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# An Experimental Approach to Buddhism and Religion

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## Abstract

Adaptations, modifications, and realignments of religious doctrine and practice can be found in any period of social history. It can be official and highly orchestrated (as in Vatican II) but more often it takes a subjective and reactionary form (as in the Hindutva movement). This paper promotes the idea of “experimental religion” as both an analytical concept and an observable set of behaviors that help identify how contemporary trends (such as individualism, secularity, information technologies, and market economies) reconfigure attitudes and motivations regarding the relevance and applicability of religious resources. Drawing from Buddhist-related case material in Japan and other liberal democracies, we see lay practitioners, priests, and occasionally institutions as well using innovation and activism to reposition and reboot existing paradigms. The intention is to fashion a religious practice responsive to individual concerns as well as to pressing environmental, political, and economic issues.

**Keywords:** Religious change, Religious practice, Experimentation, Contemporary Buddhism, Innovation, Agency, Suicide prevention

Most academic essays begin by referencing the topic at hand, citing relevant literature, or provoking thought through some telling anecdote. This article takes a slightly different approach and focuses instead on the intellectual history of each reader as its point of departure. In particular, I assume that anyone reading this essay has developed (or is in the process of doing so) a set of understandings about religion that draw upon a unique social moment in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is a time characterized by tremendous social change precipitated in part by technological advances, market capitalism, and liberal democracies, as well as political orders opposed to democratic principles. News headlines and current events remind us daily that we are living in a bipolar era of global integration (via social, economic, political and cultural networks and organizations) as well as one of unprecedented fragmentation and marginalization of huge populations (Dirlik 2003: 149).

To fine-tune the previous statement, this is also a time when higher education, immigration, travel, and shifting moralities have led to more parity among genders in the workplace, as well as more opportunities and risks for individuals of all social classes. We see how normative traditions and orientations, especially those considered “religious,” continue to react, adjust, and reformulate their basic principles in order to accommodate some of the dynamics mentioned above. All socially-constructed traditions, whether secular or religious, are described frequently as being in a state of perpetual crisis

as cultures, political alliances, ethnic groups, and worldviews respond to new opportunities and challenges.

It is likely that readers have experienced directly some or all of the features just described. It is also possible that a reader interested in this journal's special symposium on religious experimentation has already formulated an approach to religious practice and belief that—similar to the selective and creative strategies she employs for other aspects of her life—is non-traditional and interactive with the secular trends of late modernity. Critical thought, problem solving techniques, perhaps even rational argument based on evidence are all tried-and-true methods for shaping spiritual and secular worlds in ways generally considered to be positive, progressive, and beneficial. Thus, whether Catholic, Hindu, or Buddhist, many people with religious affiliations attempt to fashion a belief system that accommodates key doctrines (such as karma, salvation, or morality) and yet leaves room for personal customization.

While the intended audience for this journal may have sophistication in how they personally approach and conceptualize religion, they know that a majority of people around the world do not get their religious orientations from books, academic study, or the Internet. Instead, it comes to them primarily through the values and structures of their families, communities, schools, and religious institutions—even when they may not participate as a member of a religion. This is not to say that individuals passively accept the religious heritage of their home communities because ethnographic and historical research (such as we find in this volume and elsewhere) shows otherwise. Meredith McGuire's concept of "lived religion" reminds us to challenge the notion that religion is unified, coherent, "organizationally defined, (and a) relatively stable set of collective beliefs and practices" (McGuire 2008: 200). She emphasizes there can be tremendous "within-group diversity" that destabilizes and appropriates organizational doctrines for personal agendas. Thus, for the individual, "religion appears to be a multifaceted, often messy or even contradictory amalgam of beliefs and practices" (208).

Another perspective that conceptualizes the individualization and subjectivity of religious traditions is Leonard Primiano's idea of "vernacular religion." Primiano writes that "there is always some passive accommodation, some intriguing survival, some active creation, some dissenting impulse, some reflection on lived experience that influences how these individuals direct their religious lives" (Primiano 1995, 46). What is evident from both these examples is a dynamic that may not at first appear important because it has become so commonplace: the relative freedom to first interpret and then actively shape one's own identity.<sup>1</sup> Familiar frameworks of the self once formed by ethnicity, occupation, race, and family (to name a few) are still present but have become increasingly negotiable due to a variety of factors unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. So thoroughly have liberal democratic societies adopted a sense of self that is developmental rather than prescribed, we rarely consider how significantly this concept has altered forms of social and cultural organization. The ability to select, fashion, and then continually augment our identity in ways we hope are positive has come to dominate how we conceive of and construct our lives.

