

Secularism, Religious Renaissance, and Social Conflict in Asia

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In his monumental book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor distinguishes three meanings of secularism, at least as it refers to the “North Atlantic societies” of Western Europe and North America. The first meaning is political. In this sense, secularism refers to political arrangements that make the state neutral with regard to religious belief. 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). The second meaning of secularism can be termed sociological. It refers to a widespread decline of religious belief and practice among ordinary people. The third meaning is cultural. It refers to a change in the conditions of belief, to “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” In the North Atlantic world, all governments are (for all practical purposes) secular in the first sense, Western Europe but not the United States is secular in the second sense, and all societies, including the United States, are secular in the third sense. Taylor tells the story of how the three modes of secularism have developed throughout the course of Western history and of how they have mutually influenced one another. He is especially concerned with the third mode, the development of secular conditions of belief.

Can this intellectual framework be applied outside of the North Atlantic world, particularly to Asian societies? In this paper, I will try to fit it to East and Southeast Asian societies. I will argue that the framework is useful for making sense out of many contemporary developments in Asia. Even where the framework does not perfectly fit, the lack of fit is useful for highlighting particular dilemmas faced by Asian governments in an era of political and religious transformation.

Political Secularization

All modern East and Southeast Asian governments are secular in the first sense of the term defined by Taylor. They are based on constitutions that do not ground the state’s legitimacy on religious beliefs and do not privilege any particular religious community. East and Southeast Asian governments arrived at their present-day secular constitutions through various and often tortuous paths throughout the course of the 20th century, but in formal terms at least, they conform to North Atlantic models of state neutrality with respect to religion.

There are of course partial exceptions to these propositions. In Thailand, for example, the Vigilant Centre at the Ministry of Culture is supposed to protect the nation’s culture and values by, among other things, keeping people from using images of the Buddha for profane purposes. (In any case, the government does not seem very effective in doing this.) But in general, the constitutions of Asian states relegate religious belief and practice to the private sphere. Their national celebrations do not employ religious

symbols. On paper at least, all of them – even the People’s Republic of China – support their citizens’ rights to freedom of religious belief or non-belief.

Social Secularization

However, the secularity of modern Asian states has by no means led to widespread popular secularity – that is, to secularity in the second sense defined by Taylor, a loss of religious belief and practice among ordinary people. In terms of the quantity of people regularly taking part in religious practices, most Asian societies are more like the United States than Western Europe. The degree of religious practice varies from country to country, but almost everywhere, temples, mosques, churches, and shrines are ubiquitous – and full of people, especially during festival seasons. Even in China, where the government actively propagates an atheist ideology and has severely restricted open religious activities, it has been estimated that as much as 95 percent of the population engages from time to time in some form of religious practice. Moreover, throughout Asia, there have been impressive revivals and reformations of Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian religious belief and practice – a veritable religious renaissance. Asia is religiously dynamic.

The forms that this dynamism takes are different, however, than in the religiously dynamic sector of the North Atlantic world, that is, in the United States. In the United States, the dominant form is the religious congregation, a voluntary association of like-minded individuals who pledge allegiance to some transcendent God and espouse a universalistic morality – and sometimes cause conflict because each community espouses its own particular version of a morality that supposedly should be binding on all. In most places in Asia, a much more predominant – if not the absolutely dominant – form is the local temple, with its local deities, who represent and affirm particularistic allegiances to local communities which are formed through descent rather than consent, through ascribed membership by kinship or ethnicity rather than by voluntary association based on personal belief. This is a form of religious practice akin to what Charles Taylor calls “embedded religion,” which was the prevalent form in Europe during the Middle Ages. The world of embedded religion is “enchanted,” filled with good and bad spirits. Religious practices are used to call upon the good and control the bad, as much for the sake of the material health and prosperity of oneself and one’s community as for any otherworldly salvation. One’s community is under the protection of local spirits – patron saints in the European Middle Ages and ancestors and various local protector spirits in many parts of Asia – and although these local spirits may be imagined to be under the control of a supreme being, much of actual popular religious practice is aimed at getting one’s own local spirits to take care of one’s family and friends in the here and now.

