Perennialism as Justification for the Appropriation of Buddhist Meditation

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Perennialism as Justification for the Appropriation of Buddhist Meditation

By

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B.A., Mount Vernon Nazarene University, 2007

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Perennialism as Justification for the Appropriation of Buddhist Meditation
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Wilson, Elizabeth L. (M.A., Religious Studies)

Perennialism as Justification for the Appropriation of Buddhist Meditation

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Dr. Deborah Whitehead

Abstract

The Center for Action and Contemplation is a ministry that claims interreligious dialogue through the incorporation of Zen meditation. As two of the foundational teachers, Richard Rohr and James Finley explicitly link the practices of Catholic contemplation and Buddhist Meditation. In this thesis, I problematize Rohr’s claim of inclusivity, and by extension, the CAC’s claim of interreligious dialogue. Specifically, I claim that Rohr’s and Finley’s inclusion of Buddhist meditation alongside contemplative practice stems from their conflation of these religious concepts. This conflation is a product of their perennialist framework and, as I will illustrate, what they deem as inclusive may be interpreted as appropriation that replicates a colonial discourse by decontextualizing and essentializing Buddhist meditation.
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INTRODUCTION

The Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC), founded in 1987 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is the fruition of Father Richard Rohr’s dream of a space for ecumenical education and engagement in contemplation. While the CAC is not institutionally affiliated, it does declare its roots in “Catholic identity.”¹ The Center identifies itself as “an educational organization, deeply committed to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.”² Significantly, it highlights its ecumenism and inter-religious scope through the incorporation of Zen Buddhist meditation. The CAC is a public ministry that expresses the beliefs and ideas of Fr. Richard Rohr. In his book *Radical Grace*, Rohr reflects upon the beginning of the CAC and states that, “[o]ne of the expressions of the radical nature of our work was our extensive inclusivity, bridging gaps within the spiritual and justice communities, building a rhythm of contemplative prayer and Zen meditation into our days, and even more fundamentally, believing that external behavior should be connected to and supported by inner guidance.”³ Significantly, with this statement Rohr links the practices of Catholic contemplation and Buddhist meditation. Rohr utilizes the claim of inclusivity in an attempt to push back on those issues of Christianity that he finds problematic and exclusive, such as a Christian elitism that rejects other religious traditions and what they have to offer. Rohr anchors his work within Christianity upon perennialism, which in his view allows him to make more inclusive strides in engagement with other religious traditions. Through the CAC, Rohr attempts to present a more progressive and inclusive Christianity. However, some of these moves become problematic when religious practices are conflated through a Christian lens. In this thesis, I examine Rohr, and by extension, the CAC as a case

² Ibid.
study in a general trend of how Buddhist meditation is continually appropriated and how this appropriation is a feature of the hybridity of the spiritual marketplace. I problematize Rohr’s usage of Zen meditation as an example of his inclusivity, and by extension, the CAC’s work of “bridging gaps” as a blind spot of the claim of ecumenism. Specifically, I claim that Rohr’s inclusion of Buddhist meditation into his Christian framework is due to how he conflates these two traditions. This conflation is a product of his perennialist framework and, as I will illustrate, what he deems as inclusive may also be interpreted as appropriation. Rohr asserts his perennialism as foundational for his organization, the CAC. I will begin by discussing the emergence of the CAC and then move on to its practices, and its founder, Richard Rohr as well as one of the main teachers, James Finley.

The CAC has a physical as well as digital presence. It accomplishes its presence through conferences, webcasts, books, Rohr’s daily email meditations, and online education. The Center hosts intensive sessions and symposia as well as conferences and retreats. The location calls to “seekers” to come and visit the facilities, which host a labyrinth and bookstore. If you are unable to visit, there is plenty to engage digitally. The CAC website provides an online bookstore, publishes its own journal called Oneing, and provides two educational paths. One path is an intensive two-year online study in contemplation called the Living School. The Living School functions through the CAC, is an extension of Rohr’s teachings, and is also not institutionally affiliated. Rohr is the Dean of the school and functions as one of the three faculty, along with Cynthia Bourgeault and Dr. James Finley. The school is not an accredited school and therefore offers no degrees or certifications. It exists to “deepen engagement with [our] truest selves and with the world” by discovering one’s “authentic identity” through

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contemplative practice. This notion of contemplative practice is at the center of all teachings and missions of the CAC. The aim of contemplative practice is to realize one’s profound unity with God and all creation. The mission of the school reflects this aim by stating: “Drawing upon Christianity’s place within the Perennial Tradition, the mission of the Living School is to produce compassionate and powerfully learned individuals who will work for positive change in the world based on awareness of our common union with God and all beings.” The Perennial Tradition is a core teaching of the CAC that highlights oneness and will be discussed in chapter one. The awareness of “oneness with God” is the goal of contemplative practice for Rohr, Finley, and the CAC. Students seek to accomplish this realization of unity through online study, required readings, and sessions at the CAC. The students are required to attend four on-site intensives in Albuquerque in addition to home study and online group sessions. The website for the Living School provides no specific information regarding required readings or course descriptions. The potential student is beckoned with abstract statements that call to the inner life, such as: “Discover your authentic identity and grow your capacity to embody this calling in the world. Through rigorous study and contemplative practice, awaken to the pattern of reality—God’s loving presence with and in all things.” The Living School functions as a dissemination of Father Rohr’s “ideas and experiences of God.”

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7 Even after I requested information concerning the school’s required texts, I was directed back to the website. Email correspondence, CAC support team, April 21, 2017.


The other educational path is a less intense seven week study to gain teaching in one of three areas of specificity, all of which engage deepening contemplative practices: the “Franciscan Way,” “Breathing Under Water,” or “Immortal Diamond.” All three rely primarily upon Rohr’s books that engage each topic respectively: *Embracing an Alternative Orthodoxy: Richard Rohr on the Legacy of St. Francis*, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, and *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self.* These three texts are listed as the only required readings for all three courses. “The Franciscan Way” teaches orthopraxy over orthodoxy and union in community. “Breathing Under Water” teaches the spirituality of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. It emphasizes that good practice will change one’s thinking, but not vice versa. “The Immortal Diamond” focuses on finding the true self, hidden beneath the ego and false self produced by the ego.

Rohr’s two fundamental principles that come through the CAC and the Living School are “the Franciscan Alternative Orthodoxy” and “the Perennial Tradition.” The CAC defines the Franciscan Alternative Orthodoxy as “orthopraxy,” and operationalizes this term as “believing that lifestyle and practice are much more important than mere verbal orthodoxy.”

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states that the Perennial Tradition “encompasses the recurring themes in all of the world’s
religions and philosophies that continue to say:

· There is a Divine Reality underneath and inherent in the world of things,
· There is in the human soul a natural capacity, similarity, and longing for this Divine
  Reality,
· The final goal of existence is union with this Divine Reality.”

It is this tradition of perennialism, according to Rohr, that allows for the incorporation of
Buddhist meditation into the contemplative way. However, neither the CAC’s website nor
Rohr’s texts used in this thesis cite any sources for their information on Buddhist meditation.
Finley does include sources for his understanding of Buddhist meditation, which I will discuss in
chapter two.

While the focus of this thesis will be primarily on Father Rohr, I will also include the
contributions of Dr. James Finley, who is the primary teacher on Buddhism for the CAC. Father
Richard Rohr, born in Kansas in 1943, is an ordained priest in the Catholic Church and belongs
to the O.F.M., the Order of Friars Minor, a branch of the Catholic order founded in 1209 by
Francis of Assisi. He earned his master’s degree in theology from the University of Dayton in
1970, the same year in which he was ordained into the Franciscan priesthood.

He has written roughly thirty books since 1989 and offers conferences, audio teachings,
books, webcasts, interviews, and speaking engagements around the country. He has a strong
media presence through the CAC as well as publications in the Center’s journal, Oneing, along
with the Huffington Post, Sojourner, and the National Catholic Reporter. The two books I will
be analyzing from Fr. Rohr are Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer (2003)
and Silent Compassion (2014). In these texts Rohr argues that the practice of Christian

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contemplation shares many concepts and “truths” with Buddhist meditation. He believes that the goal and essence of the two are the same. Rohr argues that a “deep ecumenism” encourages engagement between Christianity and various other religious traditions.

Rohr is quite a controversial figure within the larger Catholic community. He defines his own positionality within Catholicism as on the “edge of the inside.” Accordingly, this allows him to examine central doctrine as well as push boundaries. He considers this a “prophetic position.” By this he means that he is able to challenge boundaries and be free from the limitations of orthodoxy in order to be truly creative. He asserts that he has no need to defend or protect orthodoxy. Due to this stance, Rohr goes on to make claims of radical inclusivity about the divine feminine, homosexuality, and the atonement theory. Rohr’s “deep ecumenism” is an attempt at bridging gaps that exclude and create categories of us versus them. He advocates for the image of God as Mother in an attempt to heal what he identifies as a damaging masculinity and patriarchy. He also embraces and supports the LGBTQ community as authentic expressions of sexuality and worthy of inclusion and acceptance within the Church. Rohr also makes the bold claim of rejecting the atonement theory of the cross, which has been a core doctrine within Christianity. This is to say that he highlights that the incarnation of Jesus was more than sufficient for redemption and rejects the idea of a bloodthirsty God who needs to murder his own son just to be convinced to love his own creation. These are a few examples of Rohr’s

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

assertions that have made him a target of critique from others within the Catholic Church and the Christian tradition more generally. Many, such as Rev. Bryce Sibley, an ordained priest in the Diocese of Lafayette in Louisiana and writer for Catholic Culture, have called him a heretic against Catholic doctrine.\textsuperscript{20}

Dr. James Finley is also a member of the Catholic Church, but at a lay level. Finley grew up with a devout Roman Catholic mother and an alcoholic and abusive father who scorned religious involvement. From childhood Finley used his involvement in the Catholic Church as a refuge from his home life. After graduating from high school, he spent six years as a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, spending two of those years under the spiritual direction of Thomas Merton. This time greatly informed Finley’s views and practices on meditation, interreligious dialogue, and ecumenism. From there he earned degrees from the University of Akron and Saint John College, and a Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary in Clinical Psychology. At present, Finley is a 73-year old retired psychotherapist in California. Through his own organization called “The Contemplative Way” as well as the CAC, he offers retreats on contemplation and Christian-Buddhist dialogue concerning meditation practice, along with workshops, audio teachings, interviews, and his own books.

My thesis will investigate the claims and justifications of Rohr and Finley concerning the incorporation of Buddhist meditation into Christian practice as they are promulgated by the CAC and in the texts by Rohr and Finley I highlight in this thesis. Both advocate the borrowing of Buddhist meditation forms and interpret the content of Buddhist meditation in such a way that it seems to align with their interpretation of Christian theology. Rohr and Finley utilize claims based in the Perennial Tradition in alignment with a Christian idea of “oneness” as their justification for incorporating Buddhist meditation. For Rohr the foundation for a perennial

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
tradition rests in the early church theologians Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine, Vatican II, and his interpretations of the ecumenism of Buddhist leaders Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. Finley draws “from both Christian and Buddhist sources in focusing on meditation as a way to pass beyond theories and ideas into an intimate experience of God’s oneness with us in life itself.” However, despite the incorporation of some Buddhist texts such as Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught*, Finley still interprets them through a perennial Christian lens with the goal of awareness of “oneness with God.”

I argue that Rohr and Finley utilize perennialism as a strategy for the appropriation of Buddhist meditative practices and teachings. Rohr and Finley believe that all religions share a common core of Divine Reality and unity with that Divine Reality enables borrowing from various traditions. One issue that I will discuss concerns the ways in which Buddhist meditation and teachings have been reframed and reinterpreted to fit within the CAC’s Christian framework. At the same time, I will also address the context in which Buddhism has made itself readily available to be appropriated by way of the spiritual marketplace. Rohr and Finley have had access to a modernist Buddhist canon, in which Buddhist texts are presented without respect to lineage or tradition. These texts have become commonplace on coffee tables and bookshelves across the U.S. Many Americans who do not identify as Buddhist have drawn upon the textual teachings of meditation prevalent in the spiritual marketplace and incorporated them into their own practices. Thus, Rohr and Finley are not unique in adopting Buddhist meditation, but nonetheless, this adoption is problematic based on the ways in which they represent Buddhist practice within their own teachings. In addition, Rohr and Finley are not responsible for the

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22 Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*. 

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decontextualization of Buddhism, which is already prevalent within the spiritual marketplace, but they do benefit from it. Again, I emphasize that Rohr and Finley incorporate the practice of Buddhist meditation into the CAC’s offerings by interpreting it through a Christian lens with the aim of “oneness with God.” Thus, I will argue that their use of Buddhist meditation may be considered an appropriation. My discussion of appropriation in chapter three attempts to address this issue in religious studies scholarship by reflecting on the notion of religious hybridity versus purity. I suggest that appropriation may be understood on a spectrum, where some forms of appropriation have become common practices within the spiritual marketplace and other forms are more glaringly damaging to interreligious engagement. I argue that Rohr and Finley represent those examples of appropriation that represent damaging repercussions of religious conflation and reinterpretation. I utilize three main sources for analysis in this work: the CAC website as an expression of Rohr’s teachings; Rohr’s book, Silent Compassion, which addresses Rohr’s claims about perennialism and contemplation; and Finley’s book, Christian Meditation, which addresses Finley’s assertions of oneness and the conflation of Christian and Buddhist meditation.

This thesis proceeds in three main parts. First, chapter one provides a review of the concepts of Buddhist modernism, the spiritual marketplace, appropriation, and perennialism. Specifically, I address the following major themes: the absence of lineage and tradition in Buddhist modernism, the individual construction of spirituality from many different traditions within the spiritual marketplace, appropriative moves that reinterpret content from one religious tradition in order to fit the framework of another tradition, and perennialism as a Christian concept.

Next, in chapter two I provide a close reading of Rohr’s and Finley’s claims to show how they justify the borrowing of Buddhist meditation and incorporate it into their Christian teaching
and practice. I discuss those particular sources utilized by Rohr that articulate his understanding of perennialism. I highlight how Rohr utilizes his definition of perennialism as well as his interpretations of early church fathers Justin Martyr and Augustine, Vatican II, and contemporary Buddhist leaders Thich Nhat Hahn and the Dalai Lama.

Finally, chapter three analyzes Rohr’s and Finley’s positions and argues that they present their perennialism as a strategy of justifiable appropriation. Their appropriation removes Buddhist meditation from context and reinterprets it through a Christian lens. After this reinterpretation, Rohr and Finley take on the role of mouthpiece for the Buddhist tradition concerning meditation. They make claims regarding the goal of Buddhist meditation as oneness with God. These actions are further problematized by their “cherry-picking” or sampling of Buddhist sources and practices as commodities ready to be consumed in the current spiritual marketplace in the United States. I discuss the limitations in scholarship with regard to a robust and engaging discussion of appropriation as a spectrum and as it is linked to colonialism and the notions of conflation and reinterpretation. Lastly, I bring these discussions together to suggest that the CAC’s claim of interreligious dialogue falls flat when closer examination reveals an essentialization of Buddhist meditation and a reinterpretation of Buddhist meditation through a Christian framework. The CAC’s attempt of interreligious dialogue becomes reductivist and removes the vibrant context and history of the Buddhist tradition. I suggest that these are some conditions that inhibit interreligious dialogue. The field of religious studies has yet to fully explore the links between religious appropriation and colonial discourse and thus open up new lines of inquiry for future research. In what follows, I hope to contribute to a thoughtful and compassionate discussion through this case study of how to give space for individual journeys.
within the spiritual marketplace while at the same time advocating for an educated, respectful, and communally engaged approach to interreligious practice and claims.
Chapter One
Context is Everything

In this chapter, I introduce and discuss the concepts of Buddhist modernism, the spiritual marketplace, appropriation, and perennialism in order to provide a foundation for my argument in this thesis. Specifically, I first consider Buddhist modernism and the modern accessibility of Buddhist thought. I trace the development of meditation as an accessible common practice devoid of a religious framework. Next, I engage the spiritual marketplace and its relationship to appropriation. Finally, I tackle the theory of perennialism and discuss its origins and development.

