Ritual Appropriation and Appropriate Ritual: Christian Healing and Adaptations of Asian Religions

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This article analyzes the uses of the past for liberal Christians who borrow from Asian healing-related practices such as yoga, Buddhist meditation and Reiki. It focuses on questions of historicity, both in the ways liberal Christians validate their syncretism by drawing connections to the Christian past, and in the way that longer histories of orientalism and colonialism shape current Christian interactions with Asian religions. Centred on the narratives of three North American Anglicans, and informed by attendance at their various healing services, meditation groups, yoga classes and Reiki sessions, this article is evidence of a wider liberal Christian embrace of difference via ritual. The article argues that these liberal Christians use “ritual proximity” to bring together symbols, acts and memories from various times and cultures, thus constructing new lineages of religious inheritance within webs of Christian ritual.

Keywords: Historicity; Healing; Syncretism; Christianity; Orientalism

Brother John, an Anglican monk living in the Cambridge, Massachusetts monastery of the Society of St. John the Evangelist (SSJE), considers healing to be an historic legacy of Jesus and the earliest Christians. To carry this healing “energy” across two thousand years, however, Brother John borrowed what he views as complementary sources of healing energy: Buddhist meditation and Reiki, a Japanese healing modality. Across the
border in Toronto, Father Patrick, the priest of the Anglican parish of St. Luke’s, and his wife Nadia, a dancer, have also nurtured a Christian inheritance of healing by consciously integrating Hindu and Buddhist practices such as yoga and meditation into the Church’s ritual life. Seeking spirituality that acknowledges and works through the body, all three of these Anglicans (and many other liberal Christians) have poised Asian and Christian traditions in “ritual proximity”—a proximity saturated with the tensions, confusions and harmonies implied by the historically laden opposition of “East” and “West”.

For liberal Protestants the last century has been a time of profound hybridity—of cultural and historical mixing that transforms (and subverts) both colonizer and colonized (Bhabha, 1994). Protestants’ confident missionary triumphalism of the early twentieth century was increasingly chastened by the harsh lessons of war, anti-colonial resistance to Western dominance and a rising discourse of human rights. Transforming from missionary-colonizers to self-critical advocates of social justice, liberal North American Protestants shifted from considering themselves to be healers of all nations—whether through evangelism or Western medicine—to understanding themselves to require healing via multiple medical and spiritual resources, including some practices formerly (or even still) considered heathen. Aware of the burden of western Christianity’s triumphalist colonial past, liberal North American Christians have legitimized their borrowing by charting lineages of religious transmission both Christian and non-Christian, as well as by embedding their syncretic embrace of yoga, meditation and Reiki within webs of Christian ritual. The ritual proximity of this embrace collapses time and space within embodied practice, conjoining disparate pasts from different places within a particular present.

As they stretch their bodies in the sun salutation in a church sanctuary, meditate with the help of a biblical verse or channel universal healing energy through an anointing service, liberal Christians have drawn criticism for their “syncretism”—a loaded but useful term (Roof, 1998; Van der Veer, 1994; Droogers, 1989; Stewart & Shaw, 1994). 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 (King, 1999: 142; see also Marty & Vaux, 1982; Tweed, 2002; McMaham, 2002; Goel, 1998; Dhavamony, 2002; Gupata & Osmaston, 1987). Early twentieth-century Anglican commentators on the “hybrid religion” of Christianity and “Eastern systems” already prophesied that “there would come a trying phase of contamination, and then a great enrichment by which our too Western, too exclusively ethical and practical, conceptions would be balanced by Oriental conceptions, predominantly mystical”.

Partially realizing this prophecy, liberal Anglicans have rejected its assumptions of Christian purity by historicizing in two directions at once; they delve inward to root their syncretic practices in personal histories of long connection with Asian religions, while also casting outward to call forth a tradition of common human religiousness in what Brother John called a “planetary path”.

Living within Christian community, and sometimes with deep attention to Christian history, these Anglicans turn not to doctrine, but to ritual to evoke and articulate their
religious blending. They claim an authenticity for their ritual adaptations based in a simultaneous valorization of innovation and tradition that invokes intimate stories of their own pasts together with grand narratives of energy flows in the past and future (see Coleman & Elsner, 2004). As Wade Clark Roof (1998) has argued, 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. Being attentive to the historicity of liberal Christians’ embrace of Asian religious traditions—in the twin senses of their conscious historicizing and of the unspoken history of privilege underlying their syncretisms—reveals that the healing sought through innovative religious cross-fertilization inevitably entails the renovation of pasts.