This description by Kristofer Schipper depicts well the way in which in its Chinese versions such religious practice was entwined with the full range of local community life:

“Before modern iconoclasm held sway, religion was in evidence everywhere in China: each house had its altar, each district and village its temple. They were numerous and easy to spot, for as a rule, the local temple was the most beautiful building, the pride of

the area.... [Temples] were always built by an association or a local community.... In the countryside, they were erected by all the members of a village community or regional association. Management of the common property – buildings, land, furnishings, and revenue – was strictly egalitarian....[W]orship in a temple is not reserved exclusively for the saint or gods to whom it is dedicated. The *miao* is a place open to all beings, divine and human. A community as well as a truly communal house, it is a place for casual and formal meetings. The elders go there daily to discuss village affairs. Grandmothers, the family delegates in religious matters, go there every day with offerings of incense and to fill the lamps with oil. Music and theater associations, along with clubs for boxing, reading, chess, charity, pilgrimages, automatic writing, medical research, kite flying, and cultural associations of all kinds create their headquarters in the temple, and find there as well a place of worship for their particular patron saint.”

These forms of localized, socially embedded religious practice have by no means entirely disappeared in the North Atlantic world. But as Taylor shows, they have, through a long, complicated historical process extending over 500 years, largely been eclipsed. By now, in the United States at least, the prevalent forms of religion are practices expressing a desire for personal authenticity carried out through voluntary associations. However, throughout Asia, local, communally embedded forms of religious practice are still extremely vital. As I have shown elsewhere, in the Chinese countryside even the Catholic Church takes on the form of a socially embedded religion. Whole villages are Catholic, most Catholics take on their religious identity through birth rather than through a personal faith commitment, and religious practice is intimately intertwined with all aspects of community life.

In the North Atlantic world, we have usually assumed that modernization entails the eclipse of such localized, socially embedded religious practices (and of the “magical” practices oriented to this worldly success discussed by Peter van der Veer). The processes of Asian modernity, however, usually took a different path. Whether through colonialism or through anti-colonial and revolutionary movements that sought national autonomy, wealth, and power by building strong, bureaucratically organized governments modeled on those from the West, national political leaders created centralized, secular – and in that sense “modern” – states imposed upon societies that had not undergone the North Atlantic West’s path to modernity. In particular, these societies had not radically loosened the ties that bound local corporate communities together – especially the local myths and cults that generated the enchanted identity of such communities.

Thus, the governments that emerged or consolidated themselves in Asia during the cold war were imposed on top of societies that were still largely assemblages of corporate groups rather than the voluntary associations of a (Western style) civil society. Popular religion was mostly an expression of the identities of corporate groups – extended families and local village communities mostly, but also in some cases larger-scale ethnic identities, as with the Muslims in the western regions of China. Religious ritual (and belief, which was generally secondary to ritual) expressed and reinforced particularistic loyalties within ascriptive communities. To create national unity, maintain social order, and mobilize large and diverse populations, modernizing governments needed (or thought

they needed) to get control over religious practices that fostered particularism, regionalism, and ethnic distinction.

There were two main strategies. One was to suppress religious practice – destroy temples, ban public religious rituals, eliminate religious leaders (by forcing them to change their professions, by imprisoning them, and sometimes by executing them) – and to replace this with a cult of the state and its Leader. This was the strategy of the People’s Republic of China and North Korea. An alternative strategy was to coopt religious leaders and to segregate religious communities. This was the strategy followed by Indonesia under Suharto. There, in the name of the national ideology of “Pancasila,” which proclaimed a national unity based upon mutual tolerance among believers in one “Almighty Divine,” the regime restricted proselytization among the five main religious groups (Muslims, Catholics, Reform Protestants, Hindus, and Buddhists), and coopted the leaders of each group by making them members of state-sponsored commissions. Some countries adopted a mix of these strategies. Taiwan under the KMT, for example, suppressed religious communities (like the Unity Way) that might effectively stand in the way of state control, while coopting other local religious leaders and generally restricting proselytization (with the big exception of Christianity, which was given special privileges because of the need to maintain support of the United States during the cold war).

