

BOOK REVIEW

**Soraj Hongladarom, Jeremiah Joven Joaquin, and
Frank J. Hoffman (Eds.). *Philosophies of Appropriated
Religions: Perspectives from Southeast Asia***

**Singapore: Springer
2023, 395 pages**

“Philosophies of Appropriated Religions: Perspectives from Southeast Asia” is a must-read for anyone interested in the Philosophy of Religion, whether casual hobbyist, wide-eyed undergrad, or serious professional. The book contains twenty-six essays from renowned Southeast Asian philosophers. “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions” is the product of collaboration between the Philosophical Association of the Philippines and the Philosophy and Religion Society of Thailand. It is a part of the Global Philosophies of Religion Project funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

This book represents the second attempt by the editors to bring Southeast Asian perspectives to the mainstream, having previously published the successful “Love and Friendship Across Cultures: Perspectives from East and West” with Springer in 2021. I believe this volume will eclipse the former. Ambitious in its mission, grand in its scope, and diverse in its perspectives, “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions” is sure to breathe the new life into the field.

In this review, I evaluate the collection’s ability to deliver on its promise: bringing Southeast Asian perspectives to mainstream philosophy of religion. First, I discuss whether there is any need for a book like this. Then, I examine the book’s four parts in some detail, summarizing and evaluating their contents. Finally, I conclude. While there is merit in thoroughly discussing the content of each essay, anything more than a brief summary and evaluation will require more time and space than available.

The Need for This Volume

In the foreword to “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions,” Professor Yujin Nagasawa (2023), who leads the Global Philosophies of Religion project, notes that mainstream discussion in the field typically stems from a Judeo-Christian context. However, the bigger questions posed in these discussions, such as the existence and nature of a supreme being, the problem of evil, what happens after death, and so on, are core to every religion. Perspectives from other traditions are prevalent, but not in the mainstream. These discussions are typically limited to journals or conferences that focus on a particular tradition. The Global Philosophies of Religion project aims to

change this by promoting greater discourse between faiths and proposing a radical new approach to the philosophy of religion.

The collection of essays in “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions” is a direct response to this challenge and a direct implementation of this new approach – utilizing resources outside a particular religion to determine the truth about the divine. This is more than just comparative philosophy or interfaith dialogue. “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions” is an open-minded and honest inquiry into spirituality that strikes down any preconceived biases. Southeast Asian philosophy perfectly encapsulates this approach for two reasons. First, the region is a melting pot for major religions. The mainland countries are predominantly Buddhist, Malaysia and Indonesia are predominantly Muslim, the Philippines is predominantly Catholic, and historically, most Southeast Asian cultures were greatly influenced by Hinduism. Second, religious belief in this region is unique in that it is intricately interwoven with indigenous beliefs. Southeast Asia’s unique perspective on the philosophy of religion stems precisely from this intersection of mainstream religion and indigenous beliefs – what the editors refer to as *appropriated religions*. These appropriated religions posit distinct answers to traditional questions that may illuminate previously unseen paths forward. Thus, not only does “Philosophies of Appropriated Religions” address the field’s need for a more open-minded perspective, but it also provides a case study on how philosophy of religion might be approached in the future.

One thing to note, though, is the use of the term *appropriated* to refer to the specific “brand” of religious belief in Southeast Asia. These religions are appropriated because “they are imported cultural products reimagined and assimilated by the culture that embraced them” (Hongladarom et al. 2023, 3). However, one wonders whether the term *appropriated* accurately describes the phenomenon. In recent years, cultural appropriation has become a controversial topic, inspiring many heated debates. Because of this, the term *appropriation* has negative connotations that imply disrespect and thievery. For instance, in “Stealing my Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation,” Liz Bucar (2022, 5) defines appropriation as “applied to cases where individuals or entities of the dominant culture take from the culture of marginalized communities, resulting in some harm or offense.” This is certainly not the case with the religions in Southeast Asia, where the reverse has occurred. Bucar (2022, 13) further states that “borrowing in the other direction is assimilation.” The *assimilation* of a major religion into indigenous beliefs is not necessarily a *bad* thing, and is worth closer examination. Thus, it is important to clarify to potential readers that although the term used to describe Southeast Asian religious belief is *appropriated*, the intention is likely closer to *assimilated*, and that the editors do not endorse the idea that Southeast Asian cultures have borrowed from major religions in any harmful or deceitful way. To avoid any negative associations, I have preferred the term *assimilated* in this review.