Buddhist Modernism

To begin, the term “Buddhist modernism” was coined by Heinz Bechert in 1966. It is a concept that is thematically driven by certain qualities that have come to be reflected in modern Buddhism despite geographic location or lineage tradition. David McMahan in Making of Buddhist Modernism draws upon Bechert’s claim that Buddhist modernism participates in “demythologization—the modernization of cosmology along with a ‘symbolic interpretation of traditional myths’.”23 In addition to demythologization, which deemphasizes the supernatural, Buddhist modernism also became more of a philosophy and contained an emphasis on meditation. McMahan defines Buddhist modernism as “an actual new form of Buddhism that is the result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, image-making, revitalization, and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian

countries for over a century."\textsuperscript{24} These are only a few of the qualities of Buddhist modernism. McMahan goes on to focus on the issue of detraditionalization.

According to McMahan, detraditionalization sets up notions of tradition against modernity. Modernists make claims about “casting off the new and reviving the old.”\textsuperscript{25} Thus, modernists make no claim as to creating something new, but rather returning to something more true to Buddhist roots. McMahan highlights the importance and necessity of traditions, Buddhism in particular, engaging with the contemporary culture in attempts to remain relevant and responsive. He expresses this engagement by citing several examples of what he identifies as ‘Buddhist sympathizers.’\textsuperscript{26} These sympathizers may not identify as Buddhist or may express a kind of hybrid identity between Buddhism and some other tradition. McMahan states that they feel “free to adopt, adapt, alter, or reject elements of Buddhism that [they see] as products of Asian cultures rather than of a more universal ‘spiritual’ truth beyond the trappings of culture.”\textsuperscript{27}

Issues of tradition, lineage, institutions, or authority are jettisoned for the sake of individual spiritual construction. McMahan states that a “key aspect of modernization with regard to religion is the shift of orientation from external to internal authority and the associated reorientation from institutional to privatized religion that is known as detraditionalization.”\textsuperscript{28} The self is the primary authority through one’s own experiences within detraditionalized religion. This shift in authority allows the individual to pick and choose what elements to incorporate into or construct as one’s own spirituality. In conjunction with modernity, detradionalized religions

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 29.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 42.
“elevate reason, experience, and intuition over tradition.” McMahan asserts that modern Buddhism represents a detraditionalized religion where “[m]ost non-Asian Americans tend to see Buddhism as a religion whose most important elements are meditation, rigorous philosophical analysis, and an ethic of compassion combined with a highly empirical psychological science that encourages reliance on individual experience.” In addition, we see an emphasis on texts in detraditionalized religions.

According to Donald Lopez in A Modern Buddhist Bible, the origins of Buddhist modernism are in nineteenth century Ceylon. Lopez differentiates modern Buddhism as opposed to classical Buddhism on the basis of certain qualities and components rather than time periods. Lopez, alongside McMahan, claims an emphasis on demythologization, “equality over hierarchy,” the individual above the institution, and a “return to the origin.” In American Buddhism, Christopher Queen categorizes those components of Buddhist modernism into three main themes: 1. Democratization, 2. Pragmatism, and 3. Engagement. Democratization includes a shift away from the authority of the institutional hierarchy toward a more prominent role for the laity. With the renunciation of hierarchy, the individual takes on a more important role. The monastic community, while still important, is no longer the center of Buddhist leadership and practice. The lay community now also works for the benefit of all sentient beings. One important addition to this lay movement is the inclusion of women. Pragmatism means that

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29 Ibid., 43.
30 Ibid., 5.
31 Lopez, A Modern Buddhist Bible.
32 Ibid., ix.
33 Williams and Queen American Buddhism, xx. See also Seager, "American Buddhism in the Making," 110; Baumann, Westward Dharma; and McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism.
practice is valued above belief, many rituals are rejected, and scriptural texts have been
demythologized to remove those “magical” elements in favor of more rational wisdom. The
focus on practice also leads to social engagement, where practitioners work for the benefit of the
social and environmental community rather than isolated self-practice. Thus, Buddhist
modernism has shifted focus from tradition to pragmatism. This shift allows the creation of an
individually unique expression of Buddhism that is concept driven.

The concept driven nature of Buddhist modernism means that the practitioner is free to
sample content from a variety of sources across traditions and lineages. The practitioner is free to
construct a kind of Buddhist practice with those concepts that reflect the individual. There is no
limitation to a specific geographical location or lineage tradition. In fact, Buddhist modernism
allows for sampling from multiple traditions across many countries. It is this sampling that has
created what Lopez identifies as a new canon specific to Buddhist modernism. Authors such as
the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and D. T. Suzuki as well as a variety of texts across different
traditions have been anthologized without consideration to tradition, lineage, or geographic
region. A compilation of this kind, which crosses previous boundaries of tradition, lineage, and
geography, has never existed before. Texts such as Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* and
Hanh’s *Being Peace* are becoming more prevalent in homes and bookshelves across the U.S.,
according to David McMahan.34 Lopez asserts that the readings of this modern Buddhist canon
actually identify themselves as a return to an original Buddhism of the past.35 By their existence
they critique the most recent expressions of Buddhism and claim that the Buddha expressed these
qualities of modernity long before they emerged as a part of the European Enlightenment. Many

34 McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 16.
of these texts bypass discussions of tenets and claims in order to emphasize the more practical, secularized, and fashionable self-help teachings on meditation or living compassionately. In the current setting of modernity, Buddhism is frequently expressed in terms of health and practicality. Practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and non-violence have been presented as a better way to live and are easily incorporated into another religious tradition when they have been stripped of their Buddhist contexts. Due to the emphasis on practicality, some Buddhist practices, such as meditation, exist devoid of their religious affiliation and have become psychologized. Psychologized meditation is also more accessible to the lay masses rather than a reserved practice within the monastic community.

One of the most prominent characteristics of Buddhist modernism is the laicization of meditation. Meditation was not always so widely associated with Buddhism. Prior to the 19th century, meditation was practiced mainly by monks who had withdrawn from society in order to dedicate themselves fully to the practice of gaining enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. At that time, meditation was understood as a higher-level practice that only few were capable of observing. However, as a result of colonization, meditation moved from a secluded monastic practice to a practice in which all were encouraged to participate. In his article “Meditation en Masse,” Erik Braun explains how meditation became an identifying component of modern Buddhism despite its previously limited practice by ascetic monks. The lay movement of meditation began in British-ruled nineteenth-century Burma. The British Imperial Army conquered and ruled Burma in the nineteenth century. The Burmese king at the time, Thibaw, was sent into exile. Under Buddhist societal structure, the king was responsible for the

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protection of Buddhism under his rule. He would support the sasana (the community of Buddhists). After British rule was established, Queen Victoria stated, “‘All those who may be in authority under us’ may not interfere in any way with the religions of colonial subjects ‘on pain of our highest displeasure’.”38 This was perceived as a threat to the Burmese way of life, considering the profound responsibilities and enmeshment between religion and government. Most feared the demise of Buddhism without governmental protection and proliferation. It was these events that lead to the dissemination of the practice of vipassana meditation to the world. The fear that Buddhism would disappear prompted a surge within the laity. Monks began to teach more publically and written teachings were dispersed. Meditation became a practical part of everyday life as propagated by the monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923). Rather than asserting the need for a deep concentration primarily through asceticism, Sayadaw promoted a more accessible state of mind called “momentary concentration” that could be accomplished while remaining in one’s current life.39 This became known as insight meditation. Meditation became a duty to all citizens rather than a privatized endeavor only of the monastic community.

From Burma, the growing practice of lay meditation stretched to Dharmapāla (1864-1933), a Buddhist missionary and writer in Sri Lanka, throughout Asia, and into Europe and the US. The teachings of Dharmapāla are what Gananath Obeyesekere refers to as “Protestant Buddhism,” which focuses on the internal and individual experience over religious institutions and responds to Christian colonial rhetoric of superiority.40

38 Ibid., 58.
39 Ibid., 60.
From Dharmapāla in Sri Lanka, lay meditation extended to Shaku Sōen (1860-1919), who was the first Zen teacher in the United States, and then to prominent Zen teacher D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966). Suzuki was the most well known teacher and author of Zen Buddhism in the United States. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield encountered the lineage teachings of Sayadaw through Suzuki’s works and became prominent advocates for insight meditation in the United States.\(^{41}\) Zen and insight meditation became very popular as expressions of 1950s and 1960s counterculture in the United States.\(^{42}\) Beat authors like Jack Kerouac emphasized “individualism, spontaneity, and intuition, qualities that appealed to counter culturists who were largely responsible for the explosive growth of Buddhism in the 1960s,” according to Richard Seager in “American Buddhism in the Making.”\(^{43}\) These countercultural qualities shaped the perceptions of Buddhist insight meditation for generations to follow.

In the U.S., lay Americans who had visited Asia in the 1960s taught insight meditation. Significantly, this instruction was devoid of the traditional monastic-lay relationship and varied according to the instructor.\(^{44}\) In other words, the teaching was disseminated by lay instructors and not passed on from monk to disciple. There was no specific authorization given in order to instruct. Familiar names in this style include Jack Kornfield, Ruth Denison, and Joseph Goldstein. According to Seager, by the 1990s, meditation became extremely popular as the only form of overtly American Buddhism divorced from a specific tradition or lineage.\(^{45}\) In fact, Seager articulates that practitioners of meditation draw freely upon a variety of Buddhist

\(^{41}\) Ibid.


\(^{43}\) Ibid.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 113.
traditions or none at all, as well as modern psychotherapy. The most prominent example of this psychologized meditation is in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He utilizes meditation as a way to counter stress, pain, depression, and other emotional distresses.46 McMahan states that,

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a psychotherapist whose Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program has adapted Buddhist meditation to a variety of medical and psychological applications, echoes this view, contending that “[mindfulness] has nothing to do with Buddhism per se or with becoming a Buddhist, but it has everything to do with waking up and living in harmony with the world.”47

Kabat-Zinn’s practicality and psychologizing of meditation contribute to the secularization of meditative practice, which removes meditation from its Buddhist context and psychologizes it.48 Today, practitioners of meditation are not limited to only those who identify as Buddhist, but also include those who identify with other traditions. In The Making of Buddhist Modernism, McMahan points out that “many lay Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers—not to mention Christians, Jews, Hindus, and secular people—now practice various forms of Buddhist meditation and mindfulness techniques.”49

Finally, McMahan suggests that not only has modernity impacted Buddhism and how it is presented, but it also creates opportunities for specific representations of Buddhism to be adopted while others are ignored.50 Furthermore, he emphasizes that the variety of Buddhist content is readily available for incorporation and appropriation through how different authors and texts represent Buddhism. In relation to author representation, McMahan states that “[c]ontemporary

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46 For example, see Jon Kabat-Zinn, Coming to our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness (New York: Hyperion, 2006).

47 McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism, 185.


49 Ibid., 184.

50 Ibid.
literature geared toward laity and Buddhist sympathizers often presents meditation as a mode of internal observation and analysis akin to empirical science and not bound by authority and tradition.”\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, by eschewing issues of authority and tradition, Buddhist meditation becomes a commodity to be consumed in the spiritual marketplace. It is as if meditation is a free-floating concept that the individual is free to adopt, adapt, and incorporate in whatever way one sees fit. When associations with authority and tradition are jettisoned and meditation becomes a commodity, these commodities become a kind of new representation of Buddhism in the marketplace. Practices such as meditation as well as the plethora of texts that exist on bookshelves branching across lineages are divorced from their previous context and recontextualized as what Lopez identifies as a more “authentic” representation of the Buddha’s teachings.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, what is marketed as Buddhism is devoid of context and made available for appropriation in the spiritual marketplace as a commodity of individual spiritual construction.\textsuperscript{53}

**The Spiritual Marketplace**

McMahan’s discussion about the contemporary commodification of Buddhist practices and representations aligns with Vincent Miller’s critique of the commodification of contemporary religious traditions. In *Consuming Religion*, Miller argues that religion has become a casualty of the American culture of consumption. Religious people become shoppers and buyers in the market for religious consumer “products” such as practices, images, and texts. A key feature of these products for Miller is that they have been lifted from their previous

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, ix.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 43.
\end{itemize}
settings and understandings within a particular religious tradition, so that their past significance within that context is often irrelevant to how they could be “used” by consumers today.

Miller’s analysis of the commodification and consumption of religious traditions can be seen in the context of what Wade Clark Roof calls the “spiritual marketplace.” Roof defines the spiritual marketplace as a map and a new way of understanding our current religious culture in the United States. He argues that baby boomers have ushered in this new expression of religious life by their openness to questioning religious claims. Where once adherents gave unquestioning devotion to religious institutions, now they feel free to question and explore. Roof argues that this openness contributes to a decline in loyalty to and identification with institutional religion, along with a growing distrust for and dissatisfaction with organized religion. This is a major theme of the spiritual marketplace. One reason for this shift is an ever-growing exposure and access to other religious traditions, including Asian religions in particular. The marketplace provides an arena for a host of truths expressed from multiple traditions, rather than one tradition claiming the corner market on truth and its dissemination. In addition to exposure to other traditions, the culture of the marketplace is created by globalization, social mobility, a notion of religion as self-help, and higher education. Consequently, people in the U.S. are encountering multiple and various religious traditions, practices, and communities in everyday life. According to Stewart Hoover, media is constantly expressing a barrage of religious ideas and information by which the individual becomes the judge. The individual, no longer the institution, has become the central authority for navigating religious waters. With a distrust for and lack of


55 Ibid., 7.

56 Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*, 3.

loyalty to religious institutions along with modernity’s emphasis on the individual, religion and religious construction has shifted to a personal endeavor.

This shift from an externally focused community to an internally focused individual spirituality is another major theme of the spiritual marketplace. Roof highlights the value of personal meaning at the expense of institutional belonging. Practitioners are free and able to construct a religious life unique to themselves, incorporating elements of psychology, feminism, metaphysics, or various religious traditions, as they see fit. Religious “shopping” has become a part of modern identity construction, as our identities are constantly redefined and shifting with the plethora of religious options. As outlined above, the boundaries and lines dividing one tradition from another have become blurred due to a shift away from tradition and institutional authority, and as a result, the construction of multiple religious identities is not just possible, but increasingly common. The notion of a cohesive religious tradition is jettisoned in favor of picking and choosing practices that seem in line with individual identity.

In After Heaven, Robert Wuthnow identifies this shift to the internal individual construction as a shift from “dwelling” to “seeking.” He defines dwelling as inhabiting sacred spaces, but now individuals are seeking sacred moments wherever they may be found, including practices from varying religious traditions. Sacred spaces such as churches, mosques, tabernacles, and meditation halls represented the communal and institutional approaches to religion. Due to the shift from the communal to the individual, individuals have become seekers of the sacred and less concerned with institutional spaces. Words like “authenticity,” “inward journey,” and “individualism” call to religious “seekers” to feel free to explore and construct

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58 Roof, Spiritual Marketplace, 7.
59 Ibid.
60 Wuthnow, After Heaven, 4.
new religious expressions. The spiritual marketplace provides opportunities for new definitions of self-expression within religion. This individualism also brings about a relativity of truth as the boundaries between traditions become permeable. With the individual as the judge of religious content, one can piece together what others may consider to be competing truths. Truth becomes relative to the individual rather than aligned within a tradition. There is little concern over where a practice originated, just so long as it is meaningful for that individual. Therefore, borrowing from various religious practices becomes an act of self-expression and a mode of identity construction. This kind of individuality tends to ignore historical precedent and context. Buyers in the marketplace choose various religious “products” without knowledge of where they came from and how. Given the nature of this selection process, one’s religious identity becomes an amalgamation of appropriated content without knowledge of or insight into the traditions that produced this content. Significantly, there is often little contact between shoppers and teachers of these traditions. What passes for religious authority is transmitted and consumed privately through the books on individual shelves. Books supplant the role of the teacher as the mode of transmission.

Previously, Buddhist practitioners in Asian countries gained training in a one on one relationship between teacher and student. While the student could gain knowledge through reading texts, it was the relationship with the teacher that provided elucidation of the text and a deeper wisdom. In Buddhist contexts, transmission entails the deep wisdom that is gained through relational instruction. Robert Sharf articulates this point in his article “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience.” He states that “…formal transmission actually involved the ritual investiture of a student in an institutionally certified genealogy.”

The emphasis here is upon the “institutionally certified genealogy,” which highlights the importance of the teacher’s status.⁶² It is important that a teacher be trained up within an authoritative lineage. From there, the teacher trains up students within the same lineage. This is also referred to as “inherit(ing) the dharma.”⁶³ This is vastly different from what currently exists in the spiritual marketplace, where books are replacing the roles of teachers as instructors. Information is transmitted and interpreted from the text by the individual. The individual can choose what texts to rely upon and what texts to reject. Consequently, authority rests with the individual and is divorced from its religious and cultural lineage.

