

The Religious Question in Modern China, by Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011. xi, 464 pp. US\$40.00 (cloth), US\$27.50 (paper), US\$7.00–\$27.00 (e-book).

Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer admit from the outset that their book is “an excessively ambitious project” that covers more ground than they could possibly master. However, their respective backgrounds as historian and anthropologist complement each other in such a marvelous way that their book has turned into an eminent historical survey that deserves to be mandatory reading for any historian of modern China, even—or maybe *especially*—for those who would usually shun the topic of religion.

The book is divided into two parts: “Religions and Revolutions,” and “Multiple Religious Identities: Into the Twenty-First Century,” together comprising a total of thirteen chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion. Although several chapters are at least partly based on work that the authors have published before, this in no way obstructs the focus or narrative flow of the book. To the contrary, each chapter expertly paves the way for the next. Topics are carefully and lucidly introduced in an apparent attempt to engage scholars with provocative questions that should provide food for academic thought, while at the same time maintaining the kind of clarity that even undergraduates will find accessible.

Before offering any specific appraisal of the book’s content, let me point out one issue that I think is a missed opportunity to find an even wider audience. While the structure of the book situates the Chinese “religious question” (*zongjiao wenti* 宗教問題) almost entirely within the realm of modern politics and society, including the scientific and other ideological assumptions that come alongside, the title of the book will not immediately appeal to people working on anything but Chinese religion. In order to avoid a book that ends up preaching to the converted, why not signal to readers that the book does, in fact, do so much more than merely offer some new insights into the development of Chinese religion in the modern age? Why not add a subtitle that explains the extent to which this book shows just how much the study of religion can

contribute to an understanding of the modern Chinese state and the society that it governs? After all, perhaps the most convincing contribution of this book is its insistence on the profound religious overtones and undercurrents that flow through the (ongoing) development of modern Chinese history.

Chapter 1 paints a picture of the late Qing “religious landscape” in such a manner that it prepares the reader for chapter 2 about the ways in which the building of the modern state affected this religious landscape. In broad brushstrokes, the picture of Chinese religion is painted as a “coherent system” (20) that finds its central nodes functionally represented by the local temple. As the authors define it, the temple effectively was “the meeting place for a community constituted through alliance with its saints: local heroes, healing gods and goddesses, or ancestors, who all embodied local identity and history” (23). The special relevance of the “territorial communities” that revolve around these temples is established when the authors explain that all such temples and their communities “were independent, not subjected to any authority” (24). It is from this starting point that the politics of modernization can be ushered in, with special emphasis on how indigenous anti-clerical sentiments in Confucian fundamentalism coalesced with the foreign rhetoric of anti-superstition. One of the results was that many temples were confiscated or destroyed, sacrificed on the altar of “education” and “progress.”

Chapters 3 and 4 elaborate on the political redefinition of the religious landscape on the basis of the imported category “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教), particularly as it was adopted within discourses of modernization and science. Many religious traditions were secularized and repackaged within new categories that could appeal to urban elites, such as “traditional medicine,” “martial arts,” “meditation,” etc. Chapter 5 introduces a fascinating dynamic between state repression and local resistance. Because the city was reinvented by modernists “as the forefront of progress and enlightenment,” a great divide emerged with rural China, which effectively became “the conservatory of religious practices and observances” (130). Chapter 6 shows that under CCP rule “the Buddhist and Taoist clergy, which had traditionally been organically

linked to local communities by providing ritual services to their temples and to individuals, was now completely cut off” from their environment (160). The result was “the complete evisceration of both religions as social entities” (159). In their stead, chapter 7 shows, the state sacralized itself, moralized its governance, and thus invented its own “political religiosity” (168).

In part 2, chapter 8 describes some of the alternative trajectories that religion has taken in other parts of the Chinese world. Chapter 9 traces the evolution of family values as expressed in practices of filial piety, practices the authors define as “the sanctuary of traditional religion” (225). Chapter 10 analyzes the revival of communal (temple) religion in the late twentieth century. Chapter 11 continues with the evolution of modern religiosities in urbanized settings, including vegetarianism, bodily cultivation movements, and lay Buddhism. Chapter 12 treats a large number of official discourses and institutions of religion, while chapter 13, finally, surveys the implications within the sphere of geopolitics caused by Chinese policies on Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

If the scope of this book is breathtaking in its own right, the authors achieve a feat no less impressive in terms of the scholarship they rely on. It is hard not to appreciate the carefully crafted narrative that guides the reader through the various religious aspects of modern Chinese history. Perhaps some will decry the rather dry and factual manner in which the authors take the reader by the hand. It is, however, a firm and reliable hand. This book should be read religiously; it will no doubt become part of the academic canon for those who study the fate of the “religious landscape” of modern China. One can only hope that scholars who study “secular” history—an approach that Goossaert and Palmer reveal to be impossible—will notice this book.

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