

## Cultural Studies and Matters of Faith

### The Case of DhammaWheel.com

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EDWIN NG

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

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*Aniccā vata sankhāra,  
uppāda vayadhammino.  
Uppajitvā nirujjhanti,  
tesam vupasamo sukho.*

Impermanent are compounded things,  
prone to rise and fall.  
Having risen, they're destroyed,  
their passing truest bliss.

In memory of jcsuperstar, former DhammaWheel moderator.

Cultural studies' commitment to ethical evaluation and radical political inquiry has seen it cross disciplinary boundaries and take its investigations from such places as the dancehall to the bedroom to explore, for instance, everyday practices, power, subjectivity and the body. But by and large it has neglected questions about religion and faith. In his essay of 1998, 'Is Elvis a God?', John Frow suggests that perhaps

because of an unreflexive commitment to the (flawed) secularisation thesis cultural studies has failed to adequately theorise faith and religion, which is arguably 'the most important set of popular cultural systems in the contemporary world'.<sup>1</sup> Extrapolating from the Australian context where an increasing awareness of and desire to honour Aboriginal heritage and spirituality has brought into focus an inescapable tension between a religious cosmology and the Enlightenment ethos governing academic work, he argues that this is a tension that 'we cannot pretend not to be subject to'. He also posits that it is 'crucial to the future of the discipline' that it reflects on this tension and 'enter sympathetically into forms of understanding which are quite alien to it', and moreover 'to do so without condescending to those other knowledges'.<sup>2</sup> Here, I pursue Frow's suggestions through analysis of a discussion thread in an online Buddhist forum where the participants debate the issue of faith *vis-a-vis* knowledge.

This article builds on studies that have attempted to address the neglect of religion in cultural studies. For example, a 2001 issue of the journal *Continuum* titled 'Serenity Now!', explored the discourses of self-help and spirituality in various textual and consumer practices.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars, like Matt Hills, write about the neoreligiosity of cult media fans, expose the moral dualisms between academic-fans and fan-academics, and question the boundaries of cultural expertise.<sup>4</sup> Jay Johnston and Ruth Barcan adopt Eve Sedgwick's ideas to argue for 'reparative' rather than 'paranoid' readings of alternative therapies and related practices of spirituality.<sup>5</sup> Johnston and Barcan attend to alternative health practices not just as an object of study but also as a source of cultural theory,<sup>6</sup> arguing that they 'have the potential to enrich and invigorate—even to radicalise—cultural studies' own theorisations of corporeality, affect and intersubjectivity'. Their aim is to mount a 'tactical challenge to the notion of cultural expertise ... a tactical collapsing of authority, important at this particular juncture because of the silence within cultural studies surrounding alternative therapies, even while many of us make use of these practices in our private lives'.<sup>7</sup>

These attempts at addressing religion and/or spirituality have largely focused on media texts and consumer practices. This article will extend the scope of inquiry to examine a set of discourses directly related to a mainstream institutional religion. Adopting the approaches of these studies, I examine the discourses of

Western Buddhism on DhammaWheel ([www.dhammadwheel.com](http://www.dhammadwheel.com)), an online forum about Theravada Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> To engage with the normative truths of Buddhism, I will position the discussions on DhammaWheel as ‘vernacular theory’.<sup>9</sup> That is, I recognise that theorising isn’t an exclusive activity of professional intellectuals but an analytical strategy practised by both academics and non-academics. This idea of vernacular theory has been used in studies on fan cultures to reflect on the relationship between academics and their objects of study; they recognise the intellectual work performed by media fans and treat them as co-participants in working through critical issues.<sup>10</sup>

As will be seen, members of DhammaWheel discuss Buddhism in a ‘shared interpretive context, one that facilitates the emergence of jointly produced meanings’.<sup>11</sup> Some of them could very well be professional intellectuals, and from my observations it is likely that many have participated in tertiary education. Nevertheless, the ideas they produce can be positioned as vernacular theory because regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds the members do not represent themselves as scholars or academics—a cursory survey of the forum reveals that, with the exception of a few ordained Buddhists, the members self-consciously represent themselves as laypeople engaging with Buddhism outside institutional settings. The concept of vernacular theory provides a framework through which I could remain mindful of the tension between sympathetic engagement and sceptical enquiry which governs my work, allowing me to engage with DhammaWheel not merely as an object of study but also as a potential source of cultural theory; that is, I examine the discussions on DhammaWheel not to unveil how they are ‘ideological’ but to explicate the normative truths of Buddhism so as to explore potential areas of dialogue with cultural studies on the topic of faith. This is not an unreflexive ‘celebration’ of Buddhist ideas—the discussions are subjected to poststructural analysis and read against their constitutive contexts.

The following discussion pivots around the thread ‘Why is Buddhist faith not blind?’; selected posts from other threads that illustrate the themes raised in this thread will be highlighted. I begin by contextualising this discussion about Buddhist faith within a wider historical continuum. This will highlight how Buddhism has been reconfigured within the modern episteme as a set of discourse that is both compatible with and critical of the dominant cultural forces of the West. I then

examine the responses in the thread more closely to explicate how the Buddhists on DhammaWheel continue to rearticulate Buddhism and produce vernacular theories of faith. Revealing as it does the discursive strategies available to contemporary Buddhists negotiating the tensions between Buddhism and wider cultural formations, the analysis demonstrates how an engagement with a religious system like Buddhism opens up lines of inquiry that are of interest to the cultural studies project. The final section speculates on some of these ideas.

