Avoiding the Stain of Religion:
Attitudes toward Social Engagement amongst
Australian Tibetan Buddhists

Ruth Fitzpatrick, BoS (Honours)

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Humanities and Communication Arts
University of Western Sydney

July 2014
Acknowledgements

Numerous people have generously assisted me in completing this thesis and to do justice to them all in words is unfortunately, an impossible task. Nevertheless, I would like to first and foremost extend my deep gratitude to my principle supervisor Judith Snodgrass for her untiring commitment and generosity to this work and more broadly to the field of Buddhist studies. I have been enormously privileged and enriched to have encountered a scholar of such quality. I will be nourished and challenged by her meticulous, sharp acuity for as long as I continue to think about and write on Buddhism.

My genuine appreciation also goes to my secondary supervisors, both wonderful scholars, Penny Rossiter and Adam Possamai, for their invaluable feedback, rich insights and considerate support.

I am also deeply indebted to the participants in this research, who were willing to open their world to me and to share with me one of their deepest loves. I have been privileged by your generosity and candour.

To my wonderful family, thank you for your encouragement and enduring love throughout the process of writing this thesis.

To Toby, my greatest academic fan, for your rich insights and passionate engagement with this work, for your multifaceted love and for the precious journey we are on together.

Finally, to the members of my sangha, past and present, for all the innumerable ways you have enriched my life and made this work possible—this thesis is dedicated to you.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Ruth Fitzpatrick
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ 4

Preface: The Germination of a Research Question ................................................................. 6

Introduction: Interrogating Engagement .................................................................................. 10
  Thesis Aims and Questions ........................................................................................................ 10
  Secularisation, Desecularisation and Engaged Buddhism ....................................................... 13
  Terminology .............................................................................................................................. 14
  Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Social Engagement ............................................................ 16
  Western Buddhism: A ‘Socially Engaged’ Tradition? .............................................................. 17
  What is the ‘Other’ of Western Buddhism? .............................................................................. 21
  Social Engagement in (Early) Modern Asian Buddhism ........................................................ 24
  Buddhist Social Engagement in (Early) Western Buddhism: The Counter-Cultural Period .... 27

Thesis Contents .......................................................................................................................... 30

Chapter One .............................................................................................................................. 33
  Transmission, Translation and Transformation: Buddhism, Modernity and Secularism .... 33
    Buddhism Meets Modernity .................................................................................................. 33
    The Formation of Modern Buddhism .................................................................................... 35
    Cross-Cultural Religious Change: Transmission, Translation and Transformation ............ 37
    Creolisation ........................................................................................................................... 41
    Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 46

Chapter Two ............................................................................................................................. 47
  The Natural History of my Research ...................................................................................... 47
    In-depth Interviews ............................................................................................................. 47
    Insider- Outsider: My Role in the Research Process ............................................................ 48
    Specific Nodes and Traditions: Tibetan Buddhism in Australia .......................................... 49
    Recruitment and Interviews ............................................................................................... 52
    Sampling ................................................................................................................................ 54
    Buddhist Organisations Involved in the Research ............................................................... 55
    Participant Details ................................................................................................................. 56
    Ethnic-Tibetan Australian Buddhists ................................................................................... 58
    Using Blogs in Sociological Research ................................................................................. 59
    Buddhist Blogs ..................................................................................................................... 62
    Analysis of Buddhist Blog Posts ......................................................................................... 65
    Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 68

Chapter Three .......................................................................................................................... 78
  Resisting Buddhist Social Engagement: Reflections of Secularism ....................................... 78
    Secularism ........................................................................................................................... 78
    ‘Religion and Politics Should Not Mix’ ................................................................................. 80
    Pervasive Suspicions: ‘People Can Initially Think that I Am Out to Convert’ ....................... 82
    Negotiating with Political Secularism .................................................................................. 84
    An Example of Shy-Desecularisation? ............................................................................... 86
List of Tables

Table 1. Convert Participant Profiles: Gender, Centre Affiliation, Age and Years of Buddhist Involvement (in order of interview date) ................................................................. 57
Table 2. Buddhist Bloggers Discussing Buddhist Social Engagement ........................................... 67
Table 3. Influences on Approaches to Buddhist Social Engagement ............................................. 77
Table 4. Overview of Orientations Toward Buddhist Social Engagement .................................... 207
Abstract

This thesis explores the attitudes of Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism to Buddhist social engagement, or, as it is generally referred to, Engaged Buddhism. Social engagement has frequently been cited as a defining characteristic of Western Buddhism possibly because much that has been written on Engaged Buddhism has showcased Engaged Buddhist organisations and highly visible leaders of Buddhist social engagement. Few studies however have investigated what significance Engaged Buddhism holds for less prominent contemporary Buddhists. I therefore set out to explore these themes further through fieldwork-based research by conducting in-depth interviews with Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

My inquiry began with identifying how Australian Tibetan Buddhists related to the concepts and practices of Engaged Buddhism, but as the project developed, and unexpected attitudes emerged, I increasingly sought to examine how their attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement were informed by contemporary social and cultural concerns. What specific socio-cultural worldviews shape the way that Australian Tibetan Buddhists see Buddhist social engagement? What do participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement suggest about the direction of Buddhist acculturation in Australia in the twenty-first century? And indirectly, what does it say about Australian culture, its relation to religion and religious engagement in the public sphere?

Beyond understanding processes of Buddhist acculturation in Australia, the topic of Buddhist social engagement provides a lens to consider central issues within the sociology of religion today; debates about the privatisation and deprivatisation of religion and more generally theories about secularisation and desecularisation. Engaged Buddhism, explicit in its very name, advocates a public role for Buddhism—a push to use Buddhism as a moral and frequently political resource for social improvement in the public domain. While the Engaged Buddhist movements documented in scholarly works represent a clear example of this, was there evidence of a similar trend amongst Australian Tibetan Buddhists?

In carrying out this research I have identified a typology of four distinct approaches toward Buddhist social engagement. Reflecting the values that inform them, I have described these as: secularist, neoconservatist, romanticist and reformist. Though the influences of reformism, romanticism, and neoconservatism were evident in my research, secularism emerged as the most significant underlying worldview shaping attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement; it underlies all the categories.
The secularism that participants accommodate to in their approach toward Buddhist social engagement reflects a form of political secularism, one that suggests that controversial religious and existential orientations should be bracketed from public discourse and political life. The influence of this form of secularism induced caution, ambivalence and resistance toward Buddhist social engagement amongst participants. Given the widespread adoption of this approach I suggested that, in method rather than principle, participants work to maintain the ‘secularist truce’; a secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm. This suggests that, secularism, while ‘allowing’ multiple religions to coexist, significantly frames and constrains participants’ attitudes and approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

Given these findings my thesis presents the need to reconsider the widespread assumption that Buddhist social engagement is strongly supported or adhered to by the majority of Western Buddhists. Furthermore my research indicates that secularism continues to be a dominant intellectual background in Australian culture, significantly influencing perceptions of religion, particularly attitudes toward religiously motivated social engagement. It affirms anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s claim that, ‘the secular is the water we swim in’; or at least suggests that Australian Tibetan Buddhists believe it best to swim with the secular current in the way they approach Buddhist social engagement, thus keeping Buddhism free from the ‘stain of religion’.
Preface

The Germination of a Research Question

I first encountered Tibetan Buddhism in the mid 1990s, as a twenty year old. I was in search of some solitary time and found myself in the pristine nature of the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, Australia. The Tibetan Buddhism I encountered came not through a well-established Western Buddhist centre but rather through a Western ‘yogin’1, who, not surprisingly, introduced me to Buddhism through the translations of the lives of the eccentric and socially transgressive ‘yogins/yoginis’.2 This included the life stories of some of the most famous Tibetan and Indian yogins and yoginis: Milarepa, Marpa, Yeshe Tsogyal and Saraha. Viewed through the life stories of the finest yogins and yoginis of Indian and Tibetan culture, Buddhism appeared to represent a worldview that contained the ideals and aspirations I most longed for. The apparently socially transgressive nature of these figures appealed to me immensely—they seemed unconcerned about social mores—or rather, they seemed determined to disrupt them. Rather than being dedicated to the attainment of material wealth, comforts and outer signs of prestige—ambitions that saturated the mainstream culture in which I lived—these Buddhist yogins and yoginis stood, at least rhetorically, for the renunciation of such things. Adding greater delight in my newly found worldview, they aspired to reach an ideal state of awakening, not purely for their own welfare and benefit, but for the benefit of all sentient beings. All of these features were immensely appealing to my own anti-materialist, anti-consumerist, communitarian ethos. Through the lens of these great exemplars, I understood Buddhism to be at once spiritual and social, individual and collective, socially disruptive and socially transformative.

Adopting a ‘Buddhist’ identity, outlook and practice, I continued to be immensely concerned and troubled by global inequality, rampant consumerism and the increasingly

1 Yogin is a Sanskrit term commonly applied to male practitioners of tantric Buddhism who engage in intensive meditative practices (Tib. rnal ’byor smyon pa). A female practitioner is known as a yogini (Tib. rnal ’byor smyon ma). This tradition arose in Indian Tantric Buddhism and had a great influence on the development of Buddhism in Tibet. The Six Yogas of Nāropā provides an example of these practices (Keown, 2003: 342, 266).

2 David DiValerio’s thesis ‘Subversive Sainthood and Tantric Fundamentalism: An Historical Study of Tibet’s Holy Madmen’ problematises the depiction of ‘holy men’ as socially transgressive (DiValerio, 2011). Nevertheless this is how they appeared to me.
pervasive if stealthy militarisation of the world that had galvanised my attention throughout my late teenage years. As my engagement with Buddhism deepened, and my involvement with mainstream Australian Tibetan Buddhism increased I began to feel some tensions between these two projects. Despite my deep respect for Buddhism’s ideals and practices, and the integrity of my commitment to the *bodhisattva* ethic\(^3\), I came to question over time what the constant reiteration of one’s commitment to all sentient beings, repeated before every Tibetan Buddhist practice, actually meant, what it actually did for all sentient beings. What did the practices, such as those whereby one saw oneself as a liberated, awakened being, a deity, one that was purportedly dedicated to and focussed on the welfare and liberation of all sentient beings, actually mean for the world in which we live?

I fought between aspects of myself. One part was resolved to see the world as an expanded Buddha-field; a place where all things and all beings were ‘ultimately’ in a state of awakened luminosity, despite appearances. The other, my activist self, would then emerge, sometimes outraged, compelled to respond to and engage with the gross global inequity of wealth, inequity of power, of military domination and consumption-obsessed societies. I wondered what the ‘I’ who momentarily ‘became’ Green Tara\(^4\) with eyes that saw the whole world, with eyes that saw her own awakened omniscient Buddha nature\(^5\), meant for those without citizenship, without homes, without access to food, health, water, without freedom from military bombardment or overt violence. What did all these practices, these verbal commitments and visualisations, aimed at transforming suffering and mental defilements, mean in terms of transforming the megalithic structures of capital, finance, consumerism, and environmental destruction?

As I became more deeply immersed in the ontological realities of Buddhist philosophy I was equally conflicted about whether the kinds of direct, overt, secular forms of activism

---

\(^3\) A *bodhisattva* is the embodiment of the spiritual ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In regards to the ethics of the *bodhisattva* I am referring to one of their central aspirations, often taken in the form of a vow, to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings (Keown, 2003: 38).

\(^4\) Green Tara (Tib. *Jetsunma Drolma*) is one of the most important and popular female deities of Tibetan Buddhism.

\(^5\) Here I am referring to a practice within Tibetan Buddhism known in English as self-generation (Tib. *bskyed rim*) whereby practitioners identify themselves as a Buddhist deity (Keown, 2003: 100). This practice involves the use of visualisation and other meditation techniques and is aimed at self-transformation and altering one’s perception of experience and reality.
I assumed necessary for social change were appropriate for Buddhism and Buddhists in Australia; if in fact they held the keys to unlocking the social injustices that greatly concerned me. My adoption of Buddhism had in no way dampened my activism, and yet it did challenge it—particularly the more secular modes and ideas of bringing about social change. Did the activism that I tended to idealise really contain the wisdom, the foresight, the ontological insights to understand the vast causes of suffering and the method of their resolution? Did society really change as a result of the kinds of actions and methods, rooted in liberal, secular, frequently anti-metaphysical paradigms that the activism I knew promoted? Should I, should Western Buddhists, necessarily be engaged in the ways that my activist self agitated for? Was such an expectation an appropriate ideal for Western Buddhists? Perhaps, I would often reason, embodying the ideal values and subjectivities that Tibetan Buddhist practices encouraged represented the richest approach to contributing to the world in which I found myself.

It was when I decided to pursue my dual interests of spiritual and social transformation through academic study, a sociological degree in Peace Studies, I encountered the notion of Engaged Buddhism, which simultaneously appealed to my spiritual and social urgings. In its ethos for both individual and social transformation I felt my deepest aspirations and priorities, for myself, and the world reflected. At the same time as encountering Engaged Buddhism, I was introduced to the field of Western Buddhist studies. And it was then that I encountered in numerous overviews, the claim that social engagement was a key feature of Western Buddhism—practiced, supported and lectured on by many. I found this description difficult to readily accept as it was challenging to reconcile with my own encounters with Buddhism in Australia. Yet, I was equally uncertain as to whether such a description was entirely wrong, either. Were my observations a product of my own limited experience and biases, was something amiss in the literature, or were there other more complex factors at work? Exposed predominantly to Tibetan Buddhism through Tibetans I met in India and Australia, and small pockets of Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, I wanted to understand what role social engagement played in a Buddhist practice for a broader Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhist population. My mood in relation to the issue was one of intense curiosity. Did social transformation, and Buddhism’s involvement in it, hold a particular significance for most Western Buddhists, or rather, a rare handful?

In addition to scholars’ claims that Western Buddhism was highly socially engaged I was also puzzled as to what it was that Western Buddhism was markedly socially
engaged in contrast to, something which was sometimes vaguely alluded to, but rarely explicit in descriptions of Western Buddhism. As noted above, much of my involvement with Tibetan Buddhism had occurred with Tibetans in exile, wherein I encountered few of the tensions between spiritual and social work that I felt amongst Western Tibetan Buddhists. The complexities associated with the relationship between Western Buddhism and social engagement seemed to me, within studies of Western Buddhism, to be a half-hidden, disguised issue needing greater examination. It was these gnawing tensions between my commitment to Buddhism, Buddhist social engagement and global social justice, as well as incongruencies between academic literature and my own experiences, which compelled me to conduct this research. I was also driven by broader questions. I held a desire to gain a deeper insight into the trajectory on which Tibetan Buddhism in Australia and globally was travelling, and what implications this direction had for it to be a movement for significant social change and social transformation. Social engagement also appeared to be a valuable issue to explore more deeply trends within the ongoing encounter between Buddhism and the West, particularly in Australia.
In this chapter I will introduce the main aims and questions orientating this thesis, along with key academic literature vital to understanding the context in which these questions find their place. Numerous scholars have written that Buddhist social engagement and the movement of Engaged Buddhism is one of the defining characteristics of Western Buddhism (Baumann, 2010: 178, Queen, 1999: xviii, Coleman, 2002: 119, Das, 1998: 550-552, Wallace, 2002: 35, Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 12). Martin Baumann for example, writing on Buddhism in the Western World in an article in the Encyclopaedia of Buddhism states, ‘[Engaged Buddhism] has appeared as a prominent topic, lectured about and practiced by many’ (Baumann, 2010: 178). Though studies have showcased highly visible leaders of Buddhist social engagement and Engaged Buddhist organisations, few studies have investigated what place, role and significance Engaged Buddhism and its related ideals, practices and concepts hold for less prominent contemporary Buddhists. Given the dearth of fieldwork-based research into social engagement in Western Buddhism, to explore these themes further I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Euro-Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

**Thesis Aims and Questions**

The first aim of this thesis is to explore what a group of Australians practicing Tibetan Buddhism understand the ideal and appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement to be. While the focus of my inquiry began with wanting to understand what attitudes Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism held on Buddhist social engagement, as the project developed, I increasingly sought to understand how their attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement might be informed by contemporary social and cultural influences.

Stemming from this, the second aim of the thesis is to examine the ways in which modern worldviews inform practitioners’ perceptions of Buddhist social engagement. How is the concept of Buddhist social engagement acculturated into and through the Australian socio-cultural landscape? What does this suggest about the direction of Buddhist acculturation in Australia in the twenty-first century? And indirectly, what does it say about Australian culture, its relation to religion and religious engagement in the public sphere?
Buddhism, wherever it has emerged and migrated, has been deeply shaped by the cultural milieu of the time and place in which it is interpreted and practiced. I understand key features of the process of religious acculturation to include transmission, translation and transformation (Bhushan and Zablocki, 2009). Translation, as I explore further in the following chapter, involves far more than language, but rather represents a complex negotiation between the religious tradition and dominant features of the host culture. Grounded sociological analysis is required to understand how that dialogue unfolds, which features of tradition survive and thrive, which are reconstituted and which are bracketed, expelled or ignored; and what modern values and ideas become prominent in the reconstitution and interpretation of the tradition. The particular transformations that take place depend on how and what aspects of the dominant culture religious ambassadors and adherents adopt and what features they reject. The way this negotiation unfolds shapes the particular transformations and types of acculturation that take place. The features of this negotiation, the influence and significance of various worldviews in shaping perceptions of Buddhist social engagement will be under investigation in this thesis.

The influence of modern contexts and ideas upon traditional Buddhism has produced a variety of new forms of Buddhism, both throughout Asia and in the West. These movements originated in Asian Buddhism well before their emergence in the West or Western Buddhism, though they have been informed by modern and Western ideologies, worldviews, and circumstances. In The Making of Buddhist Modernism, David McMahan writes that ‘little has been done to illuminate the specific modern ideological forces, textual sources, social and cultural practices, overt philosophies, and tacit assumptions’ that have framed the making of modern Buddhism, particularly in the West (McMahan, 2008: 8). Though scholars assume that contemporary forms of Buddhism have been modernised and westernised, exactly, what and how specific modern ideological forces impact and shape various features of Buddhism, particularly Buddhist social engagement still requires greater attention (McMahan, 2008: 8, Quli, 2008). In this thesis I hope to provide more specific insight and evidence for what kinds of modern ideological forces are at play in the way that Buddhist social engagement is depicted in an Australian setting. In doing so I hope to provide insights both into the ongoing encounter between Buddhism and Australian culture and society, the diverse characteristics of the various forms of modern Buddhism as well as insights into Australian society generally, in particular themes related to religious engagement in the public sphere, secularisation and desecularisation.
While scholars frequently caution that the label ‘Buddhist modernism’ describes what is in fact a very diverse group of practices and views, few researchers have taken on the task of untangling the many different orientations subsumed under this very general term (Quli, 2008: 241). Thus, in this thesis I am asking not so much whether modern philosophies, movements, ideologies and discourses shape Australian Tibetan Buddhists’ approach to Buddhist social engagement, but rather which modern ideologies do.

The initial approach by scholars of modern and Western Buddhism was that the particular forms of Buddhism promulgated by leading modernist figures and adopted by Buddhists both in Asia and the West share sufficient key beliefs and practices to be seen as a new school, one that exists alongside other forms of Buddhism (Lopez, 2002). In this thesis, I do not approach modern Buddhism as a sect, or a particular strand of Buddhism. As I understand it, all forms of Buddhism in the globalised modern world have been impacted, informed and shaped by modernity and adherents’ responses to it. As Natalie Quli notes, ‘any contemporary Buddhist group will be touched by “modernity” in one way or another; we are all modern in some ways’ (Quli, 2010: 90). Different contemporary Buddhist traditions and groups adopt different features of modernity while rejecting others—differently. That is, to approach modern Buddhism in the plural, rather than as a single category. Thus rather than approaching modern Buddhism as a sect or particular stream of contemporary Buddhism, I believe it is important to identify the way different modern discourses and contexts produce distinctly different yet, equally ‘modern’ forms of Buddhism.

I approach this exploration of the influence of modernity on Buddhism in Australia with awareness that there never was a ‘traditional’ Australian Buddhism as such. Asian Buddhism had been through extensive processes of modernisation before any ‘coherent’ Western Buddhist movement was formed. (This theme will be discussed in further detail in the following section.) The form of Buddhism that was exported to the West was already a modernised form of Buddhism; or its Asian exponents and pioneers, at least, were predominantly modern Buddhists. Thus, my focus is not so much on how the traditional has become modern, though this is part of my consideration, but rather, how, early modern forms of Buddhism, imported to Australia, have been diversifying since their arrival. How have interpretations of Buddhism morphed and developed in relation to the continuing changing nature of Australian culture? More broadly, what does this suggest about Australian culture generally and religion in Australia specifically?

Quli acknowledges Scott Mitchell’s contribution to this idea.
Secularisation, Desecularisation and Engaged Buddhism

I also analyse conversations about Buddhist social engagement with reference to sociological literature about secularisation. The theory of secularisation proposes that, in the modern world, religion would become increasingly marginal and irrelevant, if not dissolve altogether. It was one of the few theories that attained a truly paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences, but has, in the previous decades been widely debated and heavily critiqued (Casanova, 1994: 18).

One aspect of the secularisation thesis was what became known as the privatisation thesis. In the context of the secularisation debate, Thomas Luckmann presented one of the classical formulations of this theory in *The Invisible Religion* (1967). His thesis was that the trend away from institutional religion did not mean that religion was disappearing entirely. Rather it was becoming increasingly privatised and hence socially and publicly ‘invisible’ (Luckmann, 1967, Achterberg et al., 2009: 688).²

The privatisation thesis has in turn been substantially undermined. Leading sociologist of religion Jose Casanova’s highly influential book, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) was one of the first major works to do this. There he argued that religion has become more publicly significant in many countries since the 1980s, a trend that amounted to a ‘deprivatisation’ of religion in the modern world. He defined religious deprivatisation as

> the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them (Casanova, 1994: 5).

The notion of public religion or the deprivatisation of religion is a significant feature of debates relating to secularisation and desecularisation (Köhren, 2012, Achterberg et al., 2009, Casanova, 1994). The debate about religious privatisation specifically ‘relates to whether, where, and why we are witnessing either a confinement of religion to the domain of private life or an increasing tendency to push religion as a moral resource for the public domain’ (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688).

² The early work of Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1969) was another key work in formulating the idea of the privatisation of religious belief.
What do participants’ approaches toward Buddhist social engagement suggest about attitudes toward religious privatisation or deprivatisation and thus secularisation and desecularisation in Australia? The modern movement of Engaged Buddhism, explored further below, represents a rich example of deprivatisation on a global scale, a push to use Buddhism as a moral and frequently political resource for the public domain. While modern Asian Buddhist reform movements and Engaged Buddhist movements represent clear examples of this, is there evidence of the same kind of push to use Buddhism as a moral resource for the public domain amongst my participants, Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists? Do values of secularism have a significant influence on perceptions of religion in Australia, and particularly on attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement? Do participants abide by what Peter Achterberg et al. have described as the secularist truce: a secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm (Achterberg et al., 2009)? Do they affirm or disrupt anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s claim that, ‘the secular is the water we swim in’ (Hirschkind, 2011: 634)? If so, do Australian Tibetan Buddhists believe it best to swim with or against the secular current in how they approach Buddhist social engagement?

These questions and themes will be explored in greater detail throughout the thesis. In the remainder of this chapter I will provide some important background details to the central topics of this thesis. After a brief clarification of how I employ certain terms, I will provide some definitions of Engaged Buddhism. This will be followed by a discussion of academic understandings of Western Buddhism as socially engaged. I then present a brief history of modern Engaged Buddhist movements in Asia and the West, concluding the chapter with an overview of the contents of this thesis.

**Terminology**

Throughout the thesis I refer to literature describing Western Buddhism, modern Buddhism, Australian Buddhism and American Buddhism. In chapter three I will explain my position on these issues further. However as I do refer to these concepts in this and the following chapter it is necessary to briefly clarify my understanding of them here and to make it clear that I understand these categories are not necessarily interchangeable.

I employ the term Western Buddhism because, in the case of my thesis, it marks a distinction between the Buddhism of Euro-Australian participants in my study and the Buddhism of Tibetans, be that Tibetans in Tibet or ethnic Tibetans in diaspora. I am aware however of problems with the category. I appreciate, for example, that though the
term Western Buddhism has been used to describe the adaptations that have occurred to Buddhism in Western countries, ‘Western Buddhism’ is by no means an exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting; that is, the West (McMahan, 2008: 6). Thus while using the term I acknowledge that it can reflect and perpetuate the tendency to obscure and ignore the significant agency and involvement that Asian Buddhists and Asian societies have played in the shaping of modern and Western Buddhisms (Snodgrass, 2003: 10, Rocha and Barker, 2011b, McMahan, 2008). This theme emerges in various ways throughout the thesis. Later in this chapter I provide a brief introduction to the concept of modern Buddhism, which I expand on in the following chapter.

I also acknowledge that there are multiple forms of Western Buddhism, delineated not only by the distinct ‘Western’ national cultures in which they develop, but equally, or more so, the Asian traditions and locations from which they stem. This includes, to name but a few, distinctive forms of American or Australian Zen, German Thai Theravāda, non-sectarian forms of Theravāda (such as Goenka’s Vipassana movement and Insight Meditation Centres), as well as European, South American and American forms of Tibetan Buddhism. In focussing on Western Tibetan Buddhism, in particular in its Australian form, I hope to enable a greater comparative study between these different strands of Western Buddhism to be conducted in the future. I will explain in greater depth my reason for focussing on one single form of Western Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, in chapter three.

In combination with academic literature on Western Buddhism and Australian Buddhism I draw substantially from literature on American Buddhism. This partly reflects the fact that the quantity of research conducted on American Buddhism far outweighs what has been conducted on Buddhism in Australia. Though I appreciate that the acculturation of Buddhism in different global locales is distinct, Buddhism in Australia is also, like anywhere, an increasingly transnational phenomenon, and thus, literature on Western Buddhism generally and American Buddhism specifically frequently bears parallels with circumstances in Australia. In addition literature on American Buddhism has often been used to describe Western Buddhism generally, and this is also used for understanding Buddhism in Australia. Further research is still required to illuminate these distinctions, work that various scholars have been pursing since the 1990s (Harding et al., 2010, Rocha and Barker, 2011a, Prebish and Baumann, 2002b). While my research does present some findings in this area, it is not the main aim of my inquiries.
Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Social Engagement

There are numerous definitions and explanations of Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist social engagement in both academic and popular literature. In this section I present a selection of descriptions offered by scholars, providing some background to understanding prominent ways that Buddhist social engagement has been presented in academic literature. The historical development of Engaged Buddhism, both in the West and in Asia will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

The term Engaged Buddhism has been used, both by its practitioners and scholars, as a way to identify distinct socio-religious movements throughout Buddhist Asia and the West that share an interest in relating Buddhism to contemporary social issues (Deitrick, 2003). Additionally, many of these movements have recognised their commonalities and have joined together through such institutions as the International Network of Engaged Buddhists to organise a cohesive, international social movement (Deitrick, 2003).

Christopher Queen, a prominent scholar of Western and Engaged Buddhism, describes Buddhist social engagement as ‘the application of the Dharma, or Buddhist teachings, to the resolution of social problems’ (Queen, 2000b). In the introduction to Engaged Buddhism in the West, A New Buddhism, Queen outlines three characteristics he defines as peculiar to the essence of Engaged Buddhism in the West. These are, he writes

(1) the inalienable value of the human person, whatever his or her level of achievement or standing in the community, (2) the social and collective nature of experience, shaped in particular by cultural and political structures that have the power to promote good or evil, fulfillment or suffering, progress or decline, and (3) the necessity of collective action to address the systemic causes of suffering and promote social advancement in the world (Queen, 2000b: 3).

Religious scholar, Thomas Freeman Yarnall describes Engaged Buddhists as

united by a common drive to lessen the suffering of the world, in particular by ‘engaging’ (as opposed to renouncing) the various social, political, economic, etc. institutions, structures, and systems in society. Such engagement can take many different forms (for example, voting, lobbying, peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and so forth), but it is always aimed at actively challenging and changing those
institutions, etc. that are perceived as perpetuating suffering through various forms of oppression, injustice, and the like (Yarnall, 2003: 286).

Another framework for analysing Buddhist social engagement comes from Engaged Buddhist scholar-practitioner Donald Rothberg. Rothberg recognises Buddhist social engagement to involve three significant features—Buddhist political and social activism, Buddhist social service/welfare and Buddhism in everyday life. These components he draws from three particular stages within the Vietnamese Engaged Buddhist movement, as described to him by leading figures of those movements (Rothberg, 1998: 273, 337).

In Vietnam during the 1950s a movement arose that attempted to make Buddhism more accessible and practical to the lives of those outside the monasteries. The word used for this movement was Nhān Gian, literally meaning, Buddhism for everybody, which focused on cultivating awareness in daily life. In the late 1950s and early 1960s a movement with a more social emphasis, Nhāp Thē, literally meaning going into the world, emphasised social service, education and charity work. A third movement, Dā’n Thān, meaning getting involved, dated from 1963 and was connected with explicit political and social activism (Rothberg, 1998: 273).

Though my study is on Tibetan Buddhism, the Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism movement of the 1960s significantly influenced the formation of Engaged Buddhism in the West and preceded the widespread popularity of Tibetan Buddhism and the global Free Tibet movement. As I explain in greater depth later in this chapter, important movements of Engaged Buddhists emerged independently and interdependently throughout Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This included in Japan (Snodgrass, 2014) and in China, most notably spearheaded by Chinese Buddhist Master Taixu who also significantly influenced the Vietnamese movement (Devido, 2009).

**Western Buddhism: A ‘Socially Engaged’ Tradition?**

In this section I will document the emergence of literature describing Western Buddhism as socially engaged. In order to provide an adequate background to understanding this I will first discuss some historical features of the academic study of Western Buddhism. Until relatively recently, since around the 1980s, the study of Buddhism was predominantly restricted to the various regions of Asia, their texts, and historical developments in antiquity and medieval times. Scholars of Buddhism saw little value in studying Buddhism outside
of Asia (Baumann, 2010: 169, Prebish, 2002: 70). Partly based on the strong influence of Protestant assumptions on Buddhist studies (Schopen, 1997), and the predilection for textual-based studies and philology, research into Western Buddhism was perceived as not ‘real Buddhology’ or ‘Buddhism Lite’ (Prebish, 2002: 75, Numrich, 2008: 2, Baumann, 2010: 169).

By contrast, and in response to the rising interest in Buddhism outside of Asia, a handful of scholars began researching the development of Buddhism in Western cultures. In 1979 Charles Prebish published one of the first books in the area, titled *American Buddhism*, where he attempted to argue that a distinctively ‘American’ form of Buddhism was developing. Martin Baumann was one of the first scholars to publish extensively on German and European Buddhism (Baumann, 1991, 1994, 1997). Their efforts to have Western Buddhism acknowledged as worthy of academic investigation were realised in the mid 1990s when a growing number of notable scholars produced works on Buddhism in North and South America, Europe, Australia and South Africa (Prebish and Baumann, 2002a: 1). These publications, along with the development of panels on Buddhism in the West at significant Buddhist studies conferences, helped to form what has since become a gradually accepted sub-discipline of Buddhist studies, Buddhism in the West or studies of Western Buddhism (Prebish, 2002: 73-74, Baumann, 2010: 169-170).

In the introduction to *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, the first anthology of its kind, Prebish and Baumann proposed the question that most clearly defined the formative period of studies on Western Buddhism. They asked ‘how does Buddhism’s acculturation, spread and indigenization in the West contrast to Buddhism’s acculturation throughout Asia?’ (Prebish and Baumann, 2002a: 2). In response to this, since the late 1980s, scholars and popular leaders have carved out a general description of prominent characteristics of Western Buddhism. The qualities consistently noted have been laicisation, democratisation, social engagement, increased gender equality, and an emphasis on scientific, rational and psychological aspects of Buddhism (Prebish, 1999, Baumann, 2010: 178, Queen, 1999: xviii, Coleman, 2002: 119, Das, 1998: 550-552, Wallace, 2002: 35, Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 12). Given the dearth of scholarship in the area at the time however, these broad general descriptions of Western Buddhism often reflected the personal experiences, aspirations and ideals of influential American and European Buddhist teachers and scholars, rather than the results of extensive in-depth sociological research and fieldwork. These trends were and are undoubtedly present in various forms of Western Buddhism.
both then and now, but the nitty gritty work of detailing and substantiating these claims had yet to be performed.

Two articles by American Buddhist teachers discussing Western and American Buddhism serve as powerful examples of this. The first, ‘Is Buddhism Changing in North America?’ (1988) was written by a leading American Buddhist teacher, co-founder of Theravādan-based Insight Meditation Centres, Jack Kornfield. The second, written by Surya Das, an American-convert Buddhist trained in the Tibetan lineage, was titled ‘Emerging Trends in Western Dharma’ (1998). Scholars who wrote the early and seminal works on American and Western Buddhism drew on these articles extensively in describing characteristics of Western Buddhism, in particular when describing Western Buddhism as socially engaged. In closely tracing the lineage of descriptions of Western Buddhism as socially engaged these two articles appear as a basis to the majority of early works. For example, Das’ article is referenced in most of the seminal works on American or Western Buddhism (Prebish, 1999; 2011, Queen, 1999; Baumann 2001, Gregory 2001). Kornfield’s article is referenced by Queen, 1999, Prebish, 1999; Fields, 1999; Tanaka, 1999, Spuler 00, Gregory 2001; Baumann 2001.

Kornfield’s article, ‘Is Buddhism Changing in North America?’ is widely cited to substantiate the idea that American and Western Buddhism are socially engaged. In this article Kornfield identifies one of the key attributes of American Buddhism to be ‘integration’ which he describes as ‘not a withdrawal from the world, but a discovery of wisdom in the midst of our lives’ (Kornfield, 1988: xi).

Das’ article (1998) is the text of the closing presentation for a popular conference ‘The Future of Buddhist Meditative Practices in the West’, held in 1997 in Boston (Rapaport, 1998). The proceedings from the conference were later published in a book carrying an altered version of the conference title, ‘Buddhism in America, Proceedings of the First Buddhism in American Conference’ (Rapaport and Hotchkiss, 1998). The adapted title, from the conference to the proceedings, is one example of many within the field where there is an undefined and frequently conflated relationship between Western Buddhism and American Buddhism. In his article Das lists ten qualities he claims both characterise Western Buddhism and would ensure its healthy future, one of which is social engagement. He writes, ‘Dharma in the West...is very much more than before socially active, socially informed, and engaged. Informed citizens, not reclusive or withdrawing’ (Das, 1998: 550-552, Queen, 1999: xviii).
Das’ own socially active, aware and engaged youth was what initially propelled him in search of Buddhism. The first time Das set foot in a Buddhist centre was in 1970, the same year that his best friend’s girlfriend was shot at the Kent State Massacre.³ Adding further personal impact to this traumatic incident, another student killed that day both held the same original name as Das—Jeffery Miller—and was from the same place of birth, Long Island (Eisenberg, 2004). The event spurred both a life-long engagement with Buddhism and a reflection on his activism. The experience, he later describes, led him to conclude that ‘fighting for peace via radical politics was a contradiction in terms, and I wanted to become peace and be peaceful’ (Das, 2011).

As noted above, observations by these leading American Buddhist teachers formed the basis of many scholarly claims about social engagement in Western and American Buddhism. In the introduction to a seminal text in the field, American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship Queen identifies ‘engagement’ as one of the three most significant characteristics of American Buddhism, a claim he bases on Kornfield’s and Das’ articles. Queen describes social engagement within Western Buddhism as

the broadening of spiritual practice to benefit not only the self, but also...society and the world, including the social and environmental conditions that affect all people ( políticization) (Queen, 1999, xix).

Indicative of the ongoing influence of Das’ article, in a recent summation of American Buddhism, Prebish reiterates Das’ original outline of American Buddhism, including ‘a socially informed and engaged tradition’ (Prebish, 2011: 253).

As with Western Buddhism generally, social engagement has also been identified as a characteristic of Australian Buddhism (Bucknell, 2000, Spuler, 2000, Sherwood, 2001, 2003, Rocha and Barker, 2011b). In 2000, in the first academic article to address Buddhist social engagement in Australia, Rod Bucknell made the useful distinction between what

³ On May 4, 1970 in the U.S. city of Kent, Ohio, members of the Ohio National Guard fired into a crowd of Kent State University students demonstrating against American military action in Vietnam, killing four and wounding nine. Known as the Kent State massacre, Kent State shootings or May 4 massacre, the event had dramatic effects. It triggered a nationwide student strike that forced hundreds of colleges and universities to close, impacted on national politics and further exacerbated the deep political and social divisions that sharply divided the country during the Vietnam War era (Lewis and Hensley, 1998, Best, 2010 (1978), Bills, 1988).
he called ethnic and non-ethnic practitioners and found that while most ethnic Buddhist centres were involved in social welfare, non-ethnic Buddhist groups, with the exception of some notable examples, ‘show little inclination to become involved in socially relevant activities’ (Bucknell, 2000: 471). Patricia Sherwood, writing just three years later makes an entirely different claim. In *The Buddha is in the Street, Engaged Buddhism in Australia* Sherwood claims that ninety-six percent of Buddhist organisations in Australia, both ethnic and non-ethnic, are involved in social engagement (social welfare and educational activities) (Sherwood, 2003: 4). Her findings are based on survey research conducted with Buddhist organisations in Australia followed by detailed case studies of twelve organisations (2003). In the most recent and only academic anthology on Buddhism in Australia Cristina Rocha and Michelle Barker claim that social engagement is a characteristic of Buddhism in the West that is also found in Australia. They also suggest that Engaged Buddhism had increased dramatically since Bucknell’s 2000 article (Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 10-12).

In indentifying some of the literature closely associated with the assertion that Western Buddhism is socially engaged I am not suggesting that this claim has no substantive basis. Rather I am proposing that a closer and more nuanced approach to this topic is now required, founded in in-depth sociological research. In the following section I will explore an important issue associated with this claim—the overt or implicit assumption that Western Buddhism is more socially engaged than Buddhism in Asia.

**What is the ‘Other’ of Western Buddhism?**

When scholars describe Western Buddhism as socially engaged, this claim is frequently made, implicitly or explicitly, in comparison with something else, some other kind of Buddhism that was less engaged. This is evident for example in the statements presented above describing Western or American Buddhism: Das’ statement that Western Dharma is ‘more’ socially active, ‘not reclusive and withdrawing’ (1998), Kornfield’s claim that Western Buddhism represents ‘not a withdrawal from the world’ (1988) and Queen’s suggestion that Western Buddhist represents a ‘broadening of spiritual practice to benefit not only the self’ (1999). Though all comparative in nature, exactly what Buddhist tradition, in what geographical location and historical time period Western Buddhism is more engaged than, is rarely identified. On closer examination the comparisons appear to be based on a contrast with an orientalist construction, one that portrays Asian Buddhism as reclusive, withdrawn, individualistic and quietist; a Buddhism that is focussed on the
self rather than the social, a Buddhism that is socially disengaged. The influence of colonialism and orientalism is a significant factor in shaping the conception of Buddhism as being socially withdrawn. Max Weber most influentially cast the dye on the portrayal of Buddhism’s relationship to society when he described Buddhism as ‘unpolitical’, ‘apolitical’ and ‘anti political’ (Weber, 1916 (1958), 1922 (1993): 245, 256). Weber did not travel to Asia, but rather was working entirely from books in European languages written by Western scholars, whose work was unavoidably influenced by their own socio-cultural influences and priorities. Weber’s view was framed most specifically by his Calvinistic background, through which he assessed all other religions (Baumann, 1998: 125). In Buddhism he found none of the social applications familiar to him from Protestantism and hence concluded Buddhism lacked any religious legitimation of worldly action, asserting, that Buddhism had ‘not set up the slightest sociol-political aim’ (Weber, 1922 (1993): 245, 256).

Though it may not have been recognisable within the sources, frame and methodology used by Weber, Buddhism has been deeply imbedded in—has influenced and been influenced by—social, political and cultural features of Asia since its emergence (Harris, 1999: 1, Batchelor, 1994: 359). As with Buddhism itself, Buddhism’s relationship to social engagement is a dynamic phenomenon; it has morphed according to the social and political contexts in which it has emerged and the way in which individuals have reconstituted it according to these contexts. Buddhists have occupied a vast range of political and social orientations throughout its two thousand year history—conservative, radical, peaceful, violent and quietist (Harris, 1999: 1-25, Jerryson, 2010). Nevertheless, from forest monks and ascetics in mountain caves, as well as Dalai Lamas as political leaders, and monks as advisors to kings, the negotiation between introspective contemplation and socio-political engagement has been at play throughout Buddhist history (McMahan, 2008: 250).

Fore grounded by some of the themes, assumptions and approaches discussed in this and the previous section, since the 1990s a debate has emerged within academic studies as to whether Engaged Buddhism is something ‘new’, emerging from Buddhism’s interaction with Western culture, or by contrast, something that has always existed within Buddhism. Unlike other works in the field (Deitrick, 2000, 2003, Queen, 2000b, 2003, Yarnall, 2003, King, 1996a, 2005) my aim in this thesis is not to prove or refute that Engaged Buddhism is ‘authentic’, that is, largely continuous with traditional Buddhism or otherwise. Although my inquiry naturally raises issues related to such questions, this is not the aim or central...
focus of the thesis. However, it is necessary to state my approach to this debate, given my focus on analysing how contemporary Australian Tibetan Buddhists depict Buddhist social engagement and what modern influences inform them.

Though history reveals that Buddhism has always been engaged and involved in political and social life, as I understand it, the specific attitudes and activities of Engaged Buddhism are ‘new’ in the sense that they are deeply imbedded in modernity—a product of and a response or resistance to unique conditions of modernity. Though Buddhism was not historically disengaged (Harris, 1999, 2012, Faure, 2009), as representations of modern or Western Buddhism sometimes implicitly infer, the impact of circumstances, ideas and projects unique to modernity and the West have lead to significantly distinct forms of Buddhist social engagement. While the orientalist-influenced construction of Buddhism represents Buddhism’s relationship with society and politics in biased ways, resistance to colonialism alongside a range of broader modernising influences has significantly altered the way in which contemporary Buddhists approach social engagement.

This points to another problem in descriptions of Western Buddhism as more socially engaged than other forms of Buddhism; characteristics frequently attributed to Western Buddhism don’t necessarily have their origin in the West, but rather describe, more broadly, what scholars have identified as features of ‘modern Buddhism.’ As McMahan points out in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*:

> What scholars have often meant by “western Buddhism,” “American Buddhism,” or “new Buddhism” is a facet of a more global network of movements that are not the exclusive product of one geographic or cultural setting (2008: 6).

The emergence of numerous politically and socially engaged movements has been one of the most significant developments in modern Asian Buddhism (Harris, 1999, 2012, Queen and King, 1996: x). Colonialism, foreign invasion, war, Westernisation, oppression and discrimination were the central social and political contexts in which Buddhists became compelled to infuse Buddhism with the modern cultural resources available to resist the suffering that unfolded in their wake (King, 1996a: 401). Engaged Buddhist movements therefore represent both part of modernity and a resistance to hegemonic, Western, colonial forms of modernity. As McMahan writes:
Socially Engaged Buddhism both espouses and condemns various features of modernity, for example opposing western economic imperialism and militarism while employing western notions of women’s rights and individual freedom (2008: 14).

In order to highlight the primacy of the development of Engaged Buddhism in Asia, in the following section I will provide a brief historical sketch of the emergence of social engagement in modern Asian Buddhism. This will also help to provide a basis to contrast and compare the attitudes to Buddhist social engagement from my research as detailed in the following chapters.

Social Engagement in (Early) Modern Asian Buddhism

In *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, one of the formative works in the field of Modern Buddhist studies Donald Lopez writes:

This Buddhism [modern Buddhism] is above all a religion of reason dedicated to bringing an end to suffering. Suffering was often interpreted by modern Buddhists to mean not the sufferings of birth, ageing, sickness and death, but the sufferings caused by poverty and social injustice….One of the constituents of modern Buddhism is, therefore, the promotion of social good, whether it be in the form of rebellion against political oppression (especially by colonial powers), of projects on behalf of the poor, or in the more general claim that Buddhism is the religion most compatible with the technological and economic benefits that result from modernization (2002: xxxii).

Lopez’s description captures the approach of reform movements⁴ that originated firstly in Asia in the nineteenth century and later, in the twentieth century, in the West. Similar Asian Buddhist Engaged movements have continued to operate in the twenty-first century and numerous organisations throughout Asia continue to apply Buddhism to contemporary social problems (Deitrick, 2010: 311-313).

From the nineteenth century onward Buddhist social reform movements emerged independently and inter-dependently across Asia: in Siam and Ceylon in the 1830s,

⁴ Rather than characterising all forms of modern Buddhism I understand Lopez’s description to characterise one of several ‘modern’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement and suffering within Buddhism. This theme is explored further throughout the thesis.

Leading Asian Buddhists responded to these challenging and often calamitous circumstances, and the cultural oppression and violent warfare that came with them, by employing Buddhist principles and resources combined with modern technologies, ideas and practices. It was against this backdrop, in a spirit of resistance and reform, that Asian Buddhists developed an emphasis on social and political justice and welfare and a modern reformist approach to Socially Engaged Buddhism was born (Swearer, 1996, King, 1996a, Hanh, 1967).

Reformists advocated and engaged in social welfare, founded hospitals, orphanages, health-clinics, and numerous Buddhist charitable organisations (Lopez, 2002: xxxii). New forms of Buddhist educational materials were produced and periodicals were set up, in part to air a Buddhist view on many of the significant upheavals happening throughout Asian societies during these times (Devido, 2009, Hanh, 1967, Barbalet et al., 2011). Buddhists became involved in political and social activism through public advocacy, protest and debate (Lopez, 2002, Barbalet et al., 2011, 2012). Monks and nuns were frequently leaders in these movements though lay Buddhists were also heavily involved. These Buddhist reform movements represent the kind of movements that are now referred to as Engaged Buddhism (Hanh, 1967, Devido, 2009).

The term Engaged Buddhism was introduced and popularised by Thich Nhat Hanh, one of several leaders of the Vietnamese Buddhist social movement of the twentieth century. The movement, who identified itself as the Buddhist Struggle Movement, was involved in an intensive political and social struggle prior to and throughout the Vietnam War (Do, 1999: 270-275, Hanh, 1967, Topmiller, 2002, Khong, 1993). It was catapulted to international prominence in July 1963 after the first self-immolation of a Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thich Quang Duc, which was recorded and widely disseminated on world television by American photojournalists (Hanh, 1967, Biggs, 2005, Skow and Dionisopoulos, 1997). In response to the flood of confusion and alarm produced by the so-called ‘Burning Monk’ photographs, Hanh coined the term Engaged Buddhism for
a Western audience (Hanh, 1967, Biggs, 2005, Skow and Dionisopoulos, 1997). During a Buddhist retreat in Vietnam in 2009 Hanh recalls the history of his development of the term Engaged Buddhism. He retells how, in 1954, at the time of the partition of Vietnam, amidst the chaos and strife that the colonial wars and then the division of Vietnam, had produced, he was approached by the director of the Yen Cu newspaper to write a series of articles outlining a Buddhist response to the multiple crises. Describing these articles Hanh said:

I wrote a series of ten articles, Buddhism a Fresh Look—a new way of looking at Buddhism. [In] these ten articles I proposed the idea of Engaged Buddhism. So Engaged Buddhism dated from 1954: Buddhism in the realm of education, economics, politics, and so on....The newspaper sold very, very well, because people were very thirsty, they wanted to have a spiritual path, they want a direction, because they are in confusion, the confusion was so huge.

I remember that Thich Quang [Duc], at the same time he was also at En Guang temple, he was very curious on what I had written in the newspaper, so every morning he went down and bought one copy of the newspaper, which he read (Hanh, 2009).

Between 1964-65 this series of articles was collated and published into a book, firstly in Vietnamese, then in French and in English. When translated into English (by Trinh Van Du), they were given the title, Engaged Buddhism (Hanh, 2009). It was in this context that the term Engaged Buddhism emerged into English popular media, as Hanh attempted to illustrate the nature of the Vietnamese Buddhist movement to Vietnamese, French and English speaking audiences.

At the height of the offensive against the Buddhist struggle movement during 1966, Hanh, who purportedly narrowly missed execution, left for America, believing the seeds of the war to lie there (Topmiller, 2002: x). During his tour of America he met with politicians and civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, and presented the idea of Engaged Buddhism to an American audience (Hanh, 1967). Hanh’s peace activism attracted the interest of many American Buddhists of the time (Kraft, 2000: 14).

Engaged Buddhism, as it emerged in Asia was an adamantly activist Buddhism, one that dissented from large colonial and foreign forces negatively impacting on Asian societies.
Alongside the example of the anti-war movement amongst Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns, numerous other Engaged Buddhist movements existed and continue to exist throughout Asia. Some examples include: the human-rights and Tibetan movements lead by the Dalai lama of Tibet, Tenzin Gyatso; the conversion to Buddhism by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and millions of his ‘untouchable’ followers in India as a political protest against caste discrimination; the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya Shramadana community development movement engineered by educator A.T. Ariyaratne; the social reformism of Thai Buddhist layperson, Sulak Sivaraksa; and efforts by both men and women in many parts of Asia and the West to restore full ordination to women and to rebuild the nuns’ order in Theravāda Buddhism (Deitrick, 2003: 253).

**Buddhist Social Engagement in (Early) Western Buddhism: The Counter-Cultural Period**

In this section I briefly introduce the emergence of Engaged Buddhist movements in the West and some of the most significant individuals involved. These movements and individuals have been a significant foundation for the understanding of Western Buddhism as socially engaged.

Many Westerners who were attracted to Buddhism in the second half of the twentieth century and went on to be leaders in Western Buddhism or Engaged Buddhism were part of the Western counter-culture and the political and social movements of the period, particularly the protests against the Vietnam War and later the anti-nuclear movement (Deitrick, 2010: 176). Many of these Buddhists were attracted to Buddhism in the Zen boom of the post-war years. Different Western Buddhists involved in the Engaged Buddhist movements were strongly influenced and informed by a range of movements and ideologies including socialism, anti-capitalist, environmental and the peace movements. In many Engaged Buddhist leaders and movements, these influences came together with a widespread interest in Zen Buddhism in the United States in the 1960s and 70s.

Notable examples of Western Buddhists from the counter-culture movements who have strongly promoted Buddhist social engagement include Robert Aitken, Bernie Glassman, Gary Snyder, Joanna Macy and Robina Courtin (Deitrick, 2010: 313). Aitken, head of international Western Zen Buddhist movement, The Diamond Sangha, founded the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in 1978, one of the largest Western Engaged Buddhist organisations, one most frequently cited as evidence for the socially engaged tendencies
of Western Buddhism (Prebish, 1999, Coleman, 2002: 118, Deitrick, 2010: 313). Though it has an international scope, it is predominantly American. Of the twenty-four chapters (previously)\(^5\) listed on its website in 2010 only two chapters are outside the U.S.

