

# Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence

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*Researchers have speculated about the growing influence of Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States, but little has been done to estimate the scope of this influence or to consider alternative ways of understanding it. We present data collected from a large, nationally representative survey completed in 2003. The data show that one American in seven claims to have had a fair amount of contact with Buddhists and that one person in eight believes Buddhist teachings or practices have had an important influence on his or her religion or spirituality. We describe three perspectives from which variations in exposure to Buddhists and being influenced by Buddhism may be understood: two versions of the "strictness hypothesis" from the religious economies literature and a broader argument about institutional embeddedness. We find empirical support for each of the three perspectives.*

Although Buddhists have been present in the United States for more than a century and a half, interest in American Buddhists and Buddhism has emerged as a major scholarly endeavor only in recent years (Prebish 1999; Seager 1999; Williams and Queen 1999). The reasons for this interest include the growing number of immigrants in the United States who are from predominantly Buddhist countries, an evident rise in the number of Buddhist temples and meditation centers, and a great deal of attention to Buddhist leaders and practices in the mass media. Most of the research to date has been descriptive or ethnographic. Descriptive studies have sought to document the varieties of Buddhist traditions in the United States and describe their histories, teachings, and practices (Prebish 1979, 1999; Layman 1976; Kashima 1977; Seager 1999; Coleman 2001). Ethnographic research has added significantly to the literature by examining the beliefs and practices of Buddhist immigrants and converts to Buddhism (Numrich 1996; VanEsterik 1992; Perreira 2002; Smith-Hefner 1999; Preston 1988; Chen 2004; Cadge 2004). In other studies of American religion and spirituality it has been common for researchers to speculate about broader influences of Buddhism or Buddhist-like orientations to the sacred (Eck 2001; Roof 1999). Although researchers have often speculated that people in particular geographic and cultural locations in the United States are more exposed to and influenced by Buddhists and Buddhism, until now data have not been available with which to examine the extent to which this is the case.

Questions about the cultural and social locations in which Americans are more and less receptive to Buddhists and Buddhism are particularly interesting in light of the considerable attention scholars have devoted in recent years to questions about the growth and decline of religious groups in the United States. Although an earlier generation of scholars drew from Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others to argue that modernization would lead to secularization and thus to a gradual decline in the importance of religion, more recent scholarship has been interested in the persistence of religion and thus in the reasons why some religious groups seem to flourish compared with others that fare less well (Warner 1993). This interest was partly inspired by studies of new religious movements in the 1970s, but relatively few of these movements grew large enough or remained over a long enough time to occasion sustained inquiries into their sources and potential contributions to the culture at large. Most of the research on growth in religion has

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thus focused on aspects of the one strand in American religion that seems to have grown and increased in influence both in the recent past and at various earlier times in American history: evangelical Protestantism. The apparent growth of interest in Buddhism, therefore, provides an interesting opportunity to see whether the same arguments that have been developed to account for the growing influence of evangelical Protestantism can also be applied to this rather different development in American religion or whether different arguments need to be considered.

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

#### Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States

At the outset, we need to acknowledge that nobody knows precisely how many people there are in the United States who practice aspects of Buddhism and/or consider themselves Buddhists, and thus it is impossible to establish precisely just how much Buddhism or the broader cultural influences of Buddhism may have grown. Data about organizations show that the number of Buddhist temples and meditation centers in the United States has grown considerably over the past 30 years (Morreale 1998; Cadge and Sangdhanoo 2002). Credible estimates of the numbers of Buddhists in the United States at the start of the 21st century range from 1.4–4 million (Seager 1999; Smith 2002; Baumann 1997). In the total adult population of approximately 209 million, these figures suggest that between 0.07 percent and 1.9 percent of the public might be sufficiently affiliated with Buddhism to qualify as Buddhists. That number is presumably larger than would have been the case prior to 1965 because of the change in immigration laws in that year that opened the way for more immigrants from predominantly Buddhist countries, some of whom became more actively Buddhist in the United States than they were in their home countries (Yang and Ebaugh 2001; Chen 2004). A large number of native-born Americans also became interested in all of the branches of Buddhism in the 1970s and 1980s, increasing the number of Buddhists in the United States. As scholars of Buddhism often point out, however, Buddhism is not always an exclusive religion like Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, meaning that people who do not consider themselves Buddhist may nevertheless be influenced by some of its teachings and practices. The number of “nightstand Buddhists,” as they have been called (those who keep a book of Buddhist sayings on their nightstand or who practice a little Zen meditation when they get out of bed in the morning), is often thought to be larger than the number of people who actually call themselves Buddhists (Tweed 1999).

How large this wider population of people who have been influenced by Buddhism is has not been sufficiently examined. Judging from media accounts and from the number of popular books that have been published about Buddhism, we might imagine that this wider influence is quite large. Major motion pictures like *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Little Buddha* have focused on Buddhism. The Dalai Lama has made numerous U.S. tours and appears frequently on television. Celebrities talk about practicing Buddhist meditation or applying Buddhist concepts to acting or playing basketball. Yet we need to exercise caution in taking media publicity at face value. The media focus on novelty and sensation rather than claiming to represent public opinion.

Several surveys in recent years have given estimates of Buddhism’s impact in wider American society. These estimates suggest that Buddhism’s influence or potential influence is considerably larger than might be assumed from the meager proportion of the public who identifies itself as Buddhist, but is probably not as large as media coverage has implied. In a national survey of 1,530 respondents conducted by the Gallup Organization in 1999 as part of a study designed by one of us, 18 percent of adult Americans said yes when asked if they knew “anyone personally who is Buddhist” (Wuthnow 1999). Almost the same result was obtained in a national survey conducted by Edison Media Research (2002) among 1,634 respondents in April 2002 for *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*. In that survey, 17 percent of Americans claimed to be “personally acquainted with someone who is ... Buddhist.” It also showed that 26 percent of the public claimed to be very or

somewhat familiar with the teachings of Buddhism. In the research we report here from a national survey we conducted in the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003, we found that 14 percent of the public claimed to have had a great deal or fair amount of “personal contact” with Buddhists and that 30 percent claimed to be very or somewhat familiar with Buddhist teachings.

