

ROBERT DECAROLI:

Image Problems: The Origin and Development of the Buddha's Image in Early South Asia.

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During the first centuries of the Common Era, a shift occurred in the religious and artistic environment of South Asia and anthropomorphic representations of prominent religious figures proliferated. As part of this phenomenon, images of the Buddha, which until that era appeared not to have been depicted in human form, became ubiquitous all over the subcontinent. This dramatic change in Indian Buddhist history has attracted much interest among scholars for over a century. Into this crowded scene Robert DeCaroli has now contributed his book *Image Problems*. This book, in DeCaroli's words, "is an attempt to understand the history of Buddhism's relationship with figural art as an ongoing negotiation within the Buddhist community and society at large" (p. 4). As in his previous book, *Haunting the Buddha* (2004), DeCaroli grounds his inquiry in the greater Indian religious context rather than viewing Buddhism exclusively as a self-contained entity.

The book is divided into eight chapters and complemented by 45 black-and-white illustrations. The first chapter, "Problems and preconceptions", functions as an introduction and presents the book's outline and methodology. Already in this chapter, DeCaroli shows much-needed caution and outlines well the many possible "pitfalls" of dealing with the history of early India. These include issues of dating, harmful categories of "high" versus "popular" religion, and the usage of terms such as "art" in an anachronistic manner (pp. 8–9). The second chapter, "Questions of origin", is a helpful overview of the major scholarly discussions around the Buddha's image. As expected, it outlines the charged debate on the origin and dating of the first images as well as the issue of "aniconism".

In the next chapters, DeCaroli wishes to shift the discussion from the "where and when", which indeed often dominated this discourse, to the "how and why" (p. 29). Each chapter is an attempt to examine different attitudes of South Asian religious practitioners towards images at large and particularly that of the Buddha. Discussing "images", DeCaroli widens the scope by including different designations such as "form" or "likeness" in order to explore new avenues of influences and effects beyond this narrow definition (p. 189). The author does this by considering texts (mostly narratives) from different periods and persuasions, inscriptions and art.

Chapter 3, "Image aversion", is meant to display the discomfort expressed in different texts towards image use (p. 10). The examples, taken from very different contexts, convey well the diverse attitudes to figural art in general. Such attitudes range from pragmatic concerns of the *vinaya* about public criticism (p. 36) to the critique of image worship as a means of livelihood in both Buddhist and Brahmanical texts (pp. 42, 46).

Chapter 4, "Images and identity", continues along these lines and examines how images were used by South Asian communities. The chapter, also using examples from different eras and locales, conveys the idea that figural art was seen as possessing agency, and that the creation of images might constitute control over their subjects (p. 57). This idea is, of course, most relevant when considering the complex attitudes towards the embodiment of the Buddha in human form.

Chapter 5, “Historical shifts”, is an overview of the historical circumstances contributing to anthropomorphic art in the subcontinent and particularly the influence of the Kuṣāna, Śaka, and Sātavāhana dynasties. In it, DeCaroli argues that while there is no causal relationship between the portraiture of these “political elites” and the anthropomorphic shift in Indian art, it initiated a new “attitude” towards anthropomorphic art as a symbol of authority (p. 112).

Chapter 6, “Image appeal”, is the counterpart of chapter 3 as it examines the voices who promoted image use. In particular DeCaroli examines narratives that express the potency of the Buddha’s “form” (p. 121) and devotees’ passion to view it (p. 128). Then, by exploring texts which promote practices such as visualization and devotionism (*bhakti*) he demonstrates the application of images in new forms of veneration (p. 144).

Chapter 7, “Coping strategies”, appears to complement chapter 6 and discusses the way texts reconcile the Buddha’s absence with his evident presence as an image. In one of the more inspired suggestions in this book, DeCaroli offers a reading of the Śrāvastī miracle and the duplication of the Buddha as a special type of image that is separate and independent (p. 162). In part, this relates to the issue expressed in the MSV, and pointed out by Gregory Schopen, of treating the Buddha’s image as his presence. Chapter 8, “Final words”, offers a relatively brief discussion of texts addressing the deification of the Buddha, as well as conclusions.

