



**Paul G. Hackett, *Theos Bernard, The White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life***

New York: Columbia University Press, 520 pages. Notes, bibliography, plates, index. Hardcover, US\$26.00/£18.00. ISBN 978-0-231-15887-9.

EVERY ACADEMIC who has done research in what the general public perceives to be “exotic” locales has most likely toyed with the idea of writing a spiritual autobiography that would enlighten the world with the esoteric insights gathered in remote places not normally visited by average people. Tibet is one such place that has received extensive attention in the West as the spiritual rooftop of the world. Most of us, however, never publish our memoirs, nor do we make public careers based on our exaggerated academic adventures abroad. One man, however, did precisely that. Theos Bernard (1908–1947), the subject of the book under review, was the first to receive a doctorate in religion from Columbia University, but his

destiny did not await him in academe; instead, he would build a checkered career on the basis of his curious travels abroad in India and Tibet.

Bernard was born into an Arizonan family that had a great propensity for Eastern spirituality. His father, Glen, and his uncle, Pierre, were both deeply interested in spirituality and yoga. Glen became estranged at first, but Pierre went on to become rich and famous in New York by opening his own club for the pursuit of spirituality. Pierre would eventually take the young Theos under his wing, but only temporarily. Prior to that, Theos had studied law at the University of Arizona, but abandoned the profession before moving to the East Coast in the hopes of creating a more interesting life among the rich and famous who frequented his uncle's establishment. It was there in New York that he met and married his first wife, the affluent Viola, in 1934. While his wife studied medicine, he began a PhD program in philosophy, but temporarily switched into anthropology, which led to a summer's worth of fieldwork in Taos, New Mexico, as an employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He ended up back in philosophy, where he wrote a master's thesis on yoga.

Meanwhile, his father Glen was getting deeper and deeper into yoga, and he made two trips to India, the second funded by Theos' wife Viola. In 1936, the three of them traveled together in India, but Theos stayed on with his father after Viola returned to New York. They settled down in Kalimpong in January of 1937, where Theos undertook the study of Tibetan. It was there that he first met Geshe Wangyal, the influential monk who would eventually make his way to the United States and train a number of Tibetologists and practitioners. Through various connections Theos was able to arrange for a trip to Gyantse, then finally managed to go to Lhasa. While in Tibet, he sponsored an elaborate ritual ceremony at the Jokhang, collected a wide variety of artifacts and manuscripts, and traveled to the three main monastic universities. After accomplishing his goals in Tibet, thanks to generous funding from his wife, he returned to India where he received news of his mother-in-law's death. On his way home, he flew to England amidst much fanfare, where he met Somerset MAUGHAM, who purportedly wrote the fictional *The Razor's Edge* (1944) about him.

Despite the fact that Viola left him and that his first submission of a doctoral dissertation was rejected, Theos became quite a celebrity, writing popular books, embarking on lecture tours, and appearing on radio. It was in his second book, *Heaven Lies Within Us* (1939), that he claimed to be the first Westerner to receive initiation as the "white lama." The book was initially discredited in England, but due to the beginning of the yoga craze in the United States, Theos's fame increased, which led him to open a yoga studio named Hotel Pierre. After being sued in the New York Supreme Court, he and his second wife, the opera singer Ganna Walska, opened a retreat in Santa Barbara called Tibetland. He then returned to New York to revise and resubmit his dissertation on Tibetan Buddhism, which barely won him the degree in 1943.

While back in New York, he began having an affair with a woman named Helen, during which there was a long and drawn-out divorce battle between him and Walska. This left him underfinanced, but he was determined to go back to India and Tibet to reignite his public career as a mystic and yoga instructor. To this end,

he and Helen returned to India during the Partition. Theos disappeared while en route to collect Tibetan manuscripts from a remote monastery in Spiti under mysterious circumstances. The author suggests that no sooner had the news of his disappearance broken than rumors began to fly. Some say he was simply murdered by thieves who dumped his body in a river, while others say he went into occultation to pursue his individual yogic quest. Hackett follows up on all of the available leads to conclude that it was the former that was the most likely scenario. Thus, what began as an illustrious tale of adventure ended up in sad tragedy.

Hackett's sympathetic account is a page-turner, meticulously documented over a number of years. Hackett himself shares much with Theos Bernard, such as place of origin, a love of Tibetan Buddhism, residency in Taos, a degree from Columbia, and so on. In fact, this book is a revision of HACKETT's own doctoral dissertation under Robert Thurman at Columbia (2008). It is well written and meticulously researched, but it is difficult to identify a thesis within its pages. Although the author does share with us the broad history of the American engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and yoga through the life of the Bernard family, the book seems more intended for a popular audience. Indeed, it seems to be written more out of admiration (he dedicates the book to Theos) than any sense of critical inquiry. Curiously, he does not mention the other major book on the same subject by VEENHOF (2011) that came out only a year earlier. However, the study does provide a readable intellectual account of the life of an ambitious Tibetological pioneer. There is much to be praised in the book, but the author veers way off course when he recounts his own trip to India and Tibet to walk in the footsteps of Bernard. His disparaging comments on the Chinese and the current state of Tibet are unsuitable for an academic publication.

---

#### REFERENCES

- HACKETT, Paul G.  
2008 *Barbarian Lands: Theos Bernard, Tibet, and the American Religious Life*. PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.
- MAUGHAM, Somerset  
1944 *The Razor's Edge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- VEENHOF, Douglas.  
2011 *White Lama: The Life of Tantric Yogi Theos Bernard, Tibet's Lost Emissary to the New World*. New York: Harmony Books.

Frank J. Korom  
*Boston University*