

Book Reviews

Civilisation et femmes célibataires dans le Bouddhisme en Asie du Sud et du Sud-Est: 'Une étude de genre', by Steven Collins. Les Conférences de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011. 133 pp, £11.66, ISBN-13: 9782204095839

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In this small book, published in French, Steven Collins brings his attention to the study of celibate women in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism. Some of the material presented in this book is drawn from an article written with Justin McDaniel on *mae chis* (unordained Buddhist 'nuns') in Thailand.¹ Collins here expands his sociological analysis of sex, gender, and women in Pāli texts to include female figures of pre-modern, modern and contemporary Thailand and argues that the increase in the number and status of female renunciators suggests an evolution of Buddhism as a civilizational model (or rather a reversal from a later to an earlier model) or, more dramatically, a transformation of humanity as a whole, in which women and men would equally share in the requirements of the domestic sphere and the processes of production and transmission of culture and civilization. These striking suggestions reflect the public lecture nature of the book, which is an edited version of four papers Steven Collins gave at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in 2006. The specific nature of the book is both an advantage, in that it allows the author to draw on his vast knowledge both of Pāli literature and Western sociological theories to propose a provocative thesis; and a shortcoming in that it is tailored to a non-specialist audience, and therefore, sometimes frustratingly, lacks the scholarly precision to which we are accustomed from Professor Collins.

The book is made up of five chapters that each addresses different but related topics. The first and last chapter set the middle chapters within a theoretical framework. In the first chapter, Collins delineates the two themes of the book, posing their theoretical and definitional backdrop. First, he discusses asceticism as a 'civilizational enigma' — a discussion based on his previous work in *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*² — and establishes, as a starting premise, what he calls, using Weber's term, the elective affinity of asceticism and masculinity. To arrive at this claim, he brings to his discussion three theoretical perspectives: from a

1. 'Buddhist "nuns" (*mae chi*) and the teaching of Pali in contemporary Thailand'. *Modern Asian Studies* 44(6), 2010: 1373–1408
2. *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

sociological perspective, asceticism in Buddhism is culturally and socially dominant because, on the one hand, ascetics enact in a ‘maximalist fashion a social role that constitutes a minimum requirement from every human being’ (15) to allow for society and culture to exist and, on the other hand, asceticism represents an ‘aspiration to a state of perfection in concept and in behaviour’ (16). From a Performance Theory perspective, Collins defines gender as a social role produced by the acquisition and repetition of ‘representations’ and behaviours within socio-cultural constraints and hierarchies, and not always related to biological sex. To this, he adds a Gender Theory perspective mostly based on anthropologists Rosaldo and Ortner’s work, according to which women are more closely related to biological reproduction and the related obligations, which are devalued and rejected, and opposed to men’s public (as opposed to domestic) sphere.

Second, he presents a brief account of the conception of sex and gender in Pāli texts, based on the *Abhidhamma*’s systematic analysis, and the narrative accounts found in the *Brahmajāla* and *Aggañña Suttas*. He shows that sex and gender are conflated in the accounts of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, and its commentary, the *Atthasālinī*, which he quotes at length, and describes how the latter posits the inferiority of the female gender without explaining it. From a narrative perspective, Collins draws on the *Brahmajāla* and *Aggañña Suttas*, whose accounts he sees as humorous, to explain the origins of sexual differentiation. While he points out that these accounts do not blame women for the ‘Fall’ [la Chute] or the ‘Original Sins’ [les Péchés Originels], he is not concerned that they fail to provide any systematic indication on how the female gender becomes inferior to the male. He only cursorily remarks, in his discussion of Buddhist cosmology, that the texts do not explain why women cannot be reborn as *Māras* or *Sakkas*, except to note that these beings are superior and the ‘female gender is inferior’ (30).

In the second chapter, Collins gives an overview of women’s social status and roles found in Pāli literature, and a brief history of the order of Buddhist nuns. He points out passages that include parallels between men and women, and those that set down differences between them, and then briefly discuss expectations of women found in the texts, such as virginity, legal dependence on a male guardian, and faithfulness to one’s husband, that are contingent on their social status, and differ widely from expectations of men. He then discusses the foundation of the *bhikkhunī* order, its subsequent disappearance in Sri Lanka and Theravādin Southeast Asia, and the recent developments in Southeast Asian countries highlighting the increasing number of women who decide, at a young age, to become a ‘professional celibate ascetic’ [ascète-célibataire de profession], and the contemporary movement to re-establish women’s ordination in the Theravāda tradition.

In this chapter, the descriptions would have greatly benefitted from adding references to the texts drawn upon: despite Collins’s starting caveat that he did not include them because of the nature of his audience, they could have been easily added while the text was edited to be published and would have been very welcome to scholars, especially when the texts are qualified as ‘widespread’ or ‘many’ (45).

The third and fourth chapters cover very different material from the rest of the book, moving away from Pāli literature to discuss various ‘celebrities’ in South and Southeast Asia and, in chapter four, women in contemporary Thailand, including their status, and issues such as beauty contests, women in sports, les-

bians, and female mediums, before turning to specific Buddhist lay meditation teachers, *mae chis*, and ordained *bhikkhunis*. While they provide interesting and enjoyable vignettes on a wide array of female figures, Collins's purpose in describing this great variety of real and mythic women, besides emphasising their presence, remains unclear. That some of them represent illustrations of the Pāli material discussed in the first two chapters is likely, but it is never explicitly stated and, for the others, such as the mythologized (semi-)historical figures of various queens and princesses, they seem to illustrate the argument that Collins presents in his last chapter, the transformation from a model of Buddhism in which only professional male ascetics are recipients of gifts that create merit [donataires] into a model, which existed in India and Sri Lanka at least until the end of the first millennium, in which both male and female ascetics are recipients of such gifts. The emphasis on how these women, even those who are not ascetics, are worshipped (and how their worship is generated through a variety of means such as history books, films, and TV shows) supports this suggestion. However, more research is needed to determine why these figures are worshipped, why their worship is encouraged, and what aspects of their life are emphasized. For example, the queens and princesses that have been brought into the Thai nation-building exercise, seem to share one characteristic, in that they have given their life to save their husbands, an action which one can consider within the Indic tradition of wives sacrificing their lives for their husbands. Furthermore, it must be ascertained whether they are worshipped as spirits, in exchange for favours (as Collins himself suggests several times), or whether they are considered a field of merit: in other words, whether, when Thais make offerings to these figures, they consider they are making merit?

In the last chapter, Collins picks up again the theoretical ideas he discusses in the first chapter and draws far-reaching conclusions about asceticism in Buddhist civilization and its relationship to gender. According to him, gender developments in Thai religious practices suggest that Buddhism is reverting to an earlier model in which men and women are equally fields of merit, or that these changes are only a synecdoche to a much wider civilizational change that will result in men and women sharing equally in the requirements of the domestic sphere and the processes of production and transmission of culture and civilization.

Collins' conclusions are very sanguine, and indeed extremely appealing. While there is no doubt that they make a gripping finale to a public lecture series, they may appear a little too sanguine for a scholarly volume, unless we place ourselves in the *longue durée*, and imagine our children (or maybe reincarnations) in a few centuries when the ideal gender equal world envisaged by Collins has become reality. In the meantime, Collins's small volume raises a number of questions and provides leads for further research in an engaging and provocative way as he brings together the many strands of his vast knowledge to bear on his new field of interest.