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American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change and *Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture: Between Moses and Buddha, 1890–1940*

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A Review of *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change* and *Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture: Between Moses and Buddha, 1890–1940*

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American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change. By Emily Sigalow. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019, 280 pages, ISBN 978-0-691-17459-4 (hardback), $29.95/978-0-691-22805-1 (paperback), $21.95.

Jewish Encounters with Buddhism in German Culture: Between Moses and Buddha, 1890–1940. Palgrave Series in Asian German Studies. By Sebastian Musch. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, ix + 289 pages, ISBN 978-3-030-27468-9 (hardback), $99.99/978-3-030-27471-9 (paperback), $69.99/978-3-030-27469-6 (e-book), $54.99.

For the reader interested in the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists, there could not be better timing than the publication in 2019, a few months apart, of Sebastian Musch's *Jewish Encounters with German Culture* and Emily Sigalow's *American JewBu*. By turning their doctoral dissertations into books, Musch, a German historian, and Sigalow, an American sociologist,

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are not only making an important contribution to the understanding of a phenomenon often commented upon but too little analyzed; they are confirming the development of what Musch calls for in his conclusion: a proper field of study on the Jewish Buddhist phenomenon. Truth be told, the construction of such a field has actually been underway since the mid-1990s (studies include Linzer; Obadia, "Buddha in the Promised Land"; Vallely; Gez; and Niculescu, "I the Jew"). But indeed, after decades of popular interest and, more recently, the exponential publication of scientific articles and book chapters, the need for more academic monographs dedicating in-depth research to the phenomenon had been felt.[2]

The respective locations of these works in terms of discipline (history for Musch and sociology for Sigalow), theorical framework (postcolonial studies and syncretism), geographical fieldwork (Germany and the United States), and chronological timeline (from 1890 to 1945 and from the nineteenth century to the present) testify to the fact that this maturing field, like the phenomenon it talks about, is interdisciplinary and international. Both in the way they mirror each other and in the way they offer complementary approaches, Musch's and Sigalow's books make wonderful material for a comparative review.

Jewish Buddhists before American Counterculture: Highlighting a Nineteenth-Century Encounter

From their respective contexts of inquiry, the authors address the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists with similar questions: Why choose to become a Buddhist, when one is born Jewish? What was the religious and social background of those who made that choice? How did the culture and context of their time inform that choice? How does one's commitment to the Dharma impact one's Jewish identity and, if any, one's Jewish religious practice? For those who became public figures, by writing or

[2] So far, only two biographies have been published: Linzer; and Obadia, *Shalom Bouddha!*.

teaching about Buddhism, how, if at all, did their discourse and practice impact the way the Dharma was received in the West?

These questions are not new. They can be found in the popular literature, abounding with accounts (Kamenetz),[3] personal testimonies (Rosenzweig), and spiritual autobiographies (Boorstein; Kasimov et al.; Katz; Lew and Jaffe; Shoshanna), as well as in the previous scholarship on the phenomenon, from the perspective of psychology (Linzer), Jewish studies (Gez), sociology (Vallely; Niculescu, "Boundary Crossers"), and anthropology (Obadia, *Shalom Bouddha!*). What is new, and what constitutes, in my view, the main contribution of these two books, is the historiographical dimension. Most specifically, both authors offer remarkable archival material to elucidate the roots of the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists since the nineteenth century. Indeed, while popular accounts tend to locate the starting point of the phenomenon in the counterculture of the 1960s in America, both authors dig deeper into something that was only mentioned in previous academic works (Baumann; Niculescu, "*JuBus*"): the fact that the roots of the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists are to be found not in the 1960s but right before the turn of the twentieth century, and not just in America, but also in Germany.

The Attraction of American and German Jews to Buddhism: Orientalism or Rationalism?

As Musch highlights in the first part of his book, the phenomenon of Jewish interest in the Dharma emerges in the context of the broader Orientalist movement sweeping across the European intelligentsia in the nineteenth century. More specifically, he speaks about a "Jewish German Orientalism" (19) to highlight both the commonality and specificity of the romanticized attraction to Buddhism for late-nineteenth-century German

[3] Kamenetz's best seller *The Jew in the Lotus*, which was translated into several languages and is now in its thirty-seventh reprint, made the phenomenon known to a wider audience both outside of America and outside of the frame of Jews interested in Buddhism.

Jewish intellectuals. Musch interprets the movement toward Buddhism of German Jews as a response to their disillusionment with the rationality of Western modernity: "The Buddha," he writes, had become for them a "*prosthetic device* to fill a spiritual void brought about by their ascent to the middle class and ensuing secularization" (247).

In her biographic description of the lives of the first American Jews to convert to Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century, Sigalow, by contrast, highlights "the influence of liberal circles" who praised Buddhism as "an imagined otherness that resonated with messages of tolerance, universal brotherhood, and justice" (21). This can be called a type of secular-rational Orientalism. It forms the other pole of attraction of Buddhism for Westerners, then and now. And indeed, what Sigalow highlights, as a reason for the turn to Buddhism of Charles Strauss—the first Westerner to convert to Buddhism on American soil after the World Parliament of Religions in 1898—is rather its rational aspects. Strauss's perception of an affinity between Buddhist teachings and an American culture influenced by secularization, science, and pragmatism announces the reasons why "mindfulness," a Buddhist-derived, secular meditation technique, became popular in the 1990s, following its translation into therapeutic language by American biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn (83).

Yet the picture is more complex, and it seems, from reading the two books, that both elements have been influential in prompting Jews to embrace Buddhism on both sides of the Atlantic. Just like his American peers, it is also the rationalist, individualistic, and secular aspects of Buddhism, and not just a romanticized orientalist version of it, that seduced German writer Walter Tausk, to whom Musch dedicates a "microbiography" in chapter five of his book (190). Reciprocally, as can be read between the lines of Sigalow's account, in the United States, it is also certainly a romanticized, idealized version of Buddhism that made not only Charles Strauss, but also Julius Goldwater, Samuel Lewis, and William Segal in the early twentieth century—and later their coreligionists from

the counterculture of the 1960s—praise the ethics of Buddhism and adhere to its practical path.

The Phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists: A "Transnational Affair"[4]

That the same cultural trend formed the background of the engagement of American and German Jews in Buddhism around the same period is just one element that shows how much the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists, often described as an American phenomenon, is really, from its inception, a transnational one (Obadia, *Shalom Bouddha!*; Niculescu, "Going Online"). This global dimension becomes even more striking when looking at, first, the geographical and cultural origin, and second, the spiritual itineraries of the Jews who became Buddhists in America in the last century and a half. With almost no exception—including the famous team who founded the first American Insight Meditation center in Massachusetts in the early 1970s (Joseph Goldstein, Jacqueline Mandell, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg)—the American Jews who embraced Buddhism happened to all be children of Ashkenazi[5] immigrants from Central Europe. They were brought up, for the greater part, within middle- or upper-class, often intellectually oriented, reform Jewish families (a Jewish religious denomination born in Germany in the nineteenth century and quite predominant in Jewish American culture, till this day) and already more or less secularized. They had the cultural capital and the economic means to discover texts and travel to Asia (Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, or India), which they almost all did.

This international—or rather, global—aspect of the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists, although hinted at by both authors, is not something that is particularly developed in *Jewish Encounters*, and even less so in *American JewBu* (as Musch noted in his review of Sigalow's book on H-Net). And indeed, it is not the intended scope of each book, which is to focus on

[4] A term borrowed from Musch, "Review."

[5] European Jews, especially coming from Germany and Central and Eastern Europe.

the encounter of Jews with Buddhism in a specific country and culture. The authors, however, both turn to another boundary-crossing aspect of Jewish Buddhists: their crossing social boundaries within their own culture. Through their publications and the leadership roles they took as teachers, the actors whose lives are described in these books, both in Germany and in the United States, ended up "breaking down the barriers" (Sigalow 17) and playing the role of "bridge builders" (Musch, *Jewish Encounters* 101). They crossed a symbolic social and cultural boundary not just in the way they filled the gap between the Asian cultural elements of the Buddhism they had embraced and the Western culture in which they were embedded. They also did so in the way they took themselves, as Jews, beyond the imaginary line that separated the Jews of their time with their gentile peers (Niculescu, "Boundary Crossers"). Despite all the efforts of European and American Jews to assimilate, the line of separation was being signified to them on various occasions in very overt ways in Germany until the Shoah (when the quasi-totality of German Jewry, at least momentarily, disappeared), and in America well into the 1960s and to this day.

The Jewishness of Jewish Buddhists: Choice or Ascription?

According to Musch, overcoming anti-Semitism was indeed a factor of the engagement of German Jewish intellectuals with Buddhism until the 1930s. For some, it was by trying to escape the Jewish condition; for others, it was by praising the "oriental" side of Judaism as a bridge between East and West and between Buddhism and German culture, in the hope of finding, at last, an acceptable place in their gentile birth culture. The Jewish responses to Buddhism were greatly varied. This is clearly demonstrated in Musch's study, by the inclusion in his analysis of responses of controversy and rejection—an aspect that is mentioned but less developed in the historiographic part of Sigalow's book. Still, in Germany, as opposed to the United States, "[w]hat united the different responses," Musch writes, "was the common inescapability of Judaism" (247).

While Sigalow describes the Jewishness of the American Jews who became Buddhists as "voluntary" and not ascriptive (20), Musch, whose period of study spans the rise of the Nazi regime until the quasi-total eradication of Jews from Germany, concludes that it is the very inescapability of Jewishness that makes the specificity of the Jewish Buddhist phenomenon. Whether this inescapability is negative, as in the case of German Jews, or deliberate, as in the case of contemporary American Jews described by Sigalow, what characterizes the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists is that choosing Buddhism does not make one stop being Jewish.

Although in the second part of Sigalow's book anti-Semitism appears, through the mouths of the respondents of her ethnographic study, to be one of the markers of Jewish identity, this topic does not emerge from the portraits of the lives of the first Jewish Buddhists she draws in the first part. Perhaps the archives studied did not mention a phenomenon that was in fact quite present in early twentieth-century America, as evidenced through the existence of Jewish quotas in universities, cases of lynching, prohibition to access country clubs, and other forms of segregation and anti-Semitic violence. Sigalow does, however, mention as one of the factors of early Jewish engagement with Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century, a desire to fit into the culture of the Protestant American upper class, in which Buddhism was becoming popular. Musch complicates the account by showing, on the German scene, a more complex picture of contradictory dynamics of "assimilation/dissimilation" (189), by which some German Jews did not just want to blend in, but also, realizing the irremediability of their difference, worked at embracing it.

The Present and Future of Jewish Engagement with Buddhism in America and Germany

Sigalow's book, as a sociological work, moves from showing the roots of Jewish engagement with Buddhism in America to describing what she calls forms of "syncretism," through the Jewish appropriation and import

of Buddhist-derived practices within Judaism, especially since the late 1990s, as a case study for what she calls "religious change." By contrast, Musch's book, a historical account of the roots of German Jewish engagement with Buddhism at the turn of the twentieth century, concludes on a more pessimistic note: his account of the German Jewish Buddhist phenomenon ends with the mass murder of German Jews during the Shoah.

Today, Buddhism is being revived in Germany, and this pioneer land of Western engagement with Buddhism is becoming again one of the major centers of Buddhism in Europe (Baumann). As a wink to history, one of the most influential German Buddhist teachers who participated in this revival is none other than a German Jew who fled in 1939 with the *Kindertransport*, lived in England, Shanghai, and the Americas, and travelled the world before settling in Australia, where she embraced Buddhism, became a nun, and returned to Germany to revive Buddhism in the country of her childhood—and, perhaps, heal her own biography (Khema). Similar developments are to be seen in France and in England, where among the main contemporary Buddhist teachers are children of holocaust survivors (Fabrice Midal in France and Vishvapani Blomfield in England).

Much is yet to be studied regarding these European revivals and the transnational dimension of the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists. This is for scholarship to come, which will undoubtedly find, in addition to students, academics, and a wider audience thirsty to understand more about the phenomenon of Jewish Buddhists, great inspiration and solid material in these two pioneering publications.

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