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## Book Review

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TAYLOR, James. 2008. *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space*. Aldershot: Ashgate. vii + 244pp. ISBN 978 0 75466 247 1. Hbk. £55.00.

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In this volume, James Taylor provides a bricolage of diverse examples of contemporary Thai religious life, tied together only (yet persuasively) by the postmodern theories which provide its ever present analytical framework. At the outset, he argues that there has been a resurgence of interest in sacred space in Thailand as the forces of cultural re-enchantment, de-secularization and post-traditionalism shape and re-shape religiosity and social practices. He describes the profound insecurity experienced in Thailand arising from the political upheavals and uncertainties of the economic climate after the 1997 crisis and in the post-Thaksin era. He sees this insecurity as giving rise to a range of supernaturalist and commodified forms of religion, and generating a plethora of modern salvation stories and devotional cults that capture the imagination of the contemporary urban Thai, whom he describes as “lost in space” (p. 6). His examples, delineated in the subsequent chapters, are understood against this background.

Like other scholars he sees the modernist dichotomizing of rationalist and supernaturalist Buddhism as inadequate, and argues that Buddhism is not homogenous, so is best understood as “Buddhisms.” These Buddhisms are seen as responding in different ways to the various forces of urbanization, consumerism, and technologification, and consequent social fragmentation. Adopting Roland Robertson’s (1992) term “glocal” to highlight the intersection of “global” and “local” in the construction of social and religious identities, he is interested in the urban condition in its “lived totality” (p. 19), and the ways in which changes in the metropolis reverberate in the countryside. The volume focuses on a number of new (and changed old) religious practices which epitomize and elucidate these intersections of urban and rural, global and local, as well as peasant and elite, monastic and lay, forest and town, centre and periphery, *kamma* and consumerism, which characterize contemporary Thailand.

Thammakaai is a New Religious Movement, (with similarities to the Taiwanese Fo-guang-shan, so-called Humanistic Buddhism), generated in Thailand’s new white-collar classes. It combines eclectic features of Buddhism, a cosmic battle between good and evil, a charismatic leader and a capitalist political philosophy expressed through the Buddhist notions of *dana* and “merit.” The movement built a huge religious monument as its centrepiece which Taylor analyses persuasively as a heterotopia. He charts the discontinuities of Thammakaai with Theravada Buddhism, and responds to critics who say its success can be entirely explained by reference to corruption in wider Thai society. The movement has gained power through its position on the margins and is “neatly packaged and marketed as something different and new” (p. 40). Contrasting with the discipline and order of Thammakaai, Taylor then explores

Wat Sanaam Chan, 100 miles to the East of metropolitan Bangkok, another “sacred space,” but of kitsch, chaos and commerce, rather than of order and hierarchy.

In Chapter Four Taylor offers an analysis of cyber-space as contesting normative tradition, where virtual Buddhism creates new frontiers of the religious imagination (p. 97), and in which dhamma webmasters are, or will become, the new religious virtuosi (to use Weber’s term). Chapter Five focuses on the popular arahant, Maha Bua, founder of the Help Thai Nation Project and critic of Thaksin Shinawatra. The theme of this chapter is the body; in Buddhism, and the sickly social body. Further chapters explore the impact of modernity and urbanization on various aspects of monastic traditions. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) concept of the rhizome, Taylor explains how traditions and practices are transmitted through history in a fragmented fashion, with lines dying, new lines and new “imaginings” emerging.

In most of the volume there is no real sense of who James Taylor is, nor how he relates to Thai Buddhism. Apart from occasional references to the years in which ethnography was undertaken, there was no explication of the nature and terms of that ethnography, leaving the reader wondering where exactly Taylor’s vested interests might lie. This is the case until on p. 155 we are told that he was ordained as a kammathaan monk in 2007, at a monastery where he had previously undertaken fieldwork for his 1993 volume *Forest Monks and the Nation State*. Some earlier indication of his affinity for the Forest Tradition would have enabled the reader to contextualize what went before. Whilst the attempt to utilize critical and post-modern theorists and theories to elucidate the nature of contemporary Thai Buddhism was laudable and sometimes useful, it often seemed that the discourses internal to theory were more important to Taylor than the religious realities he was ostensibly trying to expose to scrutiny. That said, the volume provides a useful set of apparently random yet complementary snapshots of Thai Buddhism in the contemporary period, and a study of the usefulness of postmodern and critical theory in its analysis. It therefore offers an important alternative perspective to more historical, doctrinal or more richly ethnographic accounts.

## References

- Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 2004 (1980). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.
- Robertson, R. 1992. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.