—DEBATING FAITH

In the thread ‘Why is Buddhist faith not blind?’ mikenz66 begins by quoting another member, jcsuperstar:

its not just the 8fp [Eightfold Path] but also the 4 truths [The Four Noble Truths] that require faith, i mean sure there is suffering, that we can all see but why is there suffering? its quite obvious that many have looked at this problem of suffering and come up with different reasons so why should one [automatically] assume the buddha was right? we have to have faith that he was right about the cause of suffering, then we again have to have faith that it can in fact end, that he [wasn't] just unloading a bunch of BS on us and then at that stage we have to have faith that his path will work and that he [wasn't] just faking it ... buddhism actually takes a lot of faith if you really think about it. it just [doesn't] ask us to have blind faith like other religions do.<sup>12</sup>

While mikenz66 doesn't completely disagree with jcsuperstar's contention, he concedes that he would have difficulty justifying why Buddhist faith isn't blind. He writes:

I mean, basically I have accepted the proposition: ‘Develop sila [ethical conduct], read dhamma [teachings of the Buddha], meditate, etc, and you'll eventually be liberated [from the cycle of rebirth]’. And I can certainly see progress, but there is no logical way of proving that that it will lead to liberation.<sup>13</sup>

He then compares his situation with that of a Christian who might similarly accept propositions such as, ‘Live morally, go to church read the bible, meditate, etc, and you'll go to heaven’. Mikenz66 notes that Christians have a different soteriological

agenda, aiming to go to heaven after death instead of attaining enlightenment to transcend the cycle or rebirth. But should they accept and follow the propositions put forth by their religion they could nevertheless develop such virtues as loving-kindness which Buddhism also espouses, and likewise experience the benefits of their spiritual practice in the present. Heaven would, however, remain unproven to them just as enlightenment or *nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāna*) would remain unproven to Buddhists who are yet to be fully liberated. Mikenz66 then poses the question, 'So, for the sake of argument, how would you argue that my 'faith' is less 'blind' than the faith of my Christian counterpart?'

Jcsuperstar replies that it is because Buddhists are 'asked to test it, and told it can happen in our lives, not just after death. [A]lso many other faiths have no tolerance for questioning the faith or the teaching themselves.'<sup>14</sup> For jcsuperstar (whose moniker now becomes all the more ironic), it is the injunction to 'test' and 'question' in Buddhism that sets it apart from Christian faith. This is echoed in the next post by Jechbi who writes, 'It's a different theory of faith ... Christian faith is blind insofar as it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, not based on one's own logic or intelligence or any other such ability ... If you try to apply the term 'blind faith' to Buddhism, it doesn't fit in the same way that it fits into many forms of Christian theology, because there's an altogether different theory and use of faith in Buddhism.'<sup>15</sup>

It can be seen in jcsuperstar's and Jechbi's replies that Buddhism is, on the one hand, positioned in opposition to Christianity, and on the other, aligned with logic and rationality. Their rhetoric reflects a wider historical trend beginning in the nineteenth century which David McMahan calls 'Buddhist modernism'.<sup>16</sup> The word modernism is not used in a narrow aesthetic sense here, but rather to refer to an ongoing process of rearticulation whereby Buddhism is made contemporaneous to its historical-cultural environment. Building on Charles Taylor's account of modernity, McMahan argues that Buddhism modernism developed within the framework of three key 'discourses of modernity': Western monotheism, scientific rationalism, and Romantic expressivism (and their respective successors). In its encounter with modernity, Buddhism has had to negotiate these discourses as well as the tensions between them. To better contextualise the discussion thread about faith (and DhammaWheel more generally), I highlight the key figures and

developments in Buddhist modernism, focusing particularly on those which have positioned Buddhism between scientific rationalism and Western monotheism.

—BUDDHIST MODERNISM

The early developments of Buddhist modernism can be traced to the Orientalist discourses on Buddhism of the nineteenth century. Reflecting the colonial cultural politics of the time, Buddhism was 'discovered' by Europe through its texts. As Edward Said has argued, 'The Orient studied was a textual universe by and large; the impact of the Orient was made through books and manuscripts'.<sup>17</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, 'the textual analysis of Buddhism was perceived to be the major scholarly task. Through the West's progressive possession of the texts of Buddhism, it becomes, so to say, materially owned by the West; and by virtue of this ownership, ideologically controlled by it'.<sup>18</sup> As the religion became an object of knowledge in the West a textualised Buddhism emerged, one that prioritised the Pali Canon (the earliest extant Buddhist texts used in the Theravada tradition) because it was seen to embody 'the essence of Buddhism'.<sup>19</sup> This textualised Buddhism was also described as 'original Buddhism', 'primitive Buddhism', and even 'pure Buddhism'. Accordingly, the figure of the Buddha was historicised as 'the greatest philosopher of India's Aryan past' and his teachings interpreted as a system based on 'reason and restraint, opposed to ritual, superstition, and sacerdotalism'.<sup>20</sup> As an 'austere system of ethics and philosophy', the Orientalist interpretation of Buddhism was 'regarded as the authentic form ... against which the various Buddhisms of nineteenth century Asia could be measured, and generally found to be both derivative and adulterated'.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Western criticisms of Asian Buddhism abound, often articulated by Christian missionaries who invoked 'original Buddhism' as an 'ideological justification for the missionary enterprises of a progressive, thriving Christianity against a Buddhism now debilitated'.<sup>22</sup> Hence, we find Jonathan Titcomb, Bishop of Rangoon from 1877 to 1882, saying that 'the true glory of Buddhism has departed. It is now a crude mass of semi-idolatry and silly superstition; encrusted by dead formalism, and sunk in apathetic ignorance.' This was echoed in 1890 by Reverend Archibald Scott, who asserted that Buddhism had been undergoing a long process of decline 'without having manifested any power as

yet to recover and to reform itself according to its original and essential principles”<sup>23</sup> For these figures, Buddhism—or more precisely, an Orientalist interpretation of Buddhism—was an ally for Christian missionisation.

