

Research Article

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*"Christianity is for rubes; Buddhism is for actors": U.S. media representations of Buddhism in the wake of the Tiger Woods' scandal*

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## Research Article

### ***"Christianity is for rubes; Buddhism is for actors": U.S. media representations of Buddhism in the wake of the Tiger Woods' scandal***

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#### **Abstract**

Critical analysis of U.S. media representations of Buddhists and Buddhism can reveal American attitudes toward this minority religion as well as how Buddhism is being spread in Western, non-Buddhist cultures. This paper examines such representations in the wake of revelations of Tiger Woods' sexual scandal, a time when Buddhism was much in the news. I argue that Buddhism was here deployed in the service of a pre-existing narrative of conflict between conservatives and liberals and, by making appeals to secular scholars to define Buddhism, Buddhist voices were obscured or ignored. Finally, despite having their own media outlets, U.S. Buddhists were unable to effectively counter such representations either by perpetuating pre-existing media narratives or by ignoring them altogether.

#### **Introduction**

In late 2009, professional golfer Tiger Woods' numerous extramarital affairs became the subject of tabloids and late-night talk shows. In the familiar pattern of other celebrities, politicians and public figures, Woods would eventually hold a press conference, apologize to his family, fans, and sponsors, vow to enter rehab, and turn to religion to set his life straight. Unlike other publically shamed celebrities, however, the religion Woods turned to was not Christianity but Buddhism. And so it was that for a brief moment in the early months of 2010, "Tiger Woods' Buddhism" seemed to be everywhere in the mainstream media. Whereas the bulk of this coverage focused on Woods, his private life, and the consequences of his actions on his golf game, the media did spend a good deal of time discussing Buddhism directly, representing it in specific ways. Whether as a religion that was capable of competing with Christianity as a panacea for a troubled celebrity, or as a religion that had effectively transformed itself from the alternative spirituality of hippies and Beatniks into a "down-to-earth, family guy" faith (Stephenson, 2010), the media struggled with how best to represent Buddhism and its relevance to the ongoing narrative of Tiger Woods' fall from grace. Newsman and Evangelical Christian Brit Hume stated on Fox News that, as far as he knew, Buddhism did not offer the type of forgiveness or redemption Woods needed; therefore, he should convert to Christianity to turn his life around. Former CNN anchor Rick Sanchez went looking for answers in a televised interview with a Buddhist meditation teacher and, later, the CNN Twitter feed. And Bill Maher joked, "if I was a golfer, I'd go with Jesus—because he's a Trinity, so when you walk with him, you've got

a foursome. Christianity is for rubes. Buddhism is for actors" (Maher 2010).

Sarcastic late-night diatribes aside, such media representations of Buddhism and Buddhists can reveal much about how Buddhism is transmitted into traditionally non-Buddhist cultures. Whereas it is difficult to determine the exact number of practicing Buddhists in the United States—indeed it is seemingly impossible to arrive at a consensus of who should be counted as a Buddhist in the first place—most surveys put the number at around one per cent.<sup>1</sup> Despite the low numbers, however, Americans seem to have had significant contact with and feel generally positive about Buddhists and Buddhism. A 2003 study suggests that 55% of Americans have had some contact with Buddhists or Buddhism and that more than half of respondents associate words such as "tolerant" or "peace loving" with Buddhism (Wuthnow and Cadge, 2004: 204). The low number of self-identified Buddhists combined with the widespread positive exposure Buddhism seems to enjoy in the United States led Thomas Tweed to rightly ask "Why are Buddhists so nice?" in his comparison of U.S. media representations of Buddhists and Muslims (Tweed, 2008). Wuthnow's 2005 study on American religious diversity further suggests that media representations of Buddhism are reinforcing the stereotype that all Buddhists meditate, forcing Buddhist communities that do not emphasize this practice to adapt to newcomers' expectations (Wuthnow, 2005: 92–93). However, the extent of this stereotype and the role media representations play in creating them remains something of an open question. It is through critical analysis of U.S. media representations that we can better understand such stereotypes and positive attitudes toward this minority religion.

Studies of representations of Buddhists and Buddhism in the mass media are few and far between; and some raise more questions than answers. For example, in a conference paper from the late 1990s, Melissa Wall discussed the case of "the little lama," a four-year-old boy whose Seattle-area mother believed him to be the reincarnation of a Tibetan Buddhist lama and planned to send him to a Nepalese monastery for monastic training. In her analysis, Wall noted that the news media was particularly critical of the mother and dismissive of Buddhism as out of touch with American sensibilities,<sup>2</sup> a finding that seems at odds with the assumption that the media is generally favorable toward Buddhism. Rick Clifton Moore (2008) builds on the work of Mark Silk who suggests that news media unconsciously employ religious ways of looking at the world

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1. According to the widely quoted Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Buddhists account for roughly 0.7% of the U.S. population. This study, however, has been critiqued by Buddhist scholars who note that it was conducted only in English and Spanish, only via land-line telephones, and excluded the state of Hawai'i, effectively limiting the number of Asian American and younger Buddhists who either may not speak English or Spanish, do not have landline telephones, or live in a state with a disproportionately high number of Buddhists (see Hickey 2010: 10-11). Wuthnow and Cadge (2004) argue that American Buddhists might represent as high as 1.9% of the population, though clearly still a minority. For information on defining who is a Buddhist, see Nattier 1998, Tweed 2002.