Part I: Traditional Problems of The Philosophy of Religion

Philosophies of Appropriated Religions is divided into four parts. The first part contains seven essays addressing traditional problems within the philosophy of religion. In Chapter 2, editor Soraj Hongladarom discusses the topic of death and

immortality. He notes striking similarities between Buddhist philosophy and that of Spinoza, despite Spinoza being unlikely to have known much about Buddhism. This exemplifies the philosophical approach previously discussed. By comparing and contrasting two completely different schools of thought, Hongladarom illuminates a point of intersection that could lead to more compelling arguments. For instance, he reflects on how both Spinoza and Buddhism believe in an impersonal continuity after death. By closely examining both conceptions, one may develop a better understanding of impersonal continuity by borrowing from both Spinoza *and* Buddhism. The essay does an excellent job of bringing together Eastern and Western thought to uncover more fundamental ideas.

In Chapter 3, Hazel Biana explores South Korean ideas on reincarnation and the afterlife by analyzing how these themes are depicted in K-Dramas (Korean TV shows). What stands out about Biana's approach is that it takes into account popular religion, i.e., the kind of religion that is understood and practiced by the masses. This is in contrast to the more abstract theology discussed in academic circles. It is precisely within popular religion that intersections among culture, indigenous beliefs, and spirituality occur, and it is here where the process of assimilation actually takes place. Thus, Biana masterfully explains how the various religions present in South Korea (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and even Islam) have been assimilated, and how that assimilation has translated into popular beliefs about death and reincarnation.

Enrique Fernando III, Miqdad Wongsena-aree, and Ben Blumson discuss the problem of evil in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively. It is fitting that nearly half of all essays in Part I discuss the problem of evil, since "the problem of evil constitutes the most powerful argument against theism" (Nagasawa 2018, 151). This demonstrates that there are myriad perspectives still to be considered even for age-old problems, and that Southeast Asia is a hotbed for such perspectives.

Fernando frames the problem of evil as a legal paradox that demonstrates the difficulty in reconciling God's natural law as a basis for the validity of positive laws with the existence of evil laws throughout history (e.g., the Nazi party's antisemitic laws). He presents this as a challenge for the Philippines, whose laws are heavily influenced by Catholic doctrine. Though Fernando's essay is more closely aligned with the philosophy of law than the philosophy of religion, the distinctly Filipino context that underpins the discussion keeps in theme with the rest of the collection.

Wongsena-aree expounds on Iranian philosopher Morteza Motahhari's solution to the problem of evil. Though the essay lucidly clarifies Motahhari's philosophy, and though it sheds light on an Eastern solution to a traditional problem, its emphasis on an Iranian philosopher does not align with a collection about assimilated religions in Southeast Asia. One might find a similar case with Blumson, who convincingly argues that a dialetheist solution to the problem of evil is untenable, but makes no reference to any particular religion. However, one of the collection's goals is to promote the works of Southeast Asian philosophers to the global community (Hongladarom et al. 2023), and in this, we can find no complaint about the inclusion of these essays.

Part I is rounded off by essays from the editors Jeremiah Joaquin and Frank Hoffman in Chapters 7 and 8, respectively. Joaquin explores the question of compatibility between divine omniscience and free will through the Filipino expression *bahala na*. He shows that there are two ways of understanding this expression, and relates both to the omniscience-free will debate. Meanwhile, Hoffman contrasts two opposing Buddhist views on karma and rebirth, and proposes a third view that mediates between the two. Joaquin's and Hoffman's essays stand out as perfect examples of what this collection aims to do. They look at traditional, mainstream problems within the philosophy of religion, and offer new perspectives that arise specifically from assimilated religions in Southeast Asia. For instance, Hoffman's work serves as an excellent resource for anyone doing work on karma and rebirth, even from non-Buddhist points of view. In particular, his explanation of the Modernist position, and by extension his own Middle position presents an interesting challenge for Hindu and Sikh conceptions of karma, showing exactly how *Philosophies of Appropriated Religions* can impact philosophy of religion as a whole.