During the cold war, these various strategies worked, at least on a superficial level. Throughout East and Southeast Asia, local religions seemed to be tamed, to be rendered irrelevant to the big issues of the day. In some cases, as in China, religious practices disappeared from sight. In societies that relied less on sheer repression and more on cooptation, they provided some vibrant local color, while remaining comfortably within the grip of the state and seeming to be irrelevant to the politically directed processes that supposedly constituted national modernization. As such they were mostly invisible to Western social scientists. Anthropologists studied them, but mostly in an attempt to document them before (as it was presumed) they inevitably faded away or to develop comprehensive theories about the roots of religious experience. Even anthropologists did not generally assume that such religious activities were especially relevant to current political or economic developments. Meanwhile, political scientists, economists, and even sociologists almost completely ignored them.

But none of these strategies used by Asian states to tame local religions actually destroyed them. The suppression strategies simply drove the practices underground while in many cases maintaining the communal ties with which these religious practices had been intertwined. The cooptation strategies helped to reproduce and maintain communal religious identities.

Since the end of the cold war, however, Asian States have been losing the capacity to tame local religions through suppression or cooptation. It is unclear whether this has actually led to a quantitative increase in religious practice. But the weakening of state capacities to control religion has made local Asian religious practices more visible, more energetic, and potentially more politically consequential. All of a sudden religion demands the attention of all sorts of social scientists.

Thus, like America, Asia is “awash in a sea of faith.” The secularization of Asian states has not led to secularization in the second sense defined by Charles Taylor – to a severe decline in popular religious practice. But the Asian sea of faith is different from the American one. Asian religious practices are less individualistic and more communal, socially embedded, and locally particularistic. This makes it more difficult to imagine how Asian religions could be accommodated into the standard liberal model (all too often unreflectively based on the American experience) for political incorporation: officially consider religious belief as a personal preference of individual citizens, who will then form all sorts of different but overlapping private religious associations in an open religious marketplace; and expect that these private associations will share enough in common that they will tolerate one another but have enough differences that they will not coalesce into any unified opposition to the state. We are becoming more aware of the limitations of this liberal model, even in established Western liberal societies like the United States. How much more difficult might it be for this liberal model to accommodate the local, particularistic, communal religions that are becoming newly visible in Asia?

Probably too difficult. But does this mean that it will be impossible in most parts of Asia to develop moderate, democratic, stable but adaptable polities? It is not impossible, but we would have to expect that the paths to such a desirable outcome would be different from the North Atlantic path. The direction of these paths may depend on the precise ways in which local religious cultures are affected by secularism in the third sense defined by Charles Taylor: of a move to a society in which religious belief and practice are no longer unchallenged but seen as one option among many, and not necessarily the easiest to embrace.

Cultural Secularization

As cold war era political structures for containing religion have broken down, religious practitioners have more freedom than ever before to express their faith and to link up with similar practitioners around the globe through modern communications technologies. But with this increased freedom and capacity to communicate comes new opportunities for doubt. Any given religious practitioner can now come into contact (whether directly or through media) with nearly every type of believer and non-believer. Religious belief and practice become more of a personal option than something taken for granted. Even so, individuals in most East and Southeast Asian countries are by no means entirely set free from ties to their extended families and communities of birth, and they cannot avoid their regional and ethnic identities. Under these circumstances, those who do wish to maintain some connection with traditional religious practices (and they might be especially motivated to do this if such practices had previously been made into forbidden fruit by coercive governments) may feel a need to “modernize” these practices by rationalizing them and making them more universal. This helps to create new forms of religious fervor – and also inspires missionary tendencies. Maintaining one’s belief cannot depend on hiding within an enclosed community. It requires getting other people

to believe it as well. The stage is set for development of large scale religious movements that can then clash with one other in new ways.

Under these circumstances, the new, more open conditions of belief have different consequences than might be predicted by theories of Western liberalism. According to such theories, the possibility of voluntarily choosing one's religious affiliation in an open religious market place should produce social harmony. But in many parts of East and Southeast Asia, this form of secularity may actually produce forms of mass religiosity that are potentially more conflictual and destabilizing than forms prevalent in earlier eras.

Case Studies

We illustrate this process by presenting three case studies of the changing development of secularizations over the past half century: China, Indonesia, Taiwan.

