American Sutra: A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War. By Duncan Ryūken Williams. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 400 pages. $29.95 (hardcover). ISBN 9780674237087.

Alice Freeman
Oxford Brookes University

> By uncovering buried texts and buried memories, *American Sutra* aspires to open up a discourse about how faith in both Buddhism and America can contribute to a vision of the nation that values multiplicity over singularity, hybridity over purity, and inclusivity over exclusivity (p. 14).

American Sutra is the first comprehensive study of the history of Buddhism in the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Pacific War. As Williams notes, this is a topic that has heretofore been relatively understudied in the history of a country that continues to be seen as white and Christian. This book "flip[s] the map" (p. 2) on the national narrative of America as the westward expansion of white Christian European pioneers. By examining the wartime fate of the Japanese Buddhists who had been moving eastward to America since the mid-nineteenth century, *American Sutra* raises questions that interrogate the core values of America: "Is America best defined as a fundamentally white and Christian nation? Or is it a land of multiple races and ethnicities and a haven for religious freedom? More pointedly, does the fact of being nonwhite and non-Christian make one less American?" (p. 2). Williams has left no stone unturned in conducting over ninety interviews and consulting over 1,800 documents from private diaries to government records, from Tokyo, to Hawai'i, to California, to Washington (p. 267). *American Sutra* is a deeply insightful and beautifully crafted account of one of the most painful and traumatic experiences in the history of Japanese Americans, skillfully connecting the deeply personal experience of religious faith and discrimination with

matters of race, religion, and nationhood while remaining pertinent to the broader academic fields of American and global history.

Williams documents with rigorous thoroughness the history of the incarceration of Japanese American Buddhists across the US from the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 to resettlement at the end of the war. In so doing, he shows how Japanese Buddhists redefined American Buddhism and asserted religious freedom in the midst of a war that sought to oppress the former while proclaiming the latter. This book is a sutra, not a thesis, so don't expect any shortcuts to enlightenment by extracting the argument from the introduction and conclusion, for there is no introduction or conclusion—instead, a prologue and an epilogue. The text needs to be read start to finish, and the stories therein thus heard. That said, the text is written in clear yet exquisite language that is accessible even to the non-specialist.

As a scholar of religion and as a Sōtō Zen priest of mixed-race heritage, Williams is ideally positioned—one could say karmically appointed—to author this book. Indeed, Williams describes in the prologue how the book came about through a serendipitous encounter with the wife of his recently-deceased advisor at Harvard, Professor Masatoshi Nagatomi, who could be considered a founding father of Buddhist studies in America. The discovery of the papers of Prof. Nagatomi's father, Rev'd Shinjō Nagatomi, and a series of ensuing conversations with Prof. Nagatomi's wife, would in fact become the very first archival sources and interviews for the book (pp. 10–13). In the seventeen years since embarking on this quest, Williams has composed a refreshing antidote to the rushed monograph that is so frequently demanded of scholars in the contemporary academy. This is a text that has been honed to perfection, with rigorous analytical scholarship suffused with Buddhist insight and expressed in poignant prose.

The first chapter introduces the Pacific War with an account of the attack on Pearl Harbor. In poignant contrast to the "Day of Infamy" narrative, the chapter opens with the innocence of Japanese children at a Zen-affiliated Sunday school, where "[a]t least four Japanese American children under the age of eight died that day" (p. 15). Laying the dead to rest according to Buddhist rites proved extremely difficult, since Japanese Buddhist priests, as non-Christian, non-white Americans, were among the first to be arrested within hours of the attack, having been marked as "dangerous" by the FBI on secret lists compiled over the preceding years (pp. 16–22; 27–38).

The chapter subsequently explores the background to this tension. Since the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), Buddhism was regarded by white Americans as a heathen threat to a nation that in their view could only be not just white, but Christian. By contrast, "[m]ost Buddhists did not accept this view, asserting instead their right to live in a country that had been founded on a robust vision of religious freedom" (pp. 22–27).

Chapter 2 on Buddhism under martial law in Hawaiʻi is just one example of the flipping of the narrative of a white Christian West victimized by Japanese cruelty. As martial law was declared on Hawaiʻi, Buddhist priests were subject to particular suspicion, and many incarcerated, alongside Shinto priests, consular agents, language instructors, and Kibeis. Religious freedom was denied as the Hawaiian authorities sought to "discourage Japanese religious activities other than Christian," closing temples, vandalizing statues, and pressuring Japanese Americans to attend church (pp. 43–46).

