

CHAPTER FIVE

Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures: Sympathizers, Adherents, and the Study of Religion

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An American Catholic bishop once confided to me with dismay that the Vietnamese who attend mass in his archdiocese are 'not really Catholic.' Initially I was perplexed by this claim. Did he mean that they had not been baptized in their homeland? Something else? 'They're still too Buddhist,' he explained. He meant that the Buddhist influence was great among Vietnamese Catholics, and they carried that hybrid tradition with them to the United States when they fled after the fall of Saigon in 1975. I thought of that conversation as I recently read a newspaper article on 'The Accidental Buddhist,' which called attention to hundreds of thousands of Americans who practice Buddhist meditation but do not affiliate with any Buddhist temple or center. These examples about Vietnamese Catholics and Buddhist meditators raise central questions in the study of religion: How do we define religious identity? Who is Catholic? Who is Buddhist? And how do we view those who have interest in a religion but do not affiliate? In this essay, I focus on the issue of religious identity as it confronts religion scholars, in particular those who investigate the history of Buddhism in the United States. I aim, first, to complicate our view of adherence, as I propose a strategy for establishing religious identity; and, second, I suggest that we add another category – *sympathizer* – to those we use to interpret religious life.¹

Adherents: Complicating Religious Identity

Even though many monographs have described peoples with creole practices that have changed in interaction with other traditions – as in the religious history of Cuba and Haiti, Thailand and China – most Western scholars of religion still have assumed that religious identity is singular and fixed, and that the subjects of studies fall into two categories: adherents and non-adherents. Further, identifying adherents seems straightforward. For some, an adherent is one who accepts certain defining

beliefs and practices, a strategy I call an essentialist or normative approach. Or, for others, an adherent is one who joins a religious organization or participates in its ritual life. But these three standard strategies for defining religious identity – applying norms, counting members, or observing attendance – introduce conceptual confusions and overlook important persons and groups. The normative approach might suggest, for example, that a Buddhist is one who has formally taken refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha), practiced prescribed rituals at a Buddhist temple (chanting), or affirmed defining beliefs (the Four Noble Truths). But this constructs an essentialized notion of the tradition, imagining the religion as static, isolated, and unified. It fails to acknowledge that traditions change, that they have contacts and exchanges with other traditions, and that hybrid traditions emerge with diverse expressions claiming authenticity. Any normative definition of a religion, therefore, excludes many who might want to count themselves as followers. The other two strategies for establishing religious identity – membership and attendance – invite fewer conceptual difficulties since they do not imagine a defining core, but they fail to account for those who have little or no relation with a Buddhist institution yet still understand the world in Buddhist terms, engage in Buddhist practices, or (at least) view themselves as Buddhists. In short, the usual ways of deciding who is Buddhist – or Christian, Hindu, or Muslim – fail to take seriously enough the complexity of religious identity.²

And, as some studies have shown, religious identity can be complex in several ways. First, as in Japan, religions can be functionally compartmentalized: you might be married in one tradition, Shintō, and memorialized in another, Buddhism. Second, especially in diverse cultural contexts where religious identity does *not* carry harsh political or economic consequences, some religious women and men self-consciously and unapologetically draw on varied practices from multiple traditions. In some periods and regions in China, for instance, men and women have turned to Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, Confucian sages, and Taoist immortals – along with a host of other human or suprahuman exemplars who have emerged from vernacular religious traditions. In seventeenth-century America, many Massachusetts Puritans combined occult practices, like astrology, with their Protestant piety, just as some who attended Spiritualist seances in the 1850s identified themselves as Episcopalians. And, today, some who turn to the healing powers of crystals during the weekday sing hymns at a United Methodist Church on Sunday.³

Third, even in cultural contexts where admitting that you incorporate practices or beliefs from multiple traditions can get you sanctioned by religious leaders, relegated to menial labor, or sentenced to prison, religious identity can be multiple or ambivalent. There can be 'ism'-crossing, a (often less self-conscious) combining in practice of more than one tradition – as in the influence of Santería on Cuban Catholicism or the impact of Shintō on

Japanese Buddhism. In fact, these sorts of religious combinations are so common that, if we ignore those who affiliate with hybrid traditions, engage in creole practices, or express ambivalent identities, there would be no one left to study. Most of the religions I know emerged in contact and exchange with other traditions, and they continued to change over time – always in interaction. Scholars cannot locate a pristine beginning or precontact essence to use as a norm to define orthodoxy or orthopraxis. There is hybridity all the way down. In this sense, religious identity is usually complex. Ambivalence is the norm.⁴

Finally, religious identity also can be complex for converts. Conversion involves a more or less (often less) complete shift of beliefs and practices. The old tradition never fades completely; the new one never shapes exclusively. That was true of Christian converts in colonial Africa, Asia, and North and South America, where indigenous practices colored the religious life of many native 'converts.' It remains true of self-identified Buddhist converts in modern industrialized nations with legislated religious freedom. Conversion also has its social costs and payments, and that affects the character of religious belief and practice. In some colonized nations in nineteenth-century Africa, for example, conversion to Christianity could slightly raise one's social status. On the other hand, in nineteenth-century Britain, conversion to Vedanta Hinduism might prompt derision. In periods and places where conversion has high social *value*, the number of self-announced converts might multiply, even though their spiritual practice might retain many elements of the denounced tradition. Where conversion has high social *costs*, many of the converted who have found their frameworks of meaning and habits of practice profoundly altered by a realignment with another tradition might do all they can to hide that from public view. Some celebrate conversion; others conceal it. Either way, the converts' self-understanding and everyday practice is complex.⁵

If religious identity is as complex as I have suggested, then this has implications for the study of Buddhist adherents in America. As we study 'cradle' Buddhists who were born into the tradition – Chinese immigrants in nineteenth-century San Francisco or Laotians in contemporary Chicago – we should be alert to the ways that their religious practice has been hybrid and their religious identity ambivalent – in the homeland, in transit, and in the new land. In a similar way, as we study converts, we should attend carefully to the evidence in language, artifact, and gesture that their religious life reveals influence from multiple sources, including the tradition they rejected when they joined the Buddhist *sangha*.