This is a flattened picture of the position of modern Buddhism as yet another commodity within the contemporary spiritual marketplace. Yet Courtney Bender argues that in spite of practices, objects, and texts being lifted from their historical context, there is some sense of continuity. The spiritual marketplace did not come into existence in a vacuum. In fact, according to Bender, the marketplace exhibits some similar characteristics to that of past mysticism, such as an emphasis on the individual experience as the path to true spiritual knowledge. In The New Metaphysicals, she argues that individuals tend to be ignorant of historical contexts of current religious practices such as meditation, but are nonetheless replicating similar qualities of the past, such as an emphasis on feeling and the importance of visceral experience. Bender uses words like “mystics” and “metaphysicals” interchangeably to describe contemporary religious seekers. This calls to mind a historical past of mysticism as practiced in a variety of religious traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity.⁶⁴ She claims these concepts are reproduced in discussions of contemporary spirituality. One theme of continuity for Bender is that of

⁶² Ibid.
⁶³ Ibid., 243.
⁶⁴ Bender, The New Metaphysicals, 6.
experience. Spiritual seekers today express a focus on experience similar to medieval Christian mystics.城镇 Bender argues that many of her subjects remain unmoved in response to an Enlightenment critique of reason, that belief is irrational, instead finding that “the experience itself” remains outside of this realm of investigation and thus impervious to falsification.”城镇 For her “new metaphysicals,” true religious experience is unable to be explained. Traditionally, these kinds of mystical experiences have become foundational claims of institutions, reified and sanctioned and universalized and incorporated in religious institutions as belief and doctrine. It was irrelevant if one had experienced the same mystical encounter as another, belief was still normalized. Bender argues that today there is a proliferation of definitions of religion and spirituality. She says that spirituality is “entangled in social life, in history, and in our academic and nonacademic imaginations.”城镇 She believes that we cannot essentialize something called “spirituality” as an individual phenomenon distinct from all these previously mentioned social concepts. Bender connects the current concepts of individual spirituality to historical threads that had similar qualities. In her view, the current spiritual marketplace is not a flattening of religious content, but a nuanced expression of historical continuity. At the same time, she points to a common ignorance of this continuity and this ignorance brings forward a critique of shallowness.

In summation, the spiritual marketplace is the environment for a spiritual grab bag of content that has been stripped of its content, but still has meaning to the individual shopper. Miller critiques a system that does not favor those who deeply seek religious transformation. He claims that the spiritual marketplace allows a kind of selfishness where one can simply dismiss

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 8-9.
67 Ibid., 5.
whatever may be challenging or unappealing.\textsuperscript{68} However, Miller does not want to dismiss the creative energies of a spiritual bricolage, but does want to see those elements have depth. Similarly, Wuthnow’s solution to a shallow free-floating spirituality is advocating for a practiced-based spirituality. The focus on practice still allows for individual seeking but provides discipline and an anchor for the individual.\textsuperscript{69} In \textit{America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity}, Wuthnow encourages more education and engagement with the culture of religious pluralism.\textsuperscript{70} Thus, while the spiritual marketplace may have produced a scenario in which modern Buddhism, and specifically, the practice of meditation, has been divorced from its lineage, and to a certain extent hollowed out, it may not necessarily be completely devoid of meaning or context, as Bender argues.

\textbf{Appropriation}

Next, I turn to one of the potential dangers of religious pluralism: appropriation. Below, in my review of the scholarship I will elucidate several scholarly definitions of appropriation that will examine definitions such as taking, imitating, conflation, and reinterpretation. While I recognize that discussions about imitation and taking (Spooner and Donaldson) inevitably point towards polemics about authenticity and distortion, which may be key to broader discussions about appropriation within the field of religious studies, I actively choose to sidestep this particular nuanced discussion on appropriation. I am delimiting my discussion of appropriation insofar as it informs readings of conflation and re-interpretation within the literature (Iwamura, Bender and Cadge, King, Klassen). Bruce Ziff defines appropriation as “the taking--from a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Miller, \textit{Consuming Religion}, 225.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Wuthnow, \textit{After Heaven}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Wuthnow, \textit{America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity}, xiv.
\end{itemize}
culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge.”71 He goes on to claim the fact that this definition is contentious in and of itself. He highlights that appropriation is a rather loosely based concept, but contains three general qualities: “(1) appropriation concerns relationships among people, (2) there is a wide range of modes through which it occurs, and (3) it is widely practiced.”72 In the following section, I discuss Eastern symbols and Western values as I review sources that situate their discussions of appropriation under the processes of conflation and reinterpretation. Moreover, the following scholars seem to acknowledge that the discussion of appropriation within the field of religious studies is at best controversial. In their article “Owning Red,” Angela Riley and Kristen Carpenter open their discussion of appropriation by drawing attention to the fact that “the term itself is imprecise and deeply contested.”73 Acknowledging these cautions, I highlight certain characteristics of appropriation as used by the authors in the texts I discuss below. A common thread between these texts is the connection between appropriation and colonialism. In the following section, I discuss colonialism as a vehicle for appropriation, suggesting that appropriation is intrinsic to colonialism. To situate my claim that Rohr and Finley appropriate Zen meditative practice, I trace how other scholars have situated their own discussions of appropriation within the context of colonialism. Chapter three will extend this discussion. I use terms such as “West,” “East,” and “Orient” as employed by various scholars despite their inherent issues as I review appropriation and its connections to the topics of romanticization, essentialization, textual primacy and the textual nature of Buddhism, and heresy.

71 Ziff and Rao, Borrowed Power, 1.

72 Ibid., 3.

73 Riley and Carpenter, "Owning Red," 3.
Outside of the literature concerning Native American traditions, the most prevalent way scholars have tackled the discussion on appropriation is through the notion of religious hybridity. Dismayingly, appropriation has often been couched within the accepted discourses of religious hybridity. As Thomas Tweed points out in *Crossing and Dwelling*, we live in a world of constant cultural contact.\(^{74}\) With any and all contact comes hybridity. Tweed defines hybridity as “a product of long processes of contact and exchange.”\(^{75}\) Tweed and others have dismissed the inherently flawed notion of a pure tradition that remains untouched by time, culture, or other traditions. As I will point out, many scholars have perhaps unintentionally contributed to limitations in scholarship concerning appropriation due to the problematic implications of addressing the tension between a “pure” or a homogenized religious whole and the commonplace permutations of religious hybridity. In the following sections, I review the pertinent scholarship with regards to appropriation and take into consideration the tentative nature of this discussion, recognizing that discussion of appropriation is problematic and at the same time signaling that it is necessary. Later in my thesis, I will argue that Rohr and Finley are appropriating Zen meditation because they conflate it with Catholic contemplation; that is to say, they perceive it to be essentially the same religious practice. In the following section, I review several sources that present a nuanced theory of appropriation. I suggest that these sources primarily discuss appropriation with regards to taking or imitation. In the latter part of my literature review I will illustrate how I see this as distinct from appropriations with regards to conflation and reinterpretation.

\(^{74}\) Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 6.
For Laura Donaldson, a scholar of Cherokee descent, appropriation centers on what she calls “theft” of Native American spirituality. According to Donaldson, theft fails to embody or “manifest their (Native American) original ethical, epistemological, or ecological values.” In other words, theft removes content from its original context of meaning. Donaldson argues that the media, magazines in particular, show white women representing Native American spiritual practices as a practice of exploitation for commodification and economic gain. She focuses on the ways feminism as a critical lens may be employed to approach Native American “self-help” spiritual practices so as to highlight a lack of Native American representation and understanding. Donaldson articulates the genre of self-help as an expression of socially constructed feminism and she points out the “dangers of conceiving feminism in the narcissistic terms of psychological individuation rather than as a political movement that attends to the ethics of context.” What she means by this is that white women are imitating Native American practices devoid of contextual meaning as a way of presenting a sterilized method of self-help absent from Native American representation or explanation.

Donaldson points out the difference between imitation and theft with regards to using religious symbols across systems. In her discussion of Native American religious practice, she states that the imitation of Native American practices leaves out “about five hundred years of colonialism.” Here, she draws attention to the implicit and often-unrecognized action on the part of dominant power structure to take what it mistakenly believes to be similar or useful for its own needs and incorporate those symbols into its own practices. This is what James Lockhart

77 Ibid., 678.
78 Ibid., 693.
79 Ibid., 677.
calls “Double Mistaken Identity,” which he defines as when “each side of the cultural exchange presumes that a given form or concept is functioning in the same way familiar within its own tradition and is unaware of or unimpressed by the other side’s interpretation.” Donaldson begins to develop a discussion about this process of taking that is implicit in colonial rhetoric. For example, she discusses subjugating the other as objects of fetishization through the example of art. Donaldson discusses an image of a Native American marriage basket that is said to express “the ancient knowledge of Native women.” A white woman, having seen the image, begins a quest to own the basket and thus possess this knowledge by way of theft. Practices like these unavoidably perpetuate the colonial cycle of emptying these symbols of meaning and context in some fashion and then filling them with new meaning based on the needs of the colonizer. She states that the practice of adopting Native American women’s symbols and practices in contemporary white women’s spirituality is not imitation, but taking. Significantly, Donaldson suggests that this taking is an expression of the continuing logic of white supremacy.

In a similar way, Brian Spooner’s article “Weavers and Dealers” discusses appropriation with regards to the processes of imitation and taking. He uses the Western fascination with Oriental rugs as a vehicle to discuss the value of authenticity with regards to commodification and utilitarianism. His article examines the varying criteria around assessing the authenticity of Oriental rugs and their demand in the contemporary marketplace. The level of authenticity directly relates to the economic value of the rug. However, it is the dealer who is the constructor of the details surrounding the rug and its authenticity. Information about the rug is “consciously

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80 James Lockhart, Of Things of the Indies, 99.

81 Ibid., 686.

82 Ibid., 681.
or unconsciously informed primarily by the lore of the dealer.”

Buyers then rely upon the dealer’s information in order to measure the rug’s authenticity. Spooner articulates that “[t]he connoisseur who is the public arbiter of authenticity scarcely controls the sources of the information on which he bases his judgment.” In other words, the buyer is purchasing a rug based on the measure of authenticity that has been previously predetermined according to the dealer.

Spooners acknowledges the elusive nature of authenticity and the implicit problems of distortion, representation, construction, and commodification. He states that “[t]he concept (of authenticity) is a product of interaction between us (dominant) and them (dependent) and becomes more important as the gap grows, partly because as the gap grows we appropriate more and more of the symbolic dimension of life in the other society, and inhibit the indigenous symbolization that would generate the authenticity we seek.” In other words, Spooner suggests that to what degree the rug is authentic or not, or more importantly, the perceived value in the rug, is a result of the interaction between the “weavers” and the “dealers.” More importantly, this value increases as we take, imitate, and perpetuate what symbols we like about the “other” society that often times leaves behind or discards the indigenous aspects. As Spooner states, “[t]he social conditions in which the carpets began their journey from weavers through the hands of dealers to consumers (including collectors) are known only imperfectly. We receive them divorced from their social context. Our desire for authenticity prompts us to reconstruct that context.”

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84 Ibid., 198.
85 Ibid., 228.
86 Ibid., 199.
Spooner suggests that the tension between what the weavers make and what the dealers take empties out the authentic value of the commodity, i.e. the Oriental rug. He highlights the categories of “us” and “them” by way of his predominant discussion of authenticity. According to Spooner, this obsession with procuring Oriental rugs represents the “Western concern with the Other.” Spooner introduces the idea of a romanticized Other as the grounds for cultural appropriation as if the Other holds the authenticity one seeks to express her individuality.

Another important study that develops a theoretical discussion on appropriation and illustrates the ways in which cultural icons become commodities emptied of their initial meanings is Jane Iwamura’s *Virtual Orientalism*. This text considers the trope of the “Oriental Monk” as it has been presented in magazines, books, and television in the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s. She traces a genealogy in these images and focuses her analysis on two real life Asian figures and one fictional character as the representations of the Oriental Monk in each of these forms of consumable media: D.T. Suzuki, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine in the 1970s TV series *Kung Fu*. Iwamura points out that the qualities of the Oriental Monk are “his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, his manner of dress, and—most obviously—his peculiar gendered character.” The author highlights U.S. culture’s fascination with Asian religions, but suggests that this does not translate “into a full embrace of Asian religions.” Rather, she notes that Asian religions are exoticized and essentialized into identifiable components such as sensual, mysterious, wise, and ancient. Here again, we see notions of taking and using perceived qualities of Asian religions and

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87 Ibid., 195.
89 Ibid., 5.
reconstructing them outside of their contexts for Western consumption. Asian religions are interpreted as mystical and wise, and are reconstructed through the example of the Oriental Monk as if they were accurate depictions of Asian religious practice. This kind of appropriative move represents the subjugated group as wholly other, exotic, and stereotyped.

Iwamura’s three figures exist as stereotypes of Asian religions as mystical.⁹⁰ Thus, the construction of the Oriental Monk and its focus on personal experience serves as a response to industrialization and the Protestant work ethic, which focuses on bodily discipline. Iwamura highlights that these representations of Asian religions go largely uncontested due to their positive imagery.⁹¹ Therefore, this imagery becomes solidified and reinforced through mainstream media. Iwamura states “[t]he prevalence of this type of cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media is an important element of … Virtual Orientalism.”⁹²

In the same way Lopez and Roof highlight the practice of sampling within the spiritual marketplace regardless of lineage or tradition, Iwamura points out the conflation of Asian religious traditions in one exoticized concept of the Oriental Monk. She states “[t]he term Oriental Monk is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures (gurus, bhikkhus, sages, swamis, sifus, healers, masters) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Tibetan).”⁹³ Iwamura aligns with Roof and Wuthnow in highlighting the American context of individual religious construction through the primacy of personal experience without regard for tradition or lineage. According to her, Asian religions

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⁹⁰ Ibid., 9.
⁹¹ Ibid., 5.
⁹² Ibid., 7.
⁹³ Ibid., 6.
helped to meet this desire for personal spiritual experience without formal institutions. Religious construction became a matter of identity and a symbol of one’s freedom to choose.

Iwamura begins by discussing D.T. Suzuki as an example of a real life Oriental monk in Western representation. Magazines portrayed Suzuki as a “venerable Eastern sage—wise, noble, aged, and mysteriously foreign.” Iwamura describes Suzuki as a “mysterious Oriental” whose “wrinkled features” suggest an “ancient wisdom that harked back to an age far beyond his considerable years.” Suzuki’s writings became a “popular fad” for Americans such as Jack Kerouac and Alan Watts, which removed the Asian-ness even more so for these white figures such that the figure of the Oriental monk became a fetishization who was no longer even Asian.

Iwamura draws on Kerouac’s Dharma Bums in asserting that “[t]he Beat Generation and its followers in their own unique interpretation adopted Buddhism as a way to distinguish themselves from ‘middle-class non-identity’ and to guide and justify their own pursuits.”

Iwamura calls the visualization of David Carradine in Kung Fu an act of colonization in that he was created out of the Western imagination. Kung Fu gave white Americans access to a set of constructed Asian teachings while at the same time conveying U.S. dominance over Asia as the disseminators of those teachings. Iwamura suggests that these representations of a stereotyped Oriental Monk “can be read as a hegemonic moment in which the American popular imaginary

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94 Ibid., 20.
95 Ibid., 26.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 32.
98 Ibid., 35.
99 Ibid., 112.
once again re-created its Asian spiritual ‘other’.”  

Iwamura points out that not only did the concept of the Oriental Monk exist as a stereotyped construction, but became reified in mainstream media through the proclaimed authoritative and morally superior voice of the U.S. as the disseminator of the information about Asian representation. In other words, Iwamura presents the icon of the Oriental Monk as imitating essentialized Western stereotypes of “Asia” and taking Buddhist imagery so as to ameliorate the spiritual “gaps” in Christianity. What emerges from her discussion is a nuanced theory of appropriation that analyzes how mimicry and dynamic ways of using Eastern imagery creates meaning for Western religious systems.

The larger framework of colonialism and its inherent asymmetrical power relations is the backdrop for the contact between Christianity and Buddhism. Here I discuss nineteenth century India under British colonial rule as the context for European engagement with Buddhism. In a sense, we may approach Buddhism itself as a construction meaning that due to “the monotheistic exclusivism of Western Christianity,” propagated as the one true religion, Buddhism was subordinated; and more importantly, Buddhist practitioners were to be converted, not embraced, and were seen as Other.  

Subsequently, Christianity tended towards “fierce religious and social confrontation with members of other creeds.” Not only were Buddhists regarded as spiritually inferior, but the Indian people were seen as intellectually and morally inferior. Western knowledge was propagated as superior.

