

Marketing Buddhism in the United States of America: Elite Buddhism and the formation of religious pluralism.

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Marketing Buddhism in the United States of America: Elite Buddhism and the Formation of Religious Pluralism

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Marketing Buddhism in the United States of America:

Elite Buddhism and the Formation of Religious Pluralism

Charles B. Jones (bio)

Scope of the Inquiry

I am not the first person to report on the marketing of Buddhism within the United States. In a 2000 issue of the *Journal of Global Buddhism*, Douglas M. Padgett wrote about the manufacture and marketing of meditation cushions in the United States and ruminated on the complex relationship between Buddhism's ostensible nonmaterialistic ideals and goals on the one hand and the nuts and bolts of money and consumption in the marketing of religious paraphernalia on the other.¹ While such a study casts valuable light on the complexities and contradictions of contemporary Western Buddhist practice, I have other fish to fry here. I am concerned not with the marketing of Buddhist *gear* but with the marketing of *Buddhism itself*, its teachings and its practices. That is to say, I comment on the *kind* of Buddhism that has asserted itself in the marketplace of religious ideas in the United States, particularly through the kinds of commercial venues where religious ideas themselves are the commodity. This means, above all, bookstores and magazine stands, the places where people go to shop for reading material that will inform their Buddhist thinking and practice or merely satisfy their curiosity if they do not intend to practice but simply want information.

Beyond seeing just what kind of Buddhism is up for sale in contemporary North America, I also want to take this opportunity to explore a larger phenomenon within which this marketing operates and influences people's thinking in another area. By looking at how Buddhism is being marketed in the United States, I believe a dynamic through which people formulate ideas about the relationships between various religions can be discerned. In particular, I want to use the selling of Buddhist books and periodicals as a way to see how people arrive at their ideas about religious pluralism. As I shall show, the marketplace exerts a force that distorts (or adapts) Buddhism in such a way as to lead people to certain conclusions about religious diversity in general. **[End Page 214]**

As a major component of the research for this article, I went shopping. On 2 January 2006, I went to the Borders bookstore at the White Flint Mall in Kensington, Maryland, and spent an afternoon writing down the titles and authors of the books that were for sale under the subject heading "Buddhism." During that time, I recorded some ninety-one separate titles for sale, which represented about two-thirds of this store's total offerings. Before leaving, I quickly surveyed the remainder to see if the patterns I had noted to that point held and to make sure there would be nothing that would significantly alter my conclusions. Satisfied that the notes I had represented an adequate sample, I took them to my office to analyze the findings. To do this, I looked up each title on the Internet and scanned tables of contents, publicity materials, and reviews. This allowed me to sort the materials according to sectarian affiliation and general subject matter.

Before presenting those findings, let me say a word or two about methodology. There is some sociological theory that supports the use of books and magazines as an important resource for gauging the uptake of Buddhism into American culture. The sociologists Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge make a distinction between new religious movements that they call "sects" and those they call "cults."² They define the former as movements within preexisting religious groups that seek to reinforce certain aspects of that religion's practice or reform it in some way. A sect movement does not call on its followers to learn new concepts, worldviews, languages, practices, or texts; it can build on the foundation of the things its target group already believes and does. As a result, sect movements flourish among discontented and dispossessed populations toward the lower end of the social and educational ladder.

Cults, in Stark and Bainbridge's view, are new religions in every sense of the word, at least for the people who...

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1. Douglas Padgett, "Americans Need Something to Sit On," or Zen Meditation Materials and Buddhist Diversity in North America," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1 (2000): 61-83. There is also an article in a 2001 issue of *Triicycle* magazine by Douglas Paul that I cite in the last section.

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