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The Sociology of Buddhism:
Theoretical Implications of Current Scholarship

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Abstract

Current theoretical debates about the sources of religious identity, the process of secularization, and the causes of religious growth reflect basic differences in what have been called the old paradigm and the new paradigm. While there is a latent assumption on both sides of the debate that a general approach can be applied to all religions, current research focuses predominantly on monotheistic religions. To expand the scope of theoretical discussion, we analyze the implications for contemporary scholarship of Buddhism, a religious tradition that has nontheistic and polytheistic orientations. In the end, we argue for the continued application of the new paradigm in the study of Buddhism because of its effectiveness at explaining trends in Buddhist religiosity as groups respond to modernity, secularization, and expanding religious markets.

The sociology of religion is alive with new theoretical perspectives and a vast assortment of new data and research. Social scientific debates concerning the effect of modernization on religion (Swatos and Olson 2000), the impact of religious values on modern society (Hunter 1990; Wuthnow 1994), and the mechanisms that may explain the growth and decline of religious groups (Stark and Finke 2000) have focused predominantly on Christian societies and churches. While there still is much to be learned from studying Christianity and, more specifically, American Christian denominations, the sociology of religion should concern itself with all forms of religion throughout the world. Therefore, we propose to investigate how Buddhism,[1] a major world religion that is often ignored in current research, informs the sociology of religion by applying findings from a wide array of Buddhist scholarship to ongoing theoretical debates.

Although sociologists have investigated specific aspects of Buddhism—particularly its growth in the United States—the vast majority of scholarship on Buddhism is nonsociological.[2] Anthropologists, historians, and comparative religionists have produced volumes of important research, which might not intentionally pursue a sociological method but have an empirical analysis of religion at their core.[3] Still, this scholarship on Buddhism is largely nonsociological and has not been applied to new theoretical developments in the sociology of religion. To remedy this deficiency, we connect scholarship about Buddhism to key debates about the "new religious paradigm," as contrasted to the "old religious paradigm" by R. Stephen Warner (1993). According to Warner, the new paradigm in the social scientific study of religion offers fresh perspectives on a number of central issues pertaining to our understanding of religion. These include how researchers talk about the function of religion in society, the importance and effect of religious pluralism, the structural adaptability of religious organizations, the social base of religion, and how religious recruitment occurs.

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[1] For readers who do not have a general knowledge of Buddhism, the collection of works edited by Charles Prebish (1975) offers a synopsis of the major historical points in Buddhism as well as variations throughout Asia. Gregory (2001) provides a review of recent literature about American Buddhism, including *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, edited by Prebish and Tanaka (1998); *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship*, edited by Williams and Queen (1999); *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* by Prebish (1999); and *Buddhism in America* by Seager (1999). The most recent contribution to this literature is *North American Buddhists in Social Context* by Numrich (2008).

[2] Some of the most intriguing emerging sources of new scholarship on Buddhism, from a sociological perspective, are in Asian countries. Both Xinping Zhuo (2003) and Fenggang Yang (2004) have documented the emerging discipline of religious studies in China. Zhuo documents the historical background of religion as an element of the humanities and social sciences through its establishment as an independent field of religious studies. In particular, the native religions of China, including Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions, are gaining exposure after decades of suppression (Zhuo 2003). Yang shows how religious research was originally intended as a tool of the atheist government but, through objectivism and scientific method, became an independent entity. The result has been a move toward scholarly work on all the world's religions, including Buddhism (Yang 2004).

[3] Baumann (1997) carried out an extensive literature review of Buddhism's introduction to the West from a religious studies perspective. He did an especially effective job of noting work that goes beyond the boundaries of the United States.

Scholarship on Buddhism is relevant to these debates for two reasons.[4] First, Buddhism is the dominant religious tradition in many societies throughout the world.[5] In general, the sociology of religion has done a poor job of examining religion in Asia using current sociological methods and approaches (Lang 2004). Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, and China have very large Buddhist populations, and Buddhist culture remains a powerful presence throughout Asia. In addition, Buddhist teachings and philosophies have become influential in Western societies during the past fifty years (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). Buddhism's impact on Asian politics and society and its influence on Western culture are areas of inquiry that could reveal much about how religion creates and responds to social change.

Second, Buddhism comprises a range of orientations from nontheistic to polytheistic. In contrast, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism share the belief that there exists a One True God. The consequence of these differences in theological perspective is lost if social scientists equate religion with monotheism. In fact, Stark and Finke (2000: 90) argue that Buddhism is, in practice, a theistic religion and that the nontheistic elements of Buddhism, "far from representing the dominant religious thinking of their societies, . . . are the extreme in secularization. Perhaps some members of the intellectual elite favor them, but they have little impact on social behavior." However, although Buddhism is clearly a theistic religion in some cases, completely recasting it as theistic conceals the potential import of its nontheistic origins. Even if the nontheistic aspect of Buddhism remains a domain of elite intellectuals, these thinkers and leaders may still influence organizational structures and cultural practices in ways that are missed if we dismiss their ideas as irrelevant.

