

References

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MYENCKYO SEO, *State Management of Religion in Indonesia*. London: Routledge, 2013. 170 pp.

This thought provoking book on the complex relations between Muslims and Christians in Central Java is a timely contribution to a growing body of research examining interreligious interactions in Southeast Asia (Jones, Leng and Mohamad 2009; Hauser-Schäublin and Harnish 2014). Myengkyo Seo skilfully weaves together extensive statistical data with ethnographic accounts to produce a sociological study of religion that speaks powerfully to contemporary issues of political identity in Indonesia at both the micro and macro levels. Building on landmark studies of religious conversion practices (ex. Rambo 1993), Seo illustrates the social complexities of ‘changing’ one’s belief system and challenges readers to consider conversion as much more than a matter of faith and spirituality.

In the introduction, Seo sets up his analysis of Christian/Muslim interactions in relation to Indonesia’s unique form of secular government and history of deplorable interreligious violence. Indonesia is the world’s most populous Muslim nation, and even in Central Java where there is a relatively robust Church body, Christians account for only a small fraction of the population. In response to violent atrocities, Seo argues that government secularism is now a means to “manage religions and their majority-minority relations” (p. 3). The author describes interview strategies with Muslim converts to Christianity (p. 15), which he employs as a methodological tool to understand how such “management” worked at the micro level. The qualitative approach as described is well conceived, however, the divisive nature of conversion in Indonesia forces one to consider potential shortcomings in the data, such as normative responses from interviewees regarding their motivations for conversion.

Chapters 1 and 2 function in tandem to establish the socio-political foundation upon which Seo’s main theoretical arguments are based. Chapter 1 provides

a thorough contextualisation of Christianity in Indonesia, with a specific focus on how this religious minority is geographically and politically situated in Central Java. Several graphs assist the reader in navigating a plethora of demographic statistics. There are, however, no graphs or statistics regarding the minority-majority religious makeup of Central Java itself. A more comprehensive examination of these numbers would give readers a clearer sense of the relationship between the area under consideration and the broader national context. Chapter 2 addresses a number of key political events that led to the formation of a secular national government built upon a belief in ‘one supreme God.’ Seo utilises this historical framework as a means to understand periods of large scale conversion to state sanctioned religions, most notably Christianity.

Building upon this concise and pithy socio-historical account, Seo shifts the reader’s attention to “the consequences of conversion to Christianity in Muslim society” (p. 59). Chapter 3 is thus an account of Muslim responses to the expansion of Christianity in Central Java, the violence that sometimes ensued, and the manner in which the Indonesian government intervened. A graph provided in this chapter (p. 61) is an impactful visual representation of sharp increases in church development that corresponded to critical periods in Indonesian political history, eventually forming the basis for interreligious violence. One of these developmental periods (1925–29), however, is unaccounted for and future work ought to address how these years of church expansion relate to Seo’s broader arguments. Regardless, a clear linkage is made between practices of religious conversion and Muslim-Christian conflict by way of what the author refers to as a “genealogy” of violence (p. 65). By situating the process of religious demographic change in terms of a political and economic struggle, a general discourse of conversion is further established, not so much as a matter of spiritual phenomenology, but as a means of situating groups of individuals within broader national and international imaginaries.

Chapter 4 examines the policies of one particular “historic” denomination, the *Gereja Kristen Jawa* (the GKJ, or Javanese Christian Church), as a direct response to conflict with the surrounding religious majority. The GKJ was founded in 1931 as an offshoot of Dutch Reformed churches in Java and today is one of the largest Christian denominations in Indonesia. Seo argues that the porosity of GKJ’s interreligious boundaries enabled it to build “a solid foundation in the heartland of Muslim Java” (83). Furthermore, he notes the role of contextualised theologies in this process is a model one finds mirrored in other indigenous Indonesian churches, such as the GKPB in Bali (Wiebe 2014).

Chapters 5 and 6 investigate the role of two issues – land claims and interreligious marriage – as vehicles for the realisation of majority/minority religious negotiations. In the case of a dispute over land rights in Salatiga, Java, Seo draws attention to “how a legal issue transcended the boundary between religion and politics” (p. 108). In particular, he highlights the local association between Christianity, colonialism, and Western domination, and how this has profoundly shaped GKJ’s social policies, particularly with regard to evangelisation. Because of such scepticism, GKJ has had to reorient its social outreach programmes to

focus more on capital needs (such as education and health care), rather than trying to expand the borders of the church through aggressive proselytising. These observations from Central Java are congruent with other recent research regarding the shifting nature of evangelical projects (ex. Clarke 2013). Chapter 6 offers keen observations about the function of interreligious marriage as a means to maintain family solidarity and as a modality in the realisation of national citizenship. Seo's examination of gender in such marital contexts flows contrary to "the myths of Christianization and gender in Muslim Java" (p. 137), and provides valuable fodder for those considering the relationship between gender, religion, and marital practices.

This text offers readers a critical perspective on religious conversion within the context of Muslim-Christian relations in Central Java. More importantly, it highlights policy developments that have been institutionalised by GKJ in an effort to seek peaceable and tenable solutions to a cycle of religious strife and violence. These practical and socio-politically informed solutions may be of use to other scholars, religious leaders, and laity as points of departure in similar situations of interreligious violence around the globe. Seo's contribution to the study of religion in Indonesia is, therefore, not only academically sound but a work with applied meaning for contemporary processes of interreligious negotiation.

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