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*Virtuosity, Charisma, and the Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravāda Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism.*  
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In *Virtuosity, Charisma, and the Social Order*, Ilana Friedrich Silber sets out to accomplish two goals: the first is to provide a comparative sociological study of monasticism; the second is to provide a more inclusive understanding of religious virtuosity. By and large, she accomplishes both goals.

One of the difficulties with scholarship of a comparative nature is establishing what constitutes valid comparison. The body of material, in this case Christian and Buddhist monasticism, is so culturally, historically, and religiously varied that we wonder what in Buddhist monasticism may be legitimately compared to what in Christian monasticism. Another difficulty in comparative studies concerns the possibility of making comparisons that will be any more than superficially significant. Silber uses the first section of the book to identify precisely the criteria she has used to establish her points of comparison, why they are valid, and what we can expect to learn from them. Consistent with her other writings on the subject, Silber's approach is ideal for a study of Theravāda Buddhism because, as she notes, the salvational orientations of the virtuosi are an integral part of the relationship between those virtuosi and society both on an individual and institutional level (p. 6). The Sangha is the carrier of the highest values of society, they provide legitimation for kingship, and they have traditionally been the purveyors of education and ritual services for the populace. Because of their reliance on *dāna*, however, they have never been completely autonomous and, despite the occasional episode of monastic "muscle flexing" (turning down the begging bowl), they have not traditionally exercised independent political power. Thus, Theravāda monasticism never attained the same level of institutional strength as did medieval Catholic monasticism. Having said that, the centrality and complexity of the network of monastic-lay relationship within the overall social structure ensured that Buddhist monasticism attained a more solid institutionalization and a more enduring social position (p. 11).

The heart of this monastic-lay relationship is *dāna*, the gift relationship. Using Maussian theory, Silber provides an extremely succinct and accurate description of the nature of this exchange: "What actually occurs is the donation of mostly material goods by laymen to virtuosi, who in return are expected to provide some form of intangible, symbolic resources (merit, soteriological intercession, religious edification or even—as more salient in the Theravāda context—magico-ritual protection), as well as a variety of more tangible secular (educational, economic, therapeutic, and social) services" (p. 195). This relationship is rooted in paradox and filled with ambiguity. Its validity depends upon the separation of the worldly and the unworldly with the appearance of non-reciprocity on the part of the

Sangha. Silber provides a good discussion of this ambiguity and of the various dilemmas such as the accessibility/disconnection problem that are inherent in the nature of such relationships.

Silber's analysis also highlights the fragile nature of the Sangha-lay relationship. The ideological undergirding of this relationship is the commonly shared and acknowledged ultimate values that are enacted by the virtuosi through the support of the non-virtuosi for the benefit of all (p. 196). If the non-virtuosi withdraw their support, the soteriological community will cease to exist. The absence of any sudden or striking changes in socio-economic structure has provided stability in the lay-virtuosi relationship and, combined with the replication of this model at the political level of kingship, has allowed Buddhist monasticism to become a "dominant, even determinant feature of the social structure at large" (p. 203) that has allowed it to "[end] up forming the backbone of the interrelation of Buddhism and polity for Theravāda countries" (p. 201).

In her "Conclusion" Silber notes "there is a basic tension between the functional and ideological aspects of monasticism that, among other things, engendered much of the recurrent corruption-and-reform cycle in the history of monasticism in both settings" (p. 213). Modernism is a reality in most of Southeast Asia, and many of the traditional functions of the Sangha, such as education, are being taken over by the state. Where the Sangha has undertaken an aggressive and active role in social services, there is the danger of erosion to monks' soteriological role as "disinterested" ascetics and their "special prestige as carriers of specific cultural values," and this is the foundation upon which their ability to provide these services rests (p. 213). Further, with modernism comes materialism and with materialism there is generally a weakening of traditional values, in this case Theravāda Buddhist values. The challenge of modernism and materialism presents a direct threat to traditional Theravāda Buddhism, grounded in nirvana and supported by *dāna*.

Silber makes a variety of scholarly contributions. Her careful delineation of the historical, cultural, and religious dimensions of the two traditions involved in her study shows that solid comparative work is possible. Her careful and detailed argument throughout lends weight to her conclusions.

While Silber tells us nothing new about *dāna* per se, her structural analysis of it goes a long way towards silencing both those who persist in seeing Theravāda Buddhist monasticism as a completely asocial institution with no macrosociological significance, and those who ignore the ideological dimension of the Theravāda monastic institution when discussing its macrosociological functions. The study acts as a fine corrective to

Weberian theory and should convince some scholars of the value of utilizing sociological (or anthropological) approaches to the study of Buddhism. I would argue that such approaches can be used to good effect, not only at the level of living tradition but at the textual level as well, as they shed new light on old topics. Ironically, Silber's grounding in sociological theory is also a limitation, in that her discussion in "Part 1" of the "Weberian legacy" and the merits and limitations of various post-Weberian sociological approaches may be a little too "thick" for scholars not schooled in social-scientific theory. Anyone interested in a serious study of monasticism, however, will find the sociological "slogging" worthwhile, and sociologists will find Silber's review of Weber's legacy and current approaches to the study of monasticism valuable and, for some, provocative.

At this writing, I am aware of two other reviews of *Virtuosity, Charisma, and the Social Order*. Readers interested in a review from a sociological perspective may consult David Smilde's review in the *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 101 (May 1996), p.1776-8. Those interested in a review that focuses on the Christian monastic material may consult *Sociology of Religion*, vol. 5 (S. 1996), p.214-5 for review.