Sympathizers and the Story of Buddhism in America

So far I have discussed only adherents, cradle Buddhists who inherited the faith and converts who chose it, those followers who might meet the

standard criteria for defining Buddhist identity. But placing the focus there excludes a great deal: it overlooks those who have not offered full or formal allegiance to the tradition.

And many in the United States, and the West, fit that profile. Fifteen percent of the French express 'an interest' in Buddhism and two million describe it as 'the religion they like best,' according to a recent report. Of the 600,000 Buddhists in France less than 100,000 are 'full blown Buddhists.' But, the report continued, 'many millions are said to be influenced by Buddhism.' That recent article about meditators I mentioned at the start of the essay made a similar point about the United States. One scholar quoted in that story suggested – correctly, I think – that we do not know how many Americans use Buddhist meditation practices. But, she estimated, 'the number is large, probably in the many hundreds of thousands, possibly more.' In that same article Helen Tworok, the editor of the popular Buddhist quarterly *Tricycle*, estimated that half of the publications' 60,000 subscribers do not describe themselves as Buddhists. I call those 30,000 *Tricycle* subscribers and the hundreds of thousands of unaffiliated meditators *sympathizers*, or in a flashier but less precise and inclusive phrase, *night-stand Buddhists*.⁶

What, then, is a sympathizer or night-stand Buddhist? It might be useful to clarify first what it is *not*. *Sympathizer* does not refer to men and women who identify with a tradition self-consciously but fail to practice it vigorously or regularly. Luke-warm adherents are familiar in many cultural contexts and religious traditions. David D. Hall noticed the pattern in seventeenth-century New England. In his *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment* Hall distinguishes 'devout Calvinists' from 'horse-shed Christians.' The latter spent the long intermission between the two services in the horse-shed – yes, those Protestants attended two services on the same day – talking of secular, not religious, matters. Horse-shed Christians, in Hall's account, 'limit[ed] their commitment' to Christianity. They practiced intermittently – more in some seasons or years than others and more at certain points in the life cycle. Horse-shed Christians deserve scholarly attention, but they are not night-stand Buddhists.⁷ The term *sympathizer* does not signal the level of commitment among those who identify themselves with a tradition.

Sympathizers are those who have some sympathy for a religion but do not embrace it exclusively or fully. When asked, they would *not* identify themselves as Buddhists. They would say they are Methodist, or Jewish, or unaffiliated. If we could talk with them long enough – or, better yet, visit their homes and observe their daily routine – we would notice signs of interest in Buddhism. They might practice *zazen*, subscribe to a Buddhist periodical, or read books about the tradition. They might attend lectures at the local university. They might visit a Buddhist center's web page or participate in an on-line Buddhist discussion group. They might consciously

decorate their homes with Buddhist artifacts. Night-stand Buddhists, then, are those who might place a how-to book on Buddhist meditation on the nightstand – say, Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen* – and read it before they fall to sleep, and then rise the next morning to practice, however imperfectly or ambivalently, what they had learned the night before. If I am right, these sympathizers have been an important part of the story of Buddhism in America since the 1880s – from philosopher Paul Carus and businessman Andrew Carnegie to composer John Cage and artist William Wiley, and, more important, the many ordinary American sympathizers whose names have been lost to us.⁸

These sympathizers have encountered Buddhism in different social sites; or, to put it differently, several cultural practices have created and sustained their interest in the tradition – reading texts, viewing artifacts, and performing rituals. We could consider artifacts (including domestic furnishings and landscape architecture as well as paintings and computers) or analyze ritual practices (including meditation, chanting, or the medical uses of mindfulness practice). Here I will mention only a few textual examples.

Sympathy for Buddhism in America was predominantly a matter of reading texts in the late nineteenth century, and only as Buddhist teachers and institutions multiplied did other kinds of ritual and material contacts with the tradition become possible and important for a wide range of Americans. Still, the text-centeredness of religious sympathy (and conversion) continues in contemporary America, as James Coleman shows in his chapter in this volume: the vast majority of those non-Asians who are drawn to the tradition report that a text was decisive for them.

Several kinds of texts have been influential since the nineteenth century. Since the 1880s, when the first English-language Buddhist magazine appeared in the United States, sympathizers have been drawn to the tradition by periodicals. That first Buddhist magazine, *The Buddhist Ray* (1888–94) had a small circulation and was too idiosyncratic – with its blend of Theosophical, Swedenborgian, and Buddhist themes – for most Euro-American readers. The next English-language Buddhist magazine, *The Light of Dharma* (1901–7) had a slightly larger and more geographically dispersed readership – and it included some very sophisticated accounts of the tradition by Asian Buddhists, mostly Japanese. Some of those authors, like the youthful D. T. Suzuki, would go on to have considerable influence after World War II.