Another figurehead of the Western Engaged Buddhist movement is American Bernie Glassman, founder of Zen Peacemakers. Over the last four decades Glassman has founded numerous not-for-profit organisations serving the poor in rundown areas of America, as well as providing job-training programs, permanent housing, nursery and toddler care, drug treatment and hospice centres for the destitute and dying (Queen, 2000a: 95). Joanna Macy is another Western leader of Engaged Buddhism. Macy became a Buddhist in the 1970s and soon after, in response to the growth of the nuclear power industry, an activist. She went on to develop ‘Despair and Empowerment Workshops’ that have spread internationally. These were designed to assist activists avoid burnout in their social and environmental activism (Moon, 2000: 248-253). In the United Kingdom Ken Jones has been a prolific advocate and theoriser of Engaged Buddhism, as has Christopher Titmuss, a Buddhist since the 1970s who also became involved in Green Politics as an anti-nuclear activist (Bell, 2000: 404-406, 415-418, Deitrick, 2010: 313). In Australia, Robina Courtin, who spent over a decade involved in left-wing, black and feminist politics during the 1960s and 1970s and later became a Tibetan Buddhist nun, established the Liberation Prison Project which provides Buddhist resources and care to prisoners in Australia, U.S., New Zealand, Spain, Mexico, Mongolia and Italy (Halafoff, 2011: 148-149, Deitrick, 2010).

These leaders highlight the existence of Western Buddhist individuals and organisations advocating and involved in social engagement. However, as noted above, Western Buddhist movements and the Engaged Buddhist leaders that shaped and were shaped by them arose out of the events and conditions of the counter-cultural period of the 1950s-1970s. We are now several decades on. Where do Western Buddhists currently sit in terms of social engagement? Have Western Buddhists continued on the same trajectory both in terms of their attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement and their relationship to mainstream society? Or has it changed? If so, how? And what does this suggest about Western Buddhism, Buddhism’s relationship to Western culture and more broadly Western culture itself? A recent event gives some insight into contemporary attitudes to Buddhist

---

social engagement, which will be explored in greater depth throughout the thesis. During August 2010 the Zen Peacemakers, an American Buddhist organisation dedicated to social engagement, held the first ever ‘Symposium for Western Socially Engaged Buddhism’ in Montague, Massachusetts, United States. Within the Buddhoblogosphere, the community of Buddhists writing and commenting on Buddhism in blogs, the event caused a splash and spurred numerous blog posts on Engaged Buddhism. Blog posts titled ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism isn’t as popular as you think’, ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ and ‘Engaged Buddhism is a crock of sh*t’ indicated that not all Western Buddhists were equally committed to ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism’. Furthermore the blogs revealed that some held significant reservations about ‘Western Socially Engaged Buddhism’ or at least the approach to engagement encapsulated at the symposium held by the Zen Peacemakers. Reflecting this ambivalence further, during the symposium, attendees identified what they considered to be the top seven challenges facing Western Socially Engaged Buddhism. The first challenge they named was: ‘To practice social engagement as a Buddhist without being “drummed out of Buddhism” and accused of “staining the Dharma”’6 (Ruhl, 2010).

At the time of the symposium I had spent the previous year conducting interviews on Buddhist social engagement with Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. Many of the attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement expressed by participants in my interviews, as with those expressed in the Buddhist blog posts and comments, stood in contrast to prevalent understandings in academic literature. How prevalent or significant are the values and practices espoused at events like the Engaged Buddhist symposium? Do the academic overviews of Western Buddhism, articles in popular Buddhist magazines like Tricycle, and exemplars of Socially Engaged Buddhism reflect the attitudes of the majority of Western Buddhists? By contrast, how significant and widespread are the disparaging, ambivalent and critical reactions to Engaged Buddhism expressed in Buddhist blog posts? These broad questions and themes provide a backdrop to the more specific focus of this thesis detailed at the beginning of this chapter. In concluding this

6 Dharma, a Sanskrit term (Tib. chos, Pāli. dhamma) is a complex term with multiple meanings. It is not easily rendered into an equivalent English term and thus several scholars suggest that it is better left untranslated. Dharma can mean a universal moral order, law, religious doctrine or teachings, righteousness, truth, duty and proper conduct, as well as referring in a more technical sense to the entities and phenomena we perceive in the world around us (Keown, 2009: 271). The way it is used in the quote above and elsewhere throughout the thesis refers to religious teachings, otherwise stated as Buddha Dharma.
chapter I will provide an overview of the contents of this thesis.

**Thesis Contents**

In the following chapter, *Transmission, Translation and Transformation: Buddhism, Modernity and Secularism*, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that underpin this work. Here I introduce creolisation theory and its relationship to processes of religious acculturation. In this chapter I also provide a background to some of the particular historical and cultural conditions, discourses and ideologies that have shaped the formation of modern Buddhism. These features are significant to understanding contemporary processes of Buddhist acculturation and attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement. I then explore some of the conditions, definitions and values of secularism and secularisation, as these were particularly influential in shaping attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement amongst participants.

In chapter two, *Methodology: The Natural History of My Research*, I discuss my research methods and design. This includes a detailed description of processes of data collection and analysis, and the rationale for my focus on Tibetan Buddhism in Australia as the specific site for exploring Buddhist social engagement. Here I also introduce the participants in this study and the organisations to which they belong. I conclude with an explanation of how I arrived at the main findings detailed in this thesis—the identification of four distinct orientations toward Buddhist social engagement.

In chapters three to seven I present the data from my research.

In chapter three, *Resisting Buddhist Social Engagement: Reflections of Secularism*, I present the most prominent response to Buddhist social engagement to emerge in my research. The overarching attitudes that characterise this orientation are caution, resistance, or rejection. Given the implicit yet significant influence of secular values and frameworks on shaping participants’ responses to Buddhist social engagement I describe this approach as heavily accented by secularism. I provide examples of how this ideology emerges as a significant underlying influence toward Buddhist social engagement in the attitudes of thirteen out of twenty-four participants (fifty-four percent). I also detail some of the key assumptions relating to religion and religious engagement in the public sphere that produce ambivalence and caution toward Buddhist social engagement.

In chapter four, *'Not In the Name of Buddhism': Maintaining the Secular Truce*, I provide
further evidence of the influence of secularism particularly as it emerged in participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist public advocacy. This issue provides further evidence of the ambivalence, reluctance and resistance to an overt, collective public Buddhist social engagement. A prominent response to emerge in my research was that Buddhist public advocacy specifically and Buddhist social engagement generally should not be conducted ‘in the name of Buddhism’. Participants argue that Buddhist social engagement is valuable, however it should be conducted individually as an expression of a person’s social conscience without any overt identification with a religion or religious institution.

I discuss participants’ attitudes to Buddhist public advocacy with reference to issues related to the privatisation and deprivatisation of religion in Australia. I argue that the desire to distance a Buddhist identity from Buddhist social engagement represents an accommodation to normative claims of political secularism; that, in a liberal-democratic society religious and existential orientations need to be bracketed from public discourse and political life. Though participants suggest that Buddhist social engagement should be stripped of any overt religious reference they do not argue for the wholesale privatisation of Buddhism. Rather their approach represents a privatisation in method, rather than in principle and therefore shows the complex way in which patterns of secularisation occur alongside desecularisation in contemporary Australia.

In chapter five, ‘Seeing Things the Way They Are’: A Neoconservative Approach, I describe another response to Buddhist social engagement, one significantly informed by political neoconservatism. Here I document how participants expressed Buddhist social engagement in a way that fuses neoconservative views and values with Buddhist language and concepts. The particular way that neoconservatism informs this approach is through themes such as moral clarity, a resistance to so-called political correctness, and Islamophobia. I explore how this approach is closely associated with one of the Buddhist groups in my research, the Diamond Way organisation, and in particular with its Danish founder Ole Nydahl. I identify this approach as a right-wing form of Western Buddhist social engagement, a trend not previously documented in academic literature on Western Buddhist social engagement.

In chapter six, Romanticism and Buddhist Social Engagement: ‘Just Being in the World’, I present another distinct approach to Buddhist social engagement, one heavily accented by Romanticism. In their approach to Buddhist social engagement these participants
emphasise the individual, the spontaneous, the natural, and the subjective. For these practitioners—‘just being in the world’—a phrase used by one of my participants to describe maintaining a particular internal awareness in the midst of informal, spontaneous interactions in the public sphere, encapsulates their ideal approach to Buddhist social engagement. This is imbedded in their resistance to and critique of Buddhism being involved in structured and instrumental approaches to social engagement and social change.

In chapter seven, Reformists: Advocating Buddhist Social Engagement, I examine a response to Buddhist social engagement that I describe as reformist. In this chapter I discuss the approach of participants that are supportive of a range of forms of Buddhist social engagement. These participants reflect many of the descriptions of social engagement in literature on Western Buddhism and on modern Buddhism. A key finding in this chapter is that reformists are not the majority of Buddhists, and, in their commitment to Buddhist social engagement, express a sense of being marginal within Western Buddhism.

In the final chapter, The Secular Effect: Constraining Buddhist Social Engagement, I consider in greater detail the significance of the findings documented in the thesis. I discuss the ever diversifying, yet equally modern strands informing contemporary expressions of Buddhism and suggest that a framework that highlights the complexity of modernity would enhance the academic analysis of Western, modern and global Buddhism. I also focus in greater detail on a key finding from the research: the widespread ambivalence and resistance toward Buddhist social engagement. This leads me to claim that, echoing a blog post of the same title, ‘Engaged Buddhism is not as popular as you think’.

In this chapter I explore in greater detail the implications of secularism in my research. My findings suggest that, at least in the case of Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists, desecularisation in Australia occurs under the hegemonic gaze and rules of secularism. Insomuch as secularism appears as the most significant modern ideological force in the acculturation of Buddhist social engagement in Australia, my research affirms anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s claim that, ‘the secular is the water we swim in’ (Hirschkind, 2011: 634). I conclude that, when considering the appropriate role and form that Buddhism should take in contemporary Australian society, Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists deem it skilful to avoid the stain of religion, in particular the stain of public religious social engagement.

32
Chapter One
Transmission, Translation and Transformation:
Buddhism, Modernity and Secularism

As noted in the introduction, this thesis is an examination of how the concept of Buddhist social engagement is understood by a group of Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. In this chapter I present the theoretical frameworks that have influenced my analysis. I begin with an overview of what scholars have described as modern Buddhism. This offers a number of insights into how Buddhism has been reinterpreted during the modern period, providing a general historical background to understanding participants’ perceptions of the relationship between Buddhism and social engagement. Following this I will outline my approach to understanding religious change, particularly as it occurs through cross-cultural encounters. I then provide an outline of creolisation theory, as this is a key theoretical framework I employ in this thesis to analyse what and how social and cultural factors inform participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement.

Buddhism Meets Modernity

‘In a moment of great historical rupture’, write Nalini Bhusan and Abraham Zablocki, ‘Buddhists have embraced change as a strategy for preservation’ (Bhushan and Zablocki, 2009: 9-10). The ‘great historical rupture’ to which they refer is of course, modernity. In the last two hundred years the on-set of modernity has produced distinctive and acute socio-cultural changes that have significantly impacted on the interpretation, practice and depiction of religions worldwide, including Buddhism. The modernisation of Buddhism first began during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in independent and interrelated reform movements throughout Asia.

Key features of modernity have posed great challenges and, subsequently, opportunities to the survival and spread of Buddhism within and beyond Asia (Snodgrass, 2007, Heine and Prebish, 2003). These events include the industrial revolution, European colonialism and its scholarship, the spread of Christian missionaries into Asian cultures, the rising status and spread of ideologies such as communism, liberalism, secularism and scientism and, more recently, wars and political upheavals that have caused migrations of Buddhist populations to the West. In response to these widespread conditions, in order to survive and remain relevant in modern societies modern Buddhist leaders have skilfully translated Buddhism in distinctly ‘modern’ ways. The particular cultural and historical contexts
and themes that informed modern interpretations of Buddhism have had lasting impacts on Buddhism, profoundly shaping Western understandings of Buddhism to this day, as well as numerous modern Asian reform movements (Snodgrass, 2007, Lopez, 2002).

There is nothing particularly new or surprising about the fact that Buddhism is undergoing significant changes; Buddhism is and has always been in a state of change and given the significance of the doctrine of impermanence in Buddhism this should come as no surprise to Buddhists (Bhushan and Zablocki, 2009: 16). Since traditional Buddhist societies encountered modernity and spread globally the evolution and rate of change within Buddhism, as with so many other traditions, has moved at a rapid pace and in multiple directions (Lopez, 2002). Buddhism’s cultural adaptability has been hailed as one of its great strengths.

In the decade or so since Lopez first popularised the term ‘modern Buddhism’ (Lopez, 2002), scholars of modern Buddhism have identified some of its key characteristics. One distinctive feature is modern Buddhists’ emphasis on equality over hierarchy, which, among other things has produced an increased status for women (Lopez, 2002: ix, xx, McMahan, 2008: 243, Quli, 2010: 73). Modern Buddhism is also generally identified with laicisation and democratisation (Lopez, 2002: ix, McMahan, 2008: 242-243, Quli, 2010). In terms of practice, modern Buddhists tend to focus on meditation as a central feature of Buddhism, radically de-emphasising the ritualistic practices that are intrinsic to pre-modern Buddhism (Lopez, 2002: ix). This centralisation of meditation has lead to the historically unprecedented and widespread practice of meditation among the laity (Lopez, 2002: xxviii-xxix, xxxviii). Prebish describes this trend among American Buddhist converts as following a ‘onfold path’, in contrast to the classical Buddhist teachings of the eight-fold path; ‘focusing on meditation and little else’ (Prebish, 1999: 63). However things may be changing. In contrast to these earlier observations, more recent works such as Scott Mitchell’s thesis *Taking Refuge in the Dharma: Post-Colonialism, Ritual Theory, and American Buddhist Studies* (2008) and Jeff Wilson’s monograph *Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America* (2009b), point out, for example, that there is an increasing amount of ritual occurring within Western Buddhism.

Modern Buddhism also strongly encourages Buddhist social engagement and adopts a very ‘this-worldly’ emphasis exemplified by the reinterpretation of the objective of Buddhist teachings in terms of social reform, social service and the building of a better world
(Bechert, 1973: 91, Lopez, 2002: xxv, xxxii-xxxiii, McMahan, 2008: 14). As detailed in the introduction, this has lead to the formation of many Engaged Buddhist movements throughout Asia and the West. Engaged Buddhism, or Buddhist social engagement has consequently been considered amongst scholars to be a quintessential feature of modern Buddhism. This claim, as it stands in relationship to Western Buddhism, is one that I critically engage with throughout the thesis.

**The Formation of Modern Buddhism**

Modern Buddhism was a co-creation of Asians, Europeans and Americans—shaped both by reforming Asians and by several significant early Western interpreters (McMahan, 2008: 6, Snodgrass, 2003, 2007). The modernisation of Buddhism began throughout Asia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, well before Buddhism was taken up in a more widespread way in the West during the 1970s. The translation and interpretations of Buddhism by leading interpreters of the time—educated Asian Buddhists, Christian missionaries and theologians, colonialists and scholars—was shaped by the historical and cultural assumptions of the numerous social and historical settings in which these discussions and dialogues took place (Snodgrass, 2003, 2007, Lopez, 2002).

Scholars such as Rhys Davids and Eugène Burnouf, described by contemporary scholars as the ‘inaugural heroes’ of Buddhist studies, (Hallisey, 1995, Snodgrass, 2007) provided some of the translations and key works that came to define the contours of modern Buddhism. A seminal work in this genre, written by French scholar Eugene Burnouf, was the *Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme Indien (Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism)* (Burnouf, 2010 (1844)). Burnouf’s work, according to Lopez ‘played a crucial role in demythologizing and humanizing the Buddha, portraying a compassionate man who preached to all who would listen, without dogma and ritual’ (Lopez, 2010). In the introduction to his recent translation of Burnouf’s work, Lopez writes

for the public in Europe, and beyond, he [Burnouf] described the Buddha and Buddhism for the first time in ways that would become so ingrained and natural that their origins in an 1844 French tome would eventually be forgotten. These would include that Buddhism is an Indian religion, that the Buddha is a historical figure, and perhaps, of particular consequence, that the Buddha was the human teacher of a religion (or perhaps a philosophy) that preached ethics and morality, without recourse to dogma, ritual, or metaphysics (Lopez, 2010: 26).
The consequences of Burnouf’s portrayal of Buddha and Buddhism, writes Lopez, ‘would be profound’ (26).

Another Westerner immensely influential in the development of modern Buddhism was T. W. Rhys Davids. He founded the Pāli Text Society in 1881 and served as its chairman until his death in 1922, a position, which was taken on by his wife Caroline, after he died. In addition to and as part of this work they produced an almost complete publication of the Pāli canon, a Pāli dictionary, numerous expository works, and trained a large number of colleagues and students to perpetuate their influence (Snodgrass, 2007). With their translations and interpretations, scholars like Burnouf and Rhys Davids established, in Judith Snodgrass’ terms, ‘the parameters of the rational humanist schools of Buddhism’ (Snodgrass, 2007: 186).

The translations of these noteworthy pioneers, while doing a great service in furthering the Western world’s appreciation of Buddhism, were imbued, like any translation, with the cultural frameworks and sensibilities of their authors. In particular they reflected the prominent intellectual moods, priorities and debates of the period. The time was rich with epistemological and ontological tension, galvanised by the rising authority of science, a preference for rationality and the concomitant crisis within Christianity and so-called non-rational belief systems. Responding to and informed by these dynamics Buddhist interpreters and advocates placed Buddhism on the side of reason and science, depicting it to be largely in accord with critical autonomy, humanism and empiricism. Interpreters, both Asian and Western, did so by foregrounding and highlighting those features of Buddhism more akin to these privileged values, thus enabling them to present Buddhism as the ideal philosophy for the modern world, devoid of the irrational superstition of religion, yet replete with humanistic morality and liberal sensibilities. Buddhism was secularised and humanised, distinct from non-modern religions with their improvable notions of God. It was presented as something more akin to philosophy than religion, one not in conflict with science.

This depiction of Buddhism did not reflect the Buddhism as it was practiced by the great majority of Asian Buddhists of the time or throughout history (Snodgrass, 2007: 201, 2009a). That is, it showed more about the concerns, paradigms and lexicon of the West at the time, than the Buddhism of Asians (McMahan, 2012: 1). For leading Western interpreters of Buddhism this particular representation was a result of translating Buddhism
through the paradigm of their own culturally and historically specific realities and epistemologies. For others, such as elite Asian reformers, this presentation of Buddhism was in part strategically developed to respond to the political crisis of colonialism, and of modernity generally. Buddhism, presented in this way, showed to the Western, colonial powers that Asia contained cultural assets compatible with and able to respond to the threats of the numerous modern, materialistic and scientific worldviews that, by contrast, threatened the legitimacy of Christianity (Snodgrass, 2003, Devido, 2009).

Cross-Cultural Religious Change: Transmission, Translation and Transformation

In the previous section I have hinted at how and why social and cultural factors impact on the way religions change. In this section I will introduce more explicitly how I understand the social and cultural dynamics behind religious change, particularly when it occurs through cross-cultural encounters. I explain my approach particularly with reference to other academic literature that has analysed modern transformations of Buddhism.

In *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, Thomas Tweed employs the notions of consent and dissent to understand the particular way that Buddhism was presented within American culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Tweed, 1992). There he explores how Buddhist adherents and sympathisers of the time, through their adoption and interpretation of Buddhism, both conformed to and resisted the values of the dominant Protestant culture of the time. Tweed found that Buddhist adherents displayed ‘an ambivalent relation to the prevailing religion and dominant culture, dissenting in areas and consenting in others’ (xxi). There were, according to Tweed, significant limits to the degree to which Americans dissented from dominant mainstream cultural values in their translations and interpretations of Buddhism. Although Americans, in adopting Buddhism, were in part rejecting the dominant culture, there were core principles of the larger collectivity, reflected through the particular way they interpreted and depicted Buddhism that appeared non-negotiable. These core principles Tweed identifies as individualism, optimism and activism. According to Tweed, the individuals who were part of this complex pattern of dissent and consent were able to give up more easily the ideas of a personal creator and of a substantial, immortal self than their commitments to individualism, optimism and activism (Tweed, 1992). Tweed’s subtitle *Limits of Dissent* thus alludes to the overarching finding of his research and analysis: ‘even the most consistent dissenter’ he writes, ‘cannot flee or reject the surrounding culture completely’ (xxi).
Following Tweed, I analyse the way in which Australians, who identify as practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, negotiate between the imported religion and the attitudes and values of their Australian socio-cultural context. What indeed is negotiable or non-negotiable as far as Buddhist social engagement in twenty-first century Australia goes? In what ways do the discourses of modernity and contemporary Australian society inflect practitioners’ attitudes to Buddhist social engagement? What features of the cultural mainstream underpin how they depict the relationship between Buddhism and social engagement: what features do they consciously or unconsciously, implicitly or explicitly reject, challenge or reconstitute? What prominent discourses such as liberalism, secularism, rationality, humanism, Christianity, do participants accommodate Buddhism to or distance Buddhism from? What does this suggest about the direction of Buddhist acculturation in Australia in the twenty-first century, and indirectly about Australian culture, its relation to religion and religious engagement in the public sphere?

Like Tweed’s study discussed above, studies of modern Buddhism have shown that Buddhist adherents or sympathisers infuse their own cultural realities and underlying frameworks into their adoption and interpretation of Buddhist practice and philosophy (Tweed, 1992, Snodgrass, 2003, Rocha, 2006, McMahan, 2008). These frameworks consist of oft-unarticulated, unacknowledged paradigms, assumptions and values, normative ways of being that seem in a sense, entirely natural, but are in fact, highly cultural and historically variable (McMahan, 2008: 16). They deeply shape the way reality is perceived, how religious ideas are lived out, depicted, discussed and understood. They frame ‘the text’ and play a crucial role in the way any religious tradition undergoes acculturation and adaptation. The transformations that result from this process of translation may be radical or subtle, overt, deliberate and strategic or unconscious and unintended.

In The Making of Buddhist Modernism McMahan writes ‘transmission and translation is inevitably, word-by-word, text-by-text, culture-by-culture—transformation’ (McMahan, 2008: 18). Similarly, Bhusan and Zablocki describe key features of Buddhism’s contemporary global proliferation as ‘transmission, translation and transformation’ (Bhushan and Zablocki, 2009: 4-5). Transmission relates to the spread of religious teachings, translation the process through which those teachings undergo reinterpretation in the new cultural setting, and transformation, the result. The transformations that occur reflect the particular influences that inform the translation. By translation I mean much more than the linguistic process of converting text from one language to another.
When a religion migrates religious ambassadors translate not only between languages but also between distinct cultural paradigms. Through this process religious traditions morph, shaped by the parameters, concerns and unwritten rules of the new socio-cultural landscape into which they migrate.

It is these unwritten rules of the new socio-cultural landscape that I seek to explore in this thesis when examining how Buddhist social engagement is understood among Australian Tibetan Buddhists. The society from which Tibetan Buddhism migrated to the West, the largely agrarian, nomadic, theocratic, traditional culture of pre-1959 Tibet, is radically distinct from the modern Australian, liberal, secular society of the twentieth century into which it originally arrived in the 1970s. How might these radical differences impact on how participants in this research interpret Buddhist social engagement? And what may have changed since the 1970s?

Tibetan Buddhism, before migrating to Australia was already in the process of being retranslated by Tibetan teachers living in exile in India and Nepal. This was instigated by being uprooted from their homeland from 1959 and thus driven into a new social and cultural landscape. This translation began with greater momentum when Tibetan teachers in India encountered spiritual seekers from the West, travelling to India and Nepal in search of spiritual awakening (Croucher, 1989: 90). Numerous of these Western travellers, inspired through the example and teachings of the Tibetans, invited them to their country of origin, such as Australia (Croucher, 1989: 92-93). So began the process of the globalisation of Tibetan Buddhism. Several of these Westerner travelers went on to become seminal and prominent popular Buddhist teachers and scholars, such as Robert Thurman, Jeffery Hopkins and David Templeman, to name but a few.

While Tibetan Buddhism had undergone processes of acculturation prior to its arrival in Australia in the 1970s, it was still in its initial phases of translation. In terms of Tibetan Buddhism’s global spread, it came to Australia relatively early. Australians were some of the first to bring Tibetan teachers to the West/Australia. For example, Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe, the founders of The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana (FPMT), which is now a large international Buddhist organisation, set up their first Buddhist centre in Australia in 1974 (Croucher, 1989: 92-93).

One significant dimension of religious acculturation is the need to ensure the ongoing survival of the religion in the new culture. ‘If a new religious movement is to attract
loyal converts and build enduring institutions’, writes Tweed, ‘the cultural tensions must not be too great’ (1992: xxi). Cultures implicitly impose certain parameters upon what interpretations of religions are possible and impossible (McMahan, 2008: 8-9). The predispositions, intellectual trends, social and cultural fads and anathemas circulating overtly or implicitly in the dominant culture shape the process of translation. What philosophies, values and practices are considered acceptable, valuable, irrelevant or absurd, inform how the religious tradition is redressed and interpreted in any cultural setting. The underlying power relations between competing ideologies and epistemologies significantly inform which features of a tradition are showcased for the public, which are kept for private consumption, and which features are bracketed or overtly rejected. Deciphering what features of the dominant culture are negotiable and what features are non-negotiable can mean the difference between surviving and thriving.

Among numerous other features, two related processes are at play in how a religion changes and adapts in a new cultural setting, something studies of Buddhist acculturation have shown (Tweed, 1992, Snodgrass, 2003). The first is that adoptees implicitly, unconsciously and often unknowingly interpret the tradition through their own cultural lens. In the process the tradition is subtly or radically reconstituted along the contours of these distinct frameworks of realities, worldviews, assumptions and values. Distinct but related, religious acculturation also takes place consciously, where scholars, missionaries and advocates intentionally, explicitly or otherwise, represent the tradition in a way that they believe will appeal to certain mores, values, movements, zeitgeists of the day and avoid being associated with culturally inappropriate, unfashionable ideas and attitudes. An enduring example of this is Rhys Davids’ conscious decision, in his attempt to align the teachings of the Buddha with post-enlightenment Western philosophers, to translate bodhi as enlightenment rather than awakening (Snodgrass, 2007).

Cross-cultural translation is of course, always and everywhere a subtle reconstitution and complex negotiation between competing ideals, values and imperatives (McMahan, 2008: 16). Religious missionaries and reformers throughout history do not simply eliminate what does not conform to the implicit norms of the new cultural context. Advocates and interpreters of the tradition must balance the needs of adaptation with authenticity, and change with continuity, if they are to maintain a sufficient internal coherency and integrity to withstand the test of time (Bhushan and Zablocki, 2009). Additionally, they may consciously and deliberately, subtly and indirectly challenge and disrupt dominant
paradigms as much as they might adopt and align themselves with them. It is the manner in which this negotiation unfolds, where and how they consent and/or dissent with and from the dominant culture that shapes the particular flavouring of the religious acculturation and the distinct historical trajectory on which the religion moves (Tweed, 1992: xxii). The manner in which these negotiations unfold and the outcomes they produce is captured well by creolisation theory, a framework I will discuss in further detail in the following section.

**Creolisation**

In this thesis I employ the metaphor of creolisation to analyse and describe Australian practitioners’ depictions of Buddhist social engagement. More specifically I employ creolisation theory as a heuristic metaphorical device to identify the underlying cultural influences that shape the reconstitution of the Buddhist tradition in a new environment—Australia. Rather than any structural linguistic emphasis or analysis, I use of creolisation to describe the complexity of cultural and religious contact. My use of this framework is based on the assumption that, as with most cultural developments, perceptions of Buddhist social engagement amongst Australian Tibetan Buddhists are likely to be comprised of multiple historical sources that are potentially widely different. In this section I will begin by giving an overview of terms and scholarship related to creolisation. I will follow this with a more detailed discussion of how I employ this framework in my thesis.

The concept of creolisation has a rich and varied history stretching back to the sixteenth century (Stewart, 2007: 10). The notion of creole, from which the term creolisation later arose, was first coined during the early colonial period to denote the offspring of Old World progenitors born and raised in the New World (Stewart, 2007: 10). It is generally agreed that the immediate antecedent is the Spanish *criollo*, meaning ‘born locally though ancestrally from elsewhere’ (Stoddard and Cornwell, 1999: 336, Brathwaite, 1971).

To linguists a creole language is a new linguistic creation that emerges when individuals from diverse speech communities come together, typically in colonial settings, under the hegemonic authority of colonial powers (Prothero, 2011: 7). In linguistic terms, the formation of creole languages represents a negotiation between the dominant language of the colonial power and the languages of colonial subjects. This interaction results in a particular restructuring of the language in the domains of grammar, phonology, lexicon, and syntax (Stewart, 2007: 11). In Haiti, for example, a creole language was
produced when various West African people met under the hegemonic authority of French-speaking colonists. What resulted from this contact situation was a new creole language that creatively combined elements of both French and West African languages (Prothero, 2011: 8).

Creole languages were originally considered as corrupt or simple bastardisations of the relevant European language. It is now recognised that they represent a creative and complex fusion of the (European) vocabulary of colonial powers with the grammar of the languages of the colonised (Stoddard and Cornwell, 1999: 336-337). Typically, the lexicon of the new creole is derived almost entirely from the colonial language, such as French, while the grammar emerges most strongly from the common grammatical aspects of the various languages of those subject to colonial rule (Prothero, 2011: 8). Thus linguistic theory about creole languages articulates an important fact about cultural transformation—individuals seem to be almost as insistent about clinging to inherited grammatical forms as they are comfortable with adopting new lexicon (Prothero, 2011: 8). In cultural terms, this suggests that when individuals adopt practices and behaviours from other cultures, these practices are viewed and practiced in a manner that is deeply imbedded in and reflective of their own pre-existing social-cultural reality.

While initially the province of Caribbean and Latin American regionalists or linguists, creolisation theory is now often used to understand the increasing complexity of global cultural contact and cross-cultural exchanges (Hannerz, 1987: 551, Prothero, 2011: 7, Rocha, 2006: 17, Palmié, 2006: 434). In the field of anthropology, Ulf Hannerz was one of the early advocates of the term, and claimed that the concept of creolisation was the ‘most promising root metaphor’ for understanding the increasing complexity of global cultural contact (Hannerz, 1987: 551, Rocha, 2006: 17). In an article titled ‘The World in Creolisation’ he writes

creole cultures like creole languages are those which draw in some way on two or more historical sources, often originally widely different (1987: 552).

One objection occasionally raised against the creolisation framework is that identifying creole cultures as a particular category implies that the contents of the phenomena or culture under question were pure, bounded, unitary, until they were joined (Hannerz, 2002: 14). As I understand it, creolisation does not occur between two (or more) tightly
bound, hermetically sealed cultures or traditions. By contrast, the analysis of cultures and various cultural products through the framework of creolisation highlights very conspicuously that such products are not ‘bounded’, ‘pure’, ‘homogeneous’, and ‘timeless’ (Hannerz, 2002: 14). Thus, in terms of this thesis, I understand that the constructed encounter I am analysing, between Buddhism and Australian culture, does not in reality reflect a dialogue between two static, tightly bound homogenous entities. All cultural religious products, as with all expressions of Buddhism throughout history, represent in some way a creolisation or hybridity of multiple distinct traditions, cultures and historical constructs. Processes of creolisation, hybridity and syncretism are indeed basic, not only to religion but to ‘the predicament of culture’ in general (McGuire, 2008: 190, Stoddard and Cornwell, 1999: 332).

As well as being applied to studies of culture generally, creolisation has also been employed by scholars studying religion, whether they be historians (Prothero, 2011), sociologists (McGuire, 2008) or anthropologists (Rocha, 2006). For example, in The White Buddhist, The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott, Stephen Prothero employs the metaphor of creolisation to analyse the kind of Buddhism promoted by Henry Steel Olcott, the first president of the Theosophical Society and one of the most prominent early Western converts to Buddhism (1832-1907) (Prothero, 2011). Prothero argues that Olcott’s Buddhism represents a creolisation of liberal American Protestantism and the traditional Theravāda Buddhism of Sri Lanka, the country where Olcott converted to Buddhism (Prothero, 2011: 7). More specifically, Prothero claims that while Olcott spoke with a Buddhist lexicon

the structural framework out of which he spoke his Buddhist words—what has been described here as his “grammar”—remained Protestant (Prothero, 2011: 96).

Prothero goes on to identify a Theosophical ‘accent’ as further characteristic of Olcott’s Buddhism. In doing so Prothero highlights the impact that cross-cultural encounters have in reconstituting religious meaning and interpretation. In a similar way, in this thesis I employ the theory of creolisation to understand the new creoles that emerge in descriptions of Buddhist social engagement amongst Australian Tibetan Buddhists.

In employing creole theory as a heuristic metaphorical device I have come to focus on grammar and accents; exploring what they reflect about the social and cultural context
in which Buddhism is developing and how this informs ideas about Buddhist social engagement. I understand the lexicon as the familiar, now well established, vocabulary of Buddhist terms in English as they have been defined and circulated in the English discourse since the scholarship of the nineteenth century.

In transporting this linguistic metaphor to understand cultural mixing I identify a ‘grammar’ as an epistemological framework that has become naturalised into an underlying or sedimentary structure for interpreting reality within a given socio-cultural context. I understand this naturalised basis for interpreting reality to be a relatively non-negotiable feature of the social-cultural context. Grammars tend to be implicit, unconscious and unseen. ‘Accents’ I understand to represent additional, yet nevertheless significant influences on, and variations in, the way the new language is expressed. Accents may amplify and extend the grammar in particular ways, reflect varied pathways away from it, problematise or resist it in some way. Yet, in the case of resistance, the accent is nevertheless formed in dialectical relationship to the grammar. An accent, like a grammar also represents an influence, a set of historical values, or way of interpreting reality. Though, in relation to the social-cultural context, they are more ‘negotiable’ than a grammar. Accents, as I use the term, in contrast to grammars, are more variable and individual, an explicit or overt expression of a constellation of views or outlooks that culminate in normative claims about social engagement.

Accents are however, more than simply a matter of pronunciation or intonation. Accents shape what aspects of the tradition individuals select as relevant and significant, as well as those features they reject. This is akin to the way Prothero employs the term accent to describe Olcott’s Buddhism. Theosophy, which Prothero identified as the accent of Olcott’s Buddhism, played a significant role in shaping the way Olcott reconstituted Buddhism, framing what he saw as important in Buddhism and also what he rejected.

Applying this particular interpretation of creolisation to the thesis topic, I have come to identify Australian Tibetan Buddhist responses to Buddhist social engagement to be based on the grammar of secularism. In addition to this grammar I have identified accents, influences that, in combination with the underlying, unconscious bedrock of secularism at the level of grammar, significantly shape participants’ responses to Buddhist social engagement. The accents I have identified are neoconservatism, reformism, romanticism and secularism itself. Throughout chapters three to eight I will provide evidence and
analysis to justify why I have identified the four distinct responses to Buddhist social engagement in the manner that I have.

I will elaborate in greater detail in chapter three my understanding of secularism. Given its prominence in the research however, I will provide a brief definition of secularism here, based on that given by Casanova, which also helps to illuminate the distinction between how I approach secularism as a grammar and again as an accent.

In an article entitled ‘The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms’ Casanova describes secularism as

a whole range of modern secular world-views (or ‘Weltanschauungen’), which may be either consciously held and explicitly elaborated into historico-philosophical and normative-ideological state projects, projects of modernity and cultural programs or as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken for granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern doxa or as an “unthought” (2011, 55).

The second of Casanova's descriptions of how secularism operates, that is, ‘as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken for granted normal structure of modern reality’ (2011, 55) is akin to the way I am suggesting secularism functions as the grammar of participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement. In other words, secularism as grammar represents unarticulated normative ways of thinking about society or categorising reality that seem in a sense, entirely natural, but are in fact, highly cultural and historically variable. A grammar profoundly shapes what can and cannot be said, the parameters of what can be considered a reasonable or legitimate outlook to hold.

This however is distinct from how I am referring to secularism as an accent. An accent, in the manner in which I use the term, is more akin to Casanova’s first description of how secularism operates, that is as a ‘consciously held’ and ‘explicitly elaborated’ set of values. This characteristic of being ‘consciously held and explicitly elaborated’ also defines how I am referring to accents generally, though different perspectives are adopted in the case of the four distinct accents.
However, I will remind the reader that I am using the creolisation theory as a metaphor only, rather than as an explicit description of language formation. Cultural formations are always complex and identifying what influences participants, and to what degree, is not something that can be precisely designated into neatly defined categories. This is particularly so in the case of grammars, given their unseen and hidden nature.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented some of the key frameworks and themes that shape my focus and analysis throughout the thesis. I have explored the historical and cultural conditions leading to the formation of modern Buddhism and the various discourses and contexts that have shaped its character. I have also discussed the dynamics of cross-cultural religious acculturation, exemplified through my focus on transmission, translation and transformation. In doing so, I have described a central theoretical framework of my thesis, creolisation theory and discussed how I employ it throughout the thesis. In the following chapter I will detail the methodological approach to the collection of data through interviews with Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.
Chapter Two
The Natural History of my Research

In this chapter I will detail the methods and research design that I have employed in examining the topic of Buddhist social engagement in Australia.¹ I introduce some of the significant assumptions, orientations and challenges that have informed how and why I carried out the research in the way that I did, issues and approaches that significantly shape the findings and conclusions that I present in this thesis. I will begin by discussing my research methods and design. This includes my use of in-depth interviews and my rationale for doing so. I go on to discuss my reasons for focussing on Tibetan Buddhism in Australia as the specific site for exploring the issue of Buddhist social engagement, my insider-outsider status as a researcher and the circumstances that lead to me focussing on Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists rather than ethnic-Tibetan Buddhists. I then introduce participants in this study and the organisations to which they belong. In this chapter I also discuss my research into Buddhist blogs and how they are employed throughout the thesis. I conclude with an explanation of the process of my data analysis, which provides an understanding of how I arrived at the main findings detailed in this thesis.

In-depth Interviews
My approach to researching Buddhist social engagement can be broadly described as constructivist; that is, I take as axiomatic the notion that contemporary socio-cultural contexts shape how Buddhism and its relationship to social engagement is understood and represented by Buddhist practitioners. In order to examine more closely what and how modern discourses are adopted or contested in regards to what constitutes ideal or appropriate forms of Buddhist social engagement in Australia, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists. I considered this style of interviewing to be the most suitable approach to answer the need identified by scholars of modern Buddhism: ‘to illuminate the specific modern ideological forces’ and ‘tacit assumptions that have been involved’ in Buddhism’s ongoing development and acculturation in modern cultures (McMahan, 2008: 8).

¹ I draw the title of this chapter from David Silverman’s Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook (2010). The idea of a ‘natural history’ reflects a particular framework he advises for writing up thesis methodology chapters (Silverman, 2010: 335). Though I have attempted to adopt some of the approaches he suggests, I have not necessarily fulfilled all of the features that a ‘natural history’ requires (Silverman, 2010: 330-338).
In-depth interviews enable a rich exploration of social and cultural phenomenon, providing insights into the complexity of issues relating to a particular theme (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 74, Travers, 2010: 287, Geertz, 1973). Because I wanted to provide detailed descriptions of my participants’ attitudes, I considered in-depth interviewing to be the most suitable method for data collection. Despite social engagement being frequently described as a significant feature of Western Buddhism very few studies have employed in-depth methods, such as interviews to explore what Buddhists in Western countries think about Buddhist social engagement.

In-depth interviews and qualitative research generally are not undertaken to gain a broad illustration of an issue or problem, but rather to enable researchers to explore and provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of what a particular issue, event or circumstance means to them (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 17, Travers, 2010: 309). Conducting qualitative in-depth interviews enabled me to gain a much deeper connection with the participants and their views. The interviews also enabled me to explore topics that were raised by the participants that I had not included in my original interview program, enabling new and unexpected developments and insights to occur.

Given my research methodology I appreciate that the data I have collected and the analysis I have produced does not represent all responses to Buddhist social engagement in Australian Buddhism, or the ‘real’ or ‘definitive’ understanding of attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement amongst Australian Buddhists (Silverman, 2010: 44). I understand that the results are shaped by the interview setting itself, which can be considered as a ‘performed activity’ that neither reflects a predetermined set of values and attitudes or is entirely unique to the interview setting (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011: 156). In the interview setting, knowledge is actively formed, and, thus rather than producing a source of neutral information, it provides a site for interpretive practice (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011: 152). It is a site and a performed activity that however reflects socially grounded phenomena relating to the issues at hand and thus creates text in which broader meanings, tacit understandings and dominant worldviews, can be closely examined. In the following section I will explore the way in which my own standpoint and personal context may have shaped the results.

**Insider-Outsider: My Role in the Research Process**

The category insider-outsider both in personal and social research terms categorises well where I sit in relation to Tibetan Buddhism in Australia. As discussed in the preface,
at the beginning of this research I had been involved in Tibetan Buddhism for over a decade. Throughout this time I had attended Buddhist centres and Tibetan Buddhist public events, had acquaintances with Tibetan Buddhists in Australia, travelled numerous times to Dharamshala, the Indian-based Tibet-global contact point (Zablocki, 2005), as well as other significant global-Buddhist pilgrimage sites (Bodh Gaya, Kathmandu). I had learned to read Tibetan script, spoke Tibetan (rather poorly) and had close relations with several Tibetans, and Tibetan teachers. Consequently, from many perspectives, I may be considered an insider. As I have explained earlier, I was also engaged in social reform issues and movements.

However while my involvement in Tibetan Buddhism was in certain ways broad, it was also limited to a particular group and individuals; and I did not feel like an insider amongst many Western Tibetan Buddhists. Indeed my familiarity yet unfamiliarity, my ‘hyphenated’ position and relation to this culture was a significant compelling factor that lead me to conduct this research. I do not perceive this familiarity-unfamiliarity as producing either a more or less accurate reading of the issues, but rather is a factor that has impacted on the research in particular ways. One impact was that my familiarity with the language and culture of Tibetan Buddhism and Western Tibetan Buddhism helped me to develop greater trust and rapport with participants, two qualities identified to be paramount in unstructured and semi-structured qualitative interviewing (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 78). In other ways, this familiarity-unfamiliarity presented confronting challenges relating to maintaining an empathy with participants, while also carrying out a critical analysis. My history with Tibetan Buddhism was a significant factor in my decision to focus on Tibetan Buddhist practitioners of Australia, a choice I will explain further in the following section.

Specific Nodes and Traditions: Tibetan Buddhism in Australia
A significant feature of the research design of this study is that it is focused on practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. I understand that Tibetan Buddhism represents only one tradition within the heterogeneous and multi-faceted landscape of Buddhism in Australia and Western Buddhism more broadly. Rather than explore the many and diverse traditions of Buddhism within Australia, I focused on Tibetan Buddhism because until recently, the specific distinctions between different traditions within Western Buddhism, (perhaps with the exception of Soka Gakkai International) has not received extensive scholarly analysis. I felt that engaging in an in-depth tradition-specific study might enable future
studies to analyse distinctions or parallels between different Buddhist traditions in Australia, or between different traditions in different Western countries. Given this tradition-specific focus however, I recognise that in order to extend the findings of this study to Australian Buddhism more broadly, further research needs to be conducted with Australian Buddhists of non-Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

In addition to this, another reason why I chose to conduct research with Tibetan Buddhists was because, as discussed above, Tibetan Buddhism was the tradition that I am most familiar with. This familiarity meant that I had a background in the language and culture of Western Tibetan Buddhism and I didn’t require an informant to learn this. This familiarity also gave me easier access to interview participants (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 77).

While recognising the transnational nature of global and Western Buddhisms, I focus particularly on Buddhism in Australia for several reasons. By focusing on attitudes toward social engagement amongst Buddhists in Australia I hope to provide further insights into the particularities of how Buddhism encounters local transformation in an Australian setting. Since the emergence of the sub-discipline of Western Buddhist studies, scholars noted that the category of Western Buddhism was not meant to infer a homogenous category, but rather that Buddhism spreading globally encounters highly specific local transformation (Prebish and Baumann, 2002a: 7). Despite this emphasis however, analysing contemporary Buddhism in Western nations through the lens of ‘Western Buddhism’ has sometimes lead to generalisations, which ignore the differences in the localisation of Buddhism in each country (Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 10). I do not, in this thesis, attempt any in-depth comparative analyses between approaches to Buddhist social engagement in Australia and other Western nations. However focusing particularly on Buddhism in Australia provides a specificity that opens the way for future comparative studies of that kind to be conducted.

My choice of Australia was also based on the fact that I am Australian, which heightened my awareness of the relative lack of research conducted on Buddhism in Australia, especially when compared with research conducted on Buddhism in North America. While the presence of Buddhism in Australia dates back to at least the 1840s, and Buddhism is currently Australia’s largest non-Christian religion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) there remains a dearth of in-depth research into Buddhism in Australia.
(Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 1-2, Halafoff et al., 2012). The research into Buddhist social engagement in Australia to date (Bucknell, 2000, Sherwood, 2003) does not employ in-depth methods. Patricia Sherwood’s study, detailed in *The Buddha is in the Street, Engaged Buddhists in Australia* (2003) is based on open-ended questionnaires, which as noted earlier, Sherwood administered to several Buddhist organisations in Australia. Sherwood’s study paints a picture of uniform and widespread support for Engaged Buddhism, concluding that ninety-six percent of Buddhist organisations in her study were practicing Engaged Buddhism. Included in her definition of Engaged Buddhism are activities such as ‘adult public education programs’, which I understand to represent providing Buddhist teachings (Sherwood, 2003, 2001). Due to the different approach I take to Buddhist social engagement and the different methods and scope of my research, my findings presents a considerably different picture of Buddhist social engagement in Australia. As noted above, it is beyond the scope of this research to indentify whether this is a reflection of a methodological issue or rather, due to the greater diversity of Buddhist traditions included in Sherwood’s study. Further research in the area may elucidate on such questions.

I am conscious that as a result of my choice to focus on Tibetan Buddhists in Australia my findings are neither representative of Australian Buddhism as a whole or Western Buddhism generally. However, despite my focus on a particular branch of Buddhism in Australia, my findings do provide cause to critically consider our assessment of the relationship between social engagement and Buddhism in both Australian Buddhism and Western Buddhism. While local distinctions invariably exist, contemporary Buddhism is a significantly transnational and globalised phenomenon, meaning that Buddhism, in different locales also reflects similar qualities. To elaborate, I understand Buddhism in Australia to represent one node or location within a broader transnational network that constitutes global Buddhism—one that has both distinct local characteristics while also reflecting features of the broader phenomenon. While I recognise that the global is always localised in particular ways, the development of Buddhism in Australia, as Rocha and Barker point out, ‘does not happen in a vacuum’, but rather, is part of an intense flow of ideas, teachers, students, practices and material culture between Australia and other countries (Rocha and Barker, 2011b: 2).

---

As already evident from the previous chapters, throughout the thesis I draw on literature describing Western Buddhism and American Buddhism. I am aware of the problem of using research on Western Buddhism or American Buddhism as a basis for discussions about Australian Buddhism, however two factors make this unavoidable. The first is that there has been an enormously greater amount of work conducted on Buddhism in American than Buddhism in Australia. Secondly, given my understanding that contemporary Buddhism is increasingly a transnational phenomenon, these studies, though requiring nation-based research to confirm, are likely to bear parallels with circumstances in Australia.

Buddhism in Australia represents one aspect of Western Buddhism. As discussed in the introduction, I refer to the category Western Buddhism with an awareness that many of the characteristics that purport to describe Western Buddhism may indeed reflect broad general trends of modernity, which may or may not have their origins in Asian modern reforms, rather than or as well as the West. Nevertheless, I utilise this category because it is the source of much of the literature I employ as a basis to compare and contrast my own findings, and thus, a sub-discipline, which I believe my research, is most relevant to. The extent to which the distinct category of Western Buddhism, in contrast to global Buddhism, is still valid is an important question that warrants further research and discussion, however it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

I also make the claim of the wider applicability of my study because of my research into Buddhist blogs and popular Buddhist media. This fact is exemplified by my research on Buddhist blogs, blogs that are largely written by American Buddhist authors, which share many patterns and themes articulated in my research with Australian Buddhists. Thus while not attempting any definitive comparison between Buddhism in different Western nations my findings do offer further insights in this area.

Recruitment and Interviews
In social research terms, the participants for my interviews were accessed via purposive and snowballing methods (Tranter, 2010: 138, Silverman, 2010: 141). Purposive sampling is seen as the most desirable sampling approach for qualitative data analysis, one that provides a clear criterion or rationale for the selection of participants, places, or events to observe (Ezzy, 2002: 74). After gaining ethics clearance I recruited participants through
attending public events put on at different Tibetan Buddhist centres in Sydney and the Blue Mountains. Prior to attending I made phone contact with the centre to discuss the purpose of my attendance, which I indicated to be as a participant-observer in the events and for potentially recruiting participants for my study. After talking with the organisers of these events I sent them an information sheet on my research via email. When they agreed, which occurred in all cases, I attended events and began to interact and network with attendees. Attending events regularly helped to develop a familiarity with participants, and enabled me to develop rapport and trust with them. It was predominantly according to the kinds of rapport that I developed that I would, either after an initial meeting, or frequently after several, request to interview attendees.

I also used a snowball sampling technique, a method that involves asking existing respondents to assist in establishing contact with other potential participants (Bryman, 2004: 544). In incorporating a snowballing technique I was aware of the critique that a snowballing technique was unlikely to produce a representative sample (Bryman, 2004: 102, Ezzy, 2002: 74). Given, however that I did not set out to obtain a so-called representative sample and understood my data, rather than being, ‘scientifically validated truth’, as historically located, subjective and relative I did not perceive this to take away from the richness or significance of the data collected (Ezzy, 2002: 102).

