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Introducing the Sort-of Buddhist: Or, “If There Is No ‘I’ to Have a Religious Identity, Then How Do I Fill Out This Survey?”

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Introducing the Sort-of Buddhist: Or, "If There Is No 'I' to Have a Religious Identity, Then How Do I Fill Out This Survey?"[*]

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Abstract

Western concepts of religious identity developed from worldviews that posit a permanent self and require exclusive acceptance of a single religion for salvation. These assumptions become problematic, however, when applied to traditions holding different worldviews. As a result, Western religious demographic research uses categories that do not accurately reflect many practitioners' understanding of themselves and their religious paths. New approaches are needed to assess contemporary religious identity. A 2011 survey of participants in the Buddhist Churches of America asked respondents, "Would you describe yourself as Buddhist?" Response options included the new category: "yes, sort of." While the majority answered that they were "definitely" Buddhist, 15 percent chose the "sort of" option. We explore potential motives for this selection from multiple perspectives including a brief overview of Buddhist philosophy and teaching regarding the nature of self, a review of previous literature on Buddhist identity, and quantitative and qualitative analysis of new and existing data. Our literature review and qualitative results suggest that the choice of Sort-of Buddhist identity reflects an understanding of religious identity grounded in Buddhist teaching regarding the "self" as impermanent and interdependent. We also identify a pattern in which individuals who began attending Buddhist temples as adults are disproportionately likely to identify as "sort of" Buddhist, even though they respond similarly to "definitely" Buddhists on measures of religious participation. Finally, we suggest that contemporary ambivalence toward exclusive religious identity in the U.S. may also be a factor in choosing a "sort of" religious identity.

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A few years ago, the first author worked with an undergraduate student on a paper (Kim 2013) about religious identity. The student is from Korea, and her mother faithfully practices Buddhism. But for four years—her last two years of high school and first two years of college—the student lived with a host mother in America. Her host mother is a devout evangelical Christian. This student is close to both of her mothers and was struck by the difference between their approaches to religious identity, specifically how it affected the way they talked about themselves. Both were deeply devoted to their religion. The American evangelical mother gained comfort from understanding her Christian identity as the source of her eternal salvation. The Korean Buddhist mother saw any attachment, including attachment to self or Buddhist identity, as a source of suffering as taught in the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

This student's experience suggests that how people see their "self" in relation to a religious tradition genuinely affects their language, their priorities, and their behavior towards others. The host mother's view of her "self" as permanently Christian gave her comfort, while her host-daughter's non-Christian identity brought the host mother anxiety. For the Korean mother, understanding the self as changing and impermanent affected her willingness to claim any identity at all. The student describes a conversation with her Korean mother like this: "So I asked her 'Mom, are you a Buddhist?' and she said 'Hmm…I rather say I practice in Buddhism, I would say my religion is Buddhism and I will tell people when they ask me. But I would rather say I practice in Buddhism. That's more comfortable.'" The student's American mother says, "I am a Christian," while her Korean mother says, "I practice Buddhism" (Kim, 2013: 5). Although it is possible that the American mother would accept the idea that she "practices" Christianity, or that the Korean mother would agree that she qualifies as "a Buddhist," their preferred modes of talk, their presumed "genres of religious selfhood," are consistent with influential doctrines from their respective traditions (Lichterman, 2012: 32–33; Wuthnow 2011). The student's mothers' contrasting understandings of religious identity illustrate how different theories of "self" can lead to important differences in people's responses to queries about their religious identity.

We can see religious identity working at two levels, one spiritual and one social. On a spiritual level, the Christian mother believes that her self—or "soul"—has permanence, a concrete status crucial to salvation. People with this perspective hold an "essentialist" understanding of religious identity. It is *who they are*, and by claiming a particular and exclusive religious identity, they are also claiming a precondition for salvation itself (Wuthnow 2005). But religious identity works more conventionally as well. By claiming a particular religious identity, a person also claims a social identity, a right to be included in particular religious or social groups. This social identity grants access to the material, practical, and social benefits of belonging to the group (Stark and Finke, 2000: 36–55).[1] Societies may punish or exclude people who project flexible or non-exclusive identities, seeing them as insincere, confused, or otherwise untrustworthy. Both the spiritual and cultural benefits of religious identity lead to an often-unquestioned expectation of static and exclusive religious identities. How researchers ask questions about religious identity and affiliation on various surveys and assessments frequently reflects this assumption.[2] We wondered if assumptions about the nature of religious identity affect how respondents answer religious identity questions, and ultimately the usefulness of the data collected.

Using North American Buddhism as a model, we use a combination of literature review and quantitative and qualitative data analysis to explore how various philosophic, demographic, and personal factors may influence individuals' willingness to claim a Buddhist identity on a survey; then we present practical suggestions for how to apply this information to improve the usefulness of questions on religious identity. Since identity is multifaceted, we chose to approach the question of Buddhist identity using three different strategies. First, we summarize previous theory and research on Buddhist identity and consider the philosophical basis for some Buddhists' preference for a flexible or incomplete Buddhist identity. Second, we share results from a 2011 quantitative survey of Jōdo Shinshū (JSS) Buddhists, which allowed respondents to identify with an intermediate category: Sort-of Buddhist. Our analysis identifies demographic traits and values which are associated with claiming a Sort-of Buddhist identity. Third, we expand on these findings from the first two approaches using material from a 2015 qualitative survey, also on JSS Buddhists. Combining this information, we explore the potential usefulness of "sort of" as an option in religious identity questions and suggest several alternative ways of asking about religious identity. Although we focus on Buddhism, we believe these same questions can help develop a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of religious identity in the contemporary United States.

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[1] Conversely, such an identity can serve as a social stigma, as when one's religious affiliation marks them as "foreign," potentially prompting nativist hostilities. For this reason, in addition to others considered in this paper, some Asian Americans who are striving to be seen as fully "American" may in some cases hesitate to identify themselves as "Buddhist." As is evident in the ensuing analysis, though, avoidance of full Buddhist identity is more prevalent among those *without* Asian ancestry.

[2] Although this paper is about religious identity in Buddhism, the challenge of how to assess religious identity is not limited to Buddhism. There has, for example, been considerable discussion about how to categorize Christian identity, with extensive deliberation about how to define and apply the term "evangelical" (Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Smith et al. 1998). Scholars are also attempting to understand the growing number of people who do not identify with religion at all on large-scale surveys (Baker and Smith 2015; Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007; Lipka 2015).

WHAT IS A BUDDHIST?

Counting Buddhists in the West

Although immigrants from Asian countries have been bringing Buddhism with them to America since the mid-18th century, the academic study of Buddhism in Western countries is an emerging field, with little published material on the topic appearing until the last two decades of the 20th century (Prebish 2002). Currently, Asian immigrants and their descendants remain the majority of those who identify as Buddhists in the United States (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). A significant percentage of people practicing Buddhism, however, are Americans with no Asian ancestry, some of whom claim a Buddhist identity and others of whom do not. Though precise statistics are unavailable, a 2004 study estimated that between two and three million Americans (regardless of ethnic background) considered themselves practicing Buddhists, and approximately one in eight Americans felt that Buddhist teachings affected their spirituality to some degree (Wuthnow and Cadge 2004).

Throughout its brief history, the academic study of Buddhism in the West has struggled with how to define its study population. Vigorous debate continues among scholars about how to decide who is “Buddhist” and what, if anything, makes “Western Buddhism” or “American Buddhism” distinct from other kinds of Buddhism (see, for example, Borup 2016; Gregory 2001; Hickey 2010; Hori 2010; Nattier 1997, 1998; Prebish 1993; Spencer 2014; Tweed 1999). These debates often revolve around issues of authenticity, whether, for example, a set of beliefs or practices is authentically “Buddhist,” or whether those beliefs and practices deserve the distinct label of “American Buddhism.” Related debates raise issues of whether practice, affiliation, and/or beliefs provide a better basis for categorization than self-identification. At their best these debates have improved our understanding of the complexity of the religious landscape, describing its diversity and fostering understanding. At their worst they have created misunderstandings and reinforced racist stereotypes (Hickey 2010). Although our data will not directly resolve these debates, they do provide new perspectives into Buddhist identity which will help with research design and interpretation.

Five Types of Buddhist Affiliation/Identity

A review of the literature demonstrates that people affiliated with Buddhist groups, or who engage in Buddhist practices, respond differently to the question of whether they are Buddhist. These people can be categorized into five, sometimes overlapping, groups:

- People who engage in Buddhist practices, participate in Buddhist rituals and communities, and identify themselves as Buddhist (Nattier 1998; Tweed 1999).
- People who engage in Buddhist-based practices such as meditation or mindfulness, accept certain aspects of Buddhist philosophy, and participate in Buddhist groups, but do not identify as "Buddhist" (Cadge 2005, 2007; Campbell 2010). Buddhism and Buddhist-based practices can be disaggregated, with practices or ideas removed from the larger Buddhist context and presented in different religious or non-religious contexts (Bender and Cadge 2006; Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). There are also many who see Buddhism as a "way of life" (Danyluk, 2003: 139) and not a "religion." Gregory summarizes this outlook:

  > Buddhism is not so much a set of beliefs whose truth is to be affirmed as a practice through which "truth" is to be uncovered. For them, it is possible to be a Buddhist practitioner without being a Buddhist, although scholars would almost surely want to count them as "Buddhists" within the broad compass of American religions (Gregory, 2001: 242).

  This group approaches Buddhist practices as tools for self-realization and physical and mental health; they tend to avoid claiming overtly religious goals and therefore rarely claim a Buddhist religious identity.
- People who do not regularly participate in Buddhist communities yet still have some level of interest or engagement with Buddhism. For example, they may read Buddhist books, engage in Buddhist practices individually, and may or may not identify as Buddhist. Tweed (1999) categorizes these individuals as "sympathizers" or "nightstand Buddhists."
- People who identify with two or more traditions. This group identifies with Buddhism along with another tradition, such as Judaism or Catholicism (Cadge 2005; Coleman 2001; Rocha 2005). They perceive their multiple identities as non-contradictory and at times complementary. This multiple belonging is typical of many Asian religions and also occurs in contemporary America (Hori 2010; Smith 2007; Spencer 2018; Sun 2014).
- People who are Sort-of Buddhists. This group engages in Buddhist practices and may even participate actively in Buddhist rituals and communities. They may appear "Buddhist" to an outsider, but they claim a partial or incomplete Buddhist identity or hesitate or "fudge" when asked about it (Cadge 2005; Danyluk 2003). An example comes from Rocha (2005: 145), who reports how Brazilian students of Zen describe themselves using terms like "almost," "sort of," and "not yet" Buddhists. Wilson also uses the term "sort-of Buddhists" (2009: 488). "Sort-of Buddhist," according to Wilson, may overlap with other categories such as sympathizers and multiple-identifiers, and some may even identify as Buddhist, but they see this identity as more

> complex or nuanced than a simple one-word label conveys. Even individuals who claim Buddhist identity may have a desire to "explain how and why they responded as they did" (Danyluk, 2003: 137). "Sort-of Buddhist" includes anyone who wants a middle ground where they can acknowledge the value of Buddhism in their lives without having to claim full Buddhist identity. This group is the focus of our research.

Historical Reasons for the Complexity of Buddhist Identity

The diversity of cultural and religious traditions that are included under the label "Buddhist" complicate Buddhist identity in the United States, where people identifying as "Asian American" trace their roots to over 40 countries and speak nearly 150 languages (Han, 2017: 4). Within each Asian country and subculture, there are individual sects or lineages of Buddhism (as well as other religions which have influenced the development of Buddhism in that region), and even within sects, specific regional identities and styles developed. Variation in understanding of identity with respect to lineage, and social and political forces within that lineage, can affect how individual Buddhists talk about "being Buddhist."

These regional distinctions between Buddhist organizations in Asia can evolve in one of three possible directions when they migrate into new cultural contexts: the distinctions can grow, remain stable, or diminish. A number of studies suggest that, faced with the predominantly Christian American context, the third direction is the most likely. This tendency is because symbolic boundaries with the new U.S. culture are so much more pronounced than boundaries between the Buddhist traditions that have migrated. As Smith (2009: 64) points out, "While in Asia basic tenets such as karma and rebirth are taken for granted, this is not the case in the West. Instead, any differences between schools of Buddhism are dwarfed by the distinctions between Buddhism and the predominant Judeo-Christian ethos." Consistent with this observation, Buddhist movements in the United States have often tended toward ecumenism and the sharing of resources with each other, effectively blurring boundaries that may have been more sharply defined in their home cultures (Chen 2002; Coleman 2008; Morreale 1998; Smith 2009). At the same time, transplanted Buddhist traditions encounter cultural and competitive pressures to adapt to more Americanized religious formats, such as intensified lay involvement, meeting on Sunday mornings, sitting in pews, and singing hymns (Bankston and Zhou 2000; Coleman 2001, 2008; Numrich 1996; Warner 1993; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). As different Buddhist traditions adopt Americanized practices, the boundaries of American Buddhist identities can blur even further. In short, sharp traditional distinctions experienced in their home cultures dissipate to varying degrees as Buddhist organizations have both realized sharper distinctions with the prevailing

U.S. religious culture than with each other and also adopted similar practices and symbols which, ironically, emanate from that same religious culture. Adaptations that accompany historical transitions to the U.S. environment thus further complicate American Buddhists' patterns of religious identification.

Conceptual Reasons for the Complexity of Buddhist Identity

Full Buddhist identity is tricky for other reasons, many of which are based in the Buddhist teachings themselves. Buddhist concepts which may challenge Buddhist identity include its teachings of the impermanence of all phenomena, the importance of non-attachment, and the non-duality of self and other.

Many perceive that claiming a full Buddhist identity contradicts the teaching of impermanence fundamental to Buddhist philosophy (Cadge 2005). Buddhism teaches that everything is changing; nothing is permanent. Moreover, this tendency to perceive impermanent phenomena as permanent is the fundamental cause of human suffering. Suffering ends when we perceive the fundamentally impermanent nature of everything, even one's identity. For example, when Cadge asked about religious identity, both Thai immigrant Buddhists and Buddhist practitioners without Asian ancestry conveyed their understanding that because "humans have no permanent self to identify…we can make little sense of the ideas of identity in general and Buddhist identity in particular" (Cadge, 2005: 151). Danyluk found the same concern in her interviews with followers of several Tibetan traditions in Toronto. Ideas of religious identity conflict with teachings of non-attachment to an impermanent self: "To assume that identities are fixed is to assume they are 'closed' or complete, rather than open-ended and mutable" (Danyluk, 2003: 133). Danyluk's informants' responses "clearly illustrate…that their own conscious presentations of their own selves are multiple, partial, and shifting" (Danyluk, 2003: 137). Declaring oneself "Buddhist" may attach one to a permanent identity, something which many Buddhist practitioners are carefully trying to avoid.

Buddhism also teaches the interconnection/dependent co-arising of all phenomena. In Buddhist thought, everything is interdependent; lines of separation between different people and between people and phenomena are illusory and do not reflect the true nature of the universe (Williams 2000). And so the second conceptual challenge to Buddhist identity is that declaring oneself a "Buddhist" draws a definitional line that includes some and excludes others. Buddhists understand the world as a dynamic interconnected whole, not as a static subject-object duality. Identifying as "Buddhist," then, can reinforce unwanted dualistic thinking. An example of this concern over line-drawing is seen in this response to a question regarding whether a practitioner considered herself a Buddhist: "Not really. In the sense that I feel like when I start to apply one label, we start to exclude everything else. And I am not interested in narrowing down the field of investigation" (Danyluk, 2003: 134). People who understand the world as non-dual (or at least are working to achieve that understanding) may avoid setting up barriers between themselves and others. This same respondent continues, "So…technically yes, I am a Buddhist. And [the texts] also make clear that when you take refuge[3] you don't stop being anything else; it's not like an exclusive citizenship type of thing" (Danyluk, 2003: 134). This non-exclusive approach to Buddhist identity makes it easier for Buddhists to accept other religious teachings and creates an atmosphere more accepting of multiple-identification.

This non-dualistic teaching also leads some committed Buddhist practitioners to prefer to emphasize shared values with other traditions over personal religious identity, focusing on unity and encouraging compassion and harmony. A classic example of this focus is when the Dalai Lama states, "Kindness is my religion" (Kabat-Zinn, 1995: ix). This comment de-emphasizes his distinctive religious affiliation and emphasizes shared values across religious and cultural lines. Many Buddhist practitioners similarly attempt to connect with all religions, as well as with the non-religious, and in doing so they downplay their Buddhist identity.

With this background, it should not be surprising that for many people "being Buddhist" is "highly situational and context dependent" (Danyluk, 2003: 133). Their choice to claim or not claim a Buddhist identity is often a conscious decision that depends on whom they are talking to and the purpose of the interaction (Danyluk, 2003: 135). Since Buddhism does not share traditional American Christianity's conceptions of "self" and the spiritual, social, and soteriological consequences of having a firm religious identity, Buddhists are freer to project a flexible religious identity. This freedom allows them to choose how to respond each time they are asked. This flexibility of identity poses a challenge to those who wish to study Buddhists: if the study subjects are changing their identity at will, how do we categorize them?

Buddhism is not alone in offering alternative theories of the self. Buddhist explanations of the self parallel arguments from classical social theory. G. H. Mead (1934) famously argued that the self is not a tangible thing but a flexible and multifaceted social process involving an internal conversation between the subjective "I," objectified "me," and normative "generalized other." Symbolic interactionists claim that the self emerges situationally during exchanges of conventionalized gestures. Rather than a fixed characteristic, selves are shaped for each individual as they take on different roles in different situations. Goffman (1959, 1967) showed how modern Westerners treat the self as a sacred object, with interaction rituals frequently serving as elaborate collective efforts to protect one's own and others' presentations of self. Thus, many social theorists share with Buddhism the understanding that commonsense notions of fixed selves are reifications to avoid. The current investigation, then, not only tackles practical issues of measuring religious identity but also raises questions about how better to align sociological theory and methods.

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[3] To "take refuge" is a traditional Buddhist ceremony in which practitioners (either monastic or lay) state that they "take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha." It is a formal statement of affiliation with and intention to follow the teachings of the Buddha. Many equate the ceremony with "becoming Buddhist," but it is not seen this way universally.

Because of the complexity of Buddhist theories of self, we wanted to learn more about how people respond to more nuanced ways of asking about Buddhist identity. So when the first author created a multiple-choice survey for participants in Buddhist Churches of America temples in 2011, it included an intermediate Buddhist identity option that allowed respondents to claim some affiliation with Buddhist teachings, practices, or community without claiming a full Buddhist identity. Respondents could choose the option "sort of" to the question, "Would you describe yourself as a Buddhist?" The author chose the phrase "sort of," which Wilson and Rocha had used previously, because it seemed accessible, without the need of further explanation. Analysis of this group, which consisted almost entirely of people who were currently active participants in JSS temples in the United States, showed the majority of respondents claimed a definite Buddhist identity, but a significant subset preferred the Sort-of Buddhist option. A smaller follow-up qualitative survey, focused solely on Buddhist identity among JSS Buddhists and conducted in the spring of 2015, provided narrative data to clarify findings in the initial quantitative survey further.

DATA AND METHODS

We draw on evidence from two surveys. The first, the AJSS (American Jōdo Shinshū) survey, is a 2011 survey of demographics and attitudes with closed-ended response options designed for quantitative analysis. The second was a smaller 2015 survey with open-ended response options designed for qualitative analysis. Both surveys were conducted entirely in English.

For both surveys the research subjects were American JSS Buddhists participating in temples affiliated with the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism is a Japanese sect emphasizing lay practice, a defining feature of which is recitation of the nembutsu out of gratitude for the compassionate activity of Amida Buddha.[4] The tradition belongs to a larger category of “Pure Land” Buddhism. Due to a combination of the popularity of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan and specific immigration patterns, over half of Japanese immigrants in the late-19th and early-20th centuries were from a Pure Land school (Ama 2011). Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism has ten major branches (only two of which have significant presence in the United States [Kashima, 1977: 5]). The primary modern institution serving JSS Buddhists in the mainland United States is the BCA,[5] an overseas district of the Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha (commonly known as “Nishi Hongwanji”), which is headquartered in Kyoto, Japan. BCA currently includes over sixty temples with a total of approximately 16,000 members throughout the United States (Buddhist Churches of America 2011).[6] Organizationally, BCA temples are part of one of eight District Councils, with five in California (where the majority of JSS Buddhists reside) and the other three representing the Eastern, Mountain, and Northwest regions (Buddhist Churches of America 2011).

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[4] Saying the nembutsu means to recite or think of the name of Amida Buddha (as in the phrase "Namo Amida Butsu"). This recitation is the central religious activity of JSS Buddhism, which acknowledges the dynamic relationship between the practitioner and the celestial Buddha, Amida. In general, JSS Buddhism discourages religious activities designed to bring the practitioner to enlightenment (e.g. certain forms of meditation) because these practices reinforce egocentric goal-oriented thought. Instead, JSS teaching focuses on the compassionate activity of Amida Buddha,

The demographics of the organization reflect its history of serving Japanese immigrants and their descendants, combined with its century-long presence in the United States. Approximately 70 percent of its active participants have some Asian ancestry, and about 30 percent have no Asian ancestry (Spencer 2014). Temples typically carry out the majority of their services and business meetings in English, though Japanese may be interwoven into various rituals and conversations.

Historically, within Japanese JSS there has been geographic and familial variation in terms of identity (Kashima, 1977: 5), practice, and rituals which led to conflict in the early U.S. JSS communities (Ama, 2011: 54–55). Diversity of identity and practice within early 20th century American JSS also came from the participation of Americans of non-Asian descent. These early converts, along with the English-speaking second-generation Japanese Americans, were taught Indian Buddhism emphasizing the teachings of the historic Buddha (Ama, 2011: 70–81), while the Japanese and Japanese-speaking Japanese Americans were taught JSS

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which brings all to enlightenment but is beyond ego control (Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, Hongwanji International Center 2004).

[5] The second largest JSS organization in America is the Shinshu Center of America (SCA), an organization established by the Shinshū Ōtani-ha (Higashi Honganji) headquartered in Kyoto, Japan. It has five temples in the mainland United States (four in California and one in New York) and another five temples in Hawaii. SCA participants were not recruited for this research, though it is possible that some AJSS survey respondents participate in activities at SCA temples. (Shinshu Center of America, n.d.)

[6] The 16,000-member estimate is the number that the BCA officially reported on its website in 2011. BCA membership rates are approximate for a variety of reasons. Temples have traditionally counted member *families* rather than individuals. BCA converts the family membership number to individual membership using a standard formula which is necessarily approximate. In addition, not all participants in BCA temples become official members, and, in some cases, temples will underreport membership to BCA (Mitchell 2010).

using Japanese rituals and texts including the writings of its founder, Shinran. This divergence initially led to parallel congregations, a phenomenon described by Numrich (1996), with the Japanese speakers receiving one set of teachings and the English speakers receiving another.

Despite these early disparities in identity and practices within American JSS, by the late 20th century (about 100 years after its formal arrival in the United States mainland), both the Indian Buddhist teachings and the JSS teachings were offered similarly to all demographic groups, creating practices that integrate American, Indian Buddhist, Japanese, and non-Japanese Asian Buddhist influences.[7] There were many reasons for this integration. These influences include the disruption of established family and community traditions during the relocation of people of Japanese descent during World War II, along with practical need for Japanese religious groups to collaborate, especially in order to provide services in the internment camps (Imamura, 1998: 14–20; Kashima, 1977: 54); the availability of Shinran's works in English translation;[8] the increasing use of English in subsequent generations of Japanese Americans (Spencer, 2014: 46–47); the publication of more popular JSS books in English that integrate traditional JSS teachings with perspectives from other non-JSS Buddhist traditions;[9] and increased opportunities for American Buddhists from different ethnic backgrounds to share teachings and practices (Han 2017).

Many scholars of Buddhism in America have described a phenomenon called "Two Buddhisms," which categorizes Buddhist groups into two groups: "Heritage," which are founded by immigrants from Asia and serve the immigrant community and their descendants, and "Convert," which are founded by Americans of European descent and primarily serve people without Asian ancestry.[10] Based on findings of Kashima (1977), American JSS would historically have been categorized as a "Heritage" Buddhist group. It has diversified considerably in the past forty years, however, and, according to Spencer's (2014) research, does not fit neatly into either category. The fact that BCA has a demographically diverse membership who have access to a wide variety of JSS academic, ritual, and social resources in both English and Japanese makes it ideal for studying factors influencing religious identity.

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[7] This history raises a compelling question regarding sub-identities—whether some participants in JSS identify as "Buddhist" but do not accept the label "JSS Buddhist." Although this question is beyond the intended scope of the current study, we believe it would be a useful question for follow-up research.

[8] Starting in the late 1930s, JSS texts began to be translated from Japanese into English (Ama, 2011: 85–87), with translation efforts culminating in the two-volume *The Collected Works of Shinran* (Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-Ha 1997). This volume was widely distributed to BCA members.

[9] Examples include Tanaka (1997) and Unno (1998).

[10] This categorization system has advantages and limitations (Numrich 2003; Prebish 1993) as well as various iterations (Nattier 1997) and critics (Han 2017; Hickey 2010; Spencer 2014).

Quantitative Analysis

An electronic version of the AJSS survey became available on September 26, 2011. Using electronic distribution, the survey link was made available to anyone who accepted an invitation to participate. Invitations were distributed through various temple email lists, temple websites, newsletters, and the October 2011 issue of BCA's monthly newsletter, *The Wheel of Dharma,* which is sent to all BCA members. A paper version of the survey which matched the formatting of the electronic version was printed later that week and distributed to pre-selected temples and upon request. The electronic version of the survey was taken down on November 14, 2011, having been accessible for approximately seven weeks. Review of the data confirmed that there were no duplicates among completed responses.[11]

A total of 498 responses were received. Of these, 83 were eliminated because they were incomplete. Four were disqualified for not accepting the consent form, and another four were disqualified because their primary temple was outside of the geographic region covered by the BCA. This process left 407 valid surveys for data analysis. Responses were received from all eight districts and forty-three of the sixty BCA temples (72%). Overall, 52 percent of respondents were from non-California temples, compared to 48 percent from California temples. This finding suggests that non-California temples were somewhat overrepresented since over 75 percent of official BCA members live in California.

Because of the voluntary nature of the survey and because the response method was primarily electronic, the sample was biased both toward the more active members and internet-savvy members. Because people who respond to surveys tend to be more engaged, it is likely the respondents came from the pool of active participants, regardless of membership status, rather than the group who are officially members but rarely participants (Hammond and Machacek 1999; Pew Research Center 2012). This pattern is supported by findings within the survey itself which showed that over 70 percent of respondents volunteer at their temples at least once a month, 90 percent expect their rate of volunteering to stay the same (60%) or increase (30%), and 82 percent said they were unlikely to stop attending the temple in the next five years.

The following measures should be noted in order to aid interpretation of the multivariate analysis. First, respondents were asked to report their gender, either male (0) or female (1). Age has eight response options, including under 18 (1), 18–29 (2), 30–39 (3), 40–49 (4), 50–59 (5), 60–69 (6), 70–79 (7), and 80 or older (8). An item measuring education asks, "What is the highest level of education you have completed?", with response options of elementary or junior high (1), some high school (2), high school graduate (3), some college (4), associate's degree/trade school (5), bachelor's degree (6), and graduate/professional degree (7). Ethnicity was measured by asking, "What is your ancestry/ethnic background?", with response options of white, black, Asian/Japanese, Asian/non-Japanese, Native American/First Nations, Pacific Islander, Latino, and other. Ethnicity was recoded as Asian/non-Asian for multivariate analysis. Attendance at a JSS temple as a child, Buddhist upbringing, JSS membership, and multiple affiliation were all measured with simple yes/no items. Frequency of temple attendance was measured with the item, "On average, how often have you visited your temple for services or other activities in the last 6 months?", and response options include "less than once a month" (1), "1–3 times a month" (2), "once a week" (3), and "more than once a week" (4). Frequency of solitary meditation was measured by asking, "How often do you engage in these activities outside of the temple: Meditating by myself," with response options including "rarely or never" (1), "less than once a week" (2), and "at least once a week" (3). Finally, respondents were asked, "How important is each of these to you personally?" and given a list of activities including "having faith" and "keeping cultural/religious traditions alive." Response options for these two items included "not important at all" (1), "not very important" (2), "important" (3), and "very important" (4).

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[11] Partially completed surveys were excluded as "incomplete." There is no evidence of any duplicates among the completed surveys comparing key data points such as temple affiliation, date of first attendance, age, and gender.

This study focuses on the survey question, "Would you describe yourself as a Buddhist?" which had response options of "Yes, Definitely" (0); "Yes, sort of" (1); "Unsure"; and "No." People who replied, "yes, definitely" and "yes, sort of" were then compared on a variety of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions from the same survey and on the subsequent qualitative survey. Sample characteristics for several key variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics of AJSS Survey (2011)

Variable	Percentage/Mean	SD	Min	Max
Current JSS members	89.5%	-	-	-
Female	61.9%	-	-	-
Born in USA	94.3%	-	-	-
Born in Japan	2.9%	-	-	-
White	27.0%	-	-	-
Japanese ancestry	63.0%	-	-	-
White/Japanese dual ID	1.2%	-	-	-
Asian, non-Japanese	5.4%	-	-	-
Other non-Asian	3.3%	-	-	-
Total No Asian Ancestry	30.3%	-	-	-
Total Asian Ancestry	69.7%	-	-	-
Married	62.0%	-	-	-
Raised Jōdo Shinshū	57.0%	-	-	-
Raised Buddhist/non-J.S.	3.9%	-	-	-
Raised Protestant	18.4%	-	-	-
Raised Catholic	9.8%	-	-	-
Raised non-religious	7.8%	-	-	-
Age	50–59 (5.05)	1.52	<18 (1)	>79 (8)
Income	$30,000–59,999 (3.98)	1.57	<10k (1)	>119,999 (6)
Education	Associate's Deg. (5.87)	1.17	<h.s. (1)	Graduate Deg. (7)

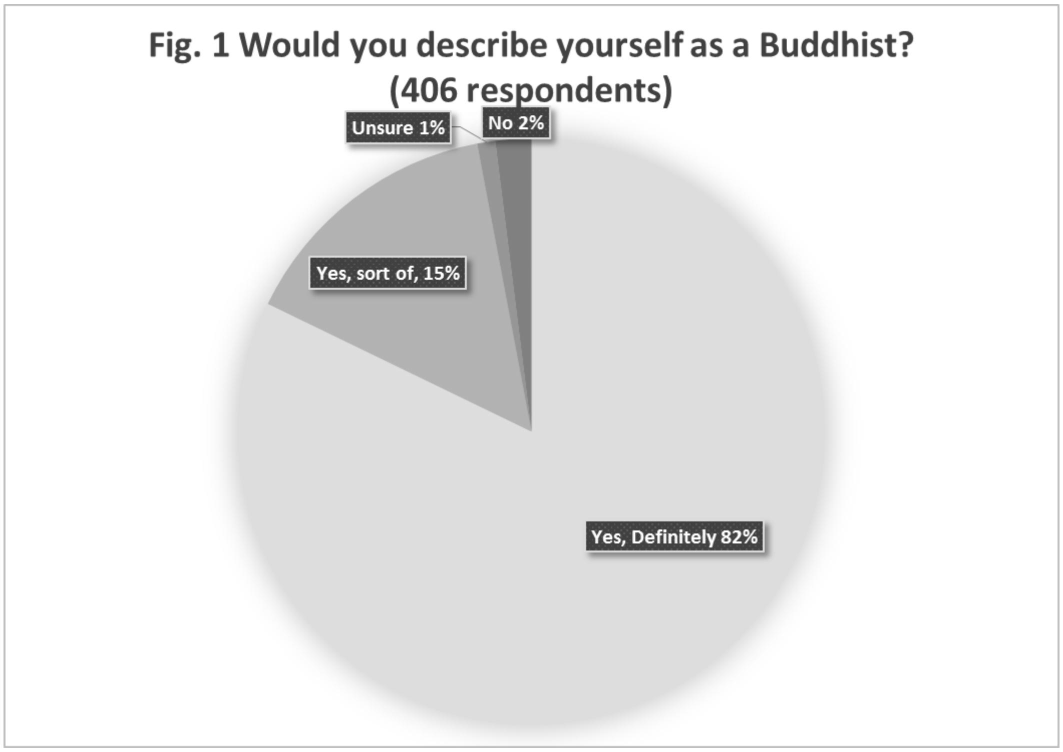
Qualitative Analysis

To clarify results from the 2011 survey data, we created an anonymous online survey and asked a few people affiliated with BCA temples to distribute the survey link to potentially interested members. This survey was administered in the spring of 2015. We received a total of eleven responses, all from individuals who indicated participation in activities at a JSS temple in the last six months. The survey asked for basic demographic data and reiterated the same Buddhist identity question from the first survey, followed by three open-ended questions: "How did you decide on the answer [to the religious identity question] you chose?"; "What do you generally say when you are asked about your religion?"; and, "If you have any other thoughts on religious identity that you would like to share, please add them here."

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

A total of 406 people responded to the question, “Would you describe yourself as a Buddhist?” Responses (Figure 1) were: (a) Yes, definitely (n=336; 82%); (b) Yes, sort of (n=59; 15%); (c) Unsure (n=4; 1.0%); and (d) No (n=7; 2%).



The fact that 15 percent of respondents chose “Yes, sort of” demonstrates that this option felt more comfortable for many than a simple binary yes/no option. It is also noteworthy that “sort of” was significantly more appealing to respondents than “unsure.” The infrequent selection of either “No” or “Unsure” suggests that JSS practitioners, like the Zen and Tibetan practitioners interviewed in other studies (Campbell 2010; Danyluk 2003), tend to have a strong sense of what “Buddhist” means and how their beliefs and actions fit that definition. The respondents who chose “sort of” apparently did not want to claim full Buddhist identity, but they were not “unsure.” Rather, they experienced a discrepancy between their understanding of their own identity and the other options presented in a survey. The "sort of" option gave people who affiliate with Buddhism a way to claim that affiliation without actually calling themselves "Buddhist."

Because the AJSS survey does not directly ask why respondents identified as they did, we cannot determine whether Buddhist philosophies such as impermanence and non-duality were in respondents' minds when they selected "sort of." Instead, analysis of the AJSS sample offers clues about other more pragmatic concerns which appear to be making a difference. Our strategy in what follows, then, is to compare the Sort-of Buddhist and the Definitely Buddhist groups on a range of different questions regarding demographics, religious background, religious practices, and values. This method allows us to gain a sense of the extent to which the selection is explicable by factors other than Buddhist philosophy.

Table 2 summarizes differences between Sort-of Buddhists and Definitely Buddhists on the mean values of several potentially relevant variables. Because of the small numbers, we omitted both the "Unsure" and the "No" respondents from the rest of the analysis, leaving a total of 396 respondents. The following summaries illustrate group tendencies; exceptions are found within each group.

Table 2: Mean Scores for Definitely Buddhists and Sort-of Buddhists

	Definitely Buddhists		**Sort-of Buddhists**		Difference of means test p-value[a]
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	
Background					
Asian ancestry	0.73	0.68–0.77	0.52	0.39–0.65	0.001**
Buddhist family	0.66	0.61–0.72	0.32	0.19–0.44	0.000***
Childhood JS temple attendance	0.62	0.56–0.67	0.27	0.15–0.38	0.000***
Current member of JS temple	0.93	0.88–0.99	0.83	0.74–0.93	0.086
Multiple affiliation	0.01	0.00-.03	0.08	0.01–0.16	0.076
Behaviors					
Frequency of temple attendance	2.69	2.582.80	2.39	2.15–2.64	0.039*
Say nembutsu out loud	0.74	0.70–0.79	0.48	0.35–0.61	0.000***
Tend home altar	0.55	0.50–0.61	0.28	0.16–0.40	0.000***
Read temple newsletter	0.94	0.92–0.97	0.91	0.83–0.98	0.385
Volunteered in last 6 months	0.40	0.34–0.45	0.29	0.16–0.43	0.178
Attended Buddhist class in last 6 months	0.55	0.50–0.61	0.54	0.41–0.67	0.823

Donated money to temple in last 6 months	0.91	0.87–0.94	0.91	0.84–0.98	0.905
Meditate in groups	0.30	0.25–0.36	0.24	0.13–0.36	0.336
Meditate at home	0.59	0.53–0.64	0.51	0.38–0.65	0.310
Values ranked as “important” or “very important”					
Having faith	0.86	0.82–0.90	0.59	0.46–0.72	0.000***
Keeping cultural and religious traditions alive	0.96	0.94–0.98	0.76	0.65–0.88	0.001**
JS teachings	0.95	0.93–0.98	0.85	0.75–0.94	0.036*
Sangha members	0.93	0.91–0.96	0.94	0.88–1.00	0.797
Minister’s knowledge of teachings	0.94	0.92–0.97	0.90	0.83–0.98	0.344
Japanese/cultural activities	0.71	0.66–0.76	0.78	0.67–0.89	0.251
Social events at temple	0.70	0.65–0.75	0.68	0.55–0.80	0.718
Children’s activities	0.80	0.76–0.85	0.71	0.58–0.84	0.132
Ringing of the *kansho*	0.90	0.86–0.93	0.83	0.73–0.93	0.225
Meditation periods during services	0.76	0.71–0.81	0.76	0.63–0.88	0.930

[a] Pooled or Satterthwaite, depending on equality of variances
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

The most striking finding is that the Sort-of Buddhists are significantly less likely to have Asian ancestry, to have been born into a Buddhist family, and to have attended temple as a child than the Definitely Buddhists. Seventy percent of all respondents had some Asian ancestry. But among the Sort-of Buddhists, only 52 percent had Asian ancestry, compared with 73 percent with Asian ancestry in the Definitely category. The age of first attendance was also highly correlated with which category one chose. Fifty-seven percent of all respondents began attending a JSS temple as a child. But 62 percent of Definitely Buddhists attended temple as a child, compared with only 27 percent of the Sort-of Buddhists.

These ethnic, religious, and attendance data suggest the power of childhood exposure and training in creating a less ambiguous Buddhist identity. We can hypothesize that religious identity for many JSS Buddhists developed in childhood and likely was intertwined with their ethnic identity. For these individuals, being Buddhist was part of their identity in childhood rather than something they had actively chosen (though they would at some point have the option of rejecting), whereas for people who come to Buddhism as adults, there is a greater element of conscious choice, which may have included rejecting a previous religious (or non-religious) identity.

The experience of moving away from or rejecting a previous religious identity could easily complicate one's relationship to a later-acquired Buddhist identity. These findings support Gregory's observation that for "many Asian Americans and Asian immigrants, Buddhism reaffirms their sense of traditional identity by locating them within a particular community defined by family, ethnicity, culture, and national origin" (Gregory, 2001: 244). The findings are also consistent with what Cadge classifies as the difference between ascribed and achieved religious identity (Cadge, 2005: 150–71), or what Solomon (2012) describes as the difference between vertical and horizontal identity. "Ascribed" or "vertical" identity refers to the identity that one inherits from parents and family. In contrast, "achieved" or "horizontal" identities are formed when individuals separate from their families of origin. Religion, or lack thereof, is initially vertical, learned from parents, but can, over time, be affected by horizontal influences (Johnson and Grim 2013).

Because of the nature of this survey's respondents, primarily Japanese Americans born into JSS families, ethnicity, religion in family of origin, and attending temple as a child tend to align in the study population.[12] Respondents who have these three features are dramatically more likely to identify as "Definitely Buddhist." Interestingly, these demographic features were the only ones that correlated with Buddhist identity.

In terms of behaviors and values, Sort-of Buddhists differ somewhat from Definitely Buddhists, though only dramatically so in a few areas. As a group, the Sort-of Buddhists are engaged with their temples but not quite as engaged as the Definitely Buddhists. The Sort-of Buddhists are about as likely to be dues-paying members of their temples and to read their local temple's monthly newsletter regularly. During the six months prior to taking the survey, the two groups are comparably likely to have volunteered for their temple, donated money to their temple, or to have taken a Buddhist class or workshop. Frequency of meditation—whether at home or in groups—is also very similar for the two groups. On average, when compared with the Definitely Buddhists, the Sort-of Buddhists do attend temple slightly less frequently, but this difference is not dramatic. Sort-of Buddhists report being somewhat less active, but they remain quite engaged; they participate in temple life and express appreciation for the events held there. For example, there are no significant differences between the two groups in terms of their high evaluation of the sangha,[13] the minister, the cultural activities, the social activities, or the children's activities.

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[12] Buddhist family of origin correlates with having attended temple as a child (0.797) and Asian ethnicity (0.818). Having attended temple as a child and Asian ethnicity are correlated at 0.652. All three correlations are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

The survey asked questions about a number of different personal views and values. On most measures (such as the value of marriage, financial security, being of service, having children, or having a fulfilling job) the two groups were statistically similar. There were notable differences between the groups on two measures, however: the importance of "having faith" and the importance of "keeping cultural and religious traditions alive." On both measures, the majority still value these things, but the Sort-of Buddhists as a group do not consistently rank these values as highly as the Definitely Buddhists. Difference of means tests indicate significant differences between the groups on these measures, and these differences remained when controlling for Asian ethnicity.

These findings are consistent with differences we might expect between ascribed and achieved religious identities. Fifty-four percent of the Sort-of Buddhists grew up in families that practiced a non-Buddhist religion, and another 14 percent came from families that did not practice religion at all. Overall, 68 percent of the Sort-of Buddhists came from non-Buddhist backgrounds; this percentage compares with only 32 percent of Definitely Buddhists who came from non-Buddhist backgrounds (see Figure 2). Since the Definitely Buddhists are more likely to have been raised attending Buddhist temples, they are also less likely to have ever experienced leaving a religion. These are people who, for various reasons, have been more likely to maintain an affiliation with the faith tradition of their childhood. The Sort-of Buddhists, in contrast, are more likely to have moved away from a prior faith commitment or to have been raised in a non-religious household. At the point of answering the survey, over two-thirds of Sort-of Buddhists had already changed religious affiliation at least once. Given their backgrounds, it may be that some of these individuals carry a negative or ambivalent attitude toward faith or religious traditions and may have actually chosen Buddhism as an alternative to versions of "religion" they have rejected.[14]

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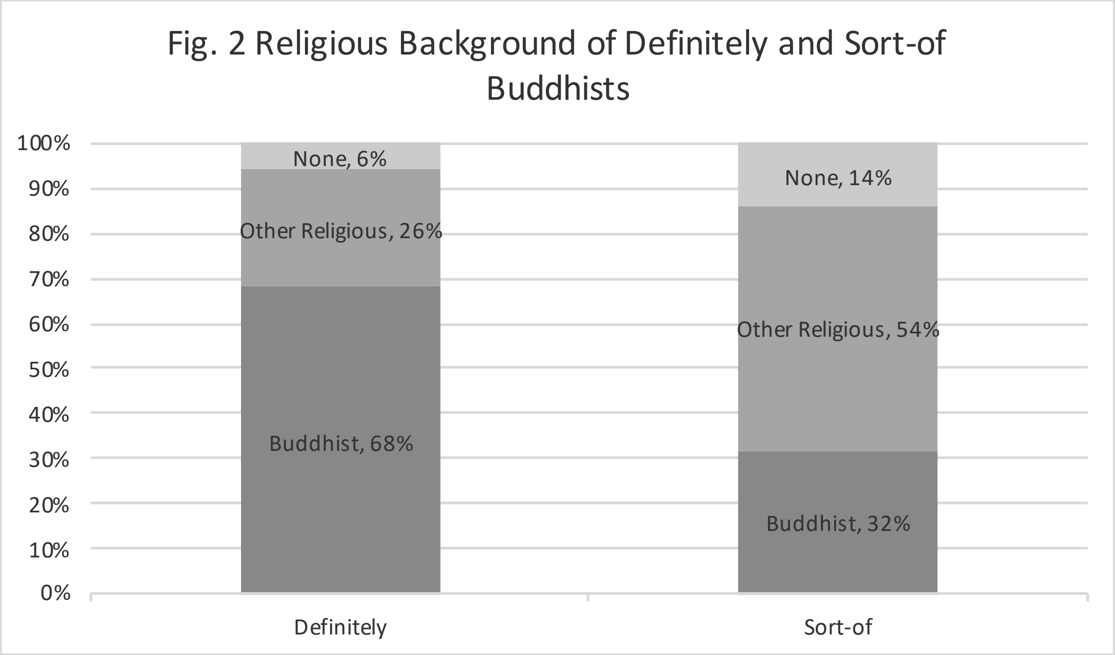
[13] "Sangha" is the term used in American JSS to refer to the lay and ordained congregation of a JSS temple.

[14] Interestingly, in several measures of cynicism (for example, whether "people in general can be trusted"), there was no significant difference between Sort-of and Definitely Buddhists, suggesting that their ambivalence about faith does not reflect generalized ambivalence or cynicism about people or non-religious institutions.



Supporting the observation that Sort-of Buddhists tend to value faith and religion less than Definitely Buddhists, the survey shows that the Sort-of Buddhists are less likely to value specific religious rituals both at home and at temple. Sort-of Buddhists are less likely to report tending their home altar and less likely to report saying the nembutsu in any circumstance (out loud, to themselves, or during services). One possible explanation for this finding is that, traditionally, tending a home altar and saying the nembutsu would be modeled for children in the home, and individuals from non-Buddhist homes would lack this exposure. Regarding elements of a typical JSS service, they are less likely to rate sutra chanting, group readings, and singing as "important," but in all cases the majority of respondents found these elements valuable.[15] The Sort-of Buddhists and the Definitely Buddhists similarly value many aspects of the service including the ringing of the *kansho* (the large bell used to signal the beginning of service), the meditation periods, the Dharma-talks (the Buddhist equivalent to sermons), and announcements.

In summary, bivariate analysis shows that there are significant group-level differences between those who claim a Definite Buddhist identity and those who claim a Sort-of Buddhist identity. Sort-of Buddhists are less likely to have attended a Buddhist temple as a child, less likely to have been born into Buddhist families, and less likely to have Asian ancestry. Although they tend to attend temple regularly and participate in and value many of the temple activities, they attend somewhat less often on average than Definitely Buddhists and are in some cases less comfortable with overtly religious teachings, rituals, and practices.

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[15] Due to space concerns, some findings mentioned in the text are not included in the tables. All supplementary analyses are available from the authors upon request.

Multivariate analysis was performed in order to assess the extent to which the selection of Sort-of Buddhist can be explained by factors that surfaced through the above comparisons. Several different models were performed, combining different sets of relevant independent variables in order to explain as much of the variance as possible. Table 3 summarizes one of the strongest models.[16]

Table 3:Binary Logistic Regression of Sort-of Buddhist Identity

Variable	b (SE)	Odds Ratio
Female	-0.041 (0.376)	__
Age	-0.002 (0.136)	__
Education	0.147 (0.166)	__
Asian ethnicity	0.892 (0.539)	__
Childhood JS temple attendance	-1.18* (0.600)	0.306
Raised in Buddhist family	-1.04 (0.671)	__
Member of JSS	-0.912 (0.501)	__
Multiple affiliation	1.05 (0.806)	__
Frequency of temple attendance	-0.278 (0.194)	__
Frequency of solitary meditation	-0.144 (0.223)	__
Importance of having faith	-1.03*** (0.235)	0.356
Importance of cultural/religious traditions	-0.793* (0.321)	0.452
Max-rescaled R^2	0.359	
N	350	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < .001$

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[16] In this model, total family income was not included as a control variable because 20 percent of the sample declined to provide this information. Since the measure was not significant in any models, we excluded it to minimize loss of data.

Binary logistic regression confirms some of the results from the bivariate analyses. Specifically, attending a JSS temple as a child, emphasizing the importance of faith, and emphasizing the importance of cultural and religious traditions all strongly reduce the odds of selecting Sort-of Buddhist. These relationships indicate a vertically-transmitted and relatively unambiguous religious identity. The model is equally informative, though, in terms of which variables do not independently correlate with the dependent variable. For example, neither Asian ethnicity, being raised in a Buddhist family, membership in JSS, multiple affiliation, frequency of temple attendance, nor frequency of solitary meditation appear to make a significant difference. The max-rescaled R^2 value is 0.359, leaving 64 percent of the variance unexplained. Based on this finding, we know there must be other factors in addition to the variables available in the AJSS that contribute to Sort-of Buddhist identity. Motivated by the research reviewed earlier in this study, we wanted to ascertain, especially, whether these additional factors include Buddhist philosophies regarding identity. For further clarification, then, we turn to our qualitative results.

Qualitative Results

Like the quantitative data, the narrative data also demonstrate that it is easier for people raised Buddhist to achieve a full Buddhist identity through vertical transmission, validated in adulthood through experience, than it is for those who achieve Buddhist identity horizontally as adults. One individual who was raised in an Asian American Buddhist family and answered “Yes Definitely” to the identity question discusses how they came to understand that they were always Buddhist: “After hearing the Buddhadharma as an adult, it makes sense in my life now. As a child being raised in the temple, I didn’t understand Buddhism or was able to explain what it was about. I explored Christianity, but that wasn’t for me. So in a way, *I was always Buddhist, I just didn’t know what that meant*. I think I learned about it from grandparents, aunts and uncles” [italics ours]. Another respondent of Asian descent raised in a JSS temple says, “I have not attended any other church other than a Buddhist temple in my sixty-plus years *and have never identified myself as anything other than Buddhist*” [italics ours]. For both these respondents who were born into Buddhist families, there is no sense that they have ever had anything but a Buddhist identity, though there may have been times of exploration in adulthood when that identity was confirmed.

These responses contrast with those from non-Buddhist, non-Asian-ancestry families, even those who say they are Definitely Buddhist: “I feel certain in my beliefs in the Shin Buddhist tradition, including the belief that I should study the teachings and decide for myself what is right for me.” The certainty of this individual comes primarily from his or her own study and decision making.

Identity, for this individual, seems to be something for which one works, something that one achieves.[17] A respondent who answered "unsure" demonstrates an ambivalence, even an anxiety, about claiming a religious identity that, based on the survey data, may be quite common among those who came to Buddhism as adults:

> I can't shake the feeling that one should earn the label somehow—through study of the dharma, or through daily practices (reciting the nembutsu, interacting with a butsudan [home altar], unselfconsciously experiencing interconnection with all things once in a while, behaving with sincere gratitude or compassion more than once a month, or whatever). I'm probably channeling my Protestant ancestry or something…. I cannot recall having any "religious" experiences that would override my rational reservations by convincing me, in a deeply intuitive way that I'm connected to whatever a given religious tradition thinks of as Reality or Truth.

Unlike individuals born into Buddhist families, these respondents seem to have set their own criteria for what makes someone a Buddhist and, perhaps out of respect for "real" Buddhists, do not wish to claim a Buddhist identity unless they "earn" that right. This sense that Buddhist identity is earned or achieved is found consistently throughout the sample of respondents who were not raised in Buddhist homes, regardless of whether they identified as Definitely, Sort-of, or Not Buddhist. For example, another individual who identifies as Definitely Buddhist says, "No one is born a Buddhist. For the path to have any meaning, we must make a conscious choice to follow it. In my opinion, it's not possible to make this choice prior to adulthood." On the other end of the spectrum is the response of an individual who is "not Buddhist" and was not raised in a JSS family: "I don't feel my current experience, level of engagement, or depth of knowledge qualifies me to say I am a buddhist."[18]

These narratives suggest that, compared with Definitely Buddhists, Sort-of Buddhists tend to look more critically at how they personally compare to their image of what a "Buddhist" is. There is little evidence that the respondents born into Buddhist families engage in this kind of self-reflection. The data suggest that people who were not raised in the temple are more likely to explain Buddhist identity as the result of conscious choice, or study and practice. People who grew up not attending temple may experience some insecurity or uncertainty about their achieved religious identity. This insecurity could help explain the higher rates of Sort-of Buddhists among those who arrived at Buddhism as adults.

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[17] Such comments are very consistent with existing research that finds American religiosity to be characteristically individualistic and achievement-based in orientation (Bellah et al. 1996; Madsen 2009) and also with Solomon's (2012) emphasis on horizontal and vertical identities, discussed above.

[18] In several responses, participants did not capitalize "Buddhist." It is unclear if this practice was because of the informal nature of the online survey process or if it came from a deeper desire to demystify the term or make it less religious. Thus, we have left the responses as they were written.

The data also support observations made by the researchers summarized earlier that Buddhist philosophical principles play a crucial role in how respondents talk about their Buddhist identity. The teaching of non-attachment to self is evident in the language JSS Buddhist practitioners use when talking about religious identity. The narrative responses demonstrate that most people (regardless of stated level of Buddhist identity, ethnic background, or religious background) want to define their relationship with Buddhism based on *what they do* rather than *who they are* or even *what they believe*. They all avoided essentialist language. For example, respondents wrote, "I try to make my choices using the question: 'What would Buddha do?'"; "Buddhism is something one does that is transformative—like dance or swimming"; "I still find myself living life through the eyes of buddhism"; and "The Buddhist philosophies and practices fit my way of life." The language of all of these individuals is active; it is how one thinks, acts, and lives. The language is decidedly not essentialist and leaves room for impermanent, interconnected "selves" to adapt and change.

The Buddhist teachings of non-duality also affect how respondents talk about their relationship with Buddhism. When asked what they tell people when asked about their religion, one person responded, "I say 'Buddhist' and wince a little, because I know that what I'm trying to say doesn't line up with what will be heard." And a respondent from a non-Asian family said, "People always are surprised when they find out I'm buddhist because I'm white." There are very real social and spiritual reasons to downplay one's Buddhist identity since, for these individuals, an attachment to a firm Buddhist identity may be the source of division between people, even while the teachings themselves emphasize unity.

Finally, the responses show a subset of people who want to downplay the religious nature of Buddhism altogether: "I do not belong to an organized religion—I am Buddhist :-)" or "I say that I am Buddhist and that buddhism is a way of life." And finally, "I think many young people today do not like to define their religious identity because they do not want to be tied to a particular religion or organization body. They may be spiritual, but have not taken on an identity as Christian or Jewish or Buddhist. I think as one gets older your religious identity becomes clearer and more focused." This de-emphasis of Buddhism as a religion, along with a tendency to reject exclusive religious identity in general, was shared by all respondents regardless of ethnic and religious background. These patterns suggest that participants' understanding of Buddhist philosophy and its view of the self as flexible and impermanent affects the way that they talk about their religious identities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Category of Sort-of Buddhist

Our first goal in offering the Sort-of Buddhist option in the 2011 survey was to learn if people active in JSS Buddhist communities would find the option acceptable, or even preferable, to a more definite yes-or-no option. A significant subset (15%) of respondents did prefer it. This finding is compatible with findings from previous research showing that practitioners of Buddhism often have nuanced, complex, flexible, and/or ambivalent understandings of their religious identity. Since 82 percent of respondents indicated that they were "definitely" Buddhists, the doctrinal, practical, and cultural concerns examined here are not influencing how all or even most American Buddhists choose to self-identify on this survey; nonetheless, the evidence is strong that they do influence a substantial subset.

Our next question was whether the category of Sort-of Buddhist offered here is meaningful or useful to researchers studying Buddhism. And, if so, should this response option be introduced more widely in social science research? This question is more difficult to answer.

The data suggest that the "sort of" response in some cases may be a marker for individuals who are less confident in their Buddhist identity because they did not grow up practicing Buddhism. Multivariate analysis shows that the primary demographic predictor for Sort-of Buddhist identity is whether the respondent attended a Buddhist temple as a child. Comparisons between the Sort-of Buddhists and the Definitely Buddhists show that, on average, the groups are similar in terms of behaviors and also in terms of what they tend to value about their temple communities. Since Sort-of and Definite Buddhists behave similarly, there may be little benefit from separating them for analysis.

The risk of ignoring the Sort-of Buddhists, however, is that if left to self-identify using standard questions, *they may not identify themselves as Buddhist at all.* The data analyzed here do not answer one key question, the question of what the Sort-of Buddhists would have marked had they been given a simple binary yes-or-no option. Since the behavior and values of Sort-of Buddhists generally match those of the Definitely Buddhists, we agree with Gregory's suggestion (2001), quoted above, that most researchers would want to count them as Buddhists. So we need to know how many Sort-of Buddhists on this survey would have marked "yes, I am Buddhist" and how many would have marked "no, I am not Buddhist" had they *not* been offered an intermediate option. If most pick "Buddhist," then the addition of a "sort of" option may not provide additional information for researchers, at least when studying active practitioners. But if a significant number would pick "No, I am not Buddhist," then we must consider the possibility that the question's phrasing is affecting research results, causing a disproportionate loss or misclassification of data from people who joined Buddhist organizations as adults or who, for philosophical or personal reasons, do not wish to call themselves Buddhist. Rewriting survey items to allow for intermediate religious identities could help researchers collect more useful data. The "sort of" option may be one way to accomplish this aim, but other approaches discussed below may also be useful.

Another question these results raise is whether the "sort of" option would be appealing to more people than just those who are active in BCA Buddhist temples. It would be helpful to test the "sort of" option on a broader range of participants, including other Buddhist groups and people who are less active in Buddhist communities, such as "Nightstand Buddhists."

We would also suggest that the "sort of" option might appeal to groups beyond Buddhism. Are there comparable numbers of "Sort-of Catholics" or "Sort-of Presbyterians," for example? Is intermediate identity limited to Buddhism, or is it a larger phenomenon in contemporary religion at a time when at least a quarter of the population switch religious affiliation (Streib 2014)? These are all questions for further research.

Writing Better Religious Identity Questions

While it is not yet clear whether the routine adoption of a "sort of" category will be helpful in social science research, the recognition that many respondents do not experience a complete or uncomplicated religious identity can be helpful to research design. Alertness to key Buddhist teachings, together with reviewing the survey findings reported here, will help scholars of Buddhism, religion, and identity to consider their research questions more critically and to draft survey questions carefully that are maximally amenable to the goals of their research.[19]

Take, for example, the question of religious identity posed by one of the Pew Research Center surveys: "What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?" (Pew Research Center n.d.) The information above raises several potential problems with this question:

First, the question relies on respondent self-identification rather than practice, beliefs, affiliation, or participation—things which many respondents may value above religious identity. As we have seen, some active Buddhist practitioners may not feel comfortable with the Buddhist label, either because of philosophical concerns about religious identity or because of insecurities regarding whether they have "earned" that label. What might the researcher miss when relying on respondents' self-identification? Might active practitioners of Buddhism say "nothing in particular" because they do not wish to be called "Buddhist"? This question also raises the issue of what people who do not consider Buddhism to be a religion might mark. Will they balk at a question that asks, "what is your present religion?"

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[19] For a summary of advantages and disadvantages of different research methods in Buddhist demographics see Mitchell (2016: 5–7).

Second, the question only allows one answer, presuming that respondents have only one religious identity. A person who identifies as Protestant and practices twice a week at a local Zen center could only pick one of their two affiliations. Additionally, since Buddhism does not typically require belief in a creator god, it is possible to be Buddhist *and* atheist or Buddhist *and* agnostic. What information is lost when the questions force individuals to select a single identity? Potentially, the study of religious affiliation and identity could evolve along the lines of racial identity. Research shows that individuals who identify with more than one race want to be able to mark multiple races on questionnaires (Johnson et al. 1997), but until the 2000 census, the United States Census Bureau did not allow individuals to mark more than one such category (United States Census Bureau 2001). Now, allowing multiple responses is the norm.

Third, the second part of the Pew item starts with "Are you…." This phrasing comes from an essentialist assumption, that a person's religious affiliation is part of who they *are* rather than what they *do*. The studies presented here show that some people who are actively engaging in Buddhist communities and/or activities and view their identities as impermanent might pick "nothing in particular" rather than claim an essentialist or permanent Buddhist identity. This practice, again, may lead to a significant loss of relevant information.

We do not believe that Buddhist practitioners want to make the lives of researchers difficult. We suspect that most would, in fact, like to provide researchers with meaningful data, especially if they believe their data will improve the lives of themselves or their fellow beings, since compassionate action is a fundamental Buddhist value. This complex issue of Buddhist identity can be resolved by understanding it within the context of the Buddhist teachings themselves. The first century CE Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna used a concept known as "two truths," which indicates a conventional (or relative) reality and an ultimate (or absolute) reality. In this view, conventional reality, the world of dualism that sees "self" and "other" or "subject" and "object," exists in a practical way. But "self" understood from the perspective of ultimate reality, of nonduality, is empty (Williams 2000). To say that "ultimate self is empty" means that the self that humans experience and identify with on a daily basis is not an independent, permanent, unchanging object, but is instead fluctuating, impermanent, and dependent; in sum, it lacks an inherent or essential existence. The self-and-other, or the subject-and-object, are ultimately mutually dependent; as one shifts and changes, so does the other. They are nondual. This abstract notion can play directly into how many Buddhist practitioners understand their religious identity. In conventional reality, they are Buddhist, but in an ultimate sense, Buddhist identity is empty; religious identity is dependent and impermanent. One of Danyluk's informants uses this idea of two truths to explain her identity, saying, "I practice Buddhism…because it's not…I don't know if it *is* what I am. Maybe in a relative sense it is, but in an absolute sense, it's not…. I feel like I don't know if I *am* a Buddhist, but I do practice it. And if that—in a relative sense—makes sense to people, then I say I am" (Danyluk, 2003: 136–37). When Buddhist practitioners such as the one just quoted answer questions about their Buddhist identity, they are trying to decide whether to answer from the realm of ultimate or conventional reality. Conventionally, they are Buddhist; ultimately, they are not.

Social science research exists in the realm of conventional reality. Many practitioners of Buddhism understand that, and they know how to give conventional answers regarding their practice. And yet, researchers can help their subjects give meaningful responses by using knowledge of Buddhist teaching and practice to craft questions that are meaningful to participants. This approach also paves the way for methodologies that take seriously a central argument from symbolic interactionists: the self is flexible rather than static, multifaceted rather than singular. To these ends, we suggest that researchers consider the following questions when approaching questions of Buddhist (and perhaps all religious/philosophical) identity:

- Who defines what makes a person Buddhist? Is it the individual, the researcher, or the Buddhist community? The answer may differ depending on the method and goals of the research. The researcher should be clear, though, about whether self-identification is appropriate for the research question, rather than just accepting that approach based on convention. As an example, Han (2017) defined "Buddhist" as anyone engaged with Buddhism without requiring self-identification with the label of "Buddhist."
- Can researchers phrase questions to emphasize practice and active verbs rather than essentialist constructions of identity? Can one ask what a person does rather than who they "are"? (Examples of useful questions might be "Do you attend a Buddhist group?"; "Do you engage in Buddhist practices?"; "Do you read books on Buddhism?"; "Have you found Buddhist teachings and philosophy useful in your daily life?"; and "Which religious traditions have influenced your spiritual life?")
- Is it possible to explain to the participant why the question is being asked? If a reason for asking questions about religious identity can be provided without harming the research design, then respondents will be better able to tailor the response to the goals of the research.
- Is it possible to create questions that allow people to acknowledge participation in multiple religious groups? If self-identification is important

> to the research, can the respondent identify with multiple traditions? Given that a subpopulation of Buddhist practitioners seem ambivalent about religion in general, consider whether it is necessary or helpful to use the word "religion" in the question. Some Buddhists who claim the identity would not necessarily consider it a "religious" identity.

The increase in the number of individuals claiming no religious affiliation on nationwide surveys has made people wonder if Americans are becoming less religious (Lipka 2015). At least part of the explanation may have less to do with declining religiosity and more to do with how religiosity merges with preferred modes of self-identification. For example, the apparent increase in "seculars" in recent years is heavily driven by the increase in those who "believe but don't belong," a status often motivated by a desire for symbolic distance from formal religious institutions and organizations (Baker and Smith 2015). Trends of this sort are not only pertinent to our methods of analysis but are also significant sociological phenomena in their own right. Precise measurement and understanding of religious identity are also crucial if we are confidently to adjudicate between competing theories of religious change, as in the vigorous debate between religious economies and secularization theories (see Berger 1967; Stark and Finke 2000). Data on religious identity among people who are active in various forms of Buddhism, including the data presented here on Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, raise the possibility that changing experience and understanding of religious identity may contribute to the rise of the apparently non-religious. Perhaps we will gain more insight into these groups and theories by changing how we conceive religious identity.

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