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## The Whiter lotus: Asian religions and reform movements in America, 1836-1933

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THE WHITER LOTUS: ASIAN RELIGIONS AND REFORM  
MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA, 1836-1933

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the

**Doctor of Philosophy in History**  
**Department of History**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College**  
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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

**Edgar A. Weir, Jr.**

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**The Whiter Lotus: Asian Religions and Reform Movements in America,  
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**May 2011**

## ABSTRACT

### **The Whiter Lotus: Asian Religions and Reform Movements in America, 1836-1933**

by

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This study examines the influence of Asian religions and thought on various reform movements in America, including anti-slavery, labor rights, the alleviation of poverty, women's rights, and the rights of immigrants. The interactions between these two forces will be uncovered and analyzed from 1836, the year Ralph Waldo Emerson's ground-breaking work *Nature* was published, until 1933, the year that Dyer Daniel Lum, the last individual discussed in this work, passed away. Previous studies have demonstrated that those who incorporated Asian religions and thought into their own lives and worldviews also affixed great importance on affecting society in a positive manner. This study continues that analysis and looks deeper in to the question of how effective these individuals were in their respective projects of reform and how those projects interrelated with their new found ideas garnered from Asia.

This history is as varied and diverse as the individuals that comprised it. Some used Asian religions and thought to support their views of the world and their philosophies, some turned their incorporation of Asian religions into "lifestyle enclaves," while others transformed their experiences into another consumptive experience, and some took what they absorbed from Asia and made significant short-term and long-term contributions to American history and to the history of the world. However, these

individuals were all effective in using Asian religions to challenge the dominant discourse of the times and thereby provide later generations with a larger frame of reference. Through their insightful explorations and analyses of Asian religions, cultures, and ideas they laid the crucial groundwork for those who came after them. This influence expanded beyond specific reform movements themselves and radiated into other areas including art, literature, poetry, and the very cultural vocabulary that runs through America to this day. To understand the general receptivity of American culture today to Asian religions, we need to understand the intellectual foundations laid by previous generations of American reformers who embraced Asian religions as an intellectual foundation for positive social change during periods when entertaining such ideas was far less accepted.

The subjects of this study include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Percival Lowell, William Sturgis Bigelow, Paul Carus, and Dyer Daniel Lum to name a few. The many connections between Asian religions and the various reform movements and activities in America are focused on these particular individuals and utilize them as case studies in order to make a larger argument. Ultimately, this dissertation contends that the interaction between Asian religions and American reform did not begin, for example, in the 1960s with anti-war protesters, but, in fact, there was an adherent to or a sympathizer with Asian religions on the front lines of most of the major reform movements in America leading back to the early nineteenth century.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Someone once said that knowledge, in the end, is really about acknowledgment. I wholeheartedly agree. It is about acknowledging that my skill and ability aren't as much about what I know, but what others knew and helped me to learn....even when they might have been completely unaware of their assistance. Indeed, the writing of this dissertation has been a truly collaborative effort. First and foremost are the members of my examination committee: David Wrobel (chair), Sue Fawn Chung, David Holland, and Aya McDonald. Their guidance, continuing encouragement, and depth of experience are largely responsible for turning this rather large topic into a focused academic study.

I wrote this dissertation primarily while employed by the Social Security Administration. Balancing work and academia was made much easier by the supportive environment created by my colleagues at the Las Vegas District Office. They are by far the most dedicated, hardworking, and compassionate group of professionals I have ever had the pleasure to work with.

Major credit goes to my wife Sae and my son Edgar III who from the very beginning encouraged me to pursue and complete this project. They deserve my sincere and heartfelt thanks for their patience and encouragement. I am extremely fortunate to have these two special people in my life who have contributed so much to this project including endless time, support, and good humor.

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## CHAPTER 1

### ASIAN RELIGIONS IN A “NEW WORLD”

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Asian religions in America have become something of a cultural force. There are thousands of Buddhist temples, Transcendental Meditation groups, Zen centers, Hindu temples and Yoga studios throughout the United States. A quick search of almost any bookstore in America reveals extensive collections of books devoted to Asian thought and religions<sup>1</sup> from the well known and oddly titled *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *The Tao of Pooh*,<sup>2</sup> to the Dalai Lama’s *The Art of Happiness*, to less well known and more academic works such as *The Blue Cliff Record* and *Zen and the Brain*. The signs and iconography of Asian religions have also inundated American culture. One can find Yin Yang symbols on cheap necklaces at local 99 cent stores or on expensive surfboards on the beaches of Malibu. Buddhist prayer beads have quickly risen and fallen as a symbol of coolness. One can purchase miniature Zen gardens at a local Starbucks while sipping on a Zen green tea. Movies like *The Matrix* (1999) capitalize on Asian intellectual and philosophical themes, while overtly Asian religious movies such as the *Little Buddha* (1993) and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) underscore the ubiquitous nature of Asian culture in America.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Asian thought and Eastern thought, Asian religions and Eastern religions will be used, for the most part, interchangeably, often based on nothing more than stylistic concerns. Furthermore, the term Asian religions will also connote those ideas that have transcended the religious dimension and have embedded themselves in secular culture. Those instances where they are not interchangeable will be duly noted.

<sup>2</sup> A quick search of amazon.com reveals no less than 3,499 books with the word Tao in the title, examples include: *The Tao of Physics*, *The Tao of Network Security Monitoring*, *The Tao of Sobriety*, *The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo*, *The Tao of Bow Wow: Understanding and Training Your Pet the Taoist Way*. An internet search for books with Zen in the title yields over 3,603 hits, including: *Zen and the Art of Poker*, *Zen Golf*, *Hardcore Zen: Punk Rock, Monster Movies, & the Truth About Reality*, *Zen of Business Administration*, and *Zen and Art of Public School Teaching*.

Asian thought, cultures, and religions have indeed permeated the American landscape. But this raises many questions: What effect have these Asian cultural influences, especially religious ones, had in America beyond the confines of Zen centers, meditation groups, and other specifically “Asian” institutions? Have they become merely commodities or brand names to be consumed? Are they simply fads that turn up every few years like African cicadas and only have a sustained and profound presence in extremely limited venues? What are the motivations propelling American interest in Asian religions? This study will attempt to answer these questions. Yet the main focus of this work, as the title suggests, will be an analysis of exactly how effective these “adherents and sympathizers” of Asian religions were in bringing reform to America itself.

### *A “City Upon a Hill”?*

American history is replete with attempts to find something new, effective, or novel to solve society’s problems. America, it is often said, *is* the story of progress. The first colonists came to this continent for many different reasons but principally they came to better their lives and those of their families and their community. John Winthrop, the colonial administrator of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, believed that his new home would be as a “City Upon a Hill.” America would serve as a beacon to the entire world. In a 1630 sermon onboard the ship *Arabella* Winthrop proclaimed that: “The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a

story and a by-word through the world.”<sup>3</sup> Two centuries later many settlers headed west partly in reaction to the perceived corruption of these ideals, by for example, slavery in the South and Unitarians in the North. Yet their movement west was a continuation of the drive to better their lives. They traveled great distances in order to attempt to reestablish a new utopian society, or, at the very least, to improve their situation as much as humanly possible. Often these settlers passed over perfectly good farming land in order to reach El Dorado, the fountain of youth, for in a land so vast and uncharted there was always something better on the other side of the mountain. “The grass was always greener on the other side.” Many adherents of Asian religions were on a similar trek but rather than move to a new geographic area they set out to discover a new intellectual or spiritual frontier. Yet, in the final analysis, their goal was the same as the many generations of Americans that preceded them, to better their lives and the lives of their families, community, and the nation as a whole.

As for the particular motivations of those following Asian religions under analysis here, common themes run throughout the American experience. Many adherents, followers, and sympathizers of Asian religions believed that American culture had become too focused on atomistic individualism and too obsessed with material possessions. To counter this seemingly inexorable drift towards selfish materialism and individualism followers incorporated elements of Asian religions into their world views to re-prioritize or re-balance their own lives and their views of the world around them. Each historical group examined here, the Transcendentalists, the Theosophists, the Pragmatists, and the Progressives, had their own unique view of the problems that beset

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<sup>3</sup> John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649*, eds. Richard S. Dunn, Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 10

America. Furthermore, the particular eras within which each group existed had their own unique problems and issues—slavery, industrialization, women’s rights, labor relations, immigration, the gap between the rich and poor, to name but a few. Yet to varying degrees, many members of these groups shared a belief that by adopting and adhering to certain elements of particular Asian religions the problems of individualism and materialism, the issues they believed were often at the core of many of America’s problems, could be, if not wholly rectified, then at the very least mitigated in significant ways.

Certainly, lamentation of contemporaneous cultural and intellectual trends was not unique to the individuals and groups under analysis here but dates as far back as recorded history. In America itself, the Founding Fathers lamented American individualistic tendencies and the public’s continued fascination with material objects.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson’s idealized yeoman farmers were meant to be self-sufficient individuals for the expressed purpose of protecting themselves from government manipulation and domination. Yet these same yeoman farmers defined in the social sphere by their family and communities were expected by Jefferson to look out for each other, to be community oriented and sacrifice their own atomistic individualism in order to assist their neighbors and their country. However, Jefferson was later to lament the growing movement away from an agrarian based society fueled by the “taste for commerce.”

You ask what I think on the expediency of encouraging our states to be commercial? Were I to indulge my own theory, I should wish them to practise neither commerce nor navigation, but to stand with respect to Europe precisely on the footing of China. We should thus avoid wars, and all our citizens would be husbandmen. Whenever indeed our numbers should so increase as that our produce would overstock the markets of

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent analysis of this phenomenon, see: Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.)

those nations who should come to seek it, the farmers must either employ the surplus of their time in manufactures, or the surplus of our hands must be employed in manufactures, or in navigation. But that day would, I think be distant, and we should long keep our workmen in Europe, while Europe should be drawing rough materials & even subsistence from America. But this is theory only, & people have a decided taste for navigation & commerce.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the myth of the yeoman farmer lived on beyond the days of revolution.

According to Henry Nash Smith, “The Western yeoman had to work as hard as a common laborer or a European peasant, and at the same tasks. Despite the settled belief of Americans to the contrary, his economic status was not necessarily higher. But he was a different creature altogether because he had become the hero of a myth, of the myth of mid-nineteenth-century America.”<sup>6</sup> Several decades after Jefferson’s “theory” Alexis de Tocqueville would write in *Democracy in America* that Jefferson’s hopes had indeed failed to come into reality. “. . . I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends.” Tocqueville continued by describing the limitations inherent in this restricted view of the world: “As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland.” Tocqueville insightfully defined this burgeoning culture of individualism as that which “disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson to G. K. van Hogendorp, October 13, 1785, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 24+ vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 8:633.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Nash Smith. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 134.

friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.” Unlike egoism, which Tocqueville argued originated from “blind instinct,” “individualism is based on misguided judgment rather than depraved feeling. It is due more to an inadequate understanding than to ‘perversity of heart.’”<sup>7</sup> Many adherents of Asian religions concurred with Tocqueville’s prescient analysis. They believed that their own hearts were in the right place but that the various defects of their minds might just be the root of their problems. Thus they incorporated components of Asian religions into their own lives in order to attempt to mitigate the overemphasis on individualism, materialism, and the other ills they perceived in modern America, and more importantly, in themselves.

Those interested in Asian religions were not the first to believe that Western civilization as a whole had perhaps made a wrong turn in history. Frederick Nietzsche argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that Western civilization had lost its Dionysian wholeness and focus on the communal aspects of life and in its place allowed Apollonian rationalism and individualism to dominate. In 1980 Jürgen Habermas had a different diagnosis and argued that the West was an incomplete project of modernity and that Western civilization must return to the Enlightenment to complete the process centered on reason. Whereas the subjects of this study believed that they needed to reach outside Western culture to obtain a solution to the problems of modernity, Jürgen Habermas and other members of the Frankfurt school believed that the seeds for reform existed at the beginning of the West’s march to modernity. The American Pragmatist John Dewey also believed reason manifested through a democratic society was the saving grace of modern

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<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Translated by George Lawrence. Edited by J. P. Mayer. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1835, 2000), 692, 506.

society. Yet Dewey's intellectual descendant, Richard Rorty, contends that a more balanced version of reason, incorporating literature imbued with empathetic opportunities and tendencies, is even better suited to the cause. Thus we see the subjects of this study working in a larger milieu of individuals and groups attempting to discern "What went wrong?" or, at the very least, how to improve America's, and for that matter the world's, future.

With the arrival of the first and especially the second industrial revolutions in America in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, these tendencies toward individualism and materialism became even more pronounced. What was essentially an agrarian nation before the Civil War became an industrial nation soon after the end of the conflict. Before the Civil War a majority of Americans worked on farms, the rest in industry. In the decades after the war, the situation was reversed. With industrialization came rapid urbanization and the strict division of labor wrought by the ever increasing efficiency, scale, and regimentation of modern machinery. Workers who were once farmers responsible for their own lives and families from sun up to sun down or who worked as apprentices learning the complete process of production were now relegated into performing smaller and smaller aspects of a larger process. People became cogs in the wheel of the mass manufacturing process. Furthermore, this process forged another cultural component in America, or at least expanded an existing one: materialism.

The modern mass production of consumer goods required the mass consumption of those goods. Through the commercial and scientific revolutions there arose a systematic attempt to dominate not only the natural world for its perceived plenty of resources, but also to fashion human beings into willing consumers. The advent of

psychology-inspired advertising burgeoned in the late-nineteenth century and accelerated this exponential increase in consumption. People had to be convinced that even though they already owned a particular consumer item they had to have a replacement because of the new colors available or some other such “refinements” of the new model. “Keeping up with the Joneses” and “competitive and conspicuous consumption” were later to become common mantras relating to this new culture of consumerism in America. In what the sociologist Colin Campbell calls the “other Protestant ethic,” the purchase of consumer goods could even provide an ecstatic experience comparable to the earlier religious experience and this emotional experience could be perceived as a means of grace in and of itself. Campbell writes: “The essential activity of consumption is thus not the actual selection, purchase or use of products, but the imaginative pleasure seeking to which the product image lends itself, ‘real’ consumption being largely a result of this ‘mentalistic’ hedonism.”<sup>8</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, on the other hand, provides a more secular and therapeutic answer to the question of consumerism. He argues that consumerism became a path to “self-realization.” Thus American advertising came to be “characterized as the attempt to conjure up the magic of self-transformation through purchase...”<sup>9</sup> One could transform oneself by transforming one’s material environment. Winston King also echoed this idea by writing that these individuals were “depressed by the mechanized environments in which they work, the routinized nature of their occupations, and the impersonal exteriority of the relationships to fellow human beings that are forced on them by technology-and they do many foolish and desperate things to escape this Kafkaesque

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<sup>8</sup> Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1987), 89.

<sup>9</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 220.



prison.”<sup>10</sup> Through consumerism we attempt to display our individuality, but in fact, it is through consumerism that we lose our individuality.

The incorporation of particular Asian ideas, or for that matter any method or attempt to battle the dominant ideology of individualism and consumerism, for the most part requires more than a weekend retreat or a seminar; it is a way of life. Neil Postman maintained that what we must worry about is not the “big brother” of George Orwell but the *soma* of Aldous Huxley. It is not what we hate that will destroy us, but what we love. Postman argued that what Orwell feared, the banning of books, would not be necessary because Huxley’s future would ultimately win out, that is, “there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.” Rather than not enough information we would be given so much information we would be reduced to “passivity and egoism” by the “truth being drowned in a sea of irrelevance.” According to Postman, “Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.”<sup>11</sup> In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley cautioned that those on the lookout for tyranny often fail “to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.”<sup>12</sup>

Modernization, industrialization, urbanization, materialism, individualism and consumerism were the touchstones of the individuals under analysis here and these issues were believed to be the foundation of many social ills in America. Many adherents and followers of Asian religions believed that only through viewing these problems from the

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<sup>10</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 387, “The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion,” (Jan., 1970), 66-76, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Viking, 1985), vii-viii.

<sup>12</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1958, 2004), 267.

outside, from the perspective of another culture, especially one based on an entirely different civilization and history, could they discern what was needed to change themselves and perhaps have an impact on American culture and society itself. For various reasons and motivations, the subjects of this study attempted to do what they could to address the problems they witnessed in a positive manner; and as we shall soon discover, some were more successful than others.

The American interest and dialogue with Asian religions began before the founding of the nation in limited form but it was much later that the dialogue took on an ever increasing importance. This rise of interest in Asian cultures, thought, and religions in the late nineteenth century was not only attributable to the greater availability of works on alternative religious ideas but also to the spiritual crises in American religious life. Increasing immigration, urbanization, and the theories of Charles Darwin coalesced to form a perfect storm challenging the religious orthodoxy of the day.<sup>13</sup> The importance of this spiritual crisis outlined by historians such as Paul Carter can not be trivialized, nor, as the religious historian Carl T. Jackson argues, should it be “carried too far.” “In the first place,” he explains, “any account of a crisis must not be allowed to obscure the intrinsic attractions of Eastern conceptions. Such attraction often began as a romantic interest and deepened into something more substantial.” Moreover, Jackson contends that “as acquaintance grew, Americans became persuaded of the philosophical profundity and

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<sup>13</sup> Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971). Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., “A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875-1900,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 64 (June 1932), 523-47.

richness offered by the Asian traditions. Westerners who looked east on the rebound from a bad experience with Christianity regularly found more than they anticipated.”<sup>14</sup>

Exactly why did the adherents of Asian religions not choose to address these problems and others they perceived in American society through the dominant religion in America at the time, Christianity? Why was the grass greener, or the “lotus whiter,” on the other side? Certainly, the Social Gospel movement in America had a great influence on reforming and moderating the worst facets of America’s continuing obsession with atomistic individualism and selfish materialism and was instrumental in numerous reform movements. Jane Addams, perhaps the leading figure of the Social Gospel movement, brought the settlement house idea from London to Chicago in 1889. At Hull House in Chicago she assisted many recent immigrants in transitioning not only from their traditional national or ethnic culture (from which she has received extensive criticism as a cultural imperialist), but also in transitioning from the traditional to the modern. The social settlement house movement became such a success that it eventually spread throughout the country in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

### *Push and Pull*

Of course the religious experiences of many of the groups and individuals in this study vary widely, but a few common themes do emerge. Roger Daniels writes that “Students of immigration have developed a few special terms to describe the prevailing forces that seem to shape the myriad personal decisions which, when taken collectively,

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<sup>14</sup> Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the West* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 14.

constitute an identifiable pattern of immigration.”<sup>15</sup> These specialized terms, “push” and “pull,” essentially explain why people are “pushed” from certain countries and why they choose or are “pulled” to others. These same categories used by historians of immigration can also be used in this context as a rubric to identify the constellation of ideas and justifications for a movement away from the culture of America and the West, towards a culture of the East.

Followers believed they were “pushed” away from Christianity for a number of reasons. Christianity, through sometimes nothing other than “guilt by association,” was blamed for the woes of modern Western society. Certainly this conflation of Christianity, Westernization, and modernization is a common one. The problems in the West wrought by the modernization process were blamed by some on Christianity directly. Popular Calvinism, interpreted through its “Gospel of Success” dimensions, (that is, building on the Puritan notion of “outward visible manifestations of inward invisible grace”), was indeed the intellectual justification for many of the inequities in American history and especially the social turmoil present in the late nineteenth century, what Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner would later call “The Gilded Age.” The concept of a “visible manifestation of inner grace” was employed by the rich and powerful to justify their status in society through God’s grace. The rich were rich and the powerful powerful because God had chosen them and thus their wealth and power were proof of God’s love of them and them alone.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the exclusionary theology of Christianity was

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<sup>15</sup> Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Carnegie, in his essay “The Gospel of Wealth” (1889), brought nuance to this belief by arguing that the rich were in fact trustees of their money, and that they held money until proper public uses could be discovered. Carnegie proclaimed that “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced.” Before he died Carnegie donated the majority of his estate to charities. However, some have argued that this philanthropic largesse did not justify the questionable methods by which Carnegie amassed that fortune in the first place.

troubling for the type of people under analysis here, that is those proportionally more globally aware and sensitive than the public-at-large. The fundamental doctrine of most Christian denominations dictated that salvation could only be achieved through belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Through this strict doctrine, those people, that is, the majority of the earth's population that did not hold this conviction, were relegated to a dark future of despair in the afterlife. Adherents of Asian thought, or even those interested in regions of the world that were not Christian, were wary of attaching such a future to such a vast portion of the world's population.<sup>17</sup> Thus they perceived a spiritual crisis in the West that could perhaps be cured or at least improved through a spiritual revitalization involving the adoption of certain components and perspectives of Asian thought and religions.

It is interesting to note that the very intellectual and cultural ability of this group to follow their hearts and heads towards Asia was a product of the particular religious and intellectual experience in America. The almost exclusive hold of Calvinism in many parts of the colonies, most notably in New England, steadily declined, as evidenced by the rise of the Half-Way Covenant in the mid-seventeenth century, which allowed children of unregenerate parents to be baptized, and Stoddardeanism, which admitted to communion those without an experience of grace. In a seminal article on the topic, religious historian

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Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth, and Other Timely Essays* (New York, NY: The Century Co., 1901), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this is a gross generalization of an intensely complicated and often argued set of beliefs. However, for the subject of this study, those who looked to Asian ideas, for solutions to modern ills, such a generalization is, as we shall see, correct. For example, most denominations of Christianity have had little success in winning converts in those cultures with a strong emphasis in what has been called "ancestor worship." However, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons, have recently had better success in those areas due to their belief that even though departed ancestors had not died knowing the "true word" their descendants could pray on their behalf and raise them to Heaven. This belief is one of the major reasons for the church's systematic focus on genealogy, and their relative success in those cultures steeped in "ancestor worship," or, what might better be called "reverence or respect for their forbearers."

Edwin S. Gaustad noted, “When, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Boston’s new Brattle Street Church declared that a public relation of one’s conversion experience was no longer a prerequisite to full church membership, the decline of Puritanism was in full view.”<sup>18</sup> With these substantial changes in one of the most profound aspects of the religious foundation of America, the ground was prepared for the widening of the religious dialogue.

During the Second Great Awakening from the late-eighteenth until the mid-nineteenth century, revival meetings were commonplace throughout the country. On the outskirts of cities and towns throughout America, itinerant preachers erected tents to preach their own variants and interpretations of the Bible. Many Christian denominations that have millions of followers today got their start, ideologically and organizationally, in these same fields and meadows. Many of these denominations, from the Methodists, to the Baptists, to the Presbyterians set up tents in the same location at the same time and the local community would stream in by the hundreds and thousands to their own particular denominational revival. However, once their meetings were completed or during breaks in services many revivalists would venture around the compound and listen to the sermons emanating from the tents of other denominations. If what they heard was amenable to them, they would often stay and sing along, pray, or perhaps even take communion with the other denomination’s flock.<sup>19</sup> In short, denominationalism made for

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<sup>18</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, “The Theological Effects of the Great Awakening in New England,” in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 40:4 (March 1954), 681-706, 682.

<sup>19</sup> However, Charles A. Johnson argues that this characterization only applies to the first phase of the movement. The frontier camp meetings “passed through a boisterous youth, characterized by a lack of planning, extreme disorder, high-tension emotionalism, bodily excitement, and some immorality; it then moved to a more formalized stage distinguished by its planning, more effective audience management, and notable decline in excessive emotionalism. In this institutional phase the meetings were smaller in size, and high systematized as to frequency, length, procedure of service, and location. Permanent and semipermanent camp installations made their appearance. Soon after 1805 ‘General Camp Meetings’

a very big tent that most Americans were able to fit under. This experience instilled in the American religious psyche a sense of openness to other ideas, a positive denominationalism. The only requisite was that the message seemed reasonable and true. Truth and reason were, in the final analysis, left to the judgment of each individual. Of course, there were limitations. For most of the attendees at these revivals two ideas were pivotal and unequivocal, the divinity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of salvation through his saving grace. This was perhaps the only limiter. Yet on a broader scale even these limitations would soon be questioned more widely. Even within the brief lifetime of the First Great Awakening, Gaustad notes, "...the central issues of an evangelical Christianity—general or particular atonement, a human or divine Christ, reason or revelation, reform or regeneration, free or earned grace—were subjected to severe testing."<sup>20</sup> As history was to unfold, it became only a matter of time before even that limitation was questioned and ultimately removed.

This same utilitarian individualism was, after all, used on a daily basis to survive in a land that was in the midst of a great cultural, sociological, and political experiment. It was recognized by those young Americans to be the perfect tool to decide for themselves where they should live, how to raise their families, and to which religious denomination they should join. What is today often cynically referred to as America's "New Age" "smorgasbord" approach to religion is in fact the same spiritual approach that has been in

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became a thing of the past. Methodist itinerants usually staged their encampments independently although the grounds were still open to newcomers. The camp meeting no longer acted as a conciliatory agent among the churches. On the contrary, its rostrum was at times the scene of savage attacks against other denominations." The third phase, according to Johnson, was the phase of "gradual but inevitable decline." Charles A. Johnson, "The Frontier Camp Meeting: Contemporary and Historical Appraisals, 1805-1840," in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 37:1 (June 1950), 91-110, 98. However, the effects of the first phase on American culture had already been established, not to mention the era before this semi-organized camp meeting phase where colonists who would become Americans. At that time, they were essentially left to their own devices on the frontier, away from over-controlling religious influences.

<sup>20</sup> Gaustad, "The Theological Effects of the Great Awakening in New England," 686.

place for hundreds of years in America and which has been inherently based on one of the core ideals of the American experiment, although not always a core reality in practice, freedom of religion.

Followers, sympathizers, and adherents of Asian thought and religions were not alone in their spiritual journeys to replace in their own lives the dominant culture of Christianity in America. The Deists, and later the Unitarians, questioned what they perceived as the overly dogmatic nature of Christianity in America. Whereas other groups moved Christianity in the First Great Awakening in America from traditionalism to reason as a response to the Puritan regimen, the Deists essentially built an entirely new foundation for themselves. This theological liberalism came into its own after the Civil War. The major focus was naturally on one of the dominant theologies of Christianity at the time, Calvinism. These dissenters argued against the natural depravity of mankind and the idea of predestination. The dissenters replaced this skeptical view with a more optimistic one. The historian Thomas Tweed points out that, “Unconventional religious groups such as Oneida Perfectionists, Mormons, Transcendentalists, Spiritualists, Shakers, Millerites, and Adventists celebrated the mounting optimism about humans still more boisterously.”<sup>21</sup>

Winston King notes that one of the appeals of Asian religions was the “elasticity of Eastern religio-philosophical language.”<sup>22</sup> King argues that “After two millennia of intellectualistic doctrinal disputation, and four centuries of dead-in-earnest Protestant biblical literalism, most of the poetry, and all of the flexibility, has gone out of the

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912 Victorian Culture & the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 11. See also, David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” 71.



Christian vocabulary-especially in America, with its superliteralistic, fundamentalist tendencies.”<sup>23</sup> This gave rise to, among other results, an ever-increasing dispute between science and faith. King continues by celebrating the flexibility and variety of religious languages in the East, where “...specific doctrinal terms are, on the whole, of no great consequence. If one finds one set of terms useless to him religiously, he may choose another more inclusive and “higher” set. For God, or Supreme Reality, has many names in the East, not just one correct one by which all men must be saved... To sum up: a free-wheeling mystic permissiveness in language and concept pervades the whole—or so it seems at least-and the tight little worries about creed and the knotted doctrinal tangles of the West really do not matter in the presence of these transcendental Eastern experiences.”<sup>24</sup>

Another part of this “push” away from Christianity towards other religions and belief systems was the view that Christianity was a religion of the past and Asian religions were the way of the future. The irony in this statement is well appreciated considering the fact that many variants of Asian religions, Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, predated Christianity by centuries. Nevertheless, for the subjects of this study, Americans, Christianity was the religion that most tied the contemporaneous socio-cultural order to the past. Asian religions, being relatively new in the Americas, were novel and free from the intense historico-scriptualism of American Protestantism and the perceived and real shortcomings of Western civilization as a whole. Partly explaining this view was that most Americans possessed a relative wealth of knowledge of the history of Christianity in the West from the persecution of the Jews, to

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

the Spanish Inquisition, to the Salem Witch trials in America. However, the vast majority of Americans, largely due to the scarcity of available resources in the early period, were wholly unaware of the equally checkered history of Asian religions and thus idealized them theologically and often developed their own similarly idealized views of their histories.

This idealization of Asian thought and religions had its own shortcomings, from over-simplification of Asian ideas and concepts to trivialization of various doctrines, to ignorance, both conscious and unconscious, of the historical dimensions of Asian thought and religions. Particularly common in this early stage was the characterization of Asian lives as simple and untouched by the travesties of the modern world as a whole.

Edward Said's analysis in his now famous and still controversial work, *Orientalism* (1978), is thus also particularly pertinent to this study. Although Said's main area of focus was West Asia (an area that in its Eurocentric variant is commonly called the Middle East or the Near East due to its geographic relationship to Europe), some of his insights and the subsequent reevaluations by a myriad of later scholars are enlightening. Said's basic argument was a Foucauldian one of the dynamics of power and knowledge. He argued that Western scholars unwittingly portrayed the Middle East, and especially the Arab world, in such a manner as to facilitate colonization by a more "advanced culture," namely the West. Yet, in the case of adherents of Asian thought in America they incorporated a "value-added" distortion to their object. That is, instead of a politically charged distortion meant to facilitate domination, enthusiasts of Asian thought and religions exercised a more subtle perhaps sympathetic distortion in order to facilitate acceptance and inclusion into the American experiment. The romanticism for

“uncorrupted cultures” was not unique to Asia, but could be found within the American continent itself. For example, Mabel Dodge Luhan idealized the lives of American Indians to such a degree that she proclaimed that “they did not want ‘a dismal accretion of cars, stoves, sinks, et al.’”<sup>25</sup> Of course, such statements often elicited strong and swift responses. A young Indian angrily proposed that they exchange places. “You can have all the horse and buggies you want and I’ll have your nice new cars. You drink muddy water from the mountains and I and my wife and five children will drink nice clean water from your faucets.”<sup>26</sup>

The enthusiasts of Asian ideas in America were, of course, subject to the same psychological factors as all other individuals. Many interpreted their particular religious focus as they saw fit. They saw in Asian religions what they wanted to see rather than what was actually there; not that any real clarity can be achieved in many cases, especially in the face of so many variations in Hinduism, and the sheer ineffability of Daoism and Buddhism, especially in its Chán or Zen manifestations. This “self-deception,” sometimes willful, sometimes unconscious, has been interpreted by some as a coping mechanism. One of the “Founding Fathers” of American Pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce, claimed as much when he argued that delusion has a significant survival value. Peirce disagreed with Sigmund Freud’s observation that the lies we tell ourselves are the root of our neuroses. Peirce argued that we convince ourselves that we know and understand what in fact we do not know and understand at all and that if we acknowledged our radical lack of knowing about most things we would be constantly terrified and paralyzed by indecision. Peirce essentially attached a modern psychological

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 131.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

bent to Plato's idea of "noble lies." Such paralyzing indecision, according to Peirce and his fellow Pragmatists, would prevent us from taking necessary action, the most important facet of the thought process. Thus, perhaps for some of the followers of Asian thought the "acids of modernity" were so great that they cast about for order and meaning among the chaos. But is a firm grasp on "reality" always necessary, or is it simply illusory?

Edward Purcell in his seminal work *The Crisis of Democratic Theory* (1973) explores this lack of certainty in connection with the fundamental basis of American political culture, democracy. Purcell appeals to the findings of Euclidian geometry to illustrate how the fundamental principles underlying particular beliefs do not need to be true in order for the system to function as long as the constituent parameters are "internally consistent." Euclidian geometry, according to Purcell, and, for that matter most professional mathematicians, is still useful even though one of its most basic theorems has been shown to be incorrect.<sup>27</sup> Yet the fact that Euclidian geometry has been proven "wrong" in one of its most fundamental assumptions does not, and has not, diminished its functionality or usefulness. Skyscrapers are still standing and the Washington monument has yet to topple suddenly to the ground.

To extend this theory to our study here, even if a particular variant of Asian thought or a group or individual's interpretation of that thought is incorrect, that does not preclude that thought from being efficacious in a particular time and place. In fact, the very project of only following the correct path of Buddhism or Hinduism is in itself, by the very nature of those belief systems, almost an impossible task. Hinduism is a religion

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<sup>27</sup> One of Euclidean geometry's foundational theorems posits that two parallel lines will never intersect. Yet, as Albert Einstein centuries later claimed, space is, in fact, warped, thus two parallel lines have the possibility of intersecting in such a warped space.

with thousands of deities and a similar number of doctrinal variations and schools, and Buddhism has always focused on the particular perspective of the follower rather than any prescribed doctrine or dogma. Historically as well, people in Asia, as on all continents, have never avoided changing and adapting these religions to better relate to their local environments. Hinduism was substantially changed by the advent of Buddhism in India, and Buddhism itself was changed to reflect the local cultures from Laos to China to Japan. The original meditation practice of *dhyana* in India transformed itself in China into Chán Buddhism through the effects of Daoism and transformed itself again into the Japanese variant of Zen. Thus Buddhism, originating and divided into schools in India, translated in China, transmitted via Korea and Japan, and finally arriving in America, had by virtue of that journey through time and space both ceased to be Buddhism, becoming a borrowed, foreign creed, and became more like Buddhism as it enacted its own fundamental principles of change and karmic causality.

Certainly Christianity itself is not necessarily a pristine religion on its own terms, being influenced by Judaism and Zoroastrianism, and later Hellenized and then Germanized as it traveled through the Mediterranean and Europe. Most religions of the world were thus developed through this ongoing contact and exchange with other faiths and ideas. Religious scholars are continually frustrated in their attempts to uncover a pristine or incontrovertible original beginning of religious identity. The cultural anthropologist Franz Boas argued that “civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization

goes....The physiological and psychological state of an organism at a certain moment is a function of its whole history.”<sup>28</sup>

If a “true or correct” belief structure is not necessary in order to effectuate particular changes according to the above dictates, then Americans are free to pick and choose whatever works for them. However much adherents of Asian religions believed that particular facets of American culture prevented them from realizing their goals, other facets of that same culture were instrumental in setting them on their journey by providing them the intellectual and institutional freedom to pick and choose their basic belief structures, at least in the post-theocratic world that followed the breakdown of the Puritan regimen. This fundamental cultural trait of picking and choosing has many antecedents in Western civilization. From Socrates admonishing that one cannot proclaim one poet to be superior to all others without first studying all others, to the scientific revolution’s foremost proponent Francis Bacon’s methodology of objective evaluation of all components. In American history, the Constitution sets down in the first amendment’s Establishment Clause that the government shall not establish a national religion. Although part of the motivation for this clause was to ensure against the domination of one Christian denomination over another, its essential philosophy has since been incorporated into the American psyche, as the idea that the religious landscape should be independent from a centrally controlled authority. In addition, the First Amendment’s “free exercise” clause enabled Americans to choose whichever belief structure they so desired from this ever expanding religious marketplace. Certainly, the ideals of the Constitution have often lagged behind American realities, yet such ideals have always left a large imprint on the American character.

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<sup>28</sup> Franz Boas, “Museums of Ethnology and Their Classification,” *Science*, 9 (1887): 587-589, 589.

Furthermore, Asian traditions were imported into the United States because at the very core of the issue they served a purpose. For those who adopted these beliefs, to whatever degree, they were convinced that the traditions, cultures, or religions of Asia offered a more effective method for realizing values that were already rooted in the American setting. “[T]he point that bears emphasizing,” Peter Gregory argues in the specific case of Buddhism, “is that in such cases Buddhism is being adopted as a means to fulfill some higher value that is seen not so much as being Buddhist but as being universal.” These values included “self-realization, freedom, transforming relationships, getting in touch with one’s experience, living more fully in the moment or the world, healing, and so forth.” Gregory further notes that: “[t]heir concern is not so much with being Buddhist per se as it is in using Buddhist practices and ideas as a means of realizing goals whose ‘truth’ is not necessarily seen to reside in their being Buddhist. This point highlights the different place that Buddhism occupies in the constellation of the identity of American converts in contrast to Asian American and immigrant Buddhists: whereas for the latter, Buddhism is more typically a central part of their identity; for the former, it is more often incidental or secondary.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly, Gregory’s analysis holds true for Hinduism, Daoism, and the whole of Asian traditions that were imported into the United States.

### *Asian Religions and “Progressivism”*

Exactly how amenable were Asian religions as a whole, and in particular the main variants of American interest, Hinduism and Buddhism, to their utilization as instruments

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” *Religion and American Culture*, Vol 11, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 233-263, 250.

against the perceived negative aspects of individualism, materialism, and the other perceived social ills of modernity? Is the idea that “action is the consummation of thought” existent in Asia as well? For example, were the seeds of what is termed today “socially engaged Buddhism” present in its founding? Furthermore, how effective have Hinduism and Buddhist been historically in combating such trends?

Hinduism has at the varied core of its numerous sects the Four Yogas, *raja-yoga*, *jnana-yoga*, *karma-yoga*, and *bhakti-yoga*. Essentially, these different techniques are utilized to achieve a union of one’s *Atman* with the ultimate consciousness, *Brahman*. The word “yoga” itself is related to the English word “yoke,” that is, “to bind.” The goal of yoga thus was to bind “one’s divine spirit,” the *Atman*, to the “ultimate and universal divine,” the *Brahman*. In Hindu thought, each individual has his or her own natural proclivities that must be considered in determining the method for obtaining this ultimate goal, and thus choosing the appropriate *yogic* path. *Raja-yoga*,<sup>30</sup> or the “royal yoga,” deals directly with balancing the mind and emotions through focused meditation. “Devotion yoga,” called *bhakti-yoga*, is, as the name implies, focused on the adoration of God and is thus extremely emotional and religious. *Jnana-yoga*, or “wisdom yoga,” is the intellectual or theoretical path. Study and introspection are used in order to differentiate the permanent from the transitory, and the real from the illusionary. The final yoga and the path most common among the subjects of this study is the *karma-yoga*, or the “yoga of action.” Through the practice of this method one improves one’s karma through righteous behavior and selfless action.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Hatha-yoga*, or “forceful yoga,” which focuses on strengthening the mind through strengthening the body is often grouped as part of *raja-yoga*.

<sup>31</sup> Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship), 1998.



Karma, beyond the metaphysical idea it is often associated with, also has a temporal dimension as well. One's prior actions last month or last year directly affect one's current condition—you reap what you sow. It is important to recognize that the four yogas listed here are not prioritized in any particular order. Each method is designed for specific types of individuals (and even for specific stages in an individual's life) and it is the individuals themselves that must decide which method is best for them; although this does not exclude the need for a guide. The Yogi, Paramahansa Yogananda, focuses on this fundamental idea of Hinduism, "With wise discernment the guru guided his followers into the paths of Bhakti (devotion), Karma (action), Jnana (wisdom), or Raja (royal or complete) Yoga, according to each man's natural tendencies."<sup>32</sup> Many of those interested in Hinduism in America did not need a guide to direct them to the path of action, *karma-yoga*. They were so attuned to this method by the very nature of the culture from which they came. Certainly many adherents, sympathizers, and followers of Hinduism were also greatly intrigued by the literature, history, and theology of Hinduism itself, but this was a natural response of those with no background in the particular subject of their interest. Of course the aesthetic beauty of many of the sacred writings of Asia compelled many to delve into them, but there was also a more pragmatic and utilitarian reason. Because those Americans interested in Asian religions were obviously not born into a Hindu-based culture they required a considerable amount of time on the wisdom (*Jnana*) path in order to "catch-up." However, for the most part, the subjects of this study were in the final analysis journeying on the road of action.

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<sup>32</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles, CA: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1998), 377.

For its part, Buddhism began in the fifth century B.C.E. as a reaction to the suffering in the world as seen by the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. Upon seeing for the first time an elderly person, a sick person, and a corpse being carried to the funeral pyre, Gautama vowed to search for a way to alleviate the suffering of the world. What was to be called “socially engaged Buddhism” over two thousand years later by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh was essentially the origin of Buddhism itself, to actively seek an end to suffering. From this basic foundation arose countless works, doctrines, and methods. Once Gautama discovered the path to the alleviation of suffering and became a Buddha, an “awakened one,” he consciously chose not to keep the answers to himself but set forth on a lifelong journey to “turn the wheel” of the *dharma*, that is, to “set in motion” the cessation of suffering. According to Buddhism, a fundamental cause of that suffering was and continues to be attachment to objects of the world, what we call today materialism, and the obsessive and ultimately unhealthy identification with our own egos that is the hallmark of individualism.

Kenneth Tanaka and Thomas Tweed are indeed correct in claiming that Buddhism in America was hampered “due to the absence in Buddhism of two qualities: optimism and activism.”<sup>33</sup> However, this perceived lack of optimism and activism in Buddhism is perhaps more a result of the limited knowledge of Buddhist thought and history that existed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America. To overcome this perceived limitation, reflecting the history of other countries’ experiences with the importation and adoption of Buddhism throughout the centuries, Americans naturally affixed their own cultural stamp on Buddhism. This “Buddhism in America,” or,

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<sup>33</sup> Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 7.

is it time to call it “American Buddhism,” compensated for the traits seen missing or deficient in the “original version” with traits that were seen as uniquely American. Although it certainly got off to a late start, the sheer speed of change in America influenced the change and adaptation of Buddhism as well. A unique American style of Buddhism, or perhaps more correctly a Westernized form of Buddhism, continues to be developing to this day.

During the same late nineteenth century, while Asian thought and religions were gaining an ever-increasing audience in America, there was another intellectual movement gaining momentum that facilitated the continued adoption by many in America of Asian thought, especially those beliefs infused with holistic ideas, Pragmatism. George Santayana characterized Americans at their most fundamental level as “idealist[s] working on a matter.”<sup>34</sup> Americans were the consummate pragmatists. And Pragmatists such as Charles Sander Peirce, William James, and John Dewey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further developed this strain of American culture and thought academically. Dewey, perhaps the greatest explicator of Pragmatism, especially in its socially active dimension, argued that one must evaluate all possibilities in order to arrive at an effective and workable solution. In an often cited, yet also often misunderstood, distillation of this process, Dewey proclaimed that “truth works.” That is, if the solution discerned from such an Instrumentalist approach, as he characterized his version of Pragmatism, worked, then it was true or correct within that particular cultural *milieu*.

This qualification is important. Dewey did not believe humankind could deduce universal truths, at least not anytime soon, and that such an enterprise was relatively

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<sup>34</sup> George Santayana, edited and with an introductory by Douglas L Wilson, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 124.

unfruitful and had as its price the sacrifice of the immediate good that could be accomplished. Thus what could work in Japan, China, India, or Iran might not necessarily work in an American setting. Yet Dewey did differentiate between short term and long term solutions. If  $x$  was the best possible solution, yet the people of the time were not open to  $x$ , or, if  $x$  was a proposal that could not possibly gain traction in a democracy, then  $x$  was not the best possible solution; thus, in the short term, another alternative would have to be investigated and followed to its conclusion. However, in the long term, making  $x$  a part of a national discussion in order for it to be better received in the future was part of an ultimate and/or more efficacious solution. And setting the foundation for a possible long term solution was just as important as the short term “band aid.”

American adherents of Asian religions followed this logic, many perhaps unwittingly, and believed their new found system could help Americans escape from individualism and materialism in their culture not only in the short run but also in the long run. Thus even though, as will soon be apparent, Asian religions made slow inroads in America the seeds that were so sewn with great effort by such early pioneers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Daniel Dyer Lum, and others germinated over the decades and came into bloom in the 1950s and 1960s, and will, as its proponents hoped, continue to bloom for decades and centuries to come.

Some cultural critics, however, have argued recently that availing ourselves of multiple possibilities and solutions closes us to the one truth and by doing so we harm our culture even more. Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) argued as much by claiming that opening up to more or different ideas closes us to choosing or knowing one as correct or true. He further posited that academics have robbed their

students of the myth of objective truth necessary for effective reasoning. Many other scholars have of course taken Bloom to task for his assertions. Richard Rorty, a modern day proponent of Deweyan Pragmatism, takes issue with Bloom and accuses him of missing the difference between the perfect solution to a problem and the best solution to a problem.<sup>35</sup> As we have seen, Euclidean geometry is still a fully functioning system without the possession of true first principles. However, this does not infer that any system of ideas will suffice; the case of Martin Heidegger during the Nazi era in Germany is illustrative. According to Heidegger's well-thought out, yet fundamentally flawed philosophy, the system of ideas one adopts does not really matter as long as it is carried to its fullest, because the existential limitations of humankind prevent us from truly knowing reality in the first place. Problems arise, of course, when belief structures such as Heidegger's do not factor in other communities outside themselves, what Peter Singer would later call the "expanded circle." Singer argues that "a decision must give equal weight to the interests of all affected by it."<sup>36</sup> In Heidegger's case he did not factor in the effect of his support for the Nazi Party on the communities outside of that limited circle: the Jews, the gypsies, and the disabled, to name just a few.

Yet would adopting or infusing ideas from such Asian cultures so different in many respects from American culture, not have the effect of separating Americans from their own unique and rich culture? Samuel Huntington argues in *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004) that America has moved away from an exclusive attachment to U.S. nationalism and toward a more cosmopolitan international identity, just as earlier Americans in the post-Revolutionary era and post-Civil War era

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Rorty, "That Old-Time Philosophy," *The New Republic* (April 4, 1988), 28-33.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (New York, NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1981), 100.

moved away from their sole identification with being Virginians or New Yorkers towards a national identity as Americans. Thus, history has shown that the infusion of different cultures is our own unique and rich culture in America. In the case of a rebalancing of individualism and materialism in modern America, what many of the subjects of this study were attempting, was actually a return to a balance more pronounced in America earlier in its history. For example, in terms of economic theory Adam Smith believed that “self interest” should act as the fundamental guide for the economy, however this “self interest” has morphed into its extreme form, “greed.” It is this recognition by the subjects under analysis in these pages that the fundamental components of American culture, and most importantly the goals of American culture, should not be forgotten. The only difference is that these individuals and groups employed Asian ideas to reach those goals.

It is appropriate at this juncture to emphasize that this study is not necessarily a study of Asian religions or thought per se, or a study of the introduction or development of Asian religions as a purely theological enterprise in America either inside or outside of Asian ethnic communities. Our focus will confine itself to a specific strain of the influence of Asian religions and thought in America, that is, as the title suggests, its actual influence on the American culture and institutions of reform. There have been several studies analyzing the interaction of Asian religions in America; however, none have focused on the relative success or failure of the particular sympathizers or adherents of Asian religions with regards to reform movements, the intellectual foundations of reform, and the other similar constellation of reform-oriented institutions and activities in America. Thomas Tweed’s seminal work *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912 Victorian Culture & the Limits of Dissent* is, for all intents and purposes, the

jumping off point for the current study. As such, his work is crucial for the current study; however, this study continues his line of thought and attempts to ascertain the ultimate success of the subjects under consideration in his study and the current one.<sup>37</sup>

The various reform movements under analysis here were, and still are, extremely difficult to define. There have been no ultimately defining singular pitched battles, or legal victories with specific dates, no constitutions or formal leaders, no quantifiable statistics and no formal set of beliefs. There have been all of these, continuously stacked up, event by event, to form a whole greater than the sum of its many parts. Furthermore, inherent in this study is the continual blurring of national borders. Historian Geoffrey Barraclough questioned whether histories with a “myopic concentration on individual nations could effectively illuminate the world in which we live.”<sup>38</sup> This study hopefully makes it clear that they cannot. Thus this study will cross national borders as freely and as easily as the actual subjects of this work crossed those same borders both intellectually and physically.

