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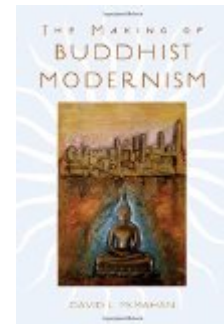
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David L. McMahan. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 299 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-518327-6.

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Buddhism Meets Modernity

In his *Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David L. McMahan presents a sophisticated narrative for the emergence of “Buddhist Modernism,” a term borrowed from Heinz Bechert.[1] Drawing on an impressive set of sources, McMahan skillfully convinces his readers that Buddhist modernism is a distinct development in Buddhist history, and that much of what is understood simply as Buddhism is in fact a result of developments of the last two centuries. While Buddhism in the modern period has been in the center of scholarly attention in the recent decade, McMahan’s book is praiseworthy and unique in its undertaking to theorize the field of Buddhist modernism from a macro rather than a micro perspective. It is obvious that any attempt to map such a diversified phenomenon as Buddhist modernism is risky and bound to leave some aspects un- or under-treated. However, not only is McMahan aware of these potential pitfalls (e.g., pp. 6, 14, 20-22), but he also gives a well-balanced narrative with rich examples that he weaves into a coherent and approachable account.

The book is divided into four parts, starting with introductory chapters, which introduce the readers to the scope of Buddhist modernism, its main contours, most salient dynamics, and major figures and their historical and cultural background. McMahan then moves to a discussion of key issues, such as the discourse of scientific Buddhism, Buddhist romanticism, and the appropriation of the doctrine of interdependence to modern needs. Next he treats the arguably most salient feature of Buddhist modernism, the meditation movement. Finally,

McMahan concludes the book with a discussion on the possible future shape of what he calls “postmodern Buddhism.”

In his introductory chapters (chapters 1 to 3), McMahan outlines the makeup of Buddhist modernism, its scope, and main players. McMahan defines Buddhist modernism not as “all Buddhism that happens to exist in the modern era but, rather, forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity” (p. 6). To define these forces, McMahan relies on Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (1989) in order to find “some vessels in which the philosophical, religious and social facets of [modernity’s] maelstrom can be contained” (p. 10). These vessels of modernity, on which he deliberates with greater details in subsequent chapters, are Western monotheism, rationalism and scientific naturalism, and romantic expressivism. The result is “Buddhist modernism,” a global Buddhist phenomenon that, among others, focuses on meditation, social engagement, internalization, and emphasis of equality and universality while deemphasizing ritual, mythology, and hierarchy.

McMahan samples different Buddhist traditions from the East and the West in his investigation of Buddhist modernism, but his departure point and major prism is North American Buddhism. There are several reasons for this choice. First, “English has become the lingua franca of Buddhist Modernism” (p. 21). Second, many of the most influential Buddhist teachers are working in North

America. Third, McMahan argues that America serves as a laboratory for adaptations and innovations and for a reconception of “Buddhism in modern terms” (p. 22). This does not mean that McMahan intends his book to be a study of American Buddhism, but rather to indicate that his examination of this global phenomenon is done “from a particular shore” (p. 22).

McMahan identifies three characteristics that separate traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism: De-traditionalization (a shift from the external transcendent to the internal self), demythologization (a term borrowed from Bechert), and psychologization. McMahan shows that the dialogue between tradition and modernity is always multidimensional and the adaptation to modernity is done through a complex process of “decontextualization and recontextualization,” in which Buddhist traditions are conceived through new “networks of meaning, value and power” (p. 62). Chapters 4 to 6 elaborate on key themes in the emergence of Buddhist modernism and the way they are constructed through the interchange between traditions and the “vessels” of modern discourse, especially those of scientific rationalism and romantic expressivism. In both cases, McMahan shows how Buddhists both accepted and, at the same time, challenged the characteristics of modernity and emphasized what sets Buddhism apart.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the discourse of scientific Buddhism, a timely topic, and one of the modern frameworks through which modern Buddhism was configured.[2] McMahan identifies two “different but overlapping agendas, spurred by two crises of legitimacy in disparate cultural context” (p. 90). He examines the first one, colonialism, through the career of Anagarika Dharmapala. The second is the “Victorian crisis of faith,” examined through the careers of Henry Steel Olcott and Paul Carus. McMahan shows how the discourse of science was used by Dharmapala as a rhetorical device against the colonial political and cultural aspirations and against Christian proselytization in his native Sri Lanka. Olcott’s and Carus’s careers are set as examples, among others, of the universalist trend of modern Euro-American thinkers, who sought an underlying unity to the variety of world religions. These two crises are interlinked as Olcott and Dharmapala cooperated despite their later fallout due to differences in motives and approaches.

In chapter 5, McMahan presents an excellent study of the close ties between Buddhist modernism and romanticism. It is difficult for the reader to get a clear sense of the

complexity of the romantic movement from this chapter. Nevertheless, McMahan’s attention to such themes as the role of art, creativity, the spiritual meaning of “nature,” and spontaneity demonstrates how Buddhism and romantic ideas were linked. This linkage was epitomized during the 50s, 60s, and 70s counterculture movement in Europe and America and their selective adoption of Buddhism. These “hybridic” characteristics (a term he borrows from Homi Bhabha [p. 20]) were synthesized into such products as Americanized Zen, especially by D. T. Suzuki (other Buddhists he explores are Sangharakshita and Anagarika Govinda), and enabled Zen to become a cultural influence beyond the boundaries of Buddhism. McMahan demonstrates that a connection between Suzuki and the romantic movement is very plausible, but I was hoping to see more evidence that his ideas were indeed influenced by and did not merely echo the works of the romantics. After all, the role of nature, spontaneity, and the spiritual meaning of art have been a part of the East Asian cultural heritage as well. Still, this “hybrid” of Zen spiritualism and romanticism had a clear and everlasting impact on Western culture and Buddhist modernism. Finally, McMahan dwells on the contemporary significance and legacy of “Romantic Buddhism,” among new (age) spiritualities, environmentalists (e.g., Gary Snyder, a beat generation writer and a follower of Suzuki and Zen), and popular entertainment. The Buddhist-romantic hybrid continues to inspire a generation of contemporary artists (a list of which can be found on page 144).

In chapter 6, we see how romantic and rationalist strands within Buddhism contributed to a particular development in the influential doctrine of “interdependence” (Skt *pratītyasamutpāda* and Pali *paṭipatticasamuppāda*). McMahan shows that in what he calls an “age of *inter*” the Buddhist concept of interdependence is timely and alluring. McMahan is right to point out that the Buddhist concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* is better translated as “Dependent Co-arising” and that even within the Buddhist tradition this term came to be understood in complex and varied ways. Moreover, in the Pali sources dependent co-arising, or interdependence, was one of the causes of suffering and not the solution at the end of the path of realization. “Indeed it is through *reversal* of this chain of interdependent causation—not the identification with it—that the Buddha is said to have become awakened” (p. 154). Still, this term came to be understood today as an underlying connection between all sentient beings in a web of dependent relationships. This connection became

for many prominent contemporary Buddhists the *sine qua non* of the tradition. As McMahan correctly points out, this world-affirming perspective is rooted more in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts and such thinkers as Nagārjuna and among Huáyán philosophers. Indeed, it was in the Huáyán school that *pratītyasamutpāda* “has become the standard symbol for interdependence in its contemporary sense” (p. 158). This is precisely why a little more extensive treatment of Huáyán would have helped to see the evolution of the concept from the *suttas* stage to its contemporary usage.

McMahan also mentions the slippery slope of concluding that Buddhist modernist’s interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda* as interdependence is “inauthentic” and wrong. To do this is to lead to an interpretation of Buddhist texts and tradition as having “a static, essentialized meaning” (p. 179). He advises historians of religion to remember that texts and traditions are never static entities but rather are always part of a dynamic process that adapts itself to the social, cultural, religious, and political needs of a particular time and place. While McMahan presents this argument in the context of interdependence, it is clear that this advice extends to the rest of the book as well.

