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# Blasphemy as *Bhāvana*

## Anti-Christianity in a New Buddhist Movement

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Jeff Wilson

**ABSTRACT:** Over the course of the twentieth century, Buddhism came to be associated widely with peace, tolerance, and calm detachment in the Western popular imagination. This association was created in opposition to depictions of Christianity as violent, intolerant, and irrational. Buddhism, as the imagined perfect Other, held considerable appeal for counterculture seekers disenchanted with mainstream cultures. While many Buddhist groups played upon these stereotypes to enhance their image and support recruitment, one new Buddhist movement—the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order—went further, employing ritualized “therapeutic blasphemy” to eradicate Christian conditioning in their members and critique mainstream society. Such actions baffled many other Buddhists, but make sense when seen as efforts to heighten in-group solidarity, proclaim distinctive identity, and take the assumption of Buddhism’s superiority over Christianity to its ultimate conclusion. This article attempts to explain why Buddhists might develop intolerant practices, and to assess the costs and benefits of such practices.

**KEYWORDS:** blasphemy, Buddhism, Sangharakshita, anti-Christianity, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Triratna Buddhist Community

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**B**uddhism is often hailed in the West for its supposed record of tolerance, detachment, and nonviolence. However, Buddhist groups are also capable of employing rhetorical violence and intolerance toward other religions when it suits their purposes, for example to enhance in-group solidarity or oppose other religions seen as threats. This case study examines an example of this phenomena within a new Buddhist movement, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO; the group changed their name to the Triratna Buddhist Community in 2010,<sup>1</sup> but since FWBO is the more familiar name, and in order to match the period examined here, FWBO is used except when discussing events since 2010). The FWBO developed the practice of “therapeutic blasphemy” as a way of breaking Buddhist converts free of their latent Christian conditioning and critiquing the British Christian social and political order. Anti-Christianity became a defining characteristic as this new group sought to position itself as the dominant form of Buddhism in the UK and reshape Western culture in what it alleged was a more Buddhist and progressive mode.

Blasphemy, one of the primary tools in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order’s struggle against Christianity, is a contested category among scholars of Buddhism. Matthew King, among others, has suggested that “blasphemy” might be a problematic term when applied to Buddhism, which has no precise matching term.<sup>2</sup> However, most discussion on this topic focuses on blasphemy against Buddhism or the attempts of Buddhist nations to legislate respectful speech and behavior toward Buddhism. Unexamined is how some contemporary Buddhists deploy blasphemy against others as a retention strategy and spiritual practice, as demonstrated by a longtime member of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order:

One day I made myself say, “Fuck the Virgin Mary!” and before I could say it I thought, Oh my god . . . maybe the sky would fall down on me or something like that. But I made myself do it and that showed me . . . this teaching by Sangharakshita is considered by some, even Western Buddhists, quite controversial . . . But I think it was fantastic! [I appreciated] the sense of relief that I felt when I could say that.<sup>3</sup>

Anti-Christianity has a long history in Buddhism. However, it has been confined mainly to Asian Buddhist commentators attacking Christianity—rhetorically or otherwise—as a defense against missionary encroachment.<sup>4</sup> Something quite different is going on in the quote above: a lapsing Christian engages in ritual blasphemy in order to make himself available to more fully pursue Buddhist awakening. Even as he expresses his appreciation, he recognizes how controversial such practices are within the Buddhist community.

Uniquely among Buddhist groups, the FWBO developed a practice of aggressive ritual defamation of Christianity as a form of Buddhist training, which encouraged the promotion of anti-Christianity as a necessary component of Buddhism. They have been advocating this practice for over forty years now, despite—or, perhaps, because of—the controversy that it provokes. It thus provides an illuminating example of the uses and drawbacks of intentionally controversial practices in Buddhism, at least in the West. Controversy has been a prominent part of the new Buddhist groups and institutions established in the West since World War II. Often such controversy has emerged from criticism of charismatic founding leaders, especially around issues of money, sex, power, or personality.<sup>5</sup> Less academic attention has been paid to controversy-provoking practices in new Buddhist groups even though these, in the context of other religious traditions—i.e., public square and door-to-door missionization by Jehovah’s Witnesses, airport evangelism by members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, Hare Krishnas), mass weddings by members of the Unification Church, etc.—have been primary concerns of both the public and scholarship. This article therefore grapples with why Buddhist groups may engage in dramatically controversial practices, what benefits may accrue to the individuals and groups involved, and what consequences they also suffer from such practices.

### **SANGHARAKSHITA AND THE FWBO**

Like many new Buddhist movements founded in England and elsewhere, the FWBO was created by a central guru figure with a strong missionary drive to spread Buddhism in the West. Dennis Lingwood (1925–2018) was born in London. Of white working-class background, he attended Anglican services and joined a Baptist boys’ group as a young teen.<sup>6</sup> Despite some emotional fondness for the compassionate figure of Jesus, Christian doctrines and the church seem to have left him cold. According to his later accounts, he rejected Christianity at an early age. In fact, he equated his discovery that he was not a Christian with the taste of nirvana itself, writing:

[I discovered that] I never had been and never would be [a Christian]—and that the whole structure of Christian doctrine was from beginning to end thoroughly repugnant to me. This realization gave me a sense of relief, of liberation as from some oppressive burden, which was so great that I wanted to dance and sing for joy. What I was, what I believed, I knew not, but what I was not and what I did not believe, that I knew with utter certainty, and this knowledge, merely negative though it was as yet, gave me a foretaste of that freedom which comes when all obstacles are removed, all barriers broken down, all limitations transcended.<sup>7</sup>

Lingwood discovered Buddhism through reading, and later, after being posted in India during World War II, he was ordained as a novice Theravada monk in Kusinagar in 1949, taking the name Sangharakshita (he received the full ordination a year later in Sarnath).<sup>8</sup> He trained with various teachers in different traditions (including receiving initiations from several Tibetan lamas), returning to England in 1967 to start a new Buddhist group, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Sangha (renamed the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order the following year). Those who were initiated as members of the Western Buddhist Order took ten precepts (like novices in the Theravada and many other Buddhist schools) that mirrored various Buddhist traditions' schema to some degree, but lacked a commitment to strict celibacy and a monastic lifestyle in which there is no involvement in financial exchanges. These precepts included vows to abstain from killing, harsh speech, and hatred.<sup>9</sup> Regular lay members who had committed themselves to the group were known as Mitras (Sanskrit for "friend").

The UK had few organized Buddhist groups at this time, and only limited immigration from Buddhist areas of Asia. With relatively few authorities on Buddhism or Buddhist communities present to represent Buddhism and no dependence on any particular Buddhist institution or sect, Sangharakshita was free to mold a new Buddhism that fit his individual vision—one that was as much about opposing the mainstream of British society and religion as it was about transmitting received Asian Buddhist tradition. Riding the rising wave of counterculture spirituality and rebellion, the FWBO grew from a core of a few dozen adherents to become one of the largest Buddhist movements founded in the West, with over 200 branches and businesses in thirty countries.<sup>10</sup> Today it is one of the three largest Buddhist groups in the United Kingdom (where it has more than eighty centers) and also has a notable presence in India, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>11</sup>

FWBO, or Triratna, Buddhism is eclectic, based on the ideas, teachings, and practices preferred by Sangharakshita. Influences from the Southeast Asian Theravada and Tibetan Vajrayana traditions are especially prominent, but there are elements of many other traditions in the mix as well: for example, the organization's Refuge Tree (a visual representation of historical figures venerated as ancestors by the FWBO) includes the Chinese Zen teacher Huineng (638–713 CE) and the Japanese Jōdo Shinshū founder Shinran (1173–1263 CE). Nearly as important are strong influences from Western religious and psychological sources. These especially coalesce around the core FWBO notion of self-transformation or self-perfection, expressed as "Higher Evolution of the True Individual." This is the gathering point for cultural streams ultimately originating in European Romanticism, Nietzschean *übermensch* philosophy, and Jungian psychology, all of which receive attention in Sangharakshita's writings and in FWBO curricula.<sup>12</sup> This personal

evolution is mirrored by an envisioned social change, whereby the “Old Society” gives way to a radical and superior “New Society” that divests itself of the ills of the past. This New Society is born from Buddhism, specifically the Buddhism of the FWBO, which shall replace the Old Society with a social order based in freedom and enlightened consciousness. The FWBO is thus utopian in intent and spends considerable time and attention on how to transform current human society for the better, rather than a more traditional Buddhist focus on accumulating merit for rebirth in future lives. This has led some researchers to classify the FWBO as a form of socially engaged Buddhism.<sup>13</sup>