At the same time, those in the West coming to grips with the ‘Victorian crisis of faith’ saw Buddhism as an alternative to Christian morality. This can be observed in T.W. Rhys Davids, whose pioneering work on early Buddhism was highly influential in recasting the religion as a largely ethical and philosophical system free from religiosity and ritual. Rhys Davids’ interpretation of Buddhism was shaped by the rationalistic and progressive spirit of the age and was associated with colonial cultural politics. However, it also reflects a desire in European culture of the time to find alternatives to Christianity morality. As Richard Gombrich notes, ‘Rhys Davids ... naturally stressed the rationalist elements in Buddhism, because they formed the most striking contrast to Christianity.’<sup>24</sup> Hence, we find Rhys Davids declaring, ‘Agnostic atheism was the characteristic of the [Buddha’s] system of philosophy’.<sup>25</sup>

The use of Buddhism to critique Christianity is also evident in Henry Steel Olcott, co-founder of the Theosophical movement. In his *Buddhist Catechism*, he links the theory of evolution with the Buddhist doctrine of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) to argue against ‘creation out of nothing’.<sup>26</sup> Although Olcott evoked mainstream science, it must be said that his theosophical approach to science was on the whole an idiosyncratic one: an ‘occult science’ that ‘brought together the Romantic images of the mysterious East with the current vogue in spiritualism, tempered by scientific and quasi-scientific concepts.’<sup>27</sup> Paul Carus was another figure who attempted to interpret Buddhism through science. Carus was disenchanted with orthodox Christianity but believed it could be ‘purified’ by science, which he described as ‘divine’ and as ‘a revelation of God’.<sup>28</sup> In his most influential work, *The Gospel of Buddhism*, Carus drew Buddhism and Christianity together in comparison, setting them within the framework of Enlightenment rationalism and late-nineteenth-century science to ‘distinguish in both religions the essential from the accidental, the eternal from the transient, the truth from allegory’.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, for Carus, Buddhism ‘is a religion which recognizes no other revelation except the truth which can be proved by science’.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that Buddhist modernism is a ‘cocreation of Asians, Europeans, and Americans’ and not just a Western construct.<sup>31</sup> As Buddhism was

being rearticulated in the West, a process of reformation also occurred from the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries in Theravada Buddhist lands like Burma, Thailand and Ceylon. The reformation of Buddhism in these countries 'deemphasised ritual, image worship, and "folk" beliefs and practices and was linked to social reform and nationalist movements'.<sup>32</sup> The situation in Ceylon—where Sinhalese Buddhists appropriated Western discourses about 'original Buddhism' as well as features of Protestantism to revive Buddhism, restore national pride and resist colonial hegemony—is especially interesting. Buddhist scholars have described this movement as 'Protestant Buddhism' because it was 'both a protest against the Protestant missionaries (and the colonial power behind them) and in many ways a mirror image of their attitude and activities'.<sup>33</sup> To this extent, Protestant Buddhism exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which refers to the ways in which colonised people mimic and rework the cultural and discursive forms of the colonisers to subvert colonial hegemony.<sup>34</sup> But the influence of the West on the reinterpretation of Buddhism in Asian countries should not be overstated. As Charles Hallisey notes, similar developments in Thailand were clearly 'not determined by the presence of antagonistic Westerners' and to this extent provide 'a useful reminder that we should avoid attributing too much force to the "West" (or Christianity, or Protestant assumptions, or Orientalism) in the changes to Theravada Buddhism [as well as other Buddhist traditions] which occurred in the nineteenth century'.<sup>35</sup>

The Protestant Buddhism movement in Ceylon was spearheaded by Anagarika Dharmapala, arguably the most outspoken Asian Buddhist missionary of the time. At the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1894, he proclaimed to the largely Christian audience that Buddhism was 'Aryan psychology' and praised the Buddha as 'a scientist full of compassion for all', while condemning Abrahamic religions for their 'persecuting spirit' and Christian theology for 'its unscientific doctrines of creator, hell, soul, and atonement'.<sup>36</sup> Dharmapala not only interpreted Buddhism with science in order to criticise Christianity, but also claimed that it had anticipated the secular philosophies of the West. Dharmapala also argued that while the West was materialistically advanced, the East was abundant in spirituality. In doing so, he was effectively reinforcing the Romanticist and



Orientalist stereotypes of the ‘mystical’ and ‘exotic’ East, but not without also turning the discourses of the colonial masters against them.

I have highlighted some key moments in which Buddhism was rearticulated in relation to the discourses of scientific rationalism and Western monotheism. This is a trend that continues today, although the dialogues between them have evolved. The dialogue between Buddhism and science has shifted from one of broad generalities to a more concrete conversation between the two such that we now find, for instance, researchers mapping brain states and psychological functioning of meditating monks with MRI machine. The dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity has evolved, too, such that we now find thoughtful scholarship like the journal *Buddhist Christian Studies*.

