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Steven Collins

Excerpt

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Introduction

WHAT IS THIS BOOK, AND WHO IS IT FOR?

This book is a rewritten version of Part I in my *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1998 (paperback 2006). That book is long, complex, expensive, and not easy to use in teaching. In this book I aim to take the attempt at understanding nirvana offered in the earlier one, and present it in what I hope is a more accessible form; the main text is less crowded with details, all direct references to Pali texts have been removed, and most references to secondary works have been placed in the endnotes. All translations are my own. Although it is intended for that mythical beast, the General Reader, I have had primarily in mind university classes, at either the undergraduate or graduate level, in courses on Buddhism, comparative Religious Studies, History, Anthropology, or other. It is intended to provoke discussion rather than to present unalterable conclusions. In my experience with students at the University of Chicago to whom I have taught what is presented here, the overall methods, arguments, and conclusions are quite comprehensible, when explained pedagogically, whether or not individuals happen to be persuaded. Readers, and teachers using the book in classes, might consult the longer book for more detail, and for the overall argument about nirvana as a part of what I call there the discourse of felicity (explained briefly

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below), and as part of what the subtitle of that book called *Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*. But this is by no means necessary.

To suggest in what vein I would like this book to be read, or at least one of them, I would point to a body of work on the early Christian and medieval European worlds produced by Caroline Walker Bynum, collected in the volumes entitled *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (1995), and *Metamorphosis and Identity*, (2001).¹ Bynum achieves a combination of two things, *inter alia*, which it would be presumptuous of me to claim also, although I can at least say that it is my aspiration: she deals with fundamental and timeless existential issues – the nature of embodiment, its relation to death and the possibility of life thereafter, the conceivability of eternal life, and much else besides – but in a manner which exemplifies the intellectual and academic virtues, again *inter alia*, of detailed linguistic (and other) analysis, meticulous care, and lucid exposition, in reading and discussing texts produced in an historical period quite different from our own. What is presented in this book, from the Pali imaginaire, was produced in roughly the same historical periods as the texts dealt with in Bynum's work, and it responds to many of the same timeless issues, but in an overall ideology different from the Christian in some very fundamental ways (though one could also argue, perhaps, that as a civilizational ideology in prescientific premodernity, it is the same, or similar, in some equally fundamental ways; that is one thing readers might discuss). What I have to say about what I will call *systematic* and *narrative* thought, and about the philosophical and cultural-historical importance of imagery and metaphor, and their capacity to be a connecting bridge between systematic and narrative thought, might also be thought through in relation to other traditions (and here Bynum's work will also be helpful). But that is an

example of the way in which the book might be used; the book is about Buddhism, it is not itself a comparative study.

It will, I hope, be helpful to summarize here some points from the General Introduction to the earlier book, in order to set the treatment of nirvana offered here in a larger context. I will do so in an abbreviated form, under a schematic set of headings.

THE DISCOURSE OF FELICITY: IMAGINING HAPPINESS

Max Weber usefully, if typically with Christian theological concepts transferred to sociology, spoke of what he – though not I – would call ‘religions’ as offering different kinds of *theodicy*.² In the Christian case this can be a purely logical issue: how can one reconcile the concept of a benevolent and all-powerful God with that of the real existence of evil and suffering? In Weber’s use of the term it refers more broadly to all traditional ideological explanations and/or justifications of evil or suffering, and especially those produced by social injustice and social hierarchy (and there are no historical societies without hierarchy). But theodicies are not just matters of accounting for existing evils and injustices, on a social level; they must also elaborate visions of happiness and the resolution of injustice which are not subject to the existential threats posed, rhetorically and actually, collectively as well as individually, by aging and death. (They can also, of course, elaborate visions of the punishments which await those who do not follow their rules, an activity to which traditional Buddhists devoted themselves with every bit as much enthusiasm as traditional Christians.) In my terms, the word ‘felicity’ does double duty: first, it is simply a general term that denotes any and every form of happiness, well-being, flourishing, or whatever, produced by traditional ideologies (Chapter 3 discusses these words; Chapter 5 translates and discusses

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texts concerned with what I call there ‘unprecedented well-being’); but second, it connotes the idea of a felicitous phrase, or felicities of expression – that is, successes, elegances, and other good qualities of discourse. The resolutions of evil and injustice offered in such ideologies are never actual, in the sense of being historically instantiated in a form of social life; they are always and only part of the internal content of texts, oral or written. They exist, historically, in an imaginaire.

