

BOOKS

General



Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India*

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. 296 pages. Glossary, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$75.00; paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 9780691128153 (cloth); 9780691128146 (paperback).

BEGINNING WITH the seminal work of J. Z. Smith and Talal Asad, scholars have produced a vast and growing body of literature tracing the evolution of religion, both as an explicitly defined concept (MASUZAWA 2005) and as meanings that are implicit in practice (COMAROFF and COMAROFF 1991). Much of this field has focused particularly on the transformation of Western ideas in the context of mission and empire.

Peter van der Veer's new book brings two new perspectives to these conversations. The first is his juxtaposition of the historical experience of India and China. Although there is occasional mention of interaction between the two, the book is careful to develop them as two distinct but parallel cases. In doing so, he adopts as the unit of analysis the nation in the context of the emergent nation-state. Taking a cue from José CASANOVA's (1994) explication of public religion, van der Veer grounds the challenges of imperialism and intellectual globalization in aspirations to create and reform national culture. The second is to widen and also integrate the scope of inquiry from the conceptual formation of religion in binary opposition to a single antithesis (be that the secular, magical, or superstitious) into a matrix of relationally defined ideas: what he refers to as the "syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality" (9).

The book begins with a lengthy introduction of themes and parameters, then moves on to seven content chapters. The first of these discusses how Western conceptions of spirituality (as a contrast to various types of scientific rationality) became central to cultural self definition in India and China. Despite its Western origin, the idea of spirituality had a very different appeal in each of these two places: while Gandhi and Tagore defined India as essentially spiritual as a way of rejecting Western materialism, Chinese religious reform assiduously avoided appeals to spirituality. Chapter 3 examines the reformulation of tradition in the wake of Western scholarly images of religion (particularly the work of scholar of comparative religious studies Max Muller and early Sinologist James Legge) and the representation of these new images at the 1893 World Parliament of Religion. Although this iconic event has been dealt with elsewhere (KETELAAR 1990; MASUZAWA 2005; SNODGRASS 2003), this chapter brings new perspectives, particularly on Chinese participation. At the same time, since the purpose of this global event was interaction and com-

parison (Japanese Buddhists at the Parliament, for example, were generally keen to distance themselves from other Asian participants), it might have been useful to momentarily merge the Indian and Chinese cases.

Chapter 4 addresses Christian conversion, both as a personal transformation, and as one of the key moments in the imperial-religious encounter. Conversion is presented here in oppositional terms, set against caste in India, and in China against a more general backwardness that was symbolized by opium. Against these, Christianity emerged as both a model of religious modernity and a perennial outsider, the latter seen most vividly in the Christian influence on the Taiping Rebellion. Chapter 5 discusses the rise of magic as a particular antithesis to religion. As with spirituality, van der Veer shows how preexisting contempt for popular practice merged with new ideas of Weberian disenchantment and Christian religious rationality, giving birth to a series of campaigns first against superstition and later against various iterations of “false knowledge” (139). Chapter 6 deals with secularism as a political and social project, with the key moment again being the nature of the imperial encounter. Chapter 7 returns to the spiritual in the context of the bodily practices (yoga and *qigong*) that at once seek to be apolitical while at the same time laying claim to national essence, one that is adaptable to new ideas of modernity. Chapter 8 addresses the place of Muslims as an internal other in both India and China, one that is accepted into the modern nation, but in terms that are in each case a reflection of national discourse.

This book is without question ambitious. Although scholars have examined many of the component pieces of this book before, this sort of broad strokes comparison is entirely new. The book is peppered with important insights about religion, imperialism, and modernity, and the big problems of the comparative sociology of religion. It reads well and is conceptually enlightening.

At the same time, the book will not appeal equally to everyone. Although it is not intended to be a historical study as such, the occasional weakness of empirical data often gives the book an impressionistic feel. Moreover, it is built on ideas that are often disconnected from individuals and is thus difficult for the reader to understand in specific terms or to ground in historical processes. Historically speaking, the Chinese side of the comparison was frequently incomplete. To take just one example, much of the argument regarding nineteenth-century Christian conversion in China (100–105) relies on Ryan DUNCH’s (2001) excellent study of Protestants in the southern city of Fuzhou. While van der Veer’s findings on this topic are on the whole defensible, they are not necessarily typical of other parts of China, of other missionaries (particularly the Catholics, who were often painted with the same brush as the native religions), or of more recent scholarship (LIAN 2010). The result is a somewhat unsubtle characterization of what was in fact a very complex and internally diverse phenomenon.

What is sacrificed is any real statement about the causal relationship between the “imperial context” and intellectual change. Other than the fact that India was formally colonized and China was not, there is very little attention to what imperialism really meant: the specific people and structures that made these two experiences so different. Moreover, the almost complete reliance on Anglophone sources to build a case for Western intellectual influence begs the question of how typical

or deep these changes actually ran. This problem may not be so significant in the case of the Anglophone intellectual elite in India but is very much so for China, where many of the sources cited were written specifically for consumption by a Western or Westernized audience. In this reader's opinion, the inherent circularity of sources raises the danger not only of overstating the depth of Western influence, but also of overlooking the importance and uniqueness of other voices, particularly those coming from Japan.

These problems are significant, but perhaps unavoidable. This is, after all, a work of pioneering intellectual ambition. Its scale, spanning the entire imperial and post-imperial experience of two vast and complex civilizations, is without precedent. It is both a reminder of the promise of comparative religious study and a call for scholars to return to the big questions of history. That a study of such scope would ruffle some feathers is perhaps inevitable, and in any case is not likely to detract from the welcome challenge van der Veer makes to the study of religion in Asia.

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