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*Theory and Method in the Study of
Buddhism: Toward 'Translocative' Analysis*

Thomas A. Tweed

Shive, Lindsay, and Gray Professor
Department of Religious Studies
University of Texas
1 University Station, A3700
Austin, Texas 78712
tomtweed@austin.utexas.edu



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R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

Theory and Method in the Study of Buddhism: Toward 'Translocative' Analysis

Thomas A. Tweed

Abstract

Focusing on theory and method in the study of U.S. Buddhism, this article analyzes the subfield's interpretive categories and theoretical assumptions during each of its four phases. A new phase opened in 2000, and no single theory or method has emerged as predominant, just as few scholars have scrutinized the moral implications of their frameworks. Most prevailing interpretive models, which are borrowed from scholars not trained in religious studies, remain indifferent or hostile to religious practice, or specialists draw on models from religious studies that commit the interpreter to a static and bounded notion of culture that offers little aid to those who want to study the dynamics of religious practice in the era of global flows. Further, whether the guiding models are derived from religious studies or not, the models' moral implications are not always examined. The emergent concerns of the subfield, in other words, are not well served by the available theories of religion and the usual methodological prescriptions. To address that problem, in this essay I propose one possible framework for the 'translocative'—not international, transnational, or global—study of Buddhism.

This journal's title announces an influential theme in scholarship on U.S. Buddhism and the study of religion more generally. It calls attention to scholars' interest in "globalization" or "transnationalism." This academic interest surged during the 1990s, just as intensified transnational migration and emerging new media prompted scholars to seek new language to name the "time-space compression" experienced by those who had access to the new communication and transportation technology (Harvey, 1990: 241). The world grew smaller, many observers said, and the pace of life accelerated, just as it had with the introduction of earlier innovations in communication and transportation. As with scholarship during the earlier phases of the academic study of western Buddhism, especially U.S. Buddhism, this essay is a product of its time. Most important, it appears after this so-called "transnational turn."¹ It is not that earlier generations did not notice connections

¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the plenary address at a conference in Berkeley on "Buddhism without Borders," and I am grateful to that meeting's organizers for the invitation to begin thinking about the implications of my theory of religion for the subfield. My own specialization is U.S. Buddhism and this essay focuses on that region, even if it includes a wider geographical area too. I offer a tentative periodization of the history of the study of Western Buddhism or Buddhism outside Asia, especially the United States. This periodization traces primarily two changes: varying notions of connections across regions and varying notions of culture. In this scheme, I propose, there are four phases of the subfield: 1) *National Studies*, which focused on the nation state: 1950s–1960s; 2) *International Studies*, which focused on interactions between two or more nation states: 1970s and 1980s; 3) *Transnational Studies*, which trace movements across national borders: 1990–2000; 4) *Global Studies*, which emphasize circulations back and forth across regions: since 2000. One scholar of Atlantic history has distinguished two major approaches to "global history": 1) "inter-national histories," "a history of competitive but mutually recognizing territorial nation states" and 2) "transnational histories," "a

across the globe. They did. They used different categories, however, and their interpretive terms—and the assumptions those terms embedded and the values they encoded—led scholars to particular conclusions about what they should study and how they should study it.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a few scholars trained in history, literature, or sociology began to write about U.S. Buddhism, though without any sense they were participating in a common subfield. With historians tracing the “history of ideas” (Ahlstrom, 1962; Chisolm, 1963; Hay, 1956; Jackson 1968; Wright, 1957) and sociologists analyzing “Americanization” (Rust, 1951), these scholars noticed “international” influences but tended to interpret them as their guiding term implied and their theoretical framework dictated: as episodic connections between two static, bounded, and autonomous national units.

By the next phase, which began in the 1970s, the scholarship shifted from a concern for the history of ideas to an interest in the history of meaning, as the symbolic anthropology of Clifford Geertz and others prompted a “cultural turn.” This period saw the first classic studies of U.S. Buddhism, including those that focused on a single geographical region (Hunter, 1971) and those with wider ambitions (Layman, 1976; Prebish, 1979).² Although in the 1970s and 1980s influential scholars continued the earlier emphasis on the history of elites’ ideas (Ellwood, 1979; Jackson, 1981), a new focus on Buddhist institutions also emerged simultaneously, as some sociologists (Horinouchi, 1973; Kashima, 1977) and some organizations (Buddhist Churches of America, 1974) produced volumes that focused on ethnicity and race and the ways that the descendants of Asian migrants resisted or accepted acculturation. For all of its erudition and impact, like other research in the human sciences at the time, most scholarship on U.S. Buddhism still assumed that “culture”—and “religion” as a cultural system of symbols—was fixed and consensual.

Things changed during the 1990s, when scholars in the humanities and social sciences began to decouple “place” and “culture” and attend more fully to diasporic groups that had been displaced, just as interpreters began to emphasize that cultures were contested (not shared) and changing (not static). Several intellectual movements that had begun in the 1960s and 1970s transformed the study of U.S. Buddhism during the 1990s, when a multidisciplinary specialization aligned with the broader study of “Asian religions” in the West or “Western Buddhism” began to form (Tweed, 1997a: 190; Tweed and Prothero, 1999; Tweed, 2000: xv–xvi), and the subfield boasted comprehensive bibliographies and literature reviews (e.g., Baumann, 1997; Gregory, 2001). Poststructuralism, Feminism, and Postcolonial theory combined with other intellectual movements to increase scholars’ attention to the role of race, class, gender, and nationalism and shift the focus from the making of meaning to the negotiation for power (e.g., Clarke). The swelling number of transnational migrants after 1965—and not only in North America—also changed the social context in which scholars worked. Some who already had been doing research on U.S. Buddhism attended to the

narrative of globalization predicated, like oceanic history, on borderlessness, fluidity, and...a lack of territorial fixity” (Armitage, 2007: 9). That’s similar to what I have in mind here. I want to emphasize the shifting terms and their implications.

² Some important texts in this period were not produced by scholars of religion, not only as with Layman, who was a psychologist, but also journalists (Fields, 1986) and specialists in American Studies and cultural history (Lears, 1981: 225–240).

demographic changes and embraced the intellectual shifts, and some Buddhist Studies specialists began to focus on migrants in the U.S. (e.g., Numrich, 1996). For the first time, scholars trained in U.S. religious history also began to turn their attention to Buddhism (Tweed, 1992; Prothero, 1996; Seager, 1999). Their work reflected their training in cultural history, which predominated during the earlier phase, but traces of the newer concerns for transnational exchange and social power also shaped their scholarship, including Stephen Prothero's *The White Buddhist*, which attended to colonialism and "creolization," and Thomas Tweed's "Nightstand Buddhists and Other Creatures," which complicated identity and emphasized "hybridity." Buddhist Studies scholars edited several collections that also pushed the subfield in new directions, including by attending more fully to racialized identities, ethnic institutions, and transnational migrants (Prebish and Tanaka, 1998; Williams and Queen, 1999). Transnational collaborations shaped those volumes and others, and scholars writing from and about various places expanded and enriched the conversation. Scholars of U.S. Buddhism increasingly were in conversation with those who analyzed historical or contemporary expressions around the world, including in Canada (Van Esterick, 1992; McLellan, 1999), Britain (Almond, 1988), Australia (Spuler, 1999), France (Raphael and Etienne, 1997), and Germany (Baumann, 1993). In this third phase, impassioned debates ensued about how to classify U.S. Buddhists (Prebish, 1993; Nattier, 1998; Tweed, 1999; Hickey, 2010), but those disputes obscured some emerging agreement: even if interpreters did not use the term, some in the subfield had begun to presume that their focus should be "transculturation" (Ortiz, 1995: 97–103), two-way cultural transformations, rather than the earlier concern to understand ethnic minorities' "acculturation" to the dominant society or to trace ideas' unidirectional "international" influence.

Although it is difficult to discern shifts as they are happening, I think another phase in the subfield's history began around 2000, the year the *Journal of Global Buddhism* published its initial issue, with its title reaffirming the global focus of scholarship about Buddhism "in industrialized non-Asian countries" (*Journal of Global Buddhism*, 2010).³ After 2000, edited volumes expanded what we knew about some understudied Buddhist groups, including Koreans, Thais, and Cambodians, and added new research topics, including environmental activism, stress reduction, and prison ministry (Queen, 2000; Iwamura and Spickard, 2003; Pereira, 2004). One of those volumes, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, continued and extended the global emphasis by including chapters not only on North America, Europe, and Australia but also Africa (Queen, 2000), just as other scholars writing about the so-called 'Global South'—Africa (Clasquin and Krüger, 2000) and Latin America (Rocha, 2006)—also have widened the subfield's scope. In a similar way, recent research on Japanese Buddhism in the Americas has helpfully framed the narrative in terms of the Western Hemisphere (Williams and Moriya, 2010). Specialists in Japanese Buddhism who studied "occidentalism" as well as "orientalism" built on earlier research (Ketelaar, 1990) and became increasingly interested in contacts with the West, including the United States (Snodgrass, 2003). Some Japanese scholars have not only analyzed western exchanges in Japan but also have made important contributions to the historical study of U.S. Buddhism (Moriya, 2000; Yoshinaga, 2005; Tanaka, 2010; Ama, 2011). Some specialists in U.S. religion, in turn, have traced the transnational flow

³ The *Journal of Global Buddhism* also has published very useful bibliographies that focus on different nations and regions, and those have been crucial for the emerging subfield and its increasing geographical scope.

of practices back and forth across the Pacific (e.g., Seager, 2006; Wilson, 2009). Interpreters trained in religion and in sociology also have devoted more attention to transnational migrants in the U.S. (e.g., Chandler, 2004; Cadge, 2005; Chen, 2008). Wanting to acknowledge both the importance of global connections and the persistence of local variations, hoping to attend to negotiations for power while not erasing individual agency or overlooking quests for meaning, these scholars' concerns—including attention to geographical variations, two-way exchanges, gendered practices, racialized representations, and new media—have been transforming the subfield since 2000.

This emerging scholarship also has its unstated assumptions, however, and as far as I can tell no fully adequate theoretical or methodological framework has emerged. I do not mean to suggest that a single theory or method is necessary, or even helpful: a subfield thrives by its differences and debates as much as by its shared views about what to study and how to study it. May many flowers bloom in the field! My point is just this: most prevailing interpretive models, which are borrowed from scholars not trained in religious studies, remain indifferent or hostile to religious practice, as with many poststructuralist and postcolonial frameworks, or specialists draw on models from religious studies that commit the interpreter to a static and bounded notion of culture that offers little aid to those who want to study the dynamics of religious practice in the era of global flows. Further, whether the guiding models are derived from religious studies or not, the models' moral implications are not always examined. The emergent concerns of the subfield, in other words, are not well served by the available theories of religion and the usual methodological prescriptions. To address that problem, in this essay I propose one possible framework for the 'translocative'—not international, transnational, or global—study of Buddhism. I identify some advantages of my theory of religion, which emphasizes movement, position, and relation and note how it harmonizes with Buddhist commitments and provides tools for the study of that tradition. Next, systematizing the theory's methodological principles, I propose five axioms for the translocative analysis of Buddhism in the contemporary world and in global history. Finally, I conclude by considering the theory's moral implications, since theoretical models and interpretive categories always enact particular values.

Religion as Crossing and Dwelling

Although I continued my research on transnational Asian migrants and the circulation of Buddhist practices as I was writing my theory of religion, that theory emerged most directly from my study of a Cuban Catholic shrine. The Cuban exiles I met in Miami during five years of fieldwork at the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity, which honors the national patroness of Cuba, seemed preoccupied with where they were and where they used to be. They wept as they told me about their former lives on the island, and they grinned as they imagined their return from exile. As I argued in the ethnography I wrote about the shrine (Tweed, 1997b), for them religion was *translocative*, a term I coined to make sense of what I found during fieldwork: religious rituals, stories, metaphors, institutions, and artifacts propelled them back and forth between the homeland and the new land.

Standing at the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity—and at the annual feast day rosary and mass in a downtown Miami stadium—I began to formulate my theory of religion (Tweed, 2006). It

emerged as I tried to articulate what I found lacking in other theories. To make sense of the practices of those transnational migrants—as well as the circulation of Buddhist migrants, ideas, artifacts, and institutions—I needed a different theory, a self-consciously positioned sighting that highlighted movement and relation. I cannot lay out that theory here, but let me give my definition of religion and explain a few of its most important commitments.

As I understand them, “*religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and surpahuman forces to make home and cross boundaries*” (Tweed, 2006: 54). This definition draws on aquatic metaphors in order to emphasize movement, avoid essentialism, and acknowledge contact. Each religion, then, is a flowing together of currents—some institutionally enforced as “orthodox”—traversing channels, where other religions, other transverse confluences, also cross, thereby creating new spiritual streams. Religions cannot be reduced to economic forces, social relations, or political interests, but they always emerge from the swirl of transfluvial currents, as both religious and non-religious streams propel religious flows. These flows are also “organic-cultural,” in my view, so I invoke the hyphen to suggest that both natural forces and cultural processes are at work in religion: we can talk about constraining organic channels and shifting cultural currents. So religions are processes in which social institutions (the state, the temple, and the family) bridge biological constraints and cultural mediations to produce reference frames that yield a variety of representations (rituals, artifacts, and narratives) that draw on suprahuman agents (gods, buddhas, or bodhisattvas) and imagine an ultimate horizon of human life (Amida Buddha’s Pure Land or the Kingdom of God). It is this appeal to suprahuman forces and an ultimate horizon that distinguishes religion from non-religion, in my view, though it can be useful to classify practices and artifacts on a continuum that allows us to acknowledge that some cases—for example, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Programs in medical centers and Buddhist-inspired paintings in art museums—might fall between the imagined poles of the fully secular and the fully religious.

All this helps us understand what religion *is*—and even how we might identify quasi-religious practices—but how does religion *function*? I suggest, first, that religion “intensifies joy and confronts suffering.” Religions involve emotion as well as cognition. They not only interpret and ease suffering—disease, disaster, dislocation, and death—but also provide ways for humans to imagine and enhance the joys derived from encounters with the natural world, including comets and rainbows, and transitions in the lifespan, including childbirth and marriage. Religions provide that idiom and transmit those practices. Religions, in other words, are about enhancing the wonder as much as wondering about evil (Tweed 2006, 69–73).

Second, shifting to spatial metaphors, I suggest that religions “make homes and cross boundaries” (Tweed 2006, 73–77). Religions are about finding one’s place (dwelling) and moving across space (crossing). As dwelling, religions are spatial practices that orient humans in time and space, situating devotees in four *chronotopes*, or time-spaces: the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos. They function, I suggest, as watch and compass. But religions make sense of the nomadic as well as the sedentary in human life and involve another spatial practice—crossing. Religions enable and constrain corporeal, terrestrial, and cosmic crossings. They mark and traverse the boundaries of not only the natural terrain, as in pilgrimages and missions, and the limits of embodied life, including illness and death, but they also chart and

cross the ultimate horizon, whether that final crossing is imagined as transport or transformation, as ascending to heaven or attaining enlightenment.

The Theory's Buddhist Parallels and Methodological Implications

Some readers have interpreted *Crossing and Dwelling* as providing a Catholic theory of religion or as primarily reflecting on religion in *modernity*. It is true that I hoped to make sense of the most prominent conditions of late modernity—including migration, pluralism, and the time-space compression produced by advances in technology, like computers and jet planes. So I noted that religion is always mediated by communication and transportation technology, and I emphasized both the movement of peoples and the confluence of traditions. Readers celebrating the theory's Catholic parallels also have a point. They have welcomed my de-emphasis of the creedal as they simultaneously criticize the ways that Protestant assumptions—especially assumptions about the centrality of beliefs—have shaped most modern Western thinking about religion. Those readers are right to note that the theory arose most directly from my immersion at a Catholic site, and I hope that my highlighting of artifacts, institutions, and rituals provides theoretical resources for making sense of devotional life in late modernity.

Yet even if I was in conversation with those studying both Catholicism and modernity, I also think it might help to note the theory's Buddhist parallels. Those who have understood themselves as 'Buddhists' have varied widely from period to period and from place to place. The more you attend to differences in practice, the more you sense that it is not easy to identify what, if anything, they have shared. We can have some sympathy, then, with the early Western interpreters who, until the middle of the nineteenth century, could not imagine that the Buddhist traditions in, for example, Burma, Japan, and Tibet claimed the same founder and a common history. I recall a recent conversation with a Buddhist Studies scholar on that topic, and we concluded that the most we could say was that 'Buddhists' are those who have taken refuge in the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *sangha*—however they understood that classic formulation. You might have your own sense of the nature and extent of Buddhist commonality. In any case, I think it is fair to say, most Buddhist philosophical schools also have accepted the claim that there are three characteristics of the phenomenal world, the world we all live in: suffering (*duhka*), no-self (*anātman*), and impermanence (*anitya*) (Anderson, 2004).⁴

And all three themes find a place in my theory, either explicitly or implicitly. The most obvious trace of Buddhist influence is my definition's emphasis on the first of these characteristics: religions, I proposed, "confront suffering." However, the other two doctrines—no-self and impermanence—are as important. Impermanence means that all things, including the self and the world, change. They change over time and are affected by—even brought into existence by—other things. The Buddhist idea of *anātman* or no-self

⁴ There is an enormous scholarly literature about these three concepts, of course. I cite Anderson's entry on *anitya* [impermanence] because she mentions the "three characteristics of the phenomenal world," and that entry might be a place to start for those (including specialists in U.S. religion) who are unfamiliar with the scholarship. Entries in that reference work on *anātman* (no-self) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) also might be helpful.

also affirms the processive and relational character of beings and objects. There is no substantial and enduring stuff. Humans are no more—or less—than constitutive elements flowing together: body, sensation, perception, habit, and consciousness. All persons and things are in a state of flux, and all are interdependent, conditioned by other things. In *Crossing and Dwelling*, I noted the intellectual resources for reimagining religion in motion and in relation, by employing metaphors from the natural sciences (like physics and hydrodynamics), and by incorporating the insights of Western thinkers (like Heraclitus and Alfred North Whitehead). But I also acknowledged the usefulness of Buddhist ideas of impermanence, no-self, and dependent co-origination (Tweed, 2006: 56–60). I even self-consciously used Buddhist terminology when trying to address some vexing problems facing any theory of religion. For example, how do we understand the relation between religion, politics, society, and economy? My solution was to emphasize the “mutual intercausality” of these forces, while also acknowledging the ways that the cultural, in turn, emerges in relation to the biological (Tweed, 2006: 60).

So I am happy to acknowledge the Buddhist influences, but what are the theory’s *methodological* implications? What might it tell us about how to study the historical and contemporary expressions of Buddhism? All theories, I proposed, have blind spots (Tweed, 2006: 14–15, 171–177). All schemes illumine some things while they obscure others. This theory, with its Buddhist-like emphasis on flux and inter-relation, proposes a different understanding of a religious ‘tradition’ and, more specifically, offers a different perspective on the history and geography of Buddhism. In 1951, Edward Conze, the British-born translator of Buddhist texts, published a popular interpretation entitled *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, and that volume had many strengths. But in terms of the role-specific obligation of scholars, it is not helpful to talk about Buddhism—or any tradition—as having an “essence,” an unchanging core of teachings or practices. As I noted, turning to aquatic metaphors, every tradition, including Buddhism, is a flowing together of currents (Tweed, 2006: 60). There is no pure substratum, no static and independent core called ‘Buddhism’—in the founder’s day or in later generations. What we have come to call ‘Buddhism’ was always becoming, being made and remade over and over again in contact and exchange, as it was carried along in the flow of things. Buddhist leaders have the right—even the role-specific obligation—to determine what constitutes ‘authentic’ Buddhism, but scholars—and Buddhist practitioners when they contribute to academic conversations—have another duty, I suggest: to follow the flows wherever they lead. To study the historical or contemporary expressions of Buddhism is to trace the flow of people, rituals, artifacts, beliefs, and institutions across spatial and temporal boundaries.

We should not overlook the ways that Buddhism orients devotees in time and space, situates them in the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos. In short, we should remember that religion is also about *dwelling* (Tweed, 2006: 80–121). But this emphasis on *crossing*—this effort to reimagine the Buddhist ‘tradition’ as a confluence of streams—illumines some things, including many of the topics addressed by specialists in this subfield. Some scholars of global Buddhism already have used my theory, for example to study the relocation of Lao migrants to Canada (White, 2010) and the transmission of a ritual from Japan to the U.S. (Wilson, 2009). I think it might have other uses. It helps to interpret the mixing of religious traditions. The emergence of Jewish-Buddhists makes more sense if we take a theoretical perspective that

highlights movement and relation, so does the contact and exchange evident in regional expressions of Buddhism. And if we keep in mind the ways that communication and transportation technology mediates religion in late modernity, Buddhist Blogs and social networking sites in virtual space seem to be yet another compelling example of crossing. Perhaps we will find that my theory of religion obscures some things we want to study—again, blind spots always remain—but to give you a better sense of what I am suggesting, let me summarize two of my recent attempts to apply this approach and then systematize my methodological proposals by offering five axioms or guidelines for the study of Buddhism.

Two Case Studies: Flows in the Atlantic and Pacific Worlds

In an article-length study (Tweed, 2005), I began with a simple question (the approach I advocate starts small and gets big). I asked: how did Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarô (aka D.T. Suzuki), the twentieth-century Japanese popularizer of Buddhism, come to be influenced by the thought of Immanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic? I will not repeat my findings here—or those of the Japanese scholar, Yoshinaga Shin'ichi (2005), with whom I have collaborated—since my article, “American Occultism and Japanese Buddhism,” (2005) is available, but I just want to note that the process of research, which I called ‘translocative analysis,’ led me to trace the flow of ideas, people, and objects across Asia, North America, and Europe.

In the same way, a forthcoming piece asks a question that begins on the other side of the Pacific but opens out to global flows (Tweed, 2011): how has Buddhism influenced the post-1945 United States, especially but not only American visual artists? How, I wondered, did U.S. artists, especially painters like Jasper Johns and video artists like Bill Viola, come to make art the way they did? That essay makes a larger point about the tradition’s influence and then focuses on the visual arts. In a process of *transcultural collage*, I proposed, some American artists between the 1940s and the 1960s assembled other kinds of found objects—Dadaism, Japanese aesthetics, and ‘Suzuki Zen’—to create new art forms that valued spontaneity and irreverence, experimented with line, color, and space, and emphasized the vernacular glance and the meditative gaze.

These are just two examples of what I have in mind. In both studies, I tried to follow the flows and begin to work out the methodological implications of my theory of religion. But what I have in mind still might not be clear, so let me try to say more about the ‘translocative analysis’ I propose by suggesting a few specific methodological guidelines, five axioms for the study of Buddhism in the contemporary world and in global history.

Axioms for the Translocative Study of Buddhism

1. *Follow the Flows.* Religions are spatial processes that involve settling in and moving across, and in the study of Buddhism we should attend to the kinetics of both itinerancy and homemaking. This means noticing, on the one hand, that even things that seem static, like landscapes and temples, are always changing. It means, in other words, putting landscape in motion. We do this by excavating the layers of human migration and settlement—and noticing all the traces left on the terrain, from the

so-called natural world to the built environment. It also means, this axiom suggests, that we follow the flows of people, artifacts, institutions, and practices that have transformed indifferent space into familiar place.

2. *Notice All the Figures Crossing.* To follow the flows and provide the richest representation of a practice or a site, we need to creatively use a variety of sources to try to recover all those who have had a presence, ordinary devotees as well as religious leaders, women as well as men, and (we need much more research on this) children as well as adults. Notice all those who are present—while also noticing those who, for one reason or another, are absent. Ask: Who is there? Who is not there? And, as with Buddhism’s critics, who is present only as an incorporeal presence, as the other who haunts the landscape?
3. *Attend to All The Senses and All Religion’s Components:* The humans crossing the water or the landscape are embodied beings, and religions are multi-sensorial spatial practices. Humans mark boundaries and cross them by appealing to all the senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing—and by using all religion’s components—stories, moral codes, artifacts, architecture, and rituals. For example, we might focus on an ordinary artifact, a single stick of incense (tracing its production, circulation, and use) and then inquire about a sense that scholars of Buddhism have underemphasized—smell.⁵
4. *Consider Varying Scales.* If we follow the flows wherever they lead—and that is easier said than done—we often will find that we need to extend our study’s temporal span and expand its geographical scope. The traces might be very recent or quite ancient, and we should expand and contract the historical frame of our study accordingly. In turn, if we follow the flows, the geographical scope of our analysis will sometimes be larger and sometimes smaller than the nation-state. We should not assume the nation as the default level of analysis, but instead move agilely across varying scales, from neural pathways to global trade routes, from the local to the transregional, or wherever the movements we are tracing take us. So we might reframe the study of Buddhism and not only think about Buddhism in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Australia, or ‘the West.’ New angles of vision might open up if we situate what we study, the Buddhist flows we are following, in the Atlantic World, the Indo-Pacific World, the Western Hemisphere, or the Global South.
5. *Notice How Flows Start, Stop, and Shift.* Religions, as I understand them, negotiate power as well as make meaning, and the kinetics of dwelling and crossing are always mediated not only by transportation and communication technology but also by institutional structures. All space is striated, marked by the traces of social power wielded by institutions and their legal and moral codes. In the same way, there are no unimpeded flows. The flows—of people, things, and practices—are propelled,

⁵ Here I mention five senses, but most Buddhist schools have counted one more sense field (*āyatana*)—mind is added to eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body. Some epistemologies include the six corresponding objects of cognition as well and list six types of consciousness (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental). In any case, my point here is simple: scholars should consider multi-sensorial encounters with the world, however we count the sense organs or imagine the perceptual system.

compelled, and blocked, directed this way and that, by institutions. Extending the aquatic metaphor to explain how institutional power—as well as individual agency—is at work, we might say that institutions channel and regulate religious flows, functioning like a dam.⁶ In those sorts of hydrodynamic engineering systems, walled structures divert the water’s direction and ‘control valves’ modulate its rate of flow. A large organization—a legal system or a corporation—usually constructs and maintains the dam, yet that collectivity also authorizes a particular person, who is subject to transmitted codes that constrain individual choice, to turn the valve and control the flow. Similar processes are at work, I suggest, as social institutions, including nation-states, divert and modulate religions’ organic-cultural flows. It is important for scholars of Buddhism to notice this—and, so, to attend to the ways that power is enacted and not only the ways that meaning is made. For example, we know something—but not enough—about the reception of the racist U.S. immigration act of 1924 in Japan (Stalker, 2006) and some scholars have studied the impact of President Roosevelt’s 1942 executive order mandating internment camps for Americans of Japanese descent (Williams, 2002). But in which *other* ways have legal codes and institutional structures—within U.S. boundaries or beyond them—compelled and constrained Buddhists’ crossings?

Moral Implications: Toward A Kinetic And Relational Ethic

This fifth axiom, which concerns power, raises other issues about right and wrong—about scholarly obligations, individual morality, and public policy. And I want to conclude by briefly pondering the moral implications of my theory of religion and the methodological approach that emerges from it. As one philosopher put it, fact and value are “entangled” (Putnam, 2002: 28–45). To restate the point using my aquatic metaphors, we might talk about the ‘transfluence of fact and value.’ All of us who study Buddhism enact epistemic values (like coherence and clarity) and moral values (like fairness and inclusiveness) when we prefer one interpretation to another. In one piece (Tweed, 2009), I started to think about the moral implications of my theory, noting how it highlights the virtue of humility and how another virtue, reciprocal generosity, might provide a basis for civic engagement.

I now want to identify other moral values that emerge from the perspective I have proposed. Before I do that I feel compelled to acknowledge that, as I consider scholarship’s moral

⁶ For this clarification and expansion of my theory, I am indebted to many readers and audiences in the United States, Canada, Japan, and Europe. A number of commentators in conference sessions and university symposia suggested that I reconsider institutional power (especially Bruce Lawrence, Kim Knott, and Manuel Vasquez), so did faculty members and graduate students I met during lectures or conferences in London, Turku, and Tromsø. It was during another conference session in Atlanta dedicated to the theory’s implications for scholars of the history of Christianity that Marie Marquardt (2010: 13) suggested that “the religious institutions that shape religious flows look more to me like retaining walls, levies, and dams that divert flows, and that create great pools of stagnant water.” A scholar in the audience, Michael Ostling, then added a related suggestion: that I consider “the analogy of valves or filters.” He followed up with a helpful note: Michael Ostling, 15 Nov. 2010, electronic mail to the author. I learned more in a video discussion about my theory with graduate students enrolled in a seminar taught by Michel Desjardins at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. With these helpful suggestions in hand, I then researched how dams and valves actually work, and I draw on that information in my analysis here.

implications, I am recalling an unpayable debt to a Jodo Shinshu practitioner and member of the Buddhist Churches of America, Nagatomi Masatoshi (1926–2000), a professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard. While I was researching my dissertation during the 1980s, I consulted with Professor Nagatomi, and, although I never told him this, it was a story he had recounted in 1980 that originally set me on my career path—and that has haunted me ever since. I have never mentioned this publicly before. It was Professor Nagatomi’s story to tell, and I have forgotten some of the details, so I will not dishonor him or his memories by attempting to report it in full. Let me relay only its outlines and its impact. While his parents were interned at Manzanar and he was in Japan studying during World War II, the nineteen-year-old Nagatomi was riding on a train. In the distance, suddenly he and his fellow passengers eyed a mushroom cloud on the horizon, the billowing traces of the atomic bomb. A white Christian missionary nearby, the Harvard professor recalled decades later, announced to the Japanese passengers that the bomb was God’s just condemnation of the ‘heathen.’ I was stunned by that heartbreaking story, my eyes filling with tears. That was the moment I decided to go on for a Ph.D. in religion. Even though I have no idea what Professor Nagatomi thought about my subsequent Buddhist research—or what he might have thought about my theorizing— I am grateful to have a chance to consider the ways that research has its moral sources and effects.

So what are the moral and political implications of my theoretical perspective? To put it negatively, my understanding of theory and method challenges alternatives that privilege stasis, homogeneity, and purity. To put it more positively, my kinetic and relational account values movement, manyness, and mixing.⁷ That, in turn, has implications not only for imagining scholarly obligations and personal morality but also for assessing public policy. Those who have thought about Buddhists, including about Asian Buddhist migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often have presupposed that stasis is the norm. People, they have presumed, are supposed to be stationary. But both the peopling of the Western Hemisphere, which began with migrants crossing from Asia 15,000 years ago, and the theory of religion I favor, suggest instead that movement is the norm. In turn, we need to revalue the migrant and challenge any immigration policy that obscures our shared history of crossing.

In a similar way, it seems wrong to assume that homogeneity, or uniformity, has been the norm in human history or in Buddhist life. In many times and places, leaders of villages, cities, nations, and empires have imagined the dominant tradition as the only tradition. But the more we follow the flows the more we recover the full complexity of ways of being Buddhist—as well as the many ways of being American or Brazilian, Japanese or South African. We have historical grounds and theoretical resources for challenging any nationalist public policy or intolerant institutional mandate that coerces or condemns, or does violence to those who dissent.

Sometimes those who have advocated violence—or prescribed coercive legal and religious codes—have defended their actions by celebrating the ‘purity’ of their lineage and condemning the impurity of others. But in both heritage and religion mixing has been the norm. There is no pure spiritual origin, in my theory, and there’s no pure race. There’s only ceaseless contact and exchange. Creolization in language, culture, and religion is the *usual*

⁷ I borrow the word “manyness” from Catherine L. Albanese, who has used it as a synonym for diversity. I use it here for obvious reasons—to preserve the alliteration.

way of things. Any personal stance or public policy that rests on an imagined ‘purity’ is both morally dangerous and historically unfounded. Because all things are interdependent and in flux, my Buddhist-inflected theory and method suggests, we should value movement, manyness, and mixing.

And if you are not ready to celebrate ‘translocative analysis’ and adopt my theoretical framework and its guiding categories, I hope we still can agree that all of us who study Buddhism after the heightened attention to asymmetrical power relations and circulating transregional flows cannot find a stable place on shore, a vantage beyond the flows we study. We can only aim to be as self-conscious as possible, scrutinizing our framework’s methodological guidelines and moral implications. So recognizing the transfluence of fact and value and the mutual intercausality of all things—including our own scholarship—perhaps we should just lay back, point our toes, look skyward, and let the swirl of the cultural currents we study toss us this way and that. Let the fullness of the Buddhist tradition, in all its meanderings, wash over us, as we examine methodological assumptions and moral commitments, as we follow the flows that carry all of us along.

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