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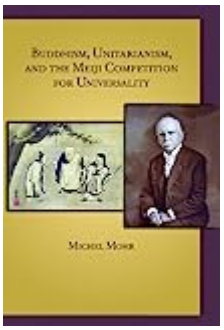

Michel Mohr. *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality.* Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014. 346 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06694-6.

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Preachers of the Universal: The Unitarian Mission to Japan

Most books in our field can be sorted into question-driven, reinterpretative, or new-source-driven projects. A good monograph will generally combine all three approaches, but usually one type predominates. A primarily question-driven project starts from a larger theoretical or methodological query and then marshals disparate sources to answer it. A reinterpretation sets out from a previous work, or a known ethnographic community or body of materials, and aims to read it afresh or according to a new context. A new-source project starts with the discovery of a source or set of sources, which are either unknown to the scholarly world at large or merely unstudied by Anglophone researchers. To be sure, there are good and bad versions of each approach. A question-driven project gone bad merely reassembles secondary sources to fit a predetermined thesis. A reinterpretation is especially hard to do well because it is easy to arrive at implausibleâor worse, trivialârereadings. But the quality of a new-source-driven project depends on the relevance of the text, community, or archive to larger debates in the field. A âgap in the literatureâ is necessary, but insufficient justification on its own for a monograph. It is no good unearthing a hitherto unread manuscript or archive only to find that it was unimportant and justly forgotten. This is not Michel Mohrâs problem.

Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality is an example of new-source-driven work done well. Its main reason for being was Mohrâs discovery that the American Unitarian Association Archives at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, contains correspondences from the Unitarian mission to Japan in the period 1887 to 1922. From the get-go, the monograph is necessarily situated in a significant scholarly lacuna because the Unitarian presence in Japan has been almost completely absent from the Anglophone secondary scholarship, appearing primarily in a brief pamphlet and a short discussion in a larger work on Christianity in Japan.[1]

But even readers uninterested in Unitarians on their own will find Mohrâs project stimulating because the AUA Archives contain candid observations about many

of the most significant Japanese thinkers and movements of the period. Additionally, Mohr has used the AUA materials as a stepping-off point which he has significantly contextualized by way of reference to understudied Japanese sources, including a host of influential Japanese-language journals loosely connected to the Unitarian project. Accordingly, this study of Unitarian missionaries and converts provides a potentially fresh view of everything from Fukuzawa Yukichiâs personal life to the birth of the Japanese labor movement and the history of Meiji Buddhism, among a host of other surprising connections.

Historians of modern Japan will want to comb through the workâs index to see if the Unitarians can provide new views of their topic of interest. There are so many potentially interesting points of contact that I cannot do justice to them here. I for one was surprised to find that Oyabe ZenâichirÅ å°è° • é¨å¨äé (1867-1941)âknown today if at all as an unusual theorist of race who made the eccentric claims that the Japanese were really descendents of a lost tribe of Israel and that the Japanese warrior Yoshitsune (1159-89) had fled to the mainland where he became Gengis Khanâwas for a time employed by the Unitarian mission, and we can see in his correspondence with it Oyabeâs facile capacity for self-fashioning and creative reinvention.

Readers of this list, however, will likely find the work primarily of interest in two broad, and, as Mohr argues, interrelated areas: Christian missionary history and the modern history of Japanese Buddhism. With respect to the first, the AUA Archives at first pass tell a familiar story of an ultimately failed Christian mission whose basic outline will be recognizable to other historians of mission historyâan initial period of excitement and growth, ambitious projects and institution building alongside a few setbacks, the emergence of indigenous sympathizers and converts, but then increasing tensions between these indigenous converts and the foreign leadership that, combined with a shift in national sentiment, lead to an eventual split and an end to the official mission. The details of this caseâwhich in a sense provide the manifest narrative of *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*âare interesting in that it was Fukuzawa Yukichi who invited the initial Unitarians to Japan. The initial institution building was connected to the construction of a combined church and educational institution called the Unity Hall (*Yuiitsukan* å¯äé¤¨)[2] in 1894 and the foundation of a short-lived graduate school called the Institute for Advanced Learning (*Senshin Gakuin* åé²å¦é¢). Their split was in part caused by a new leaderâs rejection of the Japanese labor movement (especially the YÅ«aikai åæä¼) in a political climate that had become increasingly hostile toward socialism.

On a theoretical level, the most interesting aspect of the specifically Unitarian undertaking is not to be found in the historical details above, but in the projectâs central tension, or what Mohr describes as the Unitarianâs âparticular blend of universalityâ consisting in the claim that âunder the pretense of regarding all religions as different expressions of the same truth many Unitarian protagonists assumed that Christianity nevertheless held the key to a more enlightened form of civilization that was destined to spread worldwideâ (p. 16).