King points out that Indian Buddhists were “subjugated objects of a superior (i.e. higher-order) knowledge, which remains in the possession of the Western Indological expert.”

100 Ibid., 115.
101 King, Orientalism and Religion, 105.
102 Ibid., 103.
103 Ibid., 90.
other words, the claimed superiority of Western rationalism was utilized to subordinate Buddhists and see them as those who needed to be converted to a superior way. This subordination led to the categories of insider and outsider as Buddhists were viewed as the outsider, the other. I use the term, Other, to refer a group of people that are seen as inferior to the dominant group in the colonial matrix, but more importantly, the Other is a construction of the colonizer set up within a framework of binary relationships. In this way, as both Donald Lopez and Richard King point out, Buddhism took its shape by the colonizer, and its “essence” may be seen as somewhat refracted through a kind of colonial mirror in that what was constructed about Buddhism only became knowable to the British through their own practice of defining concepts in relationship to their own cultural paradigm. For the British during the colonial engagement with Buddhism, the various practices or components of this religion such as meditation, ideas of non-dualism, and the reading of Sanskrit or Pali religious texts became essentialized, meaning for the colonizers, these practices became the fundamental tenets or “essence” of the faith for all Buddhists.

More importantly, the European construction of Buddhism imbued it with a mystical past, which could be seen in opposition to the culture in the West. Where the West was modern, Buddhism was ancient; where the West was intellectual, Buddhism was mystical. In Orientalism and Religion, King argues that by setting up this binary, the “Orient” and by extension “Oriental” religious practice became synonymous with ancient mysticism in contrast to the “West” as modern. The West was able to posit itself as modern and thus make romanticized

104 Ibid., 2.
105 Ibid., 185.
106 Ibid., 3-4.
claims that Indic religions pointed to a shared human history of innocence and purity. King points out that “[t]he romantic image of India portrays Indian culture as profoundly spiritual, idealistic and mystical.”\textsuperscript{107} Thus, Buddhism was romanticized through European perceptions and the study of Buddhist texts.

In the colonial context in which Western scholarship on Buddhism emerged, texts became the links to the past rather than insights about how those texts were historically constructed. This practice of textual reliance became identified as the “original” or “pure” Buddhism that was the standard from which all other expressions of contemporary Buddhism were judged. Buddhism was reified by locating its “true essence” within a set of sacred texts. Here we see the colonial influence vis-a-vis the imposition of Christian ideas with regards to the importance of identifying an authoritative, historical, and authentic canon that exists as a transcendent guide and link to tradition as well as the immanent words held in the hands of the modern adherent. The authoritative and historical text was accepted as the pure and transcendent truth of the tradition. In Curators of the Buddha, Lopez notes that under colonial rule Buddhism became this textualized religion with no need for cultural interpretation once the texts were translated and disseminated in European languages.\textsuperscript{108} He also highlights another outcome of textual primacy in addition to romanticization, stating that “locating the essence of ‘Buddhism’ in certain ‘canonical’ texts, of course, allows the Orientalist to maintain the authority to speak about the ‘true’ nature of Buddhism, abstractly conceived.”\textsuperscript{109} Here again we see the power differential maintained with Buddhism as the subordinated group. Not only did British Christian colonialism construct the “essence” of Buddhism, but it also asserted power over it as the

\textsuperscript{107} King, Orientalism and Religion, 92.

\textsuperscript{108} Lopez, Curators of the Buddha.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 146.
authoritative voice to speak on its behalf. Therefore, due to the process of colonization, the
construction of Buddhism in European scholarship was interpreted through a Christian
theological lens. This representation of Buddhism is a hollowed out and essentialized depiction.

King articulates several examples of reading Buddhism through a Christian lens. He
states that “one trend within Western accounts of Buddhism worth noting was the tendency in
the mid-nineteenth century to portray the Buddha as an Indian version of Martin Luther.”\textsuperscript{110} By
equating the Buddha with Luther, one already has a set of presumed notions about the Buddha
that end up aligning more with a Protestant Christian context rather than an Indic context.

Evoking the name of Martin Luther brings a familiar set of characteristics to mind. If the Buddha
is characterized as the reformer of Hinduism, in this vein of comparison, then it follows that
Buddhism could be categorized as a form of Hindu Protestantism. This imposes a Christian
framework upon Buddhist history and makes a claim about the similarity between the two
traditions. King uses this and other examples to assert that there is a “tendency to represent
‘Asian religions’ in the image of Western Christianity.”\textsuperscript{111} This in and of itself is a colonizing act
that imposes the paradigm of the dominant group upon the colonized, subordinate group.

According to King, this act does a kind of “epistemic violence” to Buddhism.\textsuperscript{112} While King
does not explicitly use the term appropriation to make this argument, he is situating this
discussion in the context of colonialism. This is germane to the discussion of appropriation
because it links the issue of power to Orientalist interpretations of Buddhism. I interpret King to
mean that epistemic violence can constitute one means of appropriation. I will return to this line
of inquiry in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{110} King, \textit{Orientalism and Religion}, 144.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 4.
Lopez articulates many of the same insights as King regarding the relationship between Buddhism and British colonialism, focusing on the development of the academic study of Buddhism under the influence of colonialism. In 1837, Brian Hodgson (1800-1894), the Assistant Resident for Great Britain at the Court of Nepal, brought 147 Sanskrit manuscripts to Eugène Burnouf, a scholar in Paris. Hodgson’s method of translation was to work with a “native” reader and speaker of Sanskrit to translate the texts into English. Lopez points to the amount of trust necessary between scholar and local practitioner in this practice. However, he points out that other European Buddhist scholars critiqued Hodgson’s work and methods in that they preferred the text over the local practitioner. Scholars claimed that they could not rely upon the veracity of a practitioner’s accounts and explanations of Buddhism. Thus, like King, Lopez points to the European scholar as the architect of what has come to be known as a “classical” or “authentic” Buddhism by locating the “essence” of Buddhism in a text. Many of the Buddhist texts known to European scholars presented philosophical teachings of Buddhism rather than concrete references to the Buddha, the Sangha, or the Dharma. But within their Buddhist contexts, most of these texts only “circulated among a small circle of monastic elites,” with no evidence of colloquial usage by practicing lay Buddhists. Here again Lopez highlights that these texts became the standard of comparison for all “authentic” Buddhism. Lopez continually draws attention to the fact that Buddhism as we know it in the West was created and controlled by European scholars. For Lopez, there is no such thing as a “pure religion,” but rather the issue is how knowledge is constructed; he argues that “the question is not one of how knowledge is

113 Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha*, 3.
115 Ibid.
tainted but of how knowledge takes form.”116 The construction of a Buddhist “essence” through British colonial contact shaped the information propagated about Buddhism. European engagement with Buddhism was filtered through a European Protestant Christian framework, as we saw in the example of Buddha being described as a reformer like Luther. Neither King nor Lopez want to demonize the textual study of religious traditions, rather their aim is to critique the limitations of a reliance on only textual engagement. Where King highlights that one author cannot speak on behalf of an entire tradition, Lopez moves beyond reliance upon the text and calls for engagement with local practitioners.

In "Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual,” Pamela Klassen points to the continued colonial rhetoric used in the contemporary appropriation of rituals from Asian religions. Klassen’s article draws on three examples of North American Anglicans who utilize Asian rituals of health and healing in their teaching. They substantiate this usage based upon the New Testament stories of Jesus as healer. Klassen states that this is a response to and continuation of colonialism. In fact, according to Klassen, it is colonialism, the construction of an essentialized Buddhism, and Orientalist scholars that provide justification for such “borrowing.”117 However, what Klassen outlines here is not merely a borrowing of yoga, Buddhist meditation, and Reiki, it is a conflation of ritual by invoking a Christian narrative of healing as validation for arrogation. For Klassen this highlights the colonial rhetoric of appropriation due to the oppression over a subordinated group. She states that

the charged notion of appropriation rests on a conviction that particular religions and cultures are discrete historical channels owned, tended or guarded by certain peoples— a

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116 Ibid., 11.

conviction made particularly forceful when the appropriating group is the historical oppressor of the appropriated.¹¹⁸

Klassen emphasizes the significance of the power differential between colonizer and colonized. For her, it is not exactly a matter of who “owns” what, but rather the means by which content is appropriated. In Klassen’s examples, it is important to note that these Anglicans avoid the issue of a power dynamic and appropriation by way of invoking an authoritative past and tradition within Christianity.

Klassen also points to the influence of the Enlightenment on Christian traditions that have jettisoned rituals of healing. Subsequently these Christian traditions have looked to Asian religions to revive or create a link to healing ritual. According to Klassen, North American Christians “revalue their subaltern others not only through revising (or forgetting) their own Western Christian history, but also through renovating their own rituals with the help of traditions that Christian-influenced Western colonialism made subaltern.”¹¹⁹ In other words, Klassen points to the modern lack of understanding of colonialism and how it shaped the study and understanding of Asian religious traditions in the Western mind. What was once condemned is now embraced and repositioned as an extension of Christianity. The Anglicans that Klassen cites in this study call on the authoritative past of Christianity as a tradition of healing. Therefore, whatever falls into the category of healing is not outside the realm of Christian tradition and practice. The Christian perspective is that true healing can only come through God and by

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 380.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
extension his son Jesus.\textsuperscript{120} Therefore, anything that brings healing must have its source in the Christian God and thus is ultimately available to be utilized as a Christian practice.

Klassen highlights the historical shifts from Protestants claiming to be the sole disseminators of salvation and the superiority of Western medicine to now needing healing from various non-Christian religious and medicinal traditions. Critiques of these actions have come from multiple sources. She states that

some fellow Christians charge them with heresy, while other critics (including some scholars) consider their syncretism a consumerist fad, or worse, an orientalist “exotic fantasy” appropriating subjected knowledge from religious traditions that colonialist Christians once condemned.\textsuperscript{121}

Here Klassen points out two thematic critiques of attempts to syncretize Christianity and Buddhism: heresy or appropriation. The former denies the historical realities of construction, contact, and colonialism as though there were some pure, untouched form of Christianity, while the latter romanticizes the essentialized East. Klassen rejects both of these critiques due to their implications. She asserts that “at their most extreme, heresy and appropriation are categories that depend on the assumption that traditions can and should be pure; that hybridity is contamination.”\textsuperscript{122} For Klassen these critiques carry the notion of calling upon the past to judge the authenticity of the present as if there were some historic essence that was untainted or pure.

Klassen praises the efforts of the Anglicans she studied in their attempts to confront the colonial past of Christianity. According to Klassen, they created a “retroactive kinship” by acknowledging the imperialist past of Christianity and moving to seek guidance from other

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 377.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 378.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 381.
religious leaders and teachers.\textsuperscript{123} This is a responsive move to a colonial past. Here, Klassen aligns with Lopez in advocating not only a textual engagement with Buddhism, but also connecting with local practitioners. These are moves toward inclusivity. Klassen wants to find a way forward in the midst of the contemporary trend of constructing one’s own spirituality. She draws on Roof’s work on the spiritual marketplace frequently throughout her article to invoke a new kind of conversation about how to meaningfully move forward in a world of religious hybridity. Klassen does not want the only option to be appropriation. She claims that “lives cannot be cast as beyond the legacies of orientalism, but neither should they be confined to a reductionist narrative that leaves exotic fantasy as the only trope with which to describe popular Western efforts of cross-religious relation.”\textsuperscript{124} Klassen suggests that the way to engage religiously hybrid culture is through ritual, not doctrine. For her, this would avoid the dangers of a reductionist perspective that leads to exoticizing, romanticizing, or essentializing Buddhism. I read Klassen as defining appropriation in these terms: as a process that has decontextualized, exoticized, romanticized, and essentialized the Other or their practices vis-a-vis the dominant paradigm.

These qualities of essentialization, decontextualization, and romanticization are also reflected in the case study entitled "Constructing Buddhism(s)” by Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge that looks at Catholic and Buddhist nuns in their meditative practices. This is a shift away from lay practitioners to a discussion concerning appropriation among “committed religious professionals.”\textsuperscript{125} This article discusses the appropriation of Buddhist meditation by Catholic nuns as a means of revivification. The Catholic nuns expressed a sense of emptiness or

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 388.

\textsuperscript{125} Bender and Cadge. "Constructing Buddhism(s),” 230.
unfulfillment with their own practices in response to the explorations encouraged after Vatican II. They felt something missing from their contemplative practice and claimed to have found it in Buddhist meditation. These nuns invoked the form of Buddhist practice, but not the content. For example, they would practice following the breath, but would incorporate breathing in and out the word “Christ” or focusing on the concept of Christ, calling their practice “Christian Zen.”

The Catholic nuns disregarded the Buddhist content and replaced it with Christian theology while still maintaining a similar form to what the Buddhist nuns practiced. The Catholic nuns admitted to still knowing very little about Buddhist teachings even after they employed Buddhist forms. Some even stated that they should not employ Buddhist forms because the content is not related to Christian practice. One Catholic nun said she explored Buddhist traditions rather intensely with several teachers. She ultimately “came back to Christ” as she felt as though she were losing her “Christian identity.”

However, according to Bender and Cadge, the Buddhist nuns did not similarly distinguish form and content. Instead, they argued that the form is inseparable from the content in order to remain a Buddhist practice. Therefore, one Buddhist nun stated that what the Catholics were doing was not really Buddhist at all, while another saw the Catholics’ incorporation of Buddhist form as an example of “skillful means,” a Buddhist concept meaning the practical ways of “bringing the dharma into mainstream settings.” In other words, this nun saw the utilization of Buddhist form as an opportunity to draw the Catholic nuns towards Buddhism. The Buddhist

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126 Ibid., 234.
127 Ibid., 239. However, this idea of a single-minded return to Christianity presupposes that Christianity is monolithic or pure and ignores the hybridity and borrowing of content that has come to be constructed and known as Christianity. There are literary, historical, and textual evidences of borrowed or appropriated content from other traditions. For example the story of Noah in Genesis reads similarly to the Epic of Gilgamesh.

nuns see key differences in the way these two traditions practice meditation. For example, where the Catholic nuns set aside specific times for practice, the Buddhist nuns see no separation between practice and daily life. For the Buddhist nuns, practice is daily life. While there are designated times for meditation, practice is more holistic and incorporated into daily chores such as cleaning. For example, while the nun is cleaning, does she have a right mind and concentration? These kinds of daily activities are not separate, but all serve as a part of a non-dual existence. During this discussion one Buddhist nun commented in response to Catholic borrowing that

> What I feel, on occasion, is the sense of having my tradition co-opted [by Catholic friends], and feeling very uncomfortable with that. One question to me was, ‘Okay, if I can fully practice Zen, how can I apply that to the Trinity?’ Well, you can’t! I mean, not from my mind you can’t. So there’s a sense of co-opting, wanting to co-opt the very central experiential piece that one can only experience by giving up everything in totality.\(^{129}\)

These Buddhist nuns critique this kind of picking and choosing as problematic. Another Buddhist nun highlights this concern and states,

> I’m somewhat concerned that in the western countries, people may begin to just sort of take those bits and pieces that they find comfortable and sort of leave the rest of the tradition, where in my view, it’s part of an organic whole. Practice without understanding the Buddha’s teachings or considering the precepts that accompany these practices is missing the point.\(^{130}\)

This is the tone throughout the article, that the Buddhist nuns want to resist the commodification of Buddhist practice in the contemporary spiritual marketplace by presenting Buddhism as a holistic tradition rather than a set of practices from which one may pick and choose. These nuns identified the need for a deep education in both traditions by both sides.