### *The Early History and Development of Asian Religions in America*

Christopher Columbus of course set sail searching for Asian markets but it was not until the 1780s that American merchants first began to trade actively in Asia. In 1784 the *Empress of China* dropped anchor in Canton and the merchant ship *United States* began trade with India the same year. It was from these merchants that the first direct

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912 Victorian Culture & the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Eric Foner *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 52.

interaction between Americans and Asians occurred. However, the merchants were often men of limited education, and they sent back observations that would lead to a predominately-negative view of Asia. Samuel Shaw, who made several trips to Asia in the late eighteenth century, confirmed the views of many in the West after he visited a Chinese temple, proclaiming that the “most seemingly extravagant accounts of their idolatry and superstition” were indeed the truth.<sup>39</sup>

In the early nineteenth century missionaries from America began to make trips to Asia, first to India in 1812, and then to China in 1830. Considering themselves unsuccessful at first, they began steadily to increase their presence and impact as the decades progressed, both in terms of actual conversions, but perhaps more importantly as “representatives” of a new and largely unknown nation, the United States of America. While missionaries were often more educated than merchants, and spent more time in country, their accounts were often colored by their own agenda in Asia, to proselytize Christianity, and therefore many were not interested in studying Asian religions in their own right, but instead in learning enough of the particular religions in order to criticize and denounce them. Winston King recounts the process of this gradual breakdown of the “militant Christian attitude”: “For possessed of The Only Truth, who can be interested in another’s error? But, with increasingly serious questions being raised about the absolute, watertight uniqueness of the Christian gospel, and with the accompanying weakening and changing of the Christian missionary impulse, the sectarian barrier to interest in and study of Eastern religions began to dissolve a generation ago.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, this dissolution of the

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<sup>39</sup> Josiah Quincy (ed.), *The Journals of Major Samuel Shaw* (Boston, MA: William Crosby & H. P. Nichols, 1847), 195.

<sup>40</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” 68.



sectarian barrier can be witnessed much earlier in the lives of a select few Americans—specifically, those under analysis here.

Scholarship on Asian religions in America began, as most cross-cultural studies have, largely as a focus on interpretations of religious or philosophical texts originally produced in Asia in order to understand the “other.” Missionary correspondence from the front lines of the “pagan world” made the pages of journals back in America such as the *Missionary Herald*. These provided some of the first pieces of direct knowledge in America of Asian religions that had not first been first filtered through European sources. Many of the earlier books on Asian religions were introduced to America via Europe in the early eighteenth century. After an initial and quite narrowly focused period of interest, scholarship began to diversify into many different fields. Hinduism, the original focus of many Americans and Europeans, was later replaced with a focus on Buddhism, although Buddhism of the Theravada school. It was not until the late nineteenth century, particularly after the 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago, that the Buddhism of East Asia, Mahayana Buddhism, gained dominance over Theravada Buddhism in the United States.

It was 1879 publication of Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* that brought Buddhism to America in a major way. The work was a retelling of the life of the Buddha written in free verse. It has gone through over 60 English and 80 American editions, selling more than one million copies in America and England. In the preface to the book Arnold writes: “In the following Poem I have sought, by the medium of an imaginary Buddhist votary, to depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble

hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism.”<sup>41</sup> Arnold purposely modeled his story of Buddhist legends to appeal to an audience accustomed to Christian legends. Certainly, the literary style was a major reason for its phenomenal success; however, the substantive approach used by Arnold also accounts for its success as well. Arnold emphasized the similarities between the teaching and the lives of Buddha and Jesus.<sup>42</sup>

Not until the first half of the twentieth century did Buddhism, as seen through the eyes of the Japanese and Chinese, make a presence in America. And today, as alluded to earlier, we are also witnessing the beginning of an “American Buddhism.” Within the last couple of decades, academic scholarship has taken into account this American variation of Buddhism by exploring the American variations and adaptations of Asian religions and simultaneously beginning to display an appreciation for the American community and their many contributions. America’s contributions and struggles with those same rich traditions have slowly but steadily carved out a place both inside and outside of academia.

However, for the most part, these studies have been conducted by members within those particular communities. Outside of the communities of followers and enthusiasts there has been little in the way of scholarly analysis of the American experience with Asian religions. One scholar who has attempted to analyze this community from the outside is T. J. Jackson Lears in his insightful work *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (1981). Lears argues that

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<sup>41</sup> Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1879), vii.

<sup>42</sup> See Arthur E. Christy, editor. *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York, NY: John Day, 1942), and Brooks Wright, *Interpreter of Buddhism to the West: Sir Edwin Arnold* (New York, NY: Bookman Associates, 1957).

followers of Asian religions can be grouped into a larger community of individuals who were attempting to “escape” from the realities of the modern world, and Asian ideas, particularly Asian religions, along with the other movements, including the arts and crafts movement, became a form of therapy. Lears reflects Anton Chekov’s belief that, “To retreat from town, from the struggle, from the bustle of life, to retreat and bury oneself in one’s farm—it’s not life, it’s egotism, laziness, it’s monasticism of a sort, but monasticism without good works.”<sup>43</sup> Lears argues that by avoiding the real problems in the world, not only through retreating to the country as Henry David Thoreau had done, but also through a psychological or intellectual retreat or escape, such “rebels” actually assisted the process by which the dominant ideology and culture, of which they protested, took control of America. Furthermore, their inability or unwillingness to unite or see the need to unite in opposition to a situation that they considered to be harmful to the short and long term interest of America *contributed* to the eventual success of the dominant ideology.

Lears continues by detailing the complexities of what he calls this movement’s “antimodernism” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the equally complex and often unintended effects it had on American culture. Lears insists that the antimodernists of the time were not simply seeking an escape; rather they were part of a much broader quest rooted in a crisis of cultural authority brought on by the apparent unreality of modernity, particularly the revulsion against rationalization as expressed through the writings of Max Weber. Lears describes this feeling by utilizing Nietzsche’s idea of “weightlessness,” a temper of “hazy moral distinctions and vague spiritual

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<sup>43</sup> Anton Chekhov, “Gooseberries,” in *The Essential Tales of Chekhov*, edited and with an introduction by Richard Ford. Translated by Constance Garnett. (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2000), 269.

commitments.”<sup>44</sup> The antimodernist quest sought meaning and expressed protest in a number of different movements.

Beyond the movement under analysis here, Lears analyzes several other similar groups, including the arts and crafts movement, that attempted to recover authenticity of not only action and thought, but also feeling. After all, the fragmentation of life manifested itself nowhere more clearly than in the modern division of labor. Craftsmen, both professional and amateur, attempted to revitalize their lives through the wholeness of production accomplished through individual identity. However, the marketplace often co-opted this holistic endeavor and turned it into another arm of mass production.

While ostensibly the polar opposite of the arts and crafts movement, the martial ideal of self-sacrifice and the strenuous life was another attempt to bring meaning to an apparently meaningless world. The bourgeois obsession with corruption would be transformed into duty and heroism; decadence transformed into Spartan virtue. Again, this movement, embodied no more clearly than in the persona of Theodore Roosevelt, was transformed, with the help of racism, into a strident form of imperialism. Closer to the movement under analysis here was the antimodernist use of Western medieval religious mentalities. Lears argues that these movements, rather than providing an end, quite often simply provided a consumptive experience. Thus, these quests for transformation through authentic experience floundered, and the often shallow experience itself became the objective. “What begins in discontent with a vapid modern culture,”

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<sup>44</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1983), 32.

Lears writes, “ends as another quest for self-fulfillment—the dominant ideal of our sleeker, therapeutic modern culture.”<sup>45</sup>

Yet Lears is quick to point out that these quests cannot be considered simply as a reaction against modernization or as an accommodation; they were far more idiosyncratic. All of these movements had as a common denominator, the sheer complexity of motivations and compositions. For example, even though many were antimodern they often looked to modern methods to solve modern problems. This study contends that there are even more “idiosyncrasies” to this picture. To be fair to Lears, he never argued that his list of attributes was exhaustive. Lears and others confine themselves to a particular era and a particular dynamic and have thus failed to consider the intergenerational dynamics inherent in such movements, especially among the followers of Asian religions. Some of the groups under analysis here, the Transcendentalists, the Theosophists, the Pragmatists, and the Progressives have been more effective than others in their own particular utilizations of Asian religions as a means of dissent and as a method of amelioration of the problems they observed in America. While ultimately not always successful in their efforts to redirect American culture towards a trajectory more to their liking, some of these adherents of Asian religions did make significant contributions to American history, culture, and society. They laid down seeds that would blossom later.

Richard Koenigsberg argues that whereas Sigmund Freud considered dreams the “royal road to the unconscious,” he considers ideology the “royal road to the cultural unconscious.” Ideologies, for Koenigsberg, “exist and persist...to the extent that they perform psychic functions for individuals within a population.” He contends that the

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

purpose of studying a particular ideology “is to reveal its psychic meaning—the needs, desires, fantasies, conflicts and human dilemmas to which the ideology responds.” In our case, the ideologies are grouped under the umbrella I have called Asian thought and religions. This study examines the “needs, desires, fantasies, conflicts and human dilemmas” to which followers of Asian thought and religions were exposed in American history. Norman O. Brown, according to Koenigsberg, suggested that human impulses must first find “real objects in the external world and attach themselves to real objects before their nature can manifest to the subject.”<sup>46</sup> For the rather disparate group under consideration here, the common thread became their similar attachment to Asian religions as possible answers to their “needs and desires.”

This study does not focus on the American interpretation of Asian religions per se, although that is certainly part of the larger objective. Nor does it detail the philosophical wrangling of Eastern thought and Asian religions in America, or the history of established communities, such as meditation societies, or temples. Distillation and debate over the exact lineage, pedigree, and ideas of communities and leaders in America is left to others.<sup>47</sup> This study instead focuses on the motivations and goals of those who adopted or followed Asian thought and religions and more importantly how those newly acquired world views affected their relationship with American history, culture, and society outside of their particular communities.

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Koenigsberg, “Making Conscious the Unconscious in Social Reality: The Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Culture,” *Anthropology Newsletter*, February 1997.

<sup>47</sup> For an excellent introduction to Buddhism in America, see: Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1992), for Hinduism in America see, Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta in America: The Ramakrishna Movement in the West* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

## Typologies

There have been several attempts at typologies of followers of Asian religious groups in America. The use of “ideal types,” as popularized by Max Weber, has the potential to either enhance or limit a scholarly dialogue. Ideal types can best be described as “theoretical constructs that function as more or less useful interpretive tools. They are designed by accentuating and exaggerating some feature(s) of empirical reality and then formulating a logically consistent construct.”<sup>48</sup> However, it is important to note the pitfalls in constructing interpretive ideal types; “No historical individual, position, or group will correspond perfectly to any of the types; and the types always are linked with the particular interests and guiding questions of the investigator.”<sup>49</sup>

In the case of followers of Buddhism, three types have been proposed, which can also be extended to the followers of Hinduism as well: “immigrant” or “ethnic Buddhism,” “import Buddhism,” and “export” or “evangelical Buddhism.” “Immigrant,” or “ethnic Buddhism,” the oldest and largest group, is comprised of immigrants to America who were already members of their particular Buddhist traditions before coming to America. This group of “ethnic Buddhists” increased after the relaxation of immigration laws for those from Asia in 1965. However, before 1965 the most visible group of Buddhists was the “import Buddhists.” This group consisted of those who were interested in Buddhism and thus imported traditions through going overseas or supporting foreign teachers in the United States, or through their own readings of Asian texts. This group is also sometimes referred to as “elite Buddhism” due to many of its members belonging to the upper class strata, represented by Zen, Vipassanā, and Vajrayāna. The third and newest category is

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<sup>48</sup> Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

“export” or “evangelical Buddhism.” These groups are often based outside the United States yet are actively recruiting members in the United States, the most successful being the Sōka Gakkai, a Japanese variant of Buddhism.

Thomas Tweed advances a more nuanced typology for grouping of these movements. He dismisses the tendency by Western religious scholars to see religious identity as “singular and fixed,” and that religious identity as comprised simply of adherents and non-adherents. The essentialist or normative approach suggests that “adherents” of a particular religion accept certain defining beliefs and practices, while for others an “adherent is one who joins a religious organization or participates in its ritual life.”<sup>50</sup> This issue arises from the fundamental difference between the doctrinaire and dogmatic nature of Western religions, especially those within the Judea-Christian-Islamic constellation of beliefs, and the essentially non-dogmatic non-doctrinaire nature of Asian religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Limiting membership to these hard and fast rules also limits and obscures the analysis of the field as a whole.

Furthermore, Emma Layman has also included the “sympathizers” in her analysis, calling them “inquirers” or “Dharma hoppers.” She defined “inquirers” as those who are “transients at the temple or meditation center, as well as non-Buddhist scholars and Christian clergymen who may be on several Buddhist mailing lists.” “Dharma hoppers” for Layman are “shopping around for a magic key to happiness and peace of mind, then dropping out.” The tourist aspect of these groups is well appreciated by Layman: “Many have tried several Buddhist sects, some have tried several Christian denominations before becoming Buddhists, and some played around with Yoga, Krishna Murti, or Sufi’

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<sup>50</sup> Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen, eds. *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (UK: Routledge, 1999), 71.



[sic].”<sup>51</sup> “However we classify things,” Peter Gregory interjects, “we should not lose sight of the fact that our categories are provisional, and, given the changes we can expect to see in the next half century, probably only apply for a limited time. In any event, it is unrealistic to expect consensus, and the disagreement may help nudge the field beyond its still primitive level of sophistication.”<sup>52</sup>

Tweed points to one of the fundamental questions and problems in the study of religious history: the issue of defining religious identity, especially with regards to identifying norms and counting members. Is a Buddhist only one who has taken refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha? Or, is a Buddhist one who attends “services” regularly, or accepts the “doctrine” of the Four Noble Truths? Tweed claims that this type of normative approach fails on many fronts. “It fails to acknowledge that traditions change, that they have contacts and exchanges with other traditions, and that hybrid traditions emerge with diverse expressions claiming authenticity. Any normative definition of religion, therefore, excludes many who might want to count themselves as followers.”<sup>53</sup>

There is a cultural limitation as well, especially in the time frame under analysis here. That is, within the particular social and political climate within which the individuals under analysis here lived, there were various and often severe repercussions to aligning themselves with a “pagan religion.” The somewhat similar history of Catholics, particularly Irish Catholics, in America must not be forgotten. The stigmatism that they endured, especially the assumption that they were not true patriots because of

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<sup>51</sup> Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 203.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory, “Describing the Elephant,” 246.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, “Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion,” in *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*. Edited by Duncan Ryūken Williams and Christopher S. Queen. (UK: Routledge, 1999), 72.

their “papal allegiance,” was not “put to rest” by the majority of Americans until the successful election of John F. Kennedy. Asian faiths were obviously seen by many as even more pagan, foreign, dangerous, and antithetical to American ideals than Catholicism and therefore the cultural and social “penalties” for membership were even more pronounced. Thus it was often a strategy of social or professional survival to hide or at the very least to speak obliquely of one’s commitment or interest in Asian religions. A parallel situation can be witnessed today in America within the ever-growing agnostic and atheist communities.

Thus we see that the complexity of the present study is even more pronounced in that conversion “involved a more or a less (often less) complete shift of beliefs and practices. The old tradition never fades completely; the new one never shapes exclusively.” The uncovering of our subjects is made even more difficult by the high social cost of “conversion” in America. Many converts “might do all they can to hide... [their conversion] from public view. Some celebrate conversion; others conceal it. Either way, the converts’ self-understanding and everyday practice is complex.”

Thus with all these limitations and complexities it has never been easy to discern an accurate number of Hindus or Buddhists in America. The simplest reason is that extremely difficult to categorize who is and who is not a member of a particular religion. Using self-description has its own difficulties. For example, Buddhism can also be categorized in the American setting as a “cultural concept” rather than just as a religion. Thus some may describe themselves as Buddhists without ever attending a Buddhist place of worship, and the opposite can also be true. One may have a long history in the community of Buddhists and attend Buddhist services regularly but not call themselves

Buddhist. However this is not unique to the American setting. A similar situation exists in Japan. For historical reasons many Japanese consider themselves members of a particular Buddhist community even though they may have never actively involved themselves in that community or the sect's practices. They consider themselves members simply through the required registration of their ancestors to a particular local temple for census purposes.

With full knowledge of the limitations involved, this study will use the criterion proposed by Tweed and Prebish, that simply self-identification as a Buddhist or a Hindu will suffice to count that individual as such.<sup>54</sup> As we shall see, Asian religions have indeed already exerted an influence on the American landscape well beyond the number of individuals who some would consider "strict believers."

Although this study uses the phrase "Asian Religions and Reform Movements in Modern America" it will soon be apparent that Buddhism will be its major focus. Hinduism, while influencing the early subjects of this study, Emerson and Thoreau, soon diminished in comparison to Buddhism in its influence and popularity in America. Other religions and traditions from Asia, Confucianism, Daoism, and Sikhism, had even less of an impact on this period and will thus receive coverage comparable to their relative influence on American culture and society.

Even though this study focuses predominantly on Buddhism in America, the limited scope of analysis does not avoid definitional difficulties. Peter N. Gregory expresses a sentiment that exudes from all scholarship on this subject, including the present study. Gregory uses the Buddhist parable of the Elephant to illustrate his point. Essentially, as the parable has been conveyed over the centuries, several blind monks

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<sup>54</sup> See Tweed, *Night-Stand Buddhists*, 79-80, and Prebish, *Luminous Passages*, 56.

observe different things while touching an elephant, one feels a wall, one feels a column, etc. Gregory believes that this truism can also be extended to the academic study of Buddhism as well as a warning “against the danger of mistaking the part for the whole.” He continues, “I have chosen this parable in part because it expresses my sense of frustration-one that I suspect many researchers in the field share-that the phenomenon of American Buddhism is far too large for any one person to grasp in its totality. In reflecting on the available literature, I certainly feel as if we have gotten a hand on some of the parts, but I am not sure we even know which parts they are, much less how they might be put together.”<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately, the poor elephant does not escape with just an examination by a few monks or a few American researchers, but has to succumb to a postmodern existentialist dissection. “To our postmodern sensibilities,” Gregory writes, “of course, the very basis on which this parable is predicated may seem suspect. After all, it presumes that there is an elephant, that this elephant is whole and unified, and that there is (in theory at least) a privileged position from which the elephant can be seen in its totality.”<sup>56</sup>

This study utilizes as its basic structure the simple and overused crux of historians, chronology, although certain exceptions had to be made to group particular characters into more appropriate groups or movements. It begins with the first Americans deeply interested in Asian religions, Ralph Waldo Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists, then advances through time to the Theosophists, the “Boston Buddhists,” to the eve of the Great Depression. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and the “Lesser Transcendentalists,” including James Freeman Clarke and Moncure Conway, are the

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<sup>55</sup> Gregory, “Describing the Elephant,” 240.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

main foci in the first section. Each had their own unique approaches and uses for the learning of Asia and each contributed a unique legacy to its beginning in America. The Theosophists were a much more limited group in America both with respect to membership and legacy. Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott are the main foci of this study's analysis of that group. However, the coverage of neither group will be confined to just a few of its most famous characters. As we shall see, the Theosophists also introduced a variant of Asian religions in American that continued after them and each group will be contextualized both spatially and temporally. For example, the disparate group of individuals who called themselves Theosophists selectively adopted and adapted certain elements of Asian thought and religions and then proceeded to utilize them not only in America but took those ideas with them back into Asia itself. This study continues with the so-called "Boston Buddhists," including Edward Sylvester Morse, Ernest Fenollosa, William Sturgis Bigelow and Percival Lowell. This group, however, did not limit itself to Boston alone. In fact, many in this group, frustrated by the limited sources for study available in the America, travelled throughout Asia to see and experience the cultures, traditions, and religions of the continent for themselves.

The 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago serves as the starting point for the next section of this study. It was at this international gathering that we see the first concerted effort by Asians themselves to explain their own beliefs and views. They accomplished this feat through several sympathetic and industrious personalities including Paul Carus, Arba N. Waterman, Marie de Souza Canavarro and Sara Chapman Bull. The final section details the branching out of Asian religions and thought in

America and is thus less singular or restricted. A wide range of characters emerge during this time with wide ranging views, motivations, and goals, from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, to Dyer Daniel Lum and Irving Babbitt.

## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSCENDING THE WORLD:

#### TRANSCENDENTALISTS AND THEOSOPHISTS

The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.<sup>1</sup>  
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854

#### **Passage to more than India!**

Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?  
O soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyage like those?  
Disportest thou on waters such as those?  
Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?  
Then have thy bent unleash'd.

...

#### **Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!**

Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;  
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,  
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.  
O my brave soul!  
O farther, farther sail!  
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?  
O farther, farther, farther sail!<sup>2</sup>

Walt Whitman, *Passage to India*, 1900

The Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century were the first major group in America to incorporate Asian religions into their own view of the world. Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson were the most famous members of the Transcendentalist movement. As we shall soon recognize, similar to other groups in this study, it was at best a loose confederation of individuals that possessed similar intellectual tendencies and perhaps can only truly be called a “group” in the normal sense of the word in blurred hindsight.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1854, 1995), 193.

<sup>2</sup> Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1969), 539-540.

However, a small group of individuals did indeed establish the Transcendental Club in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1836. Yet the wider, intellectually-based Transcendentalist movement we recognize today was rooted in the idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Specifically, the group of authors, philosophers, and social critics wanted to ground their philosophy not on the sensuous world but on the inner spiritual or mental essence, what Kant called knowledge that concerned itself “not so much with objects as with our mode of knowing objects insofar as this knowledge is supposed to be possible a priori.”<sup>3</sup>

Frederick Henry Hedge, one of the founders of what would become the Transcendentalist Club, was crucial to the introduction of Kant’s ideas in America, especially his idea of a Copernican Revolution in philosophy. Hedge explained: “Since the supposition that our institutions depend on the nature of the world without will not answer, [let us] assume that the world without depends on the nature of our intuitions.” Hedge contended that this accounted for the very possibility of “a priori knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> And this move away from the sensuous world was, at its most basic, an attempt to balance what many regarded as an ever increasing overemphasis on atomistic individualism, materialism, and Scottish skepticism in the Western world. Many of those who identified themselves as Transcendentalists, or who have since been identified as such by scholars, were highly interested in and sympathetic towards Asian religions. Although the Transcendentalists as individuals were not the very first Americans to be

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<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Robert D Richardson. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 165. Original quotation can be found in: F. H. Hedge, *Christian Examiner*, 15:7 1833, 124, 125.



interested in Asian religions, they have certainly become one of the most famous groups to do so.

Upon reading the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Laws of Manu*, Thoreau wrote: “I cannot read a sentence in the book of the Hindoos without being elevated as upon the table-land of the Ghauts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, and seems as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh Mounts.”<sup>5</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson called Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* a “mixture” of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Herald*. Certainly the view of Asian religions had come along way from the earlier negative accounts by merchants and missionaries. It is important, however, to point out that the Transcendentalists did not analyze Asian religions as scholars of comparative religion, instead they approached their subject predominately as spiritual seekers. Carl T. Jackson eloquently characterizes this group’s unique approach: “Trusting in intuition, relying on the heart rather than the head, they tended to ignore inconvenient differences between the various Eastern traditions and to assume that all somehow represented a single universal religion. As writers, they were less interested in the specifics of Asian religion than in the “lusters” to be found throughout the texts, which they viewed as echoes of the Oversoul or universal spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

The Transcendentalist movement became a cultural force in America with the 1836 publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Nature*. Emerson called for a revolution in consciousness which in turn would transform the world: “Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will

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<sup>5</sup> Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (eds.), *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, 20 vols. (New York, NY: AMS Press, 1968), VII, 266.

<sup>6</sup> Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 9.

unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The intellectual foundation for this idea can be traced partly to the ideas of Thomas Carlyle, from whom Emerson drew inspiration for the ideas he expressed in his 1837 oration to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, Massachusetts, “The American Scholar.” Carlyle argued that human beings had the authority, in many respects, of an independent deity. William Wordsworth, a favorite poet in America at the time, eloquently described this same active and powerful mind: “The human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this.”<sup>8</sup> The idea of “action as the consummation of thought,” with both “action” and “thought” serving as equivalently key components of the formula, was an integral part of this movement. The movement was not simply an intellectual exercise (although that was certainly a fundamental part of this endeavor), but an attempt to effectuate change in the human condition. As will soon become apparent, “thought,” that “pure idea in your mind,” included Asian ideas as well.

The Transcendentalists were, like most groups before and since, quite often products of their time. During the 1820s and 1830s interest in Asia steadily increased and the Transcendentalists contributed to and benefited by this increase. The British East India Company was the dominant vehicle for this transmission, and the Asiatic Society, founded on January 15, 1784 by Sir William Jones, put many texts from Asia into the hands of Americans. A lesser known figure of the Transcendentalist movement, the author and clergyman Orestes A. Brownson, recounting his view of the reaction to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, NY: Signet Classic, 2003), 224.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (UK: Routledge (UK), 1800, 1992), 248.

importation of Asian ideas into the West, recalled: “The Church rejoiced, for it was like bringing back her long lost mother, whose features she had remembered and was able at once to recognise.—Germany, England, and even France, became Oriental.” Brownson continued by delving back into the furthest reaches of Western history to convey the place he believed Asian thought had come to inhabit in the West. “Cicero, and Horace, and Virgil, Æschylus, Euripides, and even Homer, with Jupiter, Apollo and Minerva were forced to bow before Hindoo Bards and Gods of uncouth forms and unutterable names.” Brownson argued that ideas from Asia permeated Western philosophy, art, and literature.

It is remarkable in our poets. It moulds the form in Byron, penetrates to the ground in Wordsworth, and entirely predominates in the Schlegels. It causes us to feel a new interest in those writers and those epochs which partake the most of spiritualism. Those old English writers who were somewhat inclined to mysticism are revived; Plato, who traveled in the East and brought back its lore which he modified by Western genius and moulded into Grecian forms, is reedited, commented on, translated, and raised to the highest rank among philosophers.<sup>9</sup>

Brownson argued a point that was not appreciated by many of his contemporaries in the 1830s: that while American society was indeed a product of the Enlightenment, it was also at the mercy of its failures and shortcomings. Most apparent, according to the Transcendentalists, was the overdependence on rationalism, materialism, and atomistic individualism. Thus Brownson and the rest of the Transcendentalists were in effect some of the first American critics of the Enlightenment. Many of the cultural issues focused on by the Transcendentalists were quite often not even recognized by their contemporaries as issues to be considered or questioned. In fact, the advances these cultural critics made in American intellectual history have only recently come to light. The scholarship of Philip Cafaro, Stanley Cavell, Irving Howe, and Laura Dassow Walls, clearly

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<sup>9</sup> Orestes Augustus Brownson, *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (Boston, MA: James Munroe and Company, 1836), 52-53.

demonstrates that the Transcendentalists were more than the simple caricatures many have come to see them as.<sup>10</sup>

These and other scholars, including Christopher Lasch and Cornell West, have gone so far as to employ the Transcendentalists as foundations for their own post-1960s critical analyses of American intellectual and cultural history. Certainly there is always a danger in narrow readings of such a varied group for the purpose of buttressing an intellectual argument. The intellectual historian Charles Capper argues that the Transcendentalists have been enlisted “variously as allies or foils...in successive Victorian, modernist, progressivist, ‘Americanist,’ liberal religious, and left ideological projects, [thereby writing] Transcendentalism into the major designs of American history.”<sup>11</sup> This study attempts to avoid, as much as possible, subsuming Transcendentalists under one agenda or another, and attempts to give them a fair treatment as both “allies and foils,” especially with respect to their various usages of Asian thought and religions.

Transcendentalism, as partly an attempt to synthesize or, more correctly, to restore the forgotten balance of the spiritual and material worlds of humankind, was, of course, part of a larger protest against materialism in world, and especially Western, history. Brownson and others recognized that some equilibrium needed to be restored to the age old war between spiritualism and materialism. “Both these systems,” Brownson

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley Cavell was the first to take Thoreau seriously as a philosopher, Laura Dassow Walls has recently done the same for his philosophy of science, and Philip Cafaro has added to our knowledge of his ethics. (For examples of these author’s works, see: Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1974), Irving Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-century Natural Science* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond’: The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” *The Journal of American History*, 85:2 (Sep., 1998), 502-539, 503.

noted” have received so full a development, have acquired so much strength, that neither can be subdued. Both have their foundation in our nature, and both will exist and exert their influence.” Brownson continued by imploring that the war must end: “Shall they exist as antagonist principles? Shall the spirit forever lust against the flesh, and the flesh against the spirit? Is the bosom of Humanity to be eternally torn by these two contending factions? No. It cannot be. The war must end. Peace must be made.”<sup>12</sup>

Late nineteenth-century America was indeed undergoing a profound social and cultural transformation. The self-sufficient yeoman ideal of Thomas Jefferson’s utopia was giving way to wage laborers and modern industry with its concomitant social structures of urbanization, individualization, and materialism. Many groups emerged in this era with varying solutions to America’s problems. For example, Lyman Beecher, the father of the noted writer Harriet Beecher Stowe, represented those who were interested in direct reform of industry through efforts to close down businesses on Sundays to give workers a chance to rest and spend time with their families. Yet, there were also groups who saw modern America as a lost cause and attempted to abandon society itself. The Oneidans of New York and New Harmony of Indiana were two of the many Utopian societies in the 1800s promising their followers a better and simpler life, the Oneidans through free love and New Harmony through the abolition of private property, which they saw as the root of all evil. Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, began a community that would live apart from society and eventually, under the leadership of Brigham Young, trek as far as Salt Lake City,

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<sup>12</sup> Brownson, *New Views of Christianity*, 63-64. Brownson defined his terminology as such: “I use these terms, Spiritualism and Materialism, to designate two social, rather than two philosophical systems. They designate two orders, which, from time out of mind, have been called *spiritual* and *temporal* or carnal, *holy* and *profane*, *heavenly* and *worldly*, &c.” *Ibid.*, 11.

Utah to establish their own Zion, free from outside interference. The Transcendentalists were a part of this larger trend that recognized the changing landscape of American society, yet sounded the call for action, not escape.<sup>13</sup>

Charles Mayo Ellis proclaimed for his fellow Transcendentalists, “It is not to be denied that the principles of this system, are those of reform in church, state and society...”<sup>14</sup> Transcendentalism was, after all, a humanistic philosophy. It put the individual at the center of the universe and demanded human dignity: however, it must be remembered, this was not the same as self-centered egocentrism. During the rise of the Transcendentalist movement, industrialization’s dehumanizing impact also rose. The Transcendentalists were witnesses to this monumental change in American culture and society. Yet they were sometimes ambivalent about reforming society through legal or political action. Rather, the Transcendentalists sought to change society one person at a time and change them from within. By reforming the individual, society itself would be rebuilt. This foundation for individual renewal would be laid on “transcendental” thought wherever it existed, whether it be in German idealism, ancient Greek philosophy, or in Asian thought or religions.

The spiritual underpinning of American society at the time, Congregational Calvinism, was seen as harsh, unforgiving and lacking the tools necessary to combat this new and complex world. A Humean-based skepticism also arose during this time through the English translation of F.D.E. Schleiermacher’s *Critical Essay Upon the Gospel of St. Luke* (1825), which suggested that the Bible was simply a product of human history and

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<sup>13</sup> See David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Mayo Ellis, *An Essay on Transcendentalism* (1842). Facsimile Reproduction with an Introduction by Walter Harding, *Scholars’ Facsimilies & Reprints*. (Gainesville, FL: 1954), (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1970), 36.

culture. The 1833 translation of Johann Gottfried van Herder's *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, originally published in German some fifty years earlier, added to this ever increasing skepticism. Herder, however, contended that not only were texts like the Bible human constructs, but that texts with similar authority could still be written. In America, Emerson sounded a call for the search for this new spiritual path: "Where now sounds the persuasion, that by its very melody imparadises my heart, and so affirms its own origin in heaven?"<sup>15</sup> For many in the movement and later, the ideas emanating from Asia were the answers to his call. As we shall see, some advocated a wholesale adoption of a particular Asian tradition while others advocated a partial adoption coupled with an appropriate adaptation to the American cultural and intellectual context.

However, many Transcendentalists, it must be recognized, spent little or no time studying or thinking about Asian ideas. However, those whom we consider the major representatives of that group today, Emerson and Thoreau, most significantly, did spend considerable time and effort evaluating and contemplating the "learning from the East." It is widely accepted by scholars that the group's understanding of Asian ideas was somewhat superficial, which is perfectly understandable considering the relative infancy of Asian scholarship in America. However, it cannot be denied that the Transcendentalist response to the underlying symbolic power of Asian thought was, indeed, compelling.

Furthermore, by way of qualification, interest in Asian thought was not the primary determinant of the actions of this group or, for that matter, the actions of many of the later groups covered in this study. Nonetheless, Asian thought was often a reinforcing

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, July 15, 1838," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volume 1: Nature Addresses and Lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903-1904), 136.

philosophy in their greater view of the world and thus in many cases informed their actions. As for the Transcendentalists, Emerson's theory of the "over-soul" and Thoreau's theory of "conscience," the underlying concept informing his reform-based theory of "civil disobedience," the two most noted aspects of Transcendentalist thought, are replete with direct references and subtle allusions to Asian thought and religions. While Asian ideas were not direct precursors to their most fundamental views of the world, it is not too much to assert that their underlying idealist philosophies would have troubled them greatly had they not recognized similar foundations in spiritual and intellectual systems in other parts of the world, especially in Asia with its great philosophical and cultural heritage, not to mention its immense population. It would not be too bold of a statement to assume that their world views would have troubled them immensely if they claimed that their ideas were universal and at the same time realized that they were not, by dint of the fact that their "truths" were absent from such a large portion of the world's population that lived in Asia. In fact, one could go so far as to claim that neither one of these historically and intellectually important ideas would have come into fruition were they not also reflected in Asia as well as in the West and in America itself.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

It would also be incorrect to assert boldly that Emerson's philosophies can only be understood as a result of his interest in Asian thought, particularly, in his case, Hinduism. However, it is safe to contend, as Russell B. Goodman has done, that "Emerson's philosophy, from his college days onward, *grew up together* with his



knowledge of and interest in Hindu philosophical writing...<sup>16</sup> Like his contemporaries in the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson lived during the first great era of Sanskrit scholarship that crossed the Atlantic from Europe to America in the mid nineteenth century. Emerson was thus privy to Asian thought through the writings of Sir William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke in *The Edinburgh Review*, and in Victor Cousin's *Course of the History of Philosophy*, and in the poetry of Robert Southey and Charles Grant. His self-oriented metaphysics was first anticipated through a reading of *The Laws of Manu* translated by Sir William Jones in 1794, the first Sanskrit work to be translated into a European language (Jones translated the title as *The Institutes of Manu*).

Emerson called the *Divine* in human consciousness the "Over-Soul." The "Over-Soul" for Emerson was all pervading and each and every person was a part of it. In order to connect with it, Emerson emphasized the need to be true to oneself, because every person has within him or herself something really divine. Thus, in order to get in touch with the universal, one must first get in touch with oneself. This seemingly self-centered approach has had many critics over the years. However, Emerson never implied that this focus on oneself should be the *end*, but simply the *means* to the *end* of a deeper and more dynamic relationship with all of mankind. Richard Higgins convincingly argues in *The Spiritual Emerson* that "to describe Emerson's message as purely individualistic is to distort and falsify it."<sup>17</sup>

Emerson argued that self-understanding through the process of self-analysis would transform our lives and thus our society. This was essentially his formula for

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<sup>16</sup> Russell B. Goodman, "East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct. – Dec., 1990), 625-645, 625.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writing*. Edited by David M. Robinson. Introduction. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), 2.

“Self-Reliance.” His was not simply a mental exercise meant to entertain intellectuals and the elite, but an exercise for all mankind in order to inform and transform lives and thus entire cultures. Emerson recognized that the new mechanical devices of the day had all but distracted us from the life of the mind. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson’s oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, on August 31, 1837, he hoped that one day: “...the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.”<sup>18</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes called the lecture an “intellectual Declaration of Independence.”<sup>19</sup> Emerson was essentially looking to create a better human rather than a better mouse trap.

These new ideas of the mind, Emerson asserted, need not be original, we should not ignore the lessons of the past, or for that matter, the lessons from other cultures; however, it was supremely important and even critical for Emerson that we should test all ideas through experience. Emerson repeated the Spanish proverb: He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry out the wealth of the Indies. He later added that: “The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.”<sup>20</sup> The life of the mind should not be left to the great philosophers, but should permeate all parts of society. “Man,” Emerson wrote, “is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and

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<sup>18</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” in *Essays & Lectures* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1983), 53.

<sup>19</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson John Lothrop Motley, Two Memoirs* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892), 88.

<sup>20</sup> Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 60.

scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier.”<sup>21</sup> Emerson explained that, “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn.” Furthermore, he added, “The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence, it is progressive”<sup>22</sup>

Emerson had profound reservations about the individualistic tendencies permeating American culture during his day. He, of course, was also a realist and therefore recognized the inevitability of parts of the new society, but he continued to proclaim that America should not fall victim to the worst parts of modernity. Emerson was inspired by ideas that were universal, which transcended national, intellectual, and cultural boundaries. Thus, a value that Emerson also witnessed in such an “exotic locale” (to use an Orientalist concept) as Asia would have been a strong touchstone for such an intellect. For a basic human value would not be a basic human value, according to a “universalist” such as Emerson, if it was not reflected in Asia. If what he and the other Transcendentalists believed to be a universal truth was so only in the confines of Western civilization, that would have put into question their entire philosophical and intellectual project.

Again, the linkage between Asian religions and thought and the actual actions, or lack thereof, of this group, and other groups under analysis here, should not be overstated. Motivations are, after all, the shakiest ground upon which historians tread. Fortunately, we have progressed beyond elementary linkages between motivations and actions. Gone

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

are the days of simple one-dimensional, yet comforting, determinism of economics or race or gender. The understanding of human motivations has become more nuanced and more complex, and rightly so. By simply taking one of Emerson's most often cited quotes, and a quote often used to define the essence of Transcendentalism, it is apparent that there was something beyond the borders of the United States and Western civilization at work. "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds...A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."<sup>23</sup> This "Divine Soul" for the Transcendentalists permeated Asian religions and thought as well, and was a crucial factor in what made humankind capable of advancement and some dare say perfectibility.

Asian religions and thought were part of a larger constellation of ideas that these individuals possessed to varying degrees that brought them to certain conclusions in their minds and to certain conclusions in their lives. In "The American Scholar," Emerson stated that "the best books...impress us with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads.... There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had wellnigh thought and said."<sup>24</sup> Of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most holy scriptures of Hinduism, Emerson wrote in his journal in 1845: "I owed—my friend and I owed—a magnificent day to the Bhagavat Geeta. It was the first of books; it was if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age & climate *had pondered*

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<sup>23</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*

<sup>24</sup> *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: 1971-), I, 57-58.

*and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”*<sup>25</sup> Emerson continued his debt to Vedic thought, “It is sublime as heat and night and a breathless ocean. It contains every religious sentiment, all the grand ethics which visit in turn each noble poetic mind...It is of no use to put away the book; if I trust myself in the woods or in a boat upon the pond, nature makes a Brahmin of me presently: eternal necessity, eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence, --this is her creed. Peace, she saith to me, and purity and absolute abandonment—these panaceas expiate all sin and bring you to the beatitude of the Eight Gods.”<sup>26</sup>

However, the question remains, exactly how active was Emerson’s soul? How did he bring his words and ideas to life? Most scholars of Transcendentalism recognize that Emerson, although viewed as the intellectual foundation of Transcendentalism, was not as active in reform movements as those who came after him in the movement, especially Henry David Thoreau. However, Emerson did fight against the greatest injustice in antebellum America, slavery. Not only were slaves a means for the creation of wealth in America but they were also signs of affluence, a way of displaying one’s wealth. As other parts of the industrializing process in America, yet of course, to a far greater extent, American slaves were a function of wealth creation and therefore fell under the dehumanizing rubric of minimizing expenses and maximizing profits. Their fundamental purpose in the cold and sober economic system was to provide for others. Certainly, it is more than fair to label those that reaped the benefits of slave ownership as self-centered individuals. Thus the very institution of slavery in America was the epitome of the worst kind of individualism imaginable. The existence of slavery in America, a nation birthed

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, V:178. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), 315.

in rhetorical equality, was a fact that took great effort to ignore and greater effort to accept. In his impassioned 1855 “Lecture on Slavery” Emerson proclaimed that the Constitution’s recognition of slavery was a “crime.” He contrasted the United States Constitution with universal “Laws” and “Rights” as proclaimed by the world’s great religious leaders, Jesus, Menu, Moses, and Confucius. A law that went against these universal moral laws was by its very nature, according to Emerson, null and void.<sup>27</sup>

Emerson came to his eventual ideas and perspectives on the abolition of slavery slowly. Len Gougeon points out that even Emerson’s support of the abolitionists was at first tenuous at best, because Emerson believed that humans are far too complex and varied to narrow down and restrict to one particular movement, however noble. Emerson’s background as a Unitarian informed this idea that one must change oneself first and any social improvement would be “a by-product of the salvation of individuals.”<sup>28</sup> In Emerson’s early years he believed that only slaves and slaveholders themselves could effectuate change in the institution of slavery. Emerson eschewed collective action by those “outside.” As fellow Unitarian William Ellery Channing put it, “Our danger is that we shall substitute the consciences of others for our own, that we should paralyze our faculties through dependence on foreign guides.”<sup>29</sup> Emerson argued that “you must treat the men of one idea & women of one idea, the Abolitionst, the Phrenologist, the Swedenborgian, as insane persons with a continual tenderness & special reference in every remark & action to their known state, which reference presently

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<sup>27</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Lecture on Slavery,” 25 January 1855. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joel Myerson, Len Gougeon, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 91-106.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 155, 278.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

becomes embarrassing & tedious.”<sup>30</sup> Emerson employed his fundamental philosophical precept on this issue as he had on all others, Self-Reliance, that one must depend on one’s own nature not on the political workings of a particular group. One must not cease “to be a man that you may be an abolitionist.”<sup>31</sup>

However, as events unfolded in the 1840s, particularly the controversy surrounding the annexation of Texas and therefore the extension of slavery, Emerson began to change his position on social movements and began to actively involve himself in the abolitionist movement. While Emerson’s earlier avoidance of direct involvement in the abolitionist endeavor was used by a “hundred of young persons...for avoiding the Anti Slavery battle & talking about the clear light,” his later support for the movement rallied supporters throughout the nation. Michael Stryck notes in his analysis of Emerson’s intellectual battle with the issue of slavery that: “Ultimately, Emerson realized the degree to which speaking out against slavery would not compromise his singular, self-reliant stance but would complement it by working to achieve the greater potential of others to work toward their own self-reliance.”<sup>32</sup>

However, Emerson continued to reiterate his basic idea that if individuals were not regenerated, then the institution of slavery would just be replaced by another evil. In fact, history was to prove Emerson substantially correct. Slavery was replaced by a system that many contend was just as heinous, sharecropping. In a March 1844 lecture entitled “New England Reformers” he emphasized this fundamental reform of the individual as the first priority rather than attempting to change particular institutions

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Goujeon, 568.

<sup>31</sup> Journals and Misc Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, VII, 223.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Stryck, “Emerson, Slavery, and the Evolution of the Principle of Self-Reliance,” in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, edited by T. Gregory Garvey. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 142.

piecemeal without supporting the larger changes in the human condition through total regeneration. To do so would be nothing more than gloss, a “jewel on the rags of a beggar.”<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note that a man like Emerson, who was so far ahead of his time intellectually on so many issues and broke the bonds of the cultural hegemony of his era so easily failed to do so for quite some time on another important question at the time, women’s rights. Emerson believed that women were directed by “sentiment” and men were directed by “will.” Such fundamental differences such as these must be recognized, Emerson argued, as did the women’s rights advocate Margaret Fuller, and that while women’s equal rights should not be denied, women should not demand them—a point Fuller of course could not agree upon—“though their mathematical justice is not to be denied, yet the best women do not wish these things; they are asked for by people who intellectually see them, but who have not the support or sympathy of the truest women; and that, if the laws and customs were modified in the manner proposed, it would embarrass and pain gentle and lovely persons with duties which they would find irksome and distasteful.” Emerson continued by arguing that the “fact of the political & civil wrongs of woman I deny not. If women feel wronged, then they are wronged....[But] I should not wish women to wish political functions, nor, if granted assume them.” By 1855 Emerson surmised that women simply did not want equal rights. “I do not think it yet appears that women wish this equal share in public affairs, but it is they and not we that are to determine it.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> JMN VIII, 162.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Paulina W. Davis, September 18, 1850, in *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume IV Edited by Ralph L. Rusk. (Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association, 1939), 230.



Emerson's wife, Lidian, was a strong supporter of women's rights which made for some contentious discussions at the Emerson home. The Emerson daughters were split on the issue, one supporting her mother, and the other supporting her father. Over the years Emerson slowly developed and reformed his ideas on the issue of women's rights. After the Civil War, Emerson wrote that he came to believe that the women's rights movement was "an honor to the age." He began to realize that perhaps the differences were not so much dictated by "nature" as by "nurture." Women, Emerson surmised, "are better scholars than [men] at school, and the reason why they are not better than [men] twenty years later maybe because men can turn their reading to account in the professions, and women are excluded from the professions." Emerson's intellectual journey on this issue finally led him to be elected vice president of the New England Women's Suffrage Association on the strengths of his new support for women's rights witnessed in his 1869 address: "The claim now pressed by women is a claim for nothing less than all, than her share in all. She asks for her property, she asks for her rights, for her vote; she asks for her share in education, for her share in all the institutions of society, for her half of the whole world; and to this she is entitled."<sup>35</sup>

In the final analysis, Emerson continued to believe, although his methods and focus evolved, that: "What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every

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<sup>35</sup> Gougeon, "Emerson on the Women Question," 589. The original quotation can be found in the recording of the speech in the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 27, 1869, pg. 1.

hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life?"<sup>36</sup>

*Henry David Thoreau*

While Emerson was the foundational and leading figure of the Transcendentalist movement, it was Henry David Thoreau who would become the most notable Transcendental activist. Thoreau, as we shall witness, also reflected and continued Emerson's lifelong interest in Asian religions and thought.

In his most famous work, *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote of his debt to Hinduism through his readings of the sacred Hindu texts:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water—jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.<sup>37</sup>

Rick Fields goes so far as to argue that Thoreau was “pre-Buddhist,” as Chinese Daoists were before him, by forecasting Buddhism by the nature of his contemplation, especially during his time at Walden Pond. Although Thoreau was not the first to seek a life of contemplation in America, he was perhaps the first to do so in a nontheistic mode, which is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism. Whereas Emerson abstracted God into the

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<sup>36</sup> 1841 Address: “Man the Reformer” in *Essays and Lectures: Nature: Addresses and Lectures*. 78.

<sup>37</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1854, 1910), 393.

Universe, Thoreau was after the “marrow of life,” basic unfettered existence. In his voluminous *Journals*, Thoreau wrote in 1850 that:

I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another- I have no sympathy with the bigotry & ignorance which make transient & partial & puerile distinctions between one man’s faith or form of faith & another’s-as christian & heathen- I pray to be delivered from narrowness partiality exaggeration—bigotry. To the philosopher all sects all nations are alike. I like Brahma-Hare Buddha-the Great spirit as well as God.<sup>38</sup>

Thoreau was obviously not greatly concerned with grand theological ideas in and of themselves, but with the functionality of those ideas. In his 1849 work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* he wrote: “I know that some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like him too.”<sup>39</sup> Thoreau was indeed a true American pragmatist.

Perry Miller argued that Transcendentalism was a “struggle with ideas,” and, “In the final reckoning, what counts is not what the people did, but what the ideas meant.”<sup>40</sup> In the case of Thoreau, Miller was off the mark. Thoreau advocated what would be called “visualization” today. Thoreau encouraged his audience to create an idea of themselves in their mind, but once that idea was created they should then proceed to bring it to life. “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”<sup>41</sup> It is to these foundations that we now turn.

Thoreau provided American history with perhaps the greatest touchstone of anti-materialism in his work *Walden*. In one of his most quoted lines, Thoreau argued “The

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<sup>38</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal Volume 3: 1848-1851*. John C. Broderick, General Editor. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 62.

<sup>39</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. 1 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1849, 1906), 68.

