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Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

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Creating Religious Identity

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Abstract: *The author, a Buddhist monastic and scholar, explores the varieties of religious identity, their sources, and their effects on society. She discusses the fluidity of religious identities in the modern world and, in particular, the various challenges to women in confronting the stubborn persistence of gender-based exclusionary practices in religious traditions.*

Religion is a major source of world conflict today, despite the fact that peace is a fundamental aim of most religious traditions. From a Buddhist perspective, the problem is not religion per se but attachment to religious identities. Many core religious beliefs and values are strikingly similar across traditions, although it must be said that people are not always well enough educated in their own and other religious traditions to be aware of these similarities. Yet, the fact remains that some individuals identify so closely with their chosen faith that they are willing to die for it. Given that religion is a key component in cultural and personal identity, the primary question I would like to explore here is what it means to assume a religious identity. What does it mean to be a Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, and so on? More particularly, what does it mean to be a woman who follows one of these faiths?

People will surely answer this question differently depending on their different religious traditions and on the diverse individual perspectives. The authorities of religious traditions codify criteria by which it may be determined what it means to be a follower of their religion. Scholars of the tradition may formulate one set of criteria, religious authorities may hold to another set, and adherents' criteria may be vastly different. For example, at the Roman Catholic university where I teach, the terms *cradle Catholic*, *practicing Catholic*, *lapsed Catholic*, and *recovering Catholic* are frequently heard. The university requires that the dean of arts and sciences be a "knowledgeable and committed Catholic," which has given rise to many discussions about how a candidate can demonstrate this required knowledge and commitment in ways that can be verified by the search committee, faculty, and administration.

The traditional criteria for assuming a Buddhist identity is to go for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. However, the manner in which this refuge is accomplished varies. In the Tibetan tradition, a person may go for refuge in a formal ceremony. The refuge procedure entails a request to a qualified master, prostrations, symbolic offerings, recitation of the refuge formula, and dedication of merit. The procedure may involve a single individual or a group. The refuge prayer is a standard component of most Tibetan Buddhist activities, whether performed individually or in groups as large as a quarter of a million participants, as in the case of public teachings by H. H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

In other Buddhist traditions, such as the Theravada traditions of Thailand and Sri Lanka, the refuge formula is recited frequently by adherents, both in their personal practice and in public religious activities. The standard refuge formula is:

Buddham saranam gacchami
I go to the Buddha for refuge.
Dhammam saranam gacchami
I go to the Dhamma for refuge.
Sangham saranam gacchami
I go to the Sangha for refuge.

This three-part formula is repeated three times, introduced by “For the second time . . .” and “For the third time . . .” upon the second and third repetitions.

In all Buddhist traditions, the meaning of going for refuge is commonly taught, with an explanation of the qualities of the objects of refuge. However, there may be no perceived need for a distinct ceremony of going for refuge, especially for those who are born Buddhist. The identity of a “cradle Buddhist” may be simply assumed, with no formal recognition needed.

Sources of Religious Identity

These examples of diverse criteria for becoming a Buddhist show that establishing religious identity is an elusive and multifaceted process, both for those who claim these identities and for those who attempt to categorize adherents according to their religious affiliation. The inquiry into religious identities becomes complex in view of the enormous variety among adherents of each faith and their varied definitions and perceptions of what it means to be a follower of that faith. Sometimes it seems

that people of different faiths who are politically or religiously liberal have more in common with liberals of other faiths than they do with conservatives in their own faith. Compounding the complexity is the fact that adherents of any given tradition may be more conservative on some points and more liberal on others. For example, adherents of two different faiths may agree in supporting gay marriage but may hold different views on immigration and other issues. A further layer of complexity is that religious identifications are mutable. A Catholic may become a Buddhist, then a Sufi, and later return to her Catholic faith.