Part II: Religious Identity

The second part of the collection contains seven essays dealing with religious identity by illuminating the religious experience of various indigenous groups. The essays provide crucial insight into the process of religious assimilation by exploring how these indigenous groups have internalized the major religion. In some cases, it may even be argued that the indigenous belief is still the dominant belief, and the resources borrowed from the major religion have merely strengthened it – an utterly fascinating phenomenon! Given the clear focus on indigenous cultures across all the essays, in no other part does the collection's main goal shine through so clearly. It is also worth noting that the essays in Part II generally adopt interdisciplinary approaches for their methodologies, borrowing from anthropology, linguistics, history, and the like. Again, this perfectly encapsulates the approach endorsed by the Global Philosophies of Religion project. Moreover, it is praiseworthy that some contributors have conducted interviews with representatives from these indigenous cultures, ensuring that their voices are heard and that due respect is given to their beliefs. However, Part II of "Philosophies of Appropriated Religions" misses an opportunity for greater representation of the Southeast Asian region – all seven essays are about cultures from the Philippines, though one also focuses on Indonesia. A brief summary of each chapter follows:

In Chapter 9, Fernando Santiago critiques the unreliability of historical sources in describing the pre-colonial religious experiences of the Tagalogs. He argues that since these sources are records from colonizers, they do not accurately represent the Tagalogs' own understanding of their beliefs. This, he asserts, amounts to epistemic violence as a consequence of colonialism. In Chapter 10, Ramon Nadres conducts a linguistic analysis of the Tagalog *Bathala* and the Javanese *Gusti*, which refer to indigenous intuitions of a One True God. These conceptions, he argues, paved the way for the acceptance of the One God of Christianity and Islam by Filipino and Indonesian cultures. In Chapter 11, Charlie Dagwasi and Virgilio Bas-ilan II attempt to construct

a phenomenological understanding of the *Inayan* concept within the Kankanaey community. In Chapter 12, Anton Rennesland also employs a critical phenomenological approach to Filipino Christianity. He holds that the concepts of *Sákop* and *Kagándahang-loób* imply a paradox, and seeks to locate the quasi-transcendental structures behind Filipino Catholicism somewhere between these extremes. In Chapter 13, Danilo Alterado seeks to understand how the indigenous Ilokano term *Nakem* plays a central role even in the Christian faith of modern-day Ilokanos. This highlights the intricate connections between indigenous belief and assimilated Catholicism. In Chapter 14, Virgilio Rivas proposes a multispecies narrative of the Filipino Catholic experience, given its archipelagic geography. Finally, in Chapter 15, Miguel Baluyut traces the complex interweaving of Catholicism with the indigenous beliefs of the Aetas as a means of processing the tribe's suffering upon losing their home due to a volcanic eruption.

Part III: Religious Beliefs and Practices

Part III contains another seven essays focusing on religious beliefs and practices. In Chapter 16, Fleurdeliz Albela views Filipino Christmas traditions through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of Play. She argues that this framework permits a deeper understanding of the religious and cultural interplay that occurs during the Christmas season. Albela's use of Gadamer's Play to describe Filipino Christmas traditions provides an insightful explanation for how Christmas in the Philippines maintains solemnity even in lively celebrations – a novel take on the Noel.

In Chapter 17, Sheryl Morales and Roque Morales describe the nature of Indigenous Islam in the Philippines. Indigenous Islam refers to the manifestation of Islamic principles in indigenous practices. They claim that with the guidance of community elders, these practices can be a powerful instrument for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The conclusions of this essay subtly identify a social dimension of "Philosophy of Appropriated Religions" main goals. By going beyond the confines of one religion and taking inspiration from other faiths, not only are we able to do better philosophy, but we are also able to create tangible change for the common good. This more social aspect of philosophy is often neglected, and it is refreshing to see it being taken seriously in this collection.

In Chapters 18, 19, and 20, Lim Mun Chin, Theptawee Chokvasin, and Klairung Iso, respectively, offer critiques on certain aspects of assimilated Buddhism in Malaysia and Thailand. Chin critiques the performance of particular funeral rites performed by the Chinese Malaysian community. She argues that these rites are not connected to Buddhist philosophical doctrine, but arise from a mix of superstition and the intermingling of other beliefs. Meanwhile, Chokvasin asserts that contemporary use of moral shame and dread in Thai society implies irrational fear, and is thus a departure from Theravada Buddhist philosophy. Finally, Iso argues that general causation, which underpins the practical pursuit of moral education, is incompatible with the concept of *kamma*.

These three critiques explore the opposite extreme of religious assimilation – the dilution of beliefs. In this case, instead of a mutual strengthening, the assimilation muddies the original intent of certain beliefs and leads to a lack of proper understanding, as well as misguided practices, well-intentioned though they may be. While this is an unfortunate side-effect of assimilation, it is nonetheless one that ought to be seriously considered and studied. The collection benefits greatly from including these critical essays.

