

gothic arches, latin crosses anti-catholicism and american church designs in the nineteenth century

Smith, Ryan K. 2006

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

Reviewed by Nigel Yates
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The aim of this book is to explore an interesting architectural, historical, and liturgical conundrum: why was it that during the nineteenth century the same people who were leading the Protestant attacks on Roman Catholicism in the United States were at one and the same time supporting changes in Protestant church design that made such buildings appear more like those of the Roman Catholics they so despised?

The author sees the Gothic Revival in American church architecture in the nineteenth century as one primarily associated with Roman Catholicism, with Episcopalians not showing much interest in Gothic design before the 1830s, and the other Protestant churches not until a good deal later. He notes, however, that it was not until the 1840s, with the import of Pugin's ideas from England, that even Roman Catholics adopted the long chancels of "correct" medieval design, but preferred short chancels that actually met their liturgical requirements. He argues that when Episcopalians and other Protestants began to adopt Gothic designs, and could legitimately be accused (as they were) of Romanizing tendencies, they initially defended their innovations by pointing out the ways in which

their Gothic buildings differed from Roman Catholic Gothic buildings.

Smith answers the question he poses at the beginning of the book by suggesting that the reason Protestants jumped on the Gothic bandwagon was that Roman Catholicism was by far the most successful of the Christian churches in the United States in the nineteenth century in terms of growth. Because its buildings were so clearly identified with the Gothic Revival there was an assumption that the style was a factor in Roman Catholic growth, and that if Protestants were to be equally successful they had no option but to adopt the same style themselves. It is a somewhat strange answer, and certainly not one borne out by the situation in Britain, where Gothic was also the favored style of most Christian denominations by the end of the nineteenth century. In Britain the principal catalyst in the adoption of Gothic by Protestant Nonconformists was not the numerical gains by Roman Catholics but the growth of ritualism, strongly associated with the Gothic Revival, in the Church of England. To put it very crudely, the shift in one Protestant church led to a comparable shift in the others. Smith, however, seems not to have considered whether the same phenomenon might have been at work in the United States, in spite of the fact that the American Episcopalians were as much influenced by ritualism as most other Anglican churches. Indeed he makes this very point on pp. 140–43, but he never really develops it. I suspect it was a stronger motive for ritual developments in other Protestant churches than just the desire to compete with Roman Catholicism.

Nevertheless, despite this caveat, this is a well-written and entertaining book on a topic that has been inadequately explored by American scholars in the past. One of its greatest strengths is the wealth of primary sources on which it is based and the extensive quotations from these sources in the text.

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becoming the buddha the ritual of image consecration in thailand

Swearer, Donald K. 2004

Princeton: Princeton University Press

Reviewed by Cameron Warner
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A recent review of Swearer's excellent introduction to the study of Buddhist visual culture, *Becoming the Buddha*, consisted of a narrow analysis of philological points without addressing his contribution to the growing literature on Buddhist material culture, arguably the most important aspect of the book (Tannenbaum, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2006: 503–6). Swearer's deft combination of philology, art history, ritual studies, and ethnography ought to be

evaluated as a potential model for studying other multivalent matrices of Buddhist material culture.

Swearer begins with an account of the various legends of and art historical evidence for the First Buddha Image. For the most part, Buddhologists have mistakenly left the legends of the First Buddha Image to the purview of art historians, who, while searching for origins of Buddhist iconography, have often erroneously labeled it “the Udayana Buddha” (Carter 1990). Rather than give a full account of all the permutations of the legend, Swearer made the wise choice of focusing on one example, the *Kosala (Kauśalya)-Bimba-Vañṇanā (KBV)*, a thirteenth-century text compiled in Sri Lanka, and extrapolating from it the most important themes common to First Buddha Image cults pan-Asia:

the connection between kingship and the Buddha image; the polarity of absence and presence; the relationship between the Buddha image and the *dharmā*; the significance of the Buddha image for the survival of the tradition (*sāsana*); the role played by vision, that is, the mutual gaze between the image and the Buddha; the fluidity of the distinction between a sentient being and a non-sentient object; and the function of the image with regard to seminal concepts in the belief system of popular Buddhism, especially those of rebirth and meritorious benefit or advantage (*ānisaṃsa*). (p. 16)

Swearer fills out the textual picture through an analysis of manuals for making and venerating Buddhist images. In that way, the first part of the book provides the indispensable background for contextualizing and interpreting Part Two, the Thai Buddhist consecration ritual. According to Swearer, both relics and images are indexical signs because they represent the Buddha’s actual, material presence. Because the image lacks the historical connection inherent in a relic, it must be “charged” with the Buddha’s presence through a consecration ritual (p. 20). In Thailand, the consecration “ritual represents a mimetic reenactment of the night of the Buddha’s enlightenment” (p. 79), and consequently includes not only the ritual “opening of the eyes” but also instructing the image in the biography of the Buddha and Buddhist doctrine, as well as empowering the image.

