

Buddhist Economics, and the Economics of Buddhism: Conceptual Categories and Epistemological Reflections toward a New Field of Study

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ABSTRACT

This essay delineates a distinction between two fields of inquiry: Buddhist economics and the economics of Buddhism. The distinction is made on the basis that the former is a prescriptive and ethical project and the latter is a descriptive and academic one. In other words, Buddhist economics suggests how Buddhists should behave economically, and the economics of Buddhism examines how Buddhists do behave economically. On the basis of this distinction, an argument is made that although the field of the economics of Buddhism is a recent development, it does have a history. That history is presented in terms of the variety of topics that have already been studied by researchers. That research indicates the scope that the field can encompass. The range of recent studies is then also presented, again by reference to the topics of study. Such a topical presentation avoids attempting to define the field in more systematic or programmatic ways. The epistemological argument is made that a topical approach reflects an inquiry-based methodology—that is, asking good questions—rather than an artificial architectonic that imposes preconceptions about economic behavior onto the research project. The essay closes with a reflection on the economics of the field of Buddhist studies itself.

Keywords: Buddhist economics, economics of Buddhism, epistemology, monastic institutions, Buddhist studies, practice and doctrine, ownership of property, not-for-profit incorporation

I. INTRODUCTION¹

In the Introduction to our collection of essays *Buddhism Under Capitalism*, Fabio Rambelli and I distinguish between “Buddhist economics” and the “economics of Buddhism.”² The phrases are so similar that it is easy to think that they are synonyms. Initially, when I started working on this topic, I found this confusing, because in fact the two are not synonymous, but rather quite different. Like so many things in the academic world, the seemingly minor difference between these two phrases—Buddhist economics and the economics of Buddhism—is actually a conceptual chasm separating two different intellectual projects.

Buddhist economics promotes the use of Buddhist values to guide economic decisions and activities.³ The economic study of Buddhism takes an economic perspective on the history and development of Buddhist thought, practices, and institutions. Thus we have similar phrases pointing to two very different intellectual projects, each with its own separate assumptions, methods, goals, and histories.

II. BUDDHIST ECONOMICS

The goal for proponents of “Buddhist economics” is transforming individuals and society to better accord with the moral system of Buddhism ethics, a change that is justified by pragmatic goals.⁴ An important factor in the cultural background of Buddhist economics is the Social Gospel of late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century liberal Protestantism. Proponents of the Social Gospel “forwarded

1. This article is based on my presentation, “Buddhist Economics and the Economics of Buddhism” (lecture, University of California Santa Barbara, April 18, 2023). My thanks to my friend, colleague, and co-editor, Fabio Rambelli, for organizing the afternoon’s events, and to the Capps Center, the Department of Religious Studies, Shinto Studies at UCSB, and the Humanities and Social Change Center at UCSB for sponsoring it.

2. Fabio Rambelli and Richard K. Payne, eds., *Buddhism Under Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

3. Cf., Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009), 15.

4. Clair Brown, *Buddhist Economics: An Enlightened Approach to the Dismal Science* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

a wide-ranging set of visions that emphasized scientific and professional expertise, guided by Christian ethics, to solve social and political problems.”⁵ This characterization can be paraphrased and applied equally well to the work of Buddhist economics—a set of visions that emphasize scientific and professional expertise, guided by Buddhist ethics, to solve social and political problems.

At its heart, Buddhist economics is a moral project.⁶ Guiding this vision is the belief that changing the values and beliefs held by individuals will change their choices and actions. A broader goal, though, is transforming society to accord with Buddhist values. Perhaps the most ambitious project in applying Buddhist economics at a societal level is the Bhutanese project of developing a measure of Gross National Happiness.⁷

Sometimes derided in the Western media as naïve or simplistic, this system has been developed in Bhutan as a means of guiding governmental policy. Periodic surveys gather information from across the country, which become significant sources for determining budgetary commitments of the national government. This is quite different from the more typical focus on changing individual beliefs and values, which is often presumed as the only means of effecting change in societies dominated by neoliberal presumptions.⁸

Thus, in brief, Buddhist economics asks, how should Buddhists act economically? In contrast, the economics of Buddhism asks, how

5. Janine Giordano Drake, “The Social Gospel and the American Working Class,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.464>.

