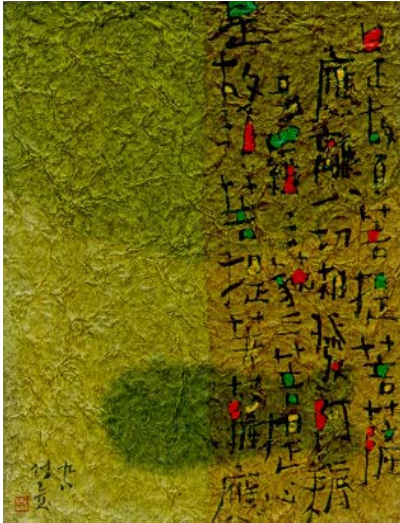


## Book Review

*Journal of Global Buddhism 10 (2009): 56 - 64*



*North American Buddhists in Social Context.* Edited by Paul David Numrich. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, x + 250 pages. Religion and the Social Order, 15. ISBN 978-90-04-16826-8 (cloth), € 85.00, US \$99.00.

Reviewed by

Scott A. Mitchell

Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, CA

buddhaworld@gmail.com

*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>

## Book Review

*North American Buddhists in Social Context*. Edited by Paul David Numrich. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008, x + 250 pages. Religion and the Social Order, 15. ISBN 978-90-04-16826-8 (cloth), € 85.00, US\$ 99.00.

Reviewed by

Scott A. Mitchell

Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, CA

[buddhaworld@gmail.com](mailto:buddhaworld@gmail.com)

In his introductory chapter to *North American Buddhists in Social Context*, Paul David Numrich questions whether or not current scholarly work on North American Buddhists constitutes a "field of study." His answer is no – at least not yet – and part of the reason is that the field has yet to achieve a sufficient level of interdisciplinary specialization and maturity. Much of the work on North American Buddhism is done from one of two perspectives: humanities-based Buddhist studies or the sociology of religion. Humanities-based Buddhist studies approaches this subject within the context of comparative religion or as part of North American religious history more generally; conversely, strict Buddhologists are primarily concerned with textual studies and have a somewhat snobbish predisposition against the topic as not "real Buddhist studies" (p. 4). The social scientific study of Buddhism, on the other hand, is engaged in smaller, empirical studies of specific and limited populations and attempts to steer clear of studies that are merely strings of anecdotes about North American Buddhist populations. As Numrich tells us, one gets the sense that social scientists are not much in contact with their

humanities-based peers and, as a result, their studies are often laced with "Buddhism 101" overviews prefacing analysis of empirical data sets. In order for North American Buddhist studies to become a mature and sufficiently interdisciplinary field of study, the scholarship needs to reach a high level of cross-disciplinary productivity and sophistication. This collection, comprised of eight very different studies of a wide diversity of North American Buddhist communities stretching back to the late nineteenth century, will certainly go a great distance in this regard and represents an important contribution to the development of a mature and robust new field of study.

Nevertheless, while Numrich is right in his somewhat grand statement that this "volume marks an important milestone" (p.12), it should be noted that this is primarily a *sociological* work. And it seems fairly clear to me that there is some truth to the notion that sociologists of religion are not paying much attention to their Buddhological comrades. This is apparent in a number of the volume's essays wherein the authors recount some basic bits of Buddhist philosophy or history that will, no doubt, be familiar to those who are classically trained in Buddhist studies. While these accounts are rarely dull and never out of place, they are the sort of "Buddhism 101" accounts that Numrich warns us of in his introduction. By and large, this is not hugely problematic *per se*, but it does make for some interesting statements mixed in with some critical errors (e.g., p. 88, p. 187). Though each of these are, to be sure, minor points, and while they may highlight how much classically trained Buddhist studies scholars and sociologists of religion need one another, they certainly do not detract from this volume's overall import.

After a brief preface by William Swatos on the apparent

decline of Buddhist studies in the face of a rising, post-9/11 Islamic studies, the volume opens with the aforementioned introductory essay by Numrich. What follows are eight chapters that cover the full breadth of Buddhisms in North America (including both Hawaii and Canada): "ethnic" communities and communities of Euro-American converts, Theravada, Mahayana, and even Soka Gakkai. Whereas a few chapters point toward the Tibetan diaspora in North America, a sustained discussion of North American Tibetan Buddhism is noticeably absent. Despite this oversight, the general coverage of topics and issues is quite good. And certainly while not setting out to deconstruct the received methodological assumptions of previous scholarship on North American Buddhisms, this volume nevertheless presents a challenge to existing conceptual frameworks such as the "two Buddhisms" typology. Whether one divides North American Buddhism into two categories of "ethnic" versus "Euro-American," "inherited" versus "convert," or "traditional" versus "modernist," a recurring theme here is that Buddhist identity and the role that Buddhist institutions play within particular communities are highly nuanced and defy easy classification.