<sup>40</sup> Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 427. 1854, 1966.

mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is resignation is confirmed desperation.”<sup>42</sup> Resignation, for Thoreau, signified acceptance of brute endurance of the state of humankind. Thoreau argued that these people have never truly lived because of their “dead” existences. Thoreau did not stop with those obsessed with the material world, but also continued his tirade against those who did not continue their spiritual journeys through action. For example, he criticized contemporary Christians who say their prayers and then go to sleep aware of injustice but doing nothing to change it. It must be noted that Thoreau did not advocate a wholesale escape from society; he was neither an aesthetic nor a Luddite. Thoreau himself only lived at Walden for two years and the stories of him waiting for the dinner bell to ring at the nearby Alcott house are well known. He saw such temporary self-imposed exiles as opportunities to reevaluate the hierarchy of priorities humans have in their lives. And while, as Ferdinand Tönnies argued, it is far more difficult to reevaluate and reprioritize one’s life in the modern city, it is still possible.

It would be inappropriate here to omit one of Thoreau’s key passages simply because of its overuse. Such passages whether from Plato or Shakespeare or FDR must not be driven to trivialization through mere repetition, but instead be re-experienced through each utterance as the authors certainly intended. Thoreau’s reaction to his times, and for our purposes, his reaction to the culture of individualism and materialism, exudes from each word and sentence.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

marrow of life...to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>43</sup>

But we must not simply appeal to the most notable of lines in *Walden*, rather we must flesh out the overall themes of the work. The largest and arguably most important chapter of *Walden* is entitled simply “Economy.” Thoreau used the word “economy” ironically to refer to the opposite of what people during his day, and even today, often thought of the term. Indeed the chapter discusses what a chapter entitled “Economy” would conventionally cover, money, power, wealth, trade, business, work and the poor. Thoreau, certainly, was intending his work to be a revolutionary economic statement and it predated Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* by over a decade. But whereas Marx viewed economic classes as the agency of change, Thoreau viewed individuals themselves as the agents of history. In fact, Thoreau rejected the entire contemporary obsession with monetary wealth by championing the opposite, non-monetary wealth. “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to leave alone.”<sup>44</sup> Thoreau reveled in co-opting the language of consumerism and materialism, “rich” and “afford,” for example, for his own purposes.

However, Thoreau passed away before his senior Emerson. Even though their relationship suffered often, in the end they both realized that even with their many disagreements and conflicting personalities that they were indeed cut from the same cloth. At Thoreau’s funeral his long time friend Emerson shook his head and lamented Thoreau’s lack of accomplishment. “I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the Captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding

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<sup>43</sup> *Walden*, 90-91.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!”<sup>45</sup> Emerson remembered his friend for essentially the same reasons most remember him today, as a recluse in the woods. Although Thoreau could certainly have done more in his short lifespan he did indeed do more than “pound beans” in the wilderness. Thoreau used his self-imposed exile to “cleanse himself” in order to begin the project of reengineering America itself. He believed that: “When a man reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact to his understanding, I foresee that all men will at length establish their lives on that basis.”<sup>46</sup> Thus his escape to Walden was not an end unto itself, it was not a form of pure escapism, but instead a means to a higher end, and an example of those “higher ends” can be found in his impassioned fight against slavery. Through his involvement in the anti-slavery movement, the problems with the industrializing process in America, and many other areas, Thoreau breathed life in to his ideas.

According to Philip Cafaro, Thoreau was deeply concerned throughout his life with the answers to “his main ethical questions: How should I live my life? What is my proper place in nature? How can I be a good friend, neighbor, and citizen?”<sup>47</sup> Cafaro contends that Thoreau was indeed a “‘real philosopher,’ both in the modern sense of

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<sup>45</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Volume X. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), 480.

<sup>46</sup> Thoreau actually went to the woods soon after the death of his brother and wrote *Walden* as perhaps a post-action justification for his self-imposed exile. However, his time at Walden pond, whether it was initially intended to or not, became a pivotal event in Thoreau’s life, and a pivotal touchstone in American intellectual history. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1910), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau’s Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004), ix.

someone who thought deeply about fundamental ethical issues...and in the ancient sense of someone who succeeded in living a good life....”<sup>48</sup>

Thoreau’s most famous essay, “*On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*” (1849), commonly referred to as simply “*Civil Disobedience*,” was the result of not only his own theoretical and intellectual battles but of real life battles as well. In protest against the seizure of Mexican land in the Mexican-American War, which would also have resulted in the extension of slavery to the newly acquired territories, Thoreau in 1846 refused to pay a poll tax and was subsequently sent to jail. Even though his jailer, Sam Staples, offered to pay Thoreau’s fine, Thoreau adamantly refused the offer. However, to his chagrin his aunt paid the requisite taxes without Thoreau’s knowledge or permission and thus his act of defiance was relegated to only one night in jail. “*Civil Disobedience*” was the result of that gesture. Its message was simple and daring - he advocated “action from principle.”<sup>49</sup> It is one’s duty to reject demands from the government or a society that are contrary to one’s individual conscience. Thoreau believed that slavery could be abolished through non-violent resistance, by refusing to pay taxes and thus clogging the system of government through mass incarcerations. Unfortunately Thoreau’s attempt to “clog the system of government” was derailed by a concerned and doting aunt. Conscience for Thoreau was the foundation of civil disobedience and subsequently much of his philosophy. For Thoreau the universality of the messages he discovered in Asian thought and religions only served to reinforce the foundational aspect of humankind’s basic conscience. The universality of Thoreau’s idea of conscience is addressed by George

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>49</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: with Bibliographical Introductions and Full Indexes, in Ten Volumes, Volume X.* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 144.

Kateb: “Conscience is taking with the utmost seriousness what everyone professes, and many fail to take seriously... One often has to fight hard against one’s conscience, and almost as often defeats it. It has to be touched to live.”<sup>50</sup> Again, this type of transcendent or universal line of thinking would have been highly improbable if Thoreau had not also discovered that “what everyone professes” included the vast population throughout Asia as well.

In 1859 Thoreau continued his anti-slavery crusade by delivering a speech to an audience in Concord, Massachusetts entitled “A Plea for Captain John Brown” two weeks after John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry. Thoreau is mostly remembered for his advocacy of civil disobedience, especially non-violent civil disobedience. However, Thoreau, as situations dictated, stepped up his resistance from non-violent resistance to active violent resistance. For Thoreau the heinous institution of slavery was exactly one of those situations. Brown, a radical abolitionist, led a seizure of the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, the government storage facility for approximately 100,000 rifles. Brown had hoped that his bold raid would inspire a violent rebellion in the South against the system of slavery, especially within the slave communities themselves. Within two days, however, the revolt was crushed by federal troops. Brown was found guilty of treason for inciting a rebellion and murder, as a result of the death of a United States Marine during the revolt. He was hanged on December 2, 1859.

In the face of strong popular opposition Thoreau supported Brown’s fight to abolish slavery through violence. “I do not wish to kill or be killed,” Thoreau wrote, “but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable.”

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<sup>50</sup> George Kateb, *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 264.



Thoreau continued by explaining that it was “[Brown’s] peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him.”<sup>51</sup> He argued that Brown was not insane or foolish, as newspapers of the day characterized him, but instead that Brown and his compatriots were heroes and true American patriots who fought state-sponsored injustice, even though that injustice had only affected Brown spiritually or intellectually. The fact that Brown was not physically affected by slavery made him even more of a hero in Thoreau’s eyes. Brown’s own moral conscience, Thoreau believed, led him down the path he ultimately followed and, according to Thoreau, it was justified: “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.” “In other words,” Thoreau summarized, “when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.”<sup>52</sup> For Thoreau, Brown was not only a great American, but because of Brown’s focus on ideals at the expense of his own material desires he could also be considered a Transcendentalist. Thoreau used Brown’s grand example to disparage the very culture of “quiet desperation.”

Thoreau proclaimed that those who believed Brown gave his life for foolish reasons were in fact fools themselves. Brown gave his life not for material gain, but for something higher and nobler: “He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.” In fact, Thoreau could not sing the praises of John Brown enough: “A man of rare

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<sup>51</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: with Bibliographical Introductions and Full Indexes, in Ten Volumes*, Volume X. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 227.

<sup>52</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 136-137.

common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of life.”<sup>53</sup> Thoreau’s lectures supporting Brown in the face of a largely disagreeing public, while powerful, were still just words, as were the many lectures protesting slavery by Emerson, Theodore Parker, Horace Greely, and Wendell Phillips that Thoreau coordinated as an officer at the Concord Lyceum from 1842 through 1844. However, no action in Thoreau’s life exemplified his belief in direct action more than his support of the Underground Railroad.

Concord, Massachusetts, a small town approximately sixteen miles outside of Boston, was one of many stops on the Underground Railroad. As Ann Bigelow recalled, Thoreau probably more often than any other man in Concord gave refuge and assistance to the escapees from slavery. One famous incident occurred when Thoreau’s family helped Henry Williams, a slave from Virginia, by raising money for his journey from slavery to freedom. Thoreau himself escorted Williams to the railroad station and shielded him from plainclothesmen so that he could safely board the train for Canada. In 1851 Thoreau wrote about the incident in his journal:

Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into the cars for Canada. He escaped from Stafford County, Virginia, to Boston last October; has been in Shadrach’s place at the Cornhill Coffee-House... Heard that there were writs out for two Williamses, fugitives, and was informed by his fellow-servants and employer that Augerhole Burns and others of the police had called for him when he was out. Accordingly fled to Concord last night on foot, bringing a letter to our family from Mr. Lovejoy of Cambridge and another which Garrison had formerly given him on another occasion. He lodged with us, and waited in the house till funds were collected with which to forward him. Intended to dispatch him at noon through to Burlington, but when I went to buy his ticket, saw one

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<sup>53</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” 234.

at the depot who looked and behaved so much like a Boston policeman that I did not venture that time.<sup>54</sup>

Hiding or escorting an escaped slave was no small matter in antebellum America, and Thoreau knew well the risks he was taking. Thoreau was so outraged with the state of affairs in America that he sarcastically wished for a cataclysmic event to end the institution of slavery once and for all. “I do not believe that the North will soon come to blows with the South on this question. It would be too bright a page to be written in the history of the race at present.”<sup>55</sup> In just ten years Thoreau would get his “bright page in history,” the Civil War.

As for the early luminaries of Transcendentalism itself, once they had passed from the scene their greatest reform impulse, antislavery, lived after them and their “collective reform energies... [were] largely absorbed by antislavery impulses within the Union.”<sup>56</sup> This is indeed a testament to the maxim that this group lived not as an end unto itself, not simply to perpetuate its own membership, but as a means to a greater end. For reform minded persons in the pre-Civil War era perhaps no agenda was more important than the abolition of slavery, and it was the work of the Transcendentalists, both intellectually and physically, that provided Abolitionists with many of their methods, arguments, and reasoning.

Yet as Emerson before him, Thoreau continued in his fundamental belief that individuals should be total beings and those particular laws or particular institutions should be second to the total regeneration of mankind. The law for Thoreau “will never

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<sup>54</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, October 1, 1851.

<sup>55</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 174 (April 1851).

<sup>56</sup> Capper, 504.

make men free, it is men who have got to make the law free.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, undue faith in the government would not serve the ends of humankind, according to Thoreau, and America should instead depend not on “what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.”<sup>58</sup> Thoreau and Emerson both warned all who would listen that it was critically important to preserve one’s autonomy and liberty and not surrender them to any particular institution or government.

Certainly Thoreau could have done more in his battle against self-centered individualism, materialism, and against slavery; of course, this could be said for almost all the great reformers in world history from Socrates to Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Gandhi. In Thoreau’s case, he was limited by the one thing neither he nor anyone could control, death. Thoreau’s health steadily declined during the Civil War due to the same disease that claimed his brother, tuberculosis. While spending time surrounded by the nature he loved so much, Thoreau caught a cold which in turn developed into bronchitis and then finally into tuberculosis. On May 6, 1862, Henry David Thoreau died in Concord, Massachusetts at the age of 44. One year later Bronson Alcott memorialized Thoreau’s passing by leading townsfolk to Walden Pond where in ancient tradition they gathered stones from the water and placed them at the site of Thoreau’s humble cabin, a tradition that continues to this day. Louisa May Alcott, who as a child was a student of Thoreau’s at the Concord Academy with her sister Anna, would later write a poem entitled *Thoreau’s Flute* that ended with these lines:

To him no vain regrets belong,

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<sup>57</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, (Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1893), 181.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

Whose soul, that finer instrument,  
Gave to the world no poor lament,  
But wood-notes ever sweet and strong.  
O lonely friend! he still will be  
A potent presence, though unseen, --  
Steadfast, sagacious, and serene:  
Seek not for him, -- he is with thee.<sup>59</sup>

### *Other Transcendentalists and Unitarianism*

While Emerson and Thoreau are perhaps the most famous of the American Transcendentalists, there were many others that counted themselves as members of this group and were also greatly interested in learning from Asia. One of those individuals was James Freeman Clarke who has been widely credited with increasing the popularization of Asian ideas in America through his writings and lectures in the mid nineteenth century. Clarke's *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) was one of the most popular presentations and distillations of Asian thought in America at the time. Due to his avid readings of European works on Asian thought and religions, and the increased availability of those works at the time, Clarke's writings are far more authoritative than earlier works on the topic available in America.

Whereas Emerson had all but abandoned his Unitarian heritage, Clarke attempted to reconcile Asian ideas with his Unitarian beliefs. In 1867 Clarke was appointed lecturer of non-Christian religions at Harvard University. In the end, however, Clarke continued to argue the superiority of Christianity and insisted that it was within Christianity that all the great religions would be harmonized. Certainly, this assertion by Clarke can be counted as one of the greatest reasons for the popularity and wide acceptance of his work. Although Clarke clothed his study of Asian ideas in the garb of Christianity, he was still

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<sup>59</sup> Louisa May Alcott, "Thoreau's Flute," *The Atlantic Monthly* XII: LXXI September 1863.

relatively objective in his presentations of what earlier scholars had termed “heathen” religions. In *Ten Great Religions* Clarke lamented that earlier treatments had “insisted that, while the Jewish and Christian religions were revealed, all other religions were invented; that while these were from God, those were the work of man; that, while in the true religions there was nothing false, in the false religions there was nothing true.”<sup>60</sup> Clarke did his best to move the American intellectual community beyond such facile interpretations. He assured his readers that his work “pursuing its impartial course as a positive science, will avoid the error into which most of the Christian apologists of the last century fell, in speaking of ethnic or heathen religions.”<sup>61</sup> Yet for all his relative objectivity, he still retained the use of the term “heathen.”

Clarke was especially fond of Buddhism, unlike many of his fellow Transcendentalists, who preferred Hinduism. Clarke called Buddhism the “Protestantism of the East” due to its divergence from its “mother religion” of Hinduism which was seen as excessively ritualistic, hierarchical and ecclesiastical, much like, he argued, the Catholic Church before the Reformation. He characterized the Buddha as an Asian Martin Luther. In the final analysis, however, Clarke became part of those he criticized: the unscientific agenda-oriented scholars of Asian ideas. Clarke used the thought and religions of the East as a “defense” of Christianity and whereas earlier critics positioned Christianity as an “exclusive” religion, Clarke described it as an “inclusive” one encompassing all the great attributes of the world’s religions. As such, Asian religions, especially Buddhism, became for Clarke, as for Emerson and Thoreau before him, although in quite a different way, simply a means to reinforce preexisting ideas. Yet

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<sup>60</sup> James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology*. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1888), 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

where Emerson and Thoreau avoided history in order to be truly autonomous individuals, Clarke subsumed Asian religions under the rubric of an all-inclusive and universal Christianity. However, Clarke's scholarship and popularization of Asian religions and thought served to move the field along. For some in America, the coverage, however "objective," was not sufficient, they wanted to cut through the interpretations, translations, and commentary by Western writers and go directly to the source as best as they were able.

Given Clarke's background as a Unitarian and in fact the background of many of the individuals under analysis here with Unitarianism it is perhaps appropriate to pause for a moment and consider the case of Unitarianism in America, and its unique intersection with Asian religions.

William Gerald MacLoughlin argues that the Puritans bequeathed an ever-present dualism on American culture: "the conflict between reason and intuition, between the head and the heart, between realism and idealism."<sup>62</sup> The Puritans brought the mystical experience of conversion to America, but other groups including the rationalists and the forerunners of the Unitarians, brought skepticism, and the preference for scientific explanations. The Puritans rebelled against formalism and by doing so shed the intermediaries between man and his deity. Each person was therefore free to experience directly the spirit that moved him or her. MacLoughlin utilizes Perry Miller's classic analysis of the Puritans: "Yet, at the same time, the Puritans were heirs of humanism, and their faith in human reason led them 'to accentuate the element of rationalism.' On the one hand the Puritans distrusted 'the affections,' emotions, passions, 'enthusiasm'; but on

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<sup>62</sup> William Gerald MacLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: an essay on religion and social change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.

the other they urged men to ‘strive for an inward communication with the force that controls the world.’ The Puritan longed for the mystical wonder and beauty of communion with God’s Spirit and at the same time checked himself against visions, arguing that God gave man reason in order to distinguish truth from hallucination. In short, the Puritans managed to hold in delicate but firm balance the idealism of Platonic thought (or the mysticism of the saints) and the realism of Aristotelian thought (or the skepticism of the humanist).<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps no movement played a more significant role in bringing Asian religions and thought to American public attention than Unitarianism.<sup>64</sup> Unitarians paved the way in many respects to a greater reliance on reason and toleration of other religions and traditions. They developed a universal religious outlook that was partly responsible for opening the window for other ideas, however “foreign” or “exotic.” One of the pioneers of this intellectual movement was the British scientist Joseph Priestley. Priestly moved to the United States in the 1790s and wrote a highly influential work *A Comparison of the Institutions of Moses with Those of the Hindoos*, one of the first attempts at comparative religion in America. The revolutionary aspect of this work was its emphasis on the similarities between Christianity and other religions, especially in the realm of ethics. While acknowledging that differences certainly existed, Priestly insisted that the similarities were more important. In the 1820s, the Unitarian community became deeply interested in the many reforms occurring in India at the time, especially those led by Rammohun Roy.

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>64</sup> See: Spencer Lavan, *Unitarians and India: A Study in Encounter and Response* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1977), and Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations*, 32-36 and 103-22.



Beginning in the 1820s, Unitarian journals including the *Christian Register* and the *Christian Examiner* published regular articles on all varieties of Asian religion, usually with considerable sympathy. One can hardly exaggerate the importance of Unitarianism in the nineteenth-century American discovery of Asian religion, with Unitarian intellectuals prominent in practically every movement that indicated interest in the Eastern religions. Besides Clarke, the Unitarian minister Samuel Johnson and the social activist and author Lydia Maria Child were also prominent conduits between East and West.

#### *Samuel Johnson and Lydia Maria Child*

The liberal preacher and author Samuel Johnson was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1822, the son of a prominent Salem physician. He began college at the age of sixteen and graduated from Harvard four years later, fourth in his class. In 1846 he graduated from the Harvard Divinity School. After graduation he spent about a year as a minister for the Unitarian church in Dorchester, Massachusetts. However, Johnson's time there was cut short due to his radical social and political views. Later he began ministering at a free church, which he continued until 1870. However, Johnson's views often kept him from affiliating himself for any period of time with a regular congregation. Even the liberal Unitarian congregations he associated with were not always accepting of some of his more radical views. Reflecting Emerson in his early years, Johnson stubbornly refused to join any organizations or reform societies to avoid undue or contaminating interference on the freedom of his individual soul. Though he avoided official affiliations he was an ardent abolitionist and staunch humanitarian. His principal

diversion in his life was hiking the scenic nature trails of New England and searching for the truth behind appearances.

Johnson was an advocate of a natural religion, what he referred to as a “Universal Religion,” and philosophically sided himself with the Transcendentalists of the day. But most of his life was spent in an attempt at understanding and interpreting Asian religions and thought in order to discern and disclose the unity of human experience. He was perhaps the most knowledgeable individual in America during his day on the topic of Asian religions. As part of this endeavor, he published a three-volume series: *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion: India* (1872), *China* (1877), and *Persia* (1885).<sup>65</sup> The years between the publication of Clarke’s work in 1871 and the final volume of Johnson’s work in 1885 were certainly a critical period in the availability of domestic scholarship on Asian religions in America. Johnson started his multivolume work by clearly laying down his approach: “I have written, not as an advocate of Christianity or of any other distinctive religion, but as attracted on the one hand by the identity of the religious sentiment under all its great historic forms, and on the other by the movement indicated in their diversities and contrasts towards a higher plane of unity, on which their exclusive claims shall disappear.”<sup>66</sup> He believed that all the world religions, including Christianity itself, could not claim exclusive truth, yet they all possessed their own unique religious truths.

Through these three works Johnson attempted to identify and convey to his readers the essential nature of all the religions in these geographic areas. In a Hegelian

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<sup>65</sup> Johnson’s final work, *Persia*, was not completed at his death, but was later published in 1885 with an introduction by Octavius B. Frothingham.

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* (London, UK: Trübner & Co., Ludgate Hill, 1879), 2.

approach, Johnson argued that religions were developing from primitive myths to an advanced Universal Religion. Although Johnson believed that the ultimate destination of this unfolding spirit would be towards Christianity, he also argued that it would be a Christianity that would be heavily influenced and transformed through its encounter with Asia, a revolutionary transformation “compared with which the passage from Judaism to Christianity itself was trivial.”<sup>67</sup>

Johnson’s personal affinity with Asian religions, beyond his intellectual and academic interest, is perhaps one of the most difficult to ascertain, and he evidently preferred it that way, proclaiming “You shall count me nowhere; but you shall exclude me nowhere. I will have the freedom of all times and all hearts; but I will, of my own motion, take on no special bonds, and wear the special labels, of none.”<sup>68</sup> Whereas intellectuals like Clarke and Johnson served a critical function in the advancement and popularization of Asian religions and thought in America, they still worked within the pages of the texts they analyzed. Lydia Maria Child, however, attempted to move profoundly beyond those pages.

Transcendentalist, author, women’s rights advocate, social activist, and abolitionist, Lydia Maria Child, wrote that she was “offended by the manner in which Christian writers usually describe other religions; for I observed that they habitually covered apparent contradictions and absurdities, in Jewish or Christian writing, with a veil of allegories and mystical interpretations, while the records of all other religions were unscrupulously analyzed, and contemptuously described as ‘childish fables,’ or

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religions* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1873), 31. Also quoted in J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: the encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 87.

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Johnson and Roger C. Mueller, *Selected Writings of Samuel Johnson* (Delmar, NY: Scholars’ Facsimils. & Reprints, 1977), 60.

‘filthy superstitions.’”<sup>69</sup> In reaction to this Child, early on in her life, wished that she could see other religions clearly from the inside through becoming “acquainted with some good, intelligent Bramin, or Mohammedan, that I might learn, in some degree, how their religions appeared to *them*.”<sup>70</sup>

Child, like many other Transcendentalists, believed that there was a common spiritual basis to all the world’s religions and that action should be based on getting in touch with that inner universal nature. Child put her beliefs into practice through her varying activities, including her vehement opposition to the Cherokee removal from their ancestral lands and the slaughtering of the Plains tribes, and most famously her efforts in the abolitionist movement, which spawned one of her greatest works, *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1836). Carolyn L Karder, the editor of *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*, contends that “the value of Child’s legacy can be measured, on the one hand, by the changes she and her fellow abolitionists succeeded in bringing about—the abolition of slavery, the extension of voting rights to African Americans, and the founding of black and integrated educational institutions—and, on the other hand, by the continuing relevance of those issues she tackled.”<sup>71</sup>

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who we shall turn to next, wrote a short biography of Child in 1868 and stated that she was an inspiration to him and others of the generation after her, specifically with regard to literature and social action. William Lloyd Garrison called Child “the first woman of the republic,” and Senator Charles Sumner claimed that it was Child who inspired him to advocate for racial equality; he

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<sup>69</sup> Lydia Maria Francis Child, *The Progress of Religious Ideas: Through Successive Ages. In Three Volumes* (New York, NY: S. Low, Son & Co., 1855), vii.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>71</sup> Lydia Maria Francis, *A Lydia Maria Child Reader* Edited by Carolyn L. Karcher. New Americanists Series, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

would also consult her often on Reconstruction policies. Later when Sumner was nearly beaten to death on the Senate floor for his views on slavery by the South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks in 1856, Child's own activism was rekindled even stronger. She supported the Kansas free-soilers through relief shipments and literary activities. Her article supporting John Brown's heroism, although not his methods, sold over three-hundred thousand copies. She raised money for the families of those who lost their lives at Harpers Ferry and also those who were hanged later. She went on to proclaim to Northerners that it might be time to risk war rather than to continue to compromise on the issue of slavery.

However, later in her life Child began to reassess her views on Asian religions and went so far as to write in an 1870 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* that: "But is the Buddhist religion, which prevails in China, much more foreign to our customs and our modes of thinking and believing than the Roman Catholic religion is? There are, in fact, many striking resemblances between the two, and in some particulars the parallel is so close that it is difficult to perceive any difference, except in names."<sup>72</sup>

As for Child's scholarship, she was entirely aware that it was not as rigorous as that of other writers in the field, but she understood that her work bridged the gap between the academic and the general public. Yet in the final analysis, Child's work and activism filled an "intermediate" role in many other respects as well: "...between the Emersonian emphasis on the transcendence of time and the postbellum Transcendentalists' embrace of societal evolutionism; between Thoreau's skepticism of the American dogmas of manifest destiny or progress and the late Transcendentalists'

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<sup>72</sup> Lydia Maria Child, "Resemblances Between the Buddhist and Roman Catholic Religions," *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 26. (December 1870).

embrace of these; between, too, the Emersonian embrace of what is universal in Asian religions and the denigration of Asian religions as belonging to the ‘superstitious past.’”<sup>73</sup>

### *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*

Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a descendant of Francis Higginson, a Puritan minister and leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His grandfather, Stephen Higginson, was a member of the Continental Congress. Higginson was also a cousin by marriage to the author of the *Light of Asia*, Sir Edwin Arnold. According to Philip R. Ammidon, “Writers very familiar with the life and history of Thomas Wentworth Higginson assure us that the benevolence for which his father was distinguished is a prominent trait in his own character; and such a view is amply corroborated by what all the world knows of his energetic and self-sacrificing labors in the cause of human freedom.”<sup>74</sup>

Higginson was an 1841 graduate of Harvard, and went on to study theology at the Harvard Divinity School where he graduated in 1847. It was during this time that Higginson began two causes that would guide him for most of his life: abolitionism and women’s rights. He later went on to be a pastor at the First Religious Society of Newburyport, Massachusetts, but preached so much about politics that he essentially “preached himself out of his pulpit.”<sup>75</sup> In 1852 he moved to the “Free Church” in Worcester, where he remained until 1861. Higginson’s political career began as an

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<sup>73</sup> Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 241-242.

<sup>74</sup> Philip R. Ammidon, “Thomas Wentworth Higginson,” *The New England Magazine* Vol 6, Issue 36 Boston, October 1888, 594-600, 595-596.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays* (New York, NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), 130.

unsuccessful Free Soil candidate for Congress in 1850. His anti-slavery activism continued when he joined the effort to make Kansas a free state after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and he was also a member of the “Secret Six” who supported the radical abolitionist John Brown.

It was around the issue of slavery that Higginson made his boldest move, the opportunity he had been waiting for, “an opportunity to get beyond this boy’s play.”<sup>76</sup> In May 1854, Anthony Burns, an escaped slave, was captured in Boston. Higginson and others including Wendell Phillips and Samuel Gridley Howe formed a Vigilance Committee and entertained a plan to rescue Burns from jail. On May 26, Higginson led his compatriots in this brash plan; but the attempt was a complete failure. During the attempted rescue Higginson’s part was to help break down a door of the court house in order to gain access to Burns. He sustained a cut on his chin in the ensuing battle with police yet this slight wound on his face was more than enough to make him obvious to those looking for him the next day and he chose to end his attempt at freeing Burns, who was eventually returned to the South. Fearful of impending legal action, Higginson began to prepare his defense in case there was a trial, but the trial never materialized.

During the controversy and division over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, Higginson supported the “free-soilers” who were being harassed by the pro-slavery border ruffians from Missouri and elsewhere. Higginson went so far as to support and encourage those who wanted to head west to join the struggle. In 1856 Higginson twice took the journey to battle pro-slavery forces and to report on the welfare of those men from his region back east, sometimes even riding shotgun on the wagon train. His first visit was to Chicago and St. Louis and his second was to Kansas. This second trek out

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<sup>76</sup> Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), 54.

West was chronicled in letters he wrote to the *New York Tribune*, which were later published in 1856 and entitled *A Ride Through Kansas*. In a letter to his mother on September 24, 1856 Higginson rather excitedly wrote: “Imagine me also patrolling as one of the guard for an hour every night, in high boots amid the dewy grass, rifle in hand and revolver in belt.”<sup>77</sup>

In 1858 Higginson was contacted by John Brown. Brown was in the process of planning and preparing for his “secret service” and was asking for money and support from abolitionist sympathizers like Higginson. Higginson became one of the “Secret Six,” critical backers of John Brown, which also included Theodore Parker, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, George L. Sterns, and Gerritt Smith. Due to the secrecy surrounding Brown’s plan, Higginson assumed incorrectly that the project was to rescue slaves in Virginia and transport them to free northern states or Canada. Brown’s famous assault on Harpers Ferry federal arsenal was, of course, a failure; it did not incite a mass slave uprising as Brown had imagined it would. Even when Brown was arrested and imprisoned, Higginson would not give up. He attempted to convince Brown’s wife to authorize an armed attempt at escape for her husband, hopefully better planned and executed than the Burn’s incident, but Brown’s wife refused. While other members of the “Secret Six” fled to Canada or Europe, Higginson, ever defiant, stayed home, even going so far as to state publicly that he wished he had been there at Harpers Ferry with Brown. Higginson, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson even organized a group of supporters to raise money for Brown’s legal defense. But it was to no avail. On December 2, 1859 Brown became the first American hanged for treason.

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<sup>77</sup> Mary Thacher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 173.



One of the most famous episodes in Higginson's life occurred during the Civil War. He was thirty-seven years old when the war began. When the war finally commenced, he knew it was time to move away from his pulpit and head to the battlefield. As events surrounding James Brown and Anthony Burn clearly demonstrate, Higginson was never hesitant in using force if the situation warranted it, and for Higginson slavery was certainly a justifiable case. He was commissioned a Captain over the 51<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Volunteers which he was instrumental in forming and training, but due to a wound soon retired from that unit and was offered the position of Colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment recruited from former slaves. Due to policy formed by the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, all black regiments were required to be commanded by white officers.<sup>78</sup> He accepted and held the position of commander of the First South Carolina Volunteers from November 1862 until April 1864.

Black soldiers had fought and died alongside white Union forces throughout the war. By the war's end there were 149 black regiments, one tenth of the Union forces. General Rufus Saxton had requested that Higginson take over command of the regiment as a Colonel based on recommendations of those he trusted. Higginson would later write that he "had been an abolitionist too long, and had known John Brown too well, not to feel a thrill of joy," at the opportunity to lead an all black regiment. Howard Meyer in his 1967 work, *Colonel of the Black Regiment*, wrote: "No one could have been chosen who was better suited to lead and understand, to teach and learn from, to educate and inspire, a

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<sup>78</sup> For an excellent recounting of his experiences commanding a black regiment, see: *Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882). This volume has also contributed to the preservation of African-American spirituals.

group of 800 men who had either been slaves from birth, or came to this country, unlike every other immigrant group, not to escape oppression but to find it.”<sup>79</sup>

The regiment was mainly relegated to raiding expeditions on the St. Mary’s River in Maryland and the South Edisto river system in the Carolinas. It had an exemplary record including the liberating of hundreds of slaves from plantations along the Edisto River in South Carolina and also conquered Jacksonville, Florida in March 1863. In July 1863 Higginson was hit by enemy shellfire and suffered a concussion. As a result of this injury and his difficulty recuperating from it, he was medically discharged in April 1864. Higginson wrote in *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1882) that “We had touched the pivot of war...Till the blacks were armed, there was no guarantee of their freedom. It was their demeanor under arms that shamed the nation into recognizing them as men.”<sup>80</sup> Until his death Higginson prized a letter written to him by a black private of the South Carolina volunteers: “I meet many [sic] of the old Soldiers I Spoke of you—all hailed your name with that Emotion (that become you) of the Sould [sic] when hearing of one who when in darkness burst light on their part way.”<sup>81</sup> Higginson realized the risk the African-American men in his unit were taking and he also realized the risk his own white officers were taking as well: ‘officers who undertook this duty entered it with a rope round our necks and Negroes who served under them were liable to be hung, shot or returned to slavery.’<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Howard N. Meyer, Introduction to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (New York, NY: Norton, 1984), 18. Originally published 1882.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1900), 359.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Thacher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson: The Story of His Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 251.

<sup>82</sup> Stanley Turkel, *Heroes of the American Reconstruction: Profiles of Sixteen Educators, Politicians and Activists* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 26.

Beyond the battlefield Higginson is also remembered today for his discovery of Emily Dickinson. During the Civil War Higginson took the time to ensure that the intellectual and literary health of the country would not dissipate. In an 1862 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Letter to a Young Contributor,” he attempted to inspire young writers. The young Emily Dickinson, having been inspired by the appeal, soon sent a letter including a sample of her writing directly to Higginson asking, “Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?” Higginson replied to Dickinson’s request with some constructive criticism and a request for some more poems. Higginson would later become Dickinson’s mentor. Yet he never stopped questioning who should be the mentor of whom.

Yet with all this Higginson still found time to be active in temperance, women’s suffrage, and educational reform movements. Higginson personified the Victorian reformer of his era. In 1921 Higginson wrote in one of his journal entries: “We all need action. This is shown by the way it transforms us just as the water of a brook that glides turgid and dull along its common bed becomes radiant and of a sunny purity when compelled to find its way over a cascade of rocks.”<sup>83</sup> In fact, according to the French biographer Th. Bentzon, Higginson was the epitome of American activism. Bentzon’s 1903 book portrayed Higginson as the “typical American” and the book was simply entitled as such: *A Typical American: Thomas Wentworth Higginson*.

Higginson was certainly a polymath who seems to have left no area untouched, especially religion. In the *New York Independent* in 1875, Higginson reflects on the state of religion in America an issue that became more and more a focus of his life. Higginson

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<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Edited by Howard N. Meyer. *The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911)* (Da Capo Press, 2000), 321.

recognized that “the question of final authority is more and more frequently stated in such form as to leave between radicals and conservatives no such formidable difference.”<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore the questioning and sometimes the disavowing, in the case of Bishop Clarke of the Episcopal Church Congress, of “verbal infallibility” led to the abandonment of the position that they are not able to “distinguish *what is divine from what is human* in the Gospel record.’ As soon as this is abandoned, the difference between these theologians and the heretics becomes a merely subordinate one.”<sup>85</sup>

Higginson’s friend Lydia Maria Child wrote an influential book on Asian religions, *The Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages* (1855), which Arthur Versluis eloquently sets in historical context by stating that the book’s title “certainly sets the tone for the whole of the postbellum Transcendentalist infatuation with ‘universal evolution.’ It is as though Emersonian Transcendentalism represented an efflorescence, an attempt to burst the bonds of time single-handedly, by ‘transcending’ religious traditions, and the rest of Transcendentalism entailed a fall into the merely temporal, the merely ‘evolutionary.’”<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, the book was not accepted well by the larger community. Higginson attempted to console Child by providing an explanation for its lack of success: “The disappointment was no doubt due partly to the fact that the book set itself in decided opposition, unequivocal though gentle, to the prevailing religious impressions of the community. It may have been, also, that it was too learned for a popular book and too popular for a learned one.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Edwin Dwight Babbitt, *Religion as Revealed by the Material and Spiritual Universe* (New York, NY: Babbitt & Co., 1881), 96.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>86</sup> Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 236.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Contemporaries* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1899), 131-132.

Higginson slowly began to revise his ideas on religion. In his early years he simply conflated Eastern and Western traditions as misguided attempts to deal with the universal fear of morality. “The great motive power in all superstitions,” according to Higginson’s earlier evaluation, “from the earliest Brahmanism to the latest Mormonism, is the same...the fear of death and the effort to remove that fear.”<sup>88</sup> By the 1870s Higginson began to reevaluate his view of Asian religions and especially Buddhism. A reading of F. Max Müller’s translation of *The Dhammapada* made a significant impact on Higginson’s interpretation of the religion. In his article entitled “The Buddhist Path of Virtue,” Higginson praised *The Dhammapada* by exclaiming: “I do not envy the man who does not find the depth of his soul stirred by a book like this.”<sup>89</sup>

In 1871 Higginson presented an ecumenical statement entitled “Sympathy of Religions” wherein he professed his happiness that he could live in a time in which “all religions are at last outgrowing their mythologies, and emancipated men are stretching out their hands to share together ‘the luxury of a religion that does not degrade.’”<sup>90</sup> In the same article Higginson avoided all the accretions of natural religion accumulated over the centuries. He argued that Christianity, Buddhism, “Mohammedanism” were all “Natural Religion[s] plus an individual name. It is by insisting on that plus that each religion stops short of being universal.”<sup>91</sup>

On Sunday, March 3, 1872 Higginson presented a lecture in Boston praising Buddhism. He began by recounting the contribution of King Asoka and his discovery of

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The Results of Spiritualism: A Discourse,” delivered at Dodsworth Hall, Sunday, March 6, 1859 (New York, NY: St. Munson, 1859), 5, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “The Buddhist Path of Virtue,” *Radical* 8 (June 1871), 62.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Magnificent Activist: The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1823-1911)*. Edited by Howard N. Meyer (Da Capo Press, 2000 ), 372.

<sup>91</sup> Higginson, *Magnificent Activist*, 357.

the tomb of the Buddha. The story is retold that those who opened the tomb found, still burning after two hundred years, the lamps of the Buddha. The flowers that had been left by Buddha's admirers were still fresh in the tomb. Higginson believed that the same thing was occurring during his day: "More than two thousand years have now passed, and we are opening this tomb again; the lights still burn, the flowers are still fresh, the perfume of that noble life, yet remains immortal."<sup>92</sup> Along with his new interest in Buddhism, he also continued his life of social activism.

Higginson became one of the pioneers of the nineteenth-century woman's rights crusade. One reason Higginson promoted women's suffrage was that he argued that women would be far better at controlling the purse strings of government: "the women of the middle classes are notoriously better [money] mangers than men."<sup>93</sup> Higginson became one of the signers of the Call for the First National Women's Rights Convention. Stanley Turkel recounts that Higginson "officiated at the wedding of Lucy Stone and formally joined the newly married couple in endorsing on the marriage certificate a protest against the ineligibility of married women to own property under existing laws."<sup>94</sup> The statement issued by Stone and her groom, Henry Blackwell, was passed on to other ministers by Higginson as an example to follow. Beyond the rejection of the laws granting property ownership solely to the husband, the statement also included a protest against the laws which gave to the husband: "exclusive control and guardianship of their children...the absolute right to the product of her industry...also against laws which give

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Thomas Tweed, *Limits*, 24. Tweed also uses this passage to begin his article: "The Seeming Anomaly of Buddhist Negation": American Encounters with Buddhist Distinctiveness, 1858-1977" *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (Jan., 1990), 65-92, 65. For the original source, see: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Character of Buddha," *The Index* 3 (16 March 1872), 83. Tweed notes that this was the ninth lecture in a series of eleven delivered at the Free Religious Association Horticultural Hall. The lecture series was entitled, "Sunday Afternoon Lectures."

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Margaret Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women*, 35.

<sup>94</sup> Turkel, *Heroes*, 68.

to the widower so much larger and more permanent interest in the property of his deceased wife, then they give to the widow in that of the deceased husband.” Essentially, the underlying justification for these rights was their belief that the “personal independence and equal human rights can never be forfeited, except for crime; that marriage should be an equal and permanent partnership, and so recognized by law; that until it is so recognized, married partners should provide against the radical injustice of present laws, by every means in their power...”<sup>95</sup> While Higginson’s main focus was on abolition and women’s rights, he was also active in many other reform movements of his day including: support of the ten hour bill, land reform, civil service reform, penal legislation, and temperance.

As a participant in the temperance movement, Higginson supported Susan B. Anthony’s appointment to the Committee of Arrangements at the 1853 World Temperance Convention in New York City. Anthony’s choice led to an uproar which led to Higginson and others walking out of the convention and forming the Whole World’s Temperance Convention. In fact, this new temperance convention would be supported by many of the most important members of the movement and some of the most notable reformers in American history including, Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, Lucy Stone, and William Lloyd Garrison. An indication of the importance of reform in Higginson’s life both intellectual and in practical terms is clearly witnessed by the names he gave his child, Margaret Waldo Higginson, after his two idols, Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Higginson’s Transcendentalism was apparent in his 1859 lecture entitled “The Results Of Spiritualism, A Discourse”

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<sup>95</sup> Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, *Marriage Protest*, May 1, 1855.

delivered at Dodworth's Hall: "I need hardly add, that nothing can produce so great an effect on individuals, without a great effect on society also."<sup>96</sup>

Higginson characterized the Transcendentalists of the early 1840s as a mixed lot, some were "the more refined votaries, who were indeed the most cultivated people of that time and place," yet others were "a less educated contingent, known popularly as 'Come-Outers.'"<sup>97</sup> This "mixed lot" is apparent by the sheer variety of supporters. Higginson noted that the antislavery movement "was predominately a people's movement...far stronger for a time in the factories and shoe-shops than in the pulpits or colleges."<sup>98</sup>

David Montgomery points out that in Massachusetts the Free Soil party "institutionalized the bond between the reformist professional or businessman and the native-born workman. Skilled workers in industrial towns like Worcester and shoe towns like Lynn and Abington provided the main base of support for that party. Henry Wilson, the "cobbler of Natick," so typified the political leader who emerged in these towns that Higginson asserted: "Radicalism went with the smell of leather...."<sup>99</sup>

Higginson would also come to protest U.S. intervention in the Philippines. Together with such notables as Carl Schurz, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Jane Addams, and William James, Higginson joined the Anti-Imperialist League after the Spanish-American War and fiercely opposed the annexation of the Philippines. From 1899 to 1908 he became the League's vice president believing that to acquire colonies was intrinsically un-American. He supported William Jennings Bryan bid for the presidency in 1900 but soon disagreed with Bryan's position on race in the early 1900s

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<sup>96</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "The Results of Spiritualism, A Discourse," March 6, 1859., 19.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in: David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862-1872: with a Bibliographical Afterword*, 118

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Montgomery, 118.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*



and finally broke from the League in 1908 when the group supported Bryan's presidential campaign.

In 1899 Higginson wrote an article for *Harper's Bazaar* that encompassed many of his sentiments on foreign intervention. The article was entitled "Where Liberty is Not, There is My Country," a quote and idea taken from Thomas Paine. After the Revolutionary War Paine's friends attempted to get Paine to settle down and stay at home quoting him the Latin motto, "Where liberty is, there is my country," (*ubi libertas ibi patria*). In response Paine retorted that the true motto for a brave man was, "Where liberty is *not*, there is my country." Paine soon set sail for Paris and the French Revolution, even spending time in the Bastille. However, Higginson believed that it was not necessarily a "neighbor's" place to manage the affairs of its neighbors. He compared this to a family neighborhood: "What would become of the neighborhood if Mrs. Jones, who manages her family rather ill, should come home and find that Mrs. Smith, her neighbor, has carried off the baby, on the ground that she can do better by it, and has therefore a natural right to it? No doubt there are extreme cases where the law must interfere and do this, but it is too great a responsibility to intrust to Mrs. Jones herself."<sup>100</sup>

Higginson feared that if America conquered and controlled the Philippines as the British conquered and controlled India, history would not bode well for the Filipinos, or for America itself. The sense of superiority engendered by such a conquest would result in the same relationship he witnessed between the British and the "Hindoos." "There appears to be no human being for whom the British government has less use than for an

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Where Liberty Is Not, There Is My Country," *Harper's Bazaar* (August 12, 1899).

educated Hindoo, unless he has a taste for the game of cricket.”<sup>101</sup> Higginson recounted that America was able to restrain its imperialist ambitions in the case of Japan.

Commodore Matthew Perry forced the country open from its self-imposed seclusion, but then left the country to its own devices. Certainly Higginson was unaware of the ultimate trajectory of the Japanese nation when he wrote this article in 1899; however, no one could have projected what Japan’s future would have been if it had been a colony of the United States.

In an open letter to the “Colored People of the United States,” Higginson, along with William Lloyd Garrison, and George S. Boutwell, pointed out that the recent history of the United States domestically and internationally as evident in the Philippines made it self-evident that freedom for the “new Republican party” was a matter of “complexion.” The authors attempted to convey to minorities in the United States that their continued support of the Republican Party would be harmful to their own interests and the interests of other “colored people” throughout the world.

We wish to warn you that the imperialistic Republican party of today is not the liberty-loving party of that name which set the American Negro free forty years ago. The time is past when you can safely give to it, as heretofore, your implicit support. We warn you that the American Negro must henceforth think for himself and must cut adrift from every organization which wars on darker races, as such, and begins to talk again of ‘the natural supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon.’ We fought through a four years' war to get rid of that doctrine, and enlisted nearly 200,000 black soldiers for the purpose. It is too soon to see such a theory brought up again. It rests with you to make it impossible.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in Brenda Wineapple, *White Heat: The Friendship of Emily Dickinson & Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New York, NY: Random House, 2008), 307.

## Moncure Conway

Moncure Conway can be considered the last of the “original line” of Transcendentalists to be interested in Asian religions and thought. Moncure was the son a Virginia slave owner and later became a Unitarian minister. He became interested in Asian religions as a student at Harvard, and in 1873 published the *Sacred Anthology*, a work that many, especially within the Transcendentalist community of the time, considered to be a “universal Bible.” Conway’s *Sacred Anthology* accumulated key ideas from various religions and grouped them thematically under various headings including: “God,” “Man,” and “Nature.” The work became an oft-cited volume in liberal congregations, and was used as proof that all religions shared universal common truths.

In the 1880s Conway, unlike most Transcendentalists of the time, actually traveled to Asia to see things for himself rather than culling ideas from available texts as many Transcendentalists had done.<sup>103</sup> In 1882 when Conway was in his early fifties he received an invitation from two Australian acquaintances, Robert J. Jeffray and Henry G. Turner, to travel to Asia. He stayed in India from 1883 to 1884. Conway believed that India was “our doorway into the whole East and the whole life of the foreworld.... We thought there was but one Holy Land; we find there are many.”<sup>104</sup> The result of Conway’s travels to Asia was his work, *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East* (1906). It begins with the biblical scene of the three Wise Men coming from the East to Jerusalem with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. “I have dreamed of missionaries traveling to the East as if returning this visit of the Wise Men: they say, ‘Show us, O elder brothers, the swaddling band your fire could not consume, that we may press it to

<sup>103</sup> Child, *Resemblances*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Moncure Daniel Conway, “What Can India Teach Us?,” in *Conway’s Sermons* (London: Allen, 1882), 264.

our eyes and lips; for the bands borne west are consumed!”<sup>105</sup> Conway continued by expressing his debt to Asian culture: “It was in studying the Oriental books in my youth that I learned that in all the earth were growing the flowers and fruits of the human heart, concerning which one Wise Man said, ‘Keep thy heart above all that thou guardest; for out of it are the issues of life.’<sup>106</sup>

Of course Conway soon realized that reading about a culture from a comfortable armchair in one’s study was far different from experiencing the actual place itself, with its strange smells, chaos, and the obvious poverty of many Asian cities and villages in the late-nineteenth century. Romanticized and idealized images of any place always suffer from reality. With these new first-hand experiences, Conway soon realized that the realities of Hinduism did not live up to the ideals of Hinduism.

Conway recounted that his view of Asian civilization changed substantially over his lifetime. In his youth he believed that “The sun of civilization rose in the East, and ever journeys Westward.” More critically he continued by arguing that the East was the night and the West was the day, and that “One is the time for dreams, the other for realities; one has visions, the other actualities.”<sup>107</sup> For the young Conway the East had served its mission by dreaming dreams that would be actualized by the West. In a common analogy Conway believed that mankind’s childhood was spent in the East but now that civilization had come of age the West would be the new home.

