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Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult
of Amitabha (review)

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There is also a terminological difficulty. For the sake of convenience, in this review, I have followed Nickelsburg's usage of the expressions "early Christians" and "early Christianity." But study of the sources problematizes such usage, suggesting that boundaries remained porous in some places for much longer than previously supposed. Nickelsburg's arrangement of the material as well as his unqualified use of the designation "early Christianity" suggests clearly separate groups as early as Paul, even while the author speaks of the new movement as emerging from the matrix of apocalyptic Judaism.

Finally a remark for the editors. This very helpful volume would have been made even more useful by including a bibliography and subject index.

For all of my questions I believe Nickelsburg has given us a book that will extend conversation about Jewish and Christian origins in nonspecialist circles by demonstrating ways in which followers of Jesus and subsequent generations used traditional sources to interpret their understanding of Jesus and their own sociohistorical realities. I certainly intend to use this book with my students and recommend it to others.

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Approaching the Land of Bliss: Religious Praxis in the Cult of Amitābha. Edited by Richard K. Payne and Kenneth K. Tanaka. University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 304 pages. \$32.00.

This aptly titled volume takes "approaching the Land of Bliss" as its subject in two distinct senses. On the one hand each of the studies included here investigates some of the myriad means by which Buddhist practitioners have approached the goal of birth in Sukhāvatī, the "Pure Land of Utmost Bliss" presided over by the Buddha Amitābha. On the other the collection as a whole is the product of skepticism about what has been the dominant scholarly approach to the study of Pure Land Buddhism and indeed of Buddhism in general. As Richard K. Payne points out in a lucid introduction, that approach has tended to treat texts and nations as basic analytical categories, defining groups of Buddhists primarily in terms of the doctrinal writings they embrace or the nation-states in which they reside. Payne takes issue with this way of conceptualizing Buddhist history for a number of reasons: it does not correspond to the ways in which most Buddhists have situated themselves within the Buddhist tradition; it distorts our perception of that tradition by privileging doctrine at the expense of practice; and it encourages us to view "the history of Buddhism as a movement from India to China to Japan" and thus "implicitly makes the Japanese forms of the various lineages and traditions into the culmination of Buddhist history" (2). This, in turn, causes us to exaggerate the importance of sectarian Buddhism (and of certain Japanese sects in particular) and to ignore, downplay, or misinterpret phenomena that cannot be slotted neatly into one

sectarian framework or another. By way of suggesting an alternative to the text- and nation-centered approach, Payne and his co-editor, Kenneth K. Tanaka, have drawn together a group of essays that are linked by a different organizing principle. Specifically, each of the works included is marked by a dual concern with religious praxis and with the cult of Amitābha. This focus on cultic practice helps the authors represented here to avoid the pitfalls Payne outlines in his introduction and to accentuate important aspects of Buddhism that have been neglected heretofore.

Among these previously neglected subjects is Amitābha's place in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, an issue that is explored by Matthew T. Kapstein. Kapstein shows that the period from the eleventh century through the thirteenth saw the emergence of "an important Pure Land orientation" (17) among the Buddhists of Tibet and that this orientation left a deep impression on a variety of devotional, ritual, and contemplative practices. However, despite the special prominence that Sukhāvati came to enjoy in the Tibetan imagination, the pursuit of birth in the Pure Land was never made the basis of an exclusive sectarianism; instead, Amitābha's remained "ever an inclusive cult, involving Tibetan Buddhists overall" (41).

Daniel Getz contributes a revisionist account of the monk Shengchang, whose Pure Conduct Society has long been credited with sparking a revival of Pure Land Buddhism in eleventh-century China. Through a meticulous analysis of the surviving documentary evidence, Getz demonstrates that the image of Shengchang as a Pure Land "patriarch" is of dubious validity: Shengchang's religious identity "was grounded not in the cult of Amitābha, but in the Huayan tradition" (53). Moreover, Shengchang founded his society to protect the interests of Buddhism as a whole, not to revive Pure Land Buddhism in particular. As Getz argues this calls into question the very notion of a Pure Land patriarchate and by extension the idea that Chinese Pure Land during this period constituted an autonomous, self-conscious movement.

In "By the Power of One's Last Nenbutsu," Jacqueline I. Stone provides a fascinating overview of the beliefs and practices associated with Pure Land deathbed ritual in medieval Japan, where it was widely believed that a condition of right mindfulness at the final instant of life was the *sine qua non* of birth in Sukhāvati. (I should here disclose that I studied under Stone in graduate school and that her essay cites some material from my doctoral dissertation.) By limning some of the ways in which Amitābha's devotees sought to ensure that they would be in the appropriate mental state when the end arrived, Stone introduces a wealth of information that will sharply challenge many readers' conception of what it meant to be a Pure Land Buddhist in medieval Japan. Hank Glassman's wide-ranging inquiry into the cult of Chūjōhime is similarly instructive. As Glassman demonstrates, the popular preachers who recounted Chūjōhime's story effectively created a new form of Pure Land Buddhism, one in which the practitioner sought birth in Sukhāvati not through direct reliance on Amitābha, but by establishing a karmic affinity with this legendary orphan turned Buddhist saint. As in the case of the practices Stone describes, this approach was not sanctioned by the sectarian orthodoxies that have come to dominate our under-

standing of Japanese Pure Land; it was, nevertheless, an integral part of the Amitābha cult for many medieval Japanese.

