
Book Reviews

Eleanor Nesbitt, 2004, *Intercultural Education*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press. viii + 204pp. £13.95. ISBN 1845190343 (pbk).

Eleanor Nesbitt's *Intercultural Education* draws upon the important research carried out by the University of Warwick's Institute of Education over the last two decades. The author and Professor Robert Jackson of the same Institute have long argued the significance of an ethnographic approach to understanding cultural and religious diversity in British schools. The studies on which the book is based were carried out amongst schoolchildren aged between 8 and 13 from Christian, Sikh and Hindu backgrounds. Although primarily written for teachers, trainers of teachers and their students the book is an invaluable resource for scholars interested in ethnicity, multi-culturalism, migration and the development of 'diaspora' religious communities. The contents of the book originate in the experience derived from extensive fieldwork undertaken in the diverse multicultural environment of the West Midlands in Britain. For educators, the significance of the research lies in the impact upon teaching when the results of ethnographic study are brought to bear upon pastoral matters, the school curriculum and events that promote intercultural understanding. Containing practical advice that helps to overcome the common cry of teachers that they have little time to deal with the complexity and diversity revealed by ethnographic study and the study of 'lived religion', especially with regard to South Asian religiosity where borders are often blurred, the book is an invaluable resource for all those involved in teaching and community relations.

For scholars of religion, the in-depth contact with the emic deconstructs essentialist understandings of religion, destroys stereotypical thinking, challenges the way beliefs and practices are represented and provides new insights into the process of identity formation.

Nesbitt's fieldwork warns us that in the contemporary situation where religion is increasing in significance as a marker of identity it is imperative that we do not take such constructions as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian as facile categories too superficially regarded as homogeneous. The contents of the book challenge a number of areas important to both educators and scholars of religion. In Chapter 1, the author explores the ways in which birthdays are celebrated by children from different communities, highlighting the cross-cultural configurations and reconfigurations of 'English' and 'Asian' elements that fuse to create hybridity. She demonstrates that children who do not conform to the dominant model can be easily marginalized. In Chapter 2 she challenges our perceptions of Hindu identity by the use of the case study that looks at attitudes towards vegetarianism. In Chapter 3 she explores intrafaith diversity and in Chapter 4 the multiple meaning of festivals, focusing on Diwali, Christmas and Vaisakhi. In each of these chapters she begins to build a powerful critique of essentialism.

Chapter 5 introduces the important theme of language, focusing upon the Sikh use of the term 'God'. In this analysis she raises the contentious issue of appropriate or 'correct' use of specific religious terminology. To the emic and etic scholar of Sikhism terms such as 'guru', 'amrit', 'sant', 'baba' may have very precise meanings which when used accurately allow precise entry into Sikh cosmology and theology. However, the research amongst children

demonstrates that they are both seeking English equivalents but also many do not conform to scholarly constructs of difference between Guru and God. Many teachers of Sikh children will be familiar with the ten Gurus of Sikhism being identified as the 'ten gods'. Others who have taken students on field visits will have met the common description by informants of the Gurus as 'prophets'. Nesbitt does not dismiss these transformations as insignificant or inaccurate use of terminology and religious concepts but seeks to elicit meaning behind the changes. Along with Chapter 6 which spotlights 'belief' and the way in which children choose their beliefs she raises the important issue of levels of religion that privilege textual 'orthodoxies' over common or vernacular beliefs and practices.

In Chapters 7 and 8 she sensitively explores the complexity of religious constructions of identity, first focusing on the porous borders between 'Sikh' and Hindu' belief and practice which originates in the South Asian context and then on the process of multiple identity formation that belongs to the new diaspora context. Significantly, she asserts that young Hindus identify themselves as Hindu not as an assertion of a return to religion but as a continuity with family traditions. This contrasts dramatically with young Muslims who have been shown in a variety of studies to use Muslim identity to challenge their parents' cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This is an area that could be fruitfully compared in order to further our understanding of the Muslim phenomena and the process of radicalization.

Chapter 9 explores spirituality especially in the context of the emphasis upon externals found in many school RE curricula. This chapter implicitly offers a critique of the dominance of phenomenological approaches to the study of religion, especially their impact on the classroom. Finally in Chapter 10, Nesbitt reiterates her plea for the use of ethnographic study to inform professional practice in schools. She argues that such studies can re-evaluate our knowledge of categories such as 'religion' or 'culture' and demonstrates how educational institutions can perpetuate certain representations and neglect the vital element of process in the formation of identity.