To delve into these issues a bit farther, it may be helpful to begin at the beginning and discuss the sources of religious identity in general. One such source has already been mentioned: a person assumes a religious identity by virtue of being born into a family with that specific identity. With all its splendors and deficiencies, the religious identity of one's family becomes one's own. This is not necessarily unhealthy, unless a person fails to recognize that each human being has multiple identity markers—religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, kinship, profession, and so on—that operate simultaneously or consecutively. A person who fails to recognize the multiple aspects of identity may become so strongly attached to a specific identity as to fall into exclusionary thinking, which is a common source of conflict.¹

Birth by itself, however, is not sufficient to determine religious identity or to determine whether one will be religious at all. In homogeneous societies, one's religious "birthright" may subsequently be reinforced by religious education and the religious culture of one's community. Amin Maalouf contends that this cultural reinforcement is paramount: "What determines a person's affiliation to a given group is essentially the influence of others: the influence of those about him [sic]—relatives, fellow-countrymen, co-religionists—who try to make him one of them; together with the influence of those on the other side, who do their best to exclude him."²

The reinforcement of religious identity can occur even in religious enclaves within pluralist societies. For example, a student from New York once told me that she did not know anyone who was not an Orthodox Jew until she was seventeen years old. Evangelical mega-churches are creating intentional communities in the United States that are equivalent to small towns, where congregants can work out, study, eat, shop, pray, and even go rock climbing among like-minded believers in a controlled, full-service environment that insulates them from the larger culture.³

Shifting Religious Identities

Religious identity may also be established by conversion, by shifting one's affiliation from one religious tradition to another, or from a nonreligious identity to a religious one. In many periods of history in certain cultures, religious identities have tended to remain relatively stable throughout a person's lifetime, as is the case even today in many cultures. A person might be more religious as a youth than in middle age, or vice versa, but a person's affiliation rarely shifted from one religion to another. Today, however, changing religions is commonplace. According to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives.⁴ To lapse from Catholic belief is so common (an estimated 30 to 40 percent) that a blog, a website, a song (by Future of the Left), and a surfer film are titled "Lapsed Catholic." The lapsed Mormon phenomenon has given its name to a rock group (Jerry Joseph & the Jackmormons) and to Jack Mormon Coffee Co. ("Heavenly Coffee Beans").

A variety of factors converge to ensure lasting religious identifications, including social expectations, cultural homogeneity, lack of awareness of other religious possibilities, a preference for social uniformity in

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the name of cohesion, and fears of social exclusion. To be the "other," especially religiously, has rarely been a comfortable identity. At the same time, as Amin Maalouf and Amartya Sen emphasize, although human beings have multiple identities, these identities naturally take on greater importance in different situations. From early childhood, most human beings become adept at assuming different identities or highlighting different aspects of their identity according to circumstances. Situational shifts of identity may be unconscious, a matter of convenience, or even a matter of survival. In 1984 in northern India, many Sikh men

cut their hair in an attempt to conceal their religious identity to avoid being killed in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Even in the course of a normal day, a person may identify as a student and a teacher, a parent and a child, a lover and a friend, or a nonreligious person and a devout person. Becoming adept at these shifts is often considered a mark of maturity as well as practicality.

Another kind of identity shift is the conscious selection of an alternative religious identity. The reasons for such a shift may be personal, social, philosophical, or circumstantial. One may change one's religious

affiliation due to changing family circumstances, such as a new parent or spouse. In cases of intermarriage, a conscious decision to change affiliations may be justified as necessary for the sake of children, for example. One may change one's denominational affiliation simply out of convenience, due to a shift in residence. The decision to change affiliations may involve a formal conversion procedure, involving baptism or even circumcision, or one may simply slide into another religious affiliation or denomination of the same religious tradition.

One may also change one's religious affiliation due to dissatisfaction with particular aspects of one's religious experience. Critiques related to perceived hypocrisy, overzealous fundraising efforts, pastoral incompetence or incompatibility, unpleasant personalities in the congregation, politics in the pulpit, dogmatism, or even comments overheard, may induce a shift to another tradition or place of worship.

