

The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire, by J. Jeffrey Franklin.
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In this major study of Victorian culture, J. Jeffrey Franklin argues that it was Buddhism, of all the religions with which the British empire came into contact, that became the Victorians' particular object of fascination and dread. By the end of the century, Buddhist doctrines — or versions of them — had permeated elite and popular culture. The nineteenth century's doubts about the sustainability of Christianity in the face of advancing scientific discoveries (particularly Darwin's theory of the evolutionary origins of humanity), and the century's increasing materialism, created a situation in which Buddhist beliefs were able to enter and play a crucial part in Victorian religious debates. Franklin shows how Victorian intellectuals and writers constructed and deployed Buddhism, and how that in turn contributed to the production of late-Victorian hybrid religions, themselves attempts to address deep-seated problems of belief. Crucially, he aims to demonstrate how 'British culture assimilated or failed to assimilate elements of Buddhism' (5). The book's importance lies in revealing how the Buddhism that Victorian culture used, or refused, is part of the period's highly complex processes of religious and social change, and how its significance in Victorian culture can only properly be seen by mapping those larger processes. Present-day Buddhism of the north Atlantic is, Franklin concludes, still shaped by those foundational acts of assimilation and rejection of our Victorian forebears.

The phrase in the sub-title, 'the British Empire', is central in explaining not just the familiar ways that colonial agents obtained Buddhist texts from the countries they dominated, sent them to Europe to be edited and published, and turned them into European-owned textualised Buddhism, but also how European Christianity was subject to a 'counter-invasion' by the colonised people's Buddhism that challenged and changed it. In chapter 1, this process is analysed as an example of cultural hybridity, and is explored through a detailed comparison of Sir Edwin Arnold's well-known and enormously influential poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879), that narrates the life of the Buddha, and the much less well-known poem on the same subject, Richard Phillips's *The Story of Gautama Buddha and His Creed* (1871). The reason why Arnold's poem became an influential best-seller and Phillips's sank into obscurity is, according to Franklin, that Arnold did a more skilful job of cultural translation. Arnold simply avoided the awkward question of Buddhist atheism, and dealt with the problem of *nirvāṇa* by opting for the vague and assimilable notion of union with the cosmic soul. Phillips, on the other hand, defined *nirvāṇa* as extinction, in a way that was harder for contemporaries to accept. Arnold also appealed to Victorian readers by picturing Gautama's wife Yashodharā as his strong spiritual support, and by silently highlighting the supposed resemblances of Gautama's life to that of Jesus. The poem's popularity and the stream of angry rebuttals it prompted showed how effective Arnold's rhetorical and ideological strategies were. Franklin argues that *The Light of Asia's*

Buddhist-Christian hybridity was only possible as a result of British imperialism, which took for granted the scholarly, as well as political, domination of foreign territories. The poem's hybrid version of the Buddha was a blending of both religions, and thus spoke with a powerful double voice that was able to persuade some Victorian readers to split their adherence between Christianity and this admirable Buddha.

Hybridity is the theme of chapter 2, which analyses the remarkable phenomenon of late-Victorian new religions, notably Spiritualism and Theosophy. Franklin makes sense of this obscure and tangled subject by separating the various strands of religious and scientific thinking that made up these new religions. Dissatisfaction with Christian theology in the face of scientific naturalism and materialism impelled these new belief formations, but ironically they often claimed justification from the very beliefs they were rejecting: Spiritualism, for instance, claimed that its communication with spirits was based on natural law not the supernatural. Franklin places these new religions in the context of larger arguments between religion and science, and materialism and spiritualism. His list of eight characteristics to be found in all of them is especially useful. Theosophy included an anti-Christian antipathy to God the Father, a deist notion of an all-embracing Divine Spirit, and a spiritualist motif of communication with Mahātmās secreted somewhere in Tibet. Into this heady mixture Blavatsky, Theosophy's co-founder, added elements of Buddhism that she defined as an *ur*-wisdom religion, though as Franklin points out, 'the Buddhism that Blavatsky ... claimed to derive from their arcane sources was not a Buddhism that ... the majority of practicing Buddhists would recognize' (76). The academic practice of comparative religion provided Blavatsky and others with their data from various world religions, and their method of comparing and selecting from a diversity of sources, what Franklin aptly calls 'sampling'. Theosophy would not have been possible without, ultimately, the British empire; and Buddhism would not have been possible in twentieth-century Britain without Theosophy. Like other Victorian hybrid religions, Theosophy picked and mixed bits of Buddhism: while it accepted an idea of *Dharma* as 'the highest natural law governing and connecting everything spiritual and material from the human mind to the galaxy' (79), it also deployed the un-Buddhist notion of soul, and rejected belief in *karma* and 'reincarnation without continuing identity' (87). Theosophy was a remarkably persuasive attempt to appropriate 'the foreign other by turning it into the self' (87); and it was to become one of the main channels through which 'Buddhism infiltrated and utterly changed Western religious discourse' (87). Franklin analyses more cogently than any previous scholar the highly complex materials and processes that went into the making of these extraordinary Victorian new religions.