Part III is capped off by two discussions on the festival of the Black Nazarene. In Chapter 21, Mark Calano explores the relationship between locality, the body, and the performance of devotion within the broader context of the class divide in Metro Manila. Meanwhile, in Chapter 22, Mark Tallara examines the impact of COVID-19 and the place of technology in religious experience. Tallara analyzes the role of technology by considering the interplay of space, knowledge, and power. What stands out about both these essays is their emphasis on the performativity of religious devotion – an often neglected topic in the philosophy of religion, but one that permeates popular religion.

All the works in Part III are characterized by their focus on popular religion, as opposed to philosophical religion. Earlier in this review, I mentioned that this is one of the reasons the essays in this book truly shine. Most mainstream philosophies of religion do not deal with popular religion, even though popular religion is more relevant to the world at large. If philosophy as a discipline is to step down from its ivory tower, popular religion ought to be considered more seriously. The study of popular religion may also aid the social dimension of philosophy previously mentioned.

Part IV: Religious Diversity

Finally, Part IV contains five essays centered on religious diversity. Although, it seems that only two of the five essays actually discuss the topic of religious diversity. Moreover, not all essays in Part IV discuss assimilated religions either. Most take on a more general scope. However, the quality of work in Part IV definitely makes up for the seemingly miscellaneous categorization.

In Chapter 23, Jerd Bandasak discusses religion's place in an era dominated by digital technology. He argues that despite the constant advancement of technology, religious belief still has an important and central place in our lives. Bandasak's discussion is compelling, but perhaps better situated in Part III. Furthermore, the essay does not refer to any particular religion. Still, the paper's conclusions are well received, and the discussion is relevant to daily life, which is certainly a direction in which the philosophy of religion ought to head. Thus, the essay still contributes well to the overall goals of the book.

Chapters 24 and 25 contain the two essays which explicitly discuss religious diversity. Both essays present viable frameworks that address the challenges presented by religious diversity in a healthy, peaceful, and respectful manner. Jove Aguas' sharp and insightful discussion in Chapter 24 stands out as one of the best in the entire collection, for both its quality and its exemplification of the book's aims. By

contextualizing the conversation on religious diversity within Asia, Aguas accomplishes several things. First, he highlights the Southeast Asian perspective that the collection seeks to advance, including the perspectives of assimilated religions. Second, he allows the work to take on a tangible, social quality. The challenges presented by religious diversity are not merely theoretical musings, but real phenomena that people within the region must deal with in an increasingly globalized world. Third, he advocates for a better world by pursuing a solution that encourages exactly the kind of approach that the Global Philosophies of Religion project aims to implement. Simply put, Aguas' essay ticks all the right boxes. Natika Krongyoot's analysis in Chapter 25 is no less stellar, albeit more generalized. Krongyoot argues her points very well, coming to a reasonable conclusion that is easily adopted by any well-intentioned religious person who seeks a more harmonious community.

Part IV, and the collection in general, closes with two feminist essays. In Chapter 26, Rosallia Domingo uses the works of Philippine National Hero Jose Rizal to reimagine the role of the Virgin Mary for Filipino women during Spanish colonial times. Her feminist reimagining seeks to empower women. Meanwhile, Joseph Jose attempts a more nuanced understanding of *dharma* as a gendered concept in Chapter 27. He does this by making use of Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care to give *Sita* from the *Ramayana* a different moral voice, contrasting her approach to *dharma* with that of her husband, *Rama*. Both these essays do well in broadening the approaches used in the philosophy of religion.

Conclusion

Philosophies of Appropriated Religions: Perspectives from Southeast Asia is a high-quality and ambitious collection of essays that will likely inspire much discussion within the philosophy of religion. Moreover, it opens up new questions about the phenomenon of religious assimilation, which could become the source of fascinating new debates in the field. Divided into four parts; the first tackles traditional problems in the philosophy of religion. The second discusses religious identity. The third examines religious beliefs and practices, while the fourth centers on religious diversity. The collection's goal is to bring Southeast Asian perspectives into mainstream philosophy of religion. By and large, *Philosophies of Appropriated Religions* is successful in its endeavor. Still, some questions may be raised. For instance, the use of the term appropriation may introduce unwanted negative connotations. Moreover, a number of works in the collection do not explicitly deal with assimilated religions from Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the emphasis seems to be mainly on Christianity and Buddhism, which feature in around seventy-one percent of the essays. However, the excellent *quality* of the works included more than made up for these issues. Each and every essay in this collection is worth reading, and *Philosophies of Appropriated Religions* represents an excellent springboard for more fruitful and dynamic discussions within the philosophy of religion.

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