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Main content

Article Preview :

Buddhism in the West has reached beyond the enclosures of monastic buildings and meditation centers, meeting the masses at the market, in films, books, magazines and ads, often portrayed as anything but religion. This article investigates relations between media, popular culture and religion and analyses representations of Buddhism in Danish mass media, relating it to opinion surveys, statistics and developments of Danish Buddhist groups. It discusses the mediatization, entertainmentization, commodification and popularization of Buddhism and concludes that such representations serve as cultural narratives, regenerating and transforming both the culture and the religion.

Keywords: Buddhism in the West, popular culture, mediatization, entertainment, Denmark

Buddha is cool and chic in the West, and as a popular brand has moved from temple to market. Buddhism has been transformed from an intellectual capital and practice path for the elite to an easily approachable mindset for the masses in which consumerism, commodification and mediatization are part of the neo-liberal market where spirituality is for sale. As the back cover of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism* (Gach 2009) says, "Enlightenment has never been easier." But consumers with no direct relations to Buddhism are also targets and manufacturers of popular Buddhist narratives. Advertisements featuring Buddha and monks sell everything from alcohol to clothes, often with recognizable symbols and stories. The Dalai Lama has appeared in advertisements for Mercedes Benz and Microsoft, and Hollywood films and an abundance of book titles featuring Zen, Tantra, Buddha, or mindfulness have helped domesticate the religion. Buddhism has become part of American cinema (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2014), and the Tibet effect, the Dalai Lama effect, and the Hollywood effect are important catalysts for global pop-cultural Buddhism. The media have used such popular narratives, helping to maintain stereotypes of Asia and Asians (Iwamura 2011, 161). The statements that "Americans have gone gaga over Buddhism" (Prothero, quoted in Moore 2008: 236) and that Buddhism "is without question a 'meme' of great resonance in contemporary United States popular and consumer culture" (Shields 2015: 403) could also be applied to most Western countries today.

The aim of this article is to analyze such popularization, entertainmentization and mediatization of Buddhism not as deviant misunderstandings in a neo-liberal consumer market, but as cultural phenomena with their own rationale in a broader perspective. Rather than seeing 'content' (teaching, practice, institution) as the only prime mover, such developments are understood here as framing conditions and transmission technologies in the overall transformation and adaptation processes of the religion. After an initial discussion of the role of media and popular culture in relation to religion, Denmark will be used as a case to illustrate a diversity of fields in which Buddhism has spread. Such cultural manifestations of Buddhism will be explored by both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing Danish news media, books, magazines and visual media before discussing theoretical implications related concretely to Buddhism's transformation in the West and more generally to the interrelations between popular culture and religion.

Mediatization and entertainmentization of religion

Mass media and popular culture are important...

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To many, Buddhism goes beyond religion and is more of a philosophy or 'way of life'. It is a philosophy because philosophy 'means love of wisdom' and the Buddhist path can be summed up as: (1) to lead a moral life, (2) to be mindful and aware of thoughts and actions, and (3) to develop wisdom and understanding. • How Can Buddhism Help Me? Buddhism explains a purpose to life, it explains apparent injustice and inequality around the world, and it provides a code of practice or way of life that leads to true happiness. • Why is Buddhism Becoming Popular? There are many different types of Buddhism, because the emphasis changes from country to country due to customs and culture. What does not vary is the essence of the teaching — the Dhamma or truth. • Are Other Religions Wrong? Types of Buddhism. Dr. Alexander Berzin. As Buddha's teachings spread to different Asian lands and cultures, local people adapted those aspects that resonated harmoniously with their own indigenous beliefs. Thus, many forms of Buddhism developed, each with its own unique approach and style, but all retaining the most essential features of the teachings. This was in keeping with Buddha's didactic method, which was to customize his message to suit the mentality of each of his disciples. Share on facebook. Let's look at some of the distinctive features of the Theravada, Chinese and Tibetan forms of Buddhism as representative of the major systems extant today. Theravada. Theravada, practiced in Southeast Asia, emphasizes the practice of mindfulness meditation. The Buddhists, much to the consternation of those who believe in the Buddha's teachings, are engaged in a vastly evil persecution of Burmese Muslims right now. But the other two religions are practiced in the west or places that affect the west such as the Middle East so they get more publicity. Also the Buddhists are really only engaged in one terribly evil act whilst the Christians and Muslims are engaged in multiple wars right now. 23 views. "Branding Buddha—mediatized and commodified Buddhism as cultural narrative." Journal of Global Buddhism 17 (2016): 41-55. 161 views · View 3 Upvoters.