

6-1-2018

Schober, Juliane & Collins, Steven (Eds.). Theravada Buddhist Encounters with Modernity. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Joseph Stimpfl Ph.D.
Webster University, jstimpfl@webster.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stimpfl, Joseph Ph.D. (2018) "Schober, Juliane & Collins, Steven (Eds.). Theravada Buddhist Encounters with Modernity. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.," *Journal of International and Global Studies: Vol. 9: No. 2, Article 28.*

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1426

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol9/iss2/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Schober, Juliane & Collins, Steven (Eds.). *Theravada Buddhist Encounters with Modernity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Mentioning Theravada Buddhism to most religious studies scholars will result in certain assumptions—namely that it is a classifiable “form” of Buddhism and that its historical origins render it the most fundamentally “authentic” or “original” form of Buddhism—though this framing is primarily a Western construct. These basic assumptions are challenged in the articles in an edited text by Juliane Schober and Steven Collins. The authors of the various articles in *Theravada Buddhist Encounters with Modernity* are affiliated with the Theravada Civilizations Project, a scholarly collaboration supported by the Henry Luce Foundation. “Theravada” originated as a concept if not a classification in monastic debates in early Buddhism. This “lineage” was modeled after the ancient elder-monks, known as *sthaviras* in Sanskrit and *thera* in Pali. The term is tied conceptually to the earliest liberated monks (*arahants*). Thus, it has come to be associated with ideas of authenticity and originality.

This volume delves into contemporary and historical differences in the development of concepts associated with Theravada Buddhism. More specifically, the work investigates how the term is used today and what it means for writers and researchers who identify themselves, their communities, or their academic fields as “Theravadan.” The editors’ stated intention is to describe “diverse practices in different places and times” while asserting that there are differences “inflected by local histories, diverse practices and vernacular languages” that affect localized social constructions of being Theravadan (p. 4).

The authors are at once both constrained and energized by the conundrum of similarity and difference and, perhaps, the enigma of classification. They collectively “recognize the limitations of the term ‘Theravada’ as a modern historical construct, taken as referring to what some would call a ‘religion,’” but they acknowledge that most Buddhists who accept the identification as Theravadan “came to experience modernity under the political domination of European colonialism” (p. 8). In his own chapter, Steve Collins suggests an approach to the examination of Theravada Buddhism that includes the breaking of the study into independent “modules” and refers to this approach as “modular history.” The modules, he suggests, include (1) understanding the socio-cultural contexts of the places Buddhism is found, (2) tracking the images of Buddha and monks, (3) tracing monastic lineages, (4) contrasting local variations of the Pali Canon as a defining characteristic of “Theravada identity,” (5) summarizing the holdings in various places throughout the Theravada world to see the influence on local and regional thought, (6) comparing the spiritual exercises and training found in various places, and (7) juxtaposing traditions and practices of other traditions found contemporaneously with any place identified with Theravada Buddhism. Collins explains this modular approach is necessary because of what he calls the “oscillation between strong/centralized and weak/diffused power” (p. 22) throughout the Theravadan world.

A strong orientation in this text is to recognize the influence of Western thought on understanding the modern classification of Theravada. Kate Crosby examines this in the context of Western writers’ differentiation of meditation into discussions of its physical and spiritual elements. She points out that by doing so, Western analysis bifurcated the practice of meditation into its “acceptable” and “unacceptable” parts undermining perhaps its more holistic elements. This was part and parcel of the colonial suppression of *ayurvedic* medicine by the West.

The authors in the second section of the book apply Collins’ analytical framework to specific places where Theravadic practice is common. John Clifford Holt explores how

Buddhism in Sri Lanka has become a matter of public, lay, and political discourse, creating a class of Buddhist “modernists” that contrast significantly with traditional village practice. Anne Hansen discusses early 20th century Cambodia, where Theravada Buddhism was subsumed into identity politics. The Buddhist differentiation of religious identities (*sasana*) she describes becomes very important where competing groups attach a specific religious practice to a civic identity. These “communities of belonging” (*samnak*) (p. 69) took on significance in competing for ownership of the nascent national identity. This section ends with an essay on post-colonial Nepal by Christoph Emmerich. In the context of defining any Buddhist group in Nepal, Theravada has come to be used less by the practitioners and more by others to rebuild or construct national identity. As he concludes, such a construct “makes it particularly difficult to draw clear lines between a historical before and after or a qualitative or paradigmatic shift suggested by the terms ‘coloniality,’ ‘modernity’ or ‘the contemporary’” (p. 91).

The final part of the book addresses the implications of “Theravada” in the contemporary world. Stephen C. Berkwitz returns to Sri Lanka. He reminds us that the historiography of Buddhism there was rife with internal debates over the authenticity of Buddhists’ disciplinary practices, not arriving at a self-imposed classification of a tradition. He extends this discussion to modern times with a contrast of recent two prominent Buddhists, Soma and Gnanananda. Ashley Thompson focuses on Buddhist art and the work of David Wyatt in the analysis of self-portraits found in Buddhist temple murals in Thailand. She offers that the core teaching of Theravadans is the “non-self,” which can present a problem in the analysis of this art. As she explains, found here is “the embodied experience of selves and collectivities irrevocably grounded in the ideal of the non-self” (p. 135). The thrust of her discussion is that “modern Buddhist identity” may depend as much on the definition superimposed by Western interpretation and analysis as any self-defined classification from Buddhists in the “Theravada world.” In the final article, Thomas Borchert addresses the role of “Theravada Buddhism” as a driver of change and modernity in southwest China. As he explains, “Translocal conceptions of Buddhism exist in tandem and in tension with local and state forms” (p. 138). Chinese scholars might portray Theravada as the original form of Buddhism, and this portrayal plays out in ethnic and geographical identity politics. Indeed, this understanding of Theravada as the original form of Buddhism is often tied to an attempt to centralize power and control in intrastate politics.

This text as a whole combines a curious combination of very specific and idiosyncratic information with themes and issues of general interest to Buddhist scholars and those who have an interest in the socio-political elements of comparative religion. It is very much the product of a rich affiliation of scholars forming a working group to address some of the more prominent themes concerning the influence, both negative and positive, of Western scholarship on the study of religion in Asia. There are many valuable points offered in the various essays, not the least of which is the question of using the term “Theravada” to rationalize the authors’ collective and collaborative study. They remind us that colonialism and its vestiges remain with us.

Joseph Stimpfl PhD
Webster University
jstimpfl@webster.edu