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This precious human life
A sociological study of everyday buddhist (and other) belief and practice

Introduction

My PhD researches the integration of Buddhist teachings into everyday life in Australia. It is a small comparative study of an interconnected group of urban Western Buddhists and non-Buddhists, part of my own social network. The study focuses on stories informants told me about their social interactions, at home, at work and in the world at large, and what these stories reveal about everyday belief and behavior. It was inspired not only by an enduring interest in sociology and social theory, but also by my very catholic passion for religion; by my contact with Vedic scriptures as a young adult in the late sixties and seventies, and more currently, by my own exploration of Buddhist belief and practice.

The study of Buddhism in everyday life offers enormous interdisciplinary scope. In this paper I trace my research process. I begin by discussing the part interdisciplinary research plays in the study of Buddhism, then move to methodological and epistemological issues. I include an overview of my research methodology and where relevant, extracts of reading notes and field notes. I close with some tentative findings, and discuss the role interdisciplinary study has played in drawing my conclusions

Interdisciplinary research and buddhism

The first task for any PhD is to design a do-able study. Like many, I struggled to formulate a simple question. From my earlier research on Buddhist conversion I had discovered Buddhists Westerners often reflected on the Buddhist *suunyaata* doctrine, which explains Buddhist understandings of self. So I wanted to investigate further whether and how Buddhists Westerners integrate Buddhist teachings into their everyday lives. Two key studies also pointed me in this general direction. The first was David Ho's (1995) *Selfhood and Identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism: Contrasts with the West* encouraging further research into Eastern conceptions of selfhood. The second was Michele Spuler's (2000) *Characteristics of Buddhism in Australia* , which identified a need for studies exploring the integration of Buddhism in Australia.

My overarching interest is spirituality in the current era. I specifically wanted to explore some questions I had about individuals, spirituality and discourse, about Western metaphysics and about East-West dialectics. I needed, then, to develop an understanding of current theoretical positions on discourse and the various sites where Western discourses are contested, and acquire a working understanding of the history and development of Western epistemologies as a point of comparison with Buddhist philosophical views. And I needed to clarify and situate my research question.

So I began to read. I started with cultural studies and an investigation of Western notions of self and subjectivity. This led me back to beginnings and very soon I was deeply immersed in European philosophy. Within both disciplines I discovered material relating to my general research topic, and as I roamed through and across other disciplines - social theory, theology and post-structuralism in particular, I took quantities of notes, which I habitually date, that are now proving useful as a quasi-annotated bibliography. These helped me trace my reading and its developing interconnections as I moved from one paradigm to the next.

For example, an extract of my notes from Habermas (2001: 130) on modernity, which I was reading to locate a broad context in social theory, dated 14 July, 2003,

highlights his links between philosophy, sociology and social theory (130); these links assisted my recognition of the truly interdisciplinary nature of my research, and will resurface in my analyses. The extract reads:

> Why the 'modern' became a topic for philosophy in the first place -
> *3 separate questions*
>
> 1. When and how did philosophers become interested in an *interpretation of the specific condition of modernity?* [*See Giddens* (1993: 284)]
>
> 2. Why do these philosophical interpretations take the form of a *critique of reason?* [*See Derrida* (1976)]
>
> 3. Why did *philosophy* eventually cede the ongoing task of an interpretation of *modernity to social theory?* [*Explore this question as rationale for sociological study*]

As I took notes, I bracketed my own comments thus [ ], as a guide to my own interpretive links for future reference. I read a great deal. Only when I found myself struggling through the early pages of *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1976), one copy in English, the other in French, to acquaint myself with classic sources of post-structuralist critique, did I realize time was precious, and that I needed to make some serious decisions. What did I want to ask, exactly, of whom, precisely, and how did I expect to interpret the answers? Taking my problem to my supervisor helped. He simply asked did I want to theorize or do an empirical study. I wanted to do an empirical study. Why?

