

Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*

London and New York: Routledge, 2015. 450 pages. Hardback, \$255.00, ISBN: 978-0-4156-3503-5. Paperback, \$53.95, ISBN: 978-1-1383-1267-8. eBook, \$28.98, ISBN 978-1-3157-5853-4.

The field of Asian religions is so sprawling that it can seem impossible to survey. First off, “Asia” refers both to an enormous geographic zone as well as to an imaginary realm profusely conjured by explorers, missionaries, merchants, politicians, and reformers. Secondly, “religion” can span countless beliefs and practices, individual experiences and communal formations, ancient artifacts and present-day developments, human and superhuman. Attempts to provide grand narratives or universal theories of Asian religions at large seem increasingly risky and old-fashioned. Recent scholarship, then, has tended toward works of expertise in particular sections of the field. Yet, even with increasingly refined localized studies, institutions—such as universities, media outlets, and government bureaus—still maintain an area of study called “Asian religions” and expect that its professors and authors can say something meaningful about its unifying aspects. Many of us in the field only find ourselves speaking these dreaded generalizations in introductory courses where we fight to restrain ourselves from confusing undergraduates with caveats, exceptions, and the colonial origin stories. The more intrepid among us write textbooks or edit volumes with framing essays that sketch the problematic histories of the field and reconsider definitions for its key terms.

Among these brave scholars are Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink, who recently edited the *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, a collection of twenty-six articles providing new research and perspectives on Asian religions, with a focus on contemporary developments. By assuming this task, Turner and Salemink have successfully brought to light the focused studies of twenty-nine scholars (three of the articles are co-authored). This volume, then, can be seen as furthering the academic movement for increasing specialization and specificity. With collections like this one, scholars and students of Asian religions have access to more research on wide ranging topics, such as those that make up the volume's five parts: "Asian origins: Religious formations;" "Missions, states, and religious competition;" "Reform movements and modernity;" "Popular religions;" and "Religion and globalization: Social dimensions." Yet, the task of editors of these kinds of large collections is to do something beyond creating printed space for new projects—it is also to curate these projects and argue for the choices of their curation. Why these articles? Why these topics? Why now?

There are two key contributions Turner and Salemink's volume makes to the field at large: to have us see Asian religions as having a global presence and to have us recognize that within Asia there are vibrant religious communities that we have typically described as belonging elsewhere. On both fronts, the volume succeeds. Several essays provide compelling case studies for how traditions with roots in Asia manifest internationally and intra-regionally. Judith Snodgrass's illuminating chapter, "Engaged Buddhism in 1920s Japan," demonstrates how the English-language journal the *Young East* worked to promote East Asian Mahayana Buddhism internationally as a modern, socially-engaged world religion. Scott Dalby's "Popular Qigong and transnational Falun Gong inside and outside post-Mao China" persuasively argues for the crucial transnational aspect of movements like Falun Gong. And in the "Internet and religion in Asia," a theoretically-engaged chapter on digital religions by Sam Han, we are invited to consider how the Internet "acts diasporically" by religiously connecting far-flung people to a sense of a homeland, while also maintaining spaces for a type of religious homelessness.

The *Handbook's* second contribution—that of seeing a wider range of religious traditions within Asia—is perhaps even more welcome in that it demonstrates how religious cultures in Asia exceed the familiar traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and so on. This volume features four chapters dedicated to Christian movements (including Catholic developments in India and the Philippines; Christian conversion in China; and Pentecostalism across South, Southeast, and East Asia) and four chapters dedicated to Islamic movements (including a historical study of major trade networks in Central, South, and Southeast Asia; a post-colonial argument to approach Islamic reform as a "discursive tradition;" a survey of contemporary Sufi revival movements in Southeast Asia; and a new periodization of eastward Islamic movements). Furthermore, the "Popular religions" portion effectively presses us to think about communities whose local practices challenge world religions models and theologically-driven ways of defining religion. For instance, this section's opening chapter, Morten Axel Pedersen's "Shamanism in Eurasia: A Mongolian case study in a comparative light," exemplifies the value of taking the findings of a sustained investigation and putting them into a comparative context.

This edited volume, then, makes its key contributions in the form of mounting evidence in support of the argument that: Expanding our definitions of what counts

as “Asian religions” allows us to demonstrate that Asian cultures and worldviews have global presences and a diverse range of contributors. Asia influences the world, so the *Handbook* reminds us. And within Asia, we can find the world.

Turner and Saleminck, however, do not stop with this work of expanding the category of “Asia.” They also address the problem of the category of “religion.” Their co-written introduction—which provides an informed overview of the state and history of the field that will be of use to scholars and students alike—notes that “modern scholarship is less inclined to make large-scale generalizations about religion” (2). And they, too, tell us that the volume “on the whole does not dwell on the epistemological problems of finding a satisfactory definition of religion” (10). The authors explain that the volume itself, like the disciplines of sociology and anthropology from which its editors and many of its contributors come, focuses on culturally-specific developments.

The contributors’ analyses of these developments, though, are often engaged with theoretical debates concerning the category of “religion.” Andrea Marion Pinkney’s chapter, “Revealing the Vedas in ‘Hinduism’: Foundations and issues of interpretations of religion in South Asian Hindu traditions,” is a prime example of how questioning these kinds of categories and their histories allows us to see what has been obscured by viewing religious traditions as natural or timeless. And even Turner, in his concluding essay, proposes generalizations about religion in contemporary Asia that, he suggests, help explain increasing and widespread revivals. This follows a claim from the introduction that in the “beginning of the twenty-first century, religion appears to be a dominant feature of both domestic and international affairs, and the sociology and anthropology of religion are enjoying a revival” (2). Turner’s conclusion then argues that these social-scientific fields and adjacent fields like religious studies might begin to understand the major causes of the rising prominence of religion in Asian societies. He ventures that these causes are: urbanization, social mobility, educational reform, and greater participation of women.

Surely, some scholars will object to the larger premise that we are in a particularly religious time. Turner’s claim that “Buddhism appears to have taken on a more political hue” (432) is especially at risk of criticism considering the tradition’s long and prominent political history. Still, Turner’s efforts here to name shared trends across Asian religions help to move the conversation beyond Orientalism and connect the isolating work of bounded experts. With volumes like the *Handbook*, scholars of Asian religions are encouraged to think again about what unites us.

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