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THE DECONTEXTUALIZATION OF ASIAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICES
IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

In modernity this often takes the form of religious practices, and within Asian religions, those practices are typically meditation and yoga. This article will demonstrate how these decontextualized practices not only relate to the modern fascination with the self, but also colonial discourses. Through these lenses, I deconstruct the historical factors that allowed these colonial discourses to continue in reimagined forms today. This disembedding of religious leaders and practitioners has become fused with modern discourses such as science and psychology. In this way, Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are able to make the claim that they are indeed modern and universally appealing. In this article I will describe the effects of globalization and modernization upon religious practices, with a particular focus on Asian religions. Then I will argue that these disembedded practices, such as yoga and meditation, have the stamp of colonialism, refracted through the discourses of the modern self as seen through science and psychology.

Global religious practices present a challenge and an opportunity to religious communities and practitioners.¹ The rapid transference and constant migrations of people, images, ideas, and commodities has brought increased contact with alternative religious beliefs and practices. Religions and cultures encounter one another and are reinterpreted in the process. Often discourses of globalization evoke nostalgia for premodern identities, a search for 'authenticity,' and fear of the loss of tradition. Globalization also allows for a way of disseminating parts of religious traditions outside of traditional religious communities. These 'global religious practices' in turn create new meanings and dialogues. This term, global religious practices, I define as practices such as Buddhist meditation² and Hindu

¹ Part of this article is taken from my dissertation, Brooke Schedneck, "Constructing Religious Modernities: Hybridity, Reinterpretation, and Adaptation in Thailand's International Meditation Centers." (Arizona State University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2012).

² Buddhist meditation is a large term covering many methods and techniques throughout the Asian Buddhist world.

yoga,³ which can be enacted and adapted in a variety of contexts disembodied from their traditional religious discourses, settings, and communities.⁴ These practices can only proliferate within globalization as they have the possibility to enter a large number of cultures at a rate not previously imaginable. Paying attention to specific contexts in which religious practices are enacted and the historical trajectories that created possibilities of global movement offers a nuanced understanding of how religious traditions connect, attach, and intersect with other modern religious and secular discourses. Global religious practices illustrate that religions do not travel as whole entities but partial elements that resonate with different cultures and are appropriated over time. Practices that religious leaders promote as ‘universal,’ such as meditation and yoga, harken back to discourses of universal reason used during colonialism.

A key strategy in creating global religious practices is to decontextualize them from their religious contexts and worldviews. It has been a noted feature of Asian religions to create ‘universal’ and ‘decontextualized’ global practices.⁵ Yoga techniques and various kinds of meditation have become entangled in multiple fields that are related to the secular, religious, spiritual, health, and well-being. Through aligning with a proliferation of modern discourses, decontextualized religious practices create opportunities for global participation and make claims towards modernity. This decontextualization and subsequent process of recontextualization enters new discursive fields, creating new relationships and dialogues. These practices are disembodied from their framework and made anew, seemingly independent and able to be inserted into a diversity of traditional and modern settings. These processes demonstrate the particular ways that Asian religions, in dialogue with global discourses, reinterpret and translate themselves into non-Asian cultures.

One of the ways Asian religions are disseminated takes place through piecemeal, modernized versions that are often mistaken to be representative of the entire tradition. I am not interested in how ‘authentic’ or consistent these practices and innovations are but rather the dynamic nature of religion within globalization, the limits and opportunities, and the complex and contingent features of this interaction. Related characteristics of the global reimagining of Asian religions include offering non-threatening practices one can add to one’s religious or health repertoire for the purpose of increased well-being. In this way, the reconstruction of Asian religious practices appeals to individuals who value personal

³ Hindu yoga also is also a diverse set of practices that are both physical movements and mental disciplines of meditation.

⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Lincoln defines religion using four domains: discourses, practices, communities, and institutions. For my argument I assert that out of these domains, practices emerge as the most important for global movement.

⁵ Bruce Kapferer, Kari Telle & Annelin Eriksen, “Introduction: Religiosities toward a Future—in Pursuit of the New Millennium.” eds. Kapferer, Bruce, Kari Telle & Annelin Eriksen, 6, in *Contemporary Religiosities: Emergent Socialities and the Post-Nation State*, (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010) 1-16.

preference and choice as well as practices, which combat the malaise of modernity, offering meaning and a sense of purpose. First I describe three processes, which have led to the flourishing of Asian global religious practices including cultural flows, discourses of Orientalism, and the modern fascination with the self. In the second part of this paper, I illustrate the strategies through which Asian global religious practices are created through decontextualization and how these are recontextualized in new settings, focusing on science and psychology.

Flows of Asian Global Religious Practices

Cultural and global flows provide the context through which Asian religions globalize, are reinterpreted, and translated for new audiences. The idea of flows helps to capture the movement of discourses across time and space that have generated global religious practices. Appadurai defines globalization in terms of disjunctive flows of people, capital, technology, images, and ideologies.⁶ He focuses on disjunctures in order to stress the different streams along which cultural materials cross boundaries at the rapid rate of modernity. Global flows circulate and generate a proliferation and variety of modernities. Appadurai also applies ideas of flow and disjuncture to religion and culture.⁷ He emphasizes that religions are dynamic, moving across time and space and leaving traces and trails with significant effects.⁸ Therefore, when studying global religious practices, binaries such as local/global, national/universal are not useful as these practices do not neatly fit into these categories. Global religious practices are instead a dynamic set of processes that are constantly shifting and seeking out new connections.⁹ Studies of global religious practices need to take into account transnational human and cultural exchanges. This fluidity lends itself to the creation of diffuse religious practices and demonstrates the framework by which Asian religions enter into new cultural contexts.

