

Book Review III

Michel Mohr, *Buddhism, Unitarianism, and the Meiji Competition for Universality*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press 2014.

Reviewed by Louella Matsunaga

Meiji Japan has proved fertile ground for scholars of religion investigating the intersections between religion and nationalism, and the re-positioning of Japanese religious organisations in a global context. One aspect of this is the emergence of a discourse of Buddhism as a world religion in the late nineteenth century, and the concomitant attempts to identify a basic Buddhism which could encompass the various strands of lived Buddhist traditions within Japan and elsewhere. There is a rich intellectual history to be unpicked here, in which the interaction between Christian and Buddhist scholars and priests plays a key role. Important work has been done on this by Ketelaar (1990) and Snodgrass (2003), both of whom examine the tension between universalist discourses of religion, and Buddhism as a world religion, in the Meiji period, and assertions by many Japanese Buddhist scholars of the superiority of Mahayana Buddhism in general, and Japanese Buddhism in particular. Assertions of globally based identity and a nationalist reading of this identity co-exist here, with social evolutionary frameworks deployed by some within Japan to depict Japanese Mahayana Buddhism as the pinnacle of evolution of Buddhism as a whole.

Rival claims to universality are a key element of these Meiji era debates, and form the starting point for Mohr's thoughtful and meticulously researched book, which weaves together two partially distinct projects: on the one hand an examination of notions of universality in the religious sphere in Meiji Japan, and on the other a close historical examination of the Unitarian Mission in Japan from 1887 -1922. Beginning with the question of universality, Mohr notes that, paradoxically, notions of universality are themselves culturally variable and subject to contestation. According to Mohr, "universality was the focus of intense

debates accompanying the construction and reshaping of national identity... Christian and Buddhist circles were contributing their respective insights to these debates, while competing for followers... In a sense, universality was the central issue at stake and, ironically, many religious denominations were claiming to be more ‘universal’ than others” (4).

The case of Unitarianism in Japan, Mohr suggests, provides one context in which the varying meanings attributed to universality in Meiji Japan can be explored through the encounters of Japanese scholars, activists, and intellectuals, with Unitarianism. He also argues that the Unitarians are of interest because of their ostensibly non-sectarian stance and emphasis on “the immanence of truth within all religious traditions” (xi). For the Unitarians, and their Japanese sympathisers, therefore, one might expect the notion of “universality” to have a particular resonance.

As Mohr points out, Unitarianism in Japan has been relatively little studied, and most of the existing published material on this topic is in Japanese (the extensive publications of Tsuchiya Hiromasa on the history of the Unitarians in Japan, listed in full in Mohr’s bibliography, are especially noteworthy). Mohr builds on this Japanese language material, and also presents new research based on documents from the Unitarian archives held at Harvard University, to give us a richly detailed account of the history of Unitarianism in Japan from the first encounters with Unitarianism by Japanese people travelling or living abroad in the late 1880s and the subsequent establishment of a Unitarian mission from the United States to Japan, to the eventual withdrawal of the American Unitarian mission in 1922.

Mohr makes a persuasive case for the importance of this mission. In the early stages of their contacts with Japan, the Unitarians enjoyed close contacts with prominent members of Japan’s elite, notably Fukuzawa Yukichi, the founder of Keio University, a very influential figure in Meiji Japan. Fukuzawa actively supported the establishment of the Unitarian mission in Japan, although an important element of this was the emphasis on dialogue with the Unitarians rather than conversion. A former student of Keio and owner and editor of a daily newspaper, Yano Fumio, went further, arguing in his newspaper that Unitarianism was a rational religion, and therefore particularly appropriate to the needs of Japan as a country in the process of modernization. Yano even went so far as to argue that Unitarianism should be adopted as the state religion (19).

This initial enthusiasm for Unitarianism seems to have waned from around 1895 as Japan experienced a backlash against the early Meiji enthusiasm for

all things Western, and many of the political elite who had initially supported Unitarianism moved to distance themselves from it. At the same time support for the mission from the United States diminished. Mohr argues, however, that the influence of Unitarianism on the religious world in Japan continued to be significant through its impact on some important contemporary figures. Notable among these were reformers from the Shin sect of Buddhism, in particular Furukawa Rōsen and Murakami Senshō. Like Yano, Furukawa praised what he saw as Unitarianism's "rationality" in contrast to reliance on the "traditional authority" of the Church, and referred to Unitarianism in the context of his own efforts to reform "today's rotten Buddhism" (Furukawa 1901: 123, cited in Mohr:72). Murakami is known for his work *Bukkyō tōitsuron* (on the unification of Buddhism), which attempts to identify a universal Buddhism and questions the continuity between the teachings of the Buddha and Mahayana Buddhism – a position which caused some consternation among the Shin Buddhist hierarchy. Mohr traces the inspiration for this work to an article in a Unitarian journal.

Mohr also explores the history of the notion of universality in Japan with reference to the career of Kishimoto Nobuta, who studied at Harvard and later became a central figure in Japanese Unitarianism. Kishimoto was an influential scholar in Religious Studies in Japan, and co-founded the Society for the Study of Comparative Religion with Anesaki Masaharu. The term "universal" appears frequently in Kishimoto's writings. Intriguingly, there seems to have been no single standard term in Japanese for the English word "universal" in the late nineteenth century, and Mohr suggests that Kishimoto's writing and his translations of European language texts on world religions played a significant role in introducing debates on universality in Western writing into Japan. The term "universal" itself was rendered in Kishimoto's writings by *uchūteki* - a word derived from a term used in Taoism to denote the cosmos – although it later became superseded in Japanese by *fuhen**teki*, a term derived from Buddhist classics meaning boundless or infinite. Mohr argues that there is a degree of inconsistency, or ambiguity, in some of Kishimoto's references to universality in religion – for example he refers to Christianity as a "universal religion", but also argues that a specific Japanese version of Christianity is needed. In this example, as in others discussed by Mohr, an emphasis on universality in religion seems to co-exist with an emphasis on the importance of specificity and difference.

The question as to what exactly "universality" might mean in practice, and the potential conflicts in its interpretation, is brought into sharp focus in the penultimate

chapter of the book, where Mohr examines clashes within Unitarianism in the period 1909 -1910. A central figure here was Saji Jitsunen, a former Shin Buddhist priest who had become a Unitarian preacher around 1890, and president of the Japan Unitarian Association only four years later. While President of the JUA, Saji published articles criticizing both the Buddhist and Christian establishments, with some pointed attacks on the Shin Buddhist establishment in particular. However, he also published articles explaining the teachings of Shin Buddhism, and identifying common points between Shin Buddhism and Christianity. Saji was dismissed from his post in 1909, and reverted to Shin Buddhism. Although the reasons for his dismissal were ostensibly inter-personal conflicts rather than conflict with the association as a whole, Mohr argues that this was underlaid by divisions over how to define Unitarianism – whether the universality claimed by Unitarianism was broad enough to encompass both Buddhism and Christianity, or whether Unitarianism was specifically Christian. Clay MacCauley, one of the early leaders of the American Unitarian Mission in Japan, who had left Japan in 1900, returned in 1909 and attempted to settle this dispute in a lecture declaring that “Unitarianism is historically Christian”. However this position was challenged by another Japanese Unitarian Minister, Hiroi Tatsutaro, who resigned shortly afterwards, going on to publish a statement giving the reasons for his departure: “Unitarianism is not a part of Christianity, but Christianity is part of Unitarianism... There may be Christian Unitarians, Buddhist Unitarians and Confucian Unitarians. The proposal to make Unitarianism a Christian denomination, I utterly reject. Today this is an obsolete thought” (201-2). Mohr suggests that the shift in Unitarianism in Japan towards asserting a specifically Christian identity, as revealed by this dispute, may have had a decisive influence on the decline of the movement.

It was more than 10 years after this incident, however, that the American Unitarian Association withdrew from Japan in 1922. The final phase of the mission, from the appointment of a new representative to replace MacCauley in 1919 until it closed, is a period of Unitarian history in Japan which had not previously been written about, and Mohr’s research reveals increasing tension between the American Unitarian Association and the Japanese membership over the close links between Yūaikai, a labour organization, and the Japanese Unitarian Association – an association supported by the local Japanese, but opposed by the new American representative dispatched in 1919. This seems to have been another important factor which contributed to the mission’s ending.

In the final section of the book, Mohr examines other possible sources for universalist discourses in the Japanese religious sphere, focusing on the Zen

teacher Shaku Sōen. He states that his aim is to discover whether there could be a link between the Unitarians and notions of universality in Sōen's work, but in fact he identifies other important sources for Sōen's thinking on this. In terms of influences from beyond Japan, Mohr notes the encounters between Sōen and the Theosophist Colonel Olcott, and also with Paul Carus, while from within the Buddhist textual tradition Mohr notes the influences on Sōen's thought of notions of universality derived from the Lotus Sutra. Mohr concludes that although Sōen encountered the American Unitarian Clay MacCauley, Unitarianism was not a significant source for his ideas on universality, suggesting that there were multiple sources and articulations of this discourse in Meiji Japan. On the other hand, Mohr points out some similarities in how notions of universality were strategically deployed, both by MacCauley and by Sōen: both men stressed the universal ground of all religions in some contexts, but the superiority of their own traditions in others. Ironically, in MacCauley's case, his conviction of the superiority of Christianity is also linked to his notion of Christianity as a "universal" religion which, in his view, would inevitably "triumph" over Buddhism in the end (235).

