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Review Essay

THE GROWING LITERATURE OF
ASIAN AMERICAN RELIGIONS:

*A Review of the Field, with Special Attention to
Three New Books**

Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents. By Jeannette Yep, Petter Cha, Susan Cho Van Riesen, Greg Jao, and Paul Tokunaga. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto. By Janet McLellan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans. Edited by David K. Yoo. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

Until recently, Asian American religions were out of the sight of most scholars in Asian American studies and other academic disciplines. In Asian American studies, as pointed out by David K. Yoo (p. 8), the influence of Marxist philosophy and the anti-colonialism discourse underpinning the Asian American movement relegated religion to an unworthy or even reactionary status. In religious studies, Asian American religions were "doubly marginalized by virtue of race and religion" (Yoo, p. 6). In social sciences, past theories failed to provide adequate tools to analyze religions of Asian immigrants and their descendants. For example, the sociological categorization of church, sect, and cult made it impossible to analyze immigrant Buddhism. Studies of Buddhism in America commonly treated Buddhism as a cult or "new religious movement" and thus focused on European American converts from mainstream religions to the "exotic" Buddhism. Similarly, secularization and assimilation theories, which once dominated sociology, blinded researchers from perceiving the importance of religion and ethnicity.

However, religion has been a vital force in Asian America. Between the mid-nineteenth century and World War II, Chinese and Japanese immigrants built hundreds of temples along the West Coast or wherever they settled. In the second half of the twentieth century, Asian new immigrants established hundreds of

Buddhist temples and thousands of Christian churches. These and many other religious institutions—Hindu and Sikh temples, Muslim mosques, etc.—have provided much needed religious and social services to the immigrants and their descendants. There are also many other religious groups, religious practices within the home, and individual spiritualities in various Asian American communities.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, new thinking in several academic disciplines arose. Consequently, the literature of Asian American religions began to emerge. In the sociology of religion, for example, a new paradigm gradually came forth that rejects classic secularization theories.¹ Instead of treating religion as a vestige of the ancient past, more and more scholars now regard religious diversity and vitality in modern or postmodern society as normal phenomenon; religion continues to play important roles in both private and public spheres. Informed by the new thinking, augmented by the increasing scholarly interest in post-1965 new immigrants, research projects focusing on immigrant religions have been carried out and many more are undergoing. These projects have resulted in some journal articles and books,² which include ethnographic studies of Asian immigrant religious communities. Some studies in fact exclusively focus on certain Asian immigrant religions, and Raymond Brady Williams is truly a pioneer in this regard.³

Janet McLellan's book, *Many Petals of the Lotus*, is the latest addition to this growing list. Buddhism is an Asian religion. Many old and new immigrants from Asia adhere to this ancient tradition. However, only recently have some studies turned the attention to Buddhism of Asian immigrants. Numrich presents two Theravada Buddhist temples, one is Thai in Chicago and one is Sinhalese (Sri Lankan) in Los Angeles.⁴ The book edited by Prebish and Tanaka includes chapters covering various ethnic Buddhist groups and Buddhist sects from Asia.⁵ Janet McLellan's work focuses on five Asian Buddhist communities in Toronto: Japanese, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Chinese Buddhists. These immigrant groups speak different ethnic languages, follow diverse Buddhist sub-traditions—Mahayana, Theravada, Vajrayana, and various sects, and have very different experiences as immigrants or refugees. The book is a remarkable accomplishment as a mostly one-person endeavor over many years.

McLellan provides fascinating ethnographic descriptions of these diverse communities in their cultural preservation, social adaptation, religious transformation, and identity construction. More important, by putting these various Buddhist communities side-by-side, some differences and common themes among these communities become obvious. Differences are myriad, which are not hard to understand. But McLellan shows that in all these communities

Buddhism has played crucial roles in reaffirming, maintaining, and recreating ethno-cultural identity. She also finds that transformations of religious practices and organizations have occurred within all Asian Buddhist communities, most notably toward what can be called "Protestantization"—adopting some Christian elements such as choirs, youth groups, Sunday schools, Sunday worship services, and monks acting like pastors. Almost all the communities have faced the challenges of increasing lay participation in leadership and gender equality, although different temples are experimenting with different accommodations based on their theological and cultural traditions. Most of these ethnic religious communities have also extended transnational networks not just with their countries of origin, but also with their counterparts in other countries.

A theoretically important finding in McLellan is that many Asian immigrants and their descendants use Buddhism to define their Asian ethnicity. This is especially true when they face assimilation or Christian proselytization pressures from the mainstream society. In other words, these Asian Buddhist immigrants seem to perceive their Asian ethnicity and Buddhist identity as inseparable and one; moreover, the religious institution serves to preserve, reinforce, and reinvent ethnicity. This finding echoes that of studies of earlier European immigrant religious communities.⁶ However, this may not be generalizable to other new immigrant religious communities such as Asian American Christians. What is common between the new Asian immigrant Buddhists and earlier European immigrant Catholics and Jews is that their transplanted traditional religion is a minority religion facing the Protestant/Christian mainstream society in the United States/Canada.

