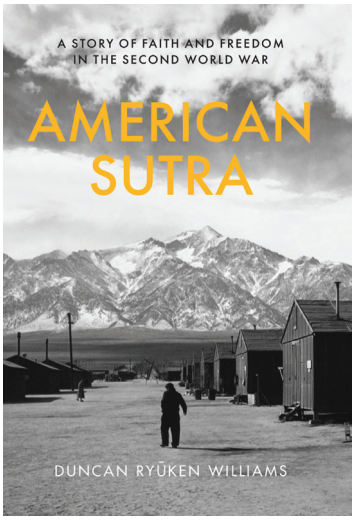
Book Review



Duncan Ryūken Williams. *American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. 384 pp.

The history of Buddhisms in the U.S. may seem a well-trodden area of study, but until Duncan Ryūken Williams' *American Sutra*, much of the history of Buddhism during the period of the internment of Japanese Americans has remained obscure (for a series of reasons). This monograph shows that American Buddhism has been generated from displacement, migration, re-envisioning, and adaptation. The book draws from a remarkable amount of archival and primary source material, packing it into an accessible narrative of how *issei* and *nisei* (first and second generation) Buddhists of many sects transformed their religions during, and because of, the Second World War. The narrative focuses on the broad heterogeneity of Buddhists before, during, and after wartime, though it is also about 'faith' more broadly: Christianity/ies, Shinto, and 'state Shinto' are also part of the story. The book's argument, seen in the title's phrase 'American Sutra', is that this traumatic chapter of American history is about more than constitutional rights, human rights, and religious freedoms (which were, as the book shows, even more violently curtailed for those who were Buddhist or Shinto than for those who were Christian); it stands as a crucial chapter in the development of

a distinctly American Buddhism. This is to say that the many primary accounts, anecdotes, quotes, poems, and songs translated and brought into the book's narrative—these records of how *issei* and *nisei* practiced and adapted their faith before, during, and after wartime—is the sūtra. If a sūtra is a canonical scripture generally taken to be the record of the oral teachings of the Buddha, the book essentially holds forth its many primary texts as a sūtra in and of itself.

The book makes three major interventions: first, framed and guided by Williams' interests in religion, the cataloguing and packaging of extensive primary source material into a narrative are remarkable and thorough. These accounts fill a gap that is not just scholarly, but one that partly exists because internment survivors found it very difficult to pass on their histories and experiences. Many of the book's personal narratives have slumbered untranslated in personal archives or in desk drawers for years. The book's major offering is therefore its thick account, the sheer amount of new information about *issei* and *nisei* religion during wartime. Second, the book strikingly reveals how Buddhist and Shinto practitioners of many differing sects were perceived as 'more', or irreversibly, and innately, 'Japanese'. As religion became a racialized marker of foreignness and disloyalty, Christian Japanese Americans were perceived as assimilable, closer to whiteness—and were provided many more resources before, during, and after the war, including income while they were interned. This is therefore a crucial chapter in scholars' and readers' ongoing understanding of race in the U.S.; the book shows how one might understand the period's human rights violations at an intersection of race, religion, and culture and as stemming from more than just a targeting of people of Japanese heritage. It therefore demonstrates that much of the 'Americanness' of American Buddhism must be traced back to this series of events.

A third major intervention of the book is its displacement of Euro-American Buddhists and their Buddhisms as central to the narrative of 'American Buddhism'. The simple statement early in chapter one that 'Japanese Buddhism first came to the Americas with migrant laborers seeking new opportunities across the Pacific' (22), while factual, is also, strangely, a relief to read because many accounts of Buddhism in America focus on or frame their interests around

Transcendentalists, occultists, theosophists, and Buddhists of Euro-American heritages. Instead, when these Euro-Americans do come up in *American Sutra*'s story, Williams states, for example, that the 'new students of the Dharma' in the early-to-mid twentieth century were 'a small number of sympathizers and converts to Buddhism' who 'confirmed the universality of the religion and assisted the predominantly Japanese American temples in navigating the legal and other obstacles to the development of an American Buddhism' (23). This is as it should be: the far greater force of American Buddhism in the early-to-mid twentieth century, even just by sheer number of practitioners, is that of Japanese American Buddhisms—not the Euro-American Buddhisms that have come to dominate the American mainstream.