In 1991 another Buddhist periodical appeared, one that consciously linked itself with that first publication from the 1880s. That magazine, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, has drawn criticism as well as praise. Shortly after its appearance, one Euro-American Buddhist teacher from California complained to me that it was an 'East Coast' magazine, and soon after an Asian American Buddhist dismissed it, saying that it was just for elite white Americans. If there are 'two Buddhisms' in America (Caucasian

and Asian), as Charles Prebish and others have claimed, clearly *Tricycle* has been less aligned with the interests of Asian American followers. But the magazine has been important for identifying – and maybe creating – European American and African American Buddhist sympathizers in the United States. Its tens of thousands of readers who do not affiliate with Buddhism formally or fully are an important part of the tradition's history in America.⁹

Many sympathizers also have encountered the tradition in books. As I argued in *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1917*, if we considered the popularity of only three nineteenth-century books we would get a sense of the scope and significance of Buddhist sympathy in the period: Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (1879), Henry Steel Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), and Paul Carus's *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894). Each had sizeable sales. Arnold's poetic life of the Buddha sold between five hundred thousand and one million copies and went through eighty American editions. Olcott's catechism went through more than forty editions before the author died in 1907. Carus's *Gospel of Buddha* went through thirteen editions by 1910, and it introduced many Americans to the tradition.¹⁰

That pattern continued throughout the twentieth century, as an increasing number of books reached a wide audience and sparked interest among sympathizers. Those include, for example, Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible* (1938), a work that excited many readers in the post-war period. It was Goddard's book that Jack Kerouac carried in his backpack as he and other 'Dharma Bums' of his generation borrowed some Buddhist ideas and practices. The writings of D. T. Suzuki (along with his public lectures) have had profound influence on some Americans since the 1940s, including his *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934), a book that continued to sell 10,000 copies each year in the 1990s. Suzuki's influence on sympathizers was both direct and indirect. His indirect influence came through the painters, musicians, therapists, and poets his books inspired.¹¹

In recent decades, the number of books with Buddhist themes has multiplied many times. For example, in 1997 *Books in Print* listed 197 titles that began with 'Zen ...', 'Zen and ...', or 'Zen of ...'. The list included, by my count, seventy-seven how-to books that apply Zen to one or another aspect of life, from the silly to the sophisticated, including *Zen and Creative Management*, *Zen and the Art of Kicking Butts: The Ultimate Guide for Quitting Smoking Forever*, *Zen in the Art of Golf*, *Zen and the Art of the Internet*, and *Zen and the Art of Changing Diapers*. However we might assess these popular prescriptive texts, which sometimes have little to do with Zen as most scholars and practitioners would understand it, they clearly show the breadth of Buddhist sympathy in the culture.¹²

The list of recent titles on Buddhism also includes fine translations of sacred texts, informed advice about practice, and reflections by American or Asian teachers. Among the latter, Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of*

Mindfulness (1975) is a good example. Beacon Press reports that the book had sold 'about 125,000' copies by 1997. If we added the publication figures for his other English-language books, from Riverhead Press and Parallax Press, his influence seems indisputable. (For example, his recent text, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, has sold 80,000 copies for Riverhead Press.) As with all texts, it is impossible to count the proportion of sympathizers included among his readers (or to determine how readers interpreted the books). It seems clear, however, that many of Thich Nhat Hanh's readers do not belong to Buddhist groups or identify themselves with Buddhism.¹³

The Meaning of 'Adherent' in the Scholarship

Some readers might object at this point: but we know this. You have built a monument to the obvious. We know that religious identity is hybrid and that there are Buddhist dabblers. And it is true that some of the best writing about Buddhism in North America has acknowledged the problem of determining identity. In his important 1979 study, *American Buddhism*, Charles Prebish takes on the issue in a two-page section titled 'What Constitutes a Buddhist?' There Prebish acknowledges that 'it has become difficult to know what constitutes a Buddhist today.' He points to the varying ways that Buddhist institutions count members: does membership refer to those who donate, attend, or join? Emma McCloy Layman in *Buddhism in America*, a study published three years earlier, also had noticed the problem as she tried to count American Buddhists. 'There are several reasons for the difficulty in estimating the number of Buddhists in America,' Layman proposed. Among the four she listed were these: that most 'nominal Buddhists' had failed to ritually accept the tradition, while other 'self-styled Buddhists' had not joined any Buddhist institution.¹⁴

Other more recent reflections on Asian immigrant Buddhists have acknowledged a related difficulty in defining Buddhists, making the point I have emphasized here: religious belief and practice, in the homeland and the new land, has been hybrid. In his study of the Vietnamese in the United States, the anthropologist Paul James Rutledge noticed:

The religious thought of many Vietnamese has been a *blending* of a number of systems, choosing not to claim one and denounce the others but rather to *mix* the teachings of various faiths in order to meet the particular needs of their community or family. This *syncretistic* practice is deeply rooted in the practice of religion by Vietnamese people.... Although most Vietnamese are Buddhist, either by practice or claim, Vietnamese refugees in America also ascribe [to] Confucianism, Taoism, Roman Catholicism and a variety of Eastern religions less known in the West.¹⁵

Penny Van Esterik, an anthropologist who specializes in Southeast Asia, made a similar point in *Taking Refuge*, her book-length study of Lao Buddhists in Toronto. She notes that Lao religion combines both 'spirit worship' and Theravāda Buddhism. The vernacular tradition of venerating spirits has been strong in Laos, as strong as anywhere in Asia, and for Van Esterik that indigenous tradition has become part of Laotian Buddhism. 'Ghosts and spirits,' she suggests, 'are interacted with as part of the Buddhist world order.' For that reason, 'understanding Lao religion in the past and the present requires close attention to obeisance owed to the spirit world as well as the system of Theravāda Buddhism. The relation between these two systems provides the unique characteristics of Lao religion.' Van Esterik essentializes and isolates the two religious 'systems' a bit too much for me – interpreting them as if they were two originally distinct and self-contained cultural forms that then came into contact with the other – but still, she recognizes the hybrid character of Buddhist identity.¹⁶