—CONTEMPORARY BUDDHISM: DEMYTHOLOGISED AND DETRADITIONALISED

On the whole, Buddhist modernism has demythologised and detraditionalised the religion, foregrounding meditation—a practice traditionally restricted to select members of the clergy—and making it readily available to laypeople. This is exemplified by the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) founded by Americans Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg, authors of bestselling books on Buddhism. Based on an approach known as *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, IMS offers meditation classes for laypeople and translates Buddhism into terms that are readily accessible to a secular audience, often invoking the language of Western psychology to explicate Buddhist teachings. It should be reiterated that the demythologisation of Buddhism and detraditionalisation of meditation is not an exclusive Western phenomenon. The *vipassanā* movement from which IMS developed was well established in countries like Burma and Thailand before it emerged in the West in the 1970s. The movement focuses almost exclusively on the practice of meditation and has deemphasised ritual and monasticism. Developing from as early as the late nineteenth century, it was a facet of the revivalism of Buddhism which, as noted above, occurred not simply as a capitulation to Western perceptions of Buddhism but as part of wider national and social reforms in various Asian Buddhist countries.<sup>37</sup>

Traces of these characteristics as well as the rhetoric from the earlier discursive moments in Buddhist modernism are evident on DharmaWheel. In a

sub-forum dedicated to the discussion of the practice, there is an ongoing thread entitled 'The DhammaWheel Meditation Challenge' which functions as a kind of peer-support group for members seeking to maintain a regular meditation practice. The OP of the thread writes, 'Members may wish to utilise this thread by diarising the vicissitudes of daily meditation, by making public a challenge they may set for themselves to maintain their daily practice, and for members to support others.'<sup>38</sup> A survey of other threads reveals that many members favour a demythologised reading of Buddhism. Consider, for instance, the following comments by retrofuturist:

One of the things that attracted me to Theravada as opposed to other Buddhist traditions was that the associated mythology was by-and-large believable. In many other traditions I saw things that seemed superstitious in nature and initially I felt quite negatively towards them thinking, 'The Dhamma is so great, so effective, yet you are turning people away from the rational and straightforward teachings of the Buddha'. In time I came to see that Theravada had its own mythology too, and some of it (though certainly not all) was embedded within the Pali Canon itself. I found it a little disconcerting but by this stage I had enough faith in the Dhamma that such things no longer had the power to turn me away.<sup>39</sup>

The so-called 'mythological' and 'superstitious' elements of Buddhism are disconcerting for retrofuturist, although interestingly he says that he had developed enough faith in the teachings such that the seeming contradictions no longer bother him (I will return to examine this later). In another discussion, Mexicali dismisses religious and ritualistic expressions outright:

I've studied Theravada for some time but only recently came over from a Mahayana practice (my final break was literally a few days ago). So I understand what you're saying. And for some time I was ending my evenings reciting Amida's name hoping for rebirth in the pure land, modeling compassion on Kuan Yin (a pre-Buddhist Chinese figure who became conflated with Avolekitsvara) and bowing to beings that I have no evidence for the existence of, and whose continued existence goes against a number of principles the Buddha spoke plainly of. There is something seductive about all the ritual and prayers and secrets, but at the end I was

forced to conclude that they are not really the dharma, at best things we've layered on top of it over millennia. Asking why Theravada has no tantric practices is somewhat like asking why Theravada doesn't include prayers to Odin or Islamic salat; they're simply a different teaching with no perceived benefit.<sup>40</sup>

Consider also the following comments by DarkDream about an article by a Thai monk-scholar who questions the limits of a rationalistic and scientific Buddhism and calls for 'skilful' uses of sacred expressions such as deities, miracles, amulets and others from the so-called realm of superstition:

So praying to deities for good fortunate [sic], attaching to amulets and so on is a good thing. This to me has absolutely nothing to do with Buddhism. The Buddha taught a person to rely on themselves and not look to gods, rituals and things to make there [sic] life better.<sup>41</sup>

Against such a definition of Buddhism, it seems that those who engage with ritual practices have to speak as apologists:

I know that many people don't like ritual and fancy Buddhist-stuffs [sic]. But I'll [tell] you that from my pov, people who struggle with parts of the Buddha's dhamma might find spending time daily really focusing on venerating the Buddha might be [sic] useful. I know I might make people mad by saying that, but it's just my opinion.<sup>42</sup>

Notions of an 'authentic' rationalistic, non-religious, and even scientific Buddhism continue to influence these exchanges and have indeed set the parameters for thinking about faith. Within these parameters, traditional expressions of faith are rendered superfluous if not anathema to what the Buddha 'originally' taught. This interpretation of Buddhism appears to find its strongest support in the *Kalama Sutta*, a text which has been described as 'the Buddha's charter of free inquiry' and even, 'the Magna Carta of Buddhist philosophical thought'.<sup>43</sup> Although hardly mentioned in traditional commentaries, the sutta has from the turn of the twentieth century become central to Buddhism. It recounts the sermon given by the Buddha to the Kalamas who, confronted with contradictory teachings offered by various wandering holy men, ask the Buddha for advice on resolving their uncertainty. This passage is often cited as the pith of the Buddha's response:

Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumour, nor upon scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon bias toward a notion pondered over, nor upon another's seeming ability, nor upon the consideration 'The monk is our teacher.' When you yourselves know: 'These things are bad, blameable, censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them ... When you yourselves know: 'These things are good, blameless, praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them.<sup>44</sup>

The Buddha, it appears, is warning against dogmatism and blind faith, encouraging instead an attitude of rigorous free inquiry and personal verification, and indeed even a certain scientific impulse. For those favouring this interpretation, the passage demonstrates that the Buddha was advocating a kind of rationalist-empiricist epistemology to resolve uncertainty and doubt, a method that leaves no place for tradition and faith—or if it does, admits faith only after it has been 'tested' and 'verified' and rendered 'non-blind'. To return to the discussion thread 'Why is Buddhist faith not blind?', it is likely that this view of Buddhism as a rationalist-empiricist system informs jcsuperstar's and Jechbi's position that faith must be 'based on knowledge'. But mikenz66 doesn't find this position adequate. He writes: 'But fully testing it means going all the way to Arahantship [an *arahant* is one who has attained *nibbāna*], which may take me quite a few more lifetimes at this rate.' He then cites a *sutta* that illustrates this fact before saying, 'So, until then we are taking it on trust, aren't we?' Mikenz66 is also unconvinced by the argument that *nibbāna* can be experienced in this life (as opposed to the heaven which is experienced post-mortem); such an argument, he counters, merely asserts 'a difference in timing, not a difference in "knowability"'.<sup>45</sup>

