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perryisa	<p>Posted: 01 Sep 2008 15:09 Post subject: September 08: Secularism and Religious Renaissance in Asia</p> <hr/> <p>Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for September 2008. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Hong You, Prasenjit Duara, and Robert Weller.</p> <p>To leave your own question or response to Richard Madsen's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply."</p> <p>In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.</p> <p>Spencer Dew Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum</p>	
sdew	<p>Posted: 08 Sep 2008 21:21 Post subject: Invited Response to Madsen's Paper by Hong You</p> <hr/> <p>Response to Richard Madsen, "Secularism, Religious Renaissance, and Social Conflict in Asia"</p> <p>The study of Chinese religious revival in the post-Mao era has been dominated, among Chinese scholars at least, by the economic framework of rational choice / market theory. The central text for this approach is Fenggang Yang's Chinese translation of Rodney Stark and Roger Finke's Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human side of Religion, a work which outlines a theoretical paradigm predicated on the insistence that religious institutions in the United States operate within and along the principles of an open market. The religious market, according to this school of thought, operates like any other market,</p>	

under economic rules. Most importantly, a free market introduces competition which leads to the flourishing of organizational religions in the United States. When Chinese scholars try to explain the recent resurgence of religion in China by applying the economic supply and demand principle to the situation, without considering whether there is, in fact, any open or free religious "market" in China, the value of this theory becomes dubious at best. It is exciting, then, to see Professor Madsen try a new approach to make sense of the religious renaissance in the changing societies of contemporary Asia, including China.

Amid an ongoing debate about secularism and its impact on religion and society, Richard Madsen engages a "monumental" work by Charles Taylor – a work Robert Bellah was tempted to call the most important book in his lifetime and which many other sociologists of religion consider as transforming/recasting the whole secularization debate – in order to explore the application of Taylor's framework for understanding secularism within the context of Asian societies, especially those of East and Southeast Asia.

Taylor's work offers a tripartite understanding of secularism as a political, sociological, and cultural phenomenon. I will limit my discussion here to the first sense, political secularism. While Professor Madsen points out that there are partial exceptions, basically he argues that all modern East and Southeast Asian governments are secular in the political sense. According to Taylor's definition of political secularization, the principal issue is the state's neutrality with respect to religion. The legitimacy of the government is not dependent on religious belief, and the government does not privilege any particular religious community (or any community of non-believers).

However, in the People's Republic of China (PRC) under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule, or in the Republic of China (ROC) under the Nationalist Party (KMT), not to mention in imperial China, state neutrality is probably the one thing always missing in a rather long history. Anthony Yu, in his 2005 book *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives* painstakingly documented the ever-shifting treatments of religion by the state.

If one takes a look at the changing state policies on religion from the establishment of the PRC to the present, it is not hard to find that the government has never been neutral on religious issues. Here, I find it hard to say that Chinese government is secular in the political sense as Taylor defines it. I think this also might be why Professor Madsen said "in formal sense at least," or "on paper at least" that modern Asian states are secular in this sense. But I could not help but wonder if we as sociologists of religion can settle for a situation that only holds up "on paper"?

My own work focuses on the specifically political contexts in which religious revival has taken and is taking place in China. In the last century (at least), China has been a platform for political experiments

of many actors. Under CCP rule, the treatment of religion, justified via an interpretation of Marxist theory with Chinese characteristics, has never been consistent, and the popular religious practices have proven persistent and resilient. The constitution, law provisions, and religious policy can say that the state is protecting every citizen's right of religious belief or disbelief, and normal religious activities, without ever clearly defining what might constitute such "normal" practices. This ambiguity might be purposefully left there, though it's possible too that the government (just like scholars) lacks a theoretical framework with which to conceive of and thus approach the "problem" of religion. It leaves the state with the power to decide when some religious practices are supported and when is over the limit (as in the case of government support of Qigong practices in the late 80's and early 90's and the final crack down against one branch – Falungong – in 1999) while it leaves citizens forever guessing where the line of limit might be.

As famously noted by both Weber and Durkheim, institutional differentiation (the separation of religion from other social realms) is the start of the whole secularization process, and, thus political secularism is the very foundation for the sociological study of secularism. But does political secularism exist in China if there has never been a period in Chinese history where the state was fully separated from religion or where the state was founded on a certain religion? My problem with applying the concept of political secularism to China is that it seems either there is nothing to be secularized or (as some Chinese political leaders would insist) everything has been secularized already.

Of course, political secularism is not the central issue Madsen deals with in his exciting piece, and his work does inspire me to think about whether and how this intellectual framework might work on the phenomenon of burgeoning popular religious practices evident not only in rural China where the localized, particularistic, communal, or to say, socially "embedded religion" is central to people's everyday life but also in urban settings across China.

While sociologists of religion have conducted research on the flourishing religious enterprise in the United States and its comparisons to the historical case of Europe for quite some time, scholars have only recently started to pay attention to the fresh "religious renaissance" happening across the Pacific Ocean. Professor Madsen is among the leading scholars conducting careful research on this relatively unstudied resurgence of religious belief and practice in Asian societies. As Madsen mentions early in his article, Taylor's theory of secularism was intended for "North Atlantic societies" of Western Europe and North America; that Madsen engages this existing theory to look at social processes still ongoing in a radically different social context is inspiring.

If we trace the origin of secularization theory, we see that it was

developed by European sociologists based on European historical experiences. The impact of Weber, Durkheim and Marx are quite obvious. It is always a challenge to see if theories developed based on the historical circumstances of Western Europe and North American can be applied to societies outside of the Western world. In too many cases unfit theoretical/methodological approaches have been imposed on social phenomena under investigation resulting in hasty and inadequate explanations. Madsen, in contrast, is pursuing a careful trial with an open mind and a knowledge that the framework may not perfectly fit. As a result, he offers us a better understanding of the religious resurgence in East and Southeast Asian societies not only by focusing on the areas where Taylor's tripartite understanding of secularism fit neatly but also by paying attention to those instances where the fit was inexact.

Hong You, University of Chicago Divinity School

sdew

Posted: 15 Sep 2008 12:20 Post subject: Invited Response to Madsen's Paper by Robert Weller

Response to Richard Madsen, "Secularism, Religious Renaissance, and Social Conflict in Asia."

Richard Madsen is one of the premier scholars on religion and modernity in Asia, and I always appreciate his thought-provoking ideas. Here he takes off from the recent work of Charles Taylor on the North Atlantic nations, telling the story of a move away from religion based on the particularistic ties of locality or kinship to universal and voluntary affiliations—the Tocquevillian roots of civil society. This new creation of multiple religious alternatives also changes the default mental state for many people from a taken-for-granted belief in religion to doubt, where any particular belief is just one of many religious (and irreligious) options.

While Madsen shows that the same basic processes also take place in Asia, he argues for some significant differences as well. He shows the thriving of local forms of religion in spite of all the predictions of an earlier modernization theory, the simultaneous growth of voluntary and delocalized religious groups (whose influence may not be entirely benign), and the opening to a vastly greater arena of alternatives. I wonder, though, whether it might be possible to push farther toward even more fundamental differences between Asian and North Atlantic religious histories. There are two points on which I will try to expand a bit on the argument: Madsen (and Taylor) may overemphasize belief as the core feature of religion and may underemphasize the full range of religious variation in premodern times. Both these points may have important consequences for civil society.

The idea that belief is the centerpiece of religion is a deeply Protestant formulation, and may not make sense for more ritual-oriented traditions. My own earliest field experiences of religion in Taiwan

focused on searching for people's beliefs about ritual symbolism. Why did people hang a fish from the mouth of a pig they were offering, or leave a mane of hair on its neck? To my dismay, no one could tell me. Worse still, no one seemed to mind that they had no idea. They told me they did it because it looked good like that, or that this was just the tradition. What really mattered, in other words, was acceptance of the ritual convention. In much the same way, people would urge me to burn incense at their temples, pointing out that it was a ritual act of respect, and that my lack of belief made no difference. Perhaps this should not be a great surprise in the cultural descendants of Confucius. Ritual for Confucius was crucial to human sociality, but belief was not really a core concept.

Ritual both accepts and creates social convention through its performance. At the same time, however, it leaves belief open—we can share a ritual while maintaining separate beliefs. If we accept that point, it means that modernity's crisis of religious doubt may not be such a big deal at all in other parts of the world. Ritual's unification at the level of performance left room for a much easier pluralism of ideas than is possible if belief is our primary criterion.

This possibility of pluralism relates to my second point as well. Like many other parts of the world, Madsen's main cases of China, Taiwan, and Indonesia had strongly rooted localist religious traditions that also left room for enormous amounts of religious variation. In part, this is because polytheism (dominant throughout the Chinese sphere and in the Hindu and animistic parts of Indonesia) is fundamentally more open to variation than the monotheistic Truths of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Everyone always knew about alternative gods and they frequently had multiple loyalties. Indeed, the Christian God sometimes found relatively quick acceptance because it appeared as just another deity, a bit strange but not fundamentally beyond the existing range of variants.

In addition, each of these places has had long experience with the choices offered by universalizing religions and their voluntary religious affiliations. The Sufi brotherhoods that have long characterized Islam in both China and Indonesia were voluntary groups of the sort that Madsen associates more with the twentieth century. China for many centuries was also home to Buddhist, Daoist, and syncretic sects whose voluntary memberships usually did not simply reflect pre-existing particularistic ties. Such things may have increased in the twentieth century—certainly groups like the Taiwanese Buddhists Madsen discusses have expanded on a scale never before possible—but the difference is not qualitative and even its scale relative to the past is not yet clear.

Madsen's analysis leads toward the vital question of what this might mean for the future of civil society in Asia. In particular, do we have a situation where the unexpected thriving of localist religion limits civility on the scale of the nation, or where the undesired intolerances of

newer universalizing ideas increase conflict? Madsen suggests that we will have to look at each tradition historically, but he sees cause for alarm in some cases, and cause for hope in others, especially Taiwan. If I am right about some of the deeper differences between North Atlantic Christian history and these Asian cases, however, it implies that there may be fruitful grounds for genuine pluralism growing directly out of these traditions. The result may not be the same as the standard liberal model of civil society, but there is every reason to be hopeful about the creation of alternate civilities in Asia, as we have already seen alternate economic modernities.

Robert Weller, Boston University

slidew

Posted: 23 Sep 2008 12:25 Post subject: Invited Response to Madsen's Paper by Prasenjit Duara

Response to Richard Madsen, "Secularism, Religious Renaissance, and Social Conflict in Asia"

Richard Madsen makes several important points about the post-war pattern of religious development in the parts of Asia he discusses; but for whatever reason, the essay is surprisingly de-contextualized and even somewhat fragmentary. I find his observations to be astute and suggestive, but am left asking many questions about the how, why and where of these developments. Madsen spells out a narrative about the post-WWII era. Religions were relatively well contained during the Cold War through a combination of suppression and co-optation by the new nation-states. After the Cold War, these same governments lost their capacity to control and contain the religious movements that burst on the scene (or re-emerged) with surprising vigor. While some of these movements tend to develop a universalistic ethic, others become entangled with the religious 'marketplace' (not a term he uses) and also with ethnic movements, which makes them destabilizing entities in society.

I agree entirely with Madsen's observation that the state in decolonizing societies was able to control and contain communities. Indeed, the Maoist regime's institutional means of keeping people tied to their locations and the Suharto regime's effort to contain the identity of the people to state sponsored religious categories are part of the same political process of state-building. How and why this state capacity is tied to the Cold War needs more elaboration, but I sense that Madsen is using the Cold War as a period marker rather than as an explanatory variable. Nonetheless, it begs the question as to why state control over religion began to unravel at the end of the Cold War. Does it have to do with state withdrawal and the ascendancy of liberalizing and globalizing capitalist forces? Or does it have to do with the withdrawal of super-power support that propped up nation-states formed by regimes dragooning unwilling communities. Certainly the latter applied to Taiwan and Indonesia; but is the former sufficient to explain the change in China? How exactly does the commercialization

of state objectives generate the liberalization and marketization of religion? In what measure does religion address the anxieties of commercialization and in what ways is it continuous with it?

One of the points Madsen emphasizes is that religious practice in Asia is much more embedded than in the US where religious belief and practice is very important yet where religious actors compete within the rules of the state. Madsen is ambiguous and perhaps even ambivalent about the role of embeddedness. On the one hand, it makes the religious groups more rooted in community, but at the same time, it predisposes these groups towards a particularistic ethic which can create problems of social conflict. Madsen's conception of universal and particularistic ethics is vintage Max Weber and I am not sure it is adequate to grasp the complexity of Asian religions.

To be sure, he sees the emergence of large-scale rationalizing and universalizing religious movements in modern Asia as well. But contrary to what we may expect based on the model of Western liberalism, these forms of mass religiosity are potentially more destabilizing than earlier forms of religion. Occasionally Madsen hints that it is continued particularism that produces conflictual forms in relation to the state and other sects, whether in China or Indonesia. To be sure, some universalizing religions in Indonesia and especially the Buddhist movements in Taiwan seek reconciliation and play a healing role, but the trend he feels is towards conflict and instability.

On the ground, the sharp distinction between community religion and universal ones is not borne out in China or perhaps in Indonesia. The hundreds of redemptive societies (some of which I have discussed elsewhere) had both village level as well as trans-local, indeed, determinedly universalistic orientations. These syncretistic groups such as the Unity Way, (Yiguandao), the Red Swastika Society (Hongwanzihui), and the Virtuous Society (Dejiao) have sought to embrace all the major faiths of their time beginning with Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and extending to include Christianity and Islam in the 20th century. The Falungong is merely one of the more recent and unfortunate representatives of this tradition. They have combined local and universalistic concerns in ways that we have yet understood.

Nonetheless, we can still ask whether the simultaneously local and universalistic orientations of syncretistic groups enhance their capacity to tolerate others and a secular society. My tentative answer is yes; up to a point. Their syncretism generates a mode of expansion that is much more passive than missions of conversion. Yet when faced with suppression by the state and intolerance by other religions they can react with violence. The home-bred religions of China are well-suited to the liberal model of a civil society. It is the state that presents a problem.

Prasenjit Duara

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