\(^{129}\) Bender and Cadge, "Constructing Buddhism(s),” 237.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.
There were two kinds of dialogue taking place here. First there was the internal Catholic dialogue where Buddhist meditation was idealized and romanticized as a way to counter the busyness of the “Protestant work ethic,” which is the concept of hard work and discipline as a mark of one’s salvation.\textsuperscript{131} Catholic nuns utilized this Buddhist form as a way to slow down and be present. They also saw their incorporation of Buddhist meditation as a response to Vatican II and the encouragement to explore other practices and traditions. Some of these Catholic nuns used Buddhist meditative forms as a way to “invigorat[e] and reviv[e] elements of Catholic contemplative life.”\textsuperscript{132} But in so doing, these Catholic nuns end up exoticizing Buddhist meditation for their own benefit. The second dialogue took place between the Catholic and Buddhist nuns. While the Catholics knew they were borrowing from Buddhism, they also saw themselves as having something to offer. The Catholics perceived that they could offer activism and a social ethic to the Buddhist nuns. However, the Buddhist nuns disagreed. The Buddhists expressed contentment with their tradition. They were not looking for something else in their practice. In fact, they articulated a need to “protect the [Buddhist] tradition” while at the same time constructing a thriving tradition here in the U.S.\textsuperscript{133} According to these nuns, they want to establish Buddhism as a holistic tradition and stop these “piecemeal appropriations.”\textsuperscript{134}

**Perennialism**

I turn now to consider the theory of perennialism. According to Charles Schmitt in "Perennial Philosophy," Agostino Steuco, an Italian Augustinian (1497-1548), coined the Latin

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 241.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 242.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 243.
\end{itemize}
phrase *philosophia perennis*. However, the idea of a common thread or underlying wisdom among traditions has a much longer history as a philosophical tradition stretching back to Plato’s idea of the “perennial fountain.” For Plato, this fountain provided the same questions and common wisdom throughout all cultures and time periods. This wisdom was not inherently religious in nature, but did concern a level of metaphysical inquiry. In this way, the perennial philosophy is an extension of Neoplatonic thought. Steuco was influenced by the ideas of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), an Italian philosopher, who taught that “the conception of perennial philosophy is an outgrowth of the Neoplatonic interest in the *prisca theologia* and of the attempt to produce harmony from discord, unity from multiplicity.” Ficino taught that the underlying unity in the world is that of love by which two streams extend, philosophy and theology. However, according to Ficino, the “[t]rue philosophy is Platonism and true theology is Christianity.” Here we see the origins of perennialism in the West in claiming Christianity as the universal truth.

As a theologian and biblical scholar, Steuco “formulated his own synthesis of philosophy, religion, and history, which he labelled ‘*philosophia perennis*’” and published in an article entitled “De perenni philosophia” in 1540. Through his discussion of the perennial, he intended to indicate what is ‘enduring’ or ‘lasting.’ Steuco’s most obvious theme is that there is one wisdom knowable by all people that has existed since the beginning of humanity, and that a single God has handed this one wisdom down to all people. Because God is the one true

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136 Ibid., 532.
137 Ibid., 508.
138 Ibid., 506.
139 Ibid., 507.
source, the perennial philosophy is Christian theology. For Steuco, religion and philosophy are the same. Thus, reason leads one to the truth of the Christian God. Steuco was critiqued for his attempts to make Platonic thought fit neatly within a Christian framework. German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) as well as many others criticized Steuco for his polemical claims that prioritized Christian theology to the point of absurdity and inconsistency.140

While Aldous Huxley credits Leibniz with the creation of perennial philosophy, in actuality Leibniz’s work draws upon Steuco’s ideas. Leibniz attempted a more detailed analysis of common themes throughout the history of philosophy and sought to articulate a religious unity, critiquing Steuco as merely pointing out what parts of other religious traditions agree with Christianity. Gerardus Johannes Vossius (1577-1649) accused Steuco of “twisting Plato's words to make them agree with Christian teaching.”141 The common thread of all of these critiques of perennial philosophy is that it has been imbued with Christian theology to such an extent that Christianity is reductively asserted as the one true source of wisdom and all wisdom teachings are interpreted in such a way as to support Christian theology.

In *The Underlying Religion*, Martin Lings discusses the emergence of perennialism as a category of comparative religion, also known as the “traditionalist” school, in the early 20th century in the writings of René Guénon (1886-1951).142 According to Clinton Minnaar, the German-Swiss metaphysician Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998) provided the greatest description of perennialism in his writings.143 In *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, Schuon articulated the perennial

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140 Ibid., 525.
141 Ibid., 527.
142 Lings and Minnaar. *The Underlying Religion*, xi.
143 Ibid.
as something innate and hereditary in all of humanity. Most succinctly, Schuon defined the perennial philosophy as the “Absolute.”\textsuperscript{144} The nature of this Absolute, he argued, is “an Essence” that is “at once immanent and transcendent.”\textsuperscript{145} Relying upon the dichotomous theme within Platonism, Schuon articulated perennialism as the Real, Permanent, or Infinite as opposed to the illusory, impermanent, or finite that is represented in this temporal world. Schuon stated that the essential function of human intelligence is discernment between the Real and the illusory or between the Permanent and the impermanent, and the essential function of the will is attachment to the Permanent or the Real. This discernment and this attachment are the quintessence of all spirituality; carried to their highest level or reduced to their purest substance, they constitute the underlying universality in every great spiritual patrimony of humanity, or what may be called the religio perennis.\textsuperscript{146}

For Schuon, discernment separates and attachment or concentration unites. Schuon identified the incarnation as the unifying of these two worlds. He read a similar incarnation in other religious traditions as well.

\textit{Aldous Huxley’s The Perennial Philosophy} is often cited as a central resource for perennialism. As mentioned above, Huxley credits Leibniz for the term \textit{philosophia perennis}, but we saw that it actually originated with Agostino Steuco. Huxley’s definition of the perennial is the one I utilize in this thesis, since it is also the definition that Rohr and Finley draw upon. Huxley states that perennialism is a metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the

\textsuperscript{144} Schuon, \textit{Light On The Ancient Worlds}, 119.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 119-120.
immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.¹⁴⁷

Here Huxley defines perennialism as a metaphysic, a psychology, and an ethic. All of this he couches in language of the “Ground of all being.” However, he does not cite his source for the “Ground of all being.” This phrase originated with twentieth century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology* as a title for the Christian God.¹⁴⁸ The other phrase of interest that Huxley employs is the description of the Ground of all being as both “immanent and transcendent.” This phrase is embedded in Christian theology, as it has been utilized in the Christian tradition to describe the incarnation of Jesus. Huxley goes on to describe perennialism and the nature of this one Reality as follows:

The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfill certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit.¹⁴⁹

Huxley describes those who can attain and understand the nature of reality as “pure in heart” and “poor in spirit.” While he does not explain what these two phrases mean, they stem from Jesus’s teachings in chapter five of the Gospel of Matthew known as the Beatitudes. According to Huxley, the principles of the Beatitudes as well as the one divine Reality are the perennial themes that can be found in every religion.

As I have pointed out in the above survey of perennialism, each of these thinkers was not only making claims about perennialism, but also about Christianity and Christian theology. For

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¹⁴⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, 156.
example, Steuco cites Saint Augustine and the Catholic Church in support of perennialism. Ultimately, the sources they cite in justification of perennialism are Christian as well. While this background is important to understanding the concept of perennialism, I will highlight in the next chapter how Rohr draws on only certain sources in his perennialist claims. He discards the older sources such as Steuco and favors more contemporary advocates for perennialism, such as Huxley, Vatican II, and his understanding of what he calls the “Judeo-Christian tradition.”

In conclusion, in this chapter I have reviewed pertinent literature on the concepts of modern Buddhism, the spiritual marketplace, appropriation, and perennialism in order to lay the groundwork for my close reading of Rohr’s and Finley's texts in the next chapter. I will argue that these concepts are foundational for understanding how Rohr and Finley justify their appropriation of meditation by conflating this practice with Catholic contemplative prayer. In the next chapter, I analyze the claims of Rohr primarily, as well as those of Finley and the CAC as extensions of Rohr.

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150 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 40.
Chapter Two

The Underlying Oneness

In this chapter, I undertake a close reading of Rohr and Finley’s use of the concepts of ecumenism and perennialism as a justification for incorporating Buddhist meditation into their Christian teachings, primarily through the vehicle of the CAC. Rohr’s, and by extension the CAC’s, definition of perennialism goes beyond an acknowledgment of “recurring themes in all of the world’s religions” and identifies these themes of one divine Reality as well as a goal of union with this Reality as the deeper streams of universal truth. For Rohr, these themes are expressed in all the world’s religious traditions. In this chapter, I examine Rohr’s work Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation and his discussions of “The Perennial Tradition” and “Universal Wisdom” available on the CAC’s website. Additionally, I evaluate Finley's text Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God. In this close reading, I focus on their use and interpretation of Christian and Buddhist sources and teachings, considering in particular their claims about Buddhist meditation and their interpretations of perennialism. While Rohr makes other claims involving other religious traditions, I do not examine them in this thesis. However, I will point out that Rohr and Finley's patterns of asserting perennialism, imposing a Christian framework, sampling certain Buddhist texts, and relying upon quotes decontextualized from other Buddhist and Christian texts are representative and recurrent across their works. While their positions tout an interreligious dialogue, counterintuitively, their uses of the themes of unity and truth do not include the perspective of other religious traditions, but

151 Rohr, "The Perennial Tradition."

rather treat those themes solely within the framework of the Christian tradition, or as Rohr calls it, “Tradition with a capital ‘T.’”153 In this chapter, I begin with an overview and examination of Rohr’s expressions of the theme of “oneness” of the perennial tradition and then I consider his claims about the lineage and tradition of what he calls “The Wisdom Tradition.”154 Next, I summarize and evaluate Finley’s articulations of the perennial framework, expressed as “oneness,” and the goal of all meditation as an awareness of said oneness with God.

Thematically, the writings of Richard Rohr and James Finley express the idea of “oneness,” which may be understood to include the concepts of unity, truth, and universalism. Oneness, as a theme, permeates all of their teachings and is the foundation for their claims about truth, God, perennialism, and non-dualism. Rohr’s introduction to Silent Compassion draws on Ephesians 4:4-7 which states, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Finley echoes this in Christian Meditation by declaring that there is “[o]ne God, one world, one truth, one suffering, and one love.”156 According to Rohr, this oneness comprises an underlying river that all peoples and religious traditions can tap into. Additionally, the belief in an objective truth linked to this notion of oneness undergirds

153 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 40.


156 Finley, Christian Meditation, 59.

Rohr’s and Finley’s perennialism. Rohr consistently reminds his readers that “all truth is one.”\textsuperscript{158} Rohr calls on his readers to interpret oneness inclusively, suggesting that all are included in the oneness whether they see it that way or not. Rohr and Finley articulate this theme of oneness as synonymous with “One Absolute” that, for them, informs all of creation. They use the term “One Absolute” interchangeably for the one Reality expressed in perennialism as well as the word they use most often, “oneness.” Rohr calls the Christian God the “Absolute.”\textsuperscript{159} This theme of oneness is foundational for Rohr’s assertions about perennialism as well as central to his ecumenism.

\textbf{The Perennial Tradition for Rohr}

Rohr’s perennialist beliefs are the key to understanding his ecumenism. He sets the tone for the rest of his book \textit{Silent Compassion} when in the introduction he states that the perennial tradition “affirms that there are some constant themes, truths, and recurrences in all the world religions.”\textsuperscript{160} The terms “perennial tradition” and “perennial wisdom” are employed rampantly throughout the CAC website as well as Rohr’s other books. For Rohr, ecumenism is based on an underlying unity, or oneness, of truth, which he believes is accessible to anyone at any time in any space. Thus, in Rohr’s estimation, this interpretation of “oneness” is what enables interreligious dialogue. If one asks foundational questions such as inquiring as to the meaning of life, she will gain access to a universal river from which all truth flows.\textsuperscript{161} Rohr states that

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{159} Rohr, \textit{Silent Compassion}, 44.

\textsuperscript{160} Rohr, \textit{Silent Compassion}, ix.

\textsuperscript{161} Rohr draws frequently from this imagery from Matthew Fox, \textit{One River, Many Wells: Wisdom Springing from Global Faiths} (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2004).
\end{footnotesize}
When you know the Tradition (with the big T), the Judeo-Christian perennial tradition, and you discover the deeper stream, it is so easy to communicate with brothers and sisters of other faith traditions. We can talk from a common base.  

For Rohr, the “common base” is the profound oneness of perennialism that he believes is the center of all existence. The truth that flows from it can come in the form of other religious traditions, but ultimately has the same base—“Judeo-Christian (T)radition.” The Tradition that Rohr refers to is the idea of one ultimate Tradition. This is why he capitalizes Tradition in the same way he employs one Reality, one Absolute, and one Truth. The meaning here emphasizes the perennialism from which all of the world’s religious traditions stem. Each tradition shares in a common core for Rohr. The common core is Rohr’s deeper stream that informs all traditions. According to him, if one only sees the variations of religious traditions expressed on the surface, then you are not looking deep enough. Because his understanding of Christianity proclaims one Reality and a perennialist perspective on other traditions, Rohr presents his Christian tradition as the propagators of the truth of perennialism. Thus his “Judeo-Christian Tradition” is used synonymously with his universal core “Truth,” i.e the deeper stream. What is most interesting about Rohr’s perennialism is the way he deploys it. Rohr claims that all “religions cultivate in their followers a deeper union with God, with each other, and with reality—or what is.” Thus, it is not just that there are universal themes of one Reality and union with that Reality, as identified by perennialism, but these themes are specific and expressed as inherently Christian. More than this, the “Judeo-Christian tradition” becomes the root for all realities, and although it

162 Ibid., 40.
163 Ibid.
164 Rohr, ”The Perennial Tradition.”
may be viewed differently by those of other faiths, nonetheless, what perennialism really is is Christian.\textsuperscript{165}

Rohr’s terminology is monotheistic and reflects the understanding of a Christian deity, not just any interchangeable god of “oneness.” This monotheism is reflected in Rohr’s usage of one Absolute and one Reality as he articulates “the truth that there is only one.”\textsuperscript{166} His rhetorical style invokes overtly Christian imagery and then imposes this framework upon other religious traditions. For example, Rohr speaks frequently on the subject of the Trinity as “the absolute foundational theology of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{167} He goes on to assert the truth of this Trinitarian concept for other religions, but claims each tradition merely uses different vocabulary to describe it. He claims that “while we use different language, most religions at the mature levels have come to a notion of God as a dynamic flow, a communion, God as relationship itself, or the very ‘Ground of Being’ as Paul says (Acts 17:28).”\textsuperscript{168} Again, we see overtly Christian language to make universal claims about other religious traditions. While other traditions may not articulate the same monotheistic beliefs, for Rohr, it is only a matter of semantics. As we saw earlier, Rohr espouses that all religious traditions share in the reality that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item There is a Divine Reality underneath and inherent in the world of things,
  \item There is in the human soul a natural capacity, similarity, and longing for this Divine Reality,
  \item The final goal of existence is union with this Divine Reality.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{165} Rohr, \textit{Silent Compassion}, 40.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 30.

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 30-31.

\textsuperscript{169} Rohr, "The Perennial Tradition."
Significantly, these three points are based upon and only slightly different from Aldous Huxley’s definition presented in *The Perennial Philosophy*, which was discussed in chapter one.

It is interesting to note that one difference between Rohr’s and Huxley’s formulations is that Rohr adds the capital “D” in “Divine Reality” in his list of themes. This appears to imply a single Divine rather than a divine in general. Considering Rohr’s views regarding the centrality of “oneness” and the “oneness” of his Christian God, we may infer that his perennialism is indeed a Christian perennialism. Rohr centers his concept of (D)ivine oneness in the scriptural claims of John 17:21. The passage articulates a prayer from Jesus “that they [all believers] may be one.”

For Rohr, this text reflects a profound oneness as the nature of all reality, and the idea of one river, one truth, and one deity at the center of that reality. He declares that the identity of this one deity and one truth is the Christian God and Christian doctrine.

As I outlined in chapter one, perennialism has a Christian background. Despite the history of perennial philosophy beginning in Neoplatonic thought, the language Huxley and other authors employ is highly Christian. Huxley used the terms “immanent” and “transcendent” to describe divine reality. Rohr, who capitalizes the “R” in reality as he did with the “D” in divine, samples and like Huxley uses the term “Ground of all being” to refer to the Christian God. As I pointed out in chapter one, this term originated with the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich as a descriptor of the Christian God, although Rohr cites Acts 17:28 as the source of this phrase. For Rohr, it is the Christian understanding of God and the relational unity expressed in

170 Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, xi.
171 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
the Trinity that is proclaimed as universal truth. Thus, it appears that Christianity is the founder, owner, and disseminator of universal truth in Rohr’s perspective.

I cannot overemphasize the fact that Rohr calls the perennial tradition “the Judeo-Christian perennial tradition.”175 This implies a sense of ownership that runs throughout Rohr’s writings. He claims that Christianity is responsible for this universal doctrine. In fact, truth itself is under Christian ownership according to Rohr. He claims that Christianity has always been the only true religion even before it had a name. His grounds for this assertion are expressed in Silent Compassion and come from his understanding of Saint Augustine, whom he calls, interestingly, a “4th century mystic.”176 Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) has been a foundational Doctor of the Church in his contributions to the Roman Catholic Church doctrine. His personal testimony in his Confessions has been crucial to teachings of the Trinity, Original Sin, and divine grace. Rohr’s position appears as a re-articulation of St. Augustine’s assertions when he claims Christian ownership of all truths. This is the claim of ‘all truth is God’s truth’ that has endured through the Christian tradition. Rohr draws on this quote from Augustine’s Retractions:

For what is now called the Christian religion existed even among the ancients and was not lacking from the beginning of the human race until "Christ came in the flesh." From that time, true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian.177

Rohr interprets this claim to mean that Christianity has been and always will be the one true religion. For Rohr, Christianity holds the corner market on truth and therefore lays claim to it. This notion reflects a sense of what theologian John Cobb calls “elitism” and rightness against a

175 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 40.
176 Ibid., 74.
177 Saint Augustine, The Retractions, 52.
perceived wrongness of other religions.\textsuperscript{178} The implication is also that if something is found to be true in another tradition, it inherently is Christian because Christianity is the core of truth. Rohr makes this explicit when he states that “any truth that keeps recurring and gathers humanity’s positive energy is called wisdom and most assuredly has to be from the One Holy Spirit.”\textsuperscript{179} This assertion is foundational for Rohr’s perennialism and enables Christianity to claim as its own whatever appears to come under the theme of truth or oneness. Rohr uses the same Augustinian quote to substantiate another aspect of his perennialism, the oneness that permeates all of life, reading it as an example of the thematic reality of one truth as expressed in the perennial philosophy. For these reasons, Rohr interprets Augustine as an early proponent of the perennial tradition.

Rohr’s claims are self-justifying in that the one true God is proclaimed in Christianity and therefore Christianity is the one true religion. This stance on Christian ownership of truth is represented in his critique of the European Enlightenment. He states, “They stole our word! Did you ever think of that? That [Enlightenment] was a New Testament concept, largely emerging from Jesus, who said he was the Enlightener (John 8:12).”\textsuperscript{180} Rohr’s choice of words here, claiming that Jesus calls himself ‘the Enlightener,’ (with a capital E) offers insight into his interpretation of this passage and illustrates the larger theme of ownership that characterizes his writings. Rohr changes the language that has Jesus claiming, “I am the light of the world” in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[178] Critiques of Christian elitism have been typically attached to the notions of Jesus as Messiah as the only true way to God. According to theologian and scholar John Cobb, this elitism has served as an impediment to true interreligious dialogue and engagement between Christianity and Buddhism. See John B. Cobb, Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998).
\item[179] Rohr, "The Perennial Tradition."
\item[180] Rohr, Silent Compassion, 12.
\end{footnotes}
John 8:12.181 By reinterpreting this passage and changing the language, Rohr claims Christian ownership of the Enlightenment and Enlightenment philosophy as well as provides another articulation of the oneness reflected in Jesus as the Enlightener. Moreover, he continuously points to Jesus as the author and founder of any and all truth. With Jesus as the founder of truth, it follows for Rohr that Jesus would also own all truth.

This idea of the one God and the one underlying river of truth for Rohr rests in the doctrine of the Trinity. According to Rohr, the mystery of the three-in-one deity informs all other doctrine and the profound unity we ought to seek through contemplative life. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the idea that God is three distinct persons comprising one relational deity. In order to understand oneness, Rohr states that

> We must finally go back to the ultimate Christian source for our principle—the central doctrine of the Trinity itself. Yes, God is one, just as our Jewish ancestors taught us (Deuteronomy 6:4), and yet the further, more subtle, level is that this oneness is, in fact, the radical love union between three completely distinct persons of the Trinity.182

For Rohr, the three persons of the Trinity are not gendered, nor are they uniform. They are distinct and yet unified in loving relationship as a model for life and all human relationship. The Trinity is the model for how to become one, not two, according to Rohr. The Trinity conquers the idea of two-dualism. Where the Trinity is harmony, unity, and relationship, dualism is “inherently comparative, competitive, and antagonistic, and usually either/or.”183 The Trinity is not a belief to be rationally acknowledged, but a reality to be embraced and lived with a meditative mind. Rohr asserts that “[t]he doctrine of the Trinity invites and, in fact, necessitates, non-dual consciousness, a contemplative mind to even begin to process this non-rational mystery.

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182 Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, xii.
183 Ibid., 17.
of God." Rohr uses “contemplative mind” and “non-dualism” back and forth interchangeably. For him, a contemplative mind is inherently non-dualistic. Through meditative practice the mind moves beyond the dualistic thinking of the ego. Rohr asserts that the mind is able to ascend to non-dualism because of the Trinity. He claims that the perennial is the only response to the divisiveness of dualism; it unites in oneness.

Non-dualism is a consistent theme in Rohr’s teachings. He defines his understanding of non-dualism by opposition, articulating what dualism is and then stating that non-dualism is not that. He claims that dualistic thinking is “where everything is separated into opposites, like life and death.” He goes on to say, “[i]t is when you choose one side, or temperamentally prefer one side, and call the other side of the equation false, wrong, heresy, or untrue.” Dualism is a kind of thinking that categorizes into either/or rather than both/and. There is light and dark as well as good and bad. Rohr declares that the “dualistic mind splits the moment and forbids the dark side, the mysterious, the paradoxical.”

Here again Rohr points to Jesus as a teacher of the truth of non-dualism. He declares that Jesus was “the first non-dualistic teacher for the West.” He does not explain this statement nor does he point out what he qualifies as the West. Nowhere in Silent Compassion does he cite any scriptural examples for the teachings of Jesus that he understands as non-dualistic teachings. He claims that the writings of Paul and John in the New Testament also exemplify the principle of non-dualism and interprets them generously to

184 Ibid., 30.

185 Ibid., 10.

186 Ibid.

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid., 73.

189 In addition, I could not find any scriptural references to the teachings of Jesus concerning non-dualism on the CAC website.
agree with his point. As briefly mentioned earlier, Rohr’s interpretation of New Testament teachings is at odds with passages such as Mark 14:38 that reflect the influence of Platonic thought in the New Testament, in dualisms such as spirit/body and divine/human.\textsuperscript{190}

**Lineage**

Lineage plays an important role for Rohr. As a Catholic, he presents a list of influences with whom he aligns and claims to have been taught by. Rohr advocates living examples and personal contact for transmission or teaching and claims to be in alignment with the relational transmission of teaching in Buddhism. He praises “the East” for recognizing that “transmission of spirituality takes place through living models, whom they called gurus, sanyassis, pandits, or avatars.”\textsuperscript{191} However, this kind of direct contact with living teachers is not what he employs in his practice. His website and his works cited in this thesis employ a traditional Catholic practice of lineage, based on the study of texts by way of apostolic authority through the Church.\textsuperscript{192} It seems like his intentions are well aligned to the spirit of Buddhist teachings but his application seems skewed; his claims are at odds with his practice. For example, in *Silent Compassion*, Rohr shares what he calls “A Time Line of Mysticism” that goes on for four pages in chronological order, but is basically a list of names.\textsuperscript{193} He claims alignment with this long list of influencers of mysticism from Socrates to Philo of Alexandria to Clement, Origen, St. Francis, Thomas Merton, Mark 14:38 states: “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” For influence of Greek philosophy on the New Testament, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009).

\textsuperscript{191} Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, 68.

\textsuperscript{192} For a further look at Catholic lineage, see John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{193} Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, 73.
and all the way to modern day figures such as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mother Teresa. While he admits the list is not an exhaustive look at mysticism, he does not provide the reader with any kind of textual references for these figures or articulate any of the major themes they might be known for in relation to mysticism. The reader is left asking more questions about the content and teachings of these figures. In the places that he does quote a figure, such as St. Augustine, as previously discussed, he does not develop a sustained discourse that illustrates how his theology is informed by the hallmarks of Augustinian thought. Primarily, Rohr uses these quotes as ways to rearticulate his own assertions. In another example, his bibliography in Silent Compassion draws frequently on himself as a reference. Out of the sixteen quotes he uses in this text, he cites himself six times.

Rohr’s tendency toward self-reference is even more apparent on the CAC’s website. Here he presents a list under the heading of “Wisdom Lineage” that is thematic and intends to show ideas with which he claims alignment. Some of the themes in this list include the Bible, “Orthopraxy in much of Buddhism,” “Desert Fathers and Mothers,” “non-dual thinkers of all religions,” and early Franciscanism. When one clicks on any one of these links, it opens an audio file of Rohr speaking about his understandings and interpretations of these themes. Once again, there is no list of references or even quotes used. One will not find a reading list on the website outside of Rohr’s own books.

Rohr’s “Wisdom lineage” reads like a prime example of the spiritual marketplace. It is a bricolage sampled from a wide variety of sources and interpreted in line with Rohr’s beliefs. The

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194 Ibid., 73-76.
195 Ibid., 77.
CAC’s website states, “Fr. Richard Rohr’s lineage includes the teachers, texts, and traditions that have most formed his own ideas and experiences of God.” However, his influences appear to all be textual, with no transmissions of teaching from living teachers. In Silent Compassion Rohr states, “[l]earning from teacher after teacher, from many traditions, I began to name and understand my own experience,” but without elaboration as to which particular teachers, religious traditions, or modes of transmission. His statement on the CAC website that “[t]he things I teach come from a combination of inner and outer authority, drawn from personal experience and a long lineage of the ‘perennial tradition’ as Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith, Ken Wilber, and many others have called it,” specifically references perennialism as one of his major influences. These are the more contemporary sources Rohr utilizes for his understanding of perennialism. Rohr quotes Smith on the CAC website to claim that “[i]f we take the world’s enduring religions at their best, we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race.” Rohr interprets Smith’s claim to mean that there is one underlying wisdom among the world’s religions. Rohr does not rely upon the previously mentioned scholars of perennialism such as Steuco or Leibniz, but instead draws on more contemporary sources to construct his articulations of perennialism. Another example of a perennialist source for Rohr is Dr. John L. Esposito in his article, “The Perennial Tradition in an Age of Globalization.” Rohr again quotes on the CAC website Esposito’s claim that the perennial tradition helps “to combat religious discrimination and conflicts between and within religious traditions, and to develop more pluralistic paths of

197 Ibid.
198 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 65.
199 Rohr, ”The Perennial Tradition.”
religious spirituality." It is important to note that Rohr’s sources for perennialism come from within the Christian tradition, as I will continue to discuss below. In addition, those sources from Buddhism that he cites as proponents of perennialism are limited and loosely interpreted at best. Once again we see a list of names that he cites as influences, but with little explanation of what particular aspects of these thinkers’ ideas he has been influenced by. Rohr offers no Buddhist authors or texts on the website’s list of lineage, but claims alignment with Buddhism. He also does not elucidate any Buddhist ideas, but again presents his own thoughts. In so doing, Rohr appears to “name drop” rather than successfully synthesizing Catholic and/or Buddhist mysticism for the everyday practitioner. His claims to be representing these thinkers and texts seem unsubstantial.

Sources of Authority

Another authoritative claim Rohr makes is to the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II (1962-1965), was an ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church that specifically addressed the relationship of the Church with the rest of the world’s major religions in hopes for interreligious dialogue. As an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic Church, Rohr aligns with and identifies himself as a Vatican II priest. In particular Rohr cites Nostra Aetate, the Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian

\[201\] Ibid.

\[202\] Huston Smith was a scholar of religious studies and is primarily known for producing works on the world’s religions. Ken Wilber is a philosopher and author on transpersonal psychology. He also is the author of the Integral Theory, a comprehensive metatheory pertaining to all of life.

\[203\] It is not my intention to downplay the Catholic tradition, but merely to point out the inconsistencies and conflations of Rohr’s claims concerning Catholic and Buddhist lineage.

Religions. According to Rohr, this document “praise[s] Native religion, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam as ‘reflecting a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people’.” Rohr also draws on the document’s claim that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” Therefore, Rohr says, through Vatican II, the Church “affirms that there are some constant themes, truths, and recurrences in all the world religions.” For Rohr, the Council’s affirmation is further justification for his assertions concerning perennialism. These quotes from Vatican II also support Rohr’s claims of ecumenism. He is an authoritative representative of the Catholic Church, so where Vatican II affirms perennialism and ecumenism, Rohr is justified to proclaim the same. We can see a small example of Rohr’s moves toward an even deeper ecumenism than what Vatican II offers in his changing of the word “men” to “people.” The original quote from Nostra Aetate reads “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” Rohr changed this word to “people” to reflect a more inclusive and gender neutral idea.

In addition, Nostra Aetate speaks of Buddhism in a way similar to what we have seen from Rohr. The document states:

Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination.

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206 Rohr, Silent Compassion, ix.

207 Nostra Aetate, sec 2.

208 Rohr, Silent Compassion, ix.

209 Nostra Aetate, sec 2.

210 Ibid.
Even in this attempt to be inclusive, these statements about Buddhism come across as filtered through a Christian lens.

By invoking such names as Augustine and the institution of the Second Vatican Council, both authoritative and formative voices within the Christian tradition, Rohr claims their authority to validate his teachings and assertions. Yet it must be noted that because these are Christian sources, Rohr is presenting perennialism as a Christian belief reflected through Christian sources. Furthermore, neither Rohr nor Vatican II address who is the arbiter of “that Truth that enlightens all people.” Who determines what is to be understood as “true and holy in these religions?”

Rohr cites two Buddhist sources as authoritative for his claims about perennialism: Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Hanh has become a well-known peace activist, author of more than 100 books, and advocate for Engaged Buddhism throughout the West. His unique voice aims to explain Buddhist teachings to a culturally Christian society. In an article entitled “Deep Ecumenism” on the CAC’s website, Rohr draws on Matthew Fox’s book One River, Many Wells, in which Fox quotes Hanh as saying, “Through the practice of deep looking and deep listening, we become free, able to see the beauty and values in our own and others’ traditions.” Rohr interprets this to mean that Hanh aligns with the perennial philosophy in the same way that...

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211 Rohr, Silent Compassion, ix.


213 For example, one of Hanh’s popular books is entitled, Living Buddha, Living Christ. Thich Nhất Hạnh, Living Buddha, Living Christ (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015).

he does. Through the lens of Rohr’s perennialism, he reads Hanh as saying that we see the same thing in all traditions, the underlying oneness of truth.

It is interesting to note that Rohr never cites Hanh directly on his website or in Silent Compassion, instead citing another text that has pulled a one-sentence quote from Hanh. In Silent Compassion Rohr includes Hanh’s name in a list of thinkers whom he claims align with his non-dualism, but he does not cite any of Hanh’s writings. All of this leads me to conclude that Rohr has interpreted Hanh as an advocate of “non-dualism” in the same way as himself, and also of perennialism and “oneness.” As we have seen, throughout Rohr’s writings is a tendency to claim that historical figures and leaders of other religious traditions agree with his perennialism, while rarely quoting these sources and instead offering his own interpretations of these sources.

Rohr continues this pattern of interpretation in his discussion of the Dalai Lama. Rohr mentions the Dalai Lama’s name throughout Silent Compassion, but never quotes one of his texts. Describing the Dalai Lama’s participation in a conference they both attended, Rohr states that the Dalai Lama came “to spread his own message of peace, of mysticism, a blend of action and contemplation built on an ancient tradition that has so characterized his life.” In describing the Dalai Lama’s intentions here, Rohr uses terminology from the name of his own organization: “action and contemplation.” It is important to note that he uses the term “contemplation” rather than meditation. For Rohr these two are one and the same. The other important piece here is Rohr invoking the term “ancient tradition.” In doing so, Rohr makes a subtle claim to authority and authenticity by implying that the Dalai Lama is practicing the same “ancient tradition” of Buddhism that has existed unchanged for thousands of years. This idea of continuity evokes

215 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 76.

216 Ibid., vi.
messages of a pure and authentic Buddhism that presumably can be traced back to the Buddha. Here Rohr draws a parallel between the Dalai Lama and himself in that they are both advocates for action and contemplation as well as practitioners of a long-standing tradition.

Rohr makes another claim regarding the Dalai Lama later in his book. He states, “I think the genius of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism is that they do not get lost in metaphysics and argumentation about dogmas and doctrines; they just do not go there. As the Dalai Lama says, ‘My religion is kindness; my only religion is kindness’.” Here Rohr identifies another perceived overlap between the Dalai Lama and himself: that they both share a belief in an underlying oneness and perennialism. Here Rohr praises the Dalai Lama and Buddhism for their commitment to staying relevant and not getting caught up in metaphysical issues. However, Rohr does not explain how he understands the Dalai Lama’s assertion that his religion is kindness as a form of perennialism, which claims one divine Reality and a unity with that Reality. The reader is left wondering how these two ideas are the same thing for Rohr.