Global religious practices can be traced by following the appeal of these practices as they enter new societies and unique adapted formations became popular. This appeal stems from particular forms of contemporary religion that are characteristic of globalization. These adaptations are driven by independent actors “who pick and choose elements from different cultures (modern and premodern) without regard to the constraints of regulating, official

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Appadurai specifically defines globalization as constituting “a complex overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models,” 32.

⁷ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 62.

⁹ Henrietta Moore, *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions*, (Cambridge, MA and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 3.

religious hierarchy.”¹⁰ These global religious practices create new forms of religiosity, and new centers of religious authority. These new centers interact with secular, religious, and modern discourses, and in turn affect traditional centers. Unique cultural and religious flows circulate throughout multiple centers and peripheries as global religious practices become mainstream in a variety of places and contexts. The emergence of global cultural flows is one of the ways global religious practices disseminate in reimagined formations along with other factors such as the reflexive turn to the self and increased demand for decontextualized religious practices. Without the possibility of these flows, Asian religious leaders and practitioners would not have the opportunity or necessity of fashioning themselves anew for different audiences.

The Modern Fascination with the Self

Globalization and cultural flows aided in the spread and resonance of Asian global religious practices. But modernity’s fascination with the self produced a reflexive inward turn, which generated a space for Asian religious practices to enter modern discourses. Religion in modernity is constituted by a plurality of belief systems and thus a variety of choice that to a large degree had not been present before. Even though religious choice in modernity is diverse, the underlying principle of a self-constructed religion is a unifying factor.¹¹ Religions of modernity are marked by their personal nature as religious worldviews are constructed out of individual preferences.¹² These self-constructed religiosities are created within particular socio-cultural contexts that illustrate the particular modes through which Asian religions enter into new discourses. They do so mainly on an individual level, appealing to those who wish to add singular components and practices without challenging or removing other aspects of their religiosity.

Openings for new religious practices to enter can be traced historically. In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor tracked the changes in Western societies from a reality where “belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹³ These self-constructed religiosities and myriad of religious possibilities is part of a process called individualization. Individualization is a process that allows one to construct one’s own biography and social group. This process marks a trend linked to modernity, which allows and compels individuals to choose how to live, what to believe, and how to practice those

¹⁰ David Lehmann, “Religion and Globalization,” eds. Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami & David Smith, 345, in *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 345-365.

¹¹ Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, “Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital.” eds. Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, 6, in *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010), 1-30.

¹² Houtman & Aupers, “Religions of Modernity,” 5.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

beliefs.¹⁴ In traditional societies the ability to lead one's own life was expected of a few, but through modern processes of globalization, society demands and favors individualization for all. This experimental, reflexive life is highly valued in modernity.¹⁵

A crucial condition for this new sense of self is the disenchantment associated with modernity. The modern self is able to imagine oneself outside of its particular membership in a particular society whereas before this was not possible. The advantage of disenchantment is this opening up of possibilities, but Taylor also discusses the "wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence . . ." ¹⁶ In this way, the modern sense of self leaves us with this sense of emptiness and need for meaning. Asian global religious practices fill this role through offering both unique non-native traditions and a source for meaning.

As the modern notion of the individual emerged, religion became relegated to personal preference and choice. This is especially appropriate for Asian religions, which, as King writes, have "proved particularly amenable to modern Western interests in non-institutional and privatized forms of spirituality."¹⁷ Perfecting the individual self, through mental and physical activities, is part of modern health trends of which Asian global religious practices have taken advantage of. Along with the inward reflexive turn, within modernity there is an abundance of choice for health and wellness options. In this way, modern yoga with its emphasis on postures, or asanas, "lent itself to incorporation within the fashionable, contemporary health and hygiene systems . . ." ¹⁸ Meditation as well is often promoted and aligned with increased physical and mental well-being.

Besides health, modern postural yoga and meditation can fit into a proliferation of possible discourses including well-being, physical and metaphysical healing, and spirituality. Yoga classes and meditation retreats embrace both the secular and sacred, aligning with the modern focus on practices of the self and individualized forms of religiosity.¹⁹ Yoga and meditation have become major cultural exports because of their ability to be decontextualized and combined with these multiple frameworks and perspectives. Strauss writes that the connection between health, freedom and modernity "acquires its shape through both the reflexive project of the individual self as well as the increasing tendency

¹⁴ Ulrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2002), 5.

¹⁵ Beck, *Individualization*, 27.

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

¹⁷ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and 'the Mystic East,'* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 141.

¹⁸ Mark Singleton. *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

¹⁹ Elizabeth DiMichelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 260.

toward globalization.”²⁰ In this way, Asian global religious practices come to be utilized for the individual self and individual needs. This turn to the self is one of the factors, which helped to create a field for decontextualized global religious practices to emerge.