In many ways, the FWBO mirrors other new Buddhist movements founded during the twentieth century in the West: it shows a strong preference for selected ancient scriptural materials in translation rather than customs, lifeways, and modes of authority found in contemporary Asian Buddhist societies; it suggests that it, perhaps uniquely, embodies the essence of the authentic Dharma (Buddhist teachings); it seeks explicitly Western modes of expression and organization; it reduces the role of inherited rules of morality; it combines lay and monastic practices and lifestyles previously kept in separate spheres; it draws on multiple Buddhist traditions and lineages; it rhetorically places itself in opposition to dogma, formalism, and authoritarianism; it has counter-cultural aspirations; it tends toward sectarianism; it shows a marked preference for psychological and poetic interpretations of Buddhist tropes and concepts rather than literal or traditional ones; and it has experienced turmoil over matters of sex, power, and money. But whereas these characteristics—and the Buddhist and Western cultural influences mentioned above—are found to some degree in a great many new European and North American Buddhist groups, the FWBO is unique in its development of blasphemy as a method for transforming self and society.

### **BLASPHEMY AND THE LOVE THAT DARES TO SPEAK ITS NAME**

The precipitating event for Sangharakshita’s proclamation of blasphemy for spiritual development took place in 1976, when the British newspaper *Gay News* published a homoerotic poem by James Kirkup.<sup>14</sup> Entitled “The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name,” the poem described a Roman centurion having sex with the dead body of Jesus Christ, as well as ruminating on Christ’s sex affairs with the twelve apostles, Pontius Pilate, and John the Baptist.<sup>15</sup> Mary Whitehouse, a well-known British moral crusader, seized on the poem, reporting *Gay News* for blasphemy. In July 1977 the court sustained the charge, fining *Gay News* 1,000 pounds and giving editor Dennis Lemon a nine-month suspended jail sentence and a 1,000-pound fine. Many Brits were shocked at the idea of

a successful modern-day prosecution for blasphemy, a crime that, while still part of the common law, had not been prosecuted since the 1920s, such that it was considered by most to be a dead letter.

Sangharakshita was certainly among those alarmed by this development. His first sally into the fray was a book review of *The Great Heresy* by Arthur Guirdham, published in the Spring 1978 issue of the *FWBO Newsletter*.<sup>16</sup> This was picked up and republished approvingly by *The Middle Way*, the leading British Buddhist journal of the period. While ostensibly about the Cathar movement, Sangharakshita's main purpose was to castigate Christianity for its history of persecuting heretics. He brought up the Inquisition and Nazi Gestapo before ending his article with a portentous warning: "At a time when, in this country, non-Christians have been suddenly made aware that they do not have quite so much freedom as they had thought, it would be well for English Buddhists at least to remind themselves that the ghosts of Pope Innocent III and the Inquisitors are still very much abroad and that it is still possible for a religion to be destroyed."<sup>17</sup>

In March 1978 the *Gay News* verdict was upheld on appeal. Sangharakshita responded by publishing a fiercely-worded condemnation of the ruling, titled *Buddhism and Blasphemy*. As this is the key document for our case study, this booklet requires close examination. Sangharakshita began by rehearsing the facts of the case, as well as some of the history of British blasphemy laws. He then shifted into a discussion of the blasphemy law's effect on Buddhists. "This is a state of affairs that gravely concerns every Buddhist in the land," he declared.

It is well known that the notion of a personal God, the creator and ruler of the universe, has no place in the Buddha's teaching, and that throughout its history Buddhism has in fact rejected the notion as detrimental to the moral and spiritual development of mankind. . . . Under the present interpretation of the law any Buddhist bearing public witness to the truth of this fundamental tenet of Buddhism, whether in speech or writing, therefore runs the risk of committing the crime of blasphemy and being punished accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Sangharakshita declared, publishing various Pali Buddhist suttas that mock the idea of an omnipotent deity would also be forbidden. Buddhists were, therefore, not free to practice their religion in the UK. This was especially true because, according to Sangharakshita, "Christians have never been remarkable for their tolerance, and after the events of 1977 and 1978 no Buddhist—no non-Christian, in fact—can feel truly safe so long as the blasphemy laws remain unrepealed. The baying of wolves, however distant, is not a very reassuring sound to more pacific beasts."<sup>19</sup>

He then went on to discuss blasphemy in Buddhism, saying that "for Buddhism there is no such thing as blasphemy."<sup>20</sup> This was because

blasphemy is offense against God, who does not exist in Buddhism. Furthermore, he stated that Buddhists do not persecute others for speaking offensively against the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha. Rather, quoting the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, he claimed that the Buddhist attitude toward such actions was to react without anger or offense. Sangharakshita grudgingly, and very briefly, admitted that Buddhists have not always lived up to this spirit, but rapidly pushed any doubts aside by returning to his stress on “the enormities that repeatedly disgraced the blood-stained record of Christianity.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he believed that “Christianity—including the Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church—has done a great deal of harm in the world. In Europe particularly, it has done more social and psychological damage than any other system of belief known to history. Crusades, Inquisitions, wars of religion, burnings of heretics and witches, and pogroms are only particularly black spots on a record almost uniformly dark.”<sup>22</sup>

Sangharakshita asked, “Why should Buddhism be permeated by sweet reasonableness and Christianity by ferocious unreasonableness?”<sup>23</sup> He answered his own question by arguing that Buddhists are counseled to give up anger and hurt feelings, as these stand in the way of their own spiritual progress. Christians, on the other hand, have been so paranoid about blasphemy because they believe in a profoundly dangerous tyrant deity (“a sort of cosmic Louis XIV or Ivan the Terrible”) whom they must appease out of fear of terrible retribution.<sup>24</sup> From this paranoia they have created a history of gruesome punishment and persecution, heightened by their own repressed impulses to commit blasphemy.

Sangharakshita then coined three terms for different types of blasphemy. First, he described rational and irrational blasphemy. Rational blasphemy is blasphemy that occurs due to the logical conclusions of one’s own beliefs. For instance, Buddhists do not believe there is a God, so when they say there is no God, they are acting rationally based on their intellectual understanding; Unitarians do not believe in the Trinity, so they are simply being rational when they dispute its existence. However, their expressions happen to be blasphemous to Christians who disagree with them.<sup>25</sup>

Sangharakshita was far more interested in the second form. As he described it, “irrational blasphemy is blasphemy committed as the psychological result of the Christian’s own largely unconscious resistance to, and reaction against, the very religion in which he believes.”<sup>26</sup> This form of blasphemy is compulsive in nature, arising from a conflict in the Christian adherent’s own soul, and stimulated by the “restrictive and coercive nature of Christianity itself.”<sup>27</sup>

Since God’s thundering commands as mediated by the Church deprive him of his freedom of thought and conduct, and force him to believe whatever he is told to believe, the Christian experiences Christianity as an

immensely powerful oppressive and coercive force that threatens to crush his nascent individuality or, at the very least, compels it to assume unnatural and distorted forms. A compulsion to commit blasphemy is his response to this situation.<sup>28</sup>

Projected outward onto others as a way of desperately displacing such perilous feelings, these unconscious impulses resulted in the persecution of the Templars, the burning of old women as witches, and, in the modern day, the suppression of Denis Lemon and *Gay News*.<sup>29</sup> The environmental conditioning of Christianity was so pervasive that even ex-Christians were subject to the lingering effects of Christian indoctrination, repression, and unconscious struggles with irrational blasphemous thoughts. To the extent that they failed to purge themselves of these deep-rooted fears and concepts, even Western Buddhists were still Christian at heart.

