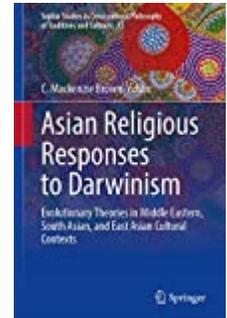


C. Brown Mackenzie, ed. *Asian Religious Responses to Darwinism: Evolutionary Theories in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian Cultural Contexts*. Sophia Studies in Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures, 33. New York: Springer, 2020. 391 pp. \$149.99, cloth, ISBN 978-3-030-37339-9.



Reviewed by Clinton G. Godart (Tohoku University, Graduate School of International Cultural Studies)

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Commissioned by Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

Very soon after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, it became clear that the theory of evolution and Darwin's theory of natural selection in particular bore on issues well beyond biology. Despite its wide-ranging implications, historians and scholars of religion have until recently not paid much attention to how religions in Asia responded to Darwinism. This oversight was partly because many scholars assumed that the major religions in Asia placed no or less emphasis on creation and were therefore less likely to clash with evolutionary theory than Christianity. These assumptions have proved wrong on several levels. Christians have embraced as much as clashed with evolution. And on closer inspection, so did adherents of Asian religions.

Asian Religious Responses to Darwinism is a major contribution to the fields of religion and science and reception studies of Darwinism, two fields still dominated by Western and Christian concerns. Some contributions are Marwa Elshakry's *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (2013), the edited volume *Global Spencerism: The*

Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist (2015), Erik Hammerstrom's *The Science of Chinese Buddhism: Early Twentieth-Century Engagements* (2015), my own *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan* (2017), Vladimir Tikhonov's *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: the Beginnings (1880s-1910s)* (2010), Hyung Wong Park's work on creationism in South Korea, and other, forthcoming work on global creationism.

Asian Religious Responses to Darwinism has an ambitious scope. It comprises three chapters on the Islamic world (Turkey, South Asia, and the Persianate world), and five chapters each on South Asia (Hindu, Jain, Indo-Tibetan, and Jain responses) and East Asia (four on China, and one on Japan). The main thrust of the book is to explore how proponents of Asian religions responded to three main Darwinian challenges: that life (and the universe) was a random process, that natural selection was an amoral process, and that humankind was not unique. The editor observes that "the most widely shared concern among Asian reli-

gions regarding these three issues was the conception of a universe devoid of any transcendent direction, meaning and purpose, in short the lack of cosmic teleology in this model” (p. 3). A major strength of the book is to point to the sources of resistance against evolutionary theory in Asia, disabusing us of the idea that the challenge of Darwinism was felt only in Christianity. While the historians of science have understandably emphasized the spread of scientific ideas, it is important to acknowledge that anti-evolutionary theories also spread globally.

Religious responses to scientific thought is a complex topic, involving not only a profound rethinking of nature and humanity but also print, education, readership, translation, religious doctrine, colonialism and nationalism, and the emergence of new concepts including “science” and “religion,” just to name a few issues. All these aspects come up in the book. The volume provides fascinating explorations of a wide range of major religious thinkers and their approaches to Darwinism. Major figures that emerge are, among others, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Yan Fu, Taixu, and Nichiren Buddhists in Japan. It is significant that similar strategies were used among Asian thinkers. One, for example, was to counter the missionary rhetoric of the superiority of Christianity by reversing the rhetoric, pointing to their own religion as more compatible with science and therefore superior to Christianity. Another was to accept science but assert that Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam “completed” it. Modern Hindu thinkers for example, pointed to a long, cyclical view of cosmic evolution, of which the modern evolutionary theories of the West described only one part, a strategy also adopted by several Japanese Buddhists.

Some of the works mentioned above, including my own, have emphasized the stimulating influence evolutionary theory had on religious thought (and vice versa). In contrast, Mackenzie takes more a negative position: “But I am very hes-

itant to say that the revitalizing of traditions has resulted in a serious reconciliation of religious beliefs and Darwinism in its specific details and more precise and rigorous forms, ... claiming such a harmony is quite different from being in actual harmony” (p. 8). Mackenzie’s statement makes an important intervention in science-religion relations in Asia: the rhetoric of harmony can conceal serious tensions. For example, Hindus have responded positively to evolution, but tend to understand evolution as a spiritual and karmic process (p. 102).

However, I am afraid this might also confuse two approaches that are taken in the volume: the philosophical (asking if we can coherently reconcile Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic religious worldviews with Darwinism) with the historical (how did *actual* Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists approach and reconcile evolutionary theory?). A problem with the philosophical approaches in the volume (especially in chapters 6, 9, and 10) is to take a particular idealized twenty-first-century form of evolutionary Darwinism (materialist, non-teleological, and amoral) and measure how well particular religious worldviews or approaches could conform to these standards. As many studies have pointed out, the nineteenth-century clerically educated and romantic Darwin was a complex figure whose ideas don’t always match twenty-first-century scientific standards. In addition, the global spread of evolutionary theory was as much or more due to Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, and later, Peter Kropotkin and Henri Bergson. (The chapters by Burenina and Ritzinger, for example, point to the important influence of Kropotkin’s evolutionary theories in China and Japan.)

Also, several of the book’s articles tend heavily towards the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of the meeting of Asian religions with Darwinism, with much less attention going to political aspects and contexts. Modern religious engagements with evolutionary theory were as much about theories of the universe as about the com-

munities in which these debates took place. Anti-evolutionary thought is often more about politics than about biology or religion.

With edited volumes, it is often not constructive to mention what “should” have been in there, usually reflecting personal biases. Still, it is worth considering the structure of the book and the choices made. This reviewer was at first somewhat surprised that there is not a lot of space for Buddhism. The emphasis is quite strongly on South Asia, Islam, and the Hindu world, which is the strength of the book. (And indeed, in sheer numbers of followers, Islam and Hinduism are, after all, Asia’s two largest religions.) Somewhat unfortunate is that three out of four chapters on China are taken up by studies on the translator and scholar Yan Fu. While a hugely influential figure in the reception of Darwinism in China, this misses the opportunity for a wider and varied inquiry to religious responses to Darwinism in China.

I hope in particular for more research on Southeast Asian and Theravada Buddhist responses to Darwinism. Another promising avenue of research is the interreligious and transnational dimensions: how did adherents of Asian religions learn from each other in thinking about science and evolution? I hope this excellent volume will stimulate more scholars to investigate the impact of Darwinism in Asia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism>

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