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Research Article

Investments in Religious Capital: An explorative case study of Australian Buddhists

by

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Abstract

Since Buddhism became Australia's fastest growing religion in 1996, the number of adherents has continued to increase dramatically. While there is much acceptance of this in Australia's multicultural milieu, the effects of this growth are unclear. The concept of religious capital is now being used to understand some effects of religious practice, and is developed further as a way of understanding the broader societal effects of a religion. Expressions of Buddhist religious capital in Australia are documented and placed within a framework that identifies different types of religious capital to improve understanding of both the concept of religious capital and the effects of the ongoing growth of Buddhism in Australia.

Introduction

In 2006 Buddhists accounted for 2.1 per cent of Australia's population. This statistic almost doubled the 1996 figures, and reconfirmed Buddhism's position as one of Australia's fastest growing religions. However, little research has been done to evidence the effects of this growth. The concept of religious capital is developing as a way of understanding the relationship between religion and economics by measuring the effects of increases in religious capital on different variables. However, religious capital could also be used to examine broader societal effects. With further development of the concept of religious capital to allow more sophisticated analysis, expressions of Buddhist religious capital in Australia could be analyzed to improve understanding of the effects of the ongoing growth of Buddhism in Australia. This in turn may have implications for the ongoing study of Buddhism in the West.

Defintions

The concept of religious capital has recently developed as a means for explaining aspects of the interrelationship of religion and economics, particularly at the household level. Religious capital developed as a concept when Iannaccone took Becker's work on human capital, Putnam's ideas on social capital and related these to concepts of household production and social capital (Iannaccone and Klick 2003, pp. 2-8). The result was the idea of religious capital, a by-product of religious activity that could be used to explain many common aspects of

religious behavior (Iannaccone and Klick 2003, p. 6). Iannaccone's model explains patterns to do with religiosity, such as conversion at young ages, marrying within one's religion, and maintenance of a single religious faith across generations (Iannaccone and Klick 2003, p. 6).

As religious capital is a relatively new concept, literature examining it does not abound. However, a commonly cited definition is: "Religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture" (Finke 2003, p. 3) with "mastery" referring to both the knowledge needed to participate fully in a religion and the strengthening of emotional ties to the religion through increasing belief and religious experiences. As Finke explains, religious capital thus develops when there are high levels of religious participation giving adherents knowledge and experiences, including social networks:

But to fully appreciate a religion requires emotional attachments and experiences that become intrinsic to one's biography. Religious activities such as prayers, rituals, miracles, and mystical experiences, build up over a lifetime, not only increasing confidence in the truth of a religion, but strengthening emotional ties to a specific religion. Together these emotional attachments and the mastering of a religion become investments that build up over time and constitute religious capital. This capital helps to explain the religious activity and satisfaction of individuals (Finke 2003, pp. 2-3).

Due to the relative newness of the idea of religious capital it has only been used in a fairly limited context. As a concept it gives a name to the results of high amounts of religious activity, be these at personal or community levels. It is important to note that there are no indicators for measuring levels of religious capital, rather it is the results that are measured. These results or effects have been conceptualized by Woodberry as investments (2003, p. 2). For example, research by Fan demonstrates that levels of religious participation (and thus levels of religious capital) affect parental choices regarding children's education (2005). This has broader societal outcomes. In a similar vein, Heller Clain and Zech demonstrate a correlation between religious activity and charitable activity (1999), again supporting the claim that high levels of religious capital can affect the broader community.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has also contributed to the idea of religious capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital identifies the investments that culture provides individuals with. Individuals then act in ways that protects this investment by conserving their cultural capital (Finke 2003, p. 3). Finke applies elements of understandings of cultural capital to religion to reach a number of propositions on the value of religious capital and how investments in it are maintained.

These include:

- In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their religious capital
- The greater their religious capital, the less likely people are to either reaffiliate or convert to a new religion.
- When people reaffiliate or convert to a new religion, they will tend to select an option that maximizes their conservation of religious

capital (Finke 2003, pp. 3-4).

As Finke notes, existing research substantiates these propositions; however, what is of interest here is the concept of how people act to protect and increase their religious capital. Religious capital is unique to each group and cannot be transferred to another religion (Finke 2003, p. 4): “Justifying the very existence of the religious organization and often providing distinctive beliefs (for example, new prophecies, spiritual gifts, worldview) and distinctive practices (for example, special diets, required prayers, moral codes), these core teachings help to form the unique religious capital offered by the group.” (Finke 2003, p. 5) Consequently, the effect of Buddhist religious capital accumulations will differ from those of other major religions, and need to be examined separately.

Most research examining the effects of religious capital focuses on understanding the implications for only one variable (such as education), not investment in a wider sphere. However, the ongoing growth of Buddhism in Australia gives rise to questions about the effects of increasing Buddhist religious capital on the broader society. To begin to understand how Buddhist religious capital is being invested and its effects on society in Australia it is first necessary to understand the demographics of Buddhism in Australia.

Demographics

Buddhism in Australia has been steadily growing, and now accounts for over two percent of the population. Australian Bureau of Statistics census data provides the following information for 1996, 2001 and 2006:

Table 1: Demographics of Australian Buddhists in 1996, 2001 and 2006

	1996 (ABS, 2006b)	2001 (ABS, 2006b)	2006 (ABS, 2007)
Percentage of population	1.1 %	1.9 %	2.1%
Numbers of adherents	199,812	357,813	418,749

While Buddhism experienced very high growth between 1996 and 2001, this trend slowed between 2001 and 2006. The reasons for this are not yet fully understood, and the release of more detailed data from the 2006 census may be illuminating. With regard to the 1996 and 2001 data, while increases to the Buddhist population from 1991 to 1996 are credited to immigration, the 2001 increases seem to be less attributable to this. Only 9 percent of the over half a million new immigrants to Australia between 1996 and 2001 were Buddhists (ABS, 2006a). This means that only 45,000 of the 158,000 new Buddhists recorded on the 2001 census were migrants. When the Australian birth and death rates (Worldpress.org, 2007) are factored in then another 1000 new Buddhists are accounted for; however, 112,000 additional people identified on the 2001 Australia census as Australian.

It is difficult to understand what this data means. On the one hand, it may be the case that many of the 112,000 additional Buddhists on the

2001 census were practicing Buddhists in 1996 that chose not to identify on the census as such; but did identify as Buddhists in 2001. Alternatively, this data could indicate an astounding shift in the ratio between the so-called convert and ethnic Buddhists. In 1996 convert Buddhists were estimated to number 30,000 people or 15 percent of the Australian Buddhist population (Spuler 2002, p. 143). If the majority of new Buddhists in Australia in 2001 are converts then converts may total 142,000 or 40 percent of the Australian Buddhist population. More detailed research is needed on this perplexing issue to understand the source of the additional 112,000 Buddhists. More detailed results of the 2006 census will be available shortly and may yield further information.

Examination of the number of Buddhist organizations groups may also shed light on this interesting data, by demonstrating whether the growth in Buddhist organizations has occurred in convert or ethnic groups. For example, the numbers and breakdown of Buddhist organizations in the Australian state of Victoria has also changed significantly from 1998 to 2001:

Table 3: Numbers of Victorian Buddhist Organizations in 1998 and 2001

	1998 (Spuler, 2000, p. 33)	2001 (Vasi 2006, pp. 17-18)
Mahayana	30	36
Theravada	22	29
Vajrayana	9	21
Unaffiliated	10	11
Total	71	97

In this context, Buddhist organizations are defined as those that self-identify as Buddhist organizations, consequently this encompasses diverse groupings including meditation centers, ecumenical groups, hospices, social action groups and libraries. The data in Table 3 evidences significant growth for both Vajrayana and Theravada Buddhist organizations. This could support the analysis of the 2001 census data as showing a marked increase in convert Buddhists, as Vajrayana Buddhist organizations are usually comprised almost exclusively of convert Buddhists. In contrast, Theravada Buddhist organizations include both ethnic Buddhists of Southeast Asian origin, and convert Buddhists who practice Vipassana. As research suggests that converts engage with Buddhism for the long duration (Phillips and Aarons 2005, p. 215), these numbers are here to stay.

The continuing growth of Buddhism in Australia indicates that Buddhist religious capital should be accumulating rapidly. But how is the capital being invested and what are its effects? Interest in this type of research is on the rise: Woodberry's discussion on research needed in the field of spiritual capital includes identification of the need to study the "consequences to individual and societies of differential investment strategies." (2003, p. 2)

Effects of Religious Capital Investments

An effective framework needs to be identified to enable sophisticated

understanding of the effects of increasing Buddhist religious capital accumulations in Australia. Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion could be used as a framework for identifying different types of religious capital. Smart identifies seven dimensions of religion: practical/ritual, experiential/emotional, narrative/mythic, doctrinal/philosophical, ethical/legal, social/institutional and material dimensions (1989). This section utilizes this framework to first identify examples of different types of religious capital before examining their effects.

1. Doctrinal/philosophical dimension

This dimension concerns the official formal teachings of a religion. Formal Buddhist teachings can be accessed in many ways in Australia: ranging from written materials to seminars and courses. A wide variety of written information is available via books and websites. One Australian Buddhist center of note for its innovative ideas for upholding and spreading the Dharma is BuddhaNet (www.buddhanet.net), an internet site founded by Australia's e-monk, the Venerable Pannyavaro. It "aims to facilitate a significant Buddhist presence in the ever-expanding realm of computer communications technology, applying this technology to helping make the Buddha's teachings freely available to all." (Buddha Dharma Education Association, n.d.)

There are also significant opportunities to access Buddhist teachings through courses and seminars. There are 570 Australian Buddhist organizations listed on the World Buddhist Directory, at least 150 actively identify as providing face-to-face teachings. (Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2006) One demonstration of the level of interest in receiving Buddhist teachings occurred when 20,000 people gathered in Melbourne to hear the Dalai Lama speak ("Thousands join in act of faith." 2002, p. 3). There is even some access to teachings in mainstream schooling: for example, the Victorian Education Department has partnered with the Buddhist Council of Victoria to offer the option of learning Buddhist teachings in Victorian primary schools (Vasi 2006, p. 88).

Some of the effects of investments of Buddhist religious capital in the doctrinal dimension may also be the application of Buddhist concepts to psychology. The use of Buddhist concepts of psychology and psychotherapy has often been identified as a characteristic of convert Buddhism in Western countries, and Australia is no exception. For example, the Australian Association of Buddhist Counsellors and Psychotherapists formed in 2006 and organisations such as Sophia College offer Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in Buddhist Counseling

2. Social/institutional dimension

This dimension consists of the Sangha and related institutions including charities. The Australian-based Sangha has grown considerably since the first Sangha member visited in 1952, and many monks and nuns are now home-grown, permanent residents in Australian monasteries. For example, at the recent "Mitra Youth Buddhist Network conference, 80 percent of the Sangha members who formally spoke had been born in Australia (2006). The increasing number of Buddhist adherents has also

caused a large rise in the number of Buddhist organizations; from 308 in 1998 (Spuler 2000, p. 33) to 570 in 2006 (Buddha Dharma Education Association, 2006).

There are also many other organizations such as hospices, libraries, ecumenical groups, social action groups, bookstores and schools. Many of these focus on social welfare, a characteristic that has often been identified as common in Western Buddhist organizations, and can be illustrated by the organization of the first “Engaging Buddhism in Australia” conference in 2004. This conference aim “to demonstrate how [Australian Buddhists] engage with Australian society in a diverse range of social programs including:

- Rehabilitation of prisoners.
- Palliative care for hospital patients and support for their families.
- Teaching meditation and Buddhist philosophy to secondary school students.
- Environmental restoration of urban landscapes.
- Internet information and education services.
- Developing educational curriculum for 8,000 Buddhist Victorian primary schoolchildren.” (“Engaging Buddhism in Australia”, 2004).

Studies of this dimension need to focus on the role of these institutions. Non-sectarian organizations can have significant influence: for example, the Buddhist Council of New South Wales provides assistance on matters ranging from immigration and local government matters, to religious instruction to Buddhist students in State schools, and is the Department of School Education’s recognized accrediting body for Buddhism teachers. Vasi suggests that Buddhist welfare operations do affect broader society:

The welfare activities of Buddhist groups not only contribute to the well being of their religious community, but also extend beyond their members to the broader society. Often the two are related; for instance, the contribution of the Buddhist groups in the area of migrant settlement and integration has contributed to both Buddhists and the broader Victorian community (Vasi 2006, p. 90).

The effect of Buddhist organizations on certain ethnic groups in aiding immigrant settlement is one area where religious capital investments are well understood. However, these studies focus mostly on immigrants, not the surrounding community. In contrast, the effect on broader society of some mainstream religious institutions is well understood. For example, when the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church won contracts from the Australian Government to provide employment agencies to replace the government-administered agencies then the implications of this for the relationships between religion and state did not go unnoticed (Cahill, 2003, p. 18). But what effect do Buddhist organizations have? Additionally, understanding of the role of Buddhist institutions should not be confined to local effects. Some investments take place internationally and some charity work provides funds to overseas organizations. (Vasi 2006, p. 79)

3. *Practical/ritual dimension*: refers to rituals and practices such as

ceremonies and holidays.

There are many examples of the ritual dimension of Buddhist practice occurring in Australia, ranging from traditional ceremonies to innovations. Traditional Buddhist ceremonies such as Vesak are openly celebrated in Australia and attended by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The integration of Buddhism into Australian culture has also seen other ceremonies arise, be they within the Buddhist tradition or ecumenical in nature. For example, a multi-faith ceremony attended by 10,000 people in Melbourne reflecting on the events of September 11 in New York included Buddhist ritual elements (Cahill 2003, p. 3).