—A VERNACULAR THEORY OF FAITH

In saying that there is no difference between the 'knowability' of *nibbāna* and heaven, mikenz66 appears to be probing the limits of rational thought. He is, I argue, articulating a vernacular theory of faith that questions the relationship between knowledge and faith, and challenges the rational-empirical reading of Buddhism

which reduces faith to a problem of epistemology—that is, of ‘knowability’. In doing so, mikenz66 is rethinking the terms of the relationship between Buddhism and scientific rationalism which has strongly influenced how the religion is understood.

According to Thomas McLaughlin, vernacular theory is articulated in ‘ordinary language’ and ‘does not differ in kind from academic theory’—accordingly, academic theory should not be seen as ‘an elitist and totalising activity, but as a rigorous and scholarly version of a widely practiced analytical strategy’.<sup>46</sup> Vernacular theory can be found in, for example, the working knowledge that nurses develop in providing healthcare. Their ideas about healthcare are shaped by their day-to-day experiences at the workplace and may sometimes coincide or contrast with the theories produced by healthcare academics and institutions. However, the vernacular theories about healthcare would not usually be recognised as legitimate ‘theory’. Vernacular theory can also be found amongst the discourses produced in fan communities. In this sense, vernacular theory is akin to Foucault’s idea of ‘subjugated knowledge’, which he characterises as ‘an autonomous, non-centralised kind of theoretical production’, a kind of knowledge articulated under ‘the tyranny of globalising discourses’.<sup>47</sup> In this post, we see mikenz66 articulating a vernacular theory of faith:

The point I am trying to make is that, despite the statement that in Buddhist practise [sic] one should ‘test for oneself’, the advertised goal of Arahantship (or even Stream Entry) is, in fact, unverifiable until achieved [Stream Entry is an important early stage in the path towards nibbana.].

Personally, I keep practising because I can see that it does give improvements. I can see that my teachers are living the holy life and it appears to be working for them. I can verify certain signposts from the Suttas, Commentaries, Dhamma books and talks, and discussions with my teachers.

However, I cannot actually state that I have ‘verified the teachings’ in the sense of verifying the ultimate goal (Nibbana). And I suspect that there are few, if any, here who can.

Of course, it is possible to ‘redefine’ the goal as something along the lines of: ‘Being reasonably happy and content in this life’. Well, if that’s the

goal, I could say that I've verified it too. However, from my reading of the Teachings, it's not...<sup>48</sup>

Mikenz66 is here offering a different conceptualisation of faith from that typically read in the *Kālāma Sutta*. In fact, his views about faith intersect with three key arguments in Stephen Evans's essay, 'Doubting the Kalama Sutta: Epistemology, Ethics, and the "Sacred"', in which he challenges the dominant epistemological reading of the *Kālāma Sutta*.<sup>49</sup>

First, Evans reconsiders the existing translation of key terms in the text to argue that the 'uncertainty' experienced by the *Kālāmas* was a kind of indecisiveness rather than doubt.<sup>50</sup> The question for the *Kālāmas*, he argues, was not so much 'What teaching is true?' but 'Whose teaching is true?' This is a different approach to 'truth' from that of early Orientalist scholars whose interpretations of Buddhism continue to influence the understanding of Buddhism today. For the Orientalist, truth is not so much a question of 'who was it that knew something' but 'what was it that could be known'.<sup>51</sup> But if we were to follow Evans's arguments, the emphasis then shifts away from 'what' to 'who'. This means that the kind of truth that the *Kālāmas* were after is not—as those favouring a narrow rationalistic-empiricist reading of Buddhism would argue—the truth of objective knowledge. Noting the nuances of the Pali language, Evans does concede that the question 'Who speaks the truth?' could be used to both enquire about truth statements and about who is giving an honest account of oneself. But given the cosmological assumptions of the time, he maintains that it is unlikely that the *Kālāmas* distinguished between these two possible meanings: one ethical the other epistemological. This underscores the fact that it cannot be unambiguously argued the *Kālāmas* are seeking epistemic certainty. The question of 'Who?' is as much about ethical issues as it is about objective knowledge.

Second, Evans points out that in the criteria given by the Buddha for accepting or rejecting a teaching (that is, 'when you yourself know: "These things are bad/good ... blameable/not blameable ... are censured/praised by the wise...'), the Pali word that is translated as 'things' in this instance refers more accurately to 'fundamental attitudes and actions' rather than 'doctrines' or 'truth statements'. This means that an epistemological reading of the passage becomes unlikely, for 'it is not clear what it would mean to blame or censure statements. Neither is it clear how blame or censure would bear on their truth.'<sup>52</sup> He further adds that the Buddha does

not in fact say that one should know whether the fundamental attitudes and actions are true or false, but whether they are wholesome or unwholesome. Evans argues, 'We would seem rather to be in the realm of ethics than of epistemology, and the *Sutta* would seem to offer a model of ethical reasoning, a method rather of determining the good than the true.'<sup>53</sup>

