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Unspoken Propositions in the Construction of American Religious Imagination

In this paper I will be making a critical analysis of Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls, the Making of American Spirituality* (2006). In this book, Schmidt offers an informative and colorful portrayal of American mysticism and spirituality. His argument traces the thoughts and influences of such characters as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and William James and their impact on the current American popular culture and religious identity. Although Schmidt's argument is compelling, I contend that it is deficient in several important aspects. Whereas Schmidt is attentive to the internal American historical context in which his main characters lived, his book is devoid of any mention of the broader context of the world history in which these characters were found. In other words, Schmidt offers a picture of American religious development as if it has happened in a vacuum, with influences from other cultures and larger global events mentioned only in passive terms. Contemporary scholarship paints us a very different account of this historical period; one framed in terms of power dynamics and contested voices. This is important to recognize, as the list of thinkers Schmidt offers us represents some of the pivotal architects of the American response to the intellectual and material imperialism that was in full swing during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the service of my argument, I will begin with a brief description of Schmidt's work with an emphasis on the salient points regarding issues of appropriation and what Edward

Said has coined as the "response to the other." I will then outline the relevant aspects of the historical context that Schmidt fails to account for in his work and explain their relevance in the construction of the American religious identity. I will follow this section with a general discussion of the issues inherent in cross-cultural appropriation and comparison, and conclude with a more accurate, however perhaps less flattering, account of American 'spirituality.'

A Professor of Religion at Princeton University, Schmidt has the intellectual maturity necessary to resist the temptation to offer any easy answers to the complex questions he poses in his work about our shared American religious and social identity. Indeed, he begins his historical account of American identity by reflecting on Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous Divinity School Address and the manner in which it articulated the longing to separate personal spirituality from religious institutions, a longing that seems to define a large portion of American religious identity. Schmidt pays close attention to the ramifications of this particular address, claiming that it could be "a sign of welcome freedom, a liberation of the spirit from stunting institutions, authorities and rites."¹ He goes on to say that Emerson's address, on the other hand, could also be "an indication of self-reliance gone awry, a spiritual seeking that went everywhere and arrived nowhere."² And it is from this dual perspective that Schmidt offers us the central thesis of his book, namely, that the Religious Right has never had a monopoly on the American religious identity, and that a liberal religious tradition, articulated by thinkers such as Emerson and Whitman, has been just as important in the construction of American religious sensibilities and offers just as much as the Right in terms of religious nourishment. What's more, the Religious Left, with its emphasis on tolerance and diversity, has more to

offer American society in terms of cultivating democratic society than the Right. As the author says towards the end of the book, "The return of a more progressive political order goes hand in hand with the vitality and integrity of religious liberalism."³

Despite his obvious investment in the value of 'religious liberalism,' Schmidt seems to go out of his way to avoid establishing any type of criteria as to what does or does not constitute 'spirituality.' It is clear, however, that he links spirituality (albeit loosely) with any religious practice that allows for the voice of the inspired practitioner rather than the exclusive voice of institutional authority. Spirituality, it seems, is an expression of religious individuality that eclipses whatever tradition it originates from. This spirituality, Schmidt argues, finds its origins in the liberal religious currents of the 19th century.

"Seeker spirituality – excitedly eclectic, mystically yearning, perennially cosmopolitan- is an artifact of religious liberalism, especially in its more radical stripes."⁴ These radical stripes, apparently, consist in movements such as the Unitarians, Transcendentalists, spiritualists, New Thought optimists, questing psychologists, Vedantists, and Theosophists. The unifying characteristic between these groups, according to Schmidt, is a shared commitment to the ideals of religious liberalism: mystical and meditative experience, spiritual liberty, tolerance, justice, and universal brotherhood. If any definition to Schmidt's position is applicable, it would seem that it is these ideals. More importantly, it is our understanding of the manifestation of these ideals as they permeate the historical development of American spirituality that will illuminate the value and living presence of these ideals in today's society according to Schmidt. Indeed, argues Schmidt, "if we really want to do something about narcissism and selfishness, about loose religious and civic connections, about the intolerant narrowness of fundamentalist

orthodoxies, about the hubris of empire, we need to work with what got us here – a robust liberal tradition with strong religious elements."⁵