Orientalism and Power in Asian Global Religious Practices

Other than global cultural flows and increased self-reflexivity, discourses of Orientalism²¹ and power also affect specifically Asian forms of global religious practices. These dynamics must be discussed as part of the historical context of the emergence of global religious practices. Discourses of Orientalism provided the characterizations and assumptions about Asian religions that continue to be utilized in the reimagination of these traditions’ global religious practices. Within the context of colonialism, certain Asian religious teachers aligned their traditions with discourses of modernity, such as rationality and science, hoping to build their authority and legitimacy. These leaders also molded their religious practices to fit with Romantic Orientalist ideas of a ‘mystical’ and ‘ancient’ Eastern spirituality. What I want to highlight in this section is the mutual interchange, or what some have called intercultural mimesis,²² involved in creating Asian global religious practices. Asian religions’ global religious practices build on this through aligning their practices with science as well as ideas of a mystic spirituality.

Orientalist scholars sought to understand and construct Buddhism through the textual tradition, but held contempt for the contemporary practice. Orientalists perceived textual Buddhism as a tradition worth preserving.²³ Protestant frameworks affected the ways scholars conducted research about Buddhism. Because Protestantism deemphasized ritual and the role of clergy, and highlighted the individual relationship with religion through scriptures, Buddhist texts were seen to represent the most ‘original’ and ‘true’ form of Buddhism. This idealized picture of Buddhism, assembled from its ancient texts, contrasted starkly, according to the Orientalist scholars’ interpretation, with contemporary Asian Buddhist lived practices. Because Asian Buddhists were considered to be denigrating their

²⁰ Sarah Strauss, *Positioning Yoga: Balancing Acts Across Cultures*, (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005), 12.

²¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 3. Orientalism describes the processes through which European powers sought to dominate colonized countries, not only through physical force, but also through knowledge. As colonizers learned about the colonial world, they created discourses of unbalanced power and domination over colonized nations through their representations of the Orient. By controlling the discourse surrounding knowledge of the Orient, Orientalists in a sense created the Orient and the terms through which East and West were constructed. This knowledge, therefore, represented the Orient as justifiably colonized and legitimated the ideology of imperialism.

²² Charles Hallisey, “Roads Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism,” ed. Donald S. Lopez, in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31-62. Hallisey used this term in this important article for Buddhist studies. His work is discussed more below.

²³ Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, (Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 24.

own tradition through their practices, Orientalists took it upon themselves to be the curators of the 'real' Buddhism that was worth preserving. In the care of contemporary Asian Buddhists, then, Buddhism had been lost and distorted, and the Orientalist scholars' task was to recover its lost glory. Therefore illustrating value in the textual tradition as opposed to the lived religion had advantages that advanced the colonial project.

Another aspect of Orientalism is the romanticizing tendency, which has led to the familiar binary of the 'spiritual East' and 'rational West'. Romantic Orientalists held up the East as a fantastic 'other,' which held the allure of the exotic. As Romantics exoticized 'the East,' they projected "the hope that the ills of western society can be assuaged by the supposedly more spiritual, primal wisdom of Asia."²⁴ Clarke argues that Europeans in the nineteenth century held a metaphysical thirst they found lacking in the modern Western world.²⁵ Romantics seek a spirituality that is unconcerned with materialism and consumerism, and a premodern place filled with ancient wisdom. In this way, Asian religions in particular played a role within a wider hope for reenchantment amidst modern malaise.²⁶ Asian religious leaders often sought to fit both molds, reinterpreting their tradition to embody a rational, modern aspect as well as a timeless, exotic allure. Although Asian religious teachers were able to construct their own ways of using these discourses for propagating their religion, the control and power over these discourses came from the Orientalist scholars and the wider colonial project.

Orientalism played a large role in the dissemination of knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism, the main traditions under discussion here. Much of the reactions to Indian religion represent the current scientific and Christian debates occurring in Europe during the time of colonialism in India (1858-1947).²⁷ The early texts of the Indian tradition, the Vedas, were held up as the ideal of Hindu religiosity. These texts evoked nostalgia for the origins of the human race as Orientalist scholars contrasted the modern West with seemingly static India.²⁸ Not only Orientalist scholars, but Hindu reformers²⁹ as well took on

²⁴ David MacMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

²⁵ John James Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 56.

²⁶ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 27.

²⁷ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 126.

²⁸ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 118.

²⁹ For example, famous early Hindu reformers were Dayananda Saraswati, Rammohun Roy, and Swami Vivekananda, among others. Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), founder of the Arya Samaj, and Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), one of the founders of the Brahmo Samaj, adapted their presentation of Hinduism in response to Christian missionaries and Orientalists (King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 123). Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), discussed more below, founded the Vedanta Society and famously participated in the World's Parliament of Religions. The most well known example of his reinterpretation of Indian spirituality is his *Raja Yoga* (Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga*. New Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 2004 [1896]). His adaptation of yoga practices led the way for many more Indian yoga teachers and the current popularity of yoga outside of India.

the task of finding the origins or 'essence' of Hinduism towards nationalist and anti-colonial ends. All of the knowledge of the modern West, according to these Hindu reformers, was prefigured in these Hindu texts. This confluence of interests in representing a mystical yet modern tradition reinforced the ways texts such as the Vedas and Upanisads came to constitute the whole of Hinduism. Despite the diversity of Indian religions, Orientalists as well as Hindu reformers identified the essence and central tenets of Hinduism as existing in these texts.³⁰ This precedence of distilling a tradition to one of its parts continues as the religion globalizes but shifts to secularized practices.

