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THE DISCIPLINES OF BUDDHIST STUDIES

NOTES ON RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

AS BOUNDARY-MARKER

OLIVER FREIBERGER

In their contributions to the 1995 special issue of the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* on method, José Cabezón and Luis Gómez masterfully analyze the state of Buddhist Studies and discuss the implications, challenges, and opportunities of reflecting on method and theory in the field.<sup>1</sup> Their analysis shows that there is a strong coherence in Buddhist Studies: It features a common subject matter, “Buddhism” (– however that term may be defined in academic practice), various institutions (professional associations, peer-reviewed journals, professorships and chairs, graduate programs, etc.), and a recorded academic history.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory,” in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18 (1995): 231–268; Luis O. Gómez, “Unspoken Paradigms: Meanderings through the Metaphors of a Field,” in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18 (1995): 183–230.

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive survey up to 1990 is Jan Willem de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America* (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing Co., 1997). See also Edward Conze, “Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies,” in: *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays by Edward Conze* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 1–32 [first published in 1959/60]; George D. Bond, “Theravada Buddhism and the Aims of Buddhist Studies,” in: *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corp., 1980), 43–65; Charles S. Prebish, “Buddhist Studies American Style: A Shot in the Dark,” in: *Religious Studies Review* 9.4 (1983): 323–330; David Seyfort Ruegg, “Some Observations on the Present and Future of Buddhist Studies,” in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15 (1992): 104–117; Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (ed.),

On the other hand, Buddhist Studies shows an extremely diverse variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. In this paper I shall argue that for conceptually organizing this “hodge podge” (Cabezón),<sup>3</sup> it is useful to view Buddhist Studies as a field of inquiry rather than a single discipline.

The nature – or, rather, the construction and conceptualization – of academic disciplines has been discussed in various ways. David Shumway and Ellen Messer-Davidow outline an approach for the study of ‘disciplinarity’ that is particularly useful for discussing Buddhist Studies. According to them, two major aspects, which go back to the classical Latin term *disciplina*, characterize an academic discipline: knowledge and power. A discipline’s knowledge is the content of its academic inquiry and teaching; its power – the ways in which students are “disciplined” and proper succession is established – materializes in its institutions.<sup>4</sup> Today’s disciplines show a variety of such institutions: departments and centers, professional associations, accepted publication forums such as specialized journals, a peer-review system, and funding agencies.<sup>5</sup> But in addition to featuring a common subject matter and common institutions, a discipline needs to be rhetorically constructed: “[D]isciplinary practitioners, who consider themselves to be members

*Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Charles S. Prebish, “The Silent Sangha: Buddhism in the Academy,” in id., *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 173–202; Frank E. Reynolds, “Coming of Age: Buddhist Studies in the United States from 1972 to 1997,” in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22 (1999): 457–483. See also Birgit Kellner’s useful bibliography, “Buddhist and Tibetan Studies: publications about their history and methodologies,” <http://www.birgitkellner.org/index.php?id=135> (access: June 9, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline,” 236.

<sup>4</sup> David S. Shumway, Ellen Messer-Davidow, “Disciplinarity: An Introduction,” in: *Poetics Today* 12 (1991): 201–225, here: 202.

<sup>5</sup> Shumway/Messer-Davidow, “Disciplinarity,” 207f.

of disciplinary communities, engage in a differentiating activity called ‘boundary-work.’ Boundary-work entails the development of explicit arguments to justify particular divisions of knowledge and of the social strategies to prevail in them.”<sup>6</sup> Shumway and Messer-Davidow observe that boundary-work is performed to establish or protect a discipline, to expand into new territory, and to regulate disciplinary practitioners.<sup>7</sup> Here the power aspect comes in. Boundary-work includes control over what is considered appropriate within a discipline. For example, “[t]he ‘refereeing’ of manuscripts not only limits what can be said to the confines of a discipline, but also serves as the principal means of rewarding or punishing researchers and as the basis for subsequent rewards or punishments.”<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the rhetorical construction of a discipline by way of boundary-work is not static. It is an ongoing process that often entails controversies within a discipline.<sup>9</sup> But all *interdisciplinary* (or

<sup>6</sup> Shumway/Messer-Davidow, “Disciplinary,” 208. The term ‘boundary-work’ as denoting the social construction of science was first introduced by sociologist of science Thomas F. Gieryn in his article “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” in: *American Sociological Review* 48.6 (1983), 781–795. See also his more recent chapter on “Boundaries of Science,” in: *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Sheila Jasanoff et al. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), 393–443.

