In *American Sutra*, Duncan Ryūken Williams offers a compelling and compassionate inclusion of Japanese American Buddhists in the “story of America.” As Williams explains, that story typically recounts the supposedly predestined westward conquest by European settlers of the continent to the Pacific coast and further onward. It does not include the eastward migration of hundreds of thousands of Asian immigrants across the Pacific to American shores in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who brought their own religious beliefs and customs with them. Williams thus takes aim at the conflicting definitions embedded in each story: is America a white, Christian nation or a multiethnic and multiracial one that cherishes religious freedom? Worse, he wonders: “does the fact of being non-white and non-Christian make one less American?” (p. 2). To be sure, many Americans over time have acted as if that premise were true, including some highly placed ones. Most notable is Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose issuing after Pearl Harbor of Executive Order 9066 led to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. In that case, religion was a “multiplier of suspiciousness” to race, since the majority of Buddhists in the United States at the time were Japanese American (p. 3). But to his credit, Williams does not dwell solely nor even primarily on the negative aspects of that injustice. Rather, he shows how Japanese American Buddhists advanced their faith in the face of adversity “in the incarceration camps, under martial law on the Hawaiian islands, and on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific theater” (p. 5). In doing so, Williams claims, they not only built a new form of Buddhism that was grounded in both tradition and the particulars of American life but also nurtured the roots of a gradual, popular acceptance of Buddhism among Americans, and therefore helped create a freer and more inclusive country.

A major strength of *American Sutra* is its reliance on interviews, anecdotes, and other firsthand accounts to tell the larger story of Japanese American Buddhists on a personal level. The use of individual and family stories lets us see real people in real time and appreciate the toll that enduring government surveillance, constant charges of disloyalty by their compatriots, and wartime incarceration took on them. Williams traces how white, Christian American authorities had a long history of distrusting the loyalties of Japanese American Buddhists (and Shintoists), whom they saw as threats to both “national security and national identity” due to their race and religion (p. 16). He shows that longstanding fears of a “heathen” faith
spreading in the United States underlay the anti-Asian immigration laws that eroded US-Japan relations over time (p. 23). For example, after passage of the 1924 National Origins Act, Christian leaders in Hawaii worked to stop the “repaganization” of the islands or “the growth of Buddhism among second-generation American citizens of Japanese ancestry” (p. 25). Relatedly, US intelligence agencies initiated surveillance of Japanese American Buddhist communities during World War I and began compiling lists of “potentially subversive Japanese” as early as 1922 (p. 35). During the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Federal Bureau of Investigation immediately arrested scores of Japanese American Buddhist priests as well as Bishop Gikyo Kuchiba, who was the first person to be detained in Hawaii. As Williams emphasizes, these arrests were not “a panicked reaction to a sudden military emergency, but the enactment of an already considered contingency plan” that in effect had been years in the making (p. 20).

Williams also convincingly emphasizes the role that race and religion played in official decisions to restrict and intern Japanese Americans during World War II. For example, under martial law in Hawaii, being Buddhist was a red flag for military authorities in determining who was a threat to national security, even if one were a citizen. After Pearl Harbor, almost 75 percent of the Japanese American Buddhist leadership and all Shinto priests were detained, compared to just 17 percent of Japanese Christian ministers. Most of the former two groups eventually ended up in internment camps on the continental United States. The official closing of temples prevented Buddhists and Shintoists from practicing their faiths, and they were pressured to act “American” by attending Christian services. On the West Coast, Japanese Americans had similar experiences, which Williams relates via vivid anecdotes. Initially, Christians were at times spared the official harassment suffered by Japanese American Buddhists, who in the local and national media became “the face of a subversive enemy” (p. 57). Buddhist symbols were perceived by other Americans as representative of the Japanese foe, particularly the ancient manji due to its resemblance to the Nazi swastika. What is more, despite public professions of allegiance to the United States by Japanese Americans, most white and black citizens saw the crackdown on them as vital to national security, while members of the Chinese, Korean, and Filipino communities distanced themselves from their Japanese compatriots. Some white Americans who were certain of Japanese American loyalty nonetheless saw their practicing Buddhism as “un-American.” As Williams recounts, by the spring of 1942, racial and religious prejudice, war hysteria, and constitutional violations converged in Executive Order 9066 and led to an “ethnic cleansing” of the Pacific coast of every person of Japanese ancestry (p. 77). But there was no mass removal nor incarceration of German or Italian Americans, he states, since they were white, Christian, and therefore recognizable to those in charge.