Other scholars have noticed how cradle and convert Buddhists have had complex and ambivalent relationships with American cultural and religious values and practices. Even if he offers an interpretation that is not sympathetic enough to Henry Steel Olcott's self-understanding as a Buddhist, Stephen Prothero's sophisticated book, *The White Buddhist*, centers upon the issue of religious identity. In an imaginative use of linguistic theory, Prothero argues that Olcott's was a 'creole' faith, combining a Buddhist 'lexicon,' a Theosophical 'accent,' and a liberal Protestant 'grammar.' Olcott, according to Prothero, accepted and promoted a Protestantized and Americanized Buddhism. In his study of Americanization in two Theravāda Buddhist temples in Los Angeles and Chicago, Paul Numrich noticed that in Los Angeles temples hold summer camps, and in Chicago monks wear overcoats. In other words, Asian American Buddhists have accommodated American culture, as well as resisted it, and in the process complex forms of the tradition have emerged in this cultural context, where Buddhists meet not only Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but a wider variety of Buddhists than anywhere in Asia.

Many scholars and Buddhists, and some Buddhist scholars, have considered the problems of adapting this Asian tradition to a Western culture. One scholar, writing for an issue of *Amerasia Journal*, exhorted Asians not to be afraid of 'religious symbiosis' as the younger generations seek to revitalize 'Asian American religious identities.' Some Buddhist leaders in the United States have made similar suggestions; while others have held a more traditional line. Either way, observers have noticed that cultural exchanges have happened and new forms of Buddhism have emerged as practitioners make their way in America, as they meditate in chairs, sing Buddhist hymns, bite into burgers, and gather on Sundays.¹⁷

If some scholars have acknowledged the hybrid character of Buddhist identity, others have not; but even those who note its complexity have not

usually explored that fully in their writings. Let's return to one of the first and best books on the subject, Prebish's *American Buddhism*. Prebish acknowledges the problem of defining Buddhist identity in two pages, as I have noted, but then goes on to write as if that were not very complicated as he surveys the Buddhist scene in the 1970s, considering, in turn, the various Buddhist traditions and groups: Buddhist Churches of America, San Francisco Zen Center, Buddhist Vihara Society, Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, and so on. Rick Fields, in his lively and important historical narrative of Buddhism in the United States, also shows that he knows that Buddhism has been creole, assuming varied forms in Asian cultures and encountering great diversity in America. He repeats, for example, the common wisdom about Chinese religious blending in China and America: 'The Chinese temples reflected popular Chinese religion, which was a *mixture* of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.' Still, most of his story overlooks or underemphasizes the hybrid character of Buddhism in the United States, especially among Asian immigrants. My point here – and I want to be clear – is not that these writers, and the rest of us too, have failed to notice the complexity of Buddhist identity. Those of us working in this subfield have not always systematically or fully applied our best insights about the hybrid character of Buddhist identity in our studies.¹⁸

To shift the focus slightly – and approach the center of my interest in this topic – I think that part of the problem in the subfield of American Buddhist history, and in religious studies more broadly, is that we continue to draw on an essentialist-normative definition of religious identity, those that construct a core or essence of right practice or belief and measure all historical expressions against that. Fields, for instance, suggests that 'Buddhist history is the record of lineage – of who gave what to whom. . . .' To apply this standard means that those who have teachers and affiliate with institutions are authentic Buddhists; others are suspect and (mostly) excluded from our stories about American Buddhist history. Because it avoids the theoretical problems of essentialist definitions and allows more characters into our historical narratives, I suggest that we use self-identification as the standard for identifying Buddhists. Buddhists, in my view, are those who say they are.¹⁹

Some readers might object that this position is too uncritical, allowing a flood of Buddhist pretenders through the scholarly gates. That concerns Philip C. Almond, the author of a fine study of Buddhism in Britain, and it is occult Buddhists, those connected with the Theosophical Society, who most worry him. His solution: ignore them, even though esoteric Buddhists far outnumbered all other self-identified Caucasian Buddhists in Europe and America during the late-nineteenth century. He explains his stance in a footnote: 'I have not dealt with the Esoteric Buddhism of Madame Blavatsky and her English disciple, Alfred Sinnett. Esoteric, it may have been. Buddhism it certainly was not. . . .' Fields never responds directly to

this issue, but he, too, implicitly rejects self-identification as a standard when he emphasizes the importance of lineages and institutions. In his *American Buddhism*, Prebish follows Holmes Welch, the accomplished scholar of Chinese Buddhism, in arguing that 'it is insufficient to simply ask "Are you a Buddhist?"' Because of the interpenetration of religious traditions, and the concomitant overlapping of religious identities, in China, the respondent might say that, yes, he is a Buddhist. In the next minute, however, he might also admit to being a Taoist or a Confucian too. Prebish proposes another strategy for settling Buddhist identity: 'A more appropriate question might be (as Professor Welch suggests): "Have you taken the Three Refuges?" Further, "Do you practice the five layman's vows?"' Prebish then complicates the issue further by pointing out that he has ignored 'a consideration of the *quality* of membership and *commitment* to the tradition.' And here a misleading essentialist-normative definition of Buddhist identity enters. In this view, which I think remains common among scholars and almost universal among practitioners, a Buddhist is someone who meets certain standards of orthodoxy or orthopraxis. She is a Buddhist if she takes refuge in the Three Jewels, accepts the doctrine of no-self, or chants regularly. But Prebish worried that some readers might misinterpret him: 'It might be inferred my sympathies rest with the older, traditional forms of Buddhism; that I assume the only valid form of a religious tradition is its pristine expression. Each claim, however, would simply be ungrounded.' Still, even though Prebish tries to clear a middle path by acknowledging the need for accommodation to the host culture, there are limits on what he (and most scholars and practitioners) will accept as Buddhist: 'Of course there is no *Ur-Buddhism*, but we must ask at what point the "aloha-amigo" amalgam becomes so strange and fantastic that it ceases to be *Buddhist*, *American*, or a *meaningful combination of the two*.' I see his point, of course: some claims to Buddhist identity seem very odd when measured against the history of the tradition in Asia, or even America. Still, I stand by my proposal that self-identification is the most useful approach for scholars.²⁰

