Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, editors, *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics 43, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009. xvii+323 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-036-2; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-037-9

A number of distinguished Cambodia scholars met in a conference at Varberg, Sweden in October 2005. They included the historians Alain Forest, David Chandler and Penny Edwards, the religious specialist Anne Hansen, and the anthropologists Judy Ledgerwood, Eve Zucker, John Marston and Alexandra Kent. The Venerable Khy Sovanratana of the Sangha Council of Cambodia spoke at the gathering, along with Heng Monychena of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Buddhism for Development and the Cambodian academic and education specialist Heng Sreang. The participants' concerns included, as Kent and Chandler state in their introduction to this volume of essays that grew out of the conference, questions of 'how community may be repaired after violent conflict, how religion and politics are interwoven and how moral order and historical change impact upon one another' (p. 1). Given the melancholy fact that so many other countries today are victims of war, instability and violence, these questions have broader, global significance.

How much changed irrevocably in Cambodia as a result of the violence and upheaval of the Pol Pot years between 1975 and 1979? As Judy Ledgerwood argues in her essay in this volume, 'If you ask a rural Khmer about Buddhism today you are likely to get the reply that Buddhism is much the same as it was before war and revolution devastated their country. What is different today, they will say, is the morality of the people, their inability to live according to the tenets of Buddhism' (p. 147). This view fits with the cyclical view of history of past Khmer society as alternating light and dark, of periods of prosperity and harmony interrupted by periods of destruction. Thus, for example, Cambodia slipped into a dark age in the late 1770s from which it did not emerge until after the coronation of Ang Duong in 1848. Eve Zucker's contribution draws attention to a 19th century Khmer poem analyzed in David Chandler's 'Songs at the Edge of the Forest' which deals with the problems of the 'rescuing of civilization from the clutches of chaos, the restoration of moral order, and the attempt to smooth over the rupture with that order's past' (p. 195). Whether such earlier upheavals were on the scale of the cataclysm that hit Cambodia in the 1970s is a moot point, but the Buddhist religion was able to act as a cement for moral order and reconstruction, and provide an ethical compass for the people's lives in times of turmoil. Today, as this volume suggests, the institutions of Buddhism themselves have been dented; the *sangha* 'has yet to recover both morally and intellectually after the years of repression' (p. 11), and many village elders have lost either their authority or their virtue (pp. 195–212).

As the contributors note, the period of 'Democratic Kampuchea' has been closely scrutinized by scholars. The 'killing fields' are the subject of countless books and documentary films. In 1970, the country was sucked into the Viet Nam War and subjected to destructive forces much deadlier than the Thai and Vietnamese armies which had ravaged the land in preceding centuries. The civil war that broke out after the National Assembly deposed Prince Sihanouk was fought with pitiless savagery on all sides. Between the coup and early 1973, the United States dropped almost 540,000 tons of bombs on the countryside with catastrophic effects. If the war-weary Cambodian people thought the victory of the Khmers Rouges in April 1975 would bring peace and national reconciliation, their hopes were dashed as Pol Pot's shadowy *Angkar* turned the country into one huge prison farm. The removal of the Pol Pot regime by the Vietnamese with the invasion of Christmas Day 1978 was a liberation from a regime perhaps best described as a 'thanatocracy'. Yet the incoming People's Republic of Kampuchea found that the destruction of the Pol Pot regime did not automatically lend it legitimacy in the eyes of the Cambodian people; indeed the discredited Khmers Rouges were able to capitalize on the government's ties with Viet Nam in order to give themselves some legitimacy. Sadly, too, in what amounted to a tragic coda to the Cold War, many Western and ASEAN nations refused to recognize the new regime, subjected Cambodia to a diplomatic, aid and trade embargo, and even helped resuscitate the Khmers Rouges.

Cambodia thus emerged from the chaos of the 1970s and 1980s as a shattered society. That is the point of departure of this intriguing book. How, ask the authors, can such a traumatized society heal itself? How can it come to terms with and cope with such a bloody interlude? Moreover, life for most Cambodians today remains harsh, even as the threat of war recedes into the past. Most Khmers are powerless before new forces that threaten to turn their world upside down, buffeted between the waves of modernity and tradition, seeking a solid bottom on which to place their feet. Market liberalism and globalization might promise to be 'a rising tide that lifts all boats' towards prosperity, but most Cambodians remain poor in what remains one of the world's poorest countries, and such materialist dogmas cannot provide a moral bedrock for a society. The poor are also the victims of widespread corruption and abuse of power, social evils which are both the product and the cause of a widespread moral vacuum. With secular remedies discredited, many Khmers look to religion as the only force capable of regenerating their society. However, there is a problem here. As Kent and Chandler put it, the Buddhist *sangha* 'has yet to recover both morally and intellectually from years of repression' (p.11).

Yet the tenor of this book is cautiously optimistic. As Heng Sreang points out, modernist monks now play an active part in reformist politics: a role that has

often brought them into sharp conflict with the government as most notably in 1998 when monks were assaulted, fired on and shocked with electric batons for their part in peaceful demonstrations. Such actions have also brought them into conflict with the Cambodian Buddhist Supreme Patriarch. Mindful of the past political role of the *sangha*, Heng Sreang reminds us of the actions of Hem Chieu and other leading monks who triggered the country's movement for national independence from the French back in 1942. In 2006, too, 50 monks joined a 50-kilometre march for freedom of expression and non-violence which was organized by the Alliance for Freedom of Expression in Cambodia, a coalition of 28 NGOs. As Heng argues, 'the *sangha* is inevitably drawn into the Cambodian political arena'. While there is a danger of politicians attempting to co-opt them for their own sometimes questionable ends, monks 'could be a constructive force for the improvement and reconstruction of the social well-being and political life of the country' (pp. 249, 251). As Khy Sovanratana notes, however, that would require improvements in the religious and secular education of monks so that they would be better able to advise and guide.

While the effects of the bloody and disruptive past still weigh heavily, as Christine Nissen argues in the concluding essay, 'it may be inappropriate to speak of a moral breakdown' in Cambodian society (p. 287). The ubiquitous corruption in Cambodian public life is not socially accepted by the majority of Cambodians. In the past, as Alain Forest puts it: 'It is no exaggeration to say that Khmer Buddhism has survived because of popular consent and popular initiatives (and the strong interdependence between the faithful and the monks)…' As a result, he continues, 'Buddhism was the only real, ensuring, unifying factor in this divided and desolate country' (p. 24). Religion is still deeply rooted in Cambodian culture and Buddhism, as Alex Hinton notes, has 'provided a way of coping with the past through meditation and concepts of forgiveness and letting go of anger' (p. 76). Thus, there are grounds to hope that the old Cambodian adage will continue to hold true: (loosely translated) 'the country of the Khmers will never die'.

John Tully