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THE SPIRITUALITY OF BUDDHIST QUAKERS IN BRITAIN

(University of Sunderland: unpublished MPhil dissertation, 2001)

This dissertation, which the author believes to be the first in-depth study of Quakers with a dual religious affiliation, focuses on those Quakers in Britain who regard Buddhism as the major source of their spirituality. It considers the connections (and differences) between Quakerism and Buddhism, exploring the complexities that emerge when two different religious traditions play a role in the formation of one person's spirituality. The author offers two explanatory approaches to the emergence of a Buddhist Quaker spirituality: one focused on the theological parallels the two religions exhibit, the other on philosophical explanations, employing the concepts of the 'open society' and 'postmodernity'. He explores whether Buddhism and Quakerism simply co-exist in a complementary fashion or could be said to comprise an essentially new religion. In the course of his research, he investigates the proposition that Buddhist Quakerism is an 'individually constructed' religion – the legacy of a contemporary pick-and-mix spiritual culture in which potentially rival but equally valid truths can be combined or discarded at will – and rejects it as a viable premise. Finally, he concludes that the dual spiritual identity of Buddhist Quakers has more of a complementary character than a syncretistic (identical) one: Buddhism serves the spiritual and intellectual needs of those individuals drawn to both Quakerism and Buddhism, whereas Quakerism answers their need for a social community and a culturally familiar context.

Key words: Buddhist Quakers, dual identity, spirituality, theist beliefs, non-theist beliefs, postmodernity

Key themes:

The relationship between spirituality and religion

The 20th context for the relationship between Quakerism and Buddhism

Theological similarities and differences between Quakerism and Buddhism

The question of dual identity

Of potential interest to: Buddhist Quakers and Quakers with an interest in Buddhism, researchers within an interest in Buddhism's connections to Quaker theology and practice, the issue of dual spiritual identity, the history of Buddhist Quakers in Britain

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

The author begins his study by introducing the dominant theme of his research into the identity of Buddhist Quakers: the relationship between spirituality and religion. His conclusion – that Buddhist Quakers cannot be described as comprising a religion but as Quakers whose source of spirituality lies in Buddhism – provides him with a working definition of his research subject.

Spirituality and religion

Spirituality is related to the individual's 'meta-empirical framework of meaning' (a system of thought that makes sense of experience in a way that transcends experience); religion is concerned with the relationship between this framework and religio-social institutions. Although religion generates spirituality, spirituality is a form of individual practice. Religion, on the other hand, is located within a social institution and a common ritual. The particular combination of Quakerism and Buddhism the author's research subjects represent lies in 'an individual manipulation of symbolic systems'; hence, the author proposes that it qualifies as a spirituality rather than a religion.

Smart's seven dimensions

To underline his case, the author adopts Smart's (1989) seven dimensions of what characterises a religion and applies them to Buddhist Quakers. The first five (the practical and ritualistic, the experiential and emotional, the narrative or mythic, the doctrinal and philosophic, and the ethical and legal) all apply to Buddhist Quaker spirituality, whereas the last two (the social and institutional, and the material) bear little relation to it. The reason for this, he asserts, is that the first five dimensions remain on an individual level, and can be accommodated within the Buddhist Quaker definition, but there appears to be no social or institutional bond between Buddhist Quakers. While they partake in the Quaker community and its worship, they have neither a social institution nor a common ritual specific to their identity as Buddhist Quakers. The author proposes that Buddhist Quakers' individual spiritual values derive from two established religious traditions but possess no common theology, philosophy or ritual, and cannot be described as a religion. His working definition of a Buddhist Quaker is of a Quaker whose main source of spirituality lies in Buddhism.

