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Self-Representation and Cultural Expectations: Yogi Chen and Religious Practices of Life-Writing

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ABSTRACT Explores the differences in self-representation as found in the autobiographical writings of Yogi Chen, Billy Graham, and the Dalai Lama. While the latter two are widely recognized in American popular religious culture, the former is virtually invisible outside the immigrant Chinese American community. This invisibility is consistent with fact that the religious praxes of immigrant communities remain largely under-studied. However, one additional factor appears to be the mismatch between the expectations of the dominant religious culture and the immigrant culture in terms of the ways in which religious leaders represent themselves. Both Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama present themselves in very humble terms, consistent with the expectations of the Pietist background to American popular religion. Yogi Chen on the contrary tends toward a self-aggrandizing style, which although consistent with the competitive nature of premodern Tibetan religious culture is not congruent with the expectations of American popular religion.

KEY WORDS religious life-writing; Buddhism; Pietism; Yogi Chen; Billy Graham; Dalai Lama; autobiography

Introduction

“There’s no success like failure”,
Bob Dylan, ‘Love Minus Zero, No Limit’

Most public attention focuses on the media superstars of translocated Buddhism. Figures like the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh are both

widely recognized and—in the dialectic mirroring of modern media—also garner the greatest amount of public attention. Others, such as Shunryu Suzuki and Chögyam Trungpa, established Buddhist institutions that successfully integrated into Western culture (Chadwick 1999, and Midal 2004). These and others have been most successful in transitioning from their home society into Western society, and have emerged onto the global mediascape as iconic representations of Buddhism.

For the academic study of translocated Buddhism, however, there is perhaps at least as much, if not more, to be learned from those who did not make such successful translocations, did not establish lasting institutions, and who remain invisible on the global mediascape. One such figure is Yogi Chen. When I've mentioned him to other Buddhist scholars, the universal response has been, Who?

In contrast to the almost invisible Yogi Chen, Billy Graham is well-known throughout American popular religious culture, even by those whose religious affinities are quite divergent from his. While Yogi Chen's activities in the United States seem to have been limited almost exclusively to the immigrant Chinese community in the San Francisco Bay Area, Billy Graham has been a major figure in American popular religious culture, having had a pivotal role in the 'Fourth Great Awakening' of American evangelical Christianity. The Dalai Lama's autobiographical writings provide a third self-representation for comparing and contrasting the styles of Yogi Chen and Billy Graham. Comparing the self-representation of Yogi Chen with that of Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama as found in their autobiographies reveals contrasting themes indicative of differing religious cultures, and suggesting that self-representation plays an important role in how widely accepted a figure may be in that culture. (We note that the phrase self-representation is used here without implying any intentional misrepresentation on the part of these authors.)

An earlier study (Payne 2005) raised the question of why one tantric Buddhist tradition, the Tibetan, has been successfully integrated into popular religious culture, while another, Shingon, remains an 'obscure oddity.' That essay examined the difference between the institutional self-representation of Tibetan and Shingon forms of tantric Buddhism. The thesis of that study was that the Romantic preconceptions of American popular religious culture promoted the acceptance of the former and neglect of the latter. This essay engages in a parallel inquiry, but in this instance the concern is individual self-representation, rather than institutional. The thesis here is that the invisibility of Yogi Chen outside the immigrant Chinese community results in a significant part from the mismatch between his style of self-representation and the expectations of popular religious culture in the United States. As an instance of religious translocation, Yogi Chen's failure to gain 'traction' outside the immigrant Chinese community contrasts with the relative success of someone like the Dalai Lama.

Religious life-writing

The study of religious life-writing provides one kind of access to a religious culture. However, the understanding provided concerns what is no doubt most central to adherents of that religious culture—what it means to be a religious person. Jacob Kinnard has claimed that

The biographical genre is at the very core of the Buddhist tradition, and one of the most prominent and potent modes for propagating the Buddha's teachings. Indeed, the Buddha's own life serves as the paradigm for all

Buddhists, monks and laity alike; through his life story, the fundamental philosophical and ethical truths known as the dharma are conveyed and humanized (Kinnard 2000, 239).

Religious life-writing tells us for some particular religious culture both what a religious person is, and how someone aspiring to be religious should behave. In the terminology of Clifford Geertz, it provides both ‘models of’ and ‘models for’ the religious life (Geertz 1993, 93-94; used here not as strict theoretical categories, but rather as a useful heuristic—cf. Schilbrack 2005).

What it is

The phrase ‘life-writing’ has entered the academic lexicon as an expansive category, that is, one that embraces a wide range of what might otherwise be considered different genres of writing—genres such as, biography, autobiography, hagiography, fact, fiction, myth, legend, memoirs, letters, diaries, testimonies, and so on (Caine 2010, 66ff.). This seems to be part of the larger intellectual project of recent history which calls into question the universality of such distinctions as those between biography, autobiography and hagiography, fact and fiction, myth and legend by examining the historical and cultural origins of such distinctions (see for example, Taylor 2013). This is not to say that such distinctions are not valid ones, but rather that their validity is solely contextual—defined by the requirements of some particular intellectual project or set of cultural preconceptions. Ulrike Roesler has noted that the literary genres of “autobiography, biography, history, hagiography, and legend—do not correspond precisely to clearly distinguishable genres in Asian literatures” (2010, 5).

Thus, the delineations between categories such as biography, autobiography, and hagiography are not universal—the semantic ranges of such concepts vary depending upon the cultural and linguistic contexts within which they are made (see for example, Houtman 1997, 311). Tanya Zivkovic has argued that anthropological studies privilege “certain (usually Euro-American) assumptions about the lifecourse...it is largely taken for granted that when it comes to the end of life, biology can transcend cultural context.” Then, in a description distinctly reminiscent of some Buddhist descriptions of meditating on a decaying corpse, she says “The deceased body will break down; the matter once contained within will leak out from our defunct apertures; skin will tighten and lose its elasticity; our constituent parts decompose; death is thus an unsurpassable and universal termination of our bodily existence” (2010, 172). She goes on to emphasize the differences between the Tibetan culture she studies and Euro-American culture regarding what constitutes the course of a life, differences rooted in a fundamental acceptance of the reality of rebirth. Earlier, scholars had tended to presume that such Euro-American cultural presumptions were unproblematically valid, and considered life-writings based on different presumptions to be of value solely as resources for historical data. Such scrutiny or interrogation of a text treats it “as an inert mine of data—names, dates, lineage affiliations, and the like—to be excavated by scholars” (Quintman, 2014, 20). There is more to value in religious life-narratives than resources for an “historical positivism” (25), providing access not just to the facts of a particular life, but to a religious culture—recognizing that there are significant differences between that culture and the post-Enlightenment worldview dominant in the academy.

One approach to understanding religious life-writing might be to employ emic categories. Roesler notes that “the Buddhist types of biographical literature “include *carita* (deeds), *vaṃśā* (genealogy), *kathā*

(story), and that biographical accounts may form part of *aṭṭhakathās* (commentaries), and “fragments of the life story of the Buddha Śākyamuni are embedded in the Sūtra and Vinaya sections of the Buddhist canonical scriptures” (2010, 5). There are also stories about Śākyamuni Buddha in lifetimes prior to his birth in this realm, the *jātakas* and *avadānas*. The list of emic categories can be extended when languages other than Sanskrit and Pāli are considered.

