‘From Mysticism to Spirituality: Colonial Legacies and the Reformulation of “the Mystic East”’.

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My Research Interests

1. *Early Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism* by Richard King
2. *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* by Richard King
3. *Orientalism and Religion* by Richard King
The Popularity of “Eastern Spirituality”

- Cultural Translation with few Gatekeepers
- Dissemination and the dangers of dilution / distortion
- De-TRADITIONALISATION: Buddhism & Buddhist meditation as transferable, portable and malleable
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

- Popularized by Jon-Cabat-Zinn (1944–)
- Now widespread in health-care, US military, corporate world
“Mindfulness ... is actually a practice. It is a way of being, rather than a merely a good idea or a clever technique or a passing fad. Indeed, it is thousands of years old and is often spoken of as ‘the heart of Buddhist meditation,’ although its essence, being about attention and awareness, is universal.” (Foreword by kabat-Zinn, p. x).
The Rise and Fall of “Mysticism”

- The fact that the "body" has become a critical term for Religious Studies whereas "mysticism," for instance, has largely dropped out, can itself signal significant change in how we study religion. Twenty or thirty years ago the situation would have been reversed: Mysticism would have been a core term and bodies, although mentioned in discussion of the theology of resurrection would not have deserved a separate entry. (La Fleur, 1998: 36)
Scholarly “Mystocentrism”

The Centrality of “Mysticism” & “Spirituality” to the Colonial Production of Modernities

Peter van der Veer explores India, China and the West and calls for an approach to viewing spirituality

“… that does not make it into a marginal form of resistance against secular modernity, but instead shows its centrality to the modern project, and a new perspective on secularity that shows the extent to which secularity is deeply involved with magic and religion.” (2013: 7)

“a syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” (2013: 9)

Peter Van der Veer (2013), The Modern Spirit of Asia (Princeton)
The Long history of “the Mystical” as an Idea

Eurocentrism and the Discourse of “World Religions”

Masuzawa: “World Religions” discourse was a means of perpetuating European universalism in a cloak of pluralism.
The Transcendental Unity of Religions

Perennialism

Mysticism as the core element or underlying “essence” that unites the different “world religions”
A Brief History of ‘the Mystical’

- Greek Mustikos: close or keep silent
- Late Antiquity/Medieval: Christian uses of ‘Mystical’
  - Mysteries of the Liturgy (esp. the eucharist)
  - Mystical/spiritual meaning of scripture (allegory)
  - Contemplative experience of the divine
  - Mystical Theology – apophatic or ‘negative’ theology (since Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, 6th century CE)
  - Corpus Mysticism (the Mystical Body of the Church)
Modernity and the Birth of a Substantive

- MYSTIC–ISM
  - A strand, aspect or movement WITHIN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

1901-2 Gifford Lectures
Colonial Modernities and the Age of “Representatives”

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)

Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933)
“The salvation of Europe depends on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita—non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the Impersonal God, – is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people.”
The image contains several books and a photograph. The books include:

- "Jack Kerouac: The Dharma Bums" by Jack Kerouac
- "The Doors of Perception" by Aldous Huxley

A photograph of a group of people, possibly the Beatles, is also present. The image does not contain any text that can be read naturally.
World Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893
Homogenisation – “Eastern spirituality” is all the same (Vedantic monism)

Psychologisation – yoga & meditation is all about the individual cultivating “altered states of consciousness”

Demythologisation (?) : What about the institutional, political, ritual, cosmological and apologetic dimensions?
The Globalisation of ‘Zen’

Soen Shaku (1860–1919) 

D T Suzuki (1870–1966)
Suzuki’s Re-Coding of Zen

Zen as Representative of the Japanese Spirit

"Today, seven hundred years after [its blossoming], Zen has come in substance to be the basis for the Japanese character, thought, religious faith, and aesthetic tastes. With it, I believe in the future there can be constructed something new of world-wide significance. Such is the mission of today's Japan"


- ZEN as a Universal / Global Phenomenon

- “Zen professes itself to be the spirit of Buddhism, but in fact it is the spirit of all religions and philosophies. When Zen is thoroughly understood, absolute peace of mind is attained, and a man lives as he ought to live.”

