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Border country dharma:  
Buddhism, Ireland and peripherality

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Article

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**Introduction**

Buddhist tradition distinguishes a "central region" where suitable conditions for practice – notably a well-developed *sangha* – are to be found, from "border regions" where there are fewer or no monks, nuns, laymen or laywomen (1). If, in the last 150 years, Buddhist Asia has acted as the "central region" to the "border regions" of western Buddhism, Ireland is arguably a border region to the border regions, a second-hand recipient of developments in more powerful societies.

These categories (relational as so many Buddhist concepts) are similar to sociological discussions of core and periphery within the global order. However, some of the most influential accounts of the arrival of Buddhism in the west (such as Almond 1988 and Tweed 2000) stress rather the *indigenous*, and essentially bounded, development of Victorian Buddhism.

Their emphasis – that this Buddhism was above all else *British* or *American* respectively, was a necessary corrective to naïve theories of unproblematic transmission, but has its own difficulties, in assuming a single national culture as an effective unit of analysis. Both struggle to maintain their boundaries, not least with

relation to Ireland: Almond in his use of Irish material with no mention of the intense cultural and religious conflicts that led to the breakup of the British state in 1922; Tweed in treating the Anglo-Irish Lafcadio Hearn as another Victorian American. In other words, even these powerful cultures are less homogenous, and more contested, than such accounts imply.

More generally, when discussion of western Buddhism has not simply meant Buddhism in the USA (Koné 2001: 155 fn1), it has typically retained this country-by-country approach in a national-comparative strategy, most visibly in the seminal work of Martin Baumann (eg 2002).

Within sociology, the identification of a society or culture with a nation-state has long been problematised, initially by dependency theory, which argued that individual societies could only be understood in terms of their core or peripheral position in the world order, and that peripheral societies were characterised precisely by a lack of internal boundedness, so that the bulk of their economic and other linkages were external (Gunder Frank 1971 etc.) Subsequently, world-systems theory has argued that the effective unit of analysis needs to be whatever global order (world-empire or world-economy, such as capitalism) actually integrates different economic, political and cultural activities (Wallerstein 1988 etc.)

The case of "Buddhism and Ireland" illustrates the need for such an approach. Firstly, a part of what was nineteenth century "Ireland" has only become a separate state within living memory, and one whose boundaries – cultural and political – remain highly contested. In this it shares a history with many, perhaps most contemporary states. Secondly, by contrast with core or metropolitan societies, a peripheral or internally-colonised society such

as Ireland is in no position to make over Buddhism in its "own" (intensely debated) image.

Thirdly, until the 1960s at least the Irish encounter with Buddhism has been mediated via international institutions (the British Empire and Catholic missionary activity); since that point, it has been institutionally dominated by "blow-ins" from more powerful western societies. Fourthly, and as a direct consequence, Irish Buddhism – like Ireland more generally – has been marked by a constant circle of emigration and immigration; until very recently it has been rare for Buddhists to be both Irish and in Ireland. Finally, the languages spoken on the island have all also been spoken elsewhere; and Ireland has shared a common publishing and reading space at different times with Britain, France and the US in particular.

If the Irish situation highlights the problematic nature of single-country units of analysis, this is not to argue for Irish exceptionalism, but rather to suggest that a history of "Buddhism and Ireland" is inevitably a partial approach to the global history of Buddhism, rather than a separate national analysis. What is particularly visible for Ireland is not less true for other countries, as Rocha's (2006) account of Brazilian Zen makes clear, in its intertwining of Brazilians' interest in Japan's economic and cultural significance as non-western success story, of Japanese labour migration and of the search for cosmopolitan cultural capital.

### **The paths of first awareness**

#### **The difficulties of national categories**

A summary of the first encounters of Ireland and Buddhism highlights the insufficiency of purely national

categories of analysis. The first knowledge of Buddhism in Ireland came through Latin and the post-imperial church, with the development of patristic scholarship in the sixth and seventh centuries and consequent access to the comments of Origen and Clement on Buddhism. The first relevant Irish-language material (Dicuil's ninth century geography, drawing on the records of Alexander's journey to India and oral accounts of India and Ceylon) was written in a French monastery.

Mediaeval Europe presents a methodological problem of linking texts (and hence knowledge) to the location of writers and readers: Old and Middle Irish, Old and Middle English, Middle Welsh, Old Norse, Norman French and Latin were all spoken in Ireland, while Irish was a language of immigration in Scotland and Wales and of monks much further afield. This was in no sense a nationally-bounded world. If the Barlaam and Josaphat legend, and Marco Polo's *Travels*, were translated into Irish (as well as English, French and Norse), we do not know where these translations were read, other than by the provenance of surviving manuscripts.