Chapter Two: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology the author used to overcome a number of challenges he faced in following his proposed area of research. To begin with, the absence of a Buddhist Quaker organisation prevented him drawing clear boundaries between the two religions. As Buddhist Quakers comprise a group that has not previously been studied, are geographically scattered and lack a distinct organisational structure, he faced problems of identification. However, he proceeded by way of a combined qualitative and quantitative approach that would allow a clearer picture to emerge of who Buddhist Quakers are through a process of self-identification. In the process, he used a postal questionnaire, where participants were identified through 'snowball sampling' (a technique, frequently used when the target population is 'socially invisible', whereby existing subjects recruit friends or acquaintances), and a number of semi-structured follow-up interviews. (He remarks, however, that a high percentage of his respondents identified themselves as both Buddhist and Quaker but not specifically as Buddhist Quakers.) His analysis of the findings was based on a combined theological and philosophical approach that enabled him to determine whether Buddhist Quakers could be viewed as comprising a new religious entity.

Chapter Three: The Outlines of Quakerism and Buddhism

Overview

This chapter reviews the relationship between Quakers and Christianity, including the most recent shift to what has been termed a 'post-Christian' theology. This complements the turn to Buddhism in the West, due to the attraction of Eastern non-dualism to individuals who perceive that Western secular culture and its conceptual frameworks are in crisis.

The emergence of Quakerism

Quakerism arose from radical beginnings in the 17th century, and was similar in many ways to many other radical non-conformist sects that emerged at the time. The author cites Steere (1984) as stating that Quakers held to an 'ethical mysticism' in tune with the times, although Dandelion (1996) counters that this was a re-interpretation of original Quakerism made at the turn of the 20th century during the early period of Quaker liberalism. Quakerism's originality lies in the fact that it was not simply a reaction against Puritanism, but a move into new territory. With its emphasis on the

corporate experience of the 'Inward Light' (the manifestation of God) and its radical ethical claims, it was not merely an inward-looking mystical movement but exhibited active and practical tendencies – the silent waiting on the Inward Light was the first step to a transformation of one's life.

The stages of Quakerism

Quakerism underwent many changes over the course of the centuries: from its early period, through its quietist, evangelical and liberal periods, to contemporary post-Christian Quakerism (Dandelion 1996), but all periods, except the evangelical one, retained an emphasis on direct revelation and the Inward Light as superior to scripture. However, although it possessed no formal credal statement, it did not place itself outside the Christian framework until as late as 1959, when Dandelion perceives a 'paradigmatic shift'. This resulted from two factors: the liberal phase of the early 20th century, which emphasised Quakerism's mystical character, and in the 1960s, a relaxation of its membership procedures. The author agrees with Dandelion that Quakerism now reflects contemporary pluralism. As it has transcended its Christian roots, the belief that there is 'that of God in everyone' has thus been rendered theologically ambiguous, as some members now have difficulties with the term 'God'. This is the context in which Buddhist and Quaker spiritualities have appeared to combine.

Buddhist traditions and their spread to the West

Early Buddhism was focused neither on ritualised ceremonies nor asceticism but on finding a 'Middle Way', through morality, contemplation and wisdom – a radical belief that challenged the prevailing Hindu orthodoxy. Its spiritual belief was equally radical: it held that the 'self' is a construct, void of any 'true' or 'absolute' sense, but consisting of a set of aspects subject to change and impermanence. This was encapsulated in the doctrine of 'not-self'. Equally, the 'soul' was simply the name for the sum of mental states that comprise the 'mind'. Buddhists, therefore, are enjoined to reach beyond the delusion of the fixed self to reach a state of enlightenment. The author notes the emergence of a number of schools (differing in their use of Buddhist scriptures), with different geographical strongholds, ranging from India and Sri Lanka to China and Japan. It came to popular consciousness in the West in the late 20th century, when a crisis of confidence in the Western mode of intellectual and spiritual enquiry led to a search for alternative ways of thought. It appeared to offer the potential to reach 'a state of peace and security in a challenging world', offering the ability to achieve a sense of a 'spiritual completeness' that acted as a corrective to the Western dualism that separated soul from body.

Chapter Four: The Survey Process

Overview

This chapter looks in detail at the survey the author conducted. This comprised a postal questionnaire, sent to 41 Buddhist Quakers, followed by interviews with 27 Buddhist Quakers (nine of whom had participated in the questionnaire), and 17 'random' interviews with Quakers with no Buddhist affiliations whom he used as a comparative control group.