Nowhere is this freedom more evident than in our relationship with religious traditions. Of course, there are many parts of the world (including western societies) where religious institutions still have sufficient clout to arbitrate morality and ethics, legitimate authority, sanction social causes and political movements, and even validate the

findings of physicians and scientists. But in societies that attempt to separate religion and politics through the rule of law, those powers have been limited. For the *first* time in human history, hundreds of millions of people are now able to choose for themselves which religious ideas to believe in, or whether to believe in religious propositions at all.<sup>2</sup> A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center (2015) on “Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.” indicated that roughly 42% of all Americans change religion at one point in their lives—which may partly explain why some readers are motivated to read this article in an academic publication that accommodates diverse and pluralistic religious interests.<sup>3</sup>

### **Experimental Buddhisms in Context**

The expansion and growth of Buddhist denominations worldwide provide many examples of adaptation and accommodation (Eddy 2012). There is an impressive range of options about which spiritual or religious path to follow among the various Buddhisms active today.<sup>4</sup> Before an individual “becomes” a practitioner of Zen, Vajrayana, Pure Land, or any of the other schools now accessible globally through actual and virtual sites, most newcomers (as well as many born into the religion), display an approach to teachings, rituals, guidelines, and communities that can be considered “experimental.” The adjective “experimental” calls particular attention to the ways the resources of religious traditions are negotiated by an individual, then implemented selectively and pragmatically over time. Through trial-and-error, relevant concepts or methods are sought, examined, and then applied to any number of agendas, some psychological, emotional, and spiritual, others social and political. This is not an idealized Buddhism of the monastery or popular culture but one fully engaged with contemporary sensibilities and situations.

What does the concept of “experimentation” contribute to an understanding of religious practice in general and Buddhism in particular? While the word may have been overused during the 1960’s regarding lifestyles, drug use, religious affiliation, music, and so on, the concept remains relevant for understanding a wide range of attitudes and behaviors. When we look at the term in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find its earliest known English usage in 1388, with its root form derived from the verb phrase “to experience.” “Experimental” means “trying out” a plan or method in actual situations rather than relying upon mere testimony or conjecture. “Experimental” is also derived from “experiment,” which can be either a noun or a verb. This range of meanings and associations references a very basic human behavior: testing an idea to see if and how it works before proceeding further. If the idea does not produce the expected results, we try again (depending on our motivation and circumstances). We might use a variety of methods until we arrive at an outcome considered acceptable (or until repeated failures lead us to abandon the endeavor entirely). While this process of cause and effect is as old as human civilization, much more recent is the way we can think objectively about the sequence of decisions and steps as a distinct methodology open to critical review and independent verification.<sup>5</sup>

An experimental approach to religious practice, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Jewish, follows a similar pattern. It is selective, pragmatic, and concerned primarily with achieving a satisfactory result that somehow improves human life or advances the agenda of an individual or group in ways thought to be beneficial.

Like any concept, it is designed to organize and delimit what is a kinetic field of activity. In the case of contemporary Buddhism in Japan, which we will return to in a moment, religious experimentation is a field bristling with the energy of individuals often dissipated by the inertia of institutions.

The following five characteristics about experimental Buddhism point to correspondences between our unique historical era—where unprecedented global flows of information, people, and money have become familiar—and the ways in which religions like Buddhism must accommodate individuals influenced by and operating within these kinds of networks. Applicable both to Buddhist institutions and practitioners (committed, casual, and otherwise), the features that follow began in the late twentieth century but have “gone viral” in the last decade.<sup>6</sup>

First and foremost, an experimental approach to Buddhism (or any religious tradition for that matter) concerns positioning. As if using a GPS navigation system, practitioners conceive of their lives as a set of mobile coordinates located within complex and interactive social, cultural, economic, and ecological networks. From this conjunction blending location, time, situation, and individuality, an assessment is made about the conditions of a person’s life. This is a highly subjective task and yet the “data” that comes from perceptions about interpersonal relationships, economic status, health and spiritual well-being, housing, and a variety of other factors all contribute to the dynamics of positioning. Motivated by a desire to improve, change, or simply comprehend one’s present circumstances, an experimental approach to religion views individuals, teachers, practices, and institutions as resources (some local and others global) that can advance spiritual progress and perhaps influence other aspects of one’s life in a positive way.

And while there is a great deal of specificity in this process of positioning—gender, education, race, class, and health all play their parts—there are also global systems that matter a great deal. Networks of information technology, transportation, finance, media cultures and so on can also shape a person’s understanding of their location in significant ways. If a university student is turned on by the idea of Theravadan “forest monks” ordaining trees to save them from logging, and determines to visit this part of northern Thailand, he will start by positioning himself vis-à-vis relevant teachings, monastic networks, environmental activism, and local centers where he might practice *metta* or “loving-kindness” meditation. Simultaneously local and global, we now accept the easy interactivity of these realms of activity and information as we position understanding about our lives.

Implicit in the first characteristic of an experimental practice is its second important feature, one already mentioned in this discussion: the agency of individuals to fashion a spiritual or religious significance for their lives. “Agency” is a well-traveled term in the social sciences indicating a creative process whereby culturally conditioned individuals select, test, and then verify a plan or process that they think will improve their circumstances. In an experimental Buddhist context, this means synthesizing teachings and methods to try to form an integrated stance that can negotiate perceived problems and challenges (which may themselves be conditioned by global forces and local contingencies).