Rohr’s lack of clarity about the relationship between metaphysics and perennialism becomes clear when we return to Rohr’s definition of perennialism. He writes, “I like British philosopher Aldous Huxley’s (1894-1963) description [of perennialism] as the combination of a spiritual metaphysics, a recurring psychology of the human person, and an ethic or morality that flows from these two.” This claim and the one concerning the Dalai Lama contradict one another. He interprets the Dalai Lama as claiming a lack of metaphysical concern in Buddhism, but Huxley’s definition of perennialism, that Rohr claims he shares, is itself a metaphysic. What

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217 Ibid., 67.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
220 Rohr, "The Perennial Tradition."
appears here is an inconsistency with Rohr’s statements. He asserts that Buddhism is not concerned with metaphysics, but then he draws on Huxley to claim that perennialism is by definition a metaphysic. While he believes he is setting up an all-inclusive framework for interreligious dialogue, his unsubstantiated claims and his contradictions reveal a superficial awareness of Buddhist meditation and Buddhist tradition.

In the next section, I turn my attention to a discussion of Dr. James Finley and, like Rohr, the ways in which he conflates notions of Buddhist meditation and Catholic contemplation. Finley’s focus on universal wisdom stems from his Christian hermeneutics that moves outward to impose this way of knowing onto a Buddhist practice. Like Rohr, Finley’s ecumenism responds to a Christian interpretation of perennialism.

**Finley’s “Oneness”**

The primary text I use from Finley is his book *Christian Meditation* (2005). I also rely upon a joint audio teaching entitled “Jesus and Buddha: Paths to Awakening” by Rohr and Finley, recorded and compiled from a 2008 CAC conference. On this CD, Finley is the primary teacher on the material concerning Buddhism. Finley seems to share Rohr’s conviction that there is an underlying similarity between Christianity and other religions. In *Christian Meditation*, he asserts that there is a “stunning affinity that sometimes exists between Christian and non-Christian sources of spiritual wisdom.”221 He expresses this commonality through the vehicle of meditation and oneness. Finley claims that the goal of Christian meditation is to become aware of something that has been present all along: oneness with God. He believes this is a non-dualistic approach to God as well as humanity; all are one. This oneness extends to the

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221 Finley, *Christian Meditation*, 3.
underlying theme of all religions, according to Finley. In fact, he also claims that all meditation, no matter the tradition, shares this aim. He states that

[t]he methods of Yoga and Zen — and, for that matter, the methods of the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah and the Muslim mystical tradition of the Sufis — all resonate with the Christian mystical tradition. All share various spiritual practices that, when engaged in with heartfelt devotion and commitment can evoke or invite a profound, life-transforming realization of oneness with the divine.\(^{222}\)

Here Finley asserts that while there are varying forms of meditative practice, the content and goal are the same across traditions. In doing so Finley conflates these practices from different traditions and places them under the perennialist heading of oneness. Finley’s belief as to the unified goal in these various traditions seemingly justifies his incorporation of their various practices. For example, by utilizing Buddhist meditation, he claims he will end up with the same realizations as practicing any other tradition’s take on meditation. He draws on his own experience of practicing walking meditation with other Buddhists and Christians, asserting that “Walking slowly, in silence, single file, around the room with Buddhists and fellow Christians was for me a powerful experience of the ecumenical potential of contemplative spirituality. For in walking together we were, I sensed, realizing our oneness with each other in ways that acknowledged and transcended the differences between us.”\(^{223}\) He claims to have realized oneness with others in the room despite being from different traditions. I suggest this is a speculation that all these people were practicing the same thing with the same focus and aim. Here, Finley imposes his understanding of oneness as the goal of meditation onto the others practicing in the room. In so doing, he filters his practice through his Christian framework and assumes that the experience was similar for the other practitioners who were individually

\(^{222}\) Ibid., 18-19.

\(^{223}\) Ibid., 267.
meditating in presumably their own unique methods and traditions. Finley essentializes and universalizes meditation and contemplation as a human experience. He states that “[e]ach of us is living out of our own unique edition of the one universal story of how we, as human beings, discover and respond to the divine origin and fulfillment of our lives.”

This is how Finley articulates his perennialism in the form of universalism.

It is important to note that while Finley does not use the word “perennial” in his writings, he does frequently invoke the rhetoric of universalism. He agrees with Rohr that there is an underlying oneness in the nature of reality and that this reality is the one Christian God. However, where Finley appears to diverge from Rohr is in his involvement with interreligious dialogue, limited though it may be. Finley mentions attending a Buddhist-Christian conference at Naropa University in the mid-1980s. Here he attended sessions led by Zen master Eido Roshi, where he learned walking meditation and went on to incorporate it into his Christian practice. In Christian Meditation, Finley offers the reader instruction for walking meditation that includes a Zen position of “making a fist with one hand, then folding the other hand over it, and holding both hands in front of you at the level of your stomach or over your heart.” Finley adds Christian theological content to this form, once again expressed as the goal of realized oneness with God. He states that he “began to incorporate walking meditation into my own practice of meditation in the Christian tradition.”

But despite claiming interreligious dialogue, here too there is a lack of Buddhist sources. It is not in the book but instead on Finley’s website that we

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224 Ibid., 132.
225 Ibid., xii.
226 Ibid., 268.
227 Ibid., 267.
see inclusion of a few Buddhist texts, such as Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught*.

However, he still interprets these sources through a Christian lens. His website states that he draws “from both Christian and Buddhist sources in focusing on meditation as a way to pass beyond theories and ideas into an intimate experience of God's oneness with us in life itself.”

Again, we see Finley’s interpretation of Christian theology as the lens through which he views all meditation.

As a psychologist, Finley highlights the healing properties of meditation. He calls upon the narratives of Jesus as healer to present meditation as a tool of that healing. He states,

> Meditation practice has the potential of playing a powerful and decisive role in this healing process. Through meditation we can learn to be less anxious, less depressed, less addictive — in short, less subject to the all the ways in which we as human beings suffer and, in our suffering, contribute to the suffering of others.

This move to psychologize meditation under the heading of Jesus as healer decontextualizes meditation and reframes its properties as Christian. Finley credits his faith in God as well as his meditative practices for his own life’s healing. Finley’s expertise as a psychologist draws on the psychologizing of Buddhist meditation as previously discussed in the example of Kabat-Zinn.

These works by Rohr and Finley express their beliefs of a deep and underlying ecumenism as expressed in the Perennial Tradition. They both draw on the Catholic contemplative tradition as well as select Buddhist sources they interpret to align with them. Rohr cites Buddhist authorities such as Thich Nhat Hanh (Mahayana) and the Dalai Lama (Tibetan) to substantiate his “deep ecumenical” claims, asserting that they are in agreement with him about the truth of perennialism. Finley recommends texts by D.T. Suzuki (Zen) and Walpola Rahula

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(Theravada) as authorities on Buddhism. In doing so, both Rohr and Finley end up creating a spiritual grab bag of Buddhist traditions. Importantly, this practice represents the non-lineage approach to Buddhist sources and authoritative voices, as previously discussed by Lopez, in constructing one’s own bricolage of Buddhist sources across traditions. In the next chapter, I will argue that their practice of approaching Buddhist practice from a perennialist perspective leads them to conflate Zen meditation with Catholic contemplation and predisposes them to appropriation of these practices, which ultimately is not inclusive and does not genuinely foster interreligious dialogue because it replicates the asymmetrical power relations between Christianity and Buddhism established during the British colonial project in Asia.
Chapter Three

Perennialism and Appropriation

In the previous chapters I presented some of the history and context for perennialism and discussed how the CAC, through Rohr and Finley, uses perennialism as a justification for its incorporation of Buddhist meditation. In this concluding chapter, I will show why this is problematic, for the following reasons: 1) it replicates a colonial power dynamic, 2) it ignores context, 3) it conflates traditions and practices, and 4) it is a form of appropriation insofar as it rearticulates Buddhist meditation through a Christian framework and imbues it with theological meaning. Here, I recognize that my use of the term appropriation opens a tenuous discussion that situates it on shaky grounds between issues of religious hybridity and essentialism. Thus, in part, the discussion that follows will contextualize the term with regards to its use in religious discourse. I seek to problematize the various discussions on appropriation insofar as I specify the processes that scholars identify as related to appropriation. This thesis highlights paths for future inquiry about how scholars can continue to develop these nuanced theoretical discussions on appropriation. Again, I emphasize the intended goal of Rohr and Finley through the CAC as one of a progressive representation of Christianity that responds to a culture of religious hybridity. Rohr and Finley attempt to step forward in inclusivity, pushing back on those parts of Christianity that have previously been perceived as exclusivist. The following highlights what I believe to be some blind spots within this aim of inclusivity. These moves of appropriation are not unique to the CAC and this case study provides an example of the trend within the spiritual marketplace.
Colonialism

As I outlined in chapter one, Buddhist meditation became associated with the laity due to British colonial influence in Burma in the nineteenth century. Prior to colonial rule, it was the governing body’s responsibility to support and promote Buddhism in Burma. Under British rule, it was Queen Victoria’s desire that the ruling body stay out of local religion. Thus, this hands-off approach to governing became a perceived threat to the structure of Buddhism. This in turn brought forward a surge of activity among the laity. Because the support for and the promotion of Buddhism was threatened due to the shifting governmental rule, meditation became a vehicle of enlightenment for all to practice, not just monks. As discussed in chapter one, lay meditation began as a response to colonial rule and now, in the example of the CAC, it represents a replication of colonial discourse in the spiritual marketplace by means of appropriation. Importantly, colonial practice forced the position in which Buddhist meditation became ready-at-hand for cultural assimilation through the spiritual marketplace. Now I shall turn my discussion to the aspects of colonialism that facilitate the CAC’s appropriative actions.

Colonialism inherently creates and maintains a power differential. The colonizer takes a position of authority over the subordinated group in order to disseminate and impose their social structure on the subordinated peoples. In the context of the British presence in Asia, the theological position that Christianity is the only true religion became embedded within the social hierarchy. Thus, the group in power, in this case Christians, asserts a theological framework onto the subordinated group. In step with this hegemonic practice, Rohr and Finley impose a Christian framework upon meditation and Buddhism in general. In a sense, they colonize meditation and impose a new meaning and theological framework upon it. It may not be that Rohr wants to use meditation as represented in Buddhism, however, it would appear that he does not accept or
acknowledge this Buddhist practice in the vein in which it was given, explained, and practiced. I assert that he is imbuing this practice with Christian theology in his claims that when a Buddhist practices meditation, she does so with the aim of a realization of oneness with God. I interpret this stance as the replication of colonial discourse and see this as a justification of the colonizer. I submit that in this way Rohr and Finley filter these religious practices through the colonizer’s lens. There seems to be a lack of awareness of difference and power. I offer that this is a kind of theological blind spot in that both Rohr and Finley appear somewhat unaware of their own religious positionality and perceive other religious traditions as Christian reflections.

Context

Next, I turn my analysis to the problem of decontextualizing a text and its connection to textual reliance. I affirm that Rohr and Finley argue tradition from a position of textual primacy. This means that they sample portions from various religious texts, and problematically, they choose these samples because they see them as representative of the one truth, given their perennialist lens. However, then they use their own sampling process to reinforce their Christian position. I suggest that the primacy of text, whether in Buddhism or in Christianity, is a largely unchallenged belief and may be traced to the questions of authority raised by the Protestant Reformation. During the Reformation, the question of ‘where does authority lie?’ and the declared answer of ‘sola scriptura’ prioritized textual primacy. This reliance upon text alone can be seen in the colonial engagement with Buddhism. As discussed in chapter one, Buddhism became a textual religion due to colonialism. The Asian practitioner and her guru-mentee relationship as well as the socio-historical context were irrelevant once the European scholar had

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a translated text in hand. The text was then lauded as the true and pure expression of Buddhism in place of the living practice. The viewpoints of those indigenous to regions of Buddhist history and practice have been jettisoned in favor of the primacy of the text. The Reformation, as a precursor to the Enlightenment, in part fueled the shift away from reliance on the divine experience and the somatic for truth in Northern European cultures and in its stead rationality and dependence upon textual inquiry became the basis for Protestant hermeneutics. Although Rohr and Finley claim to reinvigorate a history and tradition of mysticism (or mystical union), they end up reifying a knowledge based upon textual reliance that guides experience. They still draw upon the text primarily in order to inform the experience. Subsequently, these texts become commodities further devoid of tradition, history, and even explanation. The texts become the essentialized representation of Buddhism to the West.

Furthermore, I assert that Rohr is attempting to essentialize meditation through a Catholic mystical lens because his goal is to understand meditation by way of Catholic contemplation. One goal of the colonizer is to erase the subordinate practice and replace it with their own: to require the colonized to filter their own interpretations of the world through the colonial paradigm and submit to its hierarchy. In my estimation, it is this reductivist perspective that squelches the uniqueness and the expressions of the subordinated group, in this case, traditional practitioners of Buddhist meditation based upon the guru-mentee relationship maintained by lineage. Thus, with respect to what Rohr and Finley postulate, they seem to decontextualize meditation and essentialize the other.

Here, I suggest that Rohr and Finley do this by way of their perennialist perspective. By its mere definition, perennialism suppresses the context of traditions in that it claims to have one unifying thread to which all religions are linked. This position homogenizes and presents a
unified whole and ignores the cultural and historical dynamism involved in religious expression. This kind of theological attempt is revealed in Rohr and Finley’s usage of sections of texts from another tradition as a means to justify their own claims. King speaks of this problem by stating:

...to suggest that one can lift out sections of a text (which have already been transformed by English translation) and recontextualize them without significantly changing the meaning and interpretive tone of such excerpts is to display considerable hermeneutical naïveté. Quotations are provided but there is no attempt to provide a sense of the social, historical or cultural location of these religious expressions. This is perhaps no surprise since the perennialist position tends to underplay the significance of sociohistorical context.²³²

Perennialism attempts to lift religion out of the complicated and imbricated existence it has in real life application. I understand perennialism to suggest that there is meaning beyond the context. This is not surprising considering the constant description of perennialism as transcendent that we saw in chapter one. Perennialism attempts to find something pure and ancient upon which to anchor all other religions. If it can accomplish that, it carries a weight of authority by way of tradition.

**Conflation**

By invoking a rhetoric of tradition, Rohr and Finley attempt to sidestep issues of heresy. Here, I use the term heresy to signify the simultaneous adherence to divergent religious doctrines, such as the conjoined worship of Jesus and the Buddha. Rohr and Finley avoid this notion of heresy by making claims about a congruent past. This implies authority and harmony with tradition. If they point out a history of meditation within the Christian church, then there is apparently no incongruity in continuing that practice today. I suggest that this may be one of the reasons they impose the Christian framework onto Buddhist meditation. By claiming that

²³² King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 163.
meditation is indeed the same thing as contemplation in the mystical tradition of the Catholic Church, it should not be problematic for the Christian adherent to practice.

Again, this points to an authoritative and authentic past that is being lived out in the present. They do not recognize Buddhist meditative practice as inherently diverse or culturally distinct from Catholic contemplation. In fact, they openly assert they are borrowing from another tradition, but that the content is the same. They claim that this move is authentic to the heart of Christianity due to the truth of perennialism that there is only one. Therefore, by their justification, Christianity is not tainted, appropriation is validated, and perennialism is the anchor that holds all this together. All of this is under the authoritative heading of tradition and this tradition is expressed in sacred texts.