Religious capital investments in one dimension can also represent other dimensions. For example, in 2003 the Federation of Buddhist Councils formed to provide an organizing body at the Federal level, to provide national spokespeople, and to advocate recognition of Buddhism as a religious denomination by the Australian government. One of the first acts of the Federation was to create a Buddhist marriage ceremony to initiate the process of recognizing Buddhist celebrants (Buddhist Council of Victoria, 2003, p.4). This is a demonstration of how investments in the ritual dimension affect the social dimension, and vice versa.

4. *Material dimension*: concerns all physical objects of importance, both natural and man-made.

Man-made sacred objects of significance in Australia include the 30-metre, seven-storey pagoda at the Vietnamese Phuoc Hue Temple in Wetherill Park, New South Wales, which houses Buddhist relics. In Bendigo, Victoria, the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion under construction will reproduce the fifteenth century Great Stupa of Gyantse. With a base of fifty meters and total height of the same, this will become the largest Stupa in the western world, and will be blessed by the Dalai Lama upon completion.

One example of analysis of the material dimension of Buddhist religious capital in Australia is Waitt's study of the largest Buddhist temple in the southern hemisphere, the Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong, New South Wales. The temple was opened in 1995 and is a branch of the Fo Kuang Shan. Waitt's analysis of the construction of this sacred space suggests that planning permission was gained by emphasizing the temple's potential status as a tourist attraction, rather than a living religion (2003, p. 14). The construction of the Great Stupa of Universal is funded by a bank loan that is partly guaranteed by the City of Greater Bendigo (Green, 2006).

The emphasis on the Nan Tien Temple as a tourist attraction aptly demonstrates how religious capital in the material dimension can affect a much broader community. Its funding by the local community also demonstrates how the relationship can work both ways. Consequently, studies on the effects of sacred objects, pilgrimage, sacred tourism and sacred space could all provide a better understanding of how religious capital investments in the material dimension can affect the broader society.

5. *Ethical/legal dimension*: focuses on laws, both formal and informal (morals), that are either written or orally transmitted.

The ethical dimension of Australian Buddhist religious capital accumulations can be seen in doctrinal teachings on this aspect and in Buddhist organizations that put these values into practice. While the effects of these on the broader society have not been clearly articulated, Vasi suggests that they are there: “The contribution of Buddhists to the broader society has many layers, including the promotion of the Buddhist values of tolerance and compassion which significantly contribute to the maintenance of a harmonious multicultural society.” (2006, p. 90)

However, of relevance is the growing area of study examining how religious and/or spiritual capital relate to economics. Some researchers have suggested that subjects for study in this area include the effect of personal religious ethics on both private economic decisions and on “the conduct and rules as employees and employers, consumers and producers; and citizens at every level of existence” (Malloch, 2003, p. 8). Again, studies of this dimension in relation to some other religions are often well-understood, with concepts such as the Protestant Work Ethic and its social effects providing an excellent example.

Examination of the effects of Buddhist ethics on Western societies are also emerging and studies that focus on how religious ethics apply to business include arguments that Buddhist ethics are compatible with Western economics now exist. Daniels (1998) compares Buddhist ethics with Western economics and business values to conclude that Buddhist ethics are compatible with economic growth (1998). In contrast, Bubna-Litic (1995) analyses parts of Mahayana Buddhist doctrine to demonstrate that Buddhism is in accord with a market economy, providing that certain ethics are upheld. After detailing how strategic business decisions are made in the business world, Bubna-Litic argues that Mahayana Buddhist doctrines do not support the contemporary business practice of making strategic business decisions based on economic factors. He suggests that a change in business strategy needs a change from business leaders and that Buddhist ideals could provide the basis for this. However, while work has now been done explaining how Buddhism could affect business, it is not yet evident to what degree this is happening in practice in Australia.

6. *Experiential/emotional dimension*: deals with religious feelings including direct experiences of the divine such as visions and enlightenment.

The experiential dimension of religion is crucial to the accumulation of religious capital. As per Finke’s definition of religious capital above, both knowledge and religious experiences are needed to gain the mastery and attachment to a religion that is necessary to generate religious capital (2003, p. 3). Sites such as BuddhaNet list many opportunities for the experiential emotion of Buddhism to be practiced in Australia, be it through retreats or regular practice sessions. As mentioned in the doctrinal dimension section, there is also a plethora of information available on how to practice.

However, it is difficult to measure the size of these investments, let alone their effects. The experiential dimension of religious practice has long caused problems for sociological studies and there has been little written about it that is of relevance here. Inayatallah's discussion on what would be required for spirituality to be used as the fourth bottom line in economic terms suggests that that "measurement of the immeasurable" would need performance indicators in four areas: transcendental; mind practice; body practice; and relationship, the neo-humanistic dimension of inclusion, and an expanded sense of identity (2005).

7. Narrative/mythic dimension: is concerned with written and oral tales, informal teachings, predictions etc.

The narrative dimension is closely linked to the doctrinal and ethical dimensions as written materials and oratories on these subjects often invoke the narrative dimension as well. Consequently, it is difficult to identify strong examples of this dimension that stand alone. For example, the Victorian Education Department's Buddhist program is based on Buddhists texts including the Dhammapada and the Jataka Tales (Vasi, 2006, p. 88). However, the program also uses other relevant sutras.

Implications of Australian Buddhist Religious Capital Investments

Examination of religious capital via the seven dimensions of religion yields some insight into the effects of Australian Buddhist religious capital investments. Research is already underway into some effects, such as the role of Buddhist organizations in the provision of social welfare, the effect of sacred objects on tourism, and the effects of Buddhist ethics on business. While much more research is needed, this analysis suggests that a thorough investigation using Smart's seven dimensions of religion as a framework could enable identification of new or small areas that are often overlooked in mainstream analysis.

However, this analysis also demonstrates deficits caused by the use of Smart's seven dimensions as the basis for a suitable framework for further examination of religious capital investments. For example, it is difficult to explore the experiential dimension in the context of religious capital investments. Some researchers may also prefer to focus on areas where there have been sizable investments, such as education and charitable activity, and use these as categories in themselves for easy comparison with similar research on other religions.

The results of analysis on religious capital investments could also yield information in other contexts, such as illuminating the role of religious capital as a means for social demarcation and stratification. Rocha's recent study on Zen in Brazil evidences that "adherence to Buddhism is intended as establishing social distinction" (2006, p.151), and demonstrates this by demarcating three main groups of people interested in Buddhism into different social sectors according to their consumption practices (2006, pp. 143-151). Australian Buddhists have usually been grouped as either ethnic or convert with no further stratification, as Rocha notes this is traditionally the case in studies of Buddhism in the West (2006, p.143). However, analysis of religious capital investments

in various dimensions could illuminate differences in consumption patterns as per Rocha's research.

Better understanding of the effect of Australian Buddhist religious capital investments and those of other religions would both be useful, particularly for answering questions such as those raised by Rocha on the status of different religions in Western society:

Western society is eager to embrace Buddhism but distrusts and fears Islam, which our media and moral entrepreneurs define as 'violent' and linked to terrorism. Yet both Buddhism and Islam are 'foreign' Eastern faiths. Why is it that one is embraced and the other is demonized? What forces are at play in the global politics of spirituality? (2006)

This analysis of Australian Buddhist capital also raises other questions. In discussions of Buddhist demographics it has long been noted that many more people engage in Buddhist practices than those who self-identify as Buddhists. How does their presence affect religious capital? Can they contribute to religious capital accumulations and affect their investment? Or should their contributions be confined to studies of spiritual capital since spiritual capital casts a wider net; the definition of spiritual capital used by the Metanexus Institute's large-scale research on spiritual capital is: "The effects of spiritual and religious practices, beliefs, networks and institutions that have a measurable impact on individuals, communities and societies." (Metanexus, n.d.) Another area worthy of investigation is whether there is a difference between religious capital accumulations and their investments by different Buddhist sects, or even between convert and ethnic Buddhists. It is possible, for example, that some Buddhist sects may invest differently in the seven dimensions of religious capital.

Conclusion

Analysis of Australian Buddhist expressions of religious capital using Smart's seven dimensions of religion yields some insight into the effects that Australian Buddhist religious capital investments are having on the broader community. It can be seen that Australian Buddhism has effects on areas including education, psychology, social welfare, tourism, business and ecumenism. While some of this has been previously understood and researched to some degree, other areas need more research. This demonstrates the benefits of using this kind of framework to enable identification of effects previously overlooked in mainstream analysis, whilst also helping to identify problems with the framework that may inspire others to find a more creative solution.

This analysis also continues to illuminate ongoing issues in the study of Western Buddhism, such as the role of Buddhist practitioners who do not self-identify as Buddhists, and further research could identify interesting divergences between the religious capital investments of disparate Buddhist sects and groupings. It is possible that deeper examination of Australian Buddhist religious capital investments may shed light on the important unanswered question of why the number of Buddhists in Australia is continuing to increase dramatically, evidencing the value of this type of research.

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