For Buddhism, the role of Orientalists, as well as Asian Buddhist leaders, contributed to representations of Buddhism that continues in the present. It is necessary to acknowledge an intercultural mimesis³¹ between Asian Buddhists and their non-native Buddhist students. Buddhism in the West has been constructed in response to Orientalist cultural assumptions and interests but the tactics and innovations of Asian Buddhists also deserve to be acknowledged.³² This can be seen in the ways Asian Buddhists have been quick to declare the connection of their religion with science and psychology, as discussed below, which represents the ways these leaders took Orientalist-inspired constructions and reinterpreted them in a solely positive light. Despite these appropriations by Asian Buddhists, it is clear that they were reacting to a dominant discourse over which they had little control.³³ Distilling the tradition in this way enabled it to be construed by its aspects that most connected with modern, secular discourses.

This reifying of certain aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism to represent the tradition itself carries over from texts to practices. Hindu as well as Buddhist leaders created a rhetoric of tolerant inclusivism and universalism. These leaders sought to represent their traditions as ultimately accepting in contrast to the exclusive belonging of Abrahamic religions. This generated a place for non-religious, free-floating decontextualized practices such as yoga and meditation, which could be inserted into many contexts, becoming global religious practices. King writes that these practices provided a "'portable' and exportable version of indigenous Asian traditions in terms of a non-specific religiosity that explicitly eschewed institutional connections, ritualized forms and traditional religious affiliations."³⁴

Through global flows and the historical context of colonialism and modernity, Asian global religious practices became ways to spread religious traditions, if partially, as well as utilize

³⁰ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 132.

³¹ Hallisey, "Roads not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism," addresses this theme of intercultural mimesis by drawing attention to the role that both Asian Buddhists and Orientalist scholars played in constructing knowledge about Buddhism. He critiques scholarship that does not attend to this intercultural exchange and dialogue (Hallisey, "Roads not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism," 33).

³² King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 152.

³³ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 153.

³⁴ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 156.

Orientalist discourses. By illuminating the decontextualization of global religious practices, I show how they have increasingly been in dialogue with and inserted into secular frameworks of science and psychology. In particular, Asian global religious practices, such as meditation and yoga, must be restructured and reimagined in order to relate to these new contexts. This dissemination of Asian global religious practices is only possible through decontextualizing them from their religious worldviews and contexts.

Decontextualizing Asian Global Religious Practices

It is important that global religious practices are just that – practices. These are composed of physical movements, related to bodily enactments of ideologies and doctrines, which can be easily inserted into formats such as large groups in classes or on retreat. Taylor writes: “First people are drawn to a pilgrimage, or a World Youth Day, or a meditation group, or a prayer circle, and then later, if they move along in the appropriate direction, they will find themselves embedded in ordinary practice.”³⁵ It is clear that a significant way people enter religious faiths in modernity is through forms of practice. These practices are structured in ways that are individualistic, inclusivist, ecumenical, and include loose hierarchies of authority.³⁶ Because of the disembodied nature of global religious practices, practitioners are often not learning basic behaviors and protocol that surround religious practices.

Along with the extraction of a single religious practice, another consequence of these decontextualized practices is that they present solutions to the excesses of modernity, but do not challenge these extremes. Bender writes, “while yoga teachers criticized the agitations that accompanied modern society, little within their discourse suggested that doing yoga would remove students from it.”³⁷ Asian global religious practices therefore adhere to modernity, making their practices suitable for modern, busy living. Modern desires for relaxation have been met through images of a ‘mystical East’ with its ‘ancient wisdom.’ These images, however, don’t challenge the foundation of modernity’s claims, but cohere with popular recognitions of its tensions and problems.

Vivekananda, the first Hindu missionary in the United States, created a form of Vedanta that was suited for a non-Hindu audience. His form of practice was demythologized and stripped of devotionism while discourses of universalism and science were added.³⁸ Vivekananda disassociated his message from any institutional form of Hinduism and proclaimed his ‘practical Vedanta’ open to all, not requiring any particular belief or practice

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 516.

³⁶ DeMichelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*, 189.

³⁷ Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination*, (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 106.

³⁸ Anne Gleig, “Enlightenment After the Enlightenment: Transformations of Asian Contemplative Traditions,” (Rice University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2010), 58.

of renunciation.³⁹ Other Hindu movements such as the Self-Realization Fellowship, founded by Paramahansa Yogananda, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation held appeal through their cosmopolitan, inclusivist, and practical techniques, which were geared toward all modern individuals. They eschew terms like religion, sect, cult, doctrine, or belief and instead promote their movements as offering a universal, experiential approach.⁴⁰

Buddhist meditation is also a significant Asian global religious practice that has been decontextualized from its traditional cultural and religious frameworks. Like yoga, mutual interchange among interested Euro-American practitioners, as well as Asian Buddhist missionaries, created a modern form of mindfulness meditation that is inserted into health programs, anger management, addiction and recovery, and other therapeutic settings.⁴¹ Placing meditation within this secular psychological framework requires that the practice be removed from its ethical, social, and cultural contexts within Buddhism. Buddhist meditation has become extremely successful as a practice that can be reproduced in a variety of contexts. Bell writes, "Notions about the universal applicability of Buddhism provided an important impetus for the transmission and reception of Buddhism in new cultural contexts . . ."⁴²

