Young Buddhists in Australia
Negotiating transnational flows

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Introduction
This chapter introduces two bodies of theory and method on religion. More specifically, it discusses the literature on transnational flows of religion and mobile religion, as well as ‘lived’ or ‘everyday’ religion. Transnational flows of religion have contributed to the emergence of new opportunities to negotiate religious identities and to exacerbate, alter, and lessen racial and religious tensions. So far, less attention has been paid to the ways these processes are operating outside the Global North. In response, this chapter offers a microstudy of how they play out in experiences of ‘lived’ or ‘everyday’ religion among some young Australian Buddhist practitioners who are immersed in transnational flows of religion across Australia and Asia.

Theoretical developments in the study of religion and migration
While religion has long crossed borders, the period of ‘thick’ globalization since the late 1970s has led to increasingly complex and intensified flows of religion and culture. As a corollary to this, research in the fields of international migration and sociology of religion have benefitted from significant cross-fertilization and mutual development. This is evident in the ways that research on religion and global flows has come to reflect new understandings of migrants as significant religious actors.

Several researchers have documented these research developments. Ebaugh (2010), for example, has identified three stages in the development of research in this field, with a shift in focus from immigration to transnationalism and globalization. In the first stage, research on religion and the ‘new immigrants’ in the 1990s was centrally concerned with the role of religious institutions in helping migrants settle into receiving countries. This research was exemplified by Warner and Wittner (1998), and focused on the ethnic composition of immigrant religious groups, language use, gender roles, and generational issues. Research during this stage also looked at the spread of immigrant religion beyond ethnic and religious boundaries, as well as the global implications of transnational religious flows (Yang and Ebaugh 2001).
In the second stage of research, Ebaugh (2010, pp. 105–6) observes that research focused more on how religions co-existed and were transformed across sending and receiving countries. The work of Levitt (1999, 2003, p. 849) was central to this shift. Levitt showed that the religion of immigrants had a significant impact on religion in their home countries because transnational migrants produced new mixes of belief and practice that were sent back to home countries in the form of ‘social remittances.’

Third, Ebaugh (2010) observes that research on religion and migration has taken on an increasingly global dimension, moving beyond a focus on ties between sending and receiving countries. For example, once religion returns to the home country, family members and friends themselves migrate in many receiving countries around the world, consequently impacting global religious systems. Taking into account these findings, researchers have recalibrated their research on religion and migration to study the global system rather than smaller subunits such as the state (Beyer 1994, pp. 1–2). Significantly, Robertson (1994, p. 121) has identified ‘the theological and religious aspects and implications of globalization theory’ for sociological research. For example, some sociologists of religion have looked at how religion may be a homogenizing force, such as in the global Hindutva and Gulen movements (Levitt 2003, p. 848), while others have observed greater religious diversity as individuals negotiate local religious identities in relation to the world (Robertson 1994).

Mobile religion

The theoretical and methodological implications of moving towards research on religion that centers around the global have been influentially discussed by Thomas Tweed and Manual Vasquez, who offer a useful orientation towards viewing religion as ‘mobile.’

In his review of research on Buddhism, Tweed (2011) observed that no adequate theory or methodological framework had emerged in scholarship on Buddhism, particularly with respect to flows of religion and culture. Seeking to foreground both the dynamism and porousness of religion and culture, Tweed (2011) proposed a ‘translocative’ analysis of religion that built on his earlier theory of ‘crossing and dwelling’ (Tweed 2006). In the latter, Tweed focused on the ways religion both ‘crossed boundaries’ and dwelled or made homes in various locations. In proposing a translocative theory of religion (Tweed 2011), he placed additional emphasis on ‘crossing,’ movement, or change, not only in relation to religious flows but also Buddhist ideas of impermanence, no-self, and dependent origination. As Tweed (2011, pp. 24–5) outlined, a translocative approach to religion has several methodological implications. These include an imperative to ‘follow the flows’ (of people, artifacts, institutions, and practices), ‘notice all the figures crossing’ (who is present and absent), ‘attend to all the senses and all religion’s components’ (when researching religion), ‘consider varying scales’ (or geographical regions beyond the national), and ‘notice how flows start, stop, and shift’ (in ways that recognize how flows are mediated by power relations).

Similarly, Vasquez (2008) has developed a ‘networks’ approach to studying religion, that centers around a recognition of increasing connectivity and fluidity in an era of globalization. Vasquez (2008, pp. 153, 167) also emphasizes the ways global connectivity is characterized by socio-economic inequalities and ‘new exclusionary boundaries’ that may restrict certain flows, and indeed, reinforce rather than collapse borders. To account more fully for processes of ‘segregation, surveillance, and control,’ and the social inequalities that are preponderant in an era of globalization, Vasquez (2008, pp. 151, 169) suggests that a networks approach enables scholars to explore ‘relatively stable but always contested differentials of power, of inclusion and exclusion, or cooperation and conflict, of boundary-crossing and boundary-making.’
‘Lived’ or ‘everyday’ religion

Drawing on Vasquez’s (2008, p. 165) account of mobile religion, it is important to relate global flows of religion to issues of context and diversity, looking at the ways religion may simultaneously contribute to both ‘ecumenical cosmopolitanism’ and ‘exclusionary particularism.’ This can be done by looking at the ways ‘local, grassroots, official, national, and transnational actors define and live religion’ (Vasquez 2008, p. 156). Similarly Levitt argues (2003, p. 852) that the methodological implications of researching transnational and global religion include an attentiveness to the ways ‘ordinary individuals live their lives across borders.’

‘Lived religion’ has been described by McGuire (2008, p. 12) as an approach that enables scholars to understand ‘how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives.’ This approach directs attention towards the actual experiences of religious individuals, looking at how religion is continually interpreted by individuals ‘within the circumstances of his or her histories, relationships and experiences’ (Orsi 2003, p. 174). In this regard, improvisation and the ability to pick and mix from various sources through ‘cultural bricolage’ (Orsi 1997, p. 7) becomes ‘the norm, rather than the exception’ (McGuire 2008, p. 185). Ammerman (2007, p. 5) makes a similar point, utilizing the term ‘everyday religion’ to emphasize the importance of looking for the many ways religion may be interwoven in the lives of ‘non-experts.’ She contends that while individuals’ experiences of ‘organized religion’ and ‘official’ ideas about religion are still important, ‘they are most interesting to us once they get used by someone other than a professional.’

A lived or everyday religion approach can help shed light on how cosmopolitan identities and racial and religious tensions are negotiated on the ground. More specifically, looking at these lived experiences helps scholars identify the factors that may enable religious individuals to adopt fluid, relational, and cosmopolitan identities, as well as the forces that contribute to inclusion, exclusion, surveillance, and control.

Case study

This chapter examines how these processes play out in a microstudy of 22 young adult Buddhist practitioners living in Australia, aged 18 to 30, who are enmeshed in transnational flows of religion and culture between Australia and Asia. As Barker (2017, pp. 375–6) suggests, the growth of transnational flows of Buddhism in and out of Australia and Oceania, along with the increase in second, third, and beyond generation Buddhists in these nations ‘give rise to many questions about the lived status of Buddhism,’ ‘as opposed to nationally endorsed views on the integration and effects of Buddhist organizations.’ These generational changes are perhaps most usefully explored by focusing on the experiences of young people—the millennials and post-millennials—whose highly mobile lives have been noted by youth studies researchers (Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018), and for whom intense upheavals in relation to politics, the casualization of the workforce, detraditionalization, frequent overseas travel for study, work, and place, familiarity with technologically mediated networking, and precarity relating to employment and the establishment of life trajectories, are regular features of everyday living (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Harris, Wyn and Younes 2010; White and Wyn 2013). The study employed a narrative method of interviewing, which pays attention to individuals’ temporal lived experiences and processes of change regarding the self (Elliot 2005, p. 6).
Young Buddhists within and beyond Australia

Like other Western countries such as the United States, Canada, and France, Australia accepted large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the aftermath of the Vietnam War through its refugee program, which saw up to 22,000 refugees settled in Australia per year from the early 1980s (Refugee Council of Australia 2012). The influx of these refugees significantly bolstered the number of people identifying as Buddhist in these countries, with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data recording the percentage of Buddhists in Australia for the first time in 1981, at 0.2% or 35,073 people (ABS 1981, p. 12). In 2016, the percentage of Australians identifying as Buddhist grew to 2.4% or 563,674 people, making Buddhism the second most popular minority religion in Australia after Islam and the major Christian denominations. By comparison, the percentage of individuals identifying as Buddhist remains notably lower in the United States, where Buddhists made up only 0.7% of the population in 2014 (Pew Research Centre 2015), and Canada, where Buddhists made up 1.1% of the population in 2011 (Statistics Canada 2011). In the UK, only 0.4% of the population identified as Buddhist in 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2015).

