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## **GENDERED RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS** *The Case of Theravada Buddhism in America*

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*This article examines how organizational context shapes the way gender is socially constructed in two non-Judeo-Christian religious organizations in the United States, one Theravada Buddhist organization founded by immigrants and one started by converts. People at the two organizations disagree with each other about what Theravada Buddhism teaches about women in teaching and leadership positions but agree that outside of these positions, women and men are equally able to gain access to and practice the tradition. Despite these understandings, women and men have distinct gender roles and responsibilities at each organization that are in tension with what the leaders and attendees understand the tradition to teach. The extent to which teachers and attendees recognize these tensions and the ways they respond to them are explored, and their implications for each organization and for studies of gender and religious organizations are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *gender; organizations; religion; Buddhism; immigration*

**T**his article contributes to a relatively new dialogue between sociologists of religion, gender, and organizations about how gender is a factor in the teachings, structure, and organization of non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions in the United States. Much of this research focuses on religious organizations founded in the United States after changes in the immigration laws in 1965. The founders of these

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new Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist organizations have been challenged to maintain their teachings, traditions, and practices while simultaneously adapting to new American environments in which expectations for women and men are often different than they were in immigrants' home countries (Warner 2000).

Sociologists of religion have begun to examine what Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions teach about the proper roles and responsibilities for women and men and how gender influences people's positions in their religious organizations (Seager 1999; Smith 1999). In the most systematic examination, Ebaugh and Saltzman Chafetz (1999, 2000) studied 13 immigrant religious institutions (both Christian and non-Christian) in Houston, Texas, and found that women are not the pastors, head monks, or main leaders of any of these groups. Rather, they uniformly reproduce traditional ethnic cultures as they cook, educate children, and otherwise do gender in these centers. Despite their seemingly conservative roles, however, women occupy many more lay or secondary leadership positions at these centers than in their home countries. The education and enhanced employment opportunities they often gain through migration partially explain this change, as do the increased number of lay roles available in the United States and the extent to which men want (or do not want) to occupy them.

Case studies of individual religious centers further illustrate changes in women's and men's religious roles and responsibilities, although additional research is needed before definitive patterns emerge by theme or religious tradition. In the Muslim tradition, there is marked variation. Women are not welcome in some Muslim mosques while in others they serve on the boards of directors and are seen, as Abusharaf (1998, 249) explained, as "transmitters of cultural knowledge to the future generations because of their service as teachers of language and religion" (see also Yazbeck Haddad and Lummis 1987; Smith 1999). Prema Kurien (1999, 2001) argued that women's responsibilities to teach and transmit the Hindu tradition increased with their arrival in the United States, although men continue to lead most Hindu organizations: "Because women are the primary transmitters of religious and cultural traditions within the household and local associations . . . they are able to reinterpret the patriarchal images more in their favor and construct a model of gender that emphasizes the importance of male responsibilities" (Kurien 1999, 650). In her study of a Hindu temple in Pittsburgh, Aparna Rayaprol (1997) also found changes in the roles and responsibilities of women and men, reporting that women had new responsibilities in the United States in nearly every aspect of the organization.

These and other studies strongly suggest that women are occupying new and different positions in non-Judeo-Christian religious organizations in the United States than they did in their home countries and that women often have more, although certainly not complete, flexibility and agency in their new roles. Running through this research as well as studies of nonimmigrant religious organizations, however, are tensions about what non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions teach about

gender, how women and men are involved in the daily operation of specific religious centers, and how people make sense of the relationship between the teachings and the ways they are enacted in the daily operation of their centers. In the Muslim tradition, for example, these tensions are evident when Muslim leaders teach that women and men are equally able to practice Islam but only men are permitted inside of some mosques. In Hindu temples, these tensions are evident when women present the teachings in more gender-equitable ways to children in the United States but the organization does not allow women to occupy all of the leadership positions that these teachings indirectly suggest they should. These tensions are often implicit, rather than explicit, in research about gender in immigrants' religious organizations because researchers tend to focus on one aspect of organizations such as leadership or children's education rather than analyzing these centers in terms of the contents of their teachings as a whole.

I explore the relationship between what Theravada Buddhism teaches about women and men and how gender is a factor in the structure and operation of their organizations. Theravada Buddhism is one branch of Buddhism that arrived in the United States since 1965. Buddhism has grown rapidly in America in the past 40 years through both immigration and the conversion of native-born Americans. Numerous researchers and commentators argue that one of the distinctive characteristics of Buddhism in America is the fact that women and men are able to gain access to and practice the tradition in nearly identical ways (Morreale 1998; Prebish 1999; Seager 1999). For example, Kenneth Tanaka commented on the strong presence of women at many Buddhist centers across the country: "Not only do women make up a sizeable percentage of membership but many of the teachers are women, particularly within the Euro-American groups" (1998, 289). Despite these claims, little research systematically examines gender in Buddhist organizations. Available survey research suggests that more women than men are involved in Theravada Buddhist groups started by converts although no one has carefully examined what these or Buddhist organizations started by immigrants teach about women and men and the extent to which gender is a factor in the leadership or other components of the organizations (Coleman 2001).

I examine how organizations shape the ways gender is socially constructed in the Theravada Buddhist tradition in the United States by comparing one organization started and attended by first-generation Thai immigrants and a second founded and attended by white converts. I explore how gender is socially constructed in each organization by first describing what the leaders and attendees at each center understand the Theravada Buddhist tradition to teach about women and men. In the tradition of Joan Acker, I then consider how gender is a factor in the structure and daily operation of each organization. Organizations are "gendered," as Acker (1990, 1992) argued, through underlying social structures enacted through the division of responsibilities, the construction of symbols, the construction of identities, and numerous other social processes that occur within organizations. I specifically

examine the gender content of symbols and images and the number of women and men who are teachers, leaders, volunteers, and attendees. This approach to the gender of organizations takes seriously Dana Britton's (2000) emphasis on context and the multiple levels at which organizations are gendered. It interrogates the gap in each organization between what the people involved in the organization understand it to teach about women and men in the Buddhist tradition and the way gender is a factor in how it is actually organized and operates on a daily basis.

The teachers and attendees or laypeople at both organizations I studied agree that women and men are equally able to learn about and participate in the Theravada Buddhist tradition in the United States, although they disagree about women's ability to teach or lead Buddhist centers. Like in Theravada Buddhist Asia, the immigrant organization teaches that only men can become monks or teachers of their organization. The convert organization differs, teaching that women and men are equally able to become teachers. These differences in teaching, however, do not clearly correspond to the ways gender is a factor in the structure of each organization. The teachers of the immigrant organization are men, just as in Asia, but women are also involved in some teaching roles at the center in ways they would not be at similar temples in Thailand. At the convert center, men dominate in leadership and teaching positions despite the fact that people there understand the Theravada Buddhist tradition in the United States to teach otherwise. Despite the fact that people at each organization believe that outside of teaching and leadership, the Buddhist tradition teaches that there are no differences between women and men in their abilities to access and practice Buddhism, there are patterns within the organizations in the ways women and men are involved.

To understand the relationship between the teachings and the gender dimension of each organization, I consider the ways people at each center understand them. At the immigrant center, people are implicitly aware of the gap between the teachings and gender organization of the center because women see themselves, much like the women Kurien (1999) described, as creatively participating in Theravada Buddhist organizations in ways that would not be possible for them in their home country. At the convert organization, people are not aware of the gap between the teachings and organizational reality, believing that they have created a gender-blind organization in which, as Tanaka (1998) described, women and men can and do access the teachings and become involved in the organization in nearly identical manners.

The two Theravada Buddhist organizations described here clearly demonstrate how organizations shape the ways gender is socially constructed in non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions. They point to tensions between what Theravada Buddhist organizations teach about gender and the ways gender is a factor in the structure and daily operation of the centers. These cases illustrate what analyzing the relationship between the teachings and organizational realities at two Theravada Buddhist organizations bring to recent research about gender in non-Judeo-Christian religious organizations and to theoretical discussions of gender and organizations more broadly.

## CONTEXT

There are three main branches of Buddhism, and all three are currently practiced in the United States. Mahayana Buddhism, traditionally practiced in East Asia, was the first branch to come to America, arriving with Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the mid nineteenth century. Vajrayana Buddhism, traditionally practiced in Tibet, arrived in the 1960s. And Theravada Buddhism came to the States after 1965 through immigration from the Southeast Asian countries of Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia and with native-born white Americans who had lived and traveled in these countries (Prebish 1999; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Seager 1999; Williams and Queen 1999).