China

At the time the Communists established their government in China, the primary form of social affiliation among the peasantry (who constituted at least 80 percent of the population) was the extended family lineage, whose identity had long been maintained through rituals of ancestor worship, reinforced through popular versions of Buddhism and Daoism. This led to a society plagued by "localism" which presented a major challenge to the project of creating a powerful modern state.

The Communist government of the PRC tried to overcome these problems by imposing a thick net of organization, justified by its version of Marxist ideology. This entailed the harsh suppression of popular religious practice. Local temples were destroyed, "superstitious" customs forbidden, religious practitioners eliminated, and scientific socialism incessantly propagated. All of this reached a crescendo during the Cultural Revolution era. At the same time, the economic basis for ancestor worship – the ownership of family property and the ownership of common income producing property by temple associations – was destroyed in land reform and the collectivization of agriculture. Nonetheless, whether intended or not, the Maoist social system largely maintained and even reinforced the corporate basis of Chinese social life. The collectivized production teams and production brigades of the "people's communes" corresponded to portions of family lineages and traditional villages. The socialist system confined people to these communities – it was very difficult to move from place to place, especially from the countryside to the city but even from community to community within the countryside. Under these circumstances, the ties that submerged individuals into extended families actually thickened.

The exigencies of fighting the cold war may have actually intensified the Chinese Communist effort to use its political apparatus to suppress the corporate, family centered groups of its rural society. The conflict with "godly" capitalism may have intensified the resolve to impose a pure atheism on the populace. But the Maoist project of controlling

society by suppressing the religious practices that gave lineages and similar corporate groups their identity failed to be sustainable.

After Mao Zedong died and China entered its period of “reform and opening” beginning in 1979, the old system of control quickly broke down. Chinese society has become much more porous. Millions of farmers migrate to cities in search of work, although most as yet still cannot obtain permanent urban residence, cannot gain access to the health and welfare institutions of the cities, and periodically have to return to their rural communities and depend on their families of origin for social and moral support (even as these families depend on the migrant laborers for economic support). Meanwhile, even as the Chinese government warns about the dangers of “feudal superstition,” there has been a great resurgence of ancestor worship and indeed of all sorts of popular religious practices. Although one can still meet Chinese intellectuals and high government officials who will sincerely insist that “Chinese are not religious,” it is plausible that, as Peter Ng has estimated, 95 percent of the population engages in some form of religious practice, especially during personal crises, life passages, and traditional social festivals.

Much of this religion is of the socially embedded kind, similar to that which prevailed in Western Christendom during the middle ages. If not exactly a return to tradition, it is an invention of tradition. Take, for example, Chen Village. Twenty years ago, I and two colleagues published a book about this village, a small farming community not far from Shenzhen. Like almost all single lineage families in South China (in this case all the male villagers were surnamed Chen, and all claimed descent from a common ancestor who lived about 400 years ago), the village had once had an ancestral temple which commemorated and housed the spirits of the Chen lineage’s distant ancestors and each family kept tablets of their more recently deceased ancestors on an altar in the front rooms of their homes. Major festivals like the lunar new year were filled with colorful rituals for greeting and sending off the spirits of these ancestors and caring for their needs in the afterlife. These festivals involved the whole community and inspired vibrant cultural creativity. They were a principal source of entertainment for the community and they provided pleasure and brightness in a life otherwise full of backbreaking farm labor. They also thickened and deepened the relationships that held the Chen lineage together and set it apart from other lineages.

After land reform and collectivization, the lineage hall was stripped of its sacred implements. It was first turned into a school and then into a dormitory for “sent down youth” brought to the village. Especially during the Cultural Revolution era all forms of ancestor worship were banned. Even then, however, some villagers still carried out such worship quietly and cautiously, using mosquito repellent coils instead of incense sticks. Now in the era of reform and opening, the ancestor worship has come back. The community is no longer a village in the traditional sense, but rather an industrial zone in a vast metropolis with factories employing 50,000 migrant workers. The original villagers have become prosperous by renting their land out to the factories, and one of the first things they did after becoming prosperous was to refurbish their old ancestor temple and, more recently, to build a new one costing two million yuan, with intricate wood carvings and pictures of traditional deities inlaid with gold and mother of pearl. They have also

relocated their ancestors' graves to a new cemetery (with excellent fengshui), its beautiful tombstones carefully arrayed in proper generational order. The temple and its associated festivals give the villagers a sense of identity that keeps them from being swallowed up in a sea of migrant workers and impersonal factories.

Similar temple rebuilding and renovation have been going on throughout much of China, and local festivals often take even more spectacular forms than found in Chen Village. Local temples are multi-purpose centers of social life, expressions of the community's unique identity and a vehicle for the expression of its members' creativity. Such religious practice embodies a particularistic ethics where the interests of those close to one take precedence over commitments to universal justice and fairness. For a state that seeks to create a unified community of national citizens, this localistic, particularistic religion can pose problems.

Yet although the revived or invented traditions do indeed bear a surface resemblance to the original thing, they carry different meanings and have a different social valence, because the conditions of belief have changed. Decades of Communist repressions have at least partially dislodged the connection of the people (particularly the younger generation) to local communal religious practices. It is mostly the elderly who attend the principal rituals at the Chen Village ancestral temple. At the same time, the new mobility of migrant workers partially loosens their ties to their home communities and the exposure to modern media opens their imaginations to many alternative ways of understanding the world.

One consequence of these new conditions of belief is an abandonment of religious practice. Even then, the abandonment is often only partial. While sojourning in the city, for example, many migrant workers may have little interest in participating in religious rituals (with the exceptions of those which seek good luck). But when they return home, they may contribute to the construction of an ancestral temple and take part in community festivals.

Another consequence of the new conditions of belief, however, may be an openness to new religious movements, guided by visions that transcend family and locality. There were antecedents of these in so-called sectarian movements, like the White Lotus movement, in pre-modern Chinese history. Now, with the help of globalized communications, these take on new forms and new force.

One set of new religious movements entails a search for physical healing and moral reform based on qigong – the evocation and channeling of the primordial energy that for traditional Chinese cosmology pervades the universe. The most notorious form of this qigong practice was the Falungong (wheel of dharma practice) which developed an elaborate ideology based on Daoist and Buddhist ideas to explain and guide such practices. But there were many other forms, including the xianggong (fragrant practice) and the zhonggong (middle practice) which were popular in rural as well as urban milieu. Such forms of spiritual practice transcended local corporate communities. They spread through ramifying personal networks that linked people throughout China and have even

spread globally. As is well known, the Chinese government has found such large scale religious organizations threatening and has ruthlessly moved to suppress them. Nonetheless, some of the movements have gone global. From havens in exile, the Falungong leaders spread their message and gain adherents around the world through the use of modern media. The message becomes increasingly polarizing and even apocalyptic – presenting the Chinese communist regime as an evil regime that must and inevitably will be destroyed.

Another example of a disembedded religious movement is the rapid spread of evangelical, mostly Pentecostal, Christianity in China (especially rural China). Because the government inhibits systematic research into this topic, accurate statistics about the spread of Christianity are hard to come by. But it appears that the numbers of Christians have grown from less than a million to more than 30 million within the past 30 years. And some observers (mostly associated with evangelical churches themselves) claim that the population of Christians has grown to over 100 million.

Like the qigong movements, the form taken by Pentecostal Christian expansion seems to be that of the ramifying network rather than the locally grounded community. The most important networks had their origins in inland rural areas, especially in Henan Province, but they now reach much more widely throughout China. These Christian networks are open networks that link many congregations of like-minded individuals over broad areas. The congregations thus linked together consist of individuals who have a born again experience (often validated by faith healing) and have made a personal commitment to Jesus in adolescence or adulthood.

These networks have roots that go back to indigenous Christian movements in the early 20th century. But a major impetus for their expansion has come from their contact with the Pentecostal missionaries from America in the 1980s.

The de-centered nature of the Christian networks allows them constantly to generate new offspring with new theologies and new ways of adapting to specific environments. A few main themes remain constant – the Second Coming, speaking in tongues, faith healing – but they are given different specific interpretations. This aids in the expansion of the networks but it raises the threat of sectarian division. Local assemblies accuse each other as heresy. Out of this ferment have arisen certain new groups with beliefs that seem bizarre by mainstream Christian standards, like, for example, Eastern Lightning, which follows a female messiah who claims to be a reincarnation of Jesus.

