

Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain, and R. Michael Feener, eds., *Political Theologies and Development in Asia: Transcendence, Sacrifice, and Aspiration*

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Echoing Kuan-Hsing Chen’s call for “Asia as method” (Chen 2010), the past decade has seen growing intellectual endeavors to illuminate how Asia can serve as an anchoring point for postcolonial and anti-imperialist knowledge production. In this ambitious edited volume, editors Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain, and R. Michael Feener provide a timely intervention in political theology by examining the diversified theological-political configurations in Asian experiences through the prism of development and the associated themes of transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration. Consciously moving beyond the monotheistic assumption of *theos* implied in traditional political theology studies, this volume illuminates how political actors imagine, negotiate, and materialize development to shape public politics, social movements, quotidian practices, and personal affects and aesthetics within and beyond Asia. Since development is conceptualized as “a set of transnational networks of ideas and practices that connect geographically disparate locations into complex political and religious entanglements” (1), it predicates global and hybridizing encounters where Western discourses and practices remain an important yet no longer normative force and where affinities and conflicts between Asia and the West may emerge and evolve. In doing so, this volume “complicates a simplistic juxtaposition of ‘Asian’ and ‘European’ political theologies” (xvi) and demonstrates “the enormous heuristic potential afforded by de-centered, post-colonial approaches of political theology” (17).

The volume begins with Armando Salvatore's compelling analysis of the historical formation of modern Islamicate empires that traversed Europe, Asia, and Africa. As Salvatore shows, different from the European Leviathan model, which requires the sacralization of a higher corporate personality as the foundation of state sovereignty (23), modern Muslim empires relied on saintly charisma to provide political legitimacy and maintain the solidarity among relatively autonomous assemblages and networks. Salvatore further highlights that *waqf*, an institution that "financed health, educational, and infrastructural services" and embodied "a 'political theology of development' writ Islamic" (33), played a critical role in nourishing the centripetal connections between the millennial king and his populations.

Another historically informed contribution comes from Sunila S. Kale and Christian Lee Novetzke, which situates Gandhi's political theology of karma yoga within a long-established genealogy of the intersection between yoga and politics in India. By doing so, Kale and Novetzke tease out the evolution of yoga in India from an idea related to practices of self-discipline in wars to a combination of political and spiritual pursuits (45), which defies the unilinear transformation of a theological idea into a secularized principle for political institutions implied in the normative paradigm of political theology (44). Moreover, the authors point out that Gandhi's conception of development derived from his idea of karma yoga, which advocated the alignment between internal cultivation of self-control and external, non-violent resistance to political subjugation. Consequently, Gandhi considered self-rule and individual sovereignty as fundamental to national independence and collective progress, thus denouncing Western developmentalism that was characterized by centralized, industrial production and avaricious exploitation (52–53).

Till Mostowlansky's chapter resonates with Salvatore's interest in transnational/transregional Islamic experiences, and it engages the Twelver Shi'a humanitarian networks across Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and Iran to interrogate humanitarianism beyond Christian genealogies. Mostowlansky reveals that contemporary Shi'a developmentalist efforts draw inspiration from the emergent entanglement of diverse strands, including people's political aspirations for national stability, the Shi'a liberal charity tradition, and meritocracy derived from managerialism and global neoliberal economy. Mostowlansky thus challenges the reductionist narratives about humanitarianism that usually flatten its multidirectional dynamics to a monocausal connection with "an a priori theological foundation" (66).

Eli Elinoff's and Kenneth M. George's chapters share an object-oriented approach to underline the political agency of objects in public spheres (90). Elinoff's investigation into political demonstrations in Thailand illuminates how the materiality of blood and concrete enable different protesters to challenge the theological legitimacy of Thai politics and articulate their competing visions for political reform. While Red-Shirted protesters used blood to symbolically express their willingness to sacrifice for the nation and emphasize commensurate fraternity as the foundation for democracy in 2010, anti-election royalists' mobilization of concrete to obstruct the elected government in 2014 evoked its semiotic association with modernization projects and the monarch's sacrifice for national development as a Buddhist virtuous ruler. Similarly, George attends to the controversies surrounding the *Al-Qur'an Mushaf Istialal* (the National Independence Illuminated Qur'an manuscript) in 1995 and the bustier decorated with Qur'anic verses designed by Karl Lagerfeld in 1994. He argues that their agentive power is manifest

in the capability to summon public attention, confer political legitimacy, stimulate negotiations about appropriate materialization of the Qur'an, and provoke assertions from Islamic clerics for custodial authority over Qur'anic objects in Indonesian and transnational publics. What distinguishes George's analysis from other chapters is his nuanced interpretation of development as the materialization of the transcendent and sacrifice as its potential desecration due to misappropriation and mishandling.

Edoardo Siani's analysis of the public relations campaigns at a high-end shopping complex in Bangkok after King Bhumibol's death nicely complements that of Elinoff's by instantiating the intersections between Buddhist eschatology, Thai royalism, politics, and development in a quotidian yet politically charged setting. As Siani unveils, these campaigns repeatedly manipulated the trope of the monarch's sacrifice for national development to remind middle-class shoppers of their dependence on the developmental king and to establish the royalist junta as an appropriate transmitter of his legacy during a period of political transition. Undergirding these theological-political discourses is the integration of the European *telos* of progress into the Buddhist *theos* of kingship, which identifies this-worldly development as a manifestation of and justification for royal divinity (109–10).

The ethos of sacrifice for national development can also be inculcated into individuals through everyday practices. Sam Han's research on the emergent popular culture about solitude in South Korea reveals that by watching reality TV shows on living alone, enjoying "eating broadcasts" (*mukbang*), and practicing solo dining and drinking, South Koreans are attracted to a consumption pattern that promotes self-reliance and self-recuperation as solutions to increasing precarity against the backdrop of rapid national development. Han's analysis sheds light on the tension yet interdependence between a purportedly independent citizen-subjectivity and a developmental nation that obliges citizens' sacrifice through *proper* self-transformation. Echoing Kale and Novetzke's attention to theological-political articulations on (citizen-)subjectivity formation in Asian contexts, Han's concept of "development citizenship" in South Korea further complicates the picture of modern citizenship, which is predominantly premised on Western notions of the free market and (neo-)liberal subjectivity (127).

This volume is a sophisticated endeavor that substantially pluralizes the conceptions of development and modernity, destabilizes the Euro-Christian-centric, unilinear explications of the theological-political nexus, and broadens the theoretical horizon of political theology. Although engagement with the themes of transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration is not as consistently explicit across chapters, the intellectual conversations between authors at different points of intersections are thought-provoking. This volume will be an inspiring read for courses on modern conjunctures between religion, politics, and development, especially in the studies of material culture, citizenship, popular media, humanitarianism, and social movements.

REFERENCES

Chen, Kuan-Hsing. 2010. *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Beiyin Deng
Arizona State University