Chapters 3 and 4 of the book's four chapters (and much of the 'Conclusion') explore late-Victorian literature's relation to Buddhism: the popular literature of Marie Corelli, H. Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling, and the proto-modernist writers of the early twentieth century. Corelli and Haggard produced their own fictional versions of Victorian hybrid religions. Corelli used aspects of 'Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Buddhism ... scientific naturalism, and comparative religious studies' (91) for her imaginary religion, which in turn allowed readers to explore their fears about the afterlife and their hopes for spiritual progress. Franklin demonstrates the significance of the novels of these authors by

locating them within the larger context of Victorian culture's complex reworkings of Buddhism. So, when reincarnation appears in fiction it may be allied to Darwinian theory to demonstrate spiritual progress occurring over several lifetimes (or a lifetime stretched over centuries). But the possibility of reincarnation as including spiritual retrogression to the animal state is rejected, because the idea of transforming human identity could not be countenanced. The idea that a person might not have a soul was also beyond what could be imagined. Franklin concludes that of all the versions of reincarnation available to the Victorians, the Buddhist one was that 'with which [they] least could agree' (105). It is this play of assimilation and non-assimilation that Franklin succeeds in explicating in subtle and extended ways. He shows Buddhist ideas being absorbed, refashioned, or rejected as he explores the dynamic interrelationships between large frames of reference and particular objects of study. His central claim is that Buddhist thinking represented (and still represents) a challenge to fundamental Western notions of body/soul, works/faith, and sin/redemption that underlay British church and state and empire. Buddhism was truly the foreign other whose ideas, radical for Western assumptions, could only partly be naturalised.

However, Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is an exception to this rule, Franklin argues, being a Buddhist novel in the more radical sense of embodying in its literary form the Buddhism that is also part of its subject matter. Perhaps because Kipling was himself a product of the British empire — an Anglo-Indian hybrid with hybrid religious beliefs — his novel embodies a genuinely Buddhist argument, which is that Kim's character emerges from the novel not as a Western-style fixed identity that is attached either to the colonialist Great Game or to the Buddhist Way (a constant dichotomy in criticism of the novel) but rather as a non-definable self that is still in process of becoming and that is constituted by the Buddhist motif of both/and rather than the Western one of either/or. Franklin interprets Kipling's novel as presenting the figure of Kim as escaping from and undermining the Western dualisms (including the fixed essential self) that are the ideological supports of the empire. According to Franklin, Kipling attempts to represent in *Kim* the power of the idea of there being no self, an idea that is otherwise 'utterly unassimilable' (164) to his contemporaries, and indeed to most of us.

Finally, the book considers how the idea of *nirvāṇa* too was subject to a Western-style dichotomy in the nineteenth century, as either annihilation or eternal life. By the time Rhys Davids rightly moved attention from final *nirvāṇa* to *nirvāṇa* as a spiritual state during life, the damage was done; and the force of the dichotomy persisted to the present day. Franklin argues that the two sides of the *nirvāṇa* debate fed into Western philosophical nihilism (and thence into literary modernism) and twentieth-century New Age movements. The Victorians' non-assimilation of the concept of *nirvāṇa* makes clear their fundamental attachment to individualism across all their activities, including the religious and imperial. This Victorian legacy is re-enacted in the struggles that twentieth-century writers had with Buddhist concepts (D.H. Lawrence being the prime example), of trying to make sense of *nirvāṇa* and non-self while maintaining attachment to 'conceptions of individualism' (196).

Franklin brilliantly demonstrates that as Buddhism entered Victorian culture it lost its wholeness and boundedness and was transmuted into a range of forms and combinations (and absences). The Victorian relationship with Buddhism –

much like ours – turns out to be one of fragmented recognition, antipathy, negation, and partial assimilation.

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