

The Buddha and The Cross: The Development of Buddhism in Ireland

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Introduction:

When one thinks of religion in Ireland, Christian, Celtic, and perhaps even Norman images are immediately brought to mind. Unlike many Asian countries (or the Bay Area of California for instance), Ireland is usually not associated with Buddhism. While comparatively speaking, Buddhism is a young religion in Ireland, it is developing rapidly and offering new religious, philosophical, and ethical alternatives to the country's religiously-disenchanted population, which has been long dominated by the rigorous institutionalization of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, and bloody conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. The understudied, yet significant success of Buddhism's development in Ireland is due to many diverse factors including (but not limited to): the similarities between Buddhism and Celtic mythology; Ireland's rich literary history of meditative authors; the political benefits of an Irish appropriation of Asian religious thought; the strong, often stifling control of the Catholic Church; the recent fall of the Celtic Tiger and Ireland's Economic Structure; and the wider societal perceptions of Buddhism as a philosophy, not a religion.

Although there are many rural and urban Buddhist organizations of varying schools developing rapidly and gaining new membership throughout the country even as these words are being written, the religion's youth, central tenants, and philosophical features require it to, in essence, "prove itself" to most of Irish society. Thus, Irish Buddhism, like Chinese Buddhism in the decades following its arrival from India, is in a constantly changing, formative stage of existence as it strives for religious and societal authentication.

Research Objectives:

The purpose of this research is to determine the characteristics specific to "Irish

Buddhism", and note their differences from Buddhism in other countries across the globe such as (but not limited to) China, Japan, Tibet, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Cambodia, Laos, South Africa, Morocco, The United States, Brazil, Canada, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, and Australia. Due to Ireland's rich, yet tumultuous religious history, the study also strives to uncover traits of minority religions as they develop in societies with historically entrenched religious majorities (i.e. Buddhism is a slowly emerging minority religion in Ireland's majorly Christian--especially Catholic--society).

Historically, minority religions have usually entered societies with established religious majorities through cultural exchanges caused by force (conquest, war, expansion, colonization), trade, missionary goals, or changes in global climate patterns (which cause changes in human migratory patterns). The coming of Christian missionaries (along with the famous Saint Patrick who was captured by Irish traders) to Ireland in the fifth century AD shows one example of this type of minority religious development. In this case, Christianity, the minority religion of that time, began gaining popularity in a society with a previously established religious majority (Celtic and pagan mythology) due to the popularity and proselytizing methodology of the missionaries who landed there. Although they were not popular with *everyone* in fifth century Ireland, the monk's "gift" of the Roman alphabet to the people of Ireland (which allowed the traditional pagan peoples to record their oral stories, myths, and history)¹ increased their popularity, and by roughly 600-700 AD most of Ireland was Christian ("History of Ireland"). Now, the tables have turned, as Christianity holds the religious majority in the country, while Buddhism presents an example of a religious minority.

¹ Although the Irish people of this time were using the language of Ogham, many scholars believe this language is, in itself, a hybrid of early Celtic languages and the Roman language (Foster 8), making the Roman language an important development in communication patterns on the island.

Countless other examples of these kinds of religious minority/majority relationships and development patterns exist not only in Ireland's history, but in the history of every country and society. In the last century, as Buddhism has begun to plant its seeds in Ireland's religiously fertile (yet still Christian-dominated) soil, religious historians and scholars have the unique opportunity to *watch* this religion's seeds grow and possibly blossom. Interactions with Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestant sects) can be noted and recorded as they occur, and the differences and similarities between rural and urban, Northern and Southern, Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhist development can be observed. In addition, through observation, formal interviews and ethnographic-based research, more knowledge regarding the social, political, and economic functions of Buddhism in Irish society can be attained. Although the fate and future of Buddhism in Ireland are unknown, the fact that we, as a scholastic community, have the opportunity to *observe* the minority religion develop is amazing--we can literally watch *how* religious history is being created, using the development of Buddhism in Ireland as a prime case study.

Methodology:

This research was conducted during a seven-week stay in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, during which time many formal interviews were conducted with leaders and members of Buddhist centers and monasteries. In addition, many of this paper's conclusions come from careful observation of Irish Buddhist rituals and the social and religious attitudes towards Buddhism of those both within and outside of the visited Buddhist communities. Although only segments from formal interviews are included in the paper, thoughts and points from casual discussions with many Irish people, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, have played a role in the formation of the paper's conclusions.

Historical Background:

Brief Religious History of Ireland:

Up until about the fifth century AD when Christianity came to the island, Ireland was a pagan society with a rich tradition of mythology and a government structure comprised of different kings (including the famous High Kings of Tara who reigned on the Hill of Tara), kingdoms, chiefs, and chiefdoms (Byrne 8). In the early ninth century, the Vikings invaded, interrupting, although not destroying the spread of Christianity around the area. Although the Vikings destroyed many monasteries and settlements in the beginning of their presence in Ireland, it is believed that they did so for economic, and not religious reasons, as they eventually assimilated with the rest of Irish society. In 1169, Norman mercenaries attacked the island, beginning a seven-century long period of Norman and English rule (Foster 15).

In 1534, around the time of the Protestant Reformation, English military campaigns forced Irish Catholic chiefs who would not convert to Protestantism out of power and in the next decades, the English imposed many unfair, strongly anti-Catholic laws on Irish citizens, including the “plantation” policies, in which the English government confiscated land from Irish Catholics and gave it to Protestant settlers from England and Scotland (“History of Ireland”). Divisive policies like these started the history of conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, which continued into later centuries in the forms of the Easter Uprising in 1916 and the numerous violent clashes between “brothers” during the Troubles, a period from the 1960’s through the late 1990’s which saw much religious tension in Northern Ireland between Republicans (those who favored Irish Independence) and Unionists (those who favored British, or “home” rule). During this time, religion and politics became forever intertwined, as

Republicans were assumed to be Catholics and Unionists were assumed to be Protestants. This fusion of religious and political identities has reshaped the meaning of the words “Protestant” and “Catholic” in Irish (and particularly Northern Irish) society today, as these religious categories are now seen as ethnic categories (Interview H).

History of Buddhism in Ireland:

Up until the 1960’s and 1970’s, when “New Age” thinking swept the island and increased Ireland’s knowledge of Buddhism, there were a few Irish citizens who made names for themselves as Buddhists. Although these pre-1960’s-70’s Irish Buddhists have remarkable, quite individualistic stories, it would be scholastic folly to assume that there was *no* knowledge of Buddhism in Ireland *at all* before these figures’ stories were publicized. Scholar Laurence Cox writes: "If, then as now, access was structured by literacy, wealth and different languages, nevertheless we have to abandon the view that Buddhism was "news" to Irish people in some recent decade." (Cox 2).

Although the first Irish Buddhist living and practicing in Ireland was recorded in 1871²,

² “The first Irish Buddhist appeared as a County Dublin statistic in the 1871 census — given the date, most probably a university teacher or student; around the same period (1873) the *Dublin University Magazine* published a largely sympathetic article on ‘Buddhism and its founder’. From this point on, there were between one and three Buddhists in Ireland in the 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses, but identification is at present impossible,” writes scholar Laurence Cox. “This period also saw a ‘moral panic’ among Catholic and Protestant theologians alike at the prospect of Europeans converting to Buddhism, a panic reflected in, for example, the *Dublin Review* as early as 1890.” (Cox 5-6). It is interesting to note here that Buddhism was considered a threat to European theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, as early as the late nineteenth century. Although Buddhism may not have been popular or mainstream during this time in Ireland, the knowledge (and fear) of the religion/philosophy within the hierarchical vehicles of the Catholic and Protestant Churches shows its importance to Ireland’s religious history and its perceived source of religious (and/or political) power.

most of the early Irish Buddhists left Ireland to be ordained or to practice in Asian countries like Japan and Burma (Cox 4). Some of these early Buddhists include Captain C. Pfound, an Irish military officer whose service in the Opium Wars led him to Japan. After the war, he stayed, beginning a life of anti-Christian missionary rhetoric and Buddhist involvement, both in the Japanese Tendai and Shingon orders and the late nineteenth century Buddhist Propagation Society. Another Buddhist enthusiast and military man from an Anglo-Irish family, Lafcadio Hearn, settled in Japan in the late nineteenth century and is now buried at Jitoin Kobudera temple in Tokyo (Ronan 1997). Similarly, J. Bowles Daly, an Anglo-Irish Buddhist convert who went to Ceylon for military reasons also stayed and worked hard to establish the Buddhist Theosophical Society, which was created as an alternative to Christian missionary schools (Cox 6). Additionally, one of the most famous Irish Buddhists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is U Dhammaloka, a Burmese-ordained Dubliner³ whose radical anti-Christian missionary activities led him to amass charges of sedition. He was not stopped by these charges, however, and he went on to open many Buddhist institutions in Asia and talk publicly about his views (Cox 7).

