

***Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism.* Edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. vi, 298 pages. Hardcover: \$ 56.00; paperback: \$ 18.00.**

Geoff E. Foy

Graduate Theological Union

The contributors to *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* base their examination of Buddhist Studies on the critical study of Edward Said's work *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Said's study is an examination of French, British, and American colonialist perspectives which have influenced Western academic research and political movements in the last two and half centuries. According to Said, the colonialist attitudes of 18th and 19th century Europe constitute a cultural phenomenon, which he calls "Orientalism," thus the title of his book. Of course, Said's word choice is quite deliberate due to its connection to the Western notion of the "Orient," implying, among other things, the dialectical relationship between the "Occident" and the "Orient," or the "West" and the "East." Accordingly, the general meaning of "Orientalism," from Said's theory, "is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and . . . the 'Occident'" (*Orientalism*, p. 2). Essentially, what Said claims in his work is that both terms are human inventions originating from 18th and 19th century academic and political discourse. Moreover, the terms actually have much more to do with epistemology than ontology. For example, the "Orient" does not designate a physical locale, but rather a way of knowing and portraying physical places and real people. Consequently, Orientalism has more to do with "our" world than with the world of the "other" (*Orientalism*, p. 12). In the world of academics, then, Orientalism is a type of discourse which takes away the power of representation from the culture being studied and gives it to the learned scholar (the "Orientalist"), the one who declares what documents are worthy of study and which texts are deserving of the honorable title, "normative" (*Orientalism*, p. 94). The purpose of Said's critical study, which he makes quite clear, is to "criticize—with the hope of stirring discussion—the often unquestioned assumptions" with which the Orientalist predicates his or her study of the "dark," "mysterious," "undiluted," yet often "nefarious," Oriental (*Orientalism*, p. 51).¹

In effect, the authors of the *Curators of the Buddha* are engaged in a synonymous task: by drawing upon the ideas and methodology of Edward Said, the contributors set out to delineate the conceptions and methods that have created a "tradition of misrepresentation" in the history of Buddhist Studies. "The question," Donald Lopez explains, "is not one of the ethics of

scholarship but of the logics of representation, the question is not one of how knowledge is tainted but of how knowledge takes form" (p. 11).

All the entries in this collection raise provocative examples of how Buddhism has been, or could be, misrepresented despite the scholarly work that went into the formulation of such depictions. In order to reveal the characteristics of a "Critical Buddhist Studies," it will suffice to highlight selected essays from this collection.

In Charles Hallisey's article, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism" (pp. 31–62), the issue of representation arises to the surface through the author's analysis of the textual studies of T.W. Rhys Davids, R. Spence Hardy, Paul Bigandet, and Adhemard Leclere. Hallisey historically reconstructs the methodologies of these early "Orientalists" in order to show how Buddhism underwent a process of "textualization," the program of signifying certain texts as authoritative in their re-presentation of a living tradition called "Buddhism" (p. 37). Hallisey argues that the textualization of Buddhism produced the beginnings of a "professional" field of study that favored texts in classical languages, such as Sanskrit, and, in some cases, texts in vernacular languages (pp. 41–43). In either case, Hallisey shows that the European scholars constructed a framework to legitimize their textual translations and theories as authoritative while circumscribing the opinions and work of local Asian scholars (p. 37). As a consequence, European scholars created a "normative" Buddhism that was skewed in its representation because of a heavy bias on "original Buddhism" via classical texts (pp. 41–42).

Hallisey argues that despite the biases that existed within this scholarly framework, there were the beginnings of a "postorientalist" approach to Buddhist Studies (see especially pp. 33 and 49). In his discussion of Leclere's work in particular, Hallisey shows that a process of "intercultural mimesis," the influence of a subjectified people on the researcher's reconstruction of a cultural tradition, is noticeable in the scholar's own writings (pp. 49–52). According to Hallisey, Leclere was attentive to "the production of meaning in local contexts" (p. 52). As a contemporary Buddhist scholar, Hallisey wants to benefit from this insight and assist Buddhist Studies to remain vigilant in its search for all legitimate sources of information. Yet, Hallisey is aware that the criterion for claiming certain sources more authoritative than others need to be clarified. He believes that further investigation into the criteria used by early Orientalists can assist current researchers with the task.

The question of authoritative representation is also addressed in Robert H. Sharf's contribution, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" (pp. 107–160). Sharf critiques the "New Buddhist" movement of Japan during the latter part of the 19th century and the beginning decades of the 20th. Sharf calls into question the representations of Zen by figures such as D.T. Suzuki and Nishida Kitarō. Sharf deciphers at length their claims that Zen

enlightenment is a “transcultural experience” (p. 108) authentically Japanese yet transcendent of any limits that local manifestations might claim. The orthodoxies of modern Rinzai or Sōtō monasticism, as Sharf contends, do not figure into the theoretical framework of Suzuki or Nishida. Consequently, Sharf considers their version of Zen distorted and misleading.