This leads Mohr back in his epilogue to a consideration of what he terms the "universalizing channels" in Meiji Japan, and the ways in which notions of universality might be deployed or contested. He suggests that up to 1909 these universalizing channels were limited, the most significant being "Hegelian philosophy... Theosophy... Swedenborgianism, new religious movements, the Baha'i... and... liberal Christianity" (238). However, he also notes that the term "universality" was itself ill-defined, and used in different ways in different contexts. As discussed above, Mohr tells us that Japanese words introduced to convey this concept in the Meiji era were coined as translations for the English term. This surely begs the question, what other models existed within Japan that might correspond to, or offer alternatives to, the idea of universality?

Mohr attempts to answer this question with reference to possible models from Buddhism, for example all-encompassing compassion, or the idea of the potential of all beings for Buddhahood. However, he suggests that for intellectuals in Meiji Japan these models may have appeared too narrow and unappealing precisely because of their association with Buddhism, which was undergoing a crisis in the Meiji era. On the other hand, the vagueness of the imported term "universality" and its Japanese translations may have been part of their attraction, along with their association with modernity and the new. The irony here, Mohr notes, is that this imported notion of universality could

also be deployed to assert superiority and difference and often co-existed with nationalist claims – a tactic that was observable among both Japanese and Western intellectuals of the period.

Mohr's examination of the history of Unitarianism and its influence in Meiji and Taisho Japan makes fascinating reading. It is meticulously documented, and casts light on a little-known aspect of Buddhist-Christian interactions during this period. For me, as a researcher into contemporary Shin Buddhism, it was particularly interesting for its careful examination of the impact of Unitarianism on some influential Shin Buddhists of the period. There is a wealth of new material here, together with a very useful review of material previously only published in Japanese, which together make a valuable contribution to our knowledge in this area.

Mohr's attempt to situate these interactions with reference to debates on universality is also interesting, and poses some important questions, but, perhaps inevitably, becomes less satisfying when Mohr ranges beyond the field of Unitarianism to consider notions of universality more broadly in Meiji Japan. This is a vast topic, and it is clearly impossible to cover all aspects of it adequately in a single volume. I concur with Mohr that "universality" is a very vague and slippery term, which can be deployed strategically in many different ways. The challenge then, as Mohr states, is to examine its uses in "precise historical contexts" (Mohr 2014: 236). This is something that Mohr does on the whole successfully for Unitarianism, and also, though in less detail, in his chapter on Shaku Sōen, but the argument becomes less convincing when he moves to general statements about "universalizing channels" in Japan. These would benefit from being explored in further detail, and, I would suggest, could be added to.

Marxism, for example, was another intellectual current of the times with universalist aspirations, and a closer examination of Marxist notions of universality, and a comparison of these with notions of universality derived from the religious sphere could prove fruitful. The intersection of the religious and the political is an area alluded to in Mohr's chapter on the Unitarians' involvement with the Japanese labour organization the Yūaikai, where he discusses debates on social equality and the links between socialism and contemporary Buddhist thinkers such as the Shin priest Shimaji Mokurai, but a closer examination of differing discourses of universality in this context would have enriched this discussion.

There is also at times a slippage in Mohr's approach to the topic of universality.

On the one hand he emphasizes the variability in the use of this term, not only between cultures, but also between the utterances of a single speaker, depending on context, and is at pains to trace specific historical variations in the ways in which “universality” is used. But on the other hand he attempts to distance himself from what he depicts as the “arrogant rejection” of the idea of universal truth (254) by post-modernists, thus implying that a real “universality” could be identified beyond these variations. It is not clear to me where Mohr hopes to go with this argument – he seems to be at some points moving towards a philosophical discussion of the concept of “universality” in an abstract sense in a way that sits uneasily with the careful historical contextualization of this concept in other sections of the book.

However, these are relatively minor criticisms. As Mohr notes in his conclusion, the issue of competing understandings of “universality” in Meiji Japan is a potentially vast area of research, and it would not be possible for a single volume to cover all its possible ramifications. In my estimation the author succeeds in his aim of both making a valuable contribution to the understanding of this area through his research on Unitarianism in Japan, and stimulating further debate on the issues raised. I would recommend this book highly to anyone with an interest in the religious and intellectual history of Meiji Japan.

References

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- Snodgrass, Judith (2003) *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Columbian Exposition*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press