In order to become a global practice, meditation had to be removed from its Buddhist worldview. The effects of this process can be seen in new combinations of meditation within non-Buddhist contexts. Roof writes that religion in the modern world "is often loosened from its traditional moorings—from history, creeds and doctrines, from broad, symbolic universes, from religious community."⁴³ Decontextualized forms of meditation have shaped the perception of Buddhism in modern global contexts. Scholars have found that as Buddhist teachings and movements globalize, specific strategies for inserting practices into new contexts need to be employed. Low observes about the growth of the Soka Gakkai⁴⁴ movement and its global prominence that ". . . this process of hermeneutical revision and

³⁹ Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religion*. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 38.

⁴⁰ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 100.

⁴¹ A number of recent books position meditation as a secular aid to daily life and all the ills of modernity including relationships, addiction, pain and recovery. See Smalley, Susan & Diana Winston, *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010) and Boyce, Barry, ed. *The Mindfulness Revolution*, (Boston, MA & London: Shambhala Publications, 2011).

⁴² Sandra Bell, "Being Creative with Tradition: Rooting Theravada Buddhism in Britain," 7, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1: (2000) 1-23.

⁴³ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 109.

⁴⁴ Soka Gakkai is a new Buddhist religious movement started in Japan with practitioners and centers throughout the world. See Richard Hughes Seager, *Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai, and the Globalization of Buddhist Humanism*, (Berkeley & LA: University of California Press, 2006).

remapping is part of a historical process of re-interpretation within tradition."⁴⁵ Low argues that remapping and revisioning Buddhist concepts, as well as decentering rituals from the historical and cultural specificity of its religious tradition, serve to transcend the local in the midst of the effects of globalization.⁴⁶ Reimaginings of Buddhist meditation portray a 'universal' practice, which can be inserted into diverse contexts globally. Through the decontextualization of meditation and the discourse of the practice having no religious boundaries, meditation has become mixed with therapy, healing, and perhaps most importantly, psychology.

A study quoted by Tweed found the most important factor motivating exploration of Buddhism was "to find relief from physical and psychological suffering through practices such as chanting and meditation."⁴⁷ While during the late nineteenth century access to teachers and the ability to engage in meditation practice was limited, this began to change in the 1950s and 1960s when Asian Buddhist leaders sent missionaries abroad.⁴⁸ A century after Victorian American Buddhist sympathizers began their intellectual interest in the religion; psychological benefits derived from meditation became much more significant.⁴⁹ Therefore it was the ability to situate the practice of meditation within psychology and therapy, rather than a specifically Buddhist framework, and the increasingly widespread availability of lay practice, teachers, and popular books about meditation, that brought it forth eventually to the mainstream as a global practice.

Both yoga and meditation have been reimagined and renewed as the practices travel between different cultures and communities. Interchanges between the international community and Asian teachers and leaders familiar with religious understandings abroad produce a hybrid expression that illuminates the mutual influence. Recontextualizing and inserting these practices into modern discourses such as science and psychology are discussed in detail below.

Recontextualizing in New Settings

After decontextualization of these Asian religious practices, it is also necessary to discuss their recontextualization into these new settings. For the rest of this article, I discuss the

⁴⁵ Sor-Ching Low, "The Re-invention of Nichiren in an Era of Globalization: Remapping the Sacred," 28, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010), 27-43.

⁴⁶ Low, "The Re-invention of Nichiren," 28.

⁴⁷ Tweed, Thomas, *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 159.

⁴⁸ One of the first Asian Buddhist missionaries was D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966). He had a large impact on the American understanding and perception of Buddhism. See Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, (New York: Causeway Books, 1974 [1934]). This is one example of his writing that aims to explain Zen to his Western students. His interpretation of Zen Buddhism is notably psychological and places experience at the forefront of the practice.

⁴⁹ Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 159.

recontextualization process within Buddhist meditation, most often referring to the specific technique of *vipassana* (insight), or more broadly termed mindfulness, a form of Buddhist meditation.⁵⁰ I explore the nature of this process rather than evaluating any of these changes and adaptations, tracing the flows of meditation as a global religious practice.

The secular conjunctures of science and psychology are related tropes that modern meditation teachers utilize to make this practice appealing to non-Buddhist audiences. A focus on science and rationalism was a large part of the discourses of early Buddhist modernism, but within the postmodern dialogue between science and Buddhism, meditation itself emerges as a main object of scientific inquiry. In addition to scientifically verified results, therapeutic benefits of meditation represent another significant way meditation was able to enter mainstream culture. By delineating these conjunctures, I demonstrate how meditation became a global religious practice, as well as discuss the contours and features of its production.

