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## Content

- 7 *Here at the Edges*  
An introduction by the Editor  
*Alexander Nachaj*

### *Articles*

- 13 *The Trouble with Whorephobia:*  
A Contemporary Re-evaluation of the Myth of Mary Magdalene  
with Special Reference to Marlene Dumas' Magdalena Series  
*Rosanna McNamara*
- 35 *Privileging the Lens:*  
Framing Islamic Violence and the Creation of Authoritative  
Discourses  
*Jeremy Cohen*
- 51 *Once the Buddha was an Aryan:*  
Race Sciences and the Domestication of Buddhism in North  
America  
*Ryan Anningson*

## ***Art Interlude***

- 72     ***Revisiting Religion and Violence in Contemporary Art***  
Étienne Camille Charbonneau, Artist.

## ***Book Reviews***

- 77     ***Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus:  
Prostitution and Religious Obedience in the Bible***  
Anthony Easton, reviewer.
- 79     ***Veiled Figures:  
Women, Modernity, and the Spectres of Orientalism***  
Georgia Carter, reviewer.
- 82     ***Does God Make the Man?  
Media, Religion, and the Crisis of Masculinity***  
Alexander Nachaj, reviewer.
- 84     ***Canadian Women Shaping Diasporic Religious Identities***  
Purna Roy, reviewer.
- 87     ***Mythologizing Jesus:  
From Jewish Teacher to Epic Hero***  
Joseph E. Brito, reviewer.
- 90     ***Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces:  
Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums***  
Bui Dieu Linh Mai, reviewer.

# Once the Buddha was an Aryan

## *Race Sciences and the Domestication of Buddhism in North America*

Ryan Anningson

### *Abstract*

This study examines the ways in which Buddhists in North America in the early twentieth century utilized the language of race sciences in order to present themselves as carriers of a superior religious tradition. This tradition was presented as spiritually and racially superior, and therefore overturned colonial narratives of Asian Buddhist inferiority. By studying interactions of Buddhists and race sciences, we are able to nuance the historiography of Buddhism in North America, connecting it to broader global networks, as well as display instances of Asian agency in the development of Buddhist Modernism. Furthermore, the place of race sciences in American society in the early twentieth century, and connections between Buddhism and scientific racism problematizes reified terms like “modern” and “science.” What was once considered the most cutting-edge scientific development of the age, utilized by early Buddhist in North America, is now considered socially repugnant.

Keywords: History, Buddhism in North America, Buddhism and Science.

According to British Member of Parliament Philip Snowden in a 1926 article published in *The Young East*,<sup>1</sup> “The most formidable problem before the world today, and especially for the Western nations, is the awakening of the ‘subject’ races.”<sup>2</sup> Race science is a broad term that encompasses a number of scientific theories from the early twentieth century that equated racial characteristics to biology and therefore justified certain perceptions of human evolution, intelligence, phrenology, and even eugenics. In the early twentieth century, then, many within the scientific community believed that evolutionary biology could explain the development of human races.<sup>3</sup> These scientists separated human populations by phenotype, a category which was then combined with other scientific categories of the time to explain racial differences and social-

Ryan Anningson

evolutionary trajectories.<sup>4</sup> This erroneous positing of social characteristics and development from the predetermined science of race was considered the most progressive science of the day. While this twentieth century pseudo-science must be differentiated from the science of the twenty-first century, it will be important to note that in both contexts the term “science” is reified to the point where it becomes equivalent to truth. This means that in the early twentieth century scientific racism was considered by many to be scientific truth—just like biology or physics today. The rush to reify science as essentialized truth helps to explain why the United States underwent its own “eugenics craze” during the Progressive Era, reaching its zenith in 1927 when states began legislating eugenic sterilization laws for “unfit” citizens.<sup>5</sup>

What difference would it make to the study of Buddhism in North America if Buddhists actively participated in a racist past? In this paper I will argue that Buddhists utilized racial science—then considered the most modern scientific thinking of the day—in order to reimagine a past which placed them at the pinnacle of racial evolutionary development. The utilization of scientific racism influenced the process of Buddhist modernization and domestication in the United States, and this history provides new insight into Asian agency in the spread of Buddhism globally. Buddhist writers in the early twentieth century were able to use preexisting discussions of Buddhism and science, combined with the new race sciences, not only to argue for the superiority of their religion, but also their own racial superiority during a time of colonial incursion in Asia and accusations of Buddhist corruption in North America. While we now recognize race science as fictitious, these theories nevertheless allowed Buddhists to invert accusations of Asian racial and religious inferiority by claiming that science proved Asian Buddhist superiority. Presentations of Buddhist superiority in North America helped to lay the foundations for Buddhism’s place in the North American religious marketplace, as presentations of Buddhism’s religious superiority, connections to science, and non-dogmatic rationalism helped to create the Zen Boom of the 1950s and 1960s. This paper is not a discussion of whether Buddhists were “racist” in any sense, but instead describes the way in which Buddhists deployed race sciences in order to reverse common narratives of Asian racial inferiority and Buddhist corruption. Although from the standpoint of 2016 much of the language of scientific racism is understood to be socially abhorrent, the fact that scientific racism and eugenics were considered to be advanced scientific thinking complicates terms like “modern” and “science”—especially in light of popular comparisons between Buddhism and science.



