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STUDYING BUDDHISM AS IF IT WERE NOT
ONE MORE AMONG THE RELIGIONS

LUIS O. GÓMEZ

Preliminaries

The present paper began as a response to a panel titled “The Academic Discipline of Buddhist Studies in North America,” presented at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies in Atlanta in June 2008. My efforts, however, soon became less reactive, and led to a reflection on the presuppositions that have set the direction for the study of Buddhism in the Academy, particularly in North America.¹

In the interest of disclosure, I must begin by stating the obvious: the title of this paper is meant to be facetious – the intent of the irony being to call attention to the way in which the study of Buddhism in the Academy tends to be self-centered, treating Buddhism as a phenomenon so unique or self-contained that we need not imagine the subject (or the multiple subjects) of our intellectual endeavors as in any way interconnected with broader problems of human behavior, culture and life in society that obviously lie behind our notions about Buddhism and our notions about the task of the scholar.

¹ Needless to say, the panel participants implicitly use the term North America to refer only to Canada and the United States of America. They also failed to reflect on the parallelism and divergences between the academic and religious histories of both countries, or the odd fact that these histories and cultures are dominated by the cultural preferences of middle-class, educated, mostly liberal, Anglophone North Americans.

I realize that this observation is not new – it is, after all, behind the now common complaint about traditional Western “Buddhology.” I do not wish to return to what arguably would be best described in the colloquial language as a “gripe,” and a polemical stance at times based on a caricature of the efforts of the founding fathers and mothers of Buddhology, their methods, and their contributions (without which we would not be where we are). What I would like to do is try to understand, rather than polemicize.

We need to understand the temptation to see the academic study of Buddhism as a discipline with clear boundaries, a unique subject or well-defined field, and, in its most extreme forms a self-contained intellectual endeavor not open to cross-fertilization with other intellectual projects. This tendency is in many ways the central theoretical issue behind the papers in this panel, because it has shaped the institutional manifestations of Buddhist Studies, it has shaped the real or imagined conflicts between the Academy and Buddhist “theology,” and it is the focus of Freiburger’s critical paper.

The issues behind the problem of defining the field

This temptation possibly arises from four sources.

(1) The study of literate religions and of geographically defined cultural spheres, by the very nature of the way they are imagined, tends to create circumscribed spaces – of material textuality, language, and physical spaces. “Religious Studies” (more appropriately, the academic study of religion and religions), like “Area Studies” (academic studies organized around special competences in particular linguistic and cultural spheres), tend to be by their very nature more or less closed spheres of academic discourse. Thus, the academic study of Buddhism, which by necessity combines elements of both “Religious Studies” and “Area Studies,” tends to

appear in specific places in the academic imaginary and within academic institutional structures.²

We are tempted to accept the internal assumptions of identity and coherence held by apologists for the tradition, despite our knowledge to the contrary, perhaps because it would be difficult to find an institutional home if our public face were as nuanced – not to say, as tentative and blurred – as our scholarly understanding of cultural and religious identity.³ A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of the academic study of so-called Abrahamic religions (to make use of the self-referential term that reinforces this identity), despite their apparent closeness to general assumptions about religion in North America.

Needless to say, the apparent transparency (to North American eyes) of identity and belief in Abrahamic religions is deceptive; but institutionally it spares the academic teacher and students of these traditions the permanent identity crisis we feel in Buddhist Studies. As any historian worth his or her salt knows, “our” Abrahamic traditions and our past can be as foreign to us (not exclusively to the younger generations) as those of other lands. But we can ignore, at least in presenting our public and institutional face, this distance, pretending that the study of our own culture is transparently the study of what we are. That is not so easy to do in the case of Buddhism or Asia – for historical as well as sociopolitical reasons.

(2) The apparent and undeniable sense of otherness generally felt by a North American observer of Buddhism is in fact the sec-

² It should be noted that this description applies mostly to the North American academic enterprise. The same is not completely true of Europe, where the picture is more complicated. Disciplines like *Religionswissenschaft*, *histoire des religions*, etc., are not exact parallels to Religious Studies, and traditional philology, Tibetology, Sinology, Indian and Buddhist Studies, etc. are generally not conceived as “Area Studies.”

³ Such assumptions are also held by detractors of the tradition and by those who have found some semblance of neutrality in their discourse about Buddhism.

ond reason for our difficulties defining ourselves as students of Buddhism in the Academy.

(3) This sense of otherness generates a reaction in the opposite direction – which has become part of many apologetic moves, both by believers and academicians, the move to “naturalize” Buddhism in the Western Academy.

The clash between, on the one hand, those who, despite their sophistication in the study of culture, continue to see Buddhism as other (the majority, I suspect) and, on the other hand, those who, despite their historical and philological sophistication, would like to see Buddhism as altogether “not other,”⁴ is one of the roots of our ambivalence towards Buddhist Studies.

