

Book Review

Journal of Global Buddhism 4 (2003): 46 - 53



O Budismo no Brasil. Frank Usarski, ed. São Paulo: Editora Lorosae, 2002, 317 pages, ISBN 85-88775-07-7.

Reviewed by

James W. Heisig

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

Nagoya, Japan

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:

<http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

ISSN 1527-6457

Book Review

Frank Usarski, ed. *O Budismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora
Lorosae, 2002, 317 pages, ISBN 85-88775-07-7.

Reviewed by

James W. Heisig

Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture

Nagoya, Japan

As departments of religion and theology around Brasil scramble to adjust themselves to the challenge of religions from the East, the circle of scholars monitoring the changes in the sociological and spiritual landscape continues to grow and to produce its own body of literature. During a recent lecture tour around Brasil I had occasion to meet many of these scholars and hear from them firsthand about their work. Among them was Frank Usarski, professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica in São Paulo. For several years he had been directing graduate students in the study of the various aspects of the arrival and indigenization of Buddhism in Brasil, in addition to carrying out his own research on the subject. Several of the papers he passed on to me helped me better to understand the changing face of religious pluralism and alerted me to a number of

problems that Buddhist missionaries coming from abroad have had in adjusting to the Brazilian reality.

Although the Buddhist presence in Brasil dates back over 150 years, research on the area has been scarce and scattered. Usarski has labored hard to change this. In *O Budismo no Brasil*, he has gathered together eleven essays written from a variety of viewpoints on the arrival of religions from the East and their impact on contemporary society. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first such study of its kind.

To begin with, the idea that Buddhism is primarily the religion of the Japanese immigrants in Brasil needs to be set aside. For one thing, as the statistics provided by Martin Baumann of Lucerne indicate, only about a quarter of the estimated 350,000 Buddhists in the country are of Asian descent (p. 55). Indeed, as I discovered during visits to several temples and Buddhist centers serviced by Zen and Pure Land missionaries from Japan, one of the major problems faced by these institutions is the failure of Pure Land and Zen monks coming from Japan to accept the fact that very few of those of Japanese ancestry in Brasil today any longer have sustainable cultural or linguistic ties to the land of their ancestors. All indications are that the numbers of Brazilians who want a fully indigenized Buddhist practice has all but eclipsed the minority of those attracted by the oriental flavor of Buddhism.

What is more, sociologists studying the changing attitudes among traditional Roman Catholics in the major metropolitan areas of Brasil have provided conclusive statistical evidence that an openness to the truth of non-Christian religions and

their validity as ways of salvation has all but completely taken hold in the Brazilian consciousness today. An exhaustive survey conducted by the Centro de Estatística Religiosa e Investigações Sociais confirms this (*Tendências Atuais do Catolicismo Brasileiro: Um estudo em seis regiões metropolitanas*).

This, in a word, is the background against which Usarski and his colleagues work. In an opening essay, the editor lays out the questions as he sees them. Adopting the distinction between the Buddhism of the immigrants and their succeeding generations on the one hand, and the Buddhism of Brazilians who converted to it and have passed it on as far as the third generation on the other, he presents an overview of the history and social impact of Buddhism in each of the two groups. Recognizing that Buddhism is and will long remain a minority religion, he surmises that part of the reason is that circles of Zen and Tibetan meditation, as well as new movements like Soka Gakkai have tended to concentrate on the middle classes to the neglect of the masses of Brazil. This is the framework for several of the contributions that follow.

Martin Baumann, whose work on Buddhism in Europe is well known, reviews the literature of the history of Buddhism's arrival in the West and provides a few helpful statistics. While some of the information about Latin America may be new to his readers, his generalizations about the state of Buddhism in the East are a little rough around the edges, showing the typical misunderstandings of reliance on written works.

Nakamaki Hirochika of Japan's National Ethnological

Museum provides a case study of the history of the Honmon-butsuryuu-shuu in Brasil and its most illustrious figure, Ibaragui Nissui, who died at the age of 80 in 1971. The sect is a nineteenth century reform movement within Nichiren Buddhism and faces the same problems as other "foreign" religions in Japan when it comes to indigenizing, but these are glossed over until a parting comment, leaving the questions excited in the reader by many of the other essays unaddressed.

José Artur Teixeira Gonçalves focuses on the region of Oeste Paulista, where he himself is a professor of history. His essay takes up Usarski's agenda and his categories do provide a solid demographic and sociological view of how Buddhism was seeded and how it came to take root in a defined area. The questions he leaves us with at the end regarding the limits of indigenization and the future of Buddhism resound all the more forcefully for his careful work.