Traditional authority within most Buddhist denominations—based as they are upon doctrines, teachers, lineages, institutional sites, and so forth—has been slow to adjust

to this historical shift. As a result, the agency of common individuals who skillfully employ the media, wield economic influence, or advance new technologies has impacted most Buddhist traditions in significant (though not always positive) ways.<sup>7</sup> Personal agendas for spiritual and religious advancement may not always harmonize with doctrinal or traditional patterns. When this occurs, such as when a newcomer discovers to her dismay an entrenched patriarchy and discrimination against women among Buddhist priests, why risk frustration when there are many other spiritual options that promise the same liberation of heart and mind? As sociologist James Beckford reminds us, the “fashioning,” “shaping,” and “patterning” involved in constructing religious practice can also be deconstructed or reconstructed (Beckford 2015:12).

Since many Westerners tend to view religious authority with some caution, a third feature entails the wary negotiation that occurs before making a commitment to participate in and support a particular Buddhist tradition. Individuals independently and collectively evaluate concepts, doctrines, teachers, practices, institutions, and so on to imagine how a specific version of the *dharma* will play out in the “field experiment” of their lives. This endeavor is common among lay practitioners of course, but we find it increasingly among priests, monks, and other religious specialists. In my research on contemporary Buddhist priests in Japan, there is great inventiveness (often coupled with dogged determination) in rebooting the application of ancient temples and teachings to become relevant for people living in one of the world’s most advanced consumer cultures. While the concerts, cafés, websites, symposia, and social welfare-related initiatives these priests organize and promote are not always successful, at least no one can accuse them of inaction or indifference. (More about these endeavors in the second part of this essay.)

A fourth attribute of an experimental Buddhism is its rational and keenly observant quality regarding a religious practice grounded in everyday life. From an initial hypothesis about the utility of an idea or method, to the testing we perform as the results become apparent, an experimental Buddhism orients practitioners to both the meditation cushion and to the messy conditions of contemporary social orders. And while that sounds somewhat cliché, there’s one important twist of the plot: those hoping to make Buddhist teachings or practices transform their lives intuit that a subjective judgment about their progress, even when it comes from a venerated teacher, is not enough. Society, and not the temple or monastery, is becoming the ultimate testing ground and arbiter for what constitutes the viability and effectiveness of a Buddhist practice that “works.”

Some readers may consider this world-affirming approach ironic and perhaps mistaken, since it seems to undermine the whole point of stepping back from social conditioning to investigate the workings of one’s mind and emotions. While an occasional retreat may be necessary to maintain a foundation for this kind of Buddhist practice, the historical record indicates that, like the Buddha himself, monks in early *sanghas* were constantly on the move and interacted with all segments of society. Like the lay sage Vimalakirti chiding the monk Śariputra for “indulging” in tranquil forest meditation, experimental Buddhists know that leaving a controlled setting and venturing into everyday life situations exposes their practice to considerable uncertainty and challenge. The initial steps of learning meditation may have a great deal of what scientists call “internal validity,” whereby one’s efforts function smoothly

within a structured environment. However, the same practice may lack “external validity” when the location is not a quiet room lit by candlelight but a noisy city street or an intensely busy office.

Finally, an experimental religious practice embraces the continual reinvention of not just Buddhism but all religious traditions. Whether their leaders like it or not, religious organizations have entered a historical moment where conventional teachings, methods, and institutional structures have little choice but to exit traditional contexts and fashion a new significance to engage the lives of contemporary men and women. Some types of Buddhism have done this better than others, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that a number of Buddhist teachers and administrators have drawn attention to their respective approaches based on what can be described as a more experimental approach. They position and emphasize the relevance of a 2500 years old tradition for diverse and resource-full audiences; they utilize global systems unique to modernity not only to disseminate their ideas but also appear in person to conduct workshops or give lectures; they provide a pragmatic and rational case for the effectiveness of their teachings, verified by experience instead of subjective opinion; and they are able to muster the necessary financial capital to keep all of these activities moving forward. The foundations may be rooted in a particular religious tradition, but the delivery and packaging of their message often appears more secular than not.<sup>8</sup>

Since we find ourselves living at a time when it is the individual rather than the group that is privileged and empowered, practitioners are able to orient their Buddhisms to the worlds they have constructed rather than the other way around. Precedents are important, but individuals are now able to find ways that reconcile earlier models with their own deeply internalized dispositions that incline actions, thoughts, and feelings in ways consistent with social situations and cultural norms. In other words, individual agency (and the religious resources it selects as relevant) develops a competence to navigate the present without depending wholly on maps of the past. An experimental approach to Buddhist practice renders those historically inspiring yet somewhat static blueprints into creative resources, ones that everyday experience shapes into meaningful, and sometimes profound, applications.