Through either meeting participants at events, having prior contact with them through my earlier participation in Tibetan Buddhist events or through snowballing I recruited twenty-five Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism to participate in my study. Prior to conducting the interview I sent them an information sheet. (See Appendix A) The interviews were carried out between 2009 and 2010. All interviews were conducted face to face and all were recorded with a sound recorder. Before beginning the interview participants filled in a consent form. (See Appendix B) The interviews lasted on average ninety minutes, with the shortest being forty-five minutes and the longest two around three hours. (In Appendix C I have included the questions that I used as a structure for the interviews.) Background noise and recording issues in one interview meant that I was unable to include that data extensively in my analysis. However I did take notes and the responses were typical of the majority of participants. Consequently this thesis is based on the analysis of twenty-four in-depth interviews with Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.
**Sampling**

In recruiting participants I deliberately chose Australians practicing Tibetan Buddhism who were not well-known public advocates of Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist celebrities or figureheads in Western Buddhism, although one participant came close to this criteria. As suggested in the introduction, I felt such individuals may have already had a disproportionate influence on academic depictions of Western Buddhism, particularly in relationship to social engagement, and so focussed on less high profile individuals.

Though I did not want to include only those whom I knew to be involved in Engaged Buddhist organisations, another feature of my purposive sampling was to recruit some Buddhists I knew were involved in Engaged Buddhist organisations. Similar to the issue described above, I felt a significant portion of research on social engagement in Western Buddhism is based on case studies of Engaged Buddhist leaders and organisations, the campaigns and projects they are involved in and descriptions of how they saw these actions inspired, informed or rationalised by their Buddhist beliefs. As I felt Engaged Buddhist advocates were already the basis of academic work that claimed social engagement was a strong feature of Western Buddhism I sought to include both participants who were involved in Engaged Buddhist movements as well as participants who were not overtly or evidently participants in or advocates of Engaged Buddhist organisations. I should note however that I had no detailed knowledge of any of the participants’ views on Buddhist social engagement before interviewing them.

Another feature of my sampling was a focus on recruiting participants from a range of Buddhist centres. While I did not want to recruit from a single centre, I did however, hope to recruit numerous members of the same centre. The reason for this was that I was aware that different organisations and different schools of Tibetan Buddhism could be quite distinct in their approach and practice of Buddhism. Rather than conduct a study with one single group I hoped to gain interviews with multiple members from various groups. The majority of convert participants were from three different Western Tibetan Buddhist organisations. This included the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), Diamond Way and Yeshe Nyima (E-Vam). My choice of groups was influenced largely by the possibility of access, recruitment and receptivity amongst different groups. I will now provide a brief background to these organisations.
Buddhist Organisations Involved in the Research

*Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT)*

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is one of the largest international networks of Gelugpa Tibetan Buddhist centres catering to non-Tibetans (McAra, 2009: 38). FPMT has 161 centres in forty-one countries. In Australia FPMT is one of the largest Western Tibetan Buddhist organisations, with twenty-one centres or branch organisations (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, 2012). Lama Thubten Yeshe and his student Lama Zopa Rinpoche, two ethnic Tibetans, founded FPMT in the 1970s. After Lama Yeshe’s death in 1984 Lama Zopa became the successor of FMPT. Five participants in this study were members of FPMT.

*Yeshe Nyima and E-Vam*

Yeshe Nyima and E-Vam are located in Sydney and Melbourne respectively. They were both founded by Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. In addition to these two centres Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche has founded centres in Auckland and New York. Since his arrival in Australia in 1982, Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche has become one of the longest-standing Tibetan teachers to remain extensively in Australia (Croucher, 1989). Seven participants in this study were students of Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche and members of either Yeshe Nyima or E-Vam. During the writing of this thesis, on the 24th July 2012 Traleg Rinpoche passed away.

*Diamond Way*

Diamond Way is one of the largest international contemporary Buddhist networks and belongs to the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Danish lay teacher Ole Nydahl Way founded Diamond Way in 1972 (Obadia, 2002: 399). In the four-decades since, according to Diamond Way accounts, the organisation has grown to consist of over 600 centres in over forty countries (Scherer, 2009: 25). Compared to its presence in Denmark, Germany and Eastern Europe, Diamond Way adherence in Australia is relatively small. There are currently eleven Diamond Way centres in Australia. Six participants in this study were members of Diamond Way.

The three organisations involved in the research represent the most significant Tibetan Buddhist organisations in Australia and two are internationally significant. FPMT is one of the most extensive Tibetan Buddhist organisations in Australia, with the most numerous centres and, as noted above, represents the largest Gelugpa organisation globally.
Diamond Way is less significant in Australia, although internationally represents one the largest Kagyu organisations. The Australian organisations founded by Traleg Rinpoche, in particular E-Vam is one of the most long-standing and significant Tibetan Buddhist organisations in Australia (Croucher, 1989: 114). (See Buddhanet’s World Buddhist Directory, under Vajrayana (Tibetan), for a detailed listing of Tibetan Buddhist centres in Australia (Pannyavaro, 2014)).

Participant Details
In the table below I provide some demographic and descriptive details of the participants in this study including: gender, age, years being Buddhist, Buddhist centre/group affiliation. In keeping with my project’s confidentiality commitments, with the exception of one participant who did not wish her name to be changed, all of the names used in the tables and throughout the thesis are pseudonyms. One participant, Philipa, did not provide me her age, so I have provided a likely age range.

The majority of participants had had a long-term involvement with Buddhism. In this case I characterise long-term as being five years or more. Only three participants had been Buddhist for less than five years. Six participants had been Buddhist for over twenty years, including four whose involvement spanned more than thirty years. All of the participants in the study lived either in urban or outer metropolitan centres. No participants were from rural Australia.
Table 1. Convert Participant Profiles: Gender, Centre Affiliation, Age and Years of Buddhist Involvement (in order of interview date)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Centre Affiliation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Buddhist Involvement (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ani</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>FPMT</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>FPMT</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Alisha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Suzie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>FPMT</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>FPMT</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Thea</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>FPMT</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Chelsea</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Philipa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yeshe</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jacqui</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Ruel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>YN/E-Vam</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethnic-Tibetan Australian Buddhists

As noted in the preface, a compelling reason for me conducting this research was my interest in Buddhist social engagement amongst Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists, yet uncertainty about the widespread perceptions and attitudes toward it. This was in contrast to my sensed understanding, albeit relative, of Tibetan attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement. This understanding was based on close relations I had with several Tibetans over the previous decades. I had experienced a significant distinction between the approach toward issues related to Buddhist social engagement amongst European and Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists and that of ethnic Tibetans. My desire to understand whether this distinction was a result of my own limited experience or represented something broader was another impetus to conducting this research.

Given my greater familiarity with Tibetan attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement, in addition to the challenges that my insufficient language skills might pose to conducting in-depth interviews with ethnic Tibetan Australians, I did not initially include interviewing Tibetan Australian Buddhists in my research design. However in the midst of conducting my fieldwork an Australian Tibetan friend offered to translate interviews with several ethnic Tibetan Australian Buddhist practitioners. When this opportunity arose I utilised it as I thought this would provide a valuable means to compare and contrast the data generated amongst Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists. I subsequently conducted nine interviews with Australian Tibetans, all of whom were either permanent residents or citizens of Australia. However during and after conducting six of these interviews I realised that my Tibetan language skills, and the English capacities of the interviewee and translator were insufficient to adequately represent the views of the ethnic Tibetan-Australian Buddhists. Given these limitations I was unable to conduct a thorough analysis of these interviews. Though in chapter three and four I do make reference to some of the views expressed by ethnic Australian-Tibetan participants who were proficient in English, any thorough analysis comparing Australian Tibetan and Euro-Australian attitudes falls beyond the scope of this research.

Despite the fact that a sustained analysis of ethnic Tibetan Australian Buddhists views does not appear in this research, a significant underlying concern, as pointed out in the introduction, has been the way in which the description of Western Buddhism as socially engaged appears to rely in part on a misrepresentation of Asian Buddhism, both modern and traditional. I hope that an indirect result of this research may be a greater
acknowledgement and interest in the significance of social engagement in Buddhism in Asia and amongst ethnically Asian Buddhists in Western countries.

I am acutely aware of and interested in the dynamics within Western Buddhism between so-called ethnic and convert Buddhists, and the significance of debates within the field about this issue. Given some of the problems of these terms, well documented elsewhere (Hickey, 2010, Wilson, 2009a), I chose to use the terms Euro-Australian, Euro-American, Asian-Australian or Tibetan-Australian throughout this thesis. (See Numrich (2003), Wilson (2009a) and Hickey (2010) for illuminating contributions to this debate.)

Using Blogs in Sociological Research

Another source of data in this thesis comes from Buddhist blogs. In this section I will discuss the value of using Internet-based resources in sociological research, their relevance for studies into contemporary Buddhism, and more specifically how I have employed and analysed Buddhist blogs in this thesis. I will first discuss the increasing interest amongst sociologists for using Internet-based research as a means of conducting sociological research.

Although the research possibilities and issues involved with online qualitative research are still in their relative infancy it is increasingly recognised that Internet research offers a new and exciting frontier for social research (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013, Hookway, 2008, Hewson, 2008, Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). In the social sciences, quantitative researchers have made the most extensive use of the Internet as a method of gathering data, usually with survey style applications. While a little slower, in the last decade qualitative researchers have been increasingly turning to the Internet for primary sources of data (Hewson, 2008: 543, Hookway, 2008: 92). As Claire Hewson writes, Internet-mediated research or IMR as it is known, has been

characterized as the gathering of novel, original data (via the Internet) with the aim of subjecting them to analysis to provide new evidence in relation to a specific research question (Hewson et al., 2003). This can be contrasted with secondary Internet research, which uses the Internet to locate secondary information sources, such as online journals, newspapers, library data-bases, and so on (Hewson, 2008: 543).

One example of IMR is the use of a weblog, or ‘blog’ as they are more commonly known. A blog refers to a website which contains a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author
A significant feature of blogs is their archiving system organised by date and their feedback mechanism in which readers can comment on specific posts (Hookway, 2008: 92).

From her research into blogs Judit Bar-Ilan claims that blogs are excellent information hubs, i.e. provide short summaries (sometimes with a personal touch) with links to further information on major issues related to the topic of the blog (Bar-Ilan, 2005: 297).

Topic related blogs, such as Buddhist blogs, are often highly conversational (Bar-Ilan, 2005). Susan Herring et al. describe the ‘blogosphere’ as a densely interconnected conversation, with bloggers linking to other bloggers, referring to them in their entries, and posting comments on each other’s blogs (Herring et al., 2005: 1).

As a source of data blogs offer substantial benefits for social scientific research, providing similar, but in some cases more extensive opportunities than parallel forms of ‘offline’ qualitative research. Blogs provide a publicly available, low-cost and instantaneous technique for collecting substantial amounts of data, providing immediate text without the resource intensiveness of tape recorders and transcription (Hookway, 2008, Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 232).

Another advantage of blog-based research is that it can help avoid problems associated with collecting sensitive information that stems from using traditional survey or interview methods (Hookway, 2008: 95). Though not an obviously ‘sensitive’ topic, attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement contain many implicit and explicit moral and ethical

3 There are numerous categories of blogs, such as personal and self-expressive as well as topic-oriented where the topic can be related to a hobby or to the author’s profession or business (business promotion) (Bar-Ilan, 2005).

4 In their chapter ‘Conversations in the Blogosphere: An Analysis “From the Bottom Up”’ Herring et al., do question the degree of interconnectedness in the web, concluding that ‘the blogosphere is partially interconnected, and that blog conversations, while occasionally intense, are the exception rather than the rule’ (Herring et al., 2005: 2). However their description above surmises accurately the Buddhist blogs that I monitored discussing Buddhist social engagement. These types of blog conversations can be considered to reflect, albeit with significant distinctions, the traditional offline focus group setting.
implications. I found participants to be particularly self-conscious and wary about how they chose to present their attitudes to Buddhist social engagement. By contrast, bloggers and those commenting on blogs appeared comfortable being far more explicit and direct in articulating their attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement.

As researchers have noted, blogs nearly always have a personal dimension and often tend to be quite confessional in nature (Bar-Ilan, 2005: 297, Hookway, 2008: 97). Though bloggers are writing for an implicit, if not explicit audience, at the same time they are anonymous, or relatively unidentifiable. Nicolas Hookway suggests that the partial anonymity of the online context means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they (partially) remain hidden from view (Hookway, 2008: 97). This tension between visibility and invisibility gives blogging a confessional quality, where more controversial attitudes can be verbalised (Hookway, 2008: 97).

Although still relatively uncharted, research conducted so far suggests that gathering data over the Internet is an important way mixed methods researchers can strengthen their offline research findings (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013, Hewson, 2008). This research suggests that using the Internet for one component of a research project serves to complement research findings from the offline component (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013, Davis et al., 2004).

Another advantage of using blogs as a research tool is that, like the majority of online research strategies, they enable access to populations otherwise geographically or socially removed from the researcher (Hookway, 2008: 93, Hessler et al., 2003). The global nature of blogs means they are an ideal source for conducting micro-comparative research, particularly valuable for research exploring globalisation (Hookway, 2008: 97). Though conducting a micro-comparative analysis is not the aim of this thesis, I employ data I collated from Buddhist blogs to provide additional insights. I found parallels exist between the interviews I conducted and attitudes circulating within a broader contemporary Buddhist context.

Despite these advantages, there remains many barriers to the use of new technologies in social science research (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013). There are some researchers who feel, for example, that such data is not representative or that obtaining a representative sample is not possible, given the ever-changing nature of cyberspace. Thus there remains a question as to how this data can be generalised to a population (Lieberman, 2008,
Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013). Furthermore with a data source such as blogs, researchers may have concerns about potential identity play and deception (Hookway, 2008: 97). Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face interaction can cause meaning to be lost in the collection of data because non-verbal cues are missing from the interaction (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013).

Another issue relating to the use of blogs for social research is the relative transience of blogs. The ever-changing nature of cyberspace was evident in the ephemeral nature of blog sites in my research, with several of the blog sites prominent at the time of conducting the research no longer in existence at the completion of this research. This poses issues in terms of verifiability. In the case of my research, in all those cases were blog sites were no longer in operation, I had evidence of their prior existence in other blog posts and articles posted online that were still in operation. I address some of these concerns below, where I will discuss more specifically how I selected and analysed blogs in my research, including what weight they hold in the conclusions I reach in this thesis. I will begin this section by citing the increasing relevance of utilising blogs for researching contemporary Buddhism.

**Buddhist Blogs**

It is increasingly recognised by scholars that blogs are becoming evermore significant in contemporary Buddhism and, consequently, a highly relevant tool for understanding and analysing developments therein (Prebish, 2011, Schedneck, 2009, Lee, 2009). Recent research on contemporary Buddhism all points to the growing significance of the Internet as a forum for expression and investigating contemporary Buddhism. Recent research that either incorporates Internet-based research or focuses on contemporary Buddhism and the Internet include: Lee (2009), Ostrowski (2006), Busch (2010), Connelly (2010), Wilst et al. (2010).

Brooke Schedneck, a scholar of modern and Western Buddhism also writes about the significance of the Buddhoblogosphere. In a blog post titled ‘Trends in Western Buddhism’ she writes:

There is a whole close-knit community thriving on debate and discussion of a diversity of issues almost daily. This community of course, is the buddhoblogosphere. Tackling similar issues as recent scholars such as race and racism, the dynamic...
between culture and religion, and the secularization of meditation teachings, among others. This community comments on online and print Buddhist media and is more and more moving toward incorporating ideas of recent scholarship. The buddhoblogosphere is on the cutting edge of what is going on within Buddhism in the West, and they will have increasing importance for scholarship about contemporary Buddhism (Schedneck, 2009).

Though requiring greater evidence and research to support it, Schedneck’s claim that ‘the buddhoblogosphere is on the cutting edge of what is going on within Buddhism in the West’ is at least suggestive of the significance that the study of blogs holds for understanding trends within Western, modern and global Buddhism.

In a discussion on the ‘monumental’ influence of technology on the ongoing development of contemporary American Buddhism Prebish writes

perhaps the technological innovation that may have the biggest impact on the practice of American Buddhism is the creation of “Blogs” (Prebish, 2011: 250).

He goes on to write that

[while] it’s impossible to calculate how many Buddhist blogs there are because they come and go quickly—even daily—there are some relatively stable blogs, and they tell us quite a bit on how this next form of instant, far-reaching, communication has influenced both the study and practice of American Buddhism (Prebish, 2011: 250).

This significance of blogs in American Buddhism was also discussed at the Buddhism without Borders Conference held in Berkeley in March 2010. Professor of Journalism, Mindy McAdams, presented a paper titled ‘Finding American Buddhism in Blogs’. After listening to McAdams’ paper I began monitoring Buddhist blogs. My attention toward them piqued when, as noted in the introduction, a wave of blog posts debating the merits or otherwise of Buddhist social engagement were written in response to the ‘Symposium for Western Socially Engaged Buddhism’, organised by the Zen Peacemakers. Contemporary Buddhists, from a range of Buddhist traditions and countries including scholars, practitioners and teachers alike attended the symposium. This included Buddhist scholars Christopher Queen and Sallie King, American Buddhist teacher, translator and
author Bhikkhu Bodhi, American Zen Bernie Glassman, and Engaged Buddhist author and teacher Alan Senauke. The program, including lectures and panel discussions were soon posted on the Zen Peacemakers’ webpage. A range of Buddhist bloggers responded to these posts, writing critically, favourably or neutrally about Buddhist social engagement. Adam, a Buddhist blogger at Fly Like a Crow, surmises the debate writing:

There certainly has been quite a lot of talk lately about Socially Engaged Buddhism, and whether or not it is crap, real, necessary, or unavoidable (2010).

I monitored this discussion closely. I followed blogs that wrote on Buddhist social engagement as well as the comments and blogs written in response to them. Through indentifying a blog post discussing the topic, I was always led to further posts, to which the blogger made reference and frequently included links to. As Bar-Ilan writes:

Often blog postings (the individual entries) contain links to web sites or blogs and their main purpose is to discuss the contents of these links or simply to inform the readers of the blog about the existence of these sites (Bar-Ilan, 2005: 297).

In addition, I also closely followed the comments. In many blogs readers’ comments are an integral feature of the blog, and comments themselves often contain at least one additional link, often to the commentator’s own blog (Bar-Ilan, 2005: 299). I collated all of the posts and their comments that I could locate that debated Buddhist social engagement, spurred from the 2010 symposium. I monitored blogs for a period of two years; however the great majority of the blog posts that I later analysed and incorporated into my findings were written in the two months after the symposium, between August 2010 and October 2010.

The prominent bloggers involved in this discussion on Buddhist social engagement were American. Though I sought out bloggers and blog posts that were not American based, the overwhelming majority of bloggers discussing Buddhist social engagement were American Buddhists. While I sought out blogs written by Australian Tibetan Buddhists, I was unable to locate any. I did however encounter one prominent Euro-Australian Buddhist blogger; a Theravādan monk, Bhante Sujato, whom I had interviewed. While

---

5 For more information see: http://zenpeacemakers.org/socially-engaged-buddhism/aug-2010-symposium/
his blog, ‘Sujato’s Blog, Buddhism for a Small World: Views and Opinions’ (Sujato, 2014) spans an impressive array of themes including Buddhist social engagement he did not directly engage in the debate discussed above and as I had interviewed him I did not include material from his blog in my analysis. Thus I should note that, given the blog posts I collated were not written by Australian Tibetan Buddhists, though they provide a valuable additional source of data, they are supplementary, reinforcing but not central to the conclusions I draw. I will now describe the process of analysis and the role the blog posts play in the argument in my thesis in more detail.

**Analysis of Buddhist Blog Posts**

On completing the analysis of my interview material, with the blog posts still in the back of my mind, I was prompted to consider whether I would see similar results if I conducted a more thorough systematic content analysis of the blog material. Only after I had completed my analysis and discussion of the interview material did I consider systematically analysing and incorporating blog materials into my thesis. At this stage I began carrying out a content analysis of the blog posts, with the aim of identifying whether the same trends and themes emerged in the blog posts that I had identified in my interviews.

As I describe in detail in the final section of this chapter, the result of the various stages of analysis of my interview material lead me to identifying a typology of four distinct responses to Buddhist social engagement, named according to the overriding worldview that influenced them—described elsewhere as accents. I wondered whether the blogs might provide some hints as to whether these accents existed beyond Tibetan Buddhism in Australia. Hence after carrying out a content analysis on the blog posts, I sought to identify whether these same orientations, or others, were also present in the Buddhist blog posts I had collated. I felt this would provide some indication, albeit preliminary, as to whether or not these types existed beyond Tibetan Buddhism and beyond Buddhism in Australia. However I should be clear that the conclusions and findings presented in this thesis are based on the interviews I conducted. While my findings do not rest on the blog posts, they do serve to strengthen and complement my offline research, a function blogs serve well in doing, as other researchers have suggested (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2013, Hewson, 2008).

In identifying whether bloggers and those commenting on blog posts resembled any of the accents I had discovered in my interview research I looked for patterns in their responses and attitudes, key perceptions, arguments and statements that bore strong resemblance to
the exemplars of each category from my interviews. I found in numerous cases a strong resemblance to statements and attitudes from my interviews, particularly according to the four types I had identified. Consequently, to further illuminate these particular orientations and accents and to point to their likely existence beyond Tibetan Buddhism in Australia I have provided examples of these resemblances in the relevant chapters. There I discuss both the parallels and, where relevant, the distinctions between the Australian Tibetan Buddhist practitioners interviewed and blog participants. I appreciate however that these blogs do not constitute a basis for conclusions about the place and status of social engagement in Australia and further research is required to identify the particular characteristics and prominence of these trends in different forms of Buddhism in different locales. While not central to the analysis and conclusions I draw in this thesis the blog posts strongly suggest that the typology developed from interviews amongst Australian Tibetan Buddhists is of relevance beyond Tibetan Buddhism in Australia and that these orientations likely exist in various forms of Buddhism in the West.

The blogs I consistently followed in relation to Buddhist social engagement from August 2010 to January 2013 are included in the following table.
Table 2. Buddhist Bloggers Discussing Buddhist Social Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger Name</th>
<th>Blog Title</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Lineage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algernon (2010a, 2010b)</td>
<td>Notes from a Burning House</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam (2010)</td>
<td>Fly like a Crow</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daw, John/Jack&lt;sup&gt;6&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Point of Contact: Subtle Dharma Mouth Punch</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovett, Kyle&lt;sup&gt;7&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>The Reformed Buddhist</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loncke, Katie (2010)</td>
<td>Kloncke</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Insight Meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson, Nathan (2010, 2011)</td>
<td>Dangerous Harvests</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Zen Buddhism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will now discuss the approach I developed to analyse my interview data, which I later applied to the blog posts and comments from blogs listed in the above table.


<sup>7</sup> Kyle Lovett’s blog The Reformed Buddhist is no longer on-line. Evidence of his previous posts on Buddhist social engagement can be found at Adam (2010) and Thompson (2010). Further evidence of the previous existence of The Reformed Buddhist can be found in an interview conducted with Lovett on Tricycle’s blog. This can be found at: http://www.tricycle.com/blog/qa-reformed-buddhist-blogger-kyle-lovett. Accessed 18/01/2014.

67
Data Analysis

In an effort to be more transparent about my research process, something social researchers identify as providing greater trustworthiness in the findings (Koch, 1994), in this section I will describe each stage of the data analysis process, which culminated in the identification of four prominent orientations toward Buddhist social engagement, a typology I detail throughout this thesis. Before discussing explicit examples, I will introduce the framework and key terms I use for describing the unfoldment of this process—‘critical moments’ and ‘critical turns’.

In the book *Critical Moments in Qualitative Research*, qualitative social researchers Hilary Byre-Armstrong, Debbie Horsfall and Joy Higgs write:

> Critical moments are those times when researchers are impelled to negotiate between the theories and conventions about research and their lived experience of it (Byrne-Armstrong et al., 2001: 4).

The authors describe how these ‘messy, unspoken, complex and disturbing moments’ are a significant yet often concealed feature of the process of conducting qualitative research (Byrne-Armstrong et al., 2001: 4). Critical moments in the research process arose for me when, through persistent engagement with my interview data I identified limitations in the frameworks I was using. These limitations emerged when I became aware that particular approaches I was taking failed to capture the richness or underlying socio-cultural contexts that informed approaches to Buddhist social engagement, something I describe in further detail below. Negotiating these impasses produced ‘critical turns’—new directions and approaches in how I then analysed the data. Each critical turn was cumulative. That is, I drew on the insights of the previous stage and development in formulating the next one. Each stage was pivotal in the production of the typology that forms the basis of the analysis detailed throughout this thesis. I will now describe this in more detail, using specific examples.

**Coding**

I began my data analysis by carrying out a qualitative thematic analysis. Codes were central in this process for identifying prominent themes and patterns in my data. Clive Seale, Professor of sociology, describes coding schemes as ‘the creative beginnings of the eventual insights which the researcher hopes to gain by investigating the social world’
My codes emerged deductively from my pre-existing concerns and questions, as well as inductively, from the data itself. I coded my data during numerous readings of transcripts. The codes related to themes that emerged repeatedly in different interviews. These included Buddhist social engagement as engagement in everyday life, the influence of the teacher, Buddhist political activism, ideas about religion in the public sphere, non-proselytisation, attitudes to suffering, Buddhist social welfare and Buddhist public advocacy.

As I engaged with the grouped data in each of these categories, I began to notice certain overarching ‘moods’ that underlie the attitudes presented. I had adopted this particular concept of moods from renowned American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s analysis of religion (Geertz, 1973). I identified these moods, in relation to my participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement as: ambiguity; an uncertainty about what engagement was and how participants felt about engagement or an uncertainty about its importance, ambivalence; a mixture of both support for and resistance to Buddhist social engagement, support for Buddhist social engagement, and resistance. Identifying these moods represented a critical moment, and produced the first critical turn in my data analysis, as a shift from themes and topics to moods.

In analysing which moods were more prevalent it emerged that ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement far outweighed support for Buddhist social engagement. Given the prevalent understandings in academic literature on the topic, I felt that identifying this widespread ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement was a significant finding in itself. However as I began to look further, I realised that different features of engagement were being responded to in different ways. This represented another critical moment in the research process and subsequent critical turn.

This critical turn lead me to structure my analysis of Buddhist social engagement around three aspects of engagement identified by Rothberg: political engagement, social welfare, and everyday life (Rothberg, 1998: 273). (These were discussed in the introductory chapter.) I noted that while some participants were resistant about some aspects of engagement, they supported other aspects. For example, while participants expressed no resistance toward Buddhist engagement in everyday life, Buddhist political activism was approached with significant caution and frequently rejected. Consequently I began to structure my data around these three aspects of Buddhist social engagement. Around
the code ‘political engagement’ for example, were sub-codes or branches, reflecting the attitudes or perceptions expressed in relation to that form of engagement. Around these ‘attitude’ sub-codes were further branches, identifying the rationale or key statement that conveyed the attitude. Identifying these attitudes according to aspects of Buddhist social engagement represented another ‘critical turn’ in my data analysis process.

In structuring my data around these different forms of social engagement—political activism, social welfare and everyday life—however I began to notice further underlying patterns. These patterns did not relate so much to different aspects of Buddhist social engagement, though there were elective affinities between them. Rather it related to the sense of an orientation, framework or worldview that were informing these moods. I began to feel that the moods I had identified earlier were ‘symptomatic’ of these underlying discourses and orientations and thus, significant to identify. This represented another critical moment, and represented the final turning point in my analysis that lead to the development of the typology. The development of the typology itself however also had numerous critical moments and turns. I will now explore the key developments that culminated in the development of the typology of four prominent accents, as well as a grammar, that I identify as significantly informing and shaping Australian Tibetan Buddhist approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

*Development of Typology*

As noted above, the typology was a culmination of each stage of the data analysis process. In addition, certain informants, and the works of particular theorists were central to its development.

One accent within the typology first became apparent when I was writing about the ways that participants had responded to the idea of Buddhist social welfare, in particular those participants who were ambivalent about it. In these responses participants described suffering as being located in the mind, which they frequently suggested posed a tension with Buddhist social welfare. One example of this was one participant Jerry who said, ‘as far as Buddhism being just a charity institution I don’t see it as that, I mean that’s very, that’s so limiting’. Another questioned the importance of forms of social welfare, given that, as he described, ‘our ideas are the cause of suffering and ideas means an idea about how, how things could be and they’re not, or our ideas about how we want things to be’. (This issue will be explored in greater depth in chapter seven).
When musing over these responses and contemplating what framed these attitudes to Buddhist social welfare I re-engaged with Lopez’s work on modern Buddhism, particularly his description of the distinct approach to understanding and addressing suffering that characterised modern Buddhism. In his influential and seminal work on modern Buddhism, *A Modern Buddhist Bible* Lopez writes:

Suffering was often interpreted by modern Buddhists to mean not the sufferings of birth, ageing, sickness and death, but the sufferings caused by poverty and social injustice. One of the constituents of modern Buddhism is, therefore, the promotion of social good, whether it be in the form of rebellion against political oppression (especially by colonial powers), of projects on behalf of the poor (Lopez, 2002: xxxii).

In the same text Lopez goes on to say that most ‘Buddhist charitable organizations have been founded by reformist monks or by laypeople, a trend that continues today in ‘Engaged Buddhism’ (Lopez, 2002: xxxiii).

In relation to the data analysis I was undertaking at the time these descriptions were significant to me for numerous reasons. Firstly, while contrasting with the majority of participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement, Lopez’s descriptions of modern Buddhism closely mirrored the approach of one participant in my research. Yeshe, a Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhist nun was one of several participants that produced a critical turn in the development of the typology. Her approach mirrored the qualities described by Lopez above and she strongly supported all aspects of Buddhist social engagement, as per Rothberg’s description (Rothberg, 1998: 273).

Another underlying feature of Yeshe’s approach to engagement was reform—both of society generally and Western Buddhism particularly. In her emphasis on social reform Yeshe closely paralleled literature describing modern Asian Engaged Buddhists and Western Engaged Buddhists. For example, Sallie King, a scholar specialising in Engaged Buddhism, in the conclusion to *Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* describes the figures introduced throughout the anthology to be ‘reformers’ (King, 1996a: 402). In the same anthology, Donald Swearer, an authority on Southeast Asian Buddhist societies, uses the same term to describe one of two opposing developments within Thai Buddhism (1996). Yeshe’s approach also closely resembled descriptions of
Western Engaged Buddhists presented earlier by Queen: ‘collective action to address the systemic causes of suffering and promote social advancement in the world’ (Queen, 2000b: 3). Based on the emphasis on social reform in Yeshe’s approach and her analysis of suffering mirroring Lopez’s description of Asian reformists, and I came to identify Yeshe’s approach as reformist. (This will be detailed further in chapter seven.)

Part of the significance of naming Yeshe’s approach was that it represented but one of several distinct approaches. This approach however has frequently been presented as the approach toward social engagement in Western and modern Buddhism. While two participants in my research displayed characteristics of this approach, it was not the only approach to Buddhist social engagement, or, in terms of the sample in my research, as widespread as academic literature suggested it was. Indeed, there emerged significant ambivalence and resistance to it amongst many participants. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of re-reading Lopez’s description of a modern Buddhist approach to suffering and engagement—‘rebellion against political oppression’, ‘projects on behalf of the poor’—was how absent it was in the majority of responses. If the majority of participants were not emulating a ‘modern Buddhist’ approach to suffering, what was it then—traditional? Or rather, was there more than one modern Buddhist approach to suffering? This further emphasised the complexity and diversity that characterised contemporary approaches to Buddhist social engagement and my need to articulate them in describing my findings.

As noted above prominent scholar of Engaged Buddhism King had also identified Asian Engaged Buddhists as reformers. In doing so she drew on one feature of a typology describing different Asian religious responses to modernity formulated by Professor of sociology Robert Bellah (King, 1996a: 401, Bellah, 1965). Bellah’s typology included traditional, neo-traditional, reformist and Christian (Bellah, 1965). Applying his typology to Asian Buddhist responses to modernity, King drew on just two—reformist and neo-traditional. Bellah writes that neo-traditionalism has often been adopted by ‘traditional elite groups’ as ‘an ideology designed to keep change to a minimum and defend the status quo as far as possible’ and ‘defend traditional cultural values, which are held to be superior to those of any other tradition’ (Bellah, 1965: 201, 213). According to Bellah what distinguishes traditionalists from neo-traditionalists is that the latter employ ‘modern ideas and methods’ in their attempt to defend traditional values (Bellah, 1965: 201). I wondered then, were those participants in my research who were not reformist, those
whose approach did not parallel Lopez’s description of a modern Buddhist approach to suffering, neo-traditionalists?

I began to explore whether participants who were opposed or showed significant caution toward Buddhist social engagement were expressing a form of neo-traditionalism in their approach toward Buddhist social engagement. However, upon closer inspection, this did not seem to capture what I felt was the dominant orientation emergent in my research. One of the prominent patterns in responses included negative depictions of religious engagement in the public sphere and a concern that Buddhist social engagement mirrored or would be associated with these.

Again, the work of theorists, this time, sociologists of religion and scholars of a newly emerging field named ‘critical secularism’, a field that places secularism at the centre of its focus, rather than religion per se, (Scherer, 2011b) helped me to reach a richer conceptual understanding of this prominent pattern. In particular, descriptions of secularism in the work of Casanova (Casanova, 2006, 2011) and renowned political theorist William Connolly (Connolly, 1999, 2011) resounded most strongly with what I felt were the underlying themes and attitudes of many responses to Buddhist social engagement.

Both Connolly and Casanova highlight that secularism is more than simply the absence of religion, but rather a worldview, an ideology in itself, that has an overpowering influence on how religion is depicted and perceived in modern cultures (Connolly, 2011, Casanova, 2006). Informed by the work of these theorists, I identified views and concerns in my research to reflect a certain form of secularism, which produced a kind of secular depiction or response to Buddhist social engagement. Examples of this included a concern about institutional religion and institutional religious engagement in the public sphere, an implicit sense that religion should consequently be an individual and private thing, rather than something publicly and socially articulated. These underlying concerns appeared to represent the central issue that the majority of participants negotiated their approach to Buddhist social engagement in response to.

Scholars of secularism and secularisation also point out that there are multiple approaches to the secular and secularism (Possamai, 2008, Casanova, 2011). The form of secularism participants appeared to be negotiating with in depicting an approach to Buddhist social engagement was one that identified the appropriate place for religion to be in
the private sphere. A central imperative in what I identify as an approach to Buddhist social engagement spoken with an accent of secularism was that it was not in overt tension with these values. Beyond those participants that reflected this influence overtly, I identified the influence of forms of secularism to be in existence in all participants’ responses and hence identified secularism as the grammar of participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement. In the previous chapter I have discussed in more depth how I define a grammar in contrast to an accent. This issue will be discussed in greater detail throughout the thesis.

I was not yet convinced however that the accents so far identified—reformist and secular—described all of the prominent trends expressed by participants in my research. My interview with Paula, another participant, further illuminated the diversity and complexity in approaches and attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement, an interview that brought about another critical turn in my analysis and the development of my typology.

After conducting my interview with Paula, that was over three hours and for me, riveting from beginning to end, her attitudes to Buddhist social engagement circled around in my head for months. (These will be explored in greater detail in chapter six.) Paula presented an orientation that shared many parallels with secularism, but also had its own distinctive flavour, particularly with its emphasis on engagement in everyday life and a strong emphasis on the so-called ‘ordinary’. Paula had expressed more overtly than anyone, a resistance to Buddhist social engagement. However, in an apparent contradiction to this, throughout much of the rest of the interview she went on to describe in passionate detail, at one point with tears welling in her eyes, what Buddhist social engagement meant to her. Paula’s descriptions of Buddhist social engagement, as with another participant, Ani, emphasised spontaneous everyday encounters with others and the importance of embodying a ‘natural, authentic organic way of being’. It was an approach she and two others participants described as being authentic engagement—it emphasised the individual, the personal, the everyday.

While sharing some features of a secular response, Paula’s approach to engagement was clearly distinct from it. It was at odds with a reformist approach and did not feature the characteristics of neo-traditionalism described by Bellah. What I did see in Paula’s response were many features of the widespread influence of romanticism: an emphasis on spontaneity, interiority, naturalness and authenticity. I identified similar traits with
two other participants. According to the parallels between these participants’ depictions of Buddhist social engagement and romanticism, and guided by McMahan’s description of the impact of romanticism in the formation of modern Buddhism (2008: 215-240), I identified this response carry an accent of romanticism.

I felt at this point that I was close to producing a useful conceptual framework for understanding the diverse responses to Buddhist social engagement expressed by participants. I was still left with a final conundrum however, another compelling and distinctive trend within my research which could not easily be explained according to the three accents mentioned so far. This was one of the most unexpected responses to emerge in my research and the most challenging to represent, a trend, while somewhat veiled and occluded, I felt I could not avoid detailing and analysing more deeply.

Again one participant, Ruel, most clearly expressed the themes associated with this approach, though aspects of it were emergent in two other participants. My interview with Ruel was another that was fascinating for how distinct it was from academic descriptions of Western Engaged Buddhism and for conveying how variable and conflicting participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement were. The central issue animating Ruel’s approach to engagement was Islam and the need to protect Western culture from the spread of Islam. Indeed, Ruel spent a majority of the interview outlining the grave threat he perceived Islam to represent to Australian culture. Ruel depicted his anti-Islamic position, and his public advocacy of it, with Buddhist principles and perceived it as a form of Buddhist practice. Alongside the emphasis on protecting Western culture from Islam, was the need to protect Buddhism from Islam. My research, presented in further detail in chapter five, reveals a complex yet substantial connection between this approach and the leader and founder of Diamond Way Buddhism, Danish-born, Nydahl.

A critical moment in understanding this approach, particularly its organisational basis, came through reading an academic article by scholar and member of Diamond Way Burkhard Scherer (Scherer, 2009). In ‘Interpreting the Diamond Way: Contemporary Convert Buddhism in Transition’ Scherer describes how a key feature of Nydahl’s identity was as a Wrathful Protector Buddhist deity (Scherer, 2009: 35). Furthermore, Scherer described how Nydahl conceived that one of the main functions of his role as a Wrathful Protector Deity was to protect Buddhism and Western culture from Islam (Scherer, 2009: 35). This article provided an ‘insiders’ view on Diamond Way rationalities, giving me greater insight into the frameworks informing Nydahl’s students’ responses.
At this point I identified this approach as a neo-traditional one. I drew this conclusion based on the fact that Nydahl, who had evidently inspired Ruel’s approach, employed traditional Tibetan Buddhist symbols and practices in a distinctly modern way and in response to modern contexts. In addition to this, another feature of this approach that paralleled Bellah’s description of neo-traditionalism was the emphasis on ‘defending traditional values’. Ruel strongly emphasised conserving both Buddhism and Western culture—the principal threat to both was Islam.

Over time however I was increasingly unsettled about identifying this approach as neo-traditional, though it appeared to contain features of it. My uneasiness increased further after reading an article by Buddhist scholar Martin Mills which describes another contemporary approach to Buddhist social engagement (Mills, 2010). With its employment of traditional religious worldviews and ritualistic practices, such as stupa building (Mills, 2010), this approach appeared to more closely exemplify a neo-traditional approach and fit far more closely Bellah’s description of neo-traditionalism, described above.

A central feature of both approaches was the Kālacakra, a highly important Tibetan Tantric text and ritual practice (Powers, 2010c). The Tibetan-led approach described by Mills emphasised World Peace and non-violence, and oriented around World Peace Projects including Stupas for World Peace, The World Peace Vase Project and World Peace Ceremonies (2010: 99). While these ideals may have been the implicit goals of the Diamond Way approach, what appeared at the forefront was a fear of Islam, which bordered on Islamophobia, a concern about the threat it posed to Western freedoms and a resulting ambivalence yet support for military intervention in Islamic countries.

While at first I entertained the idea of including two types of neo-traditionalism in my typology—Tibetan neo-traditionalism and Diamond Way neo-traditionalism—I increasingly felt that in the case of Ruel and Nydahl some other worldview was more strongly animating their approach. Also I was reluctant to identify it as a Diamond Way approach because not all Diamond Way members adopt this view and one participant Gina, actively resisted it.

The final critical turn in relation to understanding this distinct accent emerged when I again began looking more closely into the themes, language and imperatives underlying Ruel’s approach. In doing so I felt that the stronger influence on this approach was political
neoconservatism and that traditional Buddhist motifs were being employed to rationalise politically neoconservative views rather than being their inspiration. In particular the way Islam was constructed, its positioning as a key threat to Western culture, and a strong criticism of political correctness convinced me that political neoconservatism was the more significant influence orienting this approach and thus the most appropriate signifier for it. This was the final turn in the process of identifying the four prominent accents in participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement in my research—secularism, neoconservatism, reformism and romanticism. The following table shows the distribution of participants in each category.

Table 3. Influences on Approaches to Buddhist Social Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Influence/Orientation</th>
<th>n. Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secularism</td>
<td>13 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoconservatism</td>
<td>2 (8.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romanticism</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformism</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient Information</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following five chapters I will provide further evidence and analysis of these four approaches, beginning with the most prominent, a response to Buddhist social engagement spoken with an accent of secularism.
**Chapter Three**

***Resisting Buddhist Social Engagement: Reflections of Secularism***

In this chapter I will present examples of the way secularism influences participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement. Though, as I discussed in chapter one, secularism as a ‘grammar’ informed in some way all of the orientations I identify in my research, the responses I detail in this chapter are reflective of those participants for whom secularism is a more overt influence, what I defined there as an accent. This totalled thirteen participants, or fifty-four percent of participants. In this chapter I explore how various assumptions and values associated with secularism inform, both implicitly and explicitly, participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

An approach spoken with an accent of secularism represents as much a critique of Buddhist social engagement, as it does a creative framework for enacting it. In this chapter I argue that this approach to social engagement reflects a conviction in, or an accommodation and consent toward the normative claims of political secularism: that religious and existential orientations need to be bracketed from public discourse and political life. This highlights, when adopted or consented to, (political) secularism’s tendency to constrain religious expression in the public domain.

In order to highlight the cultural specificity of these views in this chapter I also describe how they stand in sharp contrast to the attitudes expressed by ethnic Tibetans in my research and Tibetan Buddhist approaches to politics and society throughout history. I will begin explaining in greater detail my understanding and use of the term secularism. This discussion is based on academic literature. As the chapter progresses I will explore in greater detail how these themes emerge in participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

**Secularism**

Though secularism was, until recently, considered to have no ideological significance of its own, several scholars have come to explicitly identify secularism as an ideology, a worldview—a discourse in its own right (Connolly, 2011, Casanova, 2006, Calhoun et al., 2011: 20, Asad, 2003). Secularism is a framework of reality based on a set of assumptions that has an overpowering influence on how religion is depicted and perceived in modern cultures (Calhoun et al., 2011: 3). A central feature of secularism as a worldview is the
conception that religion exists in a realm differentiated from the secular (Casanova, 2011: 55). This emerges in the different types of cognitive differentiation between science, philosophy and theology, or in the practical differentiation between law, morality, and religion (Casanova, 2011: 69). This could be thought of as a central feature of the grammar of secularism. As an extension of this, adherents of some forms of secularism express various normative assessments of the place of religion vis-à-vis the public or private spheres (Casanova, 2006: 7, 2011: 60).

In the binary on which the grammar of secularism is based—between religion and the secular—the secular is perceived as a natural and universal substratum devoid of religion, whereas religion is often perceived as the residual category (Casanova, 2011: 55). Certain adherents of secularism might add that religion is superfluous, something that both humans and societies can do without. However, as Casanova points out, the religious and the secular are always and everywhere mutually constituted—neither category can exist without the other (Casanova, 2011: 54, 61).

Another core feature of secularism is the assumption that religion in the abstract is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66). This includes the postulation that religion is by nature non-rational, coercive, intolerant, dogmatic and prone to conflict and violence, autocratic and with a strong emphasis on conversion and proselytising. These depictions always emerge in relation to the secular. Within this dialectic, the secular is depicted as rational, free, tolerant, autonomous, peaceful and inclusive.

Secularism reflects an overarching way of dividing social reality, one that traverses demarcations central to enlightenment forms of thinking—a bifurcation between religion and secular spheres. It places an emphasis on individual, critical reason, is suspicious of religious institutions, and associates religion with irrationality and the secular with rationality. Along with essentialised conceptions of religion and the secular, these characteristics represent some of the key overarching features of the worldview I am denoting as secularism.

I should be clear that what I am describing as secularism does not necessarily connote the principle of the separation of religious and political authority. This separation, which is designed either for the sake of the neutrality of the state vis-à-vis each and all religions,
or for the sake of facilitating equal access of all citizens, religious as well as nonreligious, to democratic participation, I understand as a mode of statecraft (Casanova, 2011: 66). This legal principle neither presupposes nor promotes any substantive theory, positive or negative about religion (Casanova, 2011: 66). By contrast a statecraft doctrine becomes an ideological form of secularism, or bears hallmarks of secularism, when it holds a particular conception of ‘religion’ (Casanova, 2011: 66).

‘Religion and Politics Should Not Mix’

One feature of secularism characteristic of participants’ responses is differentiation. As noted above differentiation is the understanding that the secular, which encompasses the modern state, politics, the market economy and science, are intrinsically distinct from and exist in a different sphere of reality to the religious sphere, or religion per se (Casanova, 2006: 7).

A prominent understanding expressed by many participants was that Buddhism existed in a different sphere to social and political institutions. Participants expressed this attitude when the idea of Buddhist social engagement, particularly forms of social engagement that may involve political engagement such as activism, policy or governance, was discussed. When I ask Jacqui, for example, what she thinks about Buddhism’s involvement in social issues and political activism she says: ‘It’s not, it’s not good to mix religion and politics’. In Jacqui’s response we can see both the assumption that religion and politics exist as intrinsically distinct realities or categories, as well as normative claims about the fact that they should remain apart. It is this latter feature that I identify as an accent of secularism, the former, a feature of the grammar of secularism.

For many participants the notion that Buddhist social engagement may be related to political activism or institutional politics was a significant turn-off. When I ask Gina, another interview participant, whether Buddhism should be involved in political activism she says:

No. Absolutely not, absolutely not...I hate the idea of anything that is not about politics being aligned with politics.

Bill, an American Tibetan Buddhist practitioner commenting on the blog post ‘Top Seven Challenges of Western Socially Engaged Buddhism’ shares this view saying:
If Socially Engaged Buddhism means mixing Buddhism and politics, it’s not a good idea (Esterhaus, 2010).

As evidenced by these statements, the idea that the secular sphere or the political sphere exists in a distinct sphere of reality from the religious, is a taken for granted structure of reality. Amongst participants I identify as adopting an accent of secularism, this way of categorising reality carries with it normative claims, or an awareness of normative claims circulating in Australian society—to ‘mix’ these categories is perceived as ‘not good’.

Gina responds further to the idea of Buddhist political activism saying:

I feel as strongly about Buddhism not being aligned to politics as I do with Islam not tied to politics because of the inherent problems that come with it. I think there’s less danger with Buddhism tied to politics [but] no I think it would be a terrible thing to happen.

Along with differentiation Casanova argues that secularism is also characterised by a core assumption—that ‘religion’ in the abstract is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66). Some of the characteristics implicitly tied to the signifier ‘religion’ include religion as non-rational or irrational, coercive, intolerant, dogmatic, prone to conflict and violence, autocratic and with a strong emphasis on conversion and proselytising. As the mirror opposite of these negative depictions, those living in liberal-secular societies often uncritically if not unconsciously assume that the secular is rational, liberal and liberated, progressive and tolerant. Gina expresses some of these assumptions when she says that there are ‘inherent problems’ that will inevitably arise if Buddhism were to be involved in politics. There is a probable chance she suggests, that the political sphere would, if touched with the religious brush, become tainted—‘it would be a terrible thing to happen’.

When I ask Gina what has lead her to perceive an inherent danger in the combination of religion and politics she says:

Seeing how very badly it goes throughout history, whenever a religion and the state are tied together. Islam is the scariest example of it that we’ve got now. The Christians were just as bad in the Middle Ages. They have moved on a bit. If we were to have Sharia Law in Australia, as women, our lives wouldn’t be worth living.
Gina’s statement reflects a widespread rationalisation for the separation of religion and politics, one that draws upon a selective and mythologised memory of a distant past (Casanova, 2007). It represents a construct that has the function of positively differentiating modern secular Westerners from ‘the religious other,’ either from pre-modern religious Westerners ‘the Christians were just as bad in the Middle Ages’ or from contemporary non-European religious people, particularly from Muslims (Casanova, 2007). It is underscored by an idea that one of the biggest threats to individual freedom and the biggest threat to a liberal-secular democratic state is religious involvement in state power or politics. In particular Gina highlights the potential threat she identifies in Islam, a concern she carries from her Buddhist teacher Ole Nydahl, a theme discussed in further detail in chapter five.

Pervasive Suspicions: ‘People Can Initially Think that I Am Out to Convert’

Those I identify as adopting an accent of secularism respond to the idea of Buddhist social engagement with reference to concerns about religious public engagement, or how religion public engagement may be perceived in Australia. These concerns, which often emerge implicitly, create reluctance, ambivalence and resistance toward Buddhist social engagement.

One lingering concern relating to Buddhist social engagement was the issue of proselytisation. Participants were concerned that Buddhist social engagement might be perceived as proselytisation. Though it was not a theme I directly pursued in my interviews it arose several times. For example when discussing how she might approach Buddhist social engagement, Tanya, a Buddhist nun, mentions being wary of being perceived as ‘out to convert’. She says:

One has to be quite mindful presenting as a nun...people can initially think that there is an agenda behind that—that I am out to convert.

I understand Tanya’s sensed need to be ‘quite mindful’ that others will assume she has an ‘agenda’ when involved in Buddhist social engagement to be an influence of secularism. It reflects her experience and awareness of how assumptions and suspicions about religious clergy in particular and religion in general will shape how others interpret her involvement in forms of Buddhist social engagement. This is expressive of an existing assumption and suspicion that religious social engagement is ultimately motivated by a desire to convert others. For Tanya, the understandable desire to avoid being associated
with this motivation, quite distasteful in a secular culture, produced some ambivalence and uncertainty about Buddhist social engagement.

In response to questions about Buddhists commenting on socio-political issues in the public sphere, Chris, another participant, also expresses the concern that Buddhist social engagement is likely to appear to others as proselytising or missionary work in disguise. When I ask him whether he thinks Buddhists should put forth a voice on social issues affecting Australians he says:

I don’t think it would work because then you’re pushing a religion, you’re pushing an ideology, or that’s how it comes across. Even if you’re saying, it’s not about that, it’s about values and compassion and kindness and so on, like I think it can be done, but it would have to be done skillfully....So I guess it would just have to come from, I guess, the intention of the individual, but maybe it would have to be kept fairly private, in a sense, not trying to make it like, like a Buddhist country or whatever.