It is here that Sangharakshita introduced his third type of blasphemy. The solution to this problem, he posed, was blasphemy as an intentional practice undertaken to exorcise oneself of the ghost of Christianity and its despotic God.

In order to abandon Christianity completely—in order to liberate himself from its oppressive and stultifying influence—it may be necessary for the ex-Christian not only to repudiate Christianity intellectually in the privacy of his own mental consciousness but also to give public expression in words, writing, or signs to his *emotional* rejection of Christianity and the God of Christianity, i.e., it may be necessary for him to commit blasphemy.<sup>30</sup>

This is, as he called it, therapeutic blasphemy. Engaging in intentional blasphemy would allow one to become a “perfect” Buddhist. He encouraged readers to carry out therapeutic blasphemy because it would help one to “develop his human potential to the uttermost,” which was the goal of Buddhism as preached by the FWBO.<sup>31</sup> He furthermore castigated potential Buddhist critics who might accuse him of “intolerance” or “narrowmindedness” or that he was not talking about “real” Christianity.<sup>32</sup> Such “Buddhists” were really just Christians, he sneered, with an interest in Buddhism but a fear of divine punishment and inability to admit to themselves that they were repressing their own tumultuous tendencies.

Sangharakshita ended his essay with several policy recommendations. First, the law against blasphemy should be struck down. Second, complete separation of church and state should be enacted, including the disestablishment of the Church of England, the removal of all religious instruction from schools, the abolishment of religious worship at morning assembly in schools, the separation of the monarchy from religion, and removal of references to God from the national anthem.

Third, “blasphemy should be recognized as healthy, and as necessary to the moral and spiritual development of the individual. . . . Far from being prosecuted, it should be encouraged.”<sup>33</sup> The results would be positive for individuals and for society at large, which would become healthier and happier. This was blasphemy not simply as personal *bhāvana* (practice) but as bodhisattva practice, as it would help save the world.<sup>34</sup>

### THERAPEUTIC BLASPHEMY IN PRACTICE

Sangharakshita’s essay dropped like a bombshell onto the FWBO. A review in the *FWBO Newsletter* declared, “This is the most important work to come from the pen of Sangharakshita for a long time, and should certainly be read by all aspiring Buddhists and many aspiring Christians too.”<sup>35</sup> The booklet soon sold out, and was reprinted (it would be republished again in coming years). Other FWBO members took up Sangharakshita’s argument enthusiastically, discussing it amongst themselves and promoting it in the mainstream media.<sup>36</sup>

But Buddhists in the FWBO were not just reading and discussing *Buddhism and Blasphemy*: they were also actively putting its recommendations into practice. As the FWBO Newsletter reviewer claimed, “Blasphemy is the path we must tread on the way from being a Christian to becoming an ex-Christian, and possibly a Western Buddhist. . . . And certainly we in the West who are aspiring towards Buddhism will be continually hampered along the path until we too commit blasphemy, and rid ourselves once and for all of this insidious crime that passes for a religion.”<sup>37</sup>

How to walk that path quickly became a topic of intense conversation. In April 1979 seventy male FWBO members participated in a ten-day retreat in Sussex, later known as “the Vinehall Event.” Between sessions of sutra study, yoga, and meditation, the topic of blasphemy came up repeatedly, with three or four of the nightly talks exploring the subject. In small group discussions, “controversy raged over the issue of what is referred to in the pamphlet as ‘therapeutic blasphemy’: can it be consciously contrived? Does someone have to be offended for it to be effective?”<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, nineteen women who gathered in May 1979 at the Mandarava retreat center were going much further, as reported by FWBO member Dhammadina:

In the discussion some people expressed—some of them very strongly—just how deeply they felt this conditioning went, and how much it seemed to stand in the way of their growth as True Individuals. Consequently,

throughout the retreat, many people were moved, stimulated, provoked, and even felt compelled to do something about this and to try and shake off the grip of this conditioning in various ways—in some cases, through cathartic blasphemy.<sup>39</sup>

Samata, another FWBO member at the retreat, later provided an example of this sort of cathartic anti-Christian blasphemy:

After the puja here in the shrine room each evening, we went into one of the barns, and we made these two huge crucifixes out of two very, very large planks of wood and nailed them on. I was beating this crucifix with a big heavy metal chain, symbolic of loosening, letting go of my own chains that were constricting me. It was just very strong to shout, or more positively to therapeutically blaspheme against this God figure who had dominated our lives without us realizing.<sup>40</sup>

Similar discussions and acts played out at various other retreats and local gatherings. As Nagabodhi, at that time the editor of the *FWBO Newsletter*, later reported, “*Shabda*, a monthly newsletter circulating exclusively among Order members, erupted in a rash of blasphemous articles, poems, and cartoons. Rumors of bible-burnings on women’s retreats started to circulate; people lulled themselves to sleep cursing the deity.”<sup>41</sup> Other rumors—which were apparently circulated approvingly by some adherents of the FWBO—included an Order member having sex on the altar of a country church.<sup>42</sup> An attitude of carnivalistic delight permeates the writings and swapped stories of blasphemy during this period. More than just personally therapeutic, these group denunciations of Christian icons were communal rituals that collectively heightened everyone’s sense that they were engaged in a noble, revolutionary process of self and social transformation. Excess, therefore, was positive: extreme acts of blasphemy, whether real or imagined, produced greater amounts of frisson.

Many people claimed significant benefits from engaging in therapeutic blasphemy. As Nagabodhi related:

The ex-Catholics were the first to report benefits, but soon all kinds of people, right down to the humdrum “[Church of England] by birth, never seen the inside of a church except for weddings and funerals” were discovering that, in a variety of ways, they could feel themselves reclaiming an initiative in their lives—one which they had perhaps never even been consciously aware of losing. They felt free, not just of God, but of an entire substructure of absolutes and inhibitions that had stultified and limited their lives hitherto. . . . As the months went by, a tremendous amount of fresh energy and creativity were liberated. Suddenly we were walking—some of us for the first time—beneath an empty sky. Attitudes to the spiritual life itself changed as people purged themselves of the theistic assumptions and expectations they had brought to it. There was

less hankering after special experiences, less grasping pursuit of elusive mystical states. We were moving closer to a distinctly “Buddhistic” approach to the spiritual life.<sup>43</sup>

Blaspheming, it seems, was more than just a Buddhist practice: it was a way of becoming *more* Buddhist. This was true both in the sense of developing a more Buddhist spiritual outlook, and also in terms of displaying conformity to the FWBO. Given that the head of the movement advised it and many people felt they were deriving benefits, soon enough the practice was recommended to everyone. Even those who did not feel that they were hampered by Christian conditioning were pushed to perform acts of anti-Christian blasphemy, and, when they resisted, were suspected of harboring unacknowledged Christian attachments.<sup>44</sup> As Dhammadina stated, “Many of us, even though we may not have been brought up in a specifically Christian way, nevertheless suffer from . . . a remnant, or hangover, of our Christian conditioning: attitudes such as fear and guilt, desire for approval, authoritarianism, a tendency to involve ourselves in power struggles, and so on. All these attitudes are antipathetic to real spiritual friendship.”<sup>45</sup>

### **MONSTERS AND ENEMIES: THE STRATEGIC USE OF ANTI-CHRISTIANITY**

Therapeutic blasphemy was a practice for members of the FWBO on their quest toward True Individuality. But it provided a launching point for a more generalized anti-Christian rhetoric that soon became one of the most distinctive characteristics of the FWBO. Christianity became increasingly envisioned as one of the fundamental characteristics of the Old Society, and therefore something that had to be swept away before the liberated New Society could come into existence. As such, to be Buddhist came to mean being anti-Christian (as opposed to simply non-Christian). Buddhism was now imagined as not just different from, but in many ways the positive opposite of negatively valued Christianity.

FWBO member Abhaya exemplified this emerging spirit of Buddhism-as-anti-Christianity in his 1979 *FWBO Newsletter* article “Two Heads of the Monster.” The Old Society was akin to a monster, one that was especially dangerous because it did not simply lurk in the wilderness but actually lived within us, preventing us from making spiritual progress. “The words ‘the New Society’ are still so fresh on our lips! We cannot dispense with the Old Society once and for all, as cleanly as a snake sloughs its old skin. . . . On closer scrutiny we might well discover that it’s no monster out there that’s holding us back; it’s our own roots. The Old Society after all is still in us; we are its products and its

conditionings still entangle us.”<sup>46</sup> Two of the deepest-rooted and most negative forms of Old Society conditioning—the two heads of the monster—were Christianity and the family (which Abhaya blamed Christianity for reinforcing).

Abhaya described how his Christian (specifically, Roman Catholic) upbringing stifled his individuality and spirituality. Christianity provided no effective method of contemplation or transformation, insisted he accept laughable dogmas as fact, and was sexually repressive. Indeed, sexual repression was a hallmark of all forms of Christianity and “has penetrated into the make-up of the Old Society so deeply that Christians and non-Christians alike suffer its effects.”<sup>47</sup> The threat of hell was a constant burden to any who flirted with wrong practice or wrong belief, and “one was continually having to placate God in order to ward off his possible heavy retributions.”<sup>48</sup> The result was a monster of a religion, hardly worthy of that label. Abhaya concluded on a revolutionary note:

As I have tried to express, these two factors of the Old Society, Christianity and nuclear family, are, in their essential respects, restrictive and inimical to the growth of the individual. They keep people in the dark. Buddhism, on the other hand, is for Enlightenment, is liberating, leading to expansion of consciousness. It is vital, therefore, that each of us looks deep within himself or herself to find out to what extent these two strong roots are still entangled with our nubile aspirations for true growth. How far is our view of Buddhism tinged with Christianity? . . . Experiencing fully the extent to which we are still hybrids, and how dependent we still are on the old conditionings, is the first step toward becoming free of them.<sup>49</sup>

Although unmentioned here, the typical second step in FWBO practice of the time was therapeutic blasphemy intended to remove these roots.

When critiqued about therapeutic blasphemy, FWBO members often replied that it was meant to be a private practice, though in actuality it often occurred in group settings and members were not shy about broadcasting its merits to the public. As anti-Christianity became a more integral part of its identity and brand, the FWBO often went out of their way to display their antipathy. For example, the FWBO’s London Buddhist Centre rented a stand at the 1979 Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit in Olympia. Their display included a sign that announced “Belief in God is a hindrance to psychological and spiritual development. Why? The Buddha taught that belief in a personal God and an immortal soul were rationalizations of desires, of our craving for love and protection, and our attachment to our own personalities.”<sup>50</sup> Predictably, this was the aspect of their display that provoked the most comments from festival attendees, many of them negative.

One of the most ardent FWBO critics of Christianity was Subhuti (Alex Kennedy, b.1947), who was also among the top members of the Order after Sangharakshita.<sup>51</sup> In a 1980 *FWBO Newsletter* he set out to

critique other Buddhists and Buddhist groups, with their accommodation of Christianity foremost in his mind: “Our first criticism must be of those Buddhists who do not accept Buddhism—who fit Buddhism to suit their own presuppositions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attitude of many ‘Buddhists’ to Christianity and to belief in God.”<sup>52</sup> Subhuti claimed that the Buddha rejected belief in God as ruler and creator. “His attitude, in common with later tradition, was to treat it as a belief worthy only of ridicule, born of insecurity, self-interest, or mere ignorance. . . . Despite this unequivocal rejection of theism by Buddhists throughout history many ‘modern Buddhists’ in the West go out of their way to present Buddhism as, in its own fashion, talking about God.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, to his dismay, “some Eastern Buddhists who teach Westerners use the concept of God, and other Christian terminology, in naïve ignorance of the effects and influence of Christianity.”<sup>54</sup> This was terrible because the very idea of God “is inextricably bound up with authority and dogma, and cannot fail to convey the very opposite of the freedom and bliss which is at the heart of Buddhism.”<sup>55</sup> Thus for Subhuti God and Buddhism were mutually irreconcilable opposites—to be Buddhist was not simply not to believe in God but to be *against* God; to be Christian was to be against Buddhism.

From this premise, Subhuti proceeded to criticize the Sri Lankan Theravadin monk Saddhatissa (1914–1990) and Tibetan monks Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935–1984) and Akong Rinpoche (1939–2013) for mixing Buddhism and Christianity in various ways. Such admixtures by major figures such as these were due, he suggested, to carelessness and ignorance of the pernicious facts of Christianity. These venerable Asian monks lacked “any experience of the crushing burden of psychological guilt from which many have derived their Christian upbringing,” and thus did not realize that many people come to them “emotionally crippled as a result of that teaching with its repressive influence still buried deep in their psyches. To encourage them to follow the teachings of their Christian upbringing is to encourage them to persist in the crippled condition to escape from which so many have turned to Buddhism.”<sup>56</sup> Subhuti, like other FWBO commentators of this period, was unwilling to admit to the existence of a Christianity that was anything other than crushing, crippling, and repressive. Mixing Christianity, which was felt to be repulsive, with Buddhism—idealized as perfect—was therefore unacceptable. Indeed, Sangharakshita during this same period claimed that one of the main reasons he started the FWBO in 1967 was due to the “muddleheadedness” of too many existing British Buddhist groups that permitted an accommodating attitude toward Christianity.<sup>57</sup>

Subhuti’s anti-Christian Buddhism reached its apex in his 1983 book *Buddhism for Today*. Early in the book, he took pains to explain that a buddha is not a god, and that Buddhism is opposed to the idea of God. “In fact, it considers belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing creator

God to be a barrier to full human growth and the mark of failure to take complete responsibility for oneself. This failure gives rise to authoritarianism, dogmatism, fanaticism, inhumanity, weakness, and guilt—all of which have characterized the history of the theistic religions but are foreign to Buddhism.”<sup>58</sup>

This representation of Buddhism and Buddhist history is highly inaccurate and reflects a consistent pattern in FWBO publications. FWBO authors rejected critics’ rebuttals that Christian theology was more logical, charitable, and thoughtful than the dark parts of Christian history that FWBO propagandists always highlighted; at the same time, FWBO writers consistently presented an idealized, scripturally based Buddhism that bore little resemblance to Buddhism’s politically entangled, often dogmatic and authoritarian, and sometimes violent actual practice in Asian history.<sup>59</sup> But romanticization of Buddhism and Buddhist history were necessary to provide a blank screen upon which writers such as Subhuti could project Buddhism as the positive opposite of all he found despicable about Christianity, which seemed to be the largest contributing factor to the Old Society that he wanted to supplant. This New Society which the FWBO hoped to birth was fundamentally aligned against the Old Society: “The enemies to be attacked are legion and to enumerate them even, let alone to eradicate them, is a more than Herculean task. For the present it will be sufficient to discuss three major areas: the nuclear family, Christianity, and pseudo-liberalism.”<sup>60</sup> Despite listing them together, Subhuti actually devoted more space to condemning Christianity than the other two combined, and it was the only one that he advocated specific action (therapeutic blasphemy) against. Furthermore, it was an especially dangerous enemy because it infected even those who were not part of its fold:

As far-reaching in its effects upon Western culture as the nuclear family and yet far more insidious and deep-rooted is the Christian religion. Although, in modern Britain, church membership is at its lowest ever, Christian attitudes and assumptions affect most people whether they know it or not. Its effects are to be observed even in those who had no formal Christian education since the whole culture is imbued with it. Many people who become involved with Buddhism are surprised to find that they are still basically motivated by their Christian conditioning and that they must urgently break themselves free.<sup>61</sup>

The FWBO critique of Christianity rested primarily on a psychological analysis of a stereotypical Christian. Taking a (unacknowledged) page from Freud, they argued that God was a projection of the Christian’s own love and fear, an imagined ultimate father figure who could protect the weak individual, but whose overawing power was also a constant source of danger. Subhuti made this clear: “He longs for someone to make his decision for him, some cosmic parent who will

take away the burden of self-responsibility from him. Out of his fear he creates an all-powerful cosmic arbiter who establishes what is right and wrong. What is right is what the 'Almighty' wants and what is wrong is what he forbids. In relation to this God man stands as a trembling weakling who must obey."<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, he was unable to rid himself of impulses that go against the will of God, and thus the Christian lived in constant terror and guilt.

Worse still, "The Christian not only feels guilty if he transgresses God's commandments, he feels angry on God's behalf if others do. He feels justified—rather he feels a duty—to punish the sinner and may even take his life 'for the good of his soul'."<sup>63</sup> This led to the Inquisition and Crusades, and a similar dynamic fueled Muslim history as well. Buddhism, lacking God, has been exempt from this pattern: "The contrast with Buddhism is total. Buddhists and others would do well to remember that it was only in 1977 that a successful prosecution for blasphemy was brought in the English courts."<sup>64</sup>

But Subhuti was ultimately less concerned with possible attacks by Christians than by the debilitating effects of Christianity within oneself.

The most lasting legacy of Christianity is in its psychological effects on those who have been exposed to its influence, even indirectly. As it breeds ethical irresponsibility, political authoritarianism, and intellectual dogmatism, so the idea of sin weakens the individual and divides him against himself. A conventional Christian upbringing instills a sense of guilt about the more animal side of man's nature. Many Christians are confused and guilty about sex, and are not able to assert themselves generally in a healthy and straightforward way.<sup>65</sup>

From a conventional Buddhist perspective this argument may seem odd, as Buddhism can hardly be characterized as a sex-positive religion in its mainstream forms.<sup>66</sup> This is just one of many places where FWBO members such as Subhuti imagined a new Buddhism that satisfied their desires for something different from their rejected Christian and European pasts, a Buddhism that had little reality in the Asian past or present.

Having thoroughly argued the pernicious effects of Christianity on the individual, the only thing left for Subhuti to do was prescribe a treatment for this disease. Predictably, the antidote was therapeutic blasphemy:

Although Christianity is widely discredited it is still a powerful force and some of its followers are still willing to persecute in its name. Worse still, its psychological effects are still present in many who feel themselves to be ex-Christians. Before they can really develop further they must rid themselves of the image of God which they carry within. They must effectively become pagans again, freely and joyfully experiencing their

own desires and emotions. In order for them to break free it may be necessary for them to allow themselves to express the resentment which they have felt for that repressive influence. They may need to blaspheme, to openly and freely ridicule and revile the God who has so distorted and tyrannised their psyches. By expressing contempt and ridicule in that way they will finally be able to be free and to accept responsibility for whatever they do.<sup>67</sup>

In Subhuti's frequent castigation of Christianity for weakening its followers and his call for freedom from Christian strictures and the ties of the nuclear family, there seemed to be a sexual subtext. Classical forms of Buddhism primarily aim to control, diminish, and eventually eliminate desires, but for Subhuti there was something to be gained in reclaiming them from the frowning gaze of God. Writing at the tail end of the sexual revolution, Subhuti and other FWBO writers appeared to believe that the liberating power of Buddhism went beyond personal release from suffering—it also potentially included liberation from restrictive moral paradigms (instantiated primarily through organized Christianity) and from repressive sexual mores (also charged to Christianity).

It is significant that members of the FWBO were also experimenting at this time with alternative forms of partnership, ranging from single-sex communities to intense spiritual friendship to—in the case of Sangharakshita and some other senior members—homosexuality. It seems more than coincidence that Sangharakshita's ire was sparked by a blasphemy case against a gay newspaper, considering that (while often counseling celibacy and allowing most people to assume that he remained a celibate, ordained monk) he was engaged in a number of affairs and relationships with younger men throughout this period. Taking down Christianity served as protection against both anti-Buddhist and homophobic threats. Even for heterosexual FWBO members, therapeutic blasphemy against God could serve as a channel to authorize themselves to engage in sexual behavior beyond marriage and without the intention of forming lifelong family units.

## REACTIONS TO BUDDHIST BLASPHEMY

The publication of *Buddhism and Blasphemy* brought considerable attention to the FWBO, within and beyond Buddhist circles. Many atheist, humanist, and other groups discussed the FWBO's bold stance on blasphemy.<sup>68</sup> For instance, *The New Humanist* printed a lengthy and glowing review of the booklet, with particular attention to the idea of therapeutic blasphemy, calling the essay “well-written,” “well-argued,” and “remarkable.”<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the secular humanist periodical *The Freethinker* gave approving notice of the booklet. Beyond agreeing with the basic logic of Sangharakshita's premise, the author especially

appreciated his general anti-Christian tone, praising Sangharakshita's refusal to "indulge in mealy-mouthed platitudes or even bother to pay the usual, if undeserved, tribute to Christianity."<sup>70</sup> Anti-Christianity was so important to many humanists that it could take higher priority over their general antipathy to any religion:

Secularists will warmly approve most of the content of *Buddhism and Blasphemy* although many will recall that Christians, when a minority, have also made passionate pleas for religious freedom and tolerance, but on attaining power they ruthlessly persecuted and destroyed their opponents. Perhaps Buddhists are not so tolerant as Sangharakshita in those parts of the world where they are a significant force. Nevertheless, we must not allow our instinctive and justified wariness of the Christian double-Cross to make us suspicious of every dot and comma that emanates from a religious source.<sup>71</sup>

The research copy of *Buddhism and Blasphemy* that I consulted for this project was donated to the University of Wisconsin library by The Freedom From Religion Foundation. In this case an anti-religious group actually bought and donated to the university a Buddhist book that extols Buddhism, since it aligned with their own objectives: in other words, atheists assisted with the promotion of Buddhism because they found common cause in the battle against Christianity.

Beyond partnering with anti-Christian groups, FWBO representatives were invited to describe their stance and practices on the radio,<sup>72</sup> the booklet was discussed in parliamentary debate,<sup>73</sup> and its perspectives were taken into consideration as attempts to reform the blasphemy law were made.<sup>74</sup> *Buddhism and Blasphemy* and its proclamations became a seemingly permanent part of the British discussion about blasphemy, popping up time and again whenever the issue came back into the national consciousness, such as in the wake of the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 death sentence fatwa against author Salman Rushdie for alleged blasphemous elements in his novel *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>75</sup> One senior FWBO member even tried to playfully co-opt *The Satanic Verses* as an example of therapeutic blasphemy:

"There are people in whom the fear of God still operates and whose freedom of action is inhibited by unconscious belief in a vengeful God," Kulananda, a member of the order, said. "There can thus be occasions when engaging in an act of blasphemy helps someone to rid himself or herself of this unconscious belief." Usually this was a private matter rather than a public display. But it could be asked: "Is perhaps Salman Rushdie simply after freeing himself from his conditioned attitude and helping others?"<sup>76</sup>

*Buddhism and Blasphemy* also made its way into academia, with therapeutic blasphemy becoming a topic of debate for non-Buddhist

philosophers arguing over the nature of blasphemy<sup>77</sup> and a mode of analysis for religious studies scholars trying to explain the activities of famous eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century infidels such as Charles Francois Dupuis (1742–1809), Robert Taylor (1784–1844), and Aleister Crowley (1875–1947).<sup>78</sup> The FWBO did not track numbers, but anecdotally it is clear that all this attention and notoriety brought in some new participants, who, impressed with the FWBO's full-throated ridicule of Christianity, were drawn to try out its Buddhism for themselves.

By positioning themselves as crusaders for freedom and rationality under threat from superstitious and small-minded Christians, the FWBO were able to represent themselves as a vanguard of their desired New Society in battle with the Old Society. They engaged in rhetorical violence against their perceived enemies, but did not suggest that physical violence was appropriate—indeed, it was the history of physical violence by Christians and the (alleged) lack of such in Buddhist history that partially provoked their stand in the first place. They counseled non-reactivity in the face of attacks on their own sacred figures, based in an attitude of transcendent detachment, although in practice the FWBO vigorously defended actual and perceived verbal slights against Buddhism, Sangharakshita, and the group.

Right from the start, some FWBO members were uncomfortable with the practice, either because they continued to appreciate Christianity to some degree, they felt sympathy for Christians who sometimes attended FWBO events, or they were dismayed by what they took to be intolerant or belligerent attitudes on the part of their fellow Buddhists.<sup>79</sup> Heated debates, in some cases rising to the level of arguments, broke out during retreats. Some members left the FWBO, while others remained but felt silenced in their opposition to a practice strongly championed by many of the top leaders in the organization.<sup>80</sup> The number of people who exited the FWBO over its teachings and practices around blasphemy is difficult to discern, especially because many people may have simply left quietly, without proclaiming the role of blasphemy in their exodus.

Although the FWBO never suggested or engaged in physical attacks against Christians, their strongly worded condemnations of Christian history and theology were too extreme for many outsiders. While many Buddhists agreed with Sangharakshita's denunciation of blasphemy laws in Britain, far fewer were willing to approve his ideas about blasphemy's therapeutically and spiritually beneficial potentiality, let alone necessity. Most other Buddhists and Buddhist groups opposed the FWBO's anti-Christian practices, making inter-Buddhist activities and organizing difficult. One Cornwall Buddhist was so upset that he burned a copy of *Buddhism and Blasphemy*.<sup>81</sup> Perhaps more typical was dismissal of the FWBO's insistence on therapeutic blasphemy. For

example, a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism wrote to *The Middle Way* after it published a positive review of *Buddhism and Blasphemy*:

As a Buddhist who rejected the God concept on my own account, many years ago, I have not found it “psychologically necessary” to vilify the deity of my Christian friends, either publicly or in private, in order to free myself of any “legacy of fear and guilt,” because I carry no such burden. Yet the review suggests that the author’s advice is offered to *all* Buddhists. Surely it should be directed solely to *some* Buddhists, to whom Christianity is a problem? Lastly, does Buddhism not teach that a man who spits upon the faith of another defiles his own? The idea of insulting the Christian God as an emotional therapy seems, unhappily, contradictory.<sup>82</sup>

Some Buddhists used the perception of the FWBO as an intolerant false Buddhism to their advantage, luring FWBO participants away to their own groups that they depicted as exemplifying a truly Buddhist tolerance and magnanimity toward Christians.<sup>83</sup>

Scholars too have criticized the FWBO. In one of the first academic analyses of the FWBO, Philip Mellor observed that “one of the major distinguishing features of the FWBO is its outright hostility to Christianity.”<sup>84</sup> In his 2006 Routledge book *British Buddhism*, published nearly thirty years after *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, Robert Bluck referred to the FWBO’s attacks on Christianity as “extremely intolerant” and accused the organization of, ironically, fostering a crypto-Protestant attitude of arrogant sectarian self-righteousness.<sup>85</sup> The FWBO had in fact attempted in some ways to lean more toward the mainstream by this time, but their pugnacious history clearly continued to be the primary salient factor for many commentators.

Eventually, the FWBO suffered due to their earlier vigorous promotion of therapeutic blasphemy. The first warning was a September 1997 article in *The Guardian* titled “The Dark Side of Enlightenment.” The author was Madeleine Bunting, *The Guardian*’s Religion Affairs Editor, who had published a series of articles the previous year that focused on negative evaluations of another UK-based new Buddhist group, the New Kadampa Tradition.<sup>86</sup> These had apparently stimulated a number of critics of the FWBO to approach her, believing they would find a sympathetic audience. Bunting’s article focused primarily on allegations of sex abuse by Sangharakshita and other senior members of the FWBO, but also took note of his negative views toward Christianity:

It is not hard to see how one FWBO centre became a cult. Like any new religious movement, there is a strong tendency to denigrate the outside world in order to strengthen its adherents’ commitment to the movement—Sangharakshita reserves his most contemptuous scorn for a host of evils which include “pseudo-liberalism,” feminism and Christianity.

There is always a danger that this leads to a self-referential introversion in which an unscrupulous, charismatic and sexually manipulative personality can run amok.<sup>87</sup>

Responding to Bunting's articles, the newspaper of the University of Manchester Students' Union warned its readers that "two groups claiming to be Buddhists, who are in fact the subject of sinister allegations and viewed with caution and suspicion by many in the Buddhist world, are actively recruiting on the campuses of Manchester and Salford Universities, as well as across campuses nationwide."<sup>88</sup> The groups in question were the FWBO and the New Kadampa Tradition. Among the reasons that students should avoid FWBO recruitment tactics on campus, the paper stated: "The teachings of the FWBO's founder, Sangharakshita, are overtly hostile to the nuclear family and heterosexuality, markedly misogynistic, and claim that one should 'publicly insult' God because blasphemy is 'healthy' and 'necessary to the moral and spiritual development of the individual.' Buddhist experts have confirmed that such teachings are not locatable anywhere within the orthodox Buddhist tradition."<sup>89</sup>

This was just a prelude of what was to come. The following year the situation became much worse, as the FWBO was rocked by an anonymous publication called *The FWBO Files*. Written by an unnamed British Buddhist monk who opposed Sangharakshita and his organization, *The FWBO Files* was a lengthy takedown of the group filled with detailed critiques of the group's behavior, lineage, business practices, religious activities, and allegedly anti-social views. Among the ammunition marshaled against the FWBO was the practice of therapeutic blasphemy, presented as clear evidence of Sangharakshita's intolerance, aggression, and questionable Buddhist qualifications. After quoting from *Buddhism and Blasphemy* and deconstructing the views expressed therein, *The FWBO Files* concluded: "Sangharakshita's views actually have nothing whatsoever to do with the Buddhist attitude towards Christianity. Indeed they appear to be little more than thinly disguised homoerotic resentment of the above, despite the title of his work. Here, once again, he is passing off his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the Buddhist religion, his own personal, aggressive and ill-natured opinion as the word of the Buddha."<sup>90</sup>

The FWBO responded with a rebuttal, but that merely provoked a second round of accusations, again with reference to FWBO practices of blasphemy.<sup>91</sup> *The FWBO Files* received extensive discussion in Western Buddhist forums and the mainstream press. This substantially damaged the FWBO's reputation, resulting in defections from the group and a greatly heightened sense of suspicion toward the group from other Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. It remains online today, hosted by the Ex-Cult Resource Center, as one of the top three results for Google

searches of “FWBO,” and thus serves as one of the primary sources of information that curious newcomers encounter in their quest to understand the Triratna Buddhist Community better.

Therapeutic blasphemy is still an official part of the Triratna Buddhist Community, and members continue to discuss and practice it, though at much lower rates than in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>92</sup> Rather than the earlier mode of public catharsis and group ritual, therapeutic blasphemy is now primarily recommended in specific cases by teachers who discern a need by a particular student, who then engages in private acts of blasphemy. Many current members (significant numbers of whom joined after the fires of the most revolutionary early years of the movement had died) feel ambivalent about their organization’s history of intentionally controversial blasphemy and antagonistic attitudes toward Christianity. A 2007 survey of Order members found that therapeutic blasphemy was one of the least affirmed of Sangharakshita’s teachings, with less than half saying they subscribed to the practice. About one-third of men and one-fifth of women did not support therapeutic blasphemy at all, while just over one-third of men and only about one-sixth of women did express strong support for it.<sup>93</sup> Put another way, therapeutic blasphemy remains a highly disputed practice and a significant flashpoint for possible conflict, even amongst the most committed members of the overall Triratna Buddhist Community.

## CONCLUSION

The heightened emotions and sense of liberating transgression involved in therapeutic blasphemy led to intense bonding among participants. Such practices dramatically broke FWBO members from their past and created new social identities as Western Buddhists and members of a specific organization. Blaspheming enabled the FWBO to distinguish itself from other Buddhist groups and Buddhist new religious movements, as most other Buddhists took relatively more accommodationist attitudes toward the surrounding Christian culture; indeed, criticism of other Western Buddhists by members of the FWBO as “weak” or “really Christians, not Buddhists” was common, as champions of therapeutic Buddhism declared their organization to be the real inheritors of the Buddhist tradition in the West. FWBO members used the practice of therapeutic blasphemy to depict their group as psychologically astute, politically relevant, and a radical alternative to an allegedly old, ignorant, and dangerously backward social order that they had uniquely transcended.

Since at least the clash between Catholic missionaries and Buddhist institutions in sixteenth century Japan, some Buddhists have engaged in strategic anti-Christian activities. However, unlike most Asian Buddhist

defensive anti-Christianity, the FWBO's therapeutic blasphemy was part of a program of missionization and conversion. This is a striking difference, but there are certain similarities nonetheless. Both Asian Buddhist anti-Christian and British FWBO anti-Christianity were in part political actions. Loss of adherents in premodern Japan entailed a serious diminishment in political and economic power by Buddhist institutions, and they not only wrote screeds against Christian beliefs but also petitioned local and national rulers to suppress the foreign religion for the good of the nation.<sup>94</sup> The FWBO's therapeutic Christianity was originally provoked by the threat of government repression and quickly became part of the group's larger utopian political agenda in quest of a New Society. Anti-Christianity, when it appears in Buddhism, is thus usually about power and politics, not simply beliefs and tolerance/intolerance.

Buddhist-Christian interactions in the West often take the form of interfaith exchange and a search for positive commonalities, based on a diffuse liberal religious perspective that values human dignity and cooperation over sectarian loyalty. Many books have been published about similarities between the Buddha and Christ, or with Buddhists commenting appreciatively on Christianity and vice versa, with titles such as *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* by Thich Nhat Hanh and *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* by the Dalai Lama.<sup>95</sup> In these encounters, Christianity serves as a resource for Buddhists in their quest to display Buddhism's open-mindedness, reasonability, and nondogmatic qualities. However, as the case of therapeutic blasphemy shows, Christianity can also be used as a resource for Buddhists to sharpen their rhetorical battle tactics, amplify sectarian distinctiveness, and display the superiority of Buddhism. The liberal interfaith project itself can become fodder for building new Buddhist groups that reject such exchanges and seek to position themselves as the lone islands of sanity in a world of dangerous Christians and cowardly, enabling pseudo-Buddhists.

We can also note that hatred or ill-will, normally categorized by Buddhists as one of the "three mental poisons" and a serious obstacle to spiritual progress, can sometimes be drawn upon as a resource by Buddhists. FWBO members were encouraged by their leaders to cultivate and express anger, outrage, and hate toward Christian deities, beliefs, and institutions, with the advice that such attitudes and practices were healthy and necessary for personal spiritual attainment and social progress, even when individual practitioners had no Christian upbringing or harbored no particular feelings toward Christianity. In other words, therapeutic blasphemy both potentially helped individuals to move beyond psychological obstacles and promoted negative thoughts and prejudices where none previously existed. Expressing negativity toward Christianity in group settings allowed for bonding with the organization and increased loyalty to its leaders, due to the emotional nature of these

practices. FWBO leaders balanced these encouragements to hate elements of Christianity with claims that as Buddhists they held no emotional ill-will toward Christian persons, though in practice they also engaged in frequent ridicule and critique of imagined stereotypical Christians and specific individual Christians. The extreme levels of vitriol that sometimes manifested, including by top-level leaders who were supposedly advanced far on the Buddhist path to equanimity, suggest that at least part of the appeal of FWBO therapeutic blasphemy was the sheer delight of expressing negativity and reveling in being right. Hate—in certain contexts and for specific purposes—can apparently have its uses.

Another possible takeaway from this case study is that controversial practices that initially serve to distinguish emerging groups and bond new members to a fragile minority religious organization may eventually become a burden, one that embarrasses or troubles later generations. Practices designed to differentiate the FWBO succeeded, perhaps too well, as later generations who sought to emphasize the FWBO's continuity with mainstream Buddhist traditions found it hard to make such arguments in the face of unusual and strident practices and rhetoric created by the group's founder. Put another way, the FWBO intentionally stimulated controversy during its early history, and sought to benefit from that controversy; later, controversy had largely outlived its usefulness, but having nurtured it for so long they were unable to put it fully behind them, and it continued to dog the group, drawing them into conflict at a time when they now preferred to avoid such direct confrontations. Courting controversy has its own benefits and its costs, and the ongoing karmic results of earlier controversies may continue in unanticipated ways through many newer iterations of particular Buddhist organizations.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Phil Henry, *Adaptation and Developments in Western Buddhism: Socially Engaged Buddhism in the UK*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 155. Triratna refers to the “Three Jewels” of Buddhism; the Buddha (founding teacher), dharma (teachings that lead to awakening), and sangha (community of dedicated practitioners).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew King, “Giving Milk to Snakes: A Socialist ‘Dharma Minister’ and a ‘Stubborn’ Monk on How to Reject the Dharma in Revolutionary Buryatia and Khalkha.” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4, no. 2 (2016): 205–227.

<sup>3</sup> Chaiyatorn T. Suwan, “Buddhist Perspectives on Sustainability: Toward Radical Transformation of Self and World. [PhD dissertation] (Melbourne: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 2008), 556.

<sup>4</sup> Notto Thelle, *Buddhism and Christianity in Japan: From Conflict to Dialogue, 1854–1899* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987); George Elison, *Deus*

*Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Bell, “Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism,” *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002): 230–242.

<sup>6</sup> Sangharakshita, *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra: A Western Buddhist’s Encounters with Christianity* (Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2005), 98.

<sup>7</sup> Subhuti, *Bringing Buddhism to the West: A Life of Sangharakshita* (Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 1995): 21.

<sup>8</sup> Subhuti, *Bringing Buddhism to the West*, 35. The name Sangharakshita means “protector of the sangha.” Kusinagar is where the Buddha died, and Sarnath is where he gave his first major sermon, setting in motion his new religion.

<sup>9</sup> The full list of precepts is:

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from killing living beings.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from taking the not-given.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from sexual misconduct.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from false speech.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from harsh speech.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from frivolous speech.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from slanderous speech.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from covetousness.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from hatred.

I undertake the item of training which consists in abstention from false views.

<sup>10</sup> “Triratna Buddhist Community,” The Buddhist Centre. <http://thebuddhistcentre.com/text/triratna-around-world>; accessed 25 October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Phil Henry, *Adaptation and Developments in Western Buddhism*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Bell, “Change and Identity in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order,” *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* XVII, no. 2 (1996), 87–107: 102; Sally R. Munt and Sharon E. Smith, “Angels and the Dragon King’s Daughter: Gender, Sexuality in Western Buddhist New Religious Movements,” *Theology and Sexuality* 16, no. 3 (2010), 229–259: 237.

<sup>13</sup> Phil Henry, *Adaptation and Developments in Western Buddhism*.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Levy, *Blasphemy: Verbal Offense Against the Sacred, From Moses to Salman Rushdie* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> James Kirkup, “The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name,” *Gay News* 96 (3 June 1976), 26.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur Guirdham, *The Great Heresy*. (Jersey: Neville Spearman, 1977).

- 17 Sangharakshita, "The Cathar Heresy," *The Middle Way* 53, no. 2 (1978), 76–78: 78.
- 18 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy* (London: Windhorse Press, 1978), 7.
- 19 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 8–9.
- 20 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 9.
- 21 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 12.
- 22 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 19–20.
- 23 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 12.
- 24 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 13.
- 25 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 15.
- 26 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 15.
- 27 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 15.
- 28 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 17.
- 29 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 18.
- 30 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 19.
- 31 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 23.
- 32 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 23.
- 33 Sangharakshita, *Buddhism and Blasphemy*, 24.
- 34 Bodhisattvas are advanced spiritual beings who practice Buddhism not for their own sakes but for the benefit of others.
- 35 Kovida, "Catharsis Through Buddhism," *FWBO Newsletter* 41 (Winter 1979), 24–25: 25.
- 36 Anonymous, "Blasphemy on the Radio," *FWBO Newsletter* 51 (1981), 23.
- 37 Kovida, "Catharsis Through Buddhism," 25.
- 38 Dharmachari Subhuti, "The Vinehall 'Event,'" *FWBO Newsletter* 43 (Summer 1979), 24.
- 39 Dhammadina, "A Women's Mitra Retreat," *FWBO Newsletter* 43 (Summer 1979), 25.
- 40 Terry Williams, *A Circle of Friends*, [Film] (UK: Lights in the Sky, 1997).
- 41 Nagabodhi, *Jai Bhim! Dispatches from a Peaceful Revolution* (Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 1998): 51.
- 42 Guhyapati, "Guardian article FWBO," *alt.religion.buddhism.tibetan*; accessed 25 October 1997.
- 43 Nagabodhi, *Jai Bhim!*, 51
- 44 Nagabodhi, *Jai Bhim!*, 51
- 45 Dhammadina, "A Women's Mitra Retreat," 25.
- 46 Abhaya, "Two Heads of the Monster," *FWBO Newsletter* 41 (Winter 1979), 8–12: 8.
- 47 Abhaya, "Two Heads of the Monster," 9.
- 48 Abhaya, "Two Heads of the Monster," 9.
- 49 Abhaya, "Two Heads of the Monster," 12.
- 50 Devamitra, "Adding Spirit to Mind & Body," *FWBO Newsletter* 43 (Summer 1979), 30–32: 30.

- <sup>51</sup> The original Subhuti was one of the Buddha's major disciples and appears in key Buddhist scriptures.
- <sup>52</sup> Subhuti, "Criticism and the Buddhist World," *FWBO Newsletter* 47 (Autumn 1980), 5–7: 5.
- <sup>53</sup> Subhuti, "Criticism and the Buddhist World," 5.
- <sup>54</sup> Subhuti, "Criticism and the Buddhist World," 6.
- <sup>55</sup> Subhuti, "Criticism and the Buddhist World," 6.
- <sup>56</sup> Subhuti, "Criticism and the Buddhist World," 6.
- <sup>57</sup> Sangharakshita, "Buddhism and Blasphemy," *The Freethinker* 99, no. 3 (1979), 46.
- <sup>58</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today: A Portrait of a New Buddhist Movement*, (Wiltshire, UK: Element Books, 1983): 12.
- <sup>59</sup> Sangharakshita, *The FWBO and "Protestant Buddhism": An Affirmation and a Protest* (Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1992); Sangharakshita, *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra*.
- <sup>60</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 176.
- <sup>61</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 177.
- <sup>62</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 178.
- <sup>63</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 79.
- <sup>64</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 179.
- <sup>65</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 179.
- <sup>66</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017).
- <sup>67</sup> Subhuti, *Buddhism for Today*, 180.
- <sup>68</sup> It is possible that this attention had significant later effects. In 2006 the Rational Response Squad, an activist atheist group, announced the Blasphemy Challenge. This project invited atheists to post YouTube videos of themselves committing blasphemy against Christianity. The Blasphemy Challenge attracted considerable attention as various celebrities participated including, intriguingly, Raël, the founder and leader of the Raëlian movement. Was the Blasphemy Challenge influenced by the FWBO's therapeutic blasphemy? Further research is required; I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out Raël's participation in The Blasphemy Challenge.
- <sup>69</sup> Nicholas Walter, "Rational Record: A Buddhist View of Blasphemy," *New Humanist* 94, no. 5 (1979), 185–187: 185, 187.
- <sup>70</sup> William McIlroy, "Jottings," *The Freethinker* 99, no. 1 (1979), 7, 14–15: 7.
- <sup>71</sup> William McIlroy, "Jottings," 15.
- <sup>72</sup> Anonymous, "Blasphemy on the Radio."
- <sup>73</sup> Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel* (Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1993): 4.
- <sup>74</sup> Subhuti, *Bringing Buddhism to the West*, 149.
- <sup>75</sup> Commission for Racial Equality, *Law, Blasphemy, and the Multi-Faith Society* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1990): 34, 88–89; David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993): 139.
- <sup>76</sup> Robert Nowell, "Blasphemy Does Not Exist for Buddhism," *The Independent* (25 February 1989), 3.

<sup>77</sup> Frank J. Hoffman, "Remarks on Blasphemy," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 2 (1983), 138–151; Roy Perret, "Blasphemy," *Sophia* 26, no. 2 (1987), 4–14; Frank J. Hoffman, "More on Blasphemy," *Sophia* 28, no. 2 (1989), 26–34.

<sup>78</sup> Jocelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 65–66, 286.

<sup>79</sup> Sandra Bell, "Change and Identity in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* XVII, no. 2 (1996), 87–107: 102; Sangharakshita, *Travel Letters*. Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1985): 146.

<sup>80</sup> Glorfindel, "Re: Kennett and Meditation." OBC Connect (1 December 2010). <http://obconnect.forumotion.net/t135-kennett-and-meditation>; accessed 8 October 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Sangharakshita, "Buddhism and Blasphemy," 46.

<sup>82</sup> Aubrey M. Davies, "Blasphemy," *The Middle Way* 54, no. 1 (1979), 46–47.

<sup>83</sup> Sangharakshita, *Travel Letters*, 172–173.

<sup>84</sup> Philip A. Mellor, "Protestant Buddhism? The Cultural Translation of Buddhism in England," *Religion* 21, no. 1 (1991), 73–92: 88.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Bluck, *British Buddhism: Teachings, Practice, and Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006): 159, 161–162, 165–166.

<sup>86</sup> Madeleine Bunting, "Smear Campaign Sparks Safety Fears Over Dalai Lama's UK Visit," *The Guardian* (6 July 1996), 1; Madeleine Bunting, "Shadow Boxing on the Path to Nirvana: Members of the Fastest Growing Buddhist Sect in the Country are Accused of Waging a Campaign to Undermine the Dalai Lama," *The Guardian* (6 July 1996), 26; Madeleine Bunting, "Sect Disrobes British Monk," *The Guardian* (15 August 1996), 9.

<sup>87</sup> Madeleine Bunting, "The Dark Side of Enlightenment," *The Guardian* (27 October 1997), 2.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, "Campus link to Buddhist groups shamed by 'sinister allegations,'" reprinted in *World Tibet Network News*, 7 December 1997. [http://www.tibet.ca/en/library/wtn/archive/old?y=1997&m=12&p=7\\_2](http://www.tibet.ca/en/library/wtn/archive/old?y=1997&m=12&p=7_2); accessed 6 October 2017. *World Tibet Network News* attributes the original article to Peter Unwin in the 24 November 1997 issue of *Student Direct*.

<sup>89</sup> Anonymous, "Campus link to Buddhist groups shamed by 'sinister allegations.'"

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous, "The FWBO Files," <http://www.ex-cult.org/fwbo/fwbofiles.htm>; accessed 11 May 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Vishvapani and Cittapala, "The FWBO-Files: A Response," FWBO Communications Office. <http://response.fwbo.org/fwbo-files/response.html>; accessed 11 May 2016; Anonymous, "A Refutation of the FWBO's Response to the FWBO Files," <http://www.ex-cult.org/fwbo/r2r.htm>; accessed 11 May 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Kulananda, "Conditionality and the Two Truths," *Western Buddhist Review* 1 (December 1994), <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/voll/conditionality.html>; accessed 11 May 2016; Ashvajit, "Re: Protestant Buddhism," *Vividness* (27 June 2011), <http://vividness.live/2011/06/24/protestant-buddhism/>; accessed 26 October 2017; Kalyanaprabha, "Creating the Mandala" [http://candraprabha.fastmail.fm/Public/Six Guidelines/effective going for merit.rtf](http://candraprabha.fastmail.fm/Public/Six%20Guidelines/effective%20going%20for%20merit.rtf); accessed on 22 October 2017; Jayarava, "Spiritual III: Demesnes of Power,"

Jayarava's Raves, <http://jayarava.blogspot.ca/2014/06/spiritual-iii-demesnes-of-power.html>; accessed 11 May 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Lokabandhu "The Order Survey," <http://freebuddhistaudio.com/ordersurvey>; accessed 8 October 2016.

<sup>94</sup> George Elison, *Deus Destroyed*.

<sup>95</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995); Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1998).