THIS COLLECTION starts from the premise that religious traditions are not static objects to be described and cataloged so as to arrive at an eternally valid knowledge of them. The various encyclopedias or dictionaries of religion and religions now available are very useful reference works, but they may also lull their readers into a false sense of possessing authoritative, concise, and immutable knowledge about particular religious traditions. In fact, what such reference works provide are abstractions of traditions, summaries of core beliefs and practices that supposedly remain more or less constant over time and across different geographic areas. Such abstractions have their value—and we ourselves are certainly responsible for our own fair share of them. As ideal types, they can help us structure our perception of empirical reality, leading to an understanding of the religious phenomena with which we are faced.

At the same time, we must not confuse these ideal types with the empirical reality. There will always exist a—greater or smaller—gap between a tradition’s abstraction and its concretization in life. A lived religious tradition is a social construction that is conditioned by many factors, including, but not limited to, class, political system, climate, economic conditions, textual traditions, and institutional structures. As these factors keep changing, so do religions, even as they themselves become factors in the social construction of other areas of culture. Seen in this way, religions (like all of culture) are not things but dialectical processes, parts of the ongoing endeavor of human beings to draw on various cultural resources in order to make sense of and
to inject meaning into the world that surrounds them and to enable them
to live and work together.

What is true for religion is equally true for academic theories of religious
change. Much scholarly analysis has gone into creating theories of modern-
ization and its effects on religious life, practice, and belief. However, an ideal
type of “modernization” runs the same risk as an ideal type of any given reli-
gious tradition: the risk of providing a mirage of unity and singularity for
what might really be a host of local conditions and phenomena that could
more fruitfully be studied in the plural.

The assumption that a single model of modernization, generated by
analysis of data coming primarily from the West, could help understand
what is going on with the religions of East Asia has been questioned in recent
years. Tong Shijun (2000), for example, examines the applicability of Jürgen
Habermas’ theories of modernization to China and calls attention to debates
regarding modernization that took place in the early twentieth century
among Chinese intellectuals. They equated “modernization” with “Westen-
rization” and utilized the native philosophical categories of ti (substance) and
yong (function) to frame their questions: Were cultural and technological
importations from the West simply manifestations of a yong that did not
affect the Chinese ti, or were yong and ti so interrelated that the one
necessarily affected the other? In other words, could one import Western
technology without becoming Westernized? Tong himself concludes that a
Western theory such as Habermas’ can, indeed, be utilized to understand
China’s transformation in the twentieth century—if properly qualified.

Another example is Stevan Harrell’s (1994) anthropological look at
recreational patterns in modern Taiwan. While noting that urban Taiwanese
go out and play in much the same ways as Westerners, Harrell raises the
question: Is this really Westernization, or is it simply that urban folk who
need to get away from the bustle of city life find their activities necessarily
channeled into certain choices? In doing so, he questions whether one can,
as the Chinese intellectuals studied by Tong did, equate modernization with
Westernization. Both Harrell and Tong lead us to question whether one can
look at the way(s) in which Western culture has modernized and use it
either as a model for (the early Chinese intellectuals reported by Tong) or a
model of (Harrell) the process in China.

While the essays included in this volume do not by and large present
theoretical considerations of this sort (a notable exception being the pieces
by Jochim and by Nadeau and Chang), they still contribute in important
ways to the exploration of these questions by providing concrete data for
further analysis. After all, the purpose of theories is to interpret data, and, without data, theories become mere speculation without application.

A dynamic view of religion and modernization as ongoing processes (as outlined above) makes them harder to grasp, a decided disadvantage if one seeks quick and easy certainty. It means that one must remain open to the presence of plurals where one is tempted to postulate singulars. However, such a perspective is not a sophisticated academic nicety but an urgent necessity in the present world. This introduction was written in the American Midwest and in Washington, D.C., about four months after the terrorist attacks on the United States of 11 September 2001. One important strand of the public debate that transpired in the intervening months centered on the terrorists’ claim to define a normative Islam that justified their actions. Could they conceivably stand for Islam? Or was theirs such a distorted interpretation of the tradition that it did not really represent Islam at all? The mainstream view seemed to champion the latter position, claiming that “real Islam” was peace loving and could never be utilized to justify mass murder.

