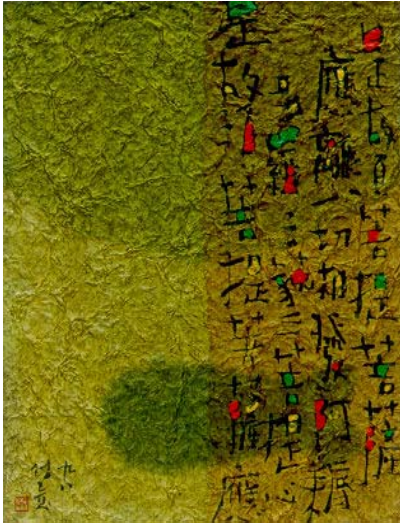


Research Article

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Buddhism and the Perils of Advocacy

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Research Article

Buddhism and the Perils of Advocacy

ABSTRACT

This article raises problems with the use of advocacy in Buddhist Studies, and critiques those who bring their Buddhist beliefs into the classroom and into their research. It argues that the foundations of the academic discipline (Religious Studies) within which Buddhist Studies is located are grounded in the search for an objective, non-confessional approach to the study of religion, one that distinguishes Religious Studies from Theology, and that this perspective is what gives the field its integrity. It cites examples of the problems that occur in teaching and research when such objectivity is replaced by confessional approaches, and provides an example from another field (the study of new religious movements) in which immense problems have occurred because some scholars have become advocates rather than analysts, to warn of the problems that can arise when confessional approaches become a dominant field paradigm.

Introduction

The relationship between personal faith, advocacy and academic endeavours has long been a key issue of concern to all who are engaged in teaching and research about religions in any shape or guise. They are, in essence, crucial to the development of Religious Studies as a

disciplinary area that has grown out of, but in many ways in contradistinction to, Theology in academic environments. Theology was - and is - inextricably tied to a particular belief system that has its very basis in the acceptance of an empirically unproven assumption - the existence of 'God' (in a Christian sense) - and in discussing and theorising about that topic and about the textual sources, notably the Bible - upon which the (unproven) claims for the existence of God rest in the Christian tradition. Indeed, because of its inherent orientations towards particular beliefs and belief systems, Theology is inherently a partial area of study and discourse, one, indeed, that it would be hard to engage in if one were not a Christian believer.

The development of Religious Studies was in effect an attempt to break out of this theological straitjacket and belief-centred intellectual cul-de-sac. It sought, in so doing, to pay the degree of attention previously accorded only to Christianity, while alleviating the worry that studies of religion were antithetical to the basic premises of the academy as it has developed in the modern era. Although Theology was central to the initial development of universities, the academy had, by the mid- nineteenth century, become more attuned to the notions of objectivity and scientific (in the broadest sense) concepts of enquiry and analysis, as a result of which Theology – which has endured at least in the UK as something of a survival from earlier eras - came to be seen increasingly as rather out of step with the modern academy

because of its very nature as a partial field of study grounded in a priori assumptions.

Moreover, until the field of religion developed as an independent disciplinary and subject area, it could be argued that religious traditions other than Christianity were not accorded appropriate or equal status as religions and as areas of study. They might have been studied in frameworks such as 'area studies' or in linguistic terms (with departments of Indic languages, for example, incorporating studies of Hinduism and early Buddhism) but for the most part it was not until the emergence of Religious Studies, that there was even the possibility of treating, for example, Islam or Buddhism within the same contextual framework as Christianity, as religious traditions worthy of proper study and examination in their own right. It was the emergence of Religious Studies - itself, as some of its critics argue, a child of Theology, that may initially be grounded in certain assumptions that are more to do with Western perceptions and constructions (including the concept of 'religion' itself (ⁱ)) than they are to do with a more global perspective on the topic - that allowed for this development, and hence enabled areas such as Buddhist Studies to properly emerge as viable topics for academic study, and for Buddhism to be studied and taught as a religion on a par with other traditions, rather than as an adjunct of a language or area studies department.

Critical to this process and to the development of Religious Studies as a mode of academic enquiry distinct from Theology, has been the importance of a non-confessional approach to the topic at hand. By this is meant that, no matter what one's own faith might be, this should not be allowed to influence or shape one's teaching and research, which should be based in an academic ideal of objectivity. Naturally, one accepts that there is no such thing as absolute objectivity, but the *principle* is clear- and it has been guiding one on the discipline and in the academic contexts in which I have worked and taught about religions, including about Buddhism. The non-confessional approach was, indeed, the cardinal guiding ideal and principle of the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster, where I worked, and which I headed, for several years. It was the founding ideal established and promoted by Charles Carter, the Vice-Chancellor ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ who, in the 1960s, shortly after the founding of Lancaster University, conceived of the notion of developing a department that studied religion rather than Theology, and who appointed, as the fledgling department's inaugural professor, Ninian Smart. Smart was, at the time, already a professor of Theology elsewhere, and had a particular personal faith, but he was committed to the principle of non-confessionalism, and strongly promoted it in the new department, just as he championed the importance of hiring specialists in various religious traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism and so on) and in ensuring these were appropriately represented in a Religious Studies curriculum just as was Christianity. This, in many respects, was his greatest contribution to the field, and one that has influenced

the ways in which the field of Religious Studies has developed in the UK and elsewhere.

This emphasis on non-confessionalism was critical for the development- in an environment in which a certain amount of distrust about the nature of Religious Studies was evident ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾ – of a properly grounded academic branch of enquiry that sought, in the mode of other academic disciplines, to dispassionately assess and analyse religious phenomena, practices, beliefs and the like, to locate them within wider (e.g. social, cultural) contexts, and to understand them as human phenomena that could help us understand more about the world about us. Indeed, one of the strengths of Religious Studies - and one that helped it gradually overcome suspicions that it was merely Theology in another guise- was its readiness to examine, analyse and critique religions, and in such ways, to break out of the bubble of belief and commitment that hindered Theology, and to examine religion in the same objective way in which scholars approach other areas of human activity that are the grist of the academic mill (such as politics, philosophy and history). To that extent it therefore should not be a matter of concern whether one is a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a sceptic or an atheist, as long as one seeks to pursue one's academic studies of religion, and of specific traditions, in as objective a position and as dispassionate a manner as is possible. I recognise that such notions as absolute objectivity and total dispassionate assessment

are, in reality, ideals rather than practical possibilities, but they are ideals that I believe one should strive for and that are at the very core of the academic enterprise. Being able to step aside from personal affiliations (which could be considered in many ways as prejudices) and allow the natural curiosity that is so important to pursuing academic studies, to be given full vent, is surely better than being trapped by one's personal faith. Certainly some of the best students I have had, have been sceptics whose main interest in studying religion has to been to fathom out what it is about the subject that attracts people, and who have been able to leave their scepticism at the lecture hall door, in order to enable their interest and spirit of enquiry to take over; by contrast, often some of my worst problems in teaching terms have been with students who declare that they are Buddhists, who wear their faith on their sleeve and allow it to become the primary lens through which they view their subject, and who, as a result, can often lose the ability to think critically.

Buddhism and the impetus to study it

While, as I have indicated, the emergence of Religious Studies as an academic area of study based on an ideal of non-confessional objectivity (or, if one wanted to put a Buddhist spin on it, of 'detachment' or non-attachment in terms of personal faith), has enhanced the scope for studying, teaching and researching Buddhism, and has given impetus to Buddhist Studies, this does not mean that the

problems inherent in Theology (such as confessional and a priori assumptions, and partiality) are absent from Religious Studies or its sub-genres. After all, one is likely to choose subjects to research because one has some degree of empathy with that subject; whether it be the study of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or specific topics within the field, it is reasonable to suggest that those who choose to specialise in and spend their careers and a large part of their lives working in such topics, are going to be drawn to them because of an underlying personal empathy. To be blunt, scholars of Islam are quite likely to be Muslims or to have strong affinities with that tradition in some form, and so on.

The same is clearly true of scholars who work or have worked on topics related to Buddhism; Donald Lopez's (1998) critical account of perspectives and studies on Tibetan Buddhism, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, for example, gives us background knowledge about how scholars such as Lopez were drawn into the field. I recognise that my initial steps in the field- and a cardinal factor in making the shift, in the late 1970s, from studying African religions and rituals (the focus of my MA studies, following on from a period of over a year wandering around West Africa and observing ritual practices), to studying Zen Buddhism thought and practices in Japan, the topic of my PhD and earliest publications - came about because of personal empathy and because I thought of myself, at the time, as a "Buddhist". During the

late 1970s I had the sort of encounter that will probably seem quite routine to many reading this journal, of reading a variety of books on Zen (notably Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970). A subsequent visit to India, where I spent two months at Bodh Gaya at a time when the Japanese temple there was run by a Soto Zen monk, who encouraged anyone interested to sit in *zazen* every evening with him, and who gave classes each day on the teachings of Doogen, made me decide that, rather than taking up an offer to pursue a PhD on African religious practices, I wanted to do a PhD on Soto Zen Buddhism and go to Japan. A year of studying Japanese, followed by a year spent at Soto temples, coupled with a lot of *zazen* and sore knees, followed. Later research in Japan - notably on pilgrimage - has also been conditioned and driven initially by personal empathy, although I should also hasten to add that this has not always been the case; my research into Aum Shinrikyo's violence and general anti-social behaviour, for example, came about not because of any empathy with the movement itself, but because the affair happened in an area (contemporary Japanese religion) in which I had an interest and a need to know and find out what was behind the horrors that that movement inflicted on the Japanese people. Likewise one does not assume that scholars who study the Nazis and Hitler have any empathy with their subject matter; in such cases, indeed, the challenge of remaining dispassionate enough to analyse and present in a manner that enables readers to understand the topic, without allowing one's assessment to be clouded by one's anger or disdain for what one is

examining, is perhaps the greatest challenge one can face in an academic context.

Buddhists in the classroom: problems and pitfalls

To return to my discussion of objectivity as a cardinal aim of academic studies, and the problems that empathy, faith and advocacy could pose, I should note that I am not proposing a revision of the famous Zen koan ‘if you meet a Buddha on the road, kill him!’- namely “If you meet a Buddhist believer in the academy - kick him out!”- but am arguing that the Buddhist in the academy, like the scholar working on Nazism, needs to have some distance from his/her faith when writing and teaching about his/her subject, rather than being an advocate for the religion. The pitfalls of doing otherwise can be seen in the following two examples, both of which come from personal experience.

The first concerns a friend - now sadly deceased - who was a devout Buddhist with a less than stellar undergraduate degree in Religious Studies (and no postgraduate degree at all), who, at a time when I was working on my PhD and was thinking of developing an academic career studying Buddhism, told me that he had applied for various academic posts in Buddhist Studies. In his applications he had emphasised what he considered his key credentials for such positions:

that he was a Buddhist who understood - and lived - the tradition from within, as a result of which he was able to impart its true essence to students. He was always annoyed at never being short-listed or interviewed - and at finding out that appointees were sometimes not devout Buddhists. He felt, indeed, that academic departments of Religious Studies should consist of people who were devotees of the various traditions, and that their role was to explain and transmit the core teachings of such traditions, rather than to dispassionately analyse (or, even worse, to critique and perhaps point out the flaws in) the traditions or raise awkward points about them. His vision of Buddhist Studies and the wider area of Religious Studies, in other words, was distinctly theological and opposed to the non-confessional founding principles of the field outlined above.

The fact that he did not at any stage get an academic post might be seen as a positive comment on his vision - yet it should not beguile us into thinking that the field is free of such advocacy-based and confessional perspectives, as my second example indicates. This concerns someone who held a position as a Professor of Buddhist Studies - or rather, it concerns a student of the said professor, who was also taking a course I taught on Buddhism in Japan. During a class I discussed the tendency of different Buddhist teachers in Japan to claim that their tradition was the apex of Buddhist teaching, and to construct arguments to “demonstrate” this view. At the time I was talking about Kuukai’s

outline of Buddhism, in which he posited ten stages of development in which prior teachings were ranked in a form of hierarchy, while the teachings of his Shingon sect became the ultimate stage of development of the tradition. I commented that such views were not atypical of Buddhist teachers, and that Kuukai's placing of his own branch of Buddhism at the apex of the tradition should be seen as a rather normative form of Buddhist rhetoric rather than a statement of actual fact. One would not, after all, expect to find other Buddhist teachers outside of Kuukai's tradition accepting his version, and nor would one hear any Buddhist teacher or tradition proclaiming the teachings of another to be superior.

This surprised the student in question, who asked 'but surely all Buddhists recognise that the tradition of (and here she named a particularly prominent Tibetan Buddhist figure) is the pinnacle of all Buddhism?' Taken aback at this I first commented that in all my times talking to Buddhist priests in Japan, I had never once heard any of them mention this teacher in such terms, or make any suggestion that their own form of Buddhism was not the highest on offer. I then asked where she had got the idea from, and was told that it had been taught in the aforesaid professor's course on Buddhism. In it, she said, students had been taught that this particular Tibetan branch of Buddhism was the acme and apex of all Buddhism, and that this was recognised as such across the Buddhist world.

I had been aware, from earlier discussions, that the professor in question was a follower of that particular teacher; s/he had also told me that s/he did not need to read Buddhist *sutras* or study any of the original languages in which they had been written. His/her reasons for taking this stand were that the Tibetan teacher in question interpreted the key issues in Buddhism (hence, it would seem, obviating the need for further analysis) and had translated or produced commentaries in English, on what he designated as the most important texts in Buddhism (hence apparently making philological and textual studies and the acquisition of languages from Pali to Japanese unnecessary elements in the study of Buddhism). Nor was it necessary to delve into academic analyses of Buddhism and of Buddhist texts, since the professor (like my frustrated friend, cited above) was a Buddhist who ‘knew’ the tradition from the heart. S/he thus did not need academic or sociological or other modes of enquiry to enable him/her to pronounce on and write about the “inner meanings” of the tradition.

The problems with such approaches are obvious. Both are examples of how advocates of the tradition seek to use a position of authority in order to further a particular cause and interpretation thereof. And while my friend’s example can be dismissed on the grounds that he did not manage at any stage to gain an academic position, the second case should serve as a warning that there are times when people with preset

views grounded in a particular reading of faith – and with evident proselytising orientations and agendas - do get into positions of authority and power as teachers of Buddhist Studies in institutions of higher learning. And, as the example shows, this position of authority can be used to create, in the minds of susceptible students (often, lest we forget, recently out of school and conditioned to accept the words of ‘experts’ and teachers), impressions and understandings that can shape their grasp of the academic topics and courses they have signed up for.

A case such as the above is especially worrying in systems where there are no, or relatively few, checks and balances on what might occur in the classroom, and little scrutiny of what teachers teach, what tasks they set their students, and how they mark them. In the UK courses are externally scrutinised, we have double marking systems and external examiners to hopefully ensure that students are treated fairly and that objectivity is maintained. However, my experiences (admittedly over a decade ago now) of teaching in Japan and the USA suggest that this is not necessarily the case there; in both countries, I was left free to draw up my courses, set the academic tasks for students, and mark them without any external scrutiny or checks. It was a position of some power and one that could easily have been abused. And, as I talked to the student mentioned above, it became clear that this was a severe danger in the aforementioned professor’s class. The “academic fact” of

the particular guru's superior position was inherent in the class, and it was thus an element of "knowledge" that students could be tested on; the student concerned, indeed, thought that her work might be marked down if she did not repeat the claims made in class. I am not, I should emphasise, stating that the marking in this class was prejudiced - rather, that it was evident that students felt that they had to write in a particular way in order to fit in with their professor's views, and that this coloured their perspective on the topics they were writing about. The dangers that can develop when an academic takes his or her own faith perspectives into the classroom and allows it to colour his/her teaching are evident here; if left unchallenged they can intrude on student learning processes and undermine the ground on which courses in areas such as Buddhism and Buddhist Studies are based. They also are an abuse of the power and responsibilities of the academic as teacher.

Scholars as Buddhists: when personal commitment and academic identity overlap

The same caveats I have cited above apply to research as well as teaching. Here I want to draw attention to the work of two scholars, both of whom have made significant contributions to the field of Buddhist Studies, yet both of whom are well-known as Buddhists, and whose Buddhism raises, for me, some issues relating to their work. My first example here is that of Brian Daizen Victoria's provocative and

ground-breaking studies of the roles of Zen Buddhism in Japan's militarism of the first half of the twentieth century, and on the activities of prominent Zen Buddhist priests and writers in promoting militarism, nationalism and war. Victoria, in bringing these issues to the fore, especially in *Zen at War* (1997) has performed a magnificent service both in academic terms and in overcoming a long-standing Japanese pattern of denying or turning away from unpleasant historical realities. *Zen at War* broke the silence on this huge and important area and it is fair to say that much of the reflection that has been done by Buddhist organisations in Japan ever since (including admissions of war guilt and apologies for having supported militarism issued by various Buddhist sects) would not have occurred, or at least not so soon, without his efforts. Among those who were shown by Victoria to be complicit in this context, were Zen figures who were held in high esteem in the Soto Zen sect at the time (the early 1980s) when I did my research on the sect's teachings, and about whom I heard nothing but praise from inside the sect.

In the context of this article, two things are of interest to me about Victoria's work. One is that, while an academic, he is also a Zen priest (indeed, *Zen at War's* back cover mentions his priestly status before his academic one) and that it is clear, as one reads his work, that his shock and reactions to finding out about Zen's warlike complicity (and the stark contrast it presented with his vision as a believer of what

Buddhism should be about) provided a major impulsion to conduct the research and write on the subject. The other was that this position as a Zen priest and believer, outraged by the contrast between the reality of Zen's warlike (and often racist) behaviour and the ideal view he had on it had, at least by the time of his second book on the subject, *Zen War Stories* (2003), coloured his views to such an extent that, in my view, it lost its focus and became subsumed by a degree of righteous outrage that undermined the academic and moral arguments that he had worked so hard to establish in his first book. *Zen War Stories* has added little to the picture painted in *Zen at War*, apart from increasing the number of examples of Zen complicity and providing further accounts, stories and vignettes to show just how bad the collusion of Zen, nationalism, militarism and war were.

Victoria's portrayals of such betrayals, as he sees it, of the tradition are (to this reader at least) so suffused with the author's own anguish and anger, that they have moved beyond being a stark yet critically astute analysis into polemics (see Reader:2004 for a detailed review of this book). While Victoria, for instance, finds it inexcusable for Zen practitioners to be acquiescent in supporting the militarism and nationalism of the period, he does not look at wider pictures that might contextualise such issues, such as the deeper connections of religion, nationalism and militarism that can be found, for example, also in the ways in which traditions such as Christianity have lent themselves to

similarly war-supporting stances. He appears to find it somehow shocking that the Japanese army had Buddhist chaplains who helped soldiers deal with the imminence of death, and that Buddhist teachers sought to comfort the bereaved kin of soldiers who died by valorising their deaths and suggesting that “no-one” was to blame for their deaths (p.159). To me the problem here is that Victoria does not provide any coherent evidence that Buddhist army chaplains were motivated by a fervent nationalism and militarism or show that they have chosen to take the role of army chaplains; often, according to priests I have talked to, they were conscripted in that role. And would one expect such people or Buddhist teachers in general, when trying to provide solace to those facing death or who had been bereaved, to tell them (especially in the midst of war) that they were fighting for a bad cause or to denigrate the circumstances of their death, thus making it more difficult for the bereaved to find solace? Likewise, when Victoria talks of how a number of condemned war criminals found solace in Buddhism in the condemned cell and talks of how they were ministered to by Buddhist chaplains, there is an underlying moral tone of disapproval. He remarks about one condemned man, who expressed faith in Zen, that the Pure Land Buddhist chaplain he talked to “made no attempt to dissuade him from his faith” (p. 179) - a comment I found rather extraordinary. Is it the role of religious ministers tending to the condemned, to persuade those facing death to abjure the faith that might help them face their fate? Victoria, too, appears to find something morally problematic in the fact that those condemned to die

for war crimes, turned to Buddhism on death row - as if that somehow made Buddhism (and especially Zen) “guilty” of war complicity. At such points, I felt that Victoria, rather than considering what the roles of priests in public service might be and rather than seriously considering the relationship between Buddhism and death, had let his anger at the wider Zen complicity in war (which he had previously done so much to expose) cloud his portrayal of issues. At such points, *Zen War Stories*, for me, became hoist by the petard of Victoria’s own idealistic Buddhism and the moral outrage it aroused in him regarding Zen Buddhism’s links to war that he lost his academic perspective. It might make for a more morally outraged book- but also for one less academically sound and consequently less persuasive. My point here is that belief and adherence need not only lead to rose-tinted portraits of Buddhism but also, if they are enveloped in the emotional outrage of a believer, can lead to an altogether different perspective – one in which academic objectivity is likewise sacrificed. Victoria thus provides us with an example of how advocacy and personal faith have created an idealised vision of Buddhism while undermining what could have been a truly incisive academic analysis of the relationship between Buddhism, war and nationalism, and thereby diminishes the impact and persuasiveness of the book.

While Victoria’s idealised visions thus lead to an excoriating depiction of Buddhism in pre-war Japan, the personal convictions and idealised

advocacy of another noted Buddhist scholar and believer, Robert Thurman, provide an altogether different result. Thurman is, of course, well-known for his studies and translations of Tibetan Buddhism, and holds a prominent professorial position at a leading American university, Columbia. He is also widely known for being a Buddhist devotee and a prominent supporter of the cause of Tibet and of the Dalai Lama. Those things in themselves, of course, are by no means a problem; indeed, Tibetan independence is a cause I fully support, and I certainly think that we could do with a few more people of the calibre and moral stature of the Dalai Lama. Yet, speaking in the context of Buddhist Studies, I think Thurman's well-known advocacy becomes a matter of concern when it becomes clear how, while using his title as a Professor, as if to denote the credibility of his positions, he has moved from an academic perspective to one of advocacy.

The title of Thurman's recent book, *Why the Dalai Lama Matters: His Act of Truth as the Solution for China, Tibet, and the World* (2008) - a sub-title that I suspect few Chinese political leaders would agree with - makes it clear that this is not an academic or impartial book. Yet, as various publicity blurbs for the book, along with Thurman's recent activities promoting the book and its arguments, indicate, much is made of his status as an academic scholar and his position as a university professor. Thurman's website <http://dalailamamatters.com/> illustrates this well, with various mentions of his academic and

devotional statuses; this to me is problematic when the one (academic status) in effect is used to reinforce and lend credibility to the devotionalist position.

Indeed, at least one recent reviewer, Martin Mills (2008), has found problems with the book because of Thurman's seemingly uncritical and idealised vision of the Dalai Lama - an idealisation that seems stripped of any objectivity whatsoever. Mills comments caustically that in essence Thurman's position is that if we all follow the Dalai Lama, then a lovely utopia will emerge but if we don't, we are heading for apocalypse. As such, there is an "extraordinarily philosophical assertive idealism" about a book that is in effect "overblown and self-indulgent" (Mills:2008). The review devastatingly pulls apart Thurman's advocacy and does much to undermine his credibility (at least in an academic sense), while indicating the underlying fallacy of scholars wearing the mantle of Buddhists and writing idealised tracts about their gurus.

In the context of Buddhist Studies as an academic discipline, such advocacy can be negative, and for those who might argue that the book itself is written as an impassioned plea rather than as an academic exercise, I would also note that the use of Thurman's academic credentials in association with the book's publicity, mean that it is legitimately treated within that context, and hence reviewed (and critiqued) within an academic framework. When people outside

Buddhist Studies (and Mills is an anthropologist specialising in religious practices in the Himalayan region) question the very credentials of leading lights who present themselves as scholars of the field, even as they pursue policies of advocacy, idealism and (as I think it fair to say with regard to Thurman's claims for the Dalai Lama as saviour, as for the earlier professor's portrayal of his/her Tibetan guru as the apex of all Buddhism) unadulterated guru veneration, one cannot but consider that Buddhist Studies itself, as an academic field of endeavour, is undermined. Now, I fully recognise that a total separation of scholarship and factional identity and engagement with particular traditions, may be difficult if not impossible to attain. It is also clear that much stimulus for the development of Buddhist Studies in the US and elsewhere has come because of the activities of those (including Thurman as well as Jeffrey Hopkins in the context of Tibetan Buddhism, for example) whose academic impetus is deeply linked to their positions as adherents. The same is true in Japan, where the activities of Buddhist sectarian organisations in establishing and developing universities and academic programmes on the study of Buddhism have been influential in helping Buddhist Studies develop beyond an initially rather narrow philological realm centred in the study of Indic languages and texts. Many leading institutions with Buddhist Studies teaching and research programmes are affiliated to, and run by, Buddhist sects, including Ootani and Ryuukoku universities (each run by a different sectarian branch of Jodo Shin Buddhism), Komazawa University (Soto Zen), and Kooyasan

University (Shingon). While a great deal of what is done in such sectarian universities can be labelled *shuugaku* or ‘sectarian studies’ centred on the teachings of the sect (and especially of its founders and leading thinkers), the sectarian universities have also produced some astute studies and critiques of Buddhist thought (such as, for example, the Critical Buddhism developed at Komazawa University by Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shiryoo) and have helped Buddhist Studies in Japan develop some new perspectives. Moreover, while such sectarian universities may continue to focus on interpreting and producing commentaries on their own traditions, they have also been active in producing sociologically-based studies of their traditions that indicate some of the problems faced by Buddhism in contemporary Japan.^(iv) In other words, while there is much in Buddhist Studies in Japan that is deeply tied in to sectarian perspectives, one can also see that such sectarianism can also, potentially, give rise to studies that need not be solely devotional or uncritical. It is a message that does not appear to have always got through to some of the devotees of Buddhism in the west who wear the mantle of professors in the academy.

New religions, cult wars and the dangers of advocacy

At this point I want to make a diversion into another field with which I have some connections, in order to indicate just how problematic issues of advocacy can become- and how entire fields of study can be

undermined when advocacy, and even the impression of bias and advocacy, come to be seen as characteristics of a field. The case I want to look at is the field broadly defined as the study of new religious movements (NRMs), but which have often been labelled (by critics and advocates who have engaged in what are widely referred to as ‘cult wars’ with scholars), as ‘cults’. This is a topic that is too complex to discuss here, but suffice it to say that, especially in the USA and, recently, in Japan, where vigorous anti-cult movements have arisen, vituperative and academically problematic depictions of new movements as “brainwashing cults”, and of scholars who study such movements as “cult apologists”, have been normative elements within the rhetoric of such anti-cult movements.^(v)

The hostility shown towards many new and ‘different’ religious groups by the amorphous anti-cult movements (and by large sections of the mass media) has in many ways been mirrored by a widespread tendency within the academic community studying NRMs (but also widely debated and criticised by some scholars in the field) for specialists in the field to perceive themselves as in some ways defenders of marginal religious groups that are under threat. While many scholars in the field have, in order to carry out their research, become close to some of the NRMs they have researched, they have also laid themselves open to charges of partiality as a result, especially if they have accepted any hospitality from such groups. Moreover a

dominant paradigm that emerged among (some) scholars of NRMs especially in the USA after the 1993 Waco tragedy, suggested that when NRMs ran into conflict and become involved in instances of violence, this was basically because of external pressures on such movements brought about by external hostility.^(vi) This notion that external forces were paramount in causing problems between NRMs and the wider society, meant that some scholars in the field often assumed that whenever a NRM was accused of any wrongdoing, that it was likely to be a victim under threat from external (e.g. anti-cult) forces; this perception was so strong that a support group, called AWARE (Association for World Academics for Religious Education) was established primarily under the guidance of James R. Lewis and (initially) J. Gordon Melton - the latter one of the pre-eminent scholars of NRMs in the USA. The aim of AWARE was (as Lewis 1995:53 put it) 'to serve as a kind of religious Amnesty International' and, in effect, to intervene with academic support in cases where NRMs claimed to be under threat.

The problem with such advocacy - and with the wider assumptions that many NRM scholars had with regard to the seeming benevolence of the groups they studied, became all too clear in the aftermath of the 1995 Tokyo subway attack. The police immediately suspected the Japanese NRM Aum Shinrikoo of having carried this out (a belief shortly afterwards proven to be correct) and raided the movement's premises.

Initially Aum protested its innocence, claimed it was being set up by the government, and called on AWARE's support; Lewis and Melton (and two others) flew to Japan to investigate what they thought might be violations of Aum's civil rights and voiced their concerns over such matters publicly in Japan. Lewis (1995) even suggested that this was "Japan's Waco", that the government rather than Aum somehow was behind the attack, and that the human rights of Aum members were being violated. The Japanese media and public- along with activists in the US and Japanese anti-cult movements - were outraged at what they saw as either naivety or prejudice on the part of scholars who appeared to have been guided by their preconceived positions of advocacy on behalf of new movements in general, to grant a clean bill of health to what was in fact a murderous organisation, and to complain about human rights violations in the context of a group that had sought to commit mass murder (Reader: 2000).

A prominent Japanese scholar of NRMs, Shimada Hiromi, who had done research on Aum and appeared to be using similar paradigms to Lewis and Melton, also had been convinced that the movement was benign and had given Aum a clean bill of health in relation to an earlier attack that, it later became clear, had been carried out by Aum. The two cases together served to create the impression that scholars of new religions were lacking in objectivity, were "credulous fools" (Watanabe 1997: 47), and that their partiality towards and support for

NRMs, had so compromised their academic values that they could not be trusted. The case affected public perceptions of the field in general; not long after, one prominent lawyer and ‘anti-cult’ activist, Takimoto Taroo, accused sociologists of religion in Japan, as an entity, of acting as a ‘cheerleading group’ for Aum (Takimoto and Nagaoka 1995: 205-208). As I have discussed subsequently, the case has had drastic repercussions on the field in Japan, not only giving all those who work on NRMs a bad name due to a perception of collective responsibility (even those who were quick to point to Aum’s guilt and to write about it, have not escaped censure) but also, and perhaps more problematically, causing an exodus from the field, to the extent that very little study on (and teaching about) NRMs is currently carried out in Japan (Reader 2001).

The advocacy of scholars in the field, spurred by their empathy towards NRMs, that caused scholars to offer support to Aum, may be an extreme example, but there have been other cases of advocacy leading to compromises of academic integrity in the field, as Kent and Krebs (1998) have noted. Such cases provide a salient warning of the pitfalls that can occur when scholars appear to side with a particular religion that they are studying. One can surely have no greater warning about the perils of advocacy than the Aum affair, in which prominent figures in the field who had previously made it clear that they had a mission to defend NRMs from repression, immediately assumed,

despite the emergent evidence, that a NRM accused of mass murder must be innocent, simply because it was a NRM - only to find that the movement concerned was, indeed, guilty of the crimes of which it was accused. While Buddhist Studies has never had to face problems of this ilk, it should nonetheless be aware of the problems that could occur when advocacy becomes a predominant paradigm, and when idealisations of specific traditions are allowed to take over from objective analysis.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I will conclude with one more example from my own experience. Many years ago I was on an interview committee for a Religious Studies post. The post left the specific area of specialisation open, but stated that the successful candidate would be expected to contribute in some ways to teaching at the introductory level across the wider spectrum of religions. One candidate, a feminist Christian theologian, displayed what I felt to be a narrower view of the subject, and a far greater indifference to areas beyond her own field of study, than I felt was reasonable in such a department. Just to test this out I asked her, if she were asked to make a contribution to some introductory teaching about traditions other than Christianity, how she might approach a tradition such as Hinduism or Sikhism. She replied firmly “with suspicion.” Further questioning revealed that this “suspicion” was, in

fact, an overt antipathy to what she regarded as dubious religious traditions that conflicted with her own belief structures.

She did not get the job, and I suspect readers will not be surprised to hear this; after all, would one want such prejudiced views to be represented in a disciplinary area which seeks to teach about religions without the hint of confessionalism, and without prejudice? But I wonder how the above-mentioned Buddhist professor who taught students that his/her guru was the acme of all Buddhism, might have answered, if the same question had been posed about, say, Islam or Christianity? Or, indeed, if it had been posed to a professor who posited the Dalai Lama as the saviour of the world? If we consider that those who regard faiths other than their own with suspicion, might be problematic members of the Religious Studies academy, should we not also think the same about those who take the reverse position and openly advocate one faith in ways that equally lack objectivity and are equally, if from a different angle, prejudicial?

Bringing one's faith into the classroom and into one's scholarship is a denial of the academic tradition and an insult to the ideal of impartiality upon which academic disciplines and enquiry rely. I have no objection to Buddhists doing Buddhist Studies, or to scholars in the field who are Buddhists - as long as they leave their (metaphorical) robes and beliefs

at the door, as it were, when they enter the classroom and conference hall, and when they write their articles and books using their academic titles and terms of office. Not only is there no evidence thus far to indicate that their faith enhances their scholarship and teaching but, in fact, as I have suggested, it could well be detrimental to many of the paradigms upon which the discipline is grounded, and a barrier to proper scholastic assessment and to student learning, as the student cited above, found out in my class. And when advocacy precludes proper intellectual discussion, leads to false depictions of the tradition and to the privileging of certain parts of the wider tradition, then it is time to kick it out entirely.

(1) See, for example Asad: 1993, McCutcheon: 1997 and (for an examination of the development of 'Religious Studies' in Japan and the accompanying western-centric concepts that have framed the subject in that country) Isomae 2003. This is not, however, the place for a wider discussion of the genealogy of terms such as religion and their relationship to the field of Buddhist Studies - although it remains a pertinent topic that requires further examination, especially in the context of the themes dealt with in this issue of the journal.

(2) For those unfamiliar with the British system of university governance, the Vice-Chancellor holds a position roughly equivalent to that of a President in the American system.

(3) I have often heard comments from academics at two previous institutions (Stirling and Lancaster) where I worked, that indicated an underlying suspicion of people in Religious Studies, and that assumed that the subject itself was not wholly legitimate but was somehow driven by religious agendas, and that people who worked in Religious

Studies must be, as one colleague from another department at Stirling once put it to me, 'religious nuts'.

(4) See, for example, Ishii: 1996, which uses data from studies by research institutes associated with the Nichiren sect and with Ryuukoku University to analyze Buddhist decline in rural Japan. Various of my studies on the Soto Zen sect (e.g. Reader 1991 pp.88-89 on how people rarely consult Buddhist priests on matters of personal misfortune and problems) have benefited immensely from the sociologically-based studies carried out by sectarian research institutes at Soto's Komazawa University.

(5) For examples of such rhetoric see <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/c11.html>

(6) For a general overview of the debates over this issue, and an outline of the dominant 'external forces' paradigm see Robbins: 1997 and Kaplan:1997, and for wider discussion of these issues see Introvigne:1998, and Kent and Krebs: 1998.

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