Indeed, when it began the Japan mission the American Unitarian Association as a whole was in the process of debating William Channing Gannettâs credo âThings Commonly Believed Among Us.â Ultimately ratified at the Western Unitarian Conference in Chicago in 1887, this statement of faith included the position that âall names that divide 'religion' are to us of little consequence,â and it advocated honoring âall inspiring scripturesâ together with the Bible and described a reverence for Jesus as a prophet next to âall holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love.â[3] So it might seem that non-Christian scriptures were potential sources of salvation. To be sure, some Unitarians resisted what they saw as the de-Christianization of the churchâs mission, but it meant that the institutional leadership was at least nominally committed to potentially placing all religions on the same footing. This credo might therefore seem to render missionary activity unnecessary, but it did not. Indeed, the Unitarian Mission to Japan embraced both Christian evangelism and a commitment to the assertion that all religions shared access to the truth. In other words, it was salvation directed toward the already saved. It was this paradox that serves as the leitmotif to Mohrâs text, if framed in his language as the debate around âuniversality.â

Second, it was this openness to other ârelationsâ that led to a particularly complex relationship to the Japanese Buddhist institution, which was at that time in a state of significant flux. Mohr argues that âin Japan the Unitarians planted the seeds of a certain version of 'universality,' which set into motion a chain reaction ranging from interest to appropriation and became the locus of a competition involving Buddhist intellectualsâ (p. 15). For Buddhologists, it is this latter claim that will perk interest, and Mohr indeed dedicates a significant portion of

the work to the transformations of Meiji Buddhism in the context of its contact with Unitarian leaders and projects. Mohr demonstrates without a doubt that the Unitarian mission was influential on some Buddhist thinkers in the period. For example, it gave Buddhists a model for pamphleteering and a Post Office Mission, and even served as a significant inspiration for modernizing Buddhism in general. Even more than many other Christian denominations the Unitarians served as dialogue partners for discussions of liberal or modern religion (for more on this broader dialogue see Notto Thelle, cited above). This material is definitely interesting and insightful and Mohrâs extensive expertise about modern and early modern Buddhism is clear on every page.[4]

It is here that I have a small disagreement with Mohrâs generally well-argued and insightful projectâI was not fully persuaded about how much a specifically Unitarian version of universality came to appear in Japan and in Buddhist circles particularly. As Mohr notes there were indigenous precedents for certain formulations of universality, and there was also a range of potential Euro-American influences unconnected to the Universalist church (from Hegel to Theosophyâsee especially pp. 238-239). To be sure, he grants an instability around the Japanese terms *fuhenteki* æ®éç and *uchÅ«teki* å®å®ç for the English âuniversalâ (pp. 95-98), but makes little of this tension. But my disagreement comes from the sense that forms of universality are more widespread than Mohr suggests. Even in a European context one can find many examples that are not particularly Unitarian. Indeed, as early as 1553 Guillaume Postel had argued in *Des merveilles du monde et principalemet [*sic*] des admirables choses des Indes & du nouveau monde* that Japanese were basically Christians, but nevertheless still needed to be further Christianized.[5]

More importantly, the formulations of universality that Mohr traces bear some similarity to indigenous precedents, including Japanese *honji suijaku* æ¬å°åè¿[1] (original foundation, manifest traces) discourse. According to the combinatory paradigm embodied in this slogan, local deities are emanations or even something like the legible signs of universal buddhas and bodhisattvas. This means that in some respect Shingon thinkers were capable of granting the reality of figures such as the âShinto godâ Tenjin, while at the same time arguing that it was merely a manifestation of the bodhisattva Kannon. This let them argue that followers of Tenjin were to that extent worshiping a Buddhist figure without knowing it. On the one hand this move was generously ecumenical or universalizing, but on the other it had the potential to subordinate all other systems into a Buddhist hermeneuticâjust as Unitarians sometimes argued that other religions were striving toward a deity understood best (but not exclusively) according to a Christian interpretative frame. Indeed, my own research suggests that this type of discourse is fairly widespread. I explore this set of logics in greater detail in my first book under the term *hierarchical inclusion*, âby which I mean an operation for dealing with alterity that works by subordinating marks of difference into a totalizing ideology, while still preserving their external signs.â[6] In that sense, I do not see the contradictions of universality that Mohr tracks through Japanese history as necessarily especially Unitarian. But I grant that the Japanese discourse around universality shifted in the nineteenth century and Unitarianism was likely an influence on this shift. So my disagreement is mainly one of emphasis.

In summary, Mohr has discovered a valuable archive of materials that will necessarily open up further research for many years ahead. *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality* will be of immediate interest to scholars engaged in the larger history of Christian mission, labor history, and modern Japanese Buddhism, and it should not be overlooked by other historians of the period who may find in it particular gems and fresh insights.

Notes

[1]. George M. Williams, *Liberal Religious Reformation in Japan* (Chico, CA.: New Horizons Press, 1984); and Notto Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854-1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

[2]. An earlier Unity Hall burned to ground. See 27-28.

[3]. Reproduced in David B. Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), 130-131.

[4]. For Francophone readers I would also recommend Michel Mohr, *TraitÃ© sur l'inÃ©puisable lampe du Zen: TÅrei (1721-1792) et sa vision de l'Ã©veil* (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes Ã©tudes chinoises, 1997).

[5]. See Jason Änanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 59.

[6]. Ibid., 26.

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