One may also change religious affiliations due to attraction to another tradition or to fill a gap that is not being addressed in one's accustomed place of worship. Some people may be attracted by a more contemplative approach or to a more scholarly approach. Some may move away from a more doctrinaire to a more relaxed style of religious practice, or vice versa. Or it may be a particular person, whether in the pulpit or in the congregation, who causes one to explore and eventually to adopt another religious tradition.

Although religion is just one of many identities that a person may adopt, the act of shifting from one religious identification to another will inevitably involve shifts in one's identity as a whole. A religious shift will not only influence how one is seen by others and how one sees oneself but will also set off changes in one's surroundings and one's group of associates. More generally, because religious identity is fundamental to how one perceives reality, this perception too must change with a change in one's religious identity.

Syncretic Identities: Crossing Religious Boundaries

The contemporary trend towards selectively borrowing from different religious traditions extends the boundaries of religious belief and complicates fixed notions of religious identity. In today's religious landscape, especially in the United States, Catholic nuns practice Zen meditation, Buddhist nuns organize prayer vigils, and Sufis chant Tibetan mantras with no fear of eternal damnation or apostasy. Some openhearted souls in my acquaintance attend gatherings of a different tradition almost every night of the week. In Honolulu, many make the rounds: Monday evenings

at the Siddha Yoga Center, Tuesday evenings at the Sufi Universal Dance of Peace, Wednesday evenings at Star of the Sea Catholic Parish, Thursday evenings for Tara Puja at the Tibetan Buddhist center, and so on. Not all of these are curiosity seekers or religious dilettantes in what Chögyam Trungpa called the “spiritual supermarket”; some have been practicing multiple traditions for years and claim to derive even greater benefit by not limiting themselves to simply one tradition.

*The present religious
landscape is a buyer’s
market.*

Borrowing from other religious traditions is not new and does not necessarily represent a degradation of traditional forms. Hindu saints have borrowed wisdom from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim saints for centuries. In Nepal, the fusion of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and rituals is so thorough that delinking the elements would constitute a breach of tradition. Religious syncretism may impart richness and vitality to a tradition or compensate for gaps and deficiencies. It seems likely that elements of Hindu ritual incorporated into Buddhist practice speak to a human need for devotional practices. Homilies spoken in Christian churches in North America today not infrequently borrow from the writings of Buddhist leaders, the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hahn. The borrowing may or may not be consciously intended, but it is clear that teachings on loving-kindness and compassion have a universal appeal.

In some religious landscapes, any deviation from orthodox belief and practice is regarded as unjustified and inauthentic. In others, deviations are not questioned or analyzed as long as objections are not raised by practitioners operating under a group-sanctioned identity label. It is well recognized that religious narratives develop through a process of selecting, interpreting, and reformulating specific aspects of the founder’s teachings. It is also well recognized that the beliefs and ideas of most religious founders were departures or even deviant in their day. These founders would no doubt be very surprised to see that their teachings, which were once creative and flexible, have become part of an ossified orthodoxy.

Despite attempts to hark back to a golden era of religious orthodoxy, and despite attempts to enforce uniformity, change ensures that religious traditions survive and remain relevant. The current tendency to mix and match is fundamental to the melting pot of the West and a natural result of the confluence of numerous salient factors, including uncensored access to knowledge, visible corruption of religious institutions, changing values, and cultural diversity. In a socially fluid global society, people do not need religion or authority figures to find community and meaning in life. The present religious landscape is a buyer’s market.

Religion today is being marketed in many forms, some more authentic than others. A common formulation is an amalgam of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Western psychology. Opinions vary on whether or not this amalgam is a good thing. On the one hand, mixing the most attractive elements of various spiritual paths may be very appealing to a generation of seekers. Proponents argue that these formulations at least guide people toward the spiritual path and away from harmful pursuits. They make available the most useful elements of traditional religions while steering people away from doctrines and other aspects of religion which may be unattractive or even unsavory. On the other hand, syncretic formulations may become very confusing. Opponents of syncretism argue that mixing many elements together may cause people to fail to make genuine spiritual progress. Syncretic religious paths lack structure and quality control, such that anything can be relabeled and marketed for profit by charlatans. In any case, in free societies, these kinds of religious movements are bound to proliferate. Only time will tell the results.