Indonesia

The USA turned Indonesia from non-alignment to a stable pro-Western stance after 1965 by firmly backing the anti-Communist dictatorship of General Suharto. Under the Suharto regime, the religious diversity of the vast Indonesian archipelago – 88 percent Muslim, but fragmented into a variety of Muslim sects, and significant populations of Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well as practitioners of a wide variety of folk

religions – was contained from the top down within an authoritarian political structure. Based on the national ideology of “Pancasila,” which proclaimed a national unity based upon mutual tolerance among believers in one “Almighty Divine,” the regime restricted proselytization among the five main religious groups (Muslims, Catholics, Reform Protestants, Hindus, and Buddhists – but excluding Chinese Confucians and practitioners of folk religion), and coopted the leaders of each group by making them members of state-sponsored commissions. In some areas of Indonesia, religious attachments are deeply intertwined with ethnic or regional attachments. One’s religious identity is ascribed to one at birth and religious rituals and practices render sacred one’s ties to family or local community. Such ascriptive identities were deepened and solidified by the Suharto regime’s policy of keeping each religious group in its place. Eager to maintain political stability in Indonesia, the United States endorsed this top down effort to achieve “unity in diversity.”

Shifting balances of global power have led to a demise of this system of integrating Indonesia’s diverse religious communities under a dictatorial regime. From the 1980s on, increased connections of Indonesia’s Muslims with global Islamic movements led to movements of reform and revival. One side effect of this was the opportunity to carve out spaces for resistance to the Suharto dictatorship. After the Suharto dictatorship collapsed in 1998 (a victim of popular outrage caused by economic hardship brought about by IMF demands for “structural adjustment” of its economy in the wake of the Asian economic crisis), ethnic and religious tensions have escalated. In Java, there has been a brutal pogrom directed against Chinese and in Ambon and Aceh there have been violent clashes between Christian and Muslim communities.

Even as religion reinforces local communal or ethnic identities, however, believers in Indonesia are becoming influenced by global movements of religious renewal, movements that encourage dissatisfaction with habitual adherence to local custom and inspire believers to seek more systematically reflexive understandings of universal Truth. Thus, some Indonesian Muslims are inspired by global Islamist movements, Christians by global missionary movements, and Buddhists by international revival movements.

This leads to potentially even more harsh clashes, between groups who are now filled with enthusiasm to undertake universal missions to promote their particular understandings of God. For example, some Christian groups (with help from networks of Christians around the world) are getting new energy by trying to win souls away from Islam, and Muslims (with connections to global Islamic movements) are excited by the possibility of expanding at the expense of Christianity. At the same time, ecumenical counter movements arise, like Dian Interfidei, founded by the late Dr. Sumartono, which has built networks of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Confucians and holds seminars and workshops that introduce participants to the history, theology, and ethics of the various traditions. The goal of all this is to create a new kind of religious person, a person Sumartono called a “cross-religious person,” who does not abandon a faith tradition for another but becomes an intentional religious citizen of the world.

Although religious movements – both Islamic and Christian – have in some places led to deadly public conflict, organizations like Interfidei have made impressive (though as yet there is no sign that they will be adequate) efforts to reconcile and mediate.

Taiwan

When it was defeated in the civil war and moved the entire government of the Republic of China (ROC) to Taiwan in 1949, the Nationalist Party (KMT) confronted the challenge of maintaining control over a hostile population. The KMT had taken control over the former Japanese colonial island after its return to Chinese sovereignty in 1945. Though they initially welcomed their new government, the native Taiwanese population soon became outraged by the KMT's corruption and incompetence. In response to widespread protests against KMT rule that had erupted in February 28, 1947, the government killed and arrested tens of thousands of Taiwan's indigenous elites. This "White Terror" continued throughout the 1950s.

The society that the KMT was trying to control was at the time mostly agrarian, a society of extended families in farming villages. The major source of community life in such villages was the local temple, with its deities and rituals celebrating the particularistic obligations of membership in ascribed communities. Unlike the Chinese Community Party, its counterpart on mainland China, the KMT did not attempt to destroy local religious practices. But it did attempt to weaken them. For example, it limited the scope of local festivals "in the name of improving frugality in folk sacrifices." At the same time, it provided various forms of patronage in order to coopt the leaders of local temples. This produced a fragmented religious landscape that was conducive to the KMT's agenda of control. Local temples could not coalesce in ways that might have challenged the government.