Insofar as the public is familiar with Buddhists and Buddhism, the response also appears to have been generally favorable. In our survey, for example, we found that relatively small proportions of the American public thought negative words, such as violent (12 percent) and fanatical (23 percent) applied to the Buddhist religion, while a majority thought this about positive words such as tolerant (56 percent) and peace loving (63 percent). The survey also showed that 59 percent of Americans would welcome “Buddhists becoming a stronger presence in the United States,” while only 32 percent said they would not welcome this development. Another national study—a survey of 2,041 nationally representative adult respondents conducted in March 2001 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2001)—found that 37 percent of those surveyed were very or mostly favorable in their “overall opinion of American Buddhists,” compared with 25 percent who were mostly or very unfavorable.

Caution must be exercised in interpreting survey results, but it is evident from these various results that a sizable number of Americans—as many as 25–30 million—believe they have had some contact with Buddhists or with Buddhist teachings and thus have had the opportunity to be influenced by Buddhism. Who these people are and why some people have had more contact than others are the questions we address here. We argue that the perception of having been influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices is an important dimension of American religion and culture, just as is the perception of being in sympathy with the Moral Majority or believing that one is an evangelical. We do not take as a starting point the assumption that Buddhism has had a *disproportionate* share of influence on American culture, though (say, compared with Islam or Judaism). The scope of its influence is an empirical question. We suggest only that a significant minority of Americans have had contact with Buddhists and Buddhism and/or been influenced by it and that others have not. Thus, we are faced with interesting questions about what accounts for these differences and what we may learn that has larger implications for understanding the dynamics of religious change more generally.

In the analysis that follows, we examine the social factors that affect two aspects of the public’s receptivity to Buddhists and Buddhism: the extent of contact with Buddhists and whether people perceive their own religion or spirituality to have been significantly influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices. We consider contact first and then perceived influence, which also permits us to examine the effect of contact on influence. Contact clearly does not always lead to being influenced, and being influenced does not always stem from contact. We turn next to a discussion of three theoretical perspectives with which we may understand public receptivity to Buddhists and Buddhism.

### Three Perspectives

The first way of understanding public receptivity to Buddhists and Buddhism is from the literature on religious economies (Stark and Finke 2000). This literature has, among other things, emphasized the role of markets and the rational choices made by consumers in those markets as a way of accounting for patterns of religious growth or decline (Finke and Stark 1998; Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998; Iannaccone 1995). One hypothesis—which has received only limited empirical support—suggests that the degree of competition present in a religious economy will be an overall stimulus to the degree of religious vitality in that economy (Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998). More relevant to the present problem is a second hypothesis suggesting that among the various competitors in a religious economy, those with “strict” teachings will attract more interest and adherents than those with less strict teachings (Iannaccone 1994). Strictness is said to be attractive because people need clear moral standards and certainty about an afterlife; groups that

provide these “goods” therefore give people more of an incentive to become interested or to join (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). The strictness hypothesis has been used to explain why theologically conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist groups seem to have grown more rapidly and had more influence in the United States and elsewhere than moderate or liberal religious groups (Iannaccone 1994; Kelley 1986).

The strictness hypothesis is, at first blush, contradicted by much of what we know about American Buddhism. Although some Buddhist groups have strict or exacting rituals, behaviors, and moral and ethical expectations for their members, the majority have lower barriers to entry and participation. Only through a leap of imagination could American Buddhism be regarded as a strict group in the same sense that Assemblies of God or Baptist fundamentalists are strict. Ethnographic research among Buddhist groups suggests, in fact, that in many Buddhist groups the teachings and practices are, if anything, attractive to the people who participate in them because of their flexibility and nonexclusivity (Fronsdal 1998, 1999; Cadge 2004). They do not require practitioners to identify as Buddhist, to give up other religious beliefs or traditions, or to go through a conversion experience, for example. This is more often the case in some branches of Buddhism than others. There is, however, a variant of the strictness hypothesis in the religious economies literature that applies. This is the idea that strict religious groups somehow never manage to capture the entire religious market and, in fact, there are segments of the market that are simply waiting to be exploited by any religious group that comes along. For instance, it has been suggested that new religious movements in the 1970s gained influence more rapidly on the West Coast of the United States and Canada because this region had not yet been populated by other religious groups and thus had larger numbers of people than in other regions who were eager to entertain the spiritual gratifications that new religious movements could provide (Stark, Bainbridge, and Doyle 1979; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). Extending this insight, we might hypothesize that the teachings of Buddhism would be most attractive for the same reason to Americans who do not already have some other religious affiliation (or to people who have one but do not regularly attend religious services). As it happens, this argument also has the advantage of at least being consistent with the apparent growth in attraction to Buddhism because the proportion of Americans who have no religious affiliation has recently been shown to have doubled, from approximately 7 percent to about 14 percent, over the past three decades (Hout and Fischer 2002). In short, the teachings of Buddhism will be most attractive to people not already captured by churches with strict beliefs and high barriers to entry, and the more such people there are, the more attractive Buddhism will be.

A second perspective focuses less on the demand side of the supply-demand relationships that compose religious economies and more on the supply side (Finke and Iannaccone 1993). In simplest terms, the shift in perspective can be seen in a slight rewording of the strictness hypothesis to suggest that religious *suppliers* that offer strict teachings will have the greatest competitive success. More interesting versions come from combining insights about religious economies with insights from resource mobilization approaches to social movements and production-of-culture approaches in cultural sociology (Peterson 1976, 1997). In these versions, the reason religious groups grow, become more attractive, or are more attractive to some populations than to others is that the groups themselves have more labor power, are better organized, and can deploy more resources at some times or to some populations than to others for the purpose of disseminating their message and influencing the wider culture. For instance, Methodists gained influence in the religious economy of the 19th century not so much because people needed strict answers to questions about morality and an afterlife, but because Methodist bishops were well organized, figured out how to mobilize a larger number of clergy at relatively low cost, launched revival meetings, and gained publicity in local newspapers (Finke and Stark 1992). Similarly, evangelicalism in the late-20th century could be argued to have grown less because of its moralistic strictness and more by giving clergy freer rein to start new churches, by encouraging members to give more money and devote their volunteer efforts to the congregation rather than

to the wider community, by developing innovative worship services that were more attractive to young people, and by encouraging their followers to become more actively engaged in politics (Miller 1997; Smith 1998).

This emphasis on supply-side resources provides a plausible and relatively straightforward way of accounting for Americans' exposure to Buddhists and Buddhism. As we have discussed, there are more Buddhists in the United States now than in the recent past because there is a larger number of immigrants from predominantly Buddhist countries. Besides the sheer numbers, there is also some evidence that these immigrants—like previous waves of immigrants—have become more actively or self-consciously religious (i.e., Buddhist) in the United States than they were before coming to this country (Chen 2004). With more neighbors and co-workers who are Buddhists, and with more Buddhist leaders and temples in their communities, it makes sense that more of the public at large would be exposed to Buddhists and might in turn feel that they had been influenced by Buddhist teachings and practices. Variation in exposure and influence would thus be most readily explained in terms of the likelihood of having come in contact with Buddhists. We would, for instance, anticipate that exposure would be greatest on the West Coast, not because that region is unchurched, but because there are probably more Buddhists living there. Since American Buddhists are mostly middle class and have college educations, we might also expect that other Americans who have college educations would be more likely to have had contact with Buddhists (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). We would hypothesize that people who had traveled abroad (or especially if they had visited Buddhist temples) would also be more likely to say their personal spirituality had been influenced by Buddhist teachings.

The third perspective broadens the second by suggesting that religious suppliers need to be understood in relation to the larger institutional structures in which they are embedded. Just as we cannot understand fast-food consumption only by counting the number of fast-food restaurants, so we need to look beyond the resources of any particular religious organization to see why it may have had those resources or been able to deploy them effectively. Institutions are the normative patterns and arrangements of social relationships in which particular forms of exchange are embedded. Institutional embeddedness has been emphasized increasingly in studies of organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 1991), sociology of culture (Wuthnow 1988), and in economic sociology (Swedberg 1993, 1996). In the case of 19th-century Methodism, the similarity between its administrative structure and the federated system of American government gave its activities legitimacy (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). That was one aspect of its institutional environment that mattered. Another was the government's territorial expansion and eagerness to deploy Methodist missions to the expanding frontier. Similarly, the growth of evangelicalism in the 20th century needs to be understood not just in terms of clergy and worship styles but also in terms of new communications technologies, racial divisions, and regional realignments of the major political parties (Wuthnow 1988).

This institutional perspective points to the importance of seeing the appeal of Buddhism in larger terms. Ethnographic studies of Buddhism suggest that people have been attracted to some forms of Buddhism because they could adopt particular practices, such as meditation techniques, or ideas, without having to become Buddhists (Fronsdal 1998, 1999; Cadge 2004). The ability to disaggregate itself meant that elements of Buddhism could be embedded in organizations or movements that were not purely Buddhist or even primarily religious. One of these, we would hypothesize, was the so-called New Age movement (Drury 1999; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Kyle 1995). Through New Age books and bookstores, periodicals, and retreat centers, some Americans could have been exposed to Buddhist practices or teachings without ever having thought about becoming Buddhists. Another institutional vehicle through which Americans may have been exposed to Buddhism was the alternative medicine and holistic health movement (Frohock 1992; Fuller 1989; McGuire and Kantor 1988). Yet another was Buddhism's ability to make use of facilities and leaders available to it at churches and synagogues (Morreale 1998). Also of likely importance were the resources institutionalized in colleges and universities, ranging

from specific courses in Buddhism, to courses in comparative religions, to the sheer capacity of universities to aggregate enough people for bookstores to be founded or lecture series to be held (Prebish 1999). These institutional mechanisms, we might suppose, may reinforce one another. For instance, while we were writing this article one of us spotted an announcement for a class about "meditation and Buddhist philosophy" on a local bulletin board. The announcement was posted at a New Age coffee shop and the lecture was being sponsored by a holistic health group and being held at the Methodist Church across the street from a university.

## METHODS

### Data

The data we analyze here are from a nationally representative survey of the adult population of the United States that was conducted between September 2002 and March 2003 as part of the Responses to Diversity Project under the supervision of one of the authors. The survey yielded responses from 2,910 adults. For descriptive results, we use a weighting factor that adjusts the responses to 2000 U.S. Census parameters and for multivariate analysis we use unweighted data in order to estimate accurate levels of statistical significance (for further details on the study, see Wuthnow 2003). We use these data in preference to the other surveys mentioned previously because these data provide good measures of the two dependent variables of greatest interest (contact and influence) and better measures of relevant independent variables.

### Measures

Our measure of contact with Buddhists is a question that asked respondents: "How much personal contact have you had with each of the following," followed by a randomly rotated list of seven groups, one of which was "Buddhists." The response options were "a great deal," "a fair amount," "only a little," "almost none," and "none." In multivariate analyses, we group the first two responses together based on an empirical determination of an appropriate cutting point. As a measure of being influenced by Buddhism, we use a question that asked: "Have any of the following had an important influence on your thinking about religion or spirituality," followed by 12 randomly rotated items, one of which was "Buddhist teachings or practices."