Later examples of Irish citizens who dared to step outside of the socially established Christian cultural norms into the realm of Buddhist thought include: Maurice Collis, the Irish civil servant who became a Burmese nationalist and advocate in the 1930's; Tibetan lineage practitioner Patrick Breslin who was living in Russia with his Russian wife and was one of three Irish victims to die in a Stalin gulag; Terrance Gray, a wealthy Anglo-Irish stage actor and frequent writer for the *Middle Way* Buddhist magazine; T. Lobsang Rampa, author of *The Third*

³ Although historians believe he was born Lawrence O'Rourke in Dublin, during his "hobo" activities in America before his move to Burma, U Dhammaloka amassed many different aliases, turning the specifics about his early life into a grey area for scholars and historians. (Cox 7).

Eye and widely-considered Buddhist “fraud”; and finally Irish Theosophist Laura/Michael Dillon, the first person ever to undergo a female-to-male plastic surgery procedure while also developing an interest in the Theravadin tradition and then the Tibetan tradition (at the Gelugpa Rizong monastery in Ladakh where he was given the name Lobzang Jivaka) (Cox 8). These seemingly endless examples of Irish Buddhist individuals and enthusiasts show that Buddhism and Buddhist thought have been present in the Irish consciousness for at least two centuries.

Current State of Buddhism in Ireland:

Although the “religious” results of the 2011 Irish census will not be published until March of 2012, many Irish Buddhist practitioners have high hopes for a numerical increase in the country’s Buddhist population.⁴ “I think it’s [Buddhism’s] quite an appropriate religion for modern Ireland in particular, I think it will grow...we had a census recently, and I will be very curious to see how many people say they’re Buddhist on the form, because I think it’s growing quite quickly in Ireland...the Irish temperament is quite a spiritual temperament but the old ways are not satisfying [people] anymore...” (Interview G). While it can be difficult to numerically track the rise in interest in Buddhism in Ireland due to the hesitancy, on the part of many Buddhists to identify as such⁵, there seems to be no doubt in the minds of Buddhist organizers and leaders that the time for Buddhism in Ireland has come.

⁴ It should be noted that in the Republic of Ireland’s most recent 2006 Census results, a 67.3% increase in self-identifying Buddhists occurred, up from the 2002 Census results. This represents an enormous rise in the percentage of self-identifying Irish Buddhists and also shows that as of 2006, 0.15% of The Republic of Ireland’s population considered themselves Buddhists, making Buddhism the third largest religious category in the country after Christianity and Islam (<http://census.cso.ie/Census/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=74644>).

⁵ “I still feel a little strange defining myself as a Buddhist.” (Interview R). Additionally, since the terms “Catholic” and “Protestant” still represent ethnic categories in Ireland, some Irish Buddhist enthusiasts still choose to identify with these traditional categories, even if they do not practice Christianity anymore (Cox 4-5).

Additionally, many different types of Buddhist communities are developing and flourishing in Ireland. There are numerous groups claiming loyalty to particular Tibetan lineages (including the Karma Kagyu lineage, Rigpa, and Potala Kadampa), there are prominent Zen groups, Vipassana groups, and Triratna groups (formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order or FWBO), all attracting people with different spiritual needs. According to Laurence Cox, there are no specific traditions that are developing better, worse, slower or more quickly than the others. “Everything is here...and I don’t think that there [are groups or traditions] developing particularly well or particularly badly,” says Cox (Interview H).

While it is nearly impossible to measure a Buddhist group’s “success” due to the subjective nature of the word and the contradictory nature (and ineffability) of the concept of “success” in Buddhist terms, it is possible to show the different forms in which Buddhism exists in Ireland. Although Cox argues that American Buddhist scholar Jan Nattier’s categories for transmission of Buddhism into Western society do not work perfectly for the Irish context⁶, he acknowledges that it is possible to see the direct links (and differences) between immigrant

⁶ These categories include “Import”, “Export”, and “Baggage” Buddhism, and further break down into Elite versus Evangelical Buddhism. (These categories were created to be used for explanation of the transmission of any and all religions, not just Buddhism.) “Import” Buddhism is driven by demand by the religious consumer for an alternative to the norm, or for Buddhist teachings in particular. “Export” Buddhism is driven by missionary activity and the Buddhist actively trying to *create* demand in the religious consumer for the religion (this happens rarely in Buddhism and the Irish Buddhist context, as proselytizing is discouraged in Buddhism). “Baggage” Buddhism is transmitted when families and individuals bring their religious beliefs to a new location (Nattier 6-7). Since their original beliefs may be different than the dominant or majority beliefs in their new location, transmission of this kind can also be cultural in nature. “Baggage” Buddhism is responsible for the most wide and vast transmission of Buddhism to Irish society, as Tibetan teachers who dominate the devotional landscape of Irish Buddhism (in the form of lineages) were among the first to relay Buddhist teachings to Irish society. Their lineage group members in Ireland continue to hold them (the Tibetan teachers) in the place of highest authority, therefore authenticating and favoring the transmission of teachings by the Tibetan teachers). Although many “import” schools of Buddhism (in which Irish people interpret and teach Buddhist ideas to each other) are in existence and doing very well in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, the landscape is, overall, still dominated by Asian transmission.

communities in Ireland and transmission of Buddhist teachings and Irish understanding and assimilation of Buddhist teachings into Western-styled *sanghas* (or Buddhist communities) (Cox 10-16). Most of the Irish people practicing Buddhism now are considered “night stand Buddhists” (Interview H), as they might keep a Thich Naht Hahn book on their nightstand and dabble in meditative practice without committing to a particular lineage, centre, or self-definition as a Buddhist. Although this “night stand Buddhist” phenomenon makes it difficult to quantify the number of Buddhists in Ireland, due to the historically entrenched religious/cultural categories of “Catholic” and “Protestant” and the traditional Irish wariness to step outside of these ethnic categories, it should be considered progressive that these “night stand” Buddhists are incorporating Buddhist teachings into their own religious, spiritual, or philosophical routines.

Factors Affecting Buddhism's Development in Ireland:

Factor 1: Similarities Between Celtic Mythology and Buddhism.

When the Dalai Lama visited Belfast in 2000 and met with both Catholic and Protestant spiritual leaders, the material gifts he received were neither Catholic nor Protestant specific, they were Celtic. “Adams [Irish religious leader] and the Dalai Lama prayed together and talked for about 20 minutes inside Clonard Monastery, a Catholic institution whose Redemptorist priests were influential in persuading the outlawed IRA to call a cease-fire in 1994. The two men exchanged gifts: for Adams, a long white silk scarf; for the Dalai Lama, a Celtic cross.” (“Dalai Lama Visits Northern Ireland”). While this small token of gratitude towards the Dalai Lama is just one example of the importance of the Celtic tradition in Ireland, it represents the larger picture of a spiritual tradition (and spiritual society) that is compatible with Buddhist teachings.

“Ireland now is a Catholic country but it also has Celtic spirituality which has been very

strong for a very long time and maybe Buddhism has a similar approach to that,” says Matt Padwick, Director of the Dzogchen Beara Centre in County Cork. “That [Celtic spirituality] lives on in the blood and bones of the people, their roots are Catholic but they also have this strong Celtic spirituality which would be a respect and love for nature and for the natural environment and the elements in nature...” (Interview R). The overlapping values and ethics that exist between Celtic spirituality and Buddhism are too similar to ignore, and have, in recent decades, been appropriated by Irish Buddhist enthusiasts who are also looking to keep their Celtic heritage alive.