In the remaining discussion, two areas relevant to both understanding and extending the concept of experimental Buddhism will be explored. The first involves innovation within existing Buddhist institutions and practices, and the second focuses on activism based on perceived “Buddhist values.” Despite the compelling nature of these examples, they represent a small fraction of the majority of Buddhist denominations in Japan today.<sup>9</sup>

### **Innovation**

What we now refer to as “Buddhist modernism” (McMahan 2008; Rocha 2012) creates both a category and a context for assessing how Buddhist traditions are seen as relevant for women and men in contemporary society. Social engagement, new forms of leadership by lay people, a rational orientation toward doctrine and ethics, a compatibility with democracy and science, and even troubling forms of religious nationalism are all features that can play a significant role in the (re)conceptualization of Buddhist traditions for both individuals and institutions. Each of these modes can be considered experimental as an individual tests, applies, assesses, and retools their practice and understanding into new systems of meaning and self-definition.<sup>10</sup>

It might seem arbitrary to start this brief survey of innovation in Buddhist traditions in Japan. And yet, there are few societies that have such a remarkable heritage in domesticating forms and concepts that come from sources outside this island nation. Nor are there many societies that have undergone such wrenching change, growth, destruction, and adaptation in the last 150 years. Due in part to this recent history, as well as domestic and global trends, Buddhist temples in Japan have entered a new and destabilizing period where conventional patterns of belief, practice, and traditional affiliations no longer guarantee institutional survival.

Because of increased education, the relativization of religious claims to truth, and skeptical attitudes about religion in general—all characteristics of late modernity and contributing factors to an experimental approach to religion—long-standing notions of divine retribution and karmic punishment have been undermined and no longer intimidate the general public as they once did. (Readers who have yet to read much Buddhist history—and think that it is free of a “fear factor” so prevalent in Christianity or Islam—are in for a shock. Buddhist hell realms and demonic activity are every bit as vivid and terrifying as anything imagined by Dante or fire-and-brimstone evangelical preachers.) Once the coercive dimension of religion loses its grip on popular imagination, there is a profusion of religious innovators who craft novel approaches, beliefs, and products that can be displayed and circulate in a kind of public commons (created by the Internet or other media) with little concern for stirring up the indignation of either deities or religious authorities. Criticism may occur, of course, but the market is generally indifferent to ideology and rewards business plans that respond to consumer preferences.

The democratization of technology and a proliferation of online information about Buddhist temples, denominations, and teachings on the Internet, as well as through guide books and tourism, is forcing priests to innovate in some of the same ways as their clientele. They may ask what resources are available in the current setting and situation that can produce tangible results of benefit to both individual and institutions. Temple websites often tout particular spiritual benefits—such as healing, salvation, or empowerment—which must be distinctive in some way so as to stand out and, if not attract attention, then at least not squander it. Priests know that potential visitors seeking a particular benefit or service now have the ability to compare religious traditions and “service-providers” without ever leaving their home. In most cases, they can also view information about transportation access, a temple’s primary Buddhist image and the benefits (*goriyaku*) attributed to it, temple art and landscaped gardens, and so forth.<sup>11</sup>

The Internet and more broadly secular trends in education, religious freedom, and consumer culture have also diminished the ability of Buddhist denominations to censure what they see as interlopers elbowing for position in a marketplace that often rewards innovation and advertising appeal over substance and tradition. Take, for example, the profitable and booming industry of memorial services. Private companies not affiliated with any major denomination have sprung up in the last 15 years and now offer cut-rate prices on Buddhist posthumous names (*kaimyō*), grave stones and sites, memorial services, interment options, and memorials for pets, with a number of shady practices stealing market share from more traditional institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Even more subversive to a once-dominant Buddhist grip on memorializing ancestors is the giant corporate discount chain Aeon’s 2009 incursion into the funeral business.

This move is similar to Walmart (in the U.S.) or PoundSaver (in the U.K.) offering full funeral services—from the moment of death to the grave itself—as part of a corporate strategy to exploit a persistent weakness in traditional funeral proceedings. Aeon executives perceived a market opportunity based on the lack of transparency regarding actual costs of mortuary services provided by temples and funeral homes. As anyone who has had to pay for a funeral in Japan will tell you, both priests and funeral home directors suggest that their fees range between a low and high amount but then defer to the bereaved family to pay what they think is appropriate based on the quality of services provided. While this may sound as if the consumer has the upper hand, a combination of subtle pressure and social propriety prevents most survivors from paying the lowest amount. They fear being embarrassed as cheapskates, or of compromising future relations with a priest and the memorial services he provides over the coming years. On the contrary, Aeon's website states clearly what the costs are for budget, average, and high-end funerals, although there is fine print qualifying all these expenses.