Let me support that claim with two examples, one from the turn of the twentieth century and the other from the contemporary period. F. Graeme Davis, a self-proclaimed Buddhist from Vermillion, South Dakota, is one of the characters in the story of Buddhism in America whom we might exclude if we use the usual standards for settling religious identity. Graeme, one of the most memorable figures in the Victorian American encounter with Buddhism, saw himself as a Buddhist. He also subscribed to a Buddhist magazine, *The Light of Dharma*, and even corresponded with the Japanese priests at the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist mission in San Francisco. 'My sympathies are altogether with you and your work,' Graeme wrote to the Reverend Nishijima in San Francisco in 1901, '[and] it is my hope that I may sometime be able and worthy to aid in working for the same cause, for

I believe Buddhism to be the religion of humanity.' But I have been unable to find evidence that he ever joined, or even attended, a Buddhist institution or ritually proclaimed his allegiance by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He tried his best to live the Buddha's teachings: he even organized a group, with three other students at the University of South Dakota, which met every Friday evening 'for the purpose of studying Buddhism.' Not enough historical evidence survives to offer a textured interpretation of the meaning of Buddhism for Graeme and his three friends – wouldn't you love to sit in that dorm room in 1901 to hear his study group's conversations about Buddhism? – but he is an important character in the story of American Buddhism, even if essentialist or institution-focused standards for deciding religious identity would lead us to ignore him.²¹

A second example of a self-proclaimed Buddhist who might be excluded if we use other criteria for deciding identity, is, I hope, familiar to you. Margaret – let's give her a pseudonym to protect her – is a middle-aged woman from a suburb just outside a major northern city. When we inquire about her life, we find that she practices zazen intermittently, dangles a crystal from her rearview mirror, watches television programs on yoga, and reads books on Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. At home she is (mostly) vegetarian and, on the mornings she can find the time, she practices tai chi. On some Saturday afternoons, after she finishes with the soccer carpool and before preparing dinner, Margaret visits the local bookstore, lingering around the 'New Age' section, usually leaving with a book on past lives or healthy relationships. On most Sundays she attends St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Margaret never attended or joined a Buddhist group. She has not taken refuge in the Three Jewels. Nor does she seem to meet most formal criteria for Buddhist identity. Still, when we ask her, Margaret insists that she is a Buddhist. Now, why would we want to take her claim seriously? In short, because of what it reveals about her and the culture. It helps us attend to someone – and to a wider cultural pattern – that we otherwise might have missed. It is important to know that in American culture at this particular moment, or at least in that middle-class (mostly white) suburban subculture, some folks want to claim Buddhist identity. Then we can begin to ask a series of questions, beginning with the most basic: why does she say she is Buddhist? We might learn that it is fashionable in her circle to be Buddhist or that she wants to signal, to anyone who will listen, her dissent from the Christian church she visits on Sunday, a church she attends mostly because she feels compelled to raise her children in some faith and the local Buddhist center has no religious education (and joining there would invite too much ridicule from her extended family). And there are other reasons she identifies with Buddhism, ones that we cannot fully or confidently recover. In any case, my point is that a normative definition of Buddhism excludes Margaret, and Graeme, from the historical narrative, and thereby overlooks important characters and significant trends.

These examples, and many others, indicate that there might be reasons to widen our definition of 'Buddhist' to include these self-identified followers, but, I realize, some readers still might have other grounds for rejecting the strategy I propose (self-identification) since personal religious commitments and role-specific obligations can shape our responses on this issue. For practitioners, and especially for religious leaders, it might make sense to draw boundaries, to set limits on acceptable belief and practice. In one sense, religious leaders have a role-specific obligation to disallow certain practices and contest certain beliefs. Some followers might insist, for example, that *authentic* Buddhists do not condone violence or affirm theism. Yet scholars, and practitioners who are working as scholars, do not have the same obligations to establish right practice or right belief. A scholar's duty, I suggest, is to understand as much as possible about religion and culture. For that reason self-identification is the most useful standard for defining religious identity, and not only because it avoids the theoretical problems of essentialist approaches and includes the greatest range of characters. It also uncovers much about the status and meaning of the religion at that historical moment and in that cultural setting.