Despite establishing an intention to contextualize the discourse (p. 8), DeCaroli’s treatment of the primary sources sometimes misses this aim and these are employed somewhat awkwardly. For example, considering that the book contends to focus on the first centuries CE in South Asia, the justification for repeatedly referring to the *Paññāsa Jātaka*, a relatively late text composed in Thailand, is needed (pp. 128, 135). Equally vague is the mention of the *Kāliṅgabodhi Jātaka* and the *Jinālaṅkāra* in the same breath as representing “early literature” (p. 179). In this sense, perhaps the book’s greatest strength, its wide perspective on the issue of images, is also one of its shortcomings. Shifting between a historical-chronological approach (for example in chapter 5) and an ahistorical-synchronic one (such as in chapters 3 and 4), the reading experience is somewhat confusing. While the theses raised in the book are interesting and stimulating, perhaps paying closer attention to the relationship between the sources (or lack thereof) would have added to its strength. In certain cases, the selective treatment of the sources seems to have brought about utterly odd conclusions. For example, discussing the issue raised around the embodiment of deities, DeCaroli states: “as complicated as these topics were for Hindus, they were even more so for Buddhists and Jains, whose teachers were no longer active in the world and could not be seen as directly accessible through their images” (p. 145). Not only is this statement grossly inaccurate, the only “Hindu” text briefly referred to in this chapter is a paraphrase of the Vaiṣṇava *Samhita*.

Furthermore, an assumption that seems to exist in the book is that the voices antagonizing the use of images were “older traditions” that were forced to “defend their positions” (p. 9). This would imply that anti-anthropomorphic views existed a priori to the creation of images. However, since as the author himself admits, we have no texts that pre-date this phenomenon, such an assumption appears unnecessary and unfounded. It is quite plausible to assume that such views arose alongside the first images or even retrospectively.

Returning to the book’s stated aims as reflected in the conclusions, while it certainly gives an interesting survey of the “how” by outlining a polyphonic and multi-layered dialogue of different Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities and a variety of practices, I am not sure the “why” has been so thoroughly treated. Indeed, the issue of legitimacy has been touched upon particularly in chapter 5 (pp. 93ff),

but it is not as clear how other issues such as “maintaining patronage” for example (p. 189) were addressed. To be sure, the question “why” is always a harder one to answer. Finally, since he shares many of its considerations, DeCaroli might have benefitted from engaging with Gérard Colas’ *Penser l’icône* (2012).

To summarize, this book is certainly a good overview of the complicated discourse surrounding image use in South Asia in the first centuries of the Common Era. The book lays down some interesting queries and problems that should be further explored in depth and could not have been due to its broad outlook and short format. It will surely be of interest to students of Buddhist art, history, and to students of South Asia at large.

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ADIL HUSSAIN KHAN:

From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia. xi, 237 pp. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015. £34. ISBN 978 0 253 01523 5.
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In the last decade very little of substance has been written by academics on the Ahmadiyya movement, despite its rapid globalization and almost universal condemnation and exclusion by Muslim groups of all types, even the most pluralist. This important millennial movement, founded in the Punjab by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), who claimed a number of problematic messianic titles, spread very rapidly first through India and then internationally through the leadership of consecutive *khulafa’-i masih* (“representatives of the messiah”). It has always been controversial in different ways to Muslims, but its problems accelerated in post-partition Pakistan, culminating in 1984 when its members were declared non-Muslims in the Pakistan penal code. This made it impossible to claim their persons and structures as Islamic and intensified coercion and persecution.

Much of the analysis of the Ahmadiyya has focused on the continuity and unanimity of prejudice, anathema, and persecution of its members. Adil Hussein Khan, in this revision of his doctoral thesis at SOAS, University of London, is no exception. But whereas much of the previous work has been concerned primarily with the religious or theological content of the confrontation, Dr Khan seeks to look at the Ahmadiyya as “both a religious movement and as a political party” (p. 178) in order to work out the changing patterns of accommodation and persecution over time and to gauge how these contributed to the emergence and maintenance of an Ahmadi identity. The author perceives a common genealogy in the disputation of identity, which he conceptualizes as “a neo-tribal conflict that extends back multiple generations along hereditary lines, whether physically or spiritually” (p. 177). This inherited conflict does not in itself produce persecution, which the author relates to political factors, but certainly intensifies it and provides for the unusual continuity within the various phases of politicization.

Khan’s arguments move three clusters of subjects through seven chapters. The first two chapters are concerned with the formative milieu of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad within a localized Sufi context and the emergence of complex but little-understood messianic claims. While it is useful to have this discussion in a single coherent location, the author adds little here to the previous analysis of Spencer