

Fieldwork Report – Leeds Jamyang Buddhist Centre

For my fieldwork I visited the Leeds Jamyang Buddhist Centre (LJBC). I attended a 30-minute secular meditation session on Tuesday 18th November at 12:30pm and an hour-long Buddhist meditation session on Monday 24th November at 18:30. I had originally planned to visit the Leeds Messianic Fellowship Alliance church, however after sending many emails to no response, I decided to visit the LJBC instead. I was worried as I had to completely change my expectations of my fieldwork experience and as it was rather last minute I felt as though my pre-visit research was insufficient. Due to my outsider position, I have taken the approach of methodological agnosticism – not to make decisions about the truth of Buddhism, but to observe the ‘diversity, similarity and utter complexity of human behaviours and beliefs’.

(McCutcheon, 1999, p.6)

Although I set off feeling unprepared, when I entered the centre on Tuesday, I was immediately made to feel welcome, being offered tea and shown into the meditation room. I noticed that most people attending the meditation were new to the centre, with little or no experience of Buddhism. This did not strike me as odd as it was a secular session (although all their sessions are open to everybody), and there were more people with a history of involvement with Buddhism attending the Monday meditation. I discovered this when the meditation leader asked whether or not people had been before. The fact that the LJBC and Tibetan Buddhism is open to the general public made me question the status of Buddhism as a religion; what it means for something to constitute as a religion, and further, what religion is as a concept. Hinnells writes that many scholars question whether the term ‘religion’ has any value or meaning behind it at all (2009, p.1). After further research into the question of what ‘religion’ is, I have decided to focus on three aspects of Buddhism that some academics argue fall into the category of religion; ritual acts, use and presence of the

sacred and the sense of community/gathering of people with the same goals and ideas in mind.

Although I tried to remain an objective observer, as an outsider to Buddhism I was aware that my own perspective on religion influenced my initial judgement of what I observed and experienced. Having been heavily influenced by a Western society dominated by fixed idea of religion (based on the Abrahamic faiths) – along with my own experience of attending Jewish schools throughout my life – it was my initial reaction to judge the experience using the scale of what I personally know to be religion. It was my instinct to view the ritual acts as worship and sacred objects as holding religious significance. To combat this, I made sure to be aware of my position beforehand and of how this could affect my interpretation of my experience. This issue was particularly evident to me when, after Tuesday's meditation, I observed Mary (the nun) changing waters on the altar. She was showing another member of the centre how to do it and was explaining her actions as she went along. She recited a mantra in Sanskrit, lit a candle and explained that fire and water were important elements. The empty cups were faced down and she took each one off the table when filling it with water, explaining that an empty cup must not touch the table, and the space between the cups must be the length of a grain of rice. Mary explained that the waters represented different offerings a guest would traditionally receive if they were to visit a home in India. In India they don't always know who the guest is and so treat them all with the upmost of importance and respect. There were six cups representing food, water for washing, water for drinking, music, scent for the heart (incense) and candles for fire/light. While Mary recited mantras throughout the process and walked around the room with the burning incense, I wondered if she was performing an act of worship, as I drew on my own experience of reciting sacred phrases and practicing rituals equating to acts of worship. I tried not to assume that she was and let the thought just be an inquisitive one. She explained that she was

not worshipping the Buddha – merely expressing that the Buddha was once like us, therefore we may one day become like him. I interpreted this as a process of reminding oneself that reaching enlightenment is not an unachievable aim. Durkheim suggests that rites ‘come into being at the heart of assembled groups...whose function it is to create, maintain and to re-establish certain mental states within these groups’ (Durkheim, 1975, p111). After witnessing the ritualistic changing of the waters and listening to Mary chant mantras, along with my research into prostration and circumambulations (Thaye, 2001, p.123) within Tibetan Buddhism, I learnt that Buddhism is a tradition filled with rites, which, according to Durkheim, constitute an essential function of religion.

Mary told me she believes Buddhism not to be a religion but a ‘science of the mind’. This was expanded upon by Andrew, a meditation leader from Monday, who said that meditation (and Buddhism as a practice) is about focusing the mind on the present. I found it interesting that a Buddhist nun did not view her way of life as a religion, and if I went back again I would ask her to expand on this.

According to Durkheim the thing connecting all religions – making them fit into the category of ‘religion’ – is that they all have a division between that which is sacred and that which is profane (1975, p.113). I had this in mind during my visit and, when walking around the meditation room for the first time, I noticed it was dotted with many different objects and decoration. From the way they were presented, my first impression was that many of these items were sacred. For example, there was an A3 book filled with mantras, open with a gold pen next to it. Kev explained this was for people to write over the mantras, a ritual many Buddhists like to complete. The book of mantras was laid out neatly on a table by the entrance, signifying its importance. There was also the altar with the waters, along with statues of the Buddha and pictures of different Deities on the wall – representing the most important aspects of

Buddhist values (according to Andrew). There were pictures of different people, the Dali Lama as well as the founder of the Federation for the Preservation of Mahayana Tradition organisation, which the LJBC is a part of, dotted around. I regret not enquiring the reason for these pictures but, as Mary explained about the Buddha on the altar – it seems they were not for worship in the sense of praising a divine being, but there as a reminder that the qualities and capabilities of these people are achievable by everyone. This presence of the sacred fits with Durkheim's idea that Buddhism is a religion. Durkheim explicitly expresses this, saying that although Buddhism is not a theistic religion, 'it admits the existence of sacred things, namely the four noble truths' and 'for this reason, Buddhism is a religion' (1975, p.114). I find the contrast interesting between Mary as an insider to Tibetan Buddhism, not accepting Buddhism as a religion, and Durkheim, an outsider but an academic in the study of religion, insisting that Buddhism is a religion. This brings up further problems of the difference between insider and outsider, along with sociological and 'lay person', opinions I come across in my research, and making sure I am aware of, but not impacted by these factors. I have found that this difference in categorising of Buddhism between insiders and outsiders is 'to be expected' as the insider does 'not necessarily have access to the same information' as the observer does (McCutcheon, 1999, p.4).

Researching Durkheim's idea that having contrasting concepts of the sacred and profane are common to all religious beliefs (1975) made me question whether sacredness is exclusive to religion. Mellor suggests that the concept of the sacred is so engrained into our everyday life, it is not acknowledged or noticed as different or special, and generally goes unobserved (2004, p.5). Thus suggesting that the sacred is not exclusive to religion, but part of every day life, or that aspects of religion are so engrained into society, the two have become indistinguishable. I noticed this from the fact that the sessions at the LJBC are open to, and attended by, non-Buddhists in

their day-to-day lives, using it often to de-stress rather than as an aspect of their religion.

The final aspect of religion my visit has led me to explore is the sense of community and belonging that seems to either lead to or stem from religion. Durkheim writes that 'Religious *representations* are...the expression of collective realities' (1975, p.111); the idea that a religious group is made up of those who share the same beliefs and aims toward a certain goal; whose practices, traditions and rituals facilitate them in achieving these goals. While the LJBC has a regular community, it also is open to anybody of any background, faith or religion. Kev described the centre to me as 'secular, even though it is a Buddhist centre', and Andrew said they get people of all different religions, including Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, visiting. If being a religion means the facilities and sessions on offer are exclusive to that religion, perhaps Buddhism does not fall into a straightforward category or definition of religion many societies place upon the concept. It has features that we recognise to be affiliated with religion, however many concepts of Buddhism can be adopted by anybody. For example, during Tuesday's meditation, Kev asked us to ponder what it means to be a good friend to someone else, and to yourself. He explained that he sometimes ends the meditation sessions with an ethical question that is applicable to everybody. I felt comfortable and included even though I am not Buddhist. Although if I were to have attended the Buddhist talk on beliefs about death I might have felt more aware of my outsider status. I was, however, aware of my outsider position in not understanding the significance of the objects around the room and when Mary was changing the waters, speaking in Sanskrit. Moreover, Buddhist belief in taking refuge is open only to those who are willing to commit.

Durkheim's proposal that a religious group is made up of people who believe in the same thing working towards a common goal led me to question to what extent the

LJBC is a religious centre. The fact that it leads secular sessions suggests it is not exclusively religious. However, this might be less to do with traditional Tibetan Buddhism and more to do with the centre having to adapt to the demands of the growing popularity of Buddhism in the West. Through my research into Tibetan Buddhism I found there does exist exclusivity within Buddhism. Lama Thaye writes that Buddhism cannot coincide with any theistic religion that believes in God as the creator as the Buddha taught that 'the world is only the result of actions, not...of divine creation' (2001, p.29). I find the contrast between this insider opinion and Mary's point of view on Buddhism's religious status interesting. And further contrasted with Fitzgerald stating that the 'concept of religion [is] unhelpful' when talking about Buddhism (2000, p.121); implying that Buddhism does not fit into the concept of religion the West has constructed. This led me to question whether a sense of community equates to being a formation of religion.

Exploring the concept of religion has left me with more questions and made me realise that this is an extremely complex and controversial topic to discuss. I have come to no firm conclusions but have found it interesting considering the different possibilities of where Buddhism might fit into the category of religion.

Word count: 1998

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