The most prominent example of this is found in the Celtic Buddhist lineage, founded in the 1970’s after a conversation between Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his student John (or Seonaidh) Perks brought up Rinpoche’s belief that the Irish people “had to first deal with their own history, mythology, and social structure in its relationship to Buddhism” before starting their own Buddhist lineage. Rinpoche believed that “the [Irish] cultural aspects were difficult to ‘see’ because of their transparency, and that through investigation one could come to understand his or her cultural biases and their illusory nature... The archetypal deities of ancient Europe still exist in many peoples' psyche or mind [and he] believed that these energies are actually based on or emanate tremendous compassion which has become overlaid with habitual clingings and fixations.” (Burns). Although this lineage claims the Tibetan teacher Karmapa as it’s head spiritual authority, aspects such as the reverence for nature and Celtic gods and goddesses show that Celtic Buddhism is a true fusion of these two spiritual traditions. It is this type of religious creativity and the recognition of similarities between the two traditions (both by Celtic Buddhists and non-Celtic Buddhists) that has contributed to a spiritual social climate that is conducive to the development of Buddhism.

Many Irish Buddhists have also chosen to identify with the “Green Tara” Buddhist Goddess, who is thought to be the manifestation of the ultimate wisdom of all of the Buddhas in the Tibetan tradition ("2011 Irish Dharma Celebration - Green Tara Empowerment"). In Ireland, the word “Tara” connotes the Hill of Tara, the place where Irish history and myth says that the Irish High King (or *Árd Rí na hÉireann*) sat in ancient times. The Hill of Tara was, up until the early sixth century, the spiritual and political capital of the country, living through centuries of different dominating spiritual traditions—pre-Celtic, Celtic, later pagan traditions, and early Irish Christianity (Byrne 3). For some in the modern Irish Buddhist community, the dual importance of the Tara symbolism is great. “There are figures in Buddhism, like Green Tara—a devotional figure, and Ireland is the land of green, so the resonance is there,” says one Triratna practitioner. “Some people have already done paintings with Celtic imagery [and] I would say in twenty years time we will have our own style of imagery and we will have teased out the teachings for our own...” (Interview J). The unrestrictive qualities of both Buddhist and Celtic mythology have allowed the two traditions to coexist peacefully and come together, creating a social environment favorable to the development of more Buddhist schools and lineages.

Factor 2: Ireland's Rich Literary History of Meditative Authors

In addition to producing brave, individualistic Buddhists and continuing to hold dear to Celtic and pagan spiritual traditions, Ireland has also spawned some of the most celebrated authors. These authors, such as James Joyce and William Butler (W.B.) Yeats, are not only important to Irish history for their flourishing poetry and prose, but they are also vital to this study for their roles in the development of a social climate that is conducive to Buddhist teachings, and has, in the modern era, so readily accepted Buddhism.

Both William Butler Yeats and James Joyce were seen at and associated with the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society in the early twentieth century⁷ where they were introduced to Buddhist concepts that had been reinterpreted by their Western cohorts (Ito 16). Although the Buddhism absorbed by Yeats and Joyce was probably philosophically slanted and would not have reconciled with the actual beliefs of many traditional Buddhist lineages and schools, their skewed knowledge of the religion transferred to their work. For example, in Joyce's favorable review of H. Fielding-Hall's *The Soul of a People*, he wrote that Burmese Buddhism is "a wise, passive philosophy" (Joyce 93). In addition, Joyce mentions Buddhism (in a favorable light) in *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Finnegans Wake* and inundates other works such as *Dubliners* with Buddhist themes and imagery (see discussion below).

Yeats was also known to pepper his poetry with Buddhist themes, and his famous poem "The Statues" was read as Zen-themed by the revered Zen master and author Daisetz Teitaro (D.T.) Suzuki himself (Naito 131). Yeats was an admirer and avid reader of Suzuki as well, collecting Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* and *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* for his library. He also made sure to read "every issue" of *The Eastern Buddhist*, a magazine dealing with Buddhist topics (Naito 67). He also corresponded with a few Japanese Zen practitioners (Naito 76), possibly finding solace in their religion's (or their philosophy's) poetic practicality and/or identifying with their society's formation of plebian thought. (See the next section, **Factor 3: The Political Benefits of Irish Appropriation of Asian Religious Thought**, for more information on the similarities between nineteenth and twentieth century Irish plebian thought and nineteenth and twentieth century Asian plebian thought).

⁷ Although it is not known when Yeats was first seen there, Joyce was spotted there as early as 1902 (Ito 87).

After being introduced to such Buddhist concepts, the *way* in which Yeats and Joyce wrote, and the characters they presented began to communicate the most essential or central teachings of the Buddha. Suzuki's reading of Yeats's "The Statues" as Zen-themed shows that the mood and tone created by this poem resonated with the Zen master, and he found similarities between Yeats's work and his own religious work. (Ito 66). The tradition of Zen in poetry has lived on in Ireland with Black Mountain Zen Centre spiritual leader Paul Haller's classes on Zen and poetry, one of which was titled "The Zen of Poetry: Zen Meditation and the Poetics of Waking Up" ("And Zen there was Peace").

In addition, exemplification of the "Buddhist way" in which these authors wrote appears in Joyce's collection of short stories titled *Dubliners*. In this book, many of the protagonists of differing stories struggle with problems caused by desire, greed, anger, and the inability to realize the impermanence of life. The male protagonist of the short story titled "Araby" lusts after a woman only to find that in the end of his quest for her attention, he is still plagued with suffering and immense loneliness. "Gazing up into the darkness I found myself a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." (Joyce 24). This blatant acknowledgement of the role of desire in human suffering is very "Buddhist" in thought, and corresponds with the first and second of the Four Noble Truths; 1) life means suffering and 2) The origin of suffering is attachment or desire.

Similarly, the female protagonist of Joyce's short story "Eveline" struggles to detach herself from her family (despite their abusive attitudes and actions towards her) and alleviate her suffering. Describing the climactic scene in which Eveline chooses her old life of suffering over the possibility of a new life without suffering with her boyfriend, Joyce writes: "All the seas of the world tumbled around her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her... She

set her white face to him [her love interest], passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition.” (Joyce 29). These are just two of the many examples of Buddhist themes in Joyce’s work.

Yeats’ and Joyce’s knowledge of Buddhism and their references to Buddhist thought show students of religious history two very important things. The first advances Laurence Cox’s theory that “If, then as now, access was structured by literacy, wealth and different languages, nevertheless we have to abandon the view that Buddhism was “news” to Irish people in some recent decade...” (Cox 2). Yeats’ correspondence with Zen masters and Joyce’s access to and usage of Buddhist teachings in his prose provides written proof that Irish knowledge of Buddhism before the 1960’s was vast and even percolated into literature, meaning that Buddhism was in no way unknown to the Irish people (especially the intellectual class) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even if there were not many self-proclaimed Buddhists in Ireland during the times of Joyce and Yeats, the fact that knowledge of the religion *existed* shows the important beginnings of Buddhist development and activity in the country.

Secondly, Joyce and Yeats’ exposure to and usage of Buddhist thought and the national popularity of these two authors shows that Buddhist teachings and themes were being distributed to the Irish populace on a large scale before Buddhism itself was popular in the country. So, whether or not readers of Joyce and Yeats *knew* that they were being exposed to Buddhist ideas, the usage of Buddhist philosophy in their works readied the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish population for the future expansion of Buddhism to the island. Therefore, it could be posited that Joyce and Yeats were early developers of Irish Buddhist thought, and, through their writings, prepared today’s Irish population (which has been exposed to globalization and intense cultural and religious exchanges) for a society more prone to and accepting of Buddhism.