As long as Buddhism is seen as wholly other, it is not threatening, it remains an exotic or archaic, if not arcane, subject of study. Under these conditions it can stay on the margins of mainstream intellectual conversations and the marketplace of ideas – in this way we can cover “Buddhism” with the protective cloak of neutrality worn by so many academic disciplines.

As long as Buddhism is seen as wholly **not** other, it can be protected from historical scrutiny; and one can adopt new voices, not recognized in the tradition’s past, without having to account for or justify the transformation.

(4) These two extreme moves intertwine with a fourth factor: the attempt to separate religion from the academy and the academy from religious apologetics. The underlying ideal or goal – academic neutrality with a modicum of objectivity – is commendable and worth preserving, but it is an ideal impossible to reach (as so many other ideals are likewise never reached, it is a beacon, a North Star, not a destination); and we would do well to recognize this fact.

⁴ Needless to say, this attempt to “naturalize” Buddhism is not always successful – it is not easy to transcend the effect of the mystification of Buddhism, which has served both the interest of the religious apologist and the interest of some academic students of Buddhism.

The distance we try to create between our work as scholars and the tradition is much greater than the distance a social scientist is required to maintain from his or her social and political ideals. We maintain a greater distance in the study of Buddhism for fear of offending our colleagues in the Academy. And for fear that our work may be confused with the program – conscious, unconscious, or surreptitious – of the Christian scholar. We do not want to be perceived as proselytizing.

Conveniently for us, it is in fact a common myth of the Buddhist identity that Buddhism is not a religion as such, and that, therefore, it does not pursue a program of conversion. This leads to a confusion regarding the real distinction between the way in which, on the one hand, Buddhist traditions have advocated their own cause, and, on the other hand, the way in which some of the Abrahamic religions have adopted exceptionalism, exclusivism and proselytistic strategies as integral and structural elements in their self-definition. Understanding the strategies of apologetics and the tactics of conversion in Buddhism is in fact part of our task as scholars, a task that requires, obviously, that we recognize the presence of such strategies even as we recognize the peculiar way in which many (though not all by far) forms of Buddhism tend to blur the program or enterprise of advocating the cause of their religious beliefs and practices. The difference between the Buddhist forms and the way other religions set out to defend and expand their influence requires subtle and problematic distinctions, but their subtlety does not allow us to pretend that Buddhism is less of a religion or lacks a will to convert and persuade others, and, above all, that it has no interest in arguing for the falsehood of other religious beliefs.

The consequences have been that for long the study of Buddhism was conducted as if it were not a manifestation of the life of religious communities, but some sort of abstraction, either a historically disembodied textual tradition or an ideal, rarefied world of ideas seen alternatively as a world of “non-discursive” (and hence

unassailable) experiences and as a very subtle rationality, somehow consonant with but surpassing scientific argumentation.

These attitudes thwart our will and capacity to reflect on and debate the purpose of our scholarly enterprise.

The papers

Now, how are we to begin the necessary examination of our discipline or field? The papers under review offer several models. Although their contribution is far from complete, the papers open several avenues of inquiry, and above all reflect, albeit at times indirectly, some of the identity problems of the field.

The papers here published as a set are accurate mirrors of “the field of Buddhist Studies” (and I use the phrase without any intent of closing debate on the three terms and their possible referent – Freiburger’s paper offers an excellent opening into this debate). As an example of the actual practice of Buddhist Studies (or the practices that constitute the field) the panel, and the resulting collection of papers, offer a plethora of facts, they present a cross-section of points that imitate the field of Buddhist Studies, in that, in the end they leave open the question of the boundaries and goals of the field – other than to mention the names of the institutions that support our work or to mention the languages we study. In short, the papers suggest an *extensional* definition of the field, but do not offer the *intensional* definition that Freiburger is seeking.

I will first indulge in some reflections on my colleagues’ papers as examples of modes of knowledge as a way of clarifying the nature of Buddhist Studies as organized, rational discourse.

The papers range from collections of facts to a very thoughtful reflection on the nature of the field of inquiry that we call Buddhist Studies. They reflect several of the major modes of organized, rational knowledge, namely, knowledge as the accumulation of observations, knowledge as the assimilation of previously accumulated observations (assimilation being here a combined process of

understanding, explanation and prediction), and dissemination of knowledge.

By accumulation, I mean the counting and collection of facts.

This activity is not as mindless as it sounds (or at least it should not be mindless). Of all three styles of knowledge, this is the one that comes the closest to the acquisition and possession of knowledge; it gives us the strongest sense of control and possession; but, beyond this dimension of epistemological avarice, it also helps preserve what others may find useful in other ways, it serves to preserve and organize so we can further digest knowledge.