In the early modern period, Irish people had access both to the products of commercial printing (mostly in English and French), such as Hakluyt's 16<sup>th</sup> century translation of William of Rubruck and the various sixteenth and seventeenth century collections of travel narratives, as well as to the Jesuits' accounts of their work in the Buddhist East (Offermans 2005) – depending on their levels of literacy, financial means, and the languages they could read (these in turn reflecting different positions within the colonial process and the pan-European wars of religion).

Thus when, in 1806, Ireland's first commercial woman writer Sydney Owenson could describe (in a best-selling

novel) a Catholic parish priest as being like "the dalai lama of little Thibet" (cited in Lennon 2004: 146) she was expressing both the level of knowledge available to *some* Irish people, and the conflicted and opposing cultures present *within* Ireland, which meant that an English-speaking and Protestant culture found the (newly decriminalised) Catholic church as alien and exotic as Tibetan Buddhism. There was no unified Irish culture to receive and remake Buddhism, but rather a conflict *between* cultures, which in turn was not restricted to the island of Ireland but part of a broader conflict within the UK and indeed Europe.

#### **International mechanisms of knowledge**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the ethnographic knowledge of Jesuits or travellers was largely replaced by new forms of textual and artefactual knowledge (Lopez 1995), which Irish people in global institutions were centrally involved in producing.

Most visibly, there was extensive Irish participation in the British empire at all levels. Trinity College, Dublin (and to a lesser extent Queen's College Belfast) played an important role in training young Protestants for the imperial administration; on retirement some civil servants joined the ranks of academic orientalists (Mansoor 1944, Lennon 2004). Other young Protestants, in what can only be called an imperial service class, became military officers (and brought back loot from the Burma expeditions of the 1880s and the Younghusband expedition to what is now the National Museum (Audrey Whitty, pers. comm.) or missionaries, while smaller categories of museum curator, art collector etc. rounded out the picture.

The "other ranks" of the British army and navy recruited

massively in Catholic Ireland and Irish Scotland (Bartlett 1997), while from the start of the twentieth century a boom in vocations led to very large numbers of Irish missionaries working in China in particular (Boland 2005), with the consequence that Buddhism became an object of study for Irish religious institutions.

Said (2003) is thus right to see European knowledge about Asia as part and parcel of processes of power. What his account misses out in relation to Buddhism and other Asian religions, as JJ Clarke (1997) has noted, is that such knowledge was often drawn on strategically by European dissidents to critique local sources of cultural power (whether in c18th Enlightenment or c20th counter culture). Lennon (2004) identifies a tradition of drawing parallels between Ireland and Asian countries, underlining a similar position with relation to metropolitan culture and empire.

Thus the first Irish Buddhists, members of the declining Anglo-Irish who "went native" in Buddhist Asia, were far from assimilating Buddhism within a self-confident metropolitan culture. Rather, it is impossible to understand the developing relationship between Buddhism and Ireland outside of the structures of British empire and Catholic "spiritual empire", and the warring cultures represented by these two within Ireland: a conflict which led to partial political independence, the collapse of the Anglo-Irish as landed aristocracy and imperial service class, and an ongoing sectarianism on both sides of the new border which has remained determining for what it means to be Buddhist, and Irish or in Ireland (rarely both) until the start of the twenty first century. Buddhism took its place in Ireland, not as something operating within the "limits of dissent" (Tweed 2000), but as one element of a much wider-ranging dissent – opposition to the world of empire, and

increasingly to the world of local sectarianisms, and an identification with something outside these terms.

### **The first Irish Buddhists**

Irish Buddhist history is not short: the first (anonymous) Irish Buddhist appeared in 1871, while the first named sympathiser and adherent were found in Japan and Ceylon respectively in 1890. The first talk by a Buddhist in Ireland was in 1889, and the first explicitly Buddhist event in 1929. The first visit by ordained Asian Buddhists, meanwhile, happened in 1925.

These first Irish Buddhists appeared, above all, as marginal. In chronological order we find an anonymous statistic, a fictional character, an exile, an adventurer, a transsexual, a fraud and a raconteur. This apparently pejorative language underlines the marginality of these exceptional individuals.

Up to now I have highlighted Ireland's peripherality and involvement in world-systems processes. The reverse of this coin is the intensive effort of boundary-creation, identity formation and policing of difference that increasingly defined ethnicity in this decisive period. After the bloody suppression of the 1798 uprising and the 1800 Act of Union, a series of mass movements – Catholic Emancipation, Home Rule, the Land War and finally independence – marked an increasing rejection by the Catholic peasants and middle classes of British rule and the local Anglo-Irish ruling class; a resistance which in turn led to frequent attempts at reasserting control, and powerful counter-movements from Ulster Protestants in particular. The revival of the Catholic church in the post-Famine period, and simultaneous cultural nationalist movements, were part and parcel of this process of creating cultural and religious division.