In chapters 7 and 8, McMahan dwells on the meditation movement. In the seventh chapter, McMahan provides the cultural and philosophical context behind this “subjective turn” (a term he borrows from Taylor) and applies other, previously discussed, theoretical concepts to describe one of Buddhism’s most salient features in the West. It is in this chapter that we see the convergence of Western romantic and rationalist views alongside Asian teachers’ hybrid usage of meditation to adapt Buddhism to the age of Western dominance in Asia. This sort of trend, which has been gaining momentum in recent years, is exemplified by such things as an invitation to participate in a Jewish *Vipassanā* meditation retreat, which I personally came across a few years back. McMahan sees it as a part of the disassociation of meditation from the “wider ethical, social and cosmological context of Buddhism.” McMahan aptly concludes, “paradoxically, while meditation is often considered the heart of Buddhism, it is also deemed the element most detachable from the tradition itself” (p. 185). This disassociation could not have happened without the processes he repeatedly highlights throughout the book (such as privatization, deinstitutionalization, and detraditionalization).

In chapter 8, McMahan narrows his discussion of meditation into the so-called mindfulness practices and

shows how these emerged from a “world-affirming” modernist view. McMahan relies on a wealth of evidence from Western literature to detail how this world-affirming mentality is deeply rooted in the Western mindset. By reviewing the romantic notion of epiphany, (introduced on pages 121-122), he is able to draw attention to parallels between observations of everyday life and self-reflexivity in the writings of Ian McEwan as well as in Virginia Woolf and in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) that have shared characteristics with mindfulness practice. McMahan’s discussion of Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* (1922) is an important part of this chapter, as the novel provided formative ideas to many Westerners regarding Buddhism. McMahan shows again that even a book that flirts with Buddhism (the protagonist name is identical to that of the Buddha) is closer to the spirit of romanticism than it is to Indian Buddhism.

In his final chapter, McMahan turns his examination toward the future, to the emergence of what he calls, rather amorphously, “postmodern” Buddhism. It is in this chapter that I found that McMahan’s main analytical notion of “Buddhist Modernism” is losing its “global” perspective. Throughout the book he convincingly shows how Buddhist modernism is not merely Western Buddhism, but in this chapter the boundaries between the two terms are much less clear. The majority of the examples he gives and discusses in this chapter concern the West. In light of this fact one wonders whether it is possible for democratization, feminization, or post-traditionalism to take hold in other parts of the Buddhist world. Moreover, the tensions that McMahan outlines, such as those between privatized and socially engaged Buddhists or detraditionalized and retraditionalized Buddhism, also makes one wonder whether Buddhist modernism is still adequate as a coherent category. In addition, I also hoped to read more about the way Buddhism can “challenge, critique, augment and offer alternatives” to the modern West (p. 260). This project deserves serious treatment, as for example in Richard Medsen’s *Democracy’s Dharma* (2007).

It is clear that McMahan is writing for both scholars and students. In reaching out to both audiences, some sections read too much like a textbook whereas others have the sort of details that beginning students may find overwhelming. However, overall, McMahan has done an excellent job in navigating such a terrain. I can testify that many of my students, especially those with little background in Buddhism, found the book very useful and illuminating.

The amount of background research and the wide range of examples from different Buddhist traditions are impressive. The breadth of writings from leading Buddhist modernists in the East and the West, and the philosophical, literary, and theoretical background this book provides make it a rich source of material that should be a part of the library of any serious scholar of Buddhism in the modern period, as well as for the delight of the growing body of Buddhist enthusiasts, who find “Buddhism” interesting (when, in fact, what they often really enjoy is exactly what McMahan calls “Buddhist Modernism”).

Notes

[1]. See Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus*, vol.

1 (Berlin: Alfred Metzner, 1966), vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1967), and vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1973). See also Heinz Bechert, “Buddhist Revival in East and West,” in *The World of Buddhism*, ed. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 273-285.

[2]. See, for example, Allan Wallace, *Buddhism and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); David McMahan, “Modernity and the Discourse of Scientific Buddhism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004): 897-933; and Donald Lopez, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). McMahan provides a fuller list on page 90.

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