Chris’ reluctance toward Buddhist social engagement, particularly toward forms of public advocacy, is based in a concern about how it would be interpreted by (non-Buddhist) others. This is shaped, I would suggest, by assumptions circulating in the Australian social context, that religious public engagement is inevitably motivated by the desire to convert or govern. He suggests that it may even be interpreted as an attempt to create a ‘Buddhist country’. Based on these assumptions Chris suggests that Buddhist social engagement in Australia should happen in an ‘individual’ way, ‘kept fairly private’, and not explicitly identified as ‘Buddhist’. (This quasi-privatised and individualised ideal is explored in greater detail in the following chapter.)

Later in the interview Chris reveals that he is torn about this issue, because he would like to see ‘Buddhist’ ideas about ‘compassion and kindness’ being voiced in the public sphere. In mulling over these issues further he says, ‘I guess that’s why getting back to the other question about politics and the like, why it’s sort of a tough question to answer because on one level those ideas [compassion, kindness, awareness of suffering] can and should be sort of promoted’. Yet he feels religious public engagement represents a tension with a ‘secular’ environment. Thus he chooses to err on the side of caution, to accommodate to certain underlying assumptions and normative values of secularism vis-à-vis religion, rather than overtly resist or reject them. Concluding on the issue of Buddhist public advocacy and engagement Chris says:
It does conflict, I think. It’s not in harmony with the external environment. If the external environment is secular or whatever, and then you try and push this non-secular movement or whatever then there’s going to be tension.

What then is this ‘external environment’ that Chris feels Buddhist social engagement is necessarily ‘not in harmony’ with? It appears that Chris’ understanding of the secular society in which he lives is governed by an ideology of political secularism—‘a secular state wherein religious and existential orientations need to be bracketed from public discourse and political life’ (Rawls, 1993). Though Chris does not adopt this worldview, he consents to it in constructing what he believes is an appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement.

**Negotiating with Political Secularism**

A significant feature of secularism is its various assessments of the normative place of religion *vis-à-vis* the public or private spheres. There are of course multiple variations of secularism, ways of experiencing the secular and being secular (Possamai, 2008, Calhoun et al., 2011: 21, Casanova, 2006). The view underlying the statements above, that ‘religion and politics should not mix’ or that, if Buddhists were to mix them, they would be ‘in tension with the external environment’ reflect a particular kind of secularism, one some have called political secularism. This kind of secularism calls for ‘religious and existential orientations to be bracketed from public discourse and political life’ (Rawls, 1993).

Advocates of this political philosophy and participants in my research who employ or negotiate with it, consciously or otherwise, appear to assume this state of affairs is a necessary precondition for modern liberal democratic politics (Casanova, 2006: 7, 2011: 60). There is a difference however between modern liberal democratic politics rooted in a liberal-secular state and secularism. Though related, they are often conflated (Maddox, 2006). A liberal-secular state is underpinned by ‘a principle of separation between religious and political authority, either for the sake of the neutrality of the state *vis-à-vis* each and all religions, or for the sake of protecting the freedom of conscience of each individual, or for the sake of facilitating equal access of all citizens, religious as well as nonreligious, to democratic participation’ (Casanova, 2011: 66). In Australia, this separation is enshrined in s. 116 of the Constitution that states:

---

1 In a critical appraisal of Rawlsian approaches to secularism, Connolly, in an article titled ‘Theses on Secularism’, identifies Rawls’ view as the ‘shallow pluralism of secularism’ (Connolly, 2011: 650). This will be explored further in the following chapter.
The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth (quoted in Maddox, 2001: 105).

A liberal-secular state neither presupposes nor promotes any substantive theory, positive or negative about religion (Casanova, 2011: 66). Though academic and popular depictions of secularism tend to identify the secular or secularism as value-neutral and associate religion with coercive impulses and practices, my research suggests that secularism can have its own coercive tendencies, which potentially violate its own logic by subtly imposing on the liberty of others to freely practice religion in the public sphere.

Remembering that the religious and the secular are always and everywhere mutually constituted I take the expressed concern that religion will be perceived to produce certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66); such as, in the cases described above, the impulse to convert others, to be formed as much by secularism as religions per se. No doubt it is ‘mutually constituted’; however the overarching concern that religion might pose a challenge to individual liberty, in terms of freedom of rational choice, far outweighs for participants, any concern that the secular state, or secularism, may equally pose such a challenge or threat.

Political secularism and the tenets on which it pivots stand in overt tension with many modern Asian Engaged Buddhist movements and Western Engaged Buddhist movements. Such a worldview, implicitly or explicitly prescribes the containment of religion or religious views to the private sphere, that is, it promotes a form of the privatisation of religion. When employed in response to the idea of Buddhist social engagement, it leads to a significant resistance, ambivalence or wariness to the appropriateness of such endeavours in an Australian context. As noted above, as well as employing a framework that assumes religion and politics exist as intrinsically distinct phenomena, for those participants I identify as speaking with an accent of secularism, this assumption also carries with it a normative prescription—that they are spheres that should remain distinct.

Participants do not however entirely agree with or categorically adopt this form of political secularism. For example Chris feels that Buddhism should be used as resource for the social sphere—‘on one level those ideas [compassion, kindness, awareness of suffering]
can and should be sort of promoted’. Though they challenge the normative values of ‘political secularism’, this is the conception of the secular they negotiate and considerably accommodate to when envisioning what they feel is an appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement in a contemporary Australian context.

**An Example of Shy-Desecularisation?**

Professor of sociology, Gary Bouma, describes Australian religiosity and spirituality as a ‘shy hope in the heart’, one best kept at ‘low-temperature’ (Bouma, 2006: 2). In *Australian Soul, Religion and Spirituality in the Twenty-first Century* he writes:

> It is not characteristically Australian to trumpet encounters with the spiritual like some American televangelist....Australians hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively about it (Bouma, 2006: 2).

More starkly, though reflecting a similar sentiment, Australian scholar of political philosophy and theology, Marion Maddox, claims that ‘Australia’s deep cultural secularism fosters a “hands-off” view of religion’ (Maddox: 2006, 135). Participants who speak with an accent of secularism bear these characteristics. I understand this overarching attitude and approach toward religion in Australia—‘shy’, ‘low-temperature’ and ‘hands-off’—to be significantly informed by the liberal-secular context of Australian society, and more particularly of secularism. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, it is a stance that informs a majority of participants’ reluctance and ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement.

Yet there is a tension at play which reflects what Adam Possamai has described as ‘Australia’s “shy” de-secularisation process’ (2008). The majority of practitioners interviewed resist some of the fundamental values of a Rawlsian type of political secularism. Their resistance however is shy and highly inconspicuous and the overriding tenor of their negotiation with secularism is accommodation. While practitioners value and support the application of Buddhist principles in the public sphere, they significantly conform to and thus perpetuate certain attitudes on which secularism is based. This particularly relates to negative suspicions of religious engagement in the public sphere and religion’s apparent conflict with liberal democratic values and freedoms. Further evidence of this will be presented in the following chapter, ‘Not in the Name of Buddhism’. Before exploring these themes further, I will show that these concerns about Buddhist social engagement, particularly in relation to the issue of proselytisation, are not unique to the Australian context.
Proselytising in the Buddhoblogosphere

In the Buddhoblogosphere, the idea that Buddhist social engagement may be interpreted as proselytising, or indeed was a form of proselytising, emerged as a notable theme. For example in response to a blog post titled ‘Engaged Buddhism isn’t as popular as you think’, Carol, an American Zen practitioner writes:

I was somewhat surprised when I discovered that most in my Zen sangha were pretty “ho-hum” about socially engaged practice. But to each his/her own, I guess. But even talking about it is often taken as preaching—and I don’t really know where that comes from.

I’ve been moved by Chan Master Sheng Yen’s aim of “Creating a Pure Land on Earth.” His group in Queens New York is ethnically mixed—perhaps about 2/3rds Asian and 1/3 Westerners—and doesn’t appear to have the aversion to “engaged” Buddhism that seems common. They practice hard in the temple and on retreats, and they are involved in their communities (quoted in Thompson, 2011).

Though anecdotal, Carol’s comments that ‘most’ in her sangha are pretty ‘ho-hum’ about Buddhist social engagement and that an aversion to ‘”engaged” Buddhism...seems common’, suggests a growing ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement within some groupings of American Buddhists. While I would not identify Carol herself as adopting an accent of secularism in her response to Buddhist social engagement, her comments identify its existence within Buddhist sanghas she has been a part of.

Carol also implies that one reason for this aversion is that some Buddhists believe that Engaged Buddhism represents a form of ‘preaching’, that is, proselytising. This claim is also evident in other comments to blog posts. Another American Buddhist, Kevin, revolts against Buddhist social engagement on just this basis. He writes:

I agree that socially engaged Buddhism could be the new evangelical Christianity. When I hear people invoke Buddhism as their motivation for public works it leaves that same bad taste in my mouth I get when I don’t change the channel fast enough when the 700 Club² comes on.

---

² Club 700 is a flagship program on the American CBN (Christian Broadcast Network). Club 700 presents news stories from a Christian religious perspective, often relating stories to passages from the
I fight with myself not to talk about Buddhism with others just because it makes me feel like I'm witnessing, and while I understand how they feel now, Jesus freaks annoyed me sooo much (quoted in Kyle, 2010).  

Another commentator Jack Daw, a Euro-American Zen practitioner writes ‘Maybe ‘engaged Buddhists’ are the new evangelical Christians? Make sure you read the fine print’ (quoted in Kyle, 2010).

References to the Christian-right do not appear as explicitly in my interviews with Australian Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in the way they do in American Buddhist blogs. However claims about proselytisation, as with concerns and critiques of Engaged Buddhism generally, are frequently framed in dialectical response to Christianity or the perceived acts of Christianity; what Kevin, in this instance pejoratively calls ‘Jesus freaks’ and their ‘witnessing’. Christianity invokes a lingering concern about fundamental religionists, repulsion toward them and a determination to keep Buddhism well away from similar kinds of stereotypes and signifiers.

This gives further insights into another underlying reason why practitioners appear either resistant or cautious about Buddhist social engagement; it may suggest a similarity between Buddhism and Christianity, and Christian styles of social engagement. Though reference to Christianity was not as overt in my interviews as in blogs, the ‘shadow’ of Christianity and its apparent clash with the quasi-secular, quasi-post religious educated milieu of Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists lingers in the background (Mills, 2001: xiv-xv).

During the nineteenth century, the period that instigated the modern encounter between Buddhism and the West, one of the major critiques Christians made of Buddhism was its purported lack of social engagement. Because traditional Buddhism was not involved in forms of engagement typical to modernising forms of Christianity, numerous Christians and Western scholars painted it as ‘otherworldly’, concerned primarily with personal spiritual development rather than with matters of this world. While modern Asian Bible along with commentary from the hosts. Celebrities and other guests are interviewed about religious views. The news segments frequently emphasise an apocalyptic eschatology. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/700_club, Accessed 27/12/11.

3 Unfortunately this blog is no longer operating. Evidence of its prior existence can be found at Nathan Thompson’s blog Dangerous Harvests (Thompson, 2011) and another blog, Fly Like a Crow (Adam, 2010).
Buddhists were influenced by Christian missionaries in Asia and, in part, based their approach to social engagement on modern Christian social engagement, the need to appear like Christianity seems increasingly redundant, if not antithetical, to the portrayal of Buddhism that contemporary Western Buddhists seek. Christianity and in particular fundamentalist, proselytising Christians stand at the very opposite spectrum of the religious-secular scale of where some Buddhists would like Buddhism to sit in the popular mind-set. Thus for Buddhists such as Kevin, activities like Buddhist social engagement that might threaten to have Buddhism associated with overtly religious forms of expression, leave a ‘bad taste in the mouth’. It is a flavour constituted by both religion and secularism that Buddhists are repulsed by and eager to stay clear of.

‘Buddhism is Not Political’
Another notion frequently expressed in my discussions with participants about Buddhist social engagement was the idea that Buddhism was ‘not political’. Buddhist social engagement, certainly engagement that involves a political dimension conflicts with participants’ claims that ‘Buddhism is not political’. Participants who held this view therefore expressed some ambivalence about whether Buddhist political activism and engagement was appropriately Buddhist. It is another idea I understand to be imbedded in and reflective of the influence of secularism. In particular, it further reflects a key aspect of the grammar of secularism, differentiation. As noted earlier differentiation is a way of categorising society into different spheres with an underlying assumption that these different spheres are composed of an intrinsically distinct reality.

When I ask Linda, a participant in my research, if she thinks Buddhism has a role to play in politics or political activism she says:

If I were putting my Buddhist hat on, I would say, ‘no, I don’t think Buddhism has a political place, I think it has an ethical place’. Yes, very strongly. That’s what I would say. Strictly speaking, from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism is ethical, not political.

The idea that Buddhism is not political also emerged in Buddhist blogs discussing Buddhist social engagement. Here the idea that Buddhism is not political appeared to be deployed quite explicitly as a basis for critiquing Engaged Buddhism. If Buddhism is not political how can Buddhist political engagement or Buddhist social engagement that is political
constitute authentic Buddhism? Though more vehement than interview participants the same tensions between Buddhist social engagement and the idea that Buddhism is not political also inform the Australian Tibetan practitioners in my research. This produces a widespread resistance or ambivalence to Buddhist social engagement, one that emerges in those that I have described as speaking with an accent of secularism.

Kyle, an American Zen Buddhist blogger provides a vivid example of how the idea that ‘Buddhism isn’t political’ can be employed as a means to undermine the authenticity of Engaged Buddhism. In a post titled ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ this idea emerges as a central weapon for his critique of Engaged Buddhism. He writes:

Buddhism is not political, but Buddhists are. I mean who isn’t, right? Though some Buddhists, especially white Buddhists, feel that Buddhism itself is the roadmap, if only read just so, that unlocks the door to enable a great political doctrine. That’s cool, socially engaged Buddhism; I get it, playing the part of the more socially aware person, the white knight of social justice, pun intended...

No, not Buddhism...

White privilege, white power, privileged suffering, understanding the vast social matrix of interpersonal, intercultural adaptations in a post colonial world, all nice wonderful viewpoints, but still not Buddhism...Very self involved stuff here, playing this game of my religion is better than your religion, my opinion is better than your opinion, my suffering is greater than your suffering, and my social awareness is more in tune than your social awareness. I am the motherfucking Intercontinental Ballistic Nuclear Warhead of Social Justice!

...Nope, not Buddhism yet (Kyle, 2010).

Kyle goes on to implicitly link anything religious and political with dogmatism. He writes:

Buddhism isn’t political, and once we take a slant on a political agenda by using Buddhist teachings, it just becomes another form of dogmatic thought (Kyle, 2010).

Kyle’s reference to ‘dogmatic thought’ and the perception that Buddhism tied to politics is likely to become dogmatic represents another influence of secularism. These comments
further reflect a view that ‘religion’ in the abstract is a thing that has an essence that produces certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66). In this case, it is the assumption religion and politics necessarily produces dogmatic thought. This presents another reason to avoid Buddhist political engagement and to question the appropriateness of Buddhist social engagement.

Kyle’s title to this post, ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ is an eye-catching way of expressing the leitmotiv of his attitude—Engaged Buddhism is not ‘true’ Buddhism. Definitions, which are constituted upon exclusion and inclusion, are a central element in shaping the way any phenomena, such as Buddhism or Buddhist social engagement is perceived. In the case of definitions of Buddhism, they suggest what ideas, actions and attitudes are appropriate to adopt if one calls oneself a Buddhist. The rhetorical purpose of Kyle’s anti-engagement post is based on an understanding or a will to inscribe the discussion about Buddhist social engagement with the notion that politics, political doctrine and cultural-social analysis do not constitute legitimate, authentic and appropriate Buddhist praxis. This is epitomised in the chorus lines, the heart beat of Kyle’s poem, Buddhist social engagement—‘no, not Buddhism’. As he places Engaged Buddhism outside of the walls that define indeed what Buddhism is he reduces the causes of Engaged Buddhism to the white Buddhists’ ego trip, claiming that white Buddhists are more prone to playing the role of ‘white knights of social justice’ . This is an unusual claim given that, as presented in the introduction, in the last two centuries (and well before) Asian Buddhists have been involved in vastly more far reaching and overtly socio-political movements than ‘white’ Buddhists have.

Kyle provides an example of a more overarching trend. Analyses and critiques of Engaged Buddhism in popular and academic Buddhism can be as informed by contemporary frameworks, as situated in the specific socio-cultural milieu as the object of their analysis, Engaged Buddhism. These critiques of Engaged Buddhism, while not without some basis, often reflect a paradigmatic quality of modern Buddhists, the tendency to see their version of Buddhism as a ‘return to the origin, to the Buddhism of the Buddha himself’ (Lopez, 2002: ix). The object they are defending, an authentic and pure Buddhism, is itself a construct. These constructs are often formed by features of secularism and liberalism, namely the differentiation of reality and society into intrinsically distinct aspects, the preference for individual actions, resistance to collective religious institutions and an overarching suspicion of religion. This produces a very different form of modern Buddhism than that of supporters of Engaged Buddhism, it is, nevertheless, no less modern.
Participants and bloggers are by no means the first to express ideas related to the notion that Buddhism is not political. Rather, as discussed in chapter one, their attitudes reflect trends that emerged in the constructions of Buddhism that emerged in early modernity. Since the nineteenth century, modernising Asian Buddhist elites and leading Western Buddhist adherents strategically depicted Buddhism in a way that avoided offending the sensibilities of enlightenment secularism. As such Buddhism was reconstructed as a rational, philosophical and ethical tradition that was not overtly religious or political (Lopez, 2002, Snodgrass, 2003, McMahan, 2008). As a means to allow Buddhism to sit more comfortably in a world increasingly privileging enlightenment rationality and secularism, one feature of some of these representations has been to strip Buddhism of its traditional political features. This particular presentation of Buddhism has worked to shield it from attacks from both scientism and secularism. It represents a highly skilful positioning and strategic manoeuvre for Buddhism’s longevity. If Buddhism is neither religious nor political, but rather a primarily humanistic, ethical endeavour it can be safely included in cultures heavily privileging the values of secularism. The ongoing strength of this depiction of Buddhism is reflected in participants’ views about Buddhism, and their suggestion that Buddhism is not political. The emergence and edification of the notion that ‘Buddhism is not political’ is the result of and a response to deeply imbedded assumptions, categories and concerns of secularism. It is an approach that is not consistent with the reality of Buddhism at any time throughout its two thousand year history in Asia. The culturally specific nature of the claim that Buddhism is not political is highlighted by the contrasting perception expressed by Tibetan participants regarding the relationship between Buddhism and politics. I will explore these further in the following section.

Modern Tibetan Political Activism

All of the Tibetans in my research expressed the view that Buddhism and politics were closely interrelated. That is to say that the views they expressed were not imbedded within a grammar of differentiation. They frequently used metaphors of the body to describe their understanding of this relationship. For example, when I asked Nigun, a Tibetan-Australian I interviewed, what he thinks the appropriate relationship between Buddhism and politics is he says:

N*: We usually say Buddhism and politics goes hand in hand.
R*: You do?
N* I mean, we used to say it.
R* Could I just ask, who is ‘we’?
N* I mean, the Tibetans.

Though Tibetan participants did not suggest that Buddhism should be involved in governance in Australia directly, most Tibetan participants expressed some support for a relationship between Buddhism and politics, political activism or political advocacy.

Tenpa, for example, an ethnic-Tibetan Australian Buddhist, strongly supports overt forms of Buddhist political engagement in the West. When I ask Tenpa what his understanding of Buddhism’s relationship to social engagement and political activism is, he says, ‘As a Tibetan you know for us, there is no difference’. He emphasises this further saying ‘A lot of Tibetans would say ‘if you’re working for Tibetan political freedom, you are practicing dharma’. Tenpa is highly supportive of an interaction between Buddhism and political engagement. According to Tenpa political activism is utterly imbedded in and with the dharma, and with the practice of dharma. Tenpa claims the majority of Tibetans believe political rights and religious freedoms are completely integrated. ‘In a nutshell’ Tenpa says, ‘what I’m trying to say, for most Tibetans their political rights and Tibetan Buddhism is something of a, you know, you have two feet, you can’t separate them’.

Tenpa’s depiction of the relationship between Buddhism and politics more closely reflects the way Buddhism and politics have interrelated throughout Tibetan history. His portrayal of the relationship is nevertheless shaped by contemporary contexts and priorities unique to his life circumstances. Notions such as ‘rights’ and ‘freedoms’, which Tenpa draws on, show the influence of modern philosophies, such as liberalism, on his views. For modern Tibetan activists who are driven by the desire to achieve autonomy or independence for Tibet, highlighting Buddhism’s close relationship with political engagement serves to authorise and encourage engagement in what is for them, central to their lives—the Tibetan political situation.

Tenpa is acutely aware of the dominant discourse within Australia regarding Buddhism and politics, and reference to it permeates his depiction of Buddhism’s relationship to politics. In my discussions with Tenpa he frequently refers to and contests the ideas expressed throughout this chapter. He provides ‘insider’ evidence of the influence of secularism on the portrayal of Buddhism in Australia. For example, he claims that
Buddhist centres in Australia have said they ‘have to be non-political to get some funding or membership.’ He goes on to say:

Maybe they have to attract certain members who don’t like politics, because mixing religion and politics historically hasn’t been good and then people have a bit of scepticism of mixing it together.

In portraying the relationship between Buddhism and politics Tenpa’s priorities significantly contrast with the majority of other Western participants. Tenpa’s depiction of Buddhism’s relationship to politics is far more reflective of the relationship between Buddhism and Tibet historically, but particularly, reflective of modern approaches to political activism amongst Tibetan monks and nuns inside Tibet. In modern times in Tibet, monks and nuns have been at the forefront of the public expression of opposition to Chinese rule and oppression. These acts can neither clearly be understood as religious or political. In an article titled ‘Tibetan Nationalism: The Politics of Religion’ Ashild Kolas writes:

In Lhasa, demonstrations have been staged in the Barkor, the pilgrimage route encircling Lhasa’s ‘Central Cathedral’. In the course of the Barkor demonstrations, the religious expression of circumambulation has been turned into a political statement of opposition to Chinese authority....(55) Photos of the Dalai Lama in company with Western political leaders have been on display in many temple altars, along with various Free Tibet items (Kolas, 1996, 57).

This approach to social engagement through political activism has emerged since the Chinese invasion of Tibet throughout the 1950s. Tenpa explains, saying ‘Most of the Tibetans in Tibet who have challenged the system, who have almost become like activists I suppose, are the monks and nuns’. A similar trend is mirrored throughout Asian nations where monks and nuns have been at the forefront of modern political resistance since the onset of modernity (Queen, 1996, King, 1996b, Devido, 2009, Lopez, 2002, Kolas, 1996). Though distancing Buddhism from politics has been an effective strategy in introducing Buddhism into a religion-wary secular society, we would be mistaken to think however, that this is how Buddhists throughout Asia see Buddhism, or that it represents the doctrinal or historical view of Buddhism.
Traditional Buddhist Polities: A Distinctly Different Grammar

Though Westerners have frequently viewed Buddhism as wholly otherworldly and introspective, notions relating to what in modern Western society we term politics are of great importance to the doctrine, practice, survival and spread of Buddhism throughout its history in Asia (Harris, 1999: 1, Tambiah, 1976a, 1976b). A reciprocal, symbiotic relationship of a social, political nature as well as a religious, spiritual, sacred and metaphysical nature criss-crossed and underpinned the worldview of Buddhists for the majority of Buddhist history. In order to further emphasise how notions such as ‘Buddhism is not political’, and the desire to differentiate Buddhism from public and political engagement is heavily influenced by secularism and how distinct these approaches are from historical and modern forms of Buddhism in Asia, in this section I will introduce the relationship between Buddhism and politics in Asian history. I will first briefly discuss the approach to Buddhism and political engagement within pre-modern Buddhist cultures and early Buddhist textual sources. I will follow this with a brief look at contemporary approaches to political and social engagement within Tibet.

The maintenance of a just social order, underpinned by dharmic principles is a central ideal and rhetoric animating what we might retrospectively call early Buddhist politics. Canonical sources describe how the central soteriological goal of Buddhism, epitomised in the vocation of the mendicant, is reliant on a just and dhammically ordered society (Smith, 1972). The achievement and maintenance of a just social order was thought to pivot on a dhammically-framed reciprocal relationship between the king and the sangha (Smith, 1972: 46). This was reliant, on one side, on the just actions of the ideal Buddhist King.

A central concept within early Buddhism and throughout much of Buddhism’s history in Asia is the notion of an ideal Buddhist King, known as a cakravartin, (cakra refers to wheel; vartin means both turning and duty) or a dharmaraja (raj meaning ruled by and ruling for the dharma) (Walshe, 1995: 601). The cakravartin is the ideal Buddhist ruler, who rules by righteousness or morality, rather than force. Various kings in history have been seen as embodying this ideal, most notably King Asoka (Keown, 2009: 274). Asoka’s conversion to Buddhism and its consequences is one of the seminal events in the institutional history of Buddhism (Swearer, 2010: 65). This of course represented a rhetorical ideal and such a situation was not necessarily realised, nevertheless this was the ideal epitomised in canonical texts and pre-modern Buddhist cultures.
One of the *cakravartin*’s most crucial tasks is the creation of a just social order. This is epitomised in *The Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta* within the Pāli Canon, one of the oldest canonical texts in Buddhism. Within this *sutta* a newly appointed King asks a royal sage what the duty of a *cakravartin* is. The royal sage responds, saying:

> Let no crime⁴ prevail in your kingdom, and to those who are in need, give property. And whatever ascetics and Brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness... if from time to time they should come to you and consult you as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed, and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness, you should listen, and tell them to avoid evil and do what is good (wholesome). That, my son, is the duty of an Aryan wheel-turning monarch (Walshe, 1995: 397).

The *sutta* then retells a story when one *cakravartin* failed to listen to the sangha in implementing the dharmic rules of governance. In particular, the *cakravartin* failed to offer land to those in poverty, which resulted in a gradual moral decline, leading to theft, violence and ultimately social chaos and disorder (Harvey, 2009: 154).

Throughout the history of Buddhism in Tibet, as with all traditional Asian Buddhist cultures, Buddhism and politics have been considered as inseparable. This is reflected in the Tibetan term *Bo-zung chos-si-nyi-dan* meaning dharma and politics combined. In this context *cho*, generally translated as dharma, can be considered to refer to religious sanctity, Buddhist law or as ‘under-taking for the spiritual world’ (Kolas, 1996: 54, Wangyal, 1975: 78-79) and *si* as the art of governance, the art of directing the government towards a particular goal, (Wangyal, 1975: 78-79) or ‘undertakings for the materialistic world’ (Kolas, 1996: 54, Burman, 1979: 3).

In Tibet, the Dalai Lama was recognised as a Tibetan Buddhist King, or *chosgyal*, the Tibetan term for *dharmaraja*. Through the role of the Dalai Lama the Tibetan state continued the universal Buddhist paradigm of statehood but collapsed the two functions of patron of religion and head of religion into one (Schwartz, 1994: 735, Burman, 1979: 45). The legal authority of the *chosgyal* is based on the idea that the King or the Dalai

---

Lama is an embodiment of *Avalokiteśvara*, (Tib. *Chenrezig*) the Buddha/bodhisattva of Compassion (Wangyal, 1975: 80). From the time of the reign of Sakya Pandita in 1242 until the 1959 exile of the Dalai Lama the King was always a monk and his duty and functioning was both religious and political (Kolas, 1996: 64).

The relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and politics, both within Tibet and throughout Tibetan diasporic cultures, has significantly changed since the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. Tibetans have been stripped of their political autonomy within Tibet and the government in exile has increasingly moved toward a democratic model. In May 2011, the Dalai Lama stepped down from political leadership and the Tibetan government revised its charter to devolve power to the democratically elected Kalon Tripa (Prime Minister), Parliament and Judiciary (Dikyi, Binara, et al.: 2012).

As a result of the invasion and colonisation of Tibet by China since 1959, both within Tibetan and many sites of the Tibetan diaspora, the intimate relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and governance has shifted to a close relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and resistance to Chinese rule; which, by extension, can easily be interpreted as a resistance to the secular, materialist ideology of the Chinese government. Within Tibet monks and nuns have been at the forefront of public resistance to Chinese rule. For example, in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa demonstrations are staged in the Barkor, the pilgrimage route encircling Lhasa’s Potala Palace, the previous headquarters of the Dalai Lama. In the course of the Barkor demonstrations, the religious expression of circumambulation has been turned into a political statement of opposition to Chinese authority (Kolas, 1996: 55). Since 2008, initially in relation to the Beijing Olympics, demonstrations have escalated significantly. In a startling turn of events, since 2011 at least thirty Tibetans in Tibet have self-immolated (McGranahan and Litzinger, 2012, Dickyi et al., 2012). Most have been young Buddhist monks (or former monks). Nuns have also immolated, as have both male and female laypeople (McGranahan and Litzinger, 2012). These extreme personal and social acts are neither solely religious or political (Kolas, 1996: 57).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described those participants I have identified as adopting an accent of secularism in their approach to Buddhist social engagement. I have identified how ideas about religion informed by secularism influence participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement. As I have demonstrated in this chapter these tenets produce a caution, ambivalence or resistance to Buddhist social engagement.
A significant basis for participants’ caution and resistance toward Buddhist social engagement was the assumption that religious engagement in the public sphere is either problematic or will be perceived as problematic by Australian society generally. These attitudes are underpinned by a suspicion of organised religion and in particular, organised religious involvement in the public sphere. Encapsulated by the phrase ‘religion and politics should not mix’ these concerns emerge most strongly in relation to the idea of any explicit Buddhist involvement in governance, as well as Buddhist involvement in political advocacy and activism. That Buddhist social engagement may be perceived as being a form of religious proselytisation is also a substantial concern for those that exemplify a strong awareness of secularism in their responses.

Their adoption of and adherence to values of secularism reflect a qualified consent toward secularism, a modern framework founded on a binary division between the secular and religion, the individual and the collective, private and public and an explicit or implicit view that these categories should be kept separate or, in particular that Buddhism should appear to abide by the perception that they should be kept separate. In its relative strict binaries between religion and the secular and the desire to maintain an (imagined) separation or divide, this view reflects a modernist orientation (rather than a traditional or late-modern one).

For participants who respond to Buddhist social engagement imbued with an accent of secularism, reluctance, ambivalence and resistance characterise their approach. These attitudes, particularly in their ambivalence and resistance to having Buddhism associated overtly with public and political social engagement are distinctly at odds with accounts given in academic literature on Western Buddhism, and with early and contemporary modern Asian Buddhist movements and early Western Buddhist movements. It is also distinct from pre-modern approaches in Asian Buddhist cultures as well as from the ideal textual description of the Buddhist relationship with the political and public sphere.

Participants’ responses to Buddhist social engagement are implicitly and explicitly framed within an awareness of what they perceive represents an appropriate form of Buddhist social engagement in an Australian context. This is the overarching context in which their particular views merge and thus are both shaped by them and equally reflect their perception of them. Participants don’t always adopt or agree with these assumptions, however they carefully accommodate to them when describing Buddhist social engagement.
Participants’ reluctance and resistance to overt Buddhist social engagement, based on imbedded assumptions and values of secularism, suggests that a kind of political secularism holds a hegemonic status in Australian society or at least, it is the form of secularism that Tibetan Buddhists most readily respond to in their depiction of Buddhism for the public sphere. It highlights the dominant influence of secularism in defining what religion is and does, at least in particular when it comes to religious praxis in the public sphere. It suggests that Buddhists desire to be in accord with and accommodate to the ‘secular truce’—‘a secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm’ (Achterberg et al., 2009) and also raises questions regarding the neutrality of secularism as an ideology. These themes will be discussed further in the following chapter, ‘Not in the Name of Buddhism’, which presents further data and detail of an approach to Buddhist social engagement spoke with an accent of secularism.
Chapter Four
‘Not in the Name of Buddhism’: Maintaining the Secular Truce

In this chapter I explore in further detail the influence of secularism on participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement, particularly through the lens of Buddhist public advocacy. I understand Buddhist public advocacy to mean Buddhists putting forth, in public forums, an explicitly ‘Buddhist’ view on social issues emerging in the public domain. As part of my research I presented the idea of Buddhist public advocacy to participants. I was interested in whether participants would support the idea of a ‘Buddhist’ point of view on contemporary social and political issues being articulated in the media and public forums. As I detail further in this chapter, the majority of participants were opposed to such an idea, seventeen out of twenty-four participants or seventy percent.

The phrase, ‘not in the name of Buddhism’ exemplifies the way many participants respond to the idea of Buddhist public advocacy and Buddhist social engagement generally. This phrase reflects a desire to conceal or distance a Buddhist identity from social engagement that otherwise could be considered, due to it being informed and inspired by being Buddhist, as Buddhist social engagement. Though participants said they were not against individual Buddhists being involved in Buddhist social engagement, the majority of participants expressed resistance toward individuals or groups carrying out forms of Buddhist public advocacy as Buddhists or as an explicitly Buddhist project. I identify this preference for Buddhist social engagement to be carried out by individuals as individuals and not conducted in ‘Buddhism’s name’ to be characteristic of a secularism accented Buddhist social engagement.

Developing a theme introduced in the previous chapter, I argue that the desire to distance a Buddhist identity from Buddhist social engagement represents an accommodation to normative claims of political secularism; that, in a liberal-democratic society religious and existential orientations need to be bracketed from public discourse and political life. I discuss how the approach of participants detailed in this chapter resists the outright privatisation of Buddhism yet stops far short of advocating the deprivatisation of Buddhism or religion generally. I also explore what these findings suggest about processes of secularisation and desecularisation in Australia.
Not in the Name of Buddhism

In the previous chapter I introduced Chris, one participant I associated with an accent of secularism. I described his approach, like others who adopt a similar attitude, as a quasi-privatised, individual approach. This becomes particularly clear when discussing Buddhist public advocacy. Ruminating over whether or not Buddhists in Australia should be putting forth a voice on social issues affecting Australians he says:

I guess it would just have to come from, I guess, the intention of the individual, but maybe it would have to be kept fairly private, in a sense, not trying to make it like, like a Buddhist country or whatever.

Chris suggests that Buddhist public advocacy is okay as long as it is ‘kept fairly private’ and ‘individual’, that is, not carried out in the name of Buddhism. He argues that Buddhists carrying out Buddhist social engagement in Australia, particularly forms of Buddhist public advocacy, should conceal their Buddhist identity while doing so.

Jacqui, another participant expresses a similar sentiment. In response to the idea of Buddhist social engagement Jacqui says:

Sometimes it’s better just to do things, rather than making a big song and dance about the fact that you’re Buddhist and you do these things because you’re Buddhist.... But obviously you know if a Buddhist wants to be a Buddhist and as a practicing Buddhist goes out into society and does things. That’s great. He doesn’t necessarily have to do it in the name of Buddhism.

Paul, another participant provides a further example of this. I ask Paul whether he would like to see, in an Australian context, a Buddhist view put forth in the public arena on issues such as refugee politics and economic issues. He responds by saying:

What I think is that Buddhists should be out there saying things, but not coming from a Buddhist viewpoint. That’s what I think. In other words, the people who are reasonable should be putting forth a view, not saying this is the Buddhist view. Rather they should be putting forth their view and saying this is how things would work, which is informed by their Buddhist beliefs.
Paul adds that he believes that Buddhist views on social issues should ‘certainly’ be shared in the public domain—‘it [Buddhism] has a lot to offer’. However he suggests that Buddhists, those who are ‘reasonable’ at least, should not publicly identify their contribution as Buddhist, not claim that they are ‘coming from a Buddhist viewpoint’, even when it ‘is informed by their Buddhist beliefs’.

The desire of the majority of participants to conceal a religious identity from religious public engagement appears to reflect ‘Australia’s deep cultural secularism’, which Maddox claims fosters a ‘“hands-off” view of religion’ (Maddox: 2006: 135) and a closely related characteristic, described by Bouma as Australians’ desire to keep religiosity at a ‘low-temperature’, to ‘hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively about it’ (Bouma, 2006: 2). Similarly, in an article titled ‘Australia’s “Shy” De-secularisation Process’ Possamai argues that:

Australia has long been known for its dislike of ‘tall poppies’,¹ and this applies to religious groups that are being ‘too’ successful and/or that move too close to the public sphere. Religion is not something to get too enthusiastic about (2008: 27).

Is participants’ decision to quarantine a religious identity from the public sphere related to this, showing further influence of the way secularism shapes perceptions of religion? Does it reflect an accommodation toward what political theorist Connolly describes as a ‘postmetaphysical politics’, that is, ‘a world of politics in which controversial religious and existential orientations are bracketed from public discourse and political life’ (Connolly, 2011: 648)? Like political secularism, a postmetaphysical politics goes beyond the separation of the public and private. Advocates of a postmetaphysical politics add that

the political justification of public goods, policies, rights, and identities must proceed without bringing contestable (or ‘controversial’) religious and metaphysical themes into public discourse (Connolly, 2011: 648-649).

Is this what adherents are informed by, consciously or otherwise, when they advocate the concealing of one’s Buddhist identity while involved in Buddhist social engagement? Or

---

¹ In Australian culture, ‘tall poppies’, or ‘tall poppy syndrome’ refers to a purported iconic tendency of Australians and Australia society to cut down those who are ‘superior’ or perceive themselves as superior to others.
is the suggestion to conceal one’s Buddhist identity a way of responding to the pluralistic, multicultural society of Australia, an approach perceived to be a more effective means of engaging in dialogue and reaching a consensus in a democratic, liberal, secular state? As such, might participants in arguing for Buddhism to be conducted without the Buddhist label be attempting to follow what Connolly describes, in contrast to shallow pluralism, as ‘deep, multidimensional pluralism’? He describes ‘deep, multidimensional pluralism’ as a process wherein

participants from multiple minorities bring aspects of their own existential creeds and ontopolitical stances with them into the public realm as this or that issue demands (2011: 650, 651,655).

Rather than supporting shallow pluralism as such, participants may believe that leaving their Buddhist identity and terminology aside may better enable a deep, multidimensional pluralism. By extension perhaps participants perceive that the ‘not in the name of Buddhism’ approach reflects an act of upāya-kauśalya, an important concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism meaning skilful means. ‘Skilful means’ is the notion that the Buddha’s teaching is essentially a provisional means to bring beings to enlightenment and that the teachings which are given will vary—what may be appropriate at one time may not be so at another (Keown, 2003: 318). By removing a Buddhist label perhaps ‘Buddhist’ ideas may be better received? Thus participants rationalise that bringing enlightenment to the Australian public sphere is better conducted incognito.

By the very fact that participants believe Buddhism ‘does have a lot to offer’ for the public sphere, despite their inclination toward not declaring it as Buddhist, suggests they do not wholly adopt or endorse shallow pluralism or political secularism. However their comments also suggest it is an influence. This is evident both within the different accents detailed throughout this thesis and particularly amongst those I identify as discussing Buddhist social engagement with an accent of secularism.

Assumptions and values of secularism, like lingering conceptions of the secular, the plural context of Australian society, and ideas about Buddhism and Buddhist notions evidently all impact on participants’ approaches, however in different ways and to different extents. For example some participants I describe as speaking with an accent of secularism quite explicitly adopt the values of political secularism. Gina, for example, introduced in the previous chapter, said:
I feel as strongly about Buddhism not being aligned to politics as I do with Islam not tied to politics because of the inherent problems that come with it. I think there’s less danger with Buddhism tied to politics [but] no I think it would be a terrible thing to happen.

Her views were based on ‘seeing how badly it goes throughout history’ to ‘mix’ politics, for example, and religion. Rather than ‘accommodating’ to political secularism, Gina appears to hold a conviction in its values, particularly the need for religion to be privatised as a means of preserving the freedoms and rights of a liberal-democratic society.

In the case of Jacqui, introduced above, it is less clear. When Jacqui says ‘it’s great’ if a ‘practicing Buddhist goes out into society and does things’ but that ‘it’s better just to do things, rather than making a big song and dance about the fact that you’re Buddhist and you do these things because you’re Buddhist’—it is not entirely clear what influences are animating her. Is her position based on a Buddhist-inspired inclination to steer away from particular identity formations (a theme explored in more depth at the end of this chapter), a response to Australian’s pluralist society, or the influence of secularism? From the data I have, it is not entirely clear.

What is animating Chris’ views, featured in both this and the previous chapter, is a little clearer. Chris advises against Buddhist public advocacy, arguing, it should be ‘kept fairly private’ so as to not appear like one is trying to ‘make it like, like a Buddhist country’. Though Chris was not opposed to Buddhist social engagement or Buddhist public advocacy in principle, he believed that ‘pushing’ a ‘non-secular movement’ in an external environment that was ‘secular’ would create a ‘tension’ and would not be ‘in harmony with the external environment’. Chris’ response seems to be shaped by implicit assumptions of political secularism and the need to steer Buddhism away from conflicting with them. In doing so Chris appears to partake of an implicit or unconscious desire to abide by the secular truce ‘a secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm’ (Achterberg et al., 2009).

Paul asserts a similar idea—that Buddhists should be involved in Buddhist public advocacy—just not as Buddhists. In Paul’s response there appear multiple influences at work. Firstly, it is possible that he understands it to be an expression of skilful means (Skt. upāya-kauśalya).
That is, leaving any explicit reference to Buddhism out of public dialogue on social issues is a more effective means for Buddhists to positively influence Australian society. This could be born both from a consideration of and response to the plural conditions of Australian society as well as a reflection of the ongoing influence of a kind of secularism that suggests that bringing religious views into the public sphere is problematic.

Phil makes other comments on the idea of Buddhist public advocacy that provide further insight into his attitudes on these issues. He says:

There are enough levels of Buddhism for me to know that actually you'll find three Buddhists; a Theravādan, a Mahāyāna and a Vajrayāna and they’ll say three different things about a political situation. So what’s the point in doing that and saying it is Buddhist? People don’t even know the difference between those three schools, let alone, what Buddhism is in this country, so it would only cause more confusion. However, three people, who were in society would probably come up with similar sorts of views on things, because of their Buddhist beliefs, without having to say, ‘I’m Buddhist and Buddhists say this’ and thereby create a situation where you have divisive ranks within the Buddhist community....Much better to give views that are reasonable, coming from individuals that are Buddhist.

As evident from Paul’s comments, another concern that arises amongst participants about Buddhist social engagement is that it may create confusion for the broader public about Buddhism and produce or reveal divisions amongst different Buddhist groups. This is another reason why Paul backs an individual, non-institutional and not explicitly Buddhist approach.

Other participants also mentioned that they were concerned that Buddhist social engagement and Buddhist public advocacy in particular would be problematic because it would reveal internal differences amongst Buddhists in relation to social and political issues. Thomas, another participant expresses something similar, saying:

I don’t think it [Buddhist public advocacy] appropriate. Part of the problem of doing so is that Buddhists would differ on what a Buddhist viewpoint would be! And this, in turn, could create unnecessary division among Buddhists, and in the mind of observing non-Buddhists.
Both Paul and Thomas are reluctant to speak on behalf of Buddhism. They show an awareness of the complexity and diversity of potential Buddhist responses to social issues and therefore understandably resist wanting to claim any one particular position as Buddhist. Consequently they conclude that they should not speak as Buddhists; which of course would be different to speaking for Buddhism.

Buddhist public advocacy undoubtedly has the potential to reveal the divergent views of different Australian Buddhist traditions, organisations and individuals. Participants whose response to Buddhist social engagement is shaped by an accent of secularism appear to regard this as being detrimental to ‘observing non-Buddhists’ and the public perception of Buddhism generally. Rather than reveal multiple and conflicting ‘Buddhist’ positions on such issues these participants privilege keeping this difference and potential disunity in the private sphere. This appears to be another factor that inclines participants to be ‘shy’ about forms of Buddhist public advocacy.

This may be related to the desire to distance Buddhism from another influential theme within discourses of secularism—the perceived proclivity of religion toward internecine conflict based on divergent doctrinal interpretations and applications. Conflicts within (and between) religions represent another prominent feature of how religion is portrayed through the lens of secularism. Avoiding an association with these kinds of divisive debates may be another underlying reason for participants’ reluctance toward Buddhist social engagement, a desire to protect Buddhism from a negative public perception in Australian popular culture. Based on these underlying assumptions or the awareness of them, and a reluctance also to speak for Buddhism, the majority of participants opt for a non-identified and individual Buddhist contribution to social issues, rather than an overt, collective one. This attitude is one of several key features of what I describe as an approach to Buddhist social engagement spoken with an accent of secularism.

**Secularisation and Desecularisation**

The tendency outlined throughout this chapter provides examples of the way that the majority of practitioners believe an ideal approach to Buddhist social engagement involves concealing the Buddhist source or inspiration that frames their approach to social engagement. What does this approach suggest about attitudes to religious privatisation or deprivatisation in Australian society, and by extension secularisation and desecularisation? Does participants’ reluctance to have Buddhists overtly contribute Buddhist ideas into
public debates on social issues suggest a resistance to religious deprivatisation and a preference for privatisation?

The privatisation thesis, which predicts that in modern societies religion becomes increasingly privatised, expelled from sphere after sphere of public life, is one of three key sub-thesis of the secularisation thesis. I will now discuss in further detail secularisation and the secularisation thesis. This is relevant to my thesis in as much as my findings contribute insights into some of the claims surrounding secularisation or desecularisation in contemporary societies.

As discussed earlier, since the origin of the academic study of modern societies, sociologists assumed that as a society modernises, religion would become increasingly irrelevant. These and related ideas developed into a general theory known as the secularisation thesis. A core assumption of the thesis, which remained unchallenged for decades, was that secularisation was part and parcel of a general teleological and progressive human and societal development wherein societies moved from the primitive ‘sacred’ to the modern ‘secular’ (Casanova, 2011: 54-55). Though this development first arose in modern European societies, scholars implicitly or explicitly assumed that secularisation would become part of a global historical transformation (Casanova, 2011: 54).

In the past two decades the secularisation thesis has been radically critiqued and revised. Scholars now appreciate that the relationship between modernity and secularisation is far more complex than was originally conceived of. It is now vividly apparent, through numerous contemporary trends across the globe, that secularisation, like modernisation, is not a singular, unilateral, linear process that unfolds homogenously throughout the world, but rather unfolds in distinct, sometimes conflicting, contradictory ways between and within nation-states and socio-cultural groupings (Turner, 2010: 651, Casanova, 2011). Yet there continues to be significant debate about whether the secularisation thesis was fundamentally false or only false in its broad-scale application.

According to Casanova the main fallacy in the theory of secularisation is the ‘confusion of historical processes of secularization proper with the alleged and anticipated consequences which those processes were supposed to have upon religion’ (Casanova, 1994: 19). Casanova suggests that in order to speak meaningfully about secularisation, or, its counter, desecularisation, we need to consider three distinct but related aspects of the
thesis (Casanova, 1994: 19-31, 2006). He identifies these as decline, privatisation and differentiation. I will here provide a brief background to these, focusing particular on the privatisation thesis, as this aspect is the most relevant to this thesis.

**Religious Privatisation and Deprivatisation**

Casanova identifies the first sub-thesis of the secularisation thesis as the thesis of decline; that is, the decline of religious beliefs and practices including church attendance and belief in God (Casanova, 2006: 7-8). This he claims is the most recent, but now most widespread usage of the term. Another sub-thesis he identifies as differentiation; the conceptual and actual distinctive categorisation between the so-called secular spheres such as the modern state, market economy, science, from religious institutions and values (Casanova, 2006: 7). A third sub-thesis he identifies as privatisation—the marginalisation of religion to the private sphere.

As noted in the introduction, Luckmann in *The Invisible Religion* (1967) presented one of the classical formulations of the privatisation thesis theory, claiming that the trend away from institutional religion did not mean that religion was disappearing entirely. Rather it was becoming increasingly privatised and hence socially and publicly ‘invisible’ (Luckmann, 1967, Achterberg et al., 2009: 688). This challenged the decline sub-thesis of the secularisation thesis, yet supported, and indeed was part of the development of, the privatisation thesis.

However, this thesis has now been widely questioned. This was spearheaded by Casanova’s work (1994) where he claimed that we are witnessing the ‘deprivatisation’ of religion in the modern world and that religions are likely to continue playing important public roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world. As noted in the introduction Casanova defined religious deprivatisation as

> the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them (Casanova, 1994: 5).

With the publication of *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Casanova also coined the term ‘public religion’. Akin to the notion of religious deprivatisation, this refers to religion or religious organisations participating effectively in the public sphere of modern societies.
Various studies have since added significant empirical weight to this claim (Haynes, 1998, Juergensmeyer, 1993). More recently Casanova has suggested that we can now assert with some confidence that we are ‘witnessing a process of “deprivatization” of religion as a relatively global trend’ (Casanova, 2008: 101). Had Casanova extended his historical analysis to Asian Buddhist countries he may have concluded that the trend toward deprivatization had been occurring since well before 1980, and indeed since the nineteenth century. However Casanova clarifies his claim regarding the deprivatization of religion in the modern world when he writes:

I do not mean to imply that the deprivatization of religion is something altogether new. Most religious traditions have resisted all along the process of secularization as well as the privatization and marginalization which tend to accompany this process. If at the end they accepted the process and accommodated themselves to the differentiated structures of the modern world, they often did so grudgingly. What was new and became “news” in the 1980s was the widespread and simultaneous character of the refusal to be restricted to the private sphere of religious traditions as different as Judaism and Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, Hinduism and Buddhism, in all “three worlds of development” (Casanova, 1994: 5).

The fact that religion has not been entirely privatised, but remains an important aspect of public life, is now widely recognised. However Casanova suggests that to speak meaningfully about these processes, scholars must historicise and contextualise their claims (Casanova, 2011: 63).

The topic of Engaged Buddhism presents the opportunity to examine contemporary attitudes to the themes these questions prompt. Engaged Buddhism, explicit in its very name, advocates a public role for Buddhism. As noted earlier, the modern movement of Engaged Buddhism represents a rich example of deprivatisation on a global scale, a push to use Buddhism as a moral and frequently political resource within the public domain. Do participants desire to have Buddhism associated with or distanced from public religious engagement, particularly an overtly socio-political kind, such as epitomised by the practices, ideals, philosophies, activities associated with the movement of Engaged Buddhism? Furthermore, what do their attitudes suggest about issues related to the privatisation or deprivatisation of religion—whether religion is or should be becoming increasingly public, or its opposite, increasingly privatised (Casanova, 1994)?
A Shy Desecularisation Process?

Rather than a clear example of deprivatisation or privatisation of religion, what I have identified so far in participants in this chapter represents a mixture of features of privatisation and deprivatisation. Participants do not support or argue for a privatisation of Buddhism as such—they resist confining Buddhism to a purely ‘private’ sphere. Thus their approach does not reflect the kind of radical individualism and privatisation that some scholars have suggested characterise contemporary spiritual movements.