Among the correlates of contact with Buddhists and influence by Buddhism, we examine the responses to several other questions about Buddhism. For respondents who said they had any contact with Buddhists, several questions were asked about the nature of this contact. One sought to distinguish contact with lifelong Buddhists (often immigrants or Buddhists in other countries) from contact with so-called converts to Buddhism: "Have your contacts with Buddhists mostly been with people who grew up as Buddhists or with people who became Buddhists?" Another question asked: "Have your contacts with Buddhists been mostly pleasant, mixed, or mostly unpleasant?" The source or location of contact was explored with a question that asked: "Have your contacts with Buddhists come about mostly through your work, through your neighborhood, or through shopping and other personal business dealings?" Respondents with contacts were also asked: "In your contacts with Buddhists, how often do you discuss religion—never, almost never, occasionally, or often?" As mentioned previously, all respondents were asked: "How familiar are you with the basic teachings of ... Buddhism? Are you very familiar, somewhat familiar, somewhat unfamiliar, or very unfamiliar?" Finally, respondents were asked: "How often, if at all, have you attended religious services at ... a Buddhist temple or center—never, once or twice, several times, or many times?"

The measures of other institutional resources (besides Buddhism) included four items in the survey: "the New Age movement," "alternative medicine or holistic health practices" (both in response to "Have any of the following had an important influence on your thinking about

religion or spirituality?”), a question that asked members of religious organizations if they had “personally participated” at their congregation in “a class or study group that focused on the beliefs and practices of some other religion besides Christianity or Judaism, such as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism,” and a question that asked respondents who had been to college if they had majored in the humanities, social sciences, science or engineering, business, education, or some other field.

Other independent variables and control variables include standard items about gender, age, level of education, region, and race and ethnicity. Detailed information about religious preference was obtained and coded using the “Reltrad” variable developed by Steensland et al. (Steensland et al. 2000). A standard question for attendance at religious services was included. Other questions used in some of the analysis include foreign born (“Were you born in the United States or in another country?”), travel (“Have you ever traveled or lived outside the United States?”), and parents’ education (“Did either of your parents graduate from college?”).

## Analysis

We first present descriptive results for the main variables. We then examine logistic regression models for the odds of saying that one had a great deal or fair amount of contact with Buddhists as opposed to saying that one had only a little, almost none, or no contact with Buddhists. These models include the effects of the main independent and control variables and test for the additional effects of several variables of special interest. All categories of these variables are treated as dichotomous variables, with the following as the “excluded” or comparison category: gender (male), age (18–24), education (no college), region (northeast), race (non-African American), ethnicity (non-Hispanic), religious preference (none), religious service attendance (never), residence (small town or rural), foreign born (born in United States), travel (never traveled or lived outside United States), parents’ education (neither parent graduated from college). We compute models for all contact with Buddhists and separate models for contact with people who grew up Buddhists and for contact with people who became Buddhists. We then compute models for the odds of saying that Buddhist teachings or practices have had an important influence on one’s thinking about religion or spirituality versus the odds of not saying this. We test first for the effects of the main demographic and religion variables and then examine the additional effects of several specific kinds of exposure to Buddhists and Buddhist teachings. Finally, we examine the additional effects on being influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices of being influenced by the New Age movement, of being influenced by alternative medicine or holistic health practices, of having participated in an interreligious class or study group, and of having majored in the humanities or social sciences.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive results from the national survey for the main variables used in the analysis are presented in Table 1. The left side of the table shows the percentages of respondents (weighted data) in each category of the main demographic and religious variables. Besides the figures shown in the table, it is worth noting that only 13 (or 0.4 percent) of the respondents gave Buddhism as their religious preference. The results for the main questions about contact with Buddhists are shown in the right half of the table. Judging from these results, more than half of the public (55 percent) claims to have had contact with Buddhists, but only about one person in seven (14 percent) has had at least a fair amount of contact with Buddhists, while another 20 percent has had a little contact. Of those who have had at least a little contact with Buddhists, the proportion who believe their contact has mostly been with people who grew up as Buddhists and the proportion who think their contact has mostly been with converts to Buddhism are approximately equal. By a

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Variable	Percent	Variable	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		<i>Personal Contact with Buddhists</i>	
Male	48	A great deal	3
Female	52	A fair amount	11
<i>Age</i>		Only a little	20
18–24	16	Almost none	21
25–44	39	None	44
45–64	29	Don’t know/refused	1
65 and over	16	<i>Contacts with Buddhists Mostly</i>	
<i>Education</i>		People who grew up Buddhist	14
< high school graduate	8	People who became Buddhist	14
High school graduate	32	Equally with both kinds	2
Some college	33	Don’t know	4
Technical/vocational training	4	No contact	66
College graduate	15	<i>Contacts with Buddhists Were</i>	
Postgraduate work or degree	7	Mostly pleasant	26
<i>Race</i>		Mixed	6
African American	12	Mostly unpleasant	1
White or other	88	No contact	66
<i>Ethnicity</i>		<i>Contacts with Buddhists Mostly</i>	
Hispanic	11	Through your work	10
Non-Hispanic	89	Through your neighborhood	6
<i>Region</i>		Shopping/personal business	14
Northeast	19	Other	3
Midwest	25	No contact	66
South	37	<i>Discuss Religion with Buddhists</i>	
West	19	Never	13
<i>Religious Preference</i>		Almost never	8
Evangelical Protestant	29	Occasionally	10
Mainline Protestant	13	Often	3
Black Protestant	6	No contact	66
Roman Catholic	24	<i>Familiar with Buddhist Teachings</i>	
Jewish	2	Very familiar	5
Other religion	7	Somewhat familiar	25
None	17	Somewhat unfamiliar	20
Don’t know/refused	2	Very unfamiliar	49
<i>Religious Service Attendance</i>		<i>Attended Buddhist Services</i>	
Once a week or more	36	Many times	<1
Almost every week	6	Several times	2
Once or twice a month	16	Once or twice	8
A few times a year	24	Never	90
Never	17	<i>Influenced by Buddhism</i>	
		Yes	12
		No/don’t know	88

*n* = 2,910; weighted data.  
Source: Religion and Diversity Survey, 2003.



margin of almost four to one, people who have had contacts with Buddhists say these contacts have been pleasant, rather than mixed or unpleasant. The source or location of most contacts, it appears, is either the workplace or through shopping and other personal business dealings. In comparison, contacts through one's neighborhood are selected by considerably fewer of the respondents. The fact that only 3 percent of the public selected "other" suggests that relatively little contact may have occurred primarily in religious settings. This possibility is also suggested by the fact that only 3 percent of the public claims to have "often" discussed religion with Buddhists, while only another 10 percent has done this "occasionally." The percentage of Americans who have attended religious services at a Buddhist temple or center is also relatively small (only 3 percent have done this several times or many times), although about one person in 10 claims to have done this at least once. Familiarity with Buddhist teachings, at least as respondents perceive it, is considerably more common: 30 percent claim to be at least somewhat familiar (although only 5 percent say they are very familiar). Twelve percent say that Buddhist teachings or practices have had an important influence on their thinking about religion or spirituality.

