

Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change*. Princeton University Press, 2019, 280 pp, ISBN 9780691174594.

Emily Sigalow's *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change* explores the history of American Jewry's encounter with Buddhism and describes how American Jews often incorporate aspects of both religions into their everyday lives. The book deals with an important contemporary topic as many Jewish Americans are increasingly adapting somewhat of a dual religious identity in which they practise Buddhism while staying connected to Judaism. Interestingly, *American JewBu* highlights the leading role that Jewish Americans have played in the popularization of meditation and mindfulness in the USA. But the U.S. trend, and Sigalow's book respectively, is certainly relevant also for Canadian Jews. Canadian Jewbu Leonard Cohen comes to mind, as well as the 2017 article in *The Canadian Jewish News* that asked "Why do so many Jews become Buddhists?"

American Jewish Buddhists account by some estimates for up to 16 per cent of American Buddhists and constitute the vast majority of American Buddhist teachers. Scholars such as James William Coleman have also found that American Jews are more than five times as likely to be attracted to Buddhism than non-Jewish Americans. Sigalow, however, disputes these numbers in her book while wrongfully claiming other scholars would not have any "precise statistics about the number of Jews involved in Buddhist communities in the United States" (p. 2) while she finds "it seems safe to assert" the numbers to be around 2 to 3 percent (p. 2). Readers would certainly hope for the book to give more data than a random guess if the author disputes numbers of other scholars, but maybe a look at Canada could give one more insight: In the Canadian census people can indicate "Jewish" as their ethnicity and "Buddhism" as their religion. The Canadian data could be a path to get an idea of the scale of the trend in North America, yet the book does not draw anything from the Canadian data for its U.S. case study.

American Jewbu is based on Sigalow's Ph.D. dissertation at Brandeis University which encouraged her to "think of the dissertation as a book from the beginning" (p. xiii). Unfortunately, it seems the book underwent little editing at Princeton University Press. Each of the chapters opens with a statement regarding what the author is going to do in the chapter in the style of "In this chapter, I..." and ends with full conclusions of what the chapter has done. The major flaw of the book, however, is its extreme naivete regarding Buddhism, especially in the Jewish context. The book does not engage with the violent history of Buddhism (sacralized warfare, self-mummifications, self-immolations, and so on) nor with the ignorance within Western Buddhism regarding current Buddhist violence against Muslim and Tamil minorities in Burma

and Sri Lanka (see for instance: *Buddhist Warfare* by Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer). The book also does not address the problem of Karma in the context of Jewish historical suffering such as the Holocaust. If karma means that action driven by intention lead to consequences and that those intentions are taken into account in the kind of rebirth one experiences, the Jewish victims of the Holocaust would be seen as having been guilty of some prior wrongdoing. One would have hoped for the book to deal with a Jewbu response to this clearly antisemitic thinking or to the dangers it poses as a rationalization for current antisemitism, racism, or even birth handicaps. One would also hope for the book to mention highly disturbing instances of Western Buddhists using Auschwitz as a meditation site to “let go of fixed ideas”. Unfortunately, Sigalow overlooks these important aspects in her book.

American JewBu further ignores antisemitism within Buddhist contexts: There is no mention of Zen master, and antisemite, Hakuun Yasutani, who was a principal teacher of influential American Buddhists such as Robert Baker Aitken and Taizan Maezumi. The book does mention D. T. Suzuki once (p. 47) but does not mention his antisemitism either. Brian Victoria’s *Zen at War* describes Suzuki’s contacts with leading Nazis in wartime Japan and his enthusiasm for war quite well, for instance. On the contrary, the book uncritically relies on the work and interviews with Jeff Wilson who the author thanks for his “insights” (p. xiv) despite his high praise of D. T. Suzuki (see for example: *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki, Volume III, Comparative Religion*, (2016), pp. xi–xxviii.).

Sigalow is wrong when she writes that the relationship between both religions largely takes on a peaceful and transformative fashion in contrast to the early encounter between Buddhism and Christianity which was shaped by violence (p. 11). On the contrary, Buddhists are generally much more prone to hold antisemitic views than Christians or people without any denomination as the *World Values Survey* has found. South Korea, a country with a long Buddhist history, is among the most antisemitic countries in the world according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) 2014 survey.

Sigalow completely overlooks the risks of American Jewry’s embrace of Buddhism. *The book* does not engage with studies demonstrating possible negative side effects of mindfulness meditation on the human mind (depersonalization, psychosis, false memories and so on) nor does it explore the commercialization of mindfulness meditation and the often bastardization of Buddhism in America. The use of Buddhist meditation as a self-improvement tool, not a religion, would be an example. Studies indicate that Buddhist meditation techniques often lead people in the West to feelings of spiritual superiority. Advocating the encounter of North American Jewry with Buddhism as positively transformative is naïve and wrong, and makes the book appear as advertisement, not scholarship.

Sigalow conducted interviews with Jeff Roth and described him in much a positive light (pp. 90, 194, 229) despite his cynical take on (Jewish) meditation that blames the individual mind for their problems instead of external factors (*Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life*, pp. 46–47). One of the first Zen Buddhist masters to teach in the United States, Shaku Sōen, expressed this idea in a similarly problematic fashion, incompatible with Judaism and the Jewish historical experience: “We are born in a world of variety; some are poor and unfortunate, others are wealthy and happy. This state of variety will be repeated again and again in our future lives. But to whom shall we complain of our misery? To none but ourselves!” (Quoted in Victoria, *Zen At War*, p. 43). How American Judaism responds to such a disturbing view would have been an interesting question to address, yet the book ignores the issue (Shaku Sōen is uncritically mentioned once on p. 34).

Overall, *American JewBu* is an uncritical, romanticized take on the history of Buddhism in America and its relation to Judaism.

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