For example, working with Tibetan materials SUN Lin has suggested a taxonomy of three large categories and within those ten subcategories of lesser scope for organizing materials within the Tibetan tradition itself. The first of the three large categories is sacred biographies, including as subsets stories of rebirth (*jātaka*), of religiously significant deeds (*avadāna*), and of the twelve great events of the Buddha’s life (*kriyati*). Sun’s second category is biographies of religious figures. Within this he lists secret biographies, exoteric biographies, inner biographies, autobiographies, great biographies and individual histories. The third category, biographies of secular figures, contains a single subcategory, which he calls “internality-karma biographies,” which he describes as emphasizing personal experiences (SUN 2008, 174–175). Here we see that the categories of Tibetan biographies are taxonomically more complex than a distinction between biography and autobiography. This means that in attempting to understand a particular figure and their place in a particular religious culture, research has available a wider range of source materials than simply the pairing of biography and autobiography.

The breadth of source materials is exemplified by Sarah Jacoby’s work on the autobiographical writings of Sera Khandro. Jacoby emphasizes the value of this breadth of material as a means by which

we can learn a great deal about the values of the audience about and for whom she wrote. We need not attempt to extract this-world biodata from the larger *mélange* of dreams, visions, songs, and stories contained in her works. Rather than dividing real from unreal according to a metaphysics foreign to Sera Khandro's writing, this book [i.e., Jacoby's] understands her social world to include not only others in her human communities but also supermundane forces, including enlightened Buddhist figures and powerful Tibetan deities and demons integral to her ability to reveal Treasures in specific places in the Tibetan environment, such as sacred mountains and lakes. The self that is the subject of Sera Khandro's autobiography emerges through dialogue with these voices, as one point in a web of interconnected relationships that encompass multiple lifetimes and stretch into Tibet's earth and sky via the land deities and celestial *dākinīs* who animate them. (2014, 17-18)

While methodologically we may seek to look through religious life-writing to see a religious culture, Patrick Geary warns that "these texts are not transparent windows into the saints' lives, their society, or even the spirituality of their age" (as cited in Quintman 2014, 23). The interpretive process therefore needs to reflect on any differences between both the religious culture and the writing practices of the source text and those of the scholar.

John Strong addresses this issue in response to a portrayal of the 'historical Buddha,' that is, the understanding of the Buddha Śākyamuni commonly found in Western sources intended for a secular audience. "There is nothing wrong with this portrait, and I am happy to espouse it. But it must be realized that this is not the way Buddhists tell the story of the Buddha." Quoting Alfred Foucher, Strong notes that "to make the Buddha into a myth is 'to dissipate his personality into thin air,' but to take away

that mythic ambiance is to arrive at an ‘equally grave misapprehension’” (2001, 3; internal quotes from Foucher 1987, 13, translated by Strong).

Similarly, concerning the miraculous events recorded in collections of the lives of ‘eminent monks,’ John Kieschnick notes that “in the past, scholars have concentrated on winnowing out such fabulous elements in an attempt to uncover a factual core” (Kieschnick 1997, 1). Such an intellectual program in Buddhist studies seems to have been formed by the epistemological distinction between myth and history, which itself derives from the Enlightenment, and which was formative for Western religious studies generally. Rather than sifting through life-writings in search of nuggets of historical gold, however, religious life-writing can provide a means for understanding the ideals of a religious culture.

An instance of the difficulties involved in treating religious life-writing as a source for historical information is the figure of Saraha, one of the *mahāsiddhas* (Dowman 1985, Robinson 1979, and Braitstein 2004). Despite the very important role he play in the narratives regarding the development of some strains of *mahāmudrā* praxis in Tibet, his dates cannot be established within several centuries, some of the texts attributed to him may well have been written or compiled by others, and even the language in which he wrote is a matter of scholarly dispute (Guenther 1968/1973, Guenther 1993, Jackson 2004, Schaeffer 2005). Such narratives, such stories—no matter their factual status—serve to construct an understanding of the world as a particular kind of place, an understanding of what it means to be a person living in such a world, and an understanding of how we should relate to others in such a world.

Scholars working in the area of Tibetan life-writing have specifically noted that autobiography and biography are not clearly distinguishable within the category of a ‘one’s own story of full liberation’ (*rang gi rnam thar*, or simply *rnam thar*). Writing one’s own life as versus writing the life of

another is not as clear and sharp a genre delineation in premodern Tibetan culture as it is in post-Enlightenment conceptions of authorial autonomy. In his *Four Lamas of Dolpo* for example, David Snellgrove notes the compound nature of the works he examines, “although these biographies were composed by devoted disciples, the material used was all explicitly autobiographical” (Snellgrove 1992 [1967], 12). Of course specific cases will differ, however, more recent scholarship—perhaps as a result of post-modernist theory—has gone further in deconstructing the authorial voice, seeing instead ‘collective remembering’ and the multivocal character of premodern Tibetan life-writing. Discussing the biography of Chokyi Droma, Hildegard Diemberger emphasizes “the interindividuality of the process of authorship, involving herself, her disciples, and the biographer and embracing multiple temporalities—past, present and [prophetic] future, and multiple positions—human and divine, male and female” (Diemberger, 2007, 87).

As useful as the expansive category of life-writing has proven to be in bringing such cultural, literary and religious issues to light, in order to limit the scope of our study here, we will only be examining works that can clearly be identified as autobiographical in intent, that is, the three authors are writing about their own lives in a comprehensive sense.

The autobiographies examined here are also written with an awareness that the people whose lives are self-reflexively described are religiously significant to the readers, either as an “object of veneration” or as a “model for emulation” (Bercovitch 1975, 8). That is, the authors are writing about themselves with awareness of their own dual role as models of (reverence) and models for (emulation). In his foundational 1988 study Thomas J. Heffernan defines what he refers to as sacred biography as

a narrative text of the *vita* of the saint written by a member of a community of belief. The text provides a documentary witness to the process of sanctification for the community and in so doing becomes itself a part of the sacred tradition it serves to document....This definition of sacred biography implies an interpretive circularity in the composition and reception of these texts. First, the text *extends* the idea that its subject is holy and worthy of veneration by the faithful, and second, the text as the documentary source of the saint's life *receives* approbation from the community as a source of great wisdom. (1988, 16).

Heffernan focuses first on religious life-writing as establishing the sacrality of its subject, and second on the reflexive veneration of the text itself as a source of religious teachings. This parallels our analysis of religious life-writing in terms of model of and model for the religious life. As a model of, religious life-writing establishes and reinforces the values of a religious culture. As a model for, religious life-writing guides the actions, molds the values, and constructs the narrative self of readers seeking, perhaps not sainthood, but to some degree themselves become a religious or more religious person.

What it does

Religious life-writing fulfills several different functions in different religious-cultural traditions. Since our general project is comparative, we cannot use the emic categories from any specific tradition. With this in mind, the two categories indicated above—models of (didactic) and models for (formative)—can be employed as generally descriptive of religious life-writings. Although the terminology employed differs, others have also

proposed that religious life-writing has these two functions. For example, Conermann and Rheingans talk about religious life-writing as “a part of the material culture in which thought patterns, imagination, and the construction of reality condense” (models of), and then also borrow Nelson Goodman’s phrase and describe them as “ways of world making” (models for) (2014, 9). Similarly, David M. DiValerio employs Dominick LaCapra’s discussion of texts as being simultaneously “*documentary*, in their capacity to convey information about empirical reality, and *work-like*, in the way they actively shape understandings of that reality” (2015, 20). Within such general categories, specific instances may be characterized in terms of the establishment or legitimation of authority, moral suasion, and direct instruction regarding practice.

In every form of Buddhism, authority is established by identifying a lineage of teacher–disciple relations that stretches back to either Śākyamuni Buddha or some other authoritative figure. For example, Tulku Thondup establishes the authority of the Longchen Nyingthig teachings by claiming, “The lineage of Longchen Nyingthig begins with the primordial Buddha, or the ultimate Buddha essence, and comes down to the contemporary masters through an unbroken line of transmission” (Thondup 1999, 46). The same legitimation of lineal authority is evident when he places the lifestory of Śākyamuni as the starting point of the lineage of *longchen nyingthig* teachings (Thondup 1996). In East Asian Buddhism, what is known as the ‘transmission of the lamp’ literature similarly serves to establish authority for Chan by claiming an unbroken lineage of teacher-disciple relations (McRae 2003, 48–9; also Mohr 1997; cf. Adamek 2007, 66–67).

Reynolds and Capps drew a distinction between what they called ‘sacred biography’ and ‘hagiography,’ reserving the former for ‘religious founders and saviors,’ while the latter is used in relation to ‘lesser religious figures’. “Whereas sacred biographies of founders and saviors primarily

intend to depict a distinctively new religious image or ideal, those which chronicle lives of lesser religious figures present their subject as one who has realized, perhaps in a distinctive way, an image, ideal, or attainment already recognized by his religious community” (Reynolds and Capps, 1976, 4). Although presented as an empirical result of their research, this approach seems to privilege the recognized ‘world religions’ and their designated founders over ‘sectarian’ developments by deploying the rhetoric of rupture—which is itself a fundamentally theological conception informed by Christian apologetics.

Rather than deploying the rhetoric of rupture, many Buddhist lineages present an unbroken lineage of Buddhas all equal to one another both before and after the life of Śākyamuni (Shaw 2010, 17), as well as the ever-present dharmadhātu as the body of all Buddhas and as the awakened nature of teachers. In this way Buddhist lineages evidence a much greater complexity than the distinction between ‘sacred biography’ of founders and saviors and ‘hagiography’ of lesser figures or the rhetoric of rupture can accurately represent.

Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that another function of reading religious life-writing is verifying the efficacy of the teacher and the tradition. As presented by Bhikkhu Bodhi, the assertion that Buddhist religious life-writing serves to verify the teachings of the Buddhist tradition resonates with a Jamesian pragmatism regarding religion:

Just as the sun is valued not only for its own intrinsic radiance but also for its ability to illuminate the world, so the brilliance of the Buddha as a spiritual master is determined not only by the clarity of his Teaching but by his ability to illuminate those who came to him for refuge and to make them luminaries in their own right. Without a community of disciples to testify to its transformative power, the Teaching, the Dhamma, would

be merely a package of doctrines and formal practices, admirably lucid and intellectually rigorous, but remote from vital human concerns. The Dhamma comes to life only to the extent that it touches life, ennobling its followers and turning them into models of wisdom, compassion, and purity (Bodhi 1997, ix).

However, the idea that such testimony serves to verify the validity of a teaching frames the question in such a fashion as to ignore the social epistemology of first establishing, at least implicitly, what the criteria for such verification are. In other words, for such life-writing to be effective in establishing the validity of a teaching as Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests, it is necessary that the reader already accept the religious ‘axioms’ of the religious life-writings. Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explains that “there is a process that takes place in the formation of authority, and other different forms of authority that interplay with one another to help create an image of efficacy, thereby legitimating tradition. Many of these forms of power are eminently social and caught up with the broader cultural and political context” (2014, xviii). Thus, rather than verifying a teaching as such, life-writing verifies the validity of a teaching for a community who already accepts the sacred status of the person whose life is being recounted, which in turn reinforces the legitimacy of the teaching—the dialectic between model of and model for.

The didactic (model of) function is the one that Heffernan considers the primary frame of textual production. “The primary social function of sacred biography, understood in the broadest of terms, is to teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example. The catechetical imperative is the most fundamental of the shared anticipations between author and audience.” This dialectic between author and community is not fixed in its expectations, and is itself reflective of

broader social changes. The “major anticipation which unites author and audience is how the text reflects the received tradition, a tradition whose locus is in the community. Such tradition is neither monolithic nor frozen but changes as the community selects and reinterprets anew from within itself” (Heffernan 1988, 19).

Although Heffernan here emphasises internal processes of reinterpretation, religious cultures are not closed systems, and both reinterpretation and resistance may result from sources external to the religious culture, such as the introduction of religious alternatives by immigrant and convert communities, or the shift from a society that presumes membership in some particular religious tradition to one in which religious commitment is a matter of choice, and in which the common ground of discourse is psychologized. This latter is exemplified in contemporary American by the self-help or self-improvement subculture, which exists in the intersection of religion and psychology (Payne, forthcoming). The literature that supports this subculture makes extensive use of putative biographical anecdote, either the author’s own or that of a client of the author. This provides the reader of such literature with an exemplary pattern for their own transformation, in the same way that the religious experience of the Christian is based upon an imitation of the Christ as an *exemplary pattern*” (Mircea Eliade, as cited in Reynolds and Capps 1976, 2).

The assimilation of a religious exemplar by the reader of religious life-writing is important because it molds the ‘narrative self’ of the reader (Stromberg 1993, Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Many different contemporary theorists have questioned the conception of the self as a transcendent Cartesian ego, abstractly viewing the events of one’s life. They suggest instead that the self comprises the collection of stories about who one is that one tells both oneself and others. This is the narrative self, as distinct

from other ways of thinking about how the self is configured, such as ‘the perceived self’ (Neisser 1994), and ‘the conceptual self’ (Neisser 1997).

The formative function of religious life-writing is effected by providing narratives of how a religious person lives. The reader integrates these narratives and forms an understanding of how they themselves can live as a religious person. The stories form the person by giving them narratives that they can reflexively apply to themselves. Hallisey and Hansen call attention to the fact that the formative function of religious life-writing has long been a key part of the Buddhist tradition itself, and are at least as deserving of scholarly attention as the scholastic discourses that tend to dominate the field (Hallisey and Hansen, 1996).

What we can learn from it

The study of religious life-writing can be pursued as a means of understanding a religious culture. Conermann and Rheingans note that literary criticism of religious life-writing “attempts to reconstruct the overall system of values, norms, world views and collective visions shaped by culture and expressed (manifested) in a condensed form” (2014, 8) by narrative texts, such as religious life-writings. By extension then, the comparison of religious life-writings can serve to highlight differences between religious cultures. The practices of religious life-writing do not exist autonomously, separate from other social, historical or literary influences. In other words there is no single Buddhist form, nor an Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese or Japanese Buddhist form as such. Rather, religious life-writing constitutes a set of practices that are engaged dialectically with the broader religious-cultural milieu. The narrative forms and the values they propound do not exist independently of the society within which they are maintained,

and therefore comparative examination of religious life-writings has the capacity to reveal important aspects of the religious cultures within which they are embedded. While not autonomous, life-writing practices are not purely passive in this engagement, but rather serve a formative function relative to the conceptions of the Buddhist tradition. As a consequence there are themes that are found frequently or even consistently in Buddhist religious life-writings. In order to appreciate the structural contours of Yogi Chen's life-writing it is necessary to locate it in its appropriate religio-cultural framework. Although, as noted, there is no single, unitary genre of Buddhist life-writing, there are three themes that appear with regularity in such works: awakening, instrumentality and visions.

Awakening, Instrumentality, Visions

Although other themes may be identified by other approaches to this same material, Buddhist religious life-writings share three themes. These are the basic narrative structure of the life experiences leading to awakening, two possible conceptions of instrumentality, and the role of visions. While these are frequently found in Buddhist religious life-writing, they are distinct from the characteristics of such Christian religious life-writings as that of Billy Graham discussed below.

Awakening Narrative: Śākyamuni Buddha as Exemplar

The establishment of the Buddha as discerning the truth (*dharma*) in this world era is itself one of the functions of stories of the life of the

Buddha, that is, one of the didactic functions of canonic works such as the *Lalitavistara* (Bays, tr., 1983), and *Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita* (Willemen, tr., 2008). The foundational narrative, effectively the charter myth for Buddhism, includes a number of familiar episodes: renunciation of the princely life after the four sights, frustration with existing teachers and with extreme austerities, awakening despite Mara's temptations, the life of teaching, and death. These narrative episodes have become familiar in Western language Buddhist literature as well (Kerouac 2008).

In addition to this didactic function, however, the tale also fulfills a formative function. Sacvan Bercovitch has described how Reformation era biographers in Europe understood this function, "The way to salvation lay in an internalized, experiential reliving of [Jesus'] life" (Bercovitch 1975, 10). Indeed, such "internalized, experiential reliving" of the life of the Buddha in visual and ritual culture may take precedence over the didactic, despite the intellectualist presumption (itself a consequence of a Protestant anthropology) that thought is primary and action derivative (Brown 1997, McGill, 1997, Schober, 1997).

Different religious cultures will, of course, reflect a variety of different understandings of religious life-writing. Janice D. Willis has pointed to the formative function of Tibetan religious life-writings (*rnam thar*). In this way such life-writings share the formative intent of Reformation era biographers discussed by Bercovitch. In Willis' opinion, however, Tibetan life-writing has a distinct character. Citing Robert A.F. Thurman, she refers to *rnam thar* as 'liberative life stories' and points out that they go beyond being simply "biographical accounts chronicling the details of the lives of highly regarded persons, but as accounts serving to make manifest that liberation by describing its process" (Willis 2009, 304). Thus in addition to being inspirational (models of), which is characteristic of religious life-writing generally, they are also instructional (models for). That is, reading

a religious life-writing in this case is not only reflexively formative of the narrative self, but provides direct instruction in the kind of practices the subject of the biography pursued in attaining full liberation. As Willis puts it, “unlike most hagiographies, *nam-thar* do more than just inspire and edify, they *instruct* as well, setting forth, albeit in veiled language, detailed descriptions of practice and instructions for future practitioners of the Path” (308; cf. Ary 2015, 3, where he notes that biographies also served political purposes as well, and similarly Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2014, who employs the categories of power and authority). This instructional function is congruent with the way in which the biography of the Buddha functions not just as a model by which adherents come to understand their own life experiences in terms of the religious worldview of Buddhism, but also as a model for practice.

The idea that followers of the Buddha would have the same sequence of experiences—with the exception that they can benefit from the Buddha’s teaching—is evidenced by the repetition of the same pattern of events in the lives of key disciples, such as the life story of Sāriputta (Śāriputra) (Thera 1997). Virtually identical with the life of Śākyamuni, Sāriputta experiences dissatisfaction with life’s pleasures because of their impermanence, renunciation of his home life, disappointment with other teachers, and then finally encounter with Śākyamuni and awakening as an arhat. This sequence of events may be identified as the ‘awakening narrative’ (cf. Payne 2006).

When viewed from the perspective of the lineage, repetition of the same events emerges as a kind of recursive function. The narrative of the Buddha’s awakening is codified into a sequence of key events, and the life of the disciple is recursively characterized as unfolding according to the same narrative sequence. The same pattern would then emerge in the narrative of the disciple’s disciple, and so on to the present. Recounting

these events as an ordered sequence emphasises the ‘bare bones’ of the Buddha story, that is the structure of the movement from ordinary foolish person (*prthagjana*) to an awakened one. As such, these tales are not so much about historically located individual persons. Rather, by repeating the structure as the same for different individuals, that structure becomes increasingly abstracted and appears natural and universal.

By ordering events in a particular sequence, narrative implicates a causal relation between those events. Some goal is achieved as a consequence of the decisions and actions of the person, the “instrumental attitude.” One instance of this is the story of the mahāsiddha Rāhula (that is, not the much better known son of the Buddha Śākyamuni of the same name).

Rather than continuing to be despised because in his old age he had lost control of his bodily functions, he moved to a cemetery to await death. Thus we see here encapsulated at the very beginning of the story three of the four sights: sickness, old age and death. The fourth sight central to the story of Śākyamuni’s leaving the home life is a passing yogin, who gives Rāhula instruction for meditating on the syllable A (an object of meditation found very widely in tantric traditions generally). He meditated as directed for sixteen years, “and then he won the siddhi of Mahāmudrā” (Robinson 1979, 165). In this story we see the instrumental attitude expressed as the direct causal relation between practicing the A syllable meditation and the attainment of *siddhi*.

The debates over whether awakening is sudden or gradual reveals, however, that the instrumental attitude was not universal. One of the places in which the instrumental attitude was challenged was in the life stories of exemplary Shin Buddhists known as *myōkōnin*.

Centrality of Karma: causal and contracausal understandings of the relation of practice and birth

Two conceptions of the path have marked Buddhist history. These are the idea of gradual self-improvement and that of a sudden, dramatic transformation. The sudden (or subitist), and gradual approaches have also been called leap and path (Potter 1965), respectively. Although seemingly opposed to one another, both share a common basis in the idea of karma. The gradual approach works with the processes of karma in order to improve the individual practitioner. The image of polishing a mirror is a frequent metaphor for the gradual approach. In contrast, the sudden approach understands awakening as a breach of the ordinary karmic processes.

John Kieschnick has described a version of the subitist approach found in Chan religious life-writing,

In these texts, the enlightened Chan master lives in a constant state of awareness, exhibiting his enlightenment through enigmatic, often crude phrases and gestures. In contrast to the scholar-monk, the ideal Chan monk ridicules scriptures and literary erudition, eschews meditation, and shows little interest in the written word. Unfettered by scriptures, rituals, and meditation, the ideal Chan figure is above all unlocalizable; his awakening, unmediated (1997, 141).

This kind of approach is also familiar in the context of Tibetan tantric Buddhism, where the teaching of the identity of path and goal (Skt. *phalayāna*) is basic to an understanding of awakening as sudden. The distinction is also found in Japan, not only in tantric contexts, but also—perhaps surprisingly—in Pure Land contexts as well.

Michael Bathgate has called attention to the relation between “literary form and moral formation” (2007, 273). He explicates two distinct literary forms, one found in the collections of stories of birth in the Pure Land, called *ōjōden* (往生伝) and the other in the *Myōkōninden* (妙好人伝). These kinds of narratives were understood to be both didactic and formative. As Bathgate says, “The reading and compilation of *ōjōden*, in other words, represented, not simply an account of diverse religious practices, but a religious practice in its own right” (2007, 281), models of and for respectively.

Highlighting the relation between literary form and religious formation, Bathgate notes that the efficacy of “*ōjōden* can be said to rest, at least in part, in their recurring literary structures, inculcating in their readers particular habits of attention, shaping their experience of the world beyond the text according to a particular kind of story” (Bathgate 2007, 280). What kind of story? One in which “the course of a life—with all its accomplishments and regrets, its unintended consequences and past-life karma—appears, less as a sequence of events than as a complex of causes leading towards a single effect, the attainment of rebirth in Amida’s Land of Utmost Bliss” (Bathgate 2007, 280).

Bathgate contrasts the literary form of the *ōjōden* with that of the *Myōkōninden*, a collection dating from around seven hundred years later. While in the *ōjōden* it is the practice of *nenbutsu* that instrumentally leads to birth in the Pure Land, with the *myōkōnin* the causal relation is reversed. We find here, in other words, “a refiguration of the *nenbutsu* as a sign of salvation rather than as a means to attain it” (Bathgate 2007, 284). This ‘contra-causal’ structure of the *Myōkōninden* operates under the same logic of a breach of karmic continuity as do other subitist narratives.

Visionary Record

Another aspect of religious life-writings found in Buddhism is a record of trances, visions, and dreams—events indicative of the extraordinary powers of an accomplished master. George Tanabe has emphasized the centrality of meditative experience throughout the entire Buddhist tradition, and at the same time pointed out the visionary quality of that experience. “Meditation is a technique for stimulating or even controlling the mental faculty of fantasy to produce visions, which are either spontaneous or prescribed by instructions sometimes passed down for generations and across cultures” (Tanabe 1992, 10). He asserts that visionary experiences are “the central characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” (*ibid.*, 1) and points to the primarily visionary rather than ideological character of such key Mahāyāna texts as the Lotus Sutra and the Flower Garland Sutra.

Another instance is the autobiography of Jamgön Kongtrul, which is filled with such extraordinary experiences. A very well-respected and widely-known Tibetan lama, Kongtrul lived from 1813 to 1900. He was one of the leading figures in the ‘non-sectarian’ (*rismed*) movement that sought to reinvigorate Tibetan Buddhism by bringing together teachings and practices from all of the different sects within Tibet.

Kongtrul records an instance of a vision that occurred to him when, toward the end of the Fire Monkey Year (1836–1837), he was travelling with the Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu sect (largest sect of the Kargyu tradition).

On the road to Karma Gön Monastery, on a cliff face dedicated to a local protective spirit, from a long way off I saw very clearly an image of Lord Düsum Khyenpa with a pale complexion, wearing the black crown of the

Karmapas. I thought, “This must be a naturally occurring image,” but when I got to the spot, it was no longer visible (Barron, tr., 2003, 32).

Düsum Khyenpa was the first Karmapa of the Kagyü school, living from 1110 to 1193, and a “naturally occurring image” is one that appears as a kind of bas-relief. This image, however, turned out to be not a naturally occurring image, which would have indicated the “great spiritual merit on the part of individuals or whole groups of people living in the areas” (Barron 2003, 314, nn. 264, 265), but rather a vision.

Within the conceptual system of a specific religious culture, visionary experiences recounted in religious life-writing provide legitimation for the individual and for teachings. In the Tibetan case this includes any treasures (*gter ma*) that they may reveal and decode in the course of their lifetime. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa notes that

The ‘discoverers’ of these Treasures were individuals who were prophetically compelled to recover these visions, often through connections with Guru Rinpoché [Padmasambhava], who was held to have hidden certain teachings before he left Tibet that would be discovered at a later time by pre-ordained individuals who would partake in a visionary process, receive teachings, and then decodify and disseminate them (2014, 72).

Treasure recovery is just one example of the extension of visionary experience to extraordinary accomplishment.

Three characteristics of religious life-writing in the Buddhist tradition, then, are the structuring role of the narrative of awakening, the centrality of karma and rebirth, and the frequency of visionary experiences as key events in a religious figure’s life.

When religious life-writings meet, or Whatever happened to Yogi Chen?

The Four Autobiographies of Yogi Chen: From Kalimpong to Berkeley

Yogi Chen recounted parts of his life story in different writings, but the most extensive autobiographical record grew out of conversations with Sangharakshita, as recorded by B. Kantipalo. These conversations took place in Kalimpong, and were first published in 1967. The autobiography employs a system of four levels found in many Tibetan religious life-writings: outer, inner, secret, and most secret. As Yogi Chen himself explains, an outer biography “concerns family, renunciation, and impermanence.” After telling some of the difficulties of his youth—threats of violence by his father against his mother, for example—he comments that “As a young prince, the Buddha-to-be saw the four great sights in the city outside his home, but I saw three of them inside my own house” (1967, unpaginated). The fourth sight, a renunciate, still lay in the future for the young Chen. At this point, in summing up his own outer biography, Chen is using the awakening narrative abstracted from the life narrative of Śākyamuni. He interprets the events of his own life in terms of the four sights, simultaneously linking the narrative of his own life with that of the Buddha and reinforcing this narrative for the reader as well.

Inner biography refers to “the mental training I received under the various teachers who guided me.” He includes his education in the Confucian classics as well as the public schools, that is, primary, high, and normal schools. He also took up reading Taoist texts as well. His education in Buddhism began in Hunan where he came into contact with the teachings

of the Venerable Taixu, an important reformer and modernizer of Chinese Buddhism. After this he then met a Gelug teacher, Gelu Rinpoche, and thus began his involvement with tantric Buddhism.

His secret biography concerns renunciation, and includes tales of travels to different places to receive teachings and the unexpected support he received that made his practice possible. Finally, in 1947 he left China for India, and settled in Kalimpong. The most secret biography concerns his realizations, which he explains in terms of the three *yānas*. He identifies the ‘attainment of cause,’ that is, renunciation, as being the Hinayana; ‘attainment of the way,’ that is, realization of the impermanence of all things, with the Mahāyāna, and ‘attainment of consequence,’ that is, certainty of awakening, with the Vajrayāna. In other words, he makes a three way equation, interpreting the three *yānas* in terms of the three stages of the path: ground, path and goal, and simultaneously with his own autobiography.

Visions and Miracles

In keeping with the common emphasis on visions and miracles in Buddhist religious life-writing discussed *supra*, the autobiography is filled with miraculous events and visionary experiences. At the very opening, speaking of himself in the third person, Yogi Chen says that “The young Chen was born covered by an unbroken placenta and so undefiled by the mother’s blood. Nor did he cry at birth as most children do. My mother noticed in my forehead a depression between or a little above the eyes—an evil omen according to worldly astrology standards but favorable sign for Bodhisattva” (1967).

The grandiosity of Yogi Chen's claims about himself, not entirely offset by his insistence that "there is no 'I' glorified here," may seem to contemporary Western audiences as contrary to their expectations of the humility proper to an awakened Buddhist master—a cultural expectation rooted in Pietism, and reflected in the autobiographies of both Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama discussed below. This appearance of self-absorption and self-promotion is, however, in keeping with the Tibetan autobiographical conventions and expectations within which Yogi Chen is working. As noted above, the Tibetan name for the genre being *rang gi rnam thar*, 'a full-liberation [story] of oneself.' (For a similar example see Barron 2003, 8–10.)

As Janet Gyatso notes regarding Jigme Lingpa's autobiographical writings, "in his own milieu his powerful subjectivity and visionary bravado become precisely the ground for his status as a realized and exceptionally honored Buddhist master" (1998, 11). This in part reflects the competitive nature of the religious world of Tibet, a competitiveness that is in some ways similar to the contemporary translocated condition of Buddhism, but also creates a tension on the part of a teacher writing their own life story. "The tension results from a pair of conflicting social norms: one requiring that persons refer to themselves with humility and the other that religious teachers present themselves as venerable exemplars. Ultimately, we should note, the show of diffidence will also satisfy the latter expectation, since it is itself a sign of the author's admirable incorporation of Buddhist sensibilities and Tibetan mores, hence worthiness as a role model" (105).

In addition to the fourfold narrative structure (outer, inner, secret, most secret) and the tension between humility and status as an exemplar, another aspect of Tibetan religious life-writing that is the context of Yogi Chen's work is a tendency toward listing accomplishments. "This record-keeping impulse also shows the affinity of autobiography with the list of lineages, teachers, and teachings received (*thob-yig* or *gsan-yig*)" (Gyatso

1998, 103-04). We see this kind of record-keeping reflected on the website devoted to Yogi Chen which compiles lists of rituals performed, retreats taken, and so on, from the time of his arrival in the United States to his death.

One of the things that makes Yogi Chen's autobiography of interest to the project of studying the interaction of Buddhism with the religious culture of the United States is its difference from the pattern described by Gyatso for most Tibetan life stories. In summary she notes that

In the Tibetan Buddhist context the normative life story repeats idealized patterns modeled on the hagiographies of the Buddha and other saints in Indian and Tibetan lore. In the outer biography this typically begins with an early renunciation of worldly life (often preceded by a mischievous childhood), followed by the protagonist's meeting with teachers, taking vows, entering a retreat, acquiring students, teaching, and finally assuming institutional positions (1998, 111).

Rather than culminating in assuming 'institutional positions' Yogi Chen becomes an immigrant and religious entrepreneur. This is in fact now the common pattern for Tibetan teachers in exile. Perhaps the best-known example is Chögyam Trungpa, but others might be mentioned as well, including another resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, Tarthang Tulku. It is also a pattern found among Chinese Buddhist teachers driven out of the People's Republic of China (Welch 1972). Rather than being able to ascend to positions of authority within an existing hierarchical system, they had to create new institutions in a foreign land. Given the increasing distance in time from the events of 1959 which led to the great exodus of Tibetans from Tibet, the situation has changed. New institutions that were established in the 1960s and 70s are now faced with the issues surrounding

the transfer of authority to a second generation, a new leadership, and with the death of Yogi Chen, Yutang Lin now works to maintain his teachings.

The One Autobiography of Billy Graham

Though in recent decades his fame has been eclipsed by other evangelical ministers who exercised greater media control by, for example, establishing not just radio programs, but their own television networks, Billy Graham is perhaps the first superstar of American evangelical Christianity. In his now-classic study of American anti-intellectualism, Richard Hofstadter called him “the most successful evangelist of our time” (Hofstadter 1963, 15; cf. Wacker 2014).

The cultural roots of his ministry go back to the Great Awakenings, a series of revival movements that have spread evangelical Christianity throughout the United States. This is one of the three strains of American religious culture described by Catherine L. Albanese. In her description, the evangelical form of religion “favors the cultivation of strong emotional experience that is felt as life-transforming. Religious change is sudden, and the individual is emphasized” (2007, 5).

Religious revivals differed from church-based religion. Revivals first moved back and forth across the colonies on the eastern seaboard, then across the United States, staying in one location for a relatively short period of time before moving on to another city or town. Because of this itinerancy they created the common semiotics, the ‘shared language,’ of religion in American popular religious culture. In contrast to the local range of established churches, the revivals brought much the same message, the same theology, the same rhetoric wherever they were held. Citing the

work of Donald Mathews, Albanese notes that this communal aspect of evangelism comes to constitute a form of social control (Albanese 2007, 5).

In particular the narrative of personal conversion is transformed into an understanding of American social history and destiny. “The convert, helpless as an individual, tells of feeling overpowered by the intruding grace of God, and then the convert—become missionary—intrudes, in some sense, on the space of others, hoping to bridge the separation (from God, Jesus, community) with help divinely come” (Albanese 2007, 5). This gives impetus to social organizations

that arise to channel and employ evangelical commitment for social transformation. Thus public culture and American history are read in light of the shaping and controlling forces that is evangelical passion. ...The direct and personal experiences of the revivals, in this history, have indelibly imprinted something that we call the American character (Albanese 2007, 5).

Fundamentalist evangelism, combining the evangelical emphasis on dramatic and emotional conversion experiences (Michaelsen 1976, 253) with the textual literalism and dogmatism of fundamentalism, characterized the third of the ‘Great Awakenings’ (ca. 1850 to 1900) that formed American popular religious culture as it exists today. The conceptual system of fundamentalist evangelism gained the hegemonic control of popular religious conceptions, and therefore both conditions the construction of religious narratives of the self, and molds religious expectations, such as the expectation of pious humility on the part of a religious leader. While here we are focusing on the figure of Billy Graham, much of what is noted here could be applied equally well to the autobiographical self-representation of Robert H. Schuller (2001), along with Graham another

leading figure in the fourth Great Awakening (ca. 1960 to 1980). Graham's particular form of Christianity continues the conceptual system of the Third Great Awakening, that is, it is both evangelical and fundamentalist. In particular, the tenet of Biblical literalism played an important part in Graham's life and message—and the effects of that message are still being seen in contemporary American society.

Graham cites the Bible repeatedly in his autobiography, thus rooting his story in a work that, as Paul Griffiths asserts, is for Christians "a peculiarly authoritative witness to God's actions and intentions." In Griffiths' view all Christians, by definition, share "the ideas that the Bible has greater authority than any other work, that the reading of it should provide Christians with a set of tools and skills we can use to interpret the world, and that the world is to be interpreted in terms of the Bible, written into its margins, so to speak, rather than the other way around" (Griffiths 1999, 19).

Thus, by linking his own story to the text of the Bible, Graham inscribes the authority of the Bible into his own story, episodes of his own life story being interpreted, as Griffiths suggests, as instantiating the Biblical message. For example, meeting a minister from Botswana who, despite the opportunities open to him as the holder of a degree from Cambridge University, had chosen the life of an itinerant evangelist, Graham comments that "He could truly say, in the Apostle Paul's words, that 'whatever was to my profit I now consider a loss for the sake of Christ' (Philippians 3:7)" (Graham 1997, 558). In addition to associating his own life with events and teachings of the Bible, Graham's autobiography reflects another aspect of American religiosity—the narrative of personal redemption.

Redemptive Narratives

Dan McAdams has examined the life stories told by what he identifies as 'highly generative' people, borrowing the term from Erik Erikson for those "who dedicate their lives to promoting the well-being of the next generation." McAdams' research has led him to conclude that "highly generative adults [in the United States] tend to tell a certain kind of story about their lives, a story that emphasizes the themes of suffering, redemption, and personal destiny" (McAdams 2006, 5). It would certainly seem to be the case that many of the prominent religious leaders in the United States have had a strongly generative commitment, motivated to make the world a better place for those who succeed them. In addition to suffering, redemption, and personal destiny, American religious figures also evidence piety, characteristic of the forms of Protestantism that make up mainstream American religion, and which thereby shape popular religious culture. (This is, of course, not to say that there are no figures in American religious history who have evidenced grandiose self-importance. Most of them, however, are to be found in the metaphysical stream, as opposed to the mainstream denominational and evangelical streams of American religion. Albanese 2007. For an important study of one instance relevant to this project, see Hackett, 2012.)

The redemptive narrative that highly generative people tell begins with a sense of destiny, that is interpreted as "a blessing, a special advantage, a sense of personal destiny" (McAdams 2006, 8). In the kind of traditional Christian world of Graham's youth, such a destiny would be understood as a calling by God, a vocation.

Vocation

Graham tells us early in his autobiography, during his years of schooling at the Florida Bible Institute, that he was directed by the dean of the school to preach to a small congregation. His entire sermon took eight minutes, leaving him feeling inadequate to the task of preaching. However, he tells us that

Believe it or not, though, when I got back to campus I felt that I had spiritually grown through the experience. But at the same time I was concerned: I could not get away from a nagging feeling in my heart that I was being called by God to preach the Gospel. I did not welcome that call (1997, 49).

Conversion

In McAdams' schema, the sense of having a special status, or unique ability, a blessing of some kind, is realized as a sense of moral responsibility toward others. As McAdams describes the dynamic, the stark contrast between the sense of being better off than others

sets up a moral challenge: Because I (the main character in the story) am advantaged in some way, I have the opportunity, or responsibility, to help improve the lives of those who may not be so blessed. I may even feel that I am *called* to do this, that it is my special fate or personal destiny to be of service to others (2006, 8).

Redemption

In the narratives studied by McAdams, redemption is the consistent narrative device organizing the life story, emplotting the action into a consistent formula. He says that “a recurrent pattern will hold: Negative emotional scenes will often lead directly to positive outcomes. Suffering will consistently be redeemed” (McAdams 2006, 9). And, as noted above, extended from one’s own personal conversion to the goal of social conversion as well. This is the implicit message that Graham tells of the Gulf War, placing the redemption narrative into a national frame rather than a personal one. Despite the suffering involved, he tells us that “The ensuing days convinced me that the Almighty Lord of the nations had heard the heart cries not only of national leaders but also of stricken parents and spouses and children of loyal men and women in the armed forces who had mustered for duty” (Graham 1973, 586). The nation was granted the blessings of the Lord in the form of a quick victory.

Piety

Popular evangelical religion in America is grounded in the movement known as Pietism, which sought to intensify “Christian piety and purity of life,” while also involving “a protest against intellectualism, churchly formalism, and ethical passivity” (Ahlstrom 1972, 236). One of the key manifestations of piety is humility, as evidenced by Graham at the conclusion of the preface to his autobiography, where he says “May God use these pages to point you not to Billy Graham but to Jesus Christ, the One I have always sought to serve” (1997, xviii).

The Three Autobiographies of the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso has published three autobiographical works. Two of these are explicitly autobiographies in the sense of being chronologically organized records of his life. The first after establishing the Tibetan government in exile in Dharamsala (1962), and the second after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (1990). The third (2010) is a compilation of statements arranged thematically by three different social identities: human being, Buddhist monk, and Dalai Lama.

One of the goals of the first two, titled *My Land, My People* and *Freedom in Exile* respectively, seems to have been increasing public awareness of the fate of Tibet after the 1959 takeover by China. The third, titled *My Spiritual Journey*, presents itself as a more personal than political statement, though the work evidences a continuing concern with the fate of Tibet and the Tibetans. None of these three works follow the fourfold structure of outer, inner, secret, and most secret. While it might be tempting apply those categories so as to interpret the first part of *My Spiritual Journey*, 'As a Human Being,' as outer, the second, 'As a Buddhist Monk,' as inner, and the third, 'As the Dalai Lama,' as secret, such an interpretation would take an apparent correspondence as more significant than the text itself warrants. For our purposes here, the themes that we find important in the texts are rebirth, visions and miracles, and humility.

As might be expected of the fourteenth incarnation of Avalokiteśvara as the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the autobiography makes frequent reference to rebirth as an unquestioned basis of his story. This includes, for example, the now widely-known story of his discovery, at which time as a very small child he identified possessions belonging to the thirteenth Dalai Lama, as well as members of the retinue of his predecessor (1962, 7-9). Being taken for granted in the Buddhist worldview as presented by the Dalai

Lama, this and other references to rebirth are not presented as miraculous events. Instead, rebirth is naturalized and does not require explanation or justification. The same is true when the topics of astrology (1990, 55) and oracles (1990, 135) appear in the autobiographies.

The one notably miraculous event that appears takes place in 1954, when the Dalai Lama travels to Beijing. The first leg of this trip was from Lhasa to Ganden monastery.

When I left [Ganden] to continue my journey to China, I noticed something very strange. A statue of one of the protector divinities of Tibet, which is represented as having a buffalo's head, had clearly moved. When I had first seen it, it was looking down with a rather subdued look on its face. Now, it was facing East, with a ferocious expression (1990, 83).

Even this single miraculous event is not effected by the Dalai Lama's own power, but rather something more akin to an oracular vision. In his study of monk's life stories in China, Kieschnick has identified two kinds of tales of miraculous events. One concerns an ordinary monk who is an observer of the miraculous. The other concerns "thaumaturges with wondrous properties and powers all their own" (1997, 70). The self-representation of the Dalai Lama in the three autobiographies places him in the former category, and not the latter.

Tibetan Buddhism has long held an aura of 'magic and mystery' for Western audiences, made popular since at least the late nineteenth century by the work of Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society. One suspects that the rather disreputable air of this popularity meant that Tibetan Buddhism was not considered a proper subject of academic study until after the Dalai Lama's exile. At that time figures such as Herbert Guenther, and slightly later Robert Thurman, followed by many others,

availed themselves of the resources newly accessible, both textual and perhaps more importantly living teachers (Lopez 1995).