Further cross-tabular analysis of these questions indicates that there are no significant differences in the likelihood of saying that one's contacts with Buddhists were mostly pleasant, mixed, or unpleasant among persons whose contact had mostly been with people who grew up as Buddhists and among persons whose contact had been with people who became Buddhists. Workplace contacts, however, were slightly more common among persons whose contact had been with people who grew up as Buddhists, while contacts through shopping or personal business dealings were slightly more common among persons whose contact had been with converts to Buddhism. By a fairly large margin (49 percent to 34 percent), those whose contact had been with converts said they had talked often or occasionally with Buddhists about religion, compared with those whose contact had been with life-long Buddhists. This difference is suggestive (as we shall see) for understanding the kind of contact that may influence the likelihood of people saying that Buddhist teachings or practices have been important to their thinking about religion or spirituality.

### **Factors Influencing Contact with Buddhists**

The models in Table 2 show the effects of various independent variables on the odds of saying that one has had at least a fair amount of contact with Buddhists. In Model 1, we see first that the effect of gender is not significant. With each increase in age, the odds of having had contact with Buddhists diminishes, such that persons between age 45 and 64 are about two-thirds as likely to have had contact as persons between age 18 and 24, and persons age 65 and over are less than a third as likely to have had contact as persons between age 18 and 24. Level of education is one of the strongest predictors of contact in these data: the odds of having had contact are about 70 percent greater for those with some college education than for those with no college training, and having graduated from college or done postgraduate work further increases these odds. Compared with the northeast, persons living in the midwest or south are not significantly less likely to have had contact with Buddhists, but persons living in the west are significantly more likely to have had such contact. Taking account of these other factors, African Americans and Hispanics are not significantly different from whites or non-Hispanics in likelihood of having had contact with Buddhists. Compared with people who have no religious preference, evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics are all less likely to have had contact with Buddhists, while the likelihood of such contact among Jews is not significantly different from that of people with no religious preference.

Model 2 in Table 2 examines the relationship between attendance at religious services and contact with Buddhists, controlling for the other factors just considered. People who attend services weekly, monthly, or only a few times a year are not significantly more or less likely to have had contact with Buddhists than people who never attend services. Model 3 introduces additional

**TABLE 2**  
**SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING EXPOSURE TO BUDDHISTS**  
(Adjusted Odds Ratios from the Logistic Regression of Contact with Buddhists by Selected Independent Variables)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Female	0.906	0.893	1.132	1.378**	0.876
Age 25–44	0.921	0.922	0.664*	0.716*	0.974
Age 45–64	0.654*	0.662*	0.667*	0.736†	0.718†
Age 65 and over	0.306***	0.319***	0.354***	0.426***	0.344***
Some college	1.768***	1.782***	1.698***	1.396*	1.656***
College grad	2.229***	2.267***	2.227***	1.927***	1.989***
Postgraduate	2.789***	2.861***	3.099***	2.602***	2.422***
Midwest	0.948	0.944	0.598**	0.880	0.964
South	0.946	0.958	0.852	1.168	1.007
West	1.552**	1.541**	1.438**	1.423*	1.558**
Black	1.155	1.140	1.212	0.836	1.147
Hispanic	0.859	0.860	1.404†	1.061	1.008
Evangelical Protestant	0.682*	0.702*	0.610**	0.961	0.704*
Mainline Protestant	0.679*	0.669*	0.723†	0.900	0.649*
Black Protestant	0.866	0.891	0.546†	0.980	0.847
Catholic	0.592***	0.602**	0.550***	0.813	0.609**
Jewish	0.985	0.980	0.713	0.747	0.859
Other religion	1.087	1.110	0.955	0.983	1.105
Attend weekly		0.876	0.714†	1.157	0.870
Attend monthly		1.256	1.420	1.462†	1.227
Attend few/year		0.965	1.106	1.331	0.974
Inner city			1.351*	1.034	1.296†
Suburb			1.207	1.152	1.020
Foreign born			0.825	1.044	0.478***
Traveled outside U.S.			1.604***	1.811***	1.312*
Parents' education			1.701***	1.228†	1.296*
Intercept	0.181***	0.181***	0.115***	0.067***	0.137***
–2 log likelihood	2351.907	2346.475	2207.030	2331.234	2321.320
Degrees of freedom	18	21	26	26	26
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.080	0.083	0.159	0.090	0.098

*n* = 2,910, unweighted data.  
†*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001 (Wald statistic).  
*Source:* Religion and Diversity Survey, 2003.

variables that may affect the likelihood of people having had the kinds of cultural experiences that would have exposed them to Buddhists. The odds of having had contact with Buddhists are significantly higher among persons living in an inner city than among persons living in a small town or rural area; these odds are not significantly different among persons living in suburbs than among persons living in small towns or rural areas. Nor are there significant differences between those who are foreign born and those who are not foreign born. Both travel and parents' education, though, do show significant effects in Model 3. The odds of having had contact with Buddhists are about 60 percent greater among those who have traveled outside the United States than among those who have not, and these odds are about 70 percent greater among people

raised by a parent who has graduated from college than by parents who have not graduated from college.

Model 4 replicates Model 3 but the dependent variable in Model 4 is for having had at least a fair amount of contact *mostly with people who grew up as Buddhists*. This contact is presumably with life-long Buddhists who are native-born Americans, immigrants to the United States, foreign visitors, or residents of other countries (such as Thailand or Japan). Model 5 repeats the analysis but for having had a fair amount or great deal of contact with *people who became Buddhists* (i.e., “converts”). Some of the variables show the same relationships in the two models, and others diverge. For instance, women are more likely than men to have had contact with life-long Buddhists, but there is not a significant gender difference in having had contact with convert Buddhists. Older people are less likely than younger people to have had contact with both kinds of Buddhists, although the relationship is somewhat stronger for contact with converts than with life-long Buddhists. The effect of education is similar for both. So is the effect of living in the west. One of the most interesting differences is in the relationships between religious preference and contact. There are no significant differences among the various religious groups in the likelihood of having had contact with life-long Buddhists. However, contact with converts to Buddhism is significantly lower among evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics than it is among persons with no religious preference. Living in an inner-city area is positively associated (at a marginally significant level) with having had contact with converts to Buddhism, while it is not associated with having had contact with life-long Buddhists. Being foreign born is negatively associated with having had contact with converts to Buddhism, but is not associated with having had contact with life-long Buddhists. Travel outside the United States is positively associated with both kinds of contact, but is more strongly associated with contact with life-long Buddhists than with converts to Buddhism. And parents’ education is related about the same to both kinds of contact.

### **Factors Affecting Being Influenced by Buddhism**

The models in Table 3 report the effects of the same independent variables we have just considered, but the dependent variable is now the likelihood of saying that one’s thinking about religion or spirituality had been importantly influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices. Here (as shown in Model 1) there is again an age effect, but it is only among those age 65 and over that the odds of having been influenced by Buddhism are significantly lower than the odds among people between age 18 and 24. The relationships with level of education are again strong, and indeed are stronger than they were for contact. Whereas the region effect on contact mostly distinguished the west from the rest of the country, the regional effect on being influenced by Buddhism suggests that the west and northeast are not significantly different from each other, but that living in the south or midwest is negatively associated with having been influenced. Being African American is also negatively associated with having been influenced by Buddhism, while being Hispanic is positively associated. Being evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish are all negatively associated with having been influenced by Buddhism, compared with having no religious preference. Only for those who attend religious services weekly, though, is religious service attendance negatively associated with having been influenced by Buddhism. Two of the other cultural exposure variables (travel outside the United States and parents’ education) are positively associated with having been influenced by Buddhism.

Model 2 takes account of the foregoing effects and examines whether contact with life-long Buddhists and contact with convert Buddhists are associated with having been influenced by Buddhism. Both relationships are statistically significant and positive. However, the effect of contact with converts is more than twice as strong as the effect of contact with life-long Buddhists. Model 3 shows that there is a strong positive relationship between having attended services at a Buddhist temple or center and having been influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices.

**TABLE 3**  
**SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING BEING INFLUENCED BY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS**  
(Adjusted Odds Ratios from the Logistic Regression of Being Influenced by Buddhist Teachings  
or Practice by Selected Independent Variables)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Female	0.886	0.896	0.895	0.890	0.928
Age 25–44	0.759	0.797	0.802	0.933	0.925
Age 45–64	0.832	0.978	0.862	1.015	1.034
Age 65 and over	0.459**	0.624†	0.474**	0.677	0.717
Some college	1.435*	1.238	1.385†	1.164	1.066
College grad	2.232***	1.845***	1.972***	1.629**	1.427†
Postgraduate	3.228***	2.444***	2.508***	2.162***	1.737*
Midwest	0.515***	0.502***	0.531***	0.550**	0.539**
South	0.613**	0.587**	0.595**	0.608**	0.586**
West	0.774	0.634**	0.638**	0.693*	0.577**
Black	0.488*	0.463*	0.516*	0.557†	0.560†
Hispanic	1.552*	1.653*	1.555*	1.615*	1.626*
Evangelical Protestant	0.418***	0.439***	0.485***	0.491***	0.551**
Mainline Protestant	0.468***	0.502**	0.527**	0.646*	0.692
Black Protestant	0.895	0.919	1.104	1.107	1.270
Catholic	0.333***	0.373***	0.381***	0.449***	0.487***
Jewish	0.354**	0.362**	0.404*	0.475*	0.471†
Other religion	1.540*	1.601*	1.407	1.885**	1.748*
Attend weekly	0.626*	0.638*	0.649*	0.605**	0.617*
Attend monthly	1.160	1.019	1.095	1.003	0.932
Attend few/year	1.265	1.242	1.207	1.237	1.199
Inner city	1.219	1.113	1.016	1.058	0.929
Suburb	1.168	1.173	1.127	1.111	1.092
Foreign born	1.046	1.242	1.019	1.071	1.200
Traveled outside U.S.	1.556**	1.409*	1.362*	1.325†	1.295
Parents' education	1.874***	1.765***	1.593***	1.781***	1.617***
Contact—Buddh. Immig.		2.213***			1.037
Contact—Buddh. Conv.		5.646***			2.592***
Temple participation			5.275***		2.528***
Familiarity with Buddh.				7.454***	5.043***
Intercept	0.166***	0.109***	0.152***	0.062***	0.060***
–2 log likelihood	1932.457	1792.496	1809.042	1687.894	1603.332
Degrees of freedom	26	28	27	27	30
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.199	0.276	0.267	0.332	0.375

*n* = 2,910, unweighted data.  
†*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001 (Wald statistic).  
*Source:* Religion and Diversity Survey, 2003.

Model 4 shows that there is an even stronger relationship between claiming familiarity with Buddhist teachings and having been influenced by them. Model 5 examines the joint effects of these various forms of exposure to Buddhism. In this model, the effect of having had contact with life-long Buddhists becomes insignificant. Contact with converts to Buddhism remains positive and strong and so does the effect of temple participation. Familiarity with Buddhist teachings shows the strongest relationship. Comparing the coefficients in Model 5 with those in Models 2,

3, and 4, we also note that the strength of the relationship between contact with converts and having been influenced by Buddhism is reduced by about half when the other factors are included. The same is true of the coefficient for temple participation. The coefficient for familiarity with Buddhist teachings remains about two-thirds as strong in Model 5 as in Model 4. In short, it appears that a significant part (although not all) of the effect of contact and temple participation occurs by making people more familiar with Buddhist teachings. The effects of familiarity, though, come about in ways additional to contact or temple participation.