Participants do permit, if not advocate, carrying Buddhism out of the religious sphere and into the political and social domain. (The way they assume the functioning of these spheres as distinct is a reflection of the overarching grammar of secularism, in particular differentiation.) However while not explicitly arguing in favour of the privatisation of religion, practitioners certainly do not celebrate public religion, or overtly support the deprivatisation of religion. Rather they very tentatively manage a tension they feel between what is required, accepted, valued in the liberal, secular context of Australian society, perceptions I argue are imbued with a worldview of secularism, with their adherence to Buddhism and their belief that it has something valuable to offer the public sphere.

In arguing that Buddhist social engagement and public advocacy should be carried out with a cloak of religious ‘invisibility’, despite Buddhism being a significant basis to their contribution, their approach represents a kind of religious privatisation—if not a privatised-deprivatisation. Or, to express it more elegantly, employing a trope used by other scholars to describe religion in Australia, it is a ‘shy’ kind of deprivatisation (Bouma, 2006, Possamai, 2008). As such, it could be seen to reflect aspects of what Possamai has described as Australia’s ‘shy’ desecularisation process (2008).

Possamai argues that

if religion and spiritualities are ‘a shy hope in the heart’, as Bouma (2006) describes them, the de-secularisation process could be characterised the same way. Religions and spiritualities are diversifying and are being revitalised in Australia, but this happens, as Bouma indicates, at a ‘low temperature’. There are no overt claims from any religious group to take central stage at the societal level, but groups and individuals are discreetly active at the organisational and individual levels (2008: 32).

Recalling Casanova’s depiction of secularisation as based on differentiation, privatisation and decline my research presents evidence for this ‘shy’ desecularisation in the form
of a shy deprivatisation. In the following section I explore in further detail what the widespread adoption of an approach to Buddhist social engagement imbued with an accent of secularism suggests about processes of secularisation in Australia.

**Religious Adherence, Privatisation, Secularisation and Desecularisation**

As noted already I adopt Casanova’s understanding of secularisation, which identifies three aspects of secularisation as differentiation, decline and privatisation. Debates about secularisation or desecularisation frequently pivot on claims about religious decline or religious privatisation (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688, Casanova, 1994). Research conducted by Achterberg et al. suggest these two crucial dimensions of secularisation develop dialectically (Achterberg et al., 2009). Their research, drawing on data from eighteen European countries, indicates that desire for a public role of religion is strongest when adherence to a particular religion is in decline (Achterberg et al., 2009). In ‘A Christian Cancellation of the Secularist Truce? Waning Christian Religiosity and Waxing Religious Deprivatization in the West’ they write:

> Though Christians in the West have experienced substantial declines in terms of sheer numbers, our findings hence suggest that they have become less rather than more likely to accept the “secularist truce” (Achterberg et al., 2009: 696).

My research suggests a similar finding, albeit in reverse. In the 2006 Australian census, Buddhism was the fastest growing religion in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics., 2006). In the most recent census, 2011, it was no longer the fastest growing religion, but still showed growth in numbers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This may suggest another reason for the reluctance shown by participants in my study toward developing a highly public or political role for Buddhism—Buddhists have little institutional impetus to become more publicly engaged in overtly socio-political ways. The way that individuals introduced in this chapter and the previous chapter approach the issue of Buddhist social engagement suggests that they feel, consciously or otherwise, that having Buddhism engage in the public domain, especially in any kind of overt, institutional socio-political capacity, would lead to a decline in affiliation, if not popular support, for Buddhism.

In conclusion to their article, Achterberg et al. write

> religious decline seems to go along with increasing desires for deprivatisation, indicating secularization and desecularization, respectively, and as such ruling
out the possibility of “all-out” claims about “whether or not” secularization takes place (Achterberg et al., 2009: 696).

Deborah Stevenson, Kevin Dunn, et al., in an article titled ‘Religious Belief across “Post-secular” Sydney: The Multiple Trends in (De)Secularisation’ make similar claims regarding the complexity of processes related to secularisation and desecularisation. They write

many Western countries are now influenced by the apparently contradictory processes of secularisation and desecularisation. Instead of remaining solely in the private sphere, religion is now in constant flux between hiding in the private sphere and seeing a decrease in religious affiliation (i.e. secularisation process) or re-emerging in the public sphere and seeing an increase in religious affiliations (i.e. desecularisation process) (2010: 323-24).

Drawing from the work of sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas, they claim that such a condition, where processes of secularisation and desecularisation are in constant flux, is characteristic of post-secular societies (Stevenson et al., 2010).

The majority of participants in this study reflect or enact ‘these apparently contradictory processes of secularisation and desecularisation’, particularly those that adopt an approach to Buddhist social engagement spoken with an accent of secularism. Through their adoption of and identification with Buddhism, participants reflect processes of desecularisation—the increasing affiliation with religious and spiritual traditions outside mainline churches in the West (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688). The majority of participants did not identify with a particular religion before becoming Buddhists. Their affiliation with Buddhism is thus part of the trend, in Western societies, toward the increasing affiliation with religious and spiritual movements not traditionally practiced in those countries.

Yet, the majority of participants articulate an approach to Buddhist social engagement significantly informed and framed by assumptions and values of secularism. In this they adopt an approach reflective more of secularisation than desecularisation—in particular a normative impulse toward the privatisation of religion. Thus in their simultaneous adherence to Buddhism yet resistance to the overt deprivatisation of Buddhism they reflect processes of both secularisation and desecularisation. While processes of desecularisation
are occurring, they appear to be doing so, from the standpoint of my research, amidst an overarching dominance of secularisation, if not secularism.

Further illuminating the evidence for both secularisation and desecularisation in Australian societies, not all participants in the research were opposed to Buddhist social engagement, nor adopted a ‘not in the name’ approach to Buddhist public advocacy or social engagement. This further highlights how not only within a society but within specific religious traditions within the same society, processes of secularisation and desecularisation occur simultaneously—further ruling out the possibility of ‘all-out’ claims about ‘whether or not’ secularisation is taking place. In order to further highlight this and the diversity of attitudes toward social engagement amongst Australian Buddhists, in the following section I will present the views of participants that support Buddhist public advocacy. I will begin with the support expressed by Euro-Australian Buddhists, followed by ethnic-Tibetan Australian participants.

**Raising the Buddhist Banner: Support for Buddhist Public Advocacy**

Two Euro-Australian participants in my research did support Buddhist public advocacy and engagement. I identify both as adopting a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement, something I detail in greater depth in chapter seven. Chelsea is one of those. I ask her whether she thinks Buddhism is suitable for dealing with social issues directly through political activism and advocacy. She responds with reference to a meeting of the Australian Sangha Association (ASA) she had recently attended. Someone she described as a ‘retired political lobbyist’ had given a keynote speech. The speaker was a prominent political figure, yet had only recently become involved in Buddhism, which had significantly altered his view on what Buddhism’s appropriate or possible role in Australian society could be.

By way of a response to my question regarding Buddhist public advocacy Chelsea began to paraphrase the content of his speech—‘You guys have got one of the best kept secrets, I never knew’—she said, imitating the speaker. ‘He had the impression of Buddhism being very passive and sedate. He had no notion of anything like Engaged Buddhism.’

---

2 The Australian Sangha Association (ASA) is the national body for Buddhist monastics in Australia. It was established in 2005 and meets annually to elect a committee of monastics (which includes monks and nuns from all traditions) to represent monastics in Australia at various levels of government. More information can be found at [http://australiansangha.org/australiansangha/](http://australiansangha.org/australiansangha/) (Australian Sangha Association, 2013).
She continues her version of the speech in approving tones, saying

look you’ve [Buddhism’s] got processes for decision making, you’ve got processes for all these things, politicians need to know this. But because we don’t go out there and do the hard sell thing, or even a soft sell, it’s like you’re keeping this secret.

Chelsea’s rendition of the speech highlights the persistence of a particular Western conception of Buddhism—as ‘passive and sedate’—a representation that continues to distance Buddhism from social engagement or public advocacy. The speaker’s perception of Buddhism as ‘passive and sedate’ and of Buddhists ‘keeping this secret’ reflects vividly the attitudes of the Euro-Australian Buddhists attitudes presented so far in this thesis. The historical construction of Buddhism however as ‘passive and sedate’ extends far beyond the participants in my study. Rather, as described in chapter one, it has its roots in orientalist constructions of Buddhism stretching back at least to the nineteenth century. It continues to be reproduced, in part, through the influence that secularism, in how contemporary Australian Buddhists present an appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement.

The speaker’s reference to ‘the best kept secrets’ appear to reflect the reluctance among Buddhists to contribute to public debates as Buddhists, or specifically presenting a ‘Buddhist view’ on social issues, as documented earlier. This may be further amplified by the fact that Euro-Australian Buddhists may not be particularly politically inclined. When I asked Bhante Sujato, a Euro-Australian monk of the Thai Forest tradition whether Buddhists should be commenting on social issues in Australia? He says, ‘Yes, of course. Definitely.’ I ask him, ‘Do you think that is happening?’ He says:

It should be happening more often. We don’t comment on everything. Partly due to cultural reasons, partly also because we’re also just learning to stand on our feet and partly because most Buddhists in Australia are pretty comfortable. You know. So it tends to be a bit of a middle class religion, and we’re kind of, we’re okay. We’re not overtly discriminated against. We’re not. So we don’t feel those things. There are some things occasionally, but not really strongly. So we tend to get a bit complacent about it. Also, we’re not educated in the issues. If I ask on a number of occasions when we have groups of people I say, what are the issues I should raise? Are you concerned with the treatment of indigenous peoples in Australia,
are you concerned with the immigration policies and of course, they always say they are, but they are not used to raising those things within a Buddhist context.

The fact that most Euro-Australian Buddhists are middle-class (Bubna-Litic and Higgins, 2010, Adams, 1995, Cunningham, 2002) is likely another factor in producing ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement, as suggested by Bhante Sujato. This theme is explored in greater depth in chapter seven.

The ‘political lobbyist’ that Chelsea referred to above was Geoff Gallop, a former premier of Western Australia, and, at the time of writing, an Honorary Professor of the School of Government at the University of Sydney. One year into his second term as the Premier of Western Australia, Gallop announced to the media that he was resigning, citing depression as the cause. One of the places he sought help was the Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, Western Australia. The monastery was presided over by an influential, controversial and highly ‘engaged’ English monk Ajahn Brahm.3

Two years after regularly attending the Bodhinyana Monastery, Gallop was giving a keynote address at the 2008 ASA’s Annual General Meeting promoting Buddhist public advocacy in Australia. The speech, titled ‘Buddhism and Australian Society’, was a presentation of Gallop’s views on the ideal relationship between Buddhism and social engagement in Australian society and in particular, the role of Buddhist public advocacy and political lobbying.4

Gallop firmly argues throughout his speech that it is essential for Buddhists in Australia to be socially engaged, including and especially, involvement in public advocacy and political consultancy. Gallop argues that ‘far too little is made of the political relevance of its [Buddhism’s] message’ (Gallop, 2008). Unlike many other Euro-Australian participants

---

3 Ajahn Brahm reached international notoriety within the globalised Buddhist community for his facilitation of the full ordination of four female bhikkhunis in October 2009 in Western Australia. Bestowing full ordination on female mendicants was forbidden within the tradition and he was subsequently excommunicated from his order, the Ajahn Chah; a lineage within the Theravāda Thai Forest tradition. In addition to his leading role in advocating gender equality within Buddhism, Brahm is a founding member of the Australian Sangha Association (ASA) and a strong advocate of Buddhist social and political engagement.

in this research, Gallop sees ‘no reason’ why Buddhists should not be involved in public advocacy, as Buddhists, ‘as visible and influential’ as other ‘creeds or religions’. For Gallop, the Buddhist source of this contribution should not be oblique. This, in Gallop’s view would transform Buddhism from an ‘inoffensive and ineffective...political force’ (Gallop, 2008) into one proactively helping to shape a better future for Australian society. This in turn, would help secure a better long-term future for Buddhism in Australia. All of these aims, ideals and effects are contingent on such activities been clearly visible and identified as Buddhist.

Gallop is aware that his comments do not represent the mainstream view of Buddhism and run counter to the dominant popular perception of Buddhism in Australia. ‘I say this with full knowledge’ says Gallop

that there is a view in the community that Buddhism is only concerned with “the individual” and “self-development”. Following from this view is the conclusion that Buddhism is inoffensive and ineffective as a political force. This gives it appeal in our consumer society but as a compliant partner rather than a challenging critic.... It’s seen as outside the mainstream and only concerned with the individual; an inoffensive product from “the East” (Gallop, 2008).

In Gallop’s eyes Buddhists need to disrupt this popular ‘individualist’ image of Buddhism that leads to a perception of Buddhism as being politically ‘ineffective’. While this favourably positions Buddhism as ‘inoffensive’ to a ‘consumer society’ and to discourses of secularism it is a depiction that Gallop suggests robs Buddhism of its fuller capacities and credentials to play a more significant socio-political role in Australia.

Gallop argues that Buddhists should be offering critical and constructive assessments of Australian culture based on uniquely Buddhist values, insights and processes. The core of Gallop’s message is to encourage Buddhists to be more involved in Buddhist public advocacy. He says:

Buddhism does take a position on many of the key issues that face us as a community and I see no reason why that position shouldn’t be as visible and influential as that of other creeds or religions. Indeed there is much about what we might call a ‘Buddhist politics’ that commends itself to a world troubled by conflict, commercialism and consumerism.
I’m not saying here that Buddhists should convert the Sangha into a base camp for an assault on state power. Nor am I saying that Buddhists throw themselves into mindless political activity. That would be a travesty. What I am saying is that the Australian community should hear more about and know more about what Buddhism tells us about politics and government (Gallop, 2008).

Gallop does not however go into detail about exactly how the Australian public would hear more and come to know more about a Buddhist approach to politics, government and social issues. Perhaps it is through the kind of ‘deep multicultural pluralism’ that Connolly proposes—albeit in Gallop’s case he does not suggest that the Buddhist label or identity should be removed from the table. Exactly how that dialogue might occur, between liberals, atheists, Christians, Islamists is a challenge and a project that requires further consideration. Perhaps Gallop’s speech at the ASA was not the place for it. Nevertheless Gallop argues that without this kind of socio-political involvement from Buddhists, Buddhism will remain on the margins of society and will fail to gain significant influence.

Gallop’s view that ‘little is made of the political relevance’ of Buddhism supports the findings throughout my thesis. His stance however that more should be made of its political and social insights publicly, contrasts with the view of the majority of participants in my interviews. Rather than making something of the ‘political relevance’ of Buddhism’s ‘message’, Participants significantly de-politicise Buddhism both by denying it is political at all (as seen in the previous chapter) or by seeking to remove its ‘name’ from public, political debate (as highlighted throughout this chapter).

Gallop’s speech, and more pertinently for my research, Chelsea’s extensive reference to it, does however highlight the fact that some Euro-Australian Buddhists do support using Buddhism as a ‘moral resource’ for the public domain, in an overt and visible fashion.

**Tibetan-Australians’ Support for Buddhist Public Advocacy**

Ethnic-Tibetan Australian Buddhists I interviewed also support Australian Buddhists being involved in Buddhist public advocacy. Tenpa, the Tibetan activist introduced in the previous chapter expresses strong support for Buddhist public advocacy. He frames many of this comments regarding Buddhist public advocacy in terms of ‘debates’, saying:

I don’t see any reason why anyone would stay away [from social issues], just because they’re Buddhist. You know sometimes I guess the whole notion of, in the West,
one of the misconceptions in the West is if you’re Buddhist, you meditate, you relieve yourself from society, you relieve from debate and you stay away...and, morally you put yourself up a bit because other people are, not so good.

While he himself does not see any reason why Buddhists would not want to be involved in public advocacy, he understands it to be due to ‘the misconceptions’ that people ‘in the West’ have of Buddhism, or what being a Buddhist is about. He says:

I think maybe some people feel a bit apprehensive because when you debate people might want you to be on one side of the boat, and criticise others and maybe that is why some Buddhists try to stay away a bit because they think people will judge them and looking back at it, again, you know, fear of being judged, to move away from that. You say what is right, but with the right motivation. You don’t say it to anger some section of the community.

Tenpa claims that if a Tibetan neglected to engage in important debates within the Tibetan community they would lose the respect of others. He says,

if you said this in a Tibetan community, if you shy away from those debates you would gain no respect whatsoever...because that’s what Buddhism is about, debating all the time.

Another Tibetan, Ngawang is also strongly supportive of Buddhist public advocacy. He also highlights the importance of Buddhist contribution to social issues, with an emphasis on its propensity for debate. When I ask him, what his thoughts are about Buddhists contributing to political debate in Australia about political and social issues he says:

This is very useful, this is very useful way to run a society; through debate. There’s many ideas that are bound to be expressed, many ideas, no question. But it is through debate, through dialogue, that we can find the best answers. But without anger. If someone, the debater, is angry, then they can’t debate, can’t debate well, they can’t use their whole intelligence....So if humans use their intelligence without anger, they can debate issues with very sharp, with very good reason. So debates are very useful for, aaah, through debates we find the reasons for many things. So debate is very necessary and very useful.
The views of the ethnic Tibetan participants, Gallop’s speech and Chelsea’s support for them represent a marginal view in my research and do not reflect the majority of participants’ attitudes toward Buddhism and political or Buddhist public advocacy in Australia. Nevertheless the support for Buddhist public advocacy, amongst Australian Buddhists (from both Tibetan and Theravādan forms of Buddhism in my research) highlights how features of secularisation and desecularisation exist simultaneously amongst Euro-Australian Buddhist and ethnic-Tibetan Australian Buddhists.

‘Don’t Wave the Buddhist Banner’: Resistance in the Blogosphere

The idea that Buddhist social engagement should occur without any Buddhist identity also emerges in Buddhist blogs posts written by American Buddhists. This suggests it is an approach that enjoys a transnational popularity. Though these Buddhists are American and frequently practitioners of Zen Buddhism I include these comments here to illuminate how similar attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement exist in different Western countries and amongst different traditions being practiced in Western countries. (I discussed this decision in greater detail in chapter two.)

In response to a post titled ‘Engaged Buddhism isn’t as popular as you think’, Harry for example, an American Buddhist blog participant, writes:

I don’t see any point in doing social engagement under a Buddhist header/banner. In our diverse, increasingly secular Western countries I see good reason for not doing it under a Buddhist header/banner tho [sic] (quoted in Thompson, 2011).

Exemplifying a resistance to Buddhists carrying out overtly ‘Buddhist’ forms of social engagement Harry’s comments further show how Buddhists believe that, in the context of living in a ‘diverse’, that is plural and secular society, it is more skilful to carry out Buddhist social engagement without the Buddhist label.

Concealing or abandoning one’s Buddhist identity while carrying out Buddhist social engagement is also a major theme in American Zen practitioner Jack Daw’s blog post on Engaged Buddhism titled provocatively, ‘Engaged Buddhism is a crock of sh*t’. There he writes:

Don’t practice social engagement as a Buddhist. Don’t practice charity as a Buddhist. Don’t show compassion as a Buddhist. These are the things that every
personal practice should contain without constraining them with religious identity. When you choose to show charity, compassion or social engagement as a part of your personal practice you can do so without waving a religious banner. Do it for the benefit for others. Period. End of sentence. No strings attached. No politics or banners. Slogans or comments. No conversions or evangelizing (Daw, 2010b).5

Carrying out social engagement as a Buddhist, Daw suggests can easily become more about ‘waving a religious banner’ than altruistically motivated acts and hence why he regards Engaged Buddhism as ‘a crock of sh*t’. Daw’s statement vividly shows that he feels a ‘religious identity’ constrains one’s expression of charity and compassion. For him, removing the Buddhist label has a higher moral purity and safeguards the individual from his or her own (potential) impulse to use social engagement as a means to convert or evangelise, or from being perceived as proselytising. Consequently he perceives that acts of civic engagement should be conducted without any overt religious identity—without ‘waving a religious banner’.

Daw’s statements seem quite evidently influenced by negative conceptions of religious activity in the public sphere. Daw’s resistance to Buddhist social engagement appears to be in part influenced by assumptions about religious actors being principally animated by the intention to convert and evangelise. There is a strong perception in his statements that certain religious and ethical ideals and values, such as ‘compassion’ and ‘charity’ can easily be motivated by a religious zeal to convert or evangelise. This suggests the impact of secularism; in this case, the tendency to perceive ‘religion’ in the abstract as a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66). Rather than his approach to Buddhist social engagement being based on sensitive awareness of these discourses circulating in Western societies, such as Chris mentioned earlier in this chapter, he believes concern about Buddhist or religious engagement in the public sphere is warranted.

His approach also reflects the influence of Buddhism, particularly (Western) Zen Buddhism. It seems in part shaped by a Zen Buddhist and, more generally, Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy that warns against carrying out otherwise pious or religious meritorious acts with an egocentric, or self-grasping motivation or awareness. This is expressive of a more fundamental and central feature of this philosophy; the deconstruction

---

of identity, or any belief in selfhood or the existence of an independent, inherently existing self. It seems that Daw perceives Engaged Buddhism, with its overt and distinguishing label, one that can easily be read as aiming to differentiate certain Buddhists from another kind of ‘dis-engaged’ Buddhist, as potentially fuelling selfhood. His statements suggest that he considers Engaged Buddhism as a kind of identity politics which conflicts with his own interpretation of Zen philosophy and ethics. This appears to be part of his resistance to Engaged Buddhism.

Other statements made by Daw further reveal the influences that inform his approach. In another blog post titled ‘Buddhist Banners’ he claims that Engaged Buddhism threatens to ‘cloud our practice with our politics’. He goes on to say, that this is what I fear will happen to Engaged Buddhism when we begin to look more into organizational activism and less towards personal activism....It should be of little doubt to anyone that I am very wary of religious organizations. Buddhist as much as any other (Daw, 2010a).

Here Daw exemplifies another key characteristic of the accent of secularism—being ‘very wary of religious organizations....Buddhist as much as any other’. His suspicion and resistance to religious institutions extend into a suspicion and resistance to an Engaged Buddhism that is organised, collective and institutionally based.

With Daw, liberalism, secularism and Zen converge together in a complex way to significantly shape his attitudes to Buddhist social engagement. Though there are various factors lying behind Daw’s attitudes toward Buddhism social engagement, his statements strongly reflect the attitudes of a secular approach that emerged in my research with Australian Tibetan Buddhists. These include a resistance to collectivised, organised religious engagement, a suspicion and concern about religious public engagement and a consequent preference for individual and religiously inconspicuous approaches.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented further evidence of what I describe as an approach to Buddhist social engagement spoken with the accent of secularism. I have explored this through the theme of Buddhist public advocacy. I have described the prominent attitude to Buddhist public advocacy as ‘not in the name of Buddhism’ or ‘without a Buddhist banner’.
These phrases reflect participants’ preference for an individual and religiously incognito approach to Buddhist social engagement. This approach implicitly and explicitly includes a resistance to overt, institutional and collective approaches to Buddhist public advocacy.

While there are undoubtedly numerous influences at play in this preference, the ‘keeping Buddhism out of Buddhist social engagement’ approach appears significantly influenced by secularism. More specifically I have suggested it is an attempt to accommodate to an implicit or explicit normative impulse that religion should be kept separate from the public domain. Participants appear to believe it would be inappropriate to overtly bring Buddhist and metaphysical themes into public discourse. I have also acknowledged that in addition to secularism, this approach may be based on ideas about pluralism and the ideal way to contribute to a pluralistic society. I have also suggested that certain Buddhist frameworks, such as the concept of skilful means play a role in forming this response—however neither of these influences was explicitly evident in participants’ statements.

While this approach appears to represent a kind of religious privatisation, I have suggested that it represents a privatisation in method rather than in principle. That is, participants do advocate that Buddhist ideas could and should be employed to contribute to social debates and the functioning of society. Consequently I have identified this approach, if enacted, to represent a form of religious deprivatisation. Given its incognito character however, I have described it as a very shy and discreet form.

As a form of religious deprivatisation I argue that it represents an example of desecularisation in Australian society. However given the way that secularism implicitly and explicitly informs it, it also highlights ongoing patterns of secularisation. It thus suggests that, at least through the eyes of Australian Tibetan Buddhists, desecularisation occurs under the hegemonic gaze and rules of secularism. By extension, it provides further evidence of the way that secularism, while ‘allowing’ multiple religions to coexist, significantly frames and constrains participants’ attitudes and approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

Insomuch as participants adopt or accommodate to a worldview of secularism when considering religion and the public sphere, one that advises leaving the Buddhist banner in the private sphere, participants’ approaches contrast sharply with the ethos of the modern Engaged Buddhist movement, traditional Buddhist societies and a purported
global trend toward religious deprivatisation (Casanova, 1994, 2006). Within my research this approach stands most starkly in contrast to a reformist approach that I discuss in chapter seven. A romantic approach, described in chapter six, is most similar to it. Furthermore, the parallels between my Australian interviews and American blogs suggest that a resistance and ambivalence to Buddhist social engagement, based on secularism extends beyond Australian Tibetan Buddhists, and exists within a variety of traditions of Buddhism practiced in the West. In the following chapter I detail another distinct accent evident in participants’ descriptions of Buddhist social engagement, one I describe as politically neoconservative.
Western Buddhism, since its emergence in the 1960s and 1970s, has been predominantly aligned with progressive, liberal politics. Engaged Buddhism has also been associated with left-wing, liberal, progressive values and politics. As James Coleman in *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* writes:

> Whether it is AIDS, human rights in Asia, the peace movement, protecting the environment, or fighting homelessness, socially engaged Buddhism has definitely drawn its agenda from the left side of the political spectrum. Unlike the Christian or Jewish communities, there are few conservative voices to be heard among Western Buddhists (Coleman, 2002: 119).

Rothberg makes a similar observation in regards to Engaged Buddhism in Asia, North America and Europe:

> The term engaged Buddhism, as used both in Asia and in North America (and Europe), usually implicitly refers to movements and activities guided by ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ values (such as justice, democracy, human rights, ecological balance or sustainability, and so on). The common (and certainly provocative) assumption seems to be that these latter values somehow fit better than more ‘right-wing’ values with Buddhism as such....At this point in the evolution of North American Buddhism, however, there are no prominently politically ‘conservative’ Buddhist public voices and movements, and no clear criticisms of ‘left-wing’ socially engaged Buddhism, that is, nothing like the controversies that exist within the Christian and Jewish worlds (Rothberg, 1998: 271).

In contrast to the claims made by scholars above, in this chapter I provide evidence of politically ‘conservative’ Buddhist voices within Western Buddhism. These politically conservative views are evident in another distinct approach to Buddhist social engagement that emerged in my research. Given the significant influence of political neoconservatism on this approach I identify it as accented by neoconservatism.

In this chapter I will explore the particular way in which political neoconservative values emerge in my discussions with participants and underlie their approach to Buddhist social
engagement. After providing an introduction to a political neoconservative worldview I will focus on how neoconservative values emerge in my discussions with participants. I go on to examine the relationship between this approach to Buddhist social engagement and the international Western Tibetan Buddhist organisation Diamond Way Buddhism, and its founder Ole Nydahl.

**Neoconservatism**

The term ‘neoconservative’ first emerged in America in the last three or four decades of the twentieth century and was often used to refer to individuals that had earlier identified with left-wing, liberal, progressive politics but had shifted significantly toward conservative values associated with right-wing politics. Its meaning is disputed and changing, but in this context I refer to the views of Irving Kristol, who is widely regarded as the founding father of neoconservatism. Kristol describes a neoconservative as ‘a liberal who has been mugged by reality’ (Kristol, 1983, Lynch, 2008: 184, Peters, 2008: 13). He later claimed that the exact meaning of neoconservatism was difficult to define and suggested it was better understood as a ‘persuasion’ rather than as an organised pressure group or movement (Kristol, 2003, Lynch, 2008: 183).

The neoconservative approach to Buddhist social engagement detailed in this chapter predominantly shares parallels with the political orientations of neoconservatism rather than the social strains. In regards to the latter I am referring to the traditional views emphasised by neoconservatives related to marriage, family, gender and sexuality.

In *America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order* Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke (2004), emphasising the political features of a neoconservative worldview, identify three common themes around which neoconservatives unite. These include:

1. A belief that the human condition is defined as a choice between good and evil and that the true measure of political character is to be found in the willingness by the former (themselves) to confront the latter.
2. An assertion that the fundamental determinant of the relationship between states rests on military power and the willingness to use it.
3. A primary focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theatre for American and Western overseas interests (2004: 11).

Michael Peters claims that ‘neoconservatism as a political doctrine has been the twin basis for the “war on terror” abroad and the “war on culture” at home’ (Peters, 2008: 24). The ‘war on terror’ reflects the prime focus of neoconservative foreign policy—Islam. Since the late 1990s neoconservatives have identified Islam as the principal threat to Western national and international interests (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 11, Hassimi, 2011: 129). For neoconservatives, Muslims represent the ‘enemy civilization’, the embodiment and source of evil in the world (Hassimi, 2011: 130). Based on these factors neoconservatives advocate pre-emptive military actions throughout the Muslim world (Hassimi, 2011: 129).

Another ‘war’ through which many neoconservative values are articulated is one waged at ‘home’, that is, within Western cultures. Neoconservatives have, since the 1980s, been at the forefront of ‘the culture wars’. The central narrative of this war, from a neoconservative stance, is that liberal-progressives and radicals who promote multiculturalism, affirmative action, the assertion of moral and cognitive relativism and generally critique Western culture are seriously undermining traditional Western values. In response to this perceived threat neoconservatives promote a ‘return’ to an age of established and certain moral order, a culturally unified and organic community reflective of a moral and cognitive certainty (Aby, 1993: 50, Shapiro, 1991: 29). Neoconservatives are passionate critics of ‘relativism’—moral, cultural and cognitive—which they perceive to be plaguing contemporary Western culture (Peters, 2008: 14, Drury, 1996: 66, Halper and Clarke, 2004: 26, Aby, 1993: 50, Shapiro, 1991: 29).

Neoconservatives typically identify both postmodernity and multiculturalism to be responsible for the ‘relativism’ that is undermining ‘universalist values’ (Peters, 2008: 19, 24). They claim that the modern liberal ideal of cultural diversity, or multiculturalism—the principle of not only tolerating but also respecting different religions and cultures and encouraging them to coexist harmoniously—tends to undermine the traditional culture of any country that tries to put it into practice (Dagger, 2012). This conception of cultural values is often based on assumptions concerning the unity, purity, origins and uninterrupted historical continuity of ‘the West’ (Peters, 2008: 19). For neoconservatives multiculturalism threatens to dismantle the state, producing ‘a clash of civilizations’
that ultimately undermines the spread of ‘universalist’ values (Peters, 2008: 19). The privileged standpoint of ‘universalist’ values for neoconservative thinkers is the Western tradition or some version of it (Peters, 2008: 19). In response, neoconservatives advocate the need for greater ‘moral clarity’. This phrase, in neoconservative lexicon, reflects an extension of absolute moral categories and the need for ‘good’ to confront ‘evil’—the need to identify ‘evil’ as ‘evil’ and the willingness to confront it (Gordon, 2003, Bennett, 2003). Moral clarity also represents an attack on political correctness, which neoconservatives perceive reflects a radical agenda designed to censor their worldview.

Debates stemming from a neoconservative view on preserving Western civilization, values and identity have become a defining feature of national scenes in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Peters, 2008: 24). While these critiques of relativism, multiculturalism, postmodernism and political correctness initially emerged in America they have framed the basis for the ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. The culture wars spread quickly to the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, as well as to European states; and then also to Asia—to China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan (Peters, 2008: 24).

**Moral Clarity or Seeing Things ‘the Way They Are’**

Several defining characteristics of neoconservatism were evident in two participants’ descriptions of Buddhist social engagement. (There was further evidence of this approach on the Internet—a theme explored later in this chapter.) One participant, Ruel, provided the most vivid example of this approach to Buddhist social engagement. Rather than responding to questions about Buddhist social engagement directly and explicitly Ruel describes what he understands as a Buddhist-inspired response to socio-political issues. Given these issues relate directly to forms of social engagement I have used these as a basis for analysing his approach to Buddhist social engagement.

I will first explore how Ruel expressed an attitude closely akin to ‘moral clarity’. This is not immediately overt and explicit, but rather emerges as Ruel discusses how Buddhism informs the way he understands socio-political issues. I ask Ruel if being Buddhist has impacted on the way he sees the social world and political and global issues. He responds saying:

I think I see things more clearly, because what training, what mind training does is that you become more aware of what’s going on around you, so instead of putting things into boxes, trying to push things away and ignore things you just become
aware because you don’t experience things, a strong aversion or attachment to things, you just see things for what they are, and when you see things for what they are then you do what fits, what’s appropriate.

The idea encapsulated in Ruel’s phrase—‘you just see things for what they are’—emerges in various forms throughout my conversation with him. The notion of seeing things ‘for what they are’, or as Ruel expresses it elsewhere in the interview ‘the way things are’, is expressive a central (Kagyu) Tibetan Buddhist phenomenological standpoint. The phrase refers to a way of seeing the world not impacted by one’s own imposition of thought, bias, or personal conditionings. It is a practice and philosophy expressive of a central Buddhist conception—emptiness.

Ruel extends this conception into his analysis of the socio-political world, showing a distinction from a secular orientation that creates a bifurcation between the Buddhism and the socio-political world. It represents a prominent feature of Ruel’s analysis of socio-political issues and his approach to Buddhist social engagement. Some of the ideas associated with the phrase ‘seeing things for what they are’ emerge further in the following discussion:

It’s not being dramatic about it, but not being afraid. What it allows, the Buddhist meditation, is to be clear, to see, I mean if you’re digging a hole yeah? If you’re walking somewhere and see a hole in front of you, if you pretend the hole is not there then you will walk into it and drop in it. How much smarter is it to just go around it or to find something to put over it so you and your friends can cross over it, and that’s what it’s about, looking at issues as the way they are, not making them dramatic, yeah, not say racist or whatever but being actually honest.

The following quote shows more closely how Ruel understands seeing things ‘the way they are’ and ‘being actually honest’ in regards to particular contemporary socio-political issues.

The clear view, sober view, unemotional view, not an emotionally cold but non-sentimental or not angry, not selfish view, yeah? And looking at a situation without actually being personal and really not trying to avoid difficult issues yeah, and because you call someone an asylum seeker, it doesn’t stop making them an illegal immigrant, that’s what they are—illegal immigrants yeah? For example, it’s a
controversial issue yeah? But if you frame it, it’s called framing yeah? If you frame something you know with nice words which people do all the time, people think oh, that sounds nice it’s all right, it’s not as big a problem, it’s not a problem yeah?

Though rooted in Buddhist ontology and philosophy, when Ruel applies ‘seeing the way things are’ into the socio-political world it frequently corresponds with characteristics of a neoconservative political standpoint. For example the underlying tone or attitude of Ruel’s ‘seeing things the way they are’, and adopting a ‘clear’ and ‘sober view’, ‘being actually honest’ bears significant parallels with the neoconservative stance of moral clarity and a critique of political correctness.

Moral clarity is a catchphrase associated with American political conservatives. Popularised by William Bennett’s Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism (2003) the phrase was first used in its current context during the 1980s in reference to the politics of Ronald Reagan, a twentieth century neoconservative hero (Kristol, 2003: 2, Bennett, 2003). In a speech given by George Bush in 2002 honouring Mr and Mrs Reagan, Bush says

[Reagan] knew that the cause of freedom is served by moral clarity, a willingness to call oppression and evil by their proper names (cited in Gordon, 2003: 160).

Moral clarity is, for advocates who employ the phrase, indicative of a courage and clarity to identify ‘evil’ as ‘evil’ and a willingness to call it by its ‘proper name’ (Gordon, 2003: 160). It is reflective of the moral certitude that characterises a neoconservative worldview and a reaction to the ‘crisis of relativism’ that neoconservatives perceive to be threatening Western culture (Peters, 2008: 21, Brown, 2006: 707). Though Ruel does not employ the phrase moral clarity or ‘evil’ his approach to analysing the world is based in a similar kind of epistemological certainty—seeing things for ‘what they are’. His emphasis on this, like a neoconservative orientation, is accompanied by a critique that people, particularly in Australian and Western cultures, tend to avoid difficult issues with nice words. Though framed in Buddhist terms and concepts rather than notions of ‘evil’ and ‘morality’ it bears strong parallels with the neoconservative notion of ‘moral clarity’. This is further reflected in Ruel’s response to the question of whether Buddhism should be contributing to social issues. He responds saying:
Yes, yes [it has] a huge role, because one of the qualities we develop is enlightening qualities, which is a manifestation of light, which is fearlessness, joy and active compassion, so those three yeah? Fearlessness does not mean jumping off the plane or the bridge or whatever it is yeah? But fearlessness is don’t be afraid or timid, open up and look at difficult issues, that’s what fearlessness is, because unless you look at the issues you cannot resolve them.

Another strong theme in Ruel’s orientation toward Buddhist social engagement, closely tied to ‘seeing things the way they are’ is a critique of political correctness. The following statement provides an example of his resistance to political correctness and the way he perceives his anti-political correctness to be based in Buddhist principles:

Political correctness, it’s a big, big problem because we’re trying to pretend that the world is the way we think it should be. And then we act accordingly but it does not free the situation because the world does not act the way we think it should be. The world is the way it is, yeah? It is here that Buddhism brings in the fearlessness, okay to actually stand up and call a spade a spade and actually being able to say, look guys you look at this from this angle how about from this angle, like I raised some controversial issues without being angry, I wasn’t angry was I?

Ruel’s statement shows how he understands the expression of his political views as an embodiment and expression of his Buddhist practice: ‘open up and look at difficult issues’ and ‘call a spade a spade’. Ruel aligns the act of confronting political correctness with Buddhist principles and frames it as a form of Buddhist practice. ‘I wasn’t angry was I’ Ruel says, integrating his praxis of resisting so called political correctness with a Buddhist ideal of maintaining equanimity at all times.

Individuals from a range of political persuasions, including both liberal and conservative, have critiqued political correctness. However the nature of these critiques differ (Reinelt, 2011: 135, Drury, 1996: 171). Some progressive artists and intellectuals perceive political correctness to impose certain censorial restrictions on artistic freedom. Neoconservatives by contrast, claim that political correctness is fostering a climate of intolerance toward any speech that is offensive to radical or progressive sensibilities (Aby, 1993: 46). Ruel’s critique of political correctness more closely parallels a neoconservative one, emphasising the need for ‘moral clarity’, the ‘fearlessness’ to ‘open up and look at difficult issues’ and
to ‘call a spade a spade’. Though it is expressed through the language of a key Tibetan Buddhist concept of seeing things ‘the way they are’, the manner in which this concept is applied is strongly informed by neoconservative concerns about ‘radical’ or ‘progressive’ sensibilities imposing censorship on political views. As such I identify this approach as accented by neoconservatism. This becomes clearer in an example I provide in the following section.

**Confronting ‘the Muslim Threat’**

The ‘difficult issues’ that Ruel was able to discuss, calling ‘a spade a spade’ without getting ‘angry’ reflect the prime focus of a twenty-first century neoconservative political view—Muslims and Islam (Halper and Clarke, 2004: 11). Throughout my interview with Ruel he consistently expresses a resistance to Muslim migration to Australia, the potential of a Muslim take-over of Australian society, and the threat that he perceives global Islam poses to Western societies. The first issue I will explore is Ruel’s resistance toward Afghani migrants to Australia.

Ruel first raises his resistance to accepting ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘illegal immigrants’ from Afghanistan during a conversation about an entirely unrelated topic. Further reiterating his emphasis on moral clarity and a resistance to political correctness, he asks me ‘can I be controversial?’ and goes on to say

> these asylum seekers coming from Afghanistan or wherever it is, because Taliban is mad you know, Taliban is persecuting them. So they come here so they can be fed and looked after while our boys go there and risk their lives and die there and do their job fighting Taliban. How fair is that? Nobody asks that in Australia, everybody is so politically correct, why our boys, Australian boys should die so those guys can sit in comfort here....Looking with a sober eye, like a clear eye on the situation, why is it happening like that? For example why, it’s their responsibility, it’s their country, so if they’re not happy with Taliban, West prepared to give them weapons, the West gives them weapons to fight them, they’re not willing to, they’re happy for us to come and fight for them, I don’t think it’s fair...We’re fighting on the same side, how come they run away from the battlefield so our boys have to die there instead of them, why is it fair?

Despite Ruel’s apparent bitterness toward ‘our boys’ fighting in Afghanistan, a view that would put him at odds with a contemporary neoconservative agenda, later in the interview
he clarifies his position—he supports military intervention based on the significant threat he perceives terrorists (and later Muslim populations generally) to pose to Australia. When I ask Ruel whether he supports Australian troops being in Afghanistan, he says:

Haaaaa, it’s like if you do you’re damned and if you don’t you’re damned, because if Australian troops weren’t there and Taliban was still there training all the guys who travel all around the world, all of the Mujahideen, they most of them came from Afghanistan, so what do you do? I mean you either wait until they blow up MCG (Melbourne Cricket Ground), as they were going to, you know, or then you wait for the right-wing in Australia to take power, because if the Australian Government does nothing then our freedoms go down, because right-wing, because what happens when they’re under threat and when the government seems to be not doing anything and the people go into the other extreme into the right-wing, and right-wing comes and all the freedom goes less and we end up ourselves with less freedom, do you know what I mean? So you got to be practical here, yeah? So what do you do?

There is however some ambivalence in Ruel’s views about exactly how ‘the West’ should deal with Islam and the Muslim ‘threat’. He expresses some concern about the potential of losing freedoms under a right-wing government, a concern however that appears more to play to an argument of the problem of not dealing directly and militarily with Islamic societies. It is still largely reflective of a neoconservative approach, though, like many other neoconservatives, Ruel appeals to liberal-secular values of freedom and liberty to make his argument. It is in this way that his approach to socio-political issues, which is what he focuses on when responding to questions about Buddhist social engagement reflects a complex mix of liberalism, secularism, neoconservatism and Buddhism.

In the following statement he continues to exemplify the neoconservative tendency to see Islamic countries as a ‘personification of the enemy civilization’ and the embodiment and source of conflict in the world (Hassimi, 2011: 130). However he seems to hold an ambivalent approach to military intervention arguing that perhaps it would be good if we just ‘keep out of their way’ and ‘let them cook in their own juices’. He says:

If you look what happens with Islam, you look, I reckon more than ninety percent of conflicts in the world in recent years were involving Islam. If you look at Iraq,
it’s a war between whom, Sunnis and Shiites and what will happen? I can tell you because it happened before. If we keep out of their way and they keep out of our way yeah? Just trade with each other, cultural exchange is beautiful, you know food, whatever it is, spices etc., just keep it that way, and let them cook in their own juices, in the real life, because at the moment they blame us for their troubles because we are mingling and we are trying to get diversity and make everything the same. But not everything is the same, you cannot say that, and then it irritates and because it is against their beliefs, yeah? And then they see us as the cause, the degradation of their youth because they don’t listen and they see us as the cause of all evils. If we are out of the picture then they look at themselves and actually maybe we should change something because we are the ones that are backwards.

Despite Ruel’s ambivalence about military intervention in Islamic countries, his overarching attitudes toward Islam and Muslims share many characteristics with a contemporary neoconservative approach to Muslims and Islam. For example, like neoconservatives Ruel is resistant to multiculturalism, or at least a multiculturalism that involves Muslims. Ruel resents the change to Western culture that Muslim migration poses and suggests that Muslim Australians would be better off returning to Muslim countries. He explains:

Because if you like what was in your country, why don’t you go back, you have a choice, there’s so many airlines flying to every corner of the world, yeah? Go there, you know. But instead people try to change it here...for example women wearing all these covers you know, you can go to Emirates, beautiful economic conditions, yes, no one killing anyone, no persecution, and you get all the cover you want, why do you try to bring it here in Australia, why? There are so many beautiful girls around. I mean would you like to do that, to wear something like that?...If you think differently, if you want to live differently, fine, but live in a different place. People who want the Sharia Law, please leave. Muslims please, your choice, but keep contained and we’ll live our culture. If you choose to come to this country, you choose to live this culture, but you cannot bring that here because it will create tension, it will create an animosity. So, if you want to live then stay there, we’ll trade, we’ll exchange, we’ll go to visit them, they will come to visit us, and have a look at these absolutely morally corrupt Westerners. And you know and we’ll go there and think how tight and angry they are, and have a bit of a joke at each other and live separately.
Though in the above statements Ruel expresses a tolerance for Muslims to exist ‘in their own culture’ at other times he also expresses considerable concern about a potential Muslim invasion from Indonesia. This further highlights his sense of the threat Islam poses to Western culture and more specifically Australian sovereignty. Expressing this concern he says:

We have the biggest Muslim nation, over-populated by more than 300 million just north of us. Australia is only twenty million people and imagine if things go sour between Indonesia, which is a well-armed country as well. For example, something happens you know, the government there becomes an extreme Muslim Government, which is quite possible yeah? They come to power and they find Australia a threat. How long do you think Australia would stand fighting against Indonesia by itself?.... Imagine, let’s think in fifty years time in Indonesia with four to five children per family yeah? In Australia it’s one to two. The growth of the population is already more than 300 million on that small piece of land, yeah? Imagine in about thirty to forty years time, double that population, that’s 600 million there, they will not be able to feed, they will start starving, so where will they look? You will have so many boats coming across because people just want a better life and they will see the big chunk of free land across the strait.

Ruel is himself an immigrant to Australia,¹ which he claims has strengthened his resolve to protect and preserve Australian culture. Discussing his relationship with Australia he says:

I came here and wow, it’s wonderful, what an amazing country, our country now, and it’s why I’m a bit like a what’s it called, new-born Christian syndrome—I’m a bit more Christian than the old one. I mean I’m more patriotic, in Australia, meaning I’m so thankful to your ancestors who created this country yeah? I am and I see it as my duty to preserve that culture, preserve the Constitution and don’t let many people who don’t respect the Constitution, who find the Australian anthem un-Australian, un-Islamic yeah, and they find it unacceptable to teach at school.

Kristol describes patriotism as the first value of neoconservative foreign policy; ‘a natural and healthy sentiment and should be encouraged by both private and public institutions’ (Kristol, 2003). Ruel’s impetus toward preserving and conserving a particular

---

¹ I have not included Ruel’s country of origin in order to further protect his anonymity.
kind of Australian culture also reflects a neoconservative emphasis on conserving and preserving a particular Western ‘traditional’ culture that is relatively homogenous and unified (Aby, 1993: 50).

Islamophobic?

Ruel’s extensive concerns about Muslims and Islam frequently appear to portray a type of Islamophobia, a characteristic that neoconservatism has also been charged with (Hassimi, 2011). A 1997 report titled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, prepared by The British Runnymede Trust Commission, describes ‘Islamophobia’ as ‘the dread, hatred and hostility towards Islam and Muslims perpetuated by a series of closed views that imply and attribute negative and derogatory stereotypes and beliefs to Muslims’ (quoted in Kayaoglu, 2012: 610). Focusing on a model of ‘closed’ rather than ‘open’ views of Islam, the report identified several ways Islam has become characterised because of Islamophobia. These included Islam as monolithic and static rather than diverse and dynamic, Islam as other and separate rather than similar and interdependent, Islam as an enemy not as a partner, Muslims as manipulative rather than sincere, discrimination against Muslims is defended rather than challenged, Muslim criticisms of ‘the West’ rejected not considered and anti-Muslim discourse seen as natural and not problematic (quoted in Kayaoglu, 2012: 610).

Several of these qualities are vividly present in Ruel’s attitudes toward Islam. For example Ruel depicts Islam as ‘monolithic and static rather than diverse and dynamic’, as distinctly ‘separate rather than similar and interdependent’, as a dangerous ‘enemy’ rather than a ‘partner’. Ruel dismisses and simplifies Muslim criticisms of ‘the West’—‘they will come to visit us, and have a look at this absolutely morally corrupt Westerners’. Furthermore anti-Muslim rhetoric is seen not only as ‘natural and not problematic’ but a necessary act of social engagement, one that Ruel rationalises and legitimises on Buddhist grounds. That is, Ruel’s ‘Islamophobia’ is analysed as seeing things ‘the way things are’ and enacting ‘fearlessness’ by ‘calling a spade, a spade’.

The relationship between neoconservatism and Islamophobia is anything but straightforward. Neoconservatives did not invent Islamophobia, and it has not always

---

2 I acknowledge that significant contention exists amongst scholars in relation to the term Islamophobia, however these issues are beyond the scope of the themes related to its usage here. For more on this debate see Sayyid and Vakil (2011), Allen (2011) and Kayaoglu (2012).
been an integral part of neoconservatism. The interaction between neoconservative policies and ideologies and Islam arose from the post-Cold War quest to define the West’s mission in the New World Order. In this pursuit, questions and assumptions about the nature of Islam and the political landscape and regimes of the Middle East have become a centrepiece of a neoconservative political narrative and agenda (Hassimi, 2011: 130). However since the late 1990s, and especially after the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11 2001, Islam has become central to neoconservative agenda (Hassimi, 2011: 129). Since this time neoconservatism has, according to Cemalettin Hassimi, been ‘the mouthpiece of a machine that normalizes Islamophobia’ (Hassimi, 2011: 129).

Throughout my interview with him Ruel reiterates depictions of Islam and Muslims central to a neoconservative political narrative. He initiates discussion on these themes in response to questions about Buddhist social engagement. When doing so, rather than speaking in an explicitly neoconservative language, he employs Buddhist language and concepts to express and justify his views: ‘fearlessness’ in ‘call[ing] a spade a spade’ and ‘not getting angry’ while doing so. The tone however, the accent, that these concepts are expressed with, is a neoconservative one.

**Western-Buddhist Neoconservatism, Ole Nydahl and Diamond Way**

Ruel's ‘Buddhist’ social and political orientation, which he articulates in response to questions about Buddhist social engagement, are closely associated with those of his Danish Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Ole Nydahl, the founder of international Tibetan Buddhist organisation Diamond Way. It is evident from my interviews that Nydahl’s approach to social and political issues, in varying degrees, influences his students’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement. Ruel for example describes how he adopted the socio-political views expressed above after meeting Nydahl and becoming involved in Diamond Way. This influence can be further seen, not only in my interviews with Diamond Way members, but also amongst members of Diamond Way internationally, in blogs, websites and popular Buddhist media. In this section I will explore the various ways that Nydahl presents his political views, how he depicts or understands their relationship to Buddhism, and how his students adopt, negotiate and apply these views in their understanding and approach toward Buddhist social engagement.

