RESEARCHING HUMANS OR RESEARCHING GOD? A ROUNDTABLE ON FIELDWORK IN RELIGIOUS SETTINGS

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MC [pseudonym] (discussants), & Giovanni Masarà (questioner)[i]

> God can only be present in creation under the form of absence.
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> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* ([1947]2002)

As with our previous dialogue on working with and on activism and within organisations, this discussion further conveys the ambiguities and uncertainties of the fieldwork situation. Here though, working with and on religion gives rise, or perhaps licence, not only for divergent interpretations but also for more elusive styles of presentation.

Three discussants, Tom Ovens, Luka Benedičič, and MC were invited to our second fieldwork roundtable discussion held in March 2025. All three have worked on anthropology and religion in their current PhD projects. Having gathered feedback on the previous event and set out to encourage a livelier conversation this time, we invited our

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discussants to begin with a short ethnographic vignette so that the audience could gain a sense of what fieldwork was for each of them. Fellow PhD student, Giovanni Masarà offered important insights during the Q&A session, which we felt would be useful to include in the text.

The discussion soon adopts a familiar rhythm: specific encounters and fieldwork challenges are described, but these moments often give way to much broader questions. These seem increasingly central to the anthropology of religion: How do we distinguish between theology and anthropology? Is there any value in doing so? As Khaled Furani (2019) has noted, the boundary between the secular and the religious is so deeply blurred that, in practice, students of anthropology, as with Luka here, sometimes find it difficult to pose questions directly related to religious understanding.

The boundary between self and other enters the discussion in a different register than in the previous discussion too. Whereas the latter focused primarily on 'external' social identities, such as whether or when one is an anthropologist or an activist, here, the concern seems to shift towards the constitution of an 'inner' self. The discussants explore how fieldwork reshapes one's own perceptions and practices regarding religion. They ask whether there exists a fundamental sameness or difference in how they and their interlocutors understand a particular faith, and whether their anthropology might itself be a religious pilgrimage (or the other way

around). What emerges is a probing of existential boundaries in the anthropologist's self as much as in the broader discipline and practice of fieldwork.

All this said, as moderator, I wondered if the desire for religious transcendence, both within and beyond anthropology, can steer discussions toward demanding too much of field material, expecting it to make a kind of heroic sacrifice in the service of existential concerns. Often, the ordinary 'aliveness' of ethnography, descriptions of monks' struggles to wake up early, for example, seems to offer deeper resonance and insight than analysis of abstract moral principles. At least for me, this discussion gave rise both to excitement and doubt, then, featuring some funny and dramatic storytelling—all elements as essential to religiosity as they are to life itself.

Yet perhaps my doubts also reflect a deeper fascination with religion as a topic, particularly in a contemporary world shaped by the discourse of secularisation. Fieldwork on religion unsettles our assumptions about whether events and experiences can be reported in a purely matter-of-fact manner, as attempted in the previous piece on meetings and organisations. It invariably gestures beyond what is conventionally considered 'social', compelling us to trace and write about those mysterious, profound dimensions of humanness that might otherwise remain unspoken or overlooked.

The final questions, raised by our fellow cohort member Dr Giovanni Masarà, were especially thought-provoking. He asked, 'Is God a participant in your research?', a question that the discussion overall perhaps brings into sharper focus. Are we researching humans, or are we, in some way, researching God?

But before reflecting further, let us allow ourselves be taken to a Benedictine monastery and witness an imaginary epic battle with a bear. From there, we jump from the dramatic to the impressionist – the mundane and peaceful reality of a Vietnamese monastery. Finally, we arrive at an intriguing metaphorical story about a small stream of water seeking advice from the sand on how to cross the desert to reach its destination.

The Vignettes

First to speak, Tom Ovens evoked for us a satiric-surreal vision of an anthropologist's first encounter, suffused with anxiety and fear, but also the courage required to step across the threshold not only of the monastery, but into fieldwork itself. His performance cannot be fully captured in text, but the vignette opened for us the image of ethnographic fieldwork as an impressive, often ludic or even ludicrous, but always unfolding, journey; what he later describes as 'a transcending movement towards the other'.

Tom Ovens [TO]:

The sheets of rain slice through the night like knives through butter. But I am an anthropologist, and anthropologists are not composed of butter. Nobody has ever made a flapjack out of an anthropologist – not out of this one, anyway. Time and again, my skin and hair defiantly splatter the maniacal assaults of compounded hydrogen and oxygen. But my medieval peasant's outfit is getting soaked. I'm cold. So damned cold.

I press on through the forest. On the assumption that a Dick Whittington sort of look will go down well with the monks, I have packed my possessions into a large spotted handkerchief and tied this to the end of a stick, which rests on my left shoulder. This, it turns out, is an intensely annoying way of transporting items. The handkerchief keeps getting stuck in the branches. The rising moon guides me only with a kind of reluctance; it shimmers disdainfully through the close – packed treetops. The forest smells of rotting things. The pine needles are soft underfoot – soft as flesh. I hear a howl, far off, and an involuntary shiver excites my spine. The last thing I need on my first day of fieldwork is to get eaten by a monkey.

Then: Oh! Suddenly a clearing, and the monastery looms up through the night like a whale leaping out of an oil – slick. The black stones glisten wetly in the moonlight like a million shimmering smiles of surprise, offering an ambiguous welcome. I can make out a wooden portal, silent and dark, set into the mighty wall. Another howl from

the forest. Closer. I approach the door quickly and my fist pounds on the ancient, gnarled surface.

'Let me the hell in!', I cry. It is the traditional appeal of the medieval pilgrim. 'I'm cold and I'm going to get eaten by a monkey!' Silence. The rain is harder now. A blast of wind out of nowhere sweeps up the teeming water horizontally against me; it is almost a wave, pressing me powerfully against the knotted wood. I am a drowning man. My fists pound again: 'Let me in!' More howls penetrate the darkness; another, and another. Glinting in the forest, beady eyes... Eyes? Or teeth… 'Let me in! Let me the fuck in!'

With a creak, a tiny panel crawls open in the face of the portal and an eye, bloodshot and yellow, appears in the aperture. 'What fool is this that braves the forest? Speak, stranger, that thy life may be spared!'

'It is I', I bellow, using all the strength of my lungs against the onslaught of wind and rain, 'the scholar from the lands of the North!'

'What's that thou sayest? The scholar?'

'Yes!'

'From the lands of the North?'

'Yes, 'tis I, I say!'

'Didst thou email in advance?'

'Yes! Argh…' The stick over my shoulder is yanked from my grasp as some unseen force takes hold of the packed handkerchief at the end. It

vanishes into the night, with all my soaked possessions; I glimpse a terrible, hairy hand. But there is the sound of bolts being drawn and, being already pressed up against the door, in a moment I am plunging into the dark interior, overbalancing and crashing to the ground. Cold, hard stone. But dry. I hear the bolts being put back across, firmly. A blessed silence lasts a long moment. Then, the strange, desiccated voice of the monk behind me as I get to my feet:

'What weird garments are these? Thou nitwit. Thou lookest like some sort of medieval peasant!'

I redden. The monk is barely visible by the light of a flaming torch set into the wall further along the passageway; he is a smudge of black in his Benedictine cowl. Beneath a voluminous hood, in those bloodshot eyes, the flames flicker in reflection.

'I just thought this was the sort of thing', I say weakly, 'that one should wear to a monastery.'

Silence. I redden further.

'Thou reddenst!' screeches the monk suddenly. 'Here in the monastery, red symboliseth readiness for violence. Symbolism, for us, is exclusively indexical and univocal. This is an extremely important principle of our society.'

I attempt to mumble my apologies, willing the blood to flee my embarrassed cheeks. In vain!

'Ah!' screams the monk. 'Willest thou violence, then, thou scholar of strange garb? Well, well! Beest thou from the North, or beest thou from the South, or beest thou from behind the fridge, by goodness, violence shalt thou have! Brothers, awake! *Release the bear.*'

Instantly the monk is transformed into a bat and disappears flapping into the shadows. But I breathe a sigh of relief. I may have ballsed up the dress code, but I have, at least, prepared well for the traditional Benedictine practice of making new guests engage in mortal combat with a bear. (Monks' ability to transform into bats, of course, is well known.) In advance of my fieldwork, I persuaded Edinburgh Zoo, not without difficulty, to permit me a year's loan of a small but ferocious grizzly, which I kept chained to the shower rail in the downstairs bathroom – somewhat to the displeasure, it has to be said, of my succession of housemates. Sustaining the creature on a diet of porridge and housemates (see previous sentence), daily in the early morning I would take it into the garden where we would wrestle, practising all the classic holds, throws and chomps of the grizzly tradition. These were beautiful hours and enriching both physically and spiritually, I believe for the bear as much as for me. As a token of my gratitude, at the end of the year I pretended to the Zoo that the creature had choked to death on a corpulent golf caddy, and gave it its freedom in Tentsmuir Forest. It was a sad parting. In any case, I am confident I have learned how best to pacify any such beast a monastic community might pit against me.

A mighty roar resounds echoing in the passageway. Firmly suppressing a momentary apprehension, I boldly approach the sound, passing through a shadowed archway into a dark, rain – lashed cloister. In the centre, a huge bear is reared up on its hind legs, beating its moonlit chest. It is truly a majestic sight. The beast roars again; then it spies me, plunges to earth with an impact that shakes the ground, and begins to move quickly in my direction with bloodthirsty demeanour.

Quick as a flash, I reach into the inside pocket of my jerkin. 'Have at thee, sir! Take that, and that!' I lunge forward, my left hand now holding a pot of mustard and my right junior fellow in International Relations.

'No chance', says the bear. 'It's Lent. Eat fur, asshole!' And it aims a huge right hook at my stupid head, which I dodge just in time.

My heart sinks. The bear hammers a left uppercut that whistles past my ear; it is boxing an unorthodox southpaw, and I am helpless against it. The air above is suddenly dense with flapping bats – the monks are sensing the kill. I cast my eyes desperately about for salvation; but there is nothing but an old sack.

'Tootle, tootle!' I desperately warble. 'Tootle tootle!' It is (I hope) a passable imitation of a 14th – century Genoese sackbut. A vague notion has entered my head about medieval dancing bears.

The bear laughs. 'Nice impression of a 14th – century Genoese sackbut, asshole! What do you think I am, some kind of medieval dancing bear? Hell, no. This bear *moonwalks*, baby!' Then it reaches into its matted fur and produces a pair of sequined platform shoes, on which it moonwalks backwards into the night, with marvellous grace and skill.

'Tootle tootle!' I persist, with great relief. 'Tootle tootle!' There is a commotion of flapping and a puff of purple smoke and suddenly the old monk – porter's yellow eyes are right up against mine, screwed up in an expression of scorn.

'So, stranger, so! Thou hast charmed the bear, then. But canst thou charm – I'm sorry, I'm standing weirdly close to you…' – he retreats a little, for which I am grateful – '…but canst thou charm…*the pit of snakes*??!!'

To be honest, after the mighty stone walls and wooden portal, the fine flaming torch and the tremendous bear, the pit of snakes is something of a disappointment. A solitary adder commences an asthmatic hiss but has to break off to have a cough. Since the controversial Liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, monasteries have found it very difficult to recruit snakes for their pits of snakes. Many have replaced this traditional institution with a ball pit or foam bath, or simply offer guests a nice cup of tea. I toss my portable International Relations scholar as an offering to the adder; unexpectedly, the creature actually sinks its own fangs into the snake, making short work of it. It is not a pretty sight.

There is a flash of thunder and a rumble of lightning. Suddenly I am standing before an enormous throne, ornately carved with images of the Apocryphal legend in which St Benedict must wrestle for forty days and forty nights with Margaret Mead. High up on the throne is seated a magnificent monk, resplendent in abbatial mitre and with a great, jewelled cross hung around his neck. He speaks:

'Hello, I'm the abbot. Sorry about the bear and all that stuff. We don't believe in these silly traditions anymore, but of course we keep up the pretence or nobody comes and spends money in the Gift Shop. What can I do for you?'

"Tis I, the scholar from the North…', I begin.

'Do talk like a normal person', interrupts the abbot. I cough.

'I'm the anthropologist. I believe we spoke on the telephone. I'm very glad to have finally arrived here at the Abbaye Saint-Pierre!'

'The Abbaye Saint-Pierre?' The abbot frowns. 'But this is the Abbaye Saint-Jacques. *The Abbaye Saint-Pierre is the next forest along, mate.*'

I exit through the Gift Shop to take my chances with the monkeys.

After Tom's theatrical performance, which we cannot fully capture in text, we turn to Luka's gentle approach to a Vietnamese Buddhist monastery in France. His account highlights the interplay between

Western and Eastern conceptions of religion and reveals how these perspectives intersect and become embedded within both cultures.

Luka Benedičič [LB]:

Upon arrival at Upper Hamlet of Plum Village, near Dordogne in southwest France, the scenes and soundscapes do not remind one of the stereotypical image Westerners might have of a Buddhist monastery but evoke a surprisingly relatable experience. Upon a single glance on a busy sunny afternoon, one can see people setting up tents on the edge of the forest, reading books, doing yoga under the sun, dancing in the Transformation Hall, walking around barefoot, chatting, smiling, perhaps playing table tennis, frisbee, football or volleyball with the monks; a few kids will be running around laughing, piano music will be coming out of the Dining Hall, and there will be lots of joyful singing in certain parts of the day. Evidently, the presence and place of lay people – by and large Europeans, though not always – within the monastery had intervened into immediate features and atmospheres of its environment.

Across several traditions, monastic tourism and retreats have become increasingly popular – not exclusively for religious purposes, but sometimes simply in search of 'the temporary exchange of an everyday reality for another' (Lengkeek 2001: 177) while referencing a more 'authentic' or 'sustainable' lifestyle (Gilli & Palmisano 2017). Something similar has occurred in Plum Village, where tourism is

encouraged. There, the relationship with laity is framed purposefully through the prism of Buddhist modernism in the West.

I was told that Thich Nhat Hanh (often referred to as Thay, meaning teacher), the recently deceased founder of the monastery, would often argue with other Buddhist leaders, asking them, 'Are young people coming to the temples? Is Buddhism changing businesses and educational systems?' He believed that if Buddhism did not change but remained too provincial and too concerned with individual salvation or devotional practice, it was as good as dead. But given that he was exiled from Vietnam and was living in the West, he felt that he had to approach his audience through Western – indeed, they were becoming ever more global – notions about the world. He presented Buddhism in a language acceptable to the scepticism of a 'scientific society', but it also landed close to the hearts of those disenchanted with contemporary religion and its institutions. By paying attention to the 'real and imagined views' of non-Buddhists and the 'powerful gaze' of Westerners (Mair 2017: 23), Plum Village persisted in changing itself to better accommodate the West, adapting also to technology, liberal social ethics, even the market economy (Chandler 2004).

In the early days, however, Plum Village was crowded with Vietnamese monastics. Most lay visitors were also from Vietnam. But the Vietnamese community was being outgrown as the presence of the Western audience grew bigger – and so did its representation within the monastic community itself. Since Thay refused to celebrate a

'national monasticism' (Poujeau 2014), changes had to be made. Back then, the practice used to have more religious, ritualistic elements, many of which were removed, shortened, or recontextualised. Lectures in Vietnamese and French were being replaced by increasingly more talks in English. Interaction with children has changed due to the social sensitisation to child molesting among religious specialists. This was supposedly most difficult for the Vietnamese monks because, as one of them told me, 'In Vietnamese culture, kissing a child is very natural and instinctive, even if you have never met the child before. This kind of intimacy comes naturally. For instance, I was breastfed by several of our neighbours, not only by my mother.'

Some aspects of the monastic etiquette have become permissible precisely in order to appropriate its 'alterity' to a Western audience. Moreover, some cases of transgression have been encoded as examples of a new practice. For example, according to the Mindful Manners (the monastic code), it is encouraged not to hug other people, especially of the opposite sex, because this can trigger sexual energy. But through Thay's learning about Western modes of sociality and interaction, 'hugging meditation' has been made into a practice, even though some of the Vietnamese brothers are still not comfortable with hugging.

Nowadays, the Vietnamese population accounts for roughly half of the brown-robed monastic community in Upper Hamlet. Indeed, a particular challenge in achieving harmony that is brought up a lot is

the tension of cultural differences between the Vietnamese brothers and the Western brothers. As a Vietnamese monk explained to me,

> Vietnamese culture is very collective, whereas the West has a strong sense of individuality. In Vietnam, you don't share your feelings explicitly. What is required is your observation, being sensitive to others' energy. Make a few mistakes and you will learn. But in the West, you have to be told how one feels about you. Second-guessing things makes people agitated. *Just tell me already!* But the Vietnamese will experience this as confrontational and arrogant.

Indeed, when Vietnamese monks share something, they do not necessarily speak in the first person, but will often speak in the third person: This has been said, this is being done, etc. This varies because many monks are of mixed backgrounds; they may have Vietnamese origins but have been brought up somewhere else. But when they are speaking in Vietnamese rather than English, this is generally the case. 'However,' my interlocutor continued,

> the Western brothers would sometimes correct me, saying, 'No, you do not sound credible or personal enough.' They would feel as though I am referencing someone else. This was hard for me

> in the beginning because in our culture, it is not humble to say that word 'I'.

On the one hand, Plum Village provides an exemplar for understanding many debates, new and old, in the anthropology of Buddhism – and of religion more generally. What makes a monastery Buddhist? How does one recognise Buddhism when one sees it? What is the relationship between authenticity and innovation? To name only a few. But the reason I chose to start off the discussion by presenting this short text is to emphasise that during fieldwork, making an intuitive observation and picking up on a question (such as: Why does the monastery look, sound, and feel the way it does?) will usually be a gateway to insights about the history, politics, and therefore internal dynamics, differentiations, and tensions within the monastery. But it will also spring up diverse yet naturally related conversations which I did not have enough space to work into the text – such as troubles getting up in the morning, struggling with one's superiors, craving coffee or