While detailing the depravations endured “behind barbed wire,” Williams emphasizes that Japanese American Buddhists strengthened their religion through the war (p. 10). He uses the analogy of a lotus flower emerging from muddy water to paint a very positive portrait of how individuals across generations and walks of life lived their faith and brought it to new places. For example, issei priests, like the Buddha, left behind “rarified lives” and experienced isolation and humiliation in camps from New Mexico to Louisiana, but their suffering allowed them to provide “valuable Buddhist teachings to America” (p. 86). In addition to the awful conditions of the camps, there was pressure on Japanese American Buddhists to hide or forsake their faith. Some Japanese Americans argued against public displays of Buddhism at a time when their loyalty was being questioned by mainstream society. Williams is more concerned, though, with highlighting the hypocrisy of US authorities, FDR included, who touted religious freedom as a core American principle all while under-
cutting it in practice. The War Relocation Authority (WRA), which oversaw the permanent wartime camps, for example, prodded Buddhists and Shintoists toward Christianity in order to “Americanize” them. But a central argument of American Sutra is that a critical mass of Japanese American Buddhists believed that their faith was compatible with American life and the “religious freedom enshrined in the constitution would be undermined if they succumbed to pressures to become Christian” (p. 106). They thus worked to anchor Buddhism more deeply into the religious landscape of the United States.

In assessing their work, Williams repeatedly asserts how nisei of the Young Buddhist Association (YBA) in particular applied a key Buddhist teaching and “skillfully adapted” their faith to conditions in the camps and mainstream American society (p. 123). A core dynamic was aligning Buddhism with certain cultural, Anglo-Protestant, and democratic standards in order to demystify it while keeping the practices and perspectives of their Japanese ancestors. The “Americanization” process included such things as public speaking and sports contests, pageants, dances, and youth conferences. Solidarity with white Buddhists was also important to the process as was the singing of “Buddhist hymns” and use of service books and Sunday worship gatherings, which had not been typical Buddhist practices (p. 128). Moreover, although tensions remained, interfaith cooperation proved essential in promoting the Buddhist cause in the WRA camps, since administrators tended to elevate Japanese American Christians to leadership roles. In addition to occasionally attending Christian services, Buddhists found acceptable ways to participate in major US holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, the latter of which they regarded as a “folk custom” or civic holiday (p. 138). The “skillful adaptation” of Buddhism to the local landscape also entailed the public election of the boards of directors of Buddhists at each WRA camp, since a democratic process was seen as more American (p. 147). Meanwhile, nisei leaders of the Buddhist Mission of North America, the largest Japanese sect in the United States, changed the word “mission” to “church” in their organization’s title, made English its official language, and cut ties with the sect’s leadership in Kyoto. Although these steps produced intergenerational friction between issei and nisei priests, Williams states, they also accelerated the process of building a “truly American Buddhism” (p. 144).

What ultimately gave Japanese American Buddhists a recognized place in the United States was serving in combat. As he does throughout the book, Williams illustrates well the bigotry and suspicion to which soldiers were subjected. We see, for example, racial slurs hurled in Texas and Mississippi at Japanese American recruits, who were also ostracized by white locals in those and other places. In a particularly fascinating passage, Williams also describes how there was initially no regard given to the spiritual needs nor even existence of Buddhists in the US military. Dog tags had designations for Protestant, Catholic, and Hebrew or were simply left blank. All military chaplains were Christian (and some tried to “save” their non-Christian charges), and soldiers who died in combat were often buried in Christian gravesites, while condolence letters home typically included Bible quotes. Buddhist soldiers, whose faith sustained them through the fighting, worked to get Buddhist chaplains, a “B” for their dog tags, and amulets for protection. But it was not until after the war that these goals were met. It was also in the postwar that public services for fallen soldiers helped revive Buddhism in Hawaii, where temples had been systematically dismantled under martial law. As Williams keenly observes, “the visible process of memorializing Buddhist soldiers made a critical public declaration that one could be both Buddhist and American” (p. 223).

Williams also illuminates the conflicts within soldiers’ psyches and the camps caused by Japanese American Buddhists being called to serve the nation that unconstitutionally suppressed or in-
carcerated them and their families. For some remarkable individuals, Buddhism brought reconciliation. US Army intelligence officer Richard Sakakida, for example, not only relied on his faith to survive capture and torture by Japanese soldiers, who hated him for his “Yankee spirit,” but also drew on Buddhism to forgive and even empathize with his tormentors (p. 156). Relatedly, most nisei combatants in the Pacific theater, Williams claims, simply did not share the hatred felt by their white counterparts toward the Japanese enemy. While torn by the karmic debt that killing would bring, many others, especially from Hawaii, not surprisingly enlisted due to “patriotism, excitement, and not wanting to miss out on an opportunity to be like any other American” (p. 181).

Things were different for Japanese Americans incarcerated on the mainland. Nisei of service age had to complete a questionnaire that would presumably reveal their allegiance to the United States. Issei were asked to pledge their loyalty, too, even though they were ineligible for citizenship, and doing so would have left them without a country. Yet those who refused, whether due to confusion over key questions or personal conviction, were sent to a segregation camp for “disloyals.” Pro-Japan factions, at times led by Buddhist priests, bullied and beat enlistees and family members for being “spies for America” or “too American,” especially if they were Christian, even as WRA administrators continued to deny privileges to Buddhists, such as early release from the camps, for being “less American” than their Christian counterparts (pp. 189, 196). In the end, issei and nisei leaders accepted and even promoted nisei military service, and this section of American Sutra in particular underscores well the complex emotions that Japanese Americans had to navigate in “a war that pitted brother against brother” (p. 193).