Rafael Shoji's study of the nuns from Taiwan's Fo Kuang Shan, and its principal figure Sinceridade, is a splendid piece of work. Although I have met some of these nuns around Latin America (Shoji cites statistics indicating there are five temples in the whole continent as of 2000, p. 128), and was aware of their struggles with adopting their mission of preaching Buddhism to languages and customs, this is the first detailed case study I have read of their history and how they have succeeded. Shoji locates their arrival in Brasil in 1992 against the broader context of Chinese immigration to Brasil—which at least one scholar claims begins in pre-Columbian times—but this is not really essential to his argument, since these immigrants have not been the focal point of their work.

Following the problematic laid out by Usarski in the opening essay, Shoji explains their appeal to a predominantly middle-class audience and contrasts their acceptance with that of Zen.

Regina Yoshie Matsue, lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Universidade de Brasília, studies Pure Land Buddhism in general, and draws special attention to the cultural and linguistic barriers that continue to impede its impact on Brazilian society. After a brief outline of the distinct traits of this sort of Buddhism, she introduces four figures on the Brazilian scene, including a young novice. The mixture of personal style and historical data makes for a solid piece of work.

Cristina Moreira da Rocha does something similar for Zen in Brasil. The central figure here is Coen Murayama, the chief nun at Busshin-ji in São Paulo. I knew Coen from her time of training in Japan, when she attended a seminar of mine, and had the pleasure of sharing the podium with her on two occasions in São Paulo. Da Rocha does a fine job of placing her work and, ever so delicately, indicating some of the tangles involved in representing a Japan-based sect in the very different world of Brasil. Her conclusions reiterate the middle-class nature of Zen, and also indicate that it is seen more as a philosophy than as a religion, which eliminates some of the barriers for Christian participants.

Eduardo Basto de Albuquerque, professor at the Universidade presents less a case study than a personal portrait of the Japanese Zen monk Ryohan Shingu and interviews with practicing members. Himself a convert to Buddhism, Basto's is

an insider's report that lacks the critical distance of some of the other pieces in the collection. It includes a sermon of Ryohan Rōshi on a Sōtō Zen text dating from 1975. Although dated, it shows something of the mentality of the Japanese missionaries towards Brasil and the approach of their preaching, but is allowed to stand without commentary.

Ricardo Mário Gonçalves, professor of History in the Universidade de São Paulo, was a phenomenon when I first met him in 1981 in São Paulo. A dedicated student of the Japanese language and Buddhist thought, he had begun Zen meditation some twenty years previous, but later turned to Pure Land. After a stay in Japan he began to translate Japanese materials and deepen his ties with Buddhist thought and practice. Although autobiographical, his essay is fascinating reading and represents an important chapter in the story of Buddhism in Brasil.

The only study of Japan's "new religions" in the collection is Ronan Alves Pereira's essay on the Soka Gakkai. One of the bright young generation of sociologists of religion in Latin America, Pereira has been a visiting scholar for the past few years at the Center for Japanese Studies in the University of California at Berkeley. When I met him in Rio de Janeiro two years ago, he had completed the essay (an earlier draft of which he had already sent me) and was pursuing his wider interests in contemporary Japanese spirituality. In trying to paint the Soka Gakkai with an objective brush, Pereira may give the impression of ignoring criticisms against its leadership, its tactics, and its political entanglements in Japan. From a Brazilian perspective, of course, there is no reason

these problems need to be transmitted along with the Buddhist teachings that form the core of its religious vision, and hence no reason they should dominate what is basically a sociological study. That said, after detailing the history and current activities of the movement in Brasil, it would have been better at least to acknowledge the potential problems. But the same could be said of most of the other essays in the collection as well.

The book closes with a splendid essay by Usarski on Lama Michel, and his Centro de Dharma De Choe Tsog in São Paulo. Here Usarski shows his skills as a historian of religions, and shows them so well that I am at a loss to condense this fascinating essay into a few words. It tells the story of the movement to the west of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism and one of its principal figures, Lama Ganchen. When Lama Ganchen visited Brasil for the first time in 1987 he met a six-year-old boy named Michel Lenz Cesar Calmanowitz and recognized him as "karmically predestined." Within two years the boy had traveled to Tibet where he was invested with the monk's robes. The rest of the essay is devoted to an analysis of the activities of Lama Michel and his center. Usarski does not gloss over the way in which Tibetan Buddhism has attracted, if not welcomed, the collaboration of other spiritual practices in Brasil, particularly through association with the Pax Drala of Rio de Janeiro, where everything from tarot readings and astrology to feng shui and holistic techniques goes on. Nor does he ignore the problem that notions of "reincarnating" masters presents to Brazilian religiosity. He concludes with the Lama's response to whether South American Buddhism might not someday become a fourth vehicle to complement the three

classical vehicles of Asian Buddhism. "Why not?" he replies.

"I have nothing against it and would be pleased. The more help the better, though I am not certain it will actually happen."

This is an appropriate end to the volume, since it raises the question that many traditional Buddhist sects will all have to face sooner or later: Might not the Buddhist communities of the West one day rise above their status as mission territory and stand shoulder to shoulder with the Buddhisms of Asia?