One of my principal theoretical interests is reflexivity and its role in everyday life. Given my earlier research observations of the way Buddhists reflect on and integrate the *suunyaata* teachings into their everyday lives, I wanted to explore reflexive spirituality further. Giddens (1993) and Habermas (2001: 130), among others, have written theoretical works on reflexivity and modernity, but as yet there is only a small, but

growing body of empirical studies. Empirical study of reflexive spirituality particularly merits closer attention (Besecke, 2001; Roof, 1999).

My main problem at this point was to decide within which discipline I might skillfully design such a study, define a sample, gather data and pursue the tricky task of data analysis most confidently and comfortably. I had read a lot of theory. I began to read a lot of methodology. Earlier I noted Habermas (2001: 130) asks why *philosophy eventually ceded the ongoing task of an interpretation of modernity to social theory*. This is an important question for interdisciplinary research of any kind, since understanding the answer underpins, to some extent at least, the philosophical logic of contemporary social scientific studies.

Habermas (2001: 132) writes that Enlightenment thought, in Kant and most particularly in Hegel, developed the notion of modernity as a 'temporal index' oppositional to tradition to validate philosophy's insights:

> 'If true philosophical insights are … to claim a context-transcendent validity, then philosophy must grasp and penetrate this disquieting present, and articulate it in its concepts. Philosophy can only seek to overcome the boundaries of the historical situation which philosophical thought itself occupies by conceiving "the modern" as such ... Philosophy must meet the challenge of time with an analysis of the "new age".'

The social sphere, suggests Habermas (2001: 137), because of its ambivalence - both its disintegrations and its developments - draws on reason for comprehension, but also for critical *interpretation*; '[t]hought itself is reflectively pulled into the motion of the dialectic of Enlightenment', (Habermas, 2001: 136). 'And it is only reason, in turn, that can give modernity - unprecedented, open to the future, anxious for novelty - its orientation' (Habermas, 2001: 136). Thus philosophy with its two sides of reason, explanation and critique, entwines with social theory for further explication; and although social theory found its research program - the critique of social consciousness - in philosophy, it must, according to Habermas (137), be carried out by its own methods.

Here was my rationale for turning to social science for my methodology. I turned to the sociology of religion.

There, among many studies I found two that captured my attention and perfectly articulated my research aims; the first, by Robert Wuthnow (2003), related to method and the second, by Peter Berger (2001), related to my epistemological concerns.

First I address method. Wuthnow (2003: 4)) suggests that in the study of religion and society:

> '[t]here are reasons to make the most of what science has to offer – science teaches us the value of empirical rigor and the need for systematic investigation. The scientific method involves thinking of ways in which our cherished assumptions about the world may be proved wrong. It involves the *strategic* (italics added) use of rationality, not in the interest of doing away with all that is rational (any more than the legal system is meant to replace literature and music), but to have reasons for conducting our research in one way or another. Science also involves the criterion of replicability, and that means candidly disclosing what we have done so others can track our mistakes. Those aspects of science can be followed without claiming to be finding universal laws for behavior, and they can be employed in the study of religion without "explaining away" the topic of inquiry. The more scholars have applied scientific methods to the study of human behavior, the more they have learned that human behavior is indeed contextual and contingent, and that its meanings must be examined from multiple perspectives.'

Building on the insights I gained reading Habermas, Wuthnow's perspective neatly summarized the very reasons I wanted to construct a candid, qualitative study exploring the tales people tell about everyday life - their experiences, interactions and communications and the meanings they attach to them.

Then came the second major issue, epistemology. Reading Berger alerted me to the question of what biases I, as a researcher, might bring to my study, my analyses and my interpretations. Berger (2001: 448) writes 'as I increasingly turned from theory to empirical problems, I found the sociology-of-knowledge paradigm of my early work very useful and have not been motivated to exchange it for another'. From this perspective,

and this can be said of Australia, religion is perceived as an interactive phenomenon produced by an ongoing and recursive dialectic between individuals and societies (Bouma, 1992: 33-63). For my study it means I bracket off theological truths, and concentrate on my informants' disclosures about their interactions, their beliefs and practices; I might then relate my findings back to my questions about East-West dialectics and the integration of Buddhist teachings into everyday Australian life. Taking this stand, I felt secure in the task of designing a study that simply asked informants for their stories, which I could analyze and interpret without theological comment or truth claims. My analytic perspective would focus more on discourse and context, mindful of my own part as a researcher in the hermeneutic process.

Sociology is the discipline in which I feel most comfortable, confident and competent, and a discipline I believe holds many research advantages; for me, it offers both a rigorous methodological framework and a wide analytical and interpretive horizon. Also, according to Fenn (2001: 8), it is important that sociologists of religion 'be open to insights and methods from other fields of inquiry'. I have followed Fenn in this and his next stricture, that sociologists of religion 'look to other disciplines for theories that will account for the persistence and vitality of the experience of the sacred even in societies that are relatively secular' (Fenn, 2001: 20) as is Australia. So my analyses and interpretive explications will draw on a range of disciplines - theology, philosophy, and social theory, but I will situate them within a sociological reading of religion and spirituality in modernity.

Next I address methodological issues - how I went about locating informants, eliciting interviews and processing data for the study.

Method

At this point my first methodological concern was ethical. Even before I went about sample selection, or ethics approval from my home university, it was important to me to have a senior member of the Australian Buddhist community approve my research

proposal. Fortunately I had been tutored by one such individual as an undergraduate, so I approached him for his opinion. He assured me the proposal was appropriate and even valuable, and offered a few pointers about sample selection and interview schedules for good measure. With this question resolved I felt ready to go out 'into the field'. The study is situated in Melbourne, one of the southernmost capital cities on the Australian mainland. It is a beautiful bayside, multicultural city and home to a richly diverse society.

The sample

At first I intended to recruit Buddhist informants from three Buddhist organizations frequented by Westerners, and to recruit the non-Buddhist group as a snowball sample. Due to time constraints, I amended this plan, and was granted ethics approval to recruit both groups as a 'snowball' sample. The only criterion stipulated for both groups was that each individual be aged between seventeen and seventy-five, and from a non-Buddhist society or culture.

The final sample consisted of ten Mahayana Buddhists, which has the largest representation amongst Australia's rapidly growing Buddhist community, six male and four female, and ten non-Buddhists, seven female and three male, who declared no particular affiliation with any religious group at all, but whose stories, it emerged, contained many unsolicited spiritual references. This is not unusual in Australia, where, according to the 2001 Household Census, the number of people who identify with the religious category 'inadequately described' is increasing (Bouma, 2003: 64). The two Jewish informants in the non-Buddhist group declared themselves to be cultural rather than religious Jews, and two other informants had earlier affiliations with Vedic spirituality. None considered themselves Christian.

Very quickly, the study took on the appearance of a small ethnography - two groups of individuals interconnected through family members, friends, or friends of friends, representing a miniature community whose lives intertwined. Often connections occurred not 'within groups' but across an imaginary dividing line 'between groups'. For example, I interviewed two women, one in each group, whose friendship spans many years. Two worked together and were both friends of a third, and almost all the Buddhists

knew each other. All twenty informants were either recruited by somebody already participating in the study, or were known to me personally and volunteered. All were part of part of a larger, unarticulated network of friends and relatives in Melbourne, subject to very similar socio-cultural influences. Although the overall sample is small, I was and still am primarily concerned with similarities and differences emerging from interview data, and how these serve as a window into broader Australian socio-cultural contexts. Below is one of my journal entries commenting on the sample:

> General method notes/field notes
> 6/8/03
> It seems to me that this research is taking the shape of an ethnography, or a study of a particular, small Melbourne coastal, family-friendship demographic (see Bordieu/habitus - supervisor). Data has been gathered as a 'snowball' sample, so all informants are linked to one another in some small way - six degrees of separation, as one informant commented. I'm beginning to think I could actually incorporate this aspect of the research into the thesis itself - to portray a 'slice of life' or a picture of a culturally and socially diverse group of Melbournians whose lives are socially interconnected, sometimes a lot, sometimes a little, but who offer a 'realist' picture of Melbourne, and specifically, local, St Kilda and its environs, its socio-cultural connection and diversity – 'Indra's net' (Loy, 1993). Not all informants are connected in this way - some (in the Buddhist sample) are simply friends of friends I have met socially (e.g. Liz K) who then referred me to other Buddhists of their acquaintance (i.e. Paul M, Ricky and Tony, and James and Tina M, who have taken vows).

Since this entry I have discovered more interconnections and plan to explore this aspect of the study in depth in the method chapter of the thesis.

In-depth interviews

Operationally I designed the study to elicit in-depth interview material about social interactions - at home, at work and in the community, from both groups of informants. I selected topics such as *gratitude, forgiveness, regret, partnership and attraction*, *pleasure* and asked informants from both groups the same questions - did they have a story about

an interaction that had left them feeling enormous gratitude - at home or amongst friends; again, at work, and finally, in the wider community? Having posed each question, I encouraged my informants to narrate at length, interjecting only occasionally to clarify a point or offer further encouragement. In operational terms I set out to investigate whether the stories Buddhist Westerners tell about their social interactions differ from those told by Non-Buddhists in ways that demonstrate significantly different belief systems and interpretive paradigms. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours.

Data analysis

According to Bouma (1992: 28), there are three levels of analysis appropriate to sociology of religion – the socio-cultural level, the organizational and the individual level. This study engages the individual level, exploring the impact of Buddhist and other spiritual belief and practice on individual behavior (Bouma, 1992: 28). To what extent might the stories people tell about their everyday interactions contain spiritual references that seem to inform their lives, and what are some of the possible sources and consequences? What would comparisons of both sets of stories reveal about religion and spirituality and Australian society and culture?

Analyzing interviews, I was, and still am less concerned with substantive elements of why informants feel grateful and so on; my main focus is on common themes within and between groups, whether any differences emerge, and what similarities and differences might mean. Designing the study, it was my hunch, from my own experience in the Buddhist community, that some of the Buddhist sample might refer to Buddhist teachings as they reflected on their interactions. I had no hunches at all about the non-Buddhist group, and those interviews yielded unexpected data - a kind of intense spirituality was articulated again and again by both groups of informants. Even as I transcribed interviews I began to identify emerging themes that both sets of stories seemed to have in common – critical reflections on aspects of Western epistemologies, reflexive spirituality, virtuoso spiritual practice, alienation from aspects of Western society and culture and interest in the East, to name a few.

Tentative findings: Beyond reason

Jean-Luc Nancy (2000: x) recalls, on the opening page of *Being Singular Plural*, that Nietzsche wrote 'we are now "on the horizon of the infinite"; that is, we are at the point where "there is no more land", where "there is nothing more terrible than the infinite"' (Nietzsche, 1974: 180) and asks are we finally going to learn this lesson or is it now impossible for us to learn anything else (Nancy, 2000: x) ? The Buddhist group in this study expressed strongly held convictions that there is much to be learned; perceived gaps in their understandings about life and interaction, many said, offered them opportunities to change and learn, principally through recourse to Buddhist teachings and practice, their Buddhist teachers and their community. Motivated by both a desire to learn and to change, members of the Buddhist group articulated a belief that life's contradictions and paradoxes could be understood and synthesized not only through the persistent use of reason and communication but also by developing inner resources - intuitive patience and meditation practice, and more *mystical* aspects of Buddhism. For these people, a Buddhist lifestyle supported the notion that life has its own mysteries and lessons that could, with perseverance, be learned.

Across both groups, my principal finding is that both a 'reflexive spirituality' identified by Besecke (2001: 365), and Giddens' (1993: 90) more general 'reflexivity' were major factors in the process of meaning-making. Comparing the two groups, the most obviously discernible difference at this point is how reflexivity plays itself out. From a Buddhist perspective, Buddhist doctrines are *intended* not only as teachings to be reflected upon, but as guiding principles in everyday life (Loy, 1992: 151-180; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998: 50; Lafitte and Ribush, 2002: 127-133).

It is not surprising then that in the Buddhist group many stories included a Buddhist component - some reference to a Buddhist teaching or practice upon which an informant drew to understand and give meaning to their experience. A similar process occurred with most non-Buddhist informants, except references were more eclectic, referring to management theory, literature texts, popular psychology – indeed a vast range of contemporary ways of interpreting and giving meaning to everyday experience

available to Australians, and possibly globally in the twenty-first century. Other forms of spirituality appeared in the stories told by the non-Buddhist group, suggesting, as Bouma writes, that spirituality in Australia is diverse and currently 'precisely in keeping with what would be expected in a postmodern, secular and multicultural society' (Bouma, 2003: 67).

In many ways the two groups were not so very different; while the substance of their stories varied, there appear to be common focal points and ways of ascribing meaning to experience shared by members of both groups – many informants across the entire sample spoke about family as the source of both intense pleasure and conflict, about spiritual practice of varying kinds as the thing that helps to get them through the day, about interests in Eastern knowledge systems and about interconnection with friends and loved ones as extremely important.

Conclusion: Into the mystic

My conclusions, drawing on the links between philosophy and social theory discussed earlier, focus on four major topics - *the marginalization of the mystical in Enlightenment thought, the epistemological consequences of that marginalization, and the re-entry of the mystical into everyday Western socio-cultural life, specifically through the religions of the East, and through Buddhism in particular.* Although Christian (and other) mystical traditions have survived the hegemonic forces of Protestantism in Australia, I want discuss one of the less well researched ways Westerners achieve a sense of the mystical in everyday life - through the integration of Buddhist belief and practice.

Habermas suggests in *classical* sociology and critical theory, Weberian and Frankfurt school conceptions of modernity, based on abstract oppositions between a disciplinary society and the 'fragile subjectivity of individuals' need to be superseded by a communicative reason and a 'hermeneutic insight into the symmetrical structure of every attempt to reach understanding' (Habermas, 2001: 151). Such insight would facilitate an 'intersubjectivist' (Habermas, 2001: 153) neoclassical reconceptualisation of modernity,

which in turn would rely on the support of a *critical* social theory. The balance, for Habermas (2001: 156) is ideally achieved through philosophical recognition of both the *values and dangers of reason*. 'The analysis must keep in mind both the emancipating, unburdening effects of communicative rationalization of the life world, and the effects of functionalist reason run wild' (Habermas, 2001: 156).

In this discussion of reason and modernity, the explication Habermas proposes is complex to be sure; one of his most salient arguments in this context is that modern discourses - science, morality or law - are 'directed by principles, and submit themselves to self-reflective standards' (148); that they are frequently misused as a medium for social, political, epistemic and cultural violence, argues Habermas is 'by itself no basis for renouncing the promise' (148) implicit in this recursive self-monitoring, which by definition must include, most importantly, a *critique* as well as a *defense* of reason. Beyond both, I suggest, is a synthesis.

My final conclusions draw on key thinkers in contemporary philosophy and refer principally to deconstruction of the rationalist imperative through the writings of Foucault, Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. I draw also on the sociological insights of Merton, Beckford and Fenn. I argue for a theoretical balance between rationality and the mystical, suggesting a synthesis of the two is possible beyond reason and the critique it attracts. I conclude further that it is through the integration of Buddhist belief and practice into everyday life that many Westerners in Australia achieve this middle way.

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