Defiance of the Third Geneva Convention relating to prisoners of war, which Japan had signed but not ratified, is an accusation that has been levelled at the Japanese military officials in charge of prisoner-of-war camps during the Pacific War.[1] Yet Williams' depictions of Sand Island Detention Center, a civilian camp in Honolulu Harbor where Japanese Americans deemed suspect were detained, resonate with descriptions of Japanese prisoner-of-war camps and even Auschwitz (pp. 47–54). The violations of religious freedom highlighted in this chapter merit consideration in regard to the work of Maxey, Josephson, and Thomas, who demonstrate that the concept of "religious freedom" was itself constructed in negotiation between Japan and the West.[2] While exposing the West's hypocrisy in this regard, *American Sutra* demonstrates throughout that while fighting for their religious rights as Buddhists, Japanese American Buddhists were also able to achieve spiritual freedom through practice under the harshest of circumstances.

---

1. Yuki Tanaka, *Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II* 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 13–48; 255.

2. Trent Maxey, *'The Greatest Problem': Religion and State Formation in Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Jason Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 72–93; Jolyon Thomas, *Faking Liberties: Religious Freedom in America-Occupied Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

Chapter 3 is a damning subversion of the American myths of both religious freedom and the frontier. Williams demonstrates how anti-Japanese hysteria stirred up by the press and a series of moves from both federal and national officials led step-by-step to the incarceration of all Japanese Americans in camps under Executive Order 9066 in January 1942. In moves hauntingly reminiscent of similar efforts by Buddhists in Japan as documented by Ichikawa Hakugen and Brian Victoria, Japanese American Buddhist organizations made vocal public pronouncements of their loyalty to the US (pp. 60–62).[3] Yet these were not enough to curb suspicion, as temples were confiscated and icons destroyed amidst a range of measures from curfews to frozen bank accounts. Save a few examples of Christians speaking up for their Japanese Christian friends, "most white and black Americans favored the public crackdown on the Japanese American community in the name of national security" (p. 63). The famed frontier of American freedom reverses beginning in March 1942 as the evacuation zones and incarceration camps spread eastward from the West coast, engulfing all Japanese Americans attempting to migrate ahead of them. Yet amidst this hardship, the frontier was also being redefined through the westward movement of the Dharma (pp. 77–84).

Chapter 4 describes the creative inscribing of the "American Sutra" by Buddhist priests in high security camps on the US mainland, whence the majority of the Hawai'ian priests were also transferred, on account of their religious affiliation, in May 1942. The history of Japanese-run prisoner-of-war camps includes several stories of Christian faith flourishing in the face of cruelty and adversity.[4] Drawing on Buddhist tradition, Williams likewise argues that the hardships of "imprisonment became an opportunity to discover freedom" as the muddy water from

3. Ichikawa Hakugen, *Bukkyō no Sensō Sekinin* ("Buddhist War Responsibility") (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1970); *Nihon Fashizumuka no Shūkyō* ("Religion under Japanese Fascism") (Tokyo: Enuesu Shuppankai, 1975); Brian Victoria, *Zen At War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997); Brian Victoria, *Zen War Stories* (London & New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

4. Ernest Gordon, *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Collins, 1963); Kelly Dispirito Taylor, *Faith behind the Fences: A True Story of Survival in a Japanese Prison Camp* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2011); Duncan Hamilton, *For the Glory: The Life of Eric Liddell from Olympian Hero to Modern Martyr* (London: Doubleday, 2016); Evelyn Caughey, *Run to Glory: The Story of Eric Liddell* (Newburyport, MA: Barbour, 2017).

which the lotus of a new American Buddhism emerged. Faced with the first noble truth that life is suffering, priests deepened their practice, counselled fellow Buddhists, and presided over makeshift ceremonies using Buddha statues carved from wood scraps and carrots (pp. 85–96).