The results shown in Table 4 provide information about the additional institutional mechanisms through which people are influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices. The New Age movement is one. The odds of having been influenced by Buddhist teachings or practices are six times as great among people who say they have been influenced by the New Age movement than among people who do not say this. The same is true for saying that one has been influenced by alternative medicine or holistic health practices, where the odds of having been influenced by Buddhism are more than five times as great among those who say they have been influenced by alternative medicine than among those who have not. There also appears to be a significant effect associated with having taken interreligious classes. Among those who say they have taken a class or been in a study group at their church or religious center that focused on religions other than Christianity or Judaism, the odds of having been influenced by Buddhism are almost four times greater than among those who have not participated in a class or study group of this kind. There is also some support for the hypothesis that college training of a particular kind is one of the institutional mechanisms through which people are influenced by Buddhist teachings. The odds of such influence are more than twice as great among persons who majored in the humanities or social sciences than among those who majored in other subjects (recall that level of education is controlled). Model 5 in Table 4 shows the relationships for all these variables simultaneously and with familiarity with Buddhism also controlled. In each instance, the relationships for the institutional mechanisms remain statistically significant and strong, and their strength is reduced by about a third, suggesting that some (but by no means all) of their influence is mediated by familiarity with Buddhist teachings.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Accounting for Receptivity to Buddhism

These results provide a clearer picture of how Buddhists have been received by the American public and who has been influenced by Buddhism than we have had from media accounts or from previous scholarship. Clearly, it is important to distinguish between exposure to Buddhists and being influenced by Buddhism. It is also important to distinguish between life-long Buddhists and converts to Buddhism in considering who has contact with Buddhists and why. The fact that younger people, those who have been to college, those who have traveled, and those who have been reared by college-educated parents have more contact with both life-long and convert Buddhists points to the differential opportunities that exist in American society for being exposed to ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse groups. The same pattern would probably be evident if the contact group at issue was African American, Mormon, or Portuguese. People with cultural capital simply have more opportunity to move in diverse circles, travel, participate in conferences, and work in settings that expose them to a wide cross-section of the public. What makes this pattern even more likely for contact with Buddhists is that Buddhist Americans are themselves relatively advantaged with respect to education, income, and contacts with non-Buddhists (Wuthnow and Hackett 2003). We have also seen that religion—preference and participation—has relatively little to do with the sheer level of contact with life-long Buddhists. Those contacts are apparently influenced by cultural capital, travel, and being in the workplace, rather than being facilitated or inhibited by the kind of religious community in which one participates.

TABLE 4  
OTHER SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING BEING INFLUENCED BY  
BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

(Adjusted Odds Ratios from the Logistic Regression of Being Influenced by Buddhist Teachings  
or Practice by Selected Independent Variables)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Female	0.940	1.113	0.906	0.938	1.218
Age 25–44	0.764	0.768	0.793	0.749	0.924
Age 45–64	0.812	0.781	0.893	0.817	0.913
Age 65 and over	0.501**	0.446**	0.498**	0.461**	0.694
Some college	1.591**	1.386†	1.460*	1.439*	1.274
College grad	2.368***	2.065***	2.167***	1.669***	1.282
Postgraduate	3.505***	3.034***	2.937***	2.358***	1.793*
Midwest	0.552**	0.573**	0.506***	0.577***	0.715
South	0.599**	0.697*	0.606**	0.641**	0.693†
West	0.768	0.855	0.784	0.798	0.832
Black	0.458*	0.448**	0.513*	0.489*	0.526†
Hispanic	1.415	1.419	1.531*	1.507*	1.384
Evangelical Protestant	0.439***	0.477***	0.402***	0.406***	0.559**
Mainline Protestant	0.529**	0.498**	0.477***	0.449***	0.720
Black Protestant	0.939	0.988	0.932	0.839	1.410
Catholic	0.375***	0.374***	0.364***	0.326***	0.565**
Jewish	0.525†	0.420*	0.333**	0.345**	0.645
Other religion	1.595*	1.636*	1.443†	1.545*	1.906*
Attend weekly	0.613*	0.663*	0.452***	0.676*	0.519**
Attend monthly	1.109	1.176	0.915	1.229	0.884
Attend few/year	1.197	1.191	1.063	1.318	1.059
Inner city	1.167	1.213	1.187	1.176	0.982
Suburb	1.149	1.129	1.128	1.194	1.047
Foreign born	1.053	1.045	1.070	1.053	1.124
Traveled outside U.S.	1.593**	1.571**	1.509***	1.531**	1.370†
Parents' education	1.887***	1.896***	1.800***	1.835***	1.765***
New Age movement	6.302***				3.800***
Alternative medicine		5.649***			3.474***
Interreligious classes			3.807***		2.469***
Humanities/social sci.				2.314***	2.051***
Familiarity with Buddh.					6.018***
Intercept	0.100***	0.069***	0.170***	0.155***	0.022***
–2 log likelihood	1773.314	1739.579	1874.962	1908.184	1446.330
Degrees of freedom	27	27	27	27	31
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.286	0.304	0.231	0.212	0.453

*n* = 2,910, unweighted data.  
†*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; \*\*\**p* < 0.001 (Wald statistic).  
*Source:* Religion and Diversity Survey, 2003.