In terms of transnational flows, Australia’s geographical proximity to Asia is of particular interest. As Rocha and Barker (2011, p. 10) observe, this has made the development of Buddhism in Australia ‘different to the growth of Buddhism in other Western countries.’ While the geographic proximity of Australian to Asia is likely to be responsible for the higher percentage of Buddhists in Australia than other Western countries, it also has the capacity to heighten inequalities relating to socially constructed categories of race and ethnicity for the Australian Buddhist community. Tensions relating to racialized and ethnic differences, specifically involving ‘Asian’ versus ‘Western’ subjectivities, are exacerbated by the fact that the majority (over 50%) of individuals identifying as ‘Buddhist’ in 2011 were born in an Asian country (ABS 2011). Indeed, Rocha and Barker (2011, p. 6) point out that many chapters in their recent edited volume, Buddhism in Australia: Traditions in Change ‘delve into Anglo Australians’ social, political and cultural capital vis-à-vis Asian Australians’ lack of these.’ As they maintain, these inequalities should be understood within the context of Australia’s historical ‘ambivalence toward Asia,’ which can be observed in political maneuvers that have at various periods distanced Australia from the Asia region, and have shown a desire for a closer engagement with Asia at other times. The politics of Asian inclusion or exclusion, and its effect on Buddhist youth identity negotiation, are worth exploring in more detail particularly among young adult Buddhist practitioners, who have grown up in a national context where anti-Asian sentiment (particularly during Senator Pauline Hanson’s initial rise to prominence in the mid-1990s) has operated alongside an official multicultural policy, which supports the maintenance of diverse ethnic and religious identities.

The growing complexity of cultural diversity has prompted scholars to develop new conceptual frameworks that recognize increasingly diverse, and often ambivalent, subject positionings. Harris (2013), drawing upon both Vertovec’s (2007) concept of ‘super-diversity’ and Noble’s (2011) work on ‘hyper-diversity,’ asserts that in an Australian context, diversity is not only increasing but is also subject to countless transmutations in everyday practice as people reflexively position themselves in relation to others in novel ways. She contends that these more complex, contextualized subject positionings held by young people are ‘ushering in a new kind of multicultural citizenship’ which reflects ‘young people’s expressions of post-minority identities and their multiple, dynamic—and at times conflictual—modes of relationality’ (Harris 2013, pp. 4–5).
Young Buddhist practitioners in Australia need to be understood within this new framework of multicultural citizenship, due to their movement between multiple social contexts involving Asian, Western, Buddhist, and non-Buddhist elements in multicultural Australia, in which notions of belonging and exclusion based on single categories of ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality may overlook the micro-dynamics of contextually based subjectivities. In a globalized and detraditionalized Buddhist era, multiple boundary crossings are standard; young Buddhist practitioners continually traverse numerous social contexts on account of both their hybrid ethnic identifications (for example, Chinese-Australian Buddhist), as well as their movement within and beyond religious institutions. In each set of circumstances, young Buddhist practitioners are required to make themselves anew; they must adopt or develop appropriate identifications and modes of relationality befitting the circumstances. The dispositions they adopt or develop as they move from one context to the next are likely to be complex and multifaceted, and have yet to be explicated in studies of Buddhist youth.

Global flows and mobilities

For many participants in the study, socialization into a Buddhist identity in Australia was facilitated by physical encounters of visiting monks, or opportunities to travel overseas. Beth, for example, explained that she initially became interested in Buddhism following an encounter with a visiting monk, who she then stayed with in Sri Lanka. For Fabian, his exploration of Buddhism took him to two different countries, where he spent several months in each country immersed in Buddhist communities. The effects of globalization are illustrated dramatically here, as Fabian initially became interested in Buddhism after attending a Buddhist center which aims to facilitate practice in a Western cultural context. He then became interested in Zen Buddhism after becoming involved in a group in Asia practicing in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, an exiled Vietnamese monk. Several years later, he went to Europe for four months to live in a Buddhist community practicing in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. These examples demonstrate the role of global flows in shaping Buddhist identity and practice, long past the initial settlement of ethnic Buddhist communities in Australia. These findings resonate with McMahan’s (2008) contention, that globalization has disembedded Buddhism from ‘traditional social networks,’ spreading Buddhism to a diverse range of contexts which can now be accessed via a range of mediums, both locally and globally.