The Significance of Sympathizers

Whether or not scholars have used self-identification to locate Buddhists – and most have not – some have acknowledged the hybrid character of religious identity, even if they have not always emphasized that in their work. Fewer interpreters, however, have taken seriously the many Americans who have had sympathy for Buddhism but have not self-identified with the tradition. A handful of sympathizers find their way into Fields's long narrative of American Buddhist history – for example, Henry Adams – but Fields (for the most part) ignores those who did not fully identify themselves with the religion. Even some who might be counted as Buddhists by any criteria – for example, William Sturgis Bigelow and Ernest Fenollosa, who both took the precepts at a Japanese temple – enter the historical narrative only as an aside. 'From the viewpoint of American Buddhist history,' Fields explains, 'the period of the *fin-de-siecle* Boston Buddhists remains an interlude... [since] neither of them had the inclination – or the training – to introduce Buddhist practice on a more practical level...neither founded any organizations or left any Buddhist disciples.' With this standard for determining characters' importance, it is not surprising that those who did not profess Buddhist identity are (mostly) ignored. The same is true of Prebish's *American Buddhism*, and most other studies on the topic.²²

Among those who have written about American Buddhism, Emma Layman did take notice of sympathizers. She called them, alternately,

'inquirers' or 'Dharma hoppers,' and discussed each briefly. By 'inquirers' she meant those 'who are transients at the temple or meditation center, as well as non-Buddhist scholars and Christian clergymen who may be on several Buddhist mailing lists.' 'Dharma hoppers,' in her usage, are 'shopping around for a magic key to happiness and peace of mind, then dropping out.' 'Many have tried several Buddhist sects,' Layman continues, 'some have tried several Christian denominations before becoming Buddhists, and some played around with Yoga, Krishna Murti, or Sufi' [sic]. It is not clear that Layman's 'Dharma hoppers' are actually sympathizers in my terminology, since some (or many) might identify themselves as Buddhists at some point along their religious journey. Still, Layman recognizes that among non-Asians there have been many seekers who have had interest in Buddhism, and some ambivalent entanglement with the tradition, even if these 'hoppers' never self-identify or formally affiliate.²³

But *sympathizer* is not an interpretive category for most religion scholars, or students of American Buddhism in particular, and so these 'inquirers' and 'Dharma hoppers' are not among the characters in our narratives about the history of Buddhism in the United States. Consider one more example from the scholarship. The Buddhist studies scholar Jan Nattier has offered a very useful typology of American Buddhism and, concomitantly, American Buddhists. 'Religions travel in three ways,' Nattier proposes, 'as import, as export, and as "baggage."' And it is 'these divergent styles of transmission, not matters of doctrine, practice, or national origin, that have shaped the most crucial differences within American Buddhism.' Elite Americans, mostly privileged whites, have sought out the Asian imports, mostly Vipassana and Zen, which emphasize meditation. Other converts have been attracted to Asian exports with missionizing impulses, like Sōka Gakkai International. Other Buddhists in America, according to Nattier's scheme, have been Asian immigrants who have brought their Buddhism along with them as cultural 'baggage.' This typology helps us to see a great deal about American Buddhists that we might otherwise overlook, but it does not account for all that is culturally or religiously significant. I suggest that we keep Nattier's economic metaphor but add another category to her typology. When it comes to the Dharma, there are not only baggage bearers, importers, and exporters, but *shoppers* as well. At least tens of thousands – and probably hundreds of thousands – of Americans have neither inherited the tradition from their parents nor bought it fully in the marketplace of U.S. religion. They shop – purchasing a bit of this and consuming a bit of that, but never buying it all. Our standard typologies (Caucasian Buddhists/Asian Buddhists or import/export/baggage Buddhists) and the usual interpretive categories (adherents/non-adherents) have not accounted for Buddhist sympathizers, who deserve fuller study.²⁴

Conclusion: Including Diverse Characters in the Story

I have argued, first, that religious identity is hybrid, which scholars have sometimes acknowledged but rarely emphasized; and that using self-identification to locate Buddhists best accounts for this religious hybridity. Second, scholars have attended even less carefully to those who have sympathy for Buddhism but do not fully or formally embrace it, and these sympathizers – like those who self-identify with the religion but never join – enrich the narrative of American Buddhist history, revealing a great deal about the beliefs and practices of American culture.

To put this differently, a wide assortment of characters have played their roles in the story of Buddhism in the United States, and we should find a place in the scholarly narratives for them all. Of course, we need to consider both *cradle Buddhists*, those born into the faith, and *convert Buddhists*, those who chose it, as we highlight the creole character of their religious life – for example, Asian immigrants who unconsciously blend Laotian spirit-religion with Theravadin practices, or Euro-American converts who unwittingly combine Protestant principles and Vajrayana values. But there are also *not-just-Buddhists*, who (if asked) would openly acknowledge dual or multiple religious identities: the Vietnamese refugee who says she is Confucian and Buddhist, the American Zen convert who claims to be both a practicing Buddhist and a religious Jew. Borrowing the term that Hall used to describe luke-warm Puritans, we also should remember *horse-shed Buddhists*, who practice more at some times of the year than others or, even though they join a temple or center, practice less vigorously than most religious leaders would prescribe. *Dharma hoppers*, to use Emma Layman's term, move from one group to another in their spiritual journey, and some claim Buddhist identity while others, distancing themselves from all institutional piety, prefer the 'seeker' label. Some other non-Buddhists, whom I have not discussed here, play an important role, too, in the story: *Buddhist opponents*, such as evangelical Protestants who dismiss Buddhism as a dangerous 'cult' or try to convert followers in Asia; and *Buddhist interpreters*, journalists, film makers, scholars, poets, painters, and novelists who represent the tradition for American audiences. Most important, I have tried to suggest, we should remember the many *night-stand Buddhists*, who have found themselves drawn to Buddhism, even if they never have gone farther in their practice than sitting almost cross-legged on two folded pillows, imitating an illustration in Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, silently facing their bedroom wall.²⁵

