

**religious  
ferment in asia**

**Studies on Asia, Second Series (Volume II-1969)**  
**Grant K. Goodman, General Editor**

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ferment in asia**



Edited by Robert J. Miller

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.S93  
ser. 2  
v. 2

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Printed in the United States of America  
Designed by Fritz Reiber

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Miller, Robert James 1923-      comp.  
    Religious ferment in Asia.

(Studies on Asia, 2d ser., v. 2)

"Most of the papers . . . were originally presented at the Midwestern Conference on Asian Studies (1969)."

1. Asia—Religion—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, 18th, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, 1969.

II. Tide. II. Series.

DS2.S8 2dser., vol. 2 [BL1035]

915'.008s

ISBN 0-7006-0111-2

[200'95]

73-11401

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

For many years investigators attempted to create *elegant* theories, descriptions, and systems definitions. . . . The aim was to obtain a neat, apt, fastidious selection. . . . The concept of elegance conflicts with the facts of life in many systems, which can be inherently messy. To eliminate such "messiness" in the name of simplicity destroys one of the essential characteristics of the system to be defined.<sup>1</sup>

The system under consideration here is religion, notoriously a difficult subject for analysis and one whose essential characteristics are still debated. At times our authors attempt to explain processes that may have their beginnings in the minds of individuals, that unfold in the interplay of movements and ideas, or that result in conflict between segments of some system. At such times the inherent complexity—messiness—of the system or systems under discussion becomes evident.

In this volume we seek to illustrate essential characteristics of a system or systems in ferment, in the broad area of Asia. There is no overriding theoretical or disciplinary framework imposed to simplify the complexity that results. Religion shades into politics; secular actions share boundaries with religious actions in apparent or momentary identity; individuals and groups manipulate, codify, and exemplify symbols drawn from

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1. Van Court Hare, *Systems Analysis: A Diagnostic Approach*, Harbrace Series in Business & Economics (New York, 1967), pp. 155-56.

the popular, visceral "religious" beliefs of their time. Always the focus is on religion, however; our contributors avoid the temptation to venture off into general discussions of social, political, or economic change per se.

Surprisingly, considering that most of the papers in this volume were originally presented at the Midwestern Conference on Asian Studies (1969), certain emphases appear at the very beginning that suggest an underlying unity of approaches among the authors. Themes set forth in the Introduction are elaborated in part or whole by other authors. The politicalization of religious values and organizations is one such theme; another lies in the disparate reactions of urbanizing and of rural populations toward attempts to modify the traditional patterns of life, or in their views of what really constitutes tradition. An associated theme is the simplification of traditional religious doctrine, a process accelerated by the use of contemporary technology and media. Some themes, subsidiary in the Introduction, are more fully developed in subsequent papers. Two such themes are, in fact, the subjects of whole essays: the selective use of tradition by renewing or revitalizing movements; and the process by which religious imperatives become viewed and used as secular ethics, understood as nothing more than the facts of life.

The prevalence of these various themes throughout a set of conference papers is certainly not the result of "neat, apt, fastidious selection." It suggests either extraordinary prescience on the part of the participants, or perhaps an underlying grasp of

the "essential characteristics of the system" under observation. The organization of the papers emerges naturally, even though it is produced deliberately. From individuals acting as distillers of fermented ideas, we move to the products of fermentation—distillations—as seen in movements, organizations, and part-societies, some becoming in turn distillers of ferment, producing new ferment. At the end of each section we present a paper posing a general theoretical approach to some of the problems raised in the section. In each section we explore examples of agitated, obvious ferment, and of quiet, slow, sometimes non-visible ferment. As our Introduction so aptly puts it, we must include *both* within our system as we seek to define it, for unless we are able to see the ferment sometimes hidden in apparent stability, "we will all too often see religious ferment where there is only momentary agitation without ultimate significance; and we will run the risk of failing to discern the significant ferment that frequently, in a quiet fashion, renews the traditional while incorporating the new and modern into itself."

Robert J. Miller  
New Delhi  
August 1971



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