While participants’ Buddhist socialization was facilitated by international travel and communication, they also had access to a wide variety of Buddhist resources, often in the form of books, or accessible via technology. Bob first came into contact with Buddhism by reading a book about the Buddha given to him by his mother. Ellen also mentioned that she first learnt about Buddhism through reading a book about Buddhism and watching a documentary about Buddhism on television. For Henry, digital media was his main source of information about Buddhism—he subscribed to email newsletters from various Buddhist groups, as well as the Facebook pages of Buddhist groups and well-known Buddhist figures, which he checked and read frequently.

As a number of participants indicated, having to piece together multiple influences required considerable individual responsibility and effort, and was further complicated by participants’ own changing interests, needs, and life circumstances. At times, participants were required to adjudicate between competing discourses about Buddhism, which had been brought into contact through the global circulation of ideas, practices, and artefacts relating to Buddhism. These included simplistic interpretations of the Dalai Lama’s teachings, misunderstandings about Buddhists, and perceptions of Buddhism as an ‘Asian’ religion which was in conflict with Western cultural norms. Ben, for example, explained:
I think that a lot of people don’t understand what Buddhism’s about... well they see the Dalai Lama and they think it’s all about well just live your life and be happy. I think Buddhist philosophy’s a lot deeper than that, it’s based on the idea that life is suffering. And there is a way out of that, um, through right action.

These findings are consistent with Bouma’s (2006, pp. 98–9) observation that contemporary forms of religiosity in Australia are now ‘less reliant on the formal organizations’ of religious institutions, and are part of a trend towards ‘do-it-yourself’ religiosity which reflects larger cultural trends of increased levels of personal agency and decision making. Other misunderstandings that participants were required to negotiate included the perception that Buddhists were attempting to cut themselves out from society and eliminate all their desires (Candice). These misunderstandings could sometimes create a distancing or dislike of Buddhism, and a perceived clash between Buddhism and Australian or Western culture, as discussed in the next section.

**Buddhist identity and ‘Australian’ culture**

For some participants in the current study, there were perceptions of a binary between Buddhism and the West. Evie, for example, likened her practice of Buddhism to the experience of an international student coming to live in Australia. When asked if she had experienced any conflict between Australian culture and Buddhist practice, she answered:

Hell yes... I feel that Australian culture is so much against the type of lifestyle that Buddhism is promoting me to live, and I find that conflict or that contradiction really, really difficult, to the point where I feel like I’ve now become so Buddhist that... I feel like I’ve lost a lot of my Australian culture, or like I’m starting to understand a lot, what it must feel like for an international student to come and live in Australia.

Perceptions about the conflict between Buddhism and Western culture were not unidirectional; they were also evident in the positioning of Buddhist identity during interactions that participants had with others. This was observed in comments questioning the legitimacy of White Buddhist practitioners, from people who had difficulty seeing the compatibility between Buddhism and being White or Western. Ben, for example, noted that people often questioned his ethnic origins once they found out he was a Buddhist. He said, ‘often the question is, oh really. Are you fully European? Why are you Buddhist?’ Tenzin, too, noted the perceived disjunction between Buddhism and Western culture, revealing how he was verbally abused for wearing his Buddhist robes in public, and labelled a ‘fraud, or charlatan or something like that.’ He explained, ‘I think it’s ‘cause I was White and I was in the robes, and he thought I was a faker.’ Tenzin likened the experience of being Buddhist and a Westener to belonging to ‘two different tribes,’ a predicament he ultimately chose to resolve by disrobing as a monk. While not all White participants experienced such a conflict between their religion and race, perhaps due to the fact that most did not take the step of becoming ordained and wearing Buddhist robes, the experiences recounted here illustrate the ways Buddhism is still perceived by many to be an ‘Asian’ religion, to be practiced solely among Asian immigrants and their offspring. Despite longstanding global flows of Buddhism, these perceptions are still salient in the minds of those who seek a clear demarcation between ‘East’ and ‘West,’ and the religions which supposedly belong to each. Globalization brings ‘East’ and ‘West’ in closer contact in ways which may be confronting, yet also serves as a productive space for the development of subjectivities which transcend bifurcated views about so-called ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ religions.
Complicity

One strategy participants used to negotiate incompatibilities between Buddhism and Australian culture (for example, Australia’s binge-drinking and meat eating culture) was complicity. Beth, for example, said she was ‘still learning’ to reconcile Buddhism with Australian culture, implying an acceptance of existing social norms rather than a desire to challenge the status quo. Indeed, many participants chose to make adjustments to their own behavior to accommodate their religious preferences. Candice chose to act as the designated driver to avoid drinking while condoning it in her friends, while Faye chose to chant in her head to avoid offending others. Candice admitted that her decision to act as the designated driver allowed her to ‘get out of it in a really cowardly way,’ while Faye emphasized that a privatization of religion was part of Australian culture, stating, ‘that’s my country so that’s how I go with it’ [laughs]. These examples illustrate the simultaneous positioning of some young Australian Buddhist practitioners in both Buddhist and Western cultures, and the acceptance of Australian cultural norms.