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the evolution of Buddhism in the Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA) and War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps, which held the majority of Japanese Americans from the exclusion zones of the West Coast. The US war against the Axis powers was portrayed at the time as a fight for President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms of speech, of worship, from want, and from fear. The picture in the relocation camps was different. Housed in huts that were at worst squalid and at best primitive, Japanese American Buddhists faced restrictions on use of the Japanese language and discrimination against the Buddhist religion (pp. 99–106). Williams shows how, continuing Buddhism's historical trend over 2,500 years of adapting to its environment through "skilful means," the Japanese American Buddhist community fought for their Constitutional rights to religious freedom not only through intense faith and tenacity, but also through the acceleration of a pre-war trend of the Americanization of religious language, organizational structure, and social activity (pp. 106–148). The scene shifts in chapters 7 to 9 from the camps to the front line. Following an all-out ban from March 1942 on the recruitment of Japanese Americans, the 100th battalion was formed exclusively of Nisei in May 1942, and the 442nd on the US continent from January 1943 (pp. 168–182).

Several studies already exist concerning the three thousand Nisei soldiers serving in the Pacific War, challenging the myth of white America.[5] *American Sutra* nonetheless offers a new perspective by

5. Masayo Duus, *Unlikely Liberators: The Men of the 100th and 442nd* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987); Lyn Crost, *Honor By Fire: Japanese Americans at War in Europe and the Pacific* (Novato: Presidio, 1994); Edwin Nakasone, *The Nisei Soldier: Historical Essays on World War II and the Korean War* (White Bear Lake, MN: J-Press Publishing, 1999); Israel Yost and Monica Yost, *Combat Chaplain: The Personal Story of the World War II Chaplain of the Japanese American 100th Battalion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Linda Tamura, *Nisei Soldiers Break their Silence: Coming Home to Hood River* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2012); Don Sellers and Lucy Ostrander, *Proof of Loyalty: Kazuo Yamane and the Nisei Soldiers of Hawai'i* (San Francisco: Stourwater Pictures, 2017); Sandra Vea, *Rising Son: A US Soldier's Secret and Heroic Role in WWII* (Seattle:

homing in on Buddhism. Although overall race, rather than religion, was the primary driver behind discrimination against Nisei fighters, once in the army, Buddhist amulets were burned and prayers silenced, and Buddhist soldiers encouraged to convert to Christianity (pp. 168–182). It was in the intelligence services that the role of Buddhists became the most prominent. Williams observes the irony that, after having shut down Japanese language schools and imprisoned their instructors, the US authorities found themselves in desperate need of Japanese language speakers for intelligence—and it was the Buddhists and Kibei, the most shunned of the Japanese American population, who possessed these skills on account of their connection with the schools and with Japan. Thus, "That the security of the nation suddenly depended on the 'heathen' Japanese-speaking Buddhist volunteers laid bare the fault in assuming America to be simply an Anglo-Christian nation" (pp. 151–168).

The power of faith in *American Sutra* bathes the stories of the Nisei fighters in a new light. Studies of modern Buddhism and war tend to focus primarily on the ethics of killing in violation of the Buddhist precepts.[6] Rather than question the morality of Buddhists engaging in war, Williams implicitly turns the issue on its head: Why should Buddhist soldiers *not* be supported in their faith, if Christian and Jewish soldiers are? In emphasizing the loyal patriotism and brave fighting of these soldiers sustained by their Buddhist faith, there is a risk not only of falling into the trap of extolling the violent religious nationalism associated with Buddhism in the Japanese army or with American Christian evangelicals, but also of becoming ensnared in the politics of promoting Japanese Americans as a "model minority." This is avoided however, through the relaying of human stories of men comforted by their religion as they struggled with the misery and irony of war while their compatriots languished in the camps (pp. 166–168).

Sasquatch Books, 2019); Daniel Brown, *Facing the Mountain: The Forgotten Heroes of the Second World War* (London: Viking, 2021).

6. Brian Victoria, *Zen At War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997); Michael K. Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds., *Buddhist Warfare* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke, eds., *Buddhism and Violence: Militarism and Buddhism in Modern Asia* (New York & London: Routledge, 2012). Discussions of Buddhism and violence also appear frequently in *The Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.

In chapter 8 the moral innocence and pro-US loyalty of Japanese American Buddhists and the promising beginnings of inter-religious dialogue that had been demonstrated so convincingly in the preceding chapters begins to crack under the pressure of the loyalty questionnaire and the draft. In January 1943, as Nisei became eligible for the draft and the WRA sought to begin releasing Japanese Americans from the camps, internees were presented with two questionnaires: "Statement of United States Citizens of Japanese Ancestry" and "War Relocation Authority Application for Leave Clearance" (pp. 183–184). Williams does not deny that Buddhists were more likely than Christians to refuse to declare loyalty to the United States. Yet he makes it clear that the racist treatment of Japanese Americans was ironically the main contributor to this resistance (pp. 173, 182, 185–186). Moreover, the salient point is made that despite the resistance, "more nisei Buddhists than nisei Christians served in the US military" (p. 186).

Chapter 9 highlights the bravery of the 100th and 442nd battalions in Europe, who experienced heavy losses while their families were oppressed or interned back home. This chapter in particular forms an important contribution to military history as a Buddhist counterpart to Deborah Dash Moore's *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*.[7] Denied Buddhist dog tags (the only options were Protestant, Catholic, or Jew), Buddhist chaplains, and even Buddhist burials, the men on the front were largely supported by lay communities at home and in the camps sending care packages, amulets, and *senninbari* as material support (pp. 201–266).

Chapter 10 closes the book with the resettlement following the closing of the camps from 1944, and the rebuilding of the Buddhist temples. This chapter fudges the boundaries between wartime and postwar with illustrations of the ongoing prejudice and racial violence met by many Japanese Americans returning to their former homes in a new stream of migration beginning in 1944. The last camp closed in March 1946 (pp. 227–248). Chapter 8 set the scene by discussing the overwhelming discrimination faced by Buddhists seeking to leave the camps—Buddhist adherence was automatically counted against those seeking discharge, and those who did manage to leave found it harder

7. Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

than their Christian counterparts to be accepted for housing, education, and work (pp. 196–198).

By focussing on the acute problems faced by Japanese American Buddhists seeking housing in America, and highlighting the roles of temples as hostels for the thousands of displaced former internees, chapter 10 adds a new dimension to the literature on housing in post-war America, which otherwise tends to divide between "little white houses" and black ghettoes.[8] Williams offers an inkling of something very different, which would merit deeper investigation: faced with resistance from the WRA who sought to assimilate the Japanese Americans in Chicago by integrating them with white Christian groups, Japanese American Buddhists moved into "more welcoming" African American neighborhoods where they "attempted to advance their own form of assimilation, one that was non-sectarian and open to members of all races" (pp. 249–252). Indeed, an important theme concluding chapter 10 is the eastward movement of Buddhism (*bukkyō tōzen*) towards the Midwest and East Coast as the camps closed. Williams argues that in this regard "several thousand Japanese American Buddhists ... served as a vanguard in building new Buddhist sanghas across the United States," which "would prove to be increasingly multiethnic and trans-sectarian" (p. 253). This is an exciting possibility, but what is not demonstrated either in this chapter or in chapter 6 is precisely how such visions of "multiplicity over singularity, hybridity over purity, and inclusivity over exclusivity" were to be carried from the camps into the post-war world. This would perhaps require a further volume, and it is hoped that this will be followed up in the future.

The epilogue unearths buried stones—characters of the *Lotus Sutra* painted individually on stones and buried under the camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, perhaps in the hope of better times (pp. 254–257). In uncovering the stories of Japanese American Buddhists, how has Williams answered the questions that were set out in the introduction?

---

8. Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Janet Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: Oxford University Press, 2013). A significant exception is Jacalyn Harden's *Double Cross: Japanese Americans in Black and White Chicago* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

The preceding chapters have spoken for themselves: during the Pacific War, at least, despite being a "land of multiple races and ethnicities," the "white and Christian" national myth made the US anything but a "haven for religious freedom." Nonetheless, the conduct of Japanese American Buddhists suggests that, if they chose to be, they were no less American than their white and Christian counterparts. Indeed, they were "both fully Buddhist and fully American" (p. 258).

American Sutra is a valuable addition to the literature on race and religion in US and global history. The text would moreover be an excellent point of comparison for students of religious history, and significant parallels can be drawn for example with the histories of discrimination, imprisonment, and military service in Judaism and Islam in the US and beyond, and indeed to the repression of ethnic and religious minorities in other times and places.

The close of the book leaves the reader curious concerning the next chapter of Japanese American Buddhist history. While eagerly anticipating further contributions from Williams in this regard, Michael Masatsugu's *Reorienting the Pure Land: Nisei Buddhism in the Transwar Years, 1943–1965*[9] may read, at least in part, as a fitting sequel.

9. Michael Masatsugu, *Reorienting the Pure Land: Nisei Buddhism in the Transwar Years, 1943–1965* (Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2023).