

Book Reviews

DOI: 10.1355/sj32-1f

Asia, Modernity, and the Pursuit of the Sacred: Gnostics, Scholars, Mystics, and Reformers. By Joel S. Kahn. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016. xiv+192 pp.

Joel S. Kahn, whose research interests include modernity and identity, above all in island Southeast Asia, has chosen a somewhat unlikely focus for his newest book: what he terms prominent Western authors' "Gnostic" engagement with Asian religion between the two world wars. Although it includes a few sections on modernity and Islam in Southeast Asia, this book primarily concerns Westerners who encountered Buddhism and Hinduism. Despite his detour from Southeast Asian studies here, Kahn is clearly passionate and knowledgeable about the topic and the argument that he advances. Other works treating Western travellers' encounters with and writing on Asian religions include Jeffrey Paine's more journalistic *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (2004) and a host of philosophical and popular books such as Victor Parachin's *Eastern Wisdom for Western Minds* (2007). Kahn's book is unique in its academic and theoretical focus, which asks scholars to take modern Gnostic thought seriously. He argues that modern Gnostic engagement with Asian religious traditions in the Interwar Period laid the groundwork for the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s and the spiritual seekers of New Age religions today.

Kahn uses the term "Gnostic" to refer both to a special inner knowledge arising from directly experienced encounters and to a strategy that organized religion and the secular mainstream have each labelled heretical (p. 19). Common criticisms of modern Gnosticism

target its Orientalism, exoticism, appropriation, commodification and distortion of Asian religions. Kahn analyses the modern Gnostic engagement with Asian religions in dialogue with these criticisms, defending and taking seriously the Gnostics' basic premise concerning the possibility of universalism. He focuses on four influential figures: the French esotericist René Guénon, the Belgo-French feminist and explorer Alexandra David-Néel, the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger, and the German novelist Herman Hesse. Each of these figures sought inspiration in one or more Asian religious traditions and influenced the ideas of subsequent generations of spiritual seekers.

Scholars of Asian religions, Kahn claims, should accord these four modern Gnostics more importance because they were interested in finding connections between and engaging seriously with the metaphysical and ontological claims of others. Unlike members of the academic profession, the four were more interested in identifying the truths they found in Asian religions than in exploring the contexts that had given rise to them. They were people who believed in universals — that things and ideas could exist across disparate cultures and times. Kahn's argument in favour of taking seriously the universal, as these modern Gnostics described it, is unique in a scholarly world that mostly attributes religious ideas and practices to expressions of local cultures at particular times.

This book is not an account of the lives and thinking of the numerous Western travellers and spiritual seekers who have turned to Asia but rather a grounded discussion of four figures who found there a source of spiritual and intellectual inspiration and solace. They were not converts in the normal sense of the term, but several of them took part in Asian practices or rituals and even in religious initiations. Kahn uses their lives and work to anchor each of the four main chapters of his book. He focuses on René Guénon in a chapter on ideas of traditionalism, while his chapter on Alexandra David-Néel is, in contrast, concerned with Asia and modernity. He next turns to Erwin Schrödinger to discuss science and religion. Finally, Kahn addresses New Age beliefs and interest in the self in

a chapter on Herman Hesse. In all of these chapters Kahn highlights the consensus in modern society that there is something embarrassing about manifestations of Asia or “the East” in Western thought. He hopes that his book will lead to the modern Gnostic project being taken more seriously.

Kahn’s aim is not to defend the modern Gnostic engagement with Asian religion as profound and necessary but rather to create the space for scholars to question their own sweeping judgments. In response to the argument that modern Gnosticism gives rise to political apathy, he points to Hesse’s call to know oneself, David-Néel’s anti-colonialism, Schrödinger’s ideas about the oneness of consciousness and Guénon’s “perennialism” as “ways of thinking, acting, and being modern that are characterized by openness and responsibility for others, nonviolence and respect for the natural world” (p. 145). In these moments he proves the importance and relevance of taking modern Gnosticism and its claims seriously.

Kahn’s acknowledgment of the criticisms of modern Gnostic thought in contemporary scholarship is one of the most successful and convincing aspects of the book. He laments the fact that scholars today are unwilling to engage with Asian religions to the extent of mystical speculation and thus create division among the disciplines that prevents social scientists, philosophers and natural scientists from involving themselves in the same conversations. This book provides a unique and creative thesis about which scholars of Asia would do well to think critically in their studies of religion and culture and in reconsidering their methodologies. Although the book is relatively short, it is quite dense. I imagine a broad audience would find it inaccessible. Therefore this book is recommended for Asian studies and religious studies scholars interested in the theoretical questions relevant to their disciplines.

REFERENCES

- Paine, Jeffrey. *Re-enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West*. New York: Norton, 2004.

Parachin, Victor. *Eastern Wisdom for Western Minds*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007.

Brooke Schedneck

Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs, P.O. Box 241, Chiangmai University, Chiangmai, Thailand 50200; email: brooke@iseaa.org.

DOI: 10.1355/sj32-1g

Indonesia's Changing Political Economy: Governing the Roads. By Jamie S. Davison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xvii+292 pp.

The past decade has witnessed a surge of interest in infrastructure as a mediating concept and object of analysis for humanistic and social scientific inquiry. Historians have detailed how infrastructure's technological forms came to enable new modes of statecraft and governmentality in (post-)colonial settings. Anthropologists have investigated how different infrastructural modalities — ranging from transportation to telecommunications — have shaped the unprecedented movement of people and values across wide swaths of space and time. And political scientists, drawing on the New Institutional Economics literature, have examined infrastructure investment in the developing world, evaluating the relations between endogenous institutions and private investment. It is within and against this third line of inquiry that Jamie S. Davidson critically situates his latest book, *Indonesia's Changing Political Economy: Governing the Roads*, the first major account of toll-road development in post-Soeharto Indonesia. The timeliness of Davidson's book is noteworthy, as it appears in the context of President Joko Widodo's prioritization of *infrastruktur* projects across a sprawling archipelagic nation. Davidson's book will serve as a guide and an example for researchers interested in the increasing salience of these projects as they come to define the president's vision and shape the national imagination.