It is worthwhile unpacking these examples further, and questioning the reasons for such complicity, or unwillingness to engage in visible displays of religiosity. I suggest here that the unwillingness to challenge existing social norms regarding religion can be attributed to a ‘cosmopolitan irony’ (Turner 2001, 2002) which young Australian Buddhist practitioners both adopt and respond to in their negotiations of belonging. As Turner (2002, p. 149) argues, an ironic distance is ‘the most prized norm of wit and principle of taste’ when individuals are required to continually interact with strangers. According to Turner (2001, p. 148, 2002, pp. 55, 58) the irony of cosmopolitanism lies in distancing from one’s own culture in order to respect other cultures in a contemporary, globalized world. In the case of young Australian Buddhist practitioners, cosmopolitan irony is reflected in participants’ simultaneous commitment to Buddhism, and their hesitations in speaking about and practicing their religion in public, out of respect for those practicing other religions. In the examples above, Candice makes a point about not stopping friends from drinking, showing a respect for diversity and an ‘ironic distance’ from her own religion. Similarly, Faye demonstrates an awareness and respect for the preferences of her housemates to not be exposed to foreign religious practices.

Yen and Anh also related how they were sometimes hesitant about mentioning Buddhism to others due to their awareness of cultural diversity in Australia. Yen for example said:

[b]ecause we’re so multicultural . . . you gotta be a . . . people are a bit sensitive sometimes, and you don’t wanna like, I don’t want people to get upset if I say anything, you know. Especially if I think they’re a great person, but sometimes religion does get in the way for some, some people. So . . . I generally try and phrase things carefully. Be a bit more politically correct.

In this case, Yen describes the value of rising above an attachment to any particular culture or religion, and sees this as necessary in the context of cultural diversity. The confrontation of diverse religious beliefs is described here as something that has the potential to lead to emotional distress, yet is also an expected feature of everyday life in multicultural Australia. Consequently, it must be anticipated and managed by distancing oneself from one’s own culture.

Although participants from the study did not cite particular Buddhist teachings, Buddhist concepts such as dependent origination (pratīyāsamatpāda), no-self (anatta), and impermanence (anicca) appeared to manifest in experiences of negotiating Buddhist identity in an Australian...
context. In particular, a recognition of pratītyasamutpāda, or interdependence, appeared to manifest in participants’ perceptions of belonging in an Australian national context, with participants adopting strategies of practicing Buddhism which complemented, rather than challenged, Australian culture. A recognition of anatta also appeared to be evident in participants’ contextualized experiences of religious belonging. It is also evident in the perceived absence of a monolithic ‘Buddhist’ or ‘Western’ identity. It is likely that recognition of anicca or impermanence gave participants a heightened awareness of the changing circumstances within which Buddhism was negotiated, and potentially predisposed them towards changing themselves. However, more research is required to support this possibility and to ascertain whether these findings resonate with the experiences of other young Buddhists globally.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have used a ‘lived religion’ approach to investigate how 22 young adult Buddhist practitioners negotiated transnational and global flows of religion between Australia, Asia, and beyond. I have explored the impact of racializing discourses which regard Buddhism as an ‘Asian religion,’ and the ways these racializing discourses affect the negotiation of Buddhism in an Australian context, which continues to serve as a site for the reproduction of ambivalence regarding Asia. I have suggested that participants’ negotiations of Buddhism take these ambivalences into account and rework them in ways which transcend the ‘East’/’West’ binary, signifying the development of more cosmopolitan dispositions. As Buddhism continues to traverse geographical boundaries, the development of such dispositions may become more pertinent to maintaining social harmony and peaceful coexistence. As the field of religion, mobility, and globalization continues to change, future research may focus on explicating the religious teachings and practices which facilitate the development of these dispositions, and the contexts in which they might manifest globally.

**Notes**

1 For further details about the study, see Lam (2018).
2 Pauline Hanson is an Australian right-wing politician who has built her political trajectory on a populist and conservative platform. She initially gained prominence for comments made during her 1996 maiden speech to parliament, where she claimed that Australia was ‘in danger of being swamped by Asians’ (Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Political Party 2015).

**References**


