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The Making of Buddhist Modernism

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A Review of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*

John L. Murphy¹

The Making of Buddhist Modernism. By David L. McMahan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 320 pages, ISBN: 978-0195183276 (cloth), US \$29.95.

Meditation, compassion, tolerance; spirituality, freedom, rationality: why do these nouns characterize modern Buddhism? Why not temple worship, ancestral cult, or ritual propitiation? How do the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, or Chögyam Trungpa incorporate “strategic occidentalism” into open-minded versions of Buddhism compatible with scientific rationalism, feminism, democracy, ethics, agnosticism, and liberal Christianity? How do Tibetan, Zen, and *vipassana* “insight” schools of practice adapt for Westernizing markets, whether in Asia, America, or Europe? McMahan mixes theory with examples to explain how both West and East interpret dharma for modern audiences—schooled in abstract thought, raised with consumer capitalism, and participants in globalizing media.

Using Donald S. Lopez’s definition of a modern form that “stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual above the community” (8), McMahan begins his study. He shows how “non-negotiable cultural assumptions” based on the superiority of equal opportunity, non-discrimination, women’s rights, and democratic access underlie a sympathizer or adherent’s reception. Charles Taylor’s three discourses of modernity apply: scientific rationalism, liberal Jewish and Christian monotheism, and romantic ex-

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pressivism combine to differentiate modern processes of accepting Buddhism from traditional cultures rooted in Asian accretions that, since Victorian times, have been critiqued by reforming progressives as interfering with a purer, primitive, or truer dharma-teaching. By demythologizing, de-traditionalizing, and psychologizing, the twentieth century continued the efforts of Romantics and rationalists to prove that not only might Buddhism be compatible with post-Enlightenment thought, but it could better Christian or scientific models.

By transmutation, modernizing occurs through psychoanalytic concepts filtering Buddhism through Westernized lenses. Chapter two, “The Spectrum of Tradition and Modernism,” takes the case study of the “Shukden affair” to show how tensions brought in—via psychological definitions—to the Tibetan controversy have been heightened as the “self-understanding” of those involved has been transformed by this modern version of dharma. The earlier “science of mind” description of Tibetan Buddhism exported early last century from Thomas W. and Caroline Rhys Davids’s Pali textual efforts now expands into a Western-influenced analogy of the Tibetans’ own “internalizing” of deities. Monotheistic and/or rational readers came to expect a Buddhism less populated by idols. The magic that once served so potently to spread the first coming of the dharma into medieval Tibet, and which sold that homeland’s allure to the West through Alexandra David-Neel, now becomes downplayed.

Not abandoned, however, for sorcery sidles into the psyche of its Tibetan practitioners, in this Westernized scenario. For those arguing not if but how Shukden should be propitiated, the existence of a wrathful deity is not a projection but a reality. While McMahan opines regarding the fatal consequences of the “Shukden affair” for three men that “people are seldom murdered over psychological archetypes” (55), I was reminded of Voltaire’s *aperçu*: “Those who can make you believe absurdi-

ties can make you commit atrocities.” McMahan in his text never takes on the verification of Shukden, unsurprisingly, but he does alert readers, as in the Nechung Oracle, to encounters often obscured by mass media. Pico Iyer’s recent work, *The Open Road*, discusses this awkward public relations situation for the Dalai Lama at more length.

Unlike Iyer’s narrative, this study remains largely theoretical. Not intended for a general audience, it cites Rudolph Bultmann, René Descartes, and—on the same page—Freidrichs Schelling and Schiller and Schleiermacher. Many topics are treated in sub-sections rapidly but efficiently; endnotes remain relatively few but the bibliography and index assist researchers. A few minor typographical errors mar the presentation, but it will prove a necessary purchase for libraries and scholars.