Third, Evans notes that that while it is believed that an enlightened being will come to understand such things as *kamma* and rebirth with certainty, and even transcend them, until one reaches that state there is no empirical way of proving it. The Buddha appears to admit this, if only tacitly, in the text itself.<sup>54</sup> This then suggests that the Buddha did not preclude a gap of uncertainty even as he enjoined the *Kālāmas* to 'know for themselves' the harm and benefits of various attitudes and actions. To this extent, 'knowing for oneself' what is good or evil isn't achieved solely by empirical 'testing' and 'verification' (which can only ever be partial) but also by an implicit appeal to wise counsel and tradition, which in turn informs one's decision to follow any teachings. Evans concludes:

the method given for making a decision leaves a gap of uncertainty, which is to be filled by an act of faith. An act of faith, indeed, is what the Buddha's discourse here elicits ... The phrase 'know for yourselves' is sometimes invoked to show that Buddhism does not require faith [or to compare Buddhist faith against other 'blind faiths'] ... however, the phrase could be translated as 'Should you yourselves come to feel that', suggesting the possibility that the method is not intended to be rigorous, and that it leaves ample room for a gap of uncertainty to be filled by faith.<sup>55</sup>

Mikenz66 echoes Evans in questioning the limits of reading Buddhism through rationalist-empiricist lenses. He recognises that the goal of *nibbāna* is unverifiable until one actually attains some degree of enlightenment which is said to take lifetimes. Yet he remains committed to—indeed, has faith in—Buddhism. His faith in Buddhism results not so much from epistemic certainty about *nibbāna* but from experiencing 'improvements' in his life, presumably the relative benefits of relinquishing the fundamental attitudes and actions that cause unhappiness. For mikenz66, to follow the Buddha's method of 'test for oneself' is at least as much a question of ethics as it is of epistemology. He is willing to commit to Buddhism despite not having epistemic certainty about the goal of *nibbāna*. His decision is an

act of faith that leaves open a gap of uncertainty. To this extent, he fails to see how his faith can be argued as less 'blind' than those who choose to live their lives as though 'God' or 'heaven' were true.

Even those favouring a demythologised, rationalistic reading of Buddhism acknowledge the ethical bases of faith. For retrofuturist—whom as we have seen valorises the 'rational and straightforward teachings' of the Buddha over the 'mythological' and 'superstitious' aspects of Buddhism—faith is founded on the 'wholesome mind states' that result from following the teachings. In a conversation, he told me that what strengthened his faith in Buddhism was 'Reduction in suffering ... the practical application of the Four Noble Truths. Seeing repeatedly over time that yes, this suffering is because of craving.' Jechbi—for whom faith must be based on logic—expresses similar sentiments, conceding that it is impossible to 'know for sure' Buddhism's penultimate truth, which until realised can only remain an 'imagined future'. He chooses instead to have faith in 'suffering':

After all, the Buddha's entire teaching revolves around suffering and the end of suffering ... The reality is that we're all suffering. We've mostly learned at least to some extent that short-term solutions like wealth, good-relationships, good health etc. yield only temporary results. Suffering continues. So we're motivated to practice for the end of suffering for ourselves and others ... In Buddhism, I don't think we have blind faith in some imagine[d] future, such as arahantship. Instead, we have firm, unshakable faith in suffering, real and present in this very moment. Faith in suffering motivates us.<sup>56</sup>

'Suffering' is commonly used as shorthand for the doctrine of *dukkha*, but it doesn't adequately capture the nuances of the term, which could also be expressed as 'unsatisfactoriness', 'stress', 'anguish', 'affliction', and so forth. It is also sometimes expressed by way of metaphor; for example, of a carriage with an ill-fitted wheel such that it is impossible to have smooth ride on it. Although the doctrine posits that life is of the nature of *dukkha*, it is not a pessimistic outlook but an honest evaluation of the fact that there is no immutable state of affairs (wealth, success, happiness, and so forth) in an ever-changing and thoroughly contingent world—not least because every biological body eventually dies. Buddhism further posits that it is the tendency to crave fixity in the face of inevitable change that is the cause of *dukkha*. But it is



possible to transcend *dukkha* if one eradicates craving. To this end, Buddhism prescribes a path of ethical conduct, mental training and wisdom, which allows one to eradicate craving and thereby attain release from *dukkha*. These four propositions—the nature of *dukkha*, the cause of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path enabling the cessation of *dukkha*—are known as the Four Noble Truths.

Retrofuturist says that he has experienced the ‘wholesome mind states’ and the ‘reduction of suffering’ that results from ‘the practical application of the Four Noble Truths’. To this extent, he can claim to have ‘tested’—and even to a certain degree ‘verified’—the Four Noble Truths. He cannot claim to have absolute certainty about the Four Noble Truths, however, for that would mean the attainment of nibbana. Yet, that he has experienced a reduction of ‘suffering’ and developed wholesome mind states is enough for him to have faith in the teachings. His faith, then, is grounded not on epistemic certainty but on ethics. In following the teachings he has, perhaps like mikenz66, experienced ‘improvements’ in his life. Jechbi appears to have experienced the same when he says that he has faith in ‘suffering’.

