Book Review


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This edited volume consists of an “Introduction” by James R. Lewis and Huang Chao, and twelve chapters. Falun Gong or Falun Dafa (Dharma Wheel Practice or Law Wheel Practice) is a new spiritual movement founded by Li Hongzhi (b. 1952), who has been resident in the United States since 1998. The group has generally been favourably regarded in the West, and publicity has tended to stress the persecution of Falun Gong by the Chinese government, with emphasis placed on alleged organ harvesting, and deaths of members by self-immolation. The chapters by David A. Palmer (“The Doctrine of Li Hongzhi: Falun Gong—Between Sectarianism and Universal Salvation”), Susan J. Palmer (“From Spiritual Healing to Protest: Falun Gong’s Emerging Culture of Martyrdom”), James R. Lewis (“Burning Faith: Interpreting the 1.2.3 Incident”) and Heather Kavan (“Friendly Fire: How Falun Gong Mistook Me for an Enemy”), are reprinted journal articles.

The remaining chapters include two that address the political views of Falun Gong: Junpeng Li’s “The Religion and Politics of Falun Gong” charts the history of the movement from state-sanctioned qigong “health-enhancing technique” (p. 11) to Li apparently self-deifying and engaging in criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from around the year 2000; whereas Campbell Fraser’s “The Falun Gong Political Narrative: Creating the Illusion of So-Called ‘Forced Organ Harvesting’” argues that using the organs of executed prisoners is a different matter to the “organ harvesting” that Falun Gong members allege is happening. Fraser notes that organ harvesting from executed prisoners was outlawed in 2015 by the CCP and that the post-mortem donation scheme that replaced it has resulted in a “shortage of organs now existing in China” (p. 234) and Chinese citizens going to other countries for transplants.

Fan Yong’s “Devil-Killing and the Essence of Falun Gong” reviews the categories of people that Falun Gong members have allegedly killed (because they were, or were controlled by, devils), and discusses Li’s ideas about devils. The theology of the group posits a radical difference between Falun Gong practitioners and other people, and seemingly supports “acts of violence against non-followers” (p. 124). Cao Yan’s “The Self-contradictions in Li Hongzhi’s Statements about Illness” is one of several chapters that address the ways the founder and Falun Gong interact with science. Understanding sickness as karma results in the rejection...
of modern medical treatments, which Cao links to human rights abuses. Wang Chengjun’s “Scientific or Anti-Scientific: A Critical Analysis of ‘Science’ Discourses in Falun Gong” analyses scientific, para-scientific and science fiction tropes in Li’s teachings, arguing that Li fails in the attempt to legitimate Falun Gong by the use of science, as his claims are unverifiable, since they cannot be empirically tested. Stefano Bigliardi’s contribution, “‘You don’t want to have that kind of thought in your mind’: Li Hongzhi, Aliens and Science”, examines Li’s “alien theology” (p. 161), noting Li’s claims that science has been introduced to humans by hostile aliens; aliens have impregnated human women; and technologically advanced alien cultures still require “Fa-rectification” (p. 179) for salvation.

Helen Farley, in “Falun Gong’s Attack on Academic Freedom”, tells a personal story of persecution by Falun Gong during her time as a Religious Studies scholar in Australia. She frames this experience around ideas of academic freedom and demonstrates effectively that Falun Gong maliciously attacked her and James Lewis, with whom she had worked, suggesting that she was not a real scholar and was in receipt of monies corruptly acquired from the CCP. Dr Farley is a friend and colleague of mine, and while this saga was unfolding, I was emailed by an academic at my own institution, seeking information about her. I declined to provide any; the scholar in question is an active Falun Gong member and is vocal on issues that affect the group. The final chapter, Lewis’s “Clarifying the Truth: Falun Gong’s Media Strategies”, provides further information about the favourable treatment of Falun Gong in Western media and deliberate work on behalf of the group to minimize hostile coverage and spread its version of the story. The Epoch Times, the newspaper published by Falun Gong, is free and in abundant quantities in my home city of Sydney, for example, and a recent three-part programme on the ABC Radio Background Briefing, entitled “The Power of Falun Gong”, saw journalist Hagar Cohen exposing the negative side of the group in ways that complemented this book.

Enlightened Martyrdom: The Hidden Side of Falun Gong is a timely publication, in that it seems that the tide of public opinion is turning against Falun Gong, and the critique offered by Lewis and Chang is modest in some ways. The stories of ex-members that media coverage is now mining for tales of abuses and personal suffering are absent, and most discussion is of the leader and his teachings. The chapters are of uneven quality, as is often the case in edited volumes, but the book is recommended for students and scholars of new religions, religion and the media, and religion and politics.