Anyone familiar with stamp collecting, or, more appropriately, bird watching, will know that accumulation and ordering of data can lead to something more than the mere gathering of data. A shepherd who counts his sheep, does so not simply to keep himself busy, celebrate his success or fall asleep; he must make sure that none have run astray – counting and collecting therefore can serve as a way of preserving and caring for something of value.

But the shepherd may also observe the reproductive cycle of sheep and thus increase his flock and his income; and to be able to observe the most effective way of breeding he must also keep count of his sheep.

In the study of Buddhism, some of us sometimes collect and count, and do so in order to preserve, whereas others among us, or the same persons at other times, will use this scholarly counting in order to account for patterns, motifs and paradigms.

However, if we return to the example of the smart shepherd, turn him into a cow maid or a cowherd, and have one of them observe the course of cowpox, we begin to see an example of a more subtle assimilation of data. For, this person could observe what would later lead to the systematic development of vaccines – once knowledge of cowpox is generalized to knowledge of smallpox, and this, in turn is generalized to knowledge of other infectious diseases, a different sort of knowledge takes shape. At this point,

our not-so-fictional cowherds and cow maids have laid the groundwork for the scientist who will theorize on the mechanism behind diseases and inoculation, and later the natural mechanisms behind both phenomena.

Thus, one can go from counting or description to analysis and generalization and to prediction (which in the Humanities is almost invariably retrospective, and hence not prediction in the strict sense of the word). Nothing as dramatic occurs in Buddhist Studies, but one can theorize on both the nature and function of religious behaviors and on the nature and methodology of the scholarly work that makes Buddhist traditions its focus of study.

In the papers under consideration one can almost see the gradient from one form of knowledge to the next, if we order the papers in the sequence Prebish, Cabezón, Freiburger.

Lastly, of course, one shares the fruits of other modes of knowing, we disseminate, we teach, we participate in conferences, and by doing so hope to change the way people study our subject matter. Needless to say, the conference papers and their subsequent publication exemplify this last form of knowledge.

In the academic study of Buddhism we accumulate to preserve and organize, and this is good. And if we do this critically, that is, not just count books or manuscripts, but compare them so as to produce new texts (the philologist), then that is even better.

But, we seldom develop applied knowledge, if ever (as in the example of the shepherd and or the vaccine); but we do theorize and generalize (I suspect skipping too quickly the intermediate step of understanding the processes that we study), we generalize about Buddhism and hopefully about religion and culture generally. This is, of course, the aspect of the discipline that was not well represented in this panel.

However, we do generalize and apply generalizations to new knowledge, that is what we call method after all – method is of

course mostly prescriptive rather than predictive, and occasionally it is retrospective.

The absence of explicit reflection on method does not imply that Buddhist Studies does not involve disciplines. Here I use the word in a sense not noted by Freiburger, discipline as rigor, as reflection arising from a critical stance... even if the rigor is not formulated in a clear disciplinary methodological plan.

Particulars

As already noted, Prebish's contribution is primarily descriptive. However, the description goes beyond the numbers assembled in the paper. Of the three papers, his paper is, in some peculiar way, the one that best reflects the field. The panel as a whole does something similar, but Prebish's paper, best exemplifies the way in which the field is diverse and disconnected.

If one could find fault in Prebish's paper it is to be found in two points. The paper does not offer a means by which its descriptive statistics could be used to generate statistical analysis for the claims of trends and tendencies (too many categories of data may render this goal unattainable). And, second, the data collected does not include much on the interface between Buddhist Studies and other disciplines in either the institutions in which the discipline of Buddhist Studies is practiced, in the work of individual scholars, or in the training of the scholars of future generations.

Prebish also highlights implicitly the fact – still to be understood – that Buddhist Studies scholars do not contribute much to theoretical work in other fields. It is not clear that Buddhist Studies has much of an impact (at least, we have no measure of such an impact) on the study of culture and society generally, or on the study of other religious traditions. Perhaps this tells us something about Buddhism and the problems involved in studying Buddhism. To the problems mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one may add an additional factor that was suggested to me by Prebish's pa-

per: "Buddhism" itself is not, cannot be, the subject of study for a single discipline, let alone a single individual. It is a conglomerate of traditions so complex that even the study of one fraction of it is enough to consume most of the energies and attention of many scholars – not much time is left to seek interfaces and implications that may produced the desired cross-fertilization. It is in this sense perhaps that Buddhist Studies, without constituting a single discipline or field has its own peculiar identity.

Prebish also notes that in his pool of North American scholars a number of Buddhist scholars (or should we say "scholars studying some aspect of Buddhist traditions and literatures"?) have some sort of commitment to Buddhism; and he notes that the relative number does not seem to have changed from the time of his first survey to the time of his most recent survey. This already raises the issue that seems to be most problematic to the authors of all three papers, and which seems to be especially characteristic of North American Buddhist Studies.