—CULTURAL STUDIES AND MATTERS OF FAITH

In their attempts to follow Buddhism, Western Buddhists like mikenz66, retrofuturist, and Jechbi have had to rethink the relationships between reason, religion, faith, knowledge and ethics which, unlike the Western philosophical tradition, aren’t categories sharply distinguished in Buddhism. Critical theory exploring new interrelationships between these categories could strike up productive conversations with Buddhism.<sup>57</sup> This analysis also highlights how Buddhism negotiates dominant cultural formations and evolves against various contexts of social struggles. These themes are of interest to cultural studies insofar as its aim is to investigate the dynamics between knowledge practices and relations of power. Here I have focused on Buddhism, but it is possible that other religious systems could refract the same themes. Yet cultural studies appears reluctant to engage with religious knowledge practices. Before concluding, I wish to briefly reflect on this issue. I speculate on a related question of why cultural studies has been silent about the pathologising discourses of ‘new atheism’: has cultural studies’ reluctance to explore religion and faith left it incapable of responding to new atheism?<sup>58</sup>

New atheism sees itself as the defender of Enlightenment reason, and from scientific premises attacks religion—and, more precisely, faith—for its alleged irrational belief in false propositions. Faith is not only false but dangerous or, as Dawkins puts it, a kind of ‘virus’ that induces destructive lunacy and which must therefore be stopped with nothing less than utmost ridicule and contempt.<sup>59</sup> Given the immense popularity of the texts produced by Richard Dawkins and other so-called new atheists like Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, new atheism has arguably become a dominant discourse on faith in present times. New atheism makes important arguments against religious fanaticism, but it is also ethically questionable: in describing faith as a virus it effectively pathologises all people of faith regardless of religious affiliation. For critics like Dawkins, faith is first and foremost a problem of epistemology. Conceptualised in this manner, the ‘proper’ human subject is essentialised as resolutely rational.

While there has yet to be any sustained discussion of new atheism within cultural studies, there are studies that have questioned the idea of the resolutely rational subject. Following the work of Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Hills posits that academia in general is bounded by its own ‘imagined subjectivity’ of the resolutely rational academic. He suggests that imagined subjectivity ‘attributes valued traits of the subject “duly trained and informed” only to those within the given community, while denigrating or devaluing the “improper” subjectivity of those who are outside the community’.<sup>60</sup> Yet, as Hills further argues:

The possibility that this intense valuing of rationality is imagined is evident from the fact that different theoretical approaches within the academy cannot be brought together via rational activity, nor can the truth claims of any one theory be rationally adjudicated on the grounds of pure ‘evidence’, whatever such a thing would look like. In short, academics have no choice, when all is said and done, other than to believe in their favoured theories. But, at the same time, the possibility that faith is the ultimate glue within academic argument is typically disavowed and ignored in favour of the imagined subjectivity of the rational academic.<sup>61</sup>

Hills, who is arguing against the moral dualisms posited between detached ‘rational’ media academics and hero-worshipping ‘irrational’ cult media fans, duly points out that academics too have emotional investments in their favoured cult heroes and

cult theorists of the past, and hence, in terms of their embodied and actual subjectivities, are never fully aligned with the imagined subjectivity of 'good' rationality. Yet, despite consistently failing to measure up to this idealisation, the imagined subjectivity persists as an extremely powerful cultural device. Hills writes, 'Imagined subjectivity is hence not just about systems of value; it is also always about who has power over cultural representations and cultural claims to legitimacy, and who is able to claim "good" and moral subjectivity while pathologising other groups as morally or mentally defective'.<sup>62</sup>

While Hills is primarily concerned with how academic practice transforms fandom into an absolute Other, his arguments do provide a useful framework for interrogating new atheism. For it appears that new atheism is, to a large degree, about maintaining the cultural legitimacy of the idealised 'good' rational subject. It is this idealised position that allows critics like Dawkins to speak of faith as a virus, of religion as that which induces destructive lunacy. I make these observations about new atheism and imagined subjectivity in order to reflect on cultural studies' neglect of religion: Does a desire to maintain the imagined subjectivity of the 'good', resolute rational subject also explain, in part at least, cultural studies' reluctance to engage with religion and faith? Has cultural studies ignored them because they are 'improper' subjects of inquiry for the 'duly trained' rational academic? Has cultural studies neglected to examine the subjectivities of people of faith because they are deemed to be of little relevance to its critical project? If so, it then finds itself an unlikely ally of Dawkins, who ironically is no sympathiser with cultural studies as he so clearly states in his support of the Alan Sokal affair.<sup>63</sup>

But doesn't cultural studies have an ethico-political commitment to constantly question its own disciplinarity, to always be mindful of the relations of power that its knowledge practices produce, and to always re-examine its exclusions? In *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*, Joanna Zylińska draws on the work of Derrida, Levinas and Laclau to argue for cultural studies as 'a responsible response', tracing a 'double-vector decision' in cultural studies work that simultaneously intervenes in relations of power and interrogates its own tasks. She writes, 'Cultural studies has a duty not only towards the marginal and the dispossessed—towards its "others"—but also towards itself, its own projects, responsibilities and boundaries'.<sup>64</sup> This 'double vector decision' is evident in Hills' study of media

fandom and Johnston and Barcan's study of alternative therapies, for instance. This article has been constructed along the same lines.

Through an analysis of how Western Buddhists debate the issue of faith—a subject which remains an 'other' of cultural studies—I have addressed the discipline's exclusion of religion, demonstrating how an engagement with religious discourse can in fact elucidate themes that are of interest to its critical project. The participants on DharmaWheel articulate a vernacular theory of faith to rethink the relationships between reason and religion, knowledge and faith, ethics and epistemology. Their arguments suggest that they are probing the limits of rationality, or as mikenz66 puts it, of 'knowability'. They are arguably exploring a post-secular mode of understanding not unlike those being explored in certain strands of critical theory. Their experience of faith, and possibly the experiences of other religious people, could illuminate new ways of interrogating the imagined subjectivity of the resolutely rational subject that governs both academia and popular cultural discourses like new atheism. Cultural studies could explore this possibility as a means to not only interrogate its own disciplinarity but also to begin to respond to new atheism. In recent years, religion has been charged with renewed significance such that 'faith' has become a conceptual site for various contestations between and within cultures. Cultural studies could take its critical interventions to this site. It could begin by speaking with people of faith, or to paraphrase Frow, by entering sympathetically into those forms of understanding which, on closer inspection, may not be that alien to it. Given the 'double vector decision' that governs cultural studies, I argue that it has an ethical responsibility to engage with the excluded 'other' of religion and address matters of faith—because faith matters.