The image of a meditative Joyce (and to a lesser degree Yeats) still lives on in many Irish Buddhist circles today. Every June 16th (and in the days leading up to and directly following June 16th), many Irish Buddhists of different lineages and groups celebrate *Blooms Day*, the holiday inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysees*. One leader of a suburban Karma Kagyu lineage group in Dublin says of the holiday: "It [Bloom's Day] was a very important date for all in the Buddhist community, and a very special moment for meditation." (Interview K). Similarly, members of the Triratna Dublin Buddhist Centre observed the holiday and mentioned it during their weekly *sangha* (or community) meeting. Therefore, it seems that the influences of Yeats and Joyce affected and are still affecting the development of Buddhism in Ireland.⁸

Factor 3: The Political Benefits of Irish Appropriation of Asian Religious Thought

Throughout history, Western powers have dominated and destroyed numerous Eastern and fellow Western local cultures in the name of religion for political and economic gain. The Irish people, whose history has been tainted by Viking, Norman, and British domination, have a lot in common with the Indians, Burmese, Tibetans and peoples of other Asian nations who were so negatively affected by colonialism and imperialism. In both the cases of Ireland and traditionally Buddhist countries of Asia, residual suds of imperialism (specifically British imperialism) still linger in the modern era, creating problematic rifts that continue to tear at the edges of these societies. These rifts, whose girths are *slowly* shrinking, have caused similar feelings to arise

⁸ It is also pertinent to note that the "meditative", Buddhist-inspired tradition of Irish art and writing that began with Yeats and Joyce is, in the modern era, continuing with new artists and writers who are also incorporating Buddhist thoughts and ideas into their works. "Irish artists, but particularly Irish poets, in recent decades have been drawn to Buddhism...because of the obvious aesthetic qualities that come from meditative practice. You find a lot of people exploring that, in looser ways since Yeats..." (Interview H).

within the hearts and minds of the affected peoples, thus creating solid pacts of emotional and religious solidarity that have shaped the transnational exchange of Buddhism from Asia to Ireland. In the modern era, these pacts of solidarity are visible in the Irish Buddhist (and larger Western Buddhist) community's involvement with the *dalits*⁹ of India and the politics affecting Tibetan Buddhists, but historically, these feelings of solidarity have been spurred by colonialism. One scholar explains: "...This [is a] peculiar form of international solidarity which linked (to misquote one Irish supporter of imperialism) 'Britain's newest colonies with her oldest'..." (Ito 58).

The transnational exchange of Buddhist thought began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the actions of the aforementioned Irish Buddhist U Dhammaloka, Irish authors like Yeats, Joyce, and AE Russell, and other Irish theosophists who saw, in Asian religious thought, a chance not only for personal spiritual development, but for plebian political freedom as well. While scholars like David Landy have argued that these early Irish Buddhists strategically misconstrued Asian Buddhist thought (and purposely shared their misinterpretations with larger Irish and Western societies) for the purpose of furthering of their own political and social goals, others like Laurence Cox believe that these interactions were in fact "constructed in the light of the politics of religion, culture and nationalism in Ireland" (Cox 21). The appropriation of Buddhist thought for a broader, more secular usage occurred during this time due to the strong anti-colonial sentiments in Ireland and throughout Asia. In a time when many Irish theosophists were looking for a way to step outside of *both* their traditional religio-ethnic roles (which were assigned by the categories of Catholic or Protestant at birth) *and* the tight

⁹ The *dalit* movement advocates for the social, economic, and political equality of *dalits* (a low social class title) in India (<http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?/dfn/about/C19/>)

fisted control of British-dominated society, identification with Asian Buddhists provided an outlet for such desires. Cox explains: “Defection from an imperial caste, then, could result in anti- imperial solidarity grounded in cultural nationalism.” (Cox 5). These feelings of solidarity, which manifested themselves in the forms of writing (Yeats, Russell)¹⁰ and political action (U Dhammaloka)¹¹ on behalf of Asian Buddhists, show that there were many reasons and advantages, outside of the realm of pure curiosity and orientalism, to bringing Buddhism and other Asian Religions to Ireland.

Factor 4: The Influence of the Catholic Church

Although many Protestant sects and other religious groups dot the Irish religious landscape, the dominating religious institution in the country is the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has, in some ways, controlled most aspects of Irish society up until very recently. With the percolation of Catholic morals into the Irish social and political spheres, The Church was able to regulate practitioners’ daily activities in both the private and public spheres of life, making it very difficult for people to step outside of the boundary of the Church’s moral

¹⁰ “Figures such as the writer and politician WB Yeats, the co-operative organiser and mystic AE (George Russell), and the novelist James Stephens all took this route, seeking an alternative way of positioning themselves in Irish politics and culture after the end of empire.” (Cox 5-6).

¹¹ “Reviled by missionaries and much of the colonial press, he [Dhammaloka] was immensely popular among Asian plebeians in several countries....Dhammaloka, however, was not Burmese but Irish, probably of working-class background and certainly with years of "hoboing" in the US preceding his involvement in the Asian Buddhist revival; and the anti-Christianity of his Buddhist commitments was underpinned by a stream of connections with the European and North American freethinking (atheist) press.... Dhammaloka along with a series of other, equally unlikely, turn-of-the-century Irish people whose solidarity and practical involvement with anti-colonial and cultural nationalist movements in Asia was mediated through Buddhism...” (Cox 19-20).

authority. This strict control on society is now declining rapidly in the face of widespread practitioner disenchantment, which has been caused by the recent molestation charges against church hierarchy, the violence of the Troubles, modernization, feminism, and a desire for greater moral and ethical freedom. As the Catholic Church has begun to lose its moral authority in Ireland, a “spiritual vacuum” (Interview O) has opened up, creating a demand for less socially controlling religious and spiritual practices like Buddhism to step into Ireland’s mainstream religious culture.

Currently, “the Irish [Catholic] Church is going through a crisis on a scale that it never has before,” says Laurence Cox (Interview H). The disenchantment many Catholics and ex-Catholics feel with religion and spirituality has helped Buddhism find its place in Irish society, serving as an alternative to the rigorous control of the Catholic Church. Says one Irish Zen practitioner:

“We are between stories. Our identity as Irish Catholics is being challenged by The Church...with the collapse of The Church and the waning of the ‘hot war’ [referring to the Troubles in Northern Ireland] which has given way to the ‘cold war’ [referring to the tenuous peace process in Northern Ireland]...there is a bit of a spiritual vacuum that will emerge...it is already evident in the rise and use of drugs, the grip of consumerism, there is an outbreak in suicides...Teachings like Buddhist teachings are much more challenging on the individual--they really ask the individual to take responsibility and not to transfer that responsibility to the priesthood.” (Interview O).

The Buddhist concepts of impermanence and interdependence correspond well with the current state of shifting religious identities in Ireland, and the lack of Buddhist hierarchical structure in Ireland has contributed to its’ association with individualism and personal responsibility. While many people are struggling to define themselves outside of the realm of religion, there is still a need present in Irish society for some sort of spiritual focus. This need is leading people to

explore other, less intrusive and restrictive religions like Buddhism.

One current Triratna practitioner and ex-Catholic says that, for him, the Catholic Church's control of the body (their "anti-body" stance) and lack of emphasis on nature did not work for him. "[In Catholicism, you're] cutting yourself off, to some extent, from nature...it is very "anti the body"...the place of nature in my practice now is far more richer and meaningful than anything I had in previous religious groups..." (Interview J).

In addition to the strong reverence for nature and the acceptance of the body in Buddhism, the religion's non-monotheistic beliefs may also be appealing to Irish society. Another Triratna practitioner, who left the Catholic Church because of its incompatibility with modern feminist ideals and its strict monotheistic views, believes that the emphases on "no self" and the lack of a Creator God in Buddhism are very attractive to the religiously disenchanted Irish population. "Sometimes during the study groups we would talk about the differences between Christianity and Buddhism...Many people who come in are very happy [to learn that] Buddhism has no Creator God or Messiah [and] that everyone can do what the Buddha did..." (Interview I). From these testimonies, it becomes apparent that the Buddhist emphases on nature, non-theism and individual potential are appealing to a society of religious consumers whose markets have been over-supplied with body control, monotheism, and the reliance on an institutional authority.

Factor 5: The Fall of the Celtic Tiger and the Irish Economy

Modern "Glocal" (Global and local) economic systems are also affecting the development of Buddhism in Ireland. Like many other countries around the world who have been hit hard by recent plunges in economic expansion, both the Republic of Ireland and the

Northern Irish territories have been suffering economic hardships in the past few years. In the Republic, this economic demise is known as “The Fall of the Celtic Tiger”, as the term “Celtic Tiger” was coined for the strong Irish economy of the 1990’s and 2000’s (Simon).

