

Public Religion in Contemporary Taiwan: The Case of Foguangshan and Its Implication towards a Sociological Understanding of Modern Religions*

Michael Chan

Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the religious resurgent phenomenon of contemporary Taiwan by examining the modern monastery of Foguangshan under Jose Casanova's model of public religion. In placing Foguangshan in this model this paper tries to argue that the conclusion made by Casanova from his case studies—that only public religions at the civic level of modern societies are compatible with modern universalistic principles and modern differentiated structures—is also a valid exposition of the way Foguangshan deprivatizes and infiltrates into the Taiwanese public society; but local contingency factors also play significant role in diverting Foguangshan to arrive at this same conclusion along different paths. The similarities and discrepancies of Casanova's model highlighted by Foguangshan's case study provide a glance of the applicability of his model in a different cultural setting, and a viable way for a better understanding of the process of secularization and religious adaptation towards modernization in a Chinese context.

Keywords: public religion, secularization, religious change, modernization, Foguangshan

Michael Chan is a researcher and adjunct lecturer for different universities in Hong Kong. He teaches undergraduate courses on comparative religions as well as other topics relating religion and contemporary society.

* This article was presented at the 9th Young Scholar Symposium of Buddhist Studies and International Conference on the Studies of Chinese Buddhism, 2014.

Introduction

The end of the martial law in the late 1990s has led to a resurgence of religious activities in the democratizing society of Taiwan, with the emergence of the Buddhist communities one of the standouts among this religious resurgence in post-militarized Taiwan. Foguangshan has grasped this opportunity to extent its organization in an exponential pace, building hundreds of temples and branches across the island and stretching into many domains of the community, with its followers today reaching up to millions in Taiwan and worldwide.

There are different explanations for the emergence of this religious resurgence among the religious and Buddhist communities. Nevertheless theoretically, the expansion of these contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist organizations along other religious communities in modern Taiwan seems to raise questions about whether the process of secularization is happening in this society, and ultimately challenges the application of the concept in a Chinese context. If we follow Jose Casanova in conceptualizing secularization in its three main aspects of social differentiation, decline of religious belief and practice, and privatization,¹ the Taiwan religious resurgence seems to defy any of these claims. The increasing number of religious communities and memberships is in opposition to the religious decline thesis in particular, the growing exposure of these religious communities throughout Taiwan, and the increasing role they play across different domains of the society also casts doubt whether the process of differentiation and deprivatization is an effective way to describe the religious satiation on the island.²

1 Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19–20.

2 It is vital to make it clear early in this essay that the understanding of secularization adapted here does not emphasize on the aspect of an increasing decrease of religious practices in a society, and certainly is not affiliated with the thesis that relates modernization to an irreversible trend of religious decline. Secularization here is used more as an analytical tool in understanding religious change within modern societies