Education itself is a factor in religious and cultural identity formation processes. The way in which religion is represented in the classroom is one factor by which children arrive at conclusions concerning who they are. It would be easy to confine the author's conclusions to the realm of the education of children, significant to teacher training and classroom interaction but she is saying something crucial for the contemporary study of religion that needs to be heard. It is not only religious education that needs to move away from the phenomenology of religion to, in the words of John Hull, 'the phenomenology of the life-world' (Hull, 2003) but also the academic study of religion which remains dominated by textual study.

References

Hull, John, 2003, Review of 'Towards Religious Competance: Diversity as a Challenge for Education in Europe'. *British Journal of Religious Education* 25(3): 251-53.

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Elizabeth J. Harris and Ramona Kauth (eds), 2004, *Meeting Buddhists*. Leicester: Christians Aware. 300pp. £11.50. ISBN 187337223X (pbk).

This is the fourth volume in a multi-authored series which the Leicester-based organization called Christians Aware have sponsored over the years. The other volumes focus on *Meeting Muslims*; *Meeting Hindus* and *Meeting Sikhs*. They are intended as a resource for people, mainly

Christians, who seek to understand something of the other, and the emphasis on 'meeting' means, in this case, reading essays on a variety of themes by different Buddhists and those engaged in dialogue with Buddhists. Of the 26 contributors, 21 are Buddhists from a variety of traditions (Theravada; Zen; Nichiren new religious movements; Tibetan; Friends of the Western Buddhist Order; Shingon and Pure Land) and cultural backgrounds (France, Burma, Japan [2], South Africa, Tibet, Sri Lanka and UK [14]). The interest of the volume for those whose focus is fieldwork is an emphasis made by Elizabeth Harris in her Introduction that the challenge is to 'try to enter Buddhism on its own terms' and in Ramona Kauth's encouragement to the reader to visit some of the many Buddhist centres in UK and meet practitioners, using the text of the book as a starting point for face-to-face meetings.

The main text of the book begins with excellent introductory histories of Buddhism worldwide by Peter Harvey, well known for his writing on Buddhism, and of Buddhism in UK by Helen Waterhouse who has done pioneering local fieldwork written up in her *Buddhism in Bath*. The next sections give three personal views of the Buddha, followed by very different presentations of the Dharma or core teaching from Theravada, Zen and Tibetan standpoints and then views of the Sangha with voices from a Theravada, Western Buddhist Order and Vajrayana practitioners. These three headings reflect the 'three jewels' or 'three refuges' of Buddhist teaching. There follows a section on Places and Symbols, which gives an insight into a range of centres in UK and is followed by a focus on the variety and commonality of practice in seven different Buddhist groups. In this section the detailed pieces by Shenpen Hookham on *Key Ideas Common to All Buddhist Traditions* and that by the late Venerable Rewata Dhamma on *Samatha and Vipassana Meditation* are notable. The final two themes are *Buddhism and Women* and *Christian Approaches to Buddhism*. In the section on women Elizabeth Harris's *Introduction* and the insights of Martine Batchelor (based on her experience in Korea) and Koko Kawanami (based on her knowledge of Japan and Burma) weave a rich and realistic tapestry of women's lives and the issues being worked out by Buddhists in relation to their texts and history. In the final section the writers are very open and honest about how their lives and faiths have changed as a result of their encounters with Buddhists.

One of the striking features of this volume is its excellent colour illustrations, many of them full-page, of Buddhist sites and activities from all over the Buddhist world. Some are of classical works of art and architecture, but many are contemporary, such as the striking sculptural presentations of The Four Signs of Old Age, Sickness, Death and a Holy Renouncer seen by the Buddha and which triggered his search for Enlightenment. These are by P.D. Ranjithand and are reproduced separately on pp. 74-77 and together on p. 103. All the photographs, most of which come from the camera of Elizabeth Harris, give a real sense of vitality to the text and evoke a living tradition with people of all ages and from many countries involved in making offerings, talking, celebrating and so on. So many inexpensive books resort to black and white photographs and very dull images without people and any sense of activity. These are vibrant and full of interest, which is so appropriate for something as dynamic as religious life.

Each chapter is fully annotated and accompanied by an appendix of further reading on the chosen themes. Other appendices give useful web sites; places to visit; details of contributors; a glossary of terms in Pali and Sanskrit; extracts from texts and some basic lists which summarize some Buddhist teachings.

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Phra Peter Pannapadipo, 2005, *Phra Farang: An English Monk in Thailand*. London: Arrow Books. 312pp. £6.99. ISBN 009948448X (pbk).