The Celtic Tiger and its subsequent “fall” are integral to the development of Buddhism in Ireland. While during the time of the Celtic Tiger the employment rate was high and most Irish people were financially comfortable and stable, this time also created a societal trend of consumerism for consumerism’s sake and deepened peoples’ interest in material goods. After the economic crash, the profound sadness and loneliness that accompanies the loss of material goods (after one learns to rely solely on them for happiness and meaning) percolated throughout Irish society, causing a large-scale societal search for meaning. “I see people needing a spiritual dimension to their lives especially after the crash of the Celtic Tiger,” says one Triratna practitioner in Dublin. “During the Celtic Tiger there was an oppressive feeling that everything is ‘buy the second extra house in Spain’ and if you weren’t doing that you were a bit of a loser...it was very materialistic and ‘go getting’, but I think the failure of a lot of the institutions--banking and politics-- has left a spiritual vacuum. I think Buddhism...fills that for a wide range of people.” (Interview J).

As people in the Republic deal with the new, harsher economic climate and reacquaint themselves with spirituality, the Socially Engaged Buddhist movement has stepped in to facilitate the transition. This movement (which will be discussed in detail in the section titled **Social Engagement**) was started by a Zen practitioner, Ken Jones, and has spread throughout the Irish and British Zen communities. The Socially Engaged Buddhist Network runs free public seminars on Buddhism’s place in the modern world, and their most recent seminars have focused in on Buddhism’s relationship with the economic downturn. One recent seminar, held on June

24th, 2011 in Dublin was titled “Buddhism and the Economic Crisis” and was led by Ken Jones himself. During this seminar, a lecture by Jones on *how* to be more involved in one’s community was given, a practice meditation sitting was conducted, and handouts on “Readings in Emotional Awareness” and “Practice in Emotional Awareness” were supplied, providing an interactive workshop wherein members of the public could participate in and use basic Buddhist practices and ideas for practical purposes. The seminar’s high attendance rate and the diversity of the participants (diversity in many areas--religious, gender, racial, ethnic, and socio-economic) show that Buddhism is playing an important role in the post-Celtic Tiger redevelopment of Irish social and spiritual consciousness.

Although the economic growth of the Celtic Tiger did not expand to Northern Ireland in the 1990s and 2000s, many Northern Irish Buddhists believe that there is still a strong interplay between Buddhism and the economy in their society. “There is a lot of poverty here...[so] giving up the idea of yourself isn’t a bad thing in this society,” (Interview P) says one Zen practitioner in Belfast. This poverty, caused by years of sectarian violence, has caused other social problems to ensue. “The spiritual vacuum [here] is already evident in the rise of drugs, the increase in consumerism, an outbreak in suicides. Teachings like Buddhist teachings that are much more challenging on the individual will become more necessary in this environment...” (Interview O). Although Buddhism’s teachings may be applicable to the spiritually and economically ailing population in Belfast, there may be economic barriers to the transmission of the teachings to those in need of economic and spiritual help. One Zen practitioner acknowledges this economic divide in Irish Buddhist participants, saying: “When people have more money, they have more leisure time and they have more time to get involved so I’m sure that [economics] impacts [the development of Buddhism]...when you’re sitting up in West

Belfast living on [government] benefits, finding your way up to the Zen Centre five days a week probably isn't an easy thing to do..." (Interview P).

Economics, politics, and religion also collide in Belfast and Northern Ireland in the form of government funding for religious projects. "Politicians here can be very Christian," says another Zen practitioner in Belfast. "This brings up issues of funding...if you went tomorrow and said you wanted to set up a Buddhist centre in Ireland, would you get government funding for it? I think you might but I don't think it would be a given, and I think there would be many political people who may need a little more convincing..." (Interview P). While the recently constructed Chinese Community Centre in Belfast was partially funded by the government ("Work Starts on a New Chinese Community Centre"), showing a change in the traditionally Anglo-Irish Christian agendas of Northern Irish politicians, there may still be a long way to go before Buddhists in Northern Ireland gain complete economic equality in the political sphere.

Factor 6: Social Perceptions and Social Authentication of Irish Buddhism

Another prominent factor affecting the development of Buddhism in Ireland is the wider societal perceptions of Buddhism as a philosophy, not a religion. Many people, both within and outside of Irish Buddhist communities see Buddhism as a "way of life" (Interview K) and not necessarily a religion, as religion has been defined by more rigorous, institutional terms in Ireland's Christianized history. Buddhism's larger social perception as a philosophy and a "useful practice for anyone" (Interview K) has allowed it to assimilate quietly and gently into a society full of religious divisions and suspicions.

Similarly, the increasing popularity of alternative spiritualities and in particular Eastern religions in Ireland in the past few decades has encouraged the development of Buddhism.

"Buddhism was off the radar for a while but [now] it's coming very much back on the radar," says one practitioner (Interview J). Another self-identified Buddhist says that originally, she began attending meetings at the Dublin Triratna Centre because Buddhism was "the cool, trendy thing to do..." (Interview I), showing that the mere social popularity of Buddhism is a possible vehicle for growth.

Although Buddhism may not be seen as a religion to the larger Irish society or even some Irish Buddhist groups, within Irish Buddhist communities, issues of group authentication are arising among different lineages and orders. While some groups are focusing more on reconciling Western Buddhism with Irish society¹², others are more concerned with keeping the Buddhist traditions pure and accurate. While neither of these methods is better than the other, it seems that some Buddhist groups are having difficulties reconciling and accepting their differences, which could prove fatal for future Buddhist development and larger social authentication.

For example, one member of the Karma Kagyu (Karmapa) lineage in Dublin discusses his concerns with some of the other Buddhist groups in Ireland:

"It's possible to have a connection between master and student all the way back to the enlightened Buddha...there are some people who are not authentic...they set up a centre, they

¹² Many Irish Buddhists are excited to have the opportunity to redefine Buddhism for what it means to them *now*. One Triratna practitioner says that he likes the order because it allows one to practice in modern Irish society. "I don't have to be able to speak Tibetan or wear Tibetan robes if [I] want to practice...one could call us [Triratna lineage] *buddhayana*, the way of the Buddha, instead of Mayahana or Hinayana...It's interesting in Buddhism at the moment because for the first time in history we have access to all of Buddhism in a way we never would have before. We have Vajrayana Buddhists living in Tibet that probably have never met Theravadin monks before but now we have the internet and communication so I think you'll see more of this happening in Buddhism, bringing new opportunities for Buddhism..." (Interview G).

have no teacher, they have no connection to a lineage, or they have a broken connection to a lineage and cannot trace their lineage back to Lord Buddha...there are some groups that they are very nice people they do good things, they are very helpful for people but they don't have the connection back to Lord Buddha which for us is a key thing. Because if you don't have that master student relationship, the connection is lost and it's not the real thing...your spiritual development is a very important thing, we don't take that lightly, if you're given the wrong practices or instruction by someone and you take that on it can damage you, that's why its so important to be connected to an authentic lineage.” (Interview F).

This extensive discussion of “authenticity” and the underlying hesitancy to authenticate members of one’s own, larger, religious community shows the potential for problems with cooperation, growth, and social authentication of Buddhism in the country. If Buddhist groups do not defend the existence of their neighboring Buddhist communities (despite differences in lineage, order, or method) and practitioners (i.e. “night stand” Buddhists who may not be practicing in a purely “authentic” manner), then Irish society at large may not accept the validity of Buddhism’s presence in Ireland. Thus, in order to promote positive minority religious expansion in a society with a strong, determined religious Christian majority, it will be necessary for Buddhist groups to defend one another and work together for the betterment of their larger community.

On a more hopeful note, there is a strong perception of Ireland as a populous Buddhist country within the International Buddhist community. A member of the Dzogchen Beara Centre believes that “because of Dzogchen Beara, Ireland has a reputation for having a lot of Buddhists here...[although] there’s still a lot of misunderstanding about what we do here on a local level...” (Interview B). This outside, international perception of Ireland as a Buddhist hub of growth shows that Buddhism is in no way hidden from view and has the potential to expand in the coming decades.