Rohr and Finley’s reasons for their reliance upon textual primacy are not addressed in the sources cited for this thesis. In fact, they continuously make claims to be engaging in interreligious dialogue but do not cite any examples other than the texts sampled in the sources used for this thesis, as addressed in chapter two. In *Silent Compassion* Rohr states, “[t]he divisions, dichotomies, and dualisms of the world can only be overcome by a unitive consciousness at every level: personal, relational, social, political, cultural, in interreligious dialogue, and in spirituality in particular.”233 After Rohr’s call to a unitive consciousness through interreligious dialogue, he goes on to quote Jesus, Julian of Norwich, and Paul. I offer that Rohr’s perpetual call to interreligious dialogue in these sources is limited to only texts. I interpret Rohr’s textual sampling to be a form of self-justifying interpretation of other traditions. I suggest that, like we saw in chapter one with the spiritual marketplace, the individual becomes procurer and arbitrator of religious commodities. I submit that Rohr makes himself the authoritative voice as he samples those pieces of spirituality that he reads as aligning with his Christianity. While

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233 Rohr, *Silent Compassion*, xi.
this is no different than any other shopper’s actions in the spiritual marketplace, Rohr has a platform within the Christian community as a teacher and leader through the mission of the CAC. Throughout the CAC website and Rohr’s texts cited here, he makes claims about the aim of Buddhist meditation as the same goal of Christian contemplation: oneness with God. Rohr offers his interpretation and understanding of Buddhism on the website, but does not cite where he has gotten his information. He draws on Paul Knitter to assert that ‘Buddhism can help Christians to be mystical Christians . . . to realize and enter into the non-dualistic, or unitive, heart of Christian experience.’ Rohr offers his interpretation and understanding of Buddhism on the website, but does so without an earned authority or transmission within the Buddhist tradition. For example, Finley offers teachings on Zen meditation, the Heart Sutra, and the Diamond Sutra. These claims concerning Buddhism by Rohr and Finley draw on the previously stated concept of Lockhart’s Double Mistaken Identity. Rohr and Finley perceive Buddhism to be “doing the same thing” as what they understand Christianity to be. Therefore, they feel the authority to make claims concerning Buddhist teachings, because the traditions are conflated for them. I assert that this can be a dangerous move to make claims on behalf of another tradition based upon textual sampling as well as the assertion of perennialism.

The perennialist convictions they assert carry the distinct Christian message of oneness with God. Rohr and Finley attempt to create religious unity by conflating religious traditions. They interpret essentialized components of Buddhist practice, such as unity of all things as exemplified as a drop in the ocean, and declare that it points to an “Absolute Truth” or oneness,

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namely, Christianity. This can be seen in the way they fluidly use Christian perennial terms interchangeably with Buddhist terminology. For example, as I highlighted in chapter two, the words contemplation, meditation, non-dualism, and oneness are frequently exchanged in their writings. Rohr and Finley conflate the traditions of Catholic contemplation and Buddhist meditation. I suggest that they interpret Buddhist meditation to mean and express the same aims and practices as the Catholic tradition, ignoring the power differential in their inability to permit Buddhist meditation to represent itself.

**Appropriation**

Based on the previous discussion of appropriation in chapter one, it may be suggested that appropriation exists on a spectrum within notions of hybridity and the spiritual marketplace. On one end where appropriative acts may be more benign, we may find acts of imitation. On the other end, we may find issues of conflation of practices and beliefs as well as reinterpretation of religious traditions within the framework of another tradition. Issues of imitation and even taking may still acknowledge the sources from which they are taking. There can still be context of the appropriated tradition. However, I suggest that in appropriative practices that invoke reinterpretation into another tradition, the context is lost; the source is conflated within the appropriating tradition. Reflecting back on Tweed’s notion of the inevitability of religious hybridity, it follows that appropriative acts would occur. I use the term appropriation in relation to this case study to refer to the practice of decontextualizing and essentializing a cultural practice. Moreover, for the purposes of my thesis appropriation refers to a hegemonic process of conflating or reinterpreting religious systems through an ethnocentric gaze. More specifically, I see it as the act of taking content such as Buddhist meditation from a subordinated religious
tradition and grafting it within a hegemonic framework, in this case, Christian contemplative prayer. I suggest that current discussions have not yet fully fleshed out appropriation with respect to the processes of conflation and its inherent colonial rhetoric. My thesis attempts to narrow the discussion and posit lines of inquiry that explore scholarship about religious appropriation situated under the processes of conflation or reinterpretation as opposed to the processes of imitation or taking.

I argue that Rohr and Finley engage in the kinds of appropriation that I reviewed in chapter one, but their appropriation is distinct from imitation and taking. To use Spooner’s imagery, Rohr and Finley may be seen as takers, or rather dealers, because they peddle Buddhist meditative practice as part and parcel with Catholic contemplation. However, they do not see themselves as takers or dealers. While they do divorce the practice of meditation from its context and imbue it with their own meaning, they do not believe that this is what they are doing. In Spooner’s article, the framework he presents with regard to a discussion on appropriation seemingly relates more to the processes of taking and imitation rather than appropriation as conflation or reinterpretation. Donaldson’s framework is also limited in terms of taking. Iwamura’s discussion of appropriation more directly approaches what I suggest the CAC is doing. She situates the icon of the Oriental Monk as representative of the narcissistic lens by which Western culture has constructed and viewed Asian religions. She states that “the primary significance of the Oriental Monk is that the icon operates as an imaginative construction, circulating widely and subjectively reinforcing this new system of Western dominance, even in instances when the icon serves as a vehicle for social critique.”

In other words, Iwamura credits Western culture with the invention and circulation of the Oriental Monk. The Monk has

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been used as a kind of patch for those parts of Western culture and religion that have fallen short or left a gap, as we saw in the discussion from the Catholic nuns. White westerners have been both creators of the Monk and disseminators of those “Asian” religious qualities that the Monk represents. Iwamura argues that “…Anglo-Americans reimagine themselves as the protectors, innovators, and guardians of Asian religions and culture and wrest the authority to define these traditions from others.”237 This authority aligns with the claims of the CAC through Rohr’s articulations.

Rohr presents his understanding and experiences of Buddhist meditation as though he were an authority on the practice. He claims that “first living it (contemplation) with some seriousness [gives] you the authority to talk about it!”238 Thus, here, Rohr not only appropriates Buddhist meditation and imposes a Christian theological lens onto it, he also claims he has the authority to teach about it. In asserting his own authority, he reifies his own interpretations of Buddhist meditation and propagates them as an accurate representation. Rohr claims that he has gained his insight through interreligious dialogue, yet as I pointed out in chapter two in relation to the CAC and Silent Compassion, his engagement with other traditions is by way of a limited number of texts. He commends “the East” for their commitment to spiritual transmission by way of teachers, but goes on to claim he has inherited teaching and a lineage not from living teachers but from either ancient figures or other texts.239 I offer that Rohr’s assertions represent the de-contextualization of Buddhism. While he appears to have some grasp of the traditional ways Buddhists have disseminated teachings, he does not operate within this relationship or limit his

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237 Ibid., 21.
238 Rohr, Silent Compassion, 68.
239 Ibid., 67.
sampling to any lineage tradition. He samples sections of texts extraneously regardless of lineage and without personal contact from a teacher.

Rohr and Finley’s textual reliance is not unique. Selectively sampling from texts is a common practice in the spiritual marketplace. This process of sampling and then attempting to speak with an authoritative voice creates multiple variations in representations of religious traditions. The kind of knowledge disseminated in the spiritual marketplace creates a personalized spiritual grab bag. As discussed in chapter one, Vincent Miller critiques the grab bag approach as a superficial tactic of instant gratification. This is a danger of the commodification of religion; it becomes reduced to a hollowed out version of a tradition. I understand this shallowness to be much like the critique of perennialism mentioned above. The spiritual marketplace and perennialism both decontextualize content for the sake of appropriation, rearticulation, and personal reconstruction of one’s own unique expression of spirituality. By decontextualizing content, the subject matter becomes free-floating and easily malleable to be repositioned within another tradition. This exchange of religious content is the reality of religious hybridity due to contact and exchange. Here, I tentatively suggest that what other religious scholars have touted as hybridity may also be read as appropriation. I want to emphasize that it is not within the scope of this thesis to develop a discussion that delineates the processes that distinguish religious hybridity from appropriation. Here, I merely recognize this line of questioning as important for future research. At the same time, below I do recognize the role the spiritual marketplace plays as an enabler and facilitator of both hybridity and appropriation.

An important question to raise is how religious content such as Zen meditation is made available in the spiritual marketplace for consumption. Buddhism has become available to be
consumed with the plethora of Buddhist texts to choose from. Each new translation and publication provides more material to sample. If one text does not connect with the reader, simply grab another. Some could see this saturation of texts in the marketplace as an example of skillful means. More texts bring more opportunity for exposure to Buddhist teachings despite the rampant sampling across lineages and the decontextualization process. As in the example of the Buddhist nuns in chapter one, one could suggest that appropriating Buddhist meditation, or any Buddhist content for that matter, is an exercise of skillful means. As we recall, skillful means was understood in that context as the idea that practicing meditation is a doorway to Buddhism and enlightenment about the true nature of reality. However, the issue of form and content is raised upon further inquiry. If one practices the form of Buddhist meditation but replaces the content with Christian theology, does it remain Buddhist? Could it still lead one towards the Buddhist understanding of codependent origination as the nature of reality? As we saw in chapter one, one of the Buddhist nuns argued that it was no longer Buddhist meditation without the willingness to abandon all preconceived ideas. Rohr and Finley draw on the form of Buddhist meditation, but rather than claiming to change the content, they suggest that the content is the same as that of Catholic contemplation. They offer their theological reading of meditation and claim that it is an accurate representation of Buddhist meditation. They make this claim on their foundation of the perennial philosophy.

240 See note 128.

241 Codependent origination is the notion of causality; “the notion of the conditionality of all existence.” It is said that the Buddha taught: ‘When this is present, that comes to be. / From the arising of this, that arises. /When this is absent, that does not come to be. / From the cessation of this, that ceases.’ Robert E. Buswell, Donald S. Lopez, and Juhn Young. Ahn, The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 669.
Here, I turn to one of the most glaring issues I find with this perennial philosophy as a justification for appropriation. In each of the texts I researched, there was a lack of discussion concerning the history of the perennial philosophy as a Christian concept that is loaded with Christian theological terms and substantiated by other self-identified Christian sources. As we saw in chapter two, Rohr claims support for perennialism from a multitude of places but primarily quotes Christian sources and then interprets Buddhist representatives Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama through his Christian framework. I assert that proclaiming that both traditions merely use different language to speak of the same universal content is ethnocentric and commits theological and epistemic violence in its inability to interpret the unique expressions of dynamic cultures and peoples. Perennialism attempts to declare a “truth” for the world’s cultures and religious traditions whether they can see it or not. Rohr’s response to those that deny such a unifying truth is that they simply cannot see; they are blind to the truth.²⁴² Rohr and Finley impose perennialism upon the world’s religious traditions, and in so doing, I argue that they are imposing a Christian framework upon all other religious traditions. Rohr and Finley present this as a manifestation of their commitment to interreligious dialogue, but through this discussion, I reevaluate their interpretations as appropriative.

The CAC’s incorporation of Buddhist meditation reflects an insufficient example of the interreligious dialogue to which they aspire. In fact, from my research there appears to be merely a pseudo dialogue. The contact between these two traditions via the CAC appears to be one-sided in that it is conducted through Rohr’s and Finley’s textual incorporation and interpretation. While they claim an aim of interreligious dialogue, I suggest that an authentic dialogue with Buddhism does not happen between a Christian and a book. Rohr and Finley claim a textual

knowledge of Buddhist meditation but have removed those texts from their context through sampling and reinterpretation. The perennial tradition that they use for their justification is based solely in Christian sources and replicates a colonial rhetoric of imperialism and ownership of other cultures. This appropriation of Buddhist meditation is damaging to authentic interreligious dialogue, which takes place in an atmosphere of equality as articulated by Riley and Carpenter in their article “Owning Red.” They highlight that “…when it comes to minority groups, cultural appropriation often occurs in a societal context of power imbalance, racism, and inequality, rather than in an atmosphere of fair, open, and multilateral exchange.” This power imbalance is intrinsically a part of the Western mindset, according to King. Colonial rhetoric is embedded in the spiritual marketplace and the commodification of religion has occurred through the description and lens of colonial discourse, but this understanding of the colonial context has been lost in the spiritual marketplace where all commodities have been flattened and readied for appropriation. Klassen articulates this tension in the spiritual marketplace by drawing on Roof in stating

the question of ‘how to appropriate the past into a meaningful present’ is one of the most pressing of issues for North Americans negotiating the relationship between historical tradition and individual choices in world of shifting religious (and other) borders.

Rohr and Finley may feel that they are in fact incorporating Buddhist meditation in a meaningful way, but it is seemingly a meaningful way for them and maybe not as meaningful for North American and non North American practitioners of Zen meditation and Buddhism. Here, I want to emphasize that Rohr’s and Finley’s writings attempt to push Christian practice into a more inclusive space for Christians. However, they may not realize that their rhetorical strategies are

244 King, Orientalism and Religion, 3.
245 Klassen, "Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual,” 379.
steeped in colonial discourse and thus, perhaps inadvertently, rupture the types of interreligious dialogues they propose to foster. Without malice, they have pushed the boundaries of hybridity and entered into the terrain of appropriation. While Klassen cites Roof in part to explore how to meaningfully address the issue of the inevitability of appropriation in the spiritual marketplace, her goal is to find a balance between historical context and constructing one’s own religious identity in a marketplace of religious hybridity. Additionally, Tweed discusses the shifting borders of the marketplace in Crossing and Dwelling when he tackles similar questions that blur the boundaries between religious traditions, but he does not address the repercussions of such hybridity, such as appropriation.246

Tweed reminds us that in a world of constant contact among traditions, hybridity naturally follows. The ideas of a pure monolithic religion or history have been rejected.247 Dialogue happens in this world of hybridity and the spiritual marketplace. But it is unnecessary to base interreligious dialogue on a perceived common ground. Lai and Von Brück in their book Christianity and Buddhism provide a definition of dialogue that does not attempt to flatten religion to a perennialist viewpoint. They state, “[d]ialogue is the middle course between refusing to acknowledge the relativity and plurality of religious reality, and a pluralism of preference that would level out all values to a common denominator.”248 I offer that this middle ground must begin by acknowledging the realities of colonialism that are still replicated today as examplified by the appropriative actions of Rohr and Finley.

I return to Tweed’s assertion that we live in an era of religious hybridity; there are not hard and fast boundaries between religious traditions. At the same time, I wonder how we can

246 Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling, 48-49.

247 Ibid.

248 Lai and Von Brück, Christianity and Buddhism, 1.
talk about appropriation respectfully and intelligently in interreligious dialogue without talking about the ways in which we continue to appropriate religious content and insert it into our own rhetorical frameworks. Beyond these theoretically non-existent boundaries lies a terrain for egalitarian interreligious dialogue and opportunities for more work in the field of religious studies. A beginning point may lie in more scholarship that situates hybridity and appropriation within a larger discussion of colonialism as linked to the spiritual marketplace. The issues of heresy or purity raised in this thesis are important points of departure but they cannot nullify a thorough discussion of the appropriative actions that decontextualize, essentialize, and impose a Christian interpretation upon other traditions. The spiritual marketplace can be a place of richness with its plethora of available content. There is a beautiful freedom of choice that exists at the hands of individual seekers. The marketplace can be a place of great value by providing extensive sources from which to draw. In addition, I advocate for an intelligent and educated engagement with these sources and content. In this way, seekers may operate more compassionately and respectfully of traditions that may be new to them.

In conclusion, I suggest that the discussion of hybridity in religious studies scholarship has left a gap in relation to appropriation, and that this gap has been due to the concern that appropriation implies either accusations of heresy or claims of a monolithic tradition (purity). I argue that these issues do not impede a discussion of religious appropriation, but encourage an examination of historical and cultural context within the spiritual marketplace. By acknowledging the colonial context that created the academic field of Buddhist studies and the essentialized ideas therein, we gain insight into the ways colonial rhetoric has been replicated through the flattening of content in the spiritual marketplace. I assert that it is the role of the religious studies scholar to bring awareness to the contemporary religious landscape. I suggest
that this must be done carefully and respectfully in light of the fact that this landscape contains passionate religious practitioners. This thesis also problematized the textual reliance that has existed as a part of colonial discourse. Textual primacy has contributed to the romanticizing and essentializing of Buddhism. Rohr and Finley, as extensions of the CAC, have contributed to this essentializing by their sampling of Buddhist texts. I argued in this thesis that Rohr and Finley employ a strategy of perennialism within a Christian framework in order to justify their incorporation of Buddhist meditation. In doing so, I have shown how they conflate the practices of Catholic contemplation and Buddhist meditation to share the same aim of oneness with God under perennialism. Rohr and Finley define all meditation as the awareness of oneness with God and then read this meaning onto Buddhist meditation. This interpretation removes Buddhist meditation from its context and imposes a Christian theological framework upon it. I argued that this is an appropriative action that decontextualizes and essentializes Buddhist meditation. I then showed that this replicates the hegemonic discourse of colonialism and keeps Buddhist voices marginalized and subjugated as the Other. Despite a cultural climate that encourages religious hybridity, there is a need to create an egalitarian space for meaningful interreligious dialogue that no longer approaches all traditions by imposing one’s own framework.
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