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Sarah-Jane Page & Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip

**Understanding Young Buddhists: Living Out Ethical Journeys. International Studies in Religion and Society 28** (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017) 194 pp., ISBN 9789004338067 \$115.00/€99.00 (hardback).

*Understanding Young Buddhists* sets out to present how young Buddhists (hereafter YB) live out their religion in cosmopolitan everyday contexts. Since Buddhists form less than one percent of Western society's demographic, anyone researching them needs to exert considerable energy to attain a viable sample. This makes the book welcome, especially since the authors have dared to venture into the particularly thorny domain of attitudes toward sexuality. YB have previously been shown to have more sex outside marriage and be more liberal in their attitudes to multiple sexualities (p.100) than peers of other religions. Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip are part of a team that has contributed to our understanding of plural youth sexuality in the West – having paired up previously on the Queer Spiritual Spaces project and in their 2013 book on religious and sexual identity for a *multi-faith* group of the same age.

This book branches specifically into Buddhism offering an intra-religious, in-depth focus. It extends the questionnaire of the 2013 book to a convenience sample of self-identifying Buddhists aged eighteen to twenty-five years in the UK. In their mixed-methods study, the quantitative component is based on the responses of forty-four YB to thirty-eight questions and the qualitative component is based on open-ended questionnaire responses, interviews and video diaries, yielding around 160 quotes from the same Buddhists (although on closer examination we hear from only twenty-seven individuals). There are six chapters to the book and an appendix that offers detail of the participants. After context given in the first chapter, chapters two through five take the form of themed quotes interwoven with sociological commentary. The second chapter sketches religious and non-religious upbringings and journeys into Buddhism establishing participants' convert or convert-raised origins. The third chapter explains YB practice and ethics, while chapter four describes attitudes and experiences of sexuality. The fifth chapter explains how being Buddhist helped YB approach the subjects of equality, environment, alcohol, consumerism, and sexualization of culture. The final

chapter concludes that YB fly in the face of youth apathy towards religion – Buddhism offering a salient source of ethics for life. The postsecular concept of ‘lived religion’ was invoked as a good model of YB involvement with religion while weighing the impact of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital on YB practice.

In its favour, the book de-stigmatizes the subject of sexuality and offers fascinating examples of conversion stories. Many YB were attracted to Buddhism because it helped them feel less ‘categorized’ (p.100) or didn’t judge them for *not* being heterosexual (p.42). YB displayed reflexivity surrounding sexual misconduct (p.76), feeling asexual (p.74), transcending sexuality (p.90), the generation gap in their *saṅgha* (p.152), multiple religious affiliation (p.22) and continued sources of inspiration (p.68-69).

Problems with the book in fulfilling the ambitious promise of the title mostly revolve around the size and representativeness of the sample. The quantitative sample would need to be expanded tenfold for any valid analysis beyond the descriptive. The qualitative sample also suffers from being skewed towards Buddhists at the convert end of the spectrum since many recent publications acknowledge that heritage Buddhists in Britain outnumber converts three to two – meaning the book yields conclusions that unwittingly privilege the convert hegemony endemic to this field of research. While the authors acknowledge the limitations of the study in terms of convert skew (p.11), it doesn’t hinder them from generalizing their findings to the wider Buddhist population. Similarly, some statement about what Buddhism *actually* says about sexuality and the extent to which YB are ignorant of this or have re-interpreted it, would insure findings against the possibility that YB of the sample were simply making up Buddhism as they went along or conflating Buddhist-inspired values (p.110) with ‘millennial’ experimentation. These criticisms weaken the conclusion that Buddhists can be held up universally as reconciling religious young adulthood with attitudes that are (by and large) sexuality-positive (p.142-143). Had heritage Buddhists been part of the sample, testimonies would have shown more prudish attitudes about sexuality that I suspect explain heritage YB reluctance to take part in the study. My own dissertation thesis, that would not have been available at the time this book was written, showed Buddhist teens *as a whole* were half as likely as teenagers in general to agree ‘homosexuality never to be justifiable’, but that heritage Buddhists were significantly *less* open to homosexuality than converts.

As long as the reader remains mindful that it portrays the forty percent of YB converts at the liberal end of the Buddhist spectrum rather than the conservative heritage YB, the book can be praised as a sensitive but compelling narrative of Buddhist youth life journeys. The book positions itself at the leading edge of Buddhist research on values

that may be particularly important to this age group – those of sexuality, relationships and employment. It would be recommended reading for RE teachers, sociologists of postsecularity and anthropologists of Western Buddhism.

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