Janet McLellan's "Themes and Issues in the Study of North American Buddhists and Buddhism," which draws on ethnographic research on Buddhism in the metropolitan Toronto, Ontario, area, highlights the nature of the wide and complex multi-ethnic and multi-generational forms that North American Buddhism has taken on in the later half of the twentieth century. Apart from providing some much needed demographic information about the actual number of Buddhists both in Canada and the United States, the chapter highlights the ways in which different communities negotiate their place within the larger, mainstream, society. This is particularly relevant for younger generations who exhibit a "range of

Buddhist participation and affiliations (including symbolic) [and] who consider themselves to be fully identified with and integrated into North American society" (p. 43).

The question of social order is taken up by Carl Bankston and Danielle Antoinette Hidalgo in their chapter "Temple and Society in the New World: Theravada Buddhism and Social Order in North America." While this chapter is concerned primarily with the ability of Theravada Buddhism to create social order for three distinct ethnic communities (Thai, Lao, and Cambodian), an important subtext in this chapter is the assertion that there is great variety between the three communities owing to the very different historical and social circumstances that brought these communities to the United States following the changes in immigration law in 1965. Whereas the Thai-American Theravada community was founded as an explicitly missionary group and receives support from the Thai government, the same cannot be said of the Lao or Cambodian communities. In some sense, all three are recreating their homeland traditions in a new locale. But for the latter two, this necessarily involves recreating traditions that no longer exist in their countries of origin. There is a distinct difference between the social order enacted by a transnational Thai organization that has ties to existing Buddhist institutions in its homeland and a Cambodian organization which is struggling to maintain its social order after surviving the Khmer Rouge's decimation of their traditions. Thus, while there are "common characteristics in the types of social order that these groups have established in America... there are also significant variations, resulting mainly from differing historical experiences and social contexts" (p. 82).

Nishimura's chapter on "The Buddhist Mission of North America 1898-1942" does an excellent job at describing

quite a different history and social context for Japanese-American Buddhists. This chapter paints a vivid picture of the role that this religious organization played in the lives of the early Japanese immigrants; moreover, it sets up the historical background for Testuden Kashima's companion piece, "Japanese Religiosity: A Contemporary Perspective." Kashima begins with an analysis of several sets of data from Japanese Americans living in the contiguous United States and Japanese Americans in Hawaii, and then compares these sets with non-Japanese Americans and Japanese in Japan. It is only by comparing such a variety of data sets that he is able to test his hypothesis that "Japanese Americans evidence a position that is relatively different from both the Japanese in Japan and from other Americans in the US" (p. 108). This analysis supports his conclusion that Japanese Americans' religiosity is effected by both their Japanese heritage and their American context which suggests that American Jodo Shinshu should be understood as both fully Japanese *and* fully American.

Carolyn Chen questions the category of "convert" and the rhetoric of modernity in her article "'True Buddhism is not Chinese': Taiwanese Immigrants Defining Buddhist Identity in the United States." Her fieldwork focuses on Taiwanese immigrants who self-identify as converts and utilize a rhetoric of rationalism and science to describe their Buddhist practice. What is most relevant here is that Chen's work "complicates possible understandings of religion's 'ethnic function' by demonstrating that individuals may use religion to create ethnic boundaries among multiple cleavages and identities" (p. 145). She does so by placing the Taiwanese Buddhists in context with both non-Chinese and non-Buddhists. It is important to note that the rhetoric of scientific rationalism employed by highly educated and financially successful Taiwanese immigrants is almost identical to the rhetoric used by

Euro-American converts to Buddhism, a phenomenon sorely in need of further research. Moreover, Chen shows that these Taiwanese Buddhists claim that they are practicing Buddhism not because it is their inherited tradition but because it is not a backwards or superstitious religion like the Christianity practiced by their non-Buddhist co-ethnics. Examining different religious attitudes and roles within a single ethnic community is also taken up by Karen Chai Kim in "A Religious Minority within an Ethnic Minority." While, by and large, this essay was not the strongest in the volume, Kim's chapter on the Korean American community demonstrates the complex ways in which Koreans embrace and reject Korean culture, Christianity, and Buddhism.

