Niculescu on Musch, 'Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture: Between Moses and Buddha, 1890-1940'

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Within the emerging scholarship on the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists, Sebastian Musch’s monograph sheds light on a facet until now unexplored: the connection between German Jews and Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century.

Musch’s book, the revised version of his PhD dissertation, brings a threefold contribution to this new field of research. First, with respect to the historical time period: whereas studies published thus far trace the phenomenon back to the counterculture of the 1960s, Musch takes a step back and focuses on the genesis of Jewish Buddhists between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of World War II. Second, on the level of space: up until now, research of Jewish Buddhists had been focused on the geographic and sociocultural spaces where this phenomenon is most visible, in other words, the United States (Judith Linzer, Emma McCloy Layman, James Coleman, Charles Prebish, Charles Hugh Seager) and, to a lesser extent, Israel (Lionel Obadia, Joseph Loss, Michal Pagis, Rachel Werczberger). Musch introduces the reader to a region previously understudied: Germany. In this book, by shedding light on the lives and thought of the first Western Jews to convert to Buddhism, Musch resets the compass and presents Europe, and more specifically Germany, as the first locus of encounter and conversion of Jews to Buddhism. In other words, Musch explores the beginnings of Jewish Buddhism in a different and broader context than it has been done thus far. Third, on the level of disciplinary approach: until now, Jewish Buddhism has been studied mainly by sociologists and anthropologists, whereas Musch employs a historical approach. Following the steps of the Swiss historian of Buddhism Martin Baumann in his work on the integration of modern Asian Buddhism in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, Musch explores the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists in the light of cultural and intellectual history. His book focuses on the history of the reception of modern Buddhism by thinkers, philosophers, writers, and rabbis, all German Jews, thereby inviting the reader to discover a dimension of modern European orientalism hitherto little explored: “Jewish Orientalism.”

If the field of study and the angle are new, the questions Musch asks are the same as his colleagues studying Jewish Buddhists: Can one become a Buddhist while still identifying as a Jew, and how? Are these two religions antithetical, or can we find confluences between them? Could one lead to the other? These questions are the thread weaving the various chapters of the book. In the first chapter, Musch starts by placing his subject in the context of German Jewish postcolonial theory. In the next
three chapters, he addresses various aspects of the encounter between German Jews and Buddhism in the wider context of Christian German orientalism. The second chapter explores the role of bridge builders played by German Jewish writers and journalists, as well as their own appropriation of Buddhism. And in the third, Musch focuses on the case study of the spiritual itinerary of a German Jewish writer who converted to Buddhism at the beginning of the century.

One of the most interesting contributions of this book to the field lies in Musch’s examination of various aspects of the encounter between Jews and Buddhism with the rise of the Nazi movement in the background. By so doing he spotlights the sociopolitical dimension as an important factor in the relation of German Jews to Buddhism at that time. For instance, when Siegmund Feniger became Nyanaponika, one of the major translators of Theravada writings in the twentieth century, Buddhism was literally for him a refuge: fleeing Germany for Asia where he took refuge in Buddhist monasteries and became a monk literally saved his life. From the opposite end of the spectrum, for the writer Walter Tausk who had stayed in Germany and died in the Holocaust, while he had thought before to relinquish his Jewish ancestry when embracing Buddhism, the Nazi persecutions against the Jews made him understand the inevitability of his belonging to the Jewish people and made him reconcile these two identities within him rather than seeing it as a zero sum game: being both Jewish and Buddhist.

Musch concludes by calling for the development of a proper field of study of the relations between Judaism and Buddhism, and in fact he has been actively part of the emergence of such a field. He is currently co-organizing with Israeli historian Boaz Huss and French anthropologist Lionel Obadia the first interdisciplinary seminar bringing together scholars from all over the world working on various aspects of the phenomenon of the Jewish Buddhists, at the center of Hebrew and Jewish studies in Oxford, England. While the last monograph dedicated to the phenomenon of the Jewish Buddhist, written by psychologist Judith Linzer, dates from the 1990s (Torah and Dharma: Jewish Seekers in Eastern Religions [1996]), the creation of this seminar, the recent multiplication of scholarly articles on the topic, the publication of Musch’s book, and the monograph of American sociologist Emily Sigalow the same year (American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change [2019]) are indeed a sign of the development of a proper field of study.

Short, well written, and well documented, Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture will be of great interest for students and scholars as well as for a wider audience. It will arguably contribute greatly to the emerging field of study on the Jewish Buddhist as well as to the understanding of Jewish German culture before World War II and to the field of postcolonial studies.

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