Though the book makes the above three interventions, it does not state *what* the interventions are. This is part of the book's storytelling style: Williams himself tends to disappear into the comprehensive, thick story and does not take up an argumentative ethos. Yet the book buries the lede a little bit: both scholars and general readers would benefit from a clearer sense of the book's value. One way to do this, of course, is to outline the scholarly gaps that the book fills. Though a few scholars have worked on this 'story' for some time (Kenneth Tanaka, Joseph Cheah, Ann Gleig, Michael K. Masatsugu, and Dorothy Swain Thomas, among others), this is the first monograph of Buddhism in wartime America—and Williams never really states that directly.

The book is organized such that it feels chronological, but is not strictly so (the story begins with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and ends with postwar resettlement, but the chapters go back and forward in time here and there). The book may be useful in undergraduate classes and perhaps even in secondary schools: the chapters, while often long, are accessible and offer neat summations of what the primary anecdotes might amount to. The book will also appeal to the average and interested history reader.

Early chapters set up the question of religious freedom in the U.S., as Japanese American Buddhist religious leaders are among the first to be surveilled (long before World War II) and later, the first to be rounded up and placed in high-security camps. Williams is careful

not to jump right to the internment itself, detailing how Japanese American lives were surveilled and curtailed dramatically before the mass removal to the War Relocation Authority camps. Chapters two, three, and four explain how the U.S. government was poised to execute the 'roundup' within hours of any national emergency (38). We learn that those affiliated with Shinto and Buddhism were disproportionately targeted, viewed as foreign and disloyal—a point that is demonstrated in new ways and in various, traumatic experiences through all chapters. Chapter 2 details how martial law governed the violence and displacement in Hawai'i; in chapter 4, readers learn what the varied Buddhisms of issei and nisei actually were like, beyond the ways they were misread as 'disloyal' and 'anti-American'. It is in chapter 5 that Williams tells the perhaps-more-familiar story of the large War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps that were built to 'house' all persons of Japanese ancestry because of 'a methodical ethnic cleansing of the west coast...in the spring of 1942' (77). Chapter 6 discusses the truly remarkable (and dizzying numbers of) ways that practitioners adapted and transformed Buddhism in America: here, most poignantly, 'the Buddha's teaching that all things are subject to change applies to the religion itself' (122). Chapter 7 tells us where Buddhism 'was' on the warfronts, from the perspective of *nisei* Buddhists who were enlisted, conscripted, training, or fighting in multiple theatres. Chapter 8 offers a thorough discussion of 'the loyalty questionnaire'; crucially, the question of loyalty was tested and examined between *issei* and *nisei* themselves during internment: there were protests, tensions, and internal strife within the camps, as people learned of and reacted to others' answers on the questionnaires. Chapter 9 shows how, as combat deaths of Japanese Americans grew higher in number, Buddhist communities in Hawai'i and on the U.S. continent focused on care and spiritual support of Buddhist soldiers who fought as part of the Japanese American segregated unit in Europe (201). Chapter 10 tells an understudied part of this story: how Japanese Americans began to resettle in the U.S., Canada, and Japan after the war ended and as the camps began to close. Here, a central point is that the dharma was, as prophesied, migrating eastward, even as the narratives of westward expansion and manifest destiny were alive and well in the U.S. occupation of Japan. The book

closes with a stunning last anecdote: hundreds of stones, inscribed with Japanese characters, had been buried underground at the Heart Mountain WRA camp in Wyoming. It was later found that each character, each stone, was a small piece of the text of the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the most venerated Buddhist sūtras. A Buddhist priest had made the stones part of his sangha's practice for years—and then had buried the sūtra in American soil. For Williams, this is a stunning example of 'a ritual practice not just for individual salvation, but for saving an entire religion' (257).

Some might cringe at the framing, seen in the book's title and elsewhere, of 'faith and freedom'. If we take the book's aims in good faith, to cringe at 'faith and freedom' is to disregard the actual words (poems, journal entries, letters) of some Japanese American Buddhists—this is their vocabulary; these are many of their metaphors. Still, readers may wonder whether such lines as Nyogen Senzaki's 'Each of the people / Should point to heaven and earth, and say, / "America is the country of righteousness"' might be tempered with a critical eye: is it possible that these lines' terms are camouflage, safety measures for those living in a country that has proven remarkably dangerous to live within? While the aims of the book are simply to let the sūtra develop from the words of those who lived through this period, I found myself occasionally looking for the narrator to step more firmly into the story and provide critical commentary. Yet what the book roundly demonstrates is that lines like Senzaki's are important rhetorical claims of Americanness *based in* a re-envisioned, distinctly American Buddhism, generated from the great hybridizing effects of war and internment.

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