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In this monograph, Michael J. Walsh provides an account of nation-state formation, with a primary focus on the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Walsh does not seek to provide a chronological history of the establishment of the Chinese nation-state, but instead adopts a thematic approach, analyzing ‘key historical moments’ in the birth of the PRC, in tandem with reflections on South Africa. The key argument presented in the book is that all nation-states are religious (relegere) and that the three core components of the nation state – texts, universal and normative categories, and territoriality – are bound together by the sacred. When these components are made sacred (‘sacralized’), they become inviolate and it is ‘the inviolate that frames and sustains the nation-state’ (xvii). The idea that the Chinese state is a religious state is not new, but Walsh’s analysis reveals the processes by which mythos and sanctified violence produce and sustain the nation-state, and this is the major contribution of this monograph.

The book contains an extended Preface and six chapters. The Preface serves as a general introduction to the book, and it is here that Walsh outlines his main argument and approach. Each of the six chapters focuses on a specific aspect of the main thesis. Chapter 1 discusses the sacralization of territory, covering the importance of sacrifice and the lexicon which the state employs in the sacralization process. The chapter draws on examples of disputed territory such as islands in the South China Sea or border areas with India. Chapter 2 explores the theme of sacred texts – primarily state constitutions – as one of the pieces of nation-state infrastructure, and through which nation-states establish the inviolate. Chapter 3 looks at the idea of freedom of religion as ‘guaranteed’ in the constitutions of nation-states and the problems and flaws which arise from seeking to establish freedom of religion as an inalienable human right. Following on from this discussion, Chapter 4 analyzes religion as a
human right in the Chinese context with some close reading of relevant articles in the current version of the PRC’s constitution. Chapter 5 explores China’s historical encounters with imperial powers and their legacy on the approach to ‘religion’ adopted by the Communist Party of China. The final chapter, Chapter 6, looks back at the birth of nation-statism as a concept and the transformation of subjects into citizens. This chapter also serves as a general conclusion to the monograph.

This monograph undoubtedly contributes to our understanding of the role of the sacred in the formation of nation-states and, in particular, how the inviolate plays out in the PRC state’s territorial disputes with neighboring states (and beyond), in its internal ethnic relations, and in its attempts to mold a particular type of modern citizen. There are, however, several aspects of the study which this reviewer feels weaken the overall text.

Firstly, while Walsh articulates very clearly the religious nature of the PRC state’s constitution, there is no discussion at all of the role which the constitution plays in society or in how it relates to the individual citizen. Considering the degree of debate in recent years in China regarding the function of the constitution and the guarantees it contains, our understanding of the constitution as a religious text would be further enhanced if some consideration had been given to the relationship between the constitution and the citizen. Secondly, while Chapter 6 serves, in part, as a conclusion to the study, a more developed conclusion would have strengthened the force of the argument and its significance for the reader. Lastly, Walsh makes a number of bold statements which are not sufficiently explained or evidenced, such as, ‘This imagined geography came to reflect the ideology of power and centrality that remain in effect in China to this day’ (p. 19) and, ‘We know that in China, thousands of citizens “disappear” every year for any number of reasons, but the primary one is the threat of bringing instability to the state’ (p. 134). To avoid ambiguity in the text, it would be helpful for the reader to know exactly what aspects of ‘the ideology of power and
centrality’ continue in the PRC today and what the source of the claim of ‘thousands’ of disappearances each year is.

However, despite these shortcomings, this is an innovative study which gives particular consideration to the role of the sacred in the formation of the PRC state, and to nation-states more generally. As such, it will be of interest to political scientists and perhaps more specifically, to scholars who work on international relations, as well as more generally to sociologists and anthropologists of China, and academics working on religion in the Chinese context.

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