The KMT strongly suppressed any pan-Taiwanese religious movements, it established firm control over all national religious institutions, like the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC) and denied them permission to establish educational and research associations that would enable such Chinese religions to develop sophisticated interpretations of their doctrines that might appeal to educated elites. The big exception was Christianity. Because some of the ROC's main American supporters during the early phases of the cold war were former China Christian missionaries and since American ideology considered the USA as a "nation under God," the ROC could hardly afford to suppress Christianity. It allowed Protestants and Catholics to establish major universities, and it allowed Protestant and Catholic missionaries to be conduits of American foreign aid, especially of food and medicine. Most of the Christian missionaries had been displaced from the Chinese Mainland. They spoke Mandarin, the official language of all of China, rather than the Taiwanese prevalent among the native population. In general, they had cooperative relationships with the KMT government and did not threaten its rule.

There were inevitably cracks in this hybrid program of cooptation and suppression. Pan-Taiwan movements like the Unity Way went underground and continued to grow despite

government suppression. Maverick Buddhist leaders established the core of new organizations in out of the way locations beyond the range of the government's surveillance. Christian groups which had sunk deep roots in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period, like the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, benefited from the general protection offered to Christian Churches, even though they were important sources of native Taiwanese consciousness, including a Taiwanese form of the "theology of liberation." These openings to new forms of religious practice and new vehicles for religious identity would become important as the KMT's authoritarian structures began to crumble.

The crumbling began in the 1970s as the result of local global factors. Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan's dictator, died in 1975. During this time period, Taiwan was beginning the transition from an agrarian to a predominately urban industrial society. Taiwan's key patron, the USA, was beginning a rapprochement with the PRC, and switched its diplomatic relations from the ROC on Taiwan to the PRC on mainland China in 1979. An opposition to the KMT monopoly government began to grow, and it could not be completely suppressed with the heavy handed tactics of earlier decades. Finally, in 1987 the KMT government of Chiang Ching-kuo – Chiang Kai-shek's son – lifted the martial law that had served as the justification for autocratic rule. The way was opened for multi-party elections and for the development of a lively civil society dominated by voluntary associations of Taiwan's middle classes.

Modernizing religious movements played a vital role in the constitution of this civil society. During the 1970s, under the KMT's radar screen, "socially engaged" Buddhist movements began to develop and propagate a universalistic vision of compassionate religious action to improve this world. With the end of martial law, some of these movements exploded in membership among middle classes eager for new forms of social affiliation. Especially important were Tzu Chi – the "Buddhist Compassionate Relief Association" – Buddha's Light Mountain, and Dharma Drum Mountain. Though there were monastic communities at the core of these associations, they developed large lay organizations and made sophisticated use of modern media to propagate their messages. Although most of them did not take part in partisan politics, they played an important political role in the transition to democracy. They smoothed out some of the rough edges of demanding civil societies and helped to nurture some of the civic virtues that make democracy possible.

These Buddhist organizations are globally expansionist. By the 1990s, they had begun to spread branches throughout the world. They carry out works of charity and education throughout East and Southeast Asia (including, for Tzu Chi, the PRC and North Korea), and to a lesser but important degree in Europe and the Americas, and even the Middle East and Africa. In most such places, they form branch communities of devout laypeople drawn from local Taiwanese diasporas. Though preaching a religion of universal love and peace, they do so with a Taiwanese accent. They are an important way of representing the best qualities of diplomatically isolated Taiwan to the rest of the world and thus play an important role in the spread of Taiwan's "soft power."

One indication that this globalization of Taiwanese religion is at least indirectly connected with the growth of Taiwanese nationalism is the fate of the Christian churches. At the same time that socially engaged, middle class Buddhist – and also to some degree Daoist – groups had begun explosive growth, most Christian churches had started to decline in membership and vigor, with the notable exception of churches like the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, which had long been associated with Taiwanese nationalism. The Christian churches have perhaps been on the decline precisely because they had earlier gained special privileges through the connection between the KMT government and the USA during the cold war.