Pet funerals and memorials are another area of innovation that has rapidly developed in urban Japan. There are references to cherished household animals throughout history, with the oldest known grave marker for an animal, dedicated to a “wise cat,” dating to 1766. According to Barbara Ambros, the earliest pet cemetery in Japan dates to 1910 at Ekōin in Tokyo, although there are cases of animals such as horses and whales receiving Buddhist posthumous names throughout history (Ambros, personal communication). She also notes that postwar memorial services (*kuyō*) for animals have been carried out by scientific laboratories, food processing corporations, or restaurants specializing in a particular delicacy (such as eels), and zoos. It is hardly surprising that pets have become a lucrative side-business for a number of urban temples offering cremation, interment, and ongoing rituals for their peaceful repose. Out of some 900 pet cemeteries in Japan, around 120 are run by Buddhist temples (Ambros 2012: 36).

On the whole, and in ways similar to interactions with their parishioners, many Buddhist priests have adopted a pragmatic, agnostic, and experimental attitude about the spirits of animals. Since there appear to be no guidelines in Buddhist scriptures or teachings prohibiting funerals and memorials for animals, priests regard the services they offer as benefiting owners by structuring the grieving process over the loss of a pet. It is also an opportunity to educate family members about the beneficial power of Buddhist rituals for dealing with death. If a family is treated well by a priest during services for their beloved pet, it is possible they may turn to the temple when faced with other significant life transitions. If we consider pet memorials from the broad perspective of experimental approaches to Buddhist religious practice, we see clearly that some of the features discussed earlier are relevant here: freedom of choice, personal agency, pluralistic ideas (about spirits and the afterlife in this case), and negotiating a combination of teachings and practices that work in everyday late modern contexts.

### **Innovative Musical Interludes**

Japanese Buddhist traditions, like their Tibetan, Chinese, and Theravadan cousins, are highly performative. They all rely on the ritual expertise of priests to maximize spiritual benefits generated by prayers, offerings, chanting, and teachings of whatever Buddha is most relevant to the tradition. There is considerable scholarship (see Chen 1973 for starters) attesting to the historical heritage of music, magic, and the spoken word as



key elements in promoting the *dharma* among audiences that were mostly illiterate. Today, there are frequent performances within Japanese Buddhist temples that aim to attract attention, evoke curiosity, disseminate Buddhist values and teachings, and provide entertainment and education for urban populations whose predominantly negative image of Buddhism is generally associated with funerals, memorials, and money.

I discuss many examples of musical performances within temples in my book, ranging from a global telecast of a rock and pop concert held in 1994 in front of the world's largest wooden structure at Tōdaiji in Nara (Temple of the Great Buddha), to a performance of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony at the Shingon temple Anyōin in Tokyo, to a trio of priests who chant ancient sutras in a jazz club in Chiba (Nelson 2013). It has become much more common to find priests both young and old who have formed jazz trios, rock bands, and recorded music available online through temple or other websites.<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are also many concerts at temples using traditional instruments (*okoto*, *biwa*, *shamisen*, flute), but these are also part of a strategy to use the temple's location and setting to attract new members.

One priest in Tokyo, Rev. Tagai Kanshō, saw a brief rise in people coming to his Nichiren denomination temple, Kyōōji, largely as a result of efforts to create a community based on musical interests rather than traditional affiliations centered on ancestral veneration. With Kyōōji's splendid main altar as the background, Rev. Tagai hosted rap, jazz, new age musical performances as well as traditional Japanese dance (*buyō*), theater, and even hybrid genres. He developed rap songs using the *Lotus Sutra* (basic to all Nichiren temples) and, thanks to profiles broadcast on local as well as international stations, became well-known as the "rapping priest." However, after 10 years of hard work in promoting and performing at the temple, the pressure to produce an event of quality weighed heavily on his health and limited his interactions with the temple's core clientele (most of whom never attended these performances). Although the performances were not designed primarily to cultivate new temple members, Rev. Tagai said he was surprised that so few first-time visitors returned for workshops and a deeper engagement. As a result of this innovative experiment, he has returned to more traditional approaches to disseminating key values in his tradition, such as carving Buddhist statues or practicing a combination of chanting, sutra-writing, and spiritual discipline (*shugyō*) in one's everyday life (Nelson 2013).<sup>14</sup>

Some of the same features of innovation in Japanese temple Buddhism can be applied to other forms of Buddhism around Asia and the world. Now that various Buddhisms have traveled and become established globally, one might expect the dynamics of an experimental approach whenever a new venture, initiative, or program is designed to attract public attention. Whether it be an "urban-dharma" program at the San Francisco Zen Center, a meditation session atop a skyscraper in downtown São Paulo, or a Kalachakra empowerment conducted by the Dalai Lama in Washington D.C., the positioning of what is possible is contextualized by late modern social trends and an experimental approach to adapting diverse Buddhist teachings to contemporary lives.