History, Historicity and Ritual Innovation

Given the force of post-colonial critiques of Orientalism and its “epistemic violence”, any analysis of popular Western Christian syncretisms of Hinduism and Buddhism must be aware of how colonialism, Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars prepared the way for such borrowings (King, 1999: 4; Said, 1979; Van der Veer, 2001). Syncretic religiosity (arguably all religiosity) implies historicity: interaction with the pastness of particular objects, places, people and traditions. Despite popular assertions of the spontaneity of “true” spirituality, invoking deities, rituals, myths and symbols within and across traditions entails a relationship—whether of responsibility, ignorance or influence—with the pastness of religions (Van der Veer, 2001; Coleman & Elsner 2004). Christianity, in all its varieties, exudes robust historicity through textual, ritual, dogmatic and storied forms that all draw on the power of the past to assert their authenticity. Religious alterity is a persistent, though often sublimated, current in these constructions of “historic Christianity”; the otherness of Jews, Muslims and the mystic East (among others) have all shaped Christian self-definitions and practices, and continue to do so. Christians integrating Asian traditions via ritual carry this past while fostering something new. They historicize with the agency to remember, forget and revive their pasts (or those of others) in particular ways, while also being more passively shaped by the weight—or support—of tradition.

Understanding the uses of the past for liberal Anglicans requires a brief clarification of historicity and history. Historicity is not identical to the discipline of history, a point Dipesh Chakrabarty illuminates by particular reference to the dilemma of historical accounts of religious consciousness. Chakrabarty describes the rationalist historian who cannot fit claims of divine agency, in which historical actors consider divine intervention more powerful than human action, into what Chakrabarty names as the two premises of rationalist history: “Can the story be told/crafted? And does it allow for a rationally-defensible point of view or position from which to tell the story?” (Chakrabarty, 1998: 16). Rationalist history looks to anthropology for epistemological assistance here, as the supernatural is first “anthropologised (i.e., converted into somebody’s belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis) before it finds a place in the historian’s narrative” (Chakrabarty, 1998: 22).
Chakrabarty insists, however, that the historian’s discipline is not the only way to remember or even reconstruct other times, places and peoples. Prominent among these alternative approaches to historicization—what Chakrabarty terms “subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot enter history ever as belonging to the historian’s own position”—are religious narratives and practices in which divine agency is a foremost reality (Chakrabarty, 1998: 22). The distinction between these subaltern pasts and historical narrative is real, but not impassible, since historical narratives are only possible when the historian recognizes some aspect of what she narrates: “[subaltern pasts] remind us that a relation of contemporaneity between the non modern and the modern, a shared ‘now’, which expresses itself on the historical plane but the character of which is ontological, is what allows historical time to unfold” (Chakrabarty, 1998: 28). Twenty-first-century liberal North American Anglicans fully immersed in modernity, but also fully engaged with the supernatural, are a challenging case for considering the contemporaneity of which Chakrabarty (1998: 25) writes, in which “a plurality of times [exist] together”. Though their Enlightenment heritage often obliges these Christians to undergo a certain ironic distancing from their own religious practices, they resolutely pursue a mingling of rituals, religions, spirits and “energies” in their twenty-first-century versions of a healing mission. They revalue their subaltern others not only through revising (or forgetting) their own Western Christian history, but also through renovating their own ritual with the help of traditions that Christian-influenced Western colonialism made subaltern.

Renewing Christian traditions of healing via subaltern Asian religions prompts moral questions. Euro-American Anglicans historicize via ritual from a position of relative privilege when compared to, for example, Sakalava spirit mediums of Madagascar who Michael Lambek (2002: 12) describes as historicizing through ancestor spirit possession in which the “past irrupts in and confronts the present”. Comparing Sakalava mediums to Western religious practitioners reveals the implied moral responsibility in historicity: Anglicans borrowing Asian religious practices also bear the past through ritual, but they draw together plural, global histories differently shaped by colonial capitalism than those borne in Sakalava possession.