The questionnaire process

The first part of the questionnaire concerned the issue of self-identification, focusing on which religion the respondents deemed to be most important to their spiritual identity. The second dwelt on the question of the respondents' spiritual resources. The third focused on the Christian basis of Quakerism vis-à-vis Buddhism (that is, whether they held a belief in a Christocentric God). The last part looked at the connections the respondents found between Quakerism and Buddhism. The author, however, cautions that spirituality is not static, and the very process of answering questions about their spirituality could influence an individual's sense of spiritual identity.

The interview process

The author followed the postal questionnaire with a number of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Their purpose was to encourage the participants to relate their individual spiritual journeys in a way that would reveal the significance various spiritual resources hold for them. They were asked if they would regard the Quaker Meeting for Worship as a form of meditation, how they would describe their worldviews and ethical values, where they would position themselves in terms of both religions, and how they relate to Christocentric Quakerism.

The definition of the respondents

The author queries whether Buddhist Quakers' self-identification could be described as a sort of 'spiritual bilinguality', drawing on two different cultural traditions. However, Buddhist Quakers differ fundamentally from those who adopt a new language. They do not acquire a new spiritual identity that is then superimposed on an original one, as their Quaker identity is not a cultural heritage but the result of individual choice. Hence, he found that the only study of bilingual group identifications of relevance to this research was that of Miemois (1980). This model places the themes of cultural identification, intellectual knowledge, familiarity with authoritative writings, and attendance at worship or other spiritual practices along an axis that determines how these are influenced by past

cultural patterns and external factors. Spiritual self-identification is a complex question; it involves an interactive relationship between spiritual patterns and the factors that shape them. Practices and beliefs strengthen an individual's commitment to a certain spiritual path, but it is also influenced, in the respondents' case, by their cultural descent in a Western secular society.

Chapter Five: The Results of the Survey

Overview

In this chapter, the author introduces his analysis of the research findings. In the course of the study, two distinct groups of Buddhist Quakers emerged: those he terms 'Quaker Buddhists', who have stronger roots in Buddhism, and 'semi-Buddhist Quakers', who remain closer to Quaker orthodoxy. He concludes that these two groups differ not only in their self-identification, but also in their choice of spiritual resources, meditation practices and belief patterns.

Spiritual resources

The author found that Buddhist teachings played a less significant role in the intellectual repertoire of his respondents than knowledge of the Bible, although they placed little reliance on the Bible as a spiritual resource. Instead, it appears that their knowledge of meditation techniques was their most important spiritual resource. This leads to the question of whether 'Quaker Buddhists' view the Quaker Meeting for Worship as analogous to meditation. *Quaker Faith and Practice* (the guidelines for the Quaker faith) does not regard them as the same: it describes the Meeting as a spiritual fusion into something that is more than the sum of its parts, and states that it cannot be compared to a group of individuals meditating together. Despite this, the author found that many of his respondents regarded it as such. He also found that 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' attended more Meetings, while the 'Quaker Buddhists' were more conversant with group meditation. However, both sub-sets of Buddhist Quakers do not abandon their Quaker stance against elaborate rituals in their choice of a meditation practice – they expressed a preference for the practice of *zazen* meditation (a simple technique that is closest in form to the unprogrammed Meeting for Worship).

Belief patterns

The author then turned to the question of whether his respondents' espousal of non-theist Buddhism contradicted their Quakerism. He cites Dandelion (1999), who found that, in the absence of a formal Quaker doctrine, creed or catechism, the responsibility of interpretation of a belief in

God shifts to the individual. Thus belief in a deity loses its status as a necessary prerequisite for contemporary Quaker faith. There appeared to be greater uncertainty among 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' in this regard: 8%, as opposed to 44% 'Quaker Buddhists' who declared that they had no belief in God. 'Quaker Buddhists' tended to speak of 'Love', 'Light', 'Spirit' or 'Energy', mirroring a general trend among some Quakers towards a non-theist spirituality. Equally, they exhibited considerable differences regarding belief in Buddhist concepts, such as the cycle of rebirths and the ability to attain perfection, with 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' more sceptical than 'Quaker Buddhists'. One interviewee the author highlights as an important source for his analysis – the Quaker author Jim Pym – commented that 'belief' does not hold a great place in either Quakerism or Buddhism; he preferred to speak of what Buddhist Quakers 'discover' rather than 'believe'. This seems to hold true for the question of the importance of Christocentric beliefs for Buddhist Quakers: most view Jesus and Buddha as exemplary spiritual teachers rather than divine messengers.

