

Stephan Buhr. *“Infinite Possibilities”: Die Zweite Generation der Transzendentalisten und die Idee einer “Universal Religion”*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015, 234 pp., € 28.50.

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Stephan Buhr argues that the comparative religion project of the so-called second generation of Transcendentalists, contrary to the usual assessment, did not represent a debasement of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ideas but, rather, an attempt to apply them. In particular, Buhr challenges the interpretation in Arthur Versluis’ 1993 monograph *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, which characterizes the second generation as having relapsed into the metaphysics Emerson was supposedly trying to move beyond. For Buhr, there was a common thread running through all iterations of Transcendentalism: the search for an ‘absolute self’. In Emerson’s writing, this absolute self was individualistic. For the later Transcendentalists, such as James Freeman Clarke, Samuel Johnson, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, John Weiss, and Cyrus Bartol, the absolute self was to be realized in a universal religion for all mankind. In short, Buhr suggests that the concerns of the second generation were variations on an idea that had been with Transcendentalism since the days of Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

To lay down the theoretical groundwork needed to make his argument, Buhr seeks to bridge the gap other scholars have seen between Emerson’s first and second lecture series and between the first and second generation. While the emphasis may have shifted between Emerson’s first and second series, Buhr argues that the search for the ‘absolute self’ runs through both, though only as unrealized potential in the latter essays. The second generation maintained this paradigm, but applied it to humanity as a whole. The crucial element was the dynamic of striving towards the absolute. Rather than moving beyond metaphysics, Buhr sees immanence as central to Emerson’s religiosity. In a very real sense, the entire universe directly expressed God’s thought. The direct relationship with God precluded the need for a mediator since, like Christ, every human contained the divine. As such, for writers like Clarke and Johnson, religions other than Christianity must have some measure of truth to them, though they need not all be of equal value. Like Emerson’s conception of the individual constantly transcending himself as he strives towards an absolute point located in the future, later Transcendentalists saw the collective spiritual efforts of the world striving towards the realization of a higher religion, shared by all humanity.

After making his case that the second generation of Transcendentalists shared a theoretical basis with the first, Buhr presents his two case studies. The first of these is James Freeman Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*, and the second is Samuel Johnson's *Oriental Religions and their Relation to Universal Religion*. He analyzes each author's overall approach and their respective chapters on Buddhism. Despite the apparent differences and personal disagreements between them, Buhr argues that the same drive for the 'absolute self' informs both authors' search for a universal religion. The seeming disparity between them and with earlier Transcendentalism can be reconciled by their shared emphasis on transcendence as an intention-driven process.

For Clarke, there were two types of religion: 'ethnic religions', which contained only partial truths suited to the supposed qualities of the race which practiced the religion, and 'Catholic religions', which were higher order religions suitable for worldwide practice. The strengths and deficits of the ethnic religions complemented each other. For instance, Hinduism and Buddhism were opposites, as were Confucianism and Zoroastrianism. Of the 'Catholic religions', Clarke found Christianity to be the most complete and suitable for becoming a universal religion. There was nothing new in Christian teaching, however; it brought together all the fragments of the lower order religions into a complete system. While other religions remained static, Christianity alone embodied the progress required for perpetually transcending its own boundaries.

Johnson, conversely, believed that no single religion, even Christianity, could fulfil the role of universal religion, which would express the best parts of all other religions. The previous religions were not false; they merely fulfilled a purpose at the time. To this end, Johnson considered the Buddhist striving to achieve nothingness as fulfilling the same purpose as striving for the absolute. It was not important what was being striven for, only that the dynamic intention was present. Likening it to a bud containing the essence of the flower itself, Johnson saw the higher potential in the lower religions that came before. Revelation was not required, since all humans carried innate knowledge of divine law within them. As such, even Jesus was just speaking to something already present in everyone.

Overall, Buhr successfully accomplishes what he set out to do; namely, to demonstrate a certain internal consistency between Transcendentalist writers, despite the often vague writings of the second generation. The book provides a clear and cohesive treatment of the source material, and ought to be of interest to students of Transcendentalism and of comparative religion more generally. The work is a welcome addition to the relatively sparse literature on the works of these later Transcendentalist authors. While his argument may not convince all detractors of the worth and quality of their writings, Buhr nonetheless makes a

strong case that they were operating within an intellectual framework firmly rooted in Transcendentalist thought and in the progressivist and evolutionary worldview common in the nineteenth century.