However, Conway would later change his ideas and the respective “missions” of the “East” and the “West.” Conway partly blamed his youth for this “doctrinaire

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<sup>105</sup> Moncure Conway, *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Conway, *Pilgrimage*, 3.

provincialism.”<sup>108</sup> Beyond youthful ignorance, which he quickly excused himself of, Conway located the foundation of his misunderstandings in the pre-Civil War belief that the New World had escaped the brutality of Old World Europe. The Civil War for Conway, and many others throughout America at the time, was to bring into sharp relief that while America was geographically separate from Europe it was still intellectually and culturally living in the same space.

Conway explained the new vision that he now possessed of the two worlds, or what he called two rival cities, the “City of Otherworldliness” and the “City of Destruction.” Reflecting a common theme now apparent, Conway conveyed his disgust with the state of affairs of religion in his lifetime: “The city which, from being the domain of the lowly friend of man, the carpenter’s son, has been given over to those who care more for bishoprics and fine livings than for mankind, has become the City of Destruction....” Conway continued by describing the other city “which has cared rather for man whom it can, than for God whom it cannot, benefit, has become the City of Humanity, which shall endure forever.” For the “City of Humanity,” towards which Conway aspired, the only prayer “is work; the only praise is virtue.”<sup>109</sup>

Conway emphasized that experiences and dogma were not the key components in a religious pilgrimage or journey. Rather, the most “important thing is...the new way of looking at things.” For Conway, this world changing event is nothing less than “a new birth.” Now “reborn” Conway set out to revise his “whole little world of conceptions...from a new standpoint.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

This “new standpoint” for Conway began with a reevaluation of his overall view on humankind. “When one ceases to regard mankind as masses rushing into prænatural heavens and hells,” Conway proclaimed “the torments or joys of human beings in this world become of supreme importance.” Conway wrote of Goethe’s statement to his friend “that he believed in immortality but did not wish to enjoy it with the people who believe in it here.” According to Conway, “Could we all content ourselves with one world at a time we could fraternize on our planet as on a larger ship floating through space, its passengers races and nations, all eager to get at each other’s wit and wisdom....” Conway sets down the foundation of his new worldview; it would be focused on the reality of society and thus be infused with a sense and a mission of reform and amelioration of the “torments” of human beings.<sup>111</sup>

Conway’s Prolegomena in *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East* concludes with this sentiment: “But has not this world as much right to happiness as any other? Unhappiness is the root of all evil. From it springs meanness, vice, crime, bitterness, injustice. Happiness is the sacred spirit, the mother of virtues.” Conway continued by asking: “What imaginable function has religion except to promote human happiness? If there be a universal Heart it suffers from every human sigh and tear, it bleeds with every falling sparrow, it ‘answereth man in the joy of his heart.’”<sup>112</sup>

Not only did these Transcendentalists endeavor to “perfect humankind” individually through various reform movements, including women’s suffrage, world peace, and Native American education and civil rights, but they also set up the experimental living communities including Brook Farm and Fruitlands.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-12.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

This is another instance of a phenomenon that was repeated in other circles influenced by Asian thought and religion, the “lifestyle enclave.” Robert Bellah in his seminal work *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1996) describes these types of groups that form “communities” in order to escape, exclude, or avoid the outside world:

Whereas a community attempts to be an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all, life style is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity. Enclaves are segmental in two senses. They involve only a segment of each individual, for they concern only private life, especially leisure and consumption. And they are segmental socially in that they include only those with a common lifestyle. The different, those with other lifestyles, are necessarily despised. They may be willingly tolerated. But they are irrelevant or even invisible in terms of one’s own lifestyle enclave.<sup>113</sup>

Bellah utilizes the work of Alexis de Tocqueville who was one of the first to use the word “individualism.” According to Bellah’s reading of Tocqueville, this state of individualism “...might eventually isolate Americans from one another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom.” Furthermore, Tocqueville argued that only our traditions of family, religion, and our participation in local politics would help “to create the kind of person who could sustain a connection to a wider political community and thus ultimately support the maintenance of free institutions.”<sup>114</sup> Bellah and his coauthors believed that individualism had indeed overtaken the shared values in America, which in turn had systematically destroyed the community that Tocqueville had so admired and had put so much hope in. This “lifestyle enclave” phenomenon can be witnessed to a

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<sup>113</sup> Robert N. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985), 72.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

certain extent in the communities of Brook Farm and Fruitlands, and in the future movements of the Beats and the Hippies to varying degrees.

The Transcendentalists knew full well that changing a culture's basic foundations would take a great amount of time and effort. Without an economic base such as that provided by the new infrastructure of the industrial age, changes in culture directed towards humankind's heart and mind required much more time.<sup>115</sup> The Transcendentalists indeed could have done more to reform the societies within which they lived; this is true of perhaps all reform movements in history. Yet the Transcendentalists did indeed set the intellectual and social foundation for a movement that continues today, and some of their greatest members were at least partly inspired or supported by their particular readings of Asian thought and religion.

Perhaps the most notable Transcendentalist influence on American culture required a "passage to India" before it hit the streets of Birmingham and Memphis in the United States. In 1906 during a famous meeting to discern the method for protesting the recent legislation requiring all Indian immigrants in South Africa to register, Mahatma Gandhi suggested what would later be called *satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance. Soon after the meeting in Johannesburg Gandhi read Thoreau's essay on *Civil Disobedience*. It is apparent from the timing that the ideas expounded by Thoreau were already existent within Gandhi's mind, but the essay provided him with a means to better articulate his ideas on nonviolent resistance. Just as the Transcendentalists detailed here did not start their philosophies with Asian thought, Gandhi used Western sources to strengthen his own arguments and world views. Gandhi wrote in 1942, "I have profited greatly by the

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<sup>115</sup> This is of course a classic Marxian argument that the superstructure (ideas, moors, etc.) responds to the base (the economic structure).



writings of Thoreau and Emerson.”<sup>116</sup> However, Gandhi utilized *gurus* not necessarily in the traditional Indian sense of the term, that is, as direct teachers, but instead as “examples” used to reinforce his own basic ideals. On returning to India to protest English rule Gandhi continued the same program of nonviolent resistance and considered it a higher form of action: “violence was no remedy for India’s ills...her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection.”<sup>117</sup> And through this refining of articulation, facilitated by his reading of Thoreau, Gandhi was able to effectuate a greater understanding and increase the motivational appeal of his message. As for Thoreau’s support of simple living, perhaps there is not greater example than Gandhi. Gandhi’s political party adopted the spinning wheel as their emblem to symbolize self-sufficiency and simple living. Gandhi also practiced what he preached even at the expense, or perhaps because of, the traditional moors of the Indian caste system. For example, much to the chagrin of his wife, he did not hesitate to clean up the human waste in his own compound.

In 1959 Martin Luther King, Jr. visited India and learned how Gandhi was influenced by Thoreau and the Russian novelist and reformer Leo Tolstoy, and by the British social reformer John Ruskin. The trip helped solidify his understanding of nonviolent action against injustice in not just theory but in practice.

Surely the Transcendentalists gave America a new intellectual tradition, as Perry Miller and many others have argued, but a group that placed so much importance on the balancing of all aspects of life would, of course, also attach great significance to action

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<sup>116</sup> Gandhi’s letter to an American friend can be found in: *Mahatma Gandhi*, Edited by Homer A. Jack. *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994), 357.

<sup>117</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Indian Home Rule,” 1909. The entire article can be found in *Mahatma Gandhi*, Edited by Homer A. Jack. *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994), 104.

itself. As we have seen through their campaign against slavery in America and through their attempts to re-center the American psyche by balancing the material and spiritual worlds, the Transcendentalists had a great and lasting effect on American history. Although it is apparent that much of the advancement, especially in the areas of materialism, that is, consumerism, has been lost in the intervening years, there still exists in the vast and profound body of their work a touchstone for our generation and future generations.

### *The Theosophists*

Whereas the Transcendentalists used Asian thought and religions to reinforce their philosophies and world views, the Theosophists were directly and intimately influenced and even defined by them on every step of their journey. The Theosophists were instrumental in popularizing Hinduism and Buddhism in America. The Theosophists, argues Thomas Tweed, can be categorized as reflecting an Esoteric ideal type by their “emphasis on hidden sources of religious truth and meaning and by belief in a spiritual or nonmaterial realm that is popularized by a plurality of nonhuman or superhuman realities that can be contacted through one or another practices or extraordinary states of consciousness.”<sup>118</sup> Along with the Theosophists, Tweed considers Neo-Platonism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and Swedenborgianism as constituents of the Esoteric ideal type.

Theosophy itself had a tangled relationship to various strains of Asian thought and religions. Many at the time, and today, considered Theosophy as essentially the

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 51.

equivalent of esoteric Buddhism. Helena Blavatsky attempted to quell this belief by simply stating that “Theosophy is not Buddhism.”<sup>119</sup> In the early-twentieth century the Theosophists began to focus more on Hinduism but the group itself was so divergent and varied by its very nature that to align it with a particular belief structure is all but impossible. Be that as it may, Theosophists saw Buddhism as the closest religion to their own beliefs. The Theosophist William H. Galvani explained, “Buddhism is not Theosophy, but in its course of development it has departed from the fundamental principles of Theosophy much less than any other system of religious thought.”<sup>120</sup>

In 1851, at the age of 20, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, who became the de facto leader of the Theosophical Society, met Mahatma Morya. Morya, according to Blavatsky set her upon her spiritual journey. After extensive travels throughout the world that took Blavatsky to London, Egypt, Syria, India, and Tibet, she formed a *Societe Spirite* in Cairo, Egypt which soon failed. In 1873 at the age of forty-two she returned to New York City to begin what she viewed as a new presentation, but she reminded others that it was not her project alone: “It is useless to say that the system in question is no fancy of one or several isolated individuals. That it is the uninterrupted record covering thousands of generations of Seers whose respective experiences were made to test and to verify the traditions passed orally by one early race to another, of the teachings of higher and exalted beings, who watched over the childhood of Humanity.”<sup>121</sup> She saw it as her task to challenge the entrenched beliefs and dogmas of Christianity and the materialistically centered science of her day. She would do so with the help of Asian religions and thought.

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<sup>119</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1889), 12.

<sup>120</sup> William H. Galvani, “Buddhism and Theosophy,” *Maha Bodhi Society* 5 (May-June 1896), 8.

<sup>121</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (Point Loma, CA: The Aryan Theosophical Press, 1917), 272-273.

Together with Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society on September 7, 1875, in order to promulgate the ancient teachings of Theosophy, or the Wisdom concerning the Divine, which had been the spiritual basis of other great movements of the past, such as Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and the Mystery-Schools of the Classical world.

Helena Petrovna Hahn Blavatsky was born at Ekaterinoslav in Southern Russia. She was born of a military family on her father's side. Her father was Colonel Peter Hahn and her grandfather was General Alexis Hahn von Rottenstern Hahn. Nobility dominated Helena's maternal family. Her mother was an aunt of the Count Witte and a daughter of Privy-Councillor Andrewy Fadeev and Princess Helena Dolgoruki, for whom the young Helena was named. Helena's mother herself was even a rather distinguished novelist using the pseudonym of "Zinaida R-va." Helena was raised in varying places including on her father's army camps and at their country mansion surrounded by parks and forests. The young Helena was a handful for her various governesses and was also prone to hallucinations.

She was married to General Nikifor Vasilevich Blavatsky in 1848, whom she soon fled to return to her grandfather and then ultimately back to her father. Yet she soon set off again to Constantinople and from there wandered around Europe, West Asia, and Egypt. Helena's travels and adventures in these years are all put impossible to unravel due to her fantastic and often contradictory statements. According to her account it was during this period, in the late 1850s, that she converted to Spiritualism through the help of Daniel D. Home, a medium living in Paris. Whatever the case, we do know that in July

of 1873 she sailed to New York and took accommodations in one of the poorer parts of the city.

A biographer of Blavatsky boldly, but perhaps accurately, portrays Blavatsky's questionable character: "Her personal duplicity and profound contempt for humanity were, however, concealed beneath an engaging frankness of manner. Her unconventionalities attracted the unconventional. Above all, her large captivating mystical blue eyes magnetized and fascinated. She was about to start a new religious movement."<sup>122</sup>

In 1874 Henry Steel Olcott reported in the *New York Graphic* on the Eddy brothers at Chittenden, Vermont, and their alleged "spiritualistic phenomena." It was there that Blavatsky met Olcott. Together they formed a team defending the spiritualism of the day. As it turned out Mrs. Nelson Holmes of Philadelphia, a noted medium, was unceremoniously exposed as a fraud and the public's interest in spiritualism died. With this twist, Blavatsky and Olcott moved away from spiritualism and began to move in a different direction by forming a group called "the Brothers of Luxor," focusing on Egyptian occultism. It was from this small group that the Theosophical Society was finally formed on September 7, 1875, with only sixteen members. Olcott became the first president and Blavatsky held the position as corresponding secretary. A branch of the Theosophical Society was also established in 1878 in London. The eventual goals of the group were proclaimed to be the study of comparative religion, occultism, and the brotherhood of man.

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<sup>122</sup> Helena Petrovna Hahn Blavatsky." *Dictionary of American Biography*. American Council of Learned Societies, 1928-1936. Reproduced in History Resource Center. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group.

One of Blavatsky's most famous works, a two-volume study of occultism, *Isis Unveiled*, was published in 1877. The Spiritualism that she once defended so vociferously was now the target of her venom. This work, edited by Olcott, was soon "unveiled" to be almost wholly plagiarized in that it was made up largely of unacknowledged quotations from other writers.

In the wake of this controversy, Blavatsky and Olcott traveled to India. There Blavatsky continued to write now using the pseudonym Radda-Bai. She worked on a series of travel tales which would later be published in English as *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (1892). She and Olcott also began a magazine, the *Theosophist*. It was in 1882 that they finally established a permanent headquarters for the Theosophical Society at Adyar, a suburb of Madras, modern day Chennai.

Another scandal was to occur while Blavatsky and Olcott were in India in 1883. Blavatsky claimed that she had received letters from the "spirit world" from two Tibetan Mahatmas. Yet it was soon discovered that the letters were taken verbatim from an American spiritualist. This scandal caused many to leave the Theosophical branch in London prompting Blavatsky and Olcott to set sail for England to attempt to mitigate the disaster. As soon as they left India, however, residents of the Theosophical society in India began to accuse Blavatsky of being a charlatan. The accusations were published in the *Christian College Magazine* in Madras, India, and Olcott and Blavatsky were forced to return quickly to India to attempt to douse another fire. Following close behind the two was an investigator from England, Richard Hodgson, who doggedly investigated the Society for three months and finally determined that the fraud accusations were indeed

true. Blavatsky immediately quit her position as corresponding secretary and fled to Europe.

Blavatsky settled down to relative obscurity in Würzburg, Germany and began to write the work that would become her most famous, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). The work was a detailed study of Theosophy. She portrayed herself as a religious martyr who had been persecuted at every turn. It turns out that this incarnation of herself, or what may be a “reincarnation,” brought her many more followers. In 1887 she moved to London and established the Blavatsky Lodge, and later assumed control over the entire European Theosophical organization.

“Although unquestionably a charlatan,” writes Ernest Sutherland Bates, “with a superficial knowledge of the Oriental philosophy which she advocated and a character the reverse of her own teachings, she made a deep appeal to the childish love of mystery and magic still latent in most human beings. She possessed the rare power of temporarily believing whatever she wanted to believe. Thus she hypnotized others, having first hypnotized herself, and, although one of the most unspiritual of women, she gained from her followers a veneration amounting almost to idolatry.”<sup>123</sup>

Although Theosophical doctrine, according to the original practitioners, was grounded in all the world’s “Wisdom” traditions, a great portion of that influence undoubtedly came from Asian thought and religions. After becoming naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1878, Blavatsky and Henry Steele Olcott left for India where they established their Theosophical Quarters in Bombay. They soon established the first Theosophical Journal in that city, *The Theosophist*, which is still in publication to this day. In 1880 they went to Sri Lanka, and Olcott attempted to stimulate a revival of Buddhism. On this

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

return trip they both took the “Pancha Sila,” or “officially”<sup>124</sup> became Buddhists. After continued travels and the establishment of more Theosophical branches, they continued their attempt to revitalize the dormant interest in India of their own traditions.

Over many years Blavatsky continued to work on her most famous book, *The Secret Doctrine*. This work is her interpretation of the evolution of the universe, and a discussion of the fundamental symbols of the great religions and mythologies of the world and a description of the evolution of humanity.

The importance of Theosophy in modern history should not be underestimated. Not only have the writings of Blavatsky and others inspired several generations of occultists, but the movement had a remarkable role in the restoration to the colonial peoples of nineteenth century Asia their own spiritual heritage.<sup>125</sup>

But this influence on American culture and society is debatable, and the rather Eurocentric statement that this group was instrumental in teaching Asians about Asia is not the subject of this study. Members of the Theosophical Society in America joined the group in order to discover something they believed was missing or deficient in American culture. The pertinent questions to consider are: Did they find what they were they looking for, or, did they simply replace one form of individualism with another form of individualism, and one form of materialism with another form of materialism? In the final analysis, does the Theosophical Society have a place in the history of reform in America?

Blavatsky set sail for America in 1873 from France. The ticket cost \$125, which left her with little money. She immediately sent off a request to her father in Russia to

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<sup>124</sup> The use of the term “officially” is qualified to the fact that Buddhism is by its very theological structure a non-dogmatic belief system.

<sup>125</sup> Robert S. Ellwood and Harry B Partin, *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1988), 63, 79-80.



forward some money to her in New York. Unfortunately, her very generous father, who always fulfilled her requests, died before he received her letter. Helena would be left to her own devices in New York, without the family financial support she had become accustomed to.

A story often repeated by those who knew Blavatsky describes an incident before her departure for America that many argue is indicative of the compassion she had for other people. On the dock in France from which she was about to depart a poorly dressed woman with two small children was crying. Blavatsky asked the woman what the problem was and the woman replied that she had intended to cross to America to meet her husband but had been swindled into purchasing bogus tickets. Blavatsky, upon hearing this story of injustice, led the woman and her children to the shipping office to relate the story to the authorities. The officials stated that without valid tickets she and her children could not be let aboard. Seeing no other alternative, Blavatsky exchanged her first-class ticket for one in steerage and provided passage for the woman and her children. Blavatsky was a well traveled woman and knew well enough that this act of compassion forced her onto a ten day journey “in the overcrowded steerage quarters of an emigrant ship—the filth, the bad smells, the rats! Ten days of horror, it was except for the warm companionship of the grateful woman and her children.”<sup>126</sup> The truth of this story is certainly questionable. However, the importance is that it is an often repeated defense of Blavatsky’s character.

Upon arrival in New York Blavatsky, now all but broke, found a small room in a tenement building on Madison Avenue occupied by about 40 other women. Madison

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<sup>126</sup> Howard Murphet, *When Daylight Comes: A Biography of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975), 66.

Avenue in the 1870s was, of course, not the same as it is today. Blavatsky was a figure who stood out from these other working women and she amazed them with her many travel stories and adventures. But soon she too was obliged to join the ranks of the working class. Luckily for her she was an artist and found money designing advertising literature which was far better than many of the positions the other women in her tenement were forced to fill.

However, news of her father's death soon found its way to Blavatsky, as did the details of his will. Blavatsky received 6,000 rubles in silver. She immediately found a room of her own on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Fourth Avenue. Blavatsky could have provided herself with better accommodations than she had, but she felt obligated to her new friends in America. The housekeeper at the tenement told a reporter: "One girl who had gone wrong and had a child, she took and gave money enough to buy a little home in the farming part of the state, and she told her: 'Don't you ever say who gave you this money.'"<sup>127</sup>

From Blavatsky's privileged position, as heir to her family's money, she was able to relax in a life of deep reflection and esoteric contemplation. Many Americans, especially the New Yorkers right outside her door, were not so lucky. Certainly there is a place for deep contemplation and self-reflection, but this must be based on the ability to support and feed oneself and one's family, an endeavor that not many of Blavatsky's fellow working class New Yorkers could accomplish.

If something important was going on right outside her door, she would have written about it, after all, this was a person who often wrote from early in the morning to

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<sup>127</sup> Louise Rice, "Madame Blavatsky" *Flynn's Weekly*, May 21, 1927. Quoted in Howard Murphet, *When Daylight Comes*, 69.

late at night, that is, about esoteric subjects—why not the economic travesties right outside her door? Yet, she does seem to have been cognizant of their sufferings, empathetic toward their plight, or willing to put her hand in her own pocket to help.

Every year on the seventeenth of February Buddhists on the South Asian island of Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, light brass lamps and offer burning incense to commemorate the anniversary of the death of an American-born Buddhist hero, Henry Steel Olcott. In India Olcott is remembered on the second of February, the day of his birth. In Adyar, a suburb of Madras, where Olcott lived and founded hundreds of schools for poor children, the descendants of those same children carry icons of Olcott draped in garlands and sing hymns. Some even go as far as to suggest that Olcott was actually a Buddhist bodhisattva, and was perhaps the reincarnation of the third century BCE Buddhist emperor Ashoka, or, perhaps a reincarnation of the historical Buddha Gautama himself.

Henry Steel Olcott is an excellent example of a man almost suspended between two worlds and two civilizations: Europe and Asia. Olcott's Puritan heritage later both repelled and attracted him. In an 1887 article in the *National Review* entitled, "The Genesis of Theosophy," Olcott derided his "Puritan ancestors who slashed, basted, and hanged the Indians, the witches and the Quakers for alleged compacts with the Evil One."<sup>128</sup> Yet Olcott praised the Puritans as often as he condemned them. Olcott frequently invoked the myth of the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" as identified by Perry Miller. Olcott concluded that the Puritans who took the risk to come to a new world

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<sup>128</sup> Henry Steel Olcott, "The Genesis of Theosophy," *National Review* 14.80 (October 1887), 213.

“were the best of their stock and, as William Stoughton said in his election sermon of 1668: ‘God sifted a whole nation that he might send choice grain into the wilderness.’”<sup>129</sup>

Olcott’s background was markedly different from the romantic feudal countryside of Blavatsky. He was born in Orange, New Jersey and educated in the schools of New York City, and attended the University of the City of New York for one year. After spending several years as a farmer in northern Ohio, he returned to New York City in 1853. In 1857 he published a work on sorghum entitled *Sorgho and Imphee*. The next year he traveled to Europe to study agriculture, and when he returned to the United States he became the associate agricultural editor and reporter for Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*.

Olcott enlisted during the Civil War and was assigned as a signal officer. However, he soon became sick and was returned home. Once he recuperated, he was promoted to colonel and assigned by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton as a special commissioner to investigate military corruption. After the war, he became a lawyer for several years in New York City. His first entrée into the world to which he was soon to commit the rest of his life was in 1874 when he wrote and published in the *New York Daily Graphic* and the *New York Sun* an account of the activities of the Eddy brothers at Chittenden, Vermont, including a set of “sketches of the spirits.”<sup>130</sup> The brothers were alleged to have mystical powers, giving “materializations” to interested visitors. Olcott later included added material to these articles and published a book, *People of the Other*

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<sup>129</sup> Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>130</sup> G. G. Hubbell, *Fact and Fancy in Spiritualism, Theosophy and Physical Research* (Cincinnati, OH: The Robert Clarke Company, 1901), 19.

*World* in 1875. It was at Chittenden that Olcott met Helena Petrovna Hahn Blavatsky and developed a friendship that would last until she died in 1891.

Henry Steel Olcott, considered the co-founder of the Theosophical Society along with Blavatsky, was a great champion of Asian spirituality internationally. Olcott traveled to Sri Lanka where he became a staunch critic of Christian missionaries in this small island and a staunch defender of Buddhism, founding several Buddhist schools there. He continued his work throughout Asia including Burma and Japan. He attempted to unite Asian Buddhists behind a fourteen-point “Buddhist platform.” While in Japan on a lecture tour in 1889, Olcott formulated fourteen points that he believed could be agreed upon by all Buddhists. He also persuaded Japanese Buddhists to dialogue with Ceylonese Buddhists for the first time in their history. While in India, Olcott received one of the highest honors in Hinduism, the sacred thread of the Brahmin caste by Tarant Tarka Vachaspati.

There has been a great and ongoing debate over the years concerning Olcott’s complicity with Blavatsky’s many “questionable practices,” and, outright frauds and obvious scams. After Blavatsky’s passing, Olcott began to focus on his own personal strengths, not the occultism of Blavatsky, but his own organizational abilities and nature. He soon began to organize the Theosophical Society on a more legitimate basis. The growth of the Theosophical Society in the two decades after Blavatsky’s death can therefore be largely credited to the work of Olcott. Upon Olcott’s own death, the Theosophical Society had over six hundred branches in forty-two different countries throughout the world.

Stephen Prothero argues that Olcott, although not a “mainstream” religious figure, was in no way a marginal one for he reflected mainline developments in American religion and culture. His life “is best understood...not as repudiation but as an outgrowth of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. His errand to Asia ought to be seen as an extension of both the Puritan errand to America and what William Hutchinson has identified as the errand of nineteenth-century American Protestant missionaries to the world. It thus demonstrates, however paradoxically, *both* the pluralization of American religion in the late nineteenth century *and* the simultaneous persistence in that period of Protestant influence.”<sup>131</sup>

It is with individuals like Olcott that Stephen Prothero advances a theory that he calls “creolization.” This interpretive tool from linguistics denotes a new linguistic creation which emerges when individuals come together and begin to intertwine their language. The interesting facet of this creolization is that “individuals seem to be almost as insistent about clinging to inherited grammatical forms as they are comfortable with adopting new vocabularies.”<sup>132</sup> Olcott’s creolization was that of the Protestantism of his youth and the Buddhism, specifically Theravada Buddhism, of his adulthood; the result was a “Protestantized” Buddhism. Prothero argues that Olcott’s faith mixed American Protestant and Asian Buddhist norms and organizations. Olcott had no qualms about introducing elements from his Protestant background into his newfound interest in Buddhism; those elements of Buddhism that did not seem familiar to him were summarily cast aside and ignored. Olcott emphasized “progressivism, optimism, and activism, which historians of American Protestant theology have long recognized as the

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<sup>131</sup> Prothero, *The White Buddhist*, 4-5.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 This mirrors the Asian version of Hegel’s dialectic.

salient features of the liberal Protestant mainstream.”<sup>133</sup> Stephen Prothero describes Olcott’s interaction with Asian religions as a form of “creolization.” That is, enthusiasts of Asian religions and thought like Olcott not only became “converts” but also “converted” Asian religions and sought to reflect and accommodate their Western assumptions and cultural vocabulary. While Olcott’s lexicon was “almost entirely Buddhist” his grammar remained “largely Protestant.”<sup>134</sup>

This thoughtful insight can be extended to many if not all the subjects of this study. Enthusiasts for Asian religion and thought came to the table with certain predilections and culturally defined mindsets and while they seemed outwardly to be espousing a new and “exotic” agenda, at a deeper level they were simply attempting to come to grips with America in a time of great social and cultural change, the transition to modernity, through the new medium of Asian religions and thought. This challenge from modernity was not unique to America, but has been a common occurrence in subsequent modernizing nations including Japan, China, Mexico, and continues to be so today throughout the Islamic world.

As for Olcott he had a lifelong interest in reform. Before leaving for Asia, Olcott worked to soothe the wounds of the Civil War in America. As part of his reform program he attempted in several venues to unite the world’s faiths into one nonsectarian family. His grand endeavor was to unite all human beings into an international “Universal Brotherhood of Humanity.” Olcott’s approach to reform often felt the mark of American organizational theory; the Theosophical Society, for example, was set up on a federal

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

system, with a written constitution and a President. Yet all of Olcott's plans were dominated by his missionary-styled emphasis on social reform.

Unlike most of the individuals under analysis in the present study, most of Olcott's reform activities took place outside the United States. However, this should not exclude Olcott from a study of the intersections of Asian religions and American reform due to the fact that it not only illustrates the breadth of American commitment to reform, but it is also illustrative of the particular focal points of that reform. In the case of Olcott, he advanced temperance, women's rights, animal rights, and international peace and even opened four free schools for children of the lower castes in India.

Olcott was a "genteel progressive," that is, both in the United States and later in Asia he attempted to "uplift" the masses, through transforming them from the vulgar existence "into respectable ladies and gentlemen of 'character' and 'culture' by instilling in them what Matthew Arnold referred to as 'the best that has been thought and written in the world.'"<sup>135</sup> Norbert Elias would later refer to this methodology as the "Civilizing Process."<sup>136</sup> While Olcott and other popularizers and adherents of Asian religions in the United States contributed to the tradition of religious diversity in America, many of these same individuals did so by reshaping those new religious imports to fit within the indigenous cultural and intellectual landscape. Again, this adaptation was not unique to America but took place throughout the history of Asian religions.

Three more individuals were involved in reform movements in America and also interested in Asian religions and thought, Mary Baker Eddy, Katherine Tingley, and Alice A. Bailey. Mari Jo Buhle points out that: "Like other contemporary mystical

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>136</sup> Actually, in the original German Elias called the process *Über den Prozess der Zivilization*.



religions, Theosophy recruited largely among women evidently dissatisfied with men's earthly rule." In fact, Blavatsky had specifically proclaimed "female virtue an agent of God's will on earth..."<sup>137</sup>

Blavatsky encouraged her followers to join Nationalist clubs. However, in the case of the follower's of Mary Baker Eddy, they were drawn more to Theosophy than to any Nationalist movements, yet Theosophy provided the structure for an entrée into the Bellamy Nationalist phenomenon of the time. The founder of the Theosophist-Nationalism utopian colony in Point Loma, outside San Diego, California, was none other than Blavatsky's second-in-command, Katherine Tingley. Tingley had a long history of reform activism, from urban reform to a leader of the Do-Good Mission in New York City.<sup>138</sup> However, Tingley's community in Point Loma only numbered in the hundreds.

With the various scandals surrounding the Theosophists and especially the questionable character of Blavatsky herself, the group's numbers and therefore their impact on society was negligible. Internal disputes and numerous defections slowly disintegrated the small groups to an almost forgotten part in America's history. In 1896 Theosophy only had 6,000 followers; in 1900 that number declined to 4,000.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 78.

<sup>138</sup> Buhle, *Women and American Socialism*, 78. C. F. Willard, an active Theosophist, also cited Madame Blavatsky's appeal among Nationalists in his unpublished autobiography (pp.12-13) in the Edward Bellamy Papers. Arthur E. Morgan emphasized connections between the Bellamy socialist movement of 1890-1892 in his work, *Edward Bellamy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1944), 29-33. However, a later and more detailed study convincingly argues that Morgan exaggerated the connections between the two groups, see: Everett W. MacNair, *Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement, 1889 to 1894* (Milwaukee, WI: The Fitzgerald Co., 1957), 329-30.

<sup>139</sup> Laurence R. Veysey, *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Communities in Twentieth-century America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1978),. 42.

However, the Theosophists have been able to continue until today. There are Theosophist Society chapters throughout the world that have continued the legacy, scholarship, and interests of the original founders. Although Blavatsky and Olcott were relatively unsuccessful in terms of reform activities in the United States, as we have seen, Olcott was very successful in adapting his learning and interests from Asia, putting a Western stamp on them through systematic organizational methods and processes, and re-exporting them back to the streets of Asia, particularly India.

The Transcendentalists provided another unique example of the effects of Asian religions and thought on America. Again, it would not be too bold to assume that Emerson and Thoreau would have been deeply troubled if the theories that they espoused to be universal and part of the alluvial soil of all great civilizations were in fact not also reflected and similarly expressed among half the world's population in Asia. Individuals as intellectually honest and circumspect as these two would not have put pen to paper as they did so eloquently while texts and tomes from Asia stared at them with disbelieving eyes. Self-reliance it may have been, but Self-Reliance based on a core faith in the one's own ability to discern truth from fiction. They saw fiction, the accumulated mythologies over time, but they also recognized truth in what they read. It was these beliefs, that an "empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age & climate *had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.*"<sup>140</sup> Although the answers might have differed in the new world of modernity, the questions were the same. Thus Asian religions, thought, and ideas interspersed with Emerson and Thoreau's own and what was produced was something new—an American Intellectual Declaration of Independence. These ideas

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<sup>140</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals*, V:178. Emphasis added.

gave birth to a new view of the world, a view of interconnectedness, a holistic view of nature, and a view of humankind's place in the world. And it was these ideas that sat in jail in protest to the expansion of slavery; it was these ideas that contemplated the "marrow of life" at Walden; it was these ideas that sympathized with the plight of John Brown and the inequality of women in America. And it was these ideas that provided a touchstone for generations long after Emerson and Thoreau passed from the scene, and which continues to this day

## CHAPTER 3

### FROM “TRANSCENDENCE” TO ENGAGEMENT:

#### BOSTON AND BEYOND

In nineteenth-century Boston there was a small group of individuals whose eyes were transfixed on the Asian continent. This group included Edward Sylvester Morse, Ernest Fenollosa, William Sturgis Bigelow, Percival Lowell, and Lafcadio Hearn. The “Boston Buddhists,” as they have since been named, were rather famous during this period, along with the larger group of Boston Brahmins, for their unrelenting and vocal criticisms of industrialization and their religious skepticism. The Episcopal priest, Phillips Brooks, half jokingly wrote his sister his reason for visiting a Buddhist shrine while in India: “In these days when a large part of Boston prefers to consider itself Buddhist rather than Christian, I consider this pilgrimage to be the duty of a minister who preaches to Bostonians.”<sup>1</sup> These “Boston Buddhists” showed little inclination, partly due to the new of ideas of Social Darwinism as proposed by Herbert Spencer, to follow in the religious footsteps of their parents. B.H. Chamberlain argued that perhaps one of the ideas that kept this group together was their “violent hostility to Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> This group used Asia, and specifically Japanese culture and traditions, as a foil to industrialization. In this respect they reflected a common generational dynamic. The industries and fortunes built by their parents were rejected by their children as excessive and cold. Yet the fact that many in this group were financially able to travel and spend

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks to Mrs. Arthur Brooks, January 30, 1883, reprinted in Alexander V. G. Allen, *Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1900), II, 393.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in David Strauss, *Percival Lowell: The Culture and Science of a Boston Brahmin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 121.

many hours studying Asian texts, however, speaks to the immense debt they owed to their privileged upbringing.

These individuals were deeply interested in Asian culture, philosophy, and religions, so much so that they became the first set of intellectuals, outside of missionaries or professional sailors, who traveled to Asia, particularly Japan. Van Wyck Brooks called the group “Fenollosa and his Circle.” However, Carl T. Jackson argues that it would be perhaps more accurate to call the group “Morse and his Circle” due to the fact that it was Morse who went to Japan, the major destination for this group, before Fenollosa.

#### *Edward Sylvester Morse*

Edward Sylvester Morse was born in Portland, Maine on June 18, 1838 to Jonathon Morse, a Calvinist Congregationalist Deacon. The young Morse would become a noted zoologist, museum curator, author, and academic. Morse taught anatomy at Bowdoin College in Maine after which he set off for Japan to study Pacific Ocean brachiopods. He eventually became a faculty member at the newly established Tokyo University in 1877 and stayed there until 1879. He is still remembered today in the world of Japanese archeology as the discoverer of the Omori Shell Mounds near Tokyo. He also made a mark by becoming a leading proponent of the new theories of Darwinism in the Japanese intellectual community.

Morse was active in organizing the Japanese Imperial Museum and kept detailed journals on all his experiences including visits to temples, fishing villages, his university professorship, life in Tokyo, and other travels throughout the Japanese archipelago.

Morse was even awarded the Order of the Sacred Treasure and the Order of the Rising Sun by the Emperor of Japan. His vast collection of Chinese and Japanese crafts, ceramics, and artifacts that he accumulated over many years is still a major part of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Those who followed Morse to Japan continued many of his interests, especially in the field of Asian art. Thanks to the additional contributions and support of Ernest Fenollosa and William Sturgis Bigelow, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has one of the finest collections of Buddhist art in the world.

Although Morse himself was not actively involved in the major reform movements of his day, he did become a spark for increased interest in Asia which later individuals used as a springboard for intellectual and cultural reflection and change in America. Art historians would perhaps disagree with a characterization that limited his influence on social reform and argue that Morse's substantial contribution to the development of a major collection of Asian art in America could be considered in and of itself a type of reform, although Morse did not necessarily see his collection in this light. Regardless of Morse's own views on his rather extensive art collection, it must be recognized that the availability of such a prominent collection in the United States became over the years an excellent source for those interested in Asian culture and perhaps even for those whom, it turned out, *became* interested in Asian culture after seeing the vast collection.

Unfortunately, Morse is all but forgotten in America today. However, this is not the case in Japan. In Enoshima, Japan in 1985 the unveiling of a new bronze monument to Morse was described by a Boston Globe reporter: "White-robed Shinto priests sprinkled cherry blossoms over a bronze image of admiring Japanese children looking on

as [Edward Sylvester Morse] sketched sea life. A schoolgirl band played John Philip Sousa marches. Dignitaries bowed before the Morse memorial. A thousand bright helium balloons were released and blown out to sea.” The ceremony was held to memorialize Morse and his contributions to Japanese science. Eishi Kobayashi, chairman of the Japan Zoological Society, who studied under a portrait of Morse in the zoology lecture hall at Tokyo University, stated that Morse “lit the flame of academic study for us... [and] taught us in pursuing science to add flesh and blood to the bones...”<sup>3</sup> This addition of “flesh and blood” extended to all aspects of Morse’s life.

One of Morse’s most widely read works on Asia was *Japan Day by Day* published in 1917 and recounted his journeys to Japan in the 1870s. In this work he conveyed to his readers the wealth that could be imported from Japan: “A foreigner, after remaining a few months in Japan slowly begins to realize that, whereas he thought he could teach the Japanese everything, he finds, to his amazement and chagrin, that those virtues or attributes which, under the name of humanity are the burden of our moral teaching at home, the Japanese seem to be born with.”<sup>4</sup> Upon returning to the States, Morse assumed his life’s work as director of the prestigious Peabody Academy of Science, later renamed the Peabody Essex Museum. Morse also delivered a very popular series of twelve lectures in 1881 and 1882 at Boston’s Lowell Institute covering his experiences in Japan. These lectures were pivotal in exposing Americans, particularly Bostonians, to Asian culture. Morse was thus instrumental in the establishment and development of the “Boston Buddhists” and the general interest in Asia throughout New

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Ashbrook, “Japanese Salute Massachusetts Scientist,” *Boston Globe* (Boston, MA: April 15, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Sylvester Morse, *Japan Day by Day, 1877, 1878-79, 1882-83* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 44.

England. In fact, the overflowing lecture hall included William Sturgis Bigelow and Percival Lowell. Inspired by Morse's fascinating and passionate talk on Asia, Lowell departed for Japan to see the country and experience the culture firsthand. Yet before these two departed for Japan, Ernest Francisco Fenollosa was to have his own personal experiences in Asia that would resonate back in America.

### *Ernest Francisco Fenollosa*

“The Far East,” Van Wyck Brooks wrote, “seemed closer to Salem than to any other American town when Ernest Fenollosa was born there in 1853.”<sup>5</sup> One of the reasons for this was that Ernest Francisco Fenollosa was born the same year Commodore Perry was sailing his Black Ships into Tokyo Bay in order to open Japan to the West. Similar to Morse, Fenollosa was to become a key figure in the development of the Western interest in Asian art, for which he is mostly remembered. Yet, unlike Morse, Fenollosa recognized a more multi-faceted meaning and a more practical purpose for art.

Fenollosa's father was a Spanish musician and his mother hailed from a prominent New England family that was involved in the East India trade; she died when he was eleven. He grew up in Salem and later graduated from Harvard in 1874. At first he studied philosophy and intellectual thought, even forming a Herbert Spencer club, but later returned to his love of art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Fenollosa traveled to Japan in 1878. He was referred to teach philosophy at Tokyo University through Edward Morse and the renowned social critic Charles Eliot Norton.

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<sup>5</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, “Ernest Fenollosa and Japan,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (April 30, 1962), 106-110, 106. For a complete analysis of Fenollosa's views on East Asia, see: Lawrence Chisolm, *Fenollosa: The Far East and American Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963).



At first he taught political economy and philosophy but after a few years began to focus almost exclusively on art. In 1890 he left Japan and became the curator of Oriental art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In 1897 he returned again to Japan as an English literature professor at the Imperial Normal School in Tokyo.

Fenollosa also brought his interest in Darwinism to Japan. Darwinism lacked the controversy in Japan as it had in America. This was certainly partly due to the absence of religious blocks to the new science. In fact, the Buddhist concept of *karma* actually facilitated the acceptance of Darwin's theories and the Japanese quickly and objectively accepted Darwin's theories. One of Fenollosa's students, Inouye Enryo, a Pure Land priest, went so far as to argue that the acceptance by Buddhists, at least the balanced consideration of the controversial theory, proved that Buddhism was in fact superior to Christianity with respect to the accommodations it made to modern science. This idea that Buddhism was better suited to a world dominated by science would consistently rise again in the decades to come.

Fenollosa believed theories and ideas culled from his various studies in both Western and Eastern culture, especially in the world of art, could serve as an effective method for the amelioration of social problems in America. After returning to the United States from Japan in 1901, Fenollosa, Kathleen Payne writes, "single-mindedly set out to convert Americans of all classes to the religion of art as a route to achieving social progress."<sup>6</sup> In an 1891 memorandum to himself he had set down his future agenda early on: "To mould the future ought to be my aim." He continued:

I must go back to my work on Hegel, I must inform myself on present psychologic progress, and I must bring them together on the basis of

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<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Pyne, "Portrait of a collector as an agnostic: Charles Lang Freer and connoisseurship," *The Art Bulletin*. New York: March 1996. Vol. 78, Iss. 1; 75, 23.

Buddhist mysticism...I should make my knowledge of the History of Eastern art, only so much example to enforce my universal precept...But, since in the long run the power successfully to pursue any high ideals depends on *character*, the art function must be duly subordinated to, or rather synthesized with, all efforts toward moral and political construction. We cannot ignore the great economical questions of the day, nor the terrific problem of the world's suffering, sin, and disease.... I must here become a preacher and prophet appealing to all that is noble and inspiring in man's experience; not stand on the defensive, but on the aggressive; not with the nomenclature and formulae of Christian preachers, nor with those of Eastern Buddhism; but translating both into a common universal language of human experience and reason....  
I must be an actual seer for my race....<sup>7</sup>

Although much of Fenollosa's interest was in art, for which he is chiefly remembered today, he realized that a single-minded focus on art alone would not suffice "to mould the future."

[T]he function of art must be so used as to brighten and gladden the lot of the poor, social rearrangement giving them leisure to cultivate taste, like the Japanese peasant. By giving them more highly skilled manual and artistic education, we shall also give these very laborers the power to assist in the beautifying of our cities and homes....Let us learn from the East to see these individual and social principles symbolized by every beautiful and significant thing in nature. Let us preach sermons in terms of beautiful scenery, and dispense spiritual balm from our delicate renderings of flowers. Let every suggestion in our decoration be dignified by its prophecy. Let us make the new art about us a new nature half dematerialized by the spiritual force with which it is transfigured.<sup>8</sup>

Fenollosa was essentially attempting to transplant the Japanese aesthetic of *mono no aware* to America. The meaning of *mono no aware* is rather difficult to comprehend; contributing to this difficulty is that its meaning has changed over time as well. Basically "mono" refers to "things" and "aware" refers to "pathos." Thus the phrase denotes an "emotional" (or perhaps more broadly, "spiritual") reaction to "reality." The famous

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Fenollosa, "My Position in America," dated May 1, 1891 (bMS Am 1759.2.60, Fenollosa Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University). The full text has been published in Seiichi Yamaguchi, "Fenollosa's Prospect in America from His Memorandum of 1891," *Journal of Saitama University*, XII, 1978, 102-4.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Pyne, "Portrait of a collector as an agnostic," 23

literary theorist Motoori Norinaga argues for an even larger understanding of the concept as eliciting a profound sensitivity to the emotional and affective dimensions of existence in general. Fenollosa argued that by developing this profound artistic sense within Americans the surrounding environment itself would be transformed. Essentially, recognition of “beauty” would stimulate the expansion of “beauty.”

While at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Fenollosa set out to accomplish these lofty goals through the authorship of numerous articles, the coordination of several exhibitions on Asian art, and by availing himself of every opportunity to “dispense spiritual balm.” For Fenollosa art would serve as the counterpoint to the cold and heartless nature of industrialism. Fenollosa’s associate and collaborator Charles Lang Freer believed that Japan would meld the cultures of East and West. However, Freer later changed his opinion and began to sound a little Nietzschean arguing that the fusion of East and West would produce “a common, but as yet unknown type, the type of the world’s future.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Fenollosa’s formulations were similar to many of the time and even today in that he believed that the “feminine East offered spiritual insight, aesthetic sensitivity, and harmonious living, while the masculine West contributed intellectual analysis, competitiveness, and mastery of nature.”<sup>10</sup>

It was Fenollosa’s interest in art that plunged him ever deeper into Buddhism, for much of traditional Japanese art was steeped in Buddhist iconography and traditions. Although he avoided discussing his conversion, he became a Buddhist at the age of 47 and remained so all his life. In fact, when he died, his ashes were interred in a Buddhist temple in Japan.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

Fenollosa argued that Asia was more dynamic than many in the West believed. It was a common occurrence to superimpose the widely held belief that Asian civilization as a whole, and specifically Asian religions and thought, were static and unchanging. Of course, Asian countries differed significantly from each other just as the countries of any large continent, and they each had their own unique socio-economic and historical trajectory. For example, beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, Japan, after its forceful opening by the American Commodore Matthew Perry, was a very active and dynamic society. While the Japanese were busily adopting and adapting the world's knowledge to their own needs, they were also conscious of ensuring that many of their country's traditional characteristics not be cast aside unnecessarily—a difficult balancing act in any country or era. Fenollosa himself continually stressed the idea to anyone who would listen that as Asia imported and incorporated the best of Western ideas and learning the West could and should do the same with regards to Asia.

In 1892 in front of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, Fenollosa read his forty-five page poem “East and West.” The poem was an historical narrative of the meeting between East and West from the time of Alexander the Great. The final section of the poem was entitled “The Future Union of East and West” wherein he argued that both civilizations needed each other and that one day they would come together again as they had in the past. As he explained in the preface to the work: “The synthesis of two continental civilizations, matured apart through fifteen hundred years, will mark this close of our century as an unique dramatic epoch in human affairs. At the end of a great cycle the two halves of the world come together for the final creation of man.”<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Francisco Fenollosa, *East and West: The Discovery of America and Other Poems by Ernest Francisco Fenollosa* (Boston, MA: Thomas Y Crowell and Company, 1893), v.

future hybridization of the “two halves of the world” would produce a new civilization and a more cosmic man, “Where there is no more West and no more East.”<sup>12</sup> Fenollosa sounds here a bit like Francis Fukuyama in his influential work *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). However, whereas Fukuyama would later argue that the West would triumph on its own terms, Fenollosa believed that both “halves of the world” could benefit through sincere and profound mutual understanding and dynamic cross-cultural exchanges.

Fenollosa was the voice in the wilderness when it came to what he saw as the main obstacle to a truly substantial East-West encounter, superficiality. His own interpretation of the stereotypical difference between East and West was more complex than many others of his time. Fenollosa added his own modifications of the common characterization of the East as feminine and the West as masculine. He argued that Christianity had softened the masculine in the West just as elements of Buddhism, and the Samurai tradition in Japan, hardened the feminine in Asia. “The violence of the West has been softened by the feminine faith of love, renunciation, obedience, salvation from without. It is the very impersonality of her great ecclesiastical institute which offers to man a refuge from self. On the other hand, the peaceful impotence of the East has been spurred by her martial faith of spiritual knighthood, self-reliance, salvation from within....This stupendous double antithesis seems to me the most significant fact in all history. The future union of the types may thus be symbolized as a twofold marriage.”<sup>13</sup>

Fenollosa recognized that the "wrong" attributes of this cross-cultural dialogue and exchange were also at work. In Japan, Fenollosa had witnessed first hand the “acids

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

of modernity,” especially superficiality, as they slowly burned away what he viewed as crucial components of Japanese culture. He wrote:

O you West in the East like the slime of a beast,  
Why must you devour that exquisite flower?  
Why poison the peace of the far Japanese?<sup>14</sup>

However, he did not limit his warning to Japan and the rest of Asia, but extended it to the West. He believed that the West too was vulnerable to a pseudo-Oriental spirituality:

O this spirituality of pure externality!  
Which can patch up disasters with arnica plasters.<sup>15</sup>

These warnings were his attempt to ensure that both civilizations borrowed from each other mainly that which was profound and useful, rather than focusing simply on the ephemeral and superficial.

