

***Religious Organizations and Democratization: Case Studies from Contemporary Asia.* Edited by Tun-Jen Cheng and Deborah A. Brown. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006. Softcover: 306pp.**

There has been a wide variety of studies documenting how non-religious social organizations espousing social welfare, minority rights, and gender equality have succeeded in making an imprint on “normal politics” in contrast to studies on religious organizations in this area. Hence, the editors argue for the necessity of this volume (Cheng and Brown, pp. 3–4). The book is a welcome contribution as it covers a discussion of all the major religions within Asia. There are two articles on Buddhism in Taiwan and Thailand; four articles on Christianity in Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and the Philippines; and two on Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia. There are also two separate articles discussing the Falun Gong in China (Ching, pp. 41–54) and the Soka Gakkai in Japan (Metraux, pp. 267–85). However, despite this extensive coverage, there is no definitive conclusion as to whether religion has played a distinctive role in the establishment or hindrance of democracy in Asia.

The editors have tried to group the articles into some logical combinations. For example, in deconstructing Buddhist organizations they contrast the ones in Thailand (Ambuel, pp. 83–108) with those of Taiwan (Laliberte, pp. 55–82). Then they group the articles on Protestants in Korea (Hyug Baeg Im, pp. 136–56) and Taiwan (Rubinstein, pp. 109–35) to illustrate how pivotal their religious orders had been in affecting change. The other two articles, one on the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines (Barry, pp. 157–79) and the other in Hong Kong (Brown, pp. 180–220), are meant to denote a delayed role of the Church in asserting a political voice in the national process. Moving on to Islam, there are two articles on this, with Indonesia and Malaysia being contrasted against each other. Islam is described to be undergoing a process of deradicalization in Indonesia with the engagement of progressive Islamic intellectuals (Barton, pp. 221–41) while in Malaysia, Islam’s radicalism may be further fuelled by the state’s cooptation of its symbols and metaphors (Martinez, pp. 242–66).

The articles show that there is much variation, from one religion to the other in form, process, and impact upon society. Herein perhaps lies the major shortcoming of the book. It leaves the question of religion too open to be of any use in understanding democracy itself. It would be more useful if the editors had devoted more pages to clarifying and defining what is meant by “religious organizations”.

This is the key variable under observation, but yet so under-defined that it gives rise to confusion. Throughout much of the book there is no distinction made between an imprecise religious “community” (Catholics of Philippines or Muslims in Malaysia) as opposed to the more formalized religious organization (the Church, political party or movement). However, even among the latter there is a wide variation. For example, there are small religion-inspired communal movements such as the Santi Asoke and Wat Phra Dhammakaya in Thailand as opposed to the bigger mass organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia. Yet again there is an even bigger mass movement such as the Soka Gakkai which functions in tandem with its political party, Komeito in Japan, as well as having branches internationally. Even this can be contrasted with the transnationally connected Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT). Then there are just political parties such as the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), which did not originate as a religious movement and whose claims to legitimacy may only be through its participation in the electoral process. Some clarification on the differences and nuances of religion-linked organizational formation and identification would serve the purpose of the book better.

The major organizational difference between Islam and Christianity, or even Buddhism and the others could have been explored in better detail. In Islam there is no established order organized around the institution of the Church or the clergy. Within Islam the identification of religious groupings is more ambiguous. Affiliation to Islam is largely mobilized around political parties or non-governmental mass organizations and collectives. The conflict involving Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia is also largely centred on a state-centric dynamics; and quite focused on electoral politics, as opposed to the dynamics of non-Islamic entities such as the Catholic diocese in Hong Kong or the Foguangshan Buddhist organization in Taiwan, which are extensively well-endowed, organized, and legitimized as welfare or charitable institutions.

Table 1.1 on page 7 is especially confusing when the authors try to correlate what seems to be religious “communities” with their ties to authority and involvement in democratization. There is too much generalization here. It would be much better if all the case studies in the various articles are limited to looking at one or two formalized religious organizations rather than discussing all manner of social processes linked to organized religion.

What is proved in the book is that the impact of religion or religious tradition on the process of democracy is much too varied and so wide-ranging that it would be impossible to reduce them into

a set of neat phenomena. It is shown through the various articles that the origin and consequence of religious mobilization is unique to its particular local context. Thus one is unable to establish if religion in its organizational and political form is either inimical or suitable to democratization. The book shows that there is really no common experience shared by religious organizations in Asia as they relate to democratization.

Nevertheless, even if this book does not come out with a major idea about religion's role in democracy, it is very useful as a tool of reference. The collection of articles provides the reader with a rich source of comparative descriptions and details on how religion is being used by both state and civil society in the realization of their wider needs and interests.

A synthesis of the findings from each article shows that religious doctrines still provide a strong moral and ethical framework for governance, political mobilization, and everyday living. Furthermore, religious organizations facilitate the provision of material and tangible goods and services to people, for instance, in the form of free education, health care and social protection. In this light the book may be slightly imbalanced in its treatment of religion, as religious organizations are broadly portrayed to be peaceful instruments of mobilization. However, it cannot be ignored that religious organizations can also be linked to destructive activities, particularly when there is an invocation of violence. Unfortunately, there is no article in the volume addressing this issue to provide the balance that is needed to understand religion's comprehensive role in mass mobilization.

Still, the book is a useful survey. It provides vital case studies of religious establishments and religious communities within a comparative national setting. Correlating the differing religious dynamics with the nature of political regimes evidences the highly politicized nature of religion today. The state is not shaped independent of religious influence; likewise, the character of religion as it evolves into a social movement is also affected by the nature and prerogative of the state. In this light, this book will contribute much towards elucidating the growing scholarship and debate on religion and society.

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