This becomes a complicated matter for Buddhist Studies scholars; they must decide how to handle the brand of Zen that originates from Suzuki and others. As most readers are aware, Suzuki’s writings on Zen have been a major source of data for Western thinkers. For that matter, many students of Buddhism received their introduction to the Buddhist tradition through Suzuki’s popularized accounts. On the one hand, then, the popularity of Buddhism in the West has a lot to owe Suzuki. Yet, on the other hand, Sharf’s critique strongly suggests that what the West has received is a gross misrepresentation of one particular Buddhist tradition that has been universalized to the point of being simultaneously associated with the word “Buddhism.”

The article by Donald Lopez, Jr., “Foreigner at the Lama’s Feet” (pp. 251–296) confronts the issue of representation in Buddhist Studies in a different manner than the previous two; he offers his critique through a self-reflexive account. By placing himself in a line of scholars seeking to preserve a mystified, lost Tibet,² Lopez recounts in rich detail his experience of studying texts under a lama exiled in India. Lopez admits that a part of what he was engaged in was the creation of his own text through the exploitation of a lama-disciple relationship (p. 286). Lopez’s intention was to do textual analysis with the “voice” of the experienced scholar-monk along his side (pp. 270 and 279). Yet he couldn’t escape the struggle within himself that he was trying to write an authoritative text which would eventually supercede the authority of the lama—all for the sake of preserving the tradition of the lama. The circularity of the dilemma is compounded by Lopez’s use of two methods: textual analysis of a historical document and the ethnography of a contemporary Buddhist practitioner. Lopez considers the combination of the two as legitimate, but he recognizes that it is not always clear when the researcher is a historian and when he/she is an ethnographer (pp. 282–83). Moreover, the role of the scholar-practitioner in the preservation of a text, and how that fits within an entire tradition, is also in question.

In all the articles of this anthology the authors attempt to recover the “Orientalism” within the cultural history of Buddhist Studies. It is true that as much as the authors are aware of the cultural biases which exist among the founders of Buddhist Studies, they are also cognizant of their own predisposition toward composing prejudiced assumptions of what constitutes legitimate Buddhist Studies. This kind of consciousness is evident in Luis O. Gomez’s warning that “all of us aspiring scholars must heed the danger signs of crypto-Orientalism—the willingness to bask in the glory of

our texts and then use them to our own ends, the desire to tell our subjects what they really think, and the compulsion to deny any sympathetic involvement" (p. 229).

Lopez's article is another good example of a "postorientalist" analysis—a critic's self-criticism involving an honest inquiry into one's own theories and methods. While exploring his subject he readily pauses to assess his actions. It is this articulation of the self-critical process that constitutes the preeminent contribution of these authors to Buddhist Studies. Others include Hallisey's acknowledgment of the importance of local meaning for constructing a "representative" conception of Buddhism, Sharf's willingness to engage his critics in his postscript in order to reassess his representation of D.T. Suzuki, and Lopez's insightful "conversation" with the ethnography and hermeneutics of Buddhist texts.

An important point to mention is that this anthology of critical studies is only the beginning. The authors readily admit the confines of their research and the limits of their theories. Their work covers many principle issues, but there are a few specifics that are left for subsequent studies. For example, as Hallisey stated in his article, there is a need for recovering more texts in vernacular languages, whether translations of sutras or commentaries (p. 49). There is also the question Sharf's article implies of how to study Buddhist expressions in the West, such as the phenomenon of "American Zen." Who decides its legitimacy or, for that matter, its illegitimacy? What kind of questions should be asked when studying it? And in relation to Lopez's article, one could ask about the significance of his ethnographic experience for the future of Buddhist Studies in the academy. What should the basic requirements be for a prospective Buddhologist? Of course, these are just a few questions and concerns out of the many which these authors contend with. Yet there still remains one pressing question: what is meant by the term "Buddhism"? By dispelling some of the myths created by "Orientalism," the authors of *Curators of the Buddha* have given present and future students of Buddhism a framework to address this question.

Notes

1. My use of these terms is not without warrant considering the literature Said reviews; see especially his comments on the same page about Raymond Schwab's *La Renaissance Orientale*.
2. Hallisey cites Rhys Davids' entries in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as examples.
3. Lopez explains that because of the "genealogy of urgency" which he shared with others scholars (Ippolitio Desideri, Alexander Csoma de Koros, and L. Austine Waddell), Tibet became "a threatened abode of western construction, a fragile site of origin and preserve, still regarded from the periphery as a timeless center" (p. 269).