

[Gajaweera on Gleig, 'American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity'](#)

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Ann Gleig. *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. x + 362 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-21580-9.

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The Postmodern Turn in American Buddhism

Combining rigorous theoretical engagement with academic scholarship on Buddhist modernism with multisited ethnography and discourse analysis, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* by Ann Gleig illuminates the trends, patterns, and diversity of American meditation-based, convert Buddhist communities. Focusing on a practice community that is often seen through lenses of essentialism and narrow parochialism in both popular commentaries and academic scholarship, Gleig highlights the cultural diversity and hybridity that have emerged from contemporary meditation-based convert Buddhist lineages, as well as the reflective and critical sensibilities that have developed in the communities. These heterogenous and self-reflexive characteristics, Gleig contends, commend new theoretical perspectives that move us beyond the totalizing analytical framework of Buddhist modernity, to explore the discourses that have come after it—to understand Buddhism in the postmodern, postcolonial, and postsecular contexts.

Chapter 1 establishes the historical antecedents to the current moment in North American Buddhism. Gleig discusses the development of “Buddhist modernism” and its passage from Asia to the United States, then outlines debates in religious studies, sociology, and Buddhist studies that have critically explored Buddhist modernist developments. In chapter 2, Gleig unpacks the complex relationship between American Buddhist convert communities and the “mindfulness movement” by analyzing the efforts of influential figures who have shaped its development and the internal critiques and tensions that have emerged from their work. We learn about the various contestations in the field, including concerns over the assimilation of Buddhism by corporate neoliberalism and anxieties about the secular dilution of canonical Buddhism, as well as more systemically oriented social critiques of the reification of white racial hegemony through the Euro-American Orientalist reshaping of Buddhism in the context of Western mindfulness. Gleig contends that these critiques and their defenses, as well as the trajectories that emerge in dialogic response to these tensions, describe the uniquely postmodern patterns of contemporary lineages of meditation-based convert Buddhist communities.

Chapter 3, “Sex, Scandal and the Shadow of the Roshi,” explores white-majority American Zen convert communities through case studies of the incorporation of psychodynamic insights in the wake of sexual abuse scandals in these communities. These communities’ self-reflexive engagement with issues of power, privilege, and authority in the relationship between teachers and students points

toward the theoretical foundations of Gleig's more recent scholarship on sexual abuse in American Buddhist communities.

With chapter 4, Gleig draws attention to the two different orientations to meditation in Insight networks derived from the Vipassana tradition: one orientation takes a more relational and integrative psychotherapeutic approach to meditation, while the other stresses a more systemic and goal-oriented approach to awakening that relies on canonical readings of the Dharma. In exploring the attempts of advocates of each orientation to discursively legitimize their authority, Gleig traces the gendered dynamics of these networks, their stylistic variations, and their generational differences over the past four decades of development. The distinctions between different generations of practitioners becomes a key area of exploration that Gleig returns to in chapter 7, "From Boomers to Generation X."

Chapter 5, "The Dukkha of Racism," offers important insights into more recent organizational attempts within convert communities to address racism and whiteness through the embrace of racial diversity and inclusion work. Acknowledging the long-running scholarly analysis and critique of predominantly white convert Buddhist communities, Gleig shifts her attention to the experiences and perspectives of nonwhite convert interlocutors who labor to promote diversity and race awareness in the broader Western convert lineages in which they practice. By examining the controversies, community splintering, and institutional resistance the efforts of nonwhite practitioners have been met with, Gleig exposes the significant power imbalances, white privilege, and exclusionary operations on which these institutions are built, as well as brings analytical evidence to the central thesis of her book: these initiatives reflect a broader cultural shift from the modern to the postmodern in Buddhism. As Gleig contends, the racial diversity and inclusion work of these proponents "[applies] pressure to a number of core Buddhist modernist characteristics—universalism, the 'essential' versus 'cultural' Buddhist distinction, liberalism, and individualism—and [displays] perspectives more associated with the postmodern and postcolonial than the modern" (p. 173).

