on one of the major inspirations behind Singapore's Reformist Buddhism, the Singapore Buddhist Youth Fellowship (SBYF) and the Community of Dharmafarers (founded by the Theravada monk, Piyasilo, now Piya Tan). However, here Kuah-Pearce fails to mention that while the Community comprised full-time lay Bud-

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dhist ministers (Dharmacaris) or "lay monks and nuns" (p. 233), the SBYF was in fact its registered structure.

Secondly, that the Reformist Buddhism, especially during the 1980s, is partly encouraged by the secular Singapore government as part of its effort to promote nationalism and nation-building, in short, social control of religion. Buddhism (as the *dhamma,cakka,* "wheel of truth") has the historical advantage in that it has generally cooperated with the ruling powers (the *āṇā,cakka,*, the "wheel of power") (VA 1, p. 10; Tan 2002 8.10) or functioned in tandem with them (see, for example, Smith 1972).

From Kuah-Pearce's book, it is apparent that while the *philosophy* behind Reformist Buddhism is largely the invention of the Buddhist actors themselves, its *public face* (social welfare, free clinics, inter-religious activities), however, is in response to the govern-ment's call for religious tolerance and harmony. In fact, the general trend today is that the larger Buddhist organizations are as a rule involved in some sort of major welfare work, such as the Ren Ci Hospital and Medicare Centre, whose CEO is a Mahayana monk and is run by a professional (qualified in medical psychiatry and in business administration) who is also one of two members of parliament who are professed Buddhists.

From Kuah-Pearce's analysis of Reformist Buddhism, one can see its remarkable resemblance of the Protestant Buddhism of Sri Lanka which has

> its roots in the latter half of the 19th century and caused by two sets of historical conditions: the activities of the Protestant missionaries and the close contact with modern knowledge and technologies of the West … a form of Buddhist revival which denies that only through the San.gha [monastic order], as a consequence can one seek or find salvation … the layman is supposed to permeate his life with his religion and strive to make Buddhism permeate his whole society. (Keown 2003, p. 223)

Echoing sentiments of Protestant Buddhism, Kuah-Pearce states that

> [t]he task of the Reformist Buddhists is to overturn this perception [of Christianity's prestige through colonial legacy and modernity] and restructure the social and class relationship through the introduction of its reformist religious structure of counteract Christianity's claim to modernity and class relationship. (p. 285)

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However, unlike the Protestant Buddhism of Sri Lanka, the Reformist Buddhism of Singapore is the result of efforts not exclusive to the laity, but also of the monastics, and interestingly, of "the Singapore state" (p. 287). In fact, although Kuah-Pearce makes it is a point of not mentioning the names of the Reformist actors, she does mention by name at least four well-known Mahayana monks and recount their work in some detail.

An interesting development arising from this new milieu which Kuah-Pearce does not mention is that of the counter-currents within the Buddhist community itself. With the rise of the lay ministry (especially lay teachers and full-time Buddhist workers) there is a growing trend of the more religiously committed laity to become more "monasticized" (taking over the roles of the monastics: teaching, counselling, communal rituals, meditation). The monastics, on the other hand, are becoming more involved in social and welfare work and other secular activities (which entail regular fund-raising and hobnobbing with the laity), and owning property, vehicles, bank accounts and credit cards — thus becoming more "laicized". This counter-current and its implications would make interesting social analysis for scholars.

Kuah-Pearce closes her book with remarks on how Singapore's Reformist Buddhism draws its strength from "the wider global Buddhist movement … [and] attempts to remain an integrated part of it" (p. 290). Reformist Buddhism, like much of Buddhism in America and Europe "has moved away from being associated with 'oriental mystique' and towards philosophical rationalism and psychotherapy" (p. 292).

In fact, during the first two months of 2004, the Buddhist Fellowship, a firebrand in Reformist Buddhism today, runs a course on "Buddhist Psychology" (based on the early Buddhist suttas) as part of the requirements for the Professional Diploma in Buddhist Counselling offered by the Brahm Education Centre, its training facility. This course is taught by one of the main actors from the early days of Singapore's Reformist Buddhism.

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NOTE

On the technical conventions used here, please see http://www.dharma.per.sg.

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