Scholars of religion must distance themselves from these turf wars over the definition of “real Islam” (in the singular) and, instead, analyze the situation by using plurals. We must look at the al-Qaeda version of Islam as one among many existing concretizations of the tradition and examine its constituent elements and determining factors. Only then will we arrive at an appropriate understanding of the terrorists’ vision of Islam and their particular reading of Islamic traditions. At the same time, it is commonly acknowledged that Islamic (as well as other types of) fundamentalism come into being as a response to modernity, and so the scholar must also determine which concretization of modernity is operative. (On this, see Lawrence [1989] and Marsden [1980].) It is the scholar’s task to provide an understanding of the way in which the religious tradition and the process of modernization manifest themselves; it is the policymaker’s task to tackle Islamicist terrorism on the basis of such a nuanced understanding of its character and nature. Any approach tied to a monolithic concept of a single “Islam” or a single “modernity” will lead nowhere and remove any basis for dealing realistically with this brand of religious fanaticism.

What does this have to do with religions in the prosperous and peaceful island nation of Taiwan, whose potential for religiously motivated violence seems to be almost nonexistent? While the political stakes may not be as high here, the same approach to the study of religious life is required as in the Islamic world (or anywhere else, for that matter). We must forgo the singulars in favor of plurals to arrive at an understanding of the religious
experience of Taiwan both in the here and now and in historical perspective. For example, arriving in Taiwan with an abstract idea of “Buddhism,” we will right away be faced with a range of “Buddhisms,” some of which are addressed in the present volume: the Venerable Xingyun’s Buddha Light Mountain; the Venerable Zhengyan’s Tzu Chi Foundation; the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China; the miraculous intervention of the bodhisattva Guanyin in the lives of lay Buddhists as recounted in the devotional literature; the “popular Buddhism” of the so-called vegetarian sects (Zhaijiao). All these are specific concretizations of “Buddhism” that must be understood in and from the sociocultural context that shaped their construction.

The main purpose of the present volume will be the presentation of such plurals and the examination of their development over time, mostly focused on the twentieth century. If we take the proposition that religion is an ongoing dialectical process seriously, we should not expect any of the religious traditions on Taiwan to have stood still. In fact, throughout its recorded history, the island of Taiwan has provided an environment highly conducive to accelerated change, probably more so than most other regions of East Asia. This makes the island a fascinating case example for students of religious life, who by the very nature of their object of study must always be students of religious change.

As Charles B. Jones outlines in his essay, significant immigration to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland began only in the seventeenth century, leading to a gradual pushing back of the aboriginal population from the plains into the mountains and the expulsion of Dutch traders from their fortified positions. Coming under the formal political control of the Qing dynasty only in 1683, Taiwan remained a frontier region whose particular geographic and political conditions led to the formation of social structures quite distinct from those of the immigrants’ home districts on the mainland, principally in Fujian and Guangdong provinces. Never fully integrated culturally into the Qing empire, Taiwan came under Japanese rule in 1895, launching it again into a new direction of development, whose main features are analyzed by Jones. The year 1945 saw the island’s retrocession to the Republic of China, followed by the Nationalist government’s 1949 relocation from the mainland to Taipei in the wake of its defeat in the Chinese civil war. With Chiang Kai-shek’s government came up to two million refugees, among them many religious activists—learned Buddhist monks, the Daoist Celestial Master, Christian missionaries of many denominations, proselytizers of popular sects such as the Way of Unity (Yiguan Dao). This period also saw the imposition of martial law and restrictions on the formation of
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nongovernment organizations, a situation that lasted until the late 1980s. The combination of new government policies and this influx of religious personnel and their expertise had profound effects on the religious life of the Taiwanese, stimulating both nativist resistance and religious diversification. By the 1960s, Taiwan’s economic miracle set in and led to a thorough reorganization of existing social structures. Industrialization and urbanization went hand in hand, bringing about a huge transformation that affected all areas of social life, including Taiwanese religions.

The present volume includes eleven essays dealing with different aspects of the religious process in Taiwan. All except Jones’ focus on developments since 1945, each singling out a particular tradition or aspect thereof. Together they provide pieces for the mosaic of Taiwanese religions. They do not provide the whole picture—something that is impossible, not just because of the necessarily limited scope of a collection such as this one, but also because the mosaic’s design is constantly changing even as we are laying these pieces. What these essays give us are glimpses of religious construction as viewed by dedicated scholars in their respective fields of inquiry. Let us take a look at the contributions of each before presenting a few tentative conclusions, suggestions for “lessons to be learned” from this effort.

IN THE OPENING CHAPTER, Charles B. Jones describes the state of religion in Taiwan prior to the end of World War II and the return of Taiwan to Chinese sovereignty. Like Pas’ essay, it does not confine its remarks to any single religious tradition but aims to give a comprehensive overview of the pre-1945 religious situation. This accomplishes two tasks: First, it gives readers some idea of what actually changed on the religious scene in the postwar period (which the other contributors cover in depth) by letting them know what it changed from. Second, it alerts readers to the fact that some of the changes reported in other essays had their beginnings during the Japanese period or even before, in particular those changes that are based in social processes such as modernization and urbanization or in technological advances.

Julian Pas’ essay takes up where Jones’ leaves off, detailing transformations in the general religious scene in Taiwan as temples and religious organizations responded to the political and economic situation as it unfolded after 1945. Pas focuses primarily on the effects of the “economic miracle” of the 1970s and 1980s, a boom time to which religions responded with increased activities in a number of arenas: temple construction; more elaborate and media-driven rituals; entrepreneurship; competition; and
even a little chicanery. Both Jones' and Pas' essays provide a historical overview and help contextualize the remaining essays, which concentrate on developments within specific religious traditions.

The remaining essays probe aspects of religious change within individual religious traditions. With a certain degree of overlap from one essay to the next, the order is roughly Confucianism, popular religion, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and aboriginal traditions.

The essay by Christian Jochim looks at developments in Confucianism, a religion (or moral worldview) that pervades Chinese thought and history, and asks: Who are the carriers of this tradition in the modern period? What persons or associations have taken it on themselves to bring the Confucian tradition into the modern world, and by what strategies have they sought to adapt it to the exigencies of modern urban life? Jochim thus demonstrates the vitality and flexibility of an ancient tradition as it found its place in the last half of the twentieth century.

Next, Philip Clart explores similar processes in a group that straddles the line between Confucianism and popular religion. In discussing the phenomenon of shanshu, morality books dictated by deities to mediums in ritual settings in order to transmit their instructions and teachings, Clart shows one way in which a fundamentally Confucian mode of morality has been carried forward into modern times by processes very different from the more “rationalist” agencies reported by Jochim. At the same time, he demonstrates how the contents of these books vary between the 1920s and the 1980s in response to clear differences in the local economic and social structuring of family life, both in the content of the morality and in the style in which the books argue for the acceptance of their vision.

Paul R. Katz stays with the topic of popular religion, focusing on the cult of the Royal Lords (wangye). He provides additional material on the development of popular religion in Taiwan prior to 1945 as a way of contextualizing postwar developments and heightening the contrast between pre- and post-1945 features. Katz’ essay will give the reader an idea of the ways in which such forces as government involvement, the rise of a tourist industry, and modern media coverage have all affected local temple festivals.

The following essay, by the noted Taiwanese scholar Lee Fong-mao, bridges the line between popular religion and Daoism. Focusing on case examples of Daoist priestly families in central Taiwan, Lee demonstrates that the symbiotic relation of popular religion and Orthodox One Daoism has been little affected by postwar social change or by deliberate attempts at restructuring Taiwanese Daoism triggered by the relocation of the Celestial Master from the mainland to Taiwan. Orthodox One Daoism continues to
play a key role in the religious life of local, subethnically defined communities and to serve as a viable and vital cultural repository within a rapidly modernizing society. In this way, Lee’s essay serves to alert the reader that, academic preoccupation with issues of modernization notwithstanding, key aspects of pre-1945 religion have endured.