Although Schmidt's contributions to our understanding of the currents of American popular religious culture are commendable, as a student trained in cross-cultural religious analysis, I am troubled by Schmidt's lack of self-reflective scholarship and his omissions of the global historical context in which the majority of his case study transpired. For example, in his explorations of 'seeker spirituality' Schmidt makes numerous references to many of the more important representatives of Asian and Indian thought from the 19th century. This group included such thinkers as Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, Swami Vivekananda, and Anagarika Dharmapala, all of whom attended and presented at the infamous 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Schmidt highlights these individuals and the World Parliament of Religions in the service of showing how they influenced the American spiritualist identity. Although I agree with Schmidt that all of these thinkers impacted American religious identity, I take issue with the way in which he presents the information. Schmidt seems to be acting under the assumption that the religions that are presented by these individuals at the World Parliament should be taken at face value. What Schmidt fails to acknowledge, however, is the abundant and well-documented contemporary scholarship that has made it clear that the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893 was originally intended to be less of a declaration of universal, religious brotherhood and more of a demonstration of the superiority of White, European/American Christian identity. Indeed, my current understanding of this event, a view informed largely by contemporary Buddhist Studies scholarship, is that it was a kind of 'freak show' that backfired. The architects of the event had not taken the

sophistication or intelligence of the charismatic representatives of Hindu and Buddhist communities into account, and were subsequently taken off guard when these individuals addressed their audience with nuance and appeal. Later scholarship has shown that the articulation of each of these representatives religious identity was carefully calculated so as to maximize the attraction of the audience to each speaker's cultural identity. This was done, in almost every case, in an effort to place Hindu and Buddhist cultures, which were mostly under colonial rule at the time, in a favorable light in the hopes of being able to preserve these cultures in the face of the dominating European presence. It was a process that has come to be known as "intercultural mimesis."⁶ This phrase refers to the mutual construction of cultural identity by the oppressed, who willingly caricature their identity in the face of an oppressive force in order to survive, and the oppressor, who, in the case at hand, project their frustrations with their own religious identity onto another, newly 'discovered' cultural identity in a manner not unlike a fetish. By unifying 'seeker spirituality' with this 19th century obsession with Orientalist agendas, Schmidt is unwittingly tying his American spirituality with the intellectual and cultural imperialism of that era.

Let us consider, for example, the relationship between Anagarika Dharmapala and the Theosophical Society. In Sri Lanka at that time, it was Anagarika Dharmapala who had initiated the birth of Sinhalese nationalist Buddhism.⁷ Dharmapala joined the Theosophical Society for a short time, but later moved away from the organization. Despite the brevity of their association, it is noteworthy that this interaction occurred, as this event would come to place Dharmapala's Buddhism as the 'official' embodiment of original Theravada, or 'original', Buddhism in Western eyes for this period. Dharmapala's

particular vision of Buddhism was steeped in political agendas, as he had earlier gone on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in 1891 and was shocked to see the run-down conditions of the place of Buddha's enlightenment. In reaction, he founded the Maha Bodhi Society of India, an institution explicitly opposed to Hinduism. He saw as one of the primary goals for the organization the liberation of the temple from Hindus. This being the case, Dharmapala initially welcomed the sudden attention he was receiving from Western intellectuals, as their patronage and interests in his construction of Buddhism served to fortify his political clout against his Hindu counterparts. This is important to note, as it gives us insight into the contested political arena in India at the time, as the traditional power struggle of Hinduism had been destabilized by the British presence and many formerly lower social groups, such as the Buddhist, were attempting to exploit the situation for their own political advantage. Therefore it should have been to no surprise that he gladly accepted the invitation by the Theosophical society in 1893 to attend the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago. He read his audience well, and was quick to become a darling of the Western intellectual elite, as his well-crafted version of Buddhist identity fit neatly with the European views of Buddhism as a hyper-rational, egalitarian, humanistic philosophy. It is important to recognize the various political factors that would motivate Dharmapala to woo the Western audience, and that his presentation of Buddhism at the World Parliament of Religions then served a dual purpose. On the one hand it fortified the integrity of Buddhism in a Global context, and on the other it provided a political advantage in Indian Buddhism's emerging battle against Hinduism, which was itself under the critical scrutiny of Western intellectuals. This was particularly true of the British who were currently citing the 'pagan' aspects of Hindu ritual life as the justification for the occupation of the Indian territory. This context, however, is absent in

Schmidt's discussion of Dharmapala, and it seems, like many in the audience in 1893, Schmidt is taking Dharmapala's construction at face value. The omission of this important background information leads thinkers to superficial conclusions about the religious identities that were inspiring them and informing their own religious identities. This superficiality, when put into practice over generations, ironically leads to greater gaps in cultural 'brotherhood' rather than less, as caricatures of religious identities simply legitimate stereotypes. Without addressing these issues then, is Schmidt advocating for a version of American spirituality that, due to its lack of structural integrity, actually runs counter to his stated objectives?