Williams is equally effective at highlighting the hard choices faced by Japanese Americans after the war about where to go to start over again. Encountering another “moment of dislocation” as the camps closed down, those returning to the West Coast confronted the same racist hostility, violence, vandalism of Buddhist temples, and calls for exclusion that they had for decades (p. 226). Still, there were also signs of a nascent social acceptance. For example, General Joseph Stilwell, joined by such celebrities as Ronald Reagan, traveled across the US to present publicly the Distinguished Service Cross to the family of Buddhist Staff Sergeant Kazuo Masuda, who had died in combat in Italy. In Hawaii, Buddhists overcame initial government and private group efforts to extend the wartime Americanization campaigns to eradicate all things Japanese, including religious traditions from the islands, and reestablished temples and communities. However, many others, both issei and nisei, some of whom had never been there, opted to start anew in Japan. In a brief but tantalizing section, Williams details the delusions of the extremist katta-gumi (winner group) whose members as late as the spring of 1946 were certain that Japan had won the war. But the more consequential and tragic group was the five thousand Japanese Americans who, fully aware of Japan’s defeat, left the United States for good due to its mistreatment of them over their religion and race. Their sentiments would only have been reinforced by the public calls of General Douglas MacArthur, the leader of the US occupation, that Japan had to become Christian to keep it from falling to communism.

Lastly, Williams chronicles the tribulations of those Japanese American Buddhists who left the camps to settle in the Midwest. For example, in Chicago, “ethnic and lineage differences” with Chinese American Buddhists and a lack of white American Buddhists “made it impossible to have any substantial links with Buddhists more broadly” (p. 251). At the same time, WRA officials tacitly discouraged construction of a new temple since they wanted Japanese Americans to integrate completely into the larger community, rather than live in separate enclaves. Nonetheless, as he
does throughout the book, Williams accentuates the positive. Rather than becoming submerged in mainstream American society, Japanese Americans took the lead in establishing new, multiethnic Buddhist communities all the way to the Atlantic coast. This not only fulfilled the prophecy of the Buddha that the faith would move ever eastward but also created a new American Buddhism for which the Constitution was scripture, he claims, as well as a more inclusive America.

As the preceding synopsis attests, Williams tills a lot of fertile soil in *American Sutra*. His emphasis on the religious discrimination faced by Japanese Americans in conjunction with race and the way their faith got them through hard times is a valuable contribution to his subfield and US history in general, given how central faith has been and remains for so many Americans. As noted above, the book also succeeds at showing how persistent people at the grassroots level have had to be in order to expand the exclusive definitions of such US rights as religious freedom and the groups who can fully exercise them. Perhaps most importantly, Williams does not spin a simple tale of the divided loyalties of Japanese Americans during wartime as if each individual were two separate people. Rather, he shows the diverse ways Japanese Americans navigated the complex emotional attachments to their homelands and heritages even as the passions of the era put them under intense pressure to exclusively commit to one side or the other, and even as they were often excluded by both. The result is a near seamless narrative in which the war is not the focal point but a necessary dark passage on the path to religious freedom for Buddhists “to practice the Dharma in the land of liberty they called home,” and thus greater enlightenment seemingly for all Americans (p. 258).

Nonetheless, as cohesive as *American Sutra* is, there are intriguing asides that deserve more attention. For example, it would be useful to learn in greater detail about those Japanese Americans who supported imperial Japan or chose to settle there after the war. Williams acknowledges the aggressive US and Canadian efforts to deport Japanese during World War II, and as noted above, he explains in extensive endnotes that for many the decision to move to Japan was deeply personal and was often based on being able to keep families together. But for others, especially members of the *katta-gumi*, being subjects of imperial Japan was at the core of their identities regardless of where they lived at any given time, and as a result, they do not neatly fit into the book’s analytical framework. Neither does the extent to which the wartime actions of imperial Japan were responsible for the anti-Japanese sentiments among other Asian Americans that Williams mentions in passing at different points in the book. This might at least in part account for the inability of Japanese American Buddhists to connect with Chinese American Buddhist communities in, say, Chicago toward the end of the war to which he alludes but does not explore in detail. Finally, I fully appreciate the positivity of *American Sutra* in stressing the successes of Japanese American Buddhists in promoting religious liberty in the United States. But the vicissitudes of religious tolerance in America since the end of World War II, not to mention the contemporary climate of the nation, suggest there remains quite a bit of work to do in that regard. None of these points, though, detracts from a book that is a rich collection of personal trials and triumphs and a model of compassion for its subject.
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