

Modernist Reformers in Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism, 1865-1935: Peripheral Geoculture in the Modern World-System

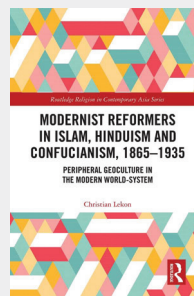
By Christian Lekon

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The history of religious reform movements across the world represent the specific socio-political requirements of different time and space. Christian Lekon's *Modernist Reformers* takes the reader on a deep journey into the makings of the various realities of present day religious understandings of Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism with the help of concepts such as the Weberian Ideal type and Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of geocultures in Modern World Systems (MWS).

This book delves into the lives and experiences of seven activists-cum-reformers from the 19th-20th century in bringing major world religion into compliance with global modernity through the reinterpretation and reformation of traditions. In particular, Lekon focuses on three main figures: Jamal ad-Din Afghani (1838-1897), Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) and K'ang Yu-wei (1858-1927) who are, respectively, the 19th century religious reformers of Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism, and examines the process of the making of their worldviews through the Quran, the Vedas and the Confucian classics.



Others personalities include, for Islam, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), for Hinduism, Swami Shradhdhananda (1857-1926), and for Confucianism, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873-1929). While accounting for the similarities in the ideas of these reformers, Lekon expounds their rationale as the expression of peripheral geocultures (centrist liberalism, anti-systemic movements, positivism) in coherence with MWSs. The book also finds a subtle link between these geocultures and their present-day fundamentalist successors.

The first three chapters provide separate, chronological narratives of the lives, times and ideas of the seven reformers. Each of these chapters begins with a brief overview of the religion in question and ends with short accounts of the respective reformers' spiritual inheritors from the 1920s until today. This section is followed by a coda chapter that presents the Weberian ideal type of the late 19th and early 20th century religious reformer (p. 13). The book indulges in developing a prototype toward a comparative study of religions

in order to arrive at a cosmopolitan ideal type. Though the author takes inspiration from Weber, Lekon differs from him on various levels. He picks from Weber's comparative perspective in order to look for both differences and similarities between social phenomena rooted in various cultures separated from each other by space and time (p. 7).

The last three chapters provide a thematic process of the ideas of the reformers, guided by Wallerstein's concept of geoculture. The book makes an examination and assessment through these parameters to find out the extent to which each thinker can be interpreted as a liberal, an

anti-systemic activist and a positivist. Thus, Lekon seeks to make sense of their ideas, transcending the Middle Eastern, South Asian or East Asian context in which they are usually discussed. The conclusion summarizes the argument, shows in what respect the reformers' positions in the MWS's periphery shaped their geocultural thinking, draws attention to the world revolution of 1919 in their shift toward a more conservative position and finally discusses the relevance of these reformers for the contemporary period (p. 7).

Chapter five examines the thought of Salafiyya, Arya Samaj and Kung-yang within the parameters of anti-systemic movements as defined by Wallerstein. This section explores the basic nature of these ethnic/national movements and their dilemma toward defining the quasi national community. Simultaneously, it focuses on the greater problematic and relationship conundrums between religion, geographical locations and linguistic barriers as the main factors in question. Here one can witness the conjugal point amongst these thinkers-cum-activists, their political aspirations and the routes they took, while

involving religion and reformed religiosity as a building block in the making and remaking of these different philosophical world views.

Another continuous theme of the book is the expectation or observation of similarities in the concepts in a cosmopolitan manner; this extends from centrist liberalism to anti-systemic movements and positivism. Lekon sums up his examination by providing the ideal-typical thought of the late 19th/early 20th century religious reformers in the MWS's periphery with similar elements (p. 194). Lekon provides a generic classification of the factors influencing the centrist liberal ideology, the anti-systemic agenda and the positivist social analysis, while providing due recognition to the caveats in the model. To sum up, the coda chapter intends to paint a roadmap to the overall picture of the existing religious and social phenomena for contemporary times.

Lastly, Lekon points out that the role of Christianity was generally much less prominent in core geoculture than in the peripheries the role of Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism. He makes a plea against the idea of pitting religiously defined civilizations against each other. Instead, in the changing world order one might see the rise and impact of non-Western regions, namely the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia in making their impact felt upon the world order to a greater extent than in the previous century; he argues that much of the impact will continue to be influenced by Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism. He makes the argument that the main agendas of Salafiyya, Arya Samaj and Kung-yang were ultimately not merely to take elements from Western-style modernity but to integrate them into the specific cultures of their own regions (p. 201). In short, the relevance of Islam, Hinduism and Confucianism in the 21st century MWS, in consensus

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with ideas of parliamentary rule, confessionals, egalitarianism, opposition to the oppression of the poor and of women, openness to new ideas and a universal appeal to humanity at large holds a significant value toward understanding the contemporary philosophical thought ruling the world and, more importantly, what future awaits.

This book is a must-read for scholars who do research on non-Western International

Relations Theory, Sociology of Religion and modernity. Its original approach opens up avenues for further research in this rich field of inquiry. The book is successful in bringing out the fluctuations of ideas, personal experiences and political changeability in the making and, more importantly, the contemporary adoption and nature of these reformed philosophical lines of thought that are being continuously reinvented in contemporary political economy of the world.