There are far too many engaging passages of Swearer’s book to summarize them all, instead *Becoming the Buddha* deserves to be reviewed in the context of the increasing body of literature on Buddhist material culture. The 1990s saw an explosion of publications on Buddhist material culture in China and Japan from authors as diverse as Robert Sharf, Donald McCallum, T. Griffith Foulk, John Kieschnick, and

especially Bernard Faure, to name a few. The predominant theme in many of these works was the concept of the “living image.” The sudden emergence of such a body of work must be in part due to an increased interest across the study of religion in Peircean semiotics, the study of visual culture, the writings of Walter Benjamin, and Igor Kopytoff’s call for cultural biographies of objects. Rather than simply a fad, the focus on East Asian Buddhist images was a needed corrective, for as Sharf aptly noted,

The tendency to overlook or misconstrue Buddhist icons is, as mentioned above, aided and abetted by a number of popular misconceptions. Among them I would highlight the following: 1) the notion that the veneration of images of buddhas, bodhisattvas, guardian deities, and saints is a degenerate or rueful display of folk piety, a sop to the masses, that was tolerated, but not encouraged, by the clerical elite; 2) the notion that the doctrinally normative function of Buddhist icons is didactic, that is, that the canon sanctions icons only as symbolic expressions of the virtues of buddhahood, or as “skillful means” intended to nurture a sense of reverence toward the Buddha and his teachings; 3) the notion that images of holy patriarchs and eminent monks are essentially commemorative in nature, that they were intended to preserve their memory for posterity, or to serve as sources of spiritual inspiration; and 4) the notion that the primary function of certain buddha images and mandalas was to serve as adjuncts in meditative practices, that is, as foci for concentration exercises or as aids to visualization. (Sharf and Sharf 2001: 8)

Though there is no need to stop pursuing this very productive line of inquiry, our understanding of East Asian Buddhism has been corrected through these numerous publications. However, the rest of Buddhist Asia has not sufficiently benefited from this sort of sustained investigation, for it also suffers from many of the same biases Sharf identified. In *Becoming the Buddha*, Swearer pushed the question one step further, in that he not only began to address the urgent desideratum of Buddhist material culture for Southeast Asian Buddhism, but he also pursued an alternative line of investigation, which is useful to the study of religion generally and, to my knowledge, has not been attempted in the study of Buddhist visual culture elsewhere in Asia, namely the combination of philology, art history, ritual studies, and ethnography.

The various methodologies employed by scholars of East Asian Buddhism are not without their merits, and to one degree or another philology, art history, and ritual studies are well represented, not to mention postmodernism. Each provides its own productive perspective. Swearer’s distinctive contribution here was to combine these approaches with ethnography.

It has often been noted that art history and philology would benefit from increased interaction, but for Swearer to enliven both with over four decades of field experience in Thailand radically elided the disjunctures between these methodologies, as well as powerfully eliminating the first of Sharf's popular misconceptions about Buddhist material culture.

Becoming the Buddha is currently the best comprehensive introduction to the history, significance, and function of Buddhist material culture, and therefore should be used in Introduction to Buddhism courses, which almost always ignore material culture. Students,

especially, ought to learn from Swearer the clear lesson that in the pursuit of ever-narrower contextualized historical studies, we should not overlook common facets of Buddhism across Asia and the lessons to be learned from such prevailing similarities.

References

Carter, Martha L. 1990. *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha*. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Sharf, Robert H. and Sharf, Elizabeth H. 2001. *Living Images: Japanese Buddhist Icons in Context*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

cosmology and architecture in premodern islam an architectural reading of mystical ideas

Akkach, Samer. 2005

Albany: State University of New York Press

Reviewed by Alain George
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This book offers to tackle a fascinating aspect of Islamic architecture: the relation between building and cosmic structure, approached from a mystical perspective.

After a methodological introduction, the first and second chapters discuss the Sufi perception of the universe, which includes not only the visible realm, but also the invisible, the latter being made accessible to man through analogy and symbol—hence the importance of symbolism. Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), in particular, saw the world as the shadow of the shadow of God's light; like his predecessors Ikhwan al-Safa and al-Ghazali, he established a duality between theoretical knowledge (representing the essence) and applied art (the form). The artist, in this perspective, seeks to imprint a reflection of the divine onto the imperfection of matter. Ibn Arabi illustrates the divine presence in the universe by the geometrical figure of a point (the One, Being) that projects into the circumference of a circle (the Created World). The lines that link the center to the circumference, which are all essentially the same, represent the force of God's will. In this scheme, man, "in both the ideal and the

embodied form, constitutes the comprehensive epitome of all manifest states of Being and the sum total of all divine and cosmic realities" (p. 84), while the Qur'an appears as an embodiment of the primordial Essence or Word. The act of writing thus bears a profound relation to human existence, with the image of the written book as one of the primary metaphors for the creation of the universe.

The third chapter is devoted to the physical order of the universe: the heavenly spheres leading to God's Throne and Footstool, which Ibn Arabi also describes in geometrical terms, like the celestial gardens. With the fourth and last chapter, we enter the realm of architecture proper. Akkach draws a parallel between the concentric images of the cosmos expounded earlier and the symmetry of some Islamic domed monuments. He notices that cities founded in Islam tended to be linked to scriptural, cosmological, or supranatural references, with their time divided by ritual prayer. There follows a reflection on the Ka'ba in Mecca as a "key element in the interplay of cosmology and architecture" (p. 179). Akkach discusses its form (the cube), the numbers associated with its size, and its role as cosmic axis and navel of the world. Finally, he relates his earlier remarks about the cosmos to the spatiality of Muslim prayer.

The reader is left to wonder, by the end of the book, whether artisans, architects, or believers shared, to any extent, the views expressed by the author. This and other essential questions have not been seriously considered because of a methodological choice. At the outset, Akkach distinguishes between two modern paradigms: on the one hand, "perennialism," an intellectual movement heralded by René Guénon in which the study of the past is not primarily aimed at writing history, but at breathing a sacred dimension