Scholarship enters most doggedly into the middle chapters. Taylor’s discourses of modernity bring Buddhism into a complicated relationship with rationalism, Christianity, and Romanticism. Countering, since the 1870s, the charges that it represents a decayed tradition, Buddhists have rallied to compete against Western liberalism as well as cohabit with its individualism, freedom of choice, and market-driven goals. This revision can get complicated, for the preference to trust inner experience, stressed by many exponents today, finds little support in early Buddhist texts’ warning not to be deluded by one’s interior illuminations. Romanticism, as McMahan explores at length, and then psychology, strive to create a compatible discourse within which modern Buddhism can appeal to interiorized realms open to the Western or Westernized seeker disenchanted by empirical, capitalist, and destructive modernity.

Chapter four extends the scientific dialogue with modernizing Buddhism. The Victorian crisis of faith entered Asian cultures, demoralized over their loss of prestige against Christian and colonizing forces. Edward Said’s “orientalism” and Homi Bhabha’s “hybridity,” beloved by

critics, here blur into concepts less applicable to East-West relations regarding a Buddhism that in Japan and Tibet had separated itself long and largely from European conquest, McMahan notes. “The discourse of scientific Buddhism” drew from Darwin, European philosophy, and rational inquiry, but it also—as with Sri Lankan nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala’s bitter tirades against monotheistic importers and imperialistic exploiters—could be forged into a rhetorical weapon with which to prove the superiority of a purified, reformed dharma-teaching cleansed of idolatry, superstition, and repetition.

Such spirited reformation contradicts the one-way export erroneously assumed by facile inquiry. Paul Carus’s *Gospel* and Henry Steele Olcott’s *Catechism* trained teachers and students in Asia; Dharmapala suspected Olcott of insufficient fidelity to the dharma while Carus urged a synthesis of Christianity and Buddhism into a Religion of Science. These late Victorian trajectories intersected and they also clashed.

Chapter five elaborates Romanticism within theories of art, spontaneity, and the “wellsprings of nature”; the New Age overlaps and neopagan sympathies flow in and out of a section that could have benefited from deeper attention to such cross-currents. All the same, McMahan excels in his inclusion of Western Buddhist theorists Anagarika Govinda and Sangharakshita. These two men reveal their own cultural assumptions when they argue for uses of art that edge closer to European Romanticism than, say, the Tibetan demotion of individual spontaneity or innovation by its *thangka* painters. The Beats and D. T. Suzuki helped impress the pattern of a Buddhism that is flexible, playful, or austere upon the Western counterculture and intelligentsia; how faithful these descriptions are to the original context, on the other hand, appears rather attenuated and distant from their sources. Limitations of Western models wedged back into Asian frameworks support McMahan’s corrective perspective.

Yet, by such intercultural exposures, Westerners can better comprehend Buddhist concepts; these interpretations after all will be inevitable in any aesthetic or philosophical dialogue that relies on translation and analogy for persuasion and perpetuation of its once-esoteric precepts. In the sixth chapter, interdependence dominates the discussion. This ethically applicable concept appears ubiquitous for modern audiences, even when in earlier Pali or South Asian Mahayana texts, McMahan shows, dependent origination is not discussed as “an assertion of the ontological unity with others or with the cosmos” (177). Still, McMahan encourages “the contemporary articulation of interdependence” as responsive to a globalized, capitalist, and ecologically sensitive situation that has no precedent in formative Buddhism. Historians of religion, he posits, must remember that nothing stands still—a wise reminder to scholars tempted to castigate practices as “inauthentic” or non-canonical. And, for a teaching grounded in impermanence, perhaps a *sine qua non*? “Tradition-in-change,” he asserts, “establishes what Buddhism is empirically” (179).

“Meditation and Modernity” enlivens chapter seven’s presentation with what today may be the most recognizable attribute of the dharma, if one increasingly separated from Buddhism itself. The privatization and de-traditionalization (awkward terms, but those McMahan employs) follow the “subjective turn” along Romantic routes. Despite the persistence of the Eastern “Other” as more “spiritual, subjective, and intuitive,” vs. the Western “materialistic, rational, and extraverted” contender, there persists in the Western reception of Buddhism a strong Romantic tension. Fierce individualism alongside “cosmic unity” in New Age movements and neo-pagan communities infiltrates Buddhist modernism.

Cited by McMahan, Ernest Troeltsch in the 1930s called such a belief “the secret religion of the educated classes” (189). More context to

align such Buddhism with “spiritualities of life” might have been welcome here, as these tendencies strongly color how Buddhism is marketed and perceived among many less familiar with the scholarly precision exerted by McMahan and historians of religion. Trungpa’s impact, for example, with “Shambhala Training” upon the institutional regimen and academic acceptance of Western Buddhism by one who left Tibet to study at Oxford before entering the Aquarian Age appears barely considered as a test of modernization upon one of the West’s most prominent figures of its formation.

Emile Durkheim’s construction of one’s “private, optional religion” earns a glance, alongside Troeltsch’s “religious romanticism.” These concepts guided how esoteric teachings widened into mass-marketed signifiers of modernity, freedom, and revolt against convention. McMahan nods to a telling insight worthy of much elaboration: Jewish and Christian converts to Buddhism, he suggests, might especially promote the liberating aspects of meditation within Western methods of its transmission. Another such remark deserving of development, here made in passing, comes when McMahan cites Thomas Tweed’s acknowledgment of the pre-1960s reliance upon textual inculcation rather than personal instruction for those few Westerners eager to learn dharma.

The countercultural move from books to gurus, reading to chanting, exotic travelogues to meditation centers has a parallel shift into another venue previously not entered by dharma transmitters. A few within the post-1960s scientific establishment wished to chart the efficacy of a spiritual discipline that might finally be verified by laboratory experiments. This dialogue with science, McMahan hesitates, may raise more questions. “Is the evocative image of robed meditators in lotus position hooked up to their individual biofeedback machines one of seamless confluence between science and meditation, the rehumanization of science, or contrariwise, the mechanization of meditation and the ac-

quiescing of Buddhism to the very scientific materialism it has hoped to transform?” (210)

The eighth chapter moves into literary predecessors of Buddhist modernism that helped popularize among an educated readership the concepts of mindfulness and the “affirmation of ordinary life.” Earlier, McMahan glanced at the “epiphany” and alludes to its social-political contexts intriguingly; later, he extends the modernist “pre-understanding for the way Buddhist mindfulness is understood today” (225). In passing, I call attention to the uncited Paul Foster’s *Beckett & Zen* (1989) as one such compatible study. This may remain an elusive project to pinpoint, but the reception of Joyce, Woolf, or Proust among the types of students with a liberal arts education who then may be most open to Buddhist equivalents for the states attained by such authors does show a novel, no pun intended, application of the concepts previously defined.

In conclusion, McMahan displays the dharma’s current phenomena. Postmodern inevitably follows modern Buddhism. Another work worthy of comparison to this final section goes unmentioned by McMahan: *The Monk and the Philosopher* (1996) by Jean-François Revel and Matthieu Ricard, discusses the clash and coupling of many Tibetan and Western political, artistic, scientific, and philosophical contexts that might have deserved consideration by McMahan. Future trends he briefly includes: a backlash returning to tradition; “free-form spirituality” divorced from Buddhism, as has been attempted increasingly with Zen; privatization and commodification; social engagement; engaged ethics; ecology; feminism; and New Age appropriation.

Case studies pass rapidly, but “The Mystical Arts of Tibet” tour by monks shows, in its program analyzed, how “global folk Buddhism” can be “translated into the language of Buddhist modernism” precisely and provocatively (257). Among the cosmopolitan elite, the dharma uses global English as it adapts to the local vernacular. The impact of commo-

dified, popular, and packaged Buddhism within consumer-driven, mass-market culture, conveyed by media and commerce earns passing comment. This fascinating topic may well generate in-depth follow-up.

Again, it may be a sign of the book's success that I wanted to find out far more about these quickly reviewed topics. I sense the compression exerted by a publisher upon the length of this work tilted the work more to satisfy the historian of religion than the general reader, who might welcome a longer tour of the popular culture contexts. Yet, this book is more about the making than the merchandising of what has become marketed and manifested as modern Buddhism. Among its passing attractions further research will emerge, into the impermanent, ever-changing parade of the dharma's production, importation, and reception across the world.