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Edwin Ng teaches media and communications studies in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. He is researching the relationship between Buddhism and poststructuralist theories of knowledge, self, and ethics

—NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> John Frow, 'Is Elvis a God? Cult, Culture, Questions of Method', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* vol. 1, no. 2, 1998, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> Frow, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> 'Serenity Now!', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, 2001. See also the 'Religion/Secular', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, available at <<http://www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/secular/secular.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Johnston, and Ruth Barcan, 'Subtle Transformations: Imagining the Body in Alternative Health Practices', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2006, pp. 25–44.

<sup>6</sup> See Alan McKee, 'What Cultural Studies Needs Is More Theory', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2002, pp. 311–16.

<sup>7</sup> Johnston and Barcan, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Theravada Buddhism is practiced predominantly in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian countries like Burma and Thailand. Theravada draws authority from the earliest extant Buddhist texts and is widely considered to be closest in doctrine and practice to early Buddhist schools.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas McLaughlin, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Alan McKee, 'Is *Doctor Who* Political?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2004, pp. 201–17.

<sup>11</sup> Lorne Dawson, 'Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community', in Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan (eds), *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> <<http://www.dhammadwheel.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9395>>.

<sup>13</sup> <<http://www.dhammadwheel.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9395>>.

<sup>14</sup> <<http://www.dhammadwheel.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9401>>.

<sup>15</sup> <<http://www.dhammadwheel.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9402>>.

<sup>16</sup> David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York, 1994, p. 52.

- <sup>18</sup> Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Melbourne, 1988, p. 24.
- <sup>19</sup> Almond, p. 95.
- <sup>20</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr, 'Introduction', in Donald S. Lopez Jr (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 6.
- <sup>21</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p. 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Almond, p. 40.
- <sup>23</sup> Almond, pp. 38–9
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in Charles Hallisey, 'Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism', in Donald S. Lopez Jr (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995, p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup> Quoted in Judith Snodgrass, 'Defining Modern Buddhism: Mr and Mrs Rhys Davids and the Pali Text Society', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2007, p. 193.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in McMahan, p. 100.
- <sup>27</sup> McMahan, p. 98.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in McMahan, p. 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in McMahan, p. 104.
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted in McMahan, p. 106.
- <sup>31</sup> McMahan, p. 6.
- <sup>32</sup> McMahan, p. 7.
- <sup>33</sup> Richard F. Gombrich, 'Buddhism in the Modern World: Secularization or Protestantization?', in Eileen Barker, James Beckford, and Karel Dobbelaere (eds), *Secularization, Rationalism, and Sectarianism: Essays in Honour of Bryan R. Wilson*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 60.
- <sup>34</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.
- <sup>35</sup> Hallisey, p. 48–9.
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in Lopez Buddhism and Science, p. 101.
- <sup>37</sup> Take for instance, the vipassana movement of Burma which has produced two of the most popular Buddhist 'exports' to the West: the U Ba Khin and Mahasi approaches to meditation. The Burmese vipassana movement had developed as early as 1823 and is historically intertwined with socio-political reform. See Chapter 9 in Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*, ICLAA, Tokyo, 1999, available at <<http://homepages.tesco.net/~ghoutman/index.htm>>.
- <sup>38</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=2647>>.
- <sup>39</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=85#p350>>.
- <sup>40</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=85#p350>>.
- <sup>41</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=13&t=958#p12122>>.

- <sup>42</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=1056#p13228>>.
- <sup>43</sup> Thera Soma, *Kalama Sutta: The Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry*, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1981, available on *Access to Insight*, <<http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>>; Pategama Gnanarama, *Blueprint of Free Inquiry and Personal Verification*, Buddhist Education Foundation, Taiwan, 2003, p. 2.
- <sup>44</sup> Soma <<http://www.accesstosight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>>.
- <sup>45</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9425>>.
- <sup>46</sup> McLaughlin, p. 6.
- <sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 81–3.
- <sup>48</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9469>>.
- <sup>49</sup> Stephen Evans, 'Doubting the Kalama-Sutta: Epistemology, Ethics, and the "Sacred"', *Buddhist Studies Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2007, pp. 91–107.
- <sup>50</sup> Evans, p. 95.
- <sup>51</sup> Hallisey, p. 46.
- <sup>52</sup> Evans, p. 103.
- <sup>53</sup> Evans, p. 101.
- <sup>54</sup> Evans, p. 102.
- <sup>55</sup> Evans, p. 105.
- <sup>56</sup> <<http://www.dhammadownload.com/viewtopic.php?f=16&t=773#p9456>>.
- <sup>57</sup> I'm referring to critical theory that builds on the work of Derrida and other poststructuralist writers; for example, Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (eds), *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992. See also Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 40–101; John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001.
- <sup>58</sup> Dawkins and the other writers mentioned here do not actually call themselves new atheists. The term was most likely popularised by Gary Wolf (undated) in an article for *Wired* magazine.
- <sup>59</sup> See for example, *The Root of All Evil?*, video recording, IWC Media, Glasgow, 2007.
- <sup>60</sup> Hills, p. 3.
- <sup>61</sup> Hills, pp. 3–4.
- <sup>62</sup> Hills, p. 5.
- <sup>63</sup> Richard Dawkins, 'Postmodernism Disrobed', *Nature* 394, available at, <<http://richarddawkins.net/article,824,Postmodernism-Disrobed,Richard-Dawkins-Nature>>.
- <sup>64</sup> Joanna Zylińska, *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, pp. 35–6.