

Taiwan and Global Religious Trends

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This paper will discuss Taiwan's relationship to two of the most important global trends in religion over the twentieth century: secularization and religionization. Both processes crossed national and denominational boundaries to affect much of the world's spiritual life. Secularization refers here to the separation of religion from daily life (rather than to total despiritualization, as the term is sometimes used). As a state project, this spread rapidly with the emulation of Western constitutions in East Asia and elsewhere. Examples from field research in Lukang will illustrate how the secularization project affected Taiwanese religion beginning in the Japanese period.

The second trend is religionization, which refers to the processes leading people to become self-conscious about their religious behavior. This can be seen in the rapid world-wide spread of new understandings of Islam and Christianity in the twentieth century. In Taiwan, the more relevant development has been the rapid expansion of new forms of Buddhism.

Taiwan's reception of these global trends has been shaped by its unique historical, economic and political experience. First, the relatively low levels of religious institutionalization have allowed flexible and rapid religious evolutions. Second, religious resources survived colonial and authoritarian control better than on the mainland, leading to different patterns over the last two decades. Third, the rapid market successes led to a combination of commercialization and market celebration with countervailing religious tendencies toward moral recuperation from the ills of the market. The paper also argues that secularization itself is one of the main causes of religionization, because it pushes religion to develop forms that can be recognized and supervised by the state.