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America's God and the World: Questioning the Protestant Consensus

Alexandra Kaloyanides

Like many historians, I am working on a ghost story. This one begins in 1813, the beginning of the American Baptist mission to Burma. Like those told by John Modern and Mark Noll, this story is contoured by war—the American Civil War and a series of Anglo-Burmese Wars waged between 1824 and 1885. Its specters appear in missionary letters and diaries, newspapers reports, illustrated travelogues, and concurrently produced Burmese royal chronicles and ritual networks. As I chase these ghosts, I am continually haunted by a bellow I hear coming from historians who have reclaimed evangelicalism as the determining subject of American religious history.

This bellow insists that a protestant intellectual synthesis prevailed, that a resonant public protestantism powered American discourse. And I am haunted by this supposition of a protestant synthesis because my research continues to conjure diverse forms of religion even as it bumps into, in nearly every corner of the archive, the protestant and imperial systems that organize and define that diversity. So my question for this line of scholarship generally, and for Mark Noll and John Modern in particular, is this: How can we avoid the diversity against which the Christian consensus was defined? Is there a way to explore a space between pluralism and protestantism, a space where both the world's diversity and certain organizing mechanisms for that diversity are at work? Here I am not asking that historians pay more attention to the margins or the minority. I am asking what non-protestants mean for those protestant consolidations.

In *America's God* and *Secularism in Antebellum America* I find a kind of consensus on consensus. Both books agree that this protestant consensus reigned supreme. But I suspect that something is unjustifiably occluded by this conclusion. To be clear, Noll and Modern anticipate this suspicion; so let me turn to their assertions before turning back to my questions.

Noll's social history of American theology before the Civil War argues, "By the early nineteenth century, a surprising intellectual synthesis . . . had come to prevail throughout the United States . . . The synthesis was a compound of evangelical Protestant religion, republican political ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning." Noll acknowledges a "bewildering appearance of theological diversity" but insists that "even with a great welter

Alexandra Kaloyanides is a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Ho Center for Buddhist Students at Stanford.

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of energetic diversity, theology in America from the Revolution to the Civil War shared a great deal more than buzzing confusion. Until the very end of this period, almost all public religious talk in the United States was Christian, even Protestant . . . It was an expansive period, but with still a relatively cohesive set of widely shared theological convictions and intellectual practices."[1] Noll is careful to note the perplexing presence of alternative religious ideas in the antebellum period, but he is ultimately confident that this diversity will not dilute his concept of the majority.

For all its differences, *Secularism in Antebellum America* seems to agree with *America's God* on this point, consistently naming protestantism as a prevailing force. In a work he describes as a "series of ghost stories," Modern attends "to the powers of public Protestantism circa 1851" to argue "that the secular imaginary occurred at the levels of emotion and mood, underneath the skin." He deliberately chooses not to follow "historical treatments of this period" that portray it "as one of unprecedented religious freedom and experimentation." Instead Modern dwells "upon the inscriptions made by a relatively privileged subculture upon themselves and others" to contend that "what is most remarkable about this period . . . was not the so-called flowering of religious pluralism and competitive strife but a resonance between different statements about religion."[2] Both books help me hear this resonance, a resonance that has been named before by other scholars of American religion, but never with such argumentative confidence. Catherine Albanese called this same feature "public Protestantism."[3] Noll and Modern specify and discern the particular institutional and interpersonal particularities of this aspect of the American past.

When I research the American Baptist mission to Burma, I immediately see what Modern and Noll see. This mission was a widely publicized protestant operation that produced an abundance of magazines, newspapers, memoirs, travelogues, tracts, and more, all inflected with protestant theology, protestant ritual programming, and protestant missionary ambition.[4] The protestants rule the story and determine its particulars. The Burma mission was invested in defining "true religion" against "other religions," especially

[1]Noll, *America's God*, 9, 227–228.

[2]Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 46, 15, 6, 4, 15.

[3]Catherine L. Albanese, *America, Religions and Religion*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1998).

[4]This evangelical media circulated concurrently with the productions of home missionary movements that Modern writes about in his first chapter, "Evangelical Secularism and the Measure of Leviathan." In his sections on the incorporation of infidelity and the business of mission, Modern acknowledges, "Evangelical media institutions positioned themselves at the frontline of an epic battle—waged in 'foreign and pagan lands' but more importantly on their own soil." I agree that home missions were important in this period, but foreign missions, too, influenced the protestant sense of religion and society. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 89.

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Buddhism, which was cast as exceptionally competitive with Christianity. In the words of the popular author and Baptist missionary Emily Chubbuck Judson, Buddhism's "system of morality is superiour to that of the nations around them, and to the heathen of ancient times, and is surpassed only by the divine percepts of our blessed Saviour."[5] Similar statements about Buddhism's resemblance to and distinction from Christianity are scattered throughout the Baptist press. Protestantism is their presumption and their hope.

But I cannot stay for long in the confidence of a protestant consensus, since it is not just the protestant idiom that articulates religion in these reports. These missionary materials included lengthy quotations credited to local informants, as well as thick descriptions of rituals, doctrinal explanations, and evocations of the enchantment of living among foreign religions. The Burma post also collected Buddha statues, mala beads, palm leaf manuscripts, and religious paintings that found their way into missionary suitcases and American living rooms in the antebellum period. What I want to wager here is that these exchanges were not just begun and decided by protestants; encounter with difference was more significant than a default description of protestantism can encapsulate. I will offer a few examples from my research on the American Baptist mission to Burma to detail this question about the space between pluralism and protestantism.

In November 1849, the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* printed a series of journal entries from Reverend Edward Stevens, a prominent American missionary in Burma. The entries minutely described the many religious debates Stevens had been getting into on his preaching tours in Burma, including one with an elderly woman, who Stevens described as "unusually intelligent and discriminating." She asked Stevens, "Must I forsake Gaudama if I accept Christ?" "Yes," the Baptist replied, "for there is but *one* God . . . and He will not suffer a rival." Stevens wrote that "so much sincerity was apparent in her inquiries and manner," that he began to hope she "might be one whose heart God has opened to receive the gospel. But, alas!" Stevens continued, "That hope was to be disappointed. She finally told [him that] her mind is deliberately made up to adhere to Gaudama and reject Christ." She said that "should she, in a future transmigration, be favored with appearing in the human state, then, perhaps, she may become a believer in Christ. But she cannot now give up the merit which she has been accumulating during a long life." Stevens, "with a sad heart . . . turned away and retired to [his] lodging places."[6] By printing a journal entry that described a wise old

[5]Emily E. Chubbock Judson, *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson, Member of the American Mission to Burmah* (Cincinnati, Ohio: L. Colby and Company, 1849), 161.

[6]Reverend Edward Stevens, "Maulmain.—Journal of Rev. Mr. Stevens. Tour to Yay—Amherst," *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, November 1849.

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Burmese Buddhist woman and her theological reservations about accepting Jesus Christ, Stevens not only lamented her choice of Buddhist devotion over Christian acceptance, but he also relayed to antebellum American readers of the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* a Burmese argument about the Buddhist value of accruing merit over multiple lifetimes. Christianity was a component of the conversation, but it did not determine its result. It was complicit with, not controlling of, the religious life recorded in this anecdote.

Two days after his religious debate with the elderly woman, Stevens met a Buddhist monk and "asked him of sin and the possibilities of escaping its punishment." The monk told Stevens that "once [sin was] committed there is no escape." Stevens replied, "Then must priests and people alike look forward to hell as inevitably their future portion?" The monk unhesitatingly replied, "Yes." Stevens pressed further, "Why, then, do you wear the yellow cloth?" And the monk replied, "To have less to endure." Stevens translated this statement for his Christian readers, explaining that in this "one expression, [the monk] uttered a volume on the nature of Boodhism. The yellow cloth,—the badge of the priesthood, the most excellent state of human existence in the world,—is assumed, not to *atone for sin,* but in order to *sin less;* not to affect the past, but the future. Let the apologist for the heathen think of this fact."[7] Here Steven addressed Americans who sympathized with non-Christian religions as well as his familiar Baptist readers to point out what he determined to be a central flaw in Buddhist doctrine: the view that one could not expiate unwholesome actions, but, rather, one must endure their consequences. Stevens clearly presented the Buddhist focus on minimizing wrong doing as inferior to the Christian emphasis on atonement, but the dialogue he published also circulates a Buddhist understanding of morality.

As I examine missionary reports like these and attend to the Buddhist ideas that emerge through them, I do not find that the arguments by Modern and Noll help me account for those ideas. Instead I turn to Burma, and its own imperial religion, Buddhism.[8] Like protestantism in antebellum America, Burmese

[7]Ibid.

[8]The term "religion" has no direct equivalent in Burmese or in the language of the country's canonical religious texts, Pali. The Pali term "*sāsana*" is often translated as "religion," but as Alicia Turner's study of religion in colonial Burma shows, the two terms "were distinct, if overlapping, categories operating at the same time." Turner defines *sāsana* "as the life of the Buddha's teachings after he is gone; it is the condition of possibility for making merit and liberation." By focusing on this Buddhist term, Turner is able to demonstrate how, in colonial Burma, "religion as a category was not static but a moving container for a variety of discourses and projects that was itself undergoing continuing redefinition." Turner's study focuses on period between 1890 and 1920, but her arguments regarding these categorical issues also apply to the Anglo-Burmese War period discussed above. Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2014), 9, 1, 10.

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Buddhism in the Konbaung Dynasty was pervasive, prolific, and powerful.[9] American missionaries like Emily Chubbuck Judson described its power in haunting terms; terms that sound, perhaps, quite like Modern. The "religion of the Burman," she wrote, "enters deeply into all his early and more pleasing associations; and, in the process of time, becomes entwined with the very fibres of his nationality; so that he literally forsakes all, when he embraces Christianity."[10] Which system is the frame, and which is the function? Who is dominating whom in this account, by what operations? To me, it is impossible to think about protestantism without thinking about its relationships to those it sought to understand, debate, and convert. Such exchanges were not simple contagious encounters. They were conflicted interchanges. What are we missing when we make Christianity the documentary finding and the interpretive presumption in our accounts of the religious past? Put more simply, and with a nod to Max Müller: to know one religious empire is to know none. How, then, should scholars of North American religions approach those other spectral forces, just as overpowering in their archive, and just as consequential in their circulations, ghosts that also bellow religious reasons for their empires?

[9]For more on the power dynamics of Burma's Konbaung dynasty, see Michael W. Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty, 1752–1885* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006).

[10]Emily C. Judson, *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson: Member of the American Mission to Burmah* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman, 1855, c1848), 5n.

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