As noted in chapter two, Diamond Way is one of the largest international Western Tibetan Buddhist organisations and possibly the largest convert Buddhist movement in
Europe (Scherer, 2009: 28). Founded by Nydahl and his wife Hannah in 1972, it has, according to Diamond Way accounts, grown to over 600 centres in over forty countries (Scherer, 2009: 25, Obadia, 2002: 399). Nydahl is a controversial and divisive figure within Western Buddhism (Scherer, 2009: 25, Obadia, 2002: 399, Borup, 2008: 30). He has been accused not only of speaking in a conceited and militaristic way, but also of being right-wing, racist, sexist, and hostile to foreigners (Freiberger, 2001: 70, fn. 30). Despite, or perhaps, because of his controversial personality, he has in many ways been the icon of living Buddhism in Denmark, Germany, and increasingly other Eastern European countries (Borup, 2008: 30).

Comments by another member of Diamond Way, James, highlight the influence that Nydahl has had in informing his approach to Buddhist social engagement. When I ask James what Buddhist social engagement means to him he says:

I mean I have to say what Ole says because that’s the best way for me to say it: to be honest and straightforward in what we say, basically try and communicate how things are.

Like Ruel, seeing and communicating ‘how things are’ is a central feature of James’ approach to Buddhist social engagement. This is something they both draw directly from Nydahl. *The Way Things Are, A Living Approach to Buddhism for Today’s World* is the title of one of Nydahl’s key publications (Nydahl, 2008: 31, Scherer, 2009). Ruel directly describes Nydahl as the inspiration behind his own emphasis on ‘seeing the way things are’ and resisting ‘political correctness’. He says:

Lama Ole for instance, in the centre all the time when he talks about these difficult issues you can see he’s not disturbed, he’s very clear, he’s not politically correct, he says the way things are, he gets under fire very often for that.

As Ruel’s comments suggest, Nydahl frequently employs the phrase ‘the way things are’ in politically controversial ways. For example, in an interview conducted with the *Calgary Herald* during a speaking tour of Canada, Nydahl uses the phrase to describe the differences between Buddhism and Islam: ‘A religion like Islam means submission. Buddhism isn’t submission. It’s understanding the way things are’ (Woodard, 2004).
Judging from comments made by members of Diamond Way and statements in popular media, Nydahl is waging something of a war on political correctness. For example, in a blog post describing Nydahl’s view about political correctness one author writes:

In his [Nydahl’s] mind there is no doubt; to be politically correct is the worst sin of all…and if there is such a thing as rebirth, the rebirth of a political correct [sic] will be the worst of all (Engberg, 2009).

Nydahl’s resistance to political correctness is also incorporated into publicity material for Diamond Way. The description of Nydahl on the Diamond Way webpage reads—‘he is not always politically correct, but his motivation is clearly always for the benefit of others’ (Diamond Way, 2012b). A website promoting The Diamond Way monthly magazine Buddhism Today, states ‘we promise to expound joy and humanism above political correctness or dogmatic assumptions’ (Diamond Way, 2012a). In another interview Nydahl says, ‘The reason I do some of these things and say things that are not politically correct is to keep certain people away from our centres—it’s a filtering process’ (Shennan, 2002).

Nydahl courts controversy in a range of areas. One area relates to his views on Islam, which he frequently expresses in public Buddhist lectures he gives. This was something brought to my attention in interviews with Diamond Way members. James, for example, says:

There’s one other thing that I will mention which may be of interest to you and is certainly one thing that Ole is very, very big on and he will say it in every public lecture, is that we have a major threat in Islam. He’s very controversial for this. You may have seen that but he just basically feels that, and I think there’s definitely some validity, I don’t stand in such extreme position as he does personally but there are concerns there. They do hold values that are not in accord with a dharma perspective, they are basically not in accord with humanity. They are, look at the extreme part of the teachings and according to the information we have and a lot of our students have read the Koran, that basically if you are a total believer, like if you are submissive, we are basically, especially Buddhists, we’re animals and they will treat us like animals. The way they treat women is not acceptable. That is actually something also that we want to make a little bit of awareness around because basically, I don’t know if you have been following this at all but in twenty or thirty years most of Europe will be more populated by Muslims than any other
faction. That could be problematic when you consider already that there are parts of Paris that police won’t even go to because of the violence and crime, these are sort of related to Muslim identity and issues.

Like James and Ruel, all Diamond Way members I interviewed articulated a concern about the significant threat they perceived Islam posed to Western society and Western culture. While not all of Nydahl’s students adopt these attitudes to the same degree or with the same fervour as Ruel, all stated implicitly or explicitly that they were committed to ‘make[ing] a little bit of awareness around these issues’, or as Ruel put it more explicitly, being ‘fearless’ and calling ‘a spade a spade’.

Jacqui, another Diamond Way member also alludes to the way Nydahl encourages others to speak out against Islam, particularly in regards to women’s rights. Jacqui explains:

He’s [Ole] very big on freedom of women and treating women fairly. It comes out strongly in his lectures as well. I guess he’s quite concerned. He often talks a bit about Islam and the way women are treated in Islam. He’s quite concerned about that. I guess he’d like women to stand up for Muslim women a bit more as well.

Though Nydahl expresses his views on Islam in ‘every public lecture he gives’, lectures that are ostensibly ‘Buddhist’ lectures, Nydahl publicly distinguishes his socio-political views from his role as a Buddhist teacher. In an interview in the Sappho, a website based in Denmark, Nydahl claims that he offers these views as a ‘responsible, thinking human being’, rather than as a Buddhist teacher (Hedegaard, 2007). Nydahl argues that this is an appropriate approach given that the contemporary socio-political issues we face today were not in existence at the time of the Buddha, therefore we have no explicitly Buddhist framework for making such assessments, an approach more secular than neoconservative (Hedegaard, 2007). Nevertheless my research shows that Nydahl’s socio-political views have a significant influence on Diamond Way members, which, to varying degrees, become operational in their approach to Buddhist social engagement. This is particularly exemplified by Ruel above, and to a lesser extent, James.

Nevertheless while Nydahl encourages his students to keep their political activism separate from Diamond Way and advises them not to identify any public statements they make on socio-political issues as Buddhist points of view, he also encourages his
students to take on a role of protecting ‘Western freedoms’—to speak out about the threat he perceives Islam poses to Western society and culture. There is evidence that some Diamond Way members, beyond those I interviewed, follow Nydahl’s advice. This can be seen for example in responses to a post published in the blog of popular American Buddhist magazine *Shambhala Sun* titled ‘Why are some Buddhists sitting out the Islamophobia debate?’ (Fisher, 2010b). The article, written by Danny Fisher, an American Buddhist chaplain and blogger was about the Buddhist response to Park51—a proposed construction, to be built two-blocks from the World Trade Centre in Manhattan and dedicated to Islam and multi-faith initiatives. The proposal incited significant controversy in America. Fisher describes how the article emerged from an enquiry made by American Buddhist scholar Stephen Prothero as to whether Fisher had noticed any responses from Buddhist Americans regarding Park51. In the article Fisher laments the relative silence of American Buddhists on the debates surrounding the Park51 controversy and their lack of response to Islamophobia generally (Fisher, 2010b).

In response to Fisher’s article one commentator writes, ‘Sadly, elements in the Western Buddhist community are VERY Islamophobic (if not borderline racist) indeed. ‘Lama’ Ole Nydahl, anyone?’ Writing under what can only be presumed to be a pseudonym, a contributor named Apuleius responds:

**Question:** How many cartoonists are currently in hiding due to death threats from Buddhists?

*Here’s a follow-up bonus question:* the entry of what new religion to the Indian subcontinent led to the precipitous (and violent) decline and near total eradication of Buddhism there?

*Yes, Lama Ole is obviously a terrible person because he speaks our [sic] for women’s rights and freedom of speech, and against terrorism. Obviously an Islamophobic racist* (comments to Fisher, 2010b)!

A rigorous debate ensues, with over thirty comments back and forth, Apuleius attempting to warn of an imminent and global threat of Islam with other respondents undermining and rejecting his claims.

My research indicates that these attitudes and responses, which I have identified as strongly accented by neoconservatism are informed and influenced by Nydahl. The
association these students have made between Nydahl’s approach to political issues and social engagement and their own Buddhist practice and worldview may in part stem from the way Nydahl rationalises his views in non-public lectures and teachings he gives.

Burkhard Scherer, a scholar of religion and member of Diamond Way, illuminates the Buddhist rationalisation for Ole Nydahl’s political views, ones he frequently describes publicly as personal views rather than specifically ‘Buddhist’ teachings. In ‘Interpreting the Diamond Way: Contemporary Convert Buddhism in Transition’, Scherer describes Nydahl’s socio-political attitudes, particularly those related to Islam, to be closely associated with his role as a Buddhist teacher. More specifically he explains that Nydahl perceives his controversial and ‘personal polarizing style’ as part of his function as a ‘Buddhist protector’ (Scherer, 2009: 34 quoting Nydahl 1997: 31). This relates to three key features of Nydahl’s self-representation, which, according to Scherer ‘implicitly addresses three key critiques’. He describes the third feature as

his function as a Buddhist teacher and protector of Western freedom. This addresses his legitimization narrative of himself as emanation of a Buddhist protector and his Kālacakra-linked fierce interpretation of Islam in particular as a key threat to Western freedom and human, especially women’s rights (Scherer, 2009: 23).

Kālacakra is one of the highest Tantric deities of Tibetan Buddhism. Practicing the Kālacakra Tantra includes visualisation practices designed to purify the psychophysical components of existence, and leads to one’s transformation into a Kālacakra (Powers, 2010a). Nydahl, as indicated by Scherer’s statements above, links his socio-political warnings against Islam to aspects of his manifestation of Kālacakra—enacting a purification of the psychophysical components of existence. Though publicly Nydahl describes his warnings about Islam as the personal thoughts of a ‘responsible, human individual’, privately, as Scherer’s comments strongly suggest, Nydahl’s approach to these issues is steeped in a reconstitution of traditional Buddhist motifs, practices and frameworks.

Showing Nydahl’s socio-political approach to be intimately tied to his self-narrative as a Buddhist protector deity and his critiques of Islam linked to the Kālacakra, strongly suggests that Nydahl sees his orientation toward socio-political analysis and social engagement as ‘Buddhist’. While frequently oriented around a Western liberal notion of freedom, Nydahl reconstitutes particular features of Buddhist philosophy, practices
and traditional motifs in ways that provide a Buddhist legitimacy and rationalisation for political views that bear significant parallels with neoconservative political stances: a critique of relativism, political correctness, Islam, the protection of Western values, and the need to describe things ‘the way they are’ (moral clarity). Another article written by Scherer, ‘Macho Buddhism: Gender and Sexualities in the Diamond Way’ further clarifies this dual or conflicting orientation within Diamond Way Buddhism. There Scherer describes Diamond Way as neo-orthodox, a school whose ‘packaging of Tibetan Buddhism’ is “modernist”, but its ‘content…mostly traditional’ (Scherer, 2011a: 87-88).

While the influence of Buddhist teachers on participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement was reflected throughout my research, the patterns that emerged between members of Diamond Way, who are all students of Nydahl, were significantly stronger than between other groups. In no other group did such a striking repetition of views and precise terminology occur. This is a little ironic given that, in a way far more pronounced and explicit than any other Western-orientated Tibetan Buddhist organisation Diamond Way presents itself as the group that most encourages independent, free, critical thought. To quote Nydahl—Diamond Way offers a spiritual path ‘to those who are too critical and independent for anything else’ (Quoted in Scherer, 2011a: 27). Elsewhere Diamond Way members are presented as the epitome of the modern European enlightened individual, what Scherer describes as the ‘critical elite’ (Scherer, 2011: 27).

Though Nydahl clearly has a strong influence in shaping the approach to Buddhist social engagement and socio-political issues amongst some of his students, there is nevertheless significant variation among Diamond Way members relating to Buddhist social engagement. That is to say that not all adopt a neoconservative orientation. For example while expressing anti-Islamic attitudes, Gina, featured in chapter three, also articulated a strong resistance to having socio-political issues being associated with Buddhism, Buddhist practice and Diamond Way Buddhism. Her views appear in part to be a reaction against this neoconservative strain within Diamond Way. Further research within Diamond Way needs to be conducted to ascertain some of the variations and tensions in relation to the neoconservative political orientation that strongly characterises Nydahl’s approach to socio-political issues and several other members, evidenced by Ruel in particular. My research nevertheless reveals that while marginal within my research, this neoconservative approach is a noteworthy trend that exists, both within Australian Diamond Way Buddhism and internationally. Given that Diamond Way is
one of the largest international Tibetan Buddhist organisations catering to Westerners and this orientation is strongly promoted by its charismatic leader, it is an area worthy of further research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have detailed another distinct approach to Buddhist social engagement to emerge in my research, one I have described as heavily accented by neoconservative values. It is an Engaged Buddhism that appears to be relatively new to the Western Buddhist landscape.

The prominent neoconservative themes to inform this approach were a notion of moral clarity, a critique of political correctness, support for military intervention into Islamic countries and Islamophobia. Though expressed in Buddhist language and concepts, such as seeing things ‘the way they are’, the underlying ideology of this approach to Buddhist social engagement, this ‘Buddhist’ analysis of socio-political events and the appropriate response to them is strongly informed by the global discourse and ideology of neoconservatism. While exemplars of this approach understand, rationalise and express their views in Buddhist language and phrases and some parallels exist between traditional Buddhist views and these, I argue that the strong likeness with contemporary neoconservative political ideology suggests that it is shaped by neoconservative values, ideals and concerns. In the following chapter I will explore another orientation toward Buddhist social engagement that is significantly distinct from a neoconservative approach, one I identify as significantly informed by romanticism.
Chapter Six
Romanticism and Buddhist Social Engagement: ‘Just Being in the World’

In this chapter I describe another distinct approach to Buddhist social engagement that emerged in my discussions with participants—a response I describe as accented by romanticism. For three participants, the values, frameworks and ideals of romanticism emerged as significant in how they approached Buddhist social engagement. This approach to Buddhist social engagement was also evident in Buddhist print media, Buddhist websites and blog posts. Before detailing how these romantic themes emerge in my research I will present some of the key themes that characterise what I mean by the term romanticism, acknowledging that there are many variations of the term.

Romanticism

Though romanticism is no longer an extant movement, it has enjoyed an often-concealed afterlife in cinema, music, literature, and eclectic New Age spiritualities (McMahan, 2008: 77). Its influence continues to underpin Western cultural worldviews in significant ways, including modern approaches to Buddhism (McMahan, 2008: 77, Tweed, 1992). In The Making of Buddhist Modernism, McMahan identifies romantic expressivism as one of the three prominent influences on the formation and ongoing development of modern Buddhism (McMahan, 2008: 10). According to McMahan this emerges in modern Buddhism’s appeal to spontaneous, innate creativity, its emphasis on inner authority and experience and the transcendence of morality through an intuitive and interior source of ethics (2008: 76).

In Roots of Romanticism Isaiah Berlin claims that romanticism is one of the largest modern movements to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world. It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it (Berlin and Hardy, 1999).

Romanticism is an attitude and intellectual movement that emerged in Western civilisation from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. It characterised many works of literature, painting, music, architecture, and criticism of the period and was adopted both
in a technical philosophical sense as a well as in popular culture (Brinton, 2006: 485). It is a cluster of attitudes and ideas, a set of philosophies loosely tied together if only by their common rejection of eighteenth century enlightenment rationalism (Brinton, 2006: 488, O’Hear, 2005: 158, Quinton, 2005: 778).

Romantics often emphasise ‘the dynamic, the disordered, the continuous, the soft-focused, the inner, the this-worldly’ (Quinton, 2005: 778, Brinton, 2006: 485). They stress the importance of non-rational or even irrational aspects of human nature. In many cases romanticism privileges feeling and intuition over thought and intellect, emotion over calculation and reason and imagination over liberal common sense (Brinton, 2006: 489). It favours the ‘concrete over the abstract, variety over uniformity, the organic over the mechanical, freedom over constraint and rules and limitations’ (Quinton, 2005: 778).

Expressive of its critique of enlightenment rationality, romanticism frequently carries an anti-intellectual strain, particularly within its popular, as opposed to its philosophical expressions (Brinton, 2006: 488). Closely tied with its critique of rationalism and reason, romanticism strongly resists the instrumentality and mechanistic nature of modern, industrial life (Brinton, 2006: 489). Part of the way in which romanticism resists this is through enhancing and re-enchanting everyday life (McMahan, 2008: 215-240). This tendency was vividly evident in some participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement, a theme I explore in more depth below.

Romantics frequently extol giving attention to the fleeting present and living in the moment. This is coupled with a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality, its moods and mental potentialities (Quinton, 2005: 778, Berlin and Hardy, 1999). This array of preferences is fleshed out in all sorts of specific ways: in literature, art, and music, in moral conduct and moral convictions, in religion and politics, in the writing of history and, not least, in philosophy as well as contemporary Buddhism (Quinton, 2005: 778, McMahan, 2008). I will now explore how various themes of romanticism inform how three participants described Buddhist social engagement.

**Emphasising the Everyday: ‘A Completely Authentic, Natural Way of Being’**

An emphasis on the ordinary and the everyday was a prominent theme in descriptions of Buddhist social engagement and Buddhist practice by three participants, Paula, Ani and Suzie. When describing her approach to Buddhist social engagement, Ani says:
It’s on a very ordinary practical day-to-day level. You pay attention to the person at the checkout, you acknowledge that there’s a human being that’s being very kind to you.

Paula describes Buddhist social engagement in a similar manner—‘it’s on a very ordinary, day-to-day level. It’s just how I approach my day’. Further elaborating on her understanding of Buddhist social engagement, focusing particularly on her approach to Buddhist practice Paula says:

Just as an ordinary practitioner in my day-to-day life, as I’m going around my day just checking. It might be washing the dishes. Just all of a sudden, it might just be ‘drop it’. Just be. And just over and over and over again....In my day I will check my mind over and over and over again and just bring it home. Bring it home. Bring it home.

Based on a previous discussion I ask Paula, ‘Is that home to a stillness?’. She says, ‘Yes. That’s home to a stillness’. Describing her understanding of Buddhism more broadly Paula says:

I mean dharma essentially is just being present, you know, of having us all just being...it’s not attaching yourself to any preconceived idea of what the path is. It’s really quite extraordinary, and its nothing more than an incredibly still mind.

Speaking more specifically on her philosophy of engagement, Paula describes her approach to Buddhist social engagement as ‘just being in the world’. She goes on to say:

Authenticity. Natural. Naturalness about this, something that is just a way of being, that is just a natural way of being....It is just a completely authentic, natural way of being, a spontaneous way of being that instantly brings benefit. Oh, you’ll have me in tears. [Tears welling up. Pauses. Laughs. Sighs]

Paula’s approach of ‘just being in the world’ and her emphasis on ‘nothing more than an incredibly still mind’ is constituted by both Buddhist and romantic influences. Her emphasis on ‘check[ing] my mind over and over and over again’ reflects the traditional Buddhist practice of mindfulness. While Paula’s practice draws on these traditional
mindfulness practices, the way she applies and analyses the results of these practices bears strong parallels with themes born from the Reformation and romanticism.

Traditional Buddhist doctrines describe mindfulness practices as a pathway toward renunciation and disentanglement from the world (McMahan, 2008: 218). In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* McMahan explains how mindfulness practices have been used, under the impulse of overarching modern trends toward the affirmation of everyday life, to inspire the valorisation of the details of everyday life. This occurs through a finely tuned attention to the flow of consciousness and its interaction with everyday activities—‘a moment-by-moment, vividly quiescent appreciation of things in their ordinariness’ (McMahan, 2008: 217). This is closely associated with the concept of authenticity, explored further in the following section.

**Authentic Engagement**

Authenticity is a central feature of a romantic approach to Buddhist social engagement. Responding to questions about Buddhist social engagement through her idea about what constitutes Buddhist practice Ani says:

> For me what the practice is about is becoming authentic and I can really miss the point and while that’s going on I’m not engaged. We can hide in the practice, we can hide in the rituals and just use it as another escape and if we really engage in it, we’re being called upon to bear witness. And again, it’s on a very ordinary practical day-to-day level.

Based on Paula and Ani’s approach I understand informal spontaneous exchanges, carried out with an awareness of one’s internal disposition, to be central to a romantic orientation toward Buddhist social engagement. The degree to which these exchanges are characterised by ‘authenticity’ delineate, for Ani and Paula, whether or not these interactions constitute authentic engagement. Authenticity in this context is defined by the embodiment of a specific internal subjective state, particularly in the midst of everyday encounters and how one perceives oneself in relation to others. An authenticity based on these kinds of characteristics is a defining characteristic of a romantic approach to Buddhist social engagement.

This bears strong parallels with the way romantics historically have employed the concept of authenticity. An emphasis upon inner authority and experience and the transcendence of
morality through an intuitive and interior source of ethics are some of the most significant ways that modern Buddhism has been subtly reconstituted through the frameworks and values of romanticism (McMahan, 2008: 76). This stands in contrast to a traditional and neo-traditional approach to authenticity within Buddhism. In a traditional Buddhist context, one’s proximity and engagement with formal, institutional hierarchies, canonical texts and formal ritual practices are the measure for authenticity, rather than a particular internal orientation or subjective state.

Ani’s emphasis on authenticity is illuminated further when she describes the work she does in jails. ‘For me’, she says, ‘to be walking into the prison thinking I’m something special is a misconception’. Based on previous discussions I ask her, ‘so breaking down those notions of being special is for you, as much about engagement as being there?’ ‘Yes’ she says, ‘the extent to which I’m caught up in my misconceptions is the extent to which I’m disengaged’. These ‘misconceptions’ relate to how she perceives herself in relation to others. For Ani, conceiving of herself as a nun, as more ‘special’ than the prisoners she is visiting, constitutes an inauthentic orientation, one that constitutes being socially disengaged. By contrast socially engaged Buddhist practice is about ‘becoming authentic’. Ani’s deconstruction of her ego, identity and any pride in her position as a nun reflects core features of Buddhist philosophy and practice. Its integration with a particular notion of authenticity, particularly as a central feature of Engaged Buddhist practice represents a subtle negotiation and integration between Buddhism and romanticism.

In the following statement Paula further demonstrates the significance of authentic encounters in her understanding of Buddhist social engagement:

Actually it [the interview] is reminding me, I had a little shop in Bungara and I would actually do a lot of practice in that shop, and people would come into the shop and I’d have a conversation with them and I’d hear the most extraordinary things and they’d go, ‘why am I telling you all this?’ To me it was, it it it, it gave me confidence, it also, it is also the value of just to be in the world. How healing that was for others. Just to create the cause, for people to have the conversation with you, or a moment-to-moment exchange. It can just be eye contact. It can be just anything. How important that is. I think people undervalue that. We’re not going to have change in society overnight. We’re not. But if there are enough people with enough awareness then that is enough. It can change quite, you know, in an authentic way.
Paula’s statement declares what for her is an ideal approach to Buddhist social engagement. Behind it lies her sense of what constitutes ‘authentic’ social change. Rather than rational, structural changes she believes authentic change occurs through subjective, gradual, inter-subjective dynamics between individuals. It is an approach to Buddhist social engagement that pivots on a heightened awareness of the ‘moment-by-moment’ exchanges that occur in the public sphere and a sense that these are central to ‘authentic change’. This further reflects how this approach orients around central ideals of romanticism (and the Reformation)—a ‘valorization of the details of everyday life’ and the ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ (McMahan, 2008). These themes are demonstrated vividly in Paula’s description of social engagement above, where it [engagement] can be ‘eye contact... just anything’.

‘Without a Label’: Resisting Instrumental Approaches to Buddhist Social Engagement

As frequently as Paula emphasises authenticity and the ordinary she also articulates an aversion to labels—the label Engaged Buddhism included. Further emphasising the significance she grants to everyday exchanges in enabling social change, defining Buddhist social engagement, she says

In terms of your question about social engagement, people who are very skilled at this [just being in the world] can take it into society, into the world, to engage with people on any level, whatever it is, but with a still mind. It’s incredibly potent. I know that people, when you’re with someone like that you can, all sorts of activity can go on, all sorts of conversations can be held, seeds are planted, exchanges are made. But once again, you can’t put a label on it. It’s just an exchange that goes on.

Paula’s resistance to labels is closely tied to her understanding of what constitutes authenticity. In further exploring this I ask her, based on previous discussions, ‘if there’s a particular agenda, that to you takes authenticity away?’. She responds saying:

Definitely, you’ve absolutely got it. That is it. Buddhism, or what I’m talking about, has no agenda. You’ve given me goose bumps up my back, because that’s exactly it. That’s exactly it...Once again it comes back for me, without a label. Because without a label somehow for me, in my mind, gives it more authenticity.

Further exemplifying her resistance to labels Paula says:
I’d have to say, at this particular point I’m not a person that favors labels. I don’t, and I feel that putting the teachings of Buddha into these little boxes and things like that, for the West, has been a little unskillful.

When I ask Paula to elaborate on this she says:

We will always, as human beings we will connect with different things, as we will. It is a highly personalised, individual thing. We are dealing with things of the mind and relating to a particular philosophy and in that, it is the most open, expansive, vast teaching that I think is not connecting with the Western mind in that way. It has been put in boxes in terms of its presentation and you see it. It’s not what the teachers teach, but we as Westerners habitually have to put things in boxes and put labels on them. So, hence, why, I’m not particularly affiliated with a centre so to speak.

These general statements about Buddhism are framed and emerge within the context of our discussions about Buddhist social engagement or Engaged Buddhism and reflect an implicit resistance Paula has to Buddhist institutions, Buddhist centres, and a formalised approach to Buddhist social engagement. This also demonstrates many themes of romanticism, which also reflect qualities of secularism and liberalism. This includes a preference for the personal, the individual and a resistance to or suspicion of institutions, particularly religion ones. A romantic approach is broadly anti-institutional. In relation to Buddhist social engagement this becomes a resistance to institutionally-based, collective and strategic approaches to Buddhist social engagement or social change.

As my interview with Paula unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that her emphasis on natural, subjective modes of engagement and her dislike of labels is imbedded within a resistance to structured, organised and instrumental approaches to Buddhist social engagement. This is made more explicit when she says:

For me, in terms of social engagement, in terms of taking these teachings out in a wider way, lets drop all that. Let’s drop all that.

As noted earlier in this chapter romanticism was born in part from a resistance to the instrumentality of modern, industrial life and Western-enlightenment rationalities
Historically romantics sought to re-enchant everyday life as part of their resistance to the instrumentalisation and mechanisation of life produced by the industrial revolution and modern societies generally. In participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement this resistance to instrumentalisation (and institutionalisation) emerges as a resistance to formal, collective and institutional approaches to Buddhist social engagement. The emphasis that romantics in my research place on the present moment, the individual, the spontaneous, and the natural in their approach to Buddhist social engagement is part of their resistance to instrumentality, and in particular, a resistance to associating Buddhism with instrumental styles of social change, such as political and social activism. Those who adopt this approach resist a strategic, structured approach to Buddhist social engagement.

The particular themes prominent in participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement detailed in this chapter were also demonstrated in Buddhist blogs. Karen Maezen Miller, an American Zen Buddhist teacher and author expresses a similar resistance to the label of Engaged Buddhism as Paula, articulating in her own way Paula’s sentiment to ‘drop all that’. In a comment in support of Kyle’s ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ post, featured in chapter three, Miller writes:

> There is nothing more socially engaged than the practice of Buddhism: alert, aware, no separation, taking care of whatever appears. The idea of socially engaged Buddhism is the opposite of social engagement. Alas, if we didn’t keep sprouting another head on top of our heads we wouldn’t need to practice (comment to Kyle, 2010).

Karen and Paula’s statements further reflect what I identify as another characteristic feature of a romantic orientation toward Buddhist social engagement: a resistance to and critique of Engaged Buddhism, or more particularly, instrumental, structured and planned forms of engagement.

The rejection of the label ‘Engaged Buddhism’ is not however exclusive to romantics—those I identify as expressing a secular response to Buddhist social engagement also critique it. What is distinct about romantics’ rejection of the label ‘Engaged Buddhism’ is that it stands more broadly for a rejection of instrumental, mechanistic, structured approaches to social change and Buddhism’s involvement in them. Romantically-orientated practitioners prefer an approach captured by Miller’s phrase above—‘taking care of
whatever appears’. She also expresses key characteristics discussed earlier, an attention on the present moment. Her reference to ‘sprouting another head on top of our heads’ appears to have strains of anti-intellectualism and a resistance to forms of rationalism, features that exist both in romanticism and Zen Buddhism.

Relocating the Sacred: Sanctifying the Everyday
A significant underlying theme in an approach to Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism is what Charles Taylor has described in his modern classic Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity as an ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ (1992). Taylor describes ‘ordinary life’ as

those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family (Taylor, 1992: 211).

According to Taylor the affirmation of ordinary life is a defining feature of modern life, expressing the tendency throughout modernity toward a this-worldly, life-affirming worldview (1992: 13-14). The Reformation has been central to achieving an enhanced status for what had formerly been described as, profane life (Taylor, 1992: 216). It was a principle agent in developing the idea that the sacred can be dispersed throughout what had previously been considered, ‘ordinary activities’. This stood in explicit contrast to a selective and particularised approach to the sacred that characterises most pre-modern and pre-Reformation approaches. In contrast to pre-modern approaches to the sacred, an affirmation of ordinary life locates human fulfilment and meaning, even sacrality itself, not in another realm, but rather in the manner of living this life (McMahan, 2008: 217-219).

One of the most fundamental principles of the Reformation was that salvation was exclusively the work of God. Therefore intermediaries, as well as sacred objects and magical religious practices and rituals were radically downgraded. Along with the significance of Mass went the whole notion that there are special places or times or actions where the power of God/divine is more intensely present. This was reflected in the distinct approach to ritual, religious practice and the religious clergy adopted by Protestantism, which emerged in a creative tension with and rejection of a Catholic or so-called ‘medieval’ understanding of the sacred.
While the Reformation was the most significant historical force (in the West) to produce new approaches to the sacred and thus an affirmation of ordinary life, many powerful cultural forces—political, economic, commercial, and social—have been at work in the revaluation and affirmation of ordinary life in modern cultures (McMahan, 2008: 228). Romantics for example have reinterpreted and reconstituted this over-arching trend in a particular manner that, through its emphasis on the quotidian events of the everyday, produces a sanctification and re-enchantment of the everyday (McMahan, 2008: 217-219).

A distinctly romantic approach to affirming ordinary life is a significant feature of the approach to Buddhist social engagement detailed throughout this chapter. This was evident in Paula’s description of her practice at work, where she emphasised the importance of ‘eye-contact’ in ‘moment-to-moment’ exchanges in everyday life. Ani also closely associates Buddhist social engagement with an affirmation of ordinary life. She tells several stories that present Buddhist social engagement as centred on involvement in ordinary life, as per Taylor’s description: ‘those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction...making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family.’ (I am not personally suggesting these things are ‘ordinary’.) She says:

I’ve seen a picture of H.H. the Dalai Lama, with his ear up to a pregnant woman’s stomach, and she’s got her shirt lifted and she’s just blissed out, just laughing her head off and His Holiness has got his ear up to her stomach. That’s Engaged Buddhism.

She tells another story about her teacher’s engagement in, what Taylor defines as, ordinary life:

Looking at Lama Yeshe as an example, I mean he used to, when he hung out with his students, he just gave himself over completely. I mean he learned to make American breakfasts in Kathmandu in the 1970s. He would go and stay in his students’ houses and he would give all his time to the kids and then he’d go into the bathroom to do his practice, and then he’d come back out. So he wasn’t like holy lama ringing his bell, he was just in there doing it.

Ani here defines Buddhist social engagement as being ‘in there doing it’—‘it’ relating to engagement with ‘ordinary life’—making food, engaging with family and children. Suggestive of the significance that engaging in ordinary life holds for her, she understands
Lama Yeshe to have given ‘himself over completely’. Ani’s descriptions further highlight the preference for informal and non-structured approaches to engagement—an approach that is neither institutional nor particularly instrumental.

Like participants in my research, Miller, the American Zen Buddhist teacher introduced above, strongly emphasises the sanctification of ordinary life in her approach to Buddhism and Buddhist social engagement. Miller’s presentations of Buddhist teachings are acutely focused on an affirmation and sanctification of ordinary life. Her website is titled ‘Making Peace with the Laundry, the Kitchen, and the Yard’ (Miller, 2012). The four main images featured there include a laundry basket, a bowl of cereal, a pot plant and the author in loving embrace with her daughter. The title of one of Miller’s popular Buddhists books is *Hand Wash Cold: Care Instructions for an Ordinary Life* (2010). On her website Miller describes herself in the following way:

I’m a wife and mother as well as a Zen Buddhist priest and teacher, or sensei, at the Hazy Moon Zen Center in Los Angeles. Don’t let that last part confuse you. I’m not the kind of priest you have pictured in your mind. I’m the kind of priest that looks a lot like you do, doing the same kinds of things you do, every day. If every Tuesday afternoon you wheeled your garbage cans out to the curb and saw your next-door neighbor doing the very same thing, your neighbor would be me (Miller, 2012).

Miller is also critical of the ‘label’ of Engaged Buddhism and appears critical of a structured, institutional approach to Buddhist social engagement, implicit in her comments featured above—‘the idea of socially engaged Buddhism is the opposite of social engagement’.

Why do participants describe their practice of Buddhism and social engagement as centring on everyday and ordinary activities and interactions? One possible reason, as McMahan has pointed out in relation to modern interpretations of Buddhist mindfulness practices, is that ‘it produces a modern way of resacralising everyday life while avoiding a return to pre-modern modes of sacralisation’ (McMahan, 2008: 218). In depicting Buddhist social engagement in the way they do, participants accommodate to the Western-enlightenment aversion to the supernatural. At the same time, they resist the instrumental banality brought on by the mechanistic, instrumentality of modern life. This aversion
to the supernatural emerges in another theme at work in depictions of Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism—the contrast between ordinary life and formal ritual practices—explored further in the following section.

**Resisting Ritual**

Romanticism’s emphasis on an organic, natural, spontaneous approach to religious practice and ordinary life vividly conflicts with or stands in tension with an approach to the sacred encapsulated by formal ritual practices and approaches to the sacred. All three participants that strongly emphasised the ordinary and everyday also de-emphasised or problematised formal ritual. For example, for Ani, the fact that Lama Yeshe privately performed his formal ritual practices in the bathroom represented a more authentic approach to Buddhist social engagement than ‘being a holy lama ringing his bell’. Suzie, another participant also exemplifies this. Early on in my interview with her Suzie describes Buddhism as

> a series of philosophical points of view that I really, really relate to, but ‘isms’. I don’t actively practice. I don’t do more of the cultural things. I do it [Buddhism] more as an ethical thing.

Here Suzie articulates a typical modernist bifurcation of Buddhism (Mills, 2001: xv), emphasising the philosophical and ethical aspects, while distancing or de-emphasising the so-called cultural aspects, which for Suzie primarily refers to the formal ritualistic aspects of Buddhism, such as prostrations. Expressing a conflict between authenticity, understood in a manner similar to other participants featured in this chapter, and ritual practices, Suzie describes the tensions she feels about conducting prostrations:

> I find it really hard to do prostrations, I mean genuinely. I can’t do them fakely, and I’m yet to feel, maybe once or twice in my life I’ve felt that sensation of really wanting to throw myself on the floor to honour somebody else. But I can’t do it just because they’ve walked in the room and they’ve been given a title. I just can’t. But every so often I do it because I am standing out like a sore thumb and everyone else is doing it and everyone is expecting me to and so I just go and do it. Then I feel really cranky with myself, because unless I mean it, it doesn’t have any authenticity.
Along with her resistance to ritual practices, we can see in the above comment Suzie’s anti-hierarchical attitudes and egalitarian ideals.

Suzie describes her approach to Buddhist social engagement as employing the ‘philosophical points of view’ that she ‘really, really relate[s] to’ at the shop she manages:

It’s everything is impermanent. It’s everything will change. It’s always moving, it’s always mutating and if we start to understand those we start to make the mind more flexible. They’re the really big tenets and they’re difficult to get and you don’t get them all because you heard them once. You throw them around in your life and even if customers come in and they’re in major states of anxieties, it’s just, ‘it will pass’ because it can’t stay here. You know, it’s just planting little seeds all the time, for me....So there are a few basic principles like that, in Buddhism, they are not to do with the religious side.

For Suzie this approach to Buddhist social engagement and Buddhist practice makes ‘more sense...than sitting down to meditate for a few hours...and lighting up a candle on an altar’. Her emphasis on the ‘ethical’ and ‘philosophical’ side of Buddhism, which for her stands in contrast to ‘the religious side’ and the ‘cultural’ is also reflected in her approach to Buddhist social engagement. In responding to her comments about Buddhist practice and Buddhist social engagement I ask her, ‘things like, maṇḍala offerings¹, that’s not something that’s significant to your practice?’ She responds saying:

Again, it is but it doesn’t have to be a specific place, like I guess, we set up the vegetables in the shop every morning and I want them to be as beautiful as possible and want them to feel a sense of beauty, and we make food everyday and we give it away to the homeless people. Again it should be happening everyday not because you light a candle and set up an altar yeah, so. Not wasting things and turning off the taps and these are maṇḍala offerings to me. You almost get to do it once an hour at the very least.

¹ Maṇḍala offerings are a ritual practice generally conducted as part of the extensive ‘preliminary practices’ (Tib. Sngon ‘gro) of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism. This practice involves using small plates which one fills with gems or grains, which are visualised as offerings of all the precious things of the universe to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas (Powers, 2010c: 789).
In her description of Buddhist social engagement Suzie reconstitutes a traditional approach to ritual in a way that accords with a re-enchantment and sanctification of everyday life. In Suzie’s problematisation of formal and particularised approaches to the sacred, ‘it should be happening everyday not because you light a candle and set up an altar’ and her desire to bring an ethical, aesthetic and environmental awareness to daily life, wanting the vegetables to ‘feel a sense of beauty’, she reflects a post-Reformation inspired approach to the sacred, as well as a romantic emphasis on the aesthetic importance of the details of everyday life and interactions.

The sanctification of ordinary life and the privileging of encounters in ordinary life are considerably distinct from traditional approaches to Buddhist social engagement and Buddhist practice. Tibetan Buddhism had no such Protestant-style Reformation. A so-called pre-modern or pre-Reformation approach to the sacred—characterised by ‘selective’ and ‘material sacrality’—pervades a Tibetan Buddhist worldview. Ritualised activities accompany every significant feature of Tibetan Buddhist life (Powers, 2010b: 618, Samuel, 1993: 157). The worldview of traditional Tibetans is a ritual cosmos, a worldview in which sacred geography—particular notions of time, place and space—are of central significance to religious functioning and practice. Formal ritual is also a significant feature of Western contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, however it is a feature of Tibetan Buddhist life that was de-emphasised in participants’ discussions about Tibetan Buddhism with me.

In *Civilized Shamans, Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Geoffrey Samuel describes three orientations central to Buddhism in Tibetan societies—a Bodhi Orientation, a Karmic Orientation and a Pragmatic Orientation (Samuel, 1993: 5-7, 26). Samuel’s typology illuminates the fact that Vajrayāna (Tantric) Buddhism, as practiced in Tibet, is utilised both in order to bring about ‘other-worldly’ ends, such as enlightenment and to bring about instrumental effects within this world, ‘a pragmatic orientation’ (Samuel, 1993: 7). This pragmatic orientation relates to the employment of ritual activities for this-worldly ends: long life and health, protection from misfortune or a suitable rebirth in one’s next life (Samuel, 1993: 7). Though steeped in a metaphysical paradigm, a Tibetan Buddhist pragmatic orientation is thoroughly instrumentalist and mechanistic. Though romantic and traditional Tibetan Buddhist approaches both share a this-worldly orientation—they are significantly different. The former emphasises the subjective dimensions in valorising the details of everyday life, while the latter works to produce tangible effects and gains in the experience of daily life—be it this life or the next.
‘God Speaks through Toothpaste’: Emphasising the Ordinary and the Everyday in Contemporary Spiritualities

Participants in my research are not unique in adopting features of romanticism in their descriptions of Buddhism. In this section I will show how romantic themes emerge in contemporary presentations of Buddhism as well as non-Buddhist contemporary spiritualities. I do this in order to further illuminate some of the underlying socio-cultural currents that animate a preference for romantic orientations described above.

Affirming and sanctifying the ordinary and the everyday is a theme that exists in various expressions of contemporary Buddhism. This trend can be seen in the numerous book titles, organisational names and public talks that feature the terms ordinary and everyday. Several Buddhist books titles for example include either the term ordinary and everyday. These include *Ordinary Magic, Everyday Life as a Spiritual Path* (Welwood, 1992) *Ordinary Enlightenment* (Luk, 2002) and *Everyday Enlightenment* (Drukpa, 2012). The blurb for *Everyday Enlightenment*, written by a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, reads ‘Everyday Enlightenment is an inspirational guide to finding happiness by taking in the beauty right in front of you’ (Drukpa, 2012). ‘Everyday Buddhism’ and ‘Buddhism for everyday life’ are likewise popular titles for books and public talks. For ten years the Australian Tibetan Buddhist E-Vam Institute published a journal, *Ordinary Mind, An Australian Buddhist Review*. One of the largest Western networks of Zen Centres, a group established in America by Charlotte Joko Beck is called The Ordinary Mind Zen School. Beck’s best selling books also emphasise the theme of the ordinary and the everyday, titled *Nothing Special: Living Zen* (1993) and *Everyday Zen: Love and Work* (1989).

As evident from several of these examples, when the terms ordinary or everyday are used, they are nearly always coupled with a metaphysical or non-material concept, such as enlightenment, awakening or magic. Joining the two concepts together, one otherworldly or transcendent, the other imminent and material, tones down the metaphysical associations of the former, while re-enchanting the latter. That is, ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ give immanence, a this-worldly, life-affirming orientation to transcendent, otherworldly or metaphysical terms.

Buddhists’ use of such terms is not unique in the landscape of contemporary spirituality however. Similar themes are evident in multiple modern forms of religion and spirituality; the New Age, self-development and human potential movements as well as Christianity
(MacKian, 2012: 9, 79-80, Holloway, 2003). Replicating similar themes to the Buddhist titles above, several contemporary Christian titles point to this. This includes *Ordinary Enlightenment: Experiencing God’s Presence in Everyday Life* (Robinson, 2000), *Hungry for God: Hearing God’s Voice in the Ordinary and the Everyday* (Feinberg, 2011), and *The Sacred Ordinary, Embracing the Holy in the Everyday* (McLeroy, 2008). Indicative of the importance that sanctifying the everyday holds in these publications, the blurb for *Hungry for God: Hearing God’s Voice in the Ordinary and the Everyday* reads, ‘Discover the ways in which God speaks to you not from the top of some holy mountain, but in the midst of your everyday affairs’ (Feinberg, 2011). Similarly, the blurb for another Christian book, *Everyday, Ordinary life, An Assortment of Musings Merging Daily with Divine*, featuring a tube of toothpaste as its cover image, reads:

> Do you know God speaks through everyday stuff like toothpaste, face-plants, thumbtacks and gutter balls? His truth is woven through the fabric of our daily moments, and if we pause long enough to notice, we’ll experience the divine in the ordinary (Cyr, 2011)!

Of the six contemporary spiritual books that have Everyday Enlightenment as their main title, two are Buddhist while six others are within the human-potential or New-Age genres. One of the most famous of the non-Buddhist works is titled *Everyday Enlightenment: Twelve Gateways to Human Potential* written by Dan Millman. A passage taken from the book illuminates some of the underlying values behind the appeal of the everyday for contemporary spiritual seekers. Millman writes:

> When people ask me abstract questions about time, or space, or reincarnation, I may respond by asking whether they exercise regularly, eat a wholesome diet, get enough sleep, show kindness to others, and remember to take a slow, deep breath on occasion—because it seems important to bring our spiritual quest down to earth. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with philosophical speculation. But let’s not mistake conceptual thought for the spiritual practice of everyday life. After all, what does it serve to know whether angels wear earrings if we can’t hold a regular job or maintain a long-term relationship? What good does it do to pray like a saint or meditate like a yogi if we are unchanged when we open our eyes? What good to attend a place of worship on Saturday or Sunday if we lack compassion on Monday (Millman, 1998)?
Phrases like ‘it seems important to bring our spiritual quest down to earth’ reveal how an emphasis on the everyday and the ordinary is frequently part of a resistance to metaphysical, abstract, transcendent activities and considerations. Millman depicts these themes in a fairly reductive manner—‘know[ing] whether angels wear earrings’ or not. He privileges instead the value of achieving the (increasingly difficult) feats within (post/late) modern, capitalistic societies of holding a regular job and maintaining a long-term relationship. Rather than sanctifying ordinary life, this approach to spirituality seems to be in part about surviving contemporary society. It is also clearly about re-enchanting the everyday and critiquing transcendent approaches to spirituality and religion.

In a talk titled, ‘Spiritual Life and Daily Life’ popular American Tibetan Buddhist teacher Thubten Chodron further illuminates how an emphasis on the ordinary and everyday often reflects a resistance to practices focused on the abstract, transcendent and other-worldly and a desire to distance Buddhism from them. She says:

Many people have the misconception that spiritual life or religious life is somewhere up there in the sky—an ethereal or mystical reality—and that our everyday life is too mundane and not so nice. Often people think that to be a spiritual person, we must ignore or neglect our everyday life, and go into another, special realm. Actually, I think being a spiritual person means becoming a real human being. Thich Nhat Hanh, a well-known Vietnamese monk, said, ‘It is not so important whether you walk on water or walk in space. The true miracle is to walk on earth.’ It’s true. In other words, becoming a kind human being is probably the greatest miracle we can perform (Chodron, 1999).

In The Making of Buddhist Modernism McMahan insightfully unpacks some of the underlying contemporary cultural dispositions that shape Hanh’s employment of the term ‘miracle’, featured for example, in the title of one of his most well known books, The Miracle of Mindfulness (1976). McMahan writes:

The evocation of this most antimodern of terms—‘miracle’—may seem an odd choice for a contemporary author trying to reach a modern, educated, and often secular audience. Clearly it is intended as metaphorical. More than that, though, it seamlessly draws together lineaments of Buddhism and western thought that could only become entwined in a ‘postmiraculous’ era. Miracles, while not banished
from the world of modernity and late modernity, are largely excluded from public discourse and are, among educated elites (including—even especially—religious elites) often viewed with suspicion and embarrassment....Buddhist modernism, as I have already argued, has had a particular investment in minimizing appeals to the miraculous because of its self-conscious attempt to ally itself with science and naturalism over against Christianity, with its explicit appeals to the supernatural. It has found itself, therefore, in a similar position to that of a number of traditions in the West that have attempted to find ways of respecting the Enlightenment’s divesting the world of contraventions of natural law while at the same time not divesting the world of sacred significance (McMahan, 2008: 236).

As described by McMahan, the themes evident in the book titles, web pages and talks featured above represent a broad rejection in Western culture of otherworldly, transcendent, abstract spiritualities. Buddhists’ adoption of these trends, intentionally or otherwise, work to disassociate Buddhism from other-worldly, supernatural paradigms while bringing it closer to secular, humanist and romantic worldviews. When these themes underlie approaches to Buddhist social engagement, Buddhist social engagement becomes, predominantly about ‘just being in the world’.

**A Romantic Approach to Deprivatisation: Embodying Immanence**

In this section I will pick up themes related to issues of religious privatisation and deprivatisation. I will analyse what a romantic approach suggests about secularisation and desecularisation in Australian society, an issue discussed in detail in chapter four.

Traditionally sociologists have conceptualised religion into two streams: the institutional (church, sect, or cult) and the individual (believer, member, or practitioner) (Besecke, 2005: 181). This theoretical division between church and individual forms a key theoretical backdrop to the claims of the privatisation thesis and the invisible religion thesis. As presented earlier, since the 1960s scholars identified a trend toward a declining commitment amongst individuals to institutional religion. However another trend was also noted; an increasing interest in individual forms of spirituality. Scholars concluded that, religion was not disappearing as such, but rather was becoming increasingly individualised and privatised (Luckmann, 1967). Luckmann’s highly influential invisible religion thesis provided an explanation of these apparently contradictory trends.
According to sociologist of religion Kelly Besecke the invisible religion thesis was underpinned by an assumption that non-institutional religion was individualistic and necessarily confined to the private sphere (Besecke, 2005). In an article titled ‘Seeing Invisible Religion: Religion as a Societal Conversation about Transcendent Meaning’, Besecke critiques this institutional-individual dualism that she suggests has framed the sociological analysis of religion over the past four decades (2005: 181). Besecke argues that the two categories—institution or individual—fail to include a host of other possibilities that do not neatly fit in either religion as a social institution or spirituality as an individual meaning system (2005: 181).

Besecke encourages us to look at religion in the modern world, particularly when considering issues of privatisation and deprivatisation, through another lens, ‘one that highlights, instead of individuals and institutions, the important social role of interaction and communication’ (181). Besecke claims that there is a vibrant form of religious practice occurring within the space between religious institutions and private individual lives. She argues that what lies in between these two spheres is a growing ‘societal conversation about transcendent meaning’ (2005: 181). These conversations represent a non-institutional-but-public or individual-but-social expression of modern religious and spiritual practice (182). This kind of religious behavior, practiced in public and in interaction, yet outside of traditional religious institutions, offers a window into a dimension of religion that the ‘individualism’ lens obscures.

The approach to Buddhist social engagement detailed in this chapter is similar, though distinct from the kinds of individual-but-public forms of religious engagement Besecke discusses. This approach to engagement is individual in certain ways. Though Buddhism is an institutional religion, the style of engagement that I have detailed in this chapter is of a non-institutional character. It is not carried out as a collective endeavour or directly tied to Buddhist institutions nor does it predominantly occur within Buddhist institutions. This is despite the fact that its exponents are involved with Buddhist institutions. (Two of those I identify as articulating an approach to Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism were ambivalent about ‘belonging’ to such institutions, something unique amongst participants. They nevertheless were members of particular Buddhist organisations.) This approach is also individual in the sense that it places a particular emphasis upon the individual’s interior state. Furthermore, its focus is not upon structural or institutional reform.
While the form of engagement I have detailed here does not clearly fit into an institutional-based form of engagement and does not reflect the kind of public and collective forms of Buddhist social engagement described in academic literature nor is it entirely individualistic and private. It occurs in public, social spaces with the intention and awareness to interact and impact upon others in ways perceived to be beneficial and transformative. Its focus is both on the individual and the other—it is neither wholly private nor overtly public.

Similar to Beseck’s claim about contemporary religious practice being a ‘societal conversation about transcendent meaning’ (2005: 181) participants in this chapter provide multiple examples wherein verbal and non-verbal ‘conversations’ about meaning are central to their descriptions of ideal forms of Buddhist social engagement. Paula, talks about how doing a lot of practice in the shop resulted in having incredible conversations with people that led them to tell her ‘extraordinary things’. ‘All sorts of conversations can take place’, she says, when an individual is embodying an ideal internal disposition—one of stillness, naturalness, beingness. Transformative forms of communication, be it ‘eye contact...[or] moment-to-moment exchanges’, are central to her notion of social engagement and social change.

