Book review: Christianity and the state in Asia. Complicity and conflict

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man, then it certainly does sustain the rather austere analysis of Butterfield’s
religious and intellectual imperatives given above. More than this, and more
important than this, the end results fully justify Michael Bentley’s immense labour
on the subject, producing a study which is a pleasure to read as well as an
education. This is a splendid book.

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Christianity and the state in Asia. Complicity and conflict. Edited by Julius Bautista and
Francis Khek Gee Lim. (Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy,
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Much has been made in recent years of a ‘southern shift’ in global Christianity,
away from the weakening Christian institutions of the global north and towards
Latin America and Africa, where in many regions Christianity’s demographic and
cultural strength is on the increase. Asia appears as something of an anomaly in
this north-south model, its Christians more often than not greatly outnumbered by
those of other religions (or none), facing governmental ambivalence or even
hostility. From this difficult, complex situation, comes the ‘complicity and conflict’
explored in this multi-disciplinary set of essays. The core contention here is that
models of ‘southern’ Christianity based in the Latin American and African
experiences simply do not apply in Asia, least of all the idea that Christianity
functions largely independently of state structures: instead, so the argument goes,
Christianity gets its diversity in Asia precisely from the multifarious ways in which,
over many decades, it has had to work with (sometimes helping to bring about the
demise of) a broad range of political conditions all with long and tangled historical
roots. One might ask whether amidst this great diversity in the region the concept
of ‘Asian Christianity’ really makes sense at all. Perhaps wisely, this volume avoids
pushing its luck here, instead focusing mostly on telling examples of the
relationship between Christianity and the state in particular countries or
subregions: south-east Asia, Japan, Tibet, India, China, the Philippines,
Singapore and South Korea. The examples are well chosen, ranging from religious
and cultural dimensions of post-war reconstruction (Japan) and the aspiring
secularism of a post-colonial state (India), to the Catholic Church’s interventions
in politics and its attempt to cast what the state would like to see as a public health
issue (HIV/AIDS in the Philippines) as one of sexual morality and therefore part
of its ‘territory’. The chapters here are brief, engaging, and come with useful
bibliographies, making this a worthwhile introductory offering for a global
Christianity audience (especially given the general predominance of work on
Africa and Latin America), an ‘afterword’ for students of colonial-era Christian
mission, and possibly good material for political scientists looking for case studies
of how minority religious groups interact with states.

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