Proponents of the new paradigm tend to stress the significance and importance of religious belief. Stark and Finke (2000: 142) argue that monotheisms are powerful because they alone can inspire wholly exclusive commitments and devotion. That said, investigations into the power of theistic traditions that lack a One True God are crucial in determining the validity of this assertion. Furthermore, there has been little exploration of the interaction and conflict between monotheistic and nonmonotheistic religions, such as the spread of Buddhism across Asia (Montgomery 1991). The doctrinal uniqueness of Buddhism provides a comparative case that we can use to assess more comprehensively

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[4] It is important to note that for the purposes of this article, we examine studies of all religions that contain elements of Buddhist teachings and practices. Therefore, the three major schools of Buddhism (Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Theravada) are all included as well as new religions movements such as Aum Shinrikyo, Falun Gong, and Soka Gakkai. This is not intended to imply that the new religions movements are direct forms of Buddhism but rather that they contain elements of the religion that make them useful to examine as exhibiting extreme characteristics of Buddhism. In fact, many Buddhists would neither accept nor even recognize many of these new groups as Buddhist.

[5] The number of Buddhists in the world is a debated figure, but estimates range from five million to 500 million (Berger 1983: 14; Fischer-Schreiber 1994: 50). This means that Buddhists represent between 0.08% and 8% of the world's population. Estimates within the United States are just as diverse, but quite a bit of growth seems to be occurring—as much as 270% between 1990 and 2000 (Kosmin and Lachman 1993; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 2001). Similarly, in Australia, 1.9% of the population considered themselves Buddhist in 2001, an increase of 79% since 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001).

sociological theories of religion, which have thus far been largely generated by and tested on monotheisms.

In the end, we argue that current scholarship on Buddhism supports many assertions from the new religious paradigm and suggests some interesting avenues for future research. We advocate the continued application of the new paradigm to the sociological study of Buddhism because the underlying assumptions of the new paradigm productively generate new theoretical questions and new ways to measure and understand religious differences. Primarily, it helps to uncover and explain the current vitality of Buddhism and the ways in which Buddhist groups adjust to encompass cultural and social changes brought about by modernization and shifts in religious pluralism.

RELIGIOUS PARADIGMS

A familiar Buddhist parable tells the story of how a father rescued his children from harm (Watson 1993). In this parable, a house is burning down with three small children playing inside, all deeply enthralled with their game. Knowing of the imminent danger, their father tells them that a goat, a deer, and an ox stand outside the house. On hearing this news, the children run outside, each having previously asked the father for one of these gifts. Once they are outside, the father presents them with something even better: a white oxen cart. The father's initial promises of a goat, deer, and ox, while false, were actually *upaya* (skillful means) by which he could convince the children to exit the burning house. The white oxen cart was so wonderful as to be unbelievable and thus implausible as an enticement. By catering to each child's personal desire, the father saved all his children and presented them with a gift beyond their wildest dreams. In this Buddhist fable, the children's path to safety represents the way to enlightenment, and as the father understood, this path is taken for a variety of reasons.

The parable of the white oxen cart indicates that self-motivation is an important aspect of religious action and recognizes that religious motives tend to originate from self-interest. This story thus appears to support part of the central assumption of the new religious paradigm: the assumption of rational choice. The new paradigm, which is associated with supply-side theories of religious change, views the religious actor as an individual who weighs the cost and benefits of religious activity (Stark and Finke 2000). In contrast, the old paradigm generally assumes that religious identities are culturally ascribed and essentially taken for granted (Warner 1993). In this perspective, individuals are not necessarily weighing options but are simply following the cultural and societal norms of their surroundings. Because the white oxen parable presents religious actors as children, one could also interpret the father in the story as the voice of social authority, a voice that manipulates and tricks the children to bend them to its wishes. In this view, even though the ultimate reward of religious action is real (the white oxen cart), the stimulus to pursue this reward was dictated from and controlled by authority.

In their 1987 book *A Theory of Religion,* Stark and Bainbridge initially outlined many basic hypotheses that form the key theoretical elements of the new religious paradigm. Their theory consists of three levels of explanation that logically unite within a core approach. At the individual level, they assume that people are rational actors who choose

religious options for self-interested reasons. At the group level, Stark and Bainbridge further argue that religious groups succeed and fail on the basis of their appeal to individual needs. Warner (1997) also points out that low barriers to entry into religious groups is a key to how theorists of the new paradigm explain high levels of religiosity in the United States. Finally, according to Stark and Bainbridge's macro-level hypotheses, societies are composed of religious markets in which religious groups compete for members. Again, Warner (1997: 95) views the supply-side or market orientation of the new religious paradigm as crucial to explaining the "institutional secret of American religion." In this, the new religious paradigm is distinct from the old religious paradigm, which posits that individuals are indoctrinated into traditional religious beliefs that tend to be ubiquitous in the individual's culture. In sum, the old religious paradigm explains religious vitality in terms of the cultural dominance of one religious ideology, while the new religious paradigm views religious growth in terms of active competition between distinct religious ideas (Warner 1993).

A much debated hypothesis in contemporary studies of religious change focuses on how religious pluralism affects religious vitality. Advocates of the old paradigm argue that a religion is more powerful when it exists with little or no ideological competition. Peter Berger (1967) initially advanced the intuitively attractive thesis that religious pluralism necessarily undermines religious faith because an individual will be less certain of his or her religious beliefs when faced with challenges from alternative beliefs. Berger indicates that the existence of multiple religious traditions in a society will produce a "crisis of credibility," and individuals will not know what to believe.