Dual identity

There was a clear distinction between those who identify as Quakers and those who identify as Buddhists – the 'Quaker Buddhists' described themselves as both, while the 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' occupied an intermediate position. The author comments that most of this sub-group were involved with Quakerism before they came to Buddhism, and therefore view Buddhism as *a* rather than *the* source of their spirituality. He believes they are still in transition, and could be called 'emerging Quaker Buddhists'. On the other hand, 'Quaker Buddhists' appear to possess a fully developed dual identity. When it came to the question of whether Buddhist Quakers hold what could be regarded as syncretistic (or identical) beliefs or complementary ones, the respondents were in agreement that the attractions of Quakerism lay in the opportunity for social engagement, a familiar Western discourse, and the absence of dogma or creed. What Buddhism gave them was an understanding of the world and their place in it, more disciplined spiritual practice and clearer guidelines. They tended to regard the religions as complementary: Quakerism was seen as their cultural home and Buddhism as a source of spiritual practice. However, there were attributes in both religions that they believed had an inner connection: the emphasis on silence and on ethical and moral values, and the Quaker idea of the 'Inward Light', which some saw as comparable to the concept of 'Buddha-nature' (see Chapter Six).

Summary of the survey findings

The author concludes there are identifiable differences that serve to divide his respondents into two groups: 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' rely on more traditional spiritual resources, attend Meetings for

Worship more frequently, and have belief patterns that are closer to Quaker orthodoxy (that is, they are open to Buddhist influences but are still essentially Quakers). ‘Quaker Buddhists’ are more rooted in Buddhist doctrine and practice – they attend Meetings for Worship and socialise with the Quaker community but their spirituality and beliefs patterns are essentially Buddhist. ‘Quaker Buddhists’, therefore, have a clear dual identity that is distinct from Quaker orthodoxy, while ‘semi-Buddhist Quakers’ draw on Buddhism as a source of spirituality. The two faiths play a complementary role for all Buddhist Quakers: the intellectual and religious aspects of spirituality are Buddhism’s attractions, while the secular aspects of Quakerism (as a cultural home and a social community) are the most influential.

Chapter Six: Theological Explanations for Buddhist Quaker Spirituality

Overview

The author explores the reasons behind the phenomenon of Buddhist Quakers, concluding that certain theological similarities between the two religions appear to render Quakerism open to explorations of Buddhism.

Theological parallels

The Inward Light and Buddha-nature: George Fox, the Quakers’ founder, described the Inward Light very specifically as the ‘Light of Christ’, whereas John Woolman (a century later) believed that it was manifest in different places and in different ages, and called different names, and therefore could not be confined within a particular religious tradition. This appears to render the concept similar to the idea of ‘Buddha-nature’ (a state that is reached through overcoming spiritual ignorance and realising one’s innate perfection). The major difference, however, lies in the interpretation of this state of perfection. The 17th century Quaker Robert Barclay used similar words to Woolman, but did not reject the Christian notion of original sin – perfection was not seen as the natural state of man but as an act of grace accessible to all. By contrast, Buddhism portrays evil as sourced in the delusions of the mind. British Quakerism has moved away from the concept of original sin – it merely validates sin as a ‘stepping stone to God’ – but it still does not espouse the idea of ‘original perfection’. The concept of a Buddha-nature is therefore not directly analogous to the Inward Light. Both concepts, however, pose serious questions about spiritual authority. As neither religion possesses a hierarchy to prescribe what spiritual ‘truths’ should be accepted, they both believe that

an individual must develop a questioning mind in order to gain a higher level of understanding. In Buddhism, this refers to critical assessment; in Quakerism, on the other hand, it means openness to continuous revelation, whatever its source.

Silence and revelation: William Penn, in 1693, called silence ‘most adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit’; Lacoute (1969) interprets God not as ‘spirit’ but as ‘Silence’: words divide, silence unites; while Britton (1998) declares that spiritual matters are beyond expression. This appears to accord with Buddhist doctrines that believe language is without inherent meaning: words are empty because what they express is also empty of meaning. Lacoute’s ‘states of silence’ appear similar to the meditative states achieved through Buddhist practice. Hence, the Meeting for Worship is often seen by Buddhist Quakers as a form of group meditation. They regard the Meeting as a ‘holy silence’ that also contains a dynamic tension, revealing its special character as a symbol of Reality or divinity.

Quakerism and Zen Buddhism: Within their respective religious traditions, both Quakerism and Zen Buddhism appear equally iconoclastic. For Quakers, the appreciation of silence is congruent with designating less significance to scriptural authority; Zen Buddhism takes a similar approach towards the Buddhist Sutras and holy texts. Zen places the emphasis on meditation and simplicity of doctrine, exemplifying the turn towards an individual form of practice, hence it occupies a radical position within Buddhism. Zen’s iconoclasm, the author believes, has a similar origin to Fox’s rage against ‘steeple houses’: the abandonment of the distinction between the sacred and the secular. Zen still maintains temples and images, but acknowledges that they are empty of meaning; they are merely temporary aids that ultimately must be transcended. Similarly it regards the Sutras as an initial aid to individuals in their attempt to relieve themselves of their intellectual burden.

Chapter Seven: Philosophical Explanations for Buddhist Quaker Spirituality

Overview

The author places his investigation into the emergence of Buddhist Quakers in the 20th century in the context of the postmodernism, and draws the conclusion that they represent a response to the challenges of contemporary Western postmodern society.

Postmodernity, the 'open society' and Buddhist Quakers

The 20th century postmodern reappraisal of formerly accepted knowledge, and its belief in the equal validity of all normative concepts, was paralleled by a popular turn to Eastern spirituality. In its rejection of totalising spiritual labels and verbal affirmations of faith, contemporary spirituality differs from religions where belief is institutionalised and certain. Buddhist Quakers' spirituality, for example, is 'apophatic' (that is, it ascribes to an understanding that the 'truth' can be known only by unlearning all that is known through personal and verbal asceticism). The Buddhist reluctance to use spiritual language to articulate the mystery of Being is similar to that of the Quakers. The author takes Popper's (1952) concept of the 'open society' (a society that is innately fluid) and transposes it onto the Quakers. Although they went through a 'closed' period in the 18th century, with rigidly enforced rules, by the turn of the 20th century they had become increasingly liberal and open. Their openness to individual forms of spirituality encouraged the adoption, later in the century, of dual spiritual identities, such as that of 'Buddhist Quaker'. However, the emergence of Buddhist Quakers could also be seen as a response to the disorientation that accompanied postmodernity's ambiguous picture of the world. The author discerns a marked difference between Buddhist Quakers and contemporary British Quakers. What they most value in Buddhism is the combination of experience and authority: the consistent teaching about the world and the individual's place in it, albeit in a context of critical questioning. He concludes that while Buddhist Quakers are not symptomatic of postmodernity, British Quakers have taken on the broad postmodern paradigm; they are 'fundamentalist' about the relativity of truth claims.

A philosophic perspective on Buddhist Quakers

The emergence of Buddhist Quakers can be related to both British society's entry into postmodernity, with its rejection of essentialism, fixed meanings and unambiguous distinctions, and to the development of Quakerism in Britain into a largely 'open society', transcending its Christian origins. Buddhism offers Buddhist Quakers a clear way of life without contradicting their postmodern experiences. However, the author warns that Quakerism, in taking on the trappings of postmodernity, with its 'fundamentalist' rejection of certainty, has 'fallen into a logic trap'. It has ceased to be open to those whose spiritual character is characterised by elements of certainty, such as those Buddhist Quakers who have found in Buddhism an answer to their spiritual questions.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The challenges of the research

