

Book Review

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Weibliche Identität und Leerheit. Eine ideengeschichtliche Rekonstruktion der buddhistischen Frauenbewegung Sakhyadhiitaa Internantional. By Thea Mohr (*Theion Jahrbuch für Religionskultur/ Annual for Religious Culture XIII*). Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2002, x + 309 pages, ISBN: 3-631-38283-9 (paperback), US \$39.95.

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*Weibliche Identität und Leerheit. Eine ideengeschichtliche
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As the title indicates, Mohr's interest is in contextualizing the ideological bent of Sakhyadhiitaa International, an organization that has brought together women of Buddhist monastic affiliations since its inception in 1987. This organization has recently attracted the attention of several scholars besides Mohr (e.g., R. Wurst, Brück and Lai, Küstermann, J. Tsedroen, K. L. Tsomo).

Mohr's main thesis is that the women's movements of the West, including contemporary feminism, are secular and stand in an antithetical relationship to the movements of Buddhist women, which Mohr sees as being grounded in religiosity. Sakhyadhiitaa constitutes for Mohr a crossroad of these two grand strands of women's movements. Thus, the

book is organized into three main parts, in addition to the introduction and conclusion: first, stages of the West's secular women's movements; second, the corresponding stages of the religiously determined women's movements in Buddhism; and a last part discussing Sakyadhiitaa. Thus, Mohr constructs her research around a Hegelian paradigm: thesis — antithesis — synthesis.

In the introduction, Mohr tries to provide the reader with a general context for the ensuing discussion of Western versus Eastern women's movements. It seems inevitable that some stark generalizations have to be made in order to achieve this goal. The main focus of the introduction is to lay the groundwork for a later discussion of Buddhist women's movements. Mohr sees in the inclusive nature of Buddhist soteriology a possible meeting ground where the secular scepticism of Western feminism may interact with the religiously determined feminist identity (*religiöse Selbstbesinnung*) of the "Buddhist East."

In part one, stages in the development of a secular self-identity, Mohr examines Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) and Christine de Pizan (1365-1430) as exemplary women laying the foundation for a secular women's identity in the West. Mohr concedes that Hildegard von Bingen is fully contained within a male dominated religious hierarchy she does not challenge. But, argues Mohr, the space provided by her monastic calling gives Hildegard the necessary freedom to create a new vision of the spiritual Christian woman. Mohr's argument that the secularization process of Western female identity finds its first manifestation in Pizan's work *Le Livre*

de la Cité des Dames (1404/1405) is not so convincing in the light of Pizan's recourse to Biblical creation narrative. From the early Renaissance period, Mohr moves on to the feminism of the twentieth century. In surveying its major intellectual and philosophical trends, Mohr draws on some North American writers (M. Daly, M. Hewitt, M. Joy and others) but omits several nineteenth and twentieth century women's movements that defined themselves as rooted in the Christian faith, such as the Social Gospel or temperance movements. Including these movements in her discussion would somehow mitigate her theoretical claim of an antithetical tension between feminine identity in the West and in the East.

Mohr gives a survey of the most prominent philosophical developments of the twentieth century as they form the basis of a mainly Europe-centered intellectual discourse, in order to buttress her conclusion of a "*säkulare Selbstbesinnung*" (secular self-reflection) dominating women's identity in the West. But she omits any discussion of feminist spirituality, a movement that gained momentum in the latter part of the twentieth century (Carol Christ, Judith Plaskow and many others). Mohr's theoretical underpinnings become particularly questionable when she asserts that those Western women/feminists who spearhead Sakyadhiitaa International and who form the focus of Mohr's research are unaffected by Christian feminist theology as they disavowed their birth religion. Can one drop one's native cultural and religious milieu like some old clothes? Studies of hybridity and multiple cultural identities seem to indicate otherwise.

Part two attempts to reconstruct the development of a Buddhist identity grounded in the sacred. Mohr discusses those laywomen and nuns already known from Pali texts without adding substantial new insight. In each case, she summarizes the main points of the biographical information contained in these texts and emphasizes that each of these women grounded her identity in the sacred realm. Mohr's understanding of the historical and textual development of Buddhist traditions is rather questionable. For instance, Mohr recounts the Buddha's life on the basis of Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, whereby no attempt is made to distinguish between historical facts (few as they are) and a fictive and piously inspired rendition of the well-known life story. Furthermore, excerpts from the Pali Canon are given mainly from the dated translation of E. K. Neumann and to the detriment of literary and philological studies. On other occasions, Mohr takes Pali texts containing opinions about women as Buddha's own views on the subject, while being seemingly unaware of the philological critique regarding the literary transmission and manipulation the texts endured over many centuries. It remains a mystery why Mohr did not use Hüsken's excellent study of the nuns' *Pratimoksha* in trying to develop a reconstruction of the life of nuns during the first few centuries of Buddhism. A serious concern is that Mohr identifies the records of the Pali Canon with the earliest period of Buddhist history and calls this tradition "Theravada" without specifying the diversity of or entertaining a discussion on the complexity of pre-Mahayana Buddhist schools. This part of her work would have gained substance if Mohr had used, for instance, the research of

Gregory Schopen, to show that epigraphical material (dating as early as the second century B.C.E.) has identified women and nuns as major donors, and that some nuns had the title of *trepī.taka*, which we can understand as "master of the three collections."

