

Chapter

1

An East Asian Perspective on Religion and Secularism

PRASENJIT DUARA

A project on state and secularism in Singapore must, it seems, inescapably create a canvas upon a palimpsest. In these opening remarks, I am going to talk less about the state in the title than about the very division of the secular from the religious.

Our first task is to see religion and secularism not as a given division but dynamically co-constitutive, constantly shaping and re-shaping the other. Second, this co-constitution or what I call “traffic” of the shaping and re-shaping will have to consider the original division in the West as one very important source. But the conceptual sociology of this traffic will have to come largely from the empirical evidence of Asian societies. In other words, the framework will require:

- (1) the historical impact of the global — heretofore, largely Western — history of secularization and Protestantization of Asian societies;
- (2) the historical relations of the cosmological transcendent and the everyday in our societies; and
- (3) contemporary imperatives — often from the state — to drive something as religious versus secular.

This historical-sociological framework also enables us to grasp the roles and relationships between the religious and the secular in the 20th century within a comparative framework. It is particularly useful to grasp Asian and non-Western societies which responded to the emergent notions of “religion”, “secularism” and “nation”, but were often dominated by non-monotheistic religions or cosmologies. I am a specialist of East Asia, but another part of the world with which I am somewhat familiar is the Indian sub-continent. The South Asian re-organization of the religious and the secular from the late 19th century seems, at first blush, to be radically different from the East Asian case. Yet, when we explore the underlying “traffic” between religious and secular ideas — particularly in the area of modern religious and national subjectivity — the situation becomes much more comparable. Here, I want to focus on some conceptual issues deriving from the case of China to see if we can come up with some comparabilities.

My point of departure is the work of Talal Asad. Asad has defied a universal definition of religion. He has argued that the very idea of religion itself is a modern Western invention in delineating and reifying a separate sphere. In a recent study of secularism, he develops the obverse side of this argument. He tries to show how secularism has occupied many different meanings within Western society itself and thus underscores the instability of this division (Asad 1993).

It is obviously meaningless to talk about whether or not religion existed in history; it has everything to do with how one defines the term. Martin Riesebrodt has suggested that it is possible to consider religion as a category throughout most of history and he explores this recognition through a process that he calls “referential legitimation.” Thus, when the Moghul emperor Akbar assembled the different leaders and thinkers from different traditions in his *Din Ilahi*, he was recognizing the common referents (Riesebrodt 2003). Confucianism is, of course, notoriously difficult to define as a religion if we use metaphysical criteria since Confucius was a self-declared agnostic. But Riesebrodt’s method of referential legitimation works well here to show that Confucians did recognize a class of activities and ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, etc., that indicated that they were working at least partially with an idea of religion. Thus, when Yongzheng disputed the Jesuits, he recognized the common ground and argued that

Jesus was an effort to embody *tian* in a human incarnation. This much is true and we have to consider the limits of Asad's assertion.

However, we see a breakdown of referential legitimation during the modern period with the rise of science as the principle of cosmological legitimation. Take again the case of China. Even until the late 19th century, Western scientific knowledge, first brought in by the Jesuits, was seen to have its origins in classical China. In Chinese historiography, this tendency is known as the "Chinese origins of Western science." Recently, Hu Minghui has shown how Jesuit scientific cosmography was absorbed by neo-Confucians by framing it within Chinese cosmology. This was not simply a way of nationalizing science, but bringing it within the Chinese moral and religious purview and utilizing it often for ritual purposes (e.g., modern astronomical knowledge to understand the will of heaven). While many Confucians were engaged in this way of appropriating science, others such as the anti-reformist Wo Ren warned that the spread of mathematical knowledge among Chinese literati youth in the later part of the 19th century would drive them into the arms of Christianity!

In retrospect, Wo Ren's mistake was to regard science as part of the Christian cosmology or somehow regard them as integral to each other. But while we may think of this as a historical mistake — which was to be more than cleared up during the May 4th movement — he was to some extent led into thinking so by the missionaries who not only made such claims, but occupied powerful positions in the translation and education agencies that brought modern scientific knowledge into China. Indeed, we can see the missionary effort itself as a means of affiliating Christianity with the emergent legitimacy of science. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Confucian thinkers came to believe that unless China had a national religion and science (like Japan and the West), it would not be able to build a modern nation-state.