Science and Meditation

Science and the scientific worldview have greatly influenced the rise of secularism. Christian Smith writes that the construction of science “considered religion to be irrelevant and often an obscuring impediment to true knowledge.”⁵¹ He argues that late nineteenth century secularizers created a discourse where science is considered objective while religion is irrational.⁵² During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, liberal Christians were facing a crisis of faith as skepticism of Christianity rose in light of scientific developments. During this same period, Western colonialists were encountering Buddhism and often found it was not opposed to science, but rather compatible with it. Science and Buddhism have had a close relationship and engaging dialogue since this time. McMahan writes “one of the prominent and persistent assertions of Buddhist modernism is that Buddhism is more compatible with a modern, scientific world view than other religions . . .”⁵³ Buddhists in Asian countries agreed that their religion was scientific—realizing this was a way to represent themselves as modern and to show their tradition’s superiority to Christianity. Here lay the foundations of meditation as a global religious practice.

This type of argument gave Buddhists an advantage in the early twentieth century as theories of social evolution at the time offered a trajectory of progress moving from

⁵⁰ *Vipassana* meditation is one of the two basic types of Theravada Buddhist meditation. This is the type of meditation that induces ‘insight’ into the three characteristics of suffering, non-self, and impermanence and that takes as its object the changing nature of the present moment.

⁵¹ Christian Smith, *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 2.

⁵² Smith, *The Secular Revolution*, 10.

⁵³ David McMahan, “Buddhist Modernism,” ed. David McMahan, in *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 159-176.

superstition, to religion, and culminating with science.⁵⁴ Lopez notes, “By claiming it to be science, Buddhism, condemned as a primitive superstition . . . leaps from the bottom of the evolutionary scale to the top.”⁵⁵ Science was the modern Asian Buddhist weapon against the European colonialist idea of Buddhism as primitive. Schober describes how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Burmese Buddhists utilized scientific discourse to explain Buddhist teachings to Orientalists and interested foreigners. This scientific discourse appealed to an audience seeking to define an ‘original’ Buddhism and find a rational system of ethics.⁵⁶

Through this positive association of Buddhism and science in colonized Southeast Asia, scientific discourse became one of the most important ways Buddhism gained currency in non-Buddhist contexts. McMahan writes of the Western reception of this ‘scientific’ religion, “[t]he interpretation of Buddhism as consonant with science has been an essential factor in the transmission of Buddhism to the West.”⁵⁷ Buddhism’s moniker as a ‘scientific religion’ therefore supported its global spread. This dialogue has continued with a diversity of figures throughout the Buddhist world such as the Dalai Lama.⁵⁸ Cho describes the history of the dialogue between Buddhism and science, delineating how Buddhism is seen to fit a variety of historical scientific frameworks. She writes:

“In the late nineteenth century, the interest was in the Buddhist idea of causality and its compatibility with the mechanistic world view of science. After the Second World War, interest shifted to Buddhist emptiness philosophy and Einsteinian relativity. Currently the attention is on Buddhism and cognitive science . . .”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ This was true also of Vedanta, which Vivekananda promoted as a scientific religious tradition whose teachings and yogic method of observation and experimentation were the same as science. See Carl, T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 76.

⁵⁵ Donald S. Lopez, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 24.

⁵⁶ Juliane Schober, *Modern Conjunctures in Burma: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies, and Civil Society*, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

⁵⁷ David McMahan, “Modernity and the Early Discourse of Scientific Buddhism,” 897, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.4 (2004), 897-933.

⁵⁸ The current dialogue between Buddhism and science consists of a large body of literature. Significant among these studies are books that offer both Buddhists’ and scientists’ perspectives on topics such as cognition and the concept of the mind. The Dalai Lama has been one of the most prominent advocates of this dialogue. See Dalai Lama, *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*, (New York: Morgan Road Books, 2006), Dalai Lama, H.H., Herbert Benson, Robert A. F. Thurman, Howard E. Gardner, Daniel Goleman & The Harvard Mind Science Symposium, *Mind Science: An East-West Dialogue*, (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1999), as well as Matthieu Ricard, *The Quantum and the Lotus: A Journey to the Frontiers Where Science and Buddhism Meet*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001).

⁵⁹ Francesca Cho, “Buddhism and Science: Translating and Re-translating Culture,” ed. David McMahan, 274, in *Buddhism in the Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 273-288.

Through the penetration of meditation into mainstream non-Buddhist contexts, Buddhism offered this practice as an object of scientific inquiry. Buddhist meditation, as an extension of this scientific discourse, is reconfigured as a pragmatic technique for healing and rendered as a rational attempt to alter one's perception of the world.⁶⁰ The practice of meditation in postmodern Buddhist contexts offers not only an argument for the compatibility of Buddhism and science, but also an object through which to test and verify this coherence. Meditation as global religious practice, with the backing of science and its reconfiguration as a universal healing practice, has been able to spread as a global practice.

Scientific studies of meditation began in the 1960s and continue today, especially in regard to the benefits of mindfulness meditation.⁶¹ Many Buddhist teachers have referred to meditation as a method of inquiry into one's mind.⁶² In this way meditators become scientists of consciousness and human interiority who test Buddhist practices as a scientist conducts experiments.⁶³ B. Alan Wallace is one of the most prolific writers of this dialogue between Buddhist meditation and science, publishing a number of recent books on the topic.⁶⁴ He cites studies which recommend meditation for improving quality of life of patients with chronic illnesses such as cancer or AIDS.⁶⁵ Scientific studies have also

⁶⁰ Robert Sharf, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience," 267, *Numen*, 42 (1995), 228-283.