THE PALI IMAGINAIRE

The General Introduction to *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* offers a history and analysis of the term ‘imaginaire’, and reasons to retain the French word. (Some writers use ‘imaginary’ as an English noun, which I find inelegant; ‘imagination’ is no good because it implies too strongly the non-existence of what is imagined.) The word ‘imaginaire’ can have various meanings, broad and narrow, and sometimes seems to be used to mean more or less the same thing as ‘culture’. My usage is in particular influenced by the work of the historian Jacques Le Goff, where it has the slightly more precise sense of a non-material, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature.³ Such worlds are by definition not the same as the material world, but in so far as the material world is thought and experienced in part through them, they are not imaginary in the sense of being false, entirely made up. This usage has Durkheimian ancestry: Hubert and Mauss spoke of *la sphère imaginaire de la religion*, insisting that this sphere exists: ‘Religious ideas exist, because they are believed; they exist objectively, as social facts.’⁴

To be very brief, the Pali imaginaire means any and every text written (or translated into) Pali. I think it is a matter of empirical

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fact that, as far as the grand issues of life, death, suffering, and nirvana are concerned, all texts in Pali show a remarkable consistency, and can be treated as a single whole. (There is one possible exception, a meditative state known as the Attainment of Cessation, or the Cessation of Perception/Ideation and Feeling, on which see Chapter 2.) On other issues – for example the precise working of the law(s) of *karma* (Pali: *kamma*) – I think that there is considerably less agreement, and an intellectual analysis and history of the idea(s) of *kamma* would require considerably more attention to differences and perhaps unintended paradoxes and contradictions in different texts. Jim Egge, writing helpfully about *kamma* in early Pali texts, has offered a useful refinement of the term ‘Pali imaginative’: we might take it to mean, he suggests, precisely those things about which the whole body of Pali texts, or at least most of them, do in fact agree.⁵ It is in this sense that I use the word in this book.

This book is only tangentially concerned with social history, but it is important to stress what is in fact entirely obvious: the creation, maintenance, and instantiation (in sermons, etc.) of the Pali imaginative was necessarily the work of a group of people, in fact the specific social formation of the Monastic Order. (This Order, the *Saṅgha*, included monks and nuns until roughly the eleventh century in India and Sri Lanka; the Order of Nuns seems not to have existed elsewhere. But gender in Buddhism is too big an issue to take on here.) Here I will cite the quotation used in the Conclusion to my book *Selfless Persons*, from Clifford Geertz (see also the Conclusion to this book, apropos Thomas Mann). Writing of Islam in Morocco, Geertz said: ‘What a given religion is – its specific content – is embodied in the images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality... But such a religion’s career – its historical course – rests in turn upon the institutions which render those images and metaphors available to those who

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thus employ them.’ The relevant institution, the Buddhist *Saṅgha*, is an essential feature of Buddhist civilization, a word which I use here in a specific sense: all human groups have *culture*, since they practise and memorialize linguistic and other forms of representation and exchange; and they are all capable of asking the kinds of simple question – Where did the world come from? What happens after death? Why do good people often suffer and bad prosper? – to which transcendentalist ideologies give complexly articulated answers. *Culture* is a trait of human society, but a *civilization*, for my purposes, is something that creates and maintains an externalized, publicly recognized, and institutionalized form of *tradition* (at least one; sometimes, as in the case of ancient India, more than one) that answers such questions (and determines whether and how they are asked) in prestige languages, and whose status depends on the fact of its perceived *traditionality*. Such an institution has, crucially, its own personnel, where authority is transmitted from teacher to pupil rather than from biological parent to child (though these roles may coincide).

I must stress that this use of the term *civilization* is not evaluative, but – for a specific purpose only – descriptive: I do *not* mean that people who have culture but not civilization are uncivilized, barbarian, or whatnot. I just mean that they do not have a certain institution, or set of institutions, which embody *externalized tradition* and *traditionalism*. Again, all human life that spans more than a generation must have ‘tradition(s)’ in some sense; I want to point to a self-conscious, rhetorical orientation to the passage of time, and to authority, by those, almost universally men, who are accorded the social and institutional status of ‘bearers of tradition’. *Tradition* means much more than just ideas and stories: there are behavioural and bodily regularities, forms of etiquette and ritual, dress codes, physical objects (oral and written texts; buildings; images; relics

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and memorials as a category), and much else. But for present purposes it is enough to say that it was the institution of the Buddhist Monastic Order that created, preserved, and made available the ideas, images/metaphors, and narratives of the Pali imaginaire with which this book is concerned. The traditionalized textuality of Buddhist felicities is a crucial feature of them. They are part of the history of civilization(s) as well as part of the history of ideas.

EU-TOPIA AND OU-TOPIA

The founder of the modern European genre of utopian writing, Thomas More, referred to his *Utopia* in Latin as *Nusquama*, 'Nowhere', but it seems he also intended the title to be a Greek pun on *eu-topia*, 'Good-place', and *ou-topia*, 'No-place'.⁶ Thus More has Anemolius ('Wind-bag'), Poet Laureate of Utopia, write, in the voice of the island itself:

Me Utopie cleped [called] Antiquitie,
 Voyde of haunte [habitation] and herboroughe [harbour]
 ...
 Wherfore not Utopie, but rather rightely
 My name is Eutopie: A place of felicitie.

More did not want his text to be seen definitely as lying on one or the other side of an ambiguity which continues to exist throughout the subsequent utopian tradition: eu-utopias as descriptions of real (actual or possible) ideal societies or as acknowledged fictions, ou-topias, which embody a critique of the writer's actual society. Sometimes authors are aware of the distinction between the two, and are clear about which they intend (or, as was More, clear about what they wanted not to be clear about). Sometimes they are not, or it is irrelevant to them.