The tightrope that seems to be the only road to the academic study of religion in North America, especially in departments of so-called "Religious Studies," is represented by a quotation from the departmental policy at the University of Calgary. The Department, we are told, "neither sanctions nor censures religious behavior nor belief." One can already see that the neutral, or middle of the road, perspective can be advocated only as long as we imagine two extremes: advocacy or rejection. In other words, the neutral position is defined by the religious, especially Abrahamic, definition of truth: one is either for or against a particular truth claim.

Calgary's departmental statement continues by asserting that teaching and research must be "based on the assumption that a critical analysis of religious systems and practices is basic to the study of social and cultural phenomena." This part of the statement defines the aspirational goal of the enterprise: to produce knowledge about social and cultural phenomena. But, is this satisfactory? I would argue that, not only is this insufficient for the so-called

practitioner or believer, it is not enough from a purely scholarly point of view; because it assumes that one can understand religious behavior without raising the question of whether religion is something more than social and cultural phenomena, and that one can understand our material without raising issues of truth.

I do not advocate a simple answer to these questions; yet, it seems to me that it is incumbent on us to raise them, and consider them. Yet, the institutional, historical and socio-political framework of North American secular universities constrains our freedom in exploring such issues.

The trap (which, in the interest of fairness, one must recognize was inherent to the religious enterprise before it became an academic problem) is that “truth” or the possibility that at least some religious phenomena are unique or *sui generis* are ideas that seem to lead inevitably to forced personal choices. As the Calgary statement expresses it, even as it denies its appropriateness in the Academy: teaching in the university is “not designed to foster personal religious commitment or to evaluate to that end the relative merits of various religious practices, traditions, and points of view.” These two activities of fostering and evaluation are inherent to most, if not all, forms of religious discourse.

This quotation evidences a frequent occurrence of key problematic words and ideas that reappeared in the remaining papers. Some of these words surfaced again during the discussion following the panel presentation at the XVth Congress: fostering, commitment, confession, evaluation, sanction and censure, belief, practice, a practicing Buddhist, a believer, a devout Buddhist. Behind these apparently transparent, but in fact complex (if not confused and obscure and simplistic) terms lie the questions that form a good part of the subject of inquiry in Buddhist Studies, and surprisingly, they are bandied about without critical reflection, usually to tell us that these are not within the purview of critical academic reflection for the student of Buddhist traditions.

It is difficult to consider these questions if one has a strong investment in Buddhist truths, but a strong investment in truth is, in fact, unavoidable, for the scholar as well as for the “believer.” As I shall argue presently, to claim otherwise is to be at best naively optimistic and at worst disingenuous. Thus, even seemingly narrow or tangential issues hide issues of authority and professional (as well as religious) identity.

In what appears to be a digression, Cabezón raises the issue of the impact of the Internet on Buddhist Studies. This digression is perhaps only a passing or casual remark, yet, it reminds us of how jealous we can be of our own sense of order and control over truth. In defense of Internet users, let us not forget that the Internet is not the Academy; it is far from being committed to the ideals of academic disciplines, or, for that matter to the ideals of the Calgary statement. But, being free from the scholar’s fantasy of ordered neutrality, it offers a richer sampling of the many ways in which academic and religious discourses diverge and intertwine.

Cabezón seems to be, like many academics, wary or leery of the influence of the Net, especially on teaching, but also on research. One may invoke Michael Gorman’s contention that the “net is like a huge vandalized library.”⁵ I find the metaphor at best puzzling, and I am not persuaded that we need fear the Internet as a negative influence on critical research or higher education.

Libraries, like much of the material that is the center of our activity as scholars, are fragmented and unwieldy collections – as much as our activity and “production” is fragmented and centrifugal. Integration, order, authority are not only negotiable, they are fluid and fleeting. It should not surprise us that the Internet, and for that matter, our own sense of “the field” are collections of broken pieces – we do not need vandals for this. Scholarly work is

⁵ Ironically this is found in an article about cataloging, where it is assumed that the act of cataloging is in some way a natural integration of knowledge. Gorman, Michael. “The Corruption of Cataloging,” *Library Journal* 120 (September 15, 1995): 34.

not always as cohesive as we like to think – if it were, perhaps, scholarly research would not be necessary. After all, the impulse to investigate is born to a great extent from an awareness of gaps, inconsistencies, peculiarities that make no sense.

Cabezón also speaks of “trends,” borrowing a term from statistics (using the word “statistics,” as before, in a soft sense). The word “trend” is a convenient tool to express a supposition about the future without committing oneself to a prediction that may be challenged or subject to rigorous testing. But predictions are often (as they have been since the days of the oracle bones and are still today in the era of opinion polls) ways of influencing outcomes or, more humbly, ways of expressing a wish. This is the way I understand the word when applied to the question of the future of Buddhist “theology” in the Western Academy. Furthermore, even if “Buddhist Divinity Schools” should arise and succeed, their presence would not resolve the tension between “theology” (“Divinity”) and the critical-historical study of Buddhist practices and institutions. The tension is inherent to the subject matter, and not only in North America, where it is of course rooted in the history of Anglophone North American.