Patterns

Despite their differences, these three cases follow a similar historical pattern. In the context of revolution, decolonization, and cold war, authoritarian states try to establish order on agrarian societies fragmented by ascriptive corporate groups. Socially embedded religion generates the moral force that holds such groups together, although different forms of religion sometimes unite such corporate groups into larger regional unities based on ethnicity. In any case, religion poses major problems for national integration. To confront these problems, self-consciously modern, secular states employ some combination of suppression and cooptation strategies. In the short run, all of these strategies serve the purpose of achieving relatively stable social order.

In the long run, none of them succeed in eliminating or even taming religion. Religion is very resilient. It outlasts authoritarian governments. As such governments begin to crumble, old forms of socially embedded religion began to reconstitute themselves, while religious elites (influenced by global currents of thought) begin to innovate new, socially transcendent forms.

But these religious revivals and transformations take place within changed conditions of belief. Even farmers in remote rural locations are aware of many alternatives to their local gods. Moreover, labor migration loosens their ties to local community and leads them to seek orientation through new forms of religious meaning. New forms of universalistic religious visions gain popularity. These grow up in parallel with older, community embedded forms, but they often claim continuity with such forms. Sometimes they draw upon pre-existing networks of community-transcendent beliefs, like the White Lotus networks of pre-modern China. Sometimes, they gain inspiration and energy through connection with global religious movements. At least when they are appropriated by ordinary people, these forms are never purely universalistic. They are intermingled with local customs, local symbols, and to some degree also express local interests. Nonetheless, they transpose local commitments into a higher register.

Under conditions of belief where one can never take one's religious practices for granted, religious believers yearn for signs that their beliefs are on the right track. One important sign is that their kind of faith is expanding. There is thus a strong missionary impulse in all of these new universalizing movements. With the crumbling of political barriers that once confined religions in place, there is now a global scramble for souls.

Depending on the particular contexts in which they develop, new expansionist religious movements can lead to serious social and political conflict or can provide resources for reconciliation and healing. In China, the scramble for souls leads to relatively more conflict. In general, the movements direct their adherents to otherworldly concerns rather than to worldly political activity. But some of their beliefs give the government cause for concern – especially eschatological beliefs. The Falungong believes that a great millennial transformation is coming in which the good will be saved and the evil punished. Many Chinese Pentecostal Christians believe in Premillennialism, which holds that the Last Times are coming soon and that those who have accepted Jesus will be raptured up to heaven, while the world undergoes great tribulations which will end with the triumphant Second Coming of Christ. The government also worries about the public health implications of practices like faith healing. Thus it steps up efforts of surveillance and sometimes suppression. But eschatological religious movements organized through ramifying networks cannot easily be suppressed. If the government punishes particular leaders, the act only inspires members who revere martyrdom. If the government cuts off a part of the network, other shoots can quickly grow up elsewhere. The networks cannot easily be coopted. Members who expect otherworldly salvation do not need anything that the government has to give them. Despite government attempts to stop such beliefs and practices, the networks that foster them are expanding very rapidly.

In Taiwan, on the other hand, the socially engaged Buddhist movements I have described here seem to have made a positive contribution toward healing the tensions of a democratizing society. Their ideologies stress generous acceptance of all people and they motivate their members to build a better world through sustained, gradual effort. By dampening the tensions that have come from Taiwan's many conflict-producing forms of identity politics, the Buddhist movements have helped shore up the shaky foundations of Taiwan's democracy.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, the record is mixed. In places like Aceh, newly energized Islamist movements clash with newly energized Christian missionizing movements. (Such clashes of course often are intertwined with clashes over the distribution of natural resources – in Aceh's case, of petroleum.) On the other hand, movements like Dian Interfidei offer some hope for creative reconciliation between different religious communities.

Internationally, the new scramble for souls can lead to intensified conflict, especially since the universalistic but less than pure religious visions are at least in part carriers of nationalistic energies. The newly universalizing impulses do not have to lead to conflict, however. A lot depends on the content of the traditions out of which they arise and the specific context in which they evolve. In the best scenario – which one sees in the case of the socially engaged Buddhists in Taiwan – the universalization of religious visions leads to confluences of care rather than conflict.

Though in this paper I have illustrated this pattern with three case studies, I would suggest that the pattern can be seen in religious transformations throughout East and

Southeast Asia, particularly in South Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia.