The Buddhist Experience In America

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Review
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culture and the imagination within relational networks that are constrained in a variety of ways. In adopting this approach, Orsi makes it clear that he does not view the experience of sacred presence as a "premodern" holdover but rather as one of two different ways of “being in the world at the same time”: the formal-aesthetic and the devotional-instrumental (50). When images and other objects are viewed devotionally rather than formally (i.e., as art), people bring emotional responses—desire, need, love, and fear—to them (50). These emotions, in his view, are both personally and culturally inflected and are implicated in relations of social power in divergent ways in various periods and locales (and, I would add, families). Not only devotional objects, but also sacred sites and sacred stories provide occasions in which intimate desires, needs, and fears may be externalized and engaged. In his innovative chapter on children, Orsi analyzes the way in which the invisible is rendered visible through bodily experience—one’s own or someone else’s—thus making the “experiencing body . . . the bearer of [sacred] presence” (74).

Although Orsi attributes the dissolution of this world to both changes authorized by Vatican II and the massive entry of Catholics into the middle class, the role of the Catholic ghetto, class, and family history in constraining the options available to Orsi’s parents and grandparents strike me as underexamined. I am left in the end with little sense of the social boundaries, and thus the pervasiveness, of the tragic vision of Catholicism that he so vividly depicts.

ANN TAVES, University of California, Santa Barbara.


This book offers a survey presentation of the nature, forms, and roles of Buddhism in the United States. Its author, Diane Morgan, has taught at Wilson and Frederick Community College and Wilson College, and this book is designed as a textbook. It begins with a history of Buddhism in Asia and then surveys various types of Buddhism in the United States largely following a Three Vehicles pattern of organization. The clear, accessible style of the book may appeal to college students, and, used critically, this volume could be a secondary textbook in courses regarding American Buddhism or alternative religions in the United States. However, its lack of citation of evidence, lack of completeness in research, and sometimes uncritical presentations make this volume of little use to scholars, whether specialists in the field of American Buddhism or not. Scholars seeking overviews of Buddhism in the United States would be better off sticking with other texts.

The book’s introduction frames the field of discourse concerning Buddhism in the United States. The author delineates elective affinities between Buddhism and American culture, such as pragmatism, egalitarianism, emphasis on experience, acceptance of science, valuing of happiness, and religious tolerance. The “two Buddhisms” model is mentioned perhaps too briefly. Then the author provides a synoptic history of Buddhism in the United States.

Chapter 2, “The Buddha and His Teaching,” provides a basic introduction
to the Buddhist religion. This chapter discusses the life of the Buddha, the
growth of the Sangha, essential teachings of the Buddha, Buddhist practices,
and an early history of Buddhism. This chapter provides strength or weakness
to the book, depending on one’s perspective. For someone teaching Buddhism
in America from the ground up in a semester-long class, this section could be
helpful. However, this section is overly long yet lacking in thoroughness, leaving
other short introductions to Buddhism as better choices if one wishes just a brief piece.

Morgan’s next chapter covers Theravada Buddhism. It describes the Pali
canon, Sangha life, and beliefs and practices in Theravada Asia. Following this,
there appears a brief history of Theravada in the United States, along with an
exploration of the important place that vipassana meditation holds in U.S.
Buddhism. Subsequently, Morgan discusses the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.
Texts, schools of thought, and practices of early Mahayana are described. The
book then surveys Mahayana schools in the United States, such as Pure Land,
Tendai, Nichiren and Soka Gakkai, Chinese and Vietnamese schools, and inter-
pretations by Beat poets.

The discussion about the Beats naturally runs into discussion about Zen,
which Morgan treats in a chapter separate from the chapter on Mahayana
because, Morgan claims, 40 percent of American Buddhist groups are Zen in
orientation (147). Morgan describes Zen’s history in Asia briefly, including
discussion of the differences among Rinzai, Soto, Thien, and Son forms of Zen. Attention is paid to evoking Zen’s worldview, especially as evidenced by
early missionaries and later teachers in the United States. Because of the rich-
ness of information, this chapter likely is the strongest of the book and would
be a good shorter resource for student reading regarding Zen in the United
States.

Chapter 6 treats Tibetan Buddhism in America. After giving a brief history
of Tibetan Buddhism, the book recounts Tibetan practices, schools of thought,
and lives of Buddhist teachers. Unfortunately only a bare paragraph is devoted
to exploring the important processes of acculturation of Tibetan Buddhism
in the United States. Resources exist for this discussion, but Morgan appears not
to include them. As a result, important studies, teachers, and centers have
been passed over.

The final chapter assesses the present state of Buddhism in the United
States. Asian- and Western-engaged Buddhist movements are discussed in some
detail. Then, in a rapid survey, a wide range of issues is briefly covered, all of
these issues concerning Buddhism and American society. Attempting to pro-
vide a treatment of the way Buddhism has become acclimatized to the United
States, this far-reaching survey of ethical and social issues lacks a depth of
understanding of the complex processes of acculturation faced by American
Buddhists. The book then concludes with glossaries of Buddhist names and
terms, a series of research questions, and a list of resources.

Richard Seager’s Buddhism in America (New York, 2000) is a much more solid
text than this one due to its superior research and scholarly grounding. Moreover, Morgan’s book offers little that is not already in Buddhism in America.
However, most of Morgan’s book is informative and very readable in its style.
Therefore, this book is recommended for careful use by college students.

DANIEL CAPPER, University of Southern Mississippi.

Book Reviews