2. Wall suggests that race may also have played a role in the critique of Buddhism as not-American; despite the fact that "the little lama's" father was a Tibetan refugee, he never makes an appearance in media reports that frame the child as a "'white' all-American boy" (19).

in its reportage and is thus predisposed to portray religion in positive terms. Testing this hypothesis for non-Judeo-Christian traditions, Moore analyzed news reports on the Dalai Lama's visit to Idaho in 2005 and found that media reports were generally supportive of Buddhism. It is worth noting, however, that Silk's work suggests that media reports on religion are positive when the religion in question conforms to general moral standards and reflects the values of pluralism; it is harshly critical when religious leaders display any sort of "hypocrisy" or "false prophecy." Given that the Dalai Lama was in Idaho to commemorate the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and spoke about the need for religious tolerance and peace, it is hard to imagine how the media could have spun this story in any sort of critical direction. Finally, Tessa Bartholomeusz (1998) frames such representations as a type of "neo-Orientalism," taking note of how Asian religions are deployed in the service of Western needs and desires. For example, in the fashion magazine *Mademoiselle*, Bartholomeusz finds Taoism described as "the way of sex," the *Kama Sutra* as a manual for how "randy bachelors" can "pick up girls," and the Buddhist *trant* as a "group of love books." Thus, Asian religions are reduced to a means by which sexually frustrated Westerners can spice up their sex lives.

Jane Naomi Iwamura's recent work, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, is a significant addition to a small handful of critical works that take seriously pop-cultural representations of Asians and Asian religions. Iwamura, building on Edward Said's original orientalism thesis, argues convincingly that for the better part of a century, American media have been constructing what she terms the icon of the Oriental Monk—a solitary, male, asexual figure who stands in as the "Other" for American audiences and thus serves the needs and desires of the dominant American culture. This icon can be found in representations of both real and fictional characters, from D.T. Suzuki and Kwai Chang Caine (from the television series *Kung Fu*) to more contemporary figures such as Deepak Chopra and the Dalai Lama. Through the repetition of stereotyped images of such "oriental" figures, audiences come to "know" Asian religions and Asian persons; however, to the extent that our knowledge is mediated by such representations, we are necessarily coming to know merely these reflections, not the actual persons who are being represented. Thus, "representations of the Dalai Lama... may be more real to an American audience than any personal encounter we might have with the actual person." Pop-cultural representations "create new configurations of intimacy and attachment that have profoundly affected our epistemological sense. Within the hyperreal environment, orientalized stereotypes begin to take on their own reality and justify their own truths" (Iwamura 2011: 8). In sum, our attachment to hyperreal representations of Asian religions become more powerful than the religions themselves; and this attachment has consequences on the real persons and communities being represented, as well as on our study of and engagement with them.

More work needs to be done in this area if we are to get an accurate picture of how Buddhism and Buddhists are represented in U.S. media. This paper hopes to add to this conversation by offering a critical analysis of U.S. media representations of Buddhism in the wake of the Tiger Woods affair. Buddhism and Buddhist figures are often

deployed in media narratives at the service of non-Buddhist ends which perpetuate orientalized stereotypes of the Asian other. I argue that during the Woods affair, Buddhism was deployed in the service of a pre-existing narrative of conflict between conservatives and liberals that permeates the current U.S. media landscape. Furthermore, representations of Buddhism were constructed, in part, by making an appeal to the expert, i.e., by consulting (usually white male) secular scholars rather than allowing Buddhists to represent their religion on their own terms, thus obscuring the voice of practicing Buddhists (Asian or otherwise). Finally, despite having their own sizable media networks, U.S. Buddhists themselves seem unable to effectively counter such representations either by perpetuating pre-existing media narratives or by ignoring them altogether.<sup>3</sup>

These conclusions are borne out of a survey of mainstream media reports on Tiger Woods and Buddhism and/or religion. As tabloids were primarily focused on the sex-scandal angle to the story, most of the reportage on Woods and Buddhism was limited to mainstream media outlets, though it should be noted that the celebrity gossip cable channel E! also reported on Buddhism both in a televised program and its website. Between January and May 2010, culled largely through online searches, I found approximately sixty-five mainstream media reports that reported specifically on Buddhism. These included several televised news broadcasts on all three major cable news networks, subsequent stories published on their associated websites, newspapers, and magazines. To the extent that late-night comedy shows were already satirizing Woods' marital infidelity, many of these programs also made reference to Buddhism including *Real Time with Bill Maher* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Newspapers and magazines reported on Tiger Woods and Buddhism as well, though these reports tended to be syndicated AP and Reuters stories that were republished in national newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *USA Today*. In what follows, rather than detailing each of these reports, I have chosen a select few examples to demonstrate the way in which

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<sup>3</sup>. In the following analysis, I have focused primarily on U.S. media reports about Tiger Woods and Buddhism for the following reasons: first and foremost, in my research, I found that while news of Woods' infidelity certainly spread around the world, U.S. media outlets seemed particularly interested in the "Buddhist angle" to the story. Moreover, to the extent that Woods is, himself, a U.S. citizen, it seemed to me to make the most sense to focus on U.S. Buddhism. However, it also seems to me that it would have been irresponsible to limit my discussion to just the United States; one of the major players in this story was the Buddhist magazine *Shambhala Sun*, a magazine that is published in Nova Scotia, Canada. Further, the two *Sun* writers whom I reference in this piece were both, at the time, living in the United States. While I essentially agree with Jeff Wilson's (2009) assessment that scholars of Buddhism in the United States need to be attentive to the regional particularities of their subject, it seems to me that media studies provides a considerable challenge to this model. Media, almost by definition, transcends regional boundaries. Media creates new, shared cultural spheres that cannot be limited to traditionally defined geopolitical nation states. Nevertheless, to the extent that this paper is focused primarily on U.S. media and U.S. Buddhists, and to the extent that such terminological and methodological issues are well beyond the scope of this paper, I have opted for the shorthand of U.S. in my discussion, except when referencing the work of other scholars who have chosen different language.