Buhr does an admirable job of imaginatively engaging with the mindset of his subjects. While the optimism of the second generation surrounding technological and scientific progress, and their faith in the unity of mankind through a universal religion, may seem hopelessly naive to twenty-first-century observers, Buhr is careful to avoid imposing present day attitudes on his material. To this end, he takes the religious motivations of his subjects seriously, and locates religion at the centre of Transcendentalist thinking, both first and second generation. Part of the reason, he argues, that the second generation has been maligned is that, in hindsight, their hopes failed to materialize. At the time, however, they were by no means anomalous or outdated. Transcendentalists were hardly the only ones engaged in the universal religion project, and were certainly among its more educated proponents.

Despite its adept handling of nineteenth-century world-views, the most significant deficit in this book is the lack of historical context. The first hint of this dearth can be seen when one consults the book's bibliography, which cites just thirteen secondary sources. While Buhr explicitly acknowledges that his work is a textual analysis of the primary source material and makes clear that his purpose is to provide a theoretical model for understanding the various incarnations of Transcendentalism, he does little to convince the reader that this lack of context is a feature and not a liability. It would be easy for a reader with no background in the history of comparative religion to be left with the impression that the notion of a universal religion originated with the later Transcendentalists as the logical extension of Emersonian ideas. While Buhr may not have wanted to stray too far from his central goal, some contextualization would have both strengthened his argument and demonstrated its historical significance.

For instance, the search for the essentials of religion, while lacking the progressive emphasis of the nineteenth century, was well underway by the eighteenth century, particularly among Deists (see Harrison 1990). Like both Clarke and Johnson, Mathew Tindal in *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730) argued that all the truths of Christianity were eternal and that Jesus simply re-articulated them. Such an argument was not all that different from Theodore Parker's in *A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* (1841). The importance of 'correspondence' for Transcendentalist thought also suggests a Neoplatonist and Swedenborgian connection. In trying to argue that the second generation was following in the footsteps of a metaphysically minded Emerson, Buhr might have strengthened his argument by acknowledging that Emerson himself was operating in a

longstanding tradition. Tellingly, Emerson was an admirer of Emanuel Swedenborg (Albanese 2007: 176, 179). A more recent book by Versluis which Buhr does not cite, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (2001), places Transcendentalism in such an esoteric and mystical traditions context. Catherine Albanese's *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007) would also have been useful in this regard. Seen from this perspective, the metaphysical leanings of the second generation do not seem so alien to Emerson's own thinking, the point Buhr aims to demonstrate.

Influences aside, Transcendentalists were not the only ones in the nineteenth-century concerned with universal religion. Other contemporaries also saw eternal truths underpinning all outward forms of religion. The Theosophical Society of Madame Helena Blavatsky, for instance, with the motto "There is no Religion higher than truth", took a keen interest in the teachings of eastern religions, hoping for universal brotherhood for all humanity. Many Spiritualists, such as Andrew Jackson Davis, also anticipated the dissolution of sectarian division and the coming of an era of unity. Despite its commonalities with Transcendentalist thought, both Emerson and Thoreau were highly critical of Spiritualism. Given this, it is worth considering the extent to which one can hand-wave away differences between thinkers on the basis of a shared philosophical structure. Thus, when Buhr points to Frothingham as an example of a later Transcendentalist whose ideas, on the surface, had strayed far enough from Emerson's so as to be unrecognizable while still maintaining the essential components of his thought, it raises questions about how far one can take such reasoning. The point is especially salient given that Clarke was sympathetic to Spiritualism and attended séances (Albanese 2007: 179). None of this is to suggest that Buhr ought to have written a book about a topic other than the one he chose, only that too much emphasis on the continuity between the two generations of Transcendentalists runs the risk of obscuring important differences between them.

Despite his focus on theoretical considerations over historical context, Buhr makes a clear and provocative argument, which is stimulating to read. His methodology is well laid out and he is clear about what he does, and does not, seek to accomplish. He draws from a range of well-chosen and relevant primary source material and analyzes it in a precise and convincing manner. Especially praiseworthy is his treatment of his sources as worthy of serious consideration on their own terms, irrespective of the views of current readers. It is to be hoped that this work will be taken up as an invitation for more scholarship on the relatively neglected subjects of universal religion and of second-generation Transcendentalism.

Works Cited

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