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- _____. 'Inclusivism and the Spiritual Journey of Marie de Souza Canavarro (1849–1933).' *Religion* 24 (1994): 43–58.
- _____. 'Identity and Authority at a Cuban Shrine in Miami: Santería, Catholicism, and Struggles for Religious Identity.' *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4 (August 1996): 27–48.
- _____. *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
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Notes

- 1 Personal interview, The Most Reverend Agustín A. Román, 9 June 1994, Archdiocese of Miami Pastoral Center, Miami Springs, Florida. Ira Rifkin, 'The Accidental Buddhist,' *News and Observer* (Raleigh), 7 February 1997, 1E, 4E. Another newspaper article that appeared in the same year, and was reprinted in many papers, raised related issues about religious identity. In 1997 the six-hundred-member Union of Orthodox Rabbis declared that the Reform and Conservative branches 'are not Judaism at all.' The rabbis thereby excluded approximately 80 percent of the Jews in North America on the grounds that the Reform and Conservative traditions condoned assimilation and intermarriage. 'Orthodox Rabbis Assail Other Branches: Union Says Movements Are Not Judaism,' *The News and Observer* (Raleigh), 1 April 1997: 6A.
- 2 Most students of Buddhist history know well that religion is hybrid. It is not only classic studies of Chinese or Thai religion that teach us that: for instance, Erik Zürcher's *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959) and Stanley J. Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Throughout Asia, Buddhist religious belief and practice changed as it encountered new cultures and other traditions – for example, combining with vernacular spirit religions, blending with Confucianism, mixing with Shintō, and incorporating Taoism. In a similar way, students of Christian history have emphasized the Hellenization, and later Germanization, of Christianity as it moved throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. On the latter, for example, see James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Contact and exchange among indigenous, African, and European religions is especially clear in the Caribbean and Latin America. Consider, for example, studies of religious life in Cuba and Haiti: Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). See also Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo and Andres I. Pérez y Mena, eds., *Enigmatic Powers: Syncretism with African and Indigenous Peoples' Religions among Latinos*, Program for the Analysis of Religion among Latinos Series, no. 3 (New York: Bildner Center for Western Hemisphere Studies, 1994). Many other historical and ethnographic monographs document religious hybridity, too many to cite here, while many theorists in cultural studies have emphasized hybridity in other areas of culture.
- 3 Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow, eds., *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983). David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). James R. Lewis and J.

Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

- 4 I have made a similar point in my analysis of Cuban religion: 'Identity and Authority at a Cuban Shrine in Miami: Santería, Catholicism, and Struggles for Religious Identity,' *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4 (August 1996): 27-48; and *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43-55.
- 5 My view of religious transformation is shaped by many studies in the sociology of conversion, including David Snow and Richard Machalek, 'The Convert as a Social Type,' in *Sociological Theory*, ed. R. Collins (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983); David Snow and Richard Machalek, 'The Sociology of Conversion,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 167-90; Clifford L. Staples and Armand L. Mauss, 'Conversion or Commitment? A Reassessment of the Snow and Machalek Approach to the Study of Conversion,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987): 133-47; John Lofland, "'Becoming a World-Saver" Revisited,' *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (July/August 1977): 805-18; and Lorne Dawson, 'Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating "Active" Conversions,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29 (June 1990): 141-63. The anthropological literature on conversion is helpful, too, because it is even more sensitive to the wielding of power and the persistence of hybridity. For example see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Coercion in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Elizabeth Colson, 'Converts and Tradition: The Impact of Christianity on Valley Tonga Religion,' *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 26 (1970): 143-56; Cornelia Kammerer, 'Customs and Christian Conversion among Akha Highlanders of Burma,' *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 277-91.
- 6 'Buddhist Revival French-Style,' *Religion Watch* 12 (December 1996): 7. This piece originally appeared in the *National Catholic Register* for November 17-23, 1996. Rifkin, 'The Accidental Buddhist,' 1E, 4E. I used the term *sympathizers* in *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). I introduced the phrase *night-stand Buddhists* in 'Asian Religions in America: Reflections on an Emerging Subfield,' in Walter Conser and Sumner Twiss, eds., *Religious Diversity and American Religious History: Studies in Traditions and Cultures* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
- 7 Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 15. Hall borrowed the term *horse-shed Christians* from the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who used it in his memoirs to describe his own male relatives: *Life and Confessions of a Psychologist* (New York and London: D. Appleton, 1923), 58.
- 8 Roshi Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (1965; New York: Anchor, 1989). This book, which originally appeared in 1965, has been popular. It had four hardcover printings by Weatherhill (the first publisher) and Harper and Row (the second publisher), as well as fourteen printings in paperback by Beacon Press. In 1989 Anchor Books issued a twenty-fifth anniversary paperback edition. In the contemporary period, other media - videocassette and computer - can function in similar ways for sympathizers. For example, Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, under the leadership of Abbot John Daido Looi, has distributed a how-to video on zazen: *Introduction to Zen Meditation*, produced by John Daido Looi and Dharma Communications, 54 min., 1991, videocassette. That Buddhist community also has an