## ***Race Sciences in America***

Eugenics became in vogue with North American intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, is often credited with the creation of eugenics, or, as he phrases it, “a brief word to express the science of improving stock.”<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking, the eugenics movement represented the pinnacle of cutting edge science and a progressive solution to societal ills through the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Theories of racial evolution were thought to explain the development of humanity from pre-history to the current day. In other words, it was widely accepted that evolution through natural selection described the process whereby humanity could progress and develop better characteristics by eradicating individual traits deemed negative for society.

Eugenics was not merely an intellectual abstraction, but influenced social policy and the state. Perhaps the starkest example of this comes from the 1927 Supreme Court case, *Buck v. Bell* (274 U.S. 200). Carrie Buck was a poor girl from Virginia when she became pregnant at age sixteen.<sup>8</sup> As Virginia, in 1924, had enacted a eugenic sterilization law based on the theory that social defects like criminality and poverty were passed down genetically, Buck’s poverty was presented as evidence that she was a “moral degenerate.” Her child was also deemed “below average” in infancy.<sup>9</sup> These charges led to her undergoing forced sterilization at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. The case made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court, with former president, Chief Justice, and active member of the national eugenics movement William Howard Taft presiding. The court found that Buck should be sterilized. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was asked to write the majority opinion, a brief which his colleagues on the court called “brutal.”<sup>10</sup> In this now infamous brief, Holmes wrote that Buck should be sterilized, “for the protection of the state,” before ending with the social lament that, “three generations of imbeciles are enough.” Major US newspapers lauded the decision, and over the next ten years more than a dozen states added eugenic sterilization laws.

Scientific racism also influenced American international policy. President Calvin Coolidge signed the Immigration Act of 1924—which encompassed the National Origins Act and Asian Exclusion Act—with the express purpose of preserving “the ideal of American homogeneity.”<sup>11</sup> The Immigration Act included a quota system for certain areas, such as Latin America, while completely banning East Asians. The Act encountered very little opposition in Congress, and garnered strong public support from the

Ryan Anningson

scientific community and even the American Federation of Labor. Madison Grant, a eugenicist and author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, strongly favoured the legislation as a way of upholding American superiority.<sup>12</sup> The quotas imposed by the Immigration Act effectively cut Asian immigration until they were repealed in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Theories of racial development were used to justify global colonial endeavours, as “benevolent” races attempted to assist those stalled along the singular evolutionary track. American military expansion into economically poorer nations was in part justified by the race science ideals of Social Darwinism and Anglo-Saxon superiority. However, American Imperialism differed from British Colonialism, as the United States very rarely occupied nations in the systematic fashion of the British in India, for instance. In 1823 the Monroe Doctrine was signed, declaring that the United States alone could influence the countries of Latin America. Following the Spanish-American War (1898), the United States embarked on a period of “benevolent imperialism,” during which time the Philippines, Hawai‘i, Puerto Rico, and Cuba all came under American power.<sup>13</sup>

Race sciences and eugenics greatly influenced popular culture, especially in the 1920s. Lothrop Stoddard was a Harvard-trained historian, political writer, and eugenicist. He wrote *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* in 1920, which enjoyed great popularity and was referenced in *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>14</sup> Stoddard wrote that the hereditary superiority of the white race was being threatened by the increasing number of births and immigration from the “colored” races, whom he often called the “hordes.”<sup>15</sup> Industrialists were revered members of society in the 1920s. In the spring of 1920, Henry Ford’s personal newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, published a series of articles chronicling the perceived conspiracies of the world Jewish population.<sup>16</sup> The articles were compiled to create *The International Jew: The World’s Problem*, a four-volume series. Popular culture both creates and reflects national social consciousness, and race sciences were ubiquitous amongst American intellectuals.

The natural sciences were not the only academic branches concerned with the development of racial characteristics; anthropology was also used to “prove” scientific theories of racial evolution. According to Brian Siegel, nineteenth century anthropologists “all but invented the idea of ‘race’... [as] most of our current racial folklore derives from the ‘scientific racism’ and armchair evolutionism of the nineteenth century anthropologists.”<sup>17</sup> Siegel argues that anthropologists studied human cultures and their findings

were then merged with race sciences in order to explain the current state of various world cultures biologically. In other words, cultural variation became biological predisposition, even to the point of considering some races as different species.<sup>18</sup> I do not argue that anthropology as an academic discipline is somehow “to blame” for the scientific racism of the early twentieth century, merely to show that the intellectual tenor of America at the time was predisposed to views of racial evolution and social Darwinism.

Scientific racism represented the cutting edge of scientific knowledge and a social truism, with scientific discovery reinforcing what was then considered to be common sense. Americans believed that eugenic sterilization and selective breeding could rid society of social ills like poverty and “feeble-mindedness.” Race science theories became so ingrained in American society that they became fodder for the writings of popular culture and were even used to justify American imperial expansion. The science of the day was thus self-reinforcing: anthropology proved what science said about racial development, while race sciences helped to explain the cultural differences anthropologists encountered, either in the field or from armchairs. Scientific racism was so ubiquitous in early twentieth century America that it influenced the beliefs of religious practitioners.

### ***Metaphysical Buddhism***

In the early twentieth century, many American intellectuals believed Buddhism was the religion most compatible with modern science. One century later, connections between Buddhism and science are so commonplace within American culture that the statement basically functions as a general truism. However, even “science” is a construct, changing in various times and locales. Paul Carus and Helena Blavatsky both claimed to be developing “religions of science” whose doctrines would fully align with the discoveries of modern science.

The doctrines of the Theosophical Society influenced the development of Buddhism in North America. Madame Blavatsky claims to have studied the ancient *Book of Dzyan*, written in the secret language of Senzar, when writing *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888.<sup>19</sup> Blavatsky argues that the earth has gone through seven ages, and that humanity originally had seven root races, which then developed seven sub-races. Atlanteans were the fourth root race in human development. They inhabited the mythical island of Atlantis, and produced an advanced civilization with the use of electricity and airplanes. However, this age was marked by materialism, and therefore

JRC Vol. 27, no. 1 55

Ryan Anningson

the final sub-race of Atlanteans was subsumed into the fifth root race, the Aryans. The Aryans destroyed the Atlanteans who remained as they had become, “yellow and red, brown and black,” due to their inferiority and sin.<sup>20</sup> It was in this violent melee that some of these inferior Atlanteans were able to escape to the lands of Africa and Asia. In Blavatsky’s version of history, “the last survivors of the fair child of the White Island perished ages before. Their elect had taken shelter on the sacred Island, while some of the accursed races, separating from the main stock, now lived in the jungles and underground, when the golden yellow race became in its turn ‘black with sin.’”<sup>21</sup> In the early twentieth century the Theosophical Society presented its doctrines as modern science, a designation which found immense popularity around the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup>

During this time philologists and race scientists sought to prove that the historical Buddha was Aryan.<sup>23</sup> Sanskrit is a part of the Indo-European language family, as is Greek, Latin, German, French, and English. These theories of language groups were combined with racial groups to demonstrate that the Buddha was racially an Aryan.<sup>24</sup> The historical Buddha was now racially and linguistically connected to Europeans.<sup>25</sup> One Philologist, Adolphe Pictet (1799-1875), attempted to publicize connections of Indo-European heritage, “to revive Indo-European memories in a Christian Europe that is in search of an even brighter future.”<sup>26</sup> The Buddha, portrayed as racially Aryan, was therefore connected to a greater European past, and Buddhism was a religion of science developed for an Aryan future.

In the early twentieth century, Buddhism was a religion of science, and North American Buddhists were eager for a religion which agreed with modern scientific thinking. *The Golden Lotus* was a popular Buddhist magazine from 1944-1967; it was published in America and portrayed itself as a magazine for seekers, sympathizers, and others coming to Buddhism for perhaps the first time.<sup>27</sup> *The Golden Lotus* describes the upward evolutionary trajectory of the Aryan race in world history, including the Buddha, in a series of articles called “The Race.”<sup>28</sup> This series of articles ran from 1944-1946, during the final years of World War II, when many were still ignorant (willfully or not) to the horrors wrought by eugenics in Nazi Germany. In “The Story of the Buddha’s Dharma,” the author describes the need for the “Āryan Root Race” to establish their religious inheritance to Buddhism, and regain control from those who would otherwise corrupt it.<sup>29</sup> In a side-panel on the following page, the editors quote Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden,”—“take up the White Man’s burden, Send forth the best ye breed/Go bind your sons to exile, to serve your

Once the Buddha was an Aryan captives' need"—before a separate article explaining how the low karmic state of the Asian population may justify colonial endeavours in order to reinvigorate the Buddhist heartland.<sup>30</sup> It is clear that Buddhists in America utilized the language of race sciences in order to imagine themselves within an historical Buddhist pedigree, and in many ways place themselves at the centre of that tradition.

Buddhist doctrines could even be used to explain the development of human history, especially when merged with scientific racism. Although collective karma is not a traditional Buddhist concept, in “The Story of the Buddha’s Dharma,” the author argues that karma creates the racial characteristics of various social groups, thus making culture biologically determined.<sup>31</sup> According to this line of thinking, when Buddhism spread from Aryan India to the “uncivilized land” of Tibet, Buddhism naturally developed “uncivilized qualities” and a number of “clinging, parasitic superstitions” such as devotional practices.<sup>32</sup> Articles within *The Golden Lotus* clearly draw connections between the unfolding of karmic proclivities, racial designations and colonialism—connections which maintain that other nations may be helped by a benevolent and karmically superior nation. This web of explanation further displays the connections between Buddhism and modern science, and elucidates the purported corruption of Buddhism over previous millennia.

The real question, then, was: how could a superior religion of science have developed in a “backwards nation” 2,500 years before the present day? Race sciences explained how a once-great religion, started by an Aryan social reformer—the Buddha—could become the corrupted superstition of the “Lamaists” and the Japanese.<sup>33</sup> Max Müller once asked:

Is it not high time that the millions who live in Japan and profess a faith in Buddha should be told that this doctrine of Amitābha is a *secondary form of Buddhism, a corruption of the pure doctrine of the Royal Prince*, and that if they really mean to be Buddhists, they should return to the words of Buddha, as they are preserved to us in the older Sūtras? But these older Sūtras are evidently far less considered in Japan than the *degraded and degrading tracts, the silly and mischievous stories of Amitābha* and his paradise of which, I feel convinced, Buddha himself never knew even the names.<sup>34</sup>

Ryan Anningson

Race sciences thus provided an explanation for what scholars viewed as the corruption of Buddhism in light of the racial genius of the Buddha himself. The Buddha preached a superior religion, which was meant for superior people. However, this “Āryan Path” was corrupted by the inferior peoples of Asia following his death.<sup>35</sup> The original Buddhism was a scientific philosophy, developed by and for Aryans, while all other corruptions were placed there through later Asian accretions. Therefore, the Aryan Buddhists discovering the religion anew were its rightful claimants. Buddhists in the United States were reclaiming their racial, linguistic, and spiritual heritage, and wresting it away from those who had previously degenerated this Aryan religion.

### ***Race Sciences and Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia***

A history of white racism would not be terribly new as an academic study, but what if Buddhists of Asian ancestries were similarly engaging debates in Buddhism and race sciences? Anagārika Dharmapāla (b. Don David Hewavitharane) first rose to prominence with the Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka. He aided Col. Henry Steele Olcott and Madame Blavatsky on their trips throughout Sri Lanka, although he later split from the group over issues of universal religion and the Theosophical presentation of what Dharmapāla considered a poor version of Buddhism.<sup>36</sup> Richard Jaffe has also described connections between Japan and Southeast Asia in the early twentieth century, which shows currents of influence as well as a pan-Asian desire to connect to original Buddhism.<sup>37</sup> Race sciences in the United States would therefore come to influence Buddhism broadly, as cross-cultural flows impacted Buddhism in Asia as well as Buddhists coming to America.

Dharmapāla used the language of race sciences to argue that Buddhism itself was proof of Asian superiority. He claims that the people of the West are not racially superior at all, and that Asians who are descended from the Buddha are the true Aryans.<sup>38</sup> Dharmapāla countered the attacks of Christians in Sri Lanka on racial grounds; as he states, “we condemn Christianity as a system utterly unsuited to the gentle spirit of the Aryan race.”<sup>39</sup> The influence of colonialism helps explain why Dharmapāla would focus on race science, as he was able to utilize the most cutting-edge science of the day in order to turn arguments around and claim Asian-Aryan superiority over those who only “call themselves Aryan.”<sup>40</sup>

Aryan superiority was further justified through anti-Semitism. As Dharmapāla writes, “the two Semitic religions [Christianity and Islam]...

are responsible for the retardation of progress of the larger Humanity of Asia... all that was beautiful in aesthetic architecture, built by the devotees of Aryan spirituality, went down with a crash, under the sledgehammer of attack of Semitic monotheism.”<sup>41</sup> He thus maintains that the nations of the West were prone to war and barbarism because they were mired in the depths of Semitic superstition.<sup>42</sup> Race sciences allowed Buddhists to claim their own superiority over the West, as the very foundation of European culture was “received... from the Asiatic Jews.”<sup>43</sup>

Aryan superiority was also used as a merit-based designator. In other words, one could become Aryan through behaviour, thus connecting a pan-Asian Buddhism against the Semitic creeds of “the West.” The Buddha uses the term *Āryan* throughout the canon to mean “noble,” as in the story of the fisherman, Ariya, where the Buddha tells him that a noble person would not gain employment as a fisherman because they hurt living beings.<sup>44</sup> According to Dharmapāla, “with the introduction of Buddhism... Japan became Aryanized.”<sup>45</sup> This merit-based designation makes all Buddhists into Aryans if they behave according to the noble example of the Buddha, although Dharmapāla continued to suggest that Sri Lankans were racially superior also. In other words, the entire Buddhist world was superior to the West, with Sri Lankan Aryans doubly superior, both spiritually and racially. If one group, Buddhists, were all of Aryan stock, then this would suggest that all others were barbarians (*mleccha*).

Although the language of racism carries a tenor of violence, race science obscures this tone behind a guise of knowledge specialization. The early twentieth century was a period of great violence, as the World Wars or the experiences of colonization demonstrate. The vocabulary of scientific racism necessarily creates a hierarchical system of violence whereby one group of people is denigrated at the expense of others. This denigration is justified through pre-determined biology, thus entrenching the tenor of violence within a science of dehumanization. A science which creates a hierarchy of humanity based on biological predisposition is inherently dehumanizing and thus connected to violence, especially during a period of World War and the utilization of race sciences in Nazi Germany.<sup>46</sup> Following the end of the colonial era in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), the island nation bore great periods of intense violence often revolving around conflicts between a perceived superior in-group against an inferior out-group, which in many ways mirrors the language of scientific racism purported in the early twentieth century.

### ***Race Sciences and Japanese Buddhism***

Japanese Buddhists also utilized the language of racial science to assert their own superiority and counter both internal and external critiques. During the Meiji Era Japanese government officials persecuted Buddhism by claiming that it was a foreign religion of superstition with a parasitic monastic class<sup>47</sup>—which leading scholars of the day such as Max Müller agreed upon. Similarly, academics and Buddhists in the United States claimed that Japanese Buddhism represented the religion's most degraded form, while the American government was perceived as insulting the nation of Japan with stilted trade agreements. Japanese Buddhists believed their religion and their homeland were being publicly disparaged. Japanese Buddhists were therefore defensive of their own status, while simultaneously attempting to spread their religious tradition to North America.

Japanese Buddhists around the early twentieth century attempted to invert discussions of Japanese Buddhist degeneration and corruption through an emic reevaluation of Buddhist historical development. Critics argued that Japanese Buddhism was a corruption of the teachings of original Buddhism, in part due to temporal distance from the founder as well as persistent historical accretions added to the religion. However, according to the Tendai doctrine of *goji* (five periods), the Buddha taught the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* first following his enlightenment, but his audience could not understand due to their low capabilities. The Buddha then taught the doctrines of Theravāda Buddhism as expedient means, before moving on to the deeper teachings of the Mahāyāna, with the pinnacle teaching of Buddhism as the *Lotus Sūtra*. This, again, explains how Buddhism could have come from a superior being, then degraded, and finally ended as a superior religion again, as the Japanese Buddhists argued that their specific forms of Buddhism represented the pinnacle of Buddhist teachings. The past was reimaged in order to position the Japanese as superior against others.

Japanese Buddhists and the Theosophical Society were mutually influencing each other in the early twentieth century. D. T. Suzuki's wife, Beatrice Lane, was a Theosophist, and the pair started a new lodge of the Theosophical Society in Kyoto on 8 May 1924 (White Lotus Day).<sup>48</sup> Articles titled "Buddhism and Theosophy" and "The Over-Soul" ran in Japanese Buddhist magazines throughout the early twentieth century. Japanese Buddhists in the United States also discussed the affinities between the doctrines of Theosophy and Eastern Buddhism.<sup>49</sup>



Japanese Buddhism and the Japanese nation became entwined with the Buddhism of Southeast Asia and India in the early twentieth century. Japanese Buddhists were in close contact with Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia through travel and correspondence.<sup>50</sup> Japanese Buddhists in the early twentieth century often went on long pilgrimage trips to the sites of “original Buddhism” in India, and some Japanese monks underwent Theravāda ordination in Sri Lanka. Dharmapāla also visited Japan, and his writings appear in both *The Young East* and the *Eastern Buddhist*, two influential Japanese Buddhist magazines. There were direct networks of influence and engagement between the United States (or at least a perceived “West”), Metaphysical Buddhists, South Asian Buddhists, and Japanese Buddhists.<sup>51</sup>

Japanese writers used *Nihonjinron*—the belief in a defined core characteristic of Japaneseness as a racial designator—to justify colonial expansion throughout Asia. *Nihonjinron* was especially promoted following the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), in which the smaller nation of Japan defeated more powerful Russia during the Meiji Era and in the years preceding World War II. According to Kwoyen Ōtani in *The Eastern Buddhist*, the Japanese Yamato race naturally “enjoy[s] peace, no warlike demonstrations take place, the virtuous are respected, the benevolent are honoured, and the rules of propriety are observed.”<sup>52</sup> D. T. Suzuki and others claimed that every Japanese is imbued with a “Samurai spirit” of selflessness, respect, and honour, which included Har Dayal’s assessment that, “the Japanese are *great* in every sense of that word—great because of their patriotism, their love of progress, their earnestness, their energy, their tradition of art, and their deep religious view of life.”<sup>53</sup> *Nihonjinron* included an imagined past, such as the article “A Representative Woman of Japan,” by Hanso Tarao, which describes how each Yamato woman holds a “samurai spirit bequeathed to her both by her parents and husband.”<sup>54</sup> Japanese Buddhists were arguing for their own racial superiority, thus inverting scientific arguments.

Japanese Buddhists also utilized the language of race sciences in order to prove their racial and spiritual superiority. Taken together, the arguments of the five periods and *Nihonjinron* suggest that the Japanese are superior, both racially and spiritually. On a global scale, Japanese Buddhist writers essentialized the East as “spiritual” versus the “materialist” West. This argument was meant to counter American material prosperity by suggesting that they were lacking in spirituality, a quality which the Japanese had in abundance. In “Monochromism Versus Polychromism,” J. Takakusu argues that biological race designators determine the preferred colour palette of individuals, and it is this colour palette which influences race-based

Ryan Anningson

religious preferences.<sup>55</sup> As Aryans are monochromatic, they are more predisposed to monotheistic and dualistic thinking, which makes them prone to violence.<sup>56</sup> This point may be seen as countering the superiority of the Buddha himself, but given the nationalistic fervour of *Nihonjinron* at the time, Japanese writers may have been very willing to ‘kill the Buddha’ on the path to proving Yamato superiority. The Yamato Race is inherently spiritual, representing the pinnacle of the pinnacle of religious thought, and racially superior through the characteristics of *Nihonjinron*.

As a superior nation the Japanese were now in a position to help the other nations of Asia, who had fallen behind due to their inferior racial and spiritual capabilities. Although Suzuki sometimes referred to China and India as antecedents of Japanese Buddhism, other authors argued that the Chinese racial temperament meant “the people of [China] have no religion,” but “with proper guidance...they will embrace true religion.”<sup>57</sup> Korea (Chōsen) had similarly fallen behind, as Japanese writers claimed Korean Buddhism was in a state of disrepair with lazy monks gambling and fornicating. Japan gained control over most of the Korean Peninsula in 1910 and placed all Korean Buddhist temples under the auspices of Japanese Zen officials. Racialized nationalistic language continued over the next decades until the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II. Japan’s colonial expansion was, in some ways, an attempt to revive the “pure Aryan form of Buddhism from the Japanese storehouse.”<sup>58</sup>

In the early twentieth century Japanese Buddhists were pressured internally, from their own government officials, and externally, from the critiques of missionaries, academics, and other Buddhists. In response, they utilized the language of race sciences to prove that Japanese Buddhism was not an inferior and degenerated form of religion but actually the pinnacle of human thought and religious development, and that the Yamato Race was racially superior through their inherent Samurai spirit. Race sciences meant that the Japanese were not a backwards nation of idol worship, but rather a superior nation bringing the true Dharma to both Asia and eventually North America. The rhetoric of race sciences, and subsequent reimagining of history, eventually contributed to Japanese colonial endeavours and the violence of World War II.<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

One question which seems to beg asking becomes, were Buddhists in the early twentieth century racists? The best answer to this question seems to be one of ‘noble silence.’ I do not think Buddhists in the early twentieth

century were either racist or not-racist, nor does it really matter. In fact, my argument here is that going beyond the designation of “racist” allows for a more fruitful and nuanced discussion about global Buddhism in the early twentieth century. The more fruitful question then becomes, for what ends did Buddhists use the language of race sciences in the early twentieth century?

Buddhists and scholars alike were imagining an original Buddhism that coincided with then-current notions of racial and spiritual development. Scientific racism was used to explain how such a superior religion of science could begin in India nearly 2,500 years ago, as the Buddha was a racially superior Aryan. This scientific description allowed Buddhists to reimagine history in order to connect themselves to the historical founder as well as argue for their own racial and spiritual superiority.

A study of Buddhism and race sciences in the early twentieth century complicates historical narratives surrounding the domestication of Buddhism in America and how Buddhists were able to “cross boundaries and make homes” in the United States.<sup>60</sup> As opposed to earlier literature on the introduction of Buddhism to North America, the Buddhist use of race sciences shows that they were not passive, simply changing to better fit North American standards as a form of “Protestant Buddhism.” Instead, Buddhists were utilizing what was thought to be the most advanced science of the day in order to assert their own superiority over the colonial powers of the world. Previous scholarship on the domestication of Buddhism in North America generally argues that Buddhism was already viewed as a religion of science by scholars, something which many seekers in the United States desired. Buddhists were able to use this connection of science and Buddhism to promote their religion in the United States. Rather than a banal “Buddhism and science,” this study shows that Buddhism was connected to a racialized theory of science which was rooted in colonial themes and concrete power formations. They utilized what was considered the most cutting-edge science of the day, race science, in order to modernize and argue for their own superiority.

By focusing on race sciences and the development of Buddhism in North America as a case study, scholars are actually provided with a powerful example of Asian agency. Buddhist groups like the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist Churches of America adapted themselves to Christian forms of worship in order to better fit North American standards, which is a traditional example of domestication. However, Michihiro Ama has shown that some

Ryan Anningson

of the changes taking place in Shin temples were simultaneously happening in Japan, suggesting that these Churches were also Japan-izing.<sup>61</sup> Race sciences also show that Japanese Buddhists were arguing for their own superiority against the nations of the West. Taken together, the movement of Buddhism is no longer a unidirectional spread with American influence changing Buddhism, but a complex back-and-forth whereby the Japanese are adapting themselves as an expedient means before providing the United States with the pinnacle of world religious thought. Asian Buddhists were not forced to change by the power of others, but believed they were adapting their superior religion to be brought to the spiritually and racially inferior United States.

This study complicates commonly held notions of what is meant by the terms “science” and “modern” in the study of Buddhism in North America. Phrases like Buddhism and Science and Buddhist Modernism have become commonplace. It would be easy to simply contrast historical pseudo-science with current scientific truths. Many post-colonial movements ask us to reexamine the unquestioned scientific truths of today, and attempt to show that our ideas of science and modern are also constructed within colonial frameworks. Some of the scientific truths of today will likely be looked upon with a similar disbelief one hundred years in the future. References to Buddhist Modernism and Buddhism and Science are generally made in a cerebral sense, with “modernism” and “science” broadly referring to Westernization. However, my research shows a much more complex relationship between Buddhism and North America, as well as science and modernity. This study shows that Buddhists were able to claim a spot within the North American religious landscape by engaging with what was considered the most modern scientific thinking at the time, and then using this position as a religion of science in order to assert their own superiority as a religious alternative to Christianity, all of which was taking place within post-colonial frameworks and the specter of two World Wars. Buddhism and science and modernity therefore do not represent simple processes of Westernization, but a complex back and forth of power dynamics and the utilization of racialized science in order to promote Buddhism as a superior religious alternative. Terms like “science” and “modern” which are often referenced haphazardly in the singular become reified without critique and reevaluation. This historical study does not separate the pseudo-science of the past from the true science of today, but displays the need to question scientific truths at all times.

Although studies regarding the history of race and race sciences may be rather uncomfortable, by going beyond stark designators such as “racist,” we can see further into the nuances of the development of Buddhism through these complicated issues. David L. McMahan uses the post-colonial theory of multiple modernities to show that the developments of Buddhist Modernism created a new alternative modernity which eschews typical versions of classical development tied to industrialization and materialism.<sup>62</sup> This study shows the development of a new “Buddhist modernity” within an era of globalization, colonialism, and race science. The various actors in this study utilized Buddhist doctrines in new ways in order to display their religious and racial superiority against more powerful figures. Although abhorrent to many today, race science contributed to Buddhist domestication in North America and spread globally, and also created a counter-argument to claims of Asian racial inferiority and Buddhist religious corruption. The outcomes of the racialized language of superiority contributed to the violence of colonialism and World War II, but was also a factor in laying foundations for what would become Buddhist Modernism globally, and Buddhism in North America locally. Buddhists actively engaged the language of race sciences in order to construct modernist Buddhist histories which placed their specific form of Buddhism at the centre of a racially and spiritually superior religion; these constructed histories deserve further study and would be an excellent contribution to the historiography of Buddhism in North America. Furthermore, by positing Buddhism as a superior religious alternative created by, and for, racially superior beings, Buddhist writers laid the foundations for the popularity of Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s in North America, while simultaneously reversing colonial narratives of Asian and Buddhist inferiority. By ignoring our initial reaction for cries of “racism,” scholars can complicate the history of Buddhism in America and show the active agency of Asian Buddhists in the development of Buddhist Modernism.

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## *Endnotes*

1. A Japanese Buddhist magazine in publication from 1925-1944.
2. Philip Snowden, “East and West: The World’s Greatest Problem,” *Young East* 1, No. 10 (March 1926): 313.
3. “Race” itself was a recently constructed categorization.
4. John Lie, *Modern Peoplehood*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.
5. Paul Lombardo, “Three generations, no imbeciles: New light on Buck V. Bell,” *New York University Law Review* (1985): 31; 45.
6. Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, (London:

Macmillan, 1883), 17.

7. Paul Lombardo, ed. *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 1.
8. Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), x.
9. Lombardo, 2008, x.
10. Ibid, xii.
11. “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act),” United States Department of State Office of the Historian, retrieved 21 August 2016.
12. *The Passing of the Great Race* was very popular in the 1920s, and Madison Grant took part in public debates with Franz Boas and other intellectuals of the time. Grant was the Chairman of the New York Zoological Society.
13. Meg Wesling, *Empire’s Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 9.
14. In chapter One of *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan says he is reading *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by “Goddard.” Tom claims, “well, it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved.”
15. Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1922), 8.
16. A. James Rudin, “The Dark Legacy of Henry Ford’s anti-Semitism (Commentary),” *The Washington Post*, 10 October, 2014, Religion News Service, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-dark-legacy-of-henry-fords-anti-semitism-commentary/2014/10/10/c95b7df2-509d-11e4-877c-335b53ffe736\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/the-dark-legacy-of-henry-fords-anti-semitism-commentary/2014/10/10/c95b7df2-509d-11e4-877c-335b53ffe736_story.html)
17. Brian Siegel, “Anthropology and the Science of ‘Race,’” *Anthropology Publications*, paper 6, (1996); 4.
18. Siegel, 6. This debate was sometimes called the “monogenesis” versus “polygenesis” debate. The question focused on whether humans shared biological ancestors, thus being of one biological origin, or developed independently from each other, thus caucasians were of a completely different origin than Africans.
19. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, vol. I, Cosmogogenesis*, (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Ltd., 1888), viii.
20. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, vol. II, Anthropogenesis*, (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Ltd., 1888), 11.
21. Blavatsky, *Anthropogenesis*, 319.
22. Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 332-333.
23. *āryan* is a Sanskrit term for “noble” or “superior.” Ancient peoples of northern India often used the term to refer to themselves. *Āryan*, in the Sanskrit, is often contrasted with *mleccha*, meaning “barbarian.” See Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7.
24. Ibid, 7.
25. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 151.
26. Maurice Olender and Arthur Goldhammer, tr., *The Languages of Paradise: Aryans and Semites, A Match Made in Heaven*, (New York: Other Press, 2002), 95.

27. *The Golden Lotus* oscillates between Buddhism and Metaphysical Religion in the United States, including the Theosophical Society, New Thought, and others. The editor of the magazine was Robert Stuart Clifton, a Theosophist who became a Jōdo Shinshū priest, and finally a Theravāda monk.
28. "The Mystery of Being," *The Golden Lotus* 1, No. 1 (January 1944): 2.
29. "The Story of the Buddha's Dharma," *The Golden Lotus* 1, No. 3 (March 1944): 17. "Āryan Root Race" is used throughout *The Golden Lotus*, such as the "Glossary" section of *The Golden Lotus* 1, No. 1.
30. Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands," quoted in *The Golden Lotus* 1, No. 10 (October 1944): 79.
31. "The Story of the Buddha's Dharma," 17.
32. Ibid.
33. M.L. Gordon, "Shall we Welcome Buddhist Missionaries to America?" *The Open Court* Vol. XIV (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, May 1900), in *Contacts and Exchanges in Print Culture: Encountering Buddhism in U.S. Periodicals, 1844-1903*, ed. Thomas Tweed, vol. 1 of Buddhism in the United States, 1840-1925, (London: Ganesha Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 302.
34. Friedrich Max Müller, *On Sanskrit Texts Discovered in Japan*, (London: Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1880), 22.
35. "The Enlightened One," *The Golden Lotus* 1, No. 4 (April 1944): 29. The various authors of *The Golden Lotus* often refer to the Dharma as the "Āryan Path" (diacritics in original)
36. Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steele Olcott*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 167.
37. Richard Jaffe, "Seeking Śākyamuni: Travel and the Reconstruction of Japanese Buddhism," *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 30, No. 1 (Winter 2004): 65.
38. Anagārika Dharmapāla, "An Appeal to Japanese Buddhists," *The Young East* 3, No. 6 (Nov. 1927): 195.
39. Anagārika Dharmapāla, "Message of the Buddha," in *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala*, ed. Ananda Guruge (Ceylon: Government Press, 1965), 442.
40. Dharmapāla (1927), 195.
41. Dharmapāla, ed. Guruge, 456-7.
42. Dharmapāla (1927), 192-3.
43. Dharmapāla, ed. Guruge, 155.
44. Lopez, 82. His name is Ariya, which means noble, but this does not match his profession as a fisherman because hurting living beings for work is an ignoble profession.
45. Dharmapāla (1927), 192.
46. Adolf Hitler expressly used some Theosophical tracts in his racial theories. Lopez, 75.
47. James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and Its Persecution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5.
48. Shin'ichi Yoshinaga, "Three Boys on a Great Vehicle: 'Mahāyāna Buddhism' and a Trans-National Network," in *A Buddhist Crossroads: Pioneer Western Buddhists and Asian Networks, 1860-1960*, ed. Brian Bocking, Phibul Choompolpaisal, Laurence Cox, and Alicia Turner, (London: Routledge, 2015), 59.
49. Sokei-an, "Concerning Soul," *Cat's Yawn* 1, No. 4 (October 1940): 13.
50. Jaffe, 67.
51. I say "perceived 'West,'" because Japanese Buddhist writings in this time period essentialized the entire "West" as basically constituting the United States. This is the inverse of most Orientalism literature, which shows the essentialization of the East

- as an imagined monolithic entity. Japanese Buddhists in the early 20th century were also creating a singular West. To quote Edward Said, the Japanese were also splitting the world into “two unequal halves, Orient and Occident” where “detailed logic [is] governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.” Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979).
52. Kwoyen Ōtani, “The First Step Towards the Realization of World-Peace,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 1, No. 4 (November-December 1921): 257.
  53. Har Dayal, “The Mission of the Japanese Buddhists,” *Young East* 3, No. 1 (June 1927): 11.
  54. Hanso Tarao, “A Representative Woman of Japan,” *Young East* 4, No. 2 (July 1928): 55.
  55. J. Takakusu, “Monochromism Versus Polychromism,” *Young East* 3, No. 6 (November 1927): 183.
  56. Takakusu, 185.
  57. Mock Joya, “Religious Features of Manchuokuo,” *Young East* 4, No. 11 (July-September 1934): 44-45.
  58. Dharmapāla (1927), 192.
  59. There are a number of scholars who have previously written on the place of Buddhism in Japan during the lead-up to World War Two, most famously Brian Victoria. He argues Buddhists were active in the rise of nationalist fervour and participants in the “Japanese War Machine.” Victoria’s claims that Buddhism engaged a concerted effort to propagate war through “religious-inspired fanaticism” seems to me rather drastic. The claims made in Victoria’s studies may initially seem totally outlandish, such as accusing Japanese Buddhists of anti-Semitism, but he is correct in his assertion that these ideas are present in primary sources during the early twentieth century. Victoria fails to take into account the theoretical frameworks of post-colonialism and multiple modernities when pointing out what was an undeniable nationalistic tone in Japanese Buddhist writings. By focusing on ideas contained within these primary sources we can obtain a more nuanced picture of the historical situation and the network of interactions between Japanese Buddhists, the government, Buddhists and non-Buddhists in the United States, and others. For instance, Victoria draws great attention to the anti-Semitic language of Yasutani Haku’un and others; however, if we consider this problem through the lens of race sciences, we can see the ways in which race sciences played a great cultural role in North America, Europe, Japan, and the rest of Asia.
  60. Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 74.
  61. Michihiro Ama, *Immigrants to the Pure Land: The Modernization, Acculturation, and Globalization of Shin Buddhism, 1898-1941*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), 5.
  62. David L. McMahan, “Buddhism and Multiple Modernities,” in *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States*, ed. Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie E.F. Quli, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 181-182.

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Ryan Anningson

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