6. E.g., Otto Chang, “Wisdom-Based Economic Theory as Informed by Buddhism,” *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019): 31–80, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hjbs.02.02.02>.

7. Barbra Clayton and Della Duncan, “Gross National Happiness: Capitalism Under Buddhism in the Kingdom of Bhutan,” in *Buddhism Under Capitalism*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli, 147–166 (London: Bloomsbury 2023).

8. This analysis intentionally parallels that regarding how the individualization of the discussion of racism evades the issues of entrenched, systemic racism. Discussion at the level of the individual focuses on whether some person is racist or not, while a discussion at the social level engages laws, governmental policies, business practices, and other social factors that have racist consequences.

do Buddhists act economically? Stated so summarily, the difference seems obvious. But given that until a decade and a half ago the economic study of Buddhism had not been clearly delineated as a distinct field of study, it has not always been so obvious.⁹

III. ECONOMICS OF BUDDHISM

My own interest in the economics of Buddhism came a couple of decades ago when I realized that economics was almost entirely absent from the field of religious studies as practiced in the US at that time.¹⁰ While preparing the essays for *How Much Is Enough?*,¹¹ I was wandering around the book display at the American Academy of Religion, where there were many books on various social science engagements with religion generally and Buddhism more specifically. That is, there were anthropological studies, sociological studies, psychological studies, all complementing the more mainstream Buddhist studies projects of textual studies, intellectual biography, and history. Out of the standard array of social sciences, economics was only evident by its absence.

What I perceived to be missing was not the moral project of Buddhist economics, but rather the social scientific project of an economic perspective on Buddhist thought, practice, history, and institutions. Such inquiries were not entirely absent, of course. But since they were out of the mainstream of the study of religion in the United

9. Lionel Obadia, "Economies of Religion, Buddhism and Economy, Buddhist Economics: Challenges and Perspectives," in *Buddhism and Business: Merit, Material Wealth, and Morality in the Global Market Economy*, ed. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 145–160.

10. Rachel M. McCleary points back to Adam Smith and Max Weber as having established the economic study of religion ("The Economics of Religion as a Field of Inquiry," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Religion*, ed. Rachel M. McCleary [Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011], <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195390049.013.0001>). To the extent that economic issues were part of my own education in religious studies, it was in the context of the sociologically oriented classics of the field, rather than contemporary research. My readings included, for example, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber, though his other works that included an economic study of Buddhism were not part of the curriculum.

11. Richard K. Payne, ed., *How Much Is Enough?* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010).

States, at least as I knew it at the time, their ramifications were effectively invisible. Looking back, however, we can interpret the kinds of questions and topics of those earlier studies as constellating an area of specialized research.

III.A. Some Epistemological Reflections

As a field of study, it is not so easy to define the economics of Buddhism by some specific subject matter. Some fields of study can be defined by a particular kind of object in the world. Researchers in such a field agree what it is that they are studying, rarely if ever engaging in the kind of (endless) definitional debates that are so very familiar for the field of religious studies. Hydraulics for example is easily defined as the study of how liquids move.

It might, for example, be appealing to say that the economic study of Buddhism in some sense has money as its object of study. Despite its appearance as something definite in the world, however, money is itself a social construct with fuzzy boundaries.¹² More generally, the objects of study in the social sciences are socially constructed and lack clearly marked boundaries. The study of socially constructed objects is itself a social project that requires constituting the object of study—an unavoidable circularity that needs to be acknowledged.¹³ This circularity and the consequent fuzziness of the boundaries of study suggests that a different approach to identifying the field of study is required.

Instead of being determined by the object of study, the economics of Buddhism can be understood as a propensity for asking certain types of questions. Just as the history of Buddhism can be seen as asking historical questions about the tradition, so can the economics of Buddhism be seen as asking economic questions about the tradition. If the question in history is “What happened, when, and why?” then the question for the economics of Buddhism is “What was exchanged,

12. Consider for recent example cryptocurrencies, which have been created without any asset other than confidence, and also the change in US currency from silver certificates to Federal Reserve Notes in 1968. See Niall Ferguson, *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008).

13. This is the well-known “hermeneutic circle”—vestiges of Heidegger and Gadamer.

when, and why?” This question in turn highlights the importance of the idea of systems of exchange as a synonym for economics.¹⁴

Some exemplary questions indicative of the field of the economics of Buddhism might be:

- What effect does economics have on institutional structures, such as decision-making authority (the effect, for example, of consumer-based capitalism)?
- What role do donors play in determining an annual cycle of ceremonies?
- What role or power or authority does a monastic official responsible for fundraising have, both within the institution and in relation to the larger society?
- Is advancement along a series of initiatory stages in which secrets are revealed dependent on donations/payments/purchases of training?
- How does not-for-profit incorporation affect relationships/organization?
- Who owns property, such as land, buildings, and equipment?
- How does forming a joint-stock corporation affect institutional organization and relationships with the community of adherents?

In this epistemological strategy, a field of study is unified (but not bounded) by the types of questions asked. From interesting questions, it is then possible to suggest ideas about how things work, that is,

14. One benefit of taking a question-based approach to research is that it avoids giving some theory a dominant position that would foreclose lines of inquiry. For example, rational choice theory in the study of religion takes a particular and limiting view of human existence and action. In that view all acts are “economic” in the sense of being decided in terms of gains and losses. In this view adherents give time, energy, attention, money, etc. to a religious institution in expectation of some return, some gain. This theory has developed some useful conceptual tools, such as the idea that some returns on the investments that people make are intangible. This would include such religious/soteriological goals as life everlasting in heaven, or full, total, and complete awakening. Rational choice theory is, however, limited by the preconception that all human actions are economically determined in the sense of calculating gain and loss. And indeed any particular theory entails constraining presumptions.

theories, meaning that theories should be specific assertions of causal relations.

Moving from an interesting question to a theory, the next step is developing methods to answer the question and to evaluate the theory.¹⁵ It is appropriate to define the object of study at the point of formulating a method to evaluate an idea about how things work. That is, the object of study is formed in relation to a specific research project. We can only know what the appropriate object of study is if we know what question we're asking. We can consider some of the questions that have already been proffered by considering historical and contemporary studies in the economics of Buddhism.

III.B. Past and Present in the Economic study of Buddhism

The rather diffuse body of literature that currently constitutes the economic study of Buddhism can be roughly divided into historical and contemporary studies. And looking at the topics considered in this literature gives us another perspective on the field.¹⁶

Historical studies of the economics of Buddhism have included such topics as:

- the possession of money by monks and nuns,¹⁷
- monastic inheritance of wealth,¹⁸
- slave holding by monasteries,¹⁹

15. One understanding of theories in the social sciences is as statements of probability—in some situation, how likely is it that some action will be taken? In this sense, theories are not simply true or false, but rather more adequate or inadequate—by degree.

16. Gregory Schopen has been a pioneer in the historical study of the economics of Buddhism through his examination of the *vinaya* and of epigraphic sources, as evidenced by several of the citations on the topics listed here.

17. Gregory Schopen, "On the Economic Activity of Buddhist Nuns: Two Examples from Early India," in *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters: Recent Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India*, ed. Gregory Schopen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

18. Gregory Schopen, "Dead Monks and Bad Debts: Some Provisions of Buddhist Monastic Inheritance Law," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44, no. 2 (2001): 99–148.

19. Gregory Schopen, "Liberation Is Only for Those Already Free: Reflections on Debts to Slavery and Enslavement to Debt in an Early Indian Buddhist Monasticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 3 (Sept. 2014): 606–635.

- monasteries engaging directly in trade, or lending money for trade, or acting as banks for merchants,²⁰
- capitalist agrarian investment,²¹
- the minting of coins,²² and
- conceptions of wealth as a magical creation.²³

Contemporary studies of the economics of Buddhism have included topics such as:

- forms of legal, corporate status,²⁴
- the effects of tourism,²⁵
- the role of merit-making for small-scale entrepreneurs,²⁶
- the relation between charisma and the mass-production of religious commodities,²⁷ and

20. Gregory Schopen, "Doing Business for the Lord: Lending on Interest and Written Loan Contracts in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1994): 527–554.

