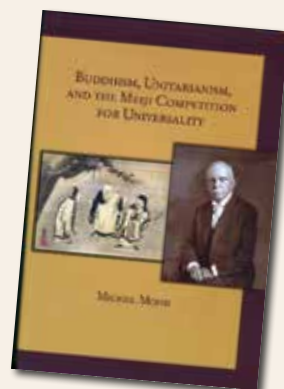


BOOK REVIEW

Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality

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The history of the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) was once presented as a trajectory “from conflict to dialogue” (Thelle 1987). Since then, many works have been published that further complicate this narrative, including several studies which from different perspectives aim at historicizing the modern idea of “religion” itself.

As much of this previous work reveals, it was through the mostly conflictual interaction between these two belief systems of Buddhism and Christianity that the term *shūkyō*—a Meiji neologism developed especially to translate the word “religion” as found in Western European languages—was established. In this book, Michel Mohr offers a contribution to the above debates from a different standpoint: he focuses on the aspect of the reception and appropriation of the discourse on “universalism” in modern Japan. In more concrete terms, Mohr presents an impressively detailed history not only of the Unitarian movement during the Meiji and Taishō periods, but also of the dynamic networks—both religious and academic—that developed around it. Unitarianism, a very heterogeneous Christian movement which in its modern manifestation emphasizes, at its core, the “immanence of truth within all religious traditions” (p. xi) played, as is also clear from Mohr’s work, an undeniably important role in the intellectual context of Meiji Japan. Despite its significance, it has nevertheless been the topic of no more than a handful of studies, perhaps the most noteworthy of these being that by Suzuki Norihisa (1979). Mohr, however, builds upon these studies, and presents a new narrative based on original manuscript sources researched in archives in both Japan and the United States.

The monograph is divided into three parts, each of them subdivided into three chapters. The first of these parts, titled “Seeds and Transplant,” begins with a general discussion of the Western concept of “universal truth,” as well as of its reception and early appropriation in the context of post-Restoration Japan, mainly through the enterprise of the Unitarian mission and its networks. Mohr then moves on to describe the incipient stage of the mission in Japan, by focusing first on the activities of Arthur May Knapp (1841–1921), and then on those of his successor, Clay MacCauley (1843–1925). Perhaps the central character of this book (it is his picture on the cover of the volume), MacCauley took over from Knapp in the early 1890s, and was responsible for the establishment in 1894 of the Tokyo Unitarian Hall, which developed into a place for lectures and discussion on

Unitarianism. MacCauley would also found, in 1894, the Institute for Advanced Learning (*Senshin Gakuin*), a Unitarian center for theological studies, which attracted several members of the intellectualized Japanese youth. However, Mohr also reveals that in the course of the 1890s the mission increasingly lost native Japanese support. In its early days it depended on the encouragement of Fukuzawa Yukichi and others, such as diplomat Kaneko Kentarō (1853–1942) and *bushi*-turned-marquis Tokugawa Yoshiakira (1863–1908), but Mohr argues that a certain drawing back of the mission was an outcome of the specific anti-Western intellectual context that developed following the promulgation of the Imperial Rescript on Education (*kyōiku chokugo*) in 1890.

In the second part of the book, “Bloom and Tensions,” Mohr goes beyond the limits of a plain history of the mission in Japan to trace how Unitarian ideas themselves influenced a far broader range of Meiji-era religionists. First, he focuses on how Buddhists such as Furukawa Rōsen (1871–99) and Sugimura Sojinkan (1872–1945), both highly significant actors in contemporary Buddhist circles, were influenced by the ideal of “free investigation” (*jiyū tōkyū*) proposed by Unitarianism. This idea would later become one of the tenets of the Bukkyō Seito Dōshikai, one of the most momentous associations in the framework of modern Japanese Buddhism. He also shows how Murakami Senshō (1851–1929), a considerably important but equally understudied character in the context of post-restoration religious history, benefited from Unitarian concepts when developing his own ideas on Buddhist doctrinal unification. The author goes on to consider Unitarianism’s impact away from Buddhism, through an analysis of the activities of Kishimoto Nobuta (1865–1928), a Harvard University graduate responsible in many ways for the introduction and establishment of the discipline of comparative religion (*hikaku shūkyōgaku*) in Meiji Japan. In the last chapter of this second part, Mohr explores the spread of Unitarian ideas in connection with (Christian) activist movements. He describes the development of the Yūaikai, a moderate labor union organization established by Unitarian Christian Suzuki Bunji (1885–1946), and backed by the mission. By focusing on the persistently significant Unitarian influence in areas as distinct as Buddhism, academia, and socialism, Mohr is able to reveal certain aspects of the intricate networks in place around the transition to the twentieth century.

