

Alternatives for Teaching Asian Religions

By Russell Kirkland

An Essay Review of Gary E. Kessler's Book

Eastern Ways of Being Religious

MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIFORNIA: MAYFIELD PUBLISHING, 2000
278 PAGES

and Robert E. Van Vorst's Book

Anthology of Asian Scriptures

BELMONT, CALIFORNIA: WADSWORTH/THOMSON LEARNING, 2000
240 PAGES

These two new textbooks give secondary and postsecondary teachers new alternatives for providing students with readings from major Asian religions.

Gary E. Kessler's book is more ambitious, and much more substantive. It does much more than provide extracts from important texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. It also serves as a solid introduction to the study of religion. Part 1 features stimulating readings from contemporary scholars, which intelligently address most of the key hermeneutical issues (e.g., "What Is Religion?" and "How Should We Study Religion?"). And even in Part 2—the "sourcebook" itself—Kessler prefaces each section not only with his own brief overview of each tradition, but also with a substantive introductory reading by a leading specialist on that tradition.

The translations themselves are often the familiar late-twentieth-century standards, but some are newer and arguably the best available today (e.g., Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's *Vedas*, Patrick Olivelle's *Upanishads*). Moreover, Kessler's annotated "suggestions for further reading" generally recommend accessible, up-to-date works by reliable scholars. The selections of readings are, again, mostly the materials familiar from late-twentieth-century anthologies, featuring intellectuals' ruminations, and the texts that intellectuals valued (e.g., writings by Wang Yang-ming and Wang Fu-chih represent late-imperial Confucianism).¹

Kessler concludes coverage of each tradition with challenging readings from "Contemporary Scholarship," mostly stressing gender issues. Selections pertaining to women and female divinities (e.g., on Mirabai in Hinduism, and "the Lady of Great Mystery" in Taoism) might have been expanded (e.g., with extracts from the Buddhist Therigatha, or with materials on the women Zen masters of Sung-dynasty China), but Kessler does take meaningful new steps in that direction. One wishes that he had apprised students

and teachers of such pertinent resources as the new two-volume *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (Macmillan, 1999). But he does note a few starting points for studying "Religion on the Web," even wisely warning, "The resources on the World Wide Web are both fleeting and untrustworthy" (276). With the usual glossaries and suggested "reading questions" and "research projects," many teachers of survey courses will find here a useful, up-to-date sourcebook which, with more specialized supplementary materials, could even be used in some upper-division courses.²

At first glance quite similar, Van Voorst's volume is actually rather different in several respects. For instance, it includes readings from Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Shintō, none of which are covered in Kessler's book. It also categorizes readings on each religion, under rubrics such as "History," "Teaching," "Ethics," "Organization," and "Ritual." But it provides nothing comparable to Kessler's explanatory extracts from today's leading scholars, and Van Voorst's "introduction" to each tradition is very perfunctory indeed. His rationale for such facts is that his focus is quite literally on tradition's "scriptures." In the Hinduism chapter, for instance, not only a poem by Mirabai but even a lengthy selection from the Bhagavad-gita are banished to appendices, on the grounds that such works do not constitute Hindu "scripture."

Moreover, despite the author's claim that "the translations used here have been selected for their accuracy and readability"

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ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

(xiii), in reality they are often extremely outdated Victorian versions—mostly from the nineteenth-century *Sacred Books of the East*—which are neither accurate nor particularly readable. Glossaries are extremely spare (e.g., only a dozen Buddhist terms are defined, and only three Shintō terms!). Discussion questions are generally sound and thought-provoking, though a few are tendentious and ill-informed (e.g., one wrongly implies that women had a more limited role in later Taoism than classical texts like the *Daodejing* would have us imagine).

Van Voorst's suggested readings do list works of contemporary scholarship, but some are mis-cited (e.g., Steven Bokenkamp's *Early Daoist Scriptures* is ascribed to the nonexistent "S. R. Nickerson"), and in every case the nineteenth-century *Sacred Books of the East* are wrongly hailed as the "standard" (and even "most accessible") translations. In addition, Van Voorst's suggested readings focus narrowly on materials pertaining to "scripture," neglecting other important elements of these traditions' history, beliefs and practices. Unless one is teaching a course entitled specifically "Asian Scriptures," one would need to supplement Van Voorst's work with one or more additional textbooks, to assure that students have a well-rounded familiarity with all aspects of the traditions studied. I also am not sure that many knowledgeable teachers will see pedagogical or hermeneutical value in trying to present texts like the Bhagavad-gita as "non-scriptural"; though, by some definitions, that distinction may be technically correct, the issues involved are beyond all but the most advanced undergraduates, and many teachers can teach Asian religions quite expertly and quite fruitfully without even raising such issues.

In sum, Van Voorst's text has only one "advantage" over Kessler's: it includes readings on four religious traditions that Kessler's does not cover. A teacher who feels a need to introduce all eight traditions may find Van Voorst's readings a useful supplement to a standard textbook. But he or she should be aware of its dated translations, and should consider giving students additional examples of each tradition's religious literature. On all other counts, Kessler's volume is clearly superior. The translations are more reliable; each tradition is much more fully, and more expertly, explained; more aspects of each tradition are covered; the basic issues in the study of religion are well presented; and in a pinch, one could even justify using Kessler as a stand-alone text. Secondary teachers may not find use for all of its materials on "scholarly issues," but their students should find most of Kessler's contents understandable and stimulating, and thoughtful students at all levels may be properly provoked, and properly guided, by Kessler's careful attention to the issues on the minds of today's leading scholars. ■

NOTES

1. As a specialist in Taoism, I will add that Kessler's wide-ranging readings on that tradition are, without question, the best available in any Asian-religion source-book today! Cf. my article, "Teaching Taoism in the 1990s," in *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1.2 (1998), 121–29.
2. A complementary text, *Western Ways of Being Religious*, is also available for teachers of courses on World Religions.

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