Fabio Rambelli's chapter on "radical Amidism" offers further challenges to received definitions of Japanese Pure Land. Although the antinomian movements associated with the controversial *ichinengi* ("one calling") teaching have generally been marginalized as deviant and heretical, Rambelli chooses to emphasize their politically transgressive, even potentially revolutionary character. Following Taira Masayuki and others he argues that these movements can be interpreted as a critique of the Buddhist ideology that legitimized medieval Japan's oppressive political order. Although Rambelli's reasoning is not always entirely convincing (his assumption that "radical Amidism" directly reflects the mentality of Japan's voiceless peasants is especially problematic), his essay is provocative and full of valuable insights. He also deserves credit for making a serious effort to understand Pure Land antinomianism on its own terms rather than viewing it through the eyes of the upholders of Buddhist orthodoxy.

Two further chapters on the Amitābha cult in Japan focus on Amitābha worship in non-Pure Land schools. In "Amida's Secret Life," James H. Sanford introduces us to the twelfth-century Shingon monk Kakuban, the putative founder of the secret nenbutsu tradition. Steeped in the nondualism that was a key component of medieval Japanese esotericism, Kakuban posited that Amitābha was essentially identical with Shingon's major deity, Mahāvairocana, and as such was "immanent, fully embedded in this world, and non-different from sentient beings" (128). In this context the goal of birth in Sukhāvati became synonymous with the traditional Shingon goal of "achieving Buddhahood in this very body." Kakuban explicated these ideas and their implications for practice in his *Amida hishaku*, a short work that Sanford translates in its entirety. Richard M. Jaffe assesses the controversy surrounding the seventeenth-century Zen monk Ungo Kiyō's advocacy of nenbutsu recitation, specifically in the form of a song of Ungo's own composition that included repeated invocations of Amitābha's name. Although Ungo stressed that this practice was for those of inferior spiritual capacities (especially women) and although the song itself reflected an immanentist conception of Sukhāvati that was generally accepted in Zen circles, Ungo was widely condemned for promoting shallow, provisional teachings. The reason for this, Jaffe shows, was that Ungo's branch of the Rinzaï sect, the Myōshinji-ha, was facing competition from new forms of Zen that were being introduced from China around this time. Because eclecticism was a salient feature of the new arrivals, the Myōshinji-ha's leaders made a strategic decision to portray themselves as the guardians of a "true Rinzaï practice" (220) that was untainted by borrowings from lesser schools. In this climate they had no choice but to denounce the song as a betrayal of their commitment to purity. Jaffe closes with a translation of the offending work, which is a lively combination of piety, moralizing, and polemic.

The chapters by Todd T. Lewis and Charles B. Jones apply anthropological methods to the study of the Amitābha cult in contemporary Nepal and Taiwan, respectively. Lewis's survey of religious customs in the Kathmandu Valley suggests that, historically, the aspiration for birth in Sukhāvati was common, though

“unsystematically articulated” (255). In this sense, Lewis notes, his findings tend to support Gregory Schopen’s contention that in Indic Mahāyāna Buddhism birth in Sukhāvātī was a generalized goal rather than the focus of an organized cult. Jones offers a Geertzian “thick description” of an all-day “buddha-recitation” retreat in contemporary Taiwan. By participating in this demanding ritual the retreatants attempt to attune their minds more completely to Amitābha, thus improving their chances of achieving birth in his realm. Jones contrasts this emphasis on self-cultivation with mainstream Japanese Pure Land’s advocacy of absolute reliance on Amitābha, a position that is rooted in extreme pessimism about practitioners’ ability to contribute even marginally to their own salvation.

The above summaries have only scratched the surface of this collection’s contents, but they should at least provide some sense of the diversity of subjects and methodologies included. What is perhaps most surprising about the book is how cohesive it is in spite of that diversity. The contributors’ shared concern with religious praxis in the Amitābha cult provides an effective unifying principle, and while explicit connections among the various subjects covered are drawn rather sparingly, both in Payne’s introduction and in the essays themselves, the linkages are nonetheless there to be discovered; in reading this volume I was often struck by the fascinating and illuminating ways in which chapters on disparate topics resonated with one another. Without exception the essays are also eminently readable, and the book is carefully edited and handsomely produced. *Approaching the Land of Bliss* is an invaluable contribution to the field of religious studies and will be read with interest and profit by scholars from a broad range of backgrounds.

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Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity. By Anthony D. Smith. Oxford University Press, 2003. 330 pages. \$29.95.

A clue as to the motivation behind Anthony Smith’s *Chosen Peoples* can be found in his preface: “perhaps more detrimental than anything to our understanding of these phenomena,” he writes of the conceptual categories “nationalism” and “religion,” “has been the general trend to dismiss the role of religion and tradition in a globalizing world, and to downplay the persistence of nationalism in a ‘post-national’ global order” (ix). His book provides an effective antidote to this trend and sheds light on the significance of the historical relationship of religion and nationhood for an adequate understanding of today’s world. Its combination of theoretical and historical analysis offers, once again, the erudition, accessibility, and interest which characterizes his whole *corpus* of scholarly studies on nationalism and ethnicity.

The range of the book is huge not only in its geographical, ethnic, and cultural sweep. It brings together political and religious history in the context of the