
A book that comes out of Singapore offering perspectives from Asia on the state and secularism naturally raises the expectation that the particular nature of the Singaporean state is under consideration. This happens in one chapter by Kenneth Paul Tan. His emphasis is on the successful manipulation of cultural values in a managerial pragmatism that characterizes Singapore’s multicultural governance. Religion is seen as a potentially disruptive force that needs to be controlled but also as the basis of a civil religion of economic prosperity that is shared by all. He does not pay much attention to the actions and ideas of religious communities and their leadership in Singapore that would complicate his picture of a well-orchestrated society. What the rest of the book offers is a large number (eighteen chapters) of interesting reflections on the European philosophical literature on secularism, discussing the usual suspects, including Locke, Comte, John Stuart Mill, Rawls, Charles Taylor, and others. It is hard to discover any particularly Asian perspectives in these reflections except for the fact that the authors are Asian. Europe is also the subject of a couple of essays that deal with secularism in the European Union and, inescapably, with *laïcité* in France. These are all very competent accounts, but for the specialist there is hardly anything new here. The same is true for the essays on South Asia, but they do have the special charm that some of the major activists for an Indian brand of secularism, Swami Agnivesh and Asghar Ali Engineer, have contributed. The volume also includes essays on Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, and Egypt. The latter about Egypt by Mona Abaza contains an important account of different positions taken by Egyptian intellectuals, including the exiled Nasr Abu Zayd, about religion and secularism.

Perspectives from Asia can be best found in the essays on China. Zhao Litao notices the revival of religion in the post-Deng era. The state continues to repress unwanted religious expressions, but tolerates a larger range than before. He rightly points out that popular religion, rooted in local communities, falls largely outside of the contemporary state regulation that is focused on the five major religions. It is in this area that one has to look for interactions between secular politics and communal religious networks. In my view, a useful comparison in this volume could have been made with Communist states such as the Soviet Union or Easter European countries or Vietnam and North Korea in Asia rather than with liberal states like France, England, and the United States. This would have solved Tan Sor Hoon’s problem that the term “secularism” is seldom used to describe China. It is Communism’s atheism that is at issue here. His contribution in this volume raises the old problem of the essential secular nature of Confucianism. In his view, Confucian morality guarantees religious freedom, but this interpretation separates morality from state formation. Prasenjit Duara points out correctly that one might
want to think about the relationship between modern citizenship and old and new models of religious subjectivity. Such questions are not asked systematically in this volume, with the result that it remains a conference proceedings rather than an integrated volume.

Peter van der Veer

Peter van der Veer is director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Ethnic and Religious Diversity in Göttingen and professor-at-large at Utrecht University. He specializes in comparative work on nationalism and religion.


This is an ambitious project in which the author proposes to study recent and contemporary East Asian literature through an intraregional episteme that draws upon the commonalities shared by industrialized societies in East Asia. Any reader interested in a comparison of specific writers or texts from Japan and Taiwan will find this book worthwhile and take interest in Hillenbrand’s readings of the texts. In addition, she has performed an important service by assembling Japanese and Taiwanese works in one place and providing a useful and extensive bibliography of secondary materials. However, the reader who seeks a theoretical analysis of regionalism upon which to ground a comparison of writers or texts may be less satisfied with the author’s approach.

A project with radical ideas, the book begins with a lengthy introductory chapter (ninety pages), “The Scope of the Enquiry,” detailing the rationale for a new paradigm and introducing the main arguments and texts to be analyzed in the three chapters that follow. This chapter alone is a must-read for anyone interested in the state of scholarship in East Asian literary studies. Hillenbrand argues that area studies scholars of literature, whether philologically or theoretically inclined, typically confine themselves to the perspectives of single nation-states or remain subservient to Western and Euro-American epistemological regimes (p. 3). By doing so, they miss the overlapping histories, experiences, and solidarities that exist in East Asia today (p. 2). According to Hillenbrand, regionalism, in contrast, exploits these commonalities to seek “new and more self-referential ways of theorizing about non-Western experience” (p. 2) and to make visible distinctive