The larger point I am trying to make here is that historical figures "mis-referencing" science as religion were not necessarily stupid. We could make the argument that the assumptions of science do occupy the same realm of categories as religion; that science does indeed make cosmological claims. Science as cosmology differentiates itself categorically from other cosmologies by its claims to demonstrable proof. Historically, however, the categorical separation of science from religion was tremendously

consequential. The older cosmologies were replaced by science in most spheres as the locus of cosmological authority and were hived off as religions that were sought to be contained in their own domains.

To be sure, this re-definition of the referential logic of religion had to be learnt — with mixed results — all over the world, but as José Casanova has persuasively argued, it did have an objective grounding in the institutional differentiation of religion — what he means by secularization — from political and economic domains all over the world. What Casanova denies is that this differentiation necessarily led to either the decline of religious belief or the privatization of religion, which happened to accompany institutional differentiation only in Western Europe. What he calls “de-privatization” and Bruce Lincoln (2003) calls the “maximizing” urge among some religions — on two sides of the de-secularizing spectrum — refer more or less to the effort of religious advocates to expand or transgress their assigned domains (Casanova 1994).

The history of the religious-secular division in the world outlined above is one that I agree with, but it is not sufficient. I do not only mean that we have to take account of historical circumstances in different parts of the world, including the historical relations between states and religions, but the narrative itself represents largely the more visible part of the transformations, particularly the separation and de-separation of religion and the secular at the level of constitutions, laws and institutions. I want to draw attention here to a less visible, pre-reflexive traffic of practices and ideas between what we call the secular and the religious.

The message I take from Asad is not that there was no “religious” phenomena in pre-modern societies, but that there was what we might call a “cosmological fusion” of these phenomena with politics, society, knowledge and perhaps even technology. The separate institutionalization of “religion” together with allied concepts such as “differentiation”, “secularization”, “disenchantment”, “privatization” and a host of different modes of unraveling may, in an initial moment, be usefully likened to the Big Bang. The Big Bang theory holds that the universe has expanded from a primordial hot and dense *initial condition* (cosmic egg) and continues to expand to this day. What is useful about this model is that it sees the unraveling as a process of expansion and production that is based on

those initial conditions. Similarly, I argue that religious elements from the cosmological fusion — as embodied yearnings, ideas and imperatives — scatter and combine dynamically with other institutions and ideas even as religion is constituted as a separate domain of life.

For instance, we have not fully grasped the significance of the fact that both Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek were Christians (Thomson 1969). The notions of religious subjectivity and citizenship were deeply interconnected especially in the way Chiang conducted the New Life movement. But let me give an example from a less famous leader in Republican China. I was reading passages from the autobiography of Feng Yuxiang, the Christian general who would baptize the troops by using a hose. Most striking here was not any deepfelt sense of religiosity or conversion experience. Nor was it instrumental. Rather, Christianity suggested to Feng ways to be a good person according to the social circumstances of the day; indeed, one might say, how to be a good citizen. Not only were the Christian people he knew non-opium smokers and ethical do-gooders, they also had an upright sense of their self — not subservient especially to imperialist authorities. He provides an example of a foreign pastor who arrived to deliver a sermon at Feng's cantonment. Accustomed to his extraterritorial rights in China, the pastor was mightily offended by Feng's Christian soldier guards' efforts to inspect his bags. However, Feng notes that the guards were neither enraged (read "Boxers") nor subservient (to imperialists), but were principled about national sovereignty. He was very proud of that (Feng 2002).

The program of inquiry that we might launch includes several questions that we can apply to this pre-reflexive traffic which constantly re-constitutes the meaning of a religious subject and a modern citizen. This traffic itself is fed by globally circulating models such as the Red Cross, global Buddhism, new religions, etc.

- (1) How do globally circulating conceptions of religious citizenship articulate with historical traditions in Asia of religious autonomy and domination?
- (2) How can we think about the relationship between the new model of citizen subjectivity that intersects with *old and new* models of religious subjectivity?

- (3) To what extent do religion and the religious subject become subordinated to the national project and subsumed by national and nationalist goals? How does the new globalization affect the nation-state's power over religious globalization and strengthening alternative bases of authority?

REFERENCES

- Asad, Talal (1993). *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Casanova, Jose (1994). *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feng, Yuxiang (2002). *Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan* (Autobiography of Feng Yuxiang). Beijing: Jie fang jun wen yi chu ban she.
- Lincoln, Bruce (2003). *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Riesebrodt, Martin (2003). Religion: Just Another Modern Western Construction? <http://martycenter.uchicago.edu/webforum/122003/riesebrodtessay.pdf>.
- Thomson, James C. (1969). *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928–1937*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.