### **Buddhist-inspired Activism**

Aided in part by new communication technologies and increased social and demographic mobility, as well as charismatic religious leaders like the Dalai Lama and Pope Francis, we are now witnessing a growing alignment between the mission of a religion

and civil society. It is not simply a matter of religions becoming more secularized; rather, the extension and application of religious values through social work, disaster relief, education, health care, and so on also gives a religious organization more visibility in a competitive spiritual marketplace. If a Mahayana-based Buddhism emphasizes “compassion” in some of its denominations, or “loving-kindness” is a theme prevalent in Theravada traditions, both practitioners and priests can activate these thematic resources in a public (and largely secular) sphere. An individual may want to embody these behaviors in order to be a better person and, at the same time, feel part of a broader moral and ethical imperative to lessen suffering in the world and thus activate some of the core teachings of historical Buddhism. The leaders of a temple can sense this concern among parishioners and the larger community, then promote events (such as rituals, programs, concerts, or other performances) that capitalize on the trend while at the same time linking the present day to Buddhist histories and traditions.

It has become commonplace for the term “engaged Buddhism” to refer to examples of activism and applied ethics among Buddhist priests, temples, and practitioners. Rather than rehash critiques raised in my book that point to the limited, misleading, and outdated nature of this term (Nelson 2013: 128), I will here emphasize a more accurate and useful concept: Buddhist-inspired activism. The word “inspired” is important because it calls attention to values and concepts that are deemed amenable to activism, and it evokes the diversity of Buddhist traditions out of which this selection occurs. Since we know it takes actors to initiate activism, the new term restores agency to the process. Emphasizing “inspired” also positions this type of Buddhist practice within a range of other experimental approaches, including the selective and strategic use of key concepts to achieve particular goals. Thus, “Buddhist-inspired activism” can help identify and analyze actions and policies based upon Buddhist traditions that exhibit a pragmatic, experimental approach towards fostering social change.

Buddhist-inspired activism in Japan and elsewhere may still represent a small percentage of how most institutions operate, and yet it is safe to say that many practitioners believe their Buddhist practice and affiliation makes the world a better place. Even during Japan’s draconian Edo period (1600–1867) when the state’s temple registration system effectively shackled communities to their local temples, a priest’s role expanded to include the resolution of disputes, the distribution of shared resources, compliance with governmental edicts, shelter to victims of domestic violence, permission to travel, and so on (see Covell 2005: 95–108). Later, after the Meiji revolution (1866–68) ended feudalism and embarked on rapid modernization from 1870 onward, temples representing several denominations reorganized along state mandates and provided schools, day-care facilities, orphanages, clinics, and so on for people of all social classes.

Today, this integration of Buddhist values and socio-political action continues in Japan and elsewhere around the world. Despite the demands placed on them by their clientele, and the often negative perceptions of their role in society as high-paid ritual performers at funerals and memorial services, some Japanese priests with vision, courage, and creativity (not to mention thick skins to deflect criticism) have shifted the weight of these burdens and refocused their mission. Even to many Japanese, it may seem odd for a Buddhist priest to devote time and resources to situations better handled by state or municipal agencies, but, as we have just seen, there are historical

precedents to support this approach. Similar to past initiatives, today's priests and lay practitioners still draw freely from texts and practices to address in Buddhist terms those complex social and personal issues conditioned by social forces like consumerism, technology, bureaucracy, and corporate restructuring. However, at their disposal are new means of communicating these ideas far and wide. They can disseminate their agendas and initiatives to a potentially broad audience and benefit from contact with activists outside the temple, and sometimes from outside Japan.

Since the passage of the 1998 Special Nonprofit Activities Law, non-governmental (NGO) and non-profit (NPO) organizations have proliferated through all sectors of Japanese society, including Buddhist denominations. As a response to the dismal performance of governmental relief agencies following the Kobe earthquake in 1995, the law ensures equal opportunity for gaining legal status by limiting bureaucratic discretion and discrimination against applicants. It also allows temples to create initiatives and organizations both inside and outside their immediate location that tackle pressing social, economic, and political issues of all kinds.

Until the “triple disaster” of March 3, 2011—when a massive earthquake and tsunami devastated coastal communities and caused the meltdown of a nuclear reactor—Japan's social problems were persistently predictable. The main issues included a high suicide rate (“one death every 16 min”), bullying in schools and businesses, elder care, rising domestic violence, demographic shifts leading to depopulation of rural areas, right-wing efforts to promote historical and constitutional revisionism—all taking place within the context of a prolonged economic recession (1991–2002, “the lost decade”). My book surveys many examples where Buddhist priests have committed resources to the issues mentioned above, as well as new problems that have emerged following the triple disaster. We might expect that key Buddhist values such as practicing compassion or alleviating suffering would be central to activist initiatives, and yet, in the many interviews with priests I conducted, no specific ideology or theme emerged as a way to attract attention and participants. Instead, the work of priests was generally low-key, persistent, networked in some cases and solitary in others—focused on one or two social problems that a priest or lay individual felt they could engage and perhaps influence in a positive way.