21. Michael Walsh, "The Economics of Salvation: Toward a Theory of Exchange in Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 2 (June 2007): 353–382; Michael Walsh, *Sacred Economies: Buddhist Monasticism and Territoriality in Medieval China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

22. Gregory Schopen, "Archeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31, no. 1 (Aug. 1991): 1–23.

23. Fabio Rambelli, "The Mystery of Wealth and the Role of Divinities: The Economy in Pre-Modern Japanese Fiction and Practice," *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019): 163–201, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hijbs.02.02.06>.

24. Kin Cheung, "Merit, Karma, and Exchange: Chinese Buddhist Mountain Tourism Company Listings on the Stock Exchange," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 3 (2021): 931–955, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab073>.

25. Courtney Bruntz and Brooke Schedneck, eds., *Buddhist Tourism in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

26. Mark Speece and Jitnisa Roenjun, "Ethics in Small Business Capitalism of Women Kuan Im Followers in Thailand," in *Buddhism Under Capitalism*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 116–131.

27. Trine Brox, "The Aura of Buddhist Material Objects in the Age of Mass-Production," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 20 (2019): 105–125.

- the effects of consumer capitalism on authority, power, and ideology.²⁸

III.C. Importance of the Economic Study of Buddhism

Why are these questions important? In other words, why is the economic study of Buddhism important? What does it contribute to our understanding of Buddhism, both historically and in the present?

One answer is that given by Johan Elverskog in his *The Buddha's Footprint*. Elverskog points out that any Buddhist environmental program needs to be grounded in a realistic understanding of the effects of Buddhist institutions on the environment. Idealized representations of Buddhism as somehow inherently environmentally sensitive can only lead to disappointment and the dismissal of solutions based in Buddhist thought in the face of the reality of the history of Buddhist institutional practices.²⁹ In the same fashion, an accurate understanding of the economics of Buddhism can help to avoid dismissing Buddhist solutions because the idealized version doesn't match the reality. In this way an economics of Buddhism can be of benefit to proponents of Buddhist economics.

A second answer is that these kinds of questions broaden our understanding of how Buddhism has continued to be an important religious institution for two and a half millennia.³⁰ The economics of Buddhism highlights the importance of institutions, understood broadly as not only named institutions such as monasteries, but also regularized ways of doing things, such as pilgrimage.

In her study of a newly created Theravāda monastery in Canada, Karen Ferguson explores the monastery as an economic institution involving laypeople. It is that economy that makes possible the mendicant lifestyle—"the monastics, adhering strictly to the Vinaya, do not handle money, drive cars, farm, cook, or store food, and thus need

28. Jørn Borup, "Prosperous Buddhism, Prosperity Buddhism, and Religious Capital," *Numen* 65, no. 2-3 (2018): 256-288.

29. Johan Elverskog, *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

30. This is the question that Michael Walsh asked about the Ayuwang monastery, and it can fruitfully be extended to other Buddhist institutions or as here the tradition in its entirety. See n. 22.

laypeople to ensure their daily survival.”³¹ The monastic ideal codified in the *vinaya* does not exist in isolation, but only in an economic context that supports both monks and monastery. It is this broader economic community that makes that ideal possible—and indeed, I would suggest always has.

But how then did we wind up with the popular image of Buddhism as a tradition of silent, seated, individual meditation? Like the problem created by an idealized representation of an environmental Buddhism, contemporary Buddhism also suffers from the Romantic ideal of the individual practitioner in isolated meditation.³² In the nineteenth century the rising project of religious studies was created as an undertaking distinct from theology. This project largely conceptualized religion as a private and individual matter, something associated with the home and not the public sphere, with women’s civilizing effect on men, and sequestered to Sundays. Within that conceptual framework Buddhism was constructed as an object of study—that is, as one religion to be studied alongside other representative instances of religion as the larger object of study, religion as the genus of which Buddhism was a species.³³ This was, of course, not an even, uniform, or uncontested development, and many other factors were involved. But the overarching conceptual structure of sacred versus profane, of otherworldly versus this-worldly, of the purity of individual religiosity versus the sordid world of profit and labor was characteristic of the field of religious studies for decades. The dominant discourse of Buddhist studies

31. Karen Ferguson, “A Monastery for Laypeople: Birken Forest Monastery and the Monasticization of Convert Theravada in Cascadia,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 23 (2022): 203, <https://doi.org/10.26034/lu.jgb.2022.3030>.

32. Scott Mitchell, “The Tranquil Meditator: Representing Buddhism and Buddhists in US Popular Media,” *Religion Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 81–89.