<sup>7</sup> Shumway/Messer-Davidow, “Disciplinary,” 209.

<sup>8</sup> Shumway/Messer-Davidow, “Disciplinary,” 212. For studies on disciplinary in several disciplines (unfortunately, none of them close to Buddhist Studies or Religious Studies), see also *Knowledges: Historical and Critical Studies in Disciplinary*, ed. Ellen Messer-Davidow, David R. Shumway, David J. Sylvan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); see, in particular, the editors’ introduction (1–21).

<sup>9</sup> For the distinction between descriptive and programmatic portrayals of disciplines see Oliver Freiberger, “Ist Wertung Theologie? Beobachtungen zur Unterscheidung von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie,” in: *Die Identität der Religionswissenschaft: Beiträge zum Verständnis einer unbekannt*

*crossdisciplinary*) work presupposes that the respective disciplines are rhetorically constructed – only boundaries that exist can be crossed.<sup>10</sup>

I shall argue that because Buddhist Studies lacks the activity of boundary-work, which is required for the construction of a discipline, it may better be viewed as a *field* in which several disciplines work. I wish to examine the ways in which boundaries between disciplines are drawn in this field by discussing one issue that is used by some as a boundary-marker: religious commitment in scholarship. This exemplary discussion shows, I believe, that identifying the disciplines of Buddhist Studies and being aware of their boundaries illumines the nature of certain tensions and helps to clarify scholarly standards.

### **Insider and outsider perspectives: A historical example**

In 1877 Thomas William Rhys Davids' book *Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha* was published in London; its American edition appeared only one year later in New York.<sup>11</sup> In this book the famous Pāli scholar describes the later development of Buddhism in India, especially the emergence of Tantra, as follows:

[U]nder the overpowering influence of these sickly imaginations the moral teachings of Gautama have been almost hid from view. The theories grew and flourished; each new step, each new hypothesis demanded another; until the whole sky was filled with forgeries of the brain, and the nobler and simpler lessons of the founder of the religion

*Disziplin*, ed. Gebhard Löhr (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2000), 97–121.

<sup>10</sup> See Julie Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas William Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha* (New York: Pott, Young, & Co., 1878).

were smothered beneath the glittering mass of metaphysical subtleties.

As the stronger side of Gautama's teaching was neglected, the debasing belief in rites and ceremonies, and charms, and incantations, which had been the especial object of his scorn, began to live again, and to grow vigorously, and spread like the Bīrana weed warmed by a tropical sun in marsh and muddy soil. As in India after the expulsion of Buddhism the degrading worship of Siva and his dusky bride had been incorporated into Brahmanism from the wild and savage devil-worship of the dark non-Āryan tribes; so as pure Buddhism died away in the north, *the Tantra system*, a mixture of magic and witchcraft and Siva-worship, was incorporated into the corrupted Buddhism. ... [T]he Tantra literature has also had its growth and its development, and some unhappy scholar of a future age may have to trace its loathsome history. The nauseous taste repelled even the self-sacrificing industry of Burnouf, when he found the later Tantra books to be as immoral as they are absurd.<sup>12</sup>

It has become trendy to quote meaty passages from 19<sup>th</sup>-century works on India, often taken out of context, in order to show that those scholars constructed a narrative that imposes Western views and values on colonized cultures and that thus served colonial domination. The general accusation of “Orientalism” – which is sometimes brought in by prosecutors whose own historical-philological expertise is shaky at best – knows no presumption of innocence, not even the benefit of the doubt, because the accusation is identical with the verdict from the very beginning. Even though factual evidence is thus not really required, the passage quoted above would probably serve this purpose very well. My admiration for Rhys Davids' expertise, knowledge, and contribution to the study of Pāli and Buddhism, however, prevents me from being that kind of prosecutor.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rhys Davids, *Buddhism*, 207–209.

<sup>13</sup> I do not mean to suggest that we should be uncritical of our scholarly ancestors' work but that our evaluation should be thorough and fair. A good example of a thought-provoking study that highlights important aspects of

Instead of making bold assumptions about Rhys Davids' "Orientalist" and colonialist agenda, I confine myself to looking at the quote itself. It is located in the eighth chapter of the book, entitled "Northern Buddhism." The first seven chapters discuss the life of the Buddha, the "essential doctrines," Buddhist morality, the saṅgha, and the Buddha legend; the ninth and last chapter explains the further spread of Buddhism. It is obvious, I think, that Rhys Davids is disgusted by what he perceives as Tantric Buddhism. He makes value judgments by using expressions such as "sickly imaginations," "forgeries of the brain," "debasement of belief in rites and ceremonies," "nauseous taste," "immoral and absurd," and "corrupted Buddhism" – as opposed to "the nobler and simpler lessons of the founder of the religion." Generally, Rhys Davids' portrayal of Buddhism is based on the Pāli sources, which he knew very well, and it is telling that the chapter on "Northern Buddhism," which includes the quote, is the shortest of all nine chapters – it has exactly twelve pages (out of 252).

To a certain degree this view of later developments in Buddhism can be explained by the limited availability of Mahāyāna and Tantric texts before 1877 – when the book was published – and by the interest in origins that was common in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But this contextualization does not explain everything, as becomes apparent when we consult a different, contemporary portrayal of Indian Buddhism. I refer to Hendrik Kern's work *Geschiedenis van het buddhisme in Indië*, which was first published in Dutch and in German only a few years after Rhys Davids' book, in 1882–84. A shorter English version appeared as the well-known *Manual of Indian Buddhism* in 1896. Kern's book is outlined very

Rhys Davids' work is Charles Hallisey's "Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism," in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31–61. For a general analysis of the postorientalist critique, see David Smith, "Orientalism and Hinduism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 45–63.

much like Rhys Davids' work, but his portrayal of Tantra reads differently:

The development of Tantrism is a feature that Buddhism and Hinduism in their later phases have in common. The object of Hindu Tantrism is the acquisition of wealth, mundane enjoyments, rewards for moral actions, deliverance, by worshipping Durgā, the Śakti of Śiva – Prajñā in the terminology of the Mahāyāna – through means of spells, muttered prayers, Samādhi, offerings &c. Similarly the Buddhist Tantras purpose to teach the adepts how by a supernatural way to acquire desired objects, either of a material nature, as the elixir of longevity, invulnerability, invisibility, alchemy; or of a more spiritual character, as the power of evoking a Buddha or a Bodhisattva to solve a doubt, or the power of achieving in this life the union with some divinity.<sup>14</sup>

I do not want to discuss the historical accuracy of these accounts. My point is that Kern abstains from value judgments of the sort we found in Rhys Davids' work.<sup>15</sup> As both authors were writing roughly at the same time, we cannot explain Rhys Davids' scolding and disgust by simply referring to lacking sources or to an interest in origins, or by bellowing the buzz-words "colonialism," "Orientalism," or – most precisely – "19<sup>th</sup> century." Note also that the authorized German edition of Rhys Davids' book – published years after Kern's English version – includes our quote unaltered.<sup>16</sup>

I wish to suggest that the main drive of Rhys Davids' colorful rejection of Tantric beliefs and practices is religious in nature. But unlike some of his contemporaries, he does not condemn them

<sup>14</sup> Hendrik Kern, *Manual of Indian Buddhism* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1896), 133.

<sup>15</sup> I do not claim that Kern's book is free of value judgments, but the reader notes significant differences regarding the quantity and the quality of such judgments.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas William Rhys Davids, *Der Buddhismus: Eine Darstellung von dem Leben und den Lehren Gautamas, des Buddhas*, nach der 17. Auflage aus dem Englischen ins Deutsche übertragen von Arthur Pfungst (Leipzig: Reclam, 1899), 214–216.

from a Christian perspective, but from a Buddhist one. His depreciation of Tantra is, at the same time, an apologia of a form of Buddhism that is based on the texts of the Pāli canon. We may recall that Rhys Davids was the founder and first president of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland, whose objectives were, among other things, to propagate Buddhism in the West, to form a lay brotherhood, and to establish a saṅgha of monks.<sup>17</sup> We may therefore conclude that his presentation is based on an insider view, while Kern's largely matter-of-fact style represents an outsider perspective.<sup>18</sup> Note that I do not take 'outsider perspective' to imply objectivity; the term merely denotes the methodological decision not to describe religious phenomena from within the tradition one studies. For the sake of argument, I ignore for the moment other biases and agendas that may come into play.

### **Religious commitment in Buddhist Studies today: Some observations**

This historical case demonstrates that both insider and outsider perspectives have been present in Buddhist Studies since its early days.<sup>19</sup> While apologias that include negative value judgments such

<sup>17</sup> See Ananda Wickremeratne, *The Genesis of an Orientalist: Thomas William Rhys Davids and Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 197–201, 231.

<sup>18</sup> Again, the two short passages quoted here are not necessarily representative of the works they are taken from, nor is the conclusion meant to assess the works in a comprehensive way. See, for example, the critical discussion of Kern's interpretation of the Buddha as a solar deity in comparison with other works of the time (Senart, Rhys Davids, Oldenberg) in: de Jong, "A Brief History," 28–32.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, a compiler's religious commitment can also be a factor in selecting textual passages for creating an anthology of Buddhist texts in Western languages. See the discussion in Oliver Freiburger, "Akademische Kanonisierung? Zur Erstellung von Anthologien buddhistischer Texte," in: *Jaina-Itihāsa-Ratna: Studies in Honour of Gustav Roth on the Occasion of his 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. Ute Hüsken, Petra Kieffer-Pülz, Anne Peters (Swisttal-

as Rhys Davids' account of Tantra have become rare, religious commitment in scholarship on Buddhism has remained observable to this day. In 1999 Charles Prebish noted that a significant number – in his estimate at least 50% – of North-American scholars of Buddhism are “scholar-practitioners.”<sup>20</sup> While some have encountered surprise and ridicule when they came out as Buddhists to their non-Buddhist colleagues, most seem to feel comfortable with stating their religious commitment among other scholars of Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> Malcolm David Eckel speaks of the “delightful feeling” that “one enters the academic gatherings of the Buddhism section [in the American Academy of Religion, O.F.] with the sense that one is joining a group of people for whom the Buddhist tradition has, once had, or may some day have significant religious meaning.”<sup>22</sup> Let me mention some random observations that seem to support this impression.

The Buddhist Scholars Information Network, H-Buddhism, is a highly specialized academic discussion list and an invaluable resource. Unlike other lists, H-Buddhism has been kept by the editors strictly academic. Still, attentive readers note that once in a while subscribers introduce their – otherwise purely academic – messages with the phrase “Dear friends in the dharma,” or close with phrases like “Yours in the Dharma” or “Namo Buddhāya.”<sup>23</sup> To my knowledge, neither subscribers nor list editors have ever found this worthy of discussion. But it is conceivable that the subscribers and

Odendorf: Indica et Tibetica Verlag, 2006), 193–207.

<sup>20</sup> Prebish, “The Silent Sangha,” 180.

<sup>21</sup> Prebish, “The Silent Sangha,” 180–183.

<sup>22</sup> Malcolm David Eckel, “The Ghost at the Table: On the Study of Buddhism and the Study of Religion,” in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (1994): 1085–1110, here: 1098. He also mentions problematic aspects and suggests an approach similar to Buddhist Theology (see below).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example: Feb 26, 2002 (Shakya); Oct 29, 2003 (Heng Tso); Feb 17, 2004 (Tu); Dec 13, 2005 (Jantrasrisalai); May 2, 2006 (McRae); Dec 22, 2006 (Skilling); June 18, 2007 (Shakya).

the editors of H-Buddhism would not be able to maintain this level of tolerance if someone began closing his or her postings with the phrase “Yours in Christ.”

Today most academic books include, on their back covers, a short blurb and information about the authors or editors. Besides data on academic training and major publications, some scholars provide the reader with additional information such as the following: “He has been a practising Buddhist for over thirty years;”<sup>24</sup> “he was thirteen years in monastery practice as an ordained Rinzai monk;” or: “he was ordained as a dharmachari in the Western Buddhist Order and currently serves as the Buddhist chaplain for the XYZ Chaplaincy Service.”<sup>25</sup> These are not edifying coffee-table books but academic works whose readers are, most likely, primarily academics. The question is, of course, what purpose does a statement about an author’s religious practice serve? The rationale seems to be that being a practitioner is a particular qualification that goes beyond mere academic education, beyond earning a Ph.D. degree and writing scholarly books. What exactly this qualification adds to the scholarly analysis is rarely discussed; but that it is mentioned in a blurb insinuates some kind of profound authenticity. No-one seems to complain about this practice, but it is unlikely that a Muslim cleric can expect the same degree of trust in his authenticity when he writes about Islamic history.<sup>26</sup>

In 2007 Mikael Aktor and Suzanne Newcombe conducted an online survey on the religious commitment of scholars of Buddhism and Hinduism among subscribers of H-Buddhism and RISA-L. Its

<sup>24</sup> From Robert Bluck, *British Buddhism: Teachings, Practice and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Both from *Teaching Buddhism in the West*, ed. Victor Sōgen Hori, Richard P. Hayes, and J. Mark Shields (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> If someday someone conducts an empirical study that examines the ways scholars of religion (and, in particular, scholars of Buddhism) perceive Buddhism vs. how they perceive other religions, the results should tell us a lot about our preconceptions.

preliminary results are published online. In a section of the survey that was meant for further comments on the subject, one scholar wrote: “It is hard for me to understand scholars that study Buddhism and don’t practice. It is like writing about swimming without ever putting a foot in the water, or ... being a couch anthropologist.”<sup>27</sup> This pithy statement illustrates the sense of authenticity that defines the insider perspective in Buddhist Studies. It reminds scholars of religion of Rudolf Otto’s influential work, *The Idea of the Holy*, in which Otto claims that in order to fully understand religion, a scholar must have had “intrinsically religious feelings.”<sup>28</sup> One standard response to this position is: Does one have to be a politician to be a good political scientist? Or, more polemically put: Does one have to be very old to study medieval history?<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See [http://e-tidsskrift.dk/rel/Preliminary\\_results\\_Buddism\\_vs\\_Hinduism.pdf](http://e-tidsskrift.dk/rel/Preliminary_results_Buddism_vs_Hinduism.pdf), p. 3 (access: May 8, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, transl. by John W. Harvey, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 8. The German original, *Das Heilige*, was first published in 1917.

<sup>29</sup> The respective controversy between Religious Studies and Christian Theology is of long standing and ongoing. Today a common counter-argument to the last point is that scholars of religion who claim to be objective have biases too, but that theirs are hidden – as opposed to those of theologians who openly declare their religious affiliation. This argument has, again, been countered by pointing out that ‘bias’ refers to rather complex combinations of mental and social factors that are related not only to one’s religious commitment but also to one’s gender, sexual orientation, childhood trauma, the novels one has read, the music one likes, the emotions one lives through when caring for an ailing aunt, etc. It is impossible – and clearly not practical – to fully disclose all one’s biases. Some argue, therefore, that referring to the individual scholar’s biases, as some theologians do, obscures the fact that declaring one’s religious affiliation in theology denotes the specific programmatic decision for an insider perspective that scholars of religion deliberately do not want to make. For further discussions, see my “Ist Wertung Theologie?” See also Francisca Cho, “Religious Identity and the Study of Buddhism,” in: *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York:

One can find this sense of authenticity also in statements about academic teaching. Not only would a majority of undergraduate students prefer to be introduced to Buddhism by a Buddhist professor, since in their view such a person can teach Buddhism more “authentically.” (This is according to my occasional informal inquiries among students.) More importantly, a number of scholars in Buddhist Studies believe that in the classroom the insider perspective is helpful, if not essential. As I have discussed elsewhere, some claim that, “One must first *be still* in order to teach and learn Buddhism. In no other way can its essence truly be known or shown. Seen from this point of view, teaching and learning Buddhism, if it is not filtered by meditation, is not worthy of attention.” The desired outcome is that “the spirit of Buddhism may rub off on [the students].”<sup>30</sup>

At first glance, all these pieces of anecdotal evidence seem to prove that the insider perspective is a way of approaching Buddhism that is well-accepted in today’s Buddhist Studies. But arguing from silence is problematic. There may be various reasons why no-one complains about those statements and approaches; unlike in Buddhist monastic law, silence does not necessarily indicate consent. One possible reason may be that because the respective disciplinary discourses on methods – in Buddhist philology, art history, sociology, etc. – rarely address the issue of the scholar’s religious

Routledge, 2004), 61–76. Cho’s description of the possible dimensions of religious identity in Buddhist Studies and her discussion of other factors that may play into scholarship are interesting, whether or not one agrees with her criticism of Robert Sharf’s work.

<sup>30</sup> O’Hyun Park, “Moving Beyond the ‘ism’: A Critique of the Objective Approach to Teaching Buddhism,” in: *Teaching Buddhism in the West: From the Wheel to the Web*, ed. Victor Sōgen Hori, Richard P. Hayes, and James Mark Shields (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 57–68, here: 59 and 68. For the insider perspective in the classroom, see also the other chapters in that book. For further discussion, see my “The Buddhist Canon and the Canon of Buddhist Studies,” in: *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27 (2004): 261–283, here: 269–271.

commitment, some scholars do not regard this issue as one that concerns their own work. In other words, some scholars of Buddhism might ignore the above-mentioned statements and approaches because they consider them as belonging outside the boundaries of their own disciplines (philology, art history, sociology, etc.). I will come back to this point below. Some disciplines in the field of Buddhist Studies, however, do discuss the religious commitment of the scholar and, furthermore, use it for their 'boundary-work.' Two of these are Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies.

### **Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies: Determining boundaries**

For more than ten years a group of scholars has been producing a discourse that they most appropriately call "Buddhist Theology." In a volume edited by Roger Jackson and John Makransky seventeen Buddhologists discuss and employ this new approach. The blurb summarizes the enterprise succinctly: "This volume is the expression of a new development in the academic study of Buddhism: scholars of Buddhism, themselves Buddhist, who seek to apply the critical tools of the academy to reassess the truth and transformative value of their tradition in its relevance to the contemporary world."<sup>31</sup> The academic standards are high. In his programmatic chapter José Cabezón calls for a commitment to breadth of analysis, to an "all-pervasive and all-penetrating critical spirit," and to the use of a formal apparatus, such as a systematic presentation of

<sup>31</sup> Roger Jackson, John Makransky (eds.), *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Scholars* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2000), back cover. See also the short definition given in the preface: "Speaking from within Buddhist traditions as contemporary scholars, they employ two kinds of reflection: critically analyzing some aspect of Buddhist thought toward a new understanding in our time, or analyzing some aspect of contemporary thought from the critical perspective of Buddhism" (ibid., ix). Before the term 'Buddhist Theology' was coined, Malcolm David Eckel had called for developing this approach within Religious Studies; see his "The Ghost at the Table."

arguments as well as proper annotation and citation.<sup>32</sup> He insists that methodologically Buddhist Theology must be grounded in – and compatible with – the Western academy, but he also calls for recognizing – and building on – the achievements of traditional Buddhist theology.<sup>33</sup>

What we are witnessing here is the formation of a new discipline in the academy. Buddhist Theology should be classified as a ‘discipline’ rather than a ‘field of interest’ or the like, because it features the above-mentioned characteristics: institutions, subject matter and objective of inquiry, and the activity of rhetorical construction, including boundary-work. The institutionalization process has begun; the young discipline has already carved out an institutional place in the academy, namely the “Buddhist Critical-Constructive Reflection Group” in the American Academy of Religion, which met for the first time at the annual meeting in 2006.<sup>34</sup> It may only be a matter of time before Buddhist Theology – just like Christian Theology – will also be institutionally integrated into the education of clerics, in the existing Buddhist chaplaincy programs, for example.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, the discipline has been described programmatically – its subject matter, its methods, and its objective of inquiry: “to reassess the truth and transformative value of [the Buddhist] tradition in its relevance to the contemporary world.” No other academic discipline does that. While the chapters of the volume on Buddhist Theology mark out a range of questions and approaches for the new discipline, Luis Gómez’ “critical response”

<sup>32</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, “Buddhist Theology in the Academy,” in: Jackson/Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, 25–52, here: 34–38.

<sup>33</sup> Cabezón, “Buddhist Theology,” 40–43.

<sup>34</sup> See the message on H-Buddhism, Thu, 09 Feb 2006; the founding co-chairs are the editors of the volume mentioned above, John Makransky and Roger Jackson.

<sup>35</sup> Such programs are currently offered by the University of the West, the Institute of Buddhist Studies at Berkeley, or the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies.

– fairly challenging at times – demonstrates the depth of potential scholarly controversy in the disciplinary discourse.<sup>36</sup> Finally, rhetorically constructing a discipline – or, boundary-work – includes determining its relations to other disciplines. Some authors discuss parallels to Christian theology and, in particular, distance their approach from Religious Studies. José Cabezón writes:

[T]he Religious Studies academy in general, and Buddhist Studies in particular, has shown itself to be somewhat allergic to the idea of normative, especially theological, discourse. ... I take this to be an irrational and unsupported bias...<sup>37</sup>

And in his introduction John Makransky claims:

Under the rubric of religious studies, the functionally secular Western academy mines world religions for its use: to generate research findings, publications, conferences to explore whatever may be of current interest and benefit to the academy. The ‘value neutral’ method of religious studies was of course never value neutral. Rather, it implicitly established a value in religions divorced from the normative interests of their own religious communities: a value found exclusively in their capacity to fulfill the intellectual, social, and economic interests of the Western academy.<sup>38</sup>

Religious Studies responded accordingly, if you will, in Richard Pilgrim’s review of the book. He writes:

Is it not risky to reinsert a theological enterprise into Religious Studies in the academy just when we have begun to make the case with the larger community that Religious Studies and theology are distinct enterprises? Do we not lend credence to the current critique of Reli-

<sup>36</sup> Luis Gómez, “Measuring the Immeasurable: Reflections on Unreasonable Reasoning,” in: Jackson/Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, 367–385.

<sup>37</sup> Cabezón, “Buddhist Theology,” 46 (note 21). Here Cabezón seems to view Buddhist Studies as part of Religious Studies.

<sup>38</sup> John Makransky, “Contemporary Academic Buddhist Theology: Its Emergence and Rationale,” in: Jackson/Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, 14–21, here: 15.

gious Studies as a ‘crypto-theology’ by bringing theology (Buddhist or otherwise) back into the fold?<sup>39</sup>

This dispute results from the idea that both parties define the same discourse. It might be more useful, however, to view the arguments as boundary-work, performed to construct Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies as two separate disciplines. Viewed this way, complaining that Religious Studies was allergic to theology and accusing it of ignoring normative interests of Buddhist theologians is beside the point, as is the fear, in Religious Studies, of being perceived as crypto-theology – there is nothing cryptic about Buddhist Theology, and it does not claim to be Religious Studies.

Some would argue, however, that Religious Studies is not a discipline at all, but merely a convenient administrative category. After all, Religious Studies departments house philologists, theologians, philosophers, and other sorts of scholars.<sup>40</sup> Viewed descriptively, this is certainly correct, but denying the disciplinary status simply for this reason ignores the fact that Religious Studies – or, the Academic Study of Religion – has also been programmatically constructed in many different ways. One approach that uses the issue of the scholar’s religious commitment for boundary-work is manifest in Bruce Lincoln’s 13<sup>th</sup> thesis on method:

When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the tem-

<sup>39</sup> Richard B. Pilgrim, Review of Jackson/Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, in: *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 22 (2002): 228.

<sup>40</sup> Also most contributors to the volume *Buddhist Theology* are institutionally affiliated to Religious Studies: Fifteen out of seventeen taught in some sort of Religious Studies environment at the time or have done so since (program or department). Exceptions are John Makransky, who teaches at the Department of Theology at Boston College, and Kenneth Tanaka, who has not taught in a Religious Studies environment so far (personal communication, May 15, 2008). The institutional affiliation of the agents, however, is secondary when it comes to constructing a new discipline rhetorically. And there are a number of scholars in that volume who, judging only from the nature of their publications, have two or more disciplinary identities.

poral and contingent, or fails to distinguish between ‘truths,’ ‘truth-claims,’ and ‘regimes of truth,’ one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however should be confused with scholarship.<sup>41</sup>

We may grant Lincoln that by “scholarship” he means an approach that is acceptable within the boundaries of Religious Studies. Similarly, Russell McCutcheon envisions scholars of religion to be “critics, not caretakers.” He writes:

[O]ur 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.<sup>42</sup>

These programmatic constructions of Religious Studies clearly demand an outsider perspective, while the before-mentioned construction of Buddhist Theology requires an insider view. If we let these constructions, for the moment, represent the two disciplines Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies,<sup>43</sup> we may conclude that

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” in: *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 (1996): 225–227.

<sup>42</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, “Critics not Caretakers: The Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual,” in: *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, ed. Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000), 167–181, here: 178.

<sup>43</sup> Because a discipline’s rhetorical and programmatic construction results from an ongoing discourse, these examples have to be selective. To make my point I have chosen straightforward statements which some scholars would probably want to debate further. Robert Orsi, for example, discusses the issue of religious commitment in Religious Studies with regard to anthropological fieldwork slightly differently in his book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). He suggests a “third way, between confessional or theological scholarship, on the one hand, and radically secular scholarship on the other,” especially in view of moral judgment: “a

both demands make sense within their respective disciplinary discourses but clearly have different objectives. The editors of *Buddhist Theology* put it this way: “By and large, scholars trained in Religious Studies ... critically analyze the data of a religion at a distance from tradition, to develop theories of interest to the Western academy. By contrast, contemporary theologians who have been trained by and stand within a religious tradition use the same tools for a different purpose: to draw critically upon the resources of tradition to help it communicate in a new and authentic voice to the contemporary world.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Buddhist Studies: A field of many disciplines**

Both Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies are present in the institutional framework of Buddhist Studies, as are many other disciplines: Philology, for example, as in the identification and edition of fragments of Buddhist manuscripts from Central Asia;<sup>45</sup> Sociology, as in an in-depth study of one Buddhist temple in a North American city; or Archaeology and Art History, as in the interpretation of stūpa complexes in India – all such studies pass as research in Buddhist Studies.<sup>46</sup> But the peers qualified to evaluate this research and to negotiate its academic quality are members of the respective

disciplined suspension of the impulse to locate the other ... securely in relation to one’s own cosmos” (198). Although being less blunt than Lincoln and McCutcheon and acknowledging the personal challenges for the researcher, in the end Orsi still advocates a – somewhat modified – outsider approach: “Religious studies is not a moralizing discipline; it exists in the suspension of the ethical, and it steadfastly refuses either to deny or to redeem the other” (202f.).

<sup>44</sup> Jackson/Makransky, *Buddhist Theology*, ix.

<sup>45</sup> I use ‘Philology’ here as an umbrella term for the various, philologically oriented disciplines of Indology, Tibetology, Sinology, etc.

<sup>46</sup> For a survey of past and current approaches, and suggestions for future avenues of research, see Seyfort Ruegg, “Some Observations,” and Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline.”

disciplinary communities – for these examples: philologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and art historians. Certainly, many studies do have an impact beyond disciplinary boundaries and are read by a variety of scholars of Buddhism. But I am not aware that anyone has ever attempted to establish a universal standard by which all research in Buddhist Studies could be evaluated – that is, an all-encompassing theoretical framework that rhetorically constructs Buddhist Studies as a discipline and clearly distinguishes it from other disciplines.

Therefore I propose that we conceptualize Buddhist Studies not as a discipline but as a field of inquiry, in which various disciplines operate. As such, it is roughly comparable in structure to area studies such as Asian Studies. This does in no way devalue its existing (interdisciplinary) institutions – on the contrary: Buddhist Studies must be interdisciplinary. But acknowledging, understanding, and respecting each discipline's discursive rules and values is crucial for crossing disciplinary boundaries successfully.

In lieu of a conclusion I wish to highlight two particular benefits of conceptualizing Buddhist Studies as a field rather than a discipline. First, in this conception the performance of boundary-work is an expected activity and can be identified more easily. This helps us to appreciate the peculiarities of the respective disciplinary discourses, to understand the nature of certain tensions, and to avoid unnecessary disputes. The debate between Buddhist Theology and Religious Studies is a case in point.

Second, relating all research to specific disciplines – rather than to the broad and obscure category of 'Buddhist Studies' – clarifies scholarly standards. The above-mentioned accounts of religious commitment may serve as examples. Few scholars in Religious Studies today would consider Rhys Davids' description of Tantra an example of good scholarship, but it might pass in Buddhist Theology, as a statement made in its sub-field of polemics;<sup>47</sup> certainly,

<sup>47</sup> See Cabezón, "Buddhist Theology," 42.

whether or not it meets the standard there would have to be discussed within that discipline. But what about the other unsolicited testimonies of religious commitment – on e-mail discussion lists, on book covers, or in calls for authenticity in research and teaching? Whether these have a place in Buddhist Theology, or to what degree they can live up to its standards of critical reflection, is also up to Buddhist Theologians to discuss. I am rather inclined to believe that this piety resides in a twilight zone of Buddhist Studies that remains unclaimed, uncontested, and uncontrolled by any of its disciplines – a space created by the Western enthusiasm about Buddhism that has flourished since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that assumes the fundamental, deeply rooted, pre-critical agreement in the Buddhist Studies academy that ‘it’s cool to be a Buddhist.’ Determining disciplinary identities may help to illumine this shadowy space as well.