The first significant low point in this collection comes in Coleman's chapter on "The Emergence of a New Buddhism: Continuity and Change." On the one hand, this article does a great service to the field by applying a sociological model to the study of "meditation oriented" communities of "Western Buddhists." It is clear that Coleman is speaking here specifically of Buddhists who are of European decent, and his fieldwork was conducted in seven different groups, all of which are demographically white, middle or upper class, and politically liberal. His findings and analysis of these groups are relevant to the overall picture of North American Buddhism, particularly his assessment that a "common pattern" of practice is emerging within these groups, regardless of their original sectarian affiliations (p. 190). The value of this chapter, however, is undercut by an important methodological and theoretical flaw.

Because his fieldwork was conducted exclusively in what might be called "white Buddhist communities," one would expect that his analysis would be restricted to these

communities. On the contrary, he constantly compares these so-called "new Buddhists" to "Asian Buddhists," setting up the latter as a straw man to the positive and creative innovations of the former. According to Coleman, "new Buddhists" are embracing the positive effects of modernity whereas Asian Buddhists are "simply born into the faith" and have imported their "cultural baggage" to the West. Further, Coleman claims that "new Buddhism" bears a "striking likeness to the original 'Buddhism' of Siddhartha Gautama" (p. 186), since "new Buddhists" are largely converts as were the Buddha's original disciples. This is an unverifiable claim. As we have no direct access to the teaching of the Buddha, nor to the "conversion experience" of Ananda or Mahakasyapa or Maudgalyayana, how can we compare their Buddhism to that of disaffected white liberal Protestants from Northern California?

Further, Coleman's contrast between meditation-oriented converts and ethnic Asian "traditional" Buddhists is undercut by other chapters in this very volume. As previously mentioned, Chen's article points to Taiwanese Americans who self-identify as converts and use a similar rhetoric of modernity in describing their Buddhist practice. In Kim's description of the Sunday services at Boh Won Sa, meditation is part of the practice repertoire of this Korean temple (p. 169); further, her fieldwork hints at "disaffected former churchgoers" who are rediscovering their Buddhist heritage (p. 179). Coleman's analysis of white American Buddhists is perfectly on point; his comparison of them to Asian American Buddhists is not. As his fieldwork was conducted exclusively among white communities, his statements about Asian communities amount to anecdotes of exactly the sort Numrich cautions against ("the plural of anecdote is not data" (p. 13)). On the one hand, we can assign Coleman's failures here to his lack of a control group in

his fieldwork; on the other, the editor of a multi-author work bears some responsibility in maintaining a certain level of scholarly rigor in that volume.

The final chapter, Constance Lynn Geekie's "Soka Gakkai: Engaged Buddhism in North America," was similarly disappointing. The opening sentence of her conclusion is rather telling: "There are many reasons for studying Soka Gakkai" (p. 220). Indeed, and I was particularly delighted that Numrich included a piece on this Buddhist denomination that has been largely left out of the literature on North American Buddhism. Nevertheless, despite her assertion that there are many reasons to study Soka Gakkai, one can't help but feel that she hasn't actually provided us with a study herself but merely a list of reasons why someone *should* study it. The piece reads not unlike a laundry list of the many things that Soka Gakkai has done and accomplished in North America, and it lacks critical analysis. This is disappointing mostly because she hints at some areas that are ripe for academic investigation: the role of the charismatic leader, Daisetsu Ikeda, in the success and future development of the group; gender disparity within the group's lay leadership; questions about recruitment practices and responses to criticism over the past decade; pan-Buddhist relationships and negotiating authenticity; and so forth. By steering clear of these possibly controversial areas, she does the field a disservice and makes her piece something of a Soka Gakkai apologetic.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the remaining articles more than justify *North American Buddhists in Social Context's* placement high in the growing canon of work on Western Buddhism. Moreover, in his afterword, "Modernization, Globalization, and Buddhism," Joseph Tamney locates this volume square in the middle of a growing canon of work on modernity and globalization –

and rightly so. Several contributions to this volume demonstrate the ways in which Buddhist identities are being negotiated within a context of modernity and that their communities are dealing with the rising influences of globalization and transnational community. These issues, which affect the full spectrum of North American Buddhisms, are framed perfectly in this collection that will undoubtedly stand as an important resource in this new field of study for some time.