33. This way of conceiving of “religion” as a higher-order category that includes Buddhism is of course still dominant in the field—expressed implicitly, for example, in the organization of textbooks on “the world’s religions.” While the genus–species structure dates to Aristotle, a more contemporary terminology employed is that of type–token. See Kevin Schilbrack, “The Concept of Religion,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/concept-religion/>.

focusing on texts and doctrines from the past comfortably operates within this larger model of religion.

The conceptual distinctions that structure the classic model of religion as a domain separate from an economic domain are social constructs. As Jason Neelis has noted:

distinctions between “profane” economic patterns and “sacred” religious realms are largely contrived. The dichotomy between the study of economy and the study of religion is largely due to late eighteenth century theories about the “naturalization” of economic patterns acting according to their own laws and the demarcation of religion as a separate sphere of belief and practice removed from the material world.³⁴

Asking these kinds of questions, that is, interrogating the thought, practice, history, and institutions of Buddhism from an economic perspective, might be seen as simply an expansion of the existing model of Buddhist studies—so that in addition to textual, philological, doctrinal, historical, biographical, as well as sociological, anthropological, and psychological studies, there are also now economic studies as one more specialized subfield. For myself, however, this shift provides an opportunity to reflect not just on the economics of Buddhism but also on the economics of Buddhist studies.

IV. THE ECONOMICS OF BUDDHIST STUDIES

It is well worth also considering the question: How does the economic context within which Buddhist scholars work affect the ways in which members of the academy think about Buddhism and Buddhists? This is, in other words, a self-reflective question. Scott A. Mitchell explains the contemporary situation, saying that Buddhist studies “is embedded within the larger world of academe. To the extent that academe is embedded within larger neoliberal late-capitalist systems, we are professionalized in ways directly related to the ideologies of neoliberalism.”³⁵ The roots of Buddhist studies as a Western intellectual project

34. Jason Neelis, *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks: Mobility and Exchange within and beyond the Northwestern Borderlands of South Asia* (Leiden & Boston: Brill 2011), 13.

35. Scott A. Mitchell, “Drawing Blood: At the Intersection of Knowledge Economies and Buddhist Economies,” in *Buddhism Under Capitalism*, ed. Richard K. Payne and Fabio Rambelli, 169–183 (London: Bloomsbury 2023), 169.

have been traced to the intertwined threads of Christian missionizing and European imperialism.³⁶ In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the overlap of religious studies and what was long called “Oriental studies,” Buddhist studies developed as an academic project in the context of European colonialism.³⁷ As a consequence, presumptions about both the nature of religion and the religious character of Buddhism have informed Buddhist studies from its earliest inception.

In light of the work of Edward Said, Richard A. Horsley points out that the rise of religious studies in the context of empire meant that some topics were given centrality and others marginalized. Likening religious studies to the study of English literature, Horsley suggests that the study of religion through the twentieth century is characterized by a pattern in which “the aesthetics, the cultural content, and the theology to be mined from our special texts” has been privileged, while “political-economic relations in general have been ignored.”³⁸

Horsley’s comments indicate the need to look beyond the history of religious studies as such to the larger social context. Mid-twentieth century American culture not only assumed a particular conception of religion—individual, private, above politics, experiential, and so on—but was also enmeshed in a set of conflicts: the Cold War, Korea, and Vietnam to name the most obvious. These conflicts were largely framed as ideological in nature, that is, as the conflict between “godless Communism” and the American way of life. Communism, Marxism, and the Soviet Union were all conflated as the enemy in these conflicts.

I believe that the association of the enemy in those conflicts with economic analyses of social problems suppressed the economic study of religion for several decades. As a category, “religion” had already been conceived on the model of mainline Protestant denominations as concerned with spiritual matters and separate from distasteful economic realities—or even as a refuge from those realities.³⁹ That is, the

36. Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

37. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

38. Richard A. Horsley, “Religion and Other Products of Empire,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2003): 13.