Religious Identity from a Buddhist Perspective

The next step in this discussion is to examine the question of religious identity using a Buddhist theoretical framework. In traditional Buddhist theories of identity, human beings are comprised of five aggregates: form, feeling, discrimination, karmic formations, and consciousness. The traditional teaching is that the nature of people is fluid and contingent upon these five aggregates, all of which are momentary. Within the cycle of repeated births, deaths, and rebirths, sentient beings take on different identities, whether as gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, or hell-beings, until they achieve liberation from cyclic existence (samsara). Although beings are infinite in number and despite their many differences, they are the same by nature, in that they are composites of transient, interrelated parts. Ignorant of their true nature, they cling to the things of this world, especially to a false concept of themselves. According to the classical Indian Madhyamika philosophy, personal identities are merely convenient labels, and the five aggregates are the basis for imputing the existence of an ephemeral, conventional notion of self.

Sociologists speak of socially constructed identities: ethnic identities, gender identities, national identities, personal identities, and so on. Whether the process of identity construction is conscious remains an open question, but the notion of identity as a social construct is compatible with the Buddhist notion of identity as a merely conventional reality. Identities can be useful on a mundane level, in developing, for example, a

healthy and balanced sense of oneself in the world in contradistinction to a self-absorbed, pathological, or nihilistic approach to being in the world.

Identities can also be problematic, however, if they give rise to attachments, fixations, or dependencies. Clinging to a fixed sense of identity can be a cause of great unhappiness. For example, clinging to an image of oneself as young and attractive even though one's body has aged can cause great frustration and misery. Similarly, clinging to one's ethnic identity in an increasingly pluralistic world or to a religious identity that one has outgrown can become a source of frustration or inner conflict. The habitual tendency to grasp at distorted or unrealistic images of oneself is akin to a case of mistaken identity and can have many ramifications, often adverse.

From a Buddhist perspective, religious affiliation is a personal choice and indicates a path for everyday living. Liberation or enlightenment is not achieved through adherence to beliefs or labels but through actions of body, speech, and mind. The central admonition of Sakyamuni Buddha was: "Engage in wholesome actions. Avoid unwholesome actions. Purify mental defilements. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas." The first two principles are the foundation for ethical conduct and human well-being. In South Asian religious traditions, these principles are expressed as the universal law of cause and effect; in the Abrahamic traditions, they are expressed in the biblical injunction, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap." These principles imply a standard for moral conduct that is more fundamental than specific religious affiliations.

Religious Identity from a Feminist Perspective

I would like to conclude this discussion of religious identities by considering them from a feminist perspective. What does it mean to be a woman who is a follower of a religious tradition? If feminism is the radical concept that women are fully human, then a feminist inquiry into religious identity would ask whether women are full participants in their religious traditions. Such an inquiry might begin by asking, with regard to a particular tradition: (1) Are women fully eligible to be followers of that tradition? (2) Are the ideals of the tradition framed in gender-equal terms? (3) Do women have equal access to the goals of the tradition? (4) Are women included as full participants of the tradition? (5) Do women have equal access to thorough knowledge of the tradition? (6) Do women have equal access to leadership roles, and are they fairly represented in the tradition's institutions? (7) Do women feel nurtured by their chosen tradition, or do they feel neglected?

We may take the Buddhist tradition as the focus of a sample inquiry. First, are women fully eligible to be Buddhist? Since people of any age and of either gender are eligible to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, women are clearly eligible to be Buddhist. The second question, whether the ideals of the tradition are framed in gender-equal terms, can also be answered in the affirmative. The ideal of all Buddhist traditions is to purify the mind and achieve awakening, which is theoretically possible for all sentient beings.

