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Old Wisdom in the New World. By Paul Numrich. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press 1996. ISBN 0-87049-905-X. Pp. xxiv + 181, cloth. \$25.

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The 1965 Immigration Act simplified the coming of Asians to the U.S. This resulted, among other things, in the immigration of an estimated seven hundred thousand people from Theravāda Buddhist countries by 1990 (xix). This tremendous numerical increase brought about a proliferation of temples, serving the religious and cultural needs of the new U.S. citizens. Paul Numrich counted 142 immigrant Theravāda Buddhist temples in the U.S. for 1995 (xxi). Despite this dramatic growth, no studies of such Buddhist temples had been conducted prior to this one. The main reason for this “scholarly myopia” (xxi) had been the “quiet” i.e., unspectacular growth of the Asian Theravāda population and an emphasis on American converts to Buddhism, leaving aside the ethnic-Asian Buddhists. As such, Numrich’s book on two immigrant Theravāda temples is highly welcome. Indeed, it fills a research gap. Despite this laudable historic-descriptive contribution, this review will also point to some limitations of analytical depth and contextualization.

The 160-page text is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one outlines the establishment of the two temples under discussion: the Wat Dhammaram in Chicago maintained by Thai Buddhists, and Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles established by Sri Lankan Buddhists. The temples were opened in 1977 and 1979 respectively. Whereas chapter two chronicles and analyses schisms and splits taking place, chapter three focuses on the monastic staff and the question, if and how the monastic rules (*vinaya*) may be adapted to the American environment. Also presented here are patterns of an emerging Buddhist ecumenism, although a comparative look beyond the confines of the U.S. scene to developments in Europe or Australia may have proven insightful. Chapter four is the heart of the investigation. Here the author points to the “dual ethnic expression, with Asian immigrants on the one hand, American converts on the other” (63). Although Prebish has already spoken of “Two Buddhisms” with regard to these different strands of practising Buddhism (*Buddhist Studies Review*, 10 (1993): 187-206), Numrich substantiates this finding with regard to immigrant temples. He brings to the surface the “intersection without interaction” (67) of Asian immigrants and American converts under the same temple roof. Whereas the former focus on ceremonial and ritualistic elements, the latter place a strong emphasis on aspects of meditation and philosophy. This parallelism takes importance on different levels: despite their numerically small number, American converts often act as spokespeople and representatives of the temples. The monks have to handle two different clientele, a task, however, they apparently manage very well (146). Researchers are advised by Numrich to employ theories both on immigrant religions and on new religious movements, thus applying the just method and approach to each

respective group within the temples. He develops four scenarios of possible future developments of these parallel congregations. The parallelism is observable not only at these and some further Theravāda temples, but also in Theravāda Buddhism in the U.S. as a whole; a pattern which occurs in Europe and Australia likewise, both with regard to actual temple life and national Theravāda groups. Chapters five and six describe in detail these parallel congregations. Among other things, the author discusses some impacts of the emerging second generation of Asian immigrants and the development of lay initiations and ordinations for American converts. The final chapter highlights the parallelism thesis as a new theme of the process of Americanization of immigrant religions. A list of the 142 immigrant Theravāda temples traceable in the U.S., a table of sources, and an index conclude the study.

Old Wisdom in the New World is a good, but not superb work, recalling, for example, Thomas A. Tweed's analysis of *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Despite its catchy title, the book's stylistic outline could have been more fluent and more interesting. To my mind, the author sticks too much to renarrating letters and pamphlets and describes certain events and participant observations in too lengthy a manner. A more straightforward and generalized perspective would have been of value. This similarly applies to the study as such: a contextualization of Theravāda Buddhism within the wider range of U.S. Buddhist history and the present state of affairs would have clarified the importance—or marginality—of the temples under discussion. One wonders why Numrich selected these two temples in particular; his reasons are stated nowhere. Furthermore, a global perspective is absent. As indicated above, such “parallel congregations” (chapter 4) are observable in other Western countries and, to a limited extent, in some Thai and Burmese monasteries also. A comparative perspective, one of the essentials of the scholarly study of religions (Religionswissenschaft), would have brought forward further valuable results.

Numrich is right to emphasize the necessity to make use of the insights gained from the study of immigrant religions with regard to the Buddhist immigrant temple visitors. However, he himself only superficially employs these results in the chapter on the “Asian-immigrant congregation.” In the light of recent studies on South Asian immigrants in Great Britain and the U.S., his analysis remains somewhat flat and insufficient. Nowhere do we read about the heightened awareness of the immigrants' religious identity, typically coming to the fore when the former majority religion in a different context becomes a minority religion. What implications does this have with regard to the remoulding and reconceptualization of one's religious

tradition? Why is it that in the new social environment, rites and practices of the so-called little tradition (e.g., palm-reading and god-worship) are purged and disregarded by proponents of the “great tradition” i.e., the monks (85)? So-called magic-animistic practices and beliefs, prevalent in South Asia amongst the vast majority of laity—and monks!—are practiced also in the diaspora. But they more and more have to give way to the “established, orthodox” way and self-presentation. Here, facets of religious change and a restructuring of aspects regarded “inappropriate in a Buddhist temple in the United States” (85) at the expense of more “established” elements of the religious tradition are observable. Such processes deserve a painstaking observation and a comparative perspective, which most likely will not be traceable by the part-time ethnography employed for this study (xii). Last but not least, what impact has the temples’ supplementary education of second-generation children on their perception and outlook of Buddhist religion? Will Buddhism “become a chosen pursuit, a rich subject for organised children’s classes, camps and festivals, rather than a total way of life,” as observable among Hindu children in Britain (R. Jackson and E. Nesbitt, *Hindu Children in Britain* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham 1993, 179)? Discussing “The Second Generation” in a separate sub-chapter (97-107) one would have wished to learn more about the impact of the children’s ability to switch codes between American and Thai/Sinhalese culture, also called “multiple cultural competence” (Jackson, Nesbitt, 175), than to have layouts of summer camp activities and Sunday school teachings. A contextualization of the study within the broader frame of South Asian diaspora studies would have given hints to many familiar themes and suggestions for analysis.

A similar dissatisfaction applies to the level of analysis of the American-convert congregation (chap. 6). If Numrich had taken seriously his advice to make use of insights from studies on new religious movements (xi, 116), then he should have reflected more on the conversion process and on motives for conversion. Why does he not apply the typology of Euro-American Buddhists of esoterics, rationalists, and romantics, set up by Tweed (1992: 48-77), to his sample of people interviewed? The particular emphasis on books, repeatedly stated, and the convert’s approach to select only particular aspects of the Buddhist tradition (meditation, philosophy, disregard of ritual, orientation towards the supposed “original purity” of Theravāda) straightforwardly invite an analysis of the reinterpretation of Buddhist tradition in light of America’s dominant religion, i.e., Protestantism. To what extent might it be possible to speak of a Protestantization of convert-Buddhism in America, very vaguely hinted towards in the final chapter (141-142)? In this regard, processes of “Americanization” could

have been fruitfully traced, which the final chapter unfortunately treats only unspecifically and too briefly.

Despite these critical reflections, Numrich has worked out convincingly the pattern of parallel congregations at Buddhist immigrants temples. This is an observation which can be employed fruitfully in the study of further Buddhist immigrant temples world wide.