However, contact with convert Buddhists is another matter. These are people who have chosen to be Buddhists, and for this reason the religious involvement of other Americans does affect the likelihood of having contact. Especially if a person participates in a religious community with strong traditions that discourage religious shopping or conversion to other religions, that person

would be less likely to have contact with persons who have become Buddhists. Evangelical Protestants most clearly fit this profile. Yet, we have also seen that mainline Protestants and Catholics are also less likely to have contact with convert Buddhists. It is not the case that frequent church attendance discourages such contact. So we are left with some puzzles. Religion influences contact, but we cannot conclude that it is simply the religiously rootless who are most likely to be drawn into circles where they can mingle with convert Buddhists.

Being significantly influenced by Buddhist teachings and practices is the more relevant consideration for understanding the religious implications of Buddhism for American society. Here, cultural capital is again an important factor. Many of the same factors that facilitate exposure to Buddhists are conducive to being influenced by Buddhism. Whereas contact with Buddhists may evoke few discussions of religion (as we have seen), being influenced by Buddhism necessarily involves how one thinks and behaves religiously. Thus, there is a negative relationship between being influenced by Buddhism and being actively involved in *any* other tradition: evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are all less likely to have been influenced by Buddhism than are people with no religious preference (the exception is African-American Protestants, but this result may be masked by the fact that being African American is itself negatively associated with being influenced by Buddhism).

We could summarize this point by saying that being religiously rootless *is* one of the factors that makes people available for being influenced by Buddhism. But then we also need to understand that being available and perhaps having a need for religion is by no means sufficient for explaining who becomes influenced. That is where the various ways in which Buddhism is actually produced, or supplied to the culture, become important. Thus, being in contact with Buddhists increases the likelihood of being religiously influenced by Buddhism. Significantly, though, it appears that contact with converts rather than with immigrants is most influential. In addition, the availability of temples and other facilities makes a difference, and beyond any of this, the larger ways in which people can gain familiarity with Buddhism (e.g., from reading) makes a difference.

The data also suggest the importance of the wider institutional mechanisms through which Buddhism is communicated in American culture. These are not specifically Buddhist, at least not in the sense of being staffed by Buddhist immigrants or being facilities that are identifiably Buddhist. They are nevertheless carriers of ideas about Buddhism. The New Age movement and the holistic health movement include bookstores, periodicals, seminars, and retreats in which some exposure to Buddhist practices may be present. Churches and synagogues are places where classes in Buddhist meditation may be taught or where people learn about Buddhist traditions. The same may be true of classes at colleges and universities.

### **Implications for Understanding Religious Change**

Much of the discussion of religious growth and decline in recent years has been couched in rational-choice ideas about market dynamics and, more specifically, in terms of the relative advantages of "strictness." To the extent that they have been tested, these arguments have been examined mainly with respect to membership in religious denominations and not in terms of larger questions about contact with religious traditions and the influence of those traditions. Thinking about the relatively broad, and almost certainly growing, impact of Buddhism on American culture over the past half century forces us to begin to rethink some of those familiar arguments about religious influence. From the results we have considered, rational-choice ideas may go part way in helping us understand the appeal of Buddhist teachings. Those ideas would suggest that strict churches would be able to protect their members from being lured away by Buddhism. Thus, we would expect that evangelicals would be disinclined to be influenced by Buddhist teachings, and in fact have seen support for that expectation. Rational-choice ideas might also persuade us that people without any religious ties would be searching for some kind of spiritual gratification

and would thus be attracted to anything that came along, such as Buddhism. However, rational-choice ideas fall short insofar as they associate strictness too closely with influence. Many of the forms Buddhism takes in the United States are decidedly not strict. Although there are certainly some Buddhist temples with high and demanding barriers to entry, others have much lower and more flexible requirements. Nor are people exposed to Buddhist teachings only through Buddhist temples, and most interpretations of Buddhist teachings do not portray it as an exclusivist religion. The overall influence of Buddhism in the United States has nevertheless increased considerably in recent decades.

To emphasize religious markets without paying attention to other factors is like trying to understand the economy without paying attention to business firms. This is why supply-side and production-of-culture approaches are important. Not surprisingly, the cultural influences of Buddhism owe a lot to the presence of Buddhists. It does matter that there are many more Buddhist immigrants in the United States now than in the recent past. It also matters that there are Buddhist converts. Buddhist temples and other outlets for Buddhist instruction also matter. Arguments about supply and production of culture help more generally to expand on the insight that sometimes strictness is a vehicle for growth. Strictness is not conducive to growth just because people hunger for moral absolutes and certainty about an afterlife. Strictness is a way of keeping the resources of a religious community at home. Strong boundaries separating the in-group from out-groups encourage people to give their money and their time within the religious community, and that provides resources that can be used to promote growth.

Supply-side approaches, though, are also limited. They focus too much attention on resources internal to a religious community and on entrepreneurial leadership. They tell us too little about what else in the society may affect the deployment of these resources. This is the advantage of taking an institutional perspective. Markets are embedded in institutions: business firms are, and so are Buddhist practices. To say that a practice is embedded means that it has been linked with activities that provide it with legitimacy and resources of both a direct and indirect nature. In the case of Buddhism, its growth has not been entirely the result of more Buddhists and Buddhist temples. Were the United States a society devoid of other religions, the effects of an enlarged Buddhist presence could well have been less significant. Churches that provide space for meditation classes or that have mildly restive Christians interested in learning more about Buddhism are a significant resource, just as are New Age bookstores, holistic health seminars, and college classes in comparative religions.

Understanding the influence of religious traditions especially requires paying attention to the institutions in which cultural production is embedded. These are the spaces in which individual preferences are shaped, the places where leaders are trained, and the meeting grounds for people to interact with people different from themselves. Arguments that take an economic approach to religion are attractive because they bring a bold, debunking perspective to the sacred, a perspective that begs scholars to understand that there is *less* about religion than religious leaders themselves have supposed. Having entertained this perspective, we now need to move back to reality and understand that reality is never as simple as economic perspectives presume. Institutions are more complex; they require that a larger variety of social factors be considered, and yet they also point to specific factors, rather than only to generalizations about norms and values. If Americans' receptivity to Buddhism requires paying attention to the institutions in which Buddhists and Buddhist teachings are embedded, so do other questions about religious change.

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