The following two essays, by André Laliberté and Barbara E. Reed, shift the focus to Buddhism in the postwar period—but from two very different angles. Laliberté focuses exclusively on political issues and traces the evolution of the relations that three prominent Buddhist organizations (the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China, Fuguangshan, and the Tzu Chi Foundation) have had with the government since 1945. Reed, on the other hand, looks at the devotional life of modern Buddhist laypeople, showing how a specific form of literature, one that gives testimony to the ways in which the bodhisattva Guanyin has granted prayers and changed lives, has changed in response to modernization and new social conditions.

The next two essays, by Murray A. Rubinstein and Huang Shiun-wei, round out the collection with a consideration of the politically active Presbyterian Church on Taiwan and of changes in the religious life of Taiwan’s aboriginal Ami tribe. While taking as their point of departure very different religious contexts, both share one theme in common: the part played by Christianity in forming the identity of a group of people on the island over against a perceived and threatening other. In each case, Christianity, a religion long considered foreign to the Chinese scene, is taken up as a component of a group’s cultural identity in order to distinguish it from a dominant other. In the case of the Presbyterians, it forms part of their self-identification as “Taiwanese” as opposed to the “mainlanders” who arrived with Chiang Kai-shek after 1949 and proceeded to dominate the island’s political life, to the detriment of the previous Chinese immigrant groups. In Huang’s essay, aboriginal tribes, which predate even the earliest Chinese settlers, take up both Protestant and Catholic Christianity as a component of their identity over against all the Han Chinese, whether “Taiwanese” or “mainlander.”

However, these two essays also touch on several other themes of their own. Rubinstein recaps the history of Presbyterian missions in Taiwan both before and after 1945 and traces the evolution of the church from a mission field dominated by Canadian and American missionaries to a fully indigenized church representing the interests of both Taiwanese selfhood and the gospel. Huang reports changes in the forms of Ami social rituals, concentrating mainly on weddings, as a way of exploring the processes by which a people form their identity in a dynamic manner, one that takes in, adapts,
and, finally, assimilates elements of an outside culture, ultimately coming to understand the new elements as integral parts of their own culture.

The final essay, by Randall Nadeau and Chang Hsun, takes an approach that is different from that of the preceding essays, focusing attention, not on changes in the religious scene per se, but on changes in the scholarly interpretation of religion on the island. Nadeau and Chang call attention to the phases through which the study of religion has gone, on the part of both Western and Chinese/Taiwanese scholars, detailing the political exigencies and ideological commitments that colored their methods and conclusions. Along the way, Nadeau and Chang also provide much useful information on religion itself, in terms of settlement and kinship patterns that are peculiar to Taiwan as well as the development (or disintegration) of the “worship circle” as a way of understanding popular religion. In this way, they show that changes have occurred since World War II both on the side of the observer and on the side of the observed.

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A WORD WILL BE in order at this point about some of the things that this volume does not do. As a collection of essays by specialists rather than a general history, it necessarily omits many phenomena, not because they are unimportant, but because this particular collection of authors lacks specialists in these areas of study. Even where a particular religion is covered in one of these essays, it should be understood that the particular strand presented does not stand metonymically for the tradition as a whole. For instance, while Rubinstein’s essay covers the Presbyterian Church in depth, the reader should understand that other mainstream Christian groups, such as Roman Catholics, or even other Protestant groups, such as Methodists and Episcopalians, have their own histories and concerns.

It should, therefore, be apparent that the sum of material omitted significantly outweighs the sum of material included. We would like to remind the reader of the image of the mosaic mentioned earlier. What this volume offers are pieces of an ever-changing picture. The purpose of those pieces is not only to give a view of significant sections of the picture at a particular point in time but also to illuminate the nature of the picture as a whole. To put it in less metaphoric terms, this volume is meant to provide glimpses of important aspects of religious life in Taiwan and their development in the modern period while, at the same time, contributing to our overall knowledge of religion in Taiwan—and of religion in general. Its underlying concerns with religion(s) and modernization(s) are not specific to Taiwan but
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are central issues in the study of religion anywhere. The data and findings offered in the present collection should, therefore, be useful in comparative approaches to an understanding of religion in the modern world.

WORKS CITED