In part three, Mohr deals with the Sakyadhiitaa movement in particular. She summarizes the themes of the six conferences (1987-1998), which were held in various Asian countries (with the exception of the last one). The conferences made it possible for Buddhist nuns and Buddhist laywomen from various traditions and cultural contexts to meet and explore common issues and concerns. A newsletter established after the first conference in 1987 provides a further forum for interaction. Regional chapters of Sakyadhiitaa were established in many Asian and European countries. The conference at Claremont highlighted the discrepancies between Western and Eastern Buddhist women: the North American Buddhist women were mainly concerned with ecology, race, sexuality, sexual exploitation, and social engagement, while the Asian Buddhist women saw their foremost concerns in education, training of female teachers, ordination, and survival. It is revealing that among the fifty-seven fully edited papers resulting from the first six conferences, forty-two were authored by Western women. All papers were edited and published by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American. A significant portion of part three is dedicated to summaries of selected Sakyadhiitaa papers dealing with: lay Buddhism in the West; motherhood as a female domain within the context of Buddhist culture; gestation and development of consciousness; subjectivity and

social engagement; sexual transformation as a condition for enlightenment; role models in Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism; tourism in the Himalayas and its impact on Buddhist women; racism; Buddhist aesthetics/dance; the integration of secular and spiritual identity resulting in inner transformation; ordination in the West; a lineage of women teachers; Aaanda enabling the nuns' order; the problem of full ordination; solutions; and a full ordination in Bodhgaya. In the interaction between Western and Eastern Buddhist women, Mohr sees a possibility that a religiously determined identity may arise within the Christian West.

In her conclusion, Mohr returns to the triangular paradigm she introduced at the beginning of her study. In this paradigm, self-identity is determined by three movements: from the outside to the inside, from the inside to the inside, and from the inside to the "above." Secular self-identity is grounded in a process where cultural and philosophical ideas and values are transmitted from the outside world to the inside world of the individual as well as a dialogue that happens within the individual. But it lacks a communication "from inside to above" with which Mohr seems to refer to the transcendental. In contrast to secular self-identity, religiously determined identity resists the influx of ideas and values from the outside to the inside, instead engaging in dialogue within the self and also with a transcendental reference point. Throughout her book, Mohr tries to place Buddhist women's activities and thinking within this triangular paradigm. Personally, I was not convinced by this approach. History and philology, as well as cultural anthropology, make it clear that no individual remains unaffected by his or her cultural

and ideological surroundings. Mohr's own study, for example, documents how Asian Buddhist women, when exposed to Western ideas such as feminism, are affected by it.

Mohr synthesizes her research by pointing at discrepancies between contemporary feminism and Buddhism: the search for a feminine identity is confronted with Buddhism's no-self concept; Western Buddhist women encounter the traditional patriarchal structure of Buddhist monasticism; and religious tourism leads to a confrontation between the rich and poor but also into the field of postcolonial third world problematics. Mohr demonstrates how some of the most potent intellectual trends of the twentieth century could intersect with some aspects of Buddhist theory as well as practice. Still, interesting as her attempt is, she cannot do justice to this complex issue by dealing with, for instance, Lacan or Cixous in paragraphs consisting of a few lines. In her final remarks, Mohr points out that the social arrangement of the genders in the past resulted in a preference for male embodiments. She quotes the Dalai Lama stating that in the past the desire to be reborn in a male body was justified because of the inferior status of women, but that with improved or superior status of women the intent should perhaps be the opposite.

Mohr's book addresses a timely subject, but its main title, *Weibliche Identität und Leerheit*, is misleading as it is much more a social science study of Sakyadhiitaa International and of some its prominent members than a philosophical inquiry into the intersection of the Buddhist concept of emptiness and

feminist reflections on women's identity. The book seems to target an interested yet non-specialist readership. Mohr avoids any detailed engagement with the scholarship of Buddhist Studies while relying on often dubious and at worst erroneous sources. The many oversights or typos are annoying, for example: China occupied Tibet in 1949 (p. 183) rather than 1950, Ladakh became accessible to foreigners in 1979 (p. 137) rather than 1976, Chengdu, capital of the Province of Sichuan is called a province (p. 183). She seems to be unaware that Tibet became incorporated in the PRC and is now the Tibetan Autonomous Region, thus, it is incorrect to refer to the state of Tibet as if it were an independent nation. The detailed bibliography is marred with typos: we learn of Bell Hocks rather than bell hooks and of David Bohn rather than David Bohm, to name just two.