In contrast to Buddhism as an Asian religion, Christianity is regarded mainly as a European American religion. However, Christianity has become the majority religion within the Korean American community and the largest religion among Chinese Americans. Without an Asian religion to serve as the institutional and cultural mechanism for preserving ethnicity, will Asian American Christians lose their ethnic identity? Does becoming or being Christian mean total assimilation to the mainstream society of Christian America? Non-Christian or non-Asian American observers often assume positive answers to those questions, but the reality is not that simple. Asian American Christians commonly face complicated identity construction problems.

This identity complex involving ethnicity, race, Americanness, and Christianity is the focus of *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents*. Written by five Asian American Christian ministers affiliated with the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, this ministry-oriented book intends to help Asian American

Christian students in their identity construction and reconstruction process. The eleven chapters deal with various practical aspects of life that these young people must face: school performance, career choice, gender equality, race relations, interracial marriage, family relations, finding a church, and so forth. In all these aspects, however, Asian American Christians must deal with their parents, and indeed the cultural traditions embodied in their parents, especially the Confucian-based traditions. The authors present vivid cases of anxieties and struggles among Asian American Christian youth and young adults, which often reflect general tensions among evangelical Christian beliefs, American values, and Confucian norms. These authors try to provide theologically based and culturally sensible suggestions for those who are going through this process, from this comes the title of the book.

What is fascinating to me is the book's underlying assumption: adhering to Christianity and inheriting Confucianism can be harmoniously combined, and it is possible to be an Asian (Chinese/Japanese/Korean) Christian and American simultaneously. This intention of integrating Asian ethnic, American and Christian identities is indeed an explicit theme in an earlier book by another team of Asian North American Christian leaders.⁷ Classic assimilation theories imply an either-or choice of a new American identity over the old ethnic identity. However, Asian American Christians are constructing adhesive identities—simultaneously attain or retain multiple identities and selectively assimilate or reject certain elements of several cultural systems. The phenomenon of adhesive identities, which I find in Chinese Christian churches,⁸ appears to be common in various Asian American Christian communities, including among American-born and American-raised generations.

Another interesting aspect is that this team of Asian American authors holds a general pan-Asian American orientation, although the scope of the book is limited to descendants of Confucian East Asia. This orientation may reflect an emerging phenomenon of pan-Asian American Christianity—churches and parachurch organizations specifically targeting English-speaking Asian Americans regardless of specific ethnicity. The construction of a pan-Asian American Christian identity raises many questions, including race dynamics in contemporary America. Future studies of such churches and ministries will be important for theoretical developments in several disciplines.

The literature of Asian American religions has grown significantly by now. However, it was only five years ago when *Amerasia Journal* made its groundbreaking contribution to the emergence of this new field within Asian American studies. In 1996 it published the special issue, "Racial Spirits: Religion

and Race in Asian American Communities." Most of the articles that first appeared there are included in the book *New Spiritual Homes* edited by David K. Yoo. This book is a collection of some pioneering studies that cover a wide range of topics. Timothy Tseng examines Chinese American Protestant nationalism in 1919-23 and Steffi San Buenaventura traces a Filipino American folk religion in its transmission and transformation. These two historical studies compellingly document the connections and mutual influences between the immigrant community and their original countries. Several articles focus on contemporary issues and communities. Through examining a court case involving a Sikh family in California, Vinay Lal raises broad issues of religion, law, and pluralism in American society. Irene Lin presents an excellent ethnographic study of the Chinese Buddhist His Lai Temple near Los Angeles. Rudy Busto analyzes the intriguing phenomenon of Asian American students gravitating to evangelical Protestant organizations on university campuses across the country. Jung Ha Kim's study focuses on the roles of women in an immigrant Korean church. In addition to these fine historical and sociological studies, there are also theological essays, spiritual memoirs, and poems, which seem to be out of place in this otherwise scholarly volume. The editor justifies their inclusion by saying that Asian American religions are more than an academic affair. For a sociologist like me, however, these articles could be read as illustrative narratives and interesting data.

In sum, the field of scholarly research on Asian American religions has grown significantly in the last decade. The literature is in fact increasing at an accelerated pace. In addition to what have been published, there are many more individual or collective projects underway. In the coming years we will see more publications of historical and ethnographic studies of various ethnic communities and religious traditions. I hope that we will see more comparative studies that compare various ethnic groups of one religion and various religions of one ethnic group. The next step, then, may include quantitative survey research comparing various Asian American ethnic groups and diverse religious traditions.

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Notes

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1. R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (March 1993): 1044-93.
2. R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); and Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet S. Chafetz, eds., *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuity and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2000).
3. Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants From India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996); and Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Also see Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Institution* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977).
4. Numrich, *Old Wisdom*.
5. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Also see Duncan Ryuken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds., *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (London: Curzon Press, 1999).
6. For example, Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956); and Jay P. Dolan, *The Immigrant Church: New York's Irish and German Catholics, 1815-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).
7. David Ng, *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1996).
8. Yang, *Chinese Christians*.

***The Politics of Fieldwork: Research in an American Concentration Camp.* By Lane Ryo Hirabayashi.** Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999.

Lane Ryo Hirabayashi's *The Politics of Fieldwork: Research in an American Concentration Camp* slices to the core of current debates in social science and challenges readers to reflect upon the politics of their academic endeavors. Hirabayashi explores issues such as the impact of social science on cultural domination and the relationships between field researchers and research supervisors. These issues have been widely discussed and debated especially within recent anthropology and sociology. Hirabayashi enters these discussions by speaking to issues of race, power, and science as they unfolded within the Japanese