Van der Veer, P. (ed.)

True to its goal of setting the platform for enhanced scholarly engagement, this book documents various ways by which religion interacts with the skylines, villages and streetscapes that compose the ‘modern’ Asian city – or cities. The scope of the book is truly encyclopedic: there are articles not only on cities like Beijing, Hong Kong, Seoul, Shanghai and Singapore, which are pegged as Asian ‘global cities’, but also on cities that are configured differently within the global balance of power such as Bangkok, Hanoi, Karachi, Jakarta, Manila, Mumbai and Suzhou. The range of perspectives offered by this vast collection immediately decenters unitary views of the ‘Asian city’ and offers cutting-edge reflections on how to pluralize the mode as well as the trajectory of the inquiry.

Contributors to this volume are from a broad range of disciplines. While majority are trained in anthropology, there are also scholars hailing from Asian, Chinese and Indian studies, heritage studies, media studies, religious studies, and sociology. What brought these scholars together is the task of clarifying the nature and extent of ‘the urban’, and of ‘aspirations’, which, as van der Veer argues in the introduction, are neither self-evident nor fixed. Coupled with this undertaking is a renewed assessment of the role and place of religion in the context of the city. The articles are organized into five core themes: (1) governance of religious diversity; (2) space, speculation and religion; (3) religious place-making in the city; (4) self-refashioning in urban space; and (5) media and materiality.

My assessment veers toward three of the core themes proposed in the book. I find the section on the governance of religious diversity particularly important because, as the articles explain, this is a manifestation of the city’s aim to locate itself within structures of power and contestation. Hence, tensions aptly discussed by case studies in this part hinge on the polarity between the immanent mode of religious experience (Daniel P.S. Goh), on one hand, and the moral arbitration of the state (Jayeel S. Cornelio), on the other. This interplay of sincerity and restraint, both at the personal and structural levels, is what accounts for the complexity of urban arrangements when it confronts religion. This accounts for the sense of competition and negotiation that underlies the Muharram festival in India (Reza Masoudi Nejad), the deterriorlization and reterritorialization of community temples in Suzhou, China (Vincent Goossart), as well as the decline and revival of Chinese folk religion in Hong Kong (Joseph Bosco).
Case studies on self-refashioning in urban space also touched on a significant theme. It has been claimed by sociologists that the self (being distinct from subjectivity in its philosophical sense) is a social product, and is thus shaped by arrangements that the individual confronts at a particular time. Articles here have validated this point. For instance, Gareth Fisher’s work on Buddhist temples in Beijing allows for a nuanced understanding of ‘religion’ itself in ‘multiaspirational’ sites. It is interesting to note how individual acts, expressions and significations are allowed to impinge upon the very understanding of ‘religion’ itself, especially in openly secular cities like Beijing. Articles by Norman Baig and Lauren Kendall reveal the interplay of economics and religion from the perspective of individual subjectivities, allowing for a deeper look at how markets and material objects may be conceived as ‘sacred’.

The section on media and materiality discusses how ‘dreams’ and online community are significant factors in understanding the modern city. Arjun Appadurai, in his chapter on Bollywood films in Mumbai, discusses how cinemas provide venues for representing and challenging the urban ‘logic of salvation’, which is far from dismissive analyses that emphasize fatalism and submissiveness. Another pillar of the section is Sahana Udupa’s chapter on internet-mediated solidarity among right-wingers in India. Her rigorous documentation of Twitter and other social media among right-wingers reveals a prolific cyberspace that mimics, as it were, the contentiousness and violence of urban life itself.

On the whole, the articles provide colorful ethnographic accounts of the regulation of religion in the city, an endeavor that is both timely and important. I particularly appreciate the theoretical orientation of the ethnographies, which allowed contributors to merge rigorous documentation and scholarly reflection. Detailed depictions allowed for more nuanced characterizations of the complexities of urban life that are refreshing to read. Scholars will find in this volume the merging of methodological rigor and theoretical reflection that is worth emulating.

But like any book volume with numerous disparate chapters, agreement with a commonly defined set of themes does not automatically translate to coherence in specific details. One instance where this has proven to be a stumbling block is the issue of what can really be managed and regulated in the interplay of religion and urban life. Most of the chapters provide an answer (or answers) as to what these dimensions are, others more explicit while others less so. But from a more theoretically-informed perspective, do these dimensions add up or should they be studied as disparate entities? These questions all the more become relevant because there is no attempt at the end of the volume to tie the various themes together (maybe because the introduction already