

*Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War.* By Michael D. Barr.  
London: Routledge, 2002. xii, 241 pp.

The book takes on the theme of Asian values by positioning two established Southeast Asian leader figures — Dr Mahathir, former Prime Minister of Malaysia and Mr Lee Kuan Yew, now Minister Mentor of Singapore — vis-à-vis the values that have driven cultural agendas in their respective countries. This book avoids former debates about Asian values by focusing on the standpoint that these do exist — at least as East and Southeast Asian values. While the author dismisses any essentialist notions of Asian, the geographical limits set for the discussion encompass what is referred to as Pacific Asia. Presumably, this includes the Pacific portions of Indonesia but not South and West Asia. He then leaves the defence of the geographical region so defined, and moves on to the discussion about the nature of cultural politics and of Asian values.

### The Region, Its Culture and Values

The author has chosen to discuss Asian values in terms of the major religions that should have influenced these values. He makes a grand sweep from Catholicism to Protestantism, through Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism and also includes philosophies such as Confucianism. The introduction and debate on the different religions provide the discursive direction in which a major effort is made to establish the relative strengths of individualism and collective interests.

The discussion about the origins and influence of the different religions may seem daunting but the author has to his credit written consistently in a highly readable and engaging manner. Certainly readers who prefer a simple and clearly written introduction to the religions that have influenced politics in the region will appreciate this book.

Yet religion alone is not culture in its entirety and the cultural politics that have been seen in Asia are not merely about religious affiliation. Given the significant fact that several Asian countries make an express effort to keep governments secular, one has to wonder just

how strongly religion has been influencing governmental outlook in the region.

In his discussion on different religions and their influence, the author also moves over nations and regions in a breathtaking sweep. It is not patently clear if the religions and religious values discussed scale the entire Asian region or if they divide the leadership and societies in each country into cultures that then contribute to the politics in the region.

The discussion does not fully engage the material aspects of governance in Asia, that is, the division of economic benefits as well as the issues that have since the 1997 economic crisis given reasons to question the relevance of Asian values. Given the cronyism, nepotism and corruption that have been exposed with the collapse of long-standing regimes like that of Suharto's in Indonesia, major proponents of Asian values have generally been silent on whether these values would subsequently bail Asian countries out of their political and economic troubles.

### Values and Political Developments

The strongest points of the book are the linkages made between the cultural values that religions have influenced in the Asian region and political developments that have unfolded. While the book attempts a grand sweep of major religions that have been influential in the region, still the discussion is sufficiently thorough to pose intriguing questions about just how such Asian values have been translated into different political ideologies within the region. On that matter, it is important to discuss how similar values originating apparently from one religion such as Christianity have occasionally led to radically different political ideologies throughout the world.

The contribution that the book might have made more fully, given the cultural diversity in the region as well as the considerable economic gulf that exists between the poorer and more affluent societies, would have been insights into the conflicts inherent in these differences, irrespective of the cultural values. Indeed, the question that needs some answers would be the capacity that the

region possesses to address Asian diversity. The future of the region and particularly that of the poorer countries hangs on the balance between development and the values that presumably sets the stage for tensions being generated by growing political and social differentiation in Asian societies.

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