⁶¹ The *Mindfulness Research Guide Website* is an example of this new research. The founder of this site, David Black, hopes for this website to be a comprehensive research guide and electronic source that provides information on the scientific study of mindfulness. Black has undertaken this task in order to update researchers and practitioners on current research and to have a centralized location specifically for mindfulness studies. Resources include publications sorted by month and year and any research that uses empirical measurement tools for mindfulness. There is also a list of research centers that have mindfulness studies as part of their central mission.

⁶²For example, in his *Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Nyanaponika Thera calls meditation a science of the mind and compares the meditator to a scientist who remains unprejudiced until he has examined his experience thoroughly (Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1996 [1954]), 42). Goenka calls meditators 'explorers of inner truth' (S.N. Goenka, "The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation," in *Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal: A Collection Commemorating the Teaching of Sayagyi U Ba Khin*, 106, (Maharashtra, India: Vipassana Research Institute), 105-108) and *vipassana* an exploration of "the reality within oneself, the material structure and the mental structure." (S.N. Goenka, "Buddha's Path is to Experience Reality," 109, in *Sayagyi U Ba Khin Journal: A Collection Commemorating the Teaching of Sayagyi U Ba Khin*, (Maharashtra, India: Vipassana Research Institute), 109-113).

⁶³ B. Alan Wallace, *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, (New York & Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Columbia University Press, 2003), 27.

⁶⁴ Most of Wallace's writing is not a scholarly appraisal of the dialogue but rather a lament of Western scientific materialism and how Buddhist contemplative practices can help to show that subjective experiences and insights are important components of scientific understandings of the mind.

⁶⁵ B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, & Christianity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 33.

suggested that meditation improves physical and psychological well-being. One of the most famous experiments involved connecting EEG sensors to highly advanced Tibetan monk meditators to understand the differences in their neural activities.⁶⁶ All of these cognitive studies are directed toward validating and understanding how the practice of meditation can aid mental and physical health and show an interest in combining scientific methods and Buddhist meditation. Summing up, Wallace asserts that scientists “are showing an unprecedented openness and curiosity to learn more about the physiological and psychological benefits of meditation and to explore its possible value for investigating the nature of the mind from within.”⁶⁷ Through statements like these meditation can enter a number of discourses of health and well-being and become part of the practices of the self so prominent in modernity.

This dialogue between cognitive science and Buddhist meditation, however, is strictly empirical, testing the neurological effects of meditation rather than arguing for coherencies between Buddhist doctrines and scientific theories.⁶⁸ This is a significant departure from earlier dialogues between Buddhism and science. Instead of Buddhist leaders and interested sympathizers writing treatises expounding Buddhism’s scientific worldview, scientists control this discourse through their experimental choices and their results. However, continuities with the popular imagination of Buddhism remain. Lopez notes, “. . . the focus on Buddhism for this research appears as yet another manifestation of the West’s fascination with Buddhism—ever ancient, ever modern—as the most appropriate partner of science.”⁶⁹

McMahan critiques these studies as presenting “meditation as a freestanding mode of inquiry, analysis, and transformation” while neglecting “its purposes and functions in its traditional social, ethical, institutional, and cosmological contexts.”⁷⁰ These contexts are ignored when Buddhist meditation is characterized as either itself a science or a scientific mode of inquiry with the goal of self-exploration. Meditation as global practice is carried further in its dialogue with psychology.

Psychology and Meditation

As mentioned briefly above, meditation would not have become a global religious practice if it did not align closely with psychology.⁷¹ Not just a method used in the path towards Buddhist Enlightenment, which includes renunciation and transcendence of self, meditation

⁶⁶ Wallace, *Mind in the Balance*, 30.

⁶⁷ Wallace, *Mind in the Balance*, 36.

⁶⁸ Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 207.

⁶⁹ Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*, 210.

⁷⁰ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 209.

⁷¹ Similar to the dialogue between Buddhism and science, Buddhist psychology comprises a large body of literature, a sub-field of Buddhist studies in itself. Some Buddhist universities have degree programs in this field of Buddhist Psychology. For this reason I have chosen prominent, pioneering actors within this dialogue.

is now perceived as an aid to better mental health and self-discovery, rather than a specifically religious practice.⁷² McMahan demonstrates how meditation has become disembedded from traditional worlds of Buddhism and has entered a new realm of psychology. Through this disembedding, meditation is no longer under the sole authority of the Buddhist tradition. He writes, "Beginning with Jung's archetypal psychoanalytic theory and working its way up to current intertwining of psychotherapy and mindfulness practices, psychology would become one of the most commonly used lenses for the interpretation of Buddhism."⁷³ Psychologists have likened meditation to psychoanalysis in that both are thought to help reveal the unconscious and repressed memories which lead toward more individual freedom.⁷⁴ Meditation, as a method of internal observation, is linked to modern psychology in a way that both seeks to aid in healing from emotional trauma, as well as creates purposefulness in daily activities through mindfulness meditation.