In 1898 Fenollosa proclaimed “The Coming Fusion of East and West.” One of the most important warnings he issued was that it would be to the West’s peril to minimize the significance of the East. With the Spanish-American War, the War in the Philippines, and the systematic carving up of China through “spheres of influence” geopolitics in the background, Fenollosa warned that war and domination was not the answer, but rather, “fusion.” Fenollosa reiterated the benefits of a peaceful fusion with the East: “We shall regain in this East magnificent enthusiasm long grown cold, living ideals that shall lend wings to our own. There is hardly a mooted topic—art, literature, philosophy, morals, manners, family organization—that shall not find its parallax of computation wonderfully enlarged.”<sup>16</sup> Earlier in 1882, Fenollosa had met another important figure and fellow

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest F. Fenollosa, “The Coming Fusion of East and West,” *Harper’s Magazine* Vol. XCVIII (December 1898), 115-122, 121

traveler in this cross-cultural exchange and dialogue, William Sturgis Bigelow. Bigelow had accompanied Edward Morse on one of his return trips to Japan in 1882.

### *William Sturgis Bigelow*

William Sturgis Bigelow was the son of a well-known Boston surgeon, Dr. Henry Jacob Bigelow. William graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1874 and seemed to be following his father's path, later continuing his medical studies in Europe under the French trailblazer Louis Pasteur. However, after two years as a surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital, Bigelow began to question his future and search out alternatives to a career in medicine. On his first trip to Japan in 1882 with Edward Morse, Bigelow was so enthralled with Japan that he remained there for seven years studying art, culture, and especially Buddhism. Bigelow and Fenollosa were perhaps more deeply affected by Asian culture, especially Japanese culture, through their ventures in Japan than any others of their generation.

While in Japan, Bigelow often played tour guide for visiting Westerners, including Henry Adams and John La Farge. Adams, however, was rather disappointed with his time in Japan, which is understandable given that he took the trip soon after the death of his wife by suicide. Furthermore, it was Adams' personal experiences with Fenollosa in Japan that also made his trip less than memorable. "I myself," Adams wrote to John Hay, "was a Buddhist when I left America, but he has converted me to Calvinism with leanings towards the Methodists."<sup>17</sup> However, Adams' friend, John La Farge later succeeded in improving Adams' estimation of Japanese and Buddhist culture. So much

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<sup>17</sup> Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams: The Middle Years* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1958), 300-301.

so that Adams would later admit: "Buddhist contemplation of the infinite seems the only natural mode of life."<sup>18</sup>

Bigelow took his interest in Buddhism very seriously and even considered becoming a Buddhist priest. However, it seems as though Bigelow's physical health would not allow him to pursue such an austere and often grueling regimen. Yet both Bigelow and Fenollosa became lay Buddhists in a formal ceremony on September 21, 1885. On that day they received the precepts of a rather esoteric form of Buddhism, *Tendai*. Unfortunately, Bigelow wrote very little regarding his knowledge of and experiences with Buddhism. Bigelow, by his own admission, was not as academically ambitious as others in this select group of Boston Buddhists. His insights and first-hand experiences would perhaps have proved fascinatingly relevant to the esoteric forms of Buddhism he was most interested in, *Tendai* and especially the far more esoteric *Shingon*. These two sects of Buddhism, along with all of Japanese culture and society, were undergoing immense pressure from Japan's modernization and internationalization drive in the late 1880s.

Bigelow's only major literary contribution to American writing on Asian religion is a seventy-six page monograph, *Buddhism and Immortality*, which was based on his 1908 Ingersoll Lecture Series at Harvard University. The work was his attempt to summarize Buddhism for a Western audience. Bigelow, like many before and after, claimed that Buddhism was infinitely compatible with science. Furthermore, in an introductory piece to Chi Ki's 1923 article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, "On the Method of Practicing Concentration and Contemplation," Bigelow wrote that Asia could help the West return from an overemphasis on the external: "Broadly speaking, in the

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Adams, *Letters*, 3: 19



East men have studied themselves; in the West, what is outside themselves—that is to say, the material world, including their own physical bodies....In the East, on the other hand, they say that the organism *is* consciousness, and that the physical body is only an item in the total of that consciousness, and a small one at that....”<sup>19</sup>

In 1902 Bigelow returned to Japan to attend the ceremony elevating his friend Nayaboshi as the Chief of the Homyoin temple. While attending the ceremony, Bigelow also received a certificate designating him one of the lineal transmitters of the Bodhisattva-shila discipline. In 1908 Bigelow was appointed a lecturer in Buddhist doctrine at Harvard University. However, it was Bigelow’s friendship with the future President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, which would bring the culture of Asia, and Buddhism specifically, closer to the halls of power in America than it had ever been before.

Bigelow became a lifelong friend of Theodore Roosevelt’s through their mutual friend Henry Cabot Lodge. In fact Bigelow would later initiate Lodge’s son, George Cabot “Bay” Lodge into Buddhism. Roosevelt and Bigelow met in France and they both enjoyed their discussions immensely. Roosevelt it seems was at first unaware of Bigelow’s Buddhist background when they first met in Paris in 1887 and was forced to endure some “frantic floundering when the subject of religion happened to be broached.” Roosevelt wrote to Lodge: “He was most charming; but, Cabot, *why* did you not tell me he was an esoteric Buddhist?”<sup>20</sup> Even with their religious differences the two became good friends. After their first meeting in Paris the two corresponded often and visited

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<sup>19</sup> Chi Ki, “On the Method of Practising Concentration and Contemplation,” *Harvard Theological Review*. Volume XVI, April 1923, 109-141, 111.

<sup>20</sup> *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Edited by Elting E. Morison. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 1:125.

each other numerous times, Roosevelt in Boston and Bigelow's summer home on Tuckernuck Island off of Nantucket, and Bigelow even stayed at the White House during Roosevelt's presidency.

The relationship between Bigelow, a professed Buddhist, and Theodore Roosevelt, soon to become the most progressive President of his era, is one of the most fascinating yet relatively unknown chapters in American history. Bigelow not only encouraged Roosevelt in his political endeavors and goals, but also influenced the future president intellectually and in the actual formulation of important policies. Japan, one of the main foci of their dialogues and debates, was the first Asian nation to industrialize and that process was in full swing during this era. This process brought Japan into America's view due to the fact that both countries were major players on the world economic and political stage and more specifically had their own designs on the future of the Pacific region. Bigelow, with his rather extensive experience in Japan, attempted to get Roosevelt to increase understanding and dialogue between the two nations. On a personal level and perhaps to build up an intellectual nexus between Roosevelt and Japanese culture, Bigelow encouraged Roosevelt to try judo and read about Bushido. In the more concrete realm, Bigelow endeavored to change and prevent anti-Japanese legislation through Roosevelt. In this regard, Bigelow was very successful. Roosevelt was instrumental in having several anti-Japanese laws repealed.

Bigelow and Theodore Roosevelt certainly made an odd couple. Roosevelt's "strenuous life" of cowboys, Rough Riders, and "big stick" diplomacy contrasted sharply with the gentile, esoteric Buddhism of Bigelow. However, Roosevelt and Bigelow were friends for over thirty years until Roosevelt died in 1919. Bigelow was one of many who

recognized Roosevelt's potential and promise. In the late 1800s Roosevelt, as was his nature, had driven himself too hard and was on the verge of a physical breakdown. In November 1895 Bigelow wrote to Lodge conveying his concern over Roosevelt's health:

Theodore Roosevelt dined with me the other night. He has grown several years older in the last month. He looks worn & tired, for him, and has lost much of his natural snap & buoyancy. At this rate it is only a question of time when he has a breakdown, and when he does it will be a bad one. He is in a wholly false position & ought to be got out of it... Roosevelt ought to have a solid rest of several months. They can't remove him. He can't resign without putting himself in the light of giving up, beaten, which he will never do till he drops. The only thing is to get him *shifted* somehow, to an *easier place* that he can hold on till the next Presidential year, when he ought to have anything he wants... If he keeps on with this job he will break down, & we shall lose one of the very few really first-class men in the country.—Think this over.<sup>21</sup>

Two years later Lodge was instrumental in securing for Roosevelt the position of Assistant Secretary of the Navy. In 1897 Bigelow wrote to Lodge of his approval of the appointment: "I am more pleased than I can tell you at T.R.'s appointment. I have an almost superstitious feeling about him that he has a great deal depending on him—10 or 20 years hence. There is nobody else just like him above the horizon."<sup>22</sup> As history unfolded, Bigelow's "feeling" about Roosevelt was to come to fruition, and in well under ten or twenty years.

It was during Roosevelt's tenure as Assistant Secretary of the Navy that he and Bigelow had their first major disagreement. The episode involved the Spanish-American War. Bigelow believed that the war was a bad idea geopolitically and also would negatively affect Roosevelt's personal standing and reputation with the American public. On the latter issue Bigelow's fears turned out to be incorrect. The majority of Americans

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<sup>21</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, ed., *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), II, 223, 216.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-54.

applauded Roosevelt's decisive and heroic actions as the Assistant Secretary and of course the mythological figure that was created through his band of "Rough Riders." In fact, Bigelow's fruitless attempt to keep Roosevelt out of the war prevented him from taking advantage of an opportunity to return to Japan in order to continue his studies of Buddhism.

As a returning war hero Roosevelt would soon be elected the Governor of New York and then be chosen as William McKinley's Vice President. In 1901 President McKinley was assassinated and Theodore Roosevelt took the oath as the new President of the United States. In a telegram from Nantucket, cosigned by George Cabot Lodge, Bigelow simply wrote: "Vive le roi." (Long Live the King!) It was through this long friendship with President Roosevelt that the Buddhist Bigelow would have the most direct impact on American history, especially in the area of Japanese-American relations. Through the process of addressing these international issues, he also had a significant impact on the view and treatment of minorities in America.

Bigelow began his project of activism, subtly, by appealing to Roosevelt's own active character. After Bigelow introduced the new president to Japanese judo, a judo room was soon built in the White House. Professor Yamashita and the Japanese naval attaché' Commander Takeshita instructed the president and his sons on the intricacies of the Japanese martial art. Bigelow also presented Roosevelt with Nitobe Inazo's work *Bushido, the Soul of Japan* (1900). However, Roosevelt worried, as Fenollosa before him, if the work was truly authentic or simply a text meant for foreign consumption. In a 1905 letter from Beacon Hill Bigelow assured him that the book was indeed an authentic expression of Japanese philosophy:

“Bushido” is the real thing. There is no trace of manufacture for export about it. The Japanese value the book highly. For instance: -- when I landed two years ago an old friend—a Samurai who had fought through the Satsuma rebellion on the losing side, been imprisoned, and now holds a high government place in Tokio under his former enemies—a man whom I have always called the typical Samurai—brought me the book to read as the best thing extant in English. Nothing could be farther from the truth than the suggestion that it is a gallery-play.<sup>23</sup>

Yet it was the war between Japan and Russia that brought the historic importance of the relationship between Theodore Roosevelt and William Sturgis Bigelow into sharp relief. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 began, as many wars of the time and since, over interests and designs by the two countries on territorial expansion and procurement of natural resources. Bigelow, of course, supported Japan in the confrontation and after an early victory by Japan in a major battle he expressed his feelings as such in a 1905 letter to Roosevelt: “Teikoku Banzai! The papers say that Europe is trying to get you to stop the fight.—I hope you will see them damned first. Kuroki and Nogi will stop it fast enough after they get together. All they need now is to be left alone.”<sup>24</sup> On January, 1905 the President, mirroring Bigelow’s sentiments, responded: “...Banzai? How the fur will fly when Nogi joins Oyama!”<sup>25</sup>

However, President Roosevelt was soon asked by the Japanese government to mediate an end to the war. Roosevelt agreed and won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. The Portsmouth Peace Conference in August 1905 led to an end to the war and Japan received recognition of hegemony over Korea and leases on the South Manchurian

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Akiko Murakata, *Selected Letters of Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University, 1971,149. Bigelow to Henry Cabot Lodge, April 13, 1897.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 267. Bigelow to Roosevelt, January 25, 1905.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 263. Bigelow to Roosevelt, January 3, 1905. General Kuroki Tamesada (1844-123) commanded the First Army in Manchuria and won the battle of the Yalu among other battles. General Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912) commanded Japanese troops at the siege and capture of Port Arthur in January 1905. Marshal Iwao Oyama (1842-1016) was the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Second Army, which captured Port Arthur.

Railway. However, the notable absence of an indemnity to Japan, a common element of peace negotiations at the time, and the exact status of the island of Sakhalin north of Japan, became contentious issues in the streets of Japan producing rioting in Tokyo with over a 1,000 casualties. The episode even brought down the Japanese premier, Katsura Taro. Bigelow as well was not happy with the outcome of the negotiations. Upon hearing of Bigelow's disappointment regarding the terms of the peace settlement, Roosevelt complained to Lodge: "If Sturgis Bigelow, who ought to know better, does not see things straight about the Russian-Japanese peace, no wonder the Japanese mob goes crooked."<sup>26</sup> Senator Lodge himself expressed his surprise over the outcome of the final settlement, although he took a different view of the results than Roosevelt:

I am a good deal surprised that the Japs should have yielded so completely. I think they could have made a stand on Saghalin [sic] and broken off on that with credit, but it is evident that the Russians were perfectly willing to have the slaughter go on rather than yield. Their feebleness and stupidity came out very strong. My opinion of the Japanese has risen enormously. I think they have shown themselves very high minded, and although just now they are in the midst of dissatisfaction and discontent I believe that what they have done will make them much stronger in the end.<sup>27</sup>

Roosevelt agreed, yet analyzed the position of Japan a little further and even took his long friend Bigelow to task:

the rioting in Tokio [sic], directed as it has been partly against foreigners and Christians...shows that the people have not advanced as far as their government and that it is a good thing for mankind that the war should have ended as it did, without the Japanese getting an enormous indemnity and with them still facing Russia in East Asia....I shall do everything I can to help Japan and have a most friendly feeling for her, but it would be a bad thing for her and for all mankind if the hopes of her ultra admirers like

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<sup>26</sup> 7 January 1905, Roosevelt papers, LC. Quoted in Akiko Murakata, *Selected Letters of Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University, 1971, 263.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, ed., *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge* (New York and London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), II, 190.

Sturgis Bigelow had been gratified; for evidently the Japanese people have been in great danger of having their heads turned.<sup>28</sup>

Lodge, sensing perhaps the beginning of some friction between his two friends wrote to Roosevelt in order to mitigate the incident: “Bigelow, you know, thinks you the greatest of modern Statesmen. Don’t think his admiration of you has ever waned. Not at all. But he thought that the Japs yielded too much and was terribly disappointed. He became reasonable after the first.”<sup>29</sup>

The Treaty of Portsmouth became the focus of several scholarly events during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its signing. Studies have uncovered that Portsmouth was one the first instances of what has been called “multi-track diplomacy.” Essentially, “track one diplomacy” is that diplomacy that resolves conflicts only through governmental channels. “Multi-track diplomacy” refers to diplomatic efforts advanced through various channels beyond government to government contacts including, business, private citizens, peace activists, religion, and media. The value of such a multi-pronged approach is apparent. Unofficial contacts can diffuse much of the conflict before actual negotiations occur, building bridges and developing trust and good will among all parties. Needless to say, Bigelow was a critical component of this diplomatic effort.

Another issue at the time which involved Japanese-American relations and the position of minorities in America was the treatment of Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans in the United States. On October 11, 1906 the San Francisco School Board ordered the segregation of all “Oriental children.” A letter from the Japanese government dated October 25th warned that such an action violated the treaty of 1894 which proscribed equal rights for Japanese residents in the United States. The order did not

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

differentiate between the children of long-term naturalized Japanese immigrants and those who had just arrived on American shores. The historian Edmund Morris insightfully writes: “Any child with sloe eyes on the West Coast would now learn what it was like to be a black child in Alabama.”<sup>30</sup> Morris continues by recounting a telling conversation between Roosevelt, Elihu Root and William Howard Taft: “Roosevelt was giving his views on immigration, and veering, in a way Root knew only too well, toward a monologue on the ‘splendid qualities’ of Nipponese culture and customs.”<sup>31</sup> In many respects Bigelow, while not physically present at the meeting, was there in spirit.

The Japanese, the first non-Western nation to defeat a major Western power, were justifiably proud of their new place in the world and any slight by another country, especially a fellow Pacific power like the United States, become an immediate object of concern and distress. Bigelow, whom Morris himself labels as “one of the President’s principal advisers on Far Eastern affairs,” wrote concerning in particular the segregation issue and for all issues generally that: “They don’t care—broadly speaking—what is done to them as long as it does not seem to be done to them as *Japanese*. --On this they are touchy. For California--or Congress--to legislate against them on the ground that they are Mongolians is just as if they should legislate against us on the ground that we are Germans--or negroes”<sup>32</sup> Later in the same letter to Roosevelt Bigelow wrote: “If you should say you favor the naturalization of Japanese the present trouble would disappear like a puff of smoke—even if Congress failed to authorize it. --All of which you know better than I.”<sup>33</sup> Roosevelt wrote back to Bigelow and included a draft of the message

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<sup>30</sup> Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), 483.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 483. Bigelow to Roosevelt, October 25, 1906.



entitled "International Morality" he intended to read to Congress and also present partly to the Japanese Ambassador Aoki on the issue, which included all the points made by Bigelow, particularly the possibility of naturalization for Japanese in America. Bigelow wrote back happily:

You have said exactly the right thing from the Jap. standpoint, and it will come at the physiological [sic] moment to catch the ball on the bounce there as far as feeling toward us is concerned. Root's excellent and tactful dispatch must I think have blocked all chance of a boycott in the mean time....It is hard to see how the craziest agitator in San Francisco is going to get away from what you have said this time. I would give a good deal to see Aoki's face when you read it to him.<sup>34</sup>

In the postscript to the letter, Bigelow emphasized:

You perhaps do not realize this thing—the recommendation of naturalization—will please the Japanese. Very likely they will not show it much. It is not good manners to express emotion with them. But they will be pleased right into the middle of their souls.<sup>35</sup>

After a series of negotiations between the White House, the government of Japan, and the mayor of San Francisco, Eugene E. Schmitz, a deal was finally made that if not satisfying all parties at least placated them temporarily. The "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1908 would limit Japanese emigration to the United States, and provide the Japanese government and the Japanese people assurances that Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans would receive equal access to education in California. This was assuredly the greatest example of Bigelow's influence on Roosevelt's decision-making as President; but it was certainly not the last. Bigelow would continue his project to bring Japan and the United States closer together, and in so doing bring the West and the East closer culturally as well. In 1908 he requested assistance from Roosevelt to establish an

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Murakata, *Selected Letters*, 281.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-282. Secretary of State Root sent a letter to Japan expressing the Administration's concern for the issue which was well received in Tokyo. Viscount Aoki Shuzo (1844-1914) was the first Japanese Ambassador to the United States. He served in this position from 1905 until 1909.

academic exchange of professors between the two countries and even requested that Roosevelt assist him in the importation of books and paintings for the Asiatic Department of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In 1913 another crisis in the relationship between the United States and Japan occurred when the California legislature considered an anti-alien land law that specifically focused on the Japanese. Roosevelt, now out of the White House, attempted to intercede in the matter but to no avail. He wrote Bigelow frustrated: "It is just like the situation six years ago, only Wilson is not taking hold of it the right way, and meanwhile Taft has done what he could to tangle things up....Wilson now puts a premium on California acting by itself by announcing to her, through Bryan, and in his own letter, that she has the power to act, and yet not offering any alternative."<sup>36</sup>

Bigelow wrote that he wished Roosevelt were in charge again. Lodge argued that this incident was different in that California's action did not violate any treaty rights. He also argued a larger point: "No nation can concede for a moment as a general proposition that any other nation has the right to impose its citizens upon them."<sup>37</sup> Bigelow agreed with Lodge's logic but answered back in defense of Japan:

Of course every country has got a right to exclude anybody it wants to. The Japanese themselves established that precedent in old days when they wouldn't let anybody in at all. On the other hand, we established the precedent, by Perry's expedition and what followed, that such reluctance to receive visitors may be overcome by force of arms even if the process involve a complete overturn of the government of the country concerned.

The real fact about it is that the Japanese, from the point of evolution and survival of the fittest, are the superior race. They produce more and consume less than we do; so do the Chinese. Moreover, the Japanese have, or always have had, the incomparable advantage of being

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<sup>36</sup> 30 April 1913, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*, Library of Congress.

<sup>37</sup> Lodge to Bigelow, 15 May 1913, *Henry Cabot Lodge Papers*, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

homogeneous and able to unite on a single, central idea; whereas it would be pretty hard digging to find an idea on which our great, straggling, heterogeneous population could get together. There is no single interest which they all have in common.<sup>38</sup>

Although Bigelow never reached the higher halls of power like his friends Lodge and Roosevelt, there is no denying his influence on them when it came to Asia and particularly Japan. Bigelow later left some of his estate to Harvard University for the advancement of Buddhist studies. His gift in 1871 of \$10,000 included a statement that the money should be “used without restrictions for the general purposes of the Oriental Department either for getting books, etc., or for helping to pay the salaries of instructors. I feel strongly that the more Buddhism is taught at Harvard, the better.”<sup>39</sup> Bigelow also left his extensive art collection to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The collection included more than 15,000 pieces and 40,000 *ukiyo-e* prints.

Even in death Bigelow was torn between two worlds. When Bigelow died, half of his ashes were buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the other half in Japan near the Buddhist temple he so loved, Homyo-in. The monument next to his Japanese grave has the following inscription:

Here and in his native land, America, lie the ashes of William Sturgis Bigelow, a follower of Buddha, known in religion as a Gesshin Koji, a pupil of Sakurai Ajari, a supporter of Homyo-in, a doctor of medicine, a lover and collector of the fine arts of Japan, a recipient of the Order of the Rising Sun. His life was distinguished by high thoughts and good deeds, by understanding and by the gift of sympathy. He was everywhere beloved and honored most by those who knew him best. April 4, 1830-October 6, 1926.

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<sup>38</sup> 21 May 1913, Quoted in Murakata, 366.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Endowment Funds of Harvard University, June 30, 1947, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1948), 34.

### *Percival Lowell*

Percival Lowell, as recounted above, accompanied Bigelow to the lecture provided by Edward Morse at the Lowell Institute. Percival Lowell, a descendant of the Boston Lowell family, and brother of the president of Harvard University, Abbott Lawrence, and the famous Imagist poet, Amy, graduated from Harvard in 1876. Percival's family was also part of the Boston Brahmins, descendants of those who established the city of Boston. The term "Boston Brahmins" was coined by Oliver Wendell Homes in 1861 when he referred to the most prominent Boston families as the Brahmin Caste of New England. Lowell traveled far and wide throughout East Asia in the 1880s and he would even become a representative of Korea to the United States. When he finally returned to the United States, he began to study astronomy, particularly the planet Mars, as a full time occupation; it is his work in this field that he is most remembered for today. Although Percival Lowell was not himself an adherent of any of the Asian religions, he is an example of a broader cultural dialogue that most of the subjects of this study shared. Lowell believed that the West would profit from a synthesis with and knowledge of Asian cultural forms.

Lowell had given up a lucrative career in medicine to delve into the world of Asian thought and culture. He arrived in Japan in 1883 to meet his friend William Sturgis Bigelow. However, Lowell did not limit himself to the study of religions or intellectual thought in Japan but approached the country like a "philosophical anthropologist," attempting to uncover the larger brushstrokes of Asian civilization. Even though his stay in Asia was relatively short, on and off from 1883 to 1893, Lowell published four books

on the region. In an interesting turn of events, Lowell was asked to accompany the first diplomatic mission from Korea to the United States. Upon his return from this mission, Lowell was invited to Korea directly as a guest of the King. Lowell's first book, *Chosön; the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea* (1886), was the result of the winter he spent in Korea in 1883. Taking into account his relatively short stay in Korea, the book was an attempt to discover the inner spirit of the Korean people.<sup>40</sup>

Lowell left Korea in the early months of 1884 and returned to Japan where he stayed for the rest of the year, after which he returned to the United States for the next four years. When he finally returned to Japan in 1889, the result was three more books, *The Soul of the Far East* (1888), *Noto: An unexplored corner of Japan* (1891), and *Occult Japan; or, The Way of the Gods; an Esoteric study of Japanese personality and possession* (1895). In an enthusiastic letter from Tokyo to a Mrs. Wetmore in November 1902 Lafcadio Hearn confidently proclaimed that Lowell's *The Soul of the Far East* was "...incomparably the greatest of all books on Japan, and the deepest..."<sup>41</sup> Lowell left Japan for the last time in 1893 and spent the rest of his life studying astronomy. The Lowell observatory, founded and named for Percival, was opened in 1893 in Flagstaff, Arizona, making it today one of the oldest in America. Lowell spent fifteen years there studying the sky and particularly Mars. The observatory was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965.

Unlike Morse, Lowell became enthralled with the "soft sciences" of religion, psychology, and behavior. Where Morse was instrumental in the introduction of Darwin's theories of evolution into Japan, Lowell was similarly instrumental in the

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<sup>40</sup> Percival Lowell, *Chosön; the Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea* (Boston, MA: Ticknor and Company, 1886).

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Murakata, *Selected Letters*, 1.

introduction of Spencerian theories of “social Darwinism.” Two observations that were informed by his Spencerian emphasis were his beliefs that the Japanese language was proof positive of the lack of personality among the Japanese, and that the Western world represented the zenith of progress and civilization.

Lowell’s intellectual endeavor to discover and document the broad strokes of Asian civilization was informed by his belief that by uncovering the essence of Asian culture the essence of Western civilization would also come into more stark relief. He believed that through knowledge of the “other,” we could better know “ourselves.” In his first work, *Chosōn*, Lowell wrote: “It is because the far-east holds up the mirror to our own civilization,—a mirror that like all mirrors gives us back left for right—because by very oddities, as they strike us at first, we learn to criticize, examine, and realize our own way of doing things, that she is so very interesting. It is in this that her great attraction lies. It is for this that men have gone to Japan intending to stay weeks, and have tarried years.”<sup>42</sup> Asia, Lowell believed, was, in all respects, the polar opposite of the West. He contended that: “For to the mind’s eye their world is one huge, comical antithesis of our own. What we regard intuitively in one way from our standpoint, they as intuitively observe in a diametrically opposite manner from theirs. To speak backwards, write backwards, read backwards, is but the a b c of their contrariety.”<sup>43</sup>

But the key to understanding Asia, according to Lowell, was the idea of impersonality. Lowell believed that the sense of self declined as one moved east. In fact, Lowell argued that: “If with us the *I* seems to be of the very essence of the soul, then the

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Bisland, *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), 487.

<sup>43</sup> Lowell, *Chosōn*, 107.

soul of the Far East may be said to be Impersonality.”<sup>44</sup> Lowell believed evidence for Asian impersonality could be found in its religion, language and everyday thought. Asians, Lowell deduced, subordinated their own individual desires to their family, where arranged marriages, not romantic love decided marriages. Where individuality was the axis upon which the West revolved, impersonality defined Asia. Lowell wrote that: “Christianity is a personal religion; Buddhism, an impersonal one. In this fundamental difference lies the world-wide opposition of the two beliefs. Christianity tells us to purify ourselves that we may enjoy countless æons of that bettered self hereafter; Buddhism would have us purify ourselves that we may lose all sense of self for evermore.”<sup>45</sup> The often repeated canard arises again in Lowell’s observation of the fundamental difference between the two faiths: “...Christianity is a gospel of optimism.... Buddhism, on the contrary, is the *cri du cœur* of pessimism.”<sup>46</sup> Yet it was the positive attributes and dimensions of these traits that drew many in the West, before and after Lowell's time; the feeling of community, solidarity, and belonging to something greater than oneself.

Many critics of Lowell, both contemporaneous and current, contend that he simply manipulated the evidence to prove his theories; that he devised a grand theory and then set about “uncovering” examples to prove it. When pulling from such a wide geographic, historical, and philosophical pool as Asia, which extends from Japan to Turkey, one could indeed support almost any claim with a selective appeal to “evidence.” For example, one support of his thesis was based on the lack of personal pronouns in Japanese, but then to prove the impersonality of family life he turned his focus to China.

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<sup>44</sup> Percival Lowell, “Percival Lowell, “The Soul of the Far East,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Volume LX (September 1887), 405-413, 408.

<sup>45</sup> Percival Lowell, “The Soul of the Far East,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Volume 362 (December 1887), 836-849, 842.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 843.

His impersonality study also fails to consider Shintoism, Daoism, or more importantly Confucianism, all of which would have cast serious doubt on his metathesis. His justification for dismissing these traditions was their lack of emphasis on the human soul. Many Lowell scholars, including Carl T. Jackson, argue that this “Impersonality Thesis” is difficult to analyze systematically because Lowell never clearly defined what he meant by impersonality and individuality.

Fenollosa, although he does not target Lowell specifically, argued that there was a basic and crucial misunderstanding of what exactly “individuality” meant. Lafcadio Hearn also realized, after only a year and a half stay in Japan, that the generalizations made by Lowell were inaccurate. In 1894 Hearn wrote to Chamberlain: “Lowell says the Japanese have no individuality. I wish he had to teach here for a year, and he would discover some of the most extraordinary individualities he ever saw.”<sup>47</sup> He even went so far as to state that “what is called personality and individuality is intensely repellent, and makes the principal misery of Occidental life. It means much that is connected with pure aggressive selfishness: and its extraordinary development in a country like America or England seems a confirmation of Viscount Torio’s theory that Western civilization has the defect of cultivating the individual at the expense only of the mass, and giving unbounded opportunities to human selfishness, unrestrained by religious sentiment, law, or emotional feeling.”<sup>48</sup>

Hearn also questioned some of Lowell’s claims on the exact nature of the “Oriental soul,” but he never denied Lowell’s influence on his own work: “If I had

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<sup>47</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 322.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in *Lafcadio Hearn’s Japan: An Anthology of His Writings on the Country and Its People*. Edited and with an introduction by Donald Richie (Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 18



Lowell's genius and Lowell's independence, how happy I should be."<sup>49</sup> Hearn's debt to Lowell's writings can be witnessed in his enthusiastic recommendation to his friend, George Gould: "I have found a marvelous book,—a book of books!—a colossal, splendid, godlike book. You must read every line of it....For heaven's sake don't skip a word of it. The book is called 'The Soul of the Far East,' but its title is smaller than its imprint."<sup>50</sup> Hearn's exuberance over the Lowell's work continued in his postscript:

P.S.—Let something else go to H---, and read this book instead. May God eternally bless and infinitely personalize the man who wrote this book! Please don't skip one solitary line of it, and don't delay reading it,-- because something, much ! is going to go out of this book into your heart and life and stay there! I have just finished this book and feel like John in Patmos, and a d----d sight better. He who shall skip one word of this book let his portion be cut off and his name blotted out of the Book of Life."<sup>51</sup>

This work, Lowell's most famous, is written very much in an Emersonian style, full of easily quotable aphorisms. Lowell argued that Asia was good at certain things, art, politeness, jollity, imitation, loving nature, and that the West was good at, science, candor, severity, originality, anthropocentrism. The importance of these categories for Lowell was that it was the traits of the West that would ultimately triumph. Lowell maintained that: "If these people continue in their old course, their earthly career is closed. Just as surely as morning passes into afternoon, so surely are these races of the Far East, if unchanged, destined to disappear before the advancing nations of the West. Vanish they will off the face of the earth and leave our planet the eventual possession of the dwellers where the day declines."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hearn, *The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> 1893 letter from Lafcadio Hearn to Basil Hall Chamberlin. Quoted in *Lafcadio Hearn: Japan's Great Interpreter: a New Anthology of His Writings: 1894-1904*, edited by Louis Allen & Jean Wilson (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 261.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in George Milbry Gould and Laura Stedman, *Concerning Lafcadio Hearn* (London: Adelphi Terrace, 1908), 82.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

In the end it was his fundamental assumption in *The Soul of the Far East* that through a balanced and thoughtful cultural exchange both the West and the East could benefit, and both civilizations could advance and progress for neither was perfect. “Indeed,” Lowell reasoned, “it is only by such a combination of two different aspects that we ever perceive substance and distinguish reality from illusion. What our two eyes make possible for material objects, the earth’s two hemispheres may enable us to do for mental traits.”<sup>53</sup> Lowell’s passion and New England’s ever increasing interest in Asia even affected his sister, the poet Amy Lowell. Amy Lowell echoed her brother’s sentiments on the benefits of an East-West dialogue in a poem entitled *A Critical Fable*:

...The West is the East, with the puritan night  
Swallowed up in a gush of approaching daylight  
At least, so our cherished delusion mistakes it,  
And since everything is as man’s attitude makes it,  
What the Orient knew we are learning again.<sup>54</sup>

Thus it was Lowell’s contribution to American intellectual history, specifically the ever increasing critical theory of questioning all cultural assumptions, that he made his most significant impact. Lowell wrote that it was from Asia, or what was then called the Orient, that “we learn truly to criticize, examine, and realize our own way of doing things.”<sup>55</sup>

Robert A. Rosenstone argues that the “crux of the encounter” between Westerners and specifically the culture of Japan was that “because it was at once civilized and yet different from the West, Japan was disturbing to the American intellectual and emotional equilibrium. Other Asian nations might be dismissed as inferior to the West, but Japan

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<sup>53</sup> Percival Lowell, *The Soul of the Far East* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 226.

<sup>54</sup> Amy Lowell, *A Critical Fable* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 84-85.

<sup>55</sup> Lowell, *Chosön*, 107.

forced people to look homeward with new eyes."<sup>56</sup> The Americans who lived or spent time there, Morse, Fenollosa, Bigelow, Adams, and Lowell, had not all been overly critical of American culture, nor had they shown themselves sympathetic to the burgeoning intellectual criticisms of industrialism, technology, and mass society. But the time they spent "outside themselves" disturbed many of their assumptions about their own culture. Hearn wrote that his cultural experiences in Japan convinced him that the country opened "a man's eyes and mind about his own country, about conventionalisms of a hundred sorts—about false ideals and idealisms—about ethical questions."<sup>57</sup>

In late-nineteenth-century America it became increasingly common to hear people begin to vocally profess to be Buddhist and the term "American Buddhist" appeared in periodicals throughout the country. The *New York Journal* reported the swelling interest in this particular Asian religious tradition: "It is no uncommon thing to hear a New Yorker say he is a Buddhist nowadays."<sup>58</sup> Understandably, most of the interest in Buddhism and Hinduism was centered in the major cities, including New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. And within those cities there were, of course, varying levels of interest. Some had a passing interest in Asian religions and thought, while others spent decades or their entire lives studying and practicing. The most notable of these adherents and sympathizers included, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Edwin Dwight Babbitt, his son, Irving Babbitt, and Daniel Dyer Lum. These individuals came to Asian religions and thought, predominantly Buddhism, from various paths, but as we shall see

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>57</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, "Learning from Those 'Imitative' Japanese: Another Side of the American Experience in the Mikado's Empire," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3. (June 1980), 572-595, 576-577.

<sup>58</sup> The quote from the *New York Journal* was quoted in Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 131. The various quotes are also used by Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1888-1912, Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, 27-28. The original quote was excerpted by Fields from the *Buddhist Ray* 6.5-6 (May-June 1893), 4.

they all attempted to utilize their interpretations of Asian religions to affect and reform the deficiencies they saw in America at the time.

### *Dyer Daniel Lum*

There was perhaps no one more sympathetic to Buddhism in America in the late nineteenth century than Dyer Daniel Lum (1839-1893). Furthermore, there was probably no one as far from the privileged “Boston Brahmins” as Lum, both geographically and socially. Lum was the first American of European descent to publicly profess his allegiance to Buddhism. It is, of course, often cited that C. T. Strauss was the first to become a Buddhist in an actual ceremony after the Parliament of Religions, but Lum was the first to simply proclaim on his own authority his standing as a Buddhist. Lum led a long and varied career in the 1800s; he was a religious radical, a political anarchist, a bookbinder, a publisher, an abolitionist, a proponent of the eight-hour day, and a supporter of the Haymarket “criminals,” to name just a few of his activities and concerns. Lum had many and varied affiliations throughout his life including as a member of the Knights of Labor, the Socialist Labor Party, and the IWPA (International Working People’s Association). He worked on an anarchist newspaper in Kansas and was a contributor to the *Alarm*, the journal of the International Working People’s Association. As part of his abolitionist crusade, Lum served four years as an infantryman and cavalry soldier in the Union Army.

It was the infinite perfectibility of human nature which Lum found to be the essential component of Buddhism and which drew him to it. Lum claimed that this fundamental optimism in Buddhism, which was not recognized by many of his

contemporaries, was profoundly compatible with American optimism and activism. Lum argued that Buddhism, and perhaps Buddhism alone, could be reconciled with Western science. As many of his time, it was the compatibility of Buddhism, Western science, and tolerance that drew Lum to Buddhism.

Lum came to Buddhism not through personal travels to Asia like the “Boston Buddhists,” but through purely intellectual means. Lum poured over every work he could find on Asia and particularly Buddhism. Through his extensive intellectual journey Lum finally felt comfortable enough to publicly proclaim his preference for Buddhism in 1875 in a public lecture to the Channing Club of Northampton, Massachusetts. During that lecture he confidently proclaimed that Buddhism was indeed “the true method of salvation.”<sup>59</sup>

Lum published only two works that focused exclusively on Buddhism, “Buddhism Notwithstanding: An Attempt to Interpret Buddhism from a Buddhist Standpoint”<sup>60</sup> (1875) and “Nirvana” (1877). However, Lum continued to refer to Buddhist ideas throughout his long career. In fact, during the funeral tribute to him by Voltairine de Cleyre, she recounted that: “Indeed, the spirit of devotion to something greater than Self, which will be found as the kernel of every religion, was so thoroughly in him, or indeed was he himself that whether he fancied himself willing it or not, his inclinations directed all his conscious efforts to read the riddle of life into the channel of Buddhism.”<sup>61</sup> Lum argued that the historical Buddha was first and foremost a social and

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<sup>59</sup> Dyer Daniel Lum, “Buddhism Notwithstanding: An Attempt to Interpret Buddhism from a Buddhist Standpoint,” *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion* Toledo, Ohio 29 (29 April 1875; 6 May 1875) 195-196, 206.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Voltairine De Cleyre, *Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre*. (New York, NY: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1914), 289-290.

religious reformer, who not only challenged discrimination by challenging the Hindu caste system, but also by allowing women into the Buddhist order. Lum never ceased emphasizing Buddhism's essential optimism about the human condition and the perfectibility of man.

Lum described himself as having a “critical and analytical nature.” Thus in Tweed's categories Lum would be classified as a “rationalist” type of Buddhist. Lum's rationalism displayed itself through his focus on science, ethics, and the authority of the individual. According to Lum, all ethical systems, including religions, had to ultimately be judged and be compatible with the laws uncovered by modern geology and biology. Thus Lum, along with many of his ilk, argued that by this criterion Buddhism was superior to Christianity and other traditions. Buddhists are not asked to ‘sacrifice reason’ by believing in notions that are contradicted by modern science—such as the belief in a supernatural being and an immortal soul. The doctrine of the moral law of cause and effect (karma), for instance, provides the basis for a religious view which is in perfect harmony with biological evolution, natural selection, and heredity. In its doctrine of karma Buddhism is able to account for the ‘moral government of the world, without a personal governor.’”<sup>62</sup>

Before becoming a self-described Buddhist, Lum flirted briefly with Spiritualism. He was raised as an orthodox Presbyterian, but became skeptical in his early childhood when he realized that God did not strike him down after he yelled “Damn!” while playing one Sunday. However, Lum's critical nature soon took over again and he began to analyze Spiritualism more closely. In 1873 he published an attack on Spiritualism

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<sup>62</sup> Lum, “Buddhism Notwithstanding,” 195.

entitled *The "Spiritualist" Delusion*<sup>63</sup> in which he chastised Spiritualists for their gullibility and unscientific approach. After two years of criticizing Spiritualism, he finally discovered in Buddhism what he was looking for, a belief system that satisfied his anti-dogmatic, scientific, humanistic, and egalitarian tendencies, and fulfilled the Emersonian call to "intellectual Self-Reliance."

There was, according to Lum and others of similar intellectual proclivities, a basic compatibility between Buddhism and science in the mid- to late-Victorian era. After all, they were indeed products of their times, and their times were highly imbued with rationalism, empiricism, and the free-thinking views of the Enlightenment. Because their particular interpretations of Buddhism lacked the creedal dogmatism that they saw in Christianity, Buddhism was the perfect religion, or, "philosophy of life" they were searching for. Jose Ignacio Cabezon argues that "The perceived Buddhist emphasis on 'the authority of the individual' and its critical spirit were seen as analogous to the methods of science, and the 'universal law' of karmic causation was perceived by many as harmonious with science's search for causes, especially for impersonal causal laws that were independent of the will of a deity."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Cabezon continues by arguing a point that is crucial for the current study: "Given that, especially in the wake of Kant, ethics was seen as the core of religion, it should also be noted that many of these thinkers saw the Buddhist path as offering a scientific, that is, systematic and empirically verifiable, method for the moral perfection of the individual."<sup>65</sup> This attempt at a "moral

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<sup>63</sup> Lum also wrote other articles criticizing spiritualism including, "Mental Health vs. Mediumship," and "The Need of Personal Development."

<sup>64</sup> Jose Ignacio Cabezon, "Buddhism and Science: On the Nature of the Dialogue," in *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, editor B. Alan Wallace. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 46.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

perfection of the individual” for many, but not all, led to various attempts at a moral perfection of society as well. For Lum and many others the belief in a personal creator god and a substantial self could be sacrificed, however, optimism and activism could never be forsaken.

Lum is predominately known today, albeit by still just a few, as a trade union activist and more famously as an anarchist. Lum was a proponent of what has been called an “unhyphenated anarchism,” or “anarchism without adjectives.” Lum, and other similar types of anarchists including Errico Malatesta and Max Nettlau, advocated a non-sectarian anarchism which attempted “to promote tolerance for different economic views within the movement, believing that economic preferences would vary according to individual tastes and that no one person or group had the only correct solution.”<sup>66</sup> Lum called for an increase in personal freedom and through such an increase human perfection would follow along naturally. Lum’s essential optimism was apparent.

Dyer Daniel Lum was one of the most politically and socially active Americans of his time. The beginning of what would become a long and varied career in social activism began in 1862 when he volunteered for the 121<sup>st</sup> New York Infantry during the Civil War. Lum was captured twice by Confederate troops and later fought heroically with the 14<sup>th</sup> New York Calvary in the Red River Campaign in Louisiana. Lum rose quickly in the ranks from Sergeant to Captain in just over two years. In 1865 he was honorably discharged and returned to his profession of bookbinding eventually settling in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1873.

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<sup>66</sup> Sharon Presly and Crispin Sartwell, eds. *Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre, Anarchist, Feminist, Genius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 22. It has been assumed that Voltairine De Cleyre was Dyer’s lover.



During the 1870s, the period in which Lum embraced Buddhism, he organized his fellow bookbinders into a union. In 1872 he was involved in the Equal Rights party that nominated Victoria Woodhull for President and later collected signatures for a petition opposing the designation of the United States as a Christian nation. In 1877 Lum ran an unsuccessful bid for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts with his Greenback-Labor ticket partner abolitionist Wendell Phillips.

The overarching agenda that informed most of Lum's activities was his attempt to redesign the core of the American economic system. Earlier experiences in third party politics and a short stint in Washington D.C. soured Lum on political solutions to the problems he witnessed in America of the late nineteenth century. Lum steadily lost faith in legislation and state control and joined the IWPA, the same organization that the Haymarket defendants would identify with.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, Lum took up the mantra that "The Wage System Must Go!" As far as Lum was concerned, he believed that the "wage system" was nothing more than "wage slavery." He issued a call to action by deriding the financial system within which business operated arguing that "rent, interest, profit are the triple heads of the monster against which modern civilization is waging war."<sup>68</sup>

Lum and other individual anarchists took a radical view of "laissez faire." They believed that the government should not intervene in labor activities and negotiations because it was their contention, which Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor would also incorporate, that government interference would weaken labor's bargaining power and independence. Essentially, they argued that if they requested the

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<sup>67</sup> Carlotta R. Anderson, *All-American Anarchist: Joseph A. Labadie and the Labor Movement* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pg. 154-155. (Anderson's footnote to section: Frank H. Brooks, "Ideology, Strategy and Organization: Dyer Lum and the American Anarchist Movement," *Labor History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 57-83; Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, 317-21.

<sup>68</sup> Gurth, "Washington Letter," *Irish World*, April 10, 1880, 8.

government to provide them certain labor requests, health services for example, then future business owners and managers would simply direct labor organizers and workers themselves to the government for any future concessions thereby restricting and curtailing any productive labor-management negotiations.

It was the Pittsburgh riots and more significantly the Railroad Strike of 1877 that moved Lum into the radical political arena. No longer sure of the ability of the existent political system and its concomitant method of often frustrating incrementalism, Lum moved from socialism and labor reform to anarchism. In 1883 he joined the Anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA), and continued to write for magazines that both advocated peaceful change, Benjamin Tucker's *Liberty*, and violent revolution, *Alarm*. Lum, with his extensive connections in the labor reform movement attempted to reconcile the two main branches of American anarchism, the "Boston anarchists," who advocated economic reforms, and the "Chicago anarchists," who believed in a radical revolutionary strategy. Lum believed he could unite these two groups under one effective flag. According to Frank H. Brooks, Lum "realized that anarchism, like any movement aiming at radical social change, had to combine an organization that could lead and coordinate action, an effective strategy, and an ideology that was convincing, inspiring, and relevant to American culture."<sup>69</sup>

"Lum," according to Brooks, "was an anomaly in the sense that he seemed to have followed both of the major paths to anarchism in the 1880s, the strategic path of those who rejected electoral socialism for revolutionary anti-statist socialism and the ideological path of labor reformers who turned to a radicalized laissez-faire explanation

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<sup>69</sup> Frank H. Brooks, "Ideology, Strategy, and Organization: Dyer Lum and the American Anarchist Movement," *Labor History* 61

of wage slavery.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps Lum’s belief in Buddhism can help explain his capacity to hold two different ideas at once. Buddhism’s contention of non-dualism, the same type of non-dualism Emerson spoke of in his poem *Brahma*, perhaps enabled Lum to “transcend” differences that many others in the anarchist movement could or would not move beyond. Lum saw it as his duty to bring the two groups together by combining the strengths of each. On a larger stage however what would eventually hamper the entire labor movement was its diversity. The anti-monopoly and eight-hour movement, Henry George’s single tax system, and Edward Bellamy’s Nationalism were but of the few solutions to the “labor problem.” The differing agendas and strategies prevented the disparate groups from speaking with a unified voice.

As he attempted to unite the differing versions of anarchism, Lum also attempted to bring order to these scattered movements. However, he realized as well that to force one single set of principles on the movement would be both unrealistic and unwise. Again, perhaps taking clues from Buddhism he embraced a non-dogmatic solution: “From the collectivists, he kept the strategic focus on organizing proletarians as a revolutionary class. From the individualists, he took the ideological focus on an anarchist economics that was theoretically sophisticated and grounded in labor reform and laissez-faire.”<sup>71</sup> With these strategic and ideological tools Lum attempted to bring as many people and groups as possible under this rather large umbrella regardless of affiliations or ideological proclivities.

In 1886 Lum officially joined the Knights of Labor and urged others to join as well. The issue of “wage slavery” was a core issue for the Knights. Yet for Lum his

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

revolutionary zeal and his fundamental belief in the inevitability of violence informed his support for the Knights. Lum's belief in the necessity of violence was simple. He argued that capitalists would not hesitate to violently resist any attempts to end the wage system that was so beneficial for them and therefore violence was necessary to combat violence, be it reaction or preemption. History, he reminded those who would listen, supported his contention because chattel slavery was only ended after the Civil War and the sacrifice of over 600,000 Americans. The cost this time would hopefully not be so high.