The third question, as to whether women have equal access to the goals of the tradition, requires a more complex answer. The Buddha is said to have affirmed that women have equal potential to achieve the goal of the path, namely, liberation, or enlightenment. The Buddha's statement is the theoretical basis for considering women equal to men in spirituality. Whether women have equal access to the means for realizing their spiritual potential remains an open question, however.

The answer to the fourth question regarding women as full participants in their respective traditions will depend on which Buddhist tradition we consider. In Buddhist countries where women have access to full ordination (for example, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam), it can be argued that women are full participants in their traditions. In Buddhist traditions where women do not have access to full ordination (for example, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Tibet), it can be argued that women are not full participants in those traditions.

The answer to the fifth question, whether women have equal access to thorough knowledge of their chosen traditions, also depends on which Buddhist tradition we consider. In those Buddhist traditions where women have full access to institutions of higher Buddhist learning (again, in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam), it can be argued that women have equal access to thorough knowledge of their traditions. In traditions where women do not have full access to institutions of higher Buddhist learning, it can be argued that they do not have equal access to thorough knowledge of their traditions—and therefore do not have equal access to the means for spiritual development. Nor do they have equal access to the highest goals of those traditions.

When we consider the sixth question—whether women have equitable access to leadership roles and are equitably represented in religious institutions—we find that the Buddhist situation is mixed. In some countries, especially Western countries, women are free to participate in the decision-making processes of Buddhist institutions. They may be elected to leadership roles on the basis of merit and often hold top positions. Women are free to participate in academic Buddhist

forums and conferences and are often selected as presenters on the basis of merit. In other countries, especially Buddhist countries, women are frequently unrepresented or under-represented in Buddhist academic forums and conferences and in the decision-making processes of Buddhist institutions. Although Buddhist women often do much to organize, support, and ensure the smooth functioning of these institutions, they are rarely in positions of authority in these institutions, especially in the higher ranks. Even though women actively support the organization of Buddhist conferences and Dharma events, when the lights go on, only men are generally present center stage. Women's voices and concerns are rarely heard—a glaring omission in a tradition that promises equal opportunity.

These questions and concerns are not unique to the Buddhist tradition, of course. Although women are eligible to be followers of most religious traditions, the ideals of these traditions are rarely framed in gender-equal terms. The religious founders, leaders, and examples of supreme attainment are most often male, leaving women to wonder whether they can hope to realize the benefits of the religious traditions they follow. Women often are unequal participants and often have limited access to the knowledge and goals of their traditions, leaving them to wonder how they can expect to achieve those goals. Even nuns who have dedicated their lives to religious practice are often unrepresented or under-represented in their religious traditions and are absent from positions of religious authority. Women may legitimately question whether they have made the right choice in investing time, effort, and devotion in their religious traditions. If women identify closely with their chosen religious traditions, yet find themselves excluded, ignored, or marginalized, they may find their aspirations unfulfilled, and they become disillusioned.

The traditions that deny women equal access to knowledge, participation, and leadership risk becoming irrelevant and anachronistic in a world where women and men are widely recognized as equal participants in global society. In particular, religious traditions that espouse egalitarian ideals, such as Buddhism, have a special responsibility to live up to their own ideals.

Like other identities, religious identity has the potential to be helpful to human development, for example in developing a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and the security of a set of values that may safely guide one's life. From a Buddhist point of view, however, it may be harmful to cling to a religious identity if one's identity becomes mixed with afflictive emotions such as attachment, aversion, and ignorance—the

three *kleśas*. Attachment to particular identities can cause adherents to abandon their capacity for rational thought or their capacity for empathy. When religious identities and identifications lead to aversion toward adherents of different religious traditions, they may become the source of violent conflict. Identities in general lack substantial reality, but when they are seen as intrinsically existent and essential, they can be the cause of myriad delusions and unskillful actions. ❧

Notes

1. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 18–39.
2. Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 25.
3. Patricia Leigh Brown, “Megachurches as Minitowns,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2002.
4. “Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.,” quoted by Jacqueline L. Salmon in her article “Study Examines Choice of Religion,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 2009.