In contrast, advocates of the new paradigm argue that religious pluralism actually increases religious devotion and vitality. Thinkers such as Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone hold that religious pluralism increases the strength of commitment to a particular faith because individuals have been exposed to alternative beliefs and have chosen for themselves which one is best (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). A heated debate about this pluralism hypothesis revolves around the measurement of pluralism in the United States and Western Europe (Breault 1989; Chaves and Gorski 2001; Olson 1999; Voas, Olson, and Crockett 2002). While it appears that pluralism is difficult to measure in predominantly Christian societies, the situation might be even worse in Buddhist cultures. Buddhist temples understand religious affiliation and identity differently from Christian churches, which have more clear-cut membership boundaries.

An additional point of contention is the historical and cultural transferability of both paradigms. The historical confines of the new paradigm are pointed out by Randall Collins in his detailed comparison of the work of Stark and Bainbridge and that of Max Weber. Collins (1997: 164) writes:

> Weber focuses attention upon forms of religion which were historically quite central, but now have sunk to the standing of cults. . . . These theoretical divergences follow the shift in focus from Weber's concern with pre-industrial societies, and Stark and Bainbridge's focus on the capitalist-industrial world in which religion is institutionally much less central than previously.

Collins's insight highlights a key point: that the new paradigm's focus on the exchange value of belief might come from the fact that religion is a matter of personal choice in the contemporary world, mainly owing to its peripheral position in most of these societies (a result of secularization). This suggests two things. First, the process of secularization leads religion to be more privatized and, in turn, a topic of individual preference. Second, the new paradigm is unique to the capitalist-industrial and postindustrial world because it mainly describes contemporary religious movements. As such, can the new religious paradigm be applied to traditional forms of Buddhism or to any religion in premodern times? Stark (1996, 2001) answers this criticism—at least with regard to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—by applying a new paradigm framework to explain the emergence and initial success of monotheistic religions; in other words, religious economies were at work before the process of modernization took effect. But does recent scholarship similarly support the idea that the new paradigm is applicable to premodern Buddhism or, for that matter, postmodern Buddhism?

In reviewing scholarship on Buddhism, we concentrate specifically on how Buddhism relates to the ongoing debate about pluralism within the sociology of religion and whether premodern Buddhism and postmodern Buddhism fit within the theoretical expectations of the new paradigm.

BUDDHISM AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In many Asian cultures, not only is religious pluralism common at the societal level, but individual practitioners tend toward religious syncretism. For example, in contemporary Japan, it is typical to consider oneself Buddhist and Shinto simultaneously (Kitagawa 1966).[6] This quality of personal pluralism makes it difficult to separate out different religious affiliations in Asian populations (Miller 1992a, 1992b). Similarly, religious syncretism has been common in China for thousands of years. In general, Buddhism, Taoism, and popular folk traditions all exist simultaneously by occupying different spheres of life rather than competing for adherents (Fan 2003).[7] Thus, these cultures do not fit the old paradigm model of a religious cultural monopoly even while being predominantly Buddhist.

The activities of Buddhism in Asia and the West provided two distinct arenas in which to test the effects of pluralism. Asia is the place of origin of Buddhism and has for centuries been home to a mix of religious traditions. In contrast, Buddhism has only recently arrived in the West. Furthermore, Western countries have long seen religion as a

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[6] For a quantitative analysis of this situation, see the work of Basabe (1972), wherein surveys were conducted of Japanese men with questions permitting the possibility of multiple religious allegiances.

[7] Sometimes this peace may exist simply because the social territories of different religions do not overlap. For example, in South Korea, Christianity and Buddhism tend to coexist peacefully because they occupy different socioeconomic realms (Kim 2002). The same can happen with different schools of Buddhism, as in Thailand, where three different socioeconomic niches are filled by distinct Buddhist schools (Satha-Anand 1990).

unique affiliation wherein religious pluralism leads to competition rather than compromise.

Historically, Buddhism existed within a diverse array of religious environments. At its formation, Buddhism arose as an alternative to the practical monopoly of pre-Hindu Brahmanism. Buddhism was successful precisely because it offered a new choice for people who were disenfranchised by the caste system: women and the poor (Chakravati 1986). Because Buddhist traditions placed a heightened social importance on motherhood, it was widely accepted by women in Sri Lanka, who were typically second-class citizens (Andaya 2002). Thus, Buddhism perhaps gained wider acceptance because it offered ideas that were both appealing and otherwise lacking in the religious landscape. As Smart (1993: 39) argues, many Chinese were attracted to the Buddhist conception of heaven because there had previously been no appealing portrayal of life after death.

There are also important doctrinal and behavioral distinctions between members of the Buddhist laity and the Sangha, members of the Buddhist order of monks and nuns. Adherents of the Sangha are expected to follow stricter precepts of behavior than the laity are, and this provides two possible forms of religious experience within Buddhism. Such a separation even extends to beliefs systems: The laity has commonly practiced worship of the Buddha as a god in a context of polytheism, while the monastic order understands the religion as nontheistic. Thus, these two complementary but distinct forms create alternatives for those who want more intensive religious experience (Spiro 1982: 270–304). These religious options within Buddhism are analogous to the various religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church and might similarly serve as a means to appeal to a wider range of religious preferences.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, there have always been diverse religious traditions that have appealed to different segments of the population (Bailey and Mabbett 2003: 9). In Buddhism, this is most explicitly demonstrated by the choice to join the monastic segment of the religion or to remain a lay member. In the United States, these differences reflect a wide variety of goals, from the concerns of immigrant communities to the religious seeking of new converts (Cadge 2005). Specifically, converts tend to want the spiritual mindfulness that is associated with meditation, while immigrants are interested in the religious merit of karma. These distinctive reasons for selecting the same religion are pronounced within the Buddhist population of Chicago, where these two varieties of Buddhism exist with almost no interaction (Numrich 2000). This separation is due at least in part to different religious preferences, which stem from the cultural and social circumstances of individuals.