Needless to say, the dynamics of an experimental approach to Buddhism sketched in the earlier part of this discussion are operative in the wide range of activism we currently find in Japan. Even when a priest voiced a traditional rationale for his activism, closer observation of his activities, policies, affiliations, and so on revealed he was quite flexible in devising strategies that he hoped would lead to positive results. Some of these initiatives include grief counseling after the tsunami, consultations for health care and other social services, housing, psychological concerns, establishing “safe” venues (such as mobile cafés) where people can gather and talk freely, rebuilding damaged structures (including many temple buildings), and so on have all received media attention. There are also priests working against the remilitarization of Japan, against the nuclear power industry responsible for the 2011 Fukushima reactor meltdown, against gender discrimination within Buddhist denominations and society at large, and to advance human rights legislation for disparaged minorities in Japan (Ainu, Koreans, Chinese and *burakumin* in particular).

While all this sounds positive and in line with basic Buddhist values, there are other types of “Buddhist inspired activism” that privilege “protecting the *dharma*” over all else. Japanese Buddhists used this justification to support militarism during the war,

much to their lasting regret. Today, the 969 movement led by the monk Wirathu in Burma, or the “Buddhist Power Society” (Bodu Bala Sinha, or BBS) from Sri Lanka, have targeted religious “others” (Christians and Muslims) as a threat to not only Buddhism but also to the stability of national and social orders. In their eyes, the need to protect cherished religious values is a type of “engaged Buddhism” that surpasses secular laws and even religious accountability and ethics. Most crucially, this stance temporarily suspends Buddhist vows of non-violence regarding all living creatures. In both countries, churches and mosques have been attacked and burned, Muslim or Hindu neighborhoods have been ransacked and sometimes torched, and violent confrontations have led to injuries and deaths of Rohingya Muslims in the Sittwe region of Myanmar.<sup>15</sup> Based in part on these recent developments, the utility and relevance of emphasizing “experimentation” within diverse Buddhist traditions holds analytical weight. It also helps promote understanding about motivations, agendas, available resources (including funding), and the agency of key monks who direct these harmful activities.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has advocated a perspective that highlights an “experimental” approach for religious practice and affiliation. Other terms and concepts may be equally valid when surveying contemporary religious (and political) affairs, yet the rubric of “experimental” religion provides a credible cohesiveness when framing and interpreting doctrines, beliefs, institutions, and practitioners. For one thing, the term opens up a range of inquiry that must necessarily encompass and employ interdisciplinary tools of investigation. Texts, networks, education, economics, and sociocultural trends and contexts are all vital to this type of scholarship, not to mention first-hand observations gained through ethnographic methods.

“Experimentation” also emphasizes the agency of individuals in shaping their personal religious practices and beliefs, as well as in formulating institutional policies designed to advance key religious themes, strategic participation in the public sphere, or enhance revenue flow to temples and denominations. In all cases, remaining alert to both individual and organizational strategies helps identify how (religious) resources provide traction for advancing specific agendas. While these are generally positive and broadly humane, it is also possible that religious experimentation can lead to disruption and violence. Much more attentive work needs to be done if scholars of contemporary religions are to keep pace with rapid social change and the seemingly inexhaustible energy of individuals who shape their religions in experimental ways.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Although I use “identity” as a singular noun, it is a concept that needs to be plural in order to hold ethnographic value. An individual enacts multiple roles in the course of a regular day that may seem contradictory or in tension with a coherent and unified sense of self. The “good Christian” banker or stockbroker may privilege financial stability and shareholder returns over the lives of employees who are downsized or fired. Similarly, a protective mother of a small child may be stridently against liberalizing immigration laws for mothers and children coming to the U.S. from developing nations.

<sup>2</sup>The anthropologist Clifford Geertz summarized this tendency as an ability “to hold religious beliefs rather than be held by them” (Geertz 1971, 17).

<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

<sup>4</sup>Although I will use the term “Buddhism” for convenience, it is vitally important to consider it as a plural noun, similar to “deer” or “people.” By adding an “s” or “-ies” to the singular categories that describe the world’s religions, we quickly move into the diversity, complexity, tensions, and contradictions that characterize religions in contemporary societies.

<sup>5</sup>At their core, both “experimental” and “experiment,” as well as the original meaning of “experience,” are all concerned with inquiry, exploration, and, as noted above, observation. In a controlled experiment (such as a proof, test, or trial), some element of change is introduced into a system whose existing components are known and predictable. The researcher then observes what happens when this independent variable interacts with known constants. I find this a fitting metaphor for the situation of contemporary Buddhism in Japan, where independent variables from outside traditional religious systems are forcing change, rethinking, and adaptation, as well as precipitating defense and survival strategies.