Like the other forms of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha. Before becoming the Buddha, or Awakened One, Siddhattha Gotama was a prince in what is today the country of Nepal. At the age of 30, he realized that he too was subject to old age, suffering, and death and left his palace in search of a way out of this suffering. He traveled with ascetics and fasted, eventually coming to rest under a tree where he sat until he attained Enlightenment, or *Nibbana*. Now called the Buddha, he began to teach the four noble truths. These truths, the core of the Buddhist tradition, state that first, there is suffering (*dukkha*); second, the cause of suffering is craving or dissatisfaction; third, this craving can be overcome; and finally, the way to overcome craving is through the noble eightfold path, a set of teachings that include right view, resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. All three branches of Buddhism emerged from these teachings, but Theravada, or the Doctrine of the Elders, is the branch most closely based on the teachings of the Buddha (Robinson and Johnson 1997).

The Buddha taught both women and men during his lifetime, although what the Buddha thought about the differences between women and men is the subject of significant scholarly debate (Cabezón 1992). In Theravada Buddhist Asia today, both men and women are involved in Buddhist organizations although men are almost exclusively the monks or leaders. These men do not marry but become ordained as monks to study and teach about Buddhism. They are entirely dependent on lay attendees for their food, clothing, and other support, much of which is provided by women. In many areas of Thailand, the monks go on alms rounds every morning, gathering donations of food that will be their physical sustenance for the day. It is often women who stand in front of their houses, making donations to the monks. Women also serve in secondary supportive positions in temples by helping with financial matters or by administering or cleaning (Keyes 1984; Kirsch 1982; Lefferts 2000; Swearer 1995).

The first permanent Theravada Buddhist organization in the United States, the Washington Buddhist Vihara, was established in Washington D.C. in 1966. Today, hundreds of Theravada Buddhist temples, meditation centers, and retreat centers dot the American religious landscape, attended by first-generation immigrants and their children and by convert Buddhist practitioners (Cadge 2004).

## RESEARCH METHOD

To examine gender in Theravada Buddhist organizations in the United States, I studied one organization started by first-generation immigrants and one started by convert Buddhists. Both organizations are identified here by their real names, and the names of the teachers and monks at each place included in this article are real and used with their permission. I changed the names of individual attendees or laypeople to protect their privacy. Wat Mongkoltepmunee, also called Wat Phila, a Thai temple in the suburbs of Philadelphia, was started by first-generation immigrant Buddhists in 1985. The temple is led by five male monks who were born and trained in Thailand and is supported by several hundred first-generation, Thai, middle- and working-class immigrants who attend. Approximately two-thirds of these people are women. Services are held in Thai on Sunday mornings. Festivals, attended by several hundred people, take place several times during the year.

For the convert Theravada Buddhist organization, I studied the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center (also called CIMC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. CIMC was founded in 1985 by Larry Rosenberg, an American-born Jewish man who completed a Ph.D. in social psychology and worked at several universities before going to Asia to study with spiritual teachers. He returned to the United States and began to teach Buddhism and meditation in the Cambridge area before a student of his donated the funds needed to start the center. CIMC is currently led by three teachers, two men and one woman. Unlike at Wat Phila, none of the teachers are ordained as monks. Classes are held at CIMC on weekday evenings, and the largest gathering occurs once a week on Wednesday nights when one of the teachers or an outside guest gives a dharma talk or sermon. CIMC has about four hundred members, two-thirds of whom are women. The majority of people who attend are white middle-class professionals. Teachings are held in English, and none of the people involved were born as Buddhists.

I conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews at Wat Phila and CIMC for more than one year. I gained entry to both organizations through colleagues and friends. I attended classes, services, festivals, and retreats at both centers and helped more informally with food preparation, cleaning, and other tasks. After periods of participant observation at both centers, I began to conduct in-depth interviews with attendees. I did not begin these interviews until I felt I had gained sufficient trust from the teachers and attendees. As a non-Thai woman who was only partially fluent in Thai language at the beginning of this research, the process of building rapport took longer at Wat Phila than at CIMC. To gain people's trust at Wat Phila, I washed dishes and spent time visiting with people, learning everything from how to address different people to how to dry dishes and cut a pineapple the Thai way. At CIMC, the teachers and attendees, most of whom had college and/or graduate degrees, were quick to accept me because of my university affiliation, so I was able to begin interviews shortly after I arrived.