As Lambek suggests, a scholarly historical mode might not count historicizing through ritual as “real” history, but such a critique is of little import to liberal Anglicans—although whether their religious innovation counts as “historic Christianity” is important to some. Most pressing are morally based judgments of Christian syncretism of Asian religious practices stemming from critics who charge this pluralistic healing mission with faddism, appropriation or heresy—categories that deploy the past to judge the authenticity of the present. In a “spiritual marketplace”, the designation of fad—a fleeting and consumerist trend—devalues the questing of the religious shopper who plucks “nuggets” from Zen, Tantra or yoga (Roof, 1999; Pond, 2003). Similarly, 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 conviction made particularly forceful when the appropriating group is the historical oppressor of the appropriated (Taylor, 1997; cf. Meyer, 1994). In this vein, some Hindu nationalists have condemned Christian-Hindu “dialogue” as appropriation by a
Christianity that “has always been a predatory imperialism par excellence” (Goel, 1998: 2). Heresy, by contrast, inverts the power relations of appropriation in that the party acting as the guardian of tradition usually has more worldly power than the heretic (c.f. Hassett, 2004). Heresy, however, also depends on markers of identity rooted in relative (or purported) antiquity, insisting on boundaries of difference rooted in “tradition”, as when evangelical Christians criticize liberals who converse with Buddhists about shared truths in their respective traditions to have “surrender[ed] every central claim of historic Christianity” (Tennant, 2002: 10).

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 (Taylor, 1997: 201; Young, 1995; Dhavamony, 2002: 168). In its multiplicity, the pluralizing discourse of liberal Protestants avoids claiming purity or uniqueness, without abandoning claims of authenticity (Stewart & Shaw, 1994: 7). Maneuvering around charges of faddism, appropriation and heresy, ritually innovative liberal Protestants deploy the past to articulate a Christian embrace (but not conversion) of Asian traditions, demonstrating that historicizing is not only about claiming one’s own history through lineages of cultural or religious purity; it can also include selective embrace of another’s tradition, with all the complicated relationships such retroactive kinship entails.

Lineages and Ritual Proximity: Bridging Times and Traditions

Brother John, Nadia and Father Patrick are all aware, to varying degrees, of the colonial and missionary history of Christianity, and have all found this triumphalist Christianity to be androcentric and insufficiently embodied. Crafting a very personal retroactive kinship in response, they have all sought out non-Christian religious teachers, found within their urban North American communities. Not alone in being transformed by the missionary practices of Buddhist, Hindu and Reiki teachers in North America, John, Nadia and Patrick represent a controversial yet persistent undercurrent of contemporary Christianity that welcomes this transformation as an authentic, faithful development (Strauss, 2002; Cadge, 2004). As Arjun Appadurai has shown, assertions of religious authenticity in the present build upon a “debatable” past, mediated by cultural norms including the authority of textual evidence, assertions of interdependence with other pasts, claims to continuity with a larger historical narrative and appeals to antiquity (Appadurai, 1981: 212; see also Appadurai et al., 1999: 25). Using these norms, in addition to the strategy of what I call “ritual proximity”, these liberal Christians accomplished and muted their syncretism through gestures and words both old and new.

Energy Sacramentalism

A white-bearded grandfather in his eighties, John was initially drawn to his Anglican monastic community after returning “in bad shape” from service as a marine in the South Pacific during the Second World War. Feeling too young to commit to a
vocation of poverty, celibacy and obedience, he left the monastery after three years to finish his history degree, and then to teach and raise his daughter as a single parent. Once his daughter left home, he sought out Buddhist teachers who taught the Ch’an and Theravada traditions in America. On the verge of ordination as a Theravada Buddhist monk, John’s teacher informed him that he would never attain enlightenment because he “was born and baptized in Jesus Christ and that’s for life”. Learning he was irrevocably Christian due to his long distant ritual of initiation caused John to rethink his spiritual path. He returned to the Cambridge monastery and for the past sixteen years has lived in the North American home of the English-born SSJE, founded in 1866 under the influence of the Oxford Movement. A nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic movement dedicated to retrieving liturgical traditions from the Catholic past that their fellow Anglicans had sometimes violently cast aside, the Oxford Movement stressed sacramentalism (including anointing the sick) and, most importantly for the SSJE, the practice of celibate vocations (Chadwick, 1960: 12; Faught, 1994).

