Book Reviews


The focus of this impressive edited collection is the interaction between imperialism — variously conceived — and a range of social contexts in East and Southeast Asia featuring what has come to be called ‘religion’. The chapters include revised contributions from a conference entitled ‘Casting Faiths: Construction of Religion in East and Southeast Asia’ held at the National University of Singapore in 2005. The notions of ‘imperialism’ adduced in the book range from Dutch, British and Japanese colonialism to the activities of Western (American, German) Christian missions and modern Han Chinese hegemony in ethnic minority areas. Dubois, in his substantial editor’s introduction, identifies a triad of influences which ‘combined to transform the definition, practice and social significance of religion in East and Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’. These he identifies as society, theology and the structural context (or technology). The book thereafter is divided into four parts: I. ‘Orientalism and the Western Recasting of Buddhism’, II. ‘Mission and Meaning in Christianity’, III. ‘State and Religious Ethnicity’ and IV. ‘New Media and New Religion’, plus an ‘Afterword’.

In Part I, Alexey Kirichenko explores the construction of concepts of ‘Buddhism’ and ‘religion’ in 19th–20th century Burma/Myanmar and Judith Snodgrass assesses D. T. Suzuki’s ‘journey to the West’ as entrepreneurial disciple — and sometime mentor — of the mercurial Paul Carus, following the disappointing reception of East Asian Mahayana at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. In Part II, Roberta Wollons assesses the changing trajectory of American Christian evangelism in modernising Japan, through the example of Annie Lyon Howe, one of a new breed of women missionary educators. Howe arrived in Japan in 1887, retiring to the USA in 1926 at the age of 74. Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz charts evolving colonial and missionary attitudes to indigenous worship practices and material culture (e.g. ‘idols’) on the Indonesian island of Nias, and Peter Hansen examines the unusually comprehensive form of priestly authority which migrated to Southern Vietnam with oppressed
Catholic communities from the North, after the 1954 partition. In Part III, Iza Hussein looks at the late 19th century making of the increasingly significant idea of 'Islamic Law' in British Malaya (now Malaysia) and Jennifer Connolly shows how a modern 'Dayak community' emerged out of disparate local groups influenced by Christian missions, Dutch colonial policy and the post-colonial Indonesian state. Donald S. Sutton and Xiaofei Kang present a case study of a contemporary multiethnic (Tibetan, Han, Muslim) centre of pilgrimage now designated a Chinese UNESCO World Heritage site. In Part IV, Thomas DuBois offers an analysis of the approaches to religion reflected in successive decades of publication of a Japanese-owned Chinese-language newspaper in what became Manchukuo, while Nancy Stalker examines the skilful exploitation by the Japanese 'new religion' Ōmoto of new media (primarily exhibitions and films) in the 1920s and '30s. These ten topical chapters are sandwiched between DuBois' Introduction and the Afterword 'Questioning faiths? Casting doubts' by Oscar Salemink which critiques Dubois' approach in the Introduction, in an appropriately postcolonial attempt to 'other' the main editorial voice.

DuBois' 'Introduction' emphasises multidirectional and reciprocal influences at work in the encounter between imperial or hegemonic powers and native or indigenous concepts and practices. He makes two main points (15). First, that changes might have been initiated by the powerful, but were never completely directed by them; the techniques they introduced constituted the lasting and pervasive influence. 'New ways of communicating knowledge, seeking religious converts, ruling diverse populations and engaging in trade were beyond the ability of any one party to monopolize, and the ideas that these new practices implied transformed the entire region, friends and foes alike'. Secondly, 'all of these transformations were deeply interconnected, and change to any one area could have diverse and often unexpected repercussions for others, including the idea and practice of religion'. Unintended consequences are for DuBois the legacy of these 19th–20th century encounters. In his afterword Salemink questions Dubois' thesis, pointing to the preponderance in this book of examples of faiths which are 'heterodox' and thus at odds with hegemonic state powers. Salemink argues that a contest between religious authority and state authority (as in Europe) sharpens the distinction between political and religious, generates the category of the secular, and hence constructs the modern area dubbed 'religion' (262).

This is a book full of intriguing ideas and interconnections. It should prove interesting to scholars across the broad field of the study of religions and it should find a place in any good library on religions. Very few readers will be