It should be noted however that these ‘conversations’ or stories that convey meaning are frequently more about immanence than transcendence. In this way, an approach to Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism does represent a conversation about meaning, immanent rather than transcendent. However it is also a dialogue with imbedded social-cultural meanings. Religion has certain meanings attached to it in Australian society. For a sub-section of the Australian community, one that many Australian Buddhists have previously identified with—religion means authoritarian dogmatism, uncritical belief and zealous proselytisation. In emphasising a non-institutional involvement with ordinary, everyday social activities and interactions as the primary form and site of their Buddhist practice and social engagement, participants construct a style of religious practice and social engagement that represents a clear distinction from these negative meanings. Practicing and depicting Buddhism in the way they do is in part about differentiating Buddhism from the negative meanings tied to traditional religion and in particular, traditional forms of religious activity in the social and public spheres. It is in these ways that this approach is based on a grammar of secularism, albeit heavily accented by romanticism.
Though I have argued that the form of engagement I have detailed here is significantly redefined and articulated along romantic and secular lines, it is not completely confined by them. Participants’ Buddhist ethic-ontology is significantly other-centred. Participants deconstruct the segregation of reality into paired dualities, such as meditation/worldly activities, private/public, and religious/secular. They disrupt and challenge a fixed demarcation between private and public religion. Their communication also, in various ways tries to challenge some of the meanings associated with both Buddhism and religion. A robe-wearing mendicant, for example, means something in a Western culture—socially withdrawn, other-worldly, world-denying, rejecting the ‘everyday’ world of family. When discussing the Dalai Lama photographed with his ear to a pregnant woman’s stomach, Ani was disrupting imbedded meanings about Buddhism and Buddhist monastics. When participants retell these stories they work to demystify Buddhism, to make it accessible, non-confronting and aligned with a public wherein conversations about transcendence are perhaps, not the norm. The message participants communicate is that Buddhism is about the ordinary, everyday lives of human beings. Buddhism is a world-affirming, socially engaged practice that is relevant and harmonious with contemporary (Australian) life. It is not an exotic, foreign, otherworldly phenomenon.

By highlighting the ordinary in their discussions of Buddhist social engagement and their Buddhist practice, participants negotiate their commitment to a Buddhist ethic-ontology with the protocols of the secular. Yet simultaneously they also spiritualise or re-sacralise the secular. This is one way in which Tibetan Buddhist participants in my research reach their truce between Buddhist social engagement and the secular, a process whereby different worlds interface, negotiate and are reshaped in the process. A romantic approach to Buddhist social engagement therefore represents another example of the deeply entwined ways that secularisation and desecularisation unfold simultaneously.

**Conclusion**

This chapter further highlights the distinctive and diverse ways that contemporary cultural themes inform the way practitioners respond to and depict Buddhist social engagement. In particular, the views presented in this chapter illuminate the unique ways that romanticism, combined with particular Buddhist principles and practices, produce another distinct approach to Buddhist social engagement.

For those practitioners who adopt this approach, a Buddhist social engagement imbedded in the ordinary and everyday holds a certain ethical or existential sense of authenticity. Its
appeal is significantly amplified by, if not imbedded in, what it stands in contrast to. On the one hand a romantic orientation stands in contrast to instrumental, collective, institutional forms of social, political engagement and activism. On the other, it stands in contrast to a ritualistic, formalised, metaphysical approach to religious practice and engagement.

Participants that I categorise as adopting a romantic orientation problematise structured and instrumental approaches to social engagement and social change. Similar to those participants exhibiting an orientation informed by secularism, they also resist or de-emphasise institutional approaches. By contrast, a romantic orientation toward Buddhist social engagement is centred on ‘just being in the world’, a phrase used by one of my participants to describe maintaining a particular internal awareness in the midst of informal, spontaneous interactions in the public sphere. With its emphasis on the individual, the spontaneous, the natural, and the subjective, ‘just being in the world’ encapsulates the overarching character and emphasis of an approach to Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism. It is informed by a romantic-inspired valorisation of the details of everyday life, which exalts a finely tuned awareness of one’s inner state, particularly amidst interaction with ‘everyday’ activities, objects and events.

While only three participants clearly articulated an approach to Buddhist social engagement accented by romanticism, no participants expressed a strong ambivalence or resistance to its central characteristics: the emphasis on the everyday and sanctification of informal exchanges in the public sphere. This stands in stark contrast to responses to features of a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement that emphasises social welfare, social justice, political engagement and public advocacy. In the following chapter I will explore this approach to Buddhist social engagement in greater detail.
Chapter Seven

Reformists: Advocating Buddhist Social Engagement

In this chapter I introduce participants who were unambiguously supportive of Engaged Buddhism. Following other scholars’ explanation of Engaged Buddhists I describe this approach as reformist. This is due to participants’ emphasis on reform: both of society generally and of contemporary Western Buddhism specifically. Throughout this chapter I will further explain why I identify these participants as adopting a reformist accent, how they justify Buddhist social engagement and the distinctive characteristics of their approach.

The research presented in this chapter shows that support for an overtly ‘Buddhist’ social engagement does exist amongst Tibetan Buddhists in Australia. However only two participants, Yeshe and Chelsea, both Euro-Australian nuns, were strongly and unreservedly affirming of the kind of Engaged Buddhism attributed to Western Buddhists in academic literature. I focus particularly on Yeshe as she is the most prominent participant in this category. Due to the rarity of a reformist approach in my interview research, and to show that this approach exists beyond Australian Tibetan Buddhism and in Western Buddhism more generally, I document the strong parallels that reformists in my research share with Buddhists commenting in Buddhist blogs and in popular Buddhist media. In particular, I present the views of Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Euro-American Theravāda monk who Yeshe refers to and is connected to in her practice of Buddhist social engagement.

I will begin by describing reformists’ support for and involvement in Buddhist social engagement. I go on to detail throughout the chapter the distinctive attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement of those participants I identify as expressing a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement. I also discuss how their approach supports the deprivatisation of Buddhism—religious organisations participating effectively in the public sphere of modern societies. I finish by discussing how this approach contrasts with what my research has identified as the approach of the majority of participants.

Advocating Engagement

In the following statement Chelsea expresses her widespread support for Buddhist social engagement, showing no reluctance toward Buddhism being exercised in the public and political spheres saying:
It is important that those people [Engaged Buddhists] go and hobnob with the politicians and actually see that we’re engaged in all these things. Thich Nhat Hanh and the Vietnam War. I mean, all of these things, [we need] social engagement everywhere and political engagement.

Yeshe expresses similar sentiments when she says:

Buddhists in every field, there is a need for engagement. If you look at some Buddhist countries like Burma and Tibet, they definitely need our aid, in terms of the political structures there are not humane. We need to address political injustice, economic injustice, and human rights.

In their advocacy, welfare and activism pro-engaged Buddhists in my research are closely akin to modern Asian reformist Buddhists and reflect key characteristics attributed to modern Buddhists. For example, in *A Modern Buddhist Bible* Lopez claims that one of the constituents of modern Buddhism is

the promotion of social good, whether it be in the form of rebellion against political oppression (especially by colonial powers), or projects on behalf of the poor (2002: xxxii).

Yeshe and Chelsea’s comments above also highlight other features of their approach: its transnational and global scope, its acknowledgement of and attention to social structures including political structures, and a related emphasis on addressing forms of social injustice. In these ways Yeshe and Chelsea reflect characteristics of Engaged Buddhists described by Queen. In an article ‘Engaged Buddhism: Agnosticism, Interdependence, Globalization’ Queen identifies collectivism and globalisation as two elements that Engaged Buddhist movements and organisations share (Queen, 2002: 326). He goes on to say:

These two marks of the new Buddhism—its collectivism and its globalization—are corollary features. For it is not possible to appreciate the social and institutional dimensions of human and environmental suffering in a globalized world without recognizing their transcultural, transnational scope (2002: 326).

Reformists’ emphasis on the social and institutional dimensions of human suffering will be explored in greater depth later in this chapter. I will firstly introduce the forms of
engagement Yeshe is involved in, to show that reformists do not just support Buddhist social engagement, but are deeply involved in ‘projects on behalf of the poor’ and ‘rebellion against oppression’.

**Enacting Engagement: Founding Charitable Organisations**

Yeshe resides in India, in the slums of Nagpur, Maharashtra, the epicentre of Bodhicitta Foundation, a non-profit organisation she founded in 2008. The Bodhicitta Foundation provides hundreds of Dalit Buddhists living in slums in India with a range of Buddhist teachings and social welfare services. Alongside Buddhist meditation this includes secular education (such as English language), offering counselling to victims of domestic violence or drug and alcohol abuse, social-life skills, (such as dealing with prejudice, abuse), health education and funding for health care and job training. In addition Bodhicitta Foundation sponsors children to attend school and university, with a focus in particular on supporting girls born to single mothers (Yeshe, 2012).

In bringing Buddhist teachings and social welfare, services and tools of empowerment to Dalit Buddhists of Nagpur Yeshe is in part following in the footsteps a famous modern Indian Buddhist Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). In a history making event in 1956 in Nagpur Maharashtra, Ambedkar, a well-known Indian political leader and scholar, lead around 400,000 Dalits to convert to Buddhism as a gesture of resistance to the oppressed status of Dalits in Hindu society (Fitzgerald, 1999: 81, 92, Lopez, 2002: 91).

Born into a poor family in Nagpur, Ambedkar, was the fourteenth son a Dalit, pejoratively known as an ‘untouchable’. He went on to become a PhD graduate of Columbia University and the London School of Economics, a London-trained barrister, the first Law Minister of Independent India, chairman of the Constitutional Drafting Committee and founder of the Dalit Buddhist movement (Fitzgerald, 1999: 79). Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was part of his lifelong struggle to achieve social and political emancipation for the oppressed classes in general and the untouchables or scheduled castes in particular (Fitzgerald, 1999: 79). Millions of other low-caste and outcaste groups within Indian culture have since followed his example (Lopez, 2002: 91).

However Ambedkar was not a direct inspiration for Yeshe’s work. Rather, Yeshe was galvanised into engagement through her experience of homelessness in Australia and a sense of being marginalised within the Tibetan Buddhist community. In the following
statement Yeshe describes how the lack of support she received within Tibetan Buddhism in Australia lead her to India and to the Buddhist Dalits. She says:

One of the reasons why I went to India and worked in a slum was because basically that’s one of the only places I can afford to live. I am totally serious. There have been times that I have been looking at homelessness. I mean, really, I found actually more support in an Indian slum than I found in the Australian Buddhist scene. So I felt, I could kind of understand what it’s like to be an outcaste in your own society and kind of in desperate poverty as well. I mean, I can't compare my own suffering to theirs but I can get a little handle on it. So, yeah, it was like, what’s the word, meeting my old family? They needed me–I needed them. I give them as much as they give me. In Sydney, when you go on alms round you can walk for kilometers, you'll be lucky to get some sticky green rice. But in India you know, in Nagpur, you walk past four houses and your bowl will be full. Mind you, the food will be like eating fire. They’re so generous. And they’re so happy to see, ‘wow, you’ve given up a materialistic society and you’re following the spiritual path and you’re here in the slum with us, how do you do it?’. People say [in an Indian accent] ‘Your mother must think you’re a great saint’. ‘No’, she replies ‘my mother thinks I should get a real job’ [laughs].

As we can see by Yeshe’s comments, her choice to adopt a monastic lifestyle, including gaining food through begging, was lauded and generously responded to in India. By contrast, Yeshe found, as a nun in Australia, she received minimal structural, financial and moral support either from society at large or within the Australian Tibetan Buddhist community. In Asian Buddhist countries nuns, as part of the sangha, were and continue to be supported by the laity with food and donations: an exchange for their maintenance of the dharma and carrying out of religious observations, including rituals and other religious offerings.

The lack of alms Yeshe was able to receive in a wealthy developed nation of Australia, compared to the abundance she received in the developing nation of India, even within a particularly impoverished area, reflects of course the religious historical traditions of each country. It also highlights the diverse forms of secularisation in each country. In India, being monastic was praised, whereas in Australia, other Buddhist practitioners, as well as society at large directly or indirectly suggested she should be providing for herself rather than expecting others to support her.
Through her engagement work and associated attitudes Yeshe exemplifies key trends within modern Buddhism, such as one described by Lopez—‘Buddhist charitable organizations have been founded by reformist monks or by laypeople, a trend that continues today in “Engaged Buddhism”’ (Lopez, 2002: xxxiii). I will now explore further the particular characteristics of reformists in my research, beginning with their emphasis on the structural causes of suffering.

**Confronting ‘Structures that Support Privilege and Violence’**
A key distinguishing feature of participants who articulated a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement was the particular way they analysed the causes of suffering.

The phrase ‘suffering I teach and the way out of suffering,’ said to be a direct translation of the Buddha’s words, has often been described by Buddhist teachers and interpreters to express the leitmotiv of the Buddhist path. Participants I have identified as reformists recognise social and political institutions as playing a significant role in the perpetuation of suffering. For example, when I ask Yeshe what she thinks the sources of social suffering are she says:

> All suffering arises out of greed, hatred and delusion. But I think a lot of it arises through unequal distribution and structures that support privilege and violence.

Yeshe’s reference to ‘greed, hatred and delusion’ draws on a foundational Buddhist doctrine known as the three root poisons or *kleśas* (Skt.). In Buddhism *kleśas*, translated variously as ‘afflictions’, ‘defilements’, ‘destructive’ or ‘disturbing’ emotions, ‘unwholesome roots’ or ‘poisons’ are considered to lie at the root of all suffering. Three *kleśas* in particular are identified as central to suffering. These are known as the three poisons or unwholesome roots. These are translated in various ways, as ignorance or delusion (Skt. *avidyā* or *moha*), that is, misunderstanding of the nature of reality; attachment or greed (Skt. *rāga*) and aversion or hatred (Skt. *dveṣa*) (Keown, 2003: 143).

As evident above, in response to the question regarding the nature of suffering, Yeshe identifies the causes of suffering to be located in this classical Buddhist framework. She hastens to add however that she also believes a great deal of suffering arises from ‘unequal distribution and structures that support privilege and violence’. Recalling Yeshe’s comments presented at the beginning of this chapter, ‘countries like Burma and Tibet,
they definitely need our aid, in terms of the political structures there are not humane’ we might assume that when Yeshe says ‘structures that support privilege and violence’ she is referring to nation states, as well as economic structures, such as capitalism.

Yeshe’s approach reflects Buddhist scholar, Yarnall’s description of Engaged Buddhists, presented in the introductory chapter, as being

united by a common drive to lessen the suffering of the world, in particular by ‘engaging’ (as opposed to renouncing) the various social, political, economic, etc. institutions, structures, and systems in society. Such engagement can take many different forms (for example, voting, lobbying, peaceful protest, civil disobedience, and so forth), but it is always aimed at actively challenging and changing those institutions, etc. that are perceived as perpetuating suffering through various forms of oppression, injustice, and the like (Yarnall, 2000).

Other Buddhists who advocate the kind of Buddhist social engagement described by Yeshe air similar views in describing contemporary sources of suffering. For example Bhikkhu Bodhi, a Euro-American Theravādan Buddhist author, translator, monk and teacher, whom Yeshe refers to several times in my interview with her, offers a similar analysis in numerous online interviews, blog posts and articles. In the article titled ‘A Challenge to Buddhists’, featured in the popular Buddhist magazine Buddhadharma Bodhi writes:

The Buddha’s mission, the reason for his arising in the world, was to free beings from suffering by uprooting the evil roots of greed, hatred, and delusion. These sinister roots don’t exist only in our own minds. Today they have acquired a collective dimension and have spread out over whole countries and continents. To help free beings from suffering today therefore requires that we counter the systemic embodiments of greed, hatred, and delusion (Bodhi, 2007).

Like Yeshe, Bodhi identifies the classical Buddhist doctrine of the kleśas as central to suffering and also extends that analysis to include ‘a collective dimension’—the ‘systemic and institutional embodiments’ of the three root poisons.

In an interview with Joshua Eaton, Bodhi elaborates on this view further. Easton asks what ‘Buddhist doctrine, ethical ideals, archetypes, legends, and historical precedents provide support for social engagement in Buddhism’. Bodhi responds by saying:
In terms of doctrine, I would start with the Buddha’s tenet that suffering originates from the three unwholesome roots: greed, hatred, and delusion. Classical Buddhism regards these “defilements” as embedded in individual minds and thus primarily deals with the problem of personal suffering: the suffering that arises when one acts in their grip.

But in the modern world, social systems and institutions molded by greed, hatred, and delusion have become so pervasive in their reach that they deeply impact the destinies of whole populations, both nationally and globally. Greed, hatred, and delusion thus generate suffering not merely as factors in individual minds but also in their systemic and institutional embodiments.

For this reason, a solution to the problem of suffering requires that its roots be extricated at multiple levels, including those collective levels touched only distantly by classical Buddhism. This would entail developing a keen diagnosis of how these defilements produce collective suffering and how we can adopt alternative ways of living that would mitigate their harmful impact (Bodhi quoted in Eaton, 2013).

As with Yeshe Bodhi begins with a kind of ‘classical’ Buddhist doctrinal approach of the ‘unwholesome roots’ as a basis of understanding and describing suffering. However he also overtly develops—‘creatively interprets’—this classical doctrine in response to the modern world. These ‘defilements’, as Bodhi perceives it, have become embodied in institutions and structures in such a way that he regards analyses which locate suffering merely ‘as factors in individual minds’, as inadequate in addressing contemporary suffering.

Like Yeshe, Bodhi’s emphasis on structures as well as the need for a collective response to them, strongly reflects descriptions of Engaged Buddhism by leading scholars. For example Queen in the introduction to Engaged Buddhism in the West, A New Buddhism identifies the essence of Engaged Buddhism to be a worldview that pivots on

the social and collective nature of experience, shaped in particular by cultural and political structures that have the power to promote good or evil, fulfillment or suffering, progress or decline, and the necessity of collective action to address the systemic causes of suffering and promote social advancement in the world (2000b: 3).

Both Bodhi and Yeshe’s statements also parallel and reflect the analysis of Buddhist scholar and Engaged Buddhist supporter David Loy. Loy has been one of the most
prominent theorists to extend the traditional Buddhist doctrine of the three root poisons to include the role of social structures and institutions in perpetuating and amplifying suffering. In *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (2003) and *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* (2008) he reframes the traditional doctrinal Buddhist analysis of suffering as arising out of greed, ill will and delusion to include institutionalised greed, institutionalised ill will and institutionalised delusion. In *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution* he writes:

> our present economic system institutionalizes greed, our militarism institutionalizes ill will, and our corporate media institutionalizes delusion...the problem is not only that the three poisons operate collectively but that they have taken on a life of their own (2008: 89).

Descriptions by Loy, Queen and Lopez closely portray the orientation toward Buddhist social engagement and suffering adopted by Yeshe and Chelsea. In their attention on contemporary social institutions and structures in their analyses of suffering, those who I identify as reformists reflect those ‘reformist’ modern Buddhists, who, as described by Swearer engage ‘head-on the tensions, dislocations and “evils” of the contemporary age, applying creative interpretations of traditional beliefs and practices as part of their solution’ (Swearer, 1996: 196).

In chapter one I noted that Lopez describes the particular distinctive way that modern Buddhists analyse suffering, writing:

> Suffering was often interpreted by modern Buddhists to mean not the sufferings of birth, ageing, sickness and death, but the sufferings caused by poverty and social injustice (2002: xxxii).

This approach is akin to the way Yeshe and Chelsea discussed suffering. However, according to my research, this is not necessarily characteristic of all modern Buddhist approaches to social engagement. Of the people interviewed only three made reference to the potential impact of political and social systems on the experience and analysis of suffering, or suggested that something outside of the individual had a significant role in creating suffering. These participants aside, the majority identified the mind and ideas as the sole cause of suffering. Furthermore several other interview participants and blog
commentators expressed significant ambivalence and overt resistance to an analysis of suffering that included ideas of systemic causes and forms of social injustices, rejecting the idea that social conditioning played a significant role in shaping individuals’ experiences. The more prominent response to analysing suffering in my research was to refer to the mind and ideas as the sole factor in the cause of suffering. In order to highlight the distinctive nature of reformists’ analysis of suffering, and in order to further illuminate the diverse approaches to social engagement within Western Buddhism, I will now provide examples of the way the majority of participants in my research articulate their understanding of the causes of suffering.

Suffering: All in the Mind?

At the Zen Peacemaker’s conference mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Christopher Queen said, ‘Amazingly, there are conservative practitioners who believe that changing the mind is all that matters’ (Zen Peacemakers, 2012). Whether we consider them conservative or not, many participants in my interviews echoed similar sentiments, at least in terms of how they analysed the causes of suffering.

When I ask Paul for example, what he thinks the causes of social suffering are he responds saying, ‘Buddhism 1-0-1 yeah—attachment, aversion and ignorance’. He then goes on to convey what he considers to be a more ‘Western’ interpretation saying:

That’s classical [three poisons] but the Western way is more that our ideas are the cause of suffering and ideas means an idea about how, how things could be and they’re not, or our ideas about how we want things to be. Our ideas about how people should behave, about what people should do or shouldn’t do...every idea causes suffering. Any concept will cause suffering, any concept, at some level. Some concepts cause more suffering than others. You only have to be in love once to realise this. The idea that the person shouldn’t have left you, or the idea that the guy or girl shouldn’t have done that or that and it doesn’t even have to be in love with a partner, it can be your parents, or your kids, or your brothers or sisters.

So, I ask Paul, ‘what about the ‘idea’ that we shouldn’t have slaves?’ He says, ‘Hmmm, why shouldn’t we have slaves? Slaves would be good. [Laughs, joking tone]’. Paul then reveals how he applies the teachings on aversion, equally to relationships, ‘the idea that the girl shouldn’t have left you’ to social circumstances that one may identify as ‘states
of injustice’, such as having slaves or thinking others should not have slaves. He goes on to explain his response, saying:

The ideas of social justice and injustice cause suffering, they do. The people that feel they are in a state of injustice, or for the people that care about it, or for the people that don’t care about it and don’t realise any better. That’s all suffering. It’s aversion to it, attachment of some form that either they want slaves and they lose them or they don’t feel the slaves should be like that and they’re attached to an idea they should be free or something like this and they suffer for that or the ignorance of not knowing either way and ending up in that situation anyway right. It’s all the same stuff. It really is all the same stuff. We suffer for all the same things.

In Paul’s analysis the nuances of different social, cultural, political and economic contexts and their impact upon experience and suffering is radically de-emphasised. The notion that we ‘suffer for all the same things’ negates the significance of social, cultural, political or economic factors in the role of suffering, reducing all suffering to the act of thinking. Any idea, particularly ideas about right and wrong, are identified as the cause of suffering to the extent it seems that the only reason a slave might suffer is because they have become aware of the idea of freedom. Consequently as Paul sees it, efforts at social engagement that are aimed at political, social factors are of peripheral significance or even misguided—except if they make individuals engaged in them ‘happy’. Paul makes this clear when I ask him what he thinks about Buddhist social engagement. He says, ‘I think it’s very good, especially if it makes them [Buddhists who are socially engaged] happy’.

In contrast to Yeshe’s and Bodhi’s statements above, Paul clearly does not emulate the kind of modern Buddhist, as described by Lopez, who interprets Buddhist teachings to be dedicated to the alleviation of sufferings caused by ‘poverty and social injustice’. In stark contrast, he identifies ideas of ‘justice and injustice’ as the cause of ‘suffering’. Is he therefore, in his approach, a traditionalist, adopting a classical Buddhist interpretation? By his own admission, Paul does not employ a ‘classical’ interpretation that incorporates the three root poisons, yet nor does he exemplify the kind of approach to suffering identified as ‘modern’ by scholars.

Similar themes also emerged in comments to blog posts online. These particularly revolve around notions of suffering. For example T_Y, a Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhist
commenting on a blog post titled ‘Hot Topics: Socially Engaged Buddhism’, is ambivalent about Buddhists being involved in social change because of her understanding that suffering is unavoidable. She writes:

I totally get that people need to eat! I just think there has to be some realism that suffering is the nature of our existence and that enlightenment (and therefore real, effortful practice) is the only way to social change. Everything else is just power-tripping (Thompson, 2010).

Bill Esterhaus, responding to the blog post ‘Top Seven Challenges of Western Socially Engaged Buddhism’ elaborates on this idea. He writes:

What living beings really need, though, is the path to liberation otherwise sufferings such as poverty are simply going to be experienced in many future lives therefore we should find a way to give people imprints on their mental continuum that will help them in their future lives and guide them to liberation and enlightenment. I believe this is more important than the temporary benefit of improving social conditions. This is true socially engaged Buddhism (Esterhaus, 2010).

As Bill exemplifies, some practitioners are not opposed to Engaged Buddhism per se, rather, what they debate, is what constitutes Buddhist social engagement. Bill does not consider improving social conditions to be ‘true socially engaged Buddhism’ because the roots of suffering are in the ‘mental continuum’ rather than ‘social conditions’. These approaches represent a tension with those who advocate Buddhist social engagement, and emphasise the significance of social, political and economic conditions for the alleviation of suffering.

Based on this research, I understand the descriptions of a modern and Engaged Buddhist approach to suffering, as encapsulated by Lopez, to be a central feature, not of modern or Western Buddhism generally, but rather of those who exemplify a reformist orientation toward Buddhist social engagement, one that is adopted by some but rejected by others. (As I have discussed earlier, and will explore further below, both the adoption of this approach and the rejection of it are steeped in and influenced by modern contexts and frameworks of reality.) It is a highly contested approach to suffering and the transformation of suffering. I will now provide greater detail of the way that reformists analyse suffering and some of the ideas that their support for Buddhist social engagement is based on.
Addressing Injustice and Inequality

In her discussion of Buddhism and Buddhist social engagement Yeshe places significant emphasis on eradicating injustices, including economic injustice. Alongside directly engaging with these issues through her work with the Bodhicitta Foundation she articulates a strong desire to see Western Buddhists more aware of and involved in alleviating world poverty. For example, addressing her fellow Western Buddhists she says:

If you can’t see the part you’re playing in world poverty, maybe you should look a bit deeper. I can’t just live, just sit on my cushion and ignore that. Many people see Buddhism as just about being about themselves and their own practice...What we really need to do is think in terms of ourselves as part of the world, instead of cut-off individuals without any connection to anything, as if we don’t affect things.... What we need to understand is inter-being and be a little bit more mindful...more compassion, more mindful awareness, more wisdom in terms of looking at things with eyes wide open, instead of eyes wide shut and seeing what part you’re playing in the problem. How you consume, how you make choices, what companies you support, what policies you support, what things you buy, how you cook, how you travel, how you speak, how you relate to others. We need to think more in that sense, become more, you know, communally minded.

These and earlier comments by Yeshe further illuminate both her support for, and the diverse influences that inform her approach to Buddhist social engagement. Firstly, it highlights the significance of collectivism in what she feels ideal Buddhist social engagement would look like. Her comments also show that addressing world poverty is a key concern for her, an issue she describes as ‘economic injustice’. This relates to her broader emphasis on addressing injustices—vivid in her statements presented earlier—‘We [Buddhists] need to address political injustice, economic injustice, and human rights’. In my research economic injustice and inequality emerge as central ‘contemporary evils’ that reformists claim contemporary Buddhists must respond to in their efforts to alleviate suffering. (This stands in contrast to secularism and romanticism wherein institutional religion, implicitly or explicitly, is held as the prime concern and potential cause of producing suffering or limiting freedom, a theme explored further below.)

Bhikkhu Bodhi, mentioned earlier, also places an emphasis on alleviating poverty. Bodhi, like Yeshe is actively engaged in forms of social welfare aimed at addressing and
mitigating poverty. He is the founder of Buddhist Global Relief (BGR). In an interview with Danny Fisher Bodhi describes the issues and Buddhist sources on which Buddhist Global Relief is founded, saying:

In quest of a more specific mission, we drew upon the Buddha’s statements that “hunger is the worst illness” and “the gift of food is the gift of life,” and decided to focus on providing food aid to people in the developing world afflicted by chronic hunger and lack of food security. This is a problem that over a billion of our fellow humans confront everyday. Ten million people, over half of them children, die of hunger and hunger-related disease each year. This tears at my heart, and so it is with the friends with whom I established BGR. Thus we chose hunger relief and improved food security as our guiding aim (Fisher, 2010a).

In the four years since BGR was formed in response to an article Bodhi wrote for the popular Buddhist magazine *Buddhadharma*, it has launched over fifty projects in countries ranging from Vietnam and Cambodia, through India and Africa, to Haiti and the U.S. BGR also provide support for other Engaged Buddhist organisations, such as Yeshe’s Bodhicitta Foundation. Grounding the justification for this work in traditional Buddhist texts Bodhi also embodies the focus on poverty, hunger and economic injustice that characterises a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement.

**Advocating Public Religion**

Several notable scholars have described Asian Buddhist leaders involved in Buddhist social engagement as reformists (King, 1996a, Swearer, 1996, Queen, 2000b, Lopez, 2002). In the conclusion to *Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, King identifies figures discussed throughout the text to be ‘reformers’ or ‘reformist’ (1996a: 402). She writes, ‘these figures and movements are all reformist in the sense that they are all deeply committed to the reform of something’ (1996a: 402, 404). One of the key factors according to King that determines which Asian Buddhist movements are reformist in character is the degree to which their fundamental concern is social change (1996a: 402).

As noted in chapter three, Swearer, in an article discussing Thai engaged Buddhist leader Sulak Sivaraksa, identifies two ‘seemingly opposed’ developments within Thai Buddhist responses to modernity: ‘fundamentalism or fundamentalist-like’, and ‘liberal-
reformist’ (Swearer, 1996: 196). According to Swearer ‘liberal-reformists engage head-on the tensions, dislocations and “evils” of the contemporary age, applying creative interpretations of traditional beliefs and practices as part of their solution’ (1996: 196).

In identifying Asian Engaged Buddhists as reformers, King, Swearer and others drew from a typology formulated by Robert Bellah to describe Asian religious responses to modernity (King, 1996a: 401, Bellah, 1965). Bellah’s typology included four major categories—traditional, neo-traditional, reformist and Christian (Bellah, 1965). Reformists, according to Bellah, reconstitute religious traditions in a way that makes them relevant in addressing contemporary political, social and economic problems (Bellah, 1965: 208). Yeshe and Chelsea both reflect these qualities, illuminated both in the interview and highly demonstrable in their lives. For Yeshe and Chelsea Buddhist practice and application of Buddhist philosophy is significantly orientated toward social change and social reform. As such, in the manner that Bellah describes a reformist orientation, reformists in my research present and perceive Buddhism to be highly relevant for addressing contemporary social and economic injustices and inequalities (Bellah, 1965: 208).

Expressed through their support for and involvement in an array of forms of Buddhist social engagement, including political engagement, reformists advocate public religion. Furthermore through their attitudes and activities, they represent a contemporary example of religious deprivatisation, that is, of bringing religion out of the private, personal sphere. Drawing from Casanova, religious deprivatisation was defined earlier as

the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them (1994: 5).

Casanova describes this global trend of deprivatisation in more detail when he writes:

Social movements have appeared which either are religious in nature or are challenging in the name of religion the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy. Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations (1994: 5).
As I have detailed throughout this chapter, the concern and foci of reformists, in terms of social change, is associated with ‘states’ (expressed in terms of their focus on responding to political injustices) and ‘markets’ (visible in their emphasis on eradicating economic inequality, poverty and hunger). They challenge, based on ‘creative interpretations of traditional beliefs and practices’ (Swearer, 1996: 196) ‘the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy’ (Casanova, 1994: 5). Furthermore they refuse to limit themselves to ‘the pastoral care of individual souls’ and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality, challenging the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations.

**Critiquing Western Buddhism as Individualistic and Privileged**

Rather than the intense criticism of tradition that Bellah ascribes to reformism (Bellah, 1965: 213) the reformists in my research are critical of Western Buddhism and contemporary social institutions and systems. Reformists are critical of Western Buddhists principally for their lack of emphasis on Buddhist social engagement and the absence of just those qualities ascribed to modern, Western and Engaged Buddhism in academic literature—an awareness of, and collective response to, contemporary, structurally and institutionally amplified forms of global suffering (Queen, 1999, 2000b, Lopez, 2002, Loy, 2003). Reformists are profoundly concerned about the implications of this neglect, in terms of what it means for the future of Western Buddhism and its relevance to addressing widespread global social problems. In the following statement Yeshe expresses her concerns for Buddhist social engagement and indirectly, her support for a public role for Buddhism:

> I have grave, I have grave fears for the future of Buddhism actually. Why, why I feel sometimes maybe it’s just me, because I’m really just living on the edge, but I feel sometimes that people are a little bit apathetic in Buddhism….I think it’s got to do with how many people approach Buddhism as a self-therapy rather than as a religion with a communal responsibility.

Pro-Engaged Buddhists critique what they regard as the individualisation of Western Buddhism, if not the privatisation of Buddhism—though they use different terms for this. These criticisms further reveal their attitudes to Buddhist social engagement and signal their support for a collective, communal and public role for Buddhism in Australia and
the West. Yeshe frequently critiques what she perceives as the individualistic focus of Western Buddhism. This is evident in other statements she makes, which further highlight her criticisms of Western Buddhism:

We talk more about how to overcome emotional problems and how to overcome suffering, but we don't talk about renunciation or enlightenment that much. Buddhism is not just meditation. Buddhism is part of the Noble Eightfold path. So there are eight, you know. And it’s a lifestyle. It’s a way of thinking. And once again, what happens when we take a very intellectual orientation to Buddhism, we forget that it is a culture. It has communal responsibilities and it’s connected to the world. It’s not just meant to make you disconnect and go into your own. It’s not just a personal trip. It actually should make you more interconnected, more practice, more real, rather than more spaced out and disconnected, because that’s the last thing we need. Isn’t it? In this culture?...There’s an interesting article by Bhikkhu Bodhi saying you know, ‘are Buddhists just sitting on their cushions ignoring all the suffering?’.

Yeshe’s reference to Buddhists ‘just sitting on their cushions’ expresses her belief that Western Buddhists are sometimes too focussed on overcoming emotional problems. Her comments also suggest that she perceives Western Buddhism to be individualised, privatised and apolitical. Her statements also implicitly affirm her support for a more public, collective role for Buddhism, one that responds collectively to contemporary global social concerns, a Buddhism that is more political, public and deprivatised.

In her support for this kind of Buddhist social engagement Yeshe further reflects a key characteristic attributed to Western Buddhism by Queen

the broadening of spiritual practice to benefit not only the self, but also...society and the world, including the social and environmental conditions that affect all people (politicization) (1999, xix).

This succinctly portrays Yeshe’s depiction of the ideal relationship between Buddhism and social engagement. It is not however, in terms of my research, the dominant approach, or even a particularly prominent approach to suffering or Buddhist social engagement in Western Buddhism.
A further critique of Western Buddhists made by reformists is what they see as the social, cultural and economic privilege permeating Western Buddhism. They identify this as a key factor in the ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement amongst Western Buddhists. For example in the article to which Yeshe refers above, ‘A Challenge to Buddhists’ Bodhi critically analyses the way Western Buddhists address suffering. The background of their ‘middle’ and ‘upper-middle’ class lives he claims, leads to a kind of ‘resigned quietism’. He writes:

I’ve been struck by how seldom the theme of global suffering—the palpable suffering of real human beings—is thematically explored in the Buddhist journals and teachings with which I am acquainted. It seems to me that we Western Buddhists tend to dwell in a cognitive space that defines the first noble truth largely against the background of our middle-class lifestyles: as the gnawing of discontent; the ennui of over-satiation; the pain of unfulfilling relationships; or, with a bow to Buddhist theory, as bondage to the round of rebirths. Too often, I feel, our focus on these aspects of dukkha¹ has made us oblivious to the vast, catastrophic suffering that daily overwhelms three-fourths of the world’s population (Bodhi, 2007).

Bodhi goes on to claim that responding to this kind of suffering ‘remains tangential to the hard core of Western interest in Buddhism, which is the dharma as a path to inner peace and self-realization’. Bodhi’s comments represent another example of a reformist critique of Western Buddhism—that it is privatised and individualised.

My research supports Bodhi’s claims that particular forms of dukkha ‘the ennui of over-satiation; the pain of unfulfilling relationships’ are given overwhelming focus in how dukkha is considered in Western Buddhism. For example Jerry, when responding to a question about what causes suffering, says with deliberate humour, but nevertheless with a clear identification of dukkha as something related to his own sense of well-being:

---

¹ Dukkha is a Pāli term (Skt. duḥkha) describing the first of the Four Noble Truths, the cornerstone of the Buddha’s teaching. Keown writes:

There is no word in English covering the same ground as duḥkha in the sense it is used in Buddhism. The usual translation of ‘suffering’ is too strong, and gives the impression that life according to Buddhism is nothing but pain....While duḥkha certainly embraces the ordinary meaning of ‘suffering’ it also includes deeper concepts such as impermanence (anitya) and unsatisfactoriness, and may be better left untranslated (2003: 81).
Oh geez, not enough beer, beer’s too cold, beer’s too hot, or the beer’s not the quality of beer that I want, I want dark beer I don’t want light beer or the barmaid that’s serving me the beer I wish she looked different or she’s not friendly enough to me. [Laughs]

When Paul describes his understanding of the causes of suffering as ‘every idea causes suffering’ he gives of an example of this related to ‘the pain of unfulfilling relationships’ saying, as quoted above:

Any concept will cause suffering, any concept, at some level. Some concepts cause more suffering than others. You only have to be in love once to realise this. The idea that the person shouldn’t have left you, or the idea that the guy or girl shouldn’t have done that or that and it doesn’t even have to be in love with a partner, it can be your parents, or your kids, or your brothers or sisters.

Bodhi’s comments above regarding the Second Noble Truth point to a broader critique that reformists hold—that the marginalised status of social engagement in Western Buddhism is due to the social privilege of Western Buddhist adherents.

Bhante Sujato, introduced in chapter four, also points to the factor of class in shaping how Western Buddhists approach Buddhist social engagement, or more specifically Buddhist public advocacy. He says:

It should be happening more often. We don’t comment on everything. Partly due to cultural reasons, partly also because we’re also just learning to stand on our feet and partly because most Buddhists in Australia are pretty comfortable. You know. So it tends to be a bit of a middle class religion, and we’re kind of, we’re okay. We’re not overtly discriminated against. We’re not. So we don’t feel those things.

Nathan, a pro-engaged American Zen Buddhist blogger makes a similar claim in regards to Buddhism in America. He writes:

Most of the time, what I hear from fellow practitioners are calls to just sit, just study the sutras, and to do whatever else on our own time. This is quite a privileged view in my opinion….I actually think part of reason there are Americans crying about
lambasting of engaged Buddhism, and in the process, failing to critically examine what they are doing, is that there isn’t very much of it. In the U.S. Convert American Buddhist communities are predominately middle and upper class white folks who are being taught by middle and upper class white folks. And their Asian teachers, who mostly arrived in the late 1950s and 1960s, downplayed social activism in part because the people who were coming to Buddhism at that time were surrounded by forms of counter-culture social activism. At that time, it was damned smart to get people to sit down and shut up. And it still is. However, one of the major flaws of that period was a lack of emphasis on ethical teachings, which led to all sorts of inner-sangha problems, never mind the rest of the world (Thompson, 2011).

Reformists like Nathan are notably concerned with what the ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement might mean for Buddhism and its capacity to remain socially relevant and contribute to the alleviation of widespread social problems and injustices. This echoes comments made by Yeshe, presented earlier: ‘I have grave...grave fears for Buddhism’. Her concerns relate to the individualisation and privatisation she believes characterises Western Buddhism. In contrast to the majority of participants Yeshe feels Buddhism’s failure to function as a ‘public religion’ involved in social, political and economic issues risks the eventual demise of Buddhism. Bodhi expresses similar concerns in the following way:

I see a danger that it [Buddhism in the West] might become an elitist methodology for discovering inner peace, or for living happily in the here and now, at the cost of its capacity for transforming broader systemic causes of suffering. It seems to me that both the ultimate liberative goal of the Buddha's teaching, and the active compassionate application of the Dharma to the alleviation of socially caused suffering, are at risk of being pushed to the sidelines in favor of a “feel good about yourself” version of Buddhism, or a Buddhism that functions as a mere existential psychotherapy. This risk is especially serious as Buddhism becomes integrated into mainstream American culture (Fisher, 2010a).

The differences between this reformist approach and the dominant approach to Buddhist social engagement detailed throughout this thesis—one accented by secularism—will be explored further in the following section.

Contrasting Reformists and Secularists
The approach I have here described as reformist contrasts starkly in several ways with
the most dominant approach to Buddhist social engagement discussed in this research, one accented by secularism. While reformists emphasise the role of states and markets in producing suffering, the central focus of a secular approach is a concern for religion’s propensity to limit individual freedom or a concern about a general perception in society that it is predisposed toward this. Though reformists do not ignore the injustices produced by religious structures—many for example are involved in campaigns for greater gender equality within Buddhism—they do not single out religion as the prime concern or source of suffering and injustice. Rather they identify the economic injustices produced by consumer capitalism and the violence of states as a greater force in perpetuating suffering in contemporary societies. Based on this analysis, reformists argue that religion, and Buddhism in particular, must play an active role in addressing systemic injustices and inequalities. In doing so, reformists implicitly and explicitly resist the normative implications of political secularism that participants of a secular orientation either adopt or accommodate to.

Another significant distinction between a reformist and a secular approach is the way concepts related to differentiation operate. As explored in the earlier chapters, differentiation is the conceptual and actual distinctive categorisation of so-called secular spheres—such as the modern state, market economy, science—from religious institutions and values, or the religious sphere (Casanova, 1994: 19-31, 2006: 7). While differentiation is central to a secular approach, reformists do not appear to hold a reality so deeply imbedded in differentiation, or more particularly a distinctive separation between a public (secular) sphere and a private (religious) sphere.

Nathan, introduced above, presents an example of this. In a comment to Kyle’s ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ blog post, featured in chapter three, he writes:

What I wonder about all this is, in a practice defined by seeing the interdependent nature of things, how is it truly possible to separate the “spiritual” from the social/political (comment to Kyle, 2010)?

Nathan’s description of Buddhism as ‘a practice defined by seeing the interdependent nature of things’ refers to a central Buddhist doctrine, dependent origination; a translation of the Sanskrit term pratitya-samutpāda. This term refers to a fundamental Buddhist concept relating to the nature of causation and the ontological status of phenomena. The
central idea is that nothing arises independently or from itself alone. The doctrine teaches, instead, that all phenomena arise in dependence on causes and conditions (Keown, 2003: 221). In modern Buddhism this term is frequently translated as interdependence and is understood as the idea that all things in the phenomenal world are implicitly connected in cause and thus not wholly or intrinsically separable. Nathan raises this concept to convey the difficulty he finds in separating the spiritual from the political or social.

He discusses a similar theme in a blog post titled ‘Hot Topics: Socially Engaged Buddhism’ where he also shows his support for public religion, challenging the assumption that religion is necessarily oppressive or problematic. He writes:

The thing I keep going back to is the idea that for better or worse, one’s belief system will influence how one acts within the larger social/political world. An atheist or secular humanist will look at things differently from a devout Christian or Jew. Perhaps, they end up making similar decisions, but the reasoning behind, as well as the path that led up to said decisions will be different. And I think it’s important to consider those differences because they help us understand how the whole of humanity is interacting together to form the world we live in at this particular time.

I believe there are ways to be inspired by, or driven by, one’s spiritual practice that don’t lead to the kinds of oppression seen in theocracies, for example, or to the kinds of self-righteousness seen in individuals who believe their path is superior in solving social problems than all others. I understand that even saying this will cause some to believe that I’m no better than folks in the “Christian Right” arguing to outlaw abortions and for a return of prayer in public schools. Perhaps this is the case. I honestly don’t know...I just can’t see how it’s possible to divorce one’s spiritual life from how one engages the big issues in the world (Thompson, 2010).

We can see in Nathan’s comments many of the themes discussed in chapters three and four—issues that some Buddhists offer as central to their resistance or reluctance toward Buddhist social engagement. Nathan’s comments also highlight a defining characteristic of a reformist approach—their critique, resistance or problematisation to what appears to be the dominant attitude toward Buddhist social engagement within Western Buddhism—resistance and ambivalence.
**Reformism: Multiple Inflections**

Though I appreciate that none of the orientations I have identified in this thesis are monolithic, that each is a generalisation encompassing a variety of complex and mixed positions, a reformist approach is even more particularly so. The different threads underlying the reformist impulse of this orientation include liberalism, radicalism and neo-traditionalism. In this section I will explore how these different themes emerge in reformists’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement.

In an article titled ‘Buddhist Ethics: A Critique’, leading scholar of Buddhist ethics Damien Keown claims that Engaged Buddhism, is an ‘anachronistic construction of Buddhism’ that could be referred to as ‘liberal Buddhism’—a construct that ‘coincides neatly with modern liberal and green agendas’ (Keown, 2012: 217). Keown is not unique in his claim; rather, it is widely assumed within academia that Engaged Buddhism and Western Buddhist ethics draws heavily from liberalism.

Scholars have substantial basis for this claim. Keown for example highlights an example of this as the Engaged Buddhist movement’s adoption of notions of justice and human rights. In the article introduced above he claims that although social justice has become one of the main concerns of Engaged Buddhism ‘the concept of justice...is seldom—if ever—mentioned in Buddhist literature’ (217). He goes on to say that although social and political issues such as kingship, war, crime, and poverty are mentioned in the Pāli canon and later scriptures, these subjects were rarely explored by thinkers in the classical tradition.

The emphasis on justice comes not just from a liberal paradigm, but also from a Judeo-Christian one. Like Keown, though with a greater emphasis on Protestantism, scholar of Engaged Buddhism James Deitrick claims that, though clothed ‘in the language and symbols of Buddhism’, Engaged Buddhism reflects essentially ‘liberal Protestant notions of social service and activism’ (2003: 252).

Similar ideas, though more critical, were also expressed in the Buddhoblogosphere. The idea that Engaged Buddhism emerges from a combination of liberalism and Buddhism represented another argument proffered against Buddhist social engagement—as a basis to deny its authenticity or legitimacy. For example Stuart, a blog participant responding to Kyle’s ‘Socially Engaged Buddhism is crap’ writes:
Now, let’s say someone mixes traditional Buddhist teaching/practice with liberal politics, and calls it ‘engaged Buddhism.’ The implication is that the particular way they relate to others is ‘engaged,’ moreso than Buddhists elsewhere on the political / social / lifestyle spectrum.

It’s an absolute B.S. way to use language, it’s deceptive, and that’s what annoys me. If you want to mix Buddhism with liberal politics, then call it ‘politically-liberal Buddhism.’ But don’t call it ‘engaged Buddhism’ (comment to Kyle, 2010).

There certainly is evidence in my research of the influence of liberalism in a reformist approach to Buddhist social engagement—Yeshe’s emphasis for example on justice, rights and equality. As quoted earlier, she says ‘we need to address political injustice, economic injustice, and human rights’.

An important issue underlying claims that Engaged Buddhism is essentially based on the grammar of liberalism however, particularly by those critical of Engaged Buddhism, is the assumption or suggestion that other contemporary presentations of Buddhist ethics and approaches to Buddhist social engagement are more continuous with traditional Buddhism, that is, based largely on a Buddhist grammar, and consequently more ‘authentic’ than Engaged Buddhism. The findings in this thesis disrupt this implicit or explicit assessment, revealing how rejections of Buddhist social engagement or approaches to Buddhist social engagement that do not emphasise concepts such as social and economic injustice can be just as rooted in modern grammars and accents such as secularism and romanticism, and just as continuous or discontinuous with classical and traditional forms of Buddhist social engagement as pro-engaged Buddhists may be.

In the article by Keown introduced above he claims that this ‘liberal Buddhism’ seems to owe as much to the rejection of certain traditional Western values as it does to the views of Buddhism itself, and if Buddhism is the ‘good guy’, it is not hard to imagine who the ‘bad guy’ is. The blame for many of today’s problems is often laid at the door of orthodox Western religion, and in particular Christianity, which is charged with being destructive of the environment, conservative, authoritarian, repressive, sexist, and stained in the blood of countless religious wars. While these stereotypes of both Western religion and Buddhism contain some truth, the reality is far more complex (2012: 217).
My research suggests that Keown conflates a Western Buddhist interpretation of Buddhist ethics generally, with Engaged Buddhist ethics. The fact he would do this is understandable given the widespread assumption that Western Buddhism is highly socially engaged and thus Engaged Buddhist ethics and Western Buddhist ethics are one and the same thing. One of the findings my research makes vividly clear is that there are significant distinctions, if not radical contrasts between how Western Buddhists that are supportive of Engaged Buddhism and those that are ambivalent about it view Buddhist ethics. For one, Engaged Buddhists, those I have called reformists, do not appear to hold the same suspicions of religion as the majority of participants in my research and perhaps, consequently, do not construct Buddhism in contrast to Christianity—this reflects more strongly those who oppose Buddhist social engagement or are ambivalent about it.

Rather than reformists, or those we might identify as Engaged Buddhists, Keown’s statements capture well the attitudes of the dominant responses identified in my thesis, those of secularism and romanticism. As noted above, the central concern for Engaged Buddhists is the injustices and inequalities created by states and markets more so than Christianity. Furthermore, if, in Keown’s passage presented above, we replaced the term Christianity with Islam, we would describe reasonably capture the characteristics of a neoconservative approach.

While in some cases Engaged Buddhism represents a blend of liberalism and Buddhism, there is a range of diverse historical sources and philosophical frameworks that appear to constitute its make up—some that are indeed in conflict with liberalism.

Further highlighting the complexity of this approach, some reformists in my research are critical of liberal kinds of Western Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism itself. For example, Katie Loncke, an American Buddhist, and rising figure in the American Engaged Buddhist movement who hosts a blog called Koncke is dissatisfied with the ideology of what she calls ‘spiritual liberalism’. In a blog post titled ‘The Dangers of Compassion’ she names her five contentions with (Buddhist) ‘spiritual liberalism’ as: mystified mechanism, healing as (total) resistance, social change relativism, root vs. radical and Buddhopian visions. Loncke ends her post saying:

Looking forward to finding and contributing to a radical Sangha in the Bay Area whose work extends beyond the healing, service, electoral-political and identity realms (Loncke, 2010).
Bhikkhu Bodhi responds to Loncke’s post, writing:

I completely agree with your post above. For some reason, American Buddhism—even Socially Engaged Buddhism—lacks the radical edge needed to cut through the deceptions and maneuvers of the dominant corporate and political elite. One rarely sees in evidence among American Buddhists the capacity for the kind of keen, penetrative, sophisticated social criticism that one finds among radical Christian and Jewish thinkers, not to speak of secular progressives (comment to Loncke, 2010).

These comments show a resistance toward Western Buddhism or an Engaged Buddhism that is based strongly on liberal ideals and the desire for an approach with a more ‘radical edge’.

In the interview conducted by Joshua Eaton in 2013 Bodhi further illuminates the (potential) ‘radical’ inflections in what I have identified as a reformist approach. Eaton asks Bodhi whether or not he believes much has changed in regards to Western Buddhism and social engagement since he wrote the article ‘A Challenge to Buddhists’ in 2007. Acknowledging that he had not conducted any extensive survey himself, Bodhi drew on his experiences at the Conference on Engaged Buddhism organised by the Zen Peacemakers in 2010 saying:

I could not help noticing that the side of Buddhism that was being emphasized, even by those seeking to give the Dharma wider relevance, is its cache of techniques for inducing inner calm, equanimity, and acceptance rather than its potential for developing a radical critique of contemporary society.

At the Conference on Engaged Buddhism the participants could be seen to fall roughly into two camps: a majority camp, made up of those who accepted the present structures of society and sought to use Buddhist teachings to enable people to function more effectively and peacefully within its contours; and a minority camp, made up of those who sought to draw from the Dharma a radical critique of the dominant social ethos and its institutions.

I would put myself in the latter camp. But I could see that, absent of a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism (Bodhi quoted in Eaton, 2013).
The above quote further conveys the emphasis in Bodhi’s approach toward structural reform—yet one that draws on what could be considered a ‘radical’ critique of current systems. Bodhi however does not advocate a complete overhaul of consumer capitalism, but rather champions the need for significant reform saying:

I see a need to change our economic model from the one that currently prevails. We need to rapidly transit away from the paradigm of neo-liberalism, which promotes the unregulated operation of markets, to regulated markets and a return of the welfare state, which ensures that no one is left without vital protections. Contrary to the claim that the free flow of market forces brings maximum benefit to everyone, the consequences are actually quite the opposite. Such a model valorizes greed and ruthless ambition as legitimate grounds of political and economic policy. The result is that, with markets acquiring a global reach, the destruction they bring—economic, environmental, and social—has also become global. The uncontrolled quest for profits and dominance can never meet the demands for justice in an increasingly integrated world (Bodhi quoted in Eaton, 2013).

Bodhi’s comments suggest that, what I have identified as reformism contains within it inflections of radicalism. A far more extensive analysis of pro-engaged Buddhists would be required to assess how extensive Bodhi’s radical inflection and approach is. Bodhi’s observations of the conference suggest that he is in the minority. Adopting support for overt, institutional and political Buddhist social engagement and rejecting political liberalism based on its inadequacies in addressing ‘the dominant corporate and political elite’ appears to be, according to my research, both in Australia and America, a highly marginal position.

Following the linguistic metaphor, we can see that reformists exhibit a variety of what we might refer to as inflections. This is further complicated by evidence of neo-traditional strains within it. This parallels King’s observations documented in the Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia. There King states that ‘it seems fair to say that all of our figures are reformers, though this judgement must be immediately qualified by noting that several of them also exhibit traditional or neo-traditional features to one degree or another’ (1996a: 402).

One characteristic relating to neo-traditionalism evident in my research is that both the participants in my interviews that adopt a reformist approach are monastics, as is
Bhikkhu Bodhi. Another neo-traditional feature exhibited by reformists in my research is their reference to notions of Buddhist kingship, such as those introduced in chapter three. Yeshe, Chelsea and Bhikkhu all referred to these when advocating Buddhist political engagement. For example, in expressing support for Buddhist engagement with political institutions in Australia Yeshe refers to Asoka, the paradigmatic Buddhist ruler. In the context of talking about the need for Western Buddhists to be more financially generous she says:

If people did give more we would have more powerful institutions and therefore could have more powerful dialogue with governments and more powerful representation and secure the long-term benefit of the dharma. The dharma always has to be supported by powerful people—otherwise it’s not going to succeed. Buddhism would never have spread in Asia without Asoka.

Yeshe’s reference to Asoka, alongside her and Chelsea’s strong adherence to monasticism and the monastic community, indicates that though reformists place a significant emphasis on reform they also strongly adhere to various features of Buddhist tradition. This reflects the patterns of Asian Buddhist reformers. For example in the article by Swearer, ‘Sulak Sivaraksa’s Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society’ Swearer claims that Sivaraksa, a leading Thai engaged Buddhist reformist ‘also looks to classic conceptions of Buddhist kingship, especially Asoka, as a model of political virtue and concern for every member of the social order’ (1996: 213). He also claims that this is not unique to Sivaraksa, but rather in this regard, Sivaraksa ‘shares much in common with the views of other contemporary Theravāda Buddhist reformers, such as A.T. Ariyaratne, the founder of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka’ (Swearer, 1996: 213).

Bhikkhu Bodhi also exemplifies this admixture of neo-traditional elements with modern liberal and reformist ones in his conception of Buddhist social engagement. In response to Eaton’s questions regarding which Buddhist doctrine, ethical ideals, archetypes, legends, and historical precedents most inspire his Buddhist social engagement work Bodhi also refers to ideas of classical Buddhist kingship saying:

In the search for an ethically based politics the figure of the “wheel-turning king” can serve as a model—the king who rules righteously for the good of all in his realm, including the birds and beasts. This last point is critical, for the way we
treat our “fellow passengers” is morally atrocious. Historically, King Asoka, as revealed in his edicts, comes closest to exemplifying the ideal of the wheel-turning king. And of course there is the figure of the bodhisattva, who vows to liberate countless beings from suffering. If this meant only teaching them to train their minds, without also transforming oppressive social systems, that would strike me as a big omission (Bodhi quoted in Eaton, 2013).

Drawing on the idea of the ‘wheel-turning king’ as a model for contemporary reformists and pro-engaged Buddhists Bodhi’s comments further reveal the features of neo-traditionalism within this modern approach to Buddhist social engagement. They also however highlight the emphasis of reformists on the need for systemic and structural changes and an implicit critique of the internalisation and privatisation of Western Buddhism.

I should note however that the return to origin is a standard trope for the legitimation of modern reform movements. Over the last century, and particularly during the 1920s, modern Asian Buddhists have drawn extensively on the Indian King Asoka to signal the humanist values of Buddhism (Snodgrass, 2009b). Asoka has provided a model for one of the characteristics of modern Buddhism: its emphasis on philanthropic works, based on the edicts that spoke of providing education, hospitals, and medicine for his people (Snodgrass, 2009b: 147). We see this characteristic also in the modern Western Buddhists I am here identifying as reformists. It further illustrates that what is defined as ‘original’ is always shaped by current concerns and contexts. While expressing some neo-traditional features a reformist approach is clearly characteristic of a response to modern conditions and deeply imbued with modern influences including progressive reformism, liberalism, anti-corporate capitalism, socialism, radicalism and, of course, Buddhism. Despite the significantly mixed nature of this approach, I have chosen to call it reformism; as the emphasis by its exemplars on the reform of social institutions as well as a need for Western Buddhism to reform its response to them, is one of its most salient features.

Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this chapter, reformists consider Buddhist social engagement to be central to Buddhist philosophy and praxis and a vital feature of Buddhism’s contemporary role in society. Reformists are supportive of overt Buddhist involvement in political engagement, political activism and social welfare. As part of an overarching
emphasis on Buddhist social engagement reformists accentuate Buddhist involvement in bringing about the social good, which frequently involves a global agenda underpinned by an internationalist vision. Participants featured in this chapter identify collective, social and political forms of engagement to be essential in assuring Buddhism remains socially relevant and effective in reducing suffering in the world.

A structural analysis of suffering is a central feature of a reformist approach. In contrast to participants who adopt a secular or romantic orientation toward Buddhist social engagement, reformists identify the cause of social suffering to rest both within the minds of individuals and the structures and institutions of society. In the hope of increasing awareness of these concerns reformists advocate a greater Buddhist involvement in combating global social inequities and suffering.

In applying Buddhism to address institutional, social and structural causes of suffering (in addition to internal and individual causes) reformists reflect Swearer’s description of reformists as engaging ‘head-on the tensions, dislocations and “evils” of the contemporary age, applying creative interpretations of traditional beliefs and practices as part of their solution’ (1996: 196). The issues reformists most identify, as ‘evils’ of the contemporary age are global economic inequality and social injustices. We can see from the organisations founded by Yeshe and Bodhi and the attitudes that propel them, that poverty, hunger and economic injustice are significant in their approach to Buddhist social engagement and a key social issue they seek to address.

Reformists are concerned by and critique the lack of engagement in Western Buddhism. This lack of emphasis on global social engagement confronts reformists’ desire to see Buddhism becoming a public religion, a movement capable of transforming social and political institutions and injustices in contemporary society. This criticism can be read as an impetus to reform within Western Buddhism.

Reformists are not unique amongst my participants in focusing on contemporary tensions and concerns. However, rather than seeing religion as the sole or central concern, they identify it as a potential and vital resource in offsetting contemporary problems, tensions and dislocations. Insomuch as reformists believe Buddhists must collectively and overtly employ Buddhism for confronting social and political institutions and injustices their approach implicitly and explicitly disrupts and resists the kind of political secularism that
frames those that adopt a secular approach. Indeed reformists regard it vital to employ Buddhism as ‘a moral resource for the public domain’ (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688). In supporting a public, collective, institutional Buddhist social engagement they represent a minority in my research. Furthermore, they express a feeling of being marginalised within Western Buddhism for adopting this position.

A reformist type is most akin to the approach to Buddhist social engagement described in Western Buddhist literature and Engaged Buddhist literature. It is most reflective of modern Asian approaches to Buddhist social engagement that have emerged since the nineteenth century and continue to this day. While my research attests to the existence of this form of engagement it suggests it is a small minority and there exists significant resistance and ambivalence toward it amongst the majority of participants. The fact that they are both a minority in my research and express a feeling of being marginalised in their support for Buddhist social engagement within Western Buddhism suggests that Engaged Buddhism does not enjoy the kind of widespread support that academic literature on Western Buddhism implies. In the following chapter I will conclude the thesis with an exploration of the implications of my findings.
Conclusion

The Secular Effect: Constraining Buddhist Social Engagement

In a blog post titled ‘The Dangers of Compassion’ Katie Lonke captures eloquently some of the themes and discoveries of this thesis when she writes:

As Buddhists and Dhamma practitioners, I would love to see us having more conversations about what compassion and social change actually look like: locally, on the ground, in practice. Because it’s too easy for us to invoke these words—compassion, inner work, social change—and assume that everyone is on the same page.

The truth is, we’re not all on the same page. And it’s not until after the event is over, on the subway ride home, when a gaggle of us start discussing in detail the relationship between inner and outer work, that these fundamental differences emerge, sharp and cold, like mountain peaks, from the soothing golden fog of Buddhist unity.

In contrast to this ‘golden fog of Buddhist unity’, a phrase that equally characterises many academic accounts of social engagement within Western Buddhism, in this thesis I have presented some divergent scripts and accents inscribed on these different pages—pages reflecting the attitudes that Buddhists hold regarding Buddhist social engagement. In particular I have explored how a group of Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhists describe the ideal and appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement, indeed, what they understand the relationship between Buddhism and social engagement to be.

Beyond simply describing what participants’ attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement were, I sought to identify if, what and how modern influences, ideologies and concerns might be shaping practitioners’ depictions of Buddhist social engagement. Given the dearth of fieldwork-based research into social engagement in Western Buddhism, to explore these themes further I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with Euro-Australian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

In carrying out this research I have identified several significant trends. My research shows that, in contrast to the way social engagement in Western Buddhism is frequently portrayed, there is significant ambivalence, resistance and caution toward Buddhist social engagement...
amongst the group of Euro-Australian Tibetan Buddhist practitioners interviewed. In
my research, this reluctance toward Buddhist social engagement outweighed support for
it. While this thesis is primarily based on the attitudes of Australian Tibetan Buddhist
practitioners, my research into Buddhist blogs show that the themes that emerged in my
Australian-based research exist within a variety of Buddhist traditions practiced in the
West. This work therefore gives cause to reconsider the assumed relationship between
Western Buddhism and social engagement, a theme I explore in greater depth in this chapter.

I have also identified four specific accents that shape and characterise Euro-Australian
approaches to Buddhist social engagement. I have described these four approaches,
reflective of the values that inform them, to be: secularism, neoconservatism, romanticism
and reformism. The identification of these accents provides some basis to understand
the increasingly diverse trends within Western forms of Buddhism, which though all
being ‘touched by the brush of modernity’ respond to and are informed by quite distinct
features of modernity.

The characteristics of each of these categories present new findings in relation to our
understanding of Buddhist social engagement within Australia. A neoconservative
approach reveals the existence of a right-wing form of Western Buddhist social
engagement—something not previously documented in academic literature on Western
Buddhism. Reformists reflect the characteristics frequently attributed to socially engaged
Western Buddhists, yet they represented a small minority of my sample. Both the romantic
and secular informed approaches express resistance, ambivalence and concern about
over forms of collective Buddhist social engagement being enacted in Australia. In the
section ‘Orientations toward Buddhist social engagement’ I will present an overview of
each of these categories and discuss in greater detail the implications of them.

Though the influences of reformism, romanticism, and neoconservatism were evident in
my research, secularism emerged as the most significant underlying worldview shaping
attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement; it underlies all the categories, hence its
appearance as both grammar and accent. In this chapter, I will further explore the
implications of this, in regards to what it suggests about Western Buddhism generally
and its relationship to social engagement, as well as issues relating to secularisation and
desecularisation. I will conclude the chapter with considerations for further research
and some personal reflections on the work.
‘Engaged Buddhism is Not as Popular as you Think’

The title of a blog post written by Nathan, an American Zen Buddhist blogger introduced in the previous chapter, ‘Engaged Buddhism is not as popular as you think’ reflects one of the most significant findings from my research—Engaged Buddhism is not as popular as ‘we’—scholars of Western and modern Buddhism may think. Paula, a participant in my research expressed this resistance when she said ‘in terms of social engagement, in terms of taking these teachings out in a wider way, let’s drop all that. Let’s drop all that’.

As stated throughout this thesis, numerous scholars have described Western Buddhism as highly socially engaged. Yet, in my research, only two participants out of twenty-four expressed overwhelming support for Buddhist social engagement. By contrast, the majority of participants, while not entirely opposed to Buddhist social engagement, expressed some ambivalence or resistance to public, organised, collective forms of Buddhist social engagement. Given this, my findings present the need to reconsider the widespread assumption that, within Western Buddhism, social engagement is ‘a prominent topic, lectured about and practiced by many’ (Baumann, 2010: 178). I acknowledge that my research reflects but a small sample of Western Buddhist practitioners and further research is required to substantiate how widespread the themes that have emerged in my research are. However the extensive parallels between my interview research and Buddhist blog posts and comments show that the trends identified in my research are not isolated to Australian Tibetan Buddhism. Rather, there is evidence to suggest they exist beyond Australia and in traditions other than Tibetan Buddhism.

Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address it, my findings naturally prompt the question: is this resistance and ambivalence a new trend emerging in Western Buddhism or did scholars simply get it wrong, in terms of their understanding about the relationship between Western Buddhism and social engagement? Rather than correcting earlier errors in scholarship I believe these findings reflect a new development in Western Buddhism. Despite its limitations, the scholarly work of the formative period provided many enduring insights into the emerging characteristics of Western Buddhism, a movement of socially engaged Buddhist practitioners being one of them. Though it is possible that scholars amplified the extent of Western Buddhist interest in social engagement at the time, I do not believe the level of resistance, ambivalence and caution toward Buddhist social engagement documented in my own research was prevalent then.
I believe the new development that I have identified throughout this thesis reflects a broader trend—Western Buddhists increasingly accommodating to and reflecting the cultural mainstream. This is in contrast to its strong counter-culture leanings during its formative period (1950s-1980s). Scholars who instigated the study of Western Buddhism were writing toward the end of, what I consider, this first phase of Western Buddhism. Their works consequently represent reflections on and descriptions of this period, what might be considered Western Buddhism’s counter-cultural period. The trends I have identified in this work, particularly the rising ambivalence toward Buddhist social engagement in Western Buddhism may be indicative of a second phase of Western Buddhism, one characterised by various overarching social trends of this period (1990s–current) and underpinned by increasing conformity, even conservatism. These are admittedly musings requiring greater evidence and analysis than I have provided. Yet they are lines of inquiry that warrant further consideration.

Multiple Orientations toward Buddhist Social Engagement

I will now provide an overview of approaches to Buddhist social engagement identified in my research. Before doing so I will briefly discuss the value of using more complex approaches to modernity for analysing contemporary Buddhism.

One thing that emerges clearly from my research is that when it comes to Buddhist social engagement, practitioners are, not surprisingly, influenced by multiple and at times conflicting modern influences and worldviews. The diversity of approaches to Buddhist social engagement highlights the need, already suggested by others, for studies of modern and Western Buddhism to incorporate more complex approaches to modernity in analysing contemporary Buddhism (Quli, 2008). Rather than approaching modern or Western Buddhism as a sect or particular stream of contemporary Buddhism, it is now necessary to identify the way different modern discourses and contexts produce distinctly different yet, arguably, equally ‘modern’ forms of Buddhism. Quli echoes this assessment when she writes:

Our definition of Buddhist modernism needs to become more nuanced and plural in nature; we need to avoid lumping together into a single undifferentiated category (“Buddhist modernism”) such a wide variety of orientations, many of which are antagonistic to one another (2008: 241).
My research strongly validates Quli’s claims. They can, and should be equally applied to our descriptions of Western Buddhism. The findings included in this thesis provide a resource for mapping this increasing diversity within Western Buddhism, and in particular the varied influences that inform them. While the results of my research parallel, in certain ways, analyses of modern Buddhism conducted by other scholars (McMahan, 2008, Tweed, 1992) they also provide further basis for understanding the influences and development particularly of the relationship between contemporary Buddhism and social engagement. I will now provide an overview of each of the accents I have identified and the way in which they are formed in relationship to the grammar of secularism. I will discuss in greatest detail secularism, given it was the most prominent modern ideology influencing the acculturation of Buddhist social engagement.

Secularism: Resisting Buddhist Social Engagement

For those I have described as adopting this accent, secularism is the value system they most consciously and overtly negotiate with when formulating their normative position on Buddhist social engagement. The values of secularism have a strong tendency to induce caution, concern, ambivalence and resistance toward Buddhist social engagement in participants. A significant basis for their caution and resistance was the assumption that religious engagement in the public sphere is either problematic, or will be perceived as problematic by others in Australian society. I understand this to reflect participant’s resistance to religious engagement in the public sphere, or more often their aversion to Buddhism being associated with religious public engagement and the perceived negativities such engagement may produce. As a response to these concerns, participants suggested that an individual and inconspicuous approach to Buddhist social engagement was most appropriate.

Throughout this thesis I have approached secularism as not just the absence of religion, but rather a discourse, a worldview, an ideology in its own right (Calhoun et al., 2011: 20, Casanova, 2011, Asad, 2003). I have shown, particularly in chapters three and four, how core tenets of secularism subtly or overtly shape the way participants present what Buddhist social engagement should look like in an Australian context. These ideas reflect distinct ways of thinking about society or categorising reality. They express values that participants consider either natural or ideal, or alternatively, necessary to observe and accommodate to. Through identifying the presence of these values in participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement I have shown how secularism,
like any ideology, shapes morals, meanings and values and, more significantly, creates a culturally specific approach to Buddhist social engagement. Though I have identified particular participants to adopt an accent of secularism, it significantly influences, in less obvious ways, participants in each category. I will explore how this occurs here as well as in the following sections where I describe those accents in further detail.

Various features of secularism emerged in how participants presented what they considered to be an appropriate approach to Buddhist social engagement in Australian society. Most fundamentally it was evident in the centrality of the concept of differentiation. As discussed in chapter two and three, differentiation is the functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialisation of religion within its own newly found religious sphere (Casanova, 1994: 19). Participants' adoption of and adherence to values of secularism included particular conceptions of reality and society founded on a binary division between the secular (politics, economics, etc.) and religion, the individual and the collective, private and public. This is not surprising—it is a primary distinguishing characteristic of modern societies. However, movements such as Engaged Buddhism do disrupt these boundaries, demonstrated briefly in chapter seven where the views of reformists were discussed.

Amongst participants I identify as adopting an accent of secularism this way of categorising reality often carried with it normative claims—to ‘mix’ these categories is perceived as ‘not good’. In these cases concepts of differentiation were accompanied, explicitly or implicitly by the view that these categories should be kept separate or that Buddhism should appear to abide by the rule of keeping them separate.

The influence of secularism was also evident in overarching suspicions of religion, particularly institutional and collective forms of religious engagement in the public sphere. These ideas about religion reflect what Casanova identifies as a defining feature of secularism as ideology—that ‘religion’ in the abstract is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects (Casanova, 2011: 66). These effects are generally assumed to be negative. This suspicion of religion was discussed and demonstrated in chapters three, four, five and six. As a result of these conceptions of religion, rather than disrupting the deeply held assumption that combining religion and politics represents a recipe for disaster, reference, for example, to the Buddhist-political historical relationship or the widespread socio-political movements permeating modern
Asian Buddhism are largely absent from the way contemporary Australian practitioners represent Buddhism.

A suspicion of religion in the public sphere extended to a concern that Buddhist social engagement may be, or may appear to others to be, in conflict with the values of a liberal-secular state. Another overarching suspicion of religion that emerged in relation to Buddhist social engagement was that religious social engagement was inherently or may likely be perceived to be motivated by a desire to convert others to Buddhism.

In chapter four I explored the way secularism informed attitudes toward Buddhist public advocacy. I described the prominent approach to Buddhist public advocacy as ‘not in the name of Buddhism’ or ‘without a Buddhist banner’. These phrases encapsulate the idea, expressed by several participants, that Buddhist public advocacy and Buddhist social engagement should take place, however it should occur without being overtly stated as Buddhist or associated with Buddhist organisations.

There are undoubtedly numerous influences at play in this preference, including that it may create confusion for the broader public about Buddhism or particular ideas about pluralism. In addition to these factors however the ‘keeping the Buddhist label out of Buddhist social engagement’ idea appears significantly influenced by a normative impulse that religion should be kept separate from the public domain, at least in terms of overt, institutional and collective approaches. Participants therefore chose to advocate an individual and inconspicuous approach that did not overtly identify their contribution as Buddhist, despite perceiving their responses to social issues as being deeply informed by Buddhism.

In this and several other respects, the secularism that participants are informed by and accommodate to reflects a form of political secularism, one that argues that controversial religious and existential orientations should be bracketed from public discourse and political life (Rawls, 1993, Connolly, 2011: 650). It seems it is these values, among other influences, that inform why participants feel it may be inappropriate or unskilful to overtly bring religious and metaphysical themes into public discourse (Connolly, 2011: 648-649). It suggests that participants believe such values have significant influence in Australian society. Given the widespread adoption of this approach I suggested that, in method rather than principle, participants work to maintain the secularist truce; a secularist contract that guarantees religious freedom yet bans religion from the public sphere by relegating it to the private realm (Achterberg et al., 2009).
The way in which secularism significantly influences participants suggests that this is a dominant intellectual background in Australian culture, one that Buddhists, consciously or otherwise, perceive to be an important ideology for Buddhism to be in accord with. This implies that values of secularism have a significant influence on perceptions of religion in Australia and particularly attitudes toward public religion. It affirms anthropologist Charles Hirschkind’s claim that, ‘the secular is the water we swim in’ (Hirschkind, 2011: 634), or at least Australian Tibetan Buddhists believe it best to swim with the secular current in how they approach Buddhist social engagement.

In swimming with the secular current, the way that these Buddhists approach social engagement is significantly constrained insomuch as it truncates a public religious engagement that is collective, overtly Buddhist, institutional and/or political. While secularism is often presented as a value-neutral set of values and ideas, its effects do not appear neutral or value free. Rather, as evident in this research, (political) secularism has the power and tendency to restrict or constrain overt, collective religious-based forms of social engagement. The trend of participants to accommodate to values of secularism and consequently censor, neglect or sublimate the socio-political values of Buddhism, whether that be conscious or otherwise, leads them to move significantly away from the collective socially engaged movements championed by Western Buddhists in the 1960s and 70s and Asian Buddhist reform movements throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However as I have argued in chapter four, even those who adopt a secular approach do resist features of secularism. This and related issues will be discussed further in the section below titled Privatisation-Deprivatisation: Secularisation-Desecularisation.

‘The Way Things Are’: A Neoconservative Approach

I identified the influence of political neoconservatism in how two participants approached Buddhist social engagement and more generally how they described a ‘Buddhist’ interpretation of contemporary political and social issues. As described in chapter five, a central framework of this approach, expressing an important Buddhist concept, was ‘seeing things the way they are’. The explanation and interpretation of this Buddhist phenomenology however, when applied to Buddhist social engagement and contemporary socio-political issues, was considerably shaped, that is, accented by, the neoconservative concept of moral clarity. Closely associated with and part of the reinterpretation of this concept included a critique of political correctness which mirrored a neoconservative one.
However the issue most vividly animating this approach was Islam, and the perception that it represents the most profound threat to Western culture and society. This fuelled a significant concern about the impact of Islamic migration on Western (and Australian) culture and society. The way this threat was conceived and the proposed response to it, was closely akin to a neoconservative one.

As I noted in chapter one, in the particular way I use the metaphor of creolisation, accents may amplify and extend the grammar in particular ways, reflect varied pathways away from it, problematise or resist it in some way. A neoconservative accent exhibits a grammar of secularism in a number of ways. This is particularly so in the way that Islam is constructed. Islam is perceived by those participants exhibiting a neoconservative accent, much like the way secularism informs views of religion generally, as a ‘thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects’ (Casanova, 2011: 66). Furthermore the way advocates express a deep concern about the threat Islam poses to liberal-secular democracy, if not the prime threat, mirrors the way some forms of secularism perceive religion generally.

This approach toward Buddhist social engagement signals a new development in Western Buddhism. This trend has not, as far as I am aware, been documented in academic literature. The influence of a contemporary right-wing political agenda on Western Buddhism challenges the assumption that Western Buddhist social engagement is necessarily politically left-wing and progressive. With considerable justification, Western Buddhism has long been associated with left-wing progressive politics and counter-cultural attitudes. Reflecting a widespread understanding of Western Buddhism at the time, Rothberg, in statements presented in chapter five, claimed that there are no known forms of conservative Western Buddhist social engagement or resistances to left-wing politics within Western Buddhism (Rothberg, 1998: 271). The neoconservative orientation identified in my research and comments in on-line print media including blogs show that there are now Buddhist public voices and movements in Western Buddhism that are politically conservative, and it appears to be a trend that exists beyond Buddhism in Australia. Though I appreciate the relationship between Diamond Way and a neoconservative approach is complex, as discussed in chapter five, my research suggests that Diamond Way Buddhism represents the first international Western Tibetan Buddhist organisation with a strong tendency toward a politically conservative approach to Buddhist social engagement. Further research is required to ascertain the extent of this trend.
'Just Being in the World': A Romantic Accent

‘Just being in the world’ is a phrase that encapsulates an approach to Buddhist social engagement significantly influenced by romanticism. This phrase was used by one of my participants to describe maintaining a particular internal awareness in the midst of informal, spontaneous interactions in the public sphere. Those who articulated a romantic approach place an emphasis on authentic, spontaneous exchanges within their daily social relations. Authenticity in this case is based on a finely tuned awareness of the flow of consciousness in their interaction with ‘ordinary life’. ‘Being authentic’ and bringing this authenticity into social relations and interactions in the public sphere is considered the central yardstick for assessing what true Buddhist social engagement is.

Those participants who are strongly informed by romanticism emphasise the individual, the spontaneous, the natural, and the subjective. This reflects and is shaped by their resistance to structured and instrumental approaches to social engagement and social change and Buddhism’s association with such approaches. They are ambivalent or opposed to forms of Buddhist social engagement that emphasise tangible, strategic outcomes such as forms of Buddhist political activism and social welfare. Closely related to these themes, romantics tend to be suspicious of religious institutions and collective, public religious activities. Rather than any overtly socio-political outcomes and aims, the underlying impulse of this approach appears to be to produce a distinctively romantic-inspired sanctification of ordinary life, a re-enchantment of the everyday, however one that avoids the metaphysical and transcendental.

In these and several other ways romantics adopt the grammar of secularism, while simultaneously expressing varied pathways away from it. For example their suspicion of religious institutions and the privileging of the individual are steeped in secularism’s concern about religious institutions, particularly when involved in forms of collective, public or political activities. Furthermore, their sensed need and desire to resacralise the ordinary and everyday strongly suggests that the public sphere they experience is a secular, desacralised one. Their desire to and approach toward resacralising the public sphere demonstrates both a negotiation with secularism and a pathway away from it. Insomuch as they shy away from anything overtly collective, metaphysical or traditional in how they approach resacralisation, they reflect the grammar of secularism. Nevertheless their resistance to the disenchantment of everyday life reflects a resistance to secularism’s broad effects.
Reformists: Advocating Buddhist Social Engagement

Reformists support Buddhist social engagement, political activism and social welfare. They articulate the type of approach to Buddhist social engagement featured in academic literature describing Western and modern Buddhism. Reformists identify social, economic and political structures to be significant in shaping experience and suffering. Based on this, they support Buddhist social engagement that focuses on structural, social and political reform. These participants also advocate reform within Western Buddhism—particularly in the direction of greater social engagement.

Reformists resist many of the underlying assumptions of and forms of secularism adopted by other participants. In contrast to the suspicion and reluctance to see overt religious and Buddhist engagement in the public sphere, reformists argue that religion, and Buddhism in particular, must play an active role in addressing systemic injustices and inequalities. They perceive collective, social and political forms of engagement to be significant in assuring Buddhism maintains a contemporary social relevance and provides ethical and moral leadership. In the hope of increasing awareness of these concerns, reformists champion a greater Buddhist involvement in combating global social inequities and suffering. While my research attests to the existence of this form of engagement and suggests it is likely to continue in some form, it is marginal, and there exists significant resistance and ambivalence toward it amongst the majority of participants.

Reformism appears to be formed in dialectal relationship to secularism. Participants in this category respond directly to the grammar of secularism by subtly and overtly resisting its values. In a way that encapsulates Casanova’s definition of the deprivatisation of religion, reformists refuse ‘to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them’ (1994: 5). They problematise the way values of secularism impact on attitudes to Buddhist social engagement amongst Western Buddhists. This can be seen in their critique of Western Buddhists’ response to Buddhist social engagement and particularly their analysis of contemporary suffering as individualistic and failing to address broader structural causes, such as the role of class. (This was discussed in detail in chapter seven.) Their critique of Western Buddhism, and their perception of secularism’s influence on attitudes toward Buddhist social engagement provides further evidence of the significance of secularism in Australian society.

Table four provides a summary of the main differences between each accent in terms of their approach to Buddhist social engagement.
Table 4. Overview of Orientations Toward Buddhist Social Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude toward Buddhist social engagement</th>
<th>Secularism</th>
<th>Romanticism</th>
<th>Neoconservatism</th>
<th>Reformism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caution, ambivalence or resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supportive of a particular form that resists Islam and political-correctness</td>
<td>Strongly supportive, exemplars of Engaged Buddhism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicious of religious institutions and collective, public religious activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Significant concern about Islam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And/or: Concerned that Buddhist social engagement is likely to be interpreted by others as problematic, in tension with a liberal democratic society</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reinterpretation of traditional Tibetan Buddhist attitudes with the influence of neoconservative values of moral clarity, Islamophobia and antipathy towards political correctness</td>
<td>Perceive social, economic and political structures as significant in shaping experience and suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual—not occurring collectively or institutionally</td>
<td>Emphasis on micro interactions in everyday life</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasis on seeing things ‘the way they are’</td>
<td>Collective, institutional, public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconspicuous—not overtly identified as Buddhist</td>
<td>‘Authenticity’ in everyday life—based on subjective and internal awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being fearless to ‘call a spade a spade’ as a means of reducing ‘political correctness’ and confronting issues head-on</td>
<td>Overtly ‘Buddhist’—that is, Buddhist-identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual—not occurring collectively or institutionally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement in political activism, social welfare and public advocacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Privatisation–Deprivatisation: Secularisation–Desecularisation
As discussed throughout this thesis, the topic of Buddhist social engagement provides a lens to consider central issues within the sociology of religion today; debates about
the privatisation and deprivatisation of religion and more generally theories about secularisation and desecularisation. As presented in chapter four, the privatisation thesis posited that in modern societies religion would become increasingly privatised, expelled from sphere after sphere of public life. However this theory has been significantly undermined and replaced with a directly opposite paradigm, the deprivatisation thesis.

As presented earlier, debates regarding privatisation or deprivatisation centre on the question: where and why we are witnessing either a confinement of religion to the domain of private life or an increasing tendency to push religion as a moral resource for the public domain (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688)? Participants’ approaches to Buddhist social engagement neither reflect a desire to confine religion to the domain of private life, yet nor, with the exception of the minority represented by reformists and neoconservatives, four participants, does it reflect a push to use Buddhism as a moral resource for the public domain. Furthermore, the approach of most participants does not parallel Casanova’s definition of deprivatisation; there is little evidence of anything overtly intentional and proactive as a ‘refusal’ to see religion marginalised. Indeed, in arguing that Buddhist social engagement and public advocacy should be carried out with a cloak of religious ‘invisibility’, as discussed in chapter four, those who adopt a secular approach significantly accommodate to the implicit values and rules of political secularism.

While not pushing for a public kind of Buddhism, a secular approach toward Buddhist social engagement does advocate Buddhist ideas being included in public debates about society. Not a single participant however argued that Buddhism is just about the private life of the individual. Participants do not advocate for the privatisation of Buddhism and many argue, albeit tentatively, that Buddhist principles and practices should be expressed in public, social activities and relations in some way. In doing so participants resist some of the fundamental values of political secularism—that religion should remain in its own religious, private sphere. Consequently I have described it, employing a trope used by other scholars to describe religion in Australia, as a ‘shy’, discreet, incognito form of deprivatisation (Bouma, 2006, Possamai, 2008). On the other hand, with the exception of reformists, there is no celebration of deprivatisation, or any general advocacy for public, collective religious responses to social problems. There is little overt resistance to secularism’s depiction of religions or religious engagement in the public sphere.

Do these findings contribute to questions relating to secularisation and desecularisation? The fact that participants in my study adopt and identify as Buddhist is an example of
the increasing affiliation with religious and spiritual traditions outside mainline churches in the West (Achterberg et al., 2009: 688). The fact that participants support Buddhist deprivatisation, albeit in a very discreet and tentative manner, provides further examples for processes of desecularisation. The way they do so affirms Possamai’s assessment of Australia’s process of desecularisation as a shy one (Possamai, 2008). However given the significant influence of secularism on participants my research also provides evidence of ongoing forms of secularisation. For my participants at least, it suggests that desecularisation occurs under the hegemonic gaze and rules of secularism. By extension, it provides further evidence of the way that secularism, while ‘allowing’ multiple religions to coexist, significantly frames and constrains participants’ attitudes and approach to Buddhist social engagement.

Several scholars have described societies in which processes of secularisation and desecularisation are in constant flux as post-secular (Stevenson et al., 2010). According to these definitions, my research supports the idea of Australia as a post-secular society. However it would be hard to imagine any contemporary nation state wherein diverse groups and individuals did not exhibit both features of secularisation or desecularisation. Consequently it is questionable how illuminating such a term or definition is. The term post-secular can easily be assumed to depict a cultural landscape in which secularism—as an ideology—no longer holds hegemonic power. In regards to Australia, my research does not support such a claim. Rather it suggests that secularism, amongst my participants, holds significant influence and authority. My research does however affirm that ‘all-out’ claims about whether secularisation takes place or not are limited and not reflective of the complex and messy reality of the way various features of the secular and religion are incorporated, resisted and combined by individuals and groups in contemporary modern societies.

**Western Buddhism: Counter-Cultural?**

In the introduction I noted how Western Buddhism, at its inception, was defined by the question, ‘how does Buddhism’s acculturation, spread and indigenisation in the West contrast to Buddhism’s acculturation throughout Asia?’. I also explained that descriptions of Western Buddhism as socially engaged have frequently, though not always, been based implicitly or explicitly on a comparison with Asian Buddhism; that is, that Western Buddhism is more engaged than Buddhism in Asia, particularly traditional Asian Buddhism. This is an important issue at stake in addressing the claim that Western Buddhism is highly socially engaged.
Given the findings of my research, most notably the constraining influence of secularism with its preference for individualism and resistance to religious engagement in the public sphere, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Western Buddhism may, by contrast, be one of the least socially engaged and socially integrated expressions of Buddhism throughout its 2,500 years. Though such a sweeping statement is difficult to substantiate, these findings do provide cause to consider more carefully the assumed alignment between Western Buddhism and social engagement, particularly when based on a comparison with Asian forms of Buddhism—either modern or traditional.

In *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* McMahan argues that within contemporary forms of Buddhism there is an emerging spectrum, one that extends from a socially engaged Buddhism that emphasises social, political, and environmental activism as well as meditation to a Buddhism that is a privatised, inward-directed, detraditionalised spirituality (McMahan, 2008: 250). McMahan acknowledges that throughout Buddhist history there have been variations between societies, sects and individuals that have emphasised introspection compared with those that have oriented toward socio-political engagement. However the tension between these two poles—personal, privatised spiritualities and socially engaged Buddhism—represents a condition unique to modernity, a reflection of a cross fertilisation between Buddhism and the discourses of modernity (2008: 250).

So where on this spectrum do my participants sit? The results of my thesis suggest that Tibetan Buddhism in Australia, in terms of how practitioners articulate the ideal form of Buddhist social engagement, tends closer toward a privatised, inward-directed, detraditionalised spirituality. Though participants do not adopt or advocate the extreme end of such a spectrum, that is, an entirely privatised approach, the caution with which participants approach overt Buddhist engagement in the public sphere leads them closer to the privatisation of Buddhism than toward a Buddhism that emphasises social, political and environmental activism.

In the same book McMahan also asks:

*What, then, is the capacity for Buddhist modernism, now entering a post-modern, global phase, to challenge, critique, augment, and offer alternatives to modern, western ideas, social practices, and ethical values? The Buddhist analysis of the relationship between craving (*ṭṛṣṇa*) and dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*), for example, as
well as its ascetic tendencies, can be fashioned into a formidable critique of the very foundations of consumerism, materialism, and the pathological aspects of capitalism (2008: 260).

With the exception of the reformists, the majority of participants are reluctant for Buddhism to be involved in the kind of ‘formidable critique’ of contemporary Western culture and society such as the ‘pathological aspects of capitalism’ that McMahan refers to. Only three participants identified systemic, structural causes, such as the impacts of consumerism and materialism, as a significant feature of Buddhist social engagement. Rather than interpreting Buddhist teachings on suffering as a basis for social engagement, social reform or social critique, the influence of secularism presents Buddhist doctrine as in conflict with these endeavours. The prominence of an interpretation of suffering that strongly emphasises the individual’s mind as the cause of suffering, presented in detail in chapter seven, is significantly at odds with the kinds of critiques McMahan proposes.

Rather than capitalism, materialism, or consumerism, the overarching concern of participants, in terms of maintaining a good society, was institutional religious engagement in the public sphere, whether that be religion generally (explicitly secularists and implicitly romantics) or Islam specifically (neoconservatives). While reformists engaged in critiques of Western culture, for the majority of participants in my research, critiquing Western culture, consumerism or materialism was not a feature of their approach to Buddhism or Buddhist social engagement. Rather, participants appeared more concerned with protecting or accommodating to the values of Western culture and society than critiquing them.

My research also provides some insights to another important question raised by McMahan—‘does the accommodation of Buddhism to modern, western, and postmodern cultures render it less able to provide challenges, critiques and alternatives to these cultures?’ (McMahan, 2008: 242). The way practitioners in my study align Buddhism with dominant discourses in Western culture appears to significantly constrain and undermine Buddhism’s capacity to challenge, critique and provide alternatives to Western culture. Phrased in another way, as suggested above, the imperative is to accommodate to Western culture, rather than critique it.

Remaining Questions, Recommendations for Future Research
In order to strengthen the claims in this thesis, to extend, challenge or confirm the findings presented here, further research needs to be conducted in various areas. Research
with other Tibetan Buddhist groups in Australia would be valuable to further examine and test the findings presented here. Research on Buddhist social engagement with Australian adherents of other Buddhist lineages beside Tibetan would assist greatly in developing deeper insights into the topics raised here. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the attitudes I have identified in my research and whether significant variations exist between different traditions. Though further investigation is required, my research findings suggest that the particular Buddhist tradition followed by converts is not a significant determining factor in the approach toward Buddhist social engagement they adopt. This was evident in the views expressed by Australian Buddhists of other Asian Buddhist lineages, as well as in the blog posts, frequently written by Zen Buddhists.

Research with adherents of other faiths on issues related to religious social engagement would also be particularly valuable. This would deliver a more robust understanding of the influence that secularism has in shaping attitudes toward religious engagement in the public sphere in Australia. It would assist in determining how unique or common Tibetan Buddhists are in their concern about Buddhism being involved in overt public religious engagement.

Research into other Western countries would also provide a greater understanding as to whether there are significant national variations within those countries captured under the category Western Buddhism. This would also provide further insight into how significantly Buddhist acculturation varies between different countries, particularly in regards to Buddhist social engagement, as well as providing deeper insights into the diversity in forms of secularisation or desecularisation occurring throughout the globe.

Researching similar issues in Buddhism in non-Western cultures, particularly Asian cultures, would also be extremely valuable in assessing variations in attitudes to Buddhism, Buddhist social engagement and related issues of secularisation. This would provide a rich basis for understanding more deeply the similarities and distinctions emerging in different forms of modern, contemporary Buddhism, how processes of acculturation differ in different cultural and geographical locations and how useful the academic categories of Western Buddhism and Asian Buddhism are.

In conducting these sorts of investigations, researchers could also employ and/or assess the usefulness of the framework developed in this thesis relating to the four accents I have
identified. This would assist in assessing how significant these modern discourses are amongst adherents of other Buddhist traditions, as well as adherents of other religions, including contemporary new religious movements both within Australia and in different countries. Where and in what form these different modern discourses are prevalent and how they may shape the future of diverse forms of modern Buddhism and social engagement would constitute valuable lines of inquiry.

As noted earlier this thesis arose out of my interest in Euro-Australian practitioners and therefore did not include an extensive analysis of ethnic Tibetan Australians. It is widely understood that the Buddhist practice of ethnic Buddhists undergoes unique processes of acculturation when migrating to Western cultures. Examining more closely the issue of Buddhist social engagement with these groups would provide further insights into the variations in acculturation between Asian-Australian Buddhists and Euro-Australian Buddhists.

A greater, purposive sample of reformists would provide the opportunity to further investigate the different strands and genealogy of contemporary pro-engaged Buddhists. Furthermore, in order to understand the ‘fate’ and status of reformists better, further research needs to be conducted with reformists within Western, Asian and global locales generally. This research could focus on the strengths and weaknesses of reformist movements, alongside critically engaging with my assessment of their marginality.

In this thesis I have intentionally focused on what and how modern influences, worldviews, values and concerns shape practitioners’ depictions of Buddhist social engagement. I appreciate that my focus on this side of the interaction, that is, the non-Buddhist side, has resulted in an inevitable neglect of the ‘Buddhist’ side of the equation. More analysis and focus could well be applied to identifying which Buddhist lexicon, philosophies and practices participants gravitate toward in their depictions of what Buddhism means to them.

In concluding, I will briefly discuss some personal reflections emerging from the process of writing this thesis.

**Personal Reflections**

I perhaps realised the complex tensions that conducting this research would present to me personally—ethically, epistemologically, ontologically, emotionally—a little too late. At
the outset of this research I held commitments to the Tibetan Buddhist community—more poignantly, a deep commitment to Tibetan Buddhism as a practice and philosophy—alongside a firm dedication to being involved in the alleviation of contemporary global, social, political and economic injustices and inequalities. I also attempted to hold true to the epistemological and ethical values, standards and ideals of the academic tradition under whose canopy I conducted this work. In the process of conducting and writing this thesis I wrestled, long and hard, to honour these commitments while equally challenging the assumptions and allegiances I held to toward them.

I frequently felt a tension between representing the desire of participants to make their Buddhist practice other-centred and useful and the need to conduct a critical analysis of the historical, cultural worldview and philosophies that appeared to be informing them. I agonised over the tension inherent in presenting contemporary Tibetan Buddhists in a light that may not be favourable or at least without sufficient acknowledgment of the numerous undoubtedly devoted, well-intentioned individuals and organisations operating under that banner. I was beset by an awareness of the privilege that I was afforded as a researcher to categorise, judge, analyse and deconstruct the approach of others to these topics I held so dear—while perhaps the limitations or inadequacies of my own views were not so vividly on display. I felt deeply indebted to the participants who shared so much with me and frequently, so candidly.

As a means of countering this perceived imbalance, throughout the research process, and particularly during the period of analysing my data I attempted to conduct a rigorous critical analysis on my own views, actions, assumptions and loyalties, one that I felt was at least on par with the critical analysis I undertook of participants’ views. Of course, like anyone else, (except, as Buddhists may argue, Buddhas and bodhisattvas) I cannot erase my own standpoint or subjectivity and the inescapable bias I have brought to the work. I therefore acknowledge that this work does not represent a single, incontestable, or necessarily ‘accurate’ representation of the themes under question. Nevertheless, I have deeply wrestled with the ethical, moral and representational issues that have emerged in conducting this research. How honestly or skilfully I have achieved this, how this may have helped and even hindered the work, the extent to which it has strengthened or weakened the claims, evidence and analysis I have put forth is up to the reader to assess.
Appendix A

Human Research Ethics Committee
Office of Research Services

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title:
Globalised Compassion: Practices of Engagement in Tibetan Buddhism in Australia

Who is carrying out the study?
Chief investigator: Ruth Fitzpatrick
Higher Degree by Research Candidate
School of Humanities and Communication Arts
University of Western Sydney

Academic supervisors:
Associate Professor Judith Snodgrass
Institute for Culture and Society
School of Humanities and Communication Arts
University of Western Sydney

Dr Penny Rossiter
Cultural and Social Analysis
School of Humanities and Communication Arts
University of Western Sydney

Professor Adam Possamai
Religion and Society Research Centre
School of Social Sciences and Psychology
University of Western Sydney

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Ruth Fitzpatrick, Higher Degree Candidate, School of Humanities and Communication Arts. The research will form the basis to the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Western Sydney under the supervision of Associate Professor Judith Snodgrass, School of Humanities and Communication Arts, Dr Penny Rossiter, School of Humanities and Communication Arts and Professor Adam Possamai, School of Social Sciences and Psychology.

What is the study about?
The purpose of this study is to investigate Tibetan Buddhism in Australia. The study seeks to investigate the meaning and significance of Tibetan Buddhism in the lives of Australians practicing Tibetan Buddhism. In particular the study seeks to examine the relationship between social engagement and Tibetan Buddhism.

What does the study involve?
Participation in this study will involve partaking in a semi-structured, conversation style interview. The interview will explore themes related to your involvement with Tibetan Buddhism. This will include how you became involved in Buddhism, what appeals to you about Buddhism,
How Buddhist teachings have been incorporated into your life and your attitudes regarding Buddhism and social engagement. Prior to the interview you will be asked to sign a consent form. Further contact after the interview may be made to clarify any content of the interview. To gain a richer understanding of Tibetan Buddhist practice the study also involves observation of Tibetan Buddhist activities in Australia; such as Dharma talks and ceremonies.

**How much time will the study take?**
The interview will last around one and a half hours.

**Will the study benefit me?**
Involvement in the study will give you the opportunity to discuss your experiences of Tibetan Buddhism and allow you to contribute to increasing knowledge about Tibetan Buddhist practice in Australia.

**Will the study involve any discomfort for me?**
Participation in the research is unlikely to produce any discomfort. Although the research deals with questions of a spiritual and religious nature, the research is not intended to approach issues of a very personal or traumatic nature. If you feel uncomfortable at any point in the research, the researcher can discuss any issues with you, and you may withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences.

**How is this study being paid for?**
The study does not have any outside sponsorship.

**Will anyone else know the results? How will the results be disseminated?**
All aspects of the study, including results, will be confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants.

A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

**Can I withdraw from the study?**
Participation is entirely voluntary: you are not obliged to be involved and - if you do participate - you can withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without any consequences.

**Can I tell other people about the study?**
Yes, you can tell other people about the study by providing them with the chief investigator’s contact details. They can contact the chief investigator to discuss their participation in the research project and obtain an information sheet.

**What if I require further information?**
When you have read this information, Ruth Fitzpatrick will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Judith Snodgrass on (02) 4736 0859, or at j.snodgrass@uws.edu.au.

**What if I have a complaint?**
This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H6827. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Office of Research Services on Tel 02-4736 0883 Fax 02-4736 0013 or email humanethics@uws.edu.au.

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to sign the Participant Consent Form.
Appendix B

Human Research Ethics Committee
Office of Research Services

Participant Consent Form

Project Title:
Globalised Compassion: Practices of Engagement in Tibetan Buddhism in Australia

I, ................................., consent to participate in the research project titled Globalised Compassion: Practices of Engagement in Tibetan Buddhism in Australia.

I acknowledge that:

I have read the participant information sheet [or where appropriate, ‘have had read to me’] and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent to the face-to-face interviews.
I consent to these interviews being recorded.

I understand that my involvement is confidential and that the information gained during the study may be published but no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher/s now or in the future.

Signed:  

Name:  

Date:  

Return Address:  Ruth Fitzpatrick  
Postgraduate Researcher  
C/o School of Humanities and Languages  
Kingswood Campus  
Locked Bag 1797  
Penrith South DC NSW 1797
Appendix C

Proposed Questions for Participants

How long have you been a Buddhist?

How did you come to be a Buddhist?

How does Buddhism impact upon your life?

What are your attitudes to social justice movements or political activism?

What are your thoughts about Buddhism’s relationship to these?

What are your thoughts on Buddhism and social engagement?

What does the term Engaged Buddhism mean to you?

Would you consider yourself an Engaged Buddhist?

What does it mean to you to be an Engaged Buddhist?

What do you consider the relationship between Buddhism and politics to be?

Would you like to see Buddhists contributing a Buddhist position on social issues in Australia?

What do you think Buddhism offers to Western/Australian society?

What do you think is the cause of suffering?

What do you think causes social suffering?
References