<sup>6</sup>The characteristics of “experimental religion” are derived from interactions between several empirical sources. First, teaching religious studies in the San Francisco Bay Area provides access to a wealth of religious institutions, practices, and beliefs. My classes incorporate fieldwork assignments that require students to become “participant observers” and report on their findings. The diversity and breadth of this research has been nothing short of amazing. Second, I have been studying the Japanese religious “landscape” since the late 1970s and have had a front-row seat to all kinds of innovations that can be found in denominations with very long histories as well those freshly arrived on the scene. Third, extensive travel in 2013–2014 helped me see that individuals affiliated with Hinduism and Islam are no strangers to experimentation, especially in places like Bali, Central Java, urban and rural Turkey, and urban India. Finally, I am indebted to many colleagues (including the guest editor of this issue) for their sophisticated and nuanced publications that advance our collective understanding about the role of individuals in shaping religious practice and institutions.

<sup>7</sup>A bit later in this discussion, I will reference an experimental trend among certain Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Myanmar that is caustic, racist, and has led to the destruction of property and human life.

<sup>8</sup>A good case in point is the “meditation gym” titled MNDFL found in central Manhattan. See the Atlantic Monthly’s short video about how the organization works and presents itself to contemporary urban millennials. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqWTApRVQIU>

<sup>9</sup>It should also be mentioned that although a particular denomination has little power to thwart innovative competition in the religious “marketplace,” it does have the ability to criticize and marginalize individual priests within the denomination. A case in point was the “Priests’ Fashion Show” held in 2006 at a large True Pure Land temple in Tokyo. Some twenty thousand people attended the 3-days event, billed as a festival about sustainability. The highlight was a multi-denominational parade of priests in their finest robes walking in front of the temple’s main altar while accompanied by hip-hop drumming and electronic music. A number of conservative True Pure Land priests within Tokyo and the nation were highly critical of the non-traditional use of the main altar area, with the result that the young priest who organized the event was disciplined and dismissed

<sup>10</sup>Recent publications representing many kinds of Buddhism exemplify some of the characteristics mentioned above. We have dramatic accounts of monks questioning and leaving their teachers in Tibetan Buddhism (Batchelor 2011), individuals accusing Zen, Theravada, or Tibetan teachers of sexual and other moral improprieties (Oppenheimer 2013; Downing 2002), women challenging sexism and gender discrimination within Buddhist institutions and teachings (Fowles 2014, Gross 1992), the use of violence to justify “Buddhist” agendas (Jerryson 2011), racist attitudes among Buddhist scholars (Hickey-Wakoh 2010) and so forth. These examples indicate that innovation and experimentation within Buddhist traditions is not always constructive (a topic we will return to in a moment) and may extend to multiple denominations, schools, institutions and individuals.

<sup>11</sup>Japan’s so-called “new religions” (such as Sōka Gakkai, Shinnyoen, or Risshō Kōseikai) were especially quick to capitalize on the Internet to attract the attention of people seeking community based on shared interests rather than family traditions or residential proximity to a temple.

<sup>12</sup>Starting as a tiny company in 2007, Rev. Hayashi Kazuma came to the Tokyo area because he was the second son of a priest in rural Gunma prefecture and therefore had little chance to assume the leadership of his family temple. Thanks almost entirely to the Internet—and building upon his knowledge about individuals without strong religious ties living in cities—he has carved out a viable and relatively inexpensive alternative to the costly temple and mortuary company (*sōgisha*) monopoly on funerals and posthumous names. On his website, *obosan.com* (*obōsan* means ‘priest’), a number of profiles broadcast on leading media channels serve as testament to his entrepreneurial spirit. The company sends free-lance Buddhist priests to officiate at funerals and memorials, cutting out the temple and mortuary network. In a rather ironic twist of fate, he rocketed to nationwide attention thanks to a brief mention in a rather sensationalistic but much cited *New York Times* article titled, “In Japan, Buddhism May be Dying Out” (Ohnishi 2008).

<sup>13</sup>The 2011 film, *Abraxas no Matsuri* (the Festival of Abraxas), portrayed a young Zen priest afflicted by depression and despair who believed that performing thrash-rock music would contribute to his salvation.

<sup>14</sup>Whether or not an attempt at religious innovation or experimentation proves “successful” is not quickly assessed. Even if a big event goes off with no problems and has full attendance, how “success” is judged depends on many local dynamics. Some activities, such as using a temple for musical and theatrical performances, may take considerable time before a priest decides that the results were not what he had in mind for promoting his temple’s financial sustainability. Whatever happens, the basic process of creating a strategy that utilizes existing resources to enhance the standing or position of a religious institution is not necessarily compromised by failures. In fact, a failure may motivate a return to the “drawing board” where an examination of what worked and what didn’t can shape the next version of religious experimentation.

<sup>15</sup>For more details, see the 2014 special issue titled, “Invoking Religion in Violent Acts and Rhetoric” edited by (Michael Jerryson and Margo Kitts 2014) in the *Journal of Religion and Violence*.

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