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A Reflection on McGill's School of Religious
Studies' Reading Group on
The Making of Buddhist Modernism

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Transmitting Buddhism in the Secular Setting: A Reflection on McGill's School of Religious Studies' Reading Group on The Making of Buddhist Modernism

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On the sunny afternoon of April 24th, students and colleagues of the School of Religious Studies (SRS) at McGill University reunited at the Redpath Library for the third session of their reading group¹ on “Multiple Facets of Secularism.” Starting at 2 p.m., their discussion on David McMahan’s *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* lasted for two hours. During the meeting, several thought provoking questions have been posed regarding the underlying power dynamics during the transmission of Buddhism in North America, the issue of authenticity, as well as the relation between Buddhism and mindfulness.

With the support of the Center for Research on Religions (CREOR) in SRS, graduate students, Jennifer Guyver, Jingjing Li, and Julia Stenzel,

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to the members of our reading group for their suggestions and comments to the earlier draft of this essay.

collaborated to convene the reading group for the purpose of exploring ways in which the discourse of secularism exerts an influence on various religious traditions, *inter alia*, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism. The first session on Charles Taylor's conceptualization of secularism marked the beginning of such inquiries. Participants who specialize in philosophy, sociology of religion, political science, and Buddhist studies engaged in conversations over issues that emerged out of the process of secularization in Quebec and in Canada.

After familiarizing themselves with the way in which the discourse of secularism stemmed from the Christian tradition, members of the reading group shifted their focus to the making of Buddhist modernism in North America. The term "Buddhist modernism" has been articulated by David McMahan to capture "forms of Buddhism that emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity."² Following this definition, McMahan pinpoints three methods of modernizing Buddhism, known as detraditionalization (the shift of authority from external monastic institutions to internal personal experiences), demythologization (the interpretation of supernatural realities as psychological activities), and psychologization (the method of understanding Buddhism in psychological terms).

Such categorization of Buddhist modernism in North America inspired the group to ask many provoking questions. One of them, which Vanessa Sasson from Marianopolis College found inadequately addressed by McMahan, was the underlying power dynamics internal to the transmission of Buddhism in the so-called West. Such dynamics manifest themselves through the tension between the old/traditional and the new/modern. To incorporate Buddhism into the greater cultural-

² David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 7.

political discourse of the West, Buddhist missionaries have inaugurated various methods of reforming Buddhism, epitomized by detraditionalization or psychologization, subsequently stimulating debates over authenticity. Traditionalists, after scrutinizing these new forms of Buddhism, accuse them of being spurious and heretic. In immigration countries like Canada, as Guyver discerned, the issue of authenticity can be further intertwined with the problem of internalized racism—after accepting the stereotype that Buddhism is the ethnic brand of Asian immigrants, most Buddhist devotees are inclined to surmise that only preachers of Asian descent have the access to the true and real teaching of the Buddha. Outside religious communities, in the meantime, clerics intend to proselytize Buddhism under the guise of various seemingly non-religious trainings, the exemplar being mindfulness. During the discussion, many colleagues expressed doubts on whether mindfulness can become devoid of religious characters. If mindfulness is inherently religious due to its association with Buddhism, is it appropriate to conduct such training in secular educational institutions? Answers to these questions, as partakers of the group anticipate, would complement McMahan's study of Buddhist modernism, further advancing existing scholarship of Buddhism, secularism, and modernity.

For the organizers, this reading group serves as the herald of the upcoming CREOR conference “Problematizing Religious Diversity in a Secular Age” in September. Ten years after the publication of Charles Taylor's seminal book *A Secular Age*, problems concerning religious diversity and secularism never cease to transpire in Canada. In the hope of stimulating on-going dialogues among various religious traditions in secular societies like that of Canada, SRS decides to launch events throughout the year. Aside from the current reading group and the CREOR conference, SRS has planned four lecture series on Buddhism, indigenous religious, 500 years of reformation, and religion and art in the up-

coming fall semester. The reading group will resume on May 8 for the last session on Akeel Bilgrami's *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*.

Bibliography

McMahan, David. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.