But it was the violence surrounding the 1885 streetcar strike that most encouraged anarchists to believe that the revolution was imminent. August Spies and other members of the International Working People's Association "called on trade unionists to abandon their 'hypocritical' lip service to 'law and order' and begin to practice armed self-defense."<sup>72</sup> At *Alarm* Lum, who had just been moved to the editorship temporarily when its leaders were arrested and convicted during the Haymarket Square incident in 1886, asked rhetorically, "If the great railroad strike of 1877 were to be repeated today, would it not be such an occasion?"<sup>73</sup> "Lum and other anarchist leaders," according to the historian Richard Schneirov, "were approaching the Blanquist theory that conditions were ripe for a band of determined revolutionaries to lead the masses into revolutionary conflict."<sup>74</sup> Schneirov continues by eloquently and succinctly describing this critical period of American history: "Among the very same people who were voicing fears that the Republic was on the verge of irreparable corruption, however, a very different labor philosophy was arising. It may even be that the very intensity with which the fear of

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 177.

<sup>73</sup> Abraham Bisno, *Abraham Bisno: Union Pioneer* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 66. Quoted in Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 177.

<sup>74</sup> Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 177.

social catastrophe gripped the imaginations of labor leaders impelled them all the more to recoil from its consequences and seek alternatives to the antihistorical equal rights republicanism.” This new thinking was both “resolutely evolutionary and historicist.” Yet unlike the “subversive metaphysic of natural liberty, it accommodated to evolving conditions but nonetheless viewed the direction of that evolution as compatible with some of the most idealist labor goals. It also treated individual rights as capable of being supplemented by or even merged into group interests.”<sup>75</sup>

Lum certainly embodied this belief that individual rights could very well be “supplemented by or even merged into group interests.” Carlotta R. Anderson adds that Lum embodied an even more “explosive” personality with this theory in that “underneath his calm exterior smoldered a revolutionary infatuation with dynamite plots and secret codes, with the use of terrorism as a weapon against tyranny, and with the yearning to die in the cause of human emancipation.”<sup>76</sup> Lum smuggled four pipe bombs in to the cell of one of the defendants hidden in cigar casings, yet they were soon discovered the following day. He informed Joseph A. Labadie that: “Only terrorism...will now save them.”<sup>77</sup> Actually, Lum’s plot to free the prisoners from the hangman’s noose through dynamiting the jail was squelched by the condemned man. They preferred “to die as martyrs and thereby immortalize their ideals.”<sup>78</sup> Lum sounded the call to arms again in the pages of *Alarm* when the Haymarket anarchists were finally executed. Lum later published an authoritative history of the Haymarket trial.

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<sup>75</sup> Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 300.

<sup>76</sup> Anderson, *All-American Anarchist*, 155.

<sup>77</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, *All-American Anarchist*, 155.

In fact, Lum believed that it was Buddhism that also enabled him to take several personally dangerous chances throughout his life. “The Buddhist concept of nirvana,” the historian Frank H. Brooks argues, “with its indifference to death and the individual soul, provided a quasi-religious sanction for Lum’s reckless devotion to revolution.”<sup>79</sup>

In 1880 there was a national conference of labor reformers held in Washington, D.C.. Lum was appointed as a member of the national eight-hour committee.<sup>80</sup> By the mid to late 1860s several cities and states had laws on the books for the provision of the eight-hour day for public employees. In 1868 Congress even enacted a law to that effect for federal workers. However, the laws were rarely enforced and of course did not extend to the bulk of the working class, those in private industry.

Lum’s philosophical beliefs and perhaps his love of controversy even brought him to write a defense of Mormonism during the height of anti-Mormon sentiment. As Lum grew older he began to reject violence, but never stopped advocating anarchism. As late as 1890 he described himself as a “Social Revolutionist.” The journal *Liberty* enjoyed a twenty seven year run and brought together activists, labor reformers, socialists, and varying other types of individualists. Benjamin Tucker’s two basic principles for the journal were individual sovereignty and equal liberty. These were ideas that Lum and others of his kind gravitated to in order to serve as a “public square” to measure various reform proposals and ideas.

There is a tendency to marginalize and trivialize individuals like Lum because of their radical views that never really succeeded in the mainstream due mainly to their fundamentally revolutionary nature. However, what is overlooked is the dialogue that

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<sup>79</sup> Frank H. Brooks, “Ideology, Strategy, and Organization: Dyer Lum and the American Anarchist Movement,” *Labor History* 61

<sup>80</sup> The other members included Richard Trevellick, John Mills, Charles Litchman, and Parsons.

they brought to the public sphere and more importantly the potential alternatives that often served to frighten the mainstream establishment into considering certain options they might not have considered or even entertained originally. A useful and well known example of this phenomenon can be witnessed in the Great Depression of the 1930s. A debate has raged for decades as to whether Franklin Delano Roosevelt saved capitalism or inflicted irreparable harm upon it through his economic and social reforms. However, in the final analysis, FDR was certainly a “conservative” in the sense that the essential economic and social system of America stayed intact after the Great Depression and a more reactionary or radical system was averted and even co-opted. The activities and ideas of Lum can be seen in the same light. The anarchists pushed for an agenda that seemed apocalyptic to many in the government and business which pressured them, and society at large, to address issues that they may have not normally addressed without the sense of a potential abyss on the horizon.

Lum, and Thoreau before him, believed that market forces should not dominate human activity. Lum in some respects foreshadowed Jürgen Habermas’ ideas, especially in the realm of “communicative action.” Habermas argued that strategic action, that is action based on the exclusive goal of winning an argument, can be traced back to these market forces. Winning, rather than understanding, became the overriding factor in communication. This colonization of public life by these types of zero-sum institutions has had a decidedly negative impact on democratic society. Through the dominance of this type of system individuals have become less citizens and more consumers. The primary reason for being has now become to consume rather than serve as citizens in a

democratic society.<sup>81</sup> As the years went by, frustrated in his yearning to avenge the tragedy of Haymarket or die for the cause of human freedom, Lum sank into depression and alcoholism, and eventually poisoned himself.<sup>82</sup>

As tragic as Lum's life eventually unfolded, no one can deny the passion and the purpose he poured into his entire being. One of the circulars passed around leading up to Haymarket echoed Lum's thought powerfully.

Arouse, ye toilers of America! Lay down your tools on May 1, 1886, cease your labor, close the factories, mills and mines—for one day in the year. One day of revolt—not of rest! A day not ordained by the bragging spokesmen of institutions holding the world of labor in bondage. A day on which labor makes its own laws and has the power to execute them! All without the consent or approval of those who oppress and rule. A day on which in tremendous force the unity of the army of toilers is arrayed against the powers that today hold sway over the destinies of the people of all nations. A day of protest against oppression and tyranny, against ignorance and war of any kind.<sup>83</sup>

The blood shed at Haymarket that day, May 1<sup>st</sup>, and later through the executions of the “conspirators,” resounded throughout the world, making May 1<sup>st</sup> an international workers' holiday, May Day. Lum was on that battlefield and so many others physically, intellectually and spiritually. Through his many essays, editorials, protests, lectures and speeches he was instrumental in giving voice to those with no voice. And his voice was undeniably accented by the worldview and ideas he garnered from his study of Asian religions.

The voice of Asia was also in the room with Theodore Roosevelt when he was contemplating some of his most important decisions on international issues.

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<sup>81</sup> David S. Allen, *Democracy, Inc.: The Press and Law in the Corporate Rationalization of the Public Sphere* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, *All-American Anarchist*, 408-9.

<sup>83</sup> *Proceedings*, FOTLU, 1885, 11-15; Printed “Appeal to all Trade and Labor Unions,” February 1, 1886, copy in American Federation Archives, Washington, D.C.



Roosevelt's lifelong friendship with the outspoken Bigelow was a critical dynamic in his life. And the voice of Asia resonated in Boston and beyond. Fenollosa would use the visual voice of art to "dispense spiritual balm," in order to unite that which was superior, whether it was from the East or the West. These lives would lay the foundations for movements that lasted long after their passing. As expressed earlier, only a few individuals are addressed in the present study for only a few individuals left a trace of their interest in Asian religions and thought due predominately to the high social cost of expressing sympathy for such radical or heretical beliefs. Such an endeavor was often just too much for all but the most radical or the most economically self-sufficient. We can only imagine how many more individuals secretly became adherents or sympathizers. Yet even without that personal identification, the ideas themselves took on a life of their own throughout the streets, museums, homes, and universities across America.

## CHAPTER 4

### “ONE WORLD AT A TIME”:

#### THE PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

The period from 1893 through 1917 was undoubtedly a watershed in American history. America became a world power after the Spanish-American War of 1898 through the acquisition of the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam. Because of this new status on the world stage, Americans began to seriously ponder their place in the world. Should America become an imperial power? Did America’s possession of a colonial empire mesh with its founding spirit of freedom and national self-determination? Back at home, even though the “acids of modernity” were beginning to tear the old order apart, many in America still believed that viable solutions could be found for even the worst problems in America. However, that optimism was severely tested on the battlefields of Europe during World War I when humankind’s technological advances were tragically used to satisfy humankind’s eternal thirst for blood and destruction. Confidence in science and humankind’s seemingly natural and inexorable ability to improve society was shaken. America was undergoing yet another of its many crucial turning points in its history.

At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago held in 1893, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of the Americas, a young historian from Wisconsin, Fredrick Jackson Turner, argued that the American frontier had disappeared. According to Turner, the 1890 U.S. Census clearly showed that the frontier line was so broken up by isolated bodies of settlement that it was no longer clearly discernible; future censuses would not even make mention of it. Furthermore, Turner went on to theorize what would

amount to a form of environmental determinism: that the frontier had been instrumental in shaping the American character. In order to survive on the frontier, Americans developed, among other “exceptional traits,” a culture of equality and individualism. Now that the frontier was gone, so was the driving force behind this unique American character. The American Pragmatist John Dewey would later argue that perhaps certain elements of the American character, especially this “rugged individualism” were not well suited to this new modern era in the first place. Dewey felt that this rugged individualism was in fact a “ragged individualism,” a pejorative term which he used to describe Americans’ tendency to unduly separate themselves from their communities both spatially and temporally. Furthermore, Dewey argued, a “pathological segregation of facts and values” or a “bifurcation of nature” posed “the deepest problem of modern life.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed American society was certainly undergoing monumental changes in the period after the Civil War and those changes intensified rapidly with the almost daily quickening of America's industrial progression. What seemed to be a country of plenty and unbridled and widespread success was in fact, as Mark Twain coined it, a Gilded Age, that is, an era seemingly bright and rich on the surface but in fact concealing a less than pristine inner core. This Gilded Age coincided with, or some would argue, was followed by, the Progressive Era in American history. This early twentieth-century Progressive movement in America consisted of an ever-increasing variety of reform activities undertaken in response to industrialization, changing demographics, and a myriad of other real and perceived social ills and injustices. Just as the Progressive movement

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<sup>1</sup> Milton R. Konovitz and Gail Kennedy, ed., *The American Pragmatists* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), 174.

began to splinter and specialize even more in the early twentieth-century, so did the increasing number of adherents and followers of Asian religions and thought. In the case of Progressivism, many historians have argued that the movement called “Progressivism” was so large and so varied that it does not warrant an “ism” at all, that is, no single term is considered appropriate to identify or encompass this movement.<sup>2</sup> However, in order to avoid such a contentious and contested debate, this analysis shall simply use as its subject those who simultaneously self-identified themselves as progressives and also, in continuity with the other historical personages in this work, self-identified themselves as adherents of or sympathizers with Asian thought or religions. The Progressives of this era, including such luminaries as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Upton Sinclair, Ida Tarbell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and Theodore Roosevelt, attempted to reform some of the worst abuses and weaknesses of this era.

Followers of various movements on all levels from the smallest village to the nation’s capital attempted to reform and control the ill effects of a seemingly uncontrollable urbanization, unchecked abuses by business, the corruption and complacency of political figures, and the minds of American citizens themselves. Perhaps it was fitting that the Columbian Exposition, steeped in progressivism and optimism, was to be held in Chicago, Illinois, the home to Jane Addams’ Hull House, the setting for Upton Sinclair’s 1906 progressive touchstone novel on the meatpacking industry, *The Jungle*, and two of the most famous labor episodes in world history, the Haymarket Square riot and the Pullman Strike.

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<sup>2</sup> See the essays in Leon Fink, editor, *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* (Chicago, IL: The University of Illinois, Chicago, 2001).

Yet, this era was also perhaps one of the greatest examples of what has been called a “cultural lag.” Simply put, a cultural lag occurs when cultural or intellectual elements left over from a previous era do not serve the people and the institutions in the new era. Perhaps the most well known example of such a cultural lag was that involving the changing views of child labor. As mentioned previously, the demographics of America changed significantly after the Civil War. Before the Civil War the vast majority of Americans lived in the country, within a few decades after the end of the war those demographics were reversed; cities grew with incredible speed. Children living on the farm with their families were required, as all farm children were, to perform certain chores, including milking cows, feeding chickens, and helping tend the fields.

As families moved to the city parents continued to believe that their children should work for and with the family. When the parents went to work at the local textile mill or coal mine, children often tagged along. Children actually became a much sought after labor force by various industries due to their small body size which allowed them to maneuver in the confined spaces of textile mills, coal mines, and other industrial workplaces, often, of course, at great risk to themselves. The first major urban industry in America, textile manufacturing, depended heavily on child labor. It took quite a while before parents and society-at-large realized that the fate and the conditions of children working on the family farm and children working in the mills and mines were not the same. When that “cultural click” finally occurred, there arose a groundswell of activists who attempted to limit and eventually abolish child labor. This sort of cultural lag reappeared throughout American society and culture, from “free labor,” to contracts, to equal rights, to the role of government. It was within this same type of cultural lag and

widespread attempts to reform and change the intellectual and cultural underpinnings of American society that the Columbian Exposition was held, including what would become know as the World Parliament of Religions.

It is interesting that at the same 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, along with the annual meeting of the young American Historical Association, exhibits on recent technological advances, and architectural displays, the World Parliament of Religions was also held. The chairman of the parliament, John Henry Barrows, expressed the logic of such a meeting alongside the technological marvels of the day, although with more than a little Christian self-congratulation: "it is as clear as the light that the Religion of Christ has led to many of the chief and noblest developments of our modern civilization, it did not appear that Religion any more than Education, Art or Electricity should be excluded from the Columbian exposition."<sup>3</sup> The World Parliament of Religions became a pivotal episode in the introduction and the subsequent development of Asian religions and thought in America.<sup>4</sup>

The Parliament built on the foundation set by other earlier adopters and boosters of Asian religion and thought, Thoreau, Blavatsky, Morse, and Bigelow. To house the Exposition itself an entire city had been built along the shores of Lake Michigan. The white gleaming palaces were meant to recall the great empires of the past—Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Renaissance Italy. A vast majority of the attendees at the Parliament of Religions were indeed Christians of European descent, but there was also a relatively

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Martin J. Verhoeven's introduction to Paul Carus, *The Gospel of the Buddha: Compiled from Ancient Records* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 38. See also, Milton R. Konvitz and Gail Kennedy, ed., *The American Pragmatists* (New York, NY: The World Publishing Company, 1960), 174.

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with The Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Chicago, IL: The Parliament Publishing Company, 1893.), 3.

large showing of other faiths, including Jains, Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists.<sup>5</sup> However, many of the attendees at the Parliament believed that it would be a modern version of the missionary movement and an extension of the new field of comparative theology. The discipline of “comparative theology” was, at the time, still at the mercy of those who employed it. Thus, more than a few of the Christian majority at the Parliament believed that through the comparative nature of the Parliament Christianity would once and for all be shown and recognized to be superior to all the world’s religions. Yet, even with such pronouncements by Barrows and many others at the Parliament, diversity, acceptance, and an open dialogue flourished.

The World Parliament of Religions was intended to be the “spiritual expression” of the Columbian World’s Fair. It was only one of many side congresses to the Columbian Exposition. Soon after the plans for the Exposition itself were announced in 1889, a Chicago lawyer Charles Carroll Bonney—long interested in comparative religions—proposed a religious parliament. Twenty separate congresses would eventually come to fruition including women's progress, literature, engineering, temperance, media, and labor. A common theme of progress can be seen in these congresses, including the hundreds of auxiliary congresses held at the exposition. The titles and minutes of these meetings are replete with references to forward thinking and the undeniable ability of humankind to advance civilization. The Parliament of Religions came to have fans around the world. Friedrich Max Müller, the “father of Religious Studies” and the one

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent history and analysis of the World Parliament of Religions with specific focus on Asian religions, see Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). For a general overview of the Parliament refer to John Henry Barrow, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular History* (2 volumes), *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions*, edited by Walter Houghton, and *The World’s Congress of Religions*, edited by J. W. Hanson.

who coined the term “science of religion,” would regret not having attended the conference and wrote: “Who would have thought that what was announced as simply an auxiliary branch of that exhibition could have developed into what it was, could have become the most important part of that immense undertaking, could have become the greatest success of the year...” He continued by stating that he would not “hesitate to say” that the Parliament “could now take its place as one of the most memorable events in the history of the world!”<sup>6</sup> One hundred years later a centennial Parliament of Religions was held but it failed to achieve the same significance as the first, yet perhaps that fact is simply testimony to the very success of interfaith dialogue over the preceding century.

Over 10,000 letters were sent throughout the world inviting members of various religions to attend. One of the ideological justifications for the meeting was voiced by Barrows: “Religion, like the white light of Heaven, has been broken into many-colored fragments by the prisms of men. One of the objects of the Parliament of Religions has been to change this many-colored radiance back into the white light of heavenly truth.”<sup>7</sup>

The Parliament commenced with the delegates entering the hall under the flags of their respective nations. David Hewivitarne, the Ceylonese Buddhist who would become known as Anagarika Dharmapala, was asked to give the concluding remarks at the opening of the Parliament on September 11, in front of 4,000 people in the Hall of Columbus. Dharmapala, in a letter from Calcutta before the Parliament, wrote: “I rejoice to see that the best intellects of the day have all approved of your grand scheme, which, if carried out, will be the noblest and proudest achievement in history, and the crowning

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<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Max Müller, *The Essential Max Müller: On Language, Mythology, and Religion*. Edited by Jon R. Stone. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 343. Among the various Christian denominations there was even talk of a final peace or resolution of the different divisions of Christianity that perhaps could lead to a United Church.

<sup>7</sup> Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 3.



work of the nineteenth century.” However, Barrows and those with similar sympathies were generally surprised to discover that their endeavor was not the first in history. Dharmapala reminded those in attendance that: “Twenty centuries ago, just such a congress was held in India by the great Buddhist Emperor, Asoka...” Dharmapala, mirroring Barrow’s views on Christianity, argued that Buddhism was the universal message many in the Parliament were searching for and that Ashoka understood the universality of Buddhism. Furthermore, Dharmapala, referring to the Council of Ashoka, professed that the 1893 Parliament was “simply the re-echo of a great consummation which the Indian Buddhists accomplished...” Dharmapala emphasized that Ashoka had sent Buddhists like him to “instruct the world,” and teach the “noblest lessons of tolerance and gentleness.” Dharmapala concluded by conveying his hope that “in this great city, the youngest of all cities, this program will be carried out... And I hope that the noble lessons of tolerance learned in this majestic assembly will result in the dawning of universal peace which will last for twenty centuries more.”<sup>8</sup>

In the case of William James, Winston King goes as far as to claim that: “it was James who indirectly prepared the way for the study of Eastern religions by presenting religious experience as a legitimate object of study in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>9</sup> On a visit to Harvard in the early 1900s, the Buddhist Dharmapala attended a lecture by William James. Upon seeing Dharmapala, James offered him his chair and conveyed to Dharmapala: “You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I.”

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 95, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 387, *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion*. (Jan., 1970), 66-76, 67.

James continued by announcing to the class after Dharmapala's lecture on Buddhism: "This is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now."<sup>10</sup>

William James did not find what he was looking for in Hinduism, but in Buddhism he discovered an ally to his activism. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James wrote: "...for Buddhism as I interpret it, and for religion generally so far as it remains unweakened by transcendentalistic metaphysics, the word 'judgment' here means no bare academic verdict or platonic appreciation as it means in Vedantic or modern absolutist systems; it carries on the contrary, *execution* with it, is *in rebus* as well as *post rem*, and operates 'casually' as partial factor in the total fact." James was of course the advocate of a "stream of consciousness," the idea of "a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir..."<sup>11</sup>

The nature and scope of religiously motivated political activism quickly became a topic of discussion at the Parliament through the work of the Zen Rinzai monk Kinzō Hirai. Hirai immediately brought up the issue of the treatment of Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans in San Francisco who were at the time being barred from entry into public schools and universities by the San Francisco school board. In excellent English Hirai questioned the state of Christian ethics and morality by asking "when there are men who go in procession hoisting lanterns marked 'Japs must go'? If such be Christian ethics, then we are perfectly content to remain idolators, heathens or pagans."<sup>12</sup> Barrows

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<sup>10</sup> Bhikshu Sangarakshita, *Anagarika Dharmapala. A Biographical Sketch*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1964), 78.

<sup>11</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, The Gifford Lectures in 1901-1902 (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1902), 512.

<sup>12</sup> James E. Ketelaar, "Strategic Occidentalism: Meiji Buddhists at the World's Parliament of Religions," in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 11. (1991), 37-56, 48. This is Ketelaar's translation of Hirai's speech as recorded by Matsuda Jin'emon in his edited work, *Hirai Kinzō shi Bankoku Shūkyō*

recorded in his history of the Parliament that: “Loud applause followed many of his declarations, and a thousand cries of ‘Shame’ were heard when he pointed to the wrongs which his countrymen had suffered through the practices of false Christianity.”<sup>13</sup>

Another attendee also brought social activism to the forefront of the Parliament by appealing to the crowd not to forget their moral obligation to help those in need. Pung Kwang Yu, a member of the Chinese legation in Washington, and an orthodox Confucian, sought to remind the attendees of the plight of his fellow countrymen in America: “I have a favor to ask of all the religious people of America, and that is that they will treat, hereafter, all my countrymen just as they have treated me. I shall be a hundred times more grateful to them for the kind treatment of my countrymen than of myself. I am sure that the Americans in China receive just such considerate treatment from the cultured people of China as I have received from you. The majority of my countrymen in this country are honest and law-abiding. Christ teaches us that it is not enough to love one's brethren only. I am sure that all religious people will not think this request is too extravagant.”<sup>14</sup> To a positive audience reaction, Dr. Barrows announced that he would support such a call by passing Pung Kwang Yu's appeal to the government and hoped that the version of the Chinese Exclusion Act then in force would be repealed.

Speeches and panels continued at the Parliament for sixteen full days. However, the dialogue was not limited to Expo grounds; delegates visited and participated in many discussions and inquiries in homes and places of worship throughout the Chicago area and beyond.

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*daikai enzetsu* (Kyoto, Japan: Yūshichū, 1894). As Ketelaar points out, the English version as detailed by Barrows is much briefer: “If such be the Christian ethics—well, we are perfectly satisfied to be heathen.”

<sup>13</sup> Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 115-116.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Judith Snodgrass argues that “Buddhism held a unique place at the World’s Parliament of Religions. More than any other non-Christian religion it was the ‘other’ of Christianity. Its function was not *xenos*, the radically different and totally ‘not-us’ of the ‘heathen,’ ‘idolatrous’ Hinduism of missionary rhetoric, or of Islam, which at this event remained beyond the pale, but that of alterity. Buddhism was recognizably similar, a religion comparable with Christianity, but differing from it precisely on those points at issue in the debates of the time.”<sup>15</sup> This idea was reflected in the personage of Josiah Royce who was originally drawn to Hinduism but after 1900 began to take a greater interest in Buddhism. Dale Riepe recounts that his interest was perhaps due to his reading of Schopenhauer. Riepe writes, “Royce’s attachment to Buddhism depended upon his belief not only that it was Christianity’s greatest rival, but also that it was concerned with the reciprocal relations between metaphysical and moral problems. That Buddhism stressed the epistemological rather than the ontological also was in keeping with Royce’s idealist propensities. Furthermore, the Buddha was loyal in Royce’s basic sense of loyalty-loyal to the community and not simply to himself. This must have struck Royce as splendidly anticipatory of his own view of loyalty.”<sup>16</sup>

However, Kenneth Tanaka and Thomas Tweed have both argued that Buddhism failed to catch hold in America following its initial introduction in the “...Victorian period, largely due to the absence in Buddhism of two qualities: optimism and activism. While other features of Buddhism appealed to certain elements of the Victorian ethos, such as its amenability to the scientific worldview and the spirit of individualism, the

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<sup>15</sup> Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 85.

<sup>16</sup> Dale Riepe, “The Indian Influence in American Philosophy: Emerson to Moore,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 17, No. ¼. (Jan. – Oct., 1967), 125-137, 128.

pessimistic and passive Buddhist image dampened further growth.”<sup>17</sup> It is true that Buddhism did not catch on like many of its proponents had hoped after its initial introduction, but it certainly did have an effect on America at the time. The pragmatism and adaptability of the American spirit and the pragmatism and adaptability of Buddhism went hand in hand. Adherents and followers of Asian religions in America may have indeed misunderstood the “passivity” of Buddhism as inaction but the active spirit of the followers infused Buddhism with their own infectious activism and optimism. In effect, although they may have incorrectly interpreted Buddhism as inactive and pessimistic, they possessed more than enough of these qualities themselves to infuse any perceived shortcomings in Buddhism. Much later in the post-World War II era and specifically during and after the Vietnam War, it was the perceived passivity of Buddhism that was its appeal as a balm to the aggression of war and the seemingly eternal battle for military domination by the major world powers during the Cold War.

But in the end many, including the chairman of the Parliament, John Barrows, announced what he believed to be the obvious truth: “The Parliament has shown that Christianity is still the great quickener of humanity... that there is no teacher to be compared with Christ, and no savior excepting Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Barrows also professed his “doubt if any Orientals who were present misinterpreted the courtesy with which they were received into a readiness on the part of the American people to accept Oriental faiths in place of their own.”<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding this remark, certainly an accurate reflection of many Christian attendees, the largest contingent if for no other reason than

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<sup>17</sup> Charles S. Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 297.

<sup>18</sup> Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1581.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1580.

simple logistics, those representing Asian religions and traditions in fact did find able and accepting individuals at the Parliament that were ready to lend an ear and a voice. One man that perhaps made more of a contribution to the early positive reception of Asian religions and thought in America than any other, particularly Buddhism, was the Ceylonese monk Dharmapala.

Anagarika Dharmapala spoke English well and even looked the part of an Asian sage. Lewis Pyle Mercer recounts that “all eyes turn to one of the most winning figures on the platform, tall, clad in white, soft and closely clinging robes, idealistic face, gentle eyes, waving black hair and scanty beard—the gentle and lovable Dharmapala of Ceylon.”<sup>20</sup> Dharmapala was passionate about his views, particularly his belief that Buddhism was far better suited to bridge the divide between science and religion. Dharmapala argued, and Paul Carus, one of the other most important figures in the introduction of Asian religions in America, concurred, that Buddhism was not tied to explanations based on miracles and therefore Buddhists were able to look at natural phenomena more objectively. This debate, ceaseless and heated, intensified again with each new scientific discovery, in particular the growing interest in Charles Darwin’s theories on evolution.

Dharmapala’s second talk entitled “The World’s Debt to Buddha” expressed his view of a second revolution occurring in the world: “Ancient India, twenty-five centuries ago, was the scene of a religious revolution, the greatest the world has ever seen... And now, history is repeating itself. Twenty-five centuries ago India witnessed an intellectual and religious revolution which culminated in the overthrow of monotheism, priestly

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis Pyle Mercer, *Review of the World’s Religious Congresses of the World’s Congress Auxiliary of the World’s Columbia Exposition* (Chicago, IL: Rand, McNally & Company, 1893), 37.

selfishness, and the establishment of a synthetic religion, a system of life and thought which was appropriately called Dharma, a philosophical religion. All that was good was collected from every source and embodied therein and all that was bad was discarded.”<sup>21</sup> He continued by arguing that the world was witnessing, as was evident at the Parliament and the development of comparative theology and the science of religion, that intellectual ideas in “the world is not toward theology, but philosophy and psychology.”<sup>22</sup> For Dharmapala, and the many others that followed in his footsteps, Buddhism and psychology went hand in hand.

Dharmapala himself took a broad view on social issues instead of focusing on training individuals as the Hindu swamis did. For beyond all the accumulated metaphysics of Buddhism, at its very core is the goal of the alleviation of suffering. Yet this does not simply stop at “flinging a coin at a beggar” as Martin Luther King, Jr. would later profess, but recognizing “that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”<sup>23</sup> On one of his visits to America from 1902 through 1904 he visited Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and the Carlisle school. Virginia Lantz Denton writes that Dharmapala “looked to Tuskegee for answers to the poverty of Ceylon and India, seeking in Washington’s work a freedom from sectarian Christianity with the promise of material progress without serious challenge to India’s caste system.”<sup>24</sup>

Dharmapala and Washington had met previously and Dharmapala was also familiar with the differing ideas and methodologies of Washington and W.E.B. DuBois.

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<sup>21</sup> Anagarika Dharmapala, “Mr. H. Dharmapala At the Parliament of Religions, Chicago,” in *Journal of the Maha-Bodhi Society*, Vol. II, No. 7, Calcutta (November 1893), 862-880, 863.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 863.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Edited by James Melvin Washington. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1986), 250.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Lantz Denton, *Booker T. Washington and the Adult Education Movement* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), 149.

Many contemporaries in America and unfortunately many scholars in recent years often stress the “animosity” between DuBois and Washington because of their different methodologies; Dharmapala disagreed with this interpretation. Noting that the two men took a somewhat different view of things, he concluded: “On the whole it is healthy that two parties are at work on two different lines; and there is no energy lost. The moral, political and industrial developments are the three sides of a triangle.” Dharmapala was a true Pragmatist in this regard. He believed that Asia needed Western technology and the West needed the teachings of Asia. Reminiscing on his visit to Tuskegee, Dharmapala wrote: “[w]hen I saw the Tuskegee Institute with its manifold branches under enlightened teachers I rejoiced that you have made all this glorious work a consummation within a generation; and I thought of the Viceroy in India who with millions of children starving for education and bread that he should waste in sky rockets and tomfoolery and vain show to please a few loafing lords who came from England last January six million dollars in thirteen days! He is not worth to loose the latchet of your shoe. [sic]”<sup>25</sup>

A few days after the World Parliament of Religions, on September 26, 1893 Dharmapala, before leaving the United States, administered the refuge ceremony to Charles T. Strauss following a Theosophical Society lecture in Chicago. Charles T. Strauss the son of Jewish parents, a New York businessman and a student of comparative religion and philosophy became the first person of European descent in America to be admitted into the Buddhist Sangha. The ceremony was anything but memorable. It was recorded in the *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society* that: “As the audience was about to go the announcement came from the platform that an unusual event was about to take place.

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<sup>25</sup> Anagarika H. Dharmapala to Washington, June 30, 1903, Washington’s papers in Tuskegee archives. Quote in Virginia Lantz Denton, *Booker T. Washington and the Adult Education Movement*. 149.



C.T. Strauss was about to be admitted to the faith of Buddha....It was ended in a moment, and Mr. Strauss was an accepted and approved Buddhist of the Maha-Bodhi Samaj.”<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, for a person who holds such a historic place in the history of American Buddhism, little is known.

The closing of the “White City,” as the Columbian Exposition was to be called because of its predominant white architecture, did not mean the end of the missionary work of the attendees from Asia. They quickly left Chicago for all points across America and enthralled and challenged audiences wherever they went. Richard Hughes Seager points out that they furthered “an Asian agenda by making pointed, public criticisms of Christian missionaries and by calling into question the legitimacy of Christianity’s claim to normativity. Others began missions of their own to America and other western nations. The success of these missions—small at first, but increasingly substantial in subsequent decades—helped to create a new religious climate in the next century, as eastern religions began to sink roots in the West.”<sup>27</sup> This questioning of the “claim to normativity” was the same questioning broached earlier by Emerson, Thoreau, Olcott, Blavatsky, and continued in America through the Pragmatists, Progressives, Beats, and into the present. In fact, there was one member in the audience at a lecture presented by the Zen Buddhist Sōen Shaku who was profoundly interested in the cross-cultural dialogue presented and would become a significant figure in the history of Buddhism in America, Dr. Paul Carus. Even before the Parliament began, Carus was hard at work as usual actively courting the Japanese delegation by distributing gifts and numerous suggestions on how he could assist them in their endeavors in the United States. Perhaps no one was more important to

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<sup>26</sup> *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society*, 2:8 (Nov. 1893), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Seager, *Parliament of Religions*, 148.

the development of Buddhism in America after the World Parliament of Religions than Carus.

*Paul Carus and D. T. Suzuki*

Paul Carus was born in Isenberg, Germany, in 1852. His family was made up of distinguished scholars and his father, Dr. Gustav Carus, was a pastor and later became First General of the Church of Eastern and Western Prussia. Paul Carus studied at the universities of Greifswald, Strassburg, and Tübingen where he received a Ph. D. in 1876. He resigned his first teaching position at the military academy at Dresden due to his overwhelmingly liberal views. Carus came to the United States in the early 1880s. He would later meet Edward Hegeler, a zinc manufacturer, who shared Carus' goal of seeking an intersection between science and religion. Carus managed and Hegeler financed both the Open Court Publishing Company and the journals it published, *The Monist* and *The Open Court*, all based in La Salle, Illinois, a small town about 90 miles southwest of Chicago. "Although a very wealthy man," as recorded by the Press Club of Chicago, "Mr. Hegeler lived quietly and simply and he was one who looked upon himself as a trustee holding his worldly possessions for the best benefit of all."<sup>28</sup> Carus would later marry Hegeler's daughter, Mary.

Open Court Publishing went on to publish various authors including John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Charles Sanders Pierce, and Max Müller, who was a frequent contributor. *The Open Court* magazine which started as a weekly then later became a monthly allowed authors to publish within its pages from various perspectives and

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<sup>28</sup> Official Reference Book, Press Club of Chicago, 1922. Published by Press Club of Chicago. 1922, 186

academic levels. Perhaps the most important of Carus' own writings are: *Fundamental Problems* (1889); *The Soul of Man* (1891); and *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894).<sup>29</sup>

A Zen Buddhist monk named Sōen Shaku would be the connection to Asia and to Buddhism that Carus was searching for. Upon Carus' urging Sōen spent a week in dialogue in La Salle, Illinois after the Parliament. Carus even invited Sōen to remain in America and assist him in publishing a series of Asian books at Open Court.<sup>30</sup>

Sōen Shaku (釋宗演)<sup>31</sup> (1859-1919), the first Zen master in America, was a major advocate for the modernization of Buddhism and believed that it could begin at the Parliament. Sōen studied English and Western philosophy at Keio University, one of the leading progressive universities in Japan established by the writer and activist Yukichi Fukuzawa (福澤諭吉). At the Parliament of Religions in 1893 Sōen met Paul Carus for the first time. A few years after the meeting in Chicago Sōen wrote: "Buddha who lived three thousand years ago, being named Gautama, now lies bodily dead in India: but Buddha in the twentieth century being named Truth, is just to be born at Chicago in the New World."<sup>32</sup> To Carus' delight Sōen envisioned him as "a second Columbus who is

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<sup>29</sup> Other Buddhist magazines in the period include: *The Buddhist Ray*, a Santa Cruz, California-based magazine published and edited by Phillangi Dasa, born Herman Carl (or Carl Herman) Veetering (or Vettering), a recluse about whom is little known. The Ray's tone was, in the words of Rick Fields, "ironic, light, saucy, self-assured...one-hundred-percent American Buddhist." (Fields, *Swans*, 130) the Ray ceased publication in 1894;

<sup>30</sup> Paul Carus would later publish a collection of Sōen's sermons, simply titled *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1906).

<sup>31</sup> There is a common mistake in transliterating Shaku Sōen's name. John R. McRae perhaps provides the best clarification of his name. "The correct form of this monk's religious name is Kōgaku Sōen (the "y" has dropped out of contemporary pronunciation), but he is often mistakenly cited in English sources as if "Shaku" were uniquely descriptive of him. Indeed, this is the surname given to all Buddhist monks in East Asia based on their kinship with the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, but it is not sufficiently specific to be used in reference to the individual figure Sōen. The confusion no doubt stems from the pen of D. T. Suzuki, who refers to his master as "Revered Shaku" in his preface to *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1906; reprint, New York: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1971), v." John R. McRae, "Oriental Verities on the American Frontier: The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions and the Thought of Masao Abe," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 11 (1991), 7-36, 35.

<sup>32</sup> 17 May, Sōen to Carus, 1895 (2554) March 9, Open Court Papers.

endeavoring to discover the new world of truth.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, it is all but impossible to flesh out Carus’ own thoughts and positions on Buddhism and Asian thought in general with his close associates Sōen and his disciple D. T. Suzuki.

It was Sōen’s intention to bring missionary activity to the West as the West had brought it to the East. Sōen considered Carus an indispensable key to this endeavor and believed he resembled a “Daoist sage.” In the introduction to the Japanese translation of Carus’ *The Gospel of Buddha*, Sōen wrote: “As both an eminent philosopher and a scholar of comparative religion, Carus is a beachhead here for us. If...he could be brought to understand the true meaning of Buddhism, it would be better than converting a hundred thousand ordinary people.”<sup>34</sup>

Partly due to the situation in their home country, Japanese nationals played an important and active role in popularizing and conveying Buddhism in the United States. Japan was the first Asian country to modernize and industrialize, and along with the increase in trade and commerce there was a parallel increase in international relations and cultural exchange. Japanese citizens had been traveling throughout the world for several decades after the opening of Japan by Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853. Part of this endeavor was to study the best systems available in the world, including economic, political, military, or legal systems, and adopt and adapt them into the Japanese setting. Japanese citizens, predominately for economic reasons, also began to immigrate to other countries on an individual basis. As part of this movement it was only natural for religious figures to follow their fellow citizens.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Martin J. Verhoeven, “Introduction: The Dharma Through Carus’s Lens,” in Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha: According to Old Records* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 43.

Sōen certainly found a sympathetic soul in Carus. Sōen, through Carus' help intended to spread a reformed version of Buddhism outside of its historical sphere. This reformed Buddhism would become “the future universal religion of sciences.”<sup>35</sup> Sōen and Carus mutually confirmed their belief that religion must be based on a strong scientific foundation. Sōen later wrote to Carus: “I believe that if the present Christianity be reformed it will become the old Buddhism, and if the latter be reformed it will become the future Religion of Science which is still in the womb of Truth, but which is steadily growing up there to be born [into] full power.”<sup>36</sup>

Sōen knew from the beginning that Buddhism needed to be conveyed to a Western audience in an idiom that they could relate to and understand, and one of the most powerful idioms in the late nineteenth century was progress and optimism in the future. In fact, Sōen's speech during the Parliament of Religions—read by Dr. Barrows—was entitled “The Law of Cause and Effect, as Taught by Buddha.” Sōen proclaimed that pleasure and pain were but the effects of causes. In a characteristic attempt to rout his detractors, Sōen asserted that “our sacred Buddha is not the creator of this law of nature, but he is the first discoverer of the law who led thus his followers to the height of moral perfection.”<sup>37</sup>

Sōen declined Carus' invitation to stay behind and help translate Buddhist texts and literature; he was, after all, the abbot of an important Zen monastery in Japan. Instead Sōen suggested that his disciple, D. T. Suzuki, assist Carus, and perhaps ensure that Carus conveyed an authentic interpretation of Buddhism to the new American

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Sōen to Carus, 1895 (2554) May 17, Open Court Papers. Also quoted in Martin J. Verhoeven, “Introduction: The Dharma Through Carus's Lens,” in Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha: According to Old Records* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 53.

<sup>37</sup> John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 831.

audience. Suzuki remained in the United States from 1897 until 1909 becoming a close friend and collaborator of Carus'. Suzuki's influence in America can still be felt to this day through his many works including seven articles on Hinduism, thirty-nine on Buddhism, and several books that continue to go through numerous printings.

Carus had as his major Buddhist project to "Americanize the Buddha." Martin J. Verhoeven recounts that Carus attempted to accomplish this by "...modernizing the figure, depriving it of its Asiatic peculiarities, and endowing it with those features which, according to our best knowledge of Oriental lore he ought to possess would make a great hit." Carus held that, "An Occidental Buddha should exude classical simplicity and graceful composition, be 'Greek in taste and most noble and elevating.'"<sup>38</sup> More importantly, Carus believed that the "Oriental" image of the Buddha was too passive for the American setting. Instead of a figure in meditation an Americanized Buddha should be shown in an active state, "in the various phases of his lifework"; in other words, an active, socially engaged Buddha like the figure of Jesus."<sup>39</sup> Carus also believed that Buddhist texts in English should possess the same type of inspirational representations as Christian works. After all, he argued: "The Chinese, Mongols, Japanese, and the Siamese have given the Buddha ideal their own interpretation and conception."<sup>40</sup> Why shouldn't Americans, Carus asked, do the same?

The editor of *Overland Monthly* Thomas B. Wilson agreed with Paul Carus's interpretation of Buddhism as optimistic. Wilson wrote, "Buddhism is no pessimism.

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Martin J. Verhoeven, "Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 207.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Carus letter to the New York School of Applied Design for Women art historian Daniel C. Beard, December 13, 1899, Open Court Papers, Special Collections/Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Buddhism, it is true, boldly and squarely faces the problem of evil, and recognizes the existence of evil; but it does so in order to show to mankind the way of escape.

Buddhism does not preach annihilation, but salvation; it does not teach death, but life.”<sup>41</sup>

And Wilson went so far as to argue that “Buddhism makes it a duty to work for better conditions of existence for human kind, right here in this world, leaving salvation to be the blossom and the fruit of such work.”<sup>42</sup> Disagreeing with the interpretations of

Buddhism of the time that it was docile, complacent, and nihilist, Wilson claimed that it was in fact incompatible within Buddhist ethics “to quit the active currents of human progress, to hide...away in caves and forests.”<sup>43</sup> And perhaps to tip his hat to the

American idea of the “Gospel of Success,” Wilson, Tweed argues, “also presented Buddhism as compatible with capitalism and commerce. Followers have a right, even an obligation, to seek great wealth! Preaching the ‘Gospel of Wealth’ proclaimed by prominent entrepreneurs of the Gilded Age, Wilson announced that Buddhism, and all religions, approved of the accumulation of great wealth as long as the individual distributed some to those in need.”<sup>44</sup> Wilson therefore argued that those who used Buddhism as their intellectual underpinnings of reform and activism were as American as those who used Christianity to accomplish the same ends.

The foundational idea informing much of Carus’ work was that philosophy and therefore by extension, religion, could and should be reduced to a science. In 1888 Carus expressed the belief that: “The facts of nature are specie and our abstract thoughts are bills which serve to economize the process of an exchange of thought. We must know

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas B. Wilson, “Philosophy of Pain,” *Light of Dharma* 1 (August 1901), 16-21, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas B. Wilson, “The Duty of Wealth,” *Light of Dharma* 2 (October 1901), 7-10.

<sup>44</sup> Tweed, *The American Encounter*, 151.

the exact value in specie of every bill which is in our possession. And if the values of our abstract ideas are not ultimately founded upon the reality of positive facts, they are like bills or drafts for the payment of which there is no money in the bank."<sup>45</sup>

Carus believed, as Dharmapala and others, that Buddhism was the perfect vehicle for the amelioration of societal ills. This belief was based on his contention that science was the key that would unlock the most effective solutions to America's problems. "The brain of a philosopher," Carus wrote, "should be a mental alembic to clarify ideas, to analyze them, to extract their essence. His brain should work with the regularity of a machine. And among machines the philosophical mind must be compared to the so-called precision machines, the work which is not measured by horse-power, but by minute exactitude."<sup>46</sup> It was Buddhism, Carus believed, that could and would bridge the gap between science and religion. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism did not depend on miracles or faith. However, Carus did not believe that science alone could supply the answers he and society were seeking. He argued that a degree of religious sentiment infused with science was what was required. He attempted to find an effective median between the two. Religion, for Carus, was or should become at its very basic level a practical exercise in the ultimate perfection of society. Buddhism for Carus was the "Religion of Science" which would make "scientific truth itself...the last guide of a religious conception of mankind."<sup>47</sup> Winston King notes that Carus was, true to his own ethnic background and

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<sup>45</sup> Paul Carus, *Truth on Trial: An Exposition of the Nature of Truth, Preceded by a Critique of Pragmatism and an Appreciation of Its Leader* (La Salle, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1911), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Carus, *Fundamental Problems: The Method of Philosophy as a Systematic Arrangement of Knowledge*. Preface to the First Edition. (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in B. Alan Wallace, *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), 47.



academic training, essentially motivated by the “Germanic hope for a genuine *Religionswissenschaft*.”<sup>48</sup>

Sōen agreed with Carus’ interpretation of the importance of science and religion, and argued that the ever increasing interest in Buddhism in the West was due to: “The advanced state of modern science, the indefatigable researches of Western Sanskritists, and a powerful interest in comparative religion.”<sup>49</sup> Yet he also noted that he was still deciding if scholars in the West had truly understood Buddhism. Certainly, he believed that Max Müller, Emanuel Swedenborg, Henry Steele Olcott, and Matthew Arnold were powerful and intelligent scholars, but he was not exactly sure as of yet whether they truly grasped Buddhism—this tentative criticism also applied to Carus.

Sōen returned to the United States in 1905 at the invitation of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Russell of San Francisco.<sup>50</sup> The Russell’s had studied Zen meditation earlier with Sōen at Engakuji temple (円覚寺) in Japan. He lived for nine months in their home near San Francisco, where he established a small *zendo* and gave regular *zazen* lessons, making Sōen the first Zen Buddhist priest to teach in North America. Sōen introduced Mrs. Russell to *dhyana*, the Sanskrit name for Zen, while he stayed with her and her husband. He explained that this type of meditation was not intended to be a trance but “to make our consciousness realize the inner reason of the universe which abides in our

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<sup>48</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 387, *The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion*. (Jan., 1970), 66-76, 64.

<sup>49</sup> 17 May, Sōen to Carus, 1895 (2554) March 9, Open Court Papers.

<sup>50</sup> The Russells also hosted Nyogen Senzaki. He was from Sōen Shaku’s home temple. In the United States he lived with the Russell family in San Francisco and then decided to stay in America for an extended period of time. He was advised by his mentor, Sōen, not to teach Buddhism for the first seventeen years but to experience American culture as an ordinary worker. Senzaki rented his first hall in 1922 to present a paper written by Sōen. These talks were held many times from then on usually in different venues which provided the use of the name “floating zendo.” Senzaki finally settled on a permanent place in Los Angeles. He would teach there until he finally passed away in 1958.

minds. Dhyâna strives to make us acquainted with the most concrete and withal the most universal fact of life.”<sup>51</sup>

Sōen traveled with D. T. Suzuki throughout the United States and lectured in many major cities including San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. Yet it was through his Japanese disciples, Sokatsu Sōen, Shigetsu Sasaki, Nyogen Senzaki, and more importantly D. T. Suzuki himself, that Sōen made the greatest impact on the propagation of Buddhism, and especially Zen, in America.<sup>52</sup> During Sōen’s tour of the United States in 1905 and 1906 Suzuki served as his translator. Sōen’s vision of Buddhism as expressed through these lectures was later published by Carus as *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot* (1906), later entitled *Zen For Americans*. As mentioned above, Sōen’s particular interpretation of Buddhism was exactly what Carus was looking for. In 1906 at a lecture in front of the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C. Sōen argued that: “Buddhism is always ready to stand before the tribunal of science and let her pass judgment upon it merits or demerits is due to this intellectual tenor.”<sup>53</sup> This was music to Carus’ ears.

In 1897 from Kamakura, Japan, Sōen wrote to Carus that he was sending Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki (鈴木 大拙貞太郎) to assist him and that he was “an honest and diligent Buddhist,” who while “not thoroughly versed with Buddhist literature” hoped that “he will be able to assist you.”<sup>54</sup> Suzuki had been given the name Daisetsu, which meant “great simplicity,” by his teacher and mentor Sōen. Suzuki liked to comment in typical

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<sup>51</sup> Sōen Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot: Addresses on Religious Subjects* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1906), 156.

<sup>52</sup> D. T. Suzuki later translated and published Sōen’s American speeches as *Zen for Americans* (1906).

<sup>53</sup> Paul Carus, *Gospel*, 46-7. Sōen, *Zen* 81-83

<sup>54</sup> Sōen Shaku to Carus, Letter, Feb. 2, 1897. Original in Special Collections/Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Quoted in Rick Fields, *Swans*, 138.

Zen fashion that it actually meant “great stupidity.” After being detained by immigration officials for observation during his entry into the United States in 1897 under the belief that Suzuki showed signs of tuberculosis, Suzuki was finally allowed entry with some help from Carus and Dharmapala. Upon release from medical quarantine, he immediately set off for Illinois.

Suzuki was to become one of Carus’ greatest colleagues and collaborators in the dissemination of Zen Buddhism and Asian thought in general in America. From 1897 to 1908 (the first of many lengthy stays in America), Suzuki’s major focus was to assist Carus in translating and interpreting Asian religious and philosophical texts into English. Suzuki would later translate Carus’ *Gospel of Buddha* into Japanese.

Carus suggested that Suzuki take advantage of his time in America. However, after encouraging Suzuki to enroll in a class at the University of Chicago, John Dewey’s class on philosophy, Suzuki balked at the twenty-five dollar enrollment fee and felt that his “time and energy would be better spent some other ways.”<sup>55</sup> While in Illinois, Suzuki lived at the Carus home and performed not only academic duties but also “drawing water from the well, chopping firewood, carting in earth, going on errands to the grocery, and even cooking, if need be.”<sup>56</sup>

Suzuki had an epiphany while in Illinois that was based on his extensive practice at Engakuji in Japan. He wrote that “the Zen phrase *hiji soto ni magarazu*, ‘the elbow does not bend outwards’ became clear to me. ‘The elbow does not bend outward’ might seem to express a kind of necessity, but suddenly I saw that this restriction was really

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<sup>55</sup> Suzuki to Carus, 1897 September, Open Court Papers. Quoted in Martin J. Verhoeven, “Introduction: The Dharma Through Carus’s Lens,” in Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha: According to Old Records* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2004), 45.

<sup>56</sup> Shojun Bando, “D.T. Suzuki’s Life in La Salle.” *The Eastern Buddhist* 2, no. 1 (August 1967), 137-146.

freedom, the true freedom, and I felt that the whole question of free will had been solved for me."<sup>57</sup> In a letter to Sōen, Suzuki wrote:

An idea that has no immediate effect, after being received by somebody may later be of help to him in entering the way of enlightenment... all of a sudden flashing across his mind. The old Buddhist saying the, "the merit of hearing the Buddhist teaching even once, is infinite, even if one falls short of believing it," refers to this truth. I am not particularly fond of argument, but as I am firmly convinced of this truth, I occasionally express myself. It is my secret wish that if my thoughts are beneficial to the progress of humanity, good fruits will, without fail grow from them in the future...<sup>58</sup>

D. T. Suzuki would later go on to become one of the most famous and popular interpreters of Asian thought in the West. With his 1911 marriage to an American, Beatrice Erskine Lane, a graduate of Radcliffe and a former Theosophist, he published the journal *The Eastern Buddhist*. In the 1950s the Rockefeller Foundation invited him to return to the United States and lecture on Zen and Buddhism which he did at the age of 80. Through his many lectures and writings he influenced some of the most important modern thinkers including Erich Fromm, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Merton, Gary Snyder, Alan Watts, and Carl Jung, who wrote a 30-page introduction to one of Suzuki's most popular works, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1949). Suzuki returned to the United States again in 1951 to teach Buddhism, and Zen in particular, at Columbia University. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg attended some of Suzuki's lectures and it was through them and other Beat movement individuals including Gary Snyder and Kenneth Rexroth that interest in Zen increased dramatically.

Suzuki, reflecting his mentor Sōen and his collaborator Carus, adapted Buddhism for local audiences, in this case, an audience well-grounded in science and rationalism. In

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<sup>57</sup> D. T. Suzuki, "Early Memories," *Middle Way*, XXXIX (November 1964).

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Shojun Bando, "D. T. Suzuki's Life in La Salle," in *The Eastern Buddhist* New Series, II, No. 1 (August 1967), 145.

his English translation of *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907), Suzuki's view of *nirvana* resembles scientific teaching and theory. "His notions of karma and Dharma," wrote Martin J. Verhoeven, "both cleave to the authority of science, not enlightenment, as arbiter of truth."<sup>59</sup> Karma, for Suzuki, should be defined scientifically as "the conservation of energy."<sup>60</sup>

Suzuki assisted Carus in translating various works for Open Court. *The Open Court* magazine served as a forum for Buddhists and others interested in Asian religions and thought to discuss issues and theories. Hermann Oldenburg, the famous German scholar of Indology, also used the magazine as a platform to criticize Carus for ignoring the realities of Buddhist practice in Asia. Carus retorted that Oldenburg was missing the point of Buddhism by simply focusing on a philological approach.

Carus also wrote several tales with specific Buddhist themes. *Karma* (1894), a tale focusing on Buddhist ethics, was later translated into Russian by Leo Tolstoy. When the tale was translated into other European languages, Tolstoy was mistakenly credited with its authorship. After learning of this mistake Tolstoy wrote to Carus: "I deeply regret not only that such a falsehood was allowed to pass unchallenged, but also the fact that it really was a falsehood, for I should be very happy were I the author of this tale. It is one of the best products of natural wisdom and ought to be bequeathed to all mankind, like the Odyssey, the history of Joseph, and Shakyamuni."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Martin J. Verhoeven, "Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought," in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 218.

<sup>60</sup> Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (New York: Schocken, 1907), 34-35; 26; 29.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Carus, *Karma a Story of Buddhist Ethics* (Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1894), vi.

The first project that Carus and Suzuki embarked on was a translation of the Daoist classic the *Daodejing*. Carus titled the work, *The Tao Teh Ching: The Canon of Reason and Virtue* (1913). Suzuki provided Carus with a character by character gloss and Carus attempted to do with it the best he knew how, essentially the same methodology others would utilize, including the poet Sylvia Plath. Suzuki wrote that the inner most feelings are subtly conveyed in Chinese and that: “I had to explain to Dr. Carus the feeling behind each Chinese term. But being himself a German writing in English, he translated these Chinese ideas into abstract conceptual terms.”<sup>62</sup> Suzuki continually doubted his ability to impart to Carus the true meaning of each term. While he was assisting Carus with his translation of the *Daodejing*, Suzuki was working on his own book, which would eventually become his first work in English, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* (1907), an attempt to convey the basics of Mahayana Buddhism to a Western audience.

Just as Carus attempted to Westernize Asian thought for his Western audience, he also attempted to use terminology that would be more accessible to an English speaking audience. The choice of the term “Gospel” in *The Gospel of the Buddha* was not the only example. In his translation of the *Daodejing* he chose to translate “Tao/Dao” as “Reason.” But this was of course not unique in the history of the transmission of Buddhism. When Buddhism first arrived in China, the Chinese took a seemingly appropriate philosophical vocabulary, which was at that time the vocabulary of Daoism, and superimposed it on Buddhism. Partly due to this amalgamation of Daoism and Buddhism Ch’an developed in China and was later adapted again to the Japanese cultural milieu and became Zen. Thus the “Americanization” or “Westernization” of Buddhism can simply be seen as a

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha*, 83.

continuation of a broader phenomenon of Buddhist acculturation to the necessities of the local culture.

As argued by Peter Gregory, historically however, Buddhism, in the majority of cases, was the bearer of “higher civilization” into its adapted cultures throughout Asia for it brought with it writing, new systems of political organization, as well as more potent forms of spiritual power. “The adoption of Buddhism by different countries in Asia was often related to the centralization of political control, whether to break the power of the local nobility or a federation of clans, and Buddhism frequently came to be closely identified with the institutions through which political authority was exercised in the country in which it was adopted.”<sup>63</sup>

The exception was China and the West, especially America, where Buddhism was required to adapt itself to its new surroundings not just in form but in substance. In the case of China, which reflects the situation in the West and is therefore an enlightening example of the dynamics of cultural exchange, the Chinese “saw themselves as members of the superior culture, Buddhism had to be rationalized in terms of Chinese values in order to gain widespread acceptance, and Chinese Buddhists thus felt justified in taking greater liberties in adapting Buddhism.” Thus final authority was Chinese culture, which was, of course, reinforced by the Chinese imperial state and the power and dominance of the scholar-official class. Gregory continues by arguing that this situation “helps to explain why the Chinese case, of all the different cultures with which Buddhism came into contact in its spread across Asia, represents that of the greatest cultural

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” *Religion and American Culture*, Vol 11, No. 2 (Summer, 2001), 233-263, 249-250.

transformation of the religion.”<sup>64</sup> Needless to say, this was not a unilateral influence, for Chinese culture itself was also changed substantially through the adoption and adaption of Buddhism..

An important point for the current study is that while Suzuki and Carus attempted to present to the West a “single ethical and scientific system,” they also, particularly Suzuki, tried to convey that Buddhism also possessed an “organic, evolutionary nature.” In *The Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* Suzuki wrote: "Let us ask whether there is any religion which has shown some sign of vitality and yet retained its primitive form intact and unmodified in every respect. Is not changeableness, that is, susceptibility to irritation, the most essential sign of vitality? Every organism grows, which means a change in some way or another."<sup>65</sup>

Suzuki tried to impress upon Carus that there was a continual intellectual thread that ran through Buddhism that while forgotten by some interpretations still linked his school of Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, to the historical Buddha himself. Rather than Buddhism being simply a historical oddity to be studied from a distance, Buddhism was a force that affected millions of people in the world in an ongoing and profound way. Suzuki believed that Western scholars had become too enamored with Buddhist deities and the details of Buddhist practices and thus lost sight of the goal of Buddhism itself. Suzuki argued that religions possessed two fundamental aspects, the “permanent” and the “transitory.” The transitory elements that had been picked up through Buddhism’s transmission through the several countries were not the important part of Buddhism, or for that matter, any religion, according to Suzuki. Those rituals, liturgies, and other

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Suzuki, *Outlines*, 12.



various historical accretions were flexible and adaptable to new localities, new cultures, and new times. The focus should be, Suzuki maintained, on those permanent threads that had continued to exist through the passage of time and space: "that element in religion which remains unchanged throughout its successive stages of development and transformation: while the form of it is the external shell which is subject to any modification required by circumstances."<sup>66</sup> Suzuki thought that he could impart those permanent comprehensible patterns on Buddhism's next venture, America, because he himself had experienced its continuity.

While Suzuki was busy ensuring that the permanent aspects of Buddhism were being retained, Carus was simultaneously at work adapting the transitory elements of Buddhism into the American setting. Carus attempted to present Buddhism in a way that would appeal and be more comfortable to a Western audience. He believed that Buddhist services would draw more members if they seemed familiar. One addition was the introduction of music. Carus set Buddhist verses from *The Dhammapada* and other texts to Western classical music including Chopin, Beethoven, and of course, hailing from Germany, Carus also adapted some lyrics to German folk songs.

To one critic of the introduction of music to Buddhist services, the monk Ananda Metteya, Carus replied that the Buddha had taught the Middle Way between sensuality and asceticism and that music could be useful in expressing "high and noble as well as low and vulgar thoughts."<sup>67</sup> The supporters, including Reverend Massinanda, the Lord Abbot of the Buddhist Church in Sacramento, California, believed that "Buddha taught

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> Metteya was also the head of the Buddhasasana Samagama (International Buddhist Society), and the editor of *Buddhist*, a magazine with a circulation of approximately three thousand. Rick Fields, *Swans*, 143.

when you are in Rome do as the Romans do, etc.”<sup>68</sup> In a letter to Carus Massinanda confessed that he too had been initially drawn to Buddhism through song. In fact, Massinanda, who had spent time in Tibet with the Dalai Lama, reminded Carus “that music has been used in Tibet since ancient times in the Buddhist High Mass and its intonation greatly resembles the Gregorian chant. The same authority insists that those who would not allow music in Buddhist worship ‘do not manifest the spirit of Our Lord Buddha,’ adding, ‘Without inspiring music and words I should not have made so many converts.”<sup>69</sup> Carus, perhaps through the influence of Suzuki and Sōen, also believed that some schools of Asian Buddhism had diverged too far from the historical Buddha’s teachings; therefore he did not intend on allying himself with any particular sect or school of Buddhism but rather approached the subject from a comparative viewpoint, taking as his cue the contemporary advances in comparative theology. Carus attempted the same Westernization with the texts of Buddhism. His most famous work, *The Gospel of the Buddha*, is a perfect case in point.

Carus possessed an extensive library on Buddhism and owned every book on the subject in existence at the time in English, German and French; he could not read any Asian languages. Carus submitted drafts of his book, *The Gospel of Buddha*, an English compilation of Buddhist scriptures, to Sōen for review on a regular basis. Carus’ *Gospel* was not without some detractors, most notably Oldenburg. Yet the work received wide readership, being translated into several languages, and was even used by Asian Buddhists. D.T. Suzuki, who translated *The Gospel of Buddha* into Japanese, with an introduction by Sōen, remarked that “before the publication of the *Gospel of Buddha*,

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Carus, *Buddhist Hymns: Versified Translations from the Dhammapada and Various Other Sources. Adapted to Modern Music* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1911.), 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Buddhism had been treated in too scholarly a manner or too popularly. Dr. Carus combined the spirit of science and philosophy, and his sympathy went beyond mere interest. Then he was able to check himself from becoming a fanatical sympathizer, and presented Buddhism impartially and justly.”<sup>70</sup>

However, Carus’ *The Gospel of the Buddha* was still a more scholarly treatment of the historical Buddha and Buddhism itself than Arnold’s *The Light of Asia*. Carus presented the Buddha’s story, as the title of the work illustrates, as a parallel of the Christian Gospels. Sounding like a Transcendentalist Carus repeated Friedrich Max Müller: “If I do find in certain Buddhism works doctrines identically the same as in Christianity, so far from being frightened, I feel delighted, for surely truth is not the less true because it is believed by the majority of the human race.”<sup>71</sup>

Carus, like many of those drawn to Asian religions, lamented the exclusive nature of Christianity. Through a project of comparative analysis between the two faiths he believed that he could help readers “to distinguish in both religions the essential from the accidental, the eternal from the transient, the truth from the allegory in which it has found its symbolic expression.” Carus continued that: “We are anxious to press the necessity of discriminating between the symbol and its meaning, between dogma and religion, between metaphysical theories and statements of fact, between man-made formulas and eternal truth.”<sup>72</sup> Carus argued that the explicit intent of *The Gospel of Buddha* was the

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<sup>70</sup> D. T. Suzuki, “A Glimpse of Paul Carus,” *Introduction to Modern Trends in World Religion*, Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, editor. (Paul Carus Memorial Symposium, held September 9-12, 1956, Peru, Illinois.) La Salle: Open Court, 1959, xv.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha*, xi. Original quotation in Friedrich Max Müller, *India: What Can It Teach Us?: A Course of Lectures Delivered Before the University of Cambridge* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1883), 279.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

“hope that it will help to develop in Christianity not less than in Buddhism the cosmic religion of truth.”<sup>73</sup>

Carus, Sōen, and Suzuki were adamant in their belief that Buddhism could thrive and even evolve in the American setting. Sōen was one of the first to present to American audiences direct experiential views of Buddhism and the Buddhist world. However, he soon realized that his first mission was to correct the widespread misunderstanding that Buddhism was negative, inactive, and life-denying. Sōen commented that Westerners had the mistaken belief that Hinayana represented the whole of Buddhism. Those not well versed in the wide breadth of philosophical variants within Buddhism often charged the whole of Buddhism with one or two characteristics that came to their knowledge, and as is often the case, the details that came to the awareness of those on the other side of the world were often the most sensational or bizarre. For example, the vindictive often lodged against Buddhism was that it was a life-denying, pessimistic, and at its core an essentially negative philosophy. Sōen argued that Westerners only saw the negative sides of Nirvana, often missing the more fundamental and positive side, including the recognition of Truth, most importantly, that all things pass away. It was this universal Truth that Sōen, Carus, and Suzuki attempted to convey to their Western audience.

As for the importance of reform in Carus’ philosophy it is best expressed in one of his Buddhist-inspired poems: “Reform to-day and do not wait until it be too late. Do not say it is early, for the time quickly passes by. It is good to reform, and it is good to exhort people to reform.”<sup>74</sup> It is erroneous, Paul Carus wrote, “for western minds educated in Christian schools to look upon the Nirvāna of Buddhism as an annihilation,

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

and to characterize Buddhist ethics as quietism.” Carus tried to convince those who would listen that nothing “is further removed from the Tathagata’s [the historical Buddha] teachings than passive indifference...”<sup>75</sup>

As for the common Progressive era appeal to the government, be it city, state, or national, Carus believed that the state was the manifestation and the natural outgrowth of the individual. In *The Nature of the State* (1894), Carus attempted to avoid the common and erroneous conflation of the state and the nation as a means to manipulate the populace through a false patriotism, which was certainly the case at the time in America and Japan, the homeland of his colleagues Sōen and Suzuki. He reiterated that the state is a moral empire yet it must recognize the rights of the individual. Individualism, for Carus, was above all the right to rebel. Reflecting Thomas Jefferson’s idea concerning the renewal of the tree of liberty, Carus too believed that it was the individual’s moral right and duty to rebel whenever liberty was impinged by the state. However, Carus was quick to remind his readers of the fine yet often blurry and obscure line between treason and reform.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important appeals of Buddhism in the West was its willingness to stand before the bar of science. It must be remembered that the emphasis on sciences by Carus and others did not limit itself to the “hard” sciences such as biology, chemistry, or physics, but also considered the advances in social sciences at the time including, anthropology, economics, and sociology. Carus was like many of his time, especially those who studied at German universities, committed to the principle that a scientific study of society, and subsequent attempts at reform based on those analyses,

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Carus, *Buddhism and Its Christian Critics* (Chicago, IL: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1897), 99.

could improve society significantly. Carus, Sōen, Suzuki and others attempted to modernize Buddhism utilizing these new processes and theories of science.

In an excellent and succinct explanation of “Buddhist modernism,” Martin J. Verhoeven conveys the approach many in the West took in exploring and adopting Buddhism. He defines “Buddhist modernism” as attempts to “reinterpret Buddhism as a ‘system of thought,’ as opposed to a religion. Buddhism is seen as a system of philosophical thought with the sole aim of showing a way to liberation or ‘salvation’ from suffering and rebirth.” Those elements found unacceptable to modern thinkers, traditional cosmology, the belief in miracles, are identified as inessential accretions and modifications of Buddhism accumulated during its long historical development throughout Asia. “Thus, Buddhism is emphasized as a rational way of thought not demanding belief, but inviting people to discover for themselves its truths by way of reason and the direct experience of meditation practice. All Buddhist modernists interpret early Buddhism as a philosophy in relation to contemporary philosophical thought, and tend to downplay the mystical, mythological, and psychical aspects of religion in favor of the rational and psychological. Buddhist modernism grew out of the close interrelation between Buddhist resurgence in the East and the early phases of the spread of Buddhism in the West.”<sup>76</sup>

Such changes in Buddhist thought in America took shape slowly. It is undeniable that Sōen, Suzuki, Carus, and others often took “license” with aspects of Buddhist theory in order to make the ideas more palatable to a Western audience. For instance, Sōen argued that: “the practical ethics of Buddhism is to manifest the glory of God in all our

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<sup>76</sup> Martin J. Verhoeven, “Introduction to: Paul Carus,” *The Gospel of Buddha*, 43.

conduct, in all our thoughts, and in all our wishes and desires.”<sup>77</sup> This attempt to tie Buddhist ethics to a divine entity differs significantly from the theory that permeated Buddhist philosophical history, that is, cause and effect working through an impersonal force rather than a divine being. However, this “modernist Buddhism” focused laser-like on the goals of practice rather than practice itself. Perhaps by doing so it seemed to some critics to cut against the grain of Buddhist philosophy in that attachment in all forms, including goals and outcomes, was antithetical to living in the moment. However, this is a rather superficial criticism of Buddhist philosophy, that it is not forward looking or progressive. Being in the moment includes a holistic analysis of future plans free from distractions outside the immediate subject of analysis.

Perhaps Oldenburg was correct in his criticism of Carus that he ignored the realities of the Asian practice of Buddhism. But that was perhaps his point, to make it something new, something uniquely American, to reinvigorate Buddhism and reinvent it within the American milieu. As a recent émigré, Carus did not shirk under the idea of American exceptionalism, but reveled in it. Although Carus himself was not involved in the major reform movements of his day, like Thoreau with slavery, he and his collaborators and associates were instrumental in reinterpreting Asian religions and thought into a system that could and would be picked up by later adherents and sympathizers to make a substantial mark on American history. It was this necessary foundational work that provided the spark and freedom for later individuals to focus on practical measures and uses rather than intellectual and academic concerns. Perhaps

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<sup>77</sup> Soyen Shaku, *Zen for Americans*. Translated by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. (1906), 50.

Carus was not yet at the table of reform, but through his efforts he was certainly preparing a seat for those who would come after him.

*Canavarro, Foster, and Waterman*

After Carl T. Strauss, the second person on American soil to convert to Buddhism, and the first woman of European descent was Marie de Souza Canavarro (1849-1933). In a public ceremony officiated by Dharmapala in 1897 in the New Century Hall on Fifth Avenue in New York she formally converted to Buddhism. She took the religious name “Sister Sanghamitta;” Sanghamitta was the daughter of Asoka, the Buddhist king of the third century B.C.E. Canavarro strived to follow Sanghamitta’s spiritual example by going to Sri Lanka and establishing schools and orphanages. It was through Canavarro and another woman, Mary Mikahala Foster, that the continuation of the internationalization of American reform that began with the Theosophists can be witnessed.

Canavarro became a rather well known figure in fin-de-siècle America. She was sought as an authoritative lecturer on Buddhism, and later in life included lectures on other religions as well and was one of Paul Carus’ closest friends. Canavarro’s exact place of birth is unknown; she was either born in Europe, Mexico, someplace in South America, or the United States. She claimed noble Spanish descent; however, it is presumed by many that she was born in San Antonio, Texas. Her father seems to have been from Mexico while her mother was from Virginia. Her family later moved to Mariposa County, California where she would marry Samuel C. Bates while she was still sixteen years old. Her husband died and she remarried to His Excellency Senor A.



deSouza Canavarro, the Portuguese representative to the Sandwich Islands, and became Countess de Canavarro. Together they lived in Honolulu, Hawai'i for several years. Becoming bored as a diplomat's wife in Hawai'i and endeavoring to partake in some "noble and useful and sacrificing work," she sailed to Asia in 1897 with a plan to work at a Buddhist school for girls in Sri Lanka.<sup>78</sup> Canavarro imbued her view of Asian religions and thought, particularly Buddhism, with a theoretically nuanced patina of social action, certainly influenced by her own reading of Buddhist literature and her many dialogues with Paul Carus. She disagreed with the widespread perceptions in the West that Asians were generally passive and apathetic. She countered that they were instead measured in their approaches and "make haste slowly."<sup>79</sup>

Marie Canavarro provides us with an excellent example of why some chose to embrace Buddhism. She recounted that she began to feel "an unsatisfied craving for something" and she tasted several religions during her venture through the American religious buffet. However, she began with a systematic rejection of her family's Roman Catholic heritage, first turning to Theosophy and from there she met and was enthralled by the personage of Dharmapala. In a 1933 article simply and aptly entitled, "How I Came to Embrace Buddhism," Canavarro recounted her move away from the religion of her childhood towards Buddhism. She wrote that she was reared a Roman Catholic "but never thoroughly espoused it." She recognized early on in her life that she craved something different but was unaware of what would fill the void. She searched in various places including philanthropic work and studying science. She proclaimed, "I observed greed, selfishness, and deceit everywhere and in every sphere of life; it seemed to me one

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<sup>78</sup> Marie deSouza Canavarro, *Insight into the Far East* (Los Angeles, CA: Wetzel Publishing Company, 1925), 13.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

could not succeed in the feverish life of the world without pulling another down.” She found no answers in the religions she encountered because she claimed that: “Those who profess to live the most pious lives were, upon the whole, the most egotistical and selfish of people; they were incessantly wrangling over creeds.” Throughout her life she jumped from one religious or philosophical tradition to the next, from Catholicism to Theosophy to Buddhism to Baha’i to Hinduism.<sup>80</sup> However, the common theme of recognizing social ills and a subsequent call to social action ran throughout all her religious machinations and travels.

While living in Honolulu she witnessed the terrible suffering of poor immigrants arriving to the islands in search of work and a better life. It was this experience that finally drove her to become directly involved in the amelioration of societal problems. “I used to go from the homes of the wealthy to those of squalor. There I found children, tiny babes whose eyelids were eaten away by mosquitoes; little ones crying with hunger, cheerless and forlorn. Seeing this I began to question God's mercy.”<sup>81</sup>

Canavarro wrote that after a long search she was troubled by the fact that: “Look wherever I might, into the bowels of the earth or into the vast ocean, into space, everywhere, there was one unwavering law, namely, that one life was sustained by the sacrifice of another. In the waters greater life fed upon the lesser; on land and in space the same law prevailed—it was ever the survival of the fittest. Even man, whom God is said to have made after his own likeness, supported life by killing and consuming other lives.

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

At last I left the silence which had meant so much to me during the last three years and came from my retreat.”<sup>82</sup>

After this realization she sought “kindred spirits” first through the Theosophical Society and then through Buddhism. Through Buddhism she came to believe that the universe was indeed controlled by the forces of cause and effect and that these forces eventually balanced good and evil. More importantly, she professed that this law could be deduced through human reason and that it was the “Self” controlled by the ego that often disrupted this natural-balancing process.

It is interesting to note that it was through her studies of Buddhism that Canavarro was convinced that she possessed a greater appreciation and understanding of Christianity, an understanding that she believed Christians themselves had lost: “I now knew that I never understood the true teachings of Christ Jesus and that but few have done so. How can the Occident understand the subtle mind of the Orient, without knowing the Orient? And Jesus of Nazarene was an Oriental. The error of the present teachings of Christianity lies with those who teach the doctrine. They are too unyielding and ununited. The study of Buddhist scriptures satisfied my craving for Truth and led me to embrace that religion and venerate that concept of my relation to things about me.”<sup>83</sup>

In Sri Lanka she opened a girl’s school and orphanage called Sanghamitta Convent. The requisites for admission to the school included the following: “A good character, upright life, willingness to obey the rules of the Order and to be guided by the Superior, a desire to do altruistic work for humanity...”<sup>84</sup> She lived there for three years

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *Women under the Bō Tree: Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85.

from 1897 to 1900 lecturing on Buddhism and also traveled to India and Burma to lecture as well. In the fall of 1900 Canavarro and Dharmapala had a falling out, the details of which are uncertain, and she left the convent and returned to the United States and began to lecture on her experiences in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. She became very active in the American Buddhist community and would become one of the leaders of the American arm of the Maha Bodhi Society.

Yet her spiritual journey, it turns out, did not end with Buddhism. She became attracted to the syncretistic Persian faith of Baha'i and headed in the other direction taking trips to the Middle East to meet with the son of the founder of Baha'i, 'Abdu'l-Baha. In the 1920s she returned to South Asia and to an interest in Vedanta Hinduism through a connection with Swami Paramananda. All the while, however, she never rejected Buddhism and continued a life-long correspondence with Paul Carus. She married again for a short time and finally retired to a farm in New Jersey. Yet she was far from last in Hawaii to make a significant contribution to the history of Asian religions in the West.

On a return trip from San Francisco to India in 1893, Anagarika Dharmapala stopped in Honolulu on the way back from the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Mary Mikahala Robinson Foster (1884-1930) and other local Theosophists met Dharmapala with fruit and flowers. Foster, a close friend of the Hawai'ian Queen Liliuokalani came from a wealthy Hawai'ian family descended on her mother's side from Hawai'ian royalty; her father had founded a shipyard that provided the family with their wealth. At the age of sixteen she married Thomas Foster, one of Hawaii's most successful entrepreneurs. Although their initial meeting only lasted a few minutes,

Dharmapala seemed to have made a deep impression on Foster. So much so that Foster would become the primary source of financial support for Dharmapala's many international activities.

Foster was instrumental in advancing Japanese Buddhism in Hawai'i including the establishment of the Hompa Hongwanji Mission and School along Pali Highway. But she did not restrict her activities to Hawai'i alone. According to Pat Masters, "After hearing about Dharmapala's schools and orphanages, Foster donated funds to the Ceylonese Bodhi Society to promote Buddhism's spiritual and charitable causes, and funded the Foster-Robinson Hospital for the Poor -- a free ayurvedic hospital that remains part of Colombo General Hospital in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). A prayer service is held every month at the hospital in Foster's honor..."<sup>85</sup> The Foster Botanical Garden in Hawai'i has the same tree that was brought by Dharmapala from an ancient tree that was planted in 288 B.C.E at the temple in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. In fact, because of all her work and support in Sri Lanka Foster has achieved an almost saint-like status.

Foster provides another example of the early globalization of culture. It was through Foster's financial support that Dharmapala would use the expertise garnered from visits to Liverpool, Denmark, and above all, Washington's Tuskegee Institute to establish an industrial school in Sarnath, India in 1904. The school would become a model for many institutions to follow and became the realization of Dharmapala's conviction that Asia needed technology from the West. Foster supported the advancement of Asian technology and Dharmapala supported the advancement of Asian knowledge and learning in the personage of Foster and many others.

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<sup>85</sup> *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 22, 2006.

In the 1890s a society was established that tied many of the individuals under analysis here together. During Anagarika Dharmapala's second visit to the United States in 1897 he urged Paul Carus to establish a branch of the Maha Bodhi Society in Chicago. Carus did so and supported the organization until his death in 1919. The Maha Bodhi Society of Chicago, which attracted mostly professionals, was patterned after the main society in India which began in 1891. Dharmapala founded the parent organization after he witnessed first hand the deplorable conditions of the many historical Buddhist shrines and temples in India, especially the Bodh-Gaya Temple, which at the time was in the possession of Hindu's. Dharmapala set out to restore the sites to their former glory and status within the religious world and to spread the Buddha Dharma in the land of its birth, becoming an international figure in the process. The original society was instrumental in establishing libraries, schools, orphanages and hospitals in India and Sri Lanka. As part of an attempt to unify Buddhists from throughout Asia, the society mobilized vast support during a severe famine in Bengal in 1897.

Dharmapala was appointed General Secretary of The Bodh-Gaya Maha Bodhi Society —many believed he was too young to be President—and Olcott was appointed Director and Chief Advisor and the Sinhalese Buddhist monk, Sumangala, President. The chief aim of the society, as the name suggested, was to return Bodh-Gaya to the control of Buddhists. It took immense and sustained effort on the part of Dharmapala to keep members focused on this particular issue but eventually the society was successful. Rick Fields recounts that on "July 15, the day before the full moon, when the Buddha had preached his first sermon, [Dharmapala] reached Bodh-Gaya with four Burmese

bhikkhus, who raised the Buddhist flag and took up residence in the Burmese rest house.”<sup>86</sup>

Although Foster was a great supporter both psychologically and financially of the Bodhi Gaya project, Paul Carus consistently disagreed with Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society’s single-minded focus on the restoration of the historic site. Carus believed that a singular focus on this project with its many concomitant political dimensions would not appeal to an American audience and would therefore hinder the success of their other activities. Furthermore, one of the major issues Carus had with Dharmapala was his bitterness towards British authorities in India, certainly understandable given India’s troubled history as a British colony. However, Carus believed that Dharmapala should have followed more in the Buddha’s path and avoided violence in both deed and thought. Even though Carus did not totally agree with Dharmapala’s almost exclusive focus on the restoration of the shrine in India, he had to admit that Dharmapala made an excellent and effective spokesperson for Buddhism in the West regardless of his political baggage of the shrine restoration. Carus eventually put aside his reservations and became a founding member of the American branch of the Maha Bodhi Society. The Society went on to publish the *Maha Bodhi Journal* with its first issue in May 1892. It was edited by Dharmapala and included an article by Olcott entitled “The Sweet Spirit of Buddhism.” Dharmapala wrote two articles for the inaugural issue: “A United Buddhist World,” and “The Mahayana School of Buddhism.”

A few years after the founding of the society in Chicago it was agreed upon that there should be a celebration of the Buddha’s birthday which is traditionally celebrated

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<sup>86</sup> Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1992), 117.

on the tenth of May. It was also decided that the celebrations should be held in the home of the Society's Vice President, Arba N. Waterman (1836-1917). Waterman, at the time, was a judge in the Circuit Court of Cook County and is fine example of the intersections of Asian religions and reform in America, especially since he lived in Chicago, one of the epicenters of reform in post-Civil War America.

Waterman was a Lt. Colonel in the One Hundred Illinois Volunteers Calvary of the Union Army during the Civil War, who, as the story goes, had two horses shot out from under him while attacking the rebels. He was also an alderman for the 12<sup>th</sup> Ward from 1874 to 1875 and was later president of the Chicago chapter of the Sons of Vermont in 1885. In 1904 Waterman became the Dean of the University of Chicago law school until 1909 when he took over as the president of the faculty until 1914. Under Waterman's tutelage, the school became recognized for its efficiency, high standards, and thorough instruction.

One of the highest profile cases Waterman found himself on was *Baylies v. Curry*, a Civil Rights case argued in 1888. Josephine Curry, the African American plaintiff, sued Josiah Baylies, the white manager of a Chicago theater for his violation of the Illinois Civil Rights Act of 1885, by not allowing her "equal enjoyment" of places of public accommodation.<sup>87</sup> Waterman's position on this case was based on the Civil Rights Act itself, arguing that the "prohibition of segregation within a public space was included in the act and that, by any other reading, the civil rights act was rendered nugatory." Furthermore, "Waterman rejected the argument that the Civil Rights Act had to be limited so that 'order and good movement could be preserved.' He compared it to claims

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<sup>87</sup> Elizabeth Dale. "Social Equality does Not Exist among Themselves, nor among Us": *Baylies vs. Curry and Civil Rights in Chicago, 1888*," *The American Historical Review*, 102:2 (April, 1997), 311-339, 311.



that African Americans had to be enslaved lest they became public charges, or punished severely for even a trivial offense. Both ideas, Waterman noted, had fallen by the wayside in the aftermath of the Civil War, and ‘neither disorder nor destruction of the government followed.’<sup>88</sup>

In his 1901 novel *A Century of Caste*, Waterman attempted to place the “average person’s” troubles into perspective by recounting the lives of African Americans. “With many, life is a melodrama; for some, a tragedy; to most, a disappointment. The greater portion of mankind feel that they have been unjustly dealt with, unduly vexed and troubled, not properly appreciated or rewarded; that opportunities afforded to others have been denied to them.” Waterman then continues by writing: “To these, this presentation of burdens they have never borne, is offered for their consideration.”<sup>89</sup>

Along with the Maha Bodhi Society, other organizations began to be established after the Parliament of Religions. The Dharma Sangha of Buddha was established on April 16, 1900 by Dr. Norman and Reverend Shuei Sonada with five others, only known as McIntyre, Hayes, C. F. Jones, E. R. Stoddard, and Agnes White.<sup>90</sup> The group was a small one based in San Francisco and it only came to count 25 Americans and 20 Japanese as members. However, the group published an English-language journal, *The Light of Dharma*, on a bimonthly basis. The Sangha used Carus’ musical compositions in their services and their efforts were “directed primarily toward serving the religious and

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>89</sup> Arba N. Waterman, *A Century of Caste: The Short and Simple Annals of the Poor* (Chicago, IL: M. A. Donohue & Co., 1901), 3.

<sup>90</sup> *Buddhist Churches of America, Vol 1, 75 Year History 1899-1974*, 83.

social needs and interests of the Japanese immigrants who were already (at least nominally) Buddhist and preponderantly followers of Shin Buddhism.”<sup>91</sup>

In light of the ever increasing animosity shown towards Asians, Dr. Norman became something of an ambassador between the Caucasian and Japanese Buddhists in San Francisco. The official history of the Buddhist churches of America gives much credit to Dr. Norman through his contact at the Hompa Hongwanji Ranch Temple, Reverend Sonada, in building bridges between the Buddhist community and the American public.

Perhaps these types of organizations should take the same prestigious place as Jane Addams’ Hull House in the history of American reform. Due to several anti-Japanese inspired legislative and executive actions including the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1908 and the Immigration Act of 1924 Japanese immigration declined precipitously in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, alien land laws in several states including California, Oregon, and Washington prevented Japanese from owning land. In response, the Buddhist community began to establish centers to educate and facilitate social networking among its members, including the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) and the Young Women’s Buddhist Association (YWBA). These organizations, reflecting similar organizations throughout the United States, became crucial intermediaries between immigrants and non-immigrants alike and helped immigrant communities transition into the American landscape.

The religious leadership of the Buddhist churches in America was hampered however by the lack of ministers proficient in English. Beginning in 1930 Reverend Kenji

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<sup>91</sup> Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.), 35.

Masuyama attempted to locate suitable candidates among the Japanese second-generation community who were willing to consider becoming Buddhist ministers. “Ministerial aspirants went to Japan to receive formal training that would qualify them for ordination by the Homba Hongwanji. Ironically, the necessary proficiency in the Japanese language limited the use of English.”<sup>92</sup> However, significant progress was made by the Buddhist laymen and laywomen. It must be remembered, as it clearly was not during the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, that most of this community was indeed American born. They had been Americans for several generations and, to a lesser degree, reflected the same generational dynamics of other ethnicities, most notably, a gradual acculturation into the host culture. They experienced what W.E.B. Dubois characterized as a “double-consciousness.” They were at the same time Americans and Japanese. As Americans they had the same agenda for their adopted country as many previous nationalities who came to these shores, to make this grand experiment in democracy work, and in so doing provide a better and more rewarding life for themselves and their families.

A majority of Japanese Buddhists at the time were Shin Buddhists and as part of Mahayana Buddhism followed the bodhisattva ideal of reaching out to all people and alleviating suffering through compassion and understanding. From 1910 through the 1920s the community’s attempts to reach out paralleled the other positive Progressive movements throughout the United States. This group had common cause with the likes of Jane Addams, John Dewey, Upton Sinclair, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Although as a rather discreet community, often labeled the “model minority” or the “quiet Americans,” they have had less attention focused on them than many other reform groups.

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Furthermore, Buddhist ministers were often quite different in temperament. Ryo M. Imamura has studied the psychology of these ministers in depth and has concluded that Protestant and Catholic ministers are, for the most part, more extroverted than their generally more introverted Buddhist equals. Buddhist ministers are also more “introspective, persevering, hard to convince or change, quiet, caring, concerned about deep and enduring values and spend[ing] energy in making people happy and in bring[ing] harmony in relationships.”<sup>93</sup> Imamura further contends that Japanese culture in general stresses “harmony and interrelatedness, quiet reflection, patience, appreciation and humility.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, Japanese reform movements often did not take the same form as movements conducted by other nationalities. They were more subdued and often took place behind the scenes. Yet it cannot be denied that the results were numerous and often quite significant.

#### *Hinduism and the Vedanta Movement*

However, Buddhism was not the only Asian religion to achieve a foothold in America after the World Parliament of Religions. Hinduism in the form of Vedanta societies also began to emerge. The term “Vedanta” is a literal term meaning “at the end of the Vedas,” the Vedas being the ancient scriptures of India and of Hinduism. As a philosophical term it signifies a monism prevalent in large parts of Indian culture. This was a different form of Hinduism than that studied and appreciated by the Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau.

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<sup>93</sup> Ryo M. Imamura, *A Comparative Study of Temple and Non-Temple Buddhist Ministers of the Jōdo Shin Sect Using Jungian Psychological Types*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of San Francisco, 1986, 77-79, 102-103.

<sup>94</sup> These attributes are often reflected in common Japanese expressions. Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 38.

In India Vedanta arose among the Westernized elite in the late nineteenth century. Laurence R. Veysey writes that in twentieth-century America “the idea of inner withdrawal from the materialism of the society competes, more or less as an equal, with the idea of a left-wing withdrawal from that same materialism. Some historians, indeed, have gone to an opposite extreme, interpreting ‘mind-cure’ religions (such as Vedanta may be in part) as symptoms of the psychic toll of industrialization in a peculiar sense.”<sup>95</sup> So we see that Vedanta as manifested through several Vedanta societies arose concurrently with the spiritual anxieties resulting from the Gilded Age and the setting of the mainstream Protestantism golden day.

The Vedanta movement in America was begun by Swami Vivekananda after the World’s Parliament of Religions based on his interpretations of the Indian Ramakrishna movement and the guru Ramakrishna himself. The Vedanta groups were relatively elitist and small at first and their “preferred form of ritual was serious conversation.”<sup>96</sup>

The Vivekananda movement itself was a product of early intercultural and inter-religious influences during the British occupation of India. However, it goes without saying that not all early influences were welcomed by the receiving parties. Yet, what came to be seen as positive influences were wrought from these earlier episodes. One of these influential episodes was the cultural and religious “dialogue” between the West and Indian culture, especially Hinduism. The long occupation of India by British colonial forces resulted in substantial and broad contact between two civilizations that in many respects diverged widely. Modern Britain, of course, was a product of the European Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution and these influences traveled with its

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<sup>95</sup> Veysey, *The Communal Experience*, 68.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

colonists, military and Christian missionaries to India. India and Hinduism in particular resisted the changes brought by the British, if for no other reason than as a response to the forced occupation of the country. However, substantial changes were to occur nonetheless.

Apart from many Hindu's wholesale dismissal of Western influences on their religion, there was within the faith, or more appropriately in the case of Hinduism, within the many faiths, those who believed that some facets of Western culture could serve a purpose. Towards the end of the eighteenth century many young educated Hindus began to embrace Western ideas and values and simultaneously denounced and derided the religion of their parents and ancestors. As has been the case in other cultures, this challenge of new ideas elicited within the community an awakening of the need to challenge through adaptation and adoption of particular facets of the indigenous religion. In India this became what is known as the "Hindu Renaissance." As has been previously noted, religions often respond to new challenges by reforming in the name of a re-appropriation of their "original" doctrines and dogma; and this re-appropriation, as is required by cultural institutions claiming the authority of tradition, is justified by the claim that the original teachings of the faith had been lost, forgotten, or incorrectly interpreted in the intervening years since the beginning of the faith. By doing so, religious adherents are able to adapt and reform based on new challenges while still claiming the authority of their original founder, whether Abraham, Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, or, in this particular case, the ancient teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

In India numerous reform movements and individuals arose in response to the challenges of Western modernity: Brahma-Samaj, Arya Samaj, Rammohun Roy, and

Debendranath Tagore. The Brahma-Samaj, for example, incorporated several practices from the West including congregational style worship services including sermons and the singing of hymns and was also intensely committed to social action involving itself in many of India's most important social reforms and initiatives during the era. These reform initiatives challenged the traditions of idol-worship, the caste system, and widow-burning. However, reformers while certainly attempting to address these particular areas, also spent considerable energy and thought attempting to reform the larger faith of Hinduism. For the most part, these movements were centered in the small yet growing Indian middle-class; and it was members of this educated middle-class that had the financial ability to take their message to American shores.

It is important not to overstate the significance of this “impact response” dynamic and keep in mind that “Western influences certainly sparked the awakening and influenced the direction taken, but the Hindu Renaissance was primarily an Indian movement –or better, a series of movements—directed by Hindu reformers.”<sup>97</sup> The continual adaptation and change within Hinduism itself is no better illustrated than by the fact that Buddhism has all but disappeared within the borders of India owing to the almost immediate reaction and subsequent adoption of various tenets of Buddhism by Hinduism itself.

The most important “Hindu Renaissance” movement and personages for America, or at least for this study, were the Ramakrishna movement, Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Vivekananda. The Ramakrishna movement, reflecting many of the other movements at

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<sup>97</sup> Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 2. For a detailed analysis of the “impact response” phenomena, see Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997).

the time, advanced on two separate fronts through a concerted defense of Hinduism from outside attacks and simultaneous efforts to reform from within against what was viewed as orthodox Hinduism's corruptions. Ramakrishna was the fire that began the movement named for him, a celebrated Indian saint whom his devotees considered an avatar, a God-realized man.

Upon Ramakrishna's passing, Swami Vivekananda took the mantle of leadership defending Hinduism, urging internal reform, and instituting a series of humanitarian endeavors. Yet he was not content with internal reforms alone. Rather than simply defending Indian and Hindu culture, he acted on his belief that the West too could learn something from another civilization. He launched the first Vedanta societies in the United States and Europe, a wave of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange that continues to this day.

Although the importance of personal charisma may prove to be essential in the short term, and none can doubt that Ramakrishna exuded charisma with every fiber of his being, nothing can replace a permanent institutional structure in insuring the long term success of a religious organization.<sup>98</sup> A permanent religious structure has historically been difficult for Hinduism to construct for it has traditionally been conveyed from teacher to student on a one-to-one basis. Although this situation has worked well in India for thousands of years, partly because of historical circumstances in that country and partly because the various traditions of Hinduism were given ample time to flourish, decades and even centuries in fact, the lack of an organized religious structure in America has proven to be a difficult barrier to penetrate. However, the speed of modernity has demanded that many religions that came to America were required to adopt different

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.



methods than what was traditional in their home countries. The leaders of the Ramakrishna movement in the United States soon realized the fundamental need for an effective institutional and structural organization. Many of the Hindu leaders who came to the United States assuming they could propagate their particular faiths as they had back in India soon realized their errors as their organizations slowly but inexorably fell away. Thus, Hinduism in America never reached the same level of success Buddhism achieved.

The three most popular and most successful Ramakrishna swamis in the late 1800s and early 1900s were Abhedananda, Vivekananda, and Trigunatita. Abhedananda took over Vivekananda's work in New York, Trigunatita's activities centered on the West Coast, especially San Francisco. These swamis lacked a defined organizational structure. However, this was a conscious effort by leaders of the Vedanta Society. Vivekananda, whose pre-monastic name was Narendranath Dutta, stated "we have no organization nor want to build any. Each one is quite independent to teach, quite free to preach whatever he or she likes." He continued that: "Individuality is my motto, I have no ambition beyond training individuals up."<sup>99</sup>

However, it must be kept in mind that the earlier successes of particular groups do not necessarily portend their long-term success, just as in their own country there were many cases of religions falling by the wayside through religious "Darwinism" or the spiritual "free market." Vivekananda avoided organizational structure every step of the way. His policy was to "let things grow" and not to establish rules or rituals, as was the tradition back in India. The tradition depended on personal one on one instruction. In an

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<sup>99</sup> Quoted in Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries. The World Teacher: Part One* (Calcutta, India: Advaita Ashrama, 1985), 326.

interesting incident between Vivekananda and one of his greatest supporters, Marie Louise, the true depths of his lack of interest in organization structures can be understood. Louise threatened to bolt from the Vedanta Society to the Theosophists because members at the New York Vedanta Society were not supporting her. Vivekananda simply responded that he didn't want an organization and that was that. Only those organizational details that were specifically required for the proper and legal administration of the society were considered. It is interesting to note that in the case of Vivekananda, despite his resistance to the establishment of a formal structure in America, it was he who ended up providing the Ramakrishna movement with the required tools for its continued existence to this day.

Vivekananda had a great influence both directly and indirectly on various individuals in the United States. One of those was a young philosopher named William Ernest Hocking. Hocking later became a professor at Harvard University and even became rather famous through the publication of his work *The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (1912). At Harvard Hocking discovered others interested in Asian philosophy and religions including Josiah Royce, George Santayana, and William James. Before heading to the world Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swami Vivekananda spent some time in Boston. During his time in America, Vivekananda spoke at Radcliffe and Harvard and was a regular at Green Acre, a spiritual retreat in Maine. Boston became an important center of Hinduism in America. The Boston Vedanta Centre was established in 1907 and the first Hindu magazine in America, *Message of the East*, was established in Boston beginning in 1912.

Yet Vivekananda's most loyal and most significant American supporter was Sara Chapman Bull (1850-1911). Sara Bull was a true "Renaissance Woman." She was an accomplished pianist, a scholar of Norwegian literature, noted author, founder of the Cambridge School of Philosophy, and wife of the most famous Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. Her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was an intellectual salon in the where such figures as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Josiah Royce, and William James could regularly be found. Bull had come to Asian religions in the mid-1880s through her readings of Hinduism and specifically the Bhagavad Gita, which she received from an Indian Theosophist, Mohini Chatterjee.

In 1898 Bull made a pilgrimage to India under the direction and tutelage of Swami Vivekananda, who she had arranged to come and speak at Harvard. She became one of the most important financial backers of Hinduism in America through the financing of various speakers. In fact, this support led to a minor scandal after her death in 1911 when the money she left to the movement was challenged by her daughter. The legal battle and more importantly the battle in the popular press portrayed her as a victim of bizarre "Oriental" mystics.<sup>100</sup>

### *Irving Babbitt*

In 1881 the American educator and author Edwin Dwight Babbitt (1828-1905) argued that while there were certainly particular elements of superiority in Western civilization influenced by the Christian church, "we should be candid enough to see and confess that the Asiatic religions, even though burdened with many elements of

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<sup>100</sup> Pravrajika Prabhuddapana, *Saint Sara: The Life of Sara Chapman Bull, The American Mother of Sw. Vivekananda*

superstition, can present some decided points of superiority to our own.”<sup>101</sup> Babbitt employed the remarks of a prominent New England Congregational clergyman, Reverend John Murray, to substantiate his own position on Asian thought and religion: “Christian civilization might profit from Buddhism, and New England and Boston might go to school in China and Canton. The underlying idea of Buddhism is a belief in the infinite capacity of the human intellect; belief in the availability of true merit, and in the development of all the human faculties.” Babbitt argued that Buddhism was not merely a “sensual religion,” but that it was “purely rational, appealing to consciousness and intellect for support.” Babbitt continued by reminding his readers in the West of the less than glorious religious history:

While Old England and New England have used the rack, the cell, the dungeon, the inquisition and thousand implements of torture there have been twenty three hundred years of Buddhism, with not a drop of blood in its onward march, nor a groan along its pathway. It has never persecuted. It has never deceived the people, never practised pious fraud, never discouraged literature, never appealed to prejudice, never used the sword. If the Buddhists are heathen are they not civilized heathen?...Their priests depend upon voluntary subscriptions. We have homes for the sick, the poor and the aged. But the heathen Buddhists go one step farther and provide hospitals for the sick and wornout animals. They plant shade trees along the way to shelter men and animals from the scorching sun. Grazing herds and insect life represent the divine thought. All life in their eyes is sacred.<sup>102</sup>

While the elder Babbitt’s knowledge of Asian history was limited thus limiting his knowledge of the long history of Buddhism, he was, for the most part, correct in this comparison of Buddhist history, especially with the history of Christianity, or for that matter, the entire Judeo-Christian-Islamic span of history. The editor of the *New York Journal* opined upon a request for the publication of the “Buddhist creed” that, “We are

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<sup>101</sup> Edwin Dwight Babbitt, *Religion as Revealed by the Material and Spiritual Universe* (New York, NY: Babbitt & Co., 1881), 140.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

extremely happy to say that Buddhism has no creed. His majesty the Devil would long ago have swallowed Buddhism, had it had a creed. He has thus far swallowed all organizations with Creeds...and because of their presence in his belly, he is now noisomely flatulent in the world.” The editor continued by informing the subscriber that: “Buddhism has come West, not to tickle surfeited palates with ‘old church’ or ‘new church’ hash, but to teach men to think righteously and to act righteously, that they may become spiritual freemen.”<sup>103</sup> Yet it was his son, the young Irving Babbitt, who was to be instrumental in analyzing the importance of Asian thought and religions in America and thereby providing a significant touchstone for later generations.

The Babbitts were descendants of an English family who settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1643.<sup>104</sup> Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) was born in Dayton, Ohio in 1865. Young Irving was heavily influenced by his father and never failed to see the other side of issues and problems that were viewed as “too strange” or “exotic” for his contemporaries. Irving entered Harvard College in 1885 to study the Classics but was “over prepared” thanks to his family, and thus refused to attend classes on a regular basis. Irving Babbitt had an early interest in Asia and especially Buddhism going back to his early undergraduate years at Harvard in the 1880s. He graduated with Honors in 1889 and immediately sought to study Asian subjects, first in Paris at the École des hautes études with Professor Sylvain Levi and then back at Harvard with the Sanskrit scholar Professor Charles Rockwell Lanman. He used his knowledge of Sanskrit to revise Max Müller's translation of *The Dhammapada* and produce his own lengthy essay on “Buddha and the Occident.” Unfortunately, neither of these works was published until after his

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<sup>103</sup> *New York Journal*, quoted by Fields and Tweed.

<sup>104</sup> The Babbitts were descendants of Edward Bobet, who was an early member of the Plymouth colony.

death in 1933. After teaching European languages at Williams College he received an appointment at Harvard University in 1895 to teach in the Department of Romance Languages and Literature and in the Department of Comparative Literature where he remained until his death in 1933. Babbitt's considerable influence reached as far as France and China, and in 1960 the Irving Babbitt Chair of Comparative Literature was established at Harvard University.

Irving Babbitt was the consummate social critic. He had a deep impact on the writer T. S. Eliot, and later on Walter Lippmann and Russell Kirk. During his long career he questioned and took to task many of the claims and assumptions held by his influential contemporaries. In this way he was certainly his father's son. He also questioned and challenged at every turn his fellow progressives, believing that one of the highest tasks of a true progressive was the most difficult: self-discipline. Babbitt formulated and expressed his beliefs through what came to be known as New Humanism, also referred to as Neo-Humanism. While at Harvard, Babbitt met fellow student and Sanskrit enthusiast, Paul Elmer More (1864-1937). More was to become Babbitt's closest friend and a close ally in the New Humanism project. In the first expression of his new ideas in a lecture delivered at the University of Wisconsin in 1895 entitled *What is Humanism* Babbitt criticized Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Romantic Movement and argued that Naturalism had a negative effect upon Western civilization and especially America. Babbitt maintained that the Naturalistic tendencies of Rousseau had produced a mechanistic society that worshipped power and force above all, and continued that at the same time, society had become sentimental, emotional, and indulgent, liberated from all restraints. The

fundamental basis for Babbitt and More's New Humanism was their studies in the classics, not only of the West but the East as well.

Babbitt's fellow student William F. Giese recalled that: "He was already deeply immersed in Buddhism, and its influence in shaping his thought is so plain from the start that other influences (barring Aristotle) need hardly be invoked except as enriching tributaries." In fact, Giese recounted that he was asked somewhat in jest by Babbitt about the propriety of presenting himself for a teaching position as a "Unitarian or a Buddhist." "The ultimate convictions behind his humanism (which seemed then only an emerging aspect of his philosophy)," Giese continued, "are to be fully understood only in the Oriental light, however Aristotelian his analytic method. Buddhism preaches the extinction of all desire, and is thus radically anti-romantic."<sup>105</sup> In the 1920s his associate at Harvard, Victor Hamm proclaimed that "if Babbitt had a religion, it was certainly closer to Buddhism than to any other."<sup>106</sup> Arthur Christy claimed that Babbitt and More's New Humanism "Orientalism" was the first in the United States "based on sound scholarship and an acquaintance with Sanskrit and Pāli."<sup>107</sup> It is interesting to note that the ideas of Babbitt and More as expressed through New Humanism would later go on to influence Russell Kirk, a patron saint of the post-World War II conservative movement. Babbitt and his followers did not gain many converts for their humanistic ideas during their lifetime. However, in the post-World War II era, Babbitt's ideas became some of the most important influences on conservatism. Babbitt's concepts, especially those on self-discipline and self-reliance, can be witnessed in the writings of such figures as George

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Milton Hindus, *Irving Babbitt*, 29

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>107</sup> Arthur Christy, "The Sense of the Past," *The Asian Legacy and American Life*, Arthur E. Christy, ed. (New York, NY: The John Day Company, 1945), 50.

Will, Russell Kirk, and William F. Buckley. Babbitt also made a lasting impression on the young socialist Walter Lippmann which can be attested to in Lippmann's 1955 work, *Essays in The Public Philosophy*. However, Lippmann failed to mention Babbitt's name even once.<sup>108</sup>

Of course, conservatives were most interested in Babbitt's critiques of Progressivism, especially his contention that the Progressives had lost focus on the importance of self-discipline. Members of the conservative movement, especially the Christian Right faction, would perhaps be shocked to discover the Asian influences and contributions to their intellectual and ideological foundations.

In his article, "Buddha and the Occident," Babbitt believed that an ever increasing material contact between the East and West was certainly welcome but that if that trade was not also accompanied by a "spiritual" understanding then it would perhaps lead to a "special danger." Those who "assume almost unconsciously" that the West has nothing to learn from the East are hindering an increase in mutual understanding between the cultures. Babbitt continued that:

One may distinguish three main forms of this assumption of superiority on the part of the Occidental: first, the assumption of racial superiority, an almost mystical faith in the preeminent virtues of the white peoples (especially Nordic blonds) as compared with the brown or yellow races; secondly, the assumption of superiority based on the achievements of physical science and the type of "progress" it promoted, a tendency to regard as a general inferiority the inferiority of the Oriental in material efficiency; thirdly, the assumption of religious superiority, less marked now than formerly, the tendency to dismiss non-Christian Asiatics en masse as "heathen," or else to recognize value in their religious beliefs, notably in Buddhism, only so far as they conform to the pattern set by Christianity.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Essays in The Public Philosophy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1955).

<sup>109</sup> Irving Babbitt, *The Dhammapada* (New Directions Publishing, 1965), 65.



Babbitt argued that “A great religion is above all a great example.”<sup>110</sup> Milton Hindus writes that this statement looks remarkably similar to Emerson in his essay on “Self-Reliance”: “An institution is the lengthened shadow of a man.”<sup>111</sup> The intellectual thread running through Emerson and Babbitt is apparent. Hindus argues that “[t]he problem of conduct, as it presented itself to both the Buddha and Babbitt, is primarily a problem in self-perfection and self-control. While it does not necessarily result in their becoming anti-social in their attitudes, it does tend to make them more or less aloof toward social concerns.” For Babbitt, as for Emerson earlier, the focus should be on self-improvement: “Too many people in the modern world, we hear him complain over and over again, escape from their immediate responsibility for mending themselves and their own lives by undertaking to meddle with the affairs of their neighbors. For Babbitt and for Buddha, perhaps as much as for Plato in *The Republic*, justice consists first of all minding one’s own business.”<sup>112</sup>

This contention could best be described as a false choice. Babbitt believed that Europe had attempted to escape the industrial and Lockean utilitarian view of life by turning to Asia. However, Babbitt cautioned, Asia had already felt the affects of this type of modernization. Japan in particular, Babbitt proclaimed, realized that Buddhism was a way of life more than an intellectual pursuit or religious dogma. For example, the defining theological foundation that permeates all variants of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, was, Babbitt believed, a belief that must be acted upon not just recited. “Hence, it is a voluntaristic philosophy. But the trouble with romantic orientalism, which goes

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<sup>110</sup> Irving Babbitt, *On Literature, Cultures, and Religion*. Edited by George Andrew Panichas. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 266.

<sup>111</sup> Milton Hindus, *Irving Babbitt, Literature, and the Democratic Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 31.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

beyond the clear message of the Buddha, is that it is ‘picturesque surfaces,’ the locus of ‘the bower of dreams,’ a kind of ‘subrational spontaneity’ and in Schopenhauer the Buddha is converted into a ‘heavy-eyed, pessimistic dreamer’ whereas he was ‘one of the most alert and vigorous figures of whom we have historical record.’”<sup>113</sup> Babbitt reflected a belief that many other Buddhist “practitioners” would later follow. “For such Americans,” according to Peter Gregory’s estimation, “Buddhism is not so much a set of beliefs whose truth is to be affirmed as a practice through which ‘truth’ is to be uncovered. For them, it is possible to be a Buddhist practitioner without being a Buddhist, although scholars would almost surely want to count them as ‘Buddhists’ within the broad compass of American religions.”<sup>114</sup>

To this day Babbitt continues to be a hero of the American Conservative movement. One of Babbitt’s main contributions to this movement is his idea of the “inner check.” It is no surprise that that is exactly what drew him to Buddhism. Rather than the “check” coming from the outside, Buddhism advocates an inner check through the control of desires. Babbitt recognized this while translating *The Dhammapada* which reads: “If a man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, he is the greater of conquerors.”<sup>115</sup> This sentiment, that is, questioning the efficacy of “external checks,” is not surprising considering the onward march of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes at the time.

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<sup>113</sup> Dale Riepe, “The Indian Influence in American Philosophy: Emerson to Moore,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 17, No. ¼. (Jan. – Oct., 1967), 125-137, 131. Quotations taken from Irving Babbitt, “Romanticism and the Orient,” *On Being Creative* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.; The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1932), 241-243.

<sup>114</sup> Peter N. Gregory, “Describing the Elephant: Buddhism in America,” in *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 11, No. 2. (Summer, 2001), 233-263, 242.

<sup>115</sup> Babbitt, *The Dhammapada*, 18.

The poet T. S. Eliot, whose most famous works, *The Waste Land* (1922) and the *Four Quartets* (1943), were in fact both heavily influenced by his study of Buddhism and Hinduism; however, he soon became a target of some controversy as a result these “exotic” and “suspicious” intellectual and cultural foundations. The controversy extended all the way to Eliot’s Harvard mentor Irving Babbitt who was less reticent than Eliot in expressing his own “exotic” religious beliefs. Eliot addressed Babbitt in his 1934 work *After Strange Gods*: “His attitude towards Christianity seems to me that of a man who had had no emotional acquaintance with any but some debased and uncultured form: I judge entirely on his public pronouncements and not at all on any information about his upbringing.... His addiction to the philosophy of Confucius is evidence [of trying to compensate for the lack of a living tradition]: the popularity of Confucius among our contemporaries is significant.”<sup>116</sup> Eliot’s problems with Babbitt’s religious beliefs continued after Babbitt’s death. Eliot attacked Babbitt’s final work, his translation of *The Dhammapada*: “The problem is why Babbitt, with such a mind and equipment as, it would seem, could only be supported by Christianity, should have turned to primitive Buddhism (Hinayana) instead. But first it will help us if we can form some conclusion about what he made of Buddhism”<sup>117</sup> From here Eliot spent several pages explicating Babbitt’s shortcomings in his understanding of not only Buddhism, but Christianity as well. It was clear that by the mid-1930s Eliot’s own earlier interest in Asian religions had ended, although his most appreciated works were both produced under the influence of Babbitt and his interest in Asian religions and thought.

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<sup>116</sup> Quoted in *Hindus*, Irving Babbitt, 51.

<sup>117</sup> James Edwin Miller, *T. S. Eliot: the making of an American poet, 1888-1922* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 174. James Edwin Miller, *T. S. Eliot*, 174.

Although Babbitt's influence on other intellectuals is clear, he did not take much stock in reform movements per se. He believed, as did the early Emerson, that civilization could not simply be changed through external or mechanical social forces; rather, he argued that society could only be changed from the bottom up, one person at a time through the cultivation of individuals. Babbitt proposed "to bring a Socratic idea into relation with a Buddhistic one and then to use the two ideas thus combined in defense of an idea that is central in Christianity."<sup>118</sup> According to Babbitt the idea at the center of this problem was nothing else than self-control.

Babbitt agreed that the scientific and industrial advancements of the time had certainly brought great rewards, yet it was his contention that the same type of scientific experimentalism utilized by the science and technological community could reap rewards for society as well through a humanistic-based experimentalism. In a letter to G. R. Elliott, Babbitt argued that: "The paradox of the whole matter is this: a philosophy of the 'inner check' when put theoretically and in terms of the intellect seems intolerably negative. But when this philosophy is actually lived, when it becomes innate in a personality, the inner check is then felt, not as something negative, but as a positive driving-power."<sup>119</sup> Babbitt was thus experiential when it came to conduct believing that this 'driving power' or "higher will" is a mystery manifested and recognized 'in its practical effects,' and we are able to affirm this will without going beyond immediate experience and falling into dogma. Significantly, Babbitt went so far as to argue that European culture since the Middle Ages had failed "to disengage the truths of the higher

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<sup>118</sup> Irving Babbitt, *On Being Creative* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), xxxvii.

<sup>119</sup> G. R. Elliott, *Humanism and Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 86.

will from theology and to deal with them experimentally as 'immediate data of consciousness.'"<sup>120</sup> It was in the philosophy of the Greeks as well as the philosophy and religions of Asia that Babbitt sought these transcendent truths that could be used by individuals as a practical "force" and "driving power." "Babbitt is centrally concerned with the standards of cultural values, but his final appeal is neither to reason nor to the wisdom of the ages. The basis of his humanism is superrational insight."<sup>121</sup> With one stroke Babbitt attempted to destroy systematically the canard of a zero sum dichotomy between "East and West."

Babbitt approached almost all his topics in the light of the humanist concepts he recognized in ancient Greece and Asia. While he used the past as evidence to substantiate his intellectual claims, Babbitt never used the past as authority. Again sounding very Emersonian, Babbitt quoted from *The Dhammapada* that: "Self is the lord of self." Babbitt maintained that humans must proclaim continually their spiritual autonomy as "a fact of experience, a fact so primary that the position of the determinist involves an evasion of one of the immediate data of consciousness in favor of a metaphysical dream."<sup>122</sup> Babbitt was simply proclaiming in Emersonian fashion that: We must walk on our own feet; we must work with our own hands; we must speak our own minds....

Wylie Sypher succinctly summarizes Babbitt's contribution to American culture and thought: "The greater task is to affirm, to reaffirm, in a time when morality becomes more social than personal, the need of a sound individualism, based upon moderation,

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<sup>120</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1924), 323.

<sup>121</sup> James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 67.

<sup>122</sup> Babbitt, *On Being Creative*, 215.

decency, and common sense. In this way Irving Babbitt can be of the very highest use through his insistent appeal to the civilized self.”<sup>123</sup>

In the end Babbitt’s interest in Asia emanated from the same well as many others; he believed that by studying a civilization so dissimilar from his own on the surface, the deeper similarities could be uncovered. In *Democracy and Leadership* (1924) Babbitt wrote: “When studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem.”<sup>124</sup> In the case of the writings of Confucianism, for example, Babbitt wrote, that he found “mixed up with much that is almost inconceivably remote from us, maxims that have not lost their validity to-day; maxims that are sure to be reaffirmed whenever and wherever men attain to the level of humanistic insight.”<sup>125</sup> “In the oldest Buddhist documents,” Babbitt continued, “again one finds along with a great deal that is very expressive of ancient India...a good sense which is even more imaginative and inspired, and therefore more universal than that of Confucius, and which is manifested, moreover, on the religious rather than on the humanistic level.”<sup>126</sup> From all these Asian sources Babbitt was convinced that: “We are dealing here with indubitable facts, and should plant ourselves upon them as against those who would exaggerate either the constant or the variable elements in human nature.”<sup>127</sup> Babbitt, as part of his New Humanism project—although he did not like the name because to him

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<sup>123</sup> Wylie Sypher, “Irving Babbitt: A Reappraisal,” *The New England Quarterly*, 14:1 (March 1941), 64-76, 76.

<sup>124</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 23.

<sup>125</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Publishing, 1919), 176.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

there was nothing “New” about a timeless universal—did not take issue with established religion for interpreting the higher will in a doctrinal fashion, instead he argued that religions at their most basic level supported humanism.

Babbitt’s influence extended to China as well. Several Chinese students studied under Babbitt at Harvard including, May Kuangti, Wu Mi, Tang Yong-tong, Chang Hsinhai, Low Kuang-lai, Lin Yu-tang, Liang Shih-ch'iu, and Kuo Pin-ho. Throughout his life Babbitt continued to be interested in the welfare of his Chinese students and their country. During the rise of the “New Culture Movement” in China in the 1920s there was an attempt to do away with the “old ways,” especially Confucianism. In a letter written from Cambridge in 1924 to his former student, Wu Mi, Babbitt expressed his concerns and hopes, not only for the plight of Chinese civilization, but for the plight of all civilization: “My impression, such as it is, is that the Chinese are a cheerful, industrious and intelligent folk who have coped with many a serious emergency in the past and may succeed in coping with this one. My special interest, as you know, is in the great Confucian tradition and the elements of admirable humanism that it contains. This tradition needs to be revitalized and adjusted to new conditions but anything approaching a complete break with it would in my judgment be a grave disaster for China itself and ultimately perhaps for the rest of us.”<sup>128</sup> History would show that Babbitt’s hopes were not soon realized. The traditions of China, especially what is known in the West as Confucianism, were soon to be violently attacked by the Maoists after the Communist takeover of the country in 1949.

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<sup>128</sup> Quoted in Xuezhao Wu, “The birth of a Chinese cultural movement: letters between Babbitt and Wu Mi,” *Humanitas* 17.1-2 (Spring-Fall 2004), 6 (20).

The World Parliament of Religions in 1893 certainly became a watershed moment in a truly international interfaith dialogue. Yet the dialogue extended beyond purely academic or theological boundaries and reached the streets and towns of its host country. Needless to say, perhaps not all legacies were what the original thinkers intended. Babbitt would perhaps be dismayed to learn that his formulation of the “inner check” was taken to the extremes and gave intellectual cover for “movement Conservatism” in the post-World War II era. In terms of intellectual foundations no one can deny the enormous contribution D.T. Suzuki and Paul Carus made in establishing Buddhism, especially Zen, in America. This baton was to be taken up later by the likes of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. The thread of Asian religions and thought indeed led from Emerson to Thoreau to Suzuki to Lum and from there it accompanied Kerouac and Neal Cassady “On the Road,” and it was with Ginsberg and Carl Solomon at Rockland.



## CHAPTER 6

### LEGACIES

It is true that many of the groups, the Transcendentalists, the Theosophists, the Boston Buddhists, and others, analyzed in the previous pages started off rather small. Some are still routinely remembered and discussed, yet others are but bumps on the American road of history and are only recalled and appreciated by a select few. The analysis of the history of these groups and movements must thus be balanced both spatially and temporally. While some groups had a more profound effect on their contemporary society and beyond, Thoreau and the Underground Railroad, for example, other groups' effects on American culture and history are less obvious and can only be seen through a multigenerational analysis. Theosophists, for example, were perhaps the epitome of Bellah's "lifestyle enclave" in the United States, especially with respect to its co-founder Blavatsky, but their introduction of Asian texts and philosophies influenced the development and advancement of many later groups. Furthermore, taking an international perspective of the Theosophists, most notably Olcott in Sri Lanka, immediately illustrates their profound and lasting impact on the lives of many in Asia to this day.

Perhaps the sheer size of America is too large for a limited introduction of Asian thought and religions, or for that matter most cultural or intellectual introductions, to influence it on their own. Perhaps individual humans have lost their agency in the face of the ever-increasing complexity and the sheer magnitude of modern society. Perhaps we are indeed Don Quixote figures battling imaginary dragons. But are the quests for truth, beauty, justice, and humanity not a noble illusion? All we can perhaps ask for from these

individuals, at least in the short term, are small victories—but for those who are the recipients of those victories, however “insignificant” historically, they certainly made a difference. One would only hope that the winners would take some other people with them. As we have seen, the American experience with reform infused with Asian thought and religions has had varying degrees of success and failure. Asian religions and thought in America have had the benefit of growing and developing organically. However, American society is unfortunately often averse to allowing things to develop slowly or organically.

For example, Robert A. Rosenstone summarizes the experience of those who traveled to Japan during the early era: “It was the rare individual who did not return home from Japan changed and broadened, who did not thereafter see the world in some measure through the eyes that had been Japanized.” Rather than a theoretical critique of American culture and society, they were able to establish a dialogue based on real experiences. “The works of these Americans,” Rosenstone continues, “reveal a newly born dissatisfaction with many aspects of life at home. Emphases vary, but some grew critical of American institutions and behavior patterns, more appreciative of art and landscape and the necessity for good design, and more tolerant of different social, political, and religious traditions.”<sup>1</sup>

The assorted failures that occurred were often those of exclusion, both mental and physical. Some groups reduced their influence on their surrounding communities by building exclusive lifestyle enclaves that had little interaction with the outside world. Other groups and individuals took what they had learned from vastly different cultures to

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “Learning from Those ‘Imitative’ Japanese: Another Side of the American Experience in the Mikado’s Empire,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3. (June 1980), 572-595, 594.

attempt to change the world around them for the better, often through the simple introduction of alternative solutions and perspectives. “Our acculturation,” the Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty argues, “is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional.”<sup>2</sup> It is only possible to transcend this acculturation if our culture contains splits which supply footholds for new initiatives. The numerous trials and tribulations that existed during America’s march to industrialization and modernity provided those splits. The American experience of liberal intellectual and religious opportunities dating back to our founding and continuing on in such manifestations as the First and Second Awakening have allowed us to pursue other alternatives. Perhaps Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor was correct that conformity protected the soul against doubt and supported social stability. “In the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, ‘Make us your slaves, but feed us.’”<sup>3</sup> But in a modern world that is by its very nature changing at an incredible speed, conformity and a hegemonic worldview are often more the sources of our problems than lasting sources of true and continuing comfort.

While a wholesale transplantation of Asian thought and religions may not be the answer to America’s problems in dealing with an ever-changing landscape, they certainly can add perspective and alternatives for frank discussion. Even if they do not necessarily provide the answers to our questions, they can perhaps provide avenues to ensure that we are asking the right questions. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, did not describe the future world that would replace the many limitations and troubles of the current one.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers*. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, translated by Constance Garnett. *The Brothers Karamazov* (Plain Label Books), 654.

Nietzsche knew that such foresight was beyond his capabilities. (Some would even argue that his attempt to do so drove him mad.) However, Nietzsche was instrumental in providing us with an honest and insightful criticism of the shortcomings of the current age. In so doing he forced us to ask some difficult questions, and unfortunately in the process earned the hatred of many who reveled in conformity and stability.

This cultural change is not traceable solely to the importation and adaptation of Asian religions, but is the result of an entire constellation of ideas, including Einstein's relativity, Freudian psychology, and the increasing realization that there are limits to the availability of natural resources and that the global community is just that, an interdependent organic *community*. Furthermore, Asian religions and philosophies are not the only carriers of Asian ideas into the West. In the post-World War II era, more popularly produced factors have been the conduits of Asian ideas the effects of which are just now being felt. Japanese children reared on Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck are now the creators of Akira, Pokemon, and other cultural exports so popular in the United States. We cannot expect our children to be unaffected by the subtle and sometimes not so subtle cultural messages of the countries from which these programs originate, especially when they watch them on a daily basis for most of their lives on television, through movies and in video games. It would certainly be far more difficult today than it was in the 1930s and 1940s to whip up hatred for the Japanese among a generation so heavily influenced by and enamored with Japanese culture. Similarly neither could we have expected the many individuals in American history that studied and practiced Asian religions, even in passing, not to have had their lives affected and in turn perhaps to have themselves have had a small effect on American history itself.

The interest in Asian thought and religions was part of a larger project in the West to rebalance the material and spiritual worlds that many argued had been put out of order by the excesses of the Enlightenment. Jürgen Habermas was correct in proclaiming that the West had taken the wrong fork in the Enlightenment road and that in order to repair our system we needed to return to the crossroads and reassess our choices. Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysius formulations argued that the wrong turn had happened quite earlier with the ancient Greeks, particularly Aristotle. However, the over-reliance on logic, which is an often repeated complaint against Westerners by Asians, does not necessarily preclude one from factoring in the "illogical" into equations. John Dewey, the most noted American Pragmatist, focused on the rational nature of mankind due to the simple fact that the opposite had become, he believed, too much of a focal point during his era. He realized that emotions and reasonableness along with rationality should also be part of the decision making process. But his main focus was ensuring that the decision making process itself be as scientific as possible which did not necessarily preclude or exclude emotional or "illogical" variables. This partly accounts for the term he gave to his own pragmatist project, Instrumentalism, reflecting his focus on the procedural method rather than the content of the discussion.

Jared Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005) has pointed out that several civilizations in the history of humankind have fallen because of a marked disconnect between the elite, those who controlled the centers of power in politics and economics, and the non-elite. The Mayans, for example, systematically cut down the surrounding forests at the order of the elite in order to sustain the group's relatively privileged lifestyle. While the elite also eventually perished along with the rest

of their society, they were the last to perish and therefore were unaffected until it was too late. Diamond argues that history has proven time and again that the actual material effects of changing societies are not enough to change them before the day of reckoning. There must be something else to serve as a weathervane of coming events and more importantly set a call to action. Thoreau, Olcott, Carus, Bigelow, Lum, and others believed that part of the key to reconnecting humankind to the “environment” and therefore to culture was the spirit of Asia. Thoreau, in his unpopular support of the militant abolitionist John Brown, praised him for fighting for justice when only his “spirit” was affected. Brown was certainly not physically affected by slavery. But he was affected emotionally and spiritually by one of the most inhumane institutions in humankind’s history. The followers of Asian thought and religion in America were part of this larger movement to rebalance American culture from a concentration on the material to one with a similar focus on the “immaterial” even if they themselves were not physically affected due to the fact that most of the subjects under analysis in these pages were, it must be admitted, in the upper echelons of the American socio-economic class structure.

There is an often repeated Zen story that gets to the heart of the experience Americans had with their reform agendas and their adoption and subsequent adaptation of Asian religions. It is the story of an old monk in China who practiced meditation very intensely for many years. The monk’s practice bore fruits in many areas, but he failed to grasp his own true nature and the nature of the world which is the essence of Zen training. So he went to his Zen master and requested permission to travel to the mountains to practice. His master agreed. The monk left the monastery with his few possessions and

walked towards the mountains. On a small trail he met an old man descending from the mountain carrying a large bundle on his back.<sup>4</sup> Noticing the monk the old man said, "Say friend, young monk, where are you going?" The young monk told his story. "I've practiced for all these years and all I want now is to touch the center point, to know that which is true." The old man looked at him and his look was kind and wise. So the young monk said, "Tell me, old man, do you know anything of this enlightenment?" At which point the old man simply let go of the bundle; it dropped to the ground and the young monk was enlightened. That's all. Just put it down. Drop everything: I, my, what I want to be, what I'm going to get, what will happen. Just be here. At this point the newly enlightened monk looked at the old man again, and said, "So now what?" The old man purposefully reached down and picked up the bundle again and continued down the mountain.

The point of the story is a typical Zen one: to let go of one's baggage, one's ego and attachments. Furthermore, the most relevant point for the current study is the fact that once the monk realized the Truth of life, he did not stop there. Once a deep realization of the nature of being and the world is obtained, the baggage had to be picked up again and the journey had to continue.

As we have seen through some of the followers of Asian religions in America, some individuals had indeed "put it down." They escaped the reality within which they lived, that is, the reality and vocabulary of their particular cultural milieu and thus did, although less metaphysically, transcend. Certainly such an exercise can be helpful in the process of gaining perspective. But once that new perspective is genuinely obtained then

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<sup>4</sup> It is said that his old man was actually the Bodhisattva Manjusri, who is said to appear to people at the moment they are ripe for awakening and is depicted carrying the sword of discriminating wisdom that cuts through all attachment, all illusion and separateness.

something must be done with that newly discovered realization. Action must be the consummation of thought. This is not a presentist argument. Hopefully, this study has not affixed contemporary views on the characters under analysis here. Each one of the individuals included in the current study without exception, albeit with varying degrees, had a utilitarian use for their study and adoption, and adaptation, of Asian religions and thought.

In the particular case of Buddhism, America's history with this "philosophy of life" is unique. Of course, Buddhist development, or, for that matter, most religious development, is unique in every culture, but dare we say that the development of Buddhism in America is "uniquely unique." Peter Gregory argues that "In terms of the history of Buddhism, Buddhism in America is the first time in the history of the religion that representatives of almost all of the major living forms of the tradition find themselves together in the same place at the same time."<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that the forms of Buddhism most successful within the non-Asian community in the United States are, as Peter Gregory points out, "themselves products of various reform and modernization movements in Asia that, in turn, are responses to the impact of Western colonialism and imperialism. They thus arrive having already adapted forms of practice, modes of expression, and styles of thought that are suited to a Western audience.... It is often these modernized forms that are being embraced by American enthusiasts as 'traditional' Buddhism."<sup>6</sup>

Gregory uncovers some often overlooked issues involving Buddhism and globalization and modernization. He believes that "...we just may be witnessing the

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory, *Elephant*, 251.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.



beginning of a series of historical transformations that, in the course of several generations or more, may have an impact on the development of Buddhism on a scale equal to some of the greatest changes in the past, such as the emergence of Mahayana or Tantra, or the development of some of the most distinctive acculturated forms of Buddhism in different Asian countries, especially China and Japan.”<sup>7</sup> Who would have guessed that Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill” might just include a Buddhist beacon?

American and Western interest in Buddhism has indeed had an effect on the history of Buddhism itself. Some have recently argued that the Western interaction with Buddhism has ushered forth a fourth “yana.” The term “yana” has several meanings depending on the particular Buddhist school of thought, but for our purposes “yana” shall connote the particular “vehicle” or “method” used to achieve the desired goal. There have been three *yanas* in Buddhist history: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Is Buddhism in America ushering in another Buddhist vehicle? Certainly Sōen Shaku believed the West, and particularly America, would be the intellectual birthplace of new type of Buddhism.

Perhaps what is at first blush a superficial commercialization of Asian images and symbols—which of course much of it is—runs far deeper. Clifford Gertz argues that the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are indicative of our goals, ambitions, and desires. Are Utopian fantasies like “the grass is always greener” always completely problematic? The inventor of the term “utopia,” Thomas More, certainly realized the limits of utopias in practice. The word “utopia” is after all a pun on a Greek root meaning both “good place” and “nowhere.” However unlikely the existence of utopias anytime in the near future, we are reminded by Williams James that they are still useful

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

concepts: “Faiths and utopias are the noblest exercise of human reason, and no one with a spark of reason in him will sit down fatalistically before the croaker’s picture.”<sup>8</sup>

Even though Asian religions, thought, and cultural categories have not yet changed Western culture to such a large degree, maybe one day they will. Or, maybe they have already had an effect on American history to a degree not as yet fully appreciated. For this study has shown that there has been a Hindu or a Buddhist on the field of every great reform movement in American history, including the anti-slavery movement, women’s rights, immigrant rights, worker’s rights. Although they did not always openly proclaim themselves as such, they were still contributors and participants to some of America’s greatest successes in the realm of social improvement.

Even though many of the early followers and sympathizers of Asian thought and religions did not live up to many of their self-professed goals, they were instrumental in setting the ground work for different perspectives and modes of thought that continue to flourish to this day. It is part of the national sport to discount and trivialize history and tradition, but the contributions of these individuals from Emerson, to Olcott, to Higginson, to Lum, paved the way for later figures like Alan Watts and Jack Kerouac. Through a simple logistical lens, we can see that both of these individuals utilized the scholarship, arguments, and insights of all those that preceded them. Furthermore, the infusion of sympathies in the American psyche by this loose confederation enabled a compassionate and empathetic appreciation for the trials of the Dalai Lama and the other Tibetan exiles.

“When we think about the future of the world,” Ludwig Wittgenstein argued, “we always have in mind its being where it would be if it continued to move as we see it

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<sup>8</sup> William James, “The Social Value of the College Bred,” Address Delivered at a Meeting of the Association of American Alumnae at Radcliff College, November 7, 1907.

moving now. We do not realize that it moves not in a straight line, but in a curve, and that its direction changes constantly.”<sup>9</sup> Many see the world now as continuing to have a rational, individualistic, and materialist bent. But, underneath this dominant paradigm is another one that has been in existence since the beginning. The West has always had “Asian” thinkers. For example, Heraclites proclaimed, in a rather Zen-like fashion, that we cannot step in the same river twice. But those of a similar mindset to his were dominated by more objective thinkers, notably Socrates, Plato and especially Aristotle. Even Asia has had “Western” thinkers. The Chinese philosopher Mozi (Mo Tzu, 470-?391 BCE) developed an entire system of logic that rivaled the Western logicians. But for various historical and cultural reasons these particular types of thinkers and ideas essentially “died on the vine.” Today we are witnessing a rebalancing and a reevaluation of the roads we have set upon.

Perhaps it is partly due to the long history of Asian religions in America that we are finally achieving the “cultural click” or paradigm shift in the realization of our affects on the environment, and therefore the fundamental interconnectedness of the world and its inhabitants. Winston King argues that as we become more and more alienated from “our natural environment by urbanization and technical progress—and with less and less natural environment with which to relate—we are belatedly asking ourselves whether trees and meadows may not have other and more significant uses than merely being destroyed to make way for a new highway, parking lot, or factory. Might they not be worth just enjoying? Has not the East, in its identification with, rather than exploitation of, nature, discovered a source of strength and peace sorely needed in the progress-wearied

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979, 2009), vii.

West?”<sup>10</sup> Thus from an intergenerational perspective, perhaps those first followers and sympathizers of Asian thought and religions, while perhaps not doing all they could during their own time, have provided us a touchstone from which to change ours.

There has been a much heated debate between two different futures. Francis Fukuyama has argued that there is a global societal convergence underway and the convergence is taking on a Western paradigm. The “end of history” has brought a liberal system of government as the future default for all countries and those countries will be populated by “the last man.” Samuel Huntington, on the other hand, argues that the end of history is not yet upon us and that the future will be dominated by a “clash of civilizations.” I would argue that there is a third view that should be considered, which is that the world may be in for convergence rather than continued divergence, but a convergence based not purely on Western social systems and values but also on a blending of Asian systems and values. This blending has been felt in America which has arguably been the most stalwart proponent of the Western system of ideas and values. Where America was once the harbinger of this new modern world built on the rational ideas of the Enlightenment, perhaps it can also be the spearhead for a balancing of disparate, yet in the end complementary, cultures. For it was Thomas Paine, in the introduction to *Common Sense*, who forcefully proclaimed: “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.” He was one of the first to recognize that the idea, and the ideal of America, was going to be a continuing and perhaps a never-ending unfinished project.

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<sup>10</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions: A New Interest and Influence,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 387, “The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion,” (January 1970), 71.

Reality, William James declared, is not singular, it is distributive. That is, reality ties together in many different ways from different beginnings and often with different endings. James wrote that “Everything is many directional, many dimensional, in its external relations, and after pursuing one line of direction from it, you have to go back and start in a new dimension if you wish to bring in other objects related to it, different from those which lay in the original direction. No one point of view or attitude commands everything at once in a synthetic scheme....”<sup>11</sup> This is what many of those who followed Asian religions believed, that perhaps the reality they were born in to and acculturated under was simply one of many. By following a reality as far from their own they believed they could grasp a more universal or more varied view of the world. However, their goal in most of this was to improve the society within which they lived.

We must not forget the continuing criticism leveled at America’s “characteristic” smorgasbord approach to religion. One principal basis of criticism is that human beings are not intelligent enough to choose for themselves the variants of their religious beliefs. But in fact that is exactly what occurs. Even within Christianity people have the ability to form particular variants of their beliefs, including Catholicism or innumerable sects of Protestantism, particular interpretations of the Bible, or the choice not to “reinterpret” the Bible at all, which itself is a choice. Certainly many of the choices had already been made before their time: the divinity of Jesus, which books would make up the Bible, the passages that would be emphasized, sin, Baptism, etc. However, in a country that, unfortunately for historians, looks to history with more than a touch of indifference, history, and its vehicle, culture, the accumulated habits and traits passed on from one

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<sup>11</sup> William James, Notebook J, *William James Papers*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS am 1092.9 (4509).

generation to another, are continually questioned and tested in new environs and in new eras. Returning to the first subject of the current study, the individual who many believe to be one of the founding fathers of an American philosophy, Ralph Waldo Emerson, he believed that we could make our own choices and we could also completely reevaluate those choices that had been made for us in the past. As Emerson exclaimed, “The sun shines today also....There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”<sup>12</sup>

In an excellent attempt at reconfiguring a false dualism, Winston King claims that the major Asian cultures are “sophisticatedly primitive, that is, they have become many-leveled in their apprehension and experience of the world, yet without thereby losing a sense of direct participation in its basic patterns, its sense life, and its dynamic vitality---even at the most abstruse heights of spiritual discipline.”<sup>13</sup> King continues by making an argument that is increasingly echoed year after year, that is, “...has not the East, in its identification with, rather than exploitation of, nature, discovered a source of strength and peace sorely needed in the progress-wearied West? It is ironic, we may note in passing, that just as the organic relatedness to nature and the disciplines of passive contemplation are becoming attractive to the West, many in the East are discovering the attractiveness (and the political necessity) of the Western gospel of exploitative progressivism.”<sup>14</sup>

In fact, it is interesting to note that Henry David Thoreau provided what many believe is the only answer to a crucial issue in today’s world, global warming. Much has been made of energy efficiency from hybrid cars to compact fluorescent light bulbs in the

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: NY: Signet Classic, 2003), 181.

<sup>13</sup> Winston King, “Eastern Religions,” 71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

amount of energy saved and the reduction of greenhouse gases. However, the downside of these technologies is what many consider one of their greatest immediate benefits, cost savings for the consumer. The problem arises when those cost savings are then used, as they “naturally” are, in the consumption of more products. Those products themselves have used energy in the production process and in the distribution process, a theory based on a nineteenth-century economist, William Stanley Jevon. What became known as the Jevons Paradox, sometimes called waste homeostasis, simply states that as technology improves the efficiency with which resources are used, total consumption of that resource may actually increase rather than decrease. So what may seem to be a positive effect on the environment actually turns into a neutral, or even a negative, action. Thoreau therefore has provided us with the only touchstone and perhaps the only true solution to global warming one of our greatest dangers in the future, and that solution is simply the reduction of consumption itself.

There is an ongoing and sometimes heated debate in America today over whether it is time to start using the term “American Buddhism” rather than “Buddhism in America.” One need only visit a Buddhist temple or shrine in Japan to notice the solemn and rather dark nature of the surroundings. Buddhist retreats and centers in America, on the other hand, are characteristically filled with light and are comparatively cheerful. This debate was brought to the surface in 1991 when Helen Tworokov published an editorial in the winter issue of the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* wherein she argued that “Asian American Buddhists . . . have not figured very prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism.”<sup>15</sup> Although Asian Americans have not figured significantly in the present study, for reasons mentioned earlier, there can be no doubt as

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<sup>15</sup> Helen Tworokov, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 1, No. 2 (Winter 1991).

to their many significant contributions to the further adoption and adaptation into the American setting.

What is interesting to note in such a discussion of “American Buddhism” is that just as Ralph Waldo Emerson has been credited with defining much of the trajectory of the American character, he could also be partly credited with the current composition of “American Buddhism.” American Buddhism possesses its own unique characteristics that were in embryonic form from the beginning. Rick Fields lists some of the traits of American Buddhism: a movement that began as a lay movement and therefore reflects the interests and goals of “the people”—democracy, anti-authoritarianism, and an anti-hierarchical nature, particularly in regards to women. Others have also added that it is pragmatic, nonsectarian, experimental, and substantially demystified, all of which is certainly reflective of Emerson’s beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

What often goes unnoticed by those adopting Asian religions and traditions into their own lives is the contribution of these earlier individuals to their current forms. As we have seen earlier the Hindu Renaissance was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, especially rationalism. Also, Buddhism Modernism is as the name implies just that, a “modern” formulation of Buddhism. Furthermore, with the ever increasing speed with which traditions and cultures cross borders, uncovering a “pure uncorrupted form” is all but impossible.

Peter Gregory attempts to gaze deeply into the crystal ball and is worth quoting at length:

What the long-term outcome of this complex net of interactions will be is impossible to foretell, but I think it is safe to say that the various forms of Buddhism that are establishing themselves in the United States will all

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory, *Elephant*, 248.



undergo some degree of reconfiguration, in many cases profound, and that such reconfigurations will also have an impact on Buddhism around the world. Insofar as American Buddhism is developing within a larger context of globalization, developments in the United States will also affect Buddhism in Asian countries as well as Europe, just as international developments will affect what is happening in America. Some of the pressing issues confronting American Buddhists are thus not necessarily exclusively "American," even though they may be precipitated by the catalyst of being in America. It is important that scholars not lose sight of this broader, international perspective as an important context for understanding American Buddhism.<sup>17</sup>

To conclude where this study began, Tocqueville argued that one of the problems he witnessed in this new country was "individualism." Again, for Tocqueville individualism was unlike "selfishness" that originated from "blind instinct," but that individualism "has its source in the defects of the mind as much as in the vices of the heart." The subjects of this study attempted to reorient their lives, their minds and their hearts, using a set of beliefs and ideas outside of their "comfort zone," their indigenous culture. Some were more successful than others in their own times and as contributors to the wider development of American culture and society, but together they set America on a trajectory that has yet to be fully realized.

In 1849 Thoreau put forth a claim that is perhaps still unfulfilled to this day: "*Ex oriente lux* may still be the motto of scholars, for though Greece & Rome politically have passed away, that source of light is not yet exhausted. The western world has not yet derived from the east all the light which it is destined to receive."<sup>18</sup> Thoreau, Emerson, Lum, Lowell, and others set America on the road of searching for the "light of Asia," and we certainly continue that project today. The fruits of this interaction are as difficult to

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>18</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal Volume 3: 1848-1851*. John C. Broderick, General Editor. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 11. (*Ex Oriente Lux* simply translated means: From the Orient, Light)

discern in society as they are on the individual level. However, perhaps Thoreau was right in arguing that “our best deeds” should sometimes go unnoticed:

Let our words be such as we may unblushingly behold sculptured in granite on the walls—to the least syllable.

Our thoughts and actions may be private for a long time—for they demand a more catholic publicity to be displayed in than the world can afford. Our best deeds shun the narrow walks of men, are not ambitious of the faint light the world can shed on them, but delight to unfold themselves in that public ground between god and conscience.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the individuals in this short study were indeed pioneers in their own right in bringing an understanding and an appreciation of Asian religions and thought to the shores of America. And yes, much of their legacy, especially their cultural legacy, that they struggled so hard to impart has become superficial and trivialized. However, the trivialization of centuries of tradition is not a sole monopoly of America or “the West.” One can readily find yin/yang necklaces in Japanese ¥100 shops as well. Perhaps familiarity does breed contempt, but with increasing familiarity, we have slowly ceased viewing these traditions as “exotic;” itself a major step upon this journey. Perhaps in this particular case this is a fair trade off after all.

Indeed, many reform movements dating back to the Antebellum Era in the United States have benefitted immensely from contributions by those who believed or reinforced their convictions from their studies and experience with Asian religions and thought. And these individuals influenced the trajectory of American history itself, particularly through their involvement in these many reform movements. Furthermore, Asian religion and thought in America was instrumental in challenging the dominant cultural and intellectual vocabularies of the times. They put into question the claims of the

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<sup>19</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal Volume 1: 1837-1844*. John C. Broderick, General Editor. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 262-263.

accepted “final authority,” particularly enabling many to truly transcend their religious, intellectual and cultural traditions. These individuals were able to challenge their contingency, that vocabulary within which they were born, and become what Rorty called “ironists,” that is, accepting that perhaps there is no final authority at all, no “ultimate metaphysical truth.” Rorty categorized one an ironist if they fulfill three conditions:

(1) she has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.<sup>20</sup>

By accepting this new reality of the world, one might say a new found freedom, they tore down the walls that separates “us” from “them,” “East” from “West.” By experiencing the “other,” even for just a short time, they became the “other,” and thereby dissolved the entire artifice that divides us. As Emerson so eloquently wrote: “[B]ecause the heart in thee is the heart in all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet this was not just an intellectual exercise, although such a project was and is extremely crucial for the long term success of testing and questioning dominant discourses. As we have seen, these ideas permeated almost all the major reform movements in America from Emerson until today. These new worldviews espoused by those who looked to the East infused the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements, the

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

<sup>21</sup> Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” *Selected Writings*, 309.

women's rights movements, the various labor movements, and the fight against poverty and stark inequality to name just a few. The bricks that were laid generations earlier by Emerson, Carus, Lum, and others were part of the foundation upon which the more recent reform movements have been built.

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