The SSJE’s Cambridge chapel, one of Ralph Adams Cram’s neo-gothic creations, is a quietly impressive space of carved stone, stained glass, marble floors and rows of wooden chairs. At a monthly healing service, John performs the Anglican rite of laying on of hands and anointing with oil, but as a monk and not an ordained priest, he does not consecrate the Eucharist. Ironically or not, though the Society tried but failed to establish a monastery in India in the first half of the century, South Asian religions (namely, Buddhism and Hinduism) have succeeded in creating a niche for themselves in the American community, in part through the ministrations of John (see also Roth, 1989). Parallel to the ritual innovation in which the Oxford Movement revived the spurned liturgies of Anglicanism’s Catholic past, John is now part of a similar wave of ritual innovation in which some Anglicans (many influenced by the Oxford Movement) are absorbing the rituals of formerly “heathen” religions. John insisted that human beings need to “find a universal path, a planetary path” and that “Christianity that gets itself bogged into a corner” is not such a path. Though John’s pluralistic liberalism would be unrecognizable to the Oxford Movement’s founders, John cast his embrace of Asian religious traditions of healing entirely in continuity with the movement’s sacramentalist inheritance (Thomas, 1991: 2, 3; Groves, 2000).

John was studying to become a Reiki master, inspired by a fellow monk’s positive experience of Reiki treatment for a congenital heart ailment. Searching for the right words to describe his healing practices, he contended that “we need an expanded theological ability to speak about these things”. Appropriating scientific and Chinese vocabularies, he described channeling the “energy” of Reiki when laying hands on Christian worshippers seeking healing through the Holy Spirit (see Meyer, 1994). John acknowledged that speaking of energy could alarm more conservative Christians, but when that happens, he advised: “You just call it the spirit.” Though some who attend the intimate services at the monastery chapel have questioned his willingness to “mix it up”—blending Reiki, the Holy Spirit and Buddhist practices of meditation—he has followed his planetary path with the full blessing and support of his religious community.
John justified his hybrid approach to spiritual healing or “in modern terms, getting in tune with energy” by turning to a source of legitimacy that bundled together the cultural norms of textual evidence and antiquity—namely, the historical Jesus. Asserting that “Jesus wouldn’t have turned aside Reiki”, John contended that the healing energy of Reiki was also preserved in such biblical texts as the Books of Wisdom and the Acts of the Apostles. “This was the promise,” he said of healing, “but the church lost it, except for a few people.” For John, this promised healing was not necessarily curing, but instead a coming to terms with bodily suffering that may or may not eliminate the suffering (Booty, 1986; Hollis, 2005). Jesus’ first-century healing gifts are the high point of an Anglo-Catholic story of the decline, under Catholicism, and rise, within Anglicanism, of Christian traditions of healing, which John repeated: “For us, it’s the Oxford Movement revival when people began to examine what was lost and to reinstate it and to reuse it. [Healing] is available as an energy. The energy hasn’t gone away, it’s peoples’ awareness of it [that has].” According to John’s theology of energy, not only is energy universally accessible, it is also transhistorical, whether or not people were aware of it in different historical eras (see DuVernet, 1923).

John’s strongest claim to authenticity, however, lay in his assertion of continuity with the Christian past through ritual, or more particularly, sacramentalism. According to John, traditional sacramentalism rooted in the ritual and liturgy of the Anglican Church—not in a charismatic mode—distinguishes his appeal to healing energy. His sacramentalism allows him to draw not on the historical Jesus who was there, in first-century Palestine, but on the Jesus who is here in ritual proximity in the twenty-first century, inhabiting John every time he participates in the sacrament of the Eucharist: “We believe in the real presence. It’s more than a memorial. We are stained by the presence through the body and the blood.” Each time John participates in the corporate ritual of the Eucharist, he eats and drinks his way into his Christian faith via a historicizing ritual that depends on exceeding a memorial gesture. For Anglican sacramentalists, the Communion services of other Protestants seem watered down gestures of memory, rather than embodied rituals in which time, place and spirit merge (Pusey, in Chadwick, 1960: 197). Layering the orthodoxy of his sacramentalism onto his public (and private) identity as a monk, John embodies traditions of Christian liturgy and community based on reclaimed lineages of apostolic succession stretching back almost two millennia.