Buddhism was deployed within an ongoing media narrative of conflict between conservatives and liberals, a narrative that begins with Brit Hume's comment on Fox News and ends with commentary published in the Buddhist magazine *Shambhala Sun* some four months later.

This study builds in part on methodologies employed Wall and Moore, as outlined above. Noting that news media tends to set news stories within thematic narrative frames, I paid attention to the particular narrative of conflict media used in the immediate wake of Hume's comment that Woods should convert to Christianity. However, I have also been attentive to the particular way in which specific persons or their hyperreal icons were deployed within this narrative. And in this I take seriously the work of Iwamura and her critique of the orientalized representations of Asian religions in American culture. These perspectives can be helpful when talking about Buddhists in U.S. mediascapes for, as we will see, U.S. Buddhists themselves are often excluded or silenced in media narratives. Being attentive to the ways that both mainstream and Buddhist media elide Buddhist voices will have important consequences not only on how one studies U.S. Buddhism but on how Buddhists themselves may wish to engage (mis)representations of their tradition.

Finally, before I continue, it should go without saying that this paper is not about Tiger Woods. I am not interested in re-airing his dirty laundry or commenting on whether or not Woods is either a good person or a bad Buddhist. Despite whatever personal feelings I or anyone else has about persons who cheat on their spouses, I would like to give him the right of privacy we are all too ready to give up nowadays, and, only slightly more importantly, would like to take him at his word when he says that he is a practicing Buddhist. In what follows I am primarily interested in how Buddhism was represented in U.S. media in the wake of his affairs becoming public and what these representations may tell us about U.S. attitudes toward Buddhism.

### **What Hume Said: Media Narratives of Conflict**

News of Woods' infidelity began to break around Thanksgiving of 2009. Prior to this, Woods had always kept a tight lid on his personal life. His concern for privacy seems to have been extended to his religious life. A simple online search for news reports on Woods' Buddhist practice pre-2010 comes up extremely short. Several articles cite a 1996 *Sports Illustrated* interview in which he mentions Buddhism (Smith 1996); but most of these articles are focused primarily on what makes Woods a good golfer, not what makes him a good Buddhist. These stories (and Woods himself) frame Buddhism in terms of a mental discipline that enables him to remain calm under pressure on the fairway, a depiction in line with Bartholomeuz's and Iwamura's critique (e.g., Buddhism as means to some non-Buddhist end). Moreover, as the story began to break in the mainstream media, Buddhism was all but absent from media reports; his religious life seemed wholly unrelated to his sex life.

This changed with Brit Hume. On January 3, on Fox News Sunday, Hume made Buddhism and religion a central component of the story when he said:

Whether he can recover as a person... depends on his faith. He's said to be a Buddhist. I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, Tiger... turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world (Hume 2010).

It is possible that Buddhism would not have become a part of this story had Hume not brought Woods' religious identity to the forefront. Once he did, a media firestorm erupted. Dozens of stories popped up across the web and cable news channels following Hume's comment, putting him on the defensive as a host of media outlets chastised him for evangelizing. He defended himself in several primarily conservative news outlets, never wavering from the argument that he had a right to express his opinions. By and large, whereas a few media sources attempted to counter the central argument—that Buddhism-as-religion does not offer forgiveness or redemption—most commentary focused on the question of whether or not it was appropriate for a reporter to be evangelizing on a nationally broadcast news program. And these commentaries were decidedly partisan in nature.

Two examples illustrate how Buddhism was deployed in this narrative of conflict between conservatives and liberals. First was the January 4 broadcast of Keith Olbermann's *Countdown*, at the time still on MSNBC. After a short monologue wherein he argues that Hume's comments only serve to show how partisan Fox News in fact is, and after reading other critiques of Hume's comments, Olbermann interviews relationship advice columnist and political activist Dan Savage. As an outspoken critic of conservative politicians and champion of LGBT rights, Savage's appearance on *Countdown* is clearly political in nature, not religious. Had Olbermann been interested in discussing Buddhism or the accuracy of Hume's characterization of it, certainly he could have invited a Buddhist teacher or scholar onto his program.

The interview begins with Olbermann rephrasing Hume's premise as "being Christian is the best religion for adulterers because you can be forgiven." He and Savage then engage in a lengthy conversation on the inappropriateness of Hume and Fox News to be either proselytizing or giving marital advice. Essentially, Olbermann and Savage argue two things: (1) journalists should not discuss religion in public; and (2) Hume's comment is another example of the Christian right pitting one religion against another, a dangerous rhetoric that Olbermann and Savage link directly to the global war on terror. Their first argument, one that was advanced in several post-Hume editorials, is debatable. If we are never to discuss religion in public, it seems to me impossible for us to learn anything constructive about other religions and thus move past the "our religion is better than yours" rhetoric Olbermann and Savage want to end.