Without a central common textual source like the Bible in Christian traditions or the Koran for Muslims, Buddhism liberally borrows and adapts other religious teachings to create an evolving mosaic of religious syncretism. For example, when Nestorian Christians entered China in the sixth century, they gained moderate success by melding Christianity with indigenous forms of Buddhism and Taoism. This included combining religious symbols such as the cross with the lotus as well as fusing Christian and Buddhist claims (Covell 1986; Foltz 1999). Nestorians even referred to Christian saints as Buddhas and to the Bible as a sutra (Foltz 1999: 72).

While Buddhism has tended to coexist peacefully with Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and other indigenous beliefs in Asia, competition and conflict have also been present. In pre-Communist China, it was a common practice for Buddhist monks to create hierarchical listings of religions that displayed spiritual superiority. Not surprisingly, they consistently placed Buddhism in the premiere position (Sopa and Hopkins 1989: 156). In instances such as this, Buddhists were not indifferent to alternative religions but reacted competitively to religious diversity. Competition was also evident in the arrival of Christianity in Japan. The Buddhist establishment in Japan fervently opposed Christian missionaries, and the state eventually assisted Buddhist groups in fending off Christian competition (Elison 1973). More recently, Buddhist and Hindu groups have come into conflict over a key religious site in contemporary India (Doyle 2003). Thus, Buddhism seems capable of a variety of stances toward other religions. In the cases of Nestorians and Taoism, cooperation was the primary method. But when Buddhism encountered active Christianity in Japan and steadfast Hinduism in India, there was clear hostility and competition.

As Buddhism continues to spread in the United States, Buddhist ideas have tended to be adapted to an American context and have even begun to influence American culture. Wuthnow and Cadge (2004) examine the interaction between Buddhist philosophy and American culture. Amazingly, almost 10 percent of Americans claim that Buddhism influences their religious outlooks, even though there are a much smaller number of practicing Buddhists in the United States (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004: 370). Although most Americans do not accept Buddhist tenets, the mere presence of this alternative religion in American society has inspired many to reexamine their own worldviews (Wuthnow 2004). Tom Smith (2002) noted that many Americans are attracted to certain aspects of Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism even when they do not officially choose to join. This generalized interest allows the religion to make an impact beyond those who call themselves Buddhists and suggests that the religious syncretism of Buddhist traditions might appeal to religious seekers who are not content with a single religious identity.

The religious culture of the United States has led religious groups, including Buddhist groups, to develop a "de facto congregationalism" because "market incentives induce religious elites to maximize the appeal of their organizations to potential constituencies, and one result is entrepreneurial and authoritarian religious institutions" (Warner 1993: 1066; see also Bankston and Zhou 2000). It is common for American Buddhists to embrace this structural adaptation of Buddhism with changes in organizational hierarchies, doctrines, and definitions of membership (Yang and Ebaugh 2004). For example, some Buddhist groups attempt to involve the laity more directly in religious practices and simplify their rituals to accommodate novice members (Coleman 2001). Buddhism is even presented as a psychological rather than a religious activity for some people in the West (Wallace 2002). It is important to note that some of these structural adaptations may occur without conscious knowledge that they mimic an American-style congregationalism. As G. Victor Sōgen Hori notes, "Americanization occurs under the guise of a sincere belief that one is following Japanese Zen tradition" (1998: 55).

Structural adaptations are present in almost all varieties of Buddhism (for Zen, see Finney 1991; for Vajrayana, see Cozort 2003). Dramatic changes are especially clear among Buddhist congregations, for whom conversion is an explicit goal. One example is the repackaging of Zen by D. T. Suzuki for a Western audience. The doctrine of Zen has come to mean something very different in the West than what it meant in Asia (McMahan 2002: 221). In another example of American-style proselytism, many Buddhists are taking advantage of new technologies such as the Internet to spread their message (Prebish 1999). As the new paradigm predicts, Buddhist groups have become more competitive since entering free religious markets such as the United States and Europe. (For the United States, see Fields 1991, 1992; Preston 1988. For Europe, see Baumann 2002b.)

The most elementary change that Buddhism has made to accommodate Western religious culture is in its organizational form. Buddhist groups have shifted from a temple structure to a congregational structure (Bankston and Zhou 2000). The congregational form became a necessary means for preserving Buddhist tradition. For example, Buddhist congregations transmit ethnic traditions through Sunday school and prevent defection to primarily Anglo Christian congregations (Kashima 1977; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Furthermore, creating a Buddhist "church" helps members to seem more American and demonstrates a connection to American ideals (Chen 2002). However, this does not mean that all Buddhist organizations are beginning to look the same. On the contrary, a study of sixty Buddhist organizations in Toronto found that even among traditions that come from the same country, a variety of innovations in practice have occurred (McLellan 1998). In addition, there are important distinctions between congregations that are made up of predominantly cultural Buddhists and those consisting largely of Western Buddhist converts (Cadge 2005: Layman 1976: 263). These two types of Buddhism are known to exist simultaneously both at the national level, occupying distinct places of worship, and within the same organization, forming what Paul Numrich refers to as "parallel congregations" (Numrich 1996).[8]