Characteristics of “Irish Buddhism”:

Although some Buddhists shy away from self-identifying with the religion/philosophy (as aforementioned), from a scholastic, sociological point of view and for the purpose of this study, it is helpful to identify similarities that exist among Buddhists in Ireland so as to note popular trends and/or patterns within this developing religious community. And, since the growth of every new, minority religion is affected in some way by its surrounding culture (and previously established religious majority communities), it is important to notice *how* the new minority religious community (Buddhism) interacts with the older majority religious communities (Catholicism and Protestantism). By observing these aspects of Buddhism's development that are unique to Ireland, it is possible to show how and why Irish Buddhism is different from Buddhism in other parts of the world. While some of the Irish Buddhist practitioners interviewed were quick to say that Buddhism is the same in Ireland as it is all over the world¹³, it

¹³ "Buddhism came from India and in a way you can't say that there's Indian Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism and American Buddhism and Thai Buddhism, it's just Buddhism," says one member of the Karma Kagyu lineage in Dublin's City Center. "The aim is not to have so many distinctions but to open yourself to the wisdom and the blessings that are there and try to absorb them whole. Although there may be different lineages and paths for how the teachings of Lord Buddha came here at the same time the basics are all the same...so its just Buddhism there's no Irish Buddhism." (Interview F). Another Karma Kagyu practitioner from a *different* group (the Diamond Way meditation group) in *suburban* Dublin agrees saying: "In our lineage I can say there is no difference if its [the teachings occur in] Ireland or [the] U.K. ...what is different is the approach people have when they come in because life is different here in other countries." (Interview K).

Conversely, some Irish Buddhists *do* acknowledge the cultural conditioning of religious development. One Triratna practitioner, describing the differences as she sees them between Triratna and traditional Asian lineages writes: "The dharma is different in Asia than it is in Ireland...for example, there is differentiation [in enlightenment] for men and women...[In Asian countries] women are believed to gain a different [lesser] degree of enlightenment, but not here. [In Ireland] because I'm a woman my enlightenment isn't any different than a man's...at first this Western idea caused quite a controversy in Asia..." (Interview I). This subject not only shows

is necessary that scholars recognize that it is impossible for religion (or philosophy) to escape cultural, political, economic, social or geographic influences.

Ritualization:

In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, where the Catholic and Protestant churches have reigned using ritual as spiritual enforcement for hundreds of years, the ritual centered schools of Buddhism have had to adapt their formal rituals to fit a society that is divided on the merits of ritual. “It probably is true that the way people were brought up religiously influences what they like but it doesn’t do so in obvious ways,” says Laurence Cox. “For example, one person may have had a very ‘OTT Catholic upbringing’¹⁴ and they love ritual, and another person has the same upbringing but they want something minimalist,” says Cox. (Interview H) While some people find themselves drawn to the ritualized, *puja* (or devotional) aspects of Buddhism, many shy away from the ritual, as their Christian pasts have discouraged their love of ritual. Practitioners who have found ritual meaningful in their past or present religious practices are referred to as finding ritual “full”, whereas practitioners who have struggled to find meaning in past or present religious practices are referred to as finding ritual “empty”.

Of those interviewed for this study, it appears that Irish Buddhists who are drawn to

how Buddhism is different in Ireland than it is in Asia (gender equality), she also shows a perceptive understanding of the difficulties associated with Western (and/or Irish) cultural adaptations to Buddhism. This acknowledgement of the cultural differences in gender identity that exist between Irish and Asian Buddhism helps to disprove the idealistic and unifying, yet inaccurate theory that “There’s no Irish Buddhism.” (Interview F).

¹⁴ “OTT Catholic Upbringing” refers to the dogmatic style of Catholic writer Ludwig Ott.

Asian Buddhist lineage groups (such as the aforementioned Karma Kagyu and Diamond Way lineages for example) find value in the highly ritualized and devotional practice of these Asian (often Tibetan) groups. Conversely, those looking to reduce their ritual practice seem to gravitate towards Zen, Triratna, and Vipassana (also known as Insight Meditation) groups. Of course, these statements portray vast generalizations, but trends in interviewee responses support this hypothesis. For example, one Triratna practitioner, who was raised Catholic says of the ritual: "It [Catholic ritual] felt oppressive and not developmental in any way...I didn't appreciate ritual much in Christianity but the value of ritual has always been there. Catholicism had too many dogmas for me...in Buddhism there is very little dogma." (Interview J). This practitioner's frustration with his feelings of Catholicism's "empty" ritual practice has influenced his decision to join the Triratna group, which encompasses ritual (meditation, dharma talks, sutra study, chants and ethical practice in the form of the Three Fold Path) in a way that is "full" or fulfilling for this subject.

In addition, a Vipassana trained Buddhist from Dzogchen Beara shows that, for her, the percolation of Buddhist ideals into everyday life creates a new type of ritual, one that can be adapted to a compassionate work life and everyday routine. "My training was more insight meditation [which] introduced the Buddhist practices and showed that integrating them into your work [was] most important..." (Interview B). This shows how the subject chose to encompass the subtle, yet "full" ritual of the Buddhist ideal "right livelihood" into everyday life in a way that was meaningful for her.

Zen practitioners who were interviewed for this study also cite ritual as being an obstacle to their spiritual development. One ordained Zen Buddhist from Belfast, whose first introduction to Buddhism was through Tibetan Buddhism says: "For me, there was too much paraphernalia

around Tibetan Buddhism and too much praying and too much pujas... a lot of their meditation required extensive visualization and... for me that didn't work. Zen was simple in that you focus very much on your breath and that for me was easier and more straightforward. At that time, there was no ritual or chanting or anything like that involved in the practice and that was all I wanted, so that's what drew me to Zen in the first place..." (Interview L). While the Tibetan Potala Kadampa lineage worked well as an introduction into Buddhism for this subject, ultimately her desire for a less ritualized practice (which, according to Cox, could have been conditioned by her religious upbringing) led her to the Zen school, whose *zazen* (or sitting meditation) practices are less intrusive and require less external control on the practitioner's religious routine.

While the models of the Triratna, Vipassana, and Zen schools that offer less rigorous ritualization are appealing to some Irish Buddhists, the familiarity of ritual, or the newfound "fullness" of ritual is found for many in Tibetan Buddhist lineage groups that emphasize ritual in the form of devotional practice. "Our methods [rituals] are the same everywhere and people value them," says one Karma Kagyu practitioner. "We can change clothes, we can change language, but the practices are still the same... we have the original source, the text that we can refer back to so there is complete transparency in the teachings... there shouldn't be a difference in the lineages, in the different transmissions." (Interview K). The universal connection that exists among members of lineages that claim direct links to the Buddha creates meaning for the shared ritual. The fact that the ritual is synonymous with the school and does not change depending on location is similar to Catholic and Protestant Masses and services (and the importance placed on this geographic synonymy of the services). The universality of the ritual creates affinity among group members and this affinity, or connection, becomes an essential part

of the ritual's importance. Without the group's shared feelings about or knowledge of the ritual's importance, the ritual would cease to be "full" or meaningful, therefore making the devotional practitioners just as important to the ritual practice as the actual ritual itself.¹⁵

Social Engagement:

As Irish Buddhism develops, it has become apparent that the Buddhist tenant of "loving kindness" has manifested itself in Ireland in the forms of local and global social activism within Irish Buddhist circles. For example, the aforementioned Socially Engaged Buddhist Network, a group that keeps Buddhists in Ireland and the U.K. attuned to volunteer, community service, and global fundraising opportunities, keeps its members compassionately active by engaging with both Buddhist and non-Buddhist members of society who are in need of assistance. Coordinator Mark Price runs seminars and workshops on how to get involved with the community, and member Ken Jones writes many books on the topic of Socially Engaged Zen Buddhism.¹⁶

In Northern Ireland, spiritual leader of the Black Mountain Zen Centre, Paul Haller, has led Mindfulness and Stress Reduction classes for National Health Services (NHS) Staff and for the general public. Although these classes have met with some resistance on a government level

¹⁵ There are many other examples of the unbreakable bonds that are created by ritual practice in this study. Although there is not enough space for every interview and example, another prominent one is the affinity created by gender during an entirely female, annual retreat, sponsored by the Passaddhi group in Beara (Co. Cork). A group of ordained Buddhist nuns leads retreats during which alternating periods of chanting and silence persist, leading practitioners to feel "inspired and calm" (Keogh). The seemingly intense ritualization that occurs during such retreats (retreatants awake at 5:30 am and follow a pre-set schedule of daily ritual and practice) creates a spiritual bond between the women. "The fact that the participants were all women...also had its own special recompense." (Keogh). This bond created by gender and fostered by ritual shows the transformative, immense power of "full", spiritually significant ritual in Buddhist practice.