39. A similar kind of distinction has informed the religion/Buddhism and science discourses in the form of claims that the former are concerned with meaning and purpose, questions that the latter cannot answer or should not

structure of religious studies discourse was formed by the emphases on faith as salvific, a savior as founder, a text as revealing his message, and a church that maintained the tradition. This fourfold structure of mutually reinforcing concepts is so deeply engrained in popular religious culture in the United States as to be invisible, just the way things are, the natural way to think about religion. Consequently, thinking about religion in any other way is at times met with incomprehension. And, at least through the last half of the twentieth century, it seemed that from within the field of religious studies it was effectively impossible to think about religion as an economy.

V. WHAT CHANGED?

We can point to three things that are indicative of changes to the social context of the study of religion and of Buddhism that have created the opportunity for new perspectives, including economic ones. (1) At the end of the century, rational choice theory, which had its home in sociology, began to be applied to religion, introducing economic models for analyzing religious affiliation. (2) Social justice considerations among Engaged Buddhists also brought economics into the discussion. (3) And within Buddhist studies, the longstanding and still dominant focus on doctrine and doctrinal texts began to be complemented (and eventually challenged) by students turning to anthropological, sociological, art historical, and archaeological studies.

These changes, which have affected Buddhist studies and religious studies (at least for the US), may be interpreted as a consequence of the shift from an aggressive assertion of the moral superiority of capitalism (Reagan and Thatcher) to the fall of the Soviet Union, when postcolonial and anti-imperialist discourses could emerge from behind the wall of silence imposed by the anti-Communist commitments of American society at large. In other words, what I'm suggesting is that

attempt to answer. See for example Stephen Jay Gould's idea of "nonoverlapping magisteria" (Stephen Jay Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," *Natural History* 106 (March 1997): 16-22). The fact/value distinction is valid; however, it should not be employed as a basis for framing religion only as a spiritual project disjoined from material concerns, nor for the abstraction of the socio-historical structures of the Protestant tradition as universal characteristics of "religion." As an institution within a society, modern religious bodies and actors have been deeply enmeshed in economic, political, and social concerns.

the economic structures of the American empire as it was from about the Crash of '29 to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 were the broader social conditions for the study of religion. Despite academic entropy, those conditions have changed, and in doing so have disrupted the study of religion. These changes have provided the opportunity for us to ask different kinds of questions.

Some examples of these questions newly possible in the period of post-Soviet late capitalism are: Instead of focusing on beliefs, doctrines, and doctrinal texts, what can we learn by shifting our focus to actions, including ritual? Instead of assuming that periods of change were temporary adjustments before a return to the stable norm, can we reframe our historiographic practices to see ongoing processes of change punctuated by periods of relative stability? Instead of organizing our conceptions of society around the binary of center and periphery in which normative religious belief and practice is identified with the elite of the metropole, what can a focus on borderlands and margins as spaces of creativity through interaction show?⁴⁰ Instead of privileging doctrinal orthodoxy as determining religious commitment, what happens when we instead consider the benefits of social affiliation or the family dynamics of domestic religion? And, instead of treating religion as something abstracted from social and economic concerns, what does an economic perspective reveal about Buddhist thought, practice, history, and institutions?

In his essay, Horsley argues that “Because most of us in religious and biblical studies are only beginning to raise questions about religion and imperialism, it seems premature to attempt any comprehensive theoretical overview.”⁴¹ As suggested by my earlier epistemological reflections, I think that it is in fact best not to “attempt any comprehensive theoretical overview,” but instead to do what Horsley in fact does, which is ask interesting questions.

Because the social and intellectual context of our own work is no longer constrained by mid-twentieth century American imperialism, we can ask different kinds of questions, or questions that are interesting for other reasons. My suggestions regarding this dynamic should not, however, be taken as a kind of triumphalist claim that now we are

40. Birgit Meyer, “Frontier Zones and the Study of Religion,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 31, no. 2 (2018): 57–78.

41. Horsley, “Religion and Other Products of Empire,” 14.

free to actually understand what religion really is. Although we may benefit from postcolonial perspectives, we are still in a particular social and economic context, one that might be called a “post-imperial” culture. This is the culture of a society in which nation-centered empires have been if not displaced, then at least compromised by global capitalism and its neoliberal ideology.

We may now be attentive to networks and interactions, consider change to be the norm rather than the exception, view local practices as valid instances rather than deviations from some normative version of a tradition, and understand that events are consequences of both individual decisions and societal factors, but this may simply be the character of our post-imperial moment.