The Indian/Hindu political and social situation can perhaps be better understood with a brief look at some of the Hindu reactions to Western imperialism, such as Dayananda Saraswati's (1824-83)⁸ *Arya Samaj*. This organization, under Dayananda's guidance, developed a novel version of Hinduism in Punjab. The Arya Samaj wholeheartedly condemned idolatry, animal sacrifices, priestcraft, pilgrimages, child marriages and misogynistic practices, ancestor worship, caste and untouchability. It is clear that one of the main reasons why the Arya Samaj would construct this novel version of Hinduism would be because such a construction would provide greater legitimacy for the cultural traditions of the Indian people in the face of their new rulers, the British Raj. The Arya Samaj claimed that none of the practices listed above were grounded in Vedic literature. The Arya Samaj also discouraged dogma and symbolism and encouraged skepticism in beliefs that run contrary to common sense and logic, a position that matched the post-Enlightenment, Protestant disposition of the Western colonial powers well.

This organization is particularly important to our current line of research, as the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society united from 1877 to 1882. The leading members of the Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1875, and members of the Arya Samaj met in 1877. It quickly became apparent that the two societies held many views in common, and efforts were undertaken to bring their respective leaders into closer contact. As a result, correspondence began between Henry Steel Olcott, one of the foundering members of the Theosophical Society, and Harish Chandra Chintamani, the acting president of the Bombay Arya Samaj. At the suggestion of Chintamani, Olcott composed a letter addressed to Swami Dayananda (**that**) included the following statement:

There exist a number of Americans and others who earnestly seek spiritual knowledge. They place themselves at your feet and pray you [sic] to enlighten them. They are united in the object of gaining wisdom and becoming better. For this purpose they organized themselves into a body called the Theosophical Society three years ago. Finding in Christianity nothing that should satisfy their reason or intention they ... have turned to the East for light and openly proclaimed themselves foes of Christianity. We come to your feet as children to a parent and say: 'Look at us, our teacher. Tell us what we ought to do. We place ourselves under your instructions.'⁹

In his excitement, however, Olcott simply assumed that the Arya Samaj would accept this invitation and therefore re-organized the Theosophical Society as a branch of the Arya Samaj. Thus, in 1878 the Theosophical Society was renamed 'The Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of Aryavarta' and Swami Dayananda was announced as its director in chief.

Olcott's intuition, however, proved erroneous. Although Olcott's open profession of faith in the Vedas was positively received and publicly praised by Swami Dayananda, the Swami was later shocked to learn some of the more esoteric tenets the Theosophists held.

These included the belief of ghosts, mediumistic abilities, miracles and other occult matters. This, of course, was strikingly contrary to the disposition of the Arya Samaj, and soon became an item of contention between the two organizations. As such, the Theosophical Society was reverted to its former status in 1878. This episode is noteworthy, as it demonstrates the growing fascination that Western organizations such as the Theosophical Society held with the Indian culture. Given that the Theosophists' position was in many ways antithetical to the Arya Samaj (a point that the Theosophists could have easily determined had they actually looked at the literature and content of the organization they were attempting to align themselves with), it becomes easier to see how this 'spiritual seeker' movement of the American religious imagination was more involved in the construction of fantastic caricatures of other non-Western religions than making efforts to actually understanding them.

This point is made most succinctly in the work of Tomoko Masuzawa and her book *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. In this volume, Masuzawa traces the currents of 19th century European scholarship and intellectual trends as they impacted the construction of the idea of 'world religions.' The very notion of world religions, Masuzawa argues, has determined the framework for the analysis and understanding of non-Christian religions by European and American culture. Early 18th and 19th scholars saw the religious landscape of the world in simple, broad categories, namely, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and 'other/pagan/primitive.' As the field grew, the list expanded into what we commonly think of today as 'the world religions', i.e., Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shinto, Jainism, etc. Although it seems simple enough

to view this expansion as simply a move from exclusion to inclusion, or towards religious pluralism, Masuzawa argues that this framework in many ways had the opposite effect. According to Masuzawa, despite the appearance of pluralism and tolerance, this methodological structure is inherently bias towards Western values, and this construct was the result of both conscious and unconscious intentions that produced and maintained an intellectually imperialist agenda that is still being carried on today. It is my aim to demonstrate how the ambiguous 'American spirituality' that Schmidt is advocating in his book is in fact no more than a continuation of this same religious pluralism agenda, an agenda that despite its good intentions is nevertheless inherently bias towards Western values at the cost of the integrity of the other religions it claims to be inspired by and tolerant towards.

In its strongest form, Masuzawa's argument pinpoints mid-19th century comparative theologians and philologists, such as Charles Hardwick and Max Müller, as advocating the expansion of the categories of world religions in an effort to discover the essences of 'true religion.' This endeavor included the presentation of non-Christian religions as being, in one way or another, incomplete renditions of the true religion, which was invariably determined to be some vague form of Protestant Christianity, which happened to also be the religious identity of the scholars advocating this view. Indeed, in many of the cases Masuzawa examines, the scholars explicitly state that the study of non-Christian religions will serve to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, as a social Darwinian model of 'civilized' and 'primitive' cultures dominated the intellectual landscape at the time. These observations are utilized by Masuzawa to further her attempts to problematize the very structure of the contemporary field of Religious Studies and render

questionable the 'objective' study of religion by European and American scholarship (or anyone else for that matter). This larger aim of Masuzawa is beyond the scope of our current analysis, but the issues that she brings up are nevertheless germane to the issue at hand. It is my contention that Schmidt, in his portrayal of the development of American spirituality, has overlooked important aspects of the broader intellectual trends that were informing this development. By doing so he has omitted some of the potentially negative consequences of the persistence of this American spirituality that he is advocating, as 'religious pluralism' of this type perpetuates simplistic and unfair stereotypes and romanticized misconceptions of other, non-Christian cultures.

Let us next consider another argument advocating for the need for self-reflection in Religious Studies scholarship from Gregory Schopen and Donald S. Lopez. In his article "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," Schopen outlines the history of the methodological framework utilized by 19th century scholars in the 'discovery' of Buddhism in India. The bias towards textual analysis by 19th century scholars, Schopen argues, indicates the Protestant tendency to view religions as needing a canon of 'revealed' or divine literature, such as the Old and New Testament. This bias, he continues, artificially skewed our understanding of Buddhism because 19th century scholars only looked at the ancient Pali Canon of Buddhism rather than any of the lived practice that was made up the actual tradition at the time. Lopez picks up Schopen's argument in his later work, *Curators of the Buddha*, in which he claims that this Protestant presupposition colored the Western conception of Buddhism in such a way as to portray Buddhism as an idealized, hyper-rational, intellectual religious tradition that just so happened to embody the intellectual ideals of the European, post-Enlightenment

19th century scholars that 'discovered' it. It is precisely this projection of Enlightenment ideals that informs the above mentioned intercultural mimesis that Schmidt finds pivotal in the development of the American spiritualist movement.

To demonstrate exactly what this implies, let's take a close look at Schmidt's portrayal of Henry David Thoreau. Schmidt describes Thoreau as giving a "practical embodiment to Transcendentalist self-reliance and religious aspiration."¹⁰ In the service of demonstrating this truth, Schmidt give us a detailed account of Thoreau's morning ritual of bathing in Walden pond, an activity that Thoreau likened to bathing in the river Ganges. "Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste," Thoreau claims in his flattering portrayal of his imagined Indian counterpart. Setting aside Thoreau's obviously superficial understanding of Indian religious practice,¹¹ Schmidt, in failing to acknowledge the broader intellectual and popular trends in which Thoreau articulated his romanticized version of "Hindooism" is in fact simply perpetuating the same caricature of Indian religious identity that Thoreau himself was responding to. Therefore, by arguing that views such as the one Thoreau offered embody the Transcendental spirituality that founds the religious liberalism that Schmidt is advocating, Schmidt is unwittingly unifying his view of American spirituality with the 19th century romanticized, religious 'othering' that authors such as Masuzawa, Schopen, and Lopez are claiming to be synonymous with the intellectual imperialism of the 19th century. Indeed, Thoreau's off-handed comment about how the "Hindoo's" disposition, which he finds attractive, is nevertheless "offensive ... to modern taste" seems to fortify Lopez's claims that the construction of the Indian identity by Westerners had more to do with the projection of their own dissatisfaction with their individual cultural and religious

identity than it had to do with the actual cultural or religious disposition of the culture with which they were enamored. This forces us to conclude that Schmidt's vision of American spirituality is founded, at least in part, on the 19th century 'Orientalist' discourse. This discourse is structured not only to the tune of Western values but, as such, serves as a tool of intellectual imperialism, or, more bluntly put, racism.

To underscore this last point, let's consider the arguments of Mahasweta Devi and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak regarding what Spivak calls the "voice of the subaltern."¹² It is often the case, they argue, that by appropriating the religious and cultural identity of non-Christian cultures (however superficially), Westerners implicitly place themselves as the authoritative voice of non-European cultures. This move robs these cultures of their rightful ability to articulate their own cultural identity in their own terms. For example, consider the career of the famous comparativist, Joseph Campbell. This early 20th century author made much of his fortune out of telling white, Protestant audiences what the religions of non-Christian cultures 'meant.' His arguments and speculations were wildly popular, but perhaps this is more a consequence of them resonating with the undercurrents of the American spirituality that Schmidt is offering us than it had to do with his accuracy in his descriptions of Buddhism and Hinduism. Whatever the case, Campbell's descriptions of these religions set the terms and structure of how these identities were to be understood for his audience and these descriptions were, among other things, inarguably set to Western values. Thus, if a native practitioner of these traditions were to attempt to articulate their cultural identity in the shadow of Campbell, they could only be understood in the terms he had set out for them, terms which are, to say the least, somewhat inaccurate if not inappropriate.

The weight of this point is made all too clearly in Devi and Spivak's book, *Imaginary Maps*, a gripping collection of three works of fiction originally crafted by Devi that illustrates the folly of Western notions of justice and human rights in the complex reality of Indian culture. Intended to speak both to Indian and Western audiences, Devi depicts the grueling realities of the impact of Western culture on everyday life in rural India and underscores the often incompatible notions of justice and individual rights as seen from the crossroad between the two cultures. Devi's point is made most clearly in her story of a poor lower caste girl who, having been sold into sex slavery as a child, is slowly being torn apart by, on the one hand, her local village culture's attempts to acclimate to the rampant capitalism at its doorstep and, on the other, her well-meaning uncle who passionately parades Westerners past his niece in hopes of inspiring them to help her out of her plight. Unfortunately, the latter side of the story is mired with cultural confusion and clumsy misunderstandings.

The question now becomes, is Schmidt responsible for advocating a position that ultimately results in the on-the-ground tragedies that Devi and Spivak describe? Most likely not, but he is clearly advocating a trend that denies authors like Devi a voice in an American spiritualist free-market. If we take Spivak's claims about the voice of the subaltern seriously, we are forced to recognize that the American conception of mysticism that serves as the core of Schmidt's spirituality comes with serious consequences. These consequences are two-fold. On the one hand, superficial caricatures of non-Christian religious traditions undermine the integrity of the actual religious traditions they are intended to represent while simultaneously denying actual

representatives of those traditions a voice in the American context. On the other hand, these oversimplified notions of non-Western cultures shape the structure and values of our interaction with other cultures in a global context. Given the fact that America is and has been the dominate world power for several decades now, this latter point is worthy of consideration. Monolithic, simplified notions of the cultures of others, when combined with the actualization of Enlightenment ideals of individuality and human rights as seen in UN peace-keeping and humanitarian aid, can make for unsatisfying or even paradoxical results.

In closing, I would like to make it clear that I understand the intent of Schmidt and his vision of American spirituality. I am not acting under the misconception that Schmidt is intentionally advocating a sense of religious identity that, when put into practice, denies the voice of non-Christian identities. It seems clear enough that Schmidt's aim was to track the historical development of the American sense of cultural and religious identity. It is rather the omissions in his historical analysis that I wish to bring to light. The larger context that he fails to account for, like the broader global community in which America finds itself, deserves to be heard on its own terms. Indeed, it is not until we recognize that notions of self are culturally specific constructions that we will ever be able to actualize the ideals of tolerance and universal brotherhood.¹³ By advocating the particular vision of American spirituality that he does, Schmidt is perpetuating a 19th century notion of religious pluralism that, when reflected upon, is actually so steeped in Western values that it is counterproductive to it's stated agenda.

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²Ibid

³Ibid, (p. 287)

⁴Ibid, (p. 7)

⁵Ibid., (p. 289)

⁶Lopez, D. S. *Curators of the Buddha : the study of Buddhism under colonialism.* Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press, 1995.

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⁹Olcott, H. S. *Old diary leaves, the true story of the Theosophical society.* New York and London, G. P. Putnam's sons, 1895.

¹⁰Schmidt, (p. 65)

¹¹I say this because Thoreau did not speak Sanskrit or Hindi and, likewise, had no first hand experience with Indian culture or any understanding of it outside the caricature present in the popular intellectual imagination.

¹²Spivak, G. C. *A critique of postcolonial reason : toward a history of the vanishing present*. Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1999.

¹³Please note that I am intentionally avoiding the obvious gender inequality inherent in ideas of 'universal brotherhood.' That's an argument for another day.