Secure in the authenticity evoked by ritual, architectural and vocational embodiments of historical Christianity, John embraces Asian-inflected energy sacramentalism. Layering continuity with antiquity, his participation in Eucharistic ritual serves as a backdrop of Christian legitimacy when John “mixes it up” in other ritual contexts, such as when channeling an “interfaith” healing energy or when he and his fellow monks welcomed unexpected Buddhist visitors—also monks—to share in the Eucharist despite their unbaptized status. For John, taking the practices and concepts of other religions and enacting a “translation into Christian terms” is neither appropriation nor heresy. Instead, it is an embrace of an evolving future-focused planetary path that depends upon the Christian past in narrative and ritual forms to tell new stories and enact new rituals of healing and hybridity.
Therapeutic Liturgies

A church with a strong British heritage, both in its architecture and its people, St. Luke’s is now a linguistically, economically and ethnically diverse church that combines Christian liturgical traditions of sung prayer, incense and anointing with oil with non-Christian traditions of yoga and meditation. St. Luke’s is broadly concerned with healing body and spirit through social engagement and personal contemplation (Déchanet, 1960; Strauss, 2002). Meditation/bible study groups, yoga classes, and Taizé prayer and healing services—based on the sung chants of the Taizé ecumenical monastic community in France—were all further manifestations of energy sacramentalism (Kubicki, 1999).

In comparison to John’s, however, Nadia’s negotiation of the intersection of Christian tradition with Eastern practices has been less Christocentric. Despite considering herself more of a yoga practitioner than a Christian, Nadia was quite active in St. Luke’s, in part because she was married to Patrick. Growing up in a nominally Lutheran home but unmoved by church, Nadia began her own solitary, teenage yoga practice in her bedroom, with the help of a mail-order yoga booklet from Seventeen magazine: “And I remember one day walking down the school hall, and kind of feeling that the world was different somehow, that I was in this altered space. … And I knew it had to do with the yoga.” Nadia eventually began practicing liturgical dance in Christian settings, returning to yoga in the past ten years. Whereas John’s encounter with Buddhism led him back to a Christian vocation, Nadia’s found that: “Yoga sparks me more than the Christian things.” Attracted to Christian practices of meditation and chanted prayer because “they’re a little bit more eastern and I’ve always, I guess just had that kind of predisposition,” Nadia wished that she had learned earlier about Christian contemplative practices. She considered her impulse towards kinaesthetic contemplation to be somehow innate, or, in the half-joking words of a friend, evidence of a “past life” in which she was engaged in yoga. Instead of understanding her attraction to yoga and to contemplative Christianity as a matter of mere preference, Nadia historicized it, both by nodding to a past life, and by rooting it in her predispositions. Without one from her childhood, she crafted a contemplative legacy that was at once organic and lodged in an artistic and spiritual tradition bigger than her own inclinations (see Wuthnow, 2001).

Nadia has developed her healing practice on the margins of Hindu and Christian traditions without the ecclesiastical authority enjoyed by either John or Patrick; in the constructed lineages of Anglicanism, Nadia is neither a Mother nor a Sister (see Wuthnow, 1997: 223). Moving within the interstices of these traditions, and frustrated both by their patriarchal structures and their indifference to “the inner life” of bodily movement, Nadia felt called to bring her yoga discipline into the context of her Christian community, although not in a formal liturgical manner. Uncomfortable with the usual roles for a clergy wife, Nadia began to teach yoga classes each Saturday in the parish hall and sometimes in the church sanctuary, inviting all interested church and local community members. Mixing Hindu practice in Christian space, these yoga classes
were an innovative intervention into the implied “Western-ness” of the neo-gothic space of the church. The goal of St. Luke’s original nineteenth-century architect, like that of Cram, his later counterpart at the SSJE, was to remind parishioners of their English heritage, transporting them to feelings of medieval awe, without the memories of Roman Catholicism. By the 1920s, Cram had the additional goal that architecture would serve “as a language and as a mighty missionary influence, winning back the world from heathenism” (Cram, in White, 1997: 278). Nadia’s innovative reorganization of the space inverted this missionary thrust, as twenty-first-century participants lay on yoga mats gazing up at the afternoon light streaming through stained glass windows—the same windows that once shed light on early twentieth-century Anglicans dedicated to converting “the Hindu” in the British colonies.