Rocha has argued (2006: 7) that "the adoption of Buddhism in Catholic countries, such as France and Italy, should be differentiated from its adoption in Protestant ones". What stands out for the Irish case until the 1960s, however, is this role of *sectarianism* in the reception of Buddhism (2). As Lennon (2004) shows, even Catholic nationalists working in solidarity with Indian ones could not draw *religious* (as opposed to political or economic) parallels. To go further and "jump ship" would have been a betrayal of Catholic nationalism which not even Marxists would contemplate.

It was therefore from the declining Anglo-Irish imperial service class that it was possible for a handful of individuals, mostly male and well-educated, and (crucially) already very disconnected from their own families and backgrounds, to defect from an identity in the process of decomposition.

### **Seven Buddhists in search of a home**

The first Irish Buddhist appeared as a County Dublin statistic in the 1871 census – given the date, most probably a university teacher or student; perhaps, indeed, the anonymous author of the *Dublin University Magazine's* largely sympathetic article (1873) on "Buddhism and its founder". Irish universities being strongly confessional, such an admission could not have been made publicly without risking at a minimum loss of employment or expulsion. 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.

We are on equally shaky ground with the most widely represented Irish Buddhist, Kipling's *Kim* (1900 – 1): the

son of an Irish soldier and an Indian woman, brought up to bazaar life. Kim is represented as torn between two souls – a practical and cynical "English" one working for the spymasters of the Raj, and a romantic and "Indian" one whose guru is a moderately orthodox Tibetan Gelugpa lama, inspired by western accounts of the then Panchen lama (Franklin 2008, Kwon 2007).

Kim is of course a fictional character, but grounded in the reality of imperial lives in India, where civil servants and soldiers of all ranks took local wives, as did (less visibly) missionaries. Whether such arrangements – and their religious implications – were permanent or dissolved on return home, most produced no records. Nevertheless, this "going native" is the main possibility for attested Irish Buddhists of this period (that is, those who published their stories); Kim can stand for the unknown number of those who did not.

Lafcadio Hearn, Buddhist sympathiser and interpreter of "old Japan" to the west (and to its modernising, Meiji self) was the son of an Anglo-Irish soldier who married a Greek woman; he came to Ireland with his mother until she returned home. Brought up by an aunt (who having married a Catholic was kept at a distance by the rest of the family), he was sent to boarding schools before being sent to seek his fortune in the USA at 17; two decades later, he travelled to Japan, where he lies buried at Jitoin Kobudera temple in Tokyo (Ronan 1997).

Hearn's Buddhist sympathies are highlighted in Rexroth (1977) and Tweed (2000); what I want to emphasise here is the significance of this "going native" beyond the empire for the son of an Anglo-Irish soldier, as well as the fractured family life and sense of place caused precisely by Ireland's place in international processes (the British army in Greece) and by sectarianism (the division within

the Hearn family).

A comparable "going native" can be seen in Hearn's near-contemporary J. Bowles Daly, a journalist and Theosophist who had written on Buddhist education in Sri Lanka and joined Col. Olcott there in developing the Buddhist Theosophical Society schools in the late 1880s and early 1890s, becoming the first principal of Mahinda College in Rajagiriya (Olcott 1889, Dharmadasa 1992). Daly was a supporter of modernized Buddhist education, provided by the laity with government subsidy, against both the Christian mission schools and traditional temple-based education; after falling out with Olcott he remained active in the field and visited 1300 monasteries as a commissioner for the laicisation of monastery landholdings (Dennis 1897). Details are scanty, but he was clearly a strongly "Buddhist" theosophist, if not a Buddhist *tout court*.

Another Buddhist "going native" appears in Laura / Michael Dillon, best known to history as the world's first female-to-male transsexual by plastic surgery (Hodgkinson 1989, Kennedy 2007). Dillon shared with Hearn (and Kim) a fractured family background and with Daly a prior interest in theosophy. Of Anglo-Irish aristocratic family, he studied in Cambridge as a woman before the second world war and returned to Ireland to qualify in medicine as a man while undergoing pioneering (and then-illegal) surgery in Britain. He developed a deep interest in philosophical and spiritual questions, writing among other things an early work on transsexuality (Dillon 1946).

His connection with T. Lobsang Rampa, in the early 1950s, marks him as both the first Irish person to *believe* they were being ordained a Buddhist monk as well as, some years later, the first for whom this was actually true.

While working as ship's doctor in 1958, he was "outed" by the British tabloid press and fled to India, where he made contact with Asian Buddhists. He was ordained first as a Theravadin *sramanera*, then (when his sex change prevented full ordination) as a Tibetan Buddhist novice, attached to the (Gelugpa) Rizong monastery in Ladakh and writing a series of Buddhist works (Jivaka 1962, 1994).

Lobzang Jivaka, as he became, demands respect not only for his difficult personal life but also for his conscious wish to tackle his own racism: he refused special treatment in the monastery, subjecting himself to Tibetan teenagers' monastic seniority and to food and living conditions which probably contributed to his death at forty-seven.