Because there was no sampling frame in the form of a complete membership list at either center, I interviewed a cross section of people who were involved with the

organizations in different ways. This was ultimately a snowball sample, although one formed in intentional ways to fully represent the demographics of the centers and different ways people are involved. I formally and informally interviewed 55 practitioners at Wat Phila and 37 at CIMC in addition to the monks and teachers. I asked people in interviews questions such as, "Does Buddhism teach different things about women and men?" "Do women and men practice Buddhism differently?" and "Do women and men have different responsibilities at this center?" Formal interviews were tape-recorded and normally lasted about one hour. Informal interviews took place around the centers, over meals, and in people's homes and were not taped-recorded but reconstructed in field notes in as much detail as possible. Through participant observation, I also examined the physical images around the centers; I listened carefully to public dharma talks or sermons for messages about women and men; I listened to what people said and assumed in informal conversation about gender at the centers; and I watched (and systematically counted) what tasks and responsibilities women and men had at each center. After completing the data collection, I followed a grounded-theory approach to data analysis, coding my field notes and interview transcripts inductively by theme (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Several themes related to gender emerged that structure the Findings and Discussion section below.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Teachings

Historians and religious studies scholars have long debated what the Buddha taught about women and men, specifically the extent to which he believed they were able to equally understand and benefit from his teachings. Rather than focusing on these scholarly debates, I follow the examples of religious studies scholars David Hall (1997) and Robert Orsi (1997, 2003) by focusing on how the tradition is actually lived and understood by the monks, teachers, and laypeople at Wat Phila and CIMC.

At Wat Phila, dharma talks or sermons rarely mention what the Buddha taught about women and men and the way his teachings might apply differently to women and men. The monks do occasionally speak about the reasons the Buddha did not initially think women should become monks or nuns. Maha Nom, one of the monks, gave a talk about Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, who wanted to become a monk. He explained how the Buddha first refused because he thought it would be dangerous for women and later changed his mind. Consistent with this interpretation is the fact that there were orders of nuns in some parts of Asia, although this practice ended in Thailand hundreds of years ago (Lindberg Falk 2000).

When asked directly in interviews, the practitioners at Wat Phila are nearly unanimous that the Buddha and Buddhism teach the same things about laywomen



and laymen (i.e., those who are not ordained as monks) but different things about monks. "Buddhism does not state any differences between women and men," Plā, a layman in his 40s, told me. Kung, a laywoman, agreed, saying, "It's the same—the teachings for women and men." Another layman explained, "Like the five precepts [ethical guidelines]. There isn't one set of precepts for women and another set for men." These practitioners state explicitly that they do not believe Buddhism teaches different things for laywomen and laymen. However, they are also clear that the role of monk is reserved just for men. "The teachings don't differentiate [by gender]," Dr. Malin, a laywoman told me. "The dharma [teachings] is the same. The sangha [order of monks] is different." By this she means that only men are permitted to join the sangha, or order of monks. A Thai man in his 50s agreed. The only differences in the Buddha's teachings about women and men right now, he told me, pertain to the sangha.

The fact that only men can be ordained as monks and serve as leaders of the temple has numerous implications, one of which pertains to another set of the Buddha's teachings, the *Vinaya*, which lead women and men at Wat Phila to interact with the monks in slightly different ways. The *Vinaya* are a set of detailed guidelines outlined by the Buddha that include instructions about every aspect of monks' lives, including how they can interact with women (Thanissaro 1996, 2001). Monks and laypeople generally agree that one monk should not be alone with one woman without another monk or preferably another monk and laywoman present. Monks and women may not touch each other at all. If a woman wants to hand an item to a monk or vice versa, the item must rest on a neutral surface in the exchange. And monks may not have sexual relations with women. These last two guidelines are strictly followed at Wat Phila, while the first is more open to interpretation. For example, on one occasion early in my research, I was quietly scolded by a young Thai woman for talking with a monk alone in the main meditation hall approximately 10 feet from an open door to the kitchen where several women were talking. Later in my research, a different Thai woman left me alone to give one of the monks an English lesson while she took two other monks on an errand.

As at Wat Phila, the teachers and attendees at CIMC believe that laywomen and laymen can equally access and learn from the Buddha's teachings. They also believe that women and men can both teach and serve in formal leadership positions at the center. In fact, at CIMC, people are critical about what they see as the patriarchal way Buddhism was practiced historically and is still practiced in Asia. Rather than continuing the tradition of ordaining men as monks, the founders of CIMC opted for a lay-centered leadership, in part because it would allow both women and men to be leaders. In outlining his vision for the center several years after it started, the founding teacher, Larry Rosenberg, explained in a dharma talk that in Asia, "Women were kept in a secondary role in terms of practice" because they were not allowed to become ordained to teach and lead Buddhist temples. He continued, saying, "We can dwell on that" or "we can just cut it out right now." He went on to say that by having lay teachers, rather than monks, and by allowing both

women and men to lead centers, the United States is contributing a more gender-neutral ethic to Buddhism.

One longtime attendee at CIMC explained the patriarchal history of Buddhism to me in an interview, saying that historically, "Buddhism was patriarchal, just like all religions." Things have changed in the United States, she argued, because "it seems like there has been an effort in the U.S. to have more female teachers, lay teachers." Reflecting on some of the first convert Buddhist teachers in the United States who were women, she said, "I like that they were trying to bring some balance to a system that is really quite male and patriarchal." Other practitioners were similarly supportive of the extent to which the teachings are taught not by monks but by teachers who are both women and men. One woman explained, "In the Theravada tradition in the West, there's a really strong core of women teachers and a really conscious effort not to create or replicate any kind of hierarchical, male-dominated structure." The teachers and attendees see these male-dominated structures as a result of the culture and time period in which the Buddha lived rather than as essential components of his actual teaching (Cadge 2004).

People at CIMC are also clear about the fact that women and men can hear and apply the Buddha's teachings to their lives in nearly identical manners. Any observed or perceived differences between women and men are glossed over by the teachers in favor of focusing on the ways that all people, regardless of gender, are the same. "Under our conditioning, we are all the same," Larry Rosenberg taught in an evening class. Instead of focusing on the ways women and men are raised or socialized differently in the United States, he focused here and elsewhere in his teaching on the commonalities he believes underlie all human experiences. A layperson commented on how the teachers do this frequently, saying, "I think the teachers go out of their way to address the commonality in practice. . . . I'm thinking here about my experience as a man listening to Narayan [a teacher] as a woman teaching. She is marvelous in the way she can cover everyone and make everyone feel included."

### **Organizations**

The women and men who attend and lead Wat Phila and CIMC agree that attendees can learn from the Buddha's teachings in the same way, although they disagree about what the Buddha taught and the way the Buddhist tradition developed around women and men in teaching and leadership positions. As a result, one might expect that at Wat Phila, men would dominate in leadership positions but women and men would be involved in other aspects of the organization in similar manners. Similarly, at CIMC, one might expect not to see differences in how women and men are involved in the organization. I examine the multiple ways gender structures Wat Phila and CIMC as organizations by considering how gender is socially constructed within each organization through the gender content of images and the division of responsibilities in the organizations.

At Wat Phila, a 10-foot-tall, gold-plated image of the male Buddha sits on an 8-foot elevated platform at the front of the main hall. It is joined on all sides by other large images of the Buddha and by multiple, slightly smaller, statues, sketches, and paintings of a male monk, Luāngphō Sot. Numerous 5-by-5-foot images of this monk also hang on each of the four walls of the main meditation hall. The only image of a woman in the main hall is one small statue of Kuan-Yin, a figure of compassion. Kuan-Yin's image is about 1 foot tall and sits on the lower left side of the altar, below the largest image of the Buddha. She sits on a platform that elevates her about 1 foot from the ground. Kuan-Yin's small size and placement on the side of the altar so close to the floor illustrate the limited respect given to her as a Buddhist symbol.

Male images of the Buddha also dominate at CIMC, where the only female images are also of Kuan-Yin. A two-foot-tall statue of the male Buddha sits at the center of the main meditation hall on a four-foot-tall altar, and artistically rendered images of the male Buddha hang throughout the center. There are more images of Kuan-Yin at CIMC, although they are all two-dimensional images rather than statues. Given that the Buddha was a man, it is not surprising that male images dominate at both centers, but it is interesting that other than Kuan-Yin, there are no images of the female figures mentioned in the Buddha's teachings.

In addition to the symbols, there are patterns in how women and men are involved in both organizations that do not clearly correspond to what the leaders and attendees understand their centers to teach about gender. As expected, based on their understanding of the Buddha's teachings, the five monks who lead Wat Phila are all men. At CIMC, both women and men are teachers, with two men and one woman. Teachings are offered at CIMC on Wednesday evenings when between 60 and 100 people come to the center. Sometimes, one of the three teachers speaks on Wednesday nights, but more often, a teacher from another center or a guest is invited to teach. Excluding the three teachers, more men than women teach on Wednesday nights. Six women and 13 men spoke on Wednesday nights in 2001, the year I conducted research at CIMC. According to historical records, men have composed at least two-thirds of the Wednesday night teachers in most years at the center.

Apart from the monks and teachers, leadership and teaching is also provided at both centers in additional ways. One important leadership position at Wat Phila is temple treasurer. This position has been held by a man since the temple first started. Another important leadership position is the leader of Sunday morning chanting. Every Sunday morning at Wat Phila, a 30- to 40-minute chanting service is held in which praise is rendered to the Buddha, dharma (teachings), and sangha (order of monks). This part of the morning's activities is normally led by one of several women. In Thailand, this role is often occupied by men, and numerous people commented on the change in having women do it in the United States. One laywoman told me that if you go to Thailand, you never see women leading chanting sessions, only men. "But over here," she said, "the women are better than the men. . . . You

have to use the people who are skilled at being leaders.” Her husband agreed. “Women practice constantly and can lead.”

At CIMC, additional leadership is provided by a seven-person board of directors. The three teachers sit on this board, as do four other members of CIMC. Two of these members are men, and two are women, leading to four men and three women overall. Given that these members are selected by the teachers and administrators from among the laypeople at the center, it is a bit surprising that they do not better correspond to the gender distribution of attendees, two-thirds of whom are women. CIMC also has three paid staff people who administer the center. Two of these people are men, and one is a woman.

In addition to these leadership roles, women and men are involved in both Wat Phila and CIMC by volunteering in a wide variety of ways. At both centers, women are much more involved as volunteers than are men, and both women and men tend to be involved in gender-typed ways. On Sunday mornings at Wat Phila, when the largest number of people gathers each week, women often lead and direct all activities except teaching. In addition to their Sunday morning involvement, women are integrally involved in preparations for festivals that take place several times a year. For example, on the Thursday before a large festival was celebrated in October 2001, the head monk discussed specific arrangements for the celebration with 12 people who had come to the temple that day, 10 women and 2 men, including a married couple. The wife in this couple sat directly in front of the head monk and took detailed notes during the hour-long conversation about how to set up the temple and organize the celebration. Her husband sat at some distance from both her and the head monk and rarely participated. At festivals themselves, women prepare all of the food in the kitchen and largely control the speed at which festival activities take place by regulating when to make food available to the monks and laypeople. In addition to organizing the festivals, 3 women collect all of the financial donations from the people attending the festival, and women sell the flowers, candles, and sticks of incense that are a part of the festivities. While men help the monks receive rice and other material goods, wash dishes, and help to prepare and clean up the temple, women are at the center of the organization, preparation, and leadership of these occasions.

Outside of formal gatherings at Wat Phila, women also prepare most daily meals for the monks and assist them with daily tasks. Nim, a hairdresser who lives a few blocks from the temple, prepares rice soup for breakfast for the monks on Wednesday mornings. “No one wants to do that,” she told me, “because you have to get up so early. I get up at 4:30 A.M.” Sometimes women prepare the food alone and sometimes in groups. During my research, I volunteered with 8 to 10 other women who call themselves the New Jersey group. Every other Thursday, members of this group offered lunch to the monks before participating in a chanting service and listening to one of the monks give a short dharma talk.

Informally, women also help with office tasks and take care of the monks, seeing that they have food, medicine, and other items that they need. One Thursday after

the New Jersey group offered lunch, I helped a group of women fold and staple temple newsletters so they could be mailed. "We come and help with the paperwork," one woman told me as we stapled, "because it takes a lot of time." The head monk was ill through much of my fieldwork, and it was largely women who drove him to doctor's appointments in the area. Men, on the other hand, tend to take care of the physical property around the temple. A group of men recently designed and constructed a new garden in front of the temple and worked on repairing a wall in the basement.

It is important to remember that all of the support the women at Wat Phila provide for the monks at Wat Phila requires negotiation because of the *Vinaya* rules that guide the monks' lives. In January 2001, I accompanied three laywomen and three monks on a trip to a nearby mall to purchase boots and long underwear for the monks. Before looking at boots, one of the women bought cups of coffee for the monks and gave them to the monks by placing them on a neutral surface rather than handing them directly. We then went to a number of shoe stores. The monks were not familiar with American sizes, so I measured their feet and helped to locate the correct sized boots while being sure not to physically touch them. When each monk tried the boots on, the boots needed to be laced. The monks did not know how to do it, and I looked to the laywomen for guidance. When one of them kneeled down and began to lace a boot, I followed, again being careful to touch only the boot and not the monk's ankle. In this and many other situations, the *Vinaya* guided the way the laywomen could and did support the monks. Rather than allowing these rules to determine the extent to which they support the monks, however, the women take these guidelines for granted and do gender as they have learned and community expectations dictate, within these bounds.

At CIMC, women and men both volunteer in a range of ways. Often there are no patterns by gender in how women and men volunteer. Every morning and evening, a period of silent meditation is held at CIMC. Volunteers called practice leaders begin and end these sessions. Two-thirds of the practice leaders are women, and one-third are men, proportions that would be roughly expected based on the gender distribution of people at the center if women and men have equal access to these positions. People also volunteer to help with the meditation sessions and dharma talks on Wednesday evenings. Both women and men help with these events by introducing the speaker, collecting donations at the door, and cleaning up the center afterward.

The only voluntary roles in which there is a gendered pattern in women's and men's involvements at CIMC are related to cooking and cleaning. Several times a year, daylong retreats are held at CIMC in which people meditate silently for a full day. The center asks for volunteers to prepare lunch for the people participating on these days, and it is almost always women who volunteer to cook. The center also has a scheduled period for housecleaning every Wednesday evening and holds cleaning and gardening days each spring and fall. I attended the spring cleaning in April of 2001. All of the volunteers who arrived to clean the floors, vacuum the meditation cushions, and dust around the center were women. One of the two

people who lived at the center as a caretaker commented to me a few days later, "Only women come [to clean]. Men are afraid to clean."

### Tensions

Tensions between what the leaders and attendees understand the Buddhist tradition to teach about women and men and the ways women and men are involved in Theravada Buddhist organizations are evident at both Wat Phila and CIMC. At Wat Phila, these tensions are evident in women's doing some teaching as they lead the morning chanting services, women doing more volunteering than do men, and women and men volunteering in gender-typed ways. At CIMC, these tensions are most evident in the gendered patterns among people who teach at the center and in the fact that women rather than men normally volunteer as cooks and cleaners.

People at Wat Phila are implicitly aware of the tensions between the teachings and the way women and men are involved in the center. Most realize that laywomen are more involved than men and interpret women's involvement in chanting services and their many voluntary responsibilities positively, believing that these are good changes taking place in the United States. Commenting on the chanting leaders who are women, one layman proudly told me that women are "better able to concentrate their minds" than are men. Describing women's responsibilities at the temple, Mai, a laywoman, explained, "The culture says men are superior to women. But if you look at it in the opposite way, you see that it's really women who control things." She went on in the conversation to remark with pride that "without the women" at the temple, "nothing would happen." Like many others, she saw women's increased involvement in all areas of temple life as a positive change that had taken place in the United States.

Both women and men at Wat Phila attribute women's high levels of involvement to the ways women and men learned about Buddhism as girls and boys in Thailand. Women tended to learn from their mothers, who offered food to the monks. "In Thailand," Mai explained, "traditionally men work. They go out in the field, and they work all day, and women are home preparing food and taking care of children. They have time and they can visit the temple. In the evening, men come home and have supper, and they are tired and don't want to go to the temple. But women make time to go to the temple. That's why women played and continue to play important roles in Buddhism." Men, on the other hand, generally learned by spending short periods of time temporarily ordained as monks rather than by being involved with a temple on a continuing basis. In Thailand, traditionally, men ordained for a short time before they were allowed to marry. For example, Plā, a layman, lived as a monk for three weeks in Thailand before he came to the United States as a student in 1973.

The women and men I met at Wat Phila are satisfied overall with how they are involved in Wat Phila. They do not believe that women should lead the temple as monks and tend to be pleased that women have more opportunities at Wat Phila than at similar temples in Thailand. Rather than being frustrated with the *Vinaya*

rules, as non-Thai women visitors to the temple often are, they take them for granted, seeing them as part of what it means to be a monk. The only complaint about women's roles and responsibilities at the temple that I heard during this research came from a laywoman who told me that she wanted to know why men do not come to the temple. She explained, "If I go to the temple [alone], no one says anything. If my husband goes alone, everyone is surprised." This comment suggests different expectations for women and men at the temple, possibly resulting from the contributions each make.

At CIMC, people are generally not aware of any gap between what they understand the Theravada Buddhist tradition to teach about gender and the ways women and men are involved in the center. When I asked one of the administrators if she could help me locate information about the number of women and men at the center, she agreed, saying, "I would think there's more women. I just would. I think what is scary about that is that I probably hadn't noticed that." Another laywoman explained, "There are plenty of female practice leaders and women and men who come in to speak on Wednesday nights. It seems very equitable." And a third who founded a feminist bookstore in Cambridge years ago explained, "I'm a feminist, I mean I just see everything in terms of gender . . . and I have never had a problem at the center with gender issues." Later in the conversation, when we talked about men's traditionally being in leadership positions at religious centers, she responded, "I'm glad that's not the case here. When I eyeball it, I've never felt that air, and I've always felt like it was a healthy balance."

These women's experiences clearly illustrate that most attendees at CIMC do not experience the center as a place where women and men have different responsibilities or roles, particularly in teaching. There are, however, clear gender imbalances in the images, the number of women and men who teach on Wednesday nights, and the number of women and men who volunteer as cooks and cleaners. While the teachers and attendees who do not experience patterns in how women and men are involved in the center are not wrong, they point to the analytic leverage of using Acker's (1990, 1992) approach and Britton's (2000) perspective to examine the multiple ways gender is embedded in organizations. While the founders and teachers at CIMC saw themselves creating an organization where women and men would be treated identically, in a gender-blind way, this is not what has happened. The center teaches that women and men can both learn and teach Buddhism, and the teachers and attendees believe this, but men dominate in teaching positions and positions of power at the center. Rather than creating an organization in which gender is not a factor, CIMC is an organization that women and men are often (not always) involved with in distinct ways but that few people see or experience as such. To create organizational change, these patterns must first be recognized, which will likely be a challenge because the teachings and organizational culture suggest they do not exist.

Only one person I met during my research at CIMC observed a gap between what the center teaches about women and men and the way these ideas are put into practice. "I am distressed," this laywoman said, "by the fact that as somebody who

has heard probably a thousand dharma talks (without exaggeration) it is very rare that a woman is quoted in a dharma talk, especially when they quote the old sages. Not just the Buddha, who obviously was male, but can't we find any women out there who have had valid things to say?" Continuing, she commented on the dominant images of men at the center: "You have this image of a male Buddha all over the place. And we've made attempts to bring Kuan-Yin into the meditation center. But you know, I think it really has an effect on all of us to just have the image of an enlightened person as a man. . . . I think we really have to do everything we can to start seeing women as people who can get enlightened as easily as men can." The content of what this long-time practitioner hears in dharma talks and the images she sees at CIMC led her to see clear tensions between her belief that women and men can equally access the dharma and her experiences of how it is presented at CIMC.

### CONCLUSION

Existing research about non-Judeo-Christian immigrants' religious organizations suggests that women are often involved in these organizations in different ways than they were in their home countries. This article contributes a more complete way of thinking about the relationship between what these centers teach about women and men and the way those teachings are put into practice organizationally. Rather than looking just at women's participation or leadership roles, as in previous research, this analysis examines two organizations on multiple levels to understand how gender influences their structure and operation, specifically in terms of what people at the centers understand the centers to teach about gender.

By using Joan Acker's (1990, 1992) approach to the gender of organizations as a theoretical model and Dana Britton's (2000) emphasis on context and the multiple ways organizations are gendered as a guide, I clearly show how two Theravada Buddhist organizations are gendered via images and the patterned ways women and men are involved in the organizations. By describing what people at both organizations understand the Theravada Buddhist tradition to teach about women and men, I show a clear gap between these teachings and the ways they are put into practice, the ways gender is "done," in the language of West and Zimmerman (1987), in these centers. Organizational contexts clearly shape that gap, as at Wat Phila, women are more involved in teaching as chanting leaders and more involved in voluntary roles than their understanding of the tradition suggests. At CIMC, women are less involved in teaching and more involved in gender-typed voluntary roles than their view of the tradition suggests. Although this analysis is limited by focusing on only two organizations, it suggests that the ways that the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions are developing in the United States since 1965 are likely highly gendered both in the ways the traditions are understood and in how they are practiced. Different teachings and organizational responsibilities for women and men are likely evident not just in organizations started by immigrants but also in those started by converts. In this research, immigrant women have more responsibilities



than in their home countries and convert women have fewer responsibilities than they think they do.

In addition to pointing to the gendered aspects of two Theravada Buddhist organizations, this article provides a conceptual approach sociologists of gender, religion, and organizations can use to better understand how gender structures organizations in the United States. As large numbers of people, particularly women, continue to be involved with religious organizations in the States, it is essential to consider how they negotiate gender in multiple ways within these religious organizations as well as in their workplaces, families, and other social institutions.

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