David McMahan’s *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* is a study of the “specific modern western literature, concepts, ideologies, and practices that have intermingled with Buddhism to fashion a uniquely modernist form” of the religion (8). McMahan endorses his work as a corrective to Edward Said’s conception of orientalism in that he addresses the role of Asian Buddhists and refuses to dismiss “the many modernist scholarly and popular constructions of Buddhism” as mere scholarly fabrications (20-1). Instead, McMahan pieces together the intellectual genealogy of “new ways of being Buddhist practiced by living, breathing people around the globe” (21).

Each chapter of McMahan’s study focuses on how some aspect of Buddhist doctrine or practice “has come to be situated within the discourses and practices of modernity” (211). The “ideologies and social practices of the modern West” have the comprehensive effect of running Buddhism through the wringers of detraditionalization, demythologization, and psychologization (chapter two, *passim*). McMahan details the creative interaction of Buddhist thought (for example, chapter six on ‘dependent origination’) and practice (chapter seven on Buddhist meditation) with his own (rather broad) conceptions of the social and discursive formulations of modernity, including scientific rationalism, Protestant Christianity, and Romanticism. McMahan invokes Bhabha’s notion of hybridity to argue that the articulation of Buddhism modernism is not just a matter of cross-cultural translation; instead, “it involves a reconfiguration of both tradition and context through contestation and negotiation as much as enthusiastic embrace” (19). For McMahan, Buddhist modernism is not simply a new pattern embossed on the cloth of the modern West; rather, the very fabric of the West has been re-woven to some extent by the interaction.

Although in many respects transformative for the modern West, the making of Buddhist modernism has not been entirely fortuitous. McMahan problematizes each of
the discursive and praxiological developments in turn, indicating what is potentially of value and what factors might tend to undermine the viability and integrity of Buddhism as a religious tradition and interlocutor with the modern West. In his examination of “Meditation and Modernity” (chapter seven) for example, McMahan wonders whether the “detraditionalization” of Buddhist meditative practice makes it simply “one among other tools of psychology and self-exploration,” thereby compromising its value as a corrective to Western ideas of selfhood and subjectivity and rendering it yet another commodity “in the postmodern marketplace of ideas and practices” (211).

The modernity in McMahan’s study is singularly Euro-American; the lack of attention to truly indigenous forms of Buddhist modernism is conspicuous. “Indigenous” or “multiple modernities,” which “selectively incorporated distinctively modern western discourses into indigenous discourse to form a unique hybrid that refused full [western] assimilation,” are only evidenced in the late nineteenth century (112-3). There is little that touches on truly formative periods in the ‘making’ of Buddhist modernism in Asia. To cite just one example, long before Anagarika Dharmapala advocated a rationalized version of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, a Siamese Prince-monk — who would later become King Mongkut in 1851 — was navigating Theravada Buddhism along a modernist course in Siam (Thailand). Perhaps equally important though for a true examination of the ‘making’ of Buddhism modernism in Asian historical contexts is a consideration of earlier instances of monastic reform (dating roughly to the second half of the eighteenth century), which seem to have occurred irrespective of modern western (colonial) influences, and which in many ways anticipate central aspects of Buddhist modernism.1

As a corrective to Said’s Orientalism, McMahan’s work falls short. The Asian actors in his study are primarily figures such as D.T. Suzuki, Buddhist apologists whose historical significance lies precisely in their efforts at translating and popularizing

1 See, for example, the work of Anne M. Blackburn on Sri Lanka (Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001]) and Michael W. Charney on Burma (Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma’s Last Dynasty, 1752-1885 [Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2006]).
Buddhism for the West. In the penultimate chapter, McMahan acknowledges that his study is concerned with “the conditions under which Buddhism could be made sense of and transformed *in modern, western contexts*” (225, my emphasis). In its failure to engage with nascent articulations of Buddhist modernism in Asian historical contexts and its emphasis on the western discursive groundwork and the “often prereflective tendencies” of modern (Euro-American) consciousness that shaped modern Buddhism (15), McMahan’s work conforms to Said’s *Orientalism* more than he would like to admit.

In the end though, there is much to recommend McMahan’s book. It is an effective and accessible genealogy of modern Buddhism *in the West*. And while some of his terminology is less than graceful, the study is well written and relatively jargon-free. The subject matter and McMahan’s friendly, often anecdotal authorial voice are likely to appeal to Western Buddhist practitioners and undergraduates alike.

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