T. Lobsang Rampa, author of *The Third Eye* and other works, is justly famous (see e.g. Lopez 1998) in the history of western Buddhism as a commercially successful fraud. After publication of the book but prior to his "unmasking" as Cyril Hoskin, Scotland Yard had requested a Tibetan passport or residence permit, leading him to move to Ireland, where Dillon apparently bought him a house.

Rampa, his wife and their friend Sheelagh Rouse lived there for some years before moving to Canada: he subsequently dedicated *The Rampa Story* to "his friends in Howth... for the Irish people know persecution, and they know how to judge Truth" (1960: 3). Despite Rampa's inauthenticity, most observers judge him personally sincere, and this house has a good claim to being the first Buddhist community in Ireland; similarly, the shamrock Buddhas that he sold from this address may yet prove to be the first Buddhist practice in Ireland, at least for a given value of "Buddhist" and "practice".

Finally, we should mention Terence Gray, an Anglo-Irish aristocrat who had a distinguished career in theatre at Cambridge between the wars (in what is now the Cambridge Buddhist Centre) and a colourful personal life (marrying a Rimsky-Korsakov and later a Georgian princess (Cornwell 2004)). In 1958, he retired to Monte Carlo and became a regular correspondent of the London Buddhist Society's *Middle Way* (Humphreys 1968) as well as writing a series of Buddhist books as "Wei Wu Wei", seven of which are still in print with Wisdom Books. His Buddhism is a very literary "philosophy of life" in some ways comparable to Alan Watts' and combining Ch'an with Taoism.

### Reflections

By the late 1950s, if it was possible to live a comfortable Buddhist life in Monte Carlo rather than suffer the pressures of a Hearn, a Daly or a Dillon, it was still impossible, for Irish Buddhists at least, to do so in Ireland. More generally, if the stories above appear those of marginal characters, whose Irish or Buddhist "authenticity" is often questionable, this is precisely the point: by comparison with Almond's or Tweed's Victorian Buddhism, minor and subordinate parts of their own cultures, "Buddhism" and "Ireland" were almost impossible to hold together. What we find instead are defectors from the imperial service class, "going native" in Japan, Ceylon or Ladakh and stepping outside both their own local culture and imperial arrangements *tout court*.

The pressures involved are underlined by two counter-examples. Firstly, at least three Buddhist parties visited Ireland in these years. In 1889, 1894 and apparently 1896, the indefatigable Col. Olcott toured the

country discussing both Theosophy and Buddhism, exciting much controversy, but (as far as can be ascertained) leaving no Buddhist organisations or individuals. In 1929, the Unitarian minister and Buddhist sympathiser Will Hayes, a friend of Christmas Humphreys, gave a week-long lecture series in Dublin, again with no visible effects. Finally, six "dancing lamas" (Hansen 1996) were brought to Ireland in 1925 by the partly-Irish team who had filmed *The epic of Everest* – but as entertainment alone.

Secondly, Irish Theosophy, a key matrix for both British and American Buddhism, was a flourishing force throughout this period which involved among others WB Yeats, AE (George Russell) and James Stephens. However, it avoided Buddhism almost entirely, developing an interest in esoteric Christianity, Irish folklore and Hinduism instead. For the largely Anglo-Irish Theosophists, these choices made possible continuing relevance and engagement in *Irish* politics in the age of independence.

To be Buddhist, by contrast, was to step out of the conflict (and the country) – and the only two Irish "Buddhist Theosophists" did just that: Daly moving to Ceylon, and William Quan Judge, co-founder of the Society internationally and head of the American section, who had emigrated at age twelve and whose magazine followed a more "Buddhist" line.

Thus the key features of Irish Buddhism in this period are, firstly, that it is caught between the two opposing cultures of rising Catholic nationalism and the rearguard actions of the Anglo-Irish imperial service class; and, secondly, that it is played out on the global stage provided by the institutions of the British empire in particular. It is anything other than a debate within a unitary and bounded national culture.

## **A new beginning: the multiple foundations of contemporary Buddhism in Ireland**

If the previous period marks what linguists call a broken tradition, the continuous tradition of Buddhism in Ireland dates from the late 1960s and has its origins in the new Catholic public-sector service class. On the nationalist and Catholic side, the chains of transmission of knowledge about Buddhism were typically those of "spiritual empire" to use a phrase of the day.

Since the foundation of the Maynooth Mission to China in 1918, over 1500 missionaries from the Columban order alone went overseas (Boland 2005: 132), part of a much broader wave of religious vocations and religious emigration stretching back to the late nineteenth century. The Mission's paper, *The Far East*, was sold by boys in Cork as late as the 1950s (Bernard Murphy, pers. comm.) This fits into the broader popularity of, for example, St Francis Xavier, Jesuit missionary to Buddhists in India and Japan, whose name adorns many youth centres.

Maynooth's library shows a continuing and sophisticated interest in Buddhism in the country's central seminary as well as in donations and bequests from priests around the country. The key periods are between the 1920s and 1940s, no doubt reflecting the missionary effort, and from the 1970s onwards, presumably reflecting a response to new religious movements. In terms of popular culture, a survey of the Irish media shows a continuing awareness of Buddhism, whether as opponent in missionary efforts or as an exotic feature of foreign parts.

By contrast with Brazil, where the Church's secularisation has led to its losing ground among the poor (Rocha 2006: 104-5), the (highly conservative) Irish church lost its "moral monopoly" (Inglis 1998) as a result of

second-wave feminism, and the politics of memory as large-scale institutional abuse of children has become the subject of documentaries, court cases and national tribunals. Thus the primary search for Irish ex-Catholics has been for forms of religious expression which have not been forms of religious control of bodies and emotions in particular, and this shows up in responses to meditation practice.

#### **Historical trajectories**

Nattier's (1998) three-way typology of Buddhism in the west has been criticised for drawing overly sharp distinctions (see Numrich 2003). For Ireland, it does adequately describe three very different historical trajectories. It may be a feature of the relative youth of the Irish *sangha* that these boundaries have not yet broken down in the way that they have done elsewhere.

An alternative reading is that in a peripheral context the key linkages of Buddhism in Ireland are not *internal* ones. Irish Buddhism, in this sense, is still "dependent": on international Buddhist organisations, on the networks of ethnic Buddhist diasporas, or on global distribution chains of "Mind-body-spirit" literature and CDs. This dependency undermines cross-Buddhist communication, of which there has been very little. The sense of local isolation and global connectedness brought about by this peripherality has marked Irish Buddhism from the start:

"One person had put up a notice in what was called the 'East West Centre' ... saying that they were interested in Buddhism and was there anyone else in Dublin who was? And after that, I guess about ten or fifteen people came together, and all of those people at that time had thought that they were the only Buddhists in Ireland" (interview A) (3).



Nattier's categories, in other words, are useful precisely because they are not *national* categories, but highlight global relationships in the transmission of Buddhism which remain determining for contemporary Irish Buddhism.

### **Import Buddhism**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a new Buddhist-sympathetic counter-culture developed in Dublin, including vegetarian and macrobiotic restaurants, alternative bookshops and martial arts. For Catholic participants who later became Buddhists, what showed the way was personal reading, often at secondary school, of literature published in the UK and US – despite the orthodoxy of school or family. This fed into travel abroad, bringing back literature unavailable in Ireland, and into Buddhist retreats in the UK.

Indeed the oldest organisation, Kagyu Samye Dzong in north Dublin, came out of the reflection that "we thought maybe it would be cheaper to pay for one teacher to come over than everybody going over somewhere else, so we got together and we did organise many visits with monks and nuns" (interview B). This group, founded in 1977, organised between 100 and 150 visits by teachers in its early years, starting with Tibetan lamas but also including some western Theravadin-trained teachers (Ani Tsonдру, pers. comm.)

Insofar as there was ever an *elite* import Buddhism, of the kind Nattier describes for the US, this was it. Rather than being strongly committed to a single path, however, it was "very certainly multid denominational, not even that, but just a bunch of people who were meeting with an interest in Buddhism" (interview A).

A similar situation holds for the Zen Meditation Group (now Insight Meditation Group); founded by Dominican father Philip McShane, this always contained both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. In its early years, it invited Soto Zen teachers from Throssel Hole in the UK, while in the 1980s it increasingly invited Theravadin teachers from the Birmingham Buddhist Vihara and Amaravati (Kelly 1990).

One key difference between this import Buddhism and the kind that Nattier describes, of course, is that the organizers of these groups did not themselves engage in long-term training in Asia aiming at certification and teaching at home – a situation which undoubtedly builds commitment to a single approach. (As we shall see, such people existed, but rarely returned to Ireland.) Rather, these were groups initially dominated by lay practitioners, with considerable control over the invitation of teachers and the direction of their own centres.

If imported knowledge, through UK and US publishing circuits, long-distance travel, retreats abroad and now the Internet, remains important in Ireland, it has rarely led to new institutional foundations. What it has produced, as Wendy Jermyn's (unfortunately unpublished) research has shown, is a proliferation of informal, essentially private, groups of practitioners: for example, a group who meet to listen to CDs of Thich Nhat Hanh and meditate in a private house.

At a rough estimate (based on the levels of activity of publicly organised Buddhism and the numbers of non-Asian Buddhists in Ireland), such informal groups, along with more isolated or "night-stand" Buddhists (Tweed 2002), account for at least a third, and perhaps as

much as half, of all Irish Buddhists.

Such groups, like the earlier foundations, retain a greater sense of independence vis-à-vis their sources of Buddhist teaching and practice; my own impression, from 17 years involvement, is that far from being the elite Nattier predicts (1998: 189), these more recent groups (and individual night-stand Buddhists) are less educated, more dependent on commercial distribution sources, and more likely to be women than Buddhists involved in the export groups, whose stronger organisational hierarchies (necessitated among other things by a relationship "back" to organizations or lineages based close at hand in Western Europe) and tighter approaches to doctrine and practice give greater scope to a particular kind of service-class careerism, and to men.

The major condition for these developments is the prior arrival of Buddhism in more powerful (politically, economically, culturally) countries, from which it can now be diffused successfully in an Irish market which is increasingly part of a global one.

#### **Export Buddhism**

Export Buddhism in Ireland, then, is different not only in its historical origins (which are very recent – less than two decades in most cases) but also its sources. Rather than Asian missionaries, its typical carriers are westerners, themselves often mainly or exclusively trained in the west. In global terms, this is a second generation of western Buddhist foundations, with their own characteristics.

The key feature of these is the central role of "blow-ins", missionaries from other European countries. Thus Marjo Oosterhoff from the Netherlands (Passaddhi Meditation Centre, arrived 1990), Dharmachari Sanghapala from the

UK FWBO (Dublin Meditation Centre, arrived 1991), Alain Liebmann from France, trained by Taisen Deshimaru (Galway Zen Centre, arrived 1991) and others arrived to set up centres as offshoots or successors of traditions already implanted elsewhere in Europe.

A borderline case is that of Peter and Harriet Cornish (Cornish 2007), who moved to Ireland in the early 1970s, initially practicing within Chögyam Trungpa's tradition. The Cornishes offered what is now the Dzogchen Beara centre to Sogyal Rimpoche when he visited in 1986. (Another such planned centre, in Westport, failed to materialise when the lamas in question were refused permission to stay.)

The role of "blow-ins" in the Irish counter culture is well known and extends to many fields, ranging from the New Age (Kuhling 2004) to organic farming (Moore 2003). Following the traditional definitions, Ireland remains very clearly "border country": to the best of my knowledge no ordinations, in any tradition, have taken place in Ireland, for example.

More generally, it has taken a long time for Irish people to take leadership or teaching positions in export groups, if at all. Thus in Dzogchen Beara, senior Irish students act as "presenters", leading groups and presenting videos, but they "are not really teachers in their own right" (Matt Padwick, pers. comm.). In the (FWBO) Dublin Meditation Centre, the first Irish-born teacher, trained in Britain, arrived in 1993; the first Irish-trained teacher, ordained in 1998, left for Brazil; the first Irish-trained teacher to stay and teach was as late as 2001. The "import" Kagyu Samye Dzong, by contrast, had its first two Irish teachers in the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

In terms of peripherality, this situation contrasts sharply

with the large number of Irish-born Buddhists who trained abroad and did not return. Thus Paul Haller, abbot in 2007 of the San Francisco Zen Centre, comes from west Belfast and was ordained in Thailand (Breen 2007); Finian Airton from Dublin was ordained in Throssel Hole around 1984; Ratnaghosa, chair of the London Buddhist Centre between 1994 and 2003, grew up in Kildare (Ratnaghosa n.d.) Most famously, Maura O'Halloran, after studying in Trinity, received Dharma transmission in Japan shortly before her death in 1982 (O'Halloran 1995). Examples could be multiplied.

The point is *not* that Irish teachers were excluded by blow-ins, but rather that it remained, until the turn of the twenty first century, extremely hard to be Irish, and Buddhist, and in Ireland (in 1991, only 264 identified as Buddhist in the Republic; by 2006 this number had increased almost tenfold, to 2175).

As with other counter-cultural activities, to be foreign meant being granted a certain leeway in one's lifestyle which was not offered to Catholic-born Irish people. One British-born Buddhist recounts

"When I still lived in Inchicore, an elderly lady came up ... on the street, you know 'are you a Protestant or a Catholic?' – 'Well, actually, I'm a Buddhist'. And she said 'ooh, it's alright dear, so long as you're a Christian'." (interview A).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, 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 family reasons.

The "export Buddhist" groups cover the whole spectrum of Buddhism: of the fourteen most organised groups in Ireland, five are broadly Theravadin (including *vipassana*), three Mahayana, five Tibetan and one western (Dharmachari Akshobin, pers. comm.)

Nattier predicts correctly that these groups will be evangelical in orientation (1998: 189), but is wrong (at least for Ireland) to expect greater ethnic diversity (except via these groups' international connections). Nor are they more plebeian: the intellectual consistency involved in acquiring a new ideology and defending its boundaries in the "spiritual marketplace" requires a higher degree of cultural capital than "shopping around".

### **Baggage Buddhism**

In the censuses of the 1990s and 2000s, those identifying as Buddhist in the Republic broke down more or less evenly between those of Irish and other "western" nationality, and Buddhists from Asian countries. Except for mainland Chinese converts to Falun Gong, most Asian Buddhists were presumably born into Buddhism.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vietnamese "quota refugees" arrived under UNHCR programmes. Of these, some were Catholic, others Buddhist and others again from the Vietnamese Chinese community (Maguire 2004). At some point, the Buddhists were able to sustain a temple in a Dublin suburb.

The only other "ethnic Buddhist" group combining this length of presence with a similar organisational capacity is Soka Gakkai, which includes western and Japanese adherents more successfully than most Buddhist groups. This too was able for a time to sustain a temple in suburban Dublin, but has now reverted to private practice

(Wendy Cox, pers. comm.)

Special mention must be made of Chinese immigrants from the PRC, Taiwan and the diaspora (especially Malaysia), who comprise about half of the Asian Buddhist population. While Chinese New Year has some history in Ireland, the only visible organisation with any claim to be Buddhist is the well-organised Falun Dafa / Falun Gong. This is present in New Age circuits; its free paper *Epoch Times* is available in Irish supermarkets; and it holds regular public protests about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners in China.

Otherwise, a combination of very low immigration rates until the late 1990s, small absolute numbers of most Buddhist ethnicities (in the dozens or hundreds in most cases) and global downturn make the development of formal ethnic Buddhist institutions problematic. (In 2009, however, the Thai community organised a public Wesak celebration). The most likely route is affiliation to existing, import or export, foundations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that tentative moves are being made in this direction.

#### **Creolisation and not-just-Buddhists**

Finally, we should mention, as Tweed (2002: 28 – 29) observes, not only Buddhist sympathisers (as in earlier periods), but also "night-stand Buddhists", "Dharma-hoppers", "lukewarm Buddhists" and "non-just Buddhists". Alternatively, following Rocha (2006), we can speak of multiple affiliations and forms of creolisation.

Where Irish people appropriate Buddhism for themselves, within largely self-directed and informal organisations (or as a purely private matter), their own cultural orientations towards religion naturally play a key role. As

one teacher observes, "we have Irish Catholic Buddhists, Irish Catholic pagans, Irish Catholic atheists..." (Dharmachari Sanghapala, pers. comm.) who deploy the vocabulary of Buddhism (etc.) within a largely Catholic grammar.

Particular pressures are exerted by tribal affiliation. Religious affiliation remains central to many aspects of life in Ireland, formally and informally: schools and hospitals have with few exceptions an explicitly religious ethos; marriages and funerals are typically religious; confirmation and first communion are major events; and so on. Coulter (1993) documents, in relation to feminism, how only those university-trained liberal feminists with independent careers were able to set themselves openly against and outside the church. For working-class women's groups, the church was (and sometimes still remains) a central part of family and community, and one which they cannot do without. These pressures also impact on Irish Buddhism.

As Catholicism's "moral monopoly" (Inglis 1998) slowly loses its power, at least for those with the strength or resources to stand outside it, what increasingly replaces it as a pressure on "night-stand Buddhists" are the interpretations offered through consumer culture, be it the "mind-body-spirit" section of high street bookshops, the sub-Buddhist material in "angel shops" or workshops advertised in health food stores. To this extent, import Buddhism could equally be described as a collection of audience cults (Stark and Bainbridge 1985), at times developing into client cults around teachers based abroad.

These experiences – of creolisation or multiple affiliations – are not restricted to working-class women: one long-standing and well-educated male Buddhist writes



"I have always been aware that my interest in Buddhism may be rather superficial, and I am not a good or committed practitioner! However, I remain a sympathiser and an admirer, often reading Buddhist literature. But I haven't attended Buddhist teachings in recent years. Moreover, I retain a certain Christian faith and practice, and have an interest in some of the teachings of Islam".

As we have seen, the origins of this import Buddhism are eclectic, both in the encounter between Christianity and Buddhism, and in the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s. For Britain, Cush suggests that the counter culture was important for western Buddhists in the 1970s and faded from view in the 1980s, while a counter-cultural "New Age" revived in its relevance for Buddhists in the 1990s (Cush 1993: 195 - 6). Similarly, Vishvapani writes,

"the New Age is where people start looking when they want an alternative to conventional society... Buddhists might see the New Age as a kind of contemporary ethnic religion which can co-exist with Western Buddhism as tribal and national traditions co-exist with Eastern Buddhism" (1994: 21).

Relationships with Catholicism show similar features: in the 1970s and 1980s there developed a substantial interest, particularly in Christian-Zen dialogue and the adoption of Asian practices within Christian spirituality (see Hughes 1997). This has declined under the watchful eye of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, but may revive in future. The bulk of Irish Buddhists will, for the foreseeable future, have been brought up Catholic, so that Buddhist organisations in Ireland will continue to have to engage with people's religious socialisation, and individuals will still have to negotiate these identities for

themselves. As with Rocha's Brazilian Zen practitioners,

"the vast majority of the people interviewed were Catholics before they started to 'shop around' in the religious marketplace and find Zen Buddhism." (2006: 118).

Finally, a refusal to identify as Buddhist may also be a conscious, thought-out Buddhist position:

"I had this debate with myself at one stage about calling myself a Buddhist or not, because it's almost unBuddhist to call yourself Buddhist, particularly because they're labeling and they're categorizing" (interview C).

Fieldwork in the 1990s counter culture identified as key themes autonomy and reflexivity in all aspects of one's life (Cox 1999); this refusal of categorisation is no doubt related. As the long history of sectarianism in Ireland finally wanes, there are more general reactions against religious identification: the last thing many Irish people want to do is to repeat their own experience of sectarian upbringing, and interest in the idea of a Buddhist school, for example, has been virtually zero. Statistics based on practice rather than self-identification might thus show rather more Irish people who are Buddhist, or part-Buddhist (4).

### **Conclusion: the future of Irish Buddhism**

Ireland's relationship with Buddhism has always been determined by global processes, be these the circuits of mediaeval Christian knowledge and the publishing of early modern travellers' tales, the involvement of some Irish people with running the British empire and of others with the "Catholic spiritual empire", the role of UK and

US publishing in making knowledge of Buddhism available to secondary-school children in the 1960s and 1970s, "blow-ins" from the broader west European counter culture, or immigration from Buddhist Asia.

I have argued that the most central feature of "Irish culture" in relation to Buddhism is that there was not one, but two warring cultures, in a sectarian conflict which largely squeezed out alternative religious options, at least at home (to be Irish and Buddhist abroad was always more feasible).

As late as 1991, there were only 986 self-identified Buddhists in the Republic, about 0.025% of the population. By 2002 the figure was 3,894 (about 0.1 percent) and by 2006 it was 6,516 (about 0.15 percent), making it the third-largest religion after Christianity and Islam. These twenty first century figures are in line with Baumann's (2001) European estimates for the late 1990s, albeit on the low end of the spectrum. They are roughly evenly divided between those of Irish and other western nationality and those of Asian nationality – about 45 percent converts in 1991, 57 percent in 2002 and 50 percent in 2006. Thus along with a rise in immigration, there is an equally significant rise in conversion (paralleled by that to other non-established religions and non-religious categories). Is this the "end of history"?

Global recession has several obvious effects. Firstly, substantial numbers of recent immigrants have left the country, although events in the PRC in particular may offset this, and indeed lead to a growth in Falun Gong in particular.

Secondly, religious and racial intolerance is rising, whether in the recent referendum denying citizenship to children of foreign parents born in Ireland, or proposed legislation against blasphemy. How this will affect

Buddhism is anyone's guess, but it seems likely that "night-stand Buddhists" in particular will find it harder to remain broad-minded if the situation worsens. Renewed ethnic closure along religious grounds is by no means impossible.

Thirdly, there may be a shift in reasons for interest in Buddhism. The Dublin Buddhist Centre, one of the most visible ports of call, reports a sharp drop in meditation classes (perceived as an antidote to stressful work lives) and rising numbers taking classes in Buddhism.

Finally, recession increases the number of potential skilled volunteers but also makes emigration more attractive for young, educated Buddhists.

Despite these local considerations, Buddhism in Ireland remains, as it has always been, structurally dependent on global relationships. Until Asian Buddhists in Ireland are able to bridge the gap to English-language Buddhist organisations (and vice versa) they are likely to remain the poor relations of organisations in Britain or at home. The Irish franchises of international Buddhist organisations will not cease to be so in the foreseeable future, as training and ordination resources will remain beyond the reach of all but the largest groups in Ireland. And "import Buddhists" will remain dependent on the various circuits of international publishing, touring teachers, Internet ordering and so on.

To this extent, Ireland is likely to remain a "border country" of the Dharma for a long time to come; but the issues raised in this article are not Irish ones alone, even if they are particularly visible in the Irish case. Nation-states are important social facts, but as units of analysis they provide at best a particular insight into what are necessarily global relationships and processes, and at

worst a sense of naturalness, boundedness and self-sufficiency that can distract our attention from this broader picture. Similar points, of course, were made by Nagasena and Nagarjuna.

### Notes

1. The *Visuddhimagga*, for example, identifies "remote areas with no faith in the Dharma" and "border regions in dispute" as unsuitable sites for building monasteries (Ray 1999: 38, fn 20). The relative lack of monks to perform ordinations also leads to smaller quorums in these contexts: see e.g. Findly 2000: 116 fn. 8, citing Gombrich.

2. In a broader perspective, France and Italy are better described as pillarised societies, in Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) sense, with centuries-long conflicts between Catholic, secular-liberal and socialist cultures. The question of the adoption of Buddhism within the secular and socialist subcultures of western Europe has yet to be researched.

3. The three interviews cited in this section were carried out in 2008 with people who have been involved in Buddhism in Ireland since the 1970s.

4. Rocha notes (2006: 109) that Brazilians will often identify as Catholic on census forms because they are baptised. A similar situation applies in Ireland, although here the key point is that "Protestant" and "Catholic" are widely understood as *ethnic* categories.

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