For many Asian American Buddhists, their religion represents the continuation of an ancient tradition, in contrast to the religious novelty of Buddhism to convert groups (Stark 1993). A number of studies emphasize reasons, religious and otherwise, for immigrants to maintain Buddhism rather than simply because it was the religion of their ancestors. The Buddhism of immigrants often functions as a cultural institution, which helps foreigners to make the transition into American life (Bankston 1997; Bankston and Zhou 2000). This can be especially important for the children of immigrants who do not want to lose their cultural roots while also forming ties to American culture (Bankston

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[8] This is by no means the only useful typology of American Buddhism. For example, Nattier (1998) separates Buddhism into Elite, Evangelical, and Ethnic Buddhism on the basis of the cult categories of Stark and Bainbridge (1985). Alternatively, Baumann (2002a) distinguishes between traditionalist and modernist Buddhism, which represent different strains within Asian Buddhism. Finally, Padgett (2002) adds a fourth category of diasporic Buddhists: those who are simultaneously immigrants and connected to the community from which they emigrated. For a discussion of the controversy surrounding the typology of two types of American Buddhism, see Gregory (2001).

and Zhou 1996).[9] Thus, Buddhism is an important part of a broader sense of cultural identity that immigrant groups are attempting to maintain.[10] For some, this Buddhist identity is actually more important than a particular ethnicity. For example, the Buddhist Churches of America, though a largely Japanese organization, has seen one of its primary goals as spreading its religion to people of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Kashima 1990: 30). All of these effects show that immigrants predictably remain Buddhist, though not always for religious reasons.

The inclusion of women as both lay members and leaders is another adaptive phenomenon that is emerging in the West; in general, doctrine is altered to portray men and women more equally (Coleman 2001). This has both led to and been motivated by the fact that many Western Buddhists are women, and many are even spiritual leaders (Wetzel 2002).[11] Once these changes occur in the West, as in the case of ordination of women, the modifications can flow back to the countries of origin in Asia (Tsomo 2002). As Simmer-Brown (2002: 320) has noted, it is important to keep in mind that marginalized religions often rely on women early on but then become more male dominated as they gain legitimacy. Thus, the gender equality that is present in much of Western Buddhism could continue to be an aberration rather than the norm.

As Buddhism spreads into the United States and other Western countries, it faces a more pluralistic setting. According to the new paradigm, Buddhism is thriving precisely because it has the structural flexibility to adapt to the American religious market. These adaptations vary from organizational structure to individual practices and tend to display the congregational structure that is common among almost all American congregations (Bankston and Zhou 2000). However, Asian Buddhism historically occupied a religious geography in which the religious affiliation of societies and individuals was rarely singular. Rather, multiple religions thrived simultaneously in countries such as China, Japan, and Korea, and particular citizens believed and practiced within several faith traditions simultaneously. In this cultural context, Buddhism was less competitive and tended to be "communally rather than congregationally produced" (Sharot 2002: 451). Nevertheless, Buddhism displays elements of exclusivity even in traditional Buddhist societies, and Buddhist groups have successfully formed niche religious markets in Asia and the West through the introduction of previously unavailable beliefs and practices.

While the nontheistic and syncretic elements in the tradition of Buddhism appear to provide some initial problems for the new religious paradigm, we find that scholarship on Buddhism actually fits many of the predictions of the new paradigm. Nontheistic religions are expected to be less exclusive in their religious commitments, and many forms of Buddhism lend themselves to syncreticism rather than to religious dogmatism.

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[9] The alternative combination of Buddhism leading to greater Americanization can be seen in the strikingly different context of Japanese internment camps during World War II. Buddhist barrack churches were required to promote Americanization, which took the form of promoting American pastimes like basketball to renaming themselves the Buddhist Churches of America in 1944 (Williams 2002).

[10] Even so, many ethnic religious groups fail because members assimilate to the surrounding culture (e.g., Mullins 1988).

[11] Although Buddhism doctrine might never have been sexist, men dominated many of Buddhism's historical manifestations (Gross 1993).

For instance, Sharot (2002) argues that the religious conception of a God who provides worldly and otherworldly compensations is central to the new religious paradigm but is wholly incompatible with the nontheistic tenets of Buddhism. An interesting line of research that has not been adequately pursued would be a comparison of theistic and nontheistic Buddhist groups. As we discussed earlier, there has also been from the time of the Buddha forward an important internal mechanism by which Buddhism developed this distinction. This is the Sangha—the Buddhist order of monks and nuns who, along with the laity, make up the Buddhist community.[12] In general, the laity tend toward theistic beliefs in their worship of a pantheon of gods (Stark and Finke 2000), while the Sangha retains the nontheistic theology associated with the original Buddhism. The Sangha therefore would be an important component of Buddhism to study in more depth to determine the extent to which rational motives for religious commitment depend on a theistic philosophy of give and take; unfortunately, very little has been written on this topic.

That said, there is much evidence that historically, most Buddhist groups have displayed clear levels of competition with their religious neighbors. Also, Buddhism has formed a congregational organizational structure as it has modernized and encountered congregational religious forms in the West. For example, Miller (1992a) found that the Japanese tend to understand religious choices as being like any other consumer activity. What still needs to be developed in order to explore specific hypotheses of the new religious paradigm is a clear measure of Buddhist religious pluralism. This measure assumes a level of exclusivity, but we find that this assumption is not unwarranted in most cases, especially in the West. Although the measure would require a concerted effort to create typologies of the various forms of Buddhism and Buddhist organizations, this would be a worthwhile project and would yield further insights into the growth and dispersion of Buddhism. In sum, the social scientific study of Buddhism would improve immensely from the application of the new religious paradigm, a research avenue that has yet to be explored in depth.

BUDDHISM AND SECULARIZATION

Another heated debate that has been taking place in the sociology of religion addresses the religious consequences of modernity. Classical theorists universally concluded that modernity, in particular secularization, would spell the end to religious expression or at least cause severe declines in religiosity (see Gorski 2000). The new religious paradigm offered a response to this widely held thesis (Gorski 2000; Warner 1993). New paradigm researchers argued that modernity does not undermine religion in the least; instead, church-state relations are the major determinants of religious decline. Researchers found that when governments intervene in religious matters through the suppression of religious minorities or the regulation of religious ideas, overall levels of religious vitality are threatened (Finke and Iannaccone 1993; Froese 2001; Gill 1998; Greeley 1989; Jelen and Wilcox 1998; Stark and McCann 1993). Therefore, state

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[12] For a detailed explanation of the different roles that the Sangha and the laity fill, see Gethin (1998: 85–111).

regulation, not the process of modernization, was the cause of secularization. Arguments over these competing hypotheses of religious decline have become known as the secularization debate (Swatos and Olson 2000).

In sum, the new and old paradigms express an either/or choice; that is, either modernization undermines the organizational and existential sources of religion, rendering it impotent, or religion thrives in modern settings, drawing energy and vitality from expanding religious pluralism, worldwide connectedness, and the freedom of expression that comes with democracy. Another possibility that goes beyond this dichotomy is the idea that modernity initially poses problems for premodern religious traditions that have largely thrived in an areas of cultural homogeneity and religious-political syncretism. But instead of killing off religion, modernity inserts a new competitor—a secular one—into the religious landscape. In turn, religions compete with secularism and grow according to their ability to navigate a world of increased secular opportunities, services, and alternatives to religion. As José Casanova (1994: 5) argues,

> Religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. Social movements have appeared which either are religious in nature or are challenging in the name of religion the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy.

We will investigate the applicability of the either/or dichotomy of the secularization debate, but we will also consider a dialectical relationship between modernity and the vitality of different forms of Buddhism.

Today, Buddhism is most robust in predominantly agrarian and preindustrial societies. Therefore, its vitality in these areas could be attributed to low levels of economic, scientific, and technological development. On the other hand, in modern societies, Buddhism appeals to many educated individuals. Current scholarship on the growth and decline of Buddhism offers some insights into the disputatious processes of secularization. In particular, we can see the effects of modernity on Buddhism through the creation of new religious movements within Buddhism and Buddhism's growing autonomy from other social spheres.

One less controversial effect of modernization is the differentiation of religious and secular spheres; this is evident in the growth of separate secular and religious institutions in the Western world. Like Christianity in premodern times and Islam in many Muslim societies today, Buddhism is often closely connected to social and political authority in majority Buddhist contexts. Since before the time of King Asoka, Buddhism and the state were often intertwined (Gombrich 2002 [1988]: 127–136); Buddhism provided the foundation for many nation-states (Kitagawa 1962), and in turn, these governments have often legitimated the ideas of Buddhism (Bechert 1970) and given Buddhist monasteries financial support (Kuroda 1996).[13] The historically Buddhist countries of Asia provide

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[13] Houtart (1977) makes an important point of treating each school of Buddhism independently when determining whether the religions act to legitimate the state.

two distinct arenas in which to determine how and whether differentiation of secular and religious spheres is occurring.

Burma, Tibet, Thailand, and Sri Lanka are countries where tradition is strong and the border between Buddhism and other institutions is often vague. In Thailand, a Buddhist identity is a key component of ethnic identity (Platz 2003). This close tie extends to conceptions of the government in traditional Buddhist countries. For example, in Tibet, the Dalai Lama acted as both a political and a religious leader (Kolas 1996). Similarly, in Burma, the transition to a socialist government occurred because the winning candidate was able to portray himself as an ideal Buddhist leader (Sarkisyanz 1968). Subsequently, the government has maintained power through control of the Buddhist establishment (Matthews 1993: 413–419). Even reactions against Burma's current regime have gained legitimacy through the Sangha and Buddhist religious doctrines (Matthews 1993: 420). In Sri Lanka, there have been calls for both nationalism and democracy from the Buddhist establishment (Tambiah 1992). While Buddhism remains an intricate aspect of politics in many of these industrial and preindustrial societies, it is used for distinct ends, from legitimating military rule to advocating democratic ideals.

Where a division between religious and secular is occurring, Buddhism has not disappeared. For instance, Amstutz (1998) argues that Shin Buddhism actually helped to modernize Japan by fostering a medieval culture of political liberty. As recently as during World War II, the Japanese government reinforced nationalism through the doctrine of Buddhism (Ives 1999; Victoria 1997), and since the formal separation of church and state in Japan, Buddhist groups have continued to have influence over political discussions. Most prominently, Soka Gakkai provides the backbone for the New Komeito political party. This has led to a religious political movement similar to that of the Religious Right in the United States and a debate in Japan over how the government should react to political parties that have a religious foundation (Metraux 1999).

Outside the field of politics, the primary role of Buddhism in Japan is carrying out burial and mortuary rites. Differentiation between secular and religious institutions is clearly occurring as some Japanese try to promote cremation, thus removing Buddhist beliefs and rites from the treatment of death (Rowe 2003). On the other hand, Buddhist groups are attempting to combine with nongovernmental organizations in Japan as a means of becoming more socially involved (Watts 2004). Although these examples show opposite trajectories for Buddhism in connection with other social organizations, they both illustrate that in Japan, religion is independent from a secular government and decidedly secular institutions.

Within Pure Land Buddhism, religious traditions are often successfully modified to fit the modern world (Jones 2003). In Japan, the act of sewing robes is taking on a religious character in the face of modern means of production (Riggs 2004). In Sri Lanka, interaction with the West and Christianity led to a new form of Buddhism, which Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) term *Protestant Buddhism*. This version of Buddhism emphasizes the individual rather than the Sangha as the source of salvation, in ways that are reminiscent of Christian Protestantism. According to the new paradigm, an expected outcome of unregulated religious markets will be a plethora of sects and new religious movements to fill niche markets (Stark and Finke 2000). New Buddhist movements

provide a nonmonotheistic context in which to test ideas about secularization and new religious movements.

In particular, Soka Gakkai, Aum Shinrikyo, and Falun Gong are the most publicized new religions that contain elements of Buddhism. Furthermore, these offshoots of Buddhism are very different from one   another and provide various new niches in Buddhist religious markets. Soka Gakkai came into existence only during the 20th century but is already influential in Japan as a powerful political force and is rapidly becoming a worldwide religion (Hammond and Machacek 1999; Hurst 1992; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994). Aum Shinrikyo is typically analyzed in the genre "When Religions Go Bad," along with such groups as the Branch Davidians and the People's Temple (e.g., Mullins 1997; Reader 2003). Falun Gong gained exposure because it was the best-known new Chinese religion that the government attempted to oppress (e.g., Chang 2004; Wong and Liu 1999). Each of these groups advances beliefs or practices adopted from traditional Buddhism but also addresses issues of secularization and cultural heterogeneity.

Soka Gakkai embraces the possibilities of modernity by consciously attempting to imbue globalization with spiritualism. Soka Gakkai is adept at utilizing modern technology and has embraced the global culture to spread its ideas and members around the world. Thus, less than fifty years after being formed in Japan, the religion had spread to England (Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994), the United States (Hammond and Machacek 1999), Canada (Metraux 1996), and Australia (Metraux 2001). Soka Gakkai initially emerged out of a schism with Nichiren Shoshu. The result was a far more inclusive and accepting religion that is aimed at attaining world peace through the practice of religious chanting (Dobbelaere 2001). While Nichiren Shoshu showed signs of adaptation when it first arrived in the United States through a simplification of ritual and practice to help recruit new members (Oh 1973), Soka Gakkai generated an even more effective balance of modern thinking and traditional Buddhism to produce one the most successful religious movements of the modern era (Dawson 2001).

Soka Gakkai attracts converts because of an ethos that is very different from that of Christianity (Hurst 1992). Education may motivate this desire for a new religious culture, and in the United States, non-Asian Buddhists tend to be more educated and politically knowledgeable than the general populace (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). Buddhist groups that intentionally target such members are likely to be more successful in gaining converts. This was the case for Nichiren Shoshu when it first entered the United States in the 1960s (Oh 1973: 173). Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shoshu both directly appealed to the intellectual sophistication of new converts.

Another Buddhist movement that is emerging as a significant, if not widespread, modern presence is Falun Gong. Wong and Liu (1999: 43) argue that Falun Gong fulfills basic psychological needs that otherwise go unfulfilled in an overwhelmingly secular China. In its revival of traditional Chinese religious and cultural ideas, unlike Soka Gakkai, Falun Gong represents a reaction against modernity and, by extension, the current Communist regime. Therefore, the Chinese government has acted to suppress this faith because it views Falun Gong as a passive form of cultural rebellion (Chang 2004; Ching 2001). While also an expression of antimodernism, Aum Shinrikyo actively

attempts to destroy elements of modernity that it views as corrupt and destined for apocalypse (Metraux 1995: 1152).

Two findings emerge from this short discussion of modernization and Buddhism: (1) As the process of modernization takes root in Buddhist cultures, religious and secular spheres become more distinct; and (2) as secular and religious spheres become distinct, Buddhist groups and doctrines have effectively adapted to these circumstances, and this is true in both traditional Buddhist cultures and postmodern cultures in which Buddhism is a new religious movement. Both of these findings support assumptions and predictions of the new paradigm. It appears that the forces of modernization, namely, the growing distinction between religious and secular spheres and increases in secular alternatives to Buddhism, have not diminished the vitality of Buddhism worldwide. Although the cultural dominance of Buddhism will be called into question as traditional societies modernize, we expect that Buddhist groups will continue to respond to this form of secularization at the local level while also forming larger ties to a global Buddhist community.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism is different from most Western religions in doctrine, ritual, practice, membership, and history. These differences offer new ways to test current theories within the sociology of religion. As we have seen, there are two arenas in which Buddhism can and should inform current theoretical debates in sociology: (1) in terms of measuring religious pluralism and understanding the structural adaptability of religious traditions and (2) with regard to the effects of modernity on religion.

A wealth of scholarship on Buddhism directly addresses contemporary debates about the function and importance of religious pluralism and competition. For many Buddhists, religion is not a singular affiliation, and followers may consistently espouse diverse religious beliefs and follow the practices of other religious traditions. This is in direct contrast to the exclusive commitment that monotheistic traditions demand. Consequently, the syncretic nature of Buddhism in Asia seems to defy many assumptions of the new paradigm. In fact, Buddhists frequently engage in diverse religious practices, borrowing generously from Shinto, Confucianism, and Taoism. This blurs the normal divisions that social scientists draw between religious traditions, and any study of Buddhism will likely encompass an analysis of Confucians and Taoists. Nonetheless, there are plenty of historical instances in which Buddhists groups act competitively with regard to alternative religious traditions and attempt to either repress non-Buddhist ideas or convince Buddhists that these represent contradictions to the doctrine of Buddhism. Consequently, Buddhism can be either inclusive or exclusive, depending on the historical circumstances. Social science theory has yet to address this interesting empirical finding, along with a host of accompanying methodological problems. We hope that further systematic studies of Buddhism will greatly improve our understanding and measurement of religious pluralism around the world.

In addition, we find that clear elements of religious exclusivity, competition, and structural adaptation to competitive religious markets emerge as Buddhism moves

westward. Studies of Buddhist growth in the United States reveal two very important findings. First, the competition model of religious markets proposed by the new paradigm convincingly explains new Buddhist movements in the social and religious context of the West. Second, research finds that Buddhism is structurally adaptable to the competitive congregational model of the West. These findings provide strong support for the new paradigm's claim that religious survival is about continued innovation and competition. In sum, it appears that the religious market setting might determine the applicability and appropriateness of new paradigm hypotheses regarding Buddhism. Furthermore, the nontheistic nature of Buddhism does not appear to undermine the assumptions of the new paradigm when Buddhism exists within a competitive religious market.

While all religions necessarily change, owing to the effects of modernization, Buddhism's relationship to modernity exhibits patterns of change that are compatible with the expectations of the new paradigm. As is the case with monotheisms, growing differentiation between Buddhist and secular spheres appears to be a function of modernization. The more traditional countries of Tibet and Burma have undergone less differentiation, while the thoroughly modern state of Japan exhibits a distinct separation of religious and secular domains. Within this larger structural shift to a more secularized world, at least at the institutional level, we find that new Buddhist movements, Soka Gakkai chief among them, can be highly successful. The success of new Buddhist movements such as these undermines any sense that Buddhism is simply a product of cultural hegemony.

That said, many qualities of Buddhism deserve further study. For example, the West typically defines a successful religion as one that has a large number of adherents. However, in many societies, Buddhism is successful because its beliefs are ingrained in the culture. It would be interesting to see how Buddhist thought has affected the religious market of the United States, such as altering how some Christian congregations talk about spirituality, even while it has attracted few exclusive adherents to Buddhist groups. Furthermore, many Buddhists hold other religious affiliations in addition to their Buddhist identities. It is common for Buddhists to see themselves as Buddhist and Christian or Buddhist and Jewish (Obadia 2002; Rochford 2003)—what Tweed (2002: 29) refers to as "not-just-Buddhists." Thus, multiple affiliations among Western religious adherents are a reality that must be dealt with in any study of Buddhism. Alternatively, people can adopt Buddhist practices without claiming it as an identity (e.g., Kennedy 1996). This will create numerous wrinkles in the empirical and theoretical study of religion. For example, conversion is no longer as clear-cut if religious adherents can add a new faith without dropping an existing one. Furthermore, just counting the number of adherents of a religion becomes much more complicated if people are allowed to declare multiple affiliations.

Finally, the separation of Buddhism into two distinct but complementary realms, the monastic Sangha and the lay community, presents a unique situation for sociological studies of religion but has received little attention. Future sociological studies of Buddhism need to distinguish between the different schools of practice as well as delineating the positions that people occupy in the Sangha structure. Consistent with the new paradigm, this suggests that Buddhism is successful partially because it offers new

and varied religious niches to any religious market. Wherever future research leads, sociological theories would do well to include non-Western, nonmonotheistic faiths such as Buddhism when testing and developing universal hypotheses about religion.

The social scientific study of Buddhism presents new complications for sociologists of religion, but tackling these complications will assuredly lead to a wealth of new knowledge. As our current overview of the literature shows, we believe that studying Buddhism from the perspective of the new paradigm will yield the most productive and interesting paths toward advancing our social scientific understanding of Buddhism. Many Buddhists clearly act in rationally predictable ways, and Buddhist groups have shown an amazing ability to adapt structurally and respond to new competitive environments, the differentiation of secular and religious spheres, and the advances of modernity. This indicates that the new paradigm is already a valuable tool for understanding the sociology of Buddhism, even if we have a long way to go in our comprehension of the meaning and import of Buddhist culture and syncretism.

In the end, ironically, struggling to locate the rational and competitive elements in Buddhism might help us to comprehend better a religion that often claims to be both nonrational and noncompetitive.

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Current theoretical debates about the sources of religious identity, the process of secularization, and the causes of religious growth reflect basic differences in what have been called the old paradigm and the new paradigm. While there is a latent assumption on both sides of the debate that a general approach can be applied to all religions, current research focuses predominantly on monotheistic religions. To expand the scope of theoretical discussion, we analyze the implications for contemporary scholarship of Buddhism, a religious tradition that has nontheistic and polytheistic orientations Buddhist Science, Buddhist Philosophy and Buddhist Religion. The Relevance of Buddhist Psychology and Philosophy. True Suffering: Unhappiness, Happiness, and Compulsion. Looking Inside Our Own Minds for the True Cause of Suffering. Projecting Impossible Ways of Thinking. True Stopping. Counteracting Disturbing Emotions by Changing Our Attitude. The True Way of Understanding Reality. How to Respond to a Traffic Jam. Dealing with Our Own Unhappiness.