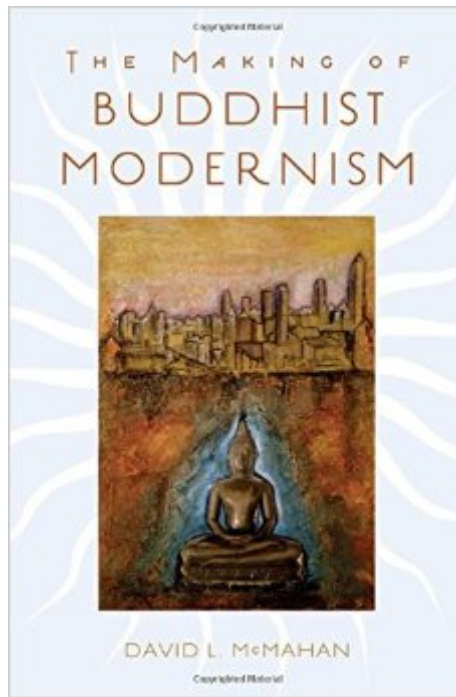


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The Making Of Buddhist Modernism



Synopsis

A great deal of Buddhist literature and scholarly writing about Buddhism of the past 150 years reflects, and indeed constructs, a historically unique modern Buddhism, even while purporting to represent ancient tradition, timeless teaching, or the "essentials" of Buddhism. This literature, Asian as well as Western, weaves together the strands of different traditions to create a novel hybrid that brings Buddhism into alignment with many of the ideologies and sensibilities of the post-Enlightenment West. In this book, David McMahan charts the development of this "Buddhist modernism." McMahan examines and analyzes a wide range of popular and scholarly writings produced by Buddhists around the globe. He focuses on ideological and imaginative encounters between Buddhism and modernity, for example in the realms of science, mythology, literature, art, psychology, and religious pluralism. He shows how certain themes cut across cultural and geographical contexts, and how this form of Buddhism has been created by multiple agents in a variety of times and places. His position is critical but empathetic: while he presents Buddhist modernism as a construction of numerous parties with varying interests, he does not reduce it to a mistake, a misrepresentation, or fabrication. Rather, he presents it as a complex historical process constituted by a variety of responses -- sometimes trivial, often profound -- to some of the most important concerns of the modern era.

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Customer Reviews

Meditation, compassion, tolerance; spirituality, freedom, rationality: why do these adjectives characterize modern Buddhism? Why not temple worship, ancestral cult, or monastic ritual? How do

the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, or ChÃ¶gyam Trungpa incorporate "strategic occidentalism" into open-minded versions of Buddhism compatible with scientific rationalism, feminism, democracy, ethics, agnosticism, and liberal Christianity? How do Tibetan, Zen, and vipassana "insight" schools of practice adapt for Westernizing markets, whether in Asia, America, or Europe? McMahan mixes theory with examples to explain how both West and East interpret dharma for modern audiences--schooled in abstract thought, raised with consumer capitalism, and participants in globalizing media. Using Donald S. Lopez' definition of a modern form that "stresses equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalts the individual above the community," McMahan begins his study (qtd. 8). By demythologizing, detraditionalizing, and psychologizing, the twentieth century continued the efforts of Romantics and rationalists to prove that not only might Buddhism be compatible with post-Enlightenment thought, it might better Christian or scientific models. Chapter Two, "The Spectrum of Tradition and Modernism," takes the case study of the "Shukden affair" to show how tensions brought in-- via psychological definitions-- to the Tibetan controversy have been heightened as the "self-understanding" of those involved has been transformed by this modern version of dharma. Pico Iyer's recent "The Open Road" (also reviewed by me) discusses this awkward P.R. situation for the Dalai Lama at more length. Scholarship enters most doggedly into the middle chapters.

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