In chapter 6, "Buddhism Unbundled," Gleig explores the impact of technology and digital culture on American convert Buddhism by examining online platforms such as Buddhist Geeks, a Buddhist media company, and Meditate.io—a virtual teaching community that offers courses on mindfulness. Theoretically, the chapter illustrates how these digital projects represent distinct but related strands in the postmodern landscape. Buddhist Geeks, for example, is illustrative of a hybrid combination of tradition and innovation, while Meditate.io is a traditionalized form of "post-Buddhism." Of particular interest to scholars examining how power, authority, leadership, and hierarchy are being reimagined in religious movements seeking to self-organize peer-led networks of practitioners will be the section of this chapter that deals with attempts of founding organizers to enact a decentralized, nonhierarchical, "ground-up" approach to Buddhism.

Chapter 7 offers a nuanced analysis of the generational differences in Buddhist convert communities and teachers—such as changing approaches to hierarchical models of teacher and lineage transmission, racial diversity and inclusion, transparency of power, and ethical accountability. In attending to generational differences that are often glossed over in scholarship, Gleig finds complex processes of continuity, along with resistance to modernization processes, in both Vipassana and Zen communities.

The penultimate chapter of the book returns to developments in contemporary Western Buddhist lineages and identifies three significant turns—critical, collective, and contextual. The critical turn points to the critically self-reflective sensibility in convert communities. The collective turn highlights the various forms of resistance to the individualism of meditation-based lineages through the development of more “relational” and collective ideas of awakening and dukkha. Finally, the contextual turn refers to the move away from an essentialized and decontextualized understanding of Buddhism to an approach to Buddhist practice that is cognizant of historical, social, and political context. Together, these sensibilities articulate discourses that resist core modernist characteristics that typify scholarly understandings of this field.

In the conclusion, Gleig returns to the thesis of the book and offers a three-pronged “post-analysis” for understanding contemporary Buddhist landscape—postmodern, postcolonial, and postsecular—by homing in on scholarship of each theoretical paradigm and assessing its analytical utility for capturing the contemporary condition and for anticipating American Buddhism’s future trajectories. Gleig’s discussion of postcolonialism critically frames certain contemporary Buddhists’ diversity and inclusion efforts in North America—such as their critical reflections on the racist and neocolonial dimensions of American convert Buddhism—as closely related to the major themes of postcolonial thinking. In my mind, this framing is an important scholarly intervention as it destabilizes conceptual divides between Buddhism in the West and the “traditional” home in the East that is so often taken for granted in the study of contemporary Buddhism. Likewise, it is important underscore the fractured histories of postcolonialism, and how these various histories are incorporated into the identity of Western Buddhists, as part of the West’s own historical trajectory.

Published in 2019, *American Dharma* has already received significant scholarly attention from the fields of Buddhist studies, religious studies, and the sociology of religion. The complex and nuanced perspective it offers on the contemporary landscape of convert American Buddhism has been groundbreaking in these fields as a consequence of the book’s complication and interruption of the grand narratives of modernity that have often shaped scholarly approaches to Buddhism.

Indeed, the book helps scholars and practitioners alike think about what postmodernism as a discourse does in the contemporary Western convert Buddhist landscape and how this discourse flourishes in contemporary Buddhist lifeworlds. Gleig’s scholarly strength is to articulate theoretical ideas in an accessible writing style, which has had a powerful influence on the book’s reception in non-academic audiences. The text widely circulates today in the communities that Gleig writes about, contributing to the critical, self-reflexive trends it describes. Drawing on novel methodological orientations in religious studies and ethnographic research, *American Dharma* complements other influential texts in the field such as *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by David McMahan (2008) and *Mindful America* by Jeff Wilson (2014). Instructors of undergraduate courses in contemporary Buddhism will find many if not all the chapters in the book useful as standalone studies for course readings in religious studies and Buddhist studies.

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