Phra Peter Pannapadipo, 2005, *Little Angels: Life as a Monk in Thailand*. London: Arrow Books. 356pp. £6.99. ISBN 0099484471 (pbk).

The bulk of academic writing on Buddhism is historical and philosophical, reflecting the belief of western converts that Buddhism is 'the religion of reason'. While some recent literature is written by academics who are also practitioners of the Buddhist religion, there are few 'outsider' ethnographic studies that portray Buddhism as it is practised. Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* (1971) remains the only major study dealing with what the author calls Buddhism's 'apotropaic' elements. In the absence of studies that are substantially based on field work, Phra Peter Pannapadipo's two autobiographical accounts of life as an English monk living in Thailand provide valuable insights into the way in which Buddhism is actually practised by the Thai population.

Little Angels is a study of twelve Thai novice monks, based on questionnaire and interview work carried out by the author, by means of a translator. It is not, he says, a piece of scholarly social research, but a set of twelve stories showing 'the human face of Buddhism' (p. 2). However, the book could readily have been made into an academic study, if Pannapadipo had been so inclined: the missing ingredients are discussion of methodology, a literature review and set of conclusions. The conventional stereotype of the Buddhist monk is the dedicated spiritual seeker, who assumes a number of demanding precepts, and practises meditation in the quest for nirvana. By contrast, Pannapadipo's informants are boys who entered the monastic life to avoid poverty, to receive an education, or to run away from dysfunctional families whose lives are plagued by domestic violence, drugs and alcohol abuse. There are apparently around 100,000 such novices in Thailand, comprising a substantial proportion of the monastic community, which is estimated to be 300,000, rising to 500,000 in the rainy season, when some of the laity can temporarily live the monastic life. Some of the novices are committed to the spiritual life, and aim for full ordination, which can be undergone on reaching the age of 20, while the majority prefer to use their education for secular vocations, such as teaching or business management.

Both books provide valuable insights into the monastic life, and the practicalities that it entails. For example, in modern society the laity often provide packaged food and bottled drinks to the Sangha, and monasteries have dilemmas about whether monks should continue to do their *bindapat* when they have far exceeded their needs. There is valuable detail on the celebrating of certain festivals, funeral customs and ordination. Apparently, there is also a ceremony for disrobing.

Even monasticism does not imply deep spirituality, according to the author. He is particularly disparaging of the village monasteries, whose monks have often taken the robe because there is 'no other more attractive or practical alternative', and whose expertise encompasses little more than a rudimentary knowledge of Thai Buddhist teachings and an ability to chant, give blessings, use holy water and perform animist rituals. The hallmark of Thai monasticism is adaptability: while the Buddha himself offered precepts that were worthy and workable, Pannapadipo confesses that, on arrival at a Thai monastery, he quickly had to relent on prohibiting novices from eating at 'unseasonable times', recounting how one group of novices feigned illness — to the extent of painting pock-marks on their faces — so as to obtain exemption from the official food rules. Monks and novices regularly handle money: their reward for chanting at funerals is that they get paid, and it is common practice for temples not only to organize fairs, film shows and dance performances to raise funds, but to involve the monks in

these events. All this does not mean that anything goes, however: in particular, drugs, sexual misconduct and theft are sanctioned with immediate expulsion.

Phra Farang (which means 'foreign monk') recounts a somewhat love-hate relationship with much of Thai Buddhist practice. He views practices such as giving blessings for good fortune as superstitious, and complains about his obligation to join other monks in blessing 'trees, trucks and washing machines' (p. 222). He is somewhat ambivalent about ghosts and exorcism, however, and testifies to having personally seen a ghost in the Wat Buddhapadipa Temple in London. Like many western Buddhists, he attributes the Thai folk practices to pre-Buddhist animism or to folk custom, which is regarded as apart from Buddhism. Like many westerners, Pannapadipo wants to develop his meditative practice, much of which appears to be done in isolation from the rest of the monastic community, and sometimes in somewhat bizarre circumstances: the author tells of using a crematorium oven as a meditation hall at one point, in order to find seclusion, combined with the traditional reminders of death.

Both books are absolutely fascinating and, although they are not remotely intended to be used academically, they provide valuable insight into Thai Buddhism as it is actually practised, as well as the tensions that western converts experience on encountering Buddhism's indigenous expressions. The author's testimony is every bit as valuable as the kind of informant testimony that is gained from field work. Books of this kind are few and far between: we ignore them at our peril.

Reference

Spiro, Melford E., 1971, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Burmese Vicissitudes*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

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