Part III, “Fracture and Rebuttals,” deals with later setbacks in Japanese Unitarianism. MacCauley resigned from his position in 1920, and in his place was appointed John B. W. Day (1874–1957), a young minister who “had his own ideas about how *he* would proceed” (p. 143). For instance, despite the sympathy of his Japanese colleagues with the Yūaikai, Day understood it was reasonable for the mission now to withdraw support from this organization. According to Mohr, given “the popularity of the Yūaikai, when the divorce between the two organizations was consumed and became public, it was perceived as a further sign of the inability of foreigners to understand the Japanese situation” (p. 167). On top of such domestic issues, support from the American headquarters also became increasingly complicated, which caused the mission to end its activities in 1922. Mohr also considers the period between 1900 and 1909, when Saji Jitsunen (1856–1920), a former Jōdo Shinshū priest, acted as head of the Unitarian mission. Along with Hiroi Tatsutarō (1876–1952), himself one of the first in modern Japan to embrace the cause of animal rights, Saji understood that Unitarianism should be less about Christianity and more about the “universal character” of religion, which put him at odds with the likes of MacCauley.

In the book's final chapter, Mohr focuses on "the counterexample" of Rinzai Zen priest, Shaku Sōen (1860–1919), teacher to Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966) and a character well-known to any student of Buddhism in the modern world. The author meticulously investigates the possible sources of Sōen's assertions of "universalism," which included, but were not limited to, Unitarianism. At the same time, nationalist rhetoric put forward by Sōen is also explored, which presents the reader with a seeming case of "double tongue" (p. 235). After all, how can one truthfully speak of universalism while exalting the superiority of one's own tradition?

The volume's epilogue (entitled "Reexamining the Universalizing Channels") draws from previous chapters' findings to consider, in even broader terms, the issue of "universalism." It mentions other possible sources which may have caused, along with Unitarianism, this idea to take root in modern Japan: Hegelian philosophy, Theosophy, and Swedenborgianism, among others. Mohr acknowledges the importance of these other factors, and despite not dealing with them in detail, he does suggest that a reconsideration of those intellectual trends would constitute a significant contribution not only to modern religious history but also more broadly.

Although one could hope for a better contextualization of Unitarianism in the framework of Christianity in post-restoration Japan, the book reads very well as a social and intellectual history of the Unitarian mission in the Meiji and Taishō periods. However, while the possible influences on Buddhism are made clear, far less attention is given to how Buddhism might have shaped Unitarianism in Japan. For example, to what extent did Murakami Senshō's quest for the inner "consistency" of Buddhism as a "religion" predate his contact with Unitarianism? One could argue that it was the very preoccupation with reframing the Buddhist tradition(s) of Japan within universal ideas such as "religion" and "science" that served as fertile ground for the reception of Unitarianism. This reviewer also felt that the discussion of Buddhist nationalism put forward by Shaku Sōen could have been further problematized. It might be less a case of "double tongue" and more a clear example of how nationalism was, in the modern context, almost necessarily construed vis-à-vis universalistic rhetoric. On this the reader is referred, for instance, to Prasenjit Duara's reflections on the idea of "civilization" as justification for imperialist expansionism (2001).

These issues aside, the volume is nevertheless an extremely well-researched contribution to the field of modern Japanese religion. Considering that a transcultural history of concepts is one of the most pressing scholarly issues of our time, Mohr's reflections do offer a possible way to go beyond the national-narrative framework.

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