

“Big Tent” Buddhism: Searching for Common Ground Among Western and Asian “Buddhisms”

*Dr. William Yaryan
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*

Make me one with everything:

When the Dalai Lama was traveling earlier this year in Australia and doing interviews, a television news announcer tried to tell him a joke.

“The Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop and says, ‘Can you make me one with everything?’ ‘The Buddhist leader, who is known for his sense of humor, looks mystified. ‘You know what I mean?’ - the newsman asks. Then he gestures: ‘Can you make me one’ -- folding his hands in a *wai* -- ‘with everything?’ -- waving his hands in a circle. Clearly not understanding the joke, the Dalai Lama kindly replies, ‘Everything is possible.’ The distraught television announcer holds his head in his hands, and says, ‘I knew that wouldn’t work!’”¹

This hoary old joke has made the rounds for some years. In the original, the Dalai Lama tells a hot dog vendor: “Make me one with everything.” Its humor depends on the common Western misconception that all Eastern spirituality is a search for mystical union, or “oneness,” with the universe. Most Buddhist teaching, however, does not advocate an expansion of self, but rather the reverse. The difference between the Dalai Lama’s Vajrayana form of Buddhism - one of the Big Three - and the vaguely Buddhist-themed spirituality of New Age enthusiasts in America is vast, indeed.

This paper is written for a panel on “Unifying Buddhist Philosophical Views.” But the more I look around, the less unified I find Buddhism to be. Aside from the identity of the founder and the Pali scriptures which most Buddhists take to be authoritative, there are enormous differences: between Asian and Western Buddhists, American convert and immigrant Buddhists, traditionalists and modernists, nationalists and universalists, monks and laity, secularists and religionists, even old hippies and young punks. Many claim to follow the “original” and “pure” teachings of the Buddha, while teachers in the West argue that Buddhism is a psychology or philosophy rather than a religion. Even among the accepted “schools” of Buddhism - Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana - there are often radical differences in ritual, texts, style and custom.

I intend to examine distinctions and similarities between various Western and Asian “Buddhisms” by comparing and contrasting several apparent extremes: the popular piety of devotional Buddhism in Thailand where making merit to achieve a better rebirth is considered by the lay faithful to be more important than the quest for enlightenment, and Stephen Batchelor’s secular or atheist Buddhism which contrasts starkly with the traditional Buddhism of B. Alan Wallace in their recent debate. I hope to show that the encounter of the teachings of the Buddha with other cultures has always produced hybrid Buddhisms that differ in significant ways from their roots. Today the challenge of “modernism” has produced remarkable adaptations of the teaching in both Asia and the West, of which participants are often unaware. I will conclude by proposing a harmonization of the hybrids as a way to unify global Buddhism based on the ideas of “family resemblance,” conversation and the dialogue of polyphony.

¹ Hoffer, Steven, “Karl Stefanovic’s Dalai Lama Joke,” *The Huffington Post*, June 14, 2011; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/14/karl-stefanovic-dalai-lam_n_876596.html.

Encountering Thai Buddhism: “Is that Buddha or Ganesha in the spirit shrine?”

The religious culture of Thailand is strange and bewildering to a visitor. Thais bow in respect (even while they are driving) to monks, spirit houses, temples, fertility shrines, ribbon-wrapped trees, and even collections of toy zebras along the highway (I’ve yet to figure out why?). They wear string tied around wrists that has been blessed by monks or relatives wishing them to be safe. Similar string is looped around houses and even buildings like my condo, presumably as a form of protection, and often the string will have been connected to a monk preaching on the teachings of the Buddha (*buddhasasana*) while holding a leaf-shaped screen in front of his face. Lovers lay flowers on the altar of a Hindu deity at a shrine in front of Central World, one of Bangkok’s biggest malls, to petition or thank the god for favors granted. Devotees construct pagodas outside temples from river mud to celebrate Songkran, the secular water-throwing festival. Thais have told me only monks can achieve enlightenment and certainly not women (who are prevented by Thai clerical rules from becoming nuns). The faithful wear large amulets around their necks (sometimes huge collections of them) that are bought and sold like rare stamps at a market opposite one of the city’s oldest monasteries. Few Thais meditate but most donate food, flowers, incense, candles and money to monks and at temples to make merit (*tamboon*) in hopes of a fortunate rebirth as well as a way to help others.

What’s a trained monotheist to do? I’m well read (comparatively speaking) in the different world religions and am sufficiently versed in the wisdom of D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hahn (not to mention Theosophy and numerous other New Age schools). I’ve studied Hindu philosophy, been to India, and even once lectured at UC Santa Cruz on the *Bhagavad Gita*. A little book by Baba Ram Dass (formerly Harvard psychology professor Richard Alpert) taught me how to meditate, and I’ve gone on retreats with Jack Kornfield and Pema Chodron, among others. Surely I should be capable of understanding Buddhism in Thailand. Thus began my education in the lived tradition of faith, and my current attempt to write an academic paper for this conference at the university where I teach English to monks.

It may be impossible for a Westerner, growing up in countries where Church and State have long been rigorously separated, to understand a culture with no clear division between the sacred and the secular. Japan, Siam and other Asian polities did not have words for “religion” until the Christian missionaries arrived, and in Japan the word used was “Christian” until other neologisms were devised.² Modernization in the West was accompanied by a disenchantment whereby magic, superstition and the irrational were displaced by a whole raft of new ‘-isms’ that fragmented dominant worldviews. It has been assumed that the final victory of modernity would mean the end of religion, and certainly, now that the globe has been unified electronically and digitally, that should be the case; but religion today, in all of its local and universal forms, seems stronger than ever. Postmodernist thinkers are trying to explain this anomaly.

However, the objectives of academic analysis and the diffusion of cognitive dissonance in the psyche of the research are often in conflict. Attending dhamma talks and meditation retreats didn’t help me. I began to think that meditation was the pastime of the idle well off and did not give me access to the Thai religious world view. Each night my wife bows three times to the Triple Gem and says her prayers. “What do you pray for,” I asked. “That everyone be happy,” she said. We keep a collection of icons on top of the bookshelf, which contains numerous popular dhamma books in Thai, and refresh

² Josephson, Jason Ananda, “When Buddhism Became a Religion,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 33:1, 2006.

them every *Wan Phra* (monk's day) with flowers, water, and red soda. The other morning we rose early and went to find a monk at the market where she bought two bags of congee and offered it to him for *tamboon*. "Now I feel happy," she said afterwards. When my friend Holly died, at the cremation ceremony I was more curious than reverent about the Buddhist ritual, and I suspect the other expats had similar feelings. I don't know what the Thais felt, those who are confident about rebirth, but then, as now, I felt like an outsider.

Popular Buddhism in Thailand is something entirely different from that found in the United States. It's more cultural, incorporating magic and superstition, like the all-encompassing religiosity I encountered in India where temples are filled with people of all ages and classes, joyfully participating in what to me were arcane rituals. It's more devotional and less intellectual than in the west where one has the "freedom" to choose a new religion or spiritual practice like a lifestyle; and Thai Buddhism is a fulltime affair rather than a Sabbath interlude. This 24/7 aspect of faith may be the defining difference.

Big Tent

Buddhism has been described as a "big tent religion."³ Buddhist scholar and author Franz Metcalf calls his web site "The Dharma is a Big Tent, Welcome to My Tiny Tear in It."⁴ Blogger David Chapman, who practices in the Vajrayana tradition, writes critically of what he calls "consensus western Buddhism" which is "supposed to be inclusive. It is a big tent, in which we can be one happy family, respecting each others' differences, yet celebrating the shared essential core of Buddhism, its fundamental unity."⁵ But what is that core? Aye, there's the rub!⁶

In Western politics, a "big tent" party is one that includes a broad range of views and ideologies among its members. In a two-party system like America's, it's important to broaden the base of the party to be as inclusive as possible to appeal to a large percentage of voters in an election. In 1975, Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neil told a reporter, "The Democratic Party is a big tent. We are widely diversified." And in 1989, a leading Republican gave a much-quoted statement that helped to popularize the term: "Our party is a big tent. We can house many views on many issues."⁷ But these days, humorist Jon Stewart told his TV show audience, "Republicans take a slightly different approach. They have a big tent – you're just not allowed in it."⁸ Some say the tent of the Republican Party, dominated by the conservative Tea Party movement, is a "pup tent" rather than a "big tent."

Underneath the big tent of Buddhism, both the Dalai Lama's ancient Tibetan form of Buddhism, fast becoming the most popular in the west, and the vague Buddhist-themed spirituality of becoming "one with everything," hopefully, can coexist. Different understandings of the Buddha's teachings are possible because there is little heresy in the world religion of Buddhism. Its doctrines emphasize orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, promoting correct conduct and practice rather than right beliefs. But to define Buddhism in this way is to accept terms and categories devised by Christian theologians to determine orthodoxy and heresies that were punished in the Middle Ages by burning at

³DemocraticUnderground.com, http://www.democraticunderground.com/discuss/duboard.php?az=show_mesg&forum=389&topic_id=1956382&mesg_id=1956541.

⁴The Dharma is a Big Tent, Welcome to my Tiny Tear in It, http://mind2mind.net/mind2mind_home.html.

⁵David Chapman@Wordpress, "Inclusion, Exclusion, Unity and Diversity," June 19, 2011, <http://meaningness.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/inclusion-exclusion-unity-and-diversity/>.

⁶From Shakespeare's Hamlet soliloquy.

⁷<http://www.thisdayinquotes.com/2009/11/lee-atwater-republicans-have-big-tent.html>.

⁸<http://www.quotecounterquote.com/2009/11/do-republicans-still-have-big-tent.html>.

the stake. Both the labels “Buddhism” and “religion” were created to draw a distinction between Christians and heathens, although Asians quickly learned to appropriate the terms in order to defend themselves against their cultured despisers.

Invention of “Religion” and “Buddhism”

Numerous scholars of “religion” have criticized the terms commonly used. “While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion,” writes religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith, “there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.”⁹ Timothy Fitzgerald studied philosophical theology but decided that social anthropology was a more useful field for researching the conversion movement of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in India. Fitzgerald wants “to reconceptualize what is now called religious studies as the study of institutionalized values, and the relation between values and the legitimation of power in a specific society.”¹⁰ The discovery of Buddhism “was therefore from the beginning, in a somewhat literal and nontribal sense, a textual construction,” according to Tomoko Masuzawa, whose book is intriguingly titled *The Invention Of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved In The Language Of Pluralism*. “It was a project that put a premium on the supposed thoughts and deeds of the reputed founder and on a certain body of writing that was perceived to authorize, and in turn was authorized by, the founder figure.”¹¹

Even the term “Theravada Buddhism,” used to distinguish Buddhists of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka (the former Ceylon) from their northern cousins, is disparaged by Pali scholar Peter Skilling who suggests that it “came to be distinguished as a kind of Buddhism or as a ‘religion’ - remembering that ‘Buddhism’ is a modern term and that ‘religion’ is a vexed concept - only in the late colonial and early globalized periods, that is, in the twentieth century.”¹² Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, in his comprehensive and insightful study of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, says the label is “a Western, or, at least, a modern construction,” and that most adherents are unaware of it outside departments of Buddhist Studies. Western scholars believed it was closest to the early or primitive Buddhism taught by the Buddha himself. But “there is no ‘pure’ or ‘primitive’ aspect of any of the religions, and certainly no ‘ism’ existed,” Prapod argues.¹³

The old labels and methods of classification don’t work very well in Asia. I’m now convinced that “religion,” “Buddhism,” “Theravada Buddhism,” and even “Hinduism” are terms invented in the 19th and early 20th century by mostly Western scholars (with some eager assistance from Asians struggling to resist missionaries and colonial power) who constructed doctrinaire world views based on the recently translated Pali and Sanskrit texts. The living traditions in Southeast Asia practiced by Asians were ignored or denigrated until they were reinvented and repackaged to conform to modern Western sensibilities and exported to America and Europe with great success. Meanwhile, the unexpurgated local traditions continue, and, if recent reports are true, are flourishing and proliferating despite state (and intellectual) attempts at centralization and control. The

⁹ Smith, Jonathan Z., *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, Tim, “Religious Studies as Cultural Studies: A Philosophical and Anthropological Critique of the Concept of Religion, *Diskus* Vol. 3 No. 1, 1995; <http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus1-6/FITZGERD.TXT>.

¹¹ Masazawa, Tomoko, *The Invention Of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved In The Language Of Pluralism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 126

¹² Skilling, Peter, “Theravada in History,” in *Pacific World: journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, Fall 2009, p. 62.

¹³ Assavavirulhakarn, Prapod, *The Ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2010, p. 177, 188.

shopworn labels of “religion” and “Buddhism” make it difficult to see the inextricable hybridity of culture and values because we want to identify the separate strands believed to be part of a syncretistic amalgam (“this is Buddhism, this is animism, this is Brahmanism”).

Perhaps “Buddhism” is simply a reification of disparate practices and it would be better to speak of “buddhisms” in the lower-case plural, just as some Christian theologians use the term “christianities” to emphasize the proliferation of sects after the death of Jesus and before church councils canonized scripture. I accept the social constructionist argument that both “Buddhism” and “religion” were categories created in the 19th century by scholars to distinguish Christianity from the other two ethnic monotheism and from the heathenism, paganism and idolatry missionaries and colonizers were discovering outside Europe and North America.

So does that clear the decks? If you follow the argument so far, there is no such thing as “religion” in the singular, or even a monolithic “Buddhism,” and the label “Theravada Buddhism” applied to the what was called disparagingly “Hinayana” (lesser vehicle) by the Mahayanists is equally a misnomer of little use in speaking of the living traditions practiced by millions of Asian Buddhists, from Ceylon to Korea. Other than stories about the founder, written down hundreds of years after his death, we have Pali and Sanskrit texts translated by European philologists in the 19th century. These were then used to construct an “original” Buddhism and to ridicule actually existing Buddhists encountered by Christian missionaries as corrupt and superstitious. The fundamental difference for buddhisms, then, is between the 19th century Western enthusiasts for Buddhism, from Schopenhauer to Thoreau, and the masses worshipping Buddha images in temples throughout Asia for a thousand years.

Buddhism Moves Out of India

In his standard social history of Theravada Buddhism in English, Richard Gombrich calls it a denomination rather than a sect. The term means “Doctrine of the Elders” and “thus claims conservatism.” A Theravadin reached Ceylon from India “in or very near 250 BCE,” Gombrich explained. “In the eleventh century it went from Ceylon to Myanmar; over the next two centuries it diffused into the areas which are now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.”¹⁴ Gombrich says the Theravada form of Buddhism did not come to Thailand until the 13th century.¹⁵ According to tradition, writes P.A. Payutto,

Buddhism was introduced into Thailand more than two thousand years ago, when this territory was known as Suvarnabhumi and was still inhabited by the Mons and Lawas. At that time, one of the nine missions sent by King Asoka of India to spread Buddhism in different countries, came to Suvarnabhumi. This mission was headed by two Arahants named Sona and Uttara and they succeeded in converting the ruler and people of the Thai kingdom to Buddhism.¹⁶

Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, in *The Ascendancy of Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (2010), disagrees with Gombrich and Payutto. He believes there were multiple introductions of numerous schools of Buddhism, and that “by the first or at least the second century CE, Buddhism was already known in Southeast Asia,¹⁷ It was brought

¹⁴ Gombrich, Richard, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁶ Payutto, P.A. (Phra Brahmagnuabhorn, *Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World*, Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya Buddhist University, 2005.

¹⁷ Assavavirulhakarn, op cit, p. 68.

by merchants, monks and pilgrims “as part of an overall process of Indianization.”¹⁸ It arrived hand-in-hand with what is now called “Hinduism,” and they remain paired, even until today. “Religious diversity was the rule in every part of Southeast Asia,” Prapod writes, “and wherever Buddhism was present, Hinduism was there also,”¹⁹ in harmony or in synthesis rather than discord. It merged with indigenous beliefs and spirit cults already present, which “appear to have existed alongside Indian religions rather than being replaced by them.”²⁰ Religious culture, he argues, “was polythetic from the beginning. The idea that one professes to belong to a single religion is foreign to the Southeast Asia mind which sees no need to synthesize multiple beliefs into one exclusive belief.”²¹

The fabled Asoka mission in 250 BCE to bring Buddhism to Ceylon and Southeast Asia is an unproven myth, Prapod believes, and the form of Buddhism called Theravada was established by kings in Burma (Myanmar) and Siam (Thailand) only in the 11th century for political and economic reasons. It never fully replaced indigenous and Indian ritual and cultural traditions. “Southeast Asian Buddhism embraces a number of cults and practices: relics, images, votive tablets, amulets, recitations, mantras, and Maitreya, the future Buddha. All of these existed before the eleventh century.”²² The attitude was, “the more the better,” and Prapod thinks that if Christianity “had not been so insistent on one God and one faith, it too, might have been accepted more readily into Southeast Asian religious life.”²³

Given this natural hybridity of religious values and practices, the question for historians to ask is, how did a slice of the whole come to be reified as something separate and given a name? What may seem obvious today - “religion” and “Buddhism” - has a history. It was not always thus.

The many Asian buddhisms, hinduisms and animisms existed in happy ignorance of their separateness until the onset of what historians call “Modernity” occurred, primarily in Western Europe. This is the period inaugurated by European voyages of discovery, followed by the scientific revolution that stimulated radical changes in political and economic structures. Beginning approximately in 1500, it’s signposted by the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, industrialization and the rise of the nation state. The negative effects of the corresponding worldview of “modernism,” caused by the dissolution of traditional ways of life and values, included anxiety, displacement and disenchantment. Karl Marx described the changes this way: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”²⁴

The other dark side of modernism was the attention paid to the rest of the world. Christian missionaries from America and Europe set out to convert the heathens, pagans and idolaters, and European states and monarchies followed up their “discovery” of native peoples by conquering and colonizing their lands. This had important ramifications for the buddhisms I have been describing.

A Tale of Three Modernisms

For the first 2,000 years of its history, teachings and practices centering on the figure of the Buddha spread out of India south to Ceylon, east to the mythical land of

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 162-3.

²⁴ Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, Chap. 1.

Suvarnabhumi, and north to Tibet, China, Japan and Korea. There was little contact and interchange between the different sects and schools that intermingled with local cultures to create different hybrids. European visitors lumped all their observations into the category of “heathen” and compared it unfavorably with the three monotheistic “world” religions. But in the 19th century, philologists working as colonial administrators in Indian and Nepal discovered and translated sacred texts of the Far East. This hodgepodge was cobbled together by Western translators and academics into a “world religion” called “Buddhism,” a self-serving gesture that may be termed intellectual colonialism. At first the texts were seen as evidence of “pure” Buddhism while living practices were viewed as corruptions of the original religion. Few spoke for the actual followers of the Buddha who inhabited a meaningful cosmos rather than possessed membership in a hypothetical religion. Then two Theosophists from the U.S. went to Ceylon, became Buddhists and reconstructed the religion, making it more “protestant” and anti-colonial in the process. There is now a large corpus of literature on “Buddhist modernism,” which, with the connivance of Asian teachers, made Buddhism more rational and scientific, countering an earlier European opinion that it fostered nihilism. Homegrown modernists (and King Mongkut in Thailand did his part) tried to purge Buddhism of superstitious accretions and promoted an intellectual understanding of the dhamma over a devotional one.

Once 19th century European philologists had rescued Pali and Sanskrit texts from the dustbin of history and constructed what they considered was an “original Buddhism” based on a founder and an ancient scripture, the Christian missionaries and foreign colonizers in Asia were faced with determining the status of actual existing heathens and idolaters who mixed and matched their worship of Hindu deities with icons of the Buddha and local gods in their seemingly bizarre rituals. Their practices were labeled as “superstitions” and “corrupt.” However, since legitimate nation states were deemed to possess modern characteristics, which included a recognized world religion, both anti-colonial nationalists and monarchs sought to update their religion in a process that scholars are calling “Buddhist modernism.”

For the purposes of this study, I want to examine the modernization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and, finally, in America. In each case, modernizers reinterpreted the Buddha’s teaching to appeal to a new audience while calling their reconstructions the “true” and “pure” Buddhism to affirm its authenticity. But there were also ulterior motives. In Ceylon (Sri Lanka), under the thumb of British rule, Christianity’s privileged status was contested by local nationalists and a couple of Theosophists from America on a mission to uncover Eastern mystical wisdom. In Thailand, a monk who became king reformed the local religion partly to prevent colonizing attempts by the British and French. In America, the case was slightly different. Christianity was in crisis after two world wars and had failed to deliver the goods in the new capitalist culture of consumption. Missionaries from several Buddhist nations brought to dissatisfied Americans a modernized faith that fitted their needs, one that was rational and shorn of unfamiliar rituals.

The literature on Buddhist modernism and its history is voluminous and growing daily. “Modern Buddhism” was coined as a category in the 1970s by Heinz Bechert.²⁵ An overall view is provided by David S. Lopez in the introduction to his *A Modern Buddhist Bible* (2002).²⁶ A comprehensive summary is given by David L. McMahan in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008).²⁷ Lopez followed his compendium of modernist texts

²⁵ Schedneck, Brooke, “Modern Buddhism and Reinterpretation,” *Wandering Dhamma*, May 1, 2011; <http://www.wanderingdhamma.org/2010/08/26/modern-buddhism-and-reinterpretation-2/>.

²⁶ Lopez, Donald S., *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, New York: Beacon Press, 2002.

²⁷ McMahan, David L., *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, London: Oxford University Press, 2008.

with *Buddhism and Science: a Guide for the Perplexed* (2008) that examines one of the basic tenets of Buddhist modernism that Buddhism is superior to other religions because it is scientific due to the early advice of the Buddha to test and verify every claim about reality.²⁸ A number of writers have studied the reforms of Thailand's King Mongkut (Rama IV)²⁹ and similar efforts at further modernization of Buddhism by reforming that reform on the part of the monk Buddhadasa Bhikku.³⁰ The subject of American, and by extension Western, Buddhism has been well-dissected by numerous scholars. One has even suggested calling it "Ameriyana" to indicate that it has all the characteristics of a new sect like the other "yanas."³¹

The key point to remember about Buddhist modernism is that it is a new reinterpretation based on a selection of the myriads of texts discovered and translated by Europeans, usually with the connivance of Asians who used this new construction to make claims for social and political as well as religious purposes; it was a co-creation of East and West and not just another "Orientalism" intended to praise the "mysterious East." And it resulted in separating "Buddhism" from the hybrid cultural values and practices the people of Asian had engaged in for over a millennium. The actual lived religion of Asians in all its national and ethnic forms is more ritualistic and superstitious compared to the reasonable and intellectual understanding of Buddhism that often serves the interests of elites more than common people.

The characteristics of Buddhist modernism are broad and variable for the three I intend to discuss. Because of its beginnings, a focus on a written text and a purported founder who wrote or inspired them is essential (similar to the stories about Jesus). Tradition, ritual and myth are dethroned, a characteristic it shares with Protestantism that gave many of its creators a model. Along with ritual, clericalism is deemphasized. Because the Buddha supposedly rejected the Brahmin priesthood along with the caste system, anti-Catholic Westerners saw him as an ally and he was hailed as "the Luther of Asia." Modernists stressed the importance of individual experience, which eliminated the need for a mediator with the divine, although many devotees were later to accept the necessity of a "guru" and the value of a teaching lineage which led back to the Buddha. Other characteristics that influenced Buddhism modernism included romanticism, centralization (and also decentralization) of authority, affirmation of the ordinary, environmental concern, social engagement, scientific naturalism, and a focus on techniques of meditation to the exclusion of all other rituals and practices, an imbalance especially predominant in western Buddhism. McMahan writes that it is an "actual new form of Buddhism" that is:

...the result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, image-making, revitalization, and reform that has been taking place not only in

²⁸ Lopez, Donald S., *Buddhism & Science: A Guide for the Perplexed (Buddhism and Modernity)*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

²⁹ Schedneck, Brooke, "Sovereign Yet Subordinate: The Use of Buddhist Discourse During the Reigns of King Rama IV, V, and VI in Siam (1851-1925)," *Explorations: a graduate student journal of southeast asian studies*, Vol. 10, Spring 2010, pps. 23-31; Somboon Sooksamran, "Buddhism, Politics, and Scandals: A Study of the Changing Functions of the Sangha Act," Singapore: NUS History Society e-Journal, 2006; David Chapman, "The King of Siam invents Western Buddhism," July 5, 2011, <http://meaningness.wordpress.com/2011/07/05/the-king-of-siam-invents-western-buddhism/>.

³⁰ Jackson, Peter A., *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, (1987) 2003.

³¹ McDonald, T.J., "Ameriyana: The Western Vehicle of the Buddha Dharma," *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2010, <http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol2/iss1/3/>; see also: Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "The Challenge of the Future: How Will the Sangha Fare in North American Buddhism?," Sept. 8, 2008, http://www.abhayagiri.org/main/article/the_challenge_of_the_future/; Jan Nattier, "American Buddhists: who are they?," *Current*, No 395, Sept. 1997, <http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha175.htm>.

the West but also in Asian countries for over a century. This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and western enthusiasts deeply engaged in creating Buddhist responses to the dominant problems and questions of modernity, such as epistemic uncertainty, religious pluralism, the threat of nihilism, conflicts between science and religion, war, and environmental destruction.³²

Lopez adds that what was different about Buddhist modernism “was the conviction that centuries of cultural and clerical ossification could be stripped from the teachings of the Buddha to reveal a Buddhism that was neither Theravada or Mahayana, neither monastic or lay, neither Sinhalese, Japanese, Chinese or Thai.”³³ He adds that it is “perhaps best to consider modern Buddhism not as a universal religion beyond sectarian borders, but as itself a Buddhist sect.”³⁴

The occult sect of Theosophy was founded in New York City in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky, Col. Henry Steel Olcott and others as a movement to discover and reveal ancient wisdom in the mysterious East. Their claims, recognizable today as New Age true verities, involved communication with “Mahatmas” (great souls) who lived in Tibet. In their travels in India and Ceylon they, perhaps unwittingly, inspired nationalist movements in both countries. One of their protégés was the Indian guru Krishnamurti who later rejected their support and achieved spiritual renown on his own. In Colombo, where Buddhism, under the thumb of its British Christian rulers, was dying out (as it had previously in India), Blavatsky and Olcott took Refuge Vows and became perhaps the first Western converts to Buddhism. Olcott declared his mission to be the restoration of “true” Buddhism in that country. He wrote *The Buddhist Catechism* which is still in use, and helped to design a Buddhist flag. A native disciple of Olcott’s took the name Anagarika Dharmapala. He helped to found the Maha Bodhi Society which continues today and attended the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 to much acclaim. Olcott, whose memorial statue I have seen in Colombo, said he was not a “debased modern” Buddhist, like the Sinhalese who were ignorant of their own religion. He identified his Buddhism with that of the Buddha himself. “Our Buddhism,” he declared, “was, in a word, a philosophy, not a creed.”³⁵ During a public address given in New York, Dharmapala declared:

The message of the Buddha that I bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilized Aryans of India twenty-five centuries ago a scientific religion containing the highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmology which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and reality.³⁶

In short, a Buddhism very unlike that practiced by millions of ignorant Buddhists throughout Asia, but one very congenial to western tastes.

King Mongkut of [Thailand] (Rama IV), “more than any other single person, invented Western Buddhism,” declares Buddhist (Tibetan) blogger David Chapman.³⁷ Before the Theosophists ever set foot in Asia, King Mongkut, grandson of Rama I,

³² McMahan, op cit, p. 5.

³³ Lopez, “Buddhist Bible,” op cit, p. xxxvi.

³⁴ Ibid., p. xxxix.

³⁵ Ibid., p. xiii.

³⁶ McMahan, op cit, p. 96.

³⁷ Chapman, “The King of Siam....” op cit.

founder of the current Chakri dynasty, had been a monk for 27 years. He formed a new monastic order, Thammayut, to purge what he saw as superstitious and magical elements from the state religion. He also dictated a strict ascetic practice for his monks and emphasized a literal interpretation of scripture. Taking scripture rather than oral tradition as authoritative was a new idea, according to Chapman, that some attribute to his friendship with Protestant missionaries. He also believed Buddhism should be rational and scientific (the latter an interest that killed him when he contracted malaria while on an expedition to observe a solar eclipse he had accurately predicted). Siam's independence was threatened by the British in Burma and the French in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. King Mongkut, and his son, King Chulalongkorn, undertook reforms to show the foreign powers that their country was a modern one that should not be colonized. Rama V centralized both political and religious authority in Bangkok (which has been termed an act of "internal colonization") and put monks under control with the Sangha Act of 1902 which is still largely in place. Along with his successor, Rama VI, these three modernizing kings of Siam, as Brooke Schedneck has shown, used Buddhism to centralize and create a national culture and political identity. In the process,

The Siamese have modified the Buddhist tradition to highlight to Westerners its modern elements. Thus Buddhism was used to help Siam remain sovereign and maintain its own modernity but at the same time to be compatible with the Western model.

Modern Buddhism, she writes, "is clearly a variable and complex tradition that can be molded to suit one's interests for desired results."³⁸

A century later, King Mongkut's reforms were continued by Buddhadasa Bhikku, albeit in a different direction. As Peter A. Jackson points out in his book *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*, his reforms closely parallel aspects of King Mongkut's reforms, which included a rejection of traditional cosmogony and cosmology and an attempt in western terms to demythologize the world. "Buddhist intellectual culture in Thailand until the twentieth century," Jackson writes, "can only be described as conservative and stagnant."³⁹ Under the sway of European-influenced forms of Buddhism, Buddhadasa and others rejected folk religion and "assumed the very principles of rationality, logical consistency, and scientific methodology which were previously used to denigrate Buddhism ...[in order] to prove the scientific character of the religion."⁴⁰ This same reformed Buddhism, says Jackson, "was ironically held up as symbolizing 'Thai-ness' and Thai independence from the west."⁴¹ Buddhadasa, who died in 1933, is much admired today by educated Thai Buddhists who share his iconoclasm and preference for meditation. He rejected large sections of the *Abhidhamma* text and Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* commentaries as well as a concern for kamma and rebirth, views according to one scholar that most Thais would find "shocking."⁴² He also claimed monks had no privileged access to *nibbana* which is equally possible for lay people. Buddhadasa hoped to purge popular religious practice of magic and superstition and rejected the popular view of "merit as a metaphysical quantity which can be accumulated" (he reinterpreted it as an selfless act for the benefit of others).⁴³ According to Jackson:

³⁸ Schedneck, "Sovereign Yet subordinate," op cit, p. 28.

³⁹ Jackson, op cit, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 43.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴² Jackson quoting anthropologist Niels Mulder, p. 107.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 224.

Buddhadasa claims that the source of the obfuscation of the Buddha's universally relevant message of salvation lies in the influence of Brahmanical and animist beliefs, which have become associated with institutional Buddhism and which have distorted the original pristine character of the religion.⁴⁴

A universalist who would be more highly regarded were his works translated and distributed widely in the west, Buddhadasa believed that all religions were different fingers pointing at the same moon (to borrow a metaphor). In a small book titled *No Religion*, he wrote that,

Those who have penetrated to the essential nature of religion will regard all religions as being the same. Although they may say there is Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, Islam, or whatever, they will also say that all religions are inwardly the same. However, those who have penetrated to the highest understanding of Dhamma will feel that the thing called "religion" doesn't exist at all.⁴⁵

This is a very heart-warming message to Buddhist modernists everywhere, and it certainly affirms that a "big tent" is possible, not only for Buddhists but for people of all faiths. But it's a message very much at odds with those who remain unaware of alternate Buddhist realities as well as the fundamentalist believers who hold to one "true" Buddhism over all others.

A wide selection of Buddhists from different Asian countries, including Dharmapala from Ceylon, were invited to Chicago in 1893 to attend the World Parliament of Religions. Their teachings had been already modified significantly by modernist ideas that made them acceptable to American sensibilities. The Transcendentalists in New England, notably Emerson and Thoreau, read Edwin Arnold's "The Light of Asia," a romanticized version of the Buddha's life, with much interest.⁴⁶ Another participant at the Chicago meeting was D.T. Suzuki who assisted Zen monk Soen Shaku and later would work with the publisher and early Buddhist promoter Paul Carus. Suzuki had an enormous influence on the spread of Zen in America in the 1950s through his writings and association with thinkers such as Christian monk Thomas Merton, Anglican priest Alan Watts, and the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. After World War Two, many Americans returned to Japan to study and some became monks, including poet Gary Snyder who helped popularize Buddhism with fellow members of the Beats, like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Poet Ginsberg was a co-founder of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa with Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, and influenced the next generation of rebels, the hippies of the 1960's, with his brand of zany Buddhism.

Western travelers to Asia in the 1970's studied with Buddhist teachers and returned to America and Europe with a Buddhism often stripped of ritual and cultural specifics that was eagerly embraced by many seeking an alternative to Christianity. This new "product for spiritual consumption" was very successful: meditation centers were established, priests, monks and rimpoches were imported from Asia to train students and local teachers, and Buddhism was established in universities as a field of academic study. The distinction between the big three major traditions was often blurred. This

⁴⁴ Ibid., p 75.

⁴⁵ Buddhadasa Bhikku, *No Religion*, reprint, 2005, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Tweed, Thomas A., *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912: Victorian Culture & the Limits of Dissent*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992, Chap. 2.

transplanted Buddhism was hailed less as a religion than as a philosophy, a system of ethics and a psychology. Over the last forty years, Buddhist teaching and practice has been modernized and reinterpreted to fit Western interests and sensibilities in ways that differed, sometimes radically, from the traditional Buddhism of immigrant communities in the West and from the Asian examples that first inspired Western visitors.

The many buddhisms available in my hometown of Santa Cruz, California, is typical of the smorgasbord of offerings throughout the United States. There are three Tibetan monasteries, one from Myanmar, a Zen center and two vipassana groups. Socially engaged Buddhists promote peace and justice events and participate with Christians in communal meditation. But there is little connection with the Buddhist “church” in the nearby farming town of Watsonville whose members are descendents of Asian immigrants. In America, convert and immigrant Buddhists do not congregate easily under a big tent.⁴⁷

While today Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Thailand is limited to the modernized Theravada denomination based on Pali scriptures with a hierarchical Sangha and a strict separation of monks and laity, buddhisms in America and the West proliferate outside of the big three with their focus on meditation and a minimum of ritual. The “Sangha” is taken to mean followers as a whole rather than the monastic establishment that is notable by its absence. The internet and podcasts spread varied interpretations of the dharma to sympathizers, believers, practitioners and devotees of all stripes. Among them are Buddhist punks, hardcore Buddhists, as well as secular and pragmatic Buddhists. Since there is no Buddhist Vatican, almost anything goes. However, when the British monk Ajahn Brahm ordained four bhikkunis (nuns) at his temple in Australia last year, all hell broke loose. Trained in the Theravadan forest tradition, which does not allow the ordination of nuns, Phra Brahm broke a rule and his monastery was disestablished by the forest Sangha in Thailand. Other Western monks in the forest lineage, notably Ajahn Sumedho, did not support him. The ideas of former Tibetan and Zen Buddhist monk Stephen Batchelor, author of the controversial *Buddhism Without Beliefs*,⁴⁸ have been especially contentious. The antipathy of traditional (although modernized) Buddhists toward secular Buddhists could be seen in the critical response Batchelor’s views received from B. Alan Wallace.

The Great Buddhist Debate: Icons and Iconoclasts

They could be spiritual twins. Both went to Dharamsala, India, in the early 1970s to study at the Tibetan Works & Archives, after it was established by the Dalai Lama, and both ordained as monks. B. Alan Wallace from Pasadena, the son of a professor at a Baptist seminary, was three years older than Stephen Batchelor who was born in Scotland and raised by a single mother in a London suburb. Both were sent by the Dalai Lama to Switzerland to study with Geshé Rabten, first at the Tibet Institute Rikon, then located at Le Mont-Pèlerin, and later at the Swiss hamlet of Schwendi where they helped the contemplative Tibetan monk establish Tharpa Choeling (now Rabten Choeling). Joining them there was Stephen Schettini, who two years ago published a memoir, *The Novice*, with the subtitle “Why I Became a Buddhist Monk, Why I Quit, and What I Learned.”

Wallace and Batchelor have become proponents of two seemingly diametrically opposed views of Buddhism. Wallace represents the traditionalists, and Batchelor the secularists, and their views were aired in a sometimes contentious exchange during the

⁴⁷ Hickey, Wakoh Shannon, “Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11 (2010).

⁴⁸ Batchelor, Stephen, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.

last year in the pages of *Mandala*, a quarterly published by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) established by followers of Lama Thubten Yeshe. Wallace began with “Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist,”⁴⁹ and Batchelor responded with “An Open Letter to B. Alan Wallace.”⁵⁰ Stephen Schettinni weighed in with his own reminiscences of the two one-time friends with “An Old Story of Faith and Doubt.”⁵¹ Buddhist blogger Ted Meissner has also made extensive comments on his Secular Buddhist blog.⁵² This is no tempest in a teapot, but a serious discussion of fundamental differences between two prominent Western Buddhists that raises question about whether all “buddhisms” can fit under the same big tent.

Wallace is not subtle, and comes out with both guns blazing. Calling Batchelor’s opinions in numerous books “ridiculous,” “groundless speculation” and even “illegitimate,” he writes that his old colleague was “recreating Buddhism to conform to his current views” despite the “consensus by professional scholars and contemplatives throughout history,” and ignoring the “most compelling evidence of what the Buddha taught.” Wallace takes aim at Batchelor’s ideas presented in *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (1997) and most recently in *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2010)⁵³, which show, Wallace argues, his “strong antipathy toward religion and religious institutions” and his “blind acceptance of materialist assumptions about consciousness.” Wallace then pulls out his Weapons of Mass Destruction and links this “scientific materialism” with “the unspeakable tragedy of communist regimes’ attempts to annihilate Buddhism from the face of the earth.” (Granted, he piggybacks this on a critique of atheist Sam Harris who advocated the practice of Buddhism while making similar allegations against religion in general⁵⁴).

The real target of Wallace’s over-the-top ire is undoubtedly Batchelor’s denial of rebirth and karma. Wallace believes rebirth was central to the Buddha’s teaching, and was a unique position for his time. Batchelor thinks it was a prevailing belief in the Indian worldview and that the Buddha neither affirmed nor denied it, but rather treated it as irrelevant. Wallace thinks his old comrade thus takes the “illegitimate option to reinvent the Buddha and his teachings based on one’s own prejudices.” He says this is the route followed by Batchelor and “other like-minded people who are intent on reshaping the Buddha in their own images.” Wallace believes an experience of the Buddha’s wisdom can be accessed through meditation, and he criticizes Batchelor’s account for describing “the experiences of those who have failed to calm the restlessness and lethargy of their own minds through the practice of samadhi, and failed to realize emptiness or transcend language and concepts through the practice of vipashyana.”

Near the end of his diatribe, Wallace calls Batchelor and Harris “both decent, well-intentioned men,” but says their writings may be regarded as “near enemies” of the true Buddhist virtues described by the commentator Buddhaghosa: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Their view of the Buddha’s teaching are “false facsimiles of all those that have been handed down reverently from one generation to the next since the time of the Buddha.”

⁴⁹ Wallace, B. Allen, “Distorted Visions of Buddhism: Agnostic and Atheist,” *Mandala*, October 2010, <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/archives/mandala-issues-for-2010/october/distorted-visions-of-buddhism-agnostic-and-atheist/>.

⁵⁰ Batchelor, Stephen, “An Open Letter to B Alan Wallace,” *Mandala*, January 2011, <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/archives/mandala-issues-for-2011/january/an-open-letter-to-b-alan-wallace/>.

⁵¹ Schettinni, Stephen, “An Old Story of Faith and Doubt,” *Mandala*, April 2011, <http://www.mandalamagazine.org/archives/mandala-issues-for-2011/april/an-old-story-of-faith-and-doubt-reminiscences-of-alan-wallace-and-stephen-batchelor/>.

⁵² Meissner, Ted, “A Reply,” *The Secular Buddhist*, http://www.theseclaribuddhist.com/articles_response.php.

⁵³ Batchelor, Stephen, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010.

⁵⁴ cf. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

Batchelor's response is more measured and collegial. He begins by apologizing for "any offence I might inadvertently have caused you and others through my writing." He recognizes that his views might "conflict with Buddhist orthodoxy" and might seem "puzzling, objectionable and even heretical to followers of traditional Buddhist schools." His students, however, have included many frustrated by traditional forms of Buddhism who find themselves confronted with a "Church-like institution that requires unconditional allegiance to a teacher and acceptance of a non-negotiable set of doctrinal beliefs." Batchelor writes that he left the Tibetan monastery where they had been colleagues because "I could no longer in good faith accept certain traditional beliefs." He then went to Korea to study as a monk in the Zen tradition" which he found "refreshing and liberating."

As for rebirth, Batchelor says, "the Buddha would have regarded this entire argument as being beside the point." Batchelor continues to study the Pali Canon, an authority on which both former monks agree, but they come to different conclusions about the meaning of suttas based on different selections and interpretation. Both cite the Kalama Sutta. Batchelor adds that "this is the only text I know of in the Pali Canon where the Buddha explicitly states that the practice of the Dharma is valid and worthwhile 'even if there is no hereafter and there are no fruits of actions good or ill.' This is the closest he comes to an agnostic position on the subject." He notes also that he and Wallace both cite passages describing the Buddha's awakening. "It is hardly surprising that you select a Pali text that describes it in terms of remembering past lives, while I prefer to cite the accounts that don't."

Batchelor's view of the intractability of language is particularly galling to Wallace who quotes him as saying: "We can no more step out of language and imagination than we can step out of our bodies." This contradicts Wallace's certainty that experiences confirming his traditional view are gained through meditation and practice, outside of our linguistic cages. Batchelor sees this as an attempt to claim privileged insight into the texts.

The Pali canon might be the most uncontested record of what the Buddha taught, but that doesn't mean it speaks in a single, unambiguous voice. One hears multiple voices, some apparently contradicting others. In part, this is because the Buddha taught dialogically, addressing the needs of different audiences, rather than imposing a single one-size-fits-all doctrine. And it is precisely this diversity, I feel that has allowed for different forms of the Dharma to evolve and flourish.

I can think of no better words for a manifesto of "Big Tent Buddhism."

Schettini, the ex-novice, has a unique perspective. "Alan and Stephen were both elder monks and teachers in our little community, and so role models to the rest of us." The two shared close quarters but differed in temperament. He says Batchelor "put on an air of nonchalance" while Wallace seemed "uncomfortable in his skin." Wallace is "a loyal traditionalist and authority figure" who feels "both qualified and responsible to state what is acceptable and what is not." On the other hand, Batchelor "is more concerned about the plausibility of the teachings ascribed to the Buddha than dependent on whether or not he actually taught them." The crux of the difference, according to Schettini, is that "what to Alan is historical fact is to Stephen debatable." Batchelor's rewriting of history and reconstruction of what's been "true" for traditional Buddhists "undermines the august pretensions of scholarship and tradition and infuriates Alan."

What's troubling to Schettini about the exchange of his elder monks is that "Alan questions Stephen's integrity. That's not debate; it's personal." Wallace's tone is

unfriendly and rude, treating him as an upstart while claiming to be a paragon of correctness. “Alan sees himself as representative of the tradition in a way that Stephen is not... I think that icons are important fixtures in the Dharma landscape and so are iconoclasts.” Wallace’s creed raises two important questions for Schettini: Are these teachings and people really sacred? Is Alan trying to keep Buddhism *pure*? He says Buddhism a religion for Wallace, and therefore sacred, but not for Batchelor. And the former novice agrees with Batchelor that purity is impossible. “Buddhism is a construct.” Can Western Buddhism not handle diversity? - he asks. As for himself, “I lost faith in the scholarly illusion of the straight and narrow...I don’t know exactly what the Buddha taught. I wasn’t there.”

The great debate between Batchelor and Wallace puts in stark contrast the traditionalist and the secular incarnations of buddhisms. Traditionalists like Wallace abound; he publishes frequently, is leading a retreat in Phuket in Thailand as I write, and speaks and teaches his version of the dhamma around the globe. Batchelor, on the other hand, has spawned a generation of followers with his doubts about purity and the “true” tradition, gathering a new generation of hardcore, pragmatic and secular Buddhists to his orbit. Can the disciples of each all hang out together in today’s “big tent Buddhism”?

Conclusion

If I’ve planted some doubts about the true verities of Buddhist studies I will have succeeded, at least this far. But please don’t misconstrue my thesis: In discussing the difficulty of unifying Buddhism, I wish to affirm the value of “buddhisms” and, in particular, the devotional culture of veneration and merit-making that surrounds me here in Thailand. While as a philosopher, I’m attracted to secular and modernist reinterpretations of the Buddha’s teachings, I worry that innovations in the West that reject rituals and “superstitions” may “throw the baby out with the bath water.” I share the sentiments of a blogger named Jayarava, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order (formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, FWBO), who wrote,

Poor traditional Buddhists assiduously feeding and caring for monks are in some ways more admirable than middle-class Western Buddhists with desultory meditation practices and still driven by their own selfishness. Though we so often scoff at them as merely ‘ethnic buddhists’.”⁵⁵

Donald K. Swearer gives a warning in his book, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, about leaving the baby without its bathwater. “This modernized view of the Buddha-dhamma demythologizes the tradition in the service of ethical and psychological values...There is a risk, however, that in the service of rationality and relevance, the varied and challenging complexity of the tradition is ignored or lost.”⁵⁶

The trajectory of Buddhist modernism has produced centralized and nationalist buddhisms in Sri Lanka and Thailand, and a profusion of traditional and innovative buddhisms in America and Europe. In some cases, as McMahan reports in the final chapter of his book, “From Modern to Postmodern?”, there has been a “retraditionalization,” in which adherents “reconstruct tradition in response to some of modernity’s dominant themes, attempting to imagine their opposites in the ancient past.”⁵⁷ The popularity of Tibetan Buddhism, Lopez suggests, may indicate a longing for

⁵⁵ Jayarava’s *Raves*, “Rescuing the Dhamma from Fundamentalists,” July 8, 2011.

⁵⁶ Swearer, Donald K., *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed., Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1995; 2009, p. 199.

⁵⁷ McMahan, op cit, p. 246.

magic and mystery in a still enchanted region of the world.⁵⁸ Marks of the postmodern, McMahan says, include “multiple interpretations of tradition, increasing pluralism, and heterogeneous combining of various modernities and traditions.”⁵⁹ All of which points to more buddhisms in the future rather than to a one size fits all teaching of the dhamma.

Here in Thailand, thinkers and researchers are discovering that the centralized Sangha bureaucracy, a product of 19th century reforms, has failed to prevent religious diversity and heteropraxy at the local level. Just as provincial Thais have been politically contesting internal colonization by Bangkok, monks and laypeople are taking back their faith. “Uniform or standard Buddhism is a thing of the past,” declares Phra Paisal Visalo. “Thai Buddhism is returning to diversity again.”⁶⁰ Pattana Kitarsa, who has studied popular spirit cults in Thailand and the profusion of deities on spirit shrines, writes that the “harmonious coexistence of deities from diverse religious traditions, ranging from Buddha to local and royal spirits, indicates a degree of transgression of the existing religious hierarchy and order.”⁶¹ Michael Parnwell and Martin Seeger, two researchers studying “relocalization” of popular Buddhism in Thailand, see that “at the local level many of the vital signs are quite strong” despite a crisis in the institution as a whole “beset by problems of scandal, corruption, commercialization and declining authority.”⁶² In a recent essay, Phra Anil Sakya concludes that, “With the onset of modernity and its profound social changes, surprisingly animistic expressions of Buddhism are flourishing and apparently on the increase.”⁶³

At the annual Day of Vesak celebration and conference held by my university, several thousand Buddhists from all over the world representing most traditions gather for three days of talks and ceremonies. The monks and nuns in their many-colored robes and the lay people speaking a Babel of languages is most impressive. The large hall at Wang Noi is certainly a big tent able to hold all views and opinions of the dhamma despite significant differences. One big difference, however, is the respect accorded the Thai monarchy. Nowhere else is royalty so intertwined with religion. One delegate describe it critically as “the Thaification of Buddhism.” But at least religious imagery and devotional ceremonies were on display, unlike in the West where perhaps, in their zeal to purge Buddhism of Asian rituals and superstition, the baby might indeed get tossed out with the bathwater.

The simplest way to unify Buddhism would be to say, with Thomas Tweed, that “Buddhists are those who say they are.”⁶⁴ But I believe this is too easy, and fails to respect the tradition as well as those innovators who have attempted to reinterpret the teaching of the dhamma in new places for new times. I would like to propose three strategies for unifying the disparate buddhisms I have discussed in this paper that would honor the complexity of tradition and the sincerity of its followers. These are the categories of conversation, family resemblance and polyphony. Each resists any attempts to consolidate conflicting views by declaring one or another to be the only true Buddhism faithful to the founder’s vision. This was the technique of a modernism that served to

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 247.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 249.

⁶⁰ Visalo, Phra Paisal, “Buddhism for the Next Century,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism for the Next Millennium*, Bangkok: Santhirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation, 1999, p. 10; quoted in Michael Parnwell and Martin Seeger, “The Relocalization of Buddhism in Thailand,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, p. 83.

⁶¹ Kitarsa, Pattana, “Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36 (3), 2005, p. 485.

⁶² Parnwell and Seeger, op cit, p. 153.

⁶³ Sakaya, Ven. Anil, “Contextualizing Thai Buddhism,” draft of unpublished paper for Korea-Thai Buddhist Cultural Forum 2010, Gyeongju Hilton Hotel, Korea, April 1-2, 2010, p. 14.

⁶⁴ Tweed, Thomas A., “Night-Stand Buddhist and Other Creatures,” in Prebish, C. and M. Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 24.

colonize the ideas of the powerful. In a postmodern world, differences are allowed to flourish and even grow.

The Day of Vesak gatherings demonstrate the value of dialogue and conversation. For Robert H. Scharf, Buddhism as a conversation “has been going on now for over two thousand years.” Participation is dependant on having a grasp of fundamentals, literature, philosophy, rituals and discipline.

It is a conversation about what it is to be a human being: why we suffer, how we can resolve our suffering, what works, what doesn't, and so forth. These are big issues, and whichever one you choose to look at, you are not going to find a single Buddhist position. There have always been different positions, and these would be debated and argued. But all parties to the debate were presumed to share a common religious culture -- a more or less shared world of texts, ideas practices -- without which there could be no real conversation.⁶⁵

Another approach would be to use the notion of “family resemblance” developed by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Rather than look for essential features in something we are investigating, such as “religion” or “Buddhism,” different practices that may be connected by overlapping similarities where no common feature dominates. His primary example was of games which we recognize even though they might be very different. Jay L. Garfield suggests that:

...a study of diverse cultural forms reveals a great diversity among Buddhist practices, doctrines, art forms and ways of life. But one is struck by the underlying family resemblance between these forms and the ease of communication between practitioners and scholars of these forms. There is no *prima facie* reason to suspect any greater discontinuity between these disparate Buddhist traditions than we observe within any other families of religious or philosophical positions.⁶⁶

The final category I would suggest to unify and harmonize the various buddhisms would be polyphony, a term the Russian semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed from music to describe literature that incorporated different voices without harmonizing them in order to let the characters take on lives of their own. He used this term to analyze the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky.⁶⁷ Stephen Batchelor captures this idea when he says multiple voices can be heard in the Pali canon, “some apparently contradicting others. In part, this is because the Buddha taught dialogically, addressing the needs of different audiences, rather than imposing a single one-size-fits-all doctrine.”

In conclusion, I hope I've argued persuasively that the various schools and traditions, old and new, that owe their genesis and inspiration to a legendary figure called the Buddha and the teachings recorded over two thousand years by his followers, can be recognized through “family resemblances” and can communicate through conversation despite their differences. The annual Day of Vesak celebrations bear witness to that possibility. And the numerous online blogs, web sites and message boards today make global exchanges a reality.

What I hope to have shown and celebrated in this essay is the appealing diversity of “buddhisms,” a cornucopia of old and new practices and interpretations that owe their

⁶⁵ Scharf, Robert H., “Losing Our Religion,” *Tricycle* Summer 2007.

⁶⁶ Garfield, Jay L., “Buddhist Studies, Buddhist Practice and the Trope of Authenticity,” Draft dated 9/20/11, <http://www.slideshare.net/zqonline/buddhist-studies-buddhist-practice-and-the-trope-of-authenticity>.

⁶⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

impetus to the reported teachings of a legendary renunciant who roamed 2,500 years ago in the foothills of the Himalayas. Like Bakhtin and Batchelor, I hear the story told by the admirers of the Buddha's teachings as a glorious babel and want to imagine a "big tent" in which they can all reside and speak.