In order to mark the space of the yoga classes as sacred, Nadia brought a Black Madonna icon from its usual position of honour in the sanctuary, and placed it on an ersatz altar, with candles and other icons, including the seventeenth-century Iroquoian Christian Kateri Tekakwitha. Bordered by a poster of Oscar Romero on the wall behind, the altar evoked syncretism and resistance, as Nadia sought to “combine the images, because [the Black Madonna] is a Christian icon, and the idea of icon is, it’s a window through which to see God”. Nadia’s careful setting for the class—the darkened room, the altar, the warm blankets she gently placed on participants during the time of relaxation at the end of the class—shaped the physical kinetics of yoga into a spiritual practice that was at once Christian and not. Subtly linking the meditative quality of her teaching to iconic and historical exemplars of Christianity, Nadia’s yoga class engaged Christian space and history while also transforming it.

Similar to the conflation of historical spaces, times and bodies in John’s experience of Eucharist, Nadia’s yoga classes, especially when held in the main church sanctuary, were a gentle challenge through ritual proximity to the Christian past of missionary triumphalism. The church housed years of sedimented memory and energy, according to Nadia: “Like any kind of consecrated space, there’s a layering of energy, because this [space] has been used for years and years and years. I mean, it’s like when you have an altar at home or a prayer room, vibrations build up.” This layering contained conjunctions of past and present, as twenty-first-century bodies practiced ujjayi breathing in a nineteenth-century building (see Stewart & Shaw, 1994: 18).

Whether working with therapeutic touch (another controversial hybrid Western/Eastern therapy similar to Reiki) or leading a yoga class, Nadia sought to create sacred space and channel divine healing energy without imparting religious labels: “That was part of my discipline, if you want to call it … to be available and open to whoever came, to try to create a nice space and to also try to find ways of including spirituality but without naming it in a particular way” (see Wuthnow, 1997). Though her antipathy towards doctrinal categorization contrasted with John’s concern for a Christian lineage, Nadia paralleled John by authenticating her combination of yoga and Christianity via a personal lineage of experience and authoritative textual and pedagogical sources, including Hindu teachers. Housing her religious fusion within a particularly Christian past (or future) was not as crucial to her, but she did share the desire to transform Christianity—and the Christian body—by bringing together disparate histories
of “East” and “West” through ritual proximity in which disciplined bodies moved in consecrated space.

Nadia’s husband, Patrick, has supported this fusion of Christianity and yoga in both his liturgical and personal practice. He connected his embrace of Hindu traditions with a revival of what he considers to be the forgotten wisdom traditions of Christianity, while also considering the success of the burgeoning popular culture of yoga: “You can go to yoga classes on Sunday morning that are much better attended than many church services, so what is it? Part of it is probably fad and a kind of fitness faddism … but there’s also, you know, people are always looking for a sense of feeling connected, and yoga is a means of union.” Suggesting that yoga functions as a spiritual practice for some, Patrick said he would “be delighted if some of them, former Christians, actually discovered that Christianity also knows something about conscious, intentional spiritual practices and yoga is an excellent vehicle that you can pull some of those things together from your own tradition, as well as learning something from other people”. Patrick recently spent a four-month sabbatical in India, living at a Syrian Orthodox seminary and practicing yoga at a variety of places, and has occasionally taught yoga classes at St. Luke’s.

Similarly to John, Patrick rooted his ritual innovation in a long history of Christian practices of contemplation and healing. He has drawn most centrally from Eastern Orthodox traditions of prayer, which were also of great interest to his nineteenth-century Oxford Movement forefathers. What these ancestors may not have foreseen, however, is how Patrick would elaborate their Anglo-Catholic liturgical sensibilities through recourse to even more “Eastern” religious traditions—namely Hinduism and Buddhism. In positioning his ritual focus on healing as Anglo-Catholic with Asian influences, Patrick also differentiated his approach from charismatic styles of faith healing, as did John. Though not entirely hostile to charismatic streams within the Anglican Church, Patrick holds them at a sceptical but respectful distance, as a “child of the Enlightenment”.