Over the course of the nearly four-minute interview, Buddhism was only mentioned in the following brief exchange:

Savage: We've gotta stop, we gotta de-escalate this rhetoric, and the rhetorical war of pitting one religion against another religion, particularly as inoffensive a religion as Buddhism.

Olbermann (laughing): We haven't heard any threats from radical Buddhists lately in this country.

Savage: There are no Buddhists with bombs in their underpants on airplanes, I don't think. (Savage 2010)

This episode of *Countdown* aired less than two weeks after Umar Abdul Mutallab attempted to blow up a plane en route to Detroit, Michigan, with a bomb in his underwear. This, coupled with several other references Olbermann and Savage make about "jihadists," makes it clear that Buddhism is a different kind of religion from Islam. Thus, despite their pleas for us to move away from a rhetoric that pits one religion against another, they inadvertently do just that. Religious extremists of both the Christian and Islamic variety are dangerous; Buddhists are inoffensive. This juxtaposition between peaceful Buddhists and jihadist Muslims speaks directly to Tweed's question, "Why are Buddhists so nice?" U.S. media is quick to portray Buddhism as tolerant while linking Islam with extremists, a trend even the left-leaning *Countdown* seems subject to.

A second example of how Buddhism was deployed in the narrative of conflict can be seen in former CNN anchor Rick Sanchez's coverage of what Hume said. Aired January 6, after Hume had attempted to defend himself on Bill O'Reilly's show, Sanchez begins his coverage by noting that "as a Christian" he doesn't find what Hume said to be particularly offensive. Where he draws the line is in the presumption that Christianity is somehow better than Buddhism. "I really don't know much about Buddhism," Sanchez says, but unlike Hume, "I'm not going to go on national television and try and explain what's right or what's wrong with Buddhism." Thus, to cure his ignorance about this faith tradition, and unlike Olbermann, Sanchez interviews Buddhist meditation instructor and the founder of New York's Interdependence Project, Ethan Nichtern. Despite the fact that Nichtern and Woods undoubtedly follow different practice traditions,<sup>4</sup> this interview is noteworthy as the only one with an actual Buddhist teacher in the immediate aftermath of Hume's comments.

Sanchez set up his interview as a way for him and his viewers to learn something about Buddhism, but it quickly becomes clear that he's interested in something else entirely. The interview lasts approximately six minutes; Nichtern speaks for roughly two and a half minutes, during which time he is interrupted repeatedly. After confirming that Nichtern is, in fact, a Buddhist, Sanchez asks for his reaction to Hume's statement. "I don't want to speak for all Buddhists," Nichtern says, and tries to describe what Buddhism is before being interrupted by Sanchez. "Before we get into a discussion of Buddhism... as a Buddhist do you believe Hume was presumptive [in what he said]?" Their ensuing back-and-forth includes many such moments when Nichtern attempts to give somewhat nuanced answers only to be interrupted again. Despite ostensibly wanting to know more about Buddhism, Sanchez appears to want to know one thing and one thing only: was Hume right or wrong? Are Buddhists offended? Nichtern

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4. As will be discussed below, Woods is most likely affiliated with a Thai-derived Theravada tradition; Nichtern is a teacher in the Shambhala tradition.



dodges these questions by saying that he cannot speak to certain things and suggests that Hume may have been ignorant but probably wasn't intentionally being harmful. For most of the interview, both Sanchez and Nichtern are simultaneously viewable via split screen; at several points one gets the impression that Sanchez isn't really paying attention, rustling papers, and getting ready to ask his next question.

Thus, despite the fact that his stated goal is to learn more about Buddhism, based on his tone and the types of questions asked, it would seem that Sanchez is more concerned about placing Buddhism in opposition to Hume/Christianity, in deploying Buddhism as just another actor in, to use Savage's term, the ongoing rhetoric that pits one religion against another. While Nichtern does a reasonably good job describing Buddhism on his own terms, Sanchez has the final word, closing the interview with the statement that "Buddhism, as you describe it sounds like a very accepting faith, a very accepting religion," even though Nichtern never uses the terms accepting, religion, or faith. And one final point: following the interview, Sanchez cut to commercial, and when he returned he turned to the "Twitter Board" for reactions. Among these was the comment: "Don't Buddhists believe in [reincarnation]? I don't want to become a tree. Trees become toilet paper. That's sad" (Nichtern 2010).

At the outset of the Woods' affair, Buddhism was deployed not so much as a religious tradition—as one choice among many in a religiously plural United States—but as an actor in an ongoing political debate between left-leaning and right-leaning ideologues. In the dozens of news stories and commentaries in the weeks following Hume's comment, the question of the appropriateness of Hume's comment and the place of religious discourse in public was at the forefront obscuring conversation about Buddhism. As the Sanchez-Nichtern interview suggests, Buddhism was asked to take a side in this debate. Sanchez does not really want to know more about Buddhism; he doesn't even want to know if Buddhism offers forgiveness. He only wants to know where Buddhists stand on the political divide between conservatives and liberals.

### **What Woods Said: Who Speaks for Buddhism in U.S. Media?**

On February 19, Buddhism was back in the news when Woods held a press conference to apologize for his sexual dalliances. In the midst of his prepared statement, Woods claimed a Buddhist identity for perhaps the first time during the affair when he said

People probably don't realize it, but I was raised a Buddhist, and I actively practiced my faith from childhood until I drifted away from it in recent years. Buddhism teaches that a craving<sup>5</sup> of things outside ourselves causes an unhappy and pointless search for security. It teaches me to stop following every impulse and to learn restraint. Obviously, I lost track of what I was taught.

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5. The text of his prepared statement contained a typo, replacing "craving" with "creating." Many commentators merely read the statement and did not see video of the press conference at which Woods clearly said "craving." This led to some confused editorials (e.g., Strand 2010).

Following Woods' apology, another firestorm of media reports spread across the web and news channels. Unlike the stories that followed Hume's comments, however, this new batch of stories was more focused on Buddhism directly; or, rather, these stories were concerned with whether or not Woods' description of Buddhism was more or less accurate (and, of course, commentators were concerned with his general sincerity and how his vow to enter rehab would affect his golf game). During this time, Buddhism was represented in very specific ways in a large number of news stories, and these representations all followed very similar patterns. Buddhism was framed as a religion that emerged in India 2500 years ago; Buddhists believe in reincarnation; Buddhism has an ethical or moral system that teaches that suffering is the result of past actions or karma; Buddhists believe that self-discipline, mental training, or meditation will alleviate suffering; and, lastly, Woods learned of Buddhism through his Thai mother, Kultida (e.g., Gilgoff 2010; Gornstein 2010; "Tiger Woods and Buddhism" 2010).

Representations of Buddhism before Woods' apology were, by and large, presented as obvious, uncontested fact. Olbermann and Savage, for example, claim that Buddhists are pacifists as compared to Christian and Islamic extremists; no evidence for this is offered apart from the apparent lack of Buddhist airline terrorists. Woods' apology, however, contained within it his own point of view regarding what Buddhism is; at the very least, he provided the public with a summation of what Buddhism means *for him*. Nevertheless, media stories disregarded his personal point of view and instead represented Buddhism in a variety of ways not based on what Woods' said but rather on the testimony of scholarly experts.

The practice of consulting experts, of course, is a fairly common trope in television news wherein an expert will be interviewed—often a university professor and more often filmed in front of a bookcase stuffed with books—to provide perspective or analysis on a story. The same was true following Woods' apology. A small handful of scholars were consulted and quoted across a large number of news sources; among those most commonly quoted were Robert Thurman and Stephen Prothero. Others included Janet Gyatso, Charles Prebish, and James William Coleman. By and large, when a scholar was consulted, the intent seemed to be to fact check Woods' description of Buddhism. For example, an article on CNN's website quoted Woods' description of Buddhism and went on to say

A handful of Buddhist scholars said Woods' description of Buddhist teaching was spot on. "Woods was quite accurate," said Janet Gyatso, a professor of Buddhist studies at Harvard University. "Craving causes unhappiness. That's a fundamental Buddhist idea." (Gilgoff 2010)

Rather than taking Woods at his word that this is what Buddhism is (or, at the very least, that this is what Buddhism is *for him*) reporters felt the need to reach out to some third party to verify that this is what Buddhism *really* is. And more often than not, this third party was a secular academic.

It is true of course that many Buddhist scholars are also Buddhist practitioners, and many of the scholars quoted are in fact "scholar-practitioners," to borrow a phrase.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to note that they are never identified as such; rather, they are identified merely by their profession, by their scholarly expertise. Robert Thurman, for example, whose Buddhist practice is a matter of public knowledge, was introduced as "a professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia University" much in the way that Janet Gyatso was described above. Regardless of the scholar's personal religious affiliation, they are framed in media stories as professors, as educators, as scholars. They are being courted by media sources not because they are Buddhist but because of their status as scholarly experts. Who speaks for Buddhism in U.S. media, then, are not necessarily Buddhists (or, for that matter, the only Buddhist who should matter here, Tiger Woods), but scholars.

Of course, some Buddhist teachers were also consulted, three to be exact: the aforementioned Ethan Nichtern, Zen iconoclast Brad Warner, and mindfulness meditation teacher and author Jack Kornfield. This is a surprising list of Buddhist teachers to be consulted when reporting on "Tiger Woods' Buddhism." Because of his penchant for privacy, it is difficult to determine precisely which Buddhist tradition Woods follows. Nevertheless, based on the fact, repeated countless times in the media, that he learned of Buddhism through his Thai mother, coupled with passing references to some of his practices, it is reasonable to assume that Woods is affiliated with a Thai-derived Theravada Buddhist tradition. If this is true, it certainly would have been possible to reach out to the Thai American Buddhist community for comment. There are likely more than a hundred thousand Thai American Buddhists, represented by two, large national organizations: the Council of Thai Bhikkhus in the USA and the Dhammayut Order in the USA (Cadge and Sangdhanoo 2005).<sup>7</sup> The three Buddhist teachers quoted, of course, not only are not Thai American, they do not follow the same Buddhist tradition as Woods. Jack Kornfield comes closest, to the extent that his mindfulness practices are based on his training in the Thai forest tradition; nevertheless, there is no evidence that Woods is a student of Kornfield.

So it would seem that as far as the mainstream media was concerned, the most reliable source of information on Woods' Buddhism was neither Woods himself nor other

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6. See Prebish 1999, 173–202. It is difficult to always know the religious affiliation of Buddhist scholars due to a long-standing bias against so-called scholar-practitioners. It may very well be that due to this bias, a number of scholars keep their personal beliefs private and are not prone to disclose them to the general public, i.e., to a reporter looking for an angle on a tabloid piece. Nevertheless, regardless of whether any individual scholar lets his or her religious affiliation known to a reporter, the reporters are clearly looking for sources from universities first, Buddhist communities second.

7. There is a third branch of Thai Theravada Buddhism in the U.S. that is affiliated with Wat Dhammakaya, a somewhat controversial organization with a much smaller presence in the U.S. Though it is certainly possible that Woods or his mother are affiliated with Wat Dhammakaya, it seems to me more likely that they are affiliated with either of the two mainstream Thai organizations.

Buddhists from a Thai Theravada Buddhist background. Instead, the go-to source was predominately (white male) academics and Buddhist teachers from other traditions.

Of course, it may come as no surprise that mainstream media outlets do not recognize the differences between Buddhist traditions and instead treat Buddhism as if it were a single, monolithic entity. As scholars such as Tweed (1992) and McMahan (2008) have noted, the notion that there is a universal essence to the religion has played a dominant role in how Buddhism has been represented in U.S. media since the nineteenth century and is a defining feature of what has become known as Buddhist modernism. Arguably, if the mainstream media views Buddhism in the singular, then it makes little difference that Woods is a follower of one type of Buddhism whereas Brad Warner, say, is the follower of a completely different tradition. Aren't all Buddhisms the same? What difference does it make which Buddhists are interviewed?

Assuming that Woods is in fact a practitioner of Thai Theravada Buddhism, one has to wonder if this oversight is related to the ongoing debate in U.S. Buddhist discourse regarding the "two Buddhisms" typology. In this schema, U.S. Buddhists are divided into one of two (sometimes one of three) categories: Euro-American converts on the one hand, Asian immigrant and Asian American heritage Buddhists on the other. Since Helen Tworikov's now infamous claim in a 1991 *Tricycle: the Buddhist Review* editorial that Asian Buddhists have not contributed to the making of "American Buddhism," this debate has had a particularly negative and divisive tone. Critics have rightly argued that this division obscures the contribution Asian Americans have long made not only to American Buddhism but to modern Buddhism and, indeed, American culture more generally (Prebish 1993; Numrich 2003; Hickey 2010). Arguably, then, the mainstream media may simply be making the Tworikov mistake, i.e., being blind to "ethnic" Buddhists while being preoccupied with the Buddhism of white converts. From this point of view, Woods' ethnic Thai community becomes hidden behind commentary on Buddhism by white converts and scholars.

However, one problem remains. Tiger Woods is not, properly speaking, Thai American. He is of mixed ethnic heritage, and in reducing him to a single, essentialist racial category, we make the same mistake the media so often does of using ethnic categories as an acceptable "gloss" without being attentive to the complexities of racial representation (Wuthnow 2005: 333, n. 38). Iwamura's Oriental Monk icon is particularly useful here. First, we must keep in mind that Iwamura draws a distinction between the real persons and the mediated "hyperreal" images of those persons. An analysis of these hyperreal images allows us to see how they function as cultural icons. The icon of "Tiger Woods" is deployed in a number of different ways, and race and ethnicity has been a part of his story since he began his professional golf career. In some ways, this image has primarily been one of a "model minority" or a "good black" to the extent that he has been portrayed as a successful African-American athlete in a historically white sport. His blackness was highlighted in 1997 following racist comments made by fellow golfer Fuzzy Zoeller. Partially in response to being characterized as African American, Woods appeared on Oprah Winfrey's shows where he described himself as "Cablinasian"—a portmanteaux of Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian, a term he coined to reflect his white, African American, Native American, and

Thai heritages.<sup>8</sup> In claiming a mixed ethnic heritage, Woods the person distances himself from the mediated icon of "Tiger Woods" who is reduced to a single ethnicity. Furthermore, by highlighting the Thai Buddhist connection as part of his success story as an athlete, the icon of "Tiger Woods" can be read as another instance of Iwamura's Oriental Monk icon. That is, rather than being seen as a threat to the dominant culture, Buddhism as foreign religion is deployed in the service of American sport. It is not surprising then that once he failed to live up to this icon, once Woods' real image failed to live up to his hyperreal image, his fall from favor was quick, and the media was quick to denounce him.<sup>9</sup>

Woods' own description of Buddhism is rejected in favor of descriptions from Buddhist studies scholars and non-Thai Buddhists. This is one of the ways that Asian and Buddhist voices can be elided or silenced altogether in favor of the dominant narrative which props up the icon of the Oriental Monk. Iwamura states:

Through the figure of the nonsexual, solitary Oriental Monk, Asian religiosity and spirituality are made palatable—psychologically, socially, and politically—for dominant culture consumption. Hence, the Monk as signifier serves as a way for Americans to manage Asian American religious communities by *re-presenting* Asian spiritual heritages in a specific way—that is, by reinforcing certain comforting assumptions and presenting the Other in a manner that is recognizable and acceptable (Iwamura 2011: 22).

Tiger Woods the man clearly cannot live up to the icon of the Oriental Monk; if nothing else, he is obviously not "nonsexual." And the type of sexuality he represents is a threat to the dominant culture's fixation on Protestant sexual norms and "family values." Before his affair, the reality of Woods could be easily eclipsed by the icon of Woods—a "model minority" athlete whose foreign religion was used in the service of his golf game. The hyperreal image of Woods was safe so long as his private life remained private. Once that privacy was dismantled, however, the conflict cannot be resolved without an appeal to acceptable experts—scholars and white Buddhist converts—to assure us that Buddhism is, in fact, a safe and palatable religion. Woods as a person can be discarded for failing to embody the hyperreal icon; Buddhism, however, is maintained as a religion acceptable for mainstream cultural consumption.

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8. See Taylor 2011: 744 for an application of Iwamura's thesis to the "model minority" trope. See Woods 1997 and "Zoeller" 1997 for more information on Woods' self-identification as "Cablinasian" in reaction to racist comments made by Zoeller.

<sup>9</sup>. Media Studies and Black Studies scholars have noted the preponderance of another icon in U.S. media, that of the "magical Negro," a quasi-spiritual character who serves the needs of the white protagonist. Will Smith's character in the 2000 film *The Legend of Bagger Vance* is a perfect case in point wherein a black caddy helps a white Southern golfer regain his "authentic swing" (e.g., Hicks 2003; Gabbard 2004; Glenn and Cunningham 2007). Certainly, Tiger Woods' life story has been cast in similarly mythic ways, and it would be interesting to explore the icon of Woods as both Oriental Monk and magical Negro.

## The Mainstream Buddhist Media Response

U.S. Buddhists (of Asian heritage or otherwise) do of course have access to media outlets and are often the creators of their own media representations. There are several mass-market, glossy magazines, for instance, in addition to countless local (and some national level), sectarian-based Buddhist newsletters and publications. And, of course, there is a growing mass of Buddhists online who inhabit various social media sites, blogs, forums, and other online publications. However, for the purposes of this study, I focus on what I will call the *mainstream Buddhist media* whose locus are three mass-market magazines, *Tricycle: the Buddhist Review*, *Shambhala Sun*, and *Buddhadharma*, and their attendant network of email newsletters, online social networks, blogs, and larger publishing houses. I focus on the mainstream Buddhist media here for several reasons, primary among them that these magazines have large subscription bases and are cited frequently by Buddhists in other media spheres. Moreover, whereas there may be a critical mass of Buddhists on Twitter, say, there is no evidence that this mass is having much of an impact on national level mainstream media discourses (Rick Sanchez's "Twitter board" notwithstanding). The mainstream Buddhist media, on the other hand, are in a position to engage and challenge the mainstream press in a way that a lone Buddhist on Twitter cannot.

One would assume, given their reach and level of influence, that a story such as the Tiger Woods' affair and the media responses to it would be newsworthy in the mainstream Buddhist media. This assumption turns out to be largely unfounded. *Buddhadharma* did not mention the Woods affair at all. *Tricycle* did not mention the story in print, but did post a few notes about it on their editor's blog. These notes, however, tended to merely point the reader to other web sites covering the affair in more detail.

*Shambhala Sun* was the exception. The magazine's editor of online and digital content is Rod Meade Sperry, a fairly well-known person in online Buddhist circles due, in part, to his popular website, *The Worst Horse* (<http://theworsthorse.com>). The site is a collection of what Meade Sperry calls "Dharma Burgers," those moments when Buddhism and pop-culture collide, often with hilarious if discomfoting results. Given his interest in the intersection of Buddhism and pop-culture, it was no surprise that the *Shambhala Sun's* blog *SunSpace*—maintained by Meade Sperry—covered the Woods-Hume fiasco closely, posting updates almost as soon as news stories aired in the mainstream press. These posts, along with a wide assortment of reactions across Buddhist blogs and social media spaces, constituted the loudest Buddhist response to what Hume, and later Woods, had to say about Buddhism. By and large, this voice was united in its antipathy toward Hume and his misrepresentation of Buddhism. But, much like mainstream media outlets, for the most part this discourse merely repeated the conservative versus liberal rhetoric.

For example, the May 2010 issue of *Shambhala Sun* included an article by Meade Sperry titled "Buddhism in the Spin Zone." Largely recapping the media coverage to date, the only mention of Tiger Woods is in the opening paragraphs where Meade Sperry writes that he was reluctant to report on the affair, but "not because he's some kind of

embarrassment to Buddhism—his affiliation never seemed to be that serious anyhow." Despite being printed well after Woods' apology, there is no mention of it or whether or not Woods achieved any sort of redemption or forgiveness. Thus, the article focuses entirely on what Hume said and why it was wrong. (It is relevant to note that he refers not to the "Woods affair" but to the "Hume affair.") Meade Sperry notes the backlash against Hume and Fox News that occurred online and writes:

All in all, this sort of online turnout was good news. Why? Well, Buddhists don't proselytize. Neither do true newsmen. But Hume had thrown impartiality out the window along with his common sense, presenting to Fox viewers... a divisive and, yes, *proselytizing* suggestion that colored Buddhism as inferior. As the story broke, one had to wonder not just *how* Buddhists would stick up for themselves, but *if*. (Meade Sperry 2009, italics in original.)

This was the last article to appear in the mainstream Buddhist media about Woods, and it is clear that *Shambhala Sun* has fallen in line with the overarching narrative of conflict. What Hume said was wrong, and Buddhists took a stand against him and Fox News.

One important exception to the overarching narrative of conflict, however, was an April 29 *SunSpace* blog post written by Danny Fisher, a teacher at the University of the West, a Buddhist university in Southern California. Challenging the notion that U.S. Buddhists are primarily liberal elites, Fisher points out that a significant number of U.S. Buddhists are Asian immigrants or Asian Americans who may self-identify as politically conservative. Fisher questions why Fox News would allow one of its commentators to say something that would alienate members of its audience. Echoing Iwamura's critique that Asian American Buddhists are often obscured in public discourse, Fisher writes:

With this apparent tendency to see Buddhist America largely through the eyes of a certain kind of [white convert], we might then ask: Is it possible that Fox News is hosting Hume's disapproving comments because of a projection about the nature of Buddhism in America? If Buddhism is so often spoken of in connection with sixties counterculture and Hollywood elitism, is it possible that Hume and Co. have decided that U.S. Buddhists are not "real Americans?" Is a media culture that tends to see the history of Buddhism as beginning with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac (and not with Chinese immigrants in California in the early nineteenth century) ultimately responsible for Buddhists being belittled on Fox News? (Fisher 2010)

Fisher's commentary is the only sustained mainstream Buddhist media response that notes the lack of Asian American voices in this debate while critically engaging and countering several stereotypes and assumptions about Buddhists and Buddhist practice in the United States.

### Concluding Perspectives: Silence/d Buddhists?

Buddhism and Buddhists are represented in U.S. media in a variety of ways, deployed within narratives, and propped up as icons for "dominant culture consumption." Prior to the revelation of his affairs, Tiger Woods' Buddhism was deployed within the familiar narrative of being an aid to his golf game, his own specific instance of "Zen and the art of golf" (Stangl 2009). Following Brit Hume's declaration that Buddhism is ill-suited to those seeking redemption for sexual impropriety, Buddhism was re-deployed, this time in service to an ongoing media narrative that pits conservatives against liberals. It should come as no surprise that a religion that has been consistently typecast as passive and non-violent would here be typecast in the role of liberal religion juxtaposed to Hume's conservative evangelism. Later, as Woods attempted to take responsibility for his actions and define Buddhism on his own terms, the media would return to the familiar pattern of relying on expert testimony to define Buddhism in terms it has been comfortable with for well over a century, terms that, once again, allow the religion to be consumed by the dominant culture. Hence, once the dust had settled from the affair, once Woods had resumed his proper place on the golf course, Buddhism could be deployed in the familiar narrative of golf aid. Consider this, from an April 27 *Wall Street Journal* story titled "Can Buddha Help Your Short Game?"

When Tiger Woods finally emerged from his trip through the wilderness of marital infidelity, he vowed to make some life changes. One of them was to reconnect to Buddhism, the religion of his youth. It's fair to say Buddhism could make him a better person. But here's a scary notion for the rest of the PGA Tour: There's a reasonable chance it could make him a better golfer, too. (Karp 2010)

The paucity of national-level Buddhist responses to how Buddhism was and continues to be represented (and misrepresented) in the mainstream media is worth further study. A cynical view might take the mainstream Buddhist media to task for ignoring or perpetuating misrepresentations. This view might argue that a magazine such as *Tricycle*, while purporting to be a "Buddhist journal," is actually more of a lifestyle magazine. As such it must balance any commitment it has to the Buddha's teachings with the realities of being in the business of selling magazines and advertising space. It would not be problematic for the editors to take a political stand on something non-threatening to the wider Buddhist community—supporting the Free Tibet movement, for example. Taking a stand on a controversial or morally ambiguous social or political issue is another matter altogether.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, it is important to note that the mainstream Buddhist media does not necessarily represent the entirety of the U.S. Buddhist population. That is, whereas there are a distinctly small number of practicing Buddhists in the United States, they represent dozens of different practice traditions, not to mention different ethnic,

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10. It has also been suggested to me that to the extent that *Tricycle* is run by a non-profit organization, it may be reluctant to take a decisive political stance lest it lose its tax-exempt status. I am not fully convinced that being a tax-exempt organization necessarily translates to an aversion to taking any political stance (either morally or legally), but it is worth considering.



cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Not all U.S. Buddhists are concerned about the same things; and given their overall minority status, mounting a critical mass of like-minded U.S. Buddhists to rail against some perceived injustice (especially if only a few Buddhists consider something to in fact be an injustice) would be difficult if not impossible. It is reasonable then to assume that while some Buddhists were deeply offended at what Hume said or deeply troubled by Woods' ethical missteps, many others either did not care or did not even know that this was an issue. Or perhaps the lack of a strong U.S. Buddhist public voice is some combination of these factors, some other factor, or none of them. Only further research can really answer that question, but at present it seems clear that U.S. Buddhists lack a strong enough media presence to meaningfully engage, counter, or redirect mainstream media narratives and (mis)representations about Buddhism.

It is important, however, to bear in mind Iwamura's analysis of the Oriental Monk icon and to be mindful of the ways that Asian American and Buddhist voices are often lost or elided in favor the voice of the scholarly expert. This is especially important for those of us, myself included, who are ourselves "scholarly experts." When representations, harmful or benign, of Buddhism and Buddhists are perpetuated in the media and popular culture, are we culpable in the obfuscation of Asian voices? To what extent do we enable (mis)representations to go unchecked? In his review of Iwamura's book, Mark Lewis Taylor highlights the moral imperative to her work, her call for those of us who are drawn to media images of the Asian other (and, presumably, scholars of Asian religions), not to "comfortably revel in our own fascination and reverence." Taylor asserts that "there is pervading Iwamura's text a moral sense with political and civic implications, which identifies processes that are 'insidious' (cunning, with harmful effects) and thus in need of exposure and resistance" (Taylor 2011: 745). Scholars of Buddhism are often asked to participate in the representation of Buddhism for mass media and pop-cultural consumption. We therefore have a moral or civic responsibility to expose and resist representations that do more harm than good.

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