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*Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994. ix + 366 pages. Maps, figures, photographic plates, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$35.00; ISBN 0-8248-1471-1.

This is an exceptionally useful work, likely to please all who are professionally involved with the study of modern Southeast and East Asian societies, but especially anthropologists and students of religion. *Asian Visions of Authority* constitutes an important antidote to much Western modernization theory, which is premised on the conceit that “as Asian states ‘progress’, they will become increasingly secularized.” On the contrary, as the editors of this book tell us, “as these states have modernized, religion has become more, not less, significant” (3). The individual essays, dealing with aspects of religion in Cambodia, Java, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China, certainly bear witness to the continuing and critical importance of religion in these countries, even in the face of state atheism as in the PRC. But religious expression in Asia during the present era may have meaning of a kind altogether different from that of times past. For example, as Jean deBernardi tells us, Chinese folk religion in Penang, Malaysia, now carries an important political message: pride in Chinese culture and opposition to the Malay-dominated Malaysian state’s attempts to establish Malay culture as the basis for a new Malaysian cultural tradition. Alternatively, subtle combinations of new and old signification may be evident, as in the memorial rites to the atom bomb victims of Hiroshima, which accommodate both the traditional and quintessentially particularistic Japanese need to propitiate the unfortunate family dead, and a universalistic yearning for world peace as expressed in the drive to eradicate nuclear warfare.

Few will dispute the claim (heralded in the dust jacket blurb) that this is a “work of substantial and well-grounded scholarship.” The editors provide a fine introduction that offers real insight into why religious phenomena remain so important in modern Southeast and East Asian societies. They show, for example, how secular governments — from Indonesia to the PRC — co-opt religion (or, more accurately, those aspects of religion of which they approve) in the interests of nation-building. Religion, in other words, often becomes a major ingredient in the construction of a new national identity. This, in turn, is usually a response to profound political, economic, and ideological changes that challenge the validity of old ideas and old social institutions (ideas and institutions that, paradoxically, were themselves informed by the same religious traditions now being used to support the new social order). The editors tell too of the importance of “endemic” or “minimal religion” — customary practices such as religious festivals and traditional rites of passage that are seen more as expressions of a particular cultural tradition than of a religious ideology. Such endemic religion is not “the frozen artifactual stuff of museum plays and cultural performances . . .

[but] is saturated with associative meanings that combine remembered personal experience with shared cultural imagery" (10). As such, endemic religion may constitute a rich source of material for the construction of national identity. On the other hand, "the diffuse authority of endemic religion can be invoked to generate new meanings, including ones that run counter to those promoted by the state" (10–11). The introduction explains the significance of supra-national religious identity (for example, adherence to Islam), which renders state co-option more problematic than in the case of nationally organized religious traditions such as Khmer or Thai Buddhism. It discusses also the different varieties of religious resurgence, which are often reactions against or responses to state-directed change. These range from short-lived millennial movements, such as those led by holy men in northeast Thailand and southern Laos, to the development of enduring "new religions," like Kurozumikyō in Japan, Ch'ondogyo in Korea, and Cao Dai in Vietnam.

The book is divided into three parts: "State Authority and Religion," "Reshaping Religious Practice," and "Modes of Resistance." Space, unfortunately, does not permit a review of the specific contents of the eleven chapters that constitute the body of the book. Suffice it to say that each one offers rich empirical data as well as analyses and interpretations that often challenge older perspectives. The practices of Chinese folk religion in Malaysia, for example, are shown to be not simply remnants of a once more coherent Chinese religious culture, but "a central means to the Chinese community's awareness of its own history and identity" (117). Islam in the PRC not only survives in the midst of a pervasive state atheism but manages to mobilize the apparati of the atheistic state to protect itself from those who seek to abuse its fundamental institutions (255–59).

If this reviewer has any major complaint about *Asian Visions of Authority*, it concerns not what is presented but what has been left out. The book is the cooperative effort of scholars (mostly, though not entirely, North American anthropologists) who specialize in Southeast or East Asian societies, and was sponsored by the respective joint committees on Southeast Asia, Korea, and Japan of the (U.S.) Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies. But surely it is a pity — and an obvious limitation to any comprehensive understanding of "Asian visions of authority" — that no South or West Asianist was invited to participate. In the introduction the editors note "the many links between East and Southeast Asian societies" that, they claim, "set the region apart from other regions of the world" (1), but as any Southeast Asianist will surely agree, ancient (Brahmanical, Buddhist, Islamic) and modern (especially Islamic) links bind most of Southeast Asia more closely to South and West than to East Asia.

Robert Hefner notes in his essay on Muslim education in East Java how primordial ethnic religious traditions were relatively resistant to the impact of evangelizing world religions when supported by a politically unified high culture, as in China or Japan — in such cases "conversion to a foreign religion [was] tantamount to the repudiation of one's ethnicity" (76), and if a foreign religion did gain entry it was either so domesticized (as with Buddhism) or marginalized (as with Islam) that it offered little challenge to preexisting ethnic-based religious traditions. Hefner contrasts this situation with that in Java, where unitary state support for ethnic religion did not survive, thus allowing for major penetration by Islam. But here a South Asianist could point out that Indian ethnic religion, that diverse but collegiate set of beliefs and practices usually subsumed under the rubric of "Hinduism," has been very successful in resisting evangelistic penetration even without the support of a unitary political system of the East Asian variety.

Even if we are to accept, for organizational if not scholarly imperatives, the geographic limitation imposed by the editors, we might still wonder why Cambodia (not to deny its critical importance) has to represent all of Southeast Asia's Theravada Buddhist polities. We might also query the omission of Singapore from a collection of essays whose purpose is to examine the complex interactions between religion and the modern Asian state.<sup>1</sup> As it is, all we have for that island republic is a passing and potentially confusing remark by Jean Commaroff linking it with Cambodia and hinting at the less-than-happy "fate of Catholicism

and Islam" at the hands of Singapore's temporal rulers (308).

Disappointment over omissions aside, this is indeed a fine collection of essays, and *Asian Visions of Authority* will surely receive wide use in the academy; it should prove particularly helpful for graduate-level seminars on the anthropology of religion in complex societies.<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Surely not for the want of expertise, given the interests of scholars like John CLAMMER (e.g., 1985, 1991), Eddie KUO (e.g. with Jon S. T. QUAH, 1988), Joseph TAMNEY (e.g., with Riaz HASSAN 1987), Chee Kiong TONG (e.g., 1988, 1989), and Vivienne WEE (e.g., 1977).

2. For which reason I must challenge Gladney's assertion (259) that the more-or-less exclusive devotion of anthropology to minority studies in the PRC follows "the traditional British anthropological approach"! Surely Dr. Gladney knows of RADCLIFFE-BROWN's (1936) championship of Han village studies? And what of MALINOWSKI's (1939) enthusiastic preface to *Peasant Life in China* by his student, Fei Xiaotong? As for a preoccupation with minority studies, American anthropologists must surely recall the near exclusive pre-Second World War attention of their discipline to the study of Native American cultural traditions!

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