In shaping a therapeutic spirituality, Patrick has turned to yoga, partly due to Nadia’s influence, and partly because of its synergy of empirical observation and wisdom traditions (neglected in Christianity, according to Patrick): “Yoga is a huge, complex tradition, but it involves—it’s not just a kind of revelation or something like that, but ‘let’s try this out and see how it works for people’.” Similarly to John and Nadia, Patrick turns to the concept of energy to dissolve the historical oppositions between Eastern religious traditions and Christianity, finding in “energy”, “qi”, “ch’i” and Reiki a transhistorical principle of “tapping into universal life force”. As with yoga, Patrick connects to this universality via Christianity: “That kind of language is also in the Christian tradition, especially in the Orthodox: the energies of god, especially related to the spirit, prana, and we’re back founding connections again; people noticing certain common human experiences that they understand as also being charged with divinity.” Though “there are Christians who regard it with fear and loathing,” Patrick considers such hostile reactions to inter-religious energies to be founded on inadequate and xenophobic historicizing: “I just think they don’t know their own tradition that well and are unduly suspicious of wisdom coming from other places.”
Patrick’s healing services during occasional Sunday liturgies were simple rituals of anointing with holy oil, in which parishioners lined up in the small sanctuary, stepping forward to let Patrick touch their foreheads with oil that had been blessed by the Bishop of the diocese. An alternate service, held occasionally on weeknights, attracted small groups of parishioners to the darkened, candlelit sanctuary, who joined in quietly intimate Taizé chant, meditative silence, prayer and the sacrament of anointing. Patrick’s weekly Tuesday night meditation sessions in the church sanctuary were also a place of religious fusion, combining Buddhist- and Eastern Orthodox-influenced meditative prayer, bible reading and frank discussion of the biblical text, all under the watchful gaze of the same Black Madonna icon that Nadia had incorporated into her yoga practice.\(^6\) Praying the Jesus Prayer by inhaling on “Lord Jesus Christ” and exhaling on “Have Mercy on Me”, the six to ten participants would sit for twenty minutes with their right hands cradled in their left palms, with thumbs touching in a Buddhist fashion. Following a contemplative reading aloud of the biblical text, the group began a more conventional style of bible study, grappling with biblical texts whose often puzzling antiquity challenged their own cultural contexts. Closing with a prayer for all who suffered, the meditation sessions were carefully structured rituals in which participants could sit with the range of human emotions, and express them in prayer and conversation if they so desired. The healing these communal rituals attempted was not so much physical, bodily repair as the restoration of the human spirit through bodily, intellectual and emotional work (Coleman & Elsner, 2004: 283).

Just as John embedded his ritual innovation in the regular practice of his deeply historicized Anglo-Catholic ritual, so too did Patrick turn to the longstanding rituals of his tradition to undergird his therapeutic spiritual practices drawn from within the Christian past and without. While his healing services and his regular Sunday liturgies were quite orthodox in their presentation, Patrick’s yoga and meditation practice informed his Christian practice in ways seen and unseen. With each new grafting of Asian practices onto Christian traditions, Patrick multiplied the branches of his family tree of religious inheritance, crafting new Christian lineages.

**Ritual and Responsibility**

The embrace of difference found in ritual proximity is not an innocent encounter, nor is it entirely hegemonic. The novel intermingling of traditions found in these Anglicans’ ritual practices can be viewed from several angles as an irruption of what Chakrabarty (1998) called a subaltern past or a “subordinated life-world”. In the context of a biomedically oriented North American society, the epiphanies and healings of Christian ritual practice are subaltern to rationality and medicine just as Buddhism and Hinduism were once subaltern (and perhaps still are) to Christian narratives and exercises of power. At another layer, the syncretisms of John, Nadia and Patrick are subaltern to traditional Christianity fearful of hybridity and devoted to doctrinal purity and Christian supremacy. At yet another layer of subalternity, their embrace of difference bears within it the compromised legacies of past Christian missionary triumphalism that pathologized or exoticized religious others. Whether the
historicity implied or employed in these Christian healing practices of embrace helps to heal only its supplicants of their woes, or more broadly, their history of its triumphalism, is not yet settled. Though recognizing limits entailed by religious difference—as when John returned to Christianity when the fact of his baptism destroyed any hopes of nirvana—John, Nadia and Patrick not only value Buddhism and Hinduism as religious traditions, but also value how these traditions can transform contemporary Christian practices of contemplation and healing.