Despite this change in academic attitudes, Tibet still retains the aura of authenticity and exoticism, in acknowledgement of which the Dalai Lama devotes a chapter in *Freedom in Exile* to the topic of miraculous powers. Deftly lowering expectations by referring to the books that promote the magical and mysterious image of Tibet as “works of the imagination” (1990, 209), he goes on to discuss the physiological study of yogic meditation, his relation with the oracle Nechung, and the efficacy of Tibetan medicine. As noted above regarding rebirth, the presentation of these in the context of the Tibetan Buddhist belief system is done in such a fashion as to naturalize them, rather than heightening their magical or mysterious character.

Throughout the autobiographies, the Dalai Lama consistently presents himself in the most humble of terms. When learning that he has passed a set of monastic examinations, he is told that had he been allowed the study opportunities any ordinary monk would have had his “performance would have been unsurpassed.” Instead of pointing to the political disruptions that had required his attention, he describes himself as feeling “very happy that this lazy student did not in the end disgrace himself” (1990, 129). Similarly, reflecting on the meanings of various titles, including Dalai Lama, and epithets such as ‘parasite,’ that have been given to him, he says “As for me, I am just a human being, and it just so happens that I am also a Tibetan who has chosen to be a Buddhist monk” (2010, 7).

Rather than being structured according to the fourfold system used by Yogi Chen, in fact the Dalai Lama’s autobiographies partake more of the redemptive narrative described by McAdams (discussed above). The characteristics of suffering, redemption, and personal destiny are found in various forms. Perhaps most explicitly, suffering of others is the suffering of the Tibetan people under the rule of China. His redemption comes

when having been unable to maintain national autonomy, he must escape, eventually establishing a government in exile. It is his personal destiny as the Dalai Lama to represent the Tibetan nation on the global stage in order to try to protect both the Tibetan peoples and their culture. One may speculate that the redemptive structure is the result of the narrative being structured under the influence of Western co-authors. The consequence, however, is to make the Dalai Lama's autobiography accessible within the frame of expectations determined by redemptive life-stories, that is the expectations of American popular religious culture.

Stylistically, the treatments of the three topics—rebirth, visions and miracles, and humility—bring the Dalai Lama's autobiographical writings closely into line with the humility evidenced by Billy Graham. Like oracles and astrology, rebirth is treated as something that is not supernatural, not particularly worthy of discussion, notice or justification. The only event approaching the miraculous is reported as something that happened, rather than as evidence of the Dalai Lama's personal powers. And his repeatedly humble self-descriptions match with the expectations of piety in American popular religious culture. Rather than dismissing this stylistic coherence between the Dalai Lama and American popular religious culture as simply the consequence of these three works having been written for Western audiences—that is exactly the point. The Dalai Lama, who has achieved widespread popular recognition, presents himself in a way that makes him easily accessible as a religious figure in that culture. In contrast, Yogi Chen did not do so, and remains almost entirely invisible.

Competing Tropes: Impermanence and Piety, Transcendence and Immanence

Based on this examination of three representative religious life-writings, systematic differences between them suggest significant differences in the religious cultures that served to support them. Comparing Yogi Chen with Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama, we find a fundamental difference in the organizing principles of the three autobiographies. Yogi Chen repeatedly thematizes impermanence and his own extraordinary powers, while Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama repeatedly express devotion and piety, and a naturalistic Buddhism and personal humility respectively.

In contrast to the closing of the preface of Graham's autobiography cited above, Yogi Chen opens his autobiographical reflections with the theme of impermanence, questioning the genre itself.

Autobiography is based on the "I," but in practice no "I" is found, so why should we deal with it? All that we can talk about is a certain mass passing through a period of time and being constantly identified as the same person. Though I have practiced meditation for more than twenty years, still no "I" has been discovered; while on the other hand voidness [śūnyatā] does not mean nothing (1967, unpaginated).

Acknowledging that his interlocutors 'have come so far' and are therefore like the bodhisattvas who came to visit Vimalakīrti, like Vimalakīrti he feels he cannot maintain silence, despite the fact that 'there was nothing to talk on.' Impermanence, or emptiness, is also cited as a key teaching. Speaking of the Mahāyāna teachings, he asserts that "the realization of impermanence of all things is most necessary" (Chen 1967, unpaginated).

Yogi Chen closes the interview, saying

As I have already said, there is no “I” glorified here. These four points [outward, inward, secret, and most secret] are also related to the sections of this autobiography: the first is the grace of my parents but not of myself. The second is the grace of my Gurus. The third is that of the protectors and patrons, and the last one is the Blessing of the Buddha—there is nothing here of myself (1967, unpaginated).

The other thematic difference between the religious life-writings of Yogi Chen, and Billy Graham and the Dalai Lama is the emphasis on miraculous events and visions in the former, and their absence in the latter. American popular religious culture is deeply imbued not only by the emphasis on the individual’s relation as creature (and therefore lesser) to God as creator (and therefore greater), but also by a strong preference for a dualistic religiosity of transcendence, and a rejection of immanent religiosity. The great transformation in religious culture instituted by the Reformation is a shift from a worldview in which the sacred is located in the human lived world, the *lebenswelt*, to one in which the sacred is outside this ordinary, mundane world—transcending it. Not being heir to this religious history, Buddhist religious life-writings do not partake of the kind of metaphysical dualism fundamental to the oppositional relation that a transcendent religiosity depends upon. Indeed, one of the persistent misinterpretations of Buddhist thought is to force the relation between nirvana and samsara into the dualistic mold of a Protestant and neo-Platonist religiosity of transcendence.

While we cannot definitely claim that the mismatch between Yogi Chen’s autobiography, with its fourfold structure of outer, inner, secret and most secret, and the stylistics of redemptive autobiography evidenced by

Graham, or the humble and naturalistic autobiographies of the Dalai Lama was the sole factor that resulted in Yogi Chen's invisibility outside the immigrant Chinese community, it is not unreasonable to assume that his style of self-representation carried over to interactions with those outside the immigrant Chinese community. As such, the differing religious cultures revealed in the comparison of religious life-writing suggests that the expectations of an American audience molded by the narrative structures of vocation, conversion, redemption and piety—especially the rhetorical style of personal humility—would not have been met by Yogi Chen's self-representation.

Conclusion

For all of their differences, however, the autobiographies of Yogi Chen, Billy Graham, and the Dalai Lama reveal the power of religious life-writing to mold self-representations, which for the reader's narrative self also means self-conceptions. Both Yogi Chen and Billy Graham structure their own self-representation by reference to the religious life-writings fundamental to their own traditions. Yogi Chen employs the narrative structure of ground, path and goal, which is itself abstracted from the life of Śākyamuni Buddha, and similarly Billy Graham employs the redemptive narrative structure while referencing events from the Bible to define the meaning of events in his own life.

Comparing and contrasting these three instances of religious life-writings provides us with insight into two sets of factors that influence the translocative dynamics of Buddhism being introduced into American popular religious culture. Narratives of self-representation both reveal and inform a religious tradition. They act as 'models of' a religious exemplar

in such a fashion as to indicate, either explicitly or implicitly, the complex web of beliefs and values that comprise the ethos of a religious culture. Dialectically, they also serve as 'models for' an adherent to a tradition for interpreting the events of their own life, and making choices that accord with the actions of the religious exemplar.

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