¹⁶ Jones has written such books as *A Social Face of Buddhism* and *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*, in which he makes the case for socially engaged Buddhism (in particularly Zen) in modern society through action in radical politics.

(one finance minister called the teaching of mindfulness to NHS staff ‘an appalling waste of money’), overall they have been well received and attended by the public (“Buddhist Monk to Begin Classes for NHS Staff”). Furthermore, it is interesting to note the importance of social activism, community, and political involvement to many within the Irish (and particularly Northern Irish) Zen community. Peter Doran, one member of the Zen community in Belfast who is currently working to bring Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh to Belfast, says: “There is a future for an Irish form of Buddhism and it will probably have to be an engaged form of Buddhism. I think it will have to have a strong social dimension...in the North here that social dimension will have to address itself to the trauma of post conflict, the need for new forms of identification, the need to deal with the addictions and behavior patterns associated with trauma...the engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh has a lot to say about identity as well, living with the other...recognizing that we're all inter-beings...and that's a very strong message in our society where sectarianism is still deeply rooted in our behaviors...” (Interview O). Doran represents just one of many socially engaged Zen Buddhists who choose to engage on a local, as well as a global level.

While Zen practitioners seem to be very interested and involved in such local and glocal activism, other Buddhist groups are struggling to engage at the local level. While many Tibetan lineage groups in the Republic (and the members of the Dublin Triratna Centre) have become active in local interreligious groups and in the global *dali* movement¹⁷, engaging with the direct community becomes difficult for groups who are devoting most of their time and energy to centre upstart, maintenance and improvement. One practitioner at Dzogchen Beara acknowledges that support of the local community of Castletownebere occurs in non-traditional,

¹⁷ The *dalit* movement advocates for the social, economic, and political equality of *dalits* (a low social class title) in India (<http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?/dfn/about/C19/>).

more economic forms. “We pump in a bunch of money into the community, and I would be interested to see if the community is aware of that, feels that...the economics of a place like this and the positive impact on the larger area [is great]...” (Interview B). Despite the economic support going to the Castletownebere, this practitioner hopes that community involvement will increase in the future: “Part of what’s missing here is a good overlap with the community in Castletownebere. There are people who know Rigpa and know this place, but for people who don’t know Buddhism or this place, it’s really a little bit foreign or odd...there’s a lot of misunderstanding about what we do here and what we’re planning to do is it make it clearer because ideally this should be a community centre for the people of Castletownebere as well as for the woman coming from Germany and the other wonderful [international] guests we’ve had here.” (Interview B).

Interreligious Interactions:

Due to Ireland’s religious history, an Irish form of Buddhism will also have to be prepared to engage with other religious groups, especially Christian groups, in both formal, quantitative and informal, qualitative ways. Formally, many Buddhists are active in interfaith dialogue and serve with community members of other religious traditions on local and national interfaith councils. Two Buddhist representatives of differing traditions (Aksobhin Tracy of the Dublin Triratna group and John Keeling of the Karma Kagyu lineage) sit on the Dublin Inter-Religious Council, which was set up in 2010, and consists of representatives from various Christian faiths, as well as representatives from the Hindu, Baha’i, Jewish and Muslim communities (McGarry). In Belfast, members of the Zen community are also active in interreligious dialogue (Interviews O and P).

In addition to the formal traits of a religiously interactive Irish Buddhism, there has been an interesting “fusion” of Buddhism with Christianity in some Buddhist circles. This fusion occurs both in practice and practitioner participation. For example, the Buddhist practice of meditation at Dzogchen Beara gives practitioners the option of looking at and focusing on Christian symbolism, as Christian images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ appear on a wall across from images of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Regarding practitioners, many people who attend meditation sits and mindfulness workshops (led by all of the varying Buddhist communities throughout Ireland) identify as Catholics or Protestants, and consider their Buddhist practice more therapeutic than religious. Irish Buddhism’s flexibility and reluctance to require practitioners to strictly identify as Buddhists shows the likely possibility for the religion’s future growth and social acceptance in Ireland.

Northern vs. Southern:

Although there are some social, political, and economic differences surrounding Buddhism’s development in the Republic of Ireland compared with its development in Northern Ireland, the two entities are probably more similar than they are different. While Belfast has undoubtedly lagged behind Dublin in economic growth and its decreasing of sectarian tensions¹⁸, there are still similar hindrances to and progressions towards Buddhism’s development in both places. Cox writes: “In Northern Ireland, where sectarian tensions have remained stronger, being Buddhist ‘at home’ has been particularly difficult until very recent years. Even in the Republic, Irish Buddhists still often have church weddings and funerals for

¹⁸ “Belfast is where Dublin was twenty years ago.” (Interview P)

family reasons.” (Cox 3). Although it has been difficult for both Northern and Southern societies to embrace Buddhism due to their preexisting socio-religious norms, many Buddhist practitioners believe that societal progress is evident. “A number of years ago you wouldn’t have had people saying they were Buddhists or saying they went to sesshins [Zen meditation sittings],” says one Zen practitioner in Belfast. “To talk about that [Buddhism] freely in a country where it was even difficult to talk about being Catholic and Protestant would not have happened but now there is definitely more openness to different spiritual views here...” (Interview M).

Implications for Ireland as Buddhism Develops:

One of the possible reasons that Buddhism has met with little resistance thus far in Ireland is that at its core, it is a peaceful, nonthreatening religion.¹⁹ Not only is Irish Buddhism often perceived as a “philosophy, not a religion”, therefore making it accessible to practitioners of the country’s majority religion (and people of all religious persuasions) in a nonaggressive, anti-proselytizing²⁰ manner, but it is also concerned with *actively* spreading peace and bettering society for all inhabitants. As Buddhism gains more momentum in Ireland, the potential for spreading good will increases.

One member of the Triratna order in Dublin says that in the future he hopes “that we [Buddhists] can bring *metta* or “loving kindness” into the rest of [Irish] society...it [Buddhism] has transformed me as a person [and] I hope that Buddhism will have a bigger place in Irish

¹⁹ Many Irish Buddhist practitioners agree and view their “religion” as compatible with the larger religious community. “I think Buddhism is on pretty good terms with the other religions,” says one Triratna practitioner. “It doesn’t have as many dogmas and it can be more open...” (Interview J).

²⁰ Unlike many other religious groups, Buddhists stay away from proselytizing. Speaking of the Christian and Muslim practices of conversions, the Dalai Lama recently said: “Whoever tries to convert, it’s wrong, not good...we [Buddhists] oppose conversions by any religious tradition using various methods of enticement.” (Misra).

society.” (Interview S). Loving kindness (or compassion), one of the central features of Triratna and all Buddhist groups, is one of the possible positive effects that Buddhism can have on Irish society, which has had trouble in the past with compassionate interreligious communication.

In addition to spreading *metta* to the rest of Irish society, Irish Buddhists are also using Buddhism in an innovative way for both mental and physical healing purposes. Since most Buddhist groups agree that the mind-body connection is very important, practices such as meditation have been used as tools for hospice therapy, psychiatry, and psychology. At the Dzogchen Beara Centre in County Cork, the DeChen Shyling Spiritual Care Centre trains hospice nurses in Buddhist inspired end of life care methods. The revered Tibetan Rigpa teacher Sogyal Rinpoche (author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*) is the Dzogchen Beara Centre’s founder and spiritual overseer and has made it his mission to open spiritual care centres like the one at Dzogchen Beara all around the world. Using his model for spiritual care, Dzogchen Beara accepts and assists many mentally and physically unwell patients for treatment each year. Although the treatments vary, most are in the area of end of life care, and rely heavily on Buddhist concepts of impermanence, acceptance, and suffering (e.g. wisdom from the Four Noble Truths).