That these three ritually innovative Anglicans came to embrace Asian traditions was partly the result of their own historical contexts, both in terms of personal experiences and of wider historical trajectories of Christianity, colonialism, orientalism, and Hindu and Buddhist proselytizing in North America. Intimations of latent orientalism in cross-cultural exchange can stimulate scholarly judgments of unrecognized “imperialist projection” (King, 1999: 84, 142). Considering liberal Christians’ syncretisms, expressed not in texts but though bodily gesture and oral narratives of lineage, places this cultural and religious exchange in the messiness and luminosity of fallible human lives. These 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.

The historicity borne by liberal Christians adapting Asian religions stresses visions of inclusion rather than exclusion, not so much through doctrinal shifts as through ritual creativity. Perhaps because these adaptations are expressed in predominantly non-discursive ritual rather than text, they often avoid the translation of ritual into dogma, thus eluding articulations of difference embedded in historical confessions and holding the ontological “meanings” behind the practices in abeyance (Fleming, 2002: 18–19). While rituals “are a principal site of new history being made,” this new history can be ephemeral (Kelly & Kaplan, 1990: 141). The fleetingness of syncretic bodily postures in ritual—the cradling of hands, the pacing of the breath—expresses this selective syncretism in the pragmatic service of healing via the fluidity of bodily gesture, and not in the lasting evidence of non-Christian texts or images (Van der Veer, 1994; Kiernan, 1994). John channeled universal energy with a Christian sacrament of laying on of hands, not a Buddhist ritual of merit; Nadia’s yoga classes were framed by Christian icons, not Ganesha figures; Patrick’s meditation sessions used a Christian “mantra” prayer, not a Hindu one.

Ritual’s ephemerality, however, does not signify its triviality or its disengagement from tradition (Coleman & Elsner, 2004: 283). While Nadia’s dissatisfaction with a disembodied and patriarchal Christian tradition spurred her ritual innovation, by contrast Anglo-Catholic tradition was the grounds of Patrick’s and John’s sacramental experimentation. Ascending from these traditional, thus historicized, grounds, yet remaining tethered to them, they all effected their integrations of Asian religious practices with recourse to multiple lineages: intersecting lines of inheritance, drawn retrospectively. Suspending in proximity symbols, acts, and memories from across times and cultures, ritual can embody the embrace of difference without necessarily articulating it, and without necessarily claiming to be historicizing. The lasting stain of ritual on and in the body (e.g., John’s Christian baptism or Nadia’s teenage yoga practice)
both limits and creates the possibilities for responsible Christian adaptations of Asian religious traditions, however, as ritually innovative Christians enact, even if tacitly, the principle that ritual carries meaningful pasts. Born Christian, white and Western, through ritual they hope to be made planetary souls, delivered by—but not necessarily from—the compromising histories of their given and chosen traditions.

Notes

[1] I first met John at his monastery in 2003 and interacted with Patrick and Nadia (pseudonyms) in various settings from 1999 to 2003. Patrick and Nadia have since left St. Luke’s (a pseudonym) and divorced, but Patrick remains employed in the Anglican Church. They all commented on an earlier version of this article. My use of “Asian religious traditions” is here limited to Buddhism, Hinduism and Reiki (which by some accounts has a Christian lineage; see Mitchell, 1985). “Liberal Christians” refers to those with pluralistic views open to wisdom from other religions.


[3] Some Christian writings seem to support Goel’s point: “It is the Christian experience which is capable of fulfilling, perfecting the Hindu spiritual experience” (Dhavamony, 2002: 154).

[4] A “sacrament”, within Anglicanism, is a ritual that functions as a sign of and channel for divine grace.

[5] “Qi” or “ch’i” and “prana” are terms that mean life-giving energy or breath, within Chinese religion and Hinduism respectively. On Hindu versions of universalizing religion, see King (1999) and Sharma (1998).

[6] I thank Jennifer Bailey, my research assistant, whose field notes informed this section on the meditation sessions.

References


