

Review

Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya, edited by Megan Adamson Sijapati and Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. 191 pp. £104 (hb). ISBN 978-0-415-72339-8.

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This collection of essays edited by two well-regarded scholars of Nepali religion draws together studies of religion in some of the world's most remote places to consider the distinctive inflections of modernity and modernizing processes in the transnational Himalayan region. The book ignores boundaries that shape other analyses and representations of the Himalayas, in particular religious boundaries and national borders, proposing that the Himalayas are a geographically and culturally cohesive territory. This collection demonstrates that the lines of religious, national, and linguistic difference that also silo most scholarship on the contemporary Himalayas belie the many shared frameworks and experiences that are in evidence at the local level. Megan Adamson Sijapati argues in her introduction that the examination of lived religion in multiple locations contributes to the further theorization of the Himalayas as a region unto itself despite its fragmentation at other levels. She argues that *modernity* rather than *modernization* is the appropriate framework for such a study because modernity does not imply linearity or a society's material development. A self-awareness about their peripherality on the part of Himalayan peoples is a widely attested theme in the book, as is the centre/margin dynamic that shapes other binaries deployed in the representation of Himalayan communities—developed/backward, educated/uneducated, progressive/traditional, and so forth. A third major theme across the volume is emplacement. Sijapati argues that 'the importance of place to religious practitioners' understanding of themselves and the divine and material worlds around them cannot be overstated' (p. 10), an assertion that the scholarly literature fully bears out.

The book's three sections each make distinct contributions. Part I on 'space, place, and material modernities' examines how material cultures and embodied practices express and encode the strong connections between

self-understanding and place that Sijapati signals. Luke Whitmore analyses modern, post-modern, and post-disaster interactions between the high-altitude pilgrimage site of Kedarnath and its pilgrims and residents; Holly Gayley presents a rich study of monastery-produced Tibetan popular music that eulogizes the lama; and Andrea Pinkney examines the multiple functions and meanings of chapbooks that celebrate Hindu pilgrimage sites in the Indian Himalayas. Part II focuses on local deities. Here Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz probes a set of innovations in the representation of the Nepali goddess Svasthani and rituals associated with her that have propelled her to new fame. Radhika Govindrajan then examines the ambivalent relationships that various groups of his worshippers maintain with Ganganath, a god of the Indian region of Kumaon, whose contested origins evoke the modern politics of belonging and identity. Part III, on education and governance, offers three windows onto discursive practices that shape Himalayan modernities. Nadine Plachta surveys changes in the educational system in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley that are rapidly opening new opportunities for Buddhist women. In an essay that thankfully brings Pakistan into the conversation, Katherine J. L. Miller shows how Isma'ili Muslim inhabitants of the Hunza Valley frame educational initiatives as spiritually modernizing undertakings that weld individual to collective aspiration and shape the community's self-understanding in contradistinction to Muslims in lowland Pakistan. Elizabeth Allison employs political ecology frameworks to study resource and waste management in rural Bhutan, arguing that the effectiveness of such efforts has suffered from the failure to consider vernacular religious concepts of waste and pollution, which match up imperfectly with those derived from ecological modernization models.

For some of these authors, the modern is evident in the anxiety it produces among Himalayan communities: anxieties about practices others consider backward, about gender and sexuality, or about migration and the contemporary politics of identity, notably in Govindrajan, Gayley, and Miller. For others like Whitmore, Birkenholtz and Plachta, the modern appears in the forms of technology and innovation. The book's significance lies in the unity of purpose it achieves across the many methods and places represented in its authors' individual chapters, each of which is strong in its own right. Together, and with the careful framing its editors provide, the book marks an important advance in the study of religion in the contemporary Himalayas.