Zen as the Exotic Surreal: And here it is ... your moment of Zen
‘Zen’ as Malleable Signifier
Zen and the removal of unwanted hair!
Zen and the art of putting you to sleep
The popularity of the category of ‘mysticism’ was tied to late colonial imaginations of what distinguishes ‘East’ from ‘West’ BUT ALSO what might unite them (the ‘transcendental unity’ of religions)

‘Mysticism’ became linked to the ‘world religions’ paradigm and the search for underlying unities (e.g. perennialism)

Attempts by figures (such as Suzuki, Watts, Huxley) to “universalize” mysticism and ground it in “pure experience” opened the door for wholesale DE-TRADITIONALIZATION, PRIVATIZATION and BANALIZATION of terms such as ‘Zen’, ‘mindfulness’ etc.
Late 20<sup>th</sup> /Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of ‘Spirituality’

- DECLINE IN POPULARITY OF ‘MYSTICISM (tradition) and RISE OF SPIRITUALITY (customisable and de–traditionalised)
- a discourse that resonates with notions of the ‘free, entrepreneurial, individual self’ of late capitalism and customised self–development

- “Spiritual but not Religious”

- ‘DE–TRADITIONALIZATION’ AND ‘FREEDOM’ TO SELF–DEVELOP?
- The discourse of free–floating, de–traditionalised spirituality is not culturally neutral or as disembedded as it appears– what we are seeing is the recoding of ancient beliefs, practices and philosophies according to prevailing western, psychological and late capitalist notions of the human self.
The Contemporary Challenge for Buddhism in a Globalizing Environment

- Cultural translation and the need for gatekeepers – a perennial challenge

- Traditions change, but at what cost?

- Today: The Overarching Cosmological Framework: Global Capitalism/Consumerism
“New Age "Asiatic" thought, which, in its different guises ranging from "Western Buddhism" to different "Taos," is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism. • The "Western Buddhist" meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. If Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his Protestant Ethic, entitled The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism.
“If we are not blinded by the distinction usually made between secular and sacred, we can see that advertising promises another kind of salvation, i.e., another way to solve our lack ... religions are not fulfilling their responsibility if they ignore this religious dimension of capitalism, if they do not emphasize that this seduction is deceptive because this solution to our unhappiness leads only to greater dissatisfaction.”
The Insight Meditation Movement in Burma: Taking Meditation to the Laity

- Traditional approach: calm/concentration (samatha) plus insight (vipassana)

- British conquest and colonization of Burma (1824–1948) – a sign of the imminent and predicted demise of Buddhism

- suddha–vipassana: ‘pure Insight’ (or ‘Insight–only’) Meditation

Ledi Sayadaw 1846-1923

Mahasi Sayadaw 1904-1982
Nyanaponika Thera (1901–94)

- German-born Theravada bhikkhu (Ordained in Sri Lanka)
- 1952 – trained under Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma
- *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (1954)
- Mindfulness as ‘bare attention’
The Historian’s Gaze & the Critique of Contemporary ‘Eastern Spirituality’

- WHAT IT IS NOT:
  - Classic ‘Orientalist’ disdain for the modern
  - Privileging of ‘the classical’ and the ‘textual’

- WHAT IT IS:
  - A critical history of ideas grounded in the recognition of:
    - *La longue durée*
    - Role of colonialism in re-framing “non-western” cultures
    - The complexity of historical forms vs. cultural ‘thinning’
    - Critique of psychologization & banalization as representative of that complexity
Interrogating Authority Claims (past and present)

Challenging the colonization & simplification of traditions and of the past

Highlighting positionality and interest in claims to neutrality and normalization
“Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hover overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat them as black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly interest as they drift past … putting you back in control of your life.” (Mark Williams and Danny Penman, 2010, Mindfulness. A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World, Piatkus, p. 5., my italics for emphasis)