Early on within the dialogue between Buddhism and the West, psychology was a significant framework of interpretation, which like science, granted Buddhism prominence and legitimacy. This early dialogue stressed the connections between canonical Buddhist texts and psychology.⁷⁵ Similar to the Buddhist dialogue with science, the tradition's relationship with psychology began with theoretical works describing how Buddhist doctrines are amenable to psychology. This changed to a focus exclusively on Buddhist meditation, which affords more resources for the modern desire for therapeutic practices. These later conjunctures have enabled dialogues between psychologists and Buddhist meditation teachers. Today psychologists and mental health care professionals use mindfulness meditation practices in hospitals and prisons in a secular appropriation of this meditation practice.

Jon Kabat-Zinn has been the pioneering advocate for secular mindfulness practices, considerably expanding meditation's potential as a global religious practice. Kabat-Zinn was one of the first scientists to measure the effects of meditation from a clinical perspective and has published more than a dozen detailed studies on the effects of mindfulness meditation in major medical journals and several popular books about mindfulness meditation and health.⁷⁶ He is the founder and director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. His programs use meditation

⁷² McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 184.

⁷³ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 65.

⁷⁴ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 192. This dialogue is part of both Theravāda and Zen engagements with psychology. For the Zen interpretation of psychotherapy see Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, Erich Fromm & Richard De Martino, eds. *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

⁷⁵ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 167.

⁷⁶ His well-known books include Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, (New York: Hyperion, 2006), *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*, (New York: Hyperion, 1994), *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, (New York, NY: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 1990).

strictly for practical purposes of reducing pain and decreasing effects of negative emotions, intentionally divorcing the practice from the ethical and cultural Buddhist context. He finds Buddhism too confusing for Americans and asserts that it would be too difficult to learn about a different culture and absorb unfamiliar meditation practices at the same time. For meditation to be accepted in mainstream environments like hospitals, he prefers the techniques to seem neither exotic nor foreign. "If you go in talking about the Buddha and inviting masters with shaved heads for lectures, its going to be perceived right away as some foreign cultural ideology – a belief system. Understandably so, it would likely be rejected."⁷⁷ He wants to emphasize that meditation is not a weird or cryptic activity and that it doesn't involve becoming a mystic or Eastern philosopher.⁷⁸ Through this decontextualization process, meditation was able to become a global religious practice and be inserted into programs in hospitals, prisons, health centers, and spas for increased well-being.

Kabat-Zinn finds that Buddhist teachings can be divorced from their original contexts because the relevance and significance of mindfulness practices has nothing to do with Buddhism or with religious conversion or organized religion.⁷⁹ He believes one does not have to think of Buddhism as a religion but as a tool, a technique that is universally applicable. Kabat-Zinn writes, "The Buddha's elaboration of the lawfulness of the dharma transcends his particular time and culture of origin . . . even though a religion grew out of it."⁸⁰ He teaches that it is best to think of mindfulness meditation techniques as universal descriptions of the functioning of the human mind. Thus he claims Buddhist meditation techniques need not be practiced only within the purview of Buddhism. The practices can be done without appealing to either an Asian culture or a Buddhist authority to authenticate it.

Through looking at the case of meditation, the features of recontextualizing global religious practices include a lack of religious identification and insertion into health and wellness activities, which is authorized by appeals to modern discourses of science and psychology. Cultural flows and the modern fascination with the self have resulted in the ability to add global religious practices as part of one's daily mental and physical health regimen. Asian religious leaders in particular have taken advantage of this and fit their practices into these modern ideas. Insertion into these new discourses requires decontextualization of these practices from their socio-cultural frameworks. Meditative practices are modified through contact and are also reinscribed in new cultural contexts in diverse ways. McMahan writes about how processes of disembedding Buddhism from traditional social networks and insertion into new discourses and contexts "multiplies the circumstances in which Buddhism must develop adaptations and strategies of legitimation. This in turn tends to spawn new interpretations, new practices, and new hybrids . . ."⁸¹ Throughout Buddhist

⁷⁷ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, xv-xvi.

⁷⁸ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, xvii.

⁷⁹ Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, 3.

⁸⁰ Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses*, 136-137.

⁸¹ McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 256.

history, meditation has been adapted to new circumstances. The distinction in modernity lies with the proliferation of decontextualized forms of meditation and rate of insertion into a variety of modern discourses.

Conclusion

Practices that religious leaders promote as ‘universal,’ such as meditation and yoga, harken back to discourses of universal reason used during colonialism. Aligning practices, categories, and ideals with universals claims the power to represent the world.⁸² Embedded within discourses of the modern and scientific, these universal claims purport to speak for all of humanity in all contexts and times and yet are set within highly nuanced and contingent historical, social, and cultural conjunctures. During the colonial era universal reason became a global form of knowledge and power as particular nations and cultures were depicted as static and unable to develop.⁸³ However much this ‘universalism’ is posited in religious discourses, it is important to deconstruct and illuminate the global connections and particular histories from which it arose. This universalism allows global religious practices to be lifted out of their religious, social, cosmological, and ritual contexts and into new templates. In this way religious others, in the form of global religious practices, instead of being understood from within their own frameworks, are molded to fit into modern discourses of science, health and wellness. Asian teachers in dialogue with non-Asian audiences disembedded their contemplative practices, calling them empirical and scientific, and opposed to Abrahamic traditions as well as their own local contexts. In this way global religious practices, as they travel abroad from Asia, become reified, decontextualized from their monastic and religious settings and reworked as a modern, scientific objects composed of intersecting values, meanings, and attributes.

⁸² Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

⁸³ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9.

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