Cognitive therapy is another area of healing in Ireland that has begun to borrow a lot of theory and methodology from Buddhist thought. Although one Buddhist practitioner says that many people “don’t want to admit” (Interview J) that modern cognitive therapy is loosely based on Buddhist thought because it brings religion into an area that has been socially defined as a science (psychology), the similarities between cognitive therapy (especially cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT) and Buddhism abound. The Buddhist concept of Mindfulness and staying mindful of one’s own behaviors is easily translatable to the Cognitive Behavioral emphasis on

conscientious thinking (Sheldon 7). Both practices can also be seen as “evidence based” (Sheldon 7-8), as in both Buddhism and CBT, practitioners are encouraged to put time, energy, effort and care into their practice, all of which will supposedly lead to “results”²¹ or improvements in behavior. Currently in Ireland, the Buddhist infused CBT is being used on people with drug, alcohol, and other substance abuse addictions. Says one Irish Buddhist of CBT: “It [CBT] creates the realization for people that they can change, that things can change...it works very well for people with addictions...” (Interview J).

CBT is not the only area of therapy in which Irish Buddhists find themselves. Many Irish Buddhist practitioners have “found” Buddhism through other therapeutic means. One Irish Zen practitioner who is also a participant in psychosynthesis therapy finds the two practices very compatible.

“The therapist I go to is a psychosynthesis therapist...while he was around the time of Freud and Jung...he seems to be saying that there's also a higher part of man, that not everything we do is an acting out of our basic instincts...he [the subject's psychosynthesis therapist] never would have directed me in any way towards anything religious, but it was sort of like a natural thing, it [subject's contact with Buddhism] grew out of those three years with him [and] quite quickly I realized that the Buddhist thing was really what I was looking for...” (Interview P).

Buddhism's compatibility with many modern forms of therapy reveals another layer of its importance to and interaction with Irish society. Those Irish citizens affected by the emotional

²¹ Although Buddhist practice does not emphasize measuring one's results, as Buddhist practice focuses more on process than end product, many Buddhist practitioners and writers do talk and write extensively about the self-improvement that occurs naturally from the time and effort they put into their practice. For example, one Zen Buddhist says: “After my first [meditation] retreat, I was so sore, like I had run a marathon...I'm surprised at how much longer I can sit now...so much longer...” (Interview M). Whether consciously or subconsciously, a positive change in behavior (i.e. increase of amount of time able to sit and meditate) occurred for this Zen practitioner. Similarly, CBT patients often notice positive changes in their behaviors after increased time and energy are put into their practice.

issues caused by sectarian strife, globalization, consumerism, and modernization have the opportunity to engage with Buddhism in a therapeutic way, showing another positive function of the religion (or philosophy) in Irish society.

Furthermore, it is possible to extrapolate from these observations that Buddhism's most profound effects on Ireland and Irish religious culture will be in the area of healing, specifically the healing processes associated with physical illness and emotional pain (much of which has been caused by the Troubles and religious history). Buddhism as a minority (and therefore third-party) religion has the opportunity to act as a mediator between Catholics and Protestants who are still working out their differences and coping with the aftermath of the religious-political violence, especially in Northern Ireland. In 2000, the day after a minor, but violent clash between the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and British troops, the Dalai Lama visited Belfast to talk with both Protestant and Catholic religious leaders and encourage peace among the city's populace. "Of course some conflicts, some differences, will always be there," he told the mixed-religion crowd. "But we should use the differences in a positive way to try to get energy from different views." ("Dalai Lama Visits Northern Ireland").

The Dalai Lama's visit even caused Gerry Adams, one of Ireland's most controversial characters to speak of peace: "I am quite confident that all of those who meet the Dalai Lama will be inspired by his quiet strength, openness and deep dedication to the pursuit of peace and justice," said Gerry Adams, leader of the Irish Republican Army's allied Sinn Fein party." ("Dalai Lama Visits Northern Ireland"). Although this visit was just "one part of the peace process" (Interview J), and is seen as such by both Irish Buddhists and non-Buddhists, the mere presence of the Dalai Lama (who has become an international symbol of Buddhism) in the reconciliation process shows the possibility for Buddhism to continue to play an important role

in the country's uncertain religious-political future.

Future of Buddhism in Ireland:

Buddhism will probably never be a majority religion in Ireland²², but its future development ironically depends largely on the actions of Asian Buddhists living in Ireland (specifically the large population of Vietnamese Buddhists who came to Ireland as refugees during the 1970s). Says Cox:

“In twenty years time, things will be more established [in the Irish Buddhist community] and there will be better information. But it's not at all clear Asian Buddhists will do, will they stay or go? When you get a recession then, you have to ask yourself ‘am I going to stick it out here despite not having a job or go home?’ If we're going to stay, now we need a temple [a Vietnamese temple]...or there may be Asians knocking on the doors of the white convert places going 'we would quite like to do this ritual that means nothing to you but means quite a lot to our community, and can we work something out?’” (Interview H).

This paints an interesting picture of the future development of Buddhism in Ireland. The religion's presence in the country may not end with its appropriation by Western Irish practitioners.

Although most Irish Buddhist practitioners interviewed for this paper believe that it is still too soon to see Buddhism as a distinct part of Ireland's cultural identity (as are the Catholic

²² “Buddhism here is very small, very minority...an embryo...it's 50 people at the most [at the Belfast Zen Centre] and some of those people are practicing Catholics or Protestants or whatever, and maybe that's what it is in twenty years, and that's fine...I think it will take a bit of time, maybe 10 years [to develop in Belfast] but I think it will continue evolving and growing...” (Interview P).

and Protestant churches), many are hopeful and optimistic about its growth and future contributions to Irish society. Says one practitioner: “I think over maybe the next 20 years, people will be turning to spirituality...I think Buddhism seems to fit that [need for more free-form spirituality] very well because it doesn’t have a Creator God but it has a strong message, it’s individualistic...[and] it is strongly grounded in an ethical foundation...I think it’s quite an appropriate religion for modern Ireland...” (Interview G).

It is also important to keep in mind that intelligent marketing is important for the development of any new, minority religious tradition. “We have to remember that the Romans were crucifying people who were Christian in the beginning, so it’s probably that anything new starting up has to sell itself and integrate over time.” (Interview P). While for now Buddhism is content to stay as a religious minority in Ireland, its teachings’ compatibility with the needs of modern Irish society may force its growth in the next few decades. The Buddha said: “A jug fills drop by drop” (“Dhammapada Sutta”). Like the jug, drops of Buddhism may, in the future, continue to fill Irish society with practical and compassionate wisdom.

Conclusion

This research was conducted primarily to obtain more information about the development of Buddhism in Ireland. More generally, the study sought to use the example of Buddhism’s transmission into Ireland as a case study for a wider assessment of characteristics of minority religions in countries with strongly held majority religious norms. This researcher concludes that in the case of Buddhism as a minority religion in Ireland, adaptation to and cooperation with practices and practitioners of local Christian (majority) religions has been necessary for survival and growth.

While the study strives to provide readers and the academic community with more “raw” ethnographic data on the subject, it also hopes to bring to light many issues facing Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) communities in Ireland. Some of the main goals of this research were to chart the major factors affecting Buddhism’s development in Ireland, determine if there are any specific characteristics of “Irish Buddhism”, and if so, what those characteristics are. This research determined that while the category “Irish Buddhism” may be applicable in an academic setting for a sociological or anthropological based study, the term is perceived as philosophically impossible by many Buddhists in Ireland, whose are wary of categorization due to key tenants of Buddhist thought. The main factors affecting growth, as determined by this research, are: the similarities between Buddhism and Celtic mythology; Ireland's rich literary history of meditative authors; the political benefits of an Irish appropriation of Asian religious thought; the strong, often stifling control of the Catholic Church; the recent fall of the Celtic Tiger and Ireland’s Economic Structure; and the wider societal perceptions of Buddhism as a philosophy, not a religion.

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