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I want to use the play on *ou-topia* and *eu-topia* in another way as well: a text by definition presents us with *a* world, which cannot, obviously, be *the* world in which it exists as a representational artefact, written-material or oral-aural. The world of an imaginaire inside any text is necessarily *ou-topia*, ‘No-place’, in relation to the real places of the material-historical world in which it exists as an artefact; but this imaginary No-place nonetheless exists, in a different sense, in the historical world, and one can write histories of it. Utopias are a species of literature, and all such forms of representations are always and everywhere both *eu-* and *ou-topias*. Pali texts refer to nirvana by a number of terms which can have spatial reference (see Chapter 2), and it is often referred to as (a) happy (place) (see Chapter 3). But none of these terms for place can be taken literally, since nirvana is an unconditioned Existent (a *dhamma*) outside space and time. Thus nirvana is not only *eu-topia*, Good-place, metaphorically, it is also *ou-topia*, No-place, twice over: first, by Buddhist definition, it exists outside the spatio-temporal locations of the conditioned world of rebirth, *saṃsāra*; second, in my argument, it is part of the discursive, textual world of soteriology embodied in the Pali imaginaire, which is, one might say, No-place in history.

NOTES ON THE WORDS ‘THERAVĀDA’ AND ‘RELIGION’

It has become standard, both in the usage of Buddhists and in scholarly and other writing about them, to refer to the currently dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia as *Theravāda*. Recent research has shown that using the word in this sense is, in fact, a Western coinage, used for the first time in the 1830s and increasingly thereafter as an alternative to *Hīnayāna* (the Lesser Vehicle, so called by the *Mahāyāna*, the Great Vehicle, now

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dominant in Tibet and East Asia), or the geographical ‘Southern’ Buddhism. The term became decisively popular as a self-description among Buddhists only after the World Fellowship of Buddhists passed a resolution in 1951 in favor of the term. In traditional Pali texts the word *theravāda*, which means literally ‘the Doctrine of the Elders’, meant two things: either (this is the most common sense) it referred to a specific lineage or lineages of monastic ordination; or, secondly and less commonly, it referred to various doctrines as depicted in Buddhist doxographical texts (that is, in histories of Buddhist doctrines and doctrinal debates). It is, therefore, somewhat imprecise as a social-historical term. I retain it here, for the sake of brevity in a book devoted to things other than social history, to mean a collection of social phenomena that have shared and still do share an orientation to the Pali imaginaire as a rhetorical and/or actual standard of orthodoxy (using this term in a loose, general sense). Starting in the first millennium AD, and extensively from the early second millennium, Pali texts were carried from places in South India and Sri Lanka throughout Southeast Asia, along with monastic ordination traditions from Sri Lanka. (Later such traditions would be re-imported from Southeast Asia into Sri Lanka, and latterly also in the twentieth century to India, among the Dalits in Maharashtra and elsewhere, and in what is called the Theravāda Revival in Nepal.) This process, in the past very often supported and at times instigated by kings eager to ‘purify’ the *Saṅgha* (that is, to offer support to a specific group or groups of monks), never entirely displaced other forms of Buddhism, notably what are rather vaguely called the Mahāyāna and Tantra. In fact, contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhism in practice contains much that is not in Pali texts: for example, we now know that certain popular figures – the monks called in Pali Upagutta and Mahakaccāyana, and the earth-goddess

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usually known by her Thai name Mae Thoranī – who are either absent or rare in Pali texts but found in extant Sanskrit texts, came from Northeast India rather than South India or Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that in a social-historical sense ‘Theravāda’ is a recent usage it still seems to me to be useful as a short-hand term to gather together various social, textual, and historical phenomena in both the historical past and the contemporary practice and self-designation of the majority of Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, as also latterly for some in India and Nepal (and, indeed, the West). More precise and careful usage would be necessary for other purposes.

Such a distinction between a loose and general, but not useless, sense of a word and its lack of utility in contexts requiring more historical and interpretive accuracy is even more important in the case of the word ‘religion’. Debates about the definition of the word, and whether it is a universal phenomenon in human life or not, have been and will no doubt remain endless. For myself, a loose, general conversational sense is acceptable: if someone were to ask me what is the majority religion in, say, Thailand or Burma, expecting a short, factual answer, it would seem best – and correct – simply to reply ‘Buddhism’ or perhaps ‘Theravāda Buddhism’, rather than churlishly to launch into a disquisition about the definition of the word, and the difficulty of applying it in many Buddhist (and other) contexts. In that general sense the words ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ are used, occasionally, in this book. But for reasons that will be evident to anyone who reads this book, it is a very much more difficult issue whether the kind(s) of Buddhist thought and practice discussed here are usefully so termed, and whether such a debate will achieve anything. The anthropologist Melford Spiro influentially defined ‘religion’ as ‘an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated