

Daphna Arbel, “‘A Chariot of Light Borne by Four Bright Eagles’: Eve’s Vision of the Chariot in the Greek Life of Adam and Eve”;

Yuval Harari, “A Different Spirituality or ‘Other’ Agents?: On the Study of Magic in Rabbinic Literature”;

Rebecca Lesses, “‘They Revealed Secrets to Their Wives’: The Transmission of Magical Knowledge in 1 Enoch”;

Celia Deutsch, “Aseneth: Ascetical Practice, Vision, and Transformation”.

Lastly, Joseph Dan’s “Messianic Movements in the Period of the Crusades” is the sole representative of yet another of Elior’s areas of interest, messianism.

Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Laos Religious Culture

John Clifford Holt. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

ISBN 978-0-8248-3327-5. Pp. xiii+ 348.

Reviewed by Chipamong Chowdhry, University of Toronto

Recently, Cambodia and Laos have become the most appealing areas for historians of religion in Buddhist studies.¹ In Laotian Buddhist culture, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the rituals involving local spirits (*phi*) and cult of *khwan* are common religious belief and cultural values. The religious culture in Laos could be called ‘trans-localized-Buddhism’ in which Hinduism and indigenous beliefs are combined with Buddhism. A veteran specialist on Sri Lankan Buddhist religious culture and its related issues, Holt, in this recent book: *Spirits of the Place: Buddhism and Laos Religious Culture*, offers another innovative insightful study of an important period of religious culture and political history of Buddhism in modern Laos.

The book consists of five loosely interwoven and thematic chapters followed by two appendixes. Holt’s argument is that normative interpretation of Laotian Theravāda Buddhism within the context of religious is placed within the framework of political history. With theoretical questions such as: What is the status of Buddhist practice in the everyday religious life of Laos? How can one relate the discrepancies between Buddhism and popular cultic practice in contemporary Laotian religious culture? How should one interpret the non-Buddhist elements that exist in Lao religious life? Holt tries to uncover the principle of the place of

1. Ian Harris. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005 and Justin McDaniel. *Gathering Leaves and Lifting Words: Histories of Buddhist Monastic Education in Laos and Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008.

spirit in Theravāda Buddhism in Laos. To make more sense of the work in this regard, Holt appropriately draws upon earlier theorists such as Paul Mus, Stanley Tambiah, Clifford Geertz, Mircea Eliade and even Durkheim.

Like his earlier works² in this study, Holt introduces three interrelated themes: a critique and comparison of other scholars in the field; a synchronic approach in the context of contemporary Laotian Theravāda Buddhism; and a theory in which the Lao Buddhist, animistic practices, and colonial and post-colonial national politics and history have reflected one another.

Chapter one not only provides a brief outline on the ontology of the local religious substratum and ritual significance of spirits (*phi*) for social and religious organization within Laos Buddhist religious spheres, but also explores the Lao political history from the fourteenth century through to the nineteenth century. Unlike the Hindu cults of *devas* in Sri Lanka, in Holt's argument, the spirit cults of *phi* and *khwan* in Lao are relatively non-institutionalized.

Chapter two explores political and religious cultural transformation of the nineteenth century Laos brought by Thai, French, and later American influences. This is interpreted from the point of view of the Buddhist monastic discourse, colonial history, and post-colonial political discourse. For monastic discourse, Holt argues that Laos was subject to a Thai Buddhist king and Laos monasticism was intimately related to Thai reformist-Thammyut Nikay. Despite this fact, surprisingly, the Lao *sangha* remained unaffected by Thammyut Nikay's influence (77). Colonial discourse refers to the arrival of the Roman Catholic missionaries and the French in Southeast Asia in seventeenth century who were successful in converting many Vietnamese and brought about the economic exploitation of Indo-china. In Holt's observation, the British developed their educational legacy in Burma and Sri Lanka by establishing institutions, which the French in contrast did very little through their colonial developments in Laos (83). Holt's historical description suggests that the American intrusion into Laos led to political and religious disintegration as the Buddhist *sangha*. As a result, tragically, there were no Buddhist *wat* (temple) in Vieng Xai. Moreover, as Holt reports, no male youth were encouraged to join the *sangha* (125).

With an overview of dramatic revolution in 1975 and its immediate and economic effects, chapter three, the best of the book, investigates how changes occurred in the Buddhist monastic *sangha* and the popular cultural practices such as the

2. John C. Holt. *Buddha in the Crown: Avalokitesvara in the Religious Traditions of Sri Lanka*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

—*The Buddhist Vinsu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005

cult-worship during the establishment and policies of the Marxist revolutionary of the Lao People Democratic Republic (PDR). Here Holt reconstructs some key historical documents about how the newly formed Lao PDR attempted to reform Buddhist thought and practice. Holt's writes "[A]fter revolution some factions of the *sangha* remained committed to supporting the Pathet Lao as 'patriotic monks,' while others were being victimized by local and national Pathet Lao policies and tactics" (140). In the Lao PDR, many Buddhist practices such as merit making and offering foods to the monks are prohibited. Although Buddhism was allowed to take place within the new Lao PDR, it was, however, concerned with economic and political space rather than religiosity (144).

Holt reveals that during the period of the Lao PDR the monks were highly encouraged to study politics (151). Despite the Lao PDR, the communist regime had leveled *phi*-cult-practices as irrational, unscientific, superstitious, and backward, and continuously endeavored to eradicate venerating spirits and cult-worships, they still prevail in contemporary Lao cultural practice.

Reflecting his seven month fieldwork in Luang Phrabang, in chapter four, Holt devotes most of the chapter to the most important venues of its public ritual expressions and how Luang Phrabang tragically became a commodity for marketing Buddhism. Through this marketing, Laos became an international tourist industry. Registration as UNESCO World Heritage Site, Luang Phrabang thus receives prospects (increasing local economy through the hotels, guesthouse, internet cafés, massage parlors etc.), while at the same time faces many dilemmas such as, social and economic transformation, which has not only created social problems, but has also heavily influenced environmental issues (192). This World Heritage Site also brings serious consequences to the Buddhist monastic life. Holt's ethnography reveals that monks are seen at internet cafes late at night, which he never saw in Sri Lanka (193). In the rest of the chapter, Holt describes the public ritual expressions and the Lao New Year in contemporary Luang Phrabang.

In the concluding chapter, Holt discusses synchronically and fully the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the spirit cults. According to Holt, Buddhism and the spirit cults are expressions of two separate ontologies, but they are mutually transformative to one another (223). For this reason, and also partly because Marxism never fully penetrated into the village culture, the veneration of *phi* persistently continues even today.

Another reason for the persistences of *phi*-cults is the indigenous *phi* are free agents and beyond the control of the ethic of karma. Holt argues that the power of *phi* cannot be rationalized by the ethic of karma (233–7). By way of comparison and his usage of technical terms such as "Buddhacization" and "inspiring," Holt brings this into the dialogue with Yukio Hayashi and Stanley Tambiah. Appendix 1 contains a comparative account of the greatest Indian epic of the *Ramayana* and

its transformation into Laotian culture. After providing a concise summary of the Valmiki (Indian) version, Holt engages details of the Laotian version, the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, in which he not only sees vast differences between them, but also notes how the Theravāda Buddhist characters are reflected in the Laotian redaction, including the idea of karmic retribution (265).

The second appendix extends another popular Laotian cultural belief, practice, and ritual ceremony or *sukhwan basi*. It is, both ritually and religiously performed at all important occasions, including during pregnancy, marriage, childbirth, and ordination. In Holt's understanding, the *khwan* (vital essence, inner spirit, and life force) is inner psychic energy attached to each individual, but it can leave the body any time. If it leaves for prolonged periods, it can bring about bad consequences which include suffering, disease, and misfortune (271). In order to restore good fortune the *sukhwan basi*-ceremony is performed.

The strength of the book lies on Holt's ability to analyze critically comparative phenomenon of different Buddhist cultural practices and his analytical descriptions. This book is well informed by contemporary scholarship on the animistic Buddhist culture of Laos. My only critique is that the book has little ethnographic narration. Nonetheless, it is an important book for those who are looking for new issues in studies of Buddhism. It greatly contributes, not only to the field of religion, Buddhist, and Laotian studies, but also to Southeast Asian studies. This book also deserves to be fully welcomed by socio-cultural anthropology as well as political historical studies. I highly recommend everyone to read this marvelous book.

Christian Anarchism. A Political Commentary on the Gospel

Abridged Edition. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2011.

ISBN 978-1845402471. Pp. 280.

Review by Aaron Ricker, McGill University

From the theatre of political protest to T-shirt sales at the mall, the brand equity of anarchism is growing, and this trend includes the subcultures of Christian theology and biblical studies. Books like Dave Andrews' *Christi-anarchy* are now appearing quite regularly, reworking Jacques Ellul or John Howard Yoder for more mainstream evangelical audiences. In this situation, Christoyannopoulos' new book should be a welcome addition, based as it is on six years of doctoral research at the University of Kent. Unfortunately, though, *Christian Anarchism* may confuse more than it clarifies when it comes to understanding the historical and theoretical relationships between Christian and anarchist traditions. "The aim of my doctoral thesis—and by