More importantly, even the existence of such schools would not necessarily lead to a satisfactory solution of the parallel problem: the presence of academicians, who are not avowed theologians or theologians by profession or avocation, but are nonetheless practitioners of some form of the Buddhist religion.

One thing that struck me about Cabezón’s paper (and I trust by now it will be evident that I do not mean this pejoratively) is that it is prescriptive at the same time that it is rhetorically descriptive. It is evidently very different from Prebish’s presentations, where, it seems to me, prescription is by implication, not necessarily by intention. Thus, Cabezón begins to raise the issues that were either seen as non-relevant or skirted in Prebish’s paper. These are in part, but not wholly, the issues raised by Freiberger.

Freiberger's paper is explicitly normative or prescriptive. He calls for a redefinition of the field in a move that is frankly corrective. Freiberger seems concerned with the field being some times a hodgepodge of projects, not a discipline, but a vaguely defined field of inquiry. Buddhist Studies, he notes, is not "a discipline." But one wonders at times whether he realizes that the identity and the methods of well-established disciplines are constantly re-negotiated; they do not happen without constant flux and contention. His point however is well taken, even if it requires some fine-tuning: Buddhist Studies is at one extreme (if it is not almost an outlier) in the continuum of disciplines. Buddhist Studies, like Area Studies and Religious Studies, is defined by its objects of study, rather than by its methods; and those objects are bound to the cultures where Buddhism arose, and bound by the intellectual traditions that defined rational reflection in and on those cultures.

Freiberger describes what he calls the "rhetoric" and "boundary work" of disciplines, concepts that he uses as the axis for his criticism of the notion of Buddhist Studies as a discipline. I would add to his apposite and perceptive observations on the problem of discipline formation as intellectual and social processes that these processes are always fluid – even in the well-established disciplines. Note, for instance, the shift in biology from taxonomy to molecular biology and evolutionary biology. The "Human Sciences" have undergone similar, arguably equally dramatic, shifts.

Perhaps Buddhist Studies has not always kept abreast with such shifts, but it is nonetheless a contended field at least in North America (as the region is implicitly defined by the authors of all four papers). This contention – for influence, authority and identity – is implicitly acknowledged in our use of the language of conquest and rule. Fields have boundaries and territories, they can lay claim to particular territories, they can be threatened or have to be defended from the incursions (real or imagined) of another discipline. And, they may be absorbed into another discipline.

The language of identity is present throughout Freiburger's paper, and it shows in a peculiarly interesting and relevant way in his reflections on the "disgust" expressed by Rhys Davids when speaking about Buddhist Tantra. In his observations on this disgust, Freiburger points to an important issue in the study of religion: the extent to which our judgments, however carefully cloaked in the language of rationality they may seem, are shaped by our own sense of what is proper, normal or healthy. Are we not disgusted by whatever offends our sense of moral order or, by whatever threatens our sense of bodily and moral integrity? To what extent is the struggle to define a discipline parallel to the struggle to generate, construct, and protect our own sense of individual and social identity? Can we observe with an even mind what appears to our own cultural eyes as bizarre, tolerating it long enough to reach an understanding that is fair to the human beings behind the observed behavior or belief?

This to me is not strictly speaking a religious, much less, a methodological, issue. It is more a question of fundamental, unexamined attitudes, deeply ingrained in all of us. Or, to put it in other words: feelings of threat are an integral part of human life, not simply a matter of religious belief or of scholarly endeavor, and they are feelings that affect our scholarly work as much as they shape other aspects of our social and psychological life. What is more, these are feelings that gentleman scholars do not like to admit.

Hence, part of the problem facing the study of Buddhism in the Academy is our reluctance to admit that many of the apparently methodological issues arise from certain assumptions about what is right and proper, feelings about pulchritude and propriety, what is seemly and what is not. For instance, the panel did not raise (although the issue surfaced in the ensuing discussion) the question of whether it is "proper" or not, and if not, why not, for a scholar to offer incense and flowers before a Buddha image in the morning and deliver in the afternoon a well researched paper at the XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies.

At this point in the discussion I am not so much interested in arguing for or against the “propriety” of such peculiar behavior. I only wish to note that it is very difficult to discuss the matter with any degree of equanimity – so much so, that the issue is seldom discussed, it is “resolved” without careful reflection. Note that this question is prior to the question of whether it makes sense for this scholar to “do theology” with his scholarship, or “do theology” in the classroom or at a scholarly conference.

Freiberger wonders, rhetorically, whether one has to be a politician to be a political scientist. The answer has a simple answer, no. But the question is simplistic, and hence the reply (the simple, obvious and categorical “no”) rings true only provisionally, and perhaps in the end is only deceptively true. After all, a person who has not experienced the thrill of politics or who believes politics is irrelevant and absurd, a figment of the imagination, would be hardly motivated to study Political Science.

I would add by the way, and not simply to be facetious, but because it is relevant, that one could advocate two parallel axioms: we do not want Political Science to be dominated by politicians, and we do not want politics to be dominated by political scientists.

In the same way one does not have to be a Buddhist (practitioner, believer, proselytizer, whatever) to be a student of Buddhist traditions, and above all, we do not want a field of Buddhist Studies dominated by Buddhists (whichever way we define the term). And, likewise, we do not want the practice of Buddhism dominated by scholars.

Even if some enlightened institution could open departments of Buddhist Studies dominated by well-meaning practitioners who could both defend their beliefs and keep academic neutrality, disagree among themselves and keep their composure, the field (to say nothing of the religious traditions themselves) would become stale and sterile in the absence of alternative critical voices.

After all, departments of Political Science invite former or senior statesmen to teach, with the understanding, of course, that

their teaching is open to criticism; and occasionally, intelligent politicians consult political scientist with the understanding that it is the politician who will assume the responsibility of the political decision.

The problem has no simple solution (perhaps the obsession with a solution or resolution is the worst part of the problem); because the problem, tension or conflict is centered in the last two requirements: that the practitioner-turned-scholar be open to criticism, and that the scholar who is not in the role of practitioner defer to the practitioner in matters of practice. These requirements generate strong dissonances (of identity and authority, more than simply of cognition) for the religious person; but the dissonance is just as disquieting for the academician. I cannot see an easy way to overcome the natural tendency of the believer to attribute cynicism (if not arrogance) to the scholar's methodological suspicion, or for the scholar to interpret as naïveté or disingenuousness (if not arrogance) those motivations that appear to the believer as convictions born of a deep personal experience.

And yet, I would argue that there should be room (and there often is, despite all the arguments to the contrary) for Buddhist theology or the participation of practitioners in the Academy. The existence of some sort of compromise solution may be a natural outgrowth of the North American compromise between sectarian religion and religious tolerance (of sorts). What would be counter-productive (to both the Academy and Buddhist traditions) would be the use of religious authority as a basis for academic work (and decisions) and, above all, the appeal to such authority in academic teaching.

Furthermore, Buddhist Studies is not a science of inanimate objects, it cannot aspire to exist apart from the life of the tradition. Its disciplinary and scientific mission has as an inevitable side effect, if not as one of its objectives (and an important, though not the most important one) the fertilization of religious life. What makes the Academy unique is that this fertilization is a cross-fertilization,

that it is open to challenges from all rational voices. It is the preservation of these mechanisms for dialogue that is at the heart of the study of religion in the Academy. This open dialogue can be threatened by placing traditional voices in a privileged position, but it is also threatened by the exclusion of traditional voices or the exclusion of constructive theology as a rational endeavor; and it is also threatened by a wish to close the boundaries of the “field” or “discipline.” These boundaries are constantly negotiated precisely because the field is the place where we negotiate, constantly and necessarily, the nature of our subject matter.

Freiberger invokes Bruce Lincoln and Russell McCutcheon, with mixed approval, on the need for a clear and sharp distinction between the work of the historian (and the disciplines) and religious thought. He quotes McCutcheon’s pithy statement claiming that scholars of religion are “critics, not caretakers” of religious discourse. A point well taken, but requiring important qualifications. First, theologians are not necessarily caretakers, if by this is meant someone who serves as a mere custodian. Theologians can be, not only critical, but also committed to growth.

Secondly, the word “critic” has several meanings. I am sure the intent in the quote is not to describe the scholar as a professional faultfinder. One calls into question, critically, a particular understanding of a phenomenon or behavior, not simply because it is there to be criticized, but because one is interested in an alternative understanding – a possibility still open to a responsible theologian.

Apart from the peculiar meaning of “critic” as one who calls something into question, a critic also judges the merits and the value or truth of ideas and practices. There is no reason why the theologian could not have such a role. Similarly, a critic also evaluates and appreciates works of art or literature, or reflects on the meaning of his or her own critical program. There is no reason why the theologian could not serve any of these functions. Lastly, criticism for criticism’s sake (that is, to raise doubts) can benefit from

dialogue with those less inclined to think critically (in this sense of criticism).

McCutcheon further states that “scholarship is not constrained by whether or not devotees recognize its value for it is not intended to appreciate, celebrate, or enhance normative, dehistoricized discourses but, rather, to contextualize and redescribe them as human constructs.” Certainly one should not be constrained by the approval or disapproval of the believer, but one would hope this does not mean one should not be concerned with the opinion of the believer. In any attempt at understanding it is helpful to test one’s understanding of the other person by listening to that person.

Again, one must agree that the scholar is not there to celebrate (which does not mean he or she is not at liberty to do so). This is certainly true, but it is not the whole truth about the relationships between secular scholarship and religious thought. The historian does not have to appreciate, celebrate or enhance religious life, this is true, he or she does not HAVE to do so; but neutrality can go just so far before it becomes deaf or, if criticism is taken one step further, before it becomes the disgust we have noted before.

Furthermore, one cannot pretend that critical studies have no impact on religious life or the life of the religion, hence, a methodological constraint on appreciation can easily turn into a posture of deprecation, or a reluctance to celebrate, a posture that can easily make us look askance with contempt, and as one succeeds in abstaining from any enhancement, it is not so easy to avoid undermining.

The religious person deserves the opportunity to make a constructive use of criticism. The scholar faces the same problem that the theologian faces when he or she begins to feel like only he or she can speak about the truth or value of religious beliefs.

The believer may want to speak for Buddhism, and such a claim is a construct. As a comment from the floor stated, Buddhists want “to claim some of the ground... to speak for Buddhism.” What struck me about this comment, however, is that the same expres-

sion is heard sometimes in academic discourse, where the so-called neutral scholars, pretending to be safe because they believe they can speak with an authoritative voice without making truth claims about religion – a claim that seems to me absurd. But more than that, we have to ask ourselves what is meant by the metaphor of claiming some ground. What is meant by “claiming”? What is meant by “ground”? To say nothing of the qualifier “some of the” (which is in itself revealing of the impossibility of establishing the ground to begin with).

Lastly, we must recognize that the fact that the study of a religious tradition inevitably will lead us to some sort of religious reasoning, that is, to some sort of destructive or constructive or de-constructive speculation about religious truths, assumptions as to what is rational (read “proper and allowable” and within the parameters of good taste, of what is “becoming of” a scholar) and that it leads inevitably to some sort of theological claim. To say that something is a human construct inevitably is a theological statement.

Any one participating at meetings of the International Association of Buddhist Studies or of the (North) American Academy of Religion knows that a good number of papers, and a good number of participants, are religious, that a good number of papers are trying to prove some kind of religious point (some times under the guise of historical analysis). This is of course especially characteristic of Buddhist Studies in North America, but it has been true of Buddhist Studies in the English-speaking world since the inception of the discipline (or field, if you prefer).

Freiberger’s paper can be easily linked to one of the opening paragraphs in Prebish’s paper, where he paraphrases Ray Hart in asking the question of what exactly is the connection between religion and the scholarship of religion. Hart’s three options for Religious Studies (scholarship and the practice of religion each have “its ‘site’ and the two are not internally related, or the relation is completely open, or the study of religion presupposes practice, and

is undertaken to prepare for and enhance practice”) occur as the focus of debate in reflecting on the nature of Buddhist Studies. I can see how these three possibilities (which are very much in the spirit of abhidharma formalism) represent logical possibilities, but I am not persuaded that they represent actual attitudes and practices, or that the issue can be categorized so neatly.

Freiberger’s paper is in fact a good example of how these distinctions cannot be maintained. Freiberger applies the useful concept of boundary work, arguing against a real opposition between Religious Studies and Buddhist Theology. The illusory dispute, he argues, “results from the idea that both parties define the same discourse.” He views Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies as two distinct “disciplines.” Freiberger hints at another problem, however, and that is, that his fine distinction is often ignored, by both sides of this debate,

I agree that the distinction is valuable, but it has its limitations. One could be critical of a Buddhist Theology claiming that the Buddhist tradition says something about psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience or about any one of the natural sciences without validating those claims historically and scientifically – that is, the claims cannot be made without appealing to criteria *outside of theology*. Similarly, although in principle the academic study of religion cannot (and should not) speak to theological questions *directly* (that is, in the form of statements about theological truth), the fact that scholars do speak about what is or is not consistent or historically accurate places them in a peculiar relationship vis à vis theological truth claims, which makes neutrality difficult, if not impossible. In other words, even if the two “discipline” do not share the same discourse, the two discourses, inevitably, overlap.

Most religious traditions do make claims about their own history and claims about what believers actually do, as well as claims about what texts actually do. There the boundary has to be crossed.

Furthermore, it seems at least problematic to me to assume that there is no value in understanding religious thought from the in-

side, and not simply by explaining it from the outside. By inside I do not mean the inside of the committed believer, but the inside of the processes of imagination, belief and the construction of meaning – processes that, arguably, may be peculiar or unique to the religious imagination.

As I read a religious text, I often need to “think religiously” – I need to empathetically attempt to think like the religious person, even if it is not my preferred way of thinking. This effort lies astride the boundaries of commitment, excitement (the thrill of understanding and sharing), and the equanimous observation of a critical mind. To understand I still have to imagine how a tradition, a particular form of discourse, or certain individuals construct meaning, how they think of their world and themselves; this includes reflecting on what a particular discourse, attitude or statement is “intending to make me believe.” There is, in many of the activities of the Human Sciences, and even in some of the Social Sciences, a rule of empathy (which should apply equally to communication with other scholars): one needs begin with the assumption that the person or persons who produce and participate in the human behavior under study have ways of making sense of their own behaviors, and that these ways of making sense are worth our attention and understanding – even if, in the end, we do not share them.

One has to remain astride the fence between understanding and disagreeing – this is at the heart of critical thinking. The so-called secular specialists of religion are trapped between these two equally problematic roles. On the one hand, they could take on the role of mouthpiece for the religion, or in its softer mode, as the true exegete for the religion. On the other, they could take on the role of the secular critic of religion. Either way they cannot avoid taking sides on a religious issue – or, if you will, on a “secular issue” (the historical and constructed nature of culture) which is nonetheless deleterious to the interests of some religious persons. One needs to retain the right to disagree, but one needs to zoom out of the

discussion to observe with empathy and equanimity the behavior (including their discourse) of religious persons.

It is not my intention here to defend the position of any such religious person, or, for that matter, of religion or a religion (whatever it might be). Rather, I only want to point out that we may have to live with the fact that religious and scholarly personae tend to be protean and amorphous, as well as often overlapping. As long as there are different kinds of secular scholars and as long as there are different kinds of religious scholars and as long as some scholars will have distinctly religious preferences (not to mention preferences hostile to religion), we will live in the midst of a conflict between religion and scholarship.

Furthermore, let us not forget that secular scholars who wish to define themselves as secular are already taking a religious stance that may clash with that of practitioners; religious scholars who wish to assume the role of scholar/believer inevitably will have to account for, or defend their position against, the views of those who understand differently the tradition they themselves cherish. And ostensibly neutral, like openly antireligious, scholars cannot act as if their work said nothing about religious truth. But the scholars who wish to follow the deceptively clear middle road of the secular scholar sympathetic to the tradition find themselves in a similar quandary. Of course one could imagine a scholar who is, or wishes to be, somehow within the tradition but also wishes to maintain his or her critical freedom. Such a scholar is faced, likewise, with the impossible task of fighting off (or denying his or her affiliation with) particular forms of the tradition at the same time that his or her work has implications as to the value (truth value, ethical value or some other value) of the tradition he or she studies. Each of these quandaries is different, yet similar. These are the risks we take any time we talk about religion.

Concluding Remarks

Needless to say, the papers in this collection could not possibly account for all aspects of, and all issues in Buddhist Studies in North America. But the papers reveal several important points that invite further reflection.

The great diversity of methods and topics of study is at the same time symptomatic of the fragmented nature of the subject itself and of the frazzled edges in the vast and complex set of traditions that we call Buddhism.

The reluctance to address the issue of the goals of our academic efforts reflects an ambivalence towards religion and its public role that may be uniquely North American, but this ambivalence is transferred in part from other fields. Religious Studies and Area Studies are still rooted, and draw some of the life from the interests of missionaries and colonialists, even as they oppose proselytism and colonialism (in the broadest sense of these terms).

We are still conflicted over the exact nature and role of a presumed “neutrality” (to avoid the more problematic term, “objectivity”) of academic endeavors. Our difficulty finding a middle ground between the so-called “celebration” and the presumed “disparagement” that are attributed, respectively, to theology and critical inquiry, cloud an important question. Taking “neutrality” for granted (as if it were a self-evident and attainable goal) does not help us with the fundamental issue of the field which is to understand a peculiar form of human behavior in which neutrality is probably impossible, and commitment is hailed as necessary for the fulfillment of human aspirations. The study of religion, Buddhism included, demands of us understanding of behaviors (our own or those of others), even those we may regard as not worthy of praise or impossible to emulate; it demands that we understand such behaviors with a critical view of our own assumptions as well, even when they include behaviors we would not adopt for ourselves or commend to

others. And, needless to say, we must be ready to examine critically those behaviors that we would adopt or recommend to others.

We need to acknowledge that the aspirations of the field remain vague, and will remain problematic, given the nature of the subject of study. It is therefore not surprising that the boundaries, goals and methods remain not just debatable, but often remain obscure and tentative – even as people forge ahead with their work, and seem to make significant contributions to our knowledge of Buddhist traditions and to the life of the Academy.

As a final, perhaps not-so-parenthetical, remark I wish to add that it would be of help to our efforts to see a panel similar to the one described in this brief review but dedicated to a broader view of the field, a panel that would include past models of Buddhist Studies, and the models followed in different parts of Asia and Europe. This panel could also examine more closely the impact of the social and political histories of the countries in which Buddhist Studies is practiced – a relevant problem I have already noted in the first footnote to this paper.