André Laliberté, The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan 1989-2003. Safeguarding the faith, building a pure land, helping the poor

Ji Zhe
With their adherents numbering millions and their enormous financial resources, Buddhist groups are a significant force in the civil society of Taiwan today. Their political stance, formed by the structural characteristics of society, is still a relatively neglected area of study. In that respect, André Laliberté’s book, centred on how Taiwanese Buddhist organisations participate in the political process, fills a gap. The book is based on research into the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC), the Buddha Light Mountain monastic order (Foguangshan) and the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association (Ciji). It seeks to explain what determines the strategies of these organisations in their relations with those in power.  

In all three cases, the writer offers clear and concise descriptions of their history, their religious objectives and their organisational structures. Then, from a comparative perspective, he examines their interaction with political parties and the government, and the position they adopted during the 1996 Presidential Election, when Chen Lü’an, a lay Buddhist, was an independent candidate. The writer maintains that the BAROC,
supported by the Kuomintang (KMT), employed “lobbying” tactics to preserve its ecclesiastical privileges within the Buddhist order. Foguangshan’s approach, while supporting Chen’s campaign in the election, was more in the nature of “remonstrance”; indeed, Foguangshan encouraged political participation and was not afraid to criticise the government. Tzu Chi, for its part, refrained from political commitment, while keeping to its ideal of reforming society by means of its charitable works.

3 In Laliberté’s view, this variety of attitudes is not explained by Buddhist theology, by the influence of the dominant culture or by the political structure—variables that researchers often understand as determining factors behind the political acts of Buddhist groups in Asia. All three organisations adhere to Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, all are influenced by the Confucian tradition and find themselves within the same political situation. Should we consider that organisational characteristics, which are held to be independent explanatory variables in studies on religious groups in the United States, apply also in the Taiwanese case? Examining in turn financial means, intensity of support from lay Buddhists and questions of ethnicity and gender, the writer concludes that there is no significant correlation between these different dimensions and the political stances of the groups. For example, both Foguangshan and Tzu Chi control greater financial resources and wider support than the BAROC. But Foguangshan is as politically active as the BAROC, whereas Tzu Chi is somewhat apolitical. The BAROC and Foguangshan are both politically committed, but while the former is dominated by monks originating from the Chinese mainland, it is nuns and lay believers of Taiwanese origin who occupy the leading positions in Foguangshan (although the founder himself came from the mainland). The writer concludes that the variation between Buddhist groups’ political attitudes derives principally from the personality of their leaders. The BAROC leaders maintain historical links with the KMT, and their attachment to this party serves the interests of their traditional monastic community. Hsing Yun, the founder of Foguangshan, believes that political activity is a means to implementing the idea of “worldly” Buddhism preached by the great Master Taixu. Yet, Cheng Yen, who founded Tzu Chi, considers politics a problem rather than a solution: the real solution, she believes, lies in spiritual reform.

4 Laliberté’s analysis, based on sound data, brings to light the diverse political attitudes of the Buddhist organisations and identifies a significant aspect of Buddhism in Taiwan. His erudition in the field of contemporary Asian and Western religions enables him to repeatedly provide relevant comparisons. While the proof is rigorously set out, the methodology may be questionable. The book starts by examining three explanations that rest in turn upon Buddhist theology, Confucian culture and the political structure. With examples drawn from various fields, the writer shows that, in many cases, these explanations are not satisfactory. He claims that all of them adopt a holistic view of religion and culture and thus do not take account of their diversity. The criticism is apt but, in our view, while the approaches in question do not offer universally valid explanations, it is undoubtedly for two other reasons: first, these explanations are effective only up to a certain point; and secondly, an explanatory model founded on a single causality is simplistic and is inadequate to a complex reality.

5 In this regard, the writer falls into the same line of thinking that he is criticising, namely, the search for a general explanation for the “rational” motivation of actors—although the unit of his analysis is the organisation. Taking his lead from studies on the American experience, he looks at how certain variables affect the political behaviour of Buddhist groups in the same positivist way. The result is hardly surprising: none of these
variables, from financial resources through to gender, is capable of providing a general explanation.

To come up with a general explanatory factor, the writer turns eventually to an essentially psychologist solution: the leader’s point of view. This path seems to us unrewarding, the more so because the writer attempts to establish connections or causes within too restricted a range of cases.

NOTES

1. The Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC), an official association supported by the Kuomintang, dominated the Buddhist world between 1952 and 1987, the year when martial law was lifted. See Ji Zhe, “The Establishment of a Lay Clergy by the Modern Chan Society”, and David Schak, Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “Taiwan’s Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups”, China Perspectives, No. 59.