The author concludes his dissertation by reviewing the challenges he faced in the study of Buddhist Quaker spirituality. At the forefront was the initial question of how to define the area of research: Buddhist Quakers have no distinct organisation, and some would not even term themselves as such. He decided, therefore, to define his subjects as 'Quakers who regard Buddhism as the major source of their spirituality'. The second challenge follows from this: how to clarify the term 'spirituality'. To address the problem, he distinguished religions from spiritualities in terms of their relationship to institutionalised symbolic systems. In a spirituality, symbols have an individual interpretation, and it is in this sense that Buddhist Quakers create their own spirituality by combining Buddhist and Quaker concepts and practices. One of the tasks of the research was to determine to what extent a Buddhist Quaker spirituality can be distilled from these individual spiritualities. The author believes this 'distillation' does result in a distinctive Buddhist Quaker spirituality, but one that could be discerned as comprising two strands: 'semi-Buddhist Quaker' and 'Quaker Buddhist'. The final challenge was the difficulty of access to this socially invisible group, which he overcame through the method of 'snowball sampling' (see Chapter Two). The author was subsequently able to test his theory that Buddhist Quakers can be divided into two sub-groups through an analysis of his survey findings. He identified a section of the participants as 'semi-Buddhist Quakers' whose general framework of thought meant they were closer to Quaker orthodoxy than Buddhism, but a Quakerism devoid of its Christian roots. The survey, however, indicated that their spiritualities are not static in nature, but rather moving in the direction of a 'Quaker Buddhist' spirituality. Those respondents he termed 'Quaker Buddhists' appeared to have developed far stronger roots in Buddhism – the 'Quaker Buddhist' adheres to a Quaker interpretation of Buddhism but Buddhism replaces Christianity as their spiritual framework.

Common themes in Quakerism and Buddhism

The author found, in the course of his investigation, that a number of common themes run through Quakerism and Buddhism that make the combination particularly attractive to those Quakers drawn to Buddhist spirituality – the most important being silence and the emphasis on inward experience. Despite the fact that these two themes are threaded through Quaker history, Buddhist Quakers appear to be a relatively recent phenomenon. This, the author believes, is due to the fact that Buddhism, since entering Western consciousness, has progressively become more accessible, while at the same time Quakerism has become more open. Whereas in the past, Buddhist philosophy and

practices would be used as a way of deepening an understanding of traditional Quaker teaching, the new 'post-Christian' era permits a 'free merger' between Quaker and Buddhist teachings and practices at an individual level. Neither religion is submerged by the other, but what appears to exist is a blend of the two. Most Buddhist Quakers find they offer complementary attractions: Buddhism offers practical methods and a consistent teaching about the contemporary world, while Quakerism offers the social aspects of fellowship and a more familiar Western outlook. There is no clear borderline between a Quaker and a Buddhist Quaker, but a spectrum of different individual spiritualities drawing on Buddhist ideas and practices to varying degrees. Yet those Buddhist Quakers the author identifies as 'Quaker Buddhists' are clearly distinct from mainstream Quakerism – they tend to be more non-theist in belief and have developed deep roots in Buddhist teaching, leaving no doubt that Buddhism is *the* major source of their spirituality.

Dual spiritual affiliation

The author's analysis leads him to reject the idea that Buddhist Quakers are an individually arbitrary combination – the parallels between the two religions are too strong. There are similarities between the concept of the Inward Light and that of a Buddha-nature, for example, and both also emphasise personal experience rather than belief, and share the characteristic of silence in their spiritual practices. Thus Buddhist Quakers can be seen to hold dual spiritual affiliation. The Quaker William Penn said 300 years ago: '...devout souls are everywhere of one religion'. Buddhist Quakers, in this sense, 'reconcile in silence the diversity of spiritual expression'. However, the author points out that both a negative and a positive conclusion can be drawn from this: it either heralds the eventual dissolution of the Society of Friends into a number of sectarian fragments of individualised spiritualities, or it presages the advent of a new co-religious entity. He ends with the comment that Buddhist Quaker spirituality 'may well be both: a sign of evolving unity and a sign of dissolution'.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)