- elaborate web page, sells recordings of Dharma discourses, and maintains an on-line Zen practice training advisor via electronic mail, called 'cybermonk' (cybermonk@mhv.net), where would-be meditators or long-time practitioners can get advice about their practice. Paul Carus wrote many works on Buddhism, even if he never embraced the tradition exclusively or fully, but he expressed his personal religious views (and sympathy for Buddhism) most clearly in his voluminous correspondence in the Open Court Publishing Company Papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois. On Andrew Carnegie's affection for Buddhism, and Edwin Arnold's poetic life of the Buddha in particular, see Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 207. I offer overviews of Carus's and Carnegie's sympathy for Buddhism in *The American Encounter with Buddhism*, 65-67 (Carus), 44-45 (Carnegie). For evidence of Buddhism's influence on Cage's work, see John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973). For a helpful autobiographical fragment concerning his relation to Buddhism see 'Where'm Now,' in Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, eds., *Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism and Contemporary American Poetry* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1991), 43-44. An exhibition catalog helpfully discusses the painter William Wiley's sympathy for Buddhism and the tradition's influence on his art: Gail Gelburd and Geri De Paoli, *The Transparent Thread: Asian Philosophy in Recent American Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 112-15.
- 9 *Tricycle* linked itself with the *Buddhist Ray* in its inaugural issue by reproducing the cover of the nineteenth-century periodical and telling the story of the magazine and its editor, Herman C. Vetterling, in its first 'Ancestors' column: Helen Tworikov and Thomas A. Tweed, 'The Original Ray,' *Tricycle* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1991): 6-7. Charles Prebish, 'Two Buddhisms Reconsidered,' *Buddhist Studies Review* 10 (1993): 187-206.
 - 10 Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia; Or, The Great Renunciation; Being the Life and Teaching of Gautama* (1879; Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1969). Henry S. Olcott, *The Buddhist Catechism*, 44th ed. (1915; Talent, Oregon: Eastern School Press, 1983). Paul Carus, ed., *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894; Tucson, Arizona: Omen, 1972). Tweed, *American Encounter with Buddhism*, 46.
 - 11 Dwight Goddard, ed., *A Buddhist Bible* (1938; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). The first edition of Goddard's volume appeared in 1934, the Beacon edition comes from the enlarged version that first was published in 1938. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1934; New York: Grove Press, 1964). The sales figures for the *Introduction* came from the press: Telephone interview, 25 April 1997, Jay Sullivan, Grove Press. The first American edition of the book appeared in 1954 from Grove Press. On the influence of D. T. Suzuki, see Masao Abe, *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York: Weatherhill, 1986).
 - 12 *Books in Print*, 1996-97: *Subjects*, vol. 7 (New Providence, New Jersey: R. R. Bowker, 1996). Albert Low, *Zen and the Art of Creative Management* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1993). Dennis G. Marthaler, *Zen and the Art of Kicking Butts: The Ultimate for Quitting Smoking Forever* (Duluth, MN: Dennis G. Marthaler, 1995). Joseph D. McLaughlin, *Zen in the Art of Golf* (Atlanta: Humanics Trade, 1997). Brendan P. Kehoe, *Zen and the Art of the Internet: A Beginner's Guide* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993). Sarah Arsone, *Zen and the Art of Changing Diapers* (Ventura, CA: Printwheel, 1991). Of course, the number of books on Zen is much larger still. On 31 October 1997 the on-line Library of Congress catalog listed 2,624 titles under the subject 'Zen.'

- 13 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, trans. Mobi Ho, rev. ed. (1975; Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). The sales figures for *Miracle of Mindfulness* and *Living Buddha* were provided by Beacon Press in communication with the author: Susan G. Worst, editor, Beacon Press, electronic mail, 14 March 1997.
- 14 Charles S. Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1979), 42–43. Emma McCloy Layman *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), xiv–xv.
- 15 Paul James Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 47. Italics mine.
- 16 Penny Van Esterik, *Taking Refuge: Lao Buddhists in North America* (Tempe: Arizona State University, Program for Southeast Asian Studies; Toronto: York University, Centre for Refugee Studies, York Lane Press, 1992), 41.
- 17 Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*, Religion in North America Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Paul David Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravada Buddhist Temples* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996). Rudy V. Busto, 'Response: Asian American Religious Identities: Building Spiritual Homes on Gold Mountain,' *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 1 (1996): 189.
- 18 Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, revised and updated edition (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1986), 74.
- 19 Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, xiii.
- 20 Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), note 10, page 147. Prebish, *American Buddhism*, 43–44.
- 21 F. Graeme Davis to Rev. Nishijima, 27 April 1901; reprinted in *Light of Dharma* 1 (June 1901): 28–29. On F. Graeme Davis, see Tweed, *American Encounter with Buddhism*, 44.
- 22 Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 153–54, 164.
- 23 Layman, *Buddhism in America*, xiv, 203. For an analysis of one 'Dharma hopper' – or, in my terms, religious seeker – who actually did ritually align herself with Buddhism in a public ceremony, only to later practice Baha'i and Vedanta Hinduism, see Thomas A. Tweed, 'Inclusivism and the Spiritual Journey of Marie de Souza Canavarro (1849–1933),' *Religion* 24 (1994): 43–58.
- 24 Jan Nattier, 'Buddhism Comes to Main Street,' *Wilson Quarterly* 21 (Spring 1997): 74.
- 25 For a contemporary evangelical Protestant interpretation of Buddhism as a dangerous or misguided 'cult,' see Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 261–69. Other evangelical handbooks and pamphlets do not classify Buddhism as a cult but still dismiss it, refuting its major claims and challenging its practices, often as a means of preparing Christians to evangelize. For example, see Fritz Ridenour, *So What's the Difference* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1979), 83–92. That evangelical description and assessment of the religions has been popular among conservative Christians: more than 615,000 copies of the first edition were in print when the second edition appeared in 1979. The publisher now claims 'more than 800,000' copies have been sold. Buddhist opponents, then, are an important part of the story. Our imaginary meditator might consult chapter nine of Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, called 'Postures,' which includes fifteen drawings of meditators in various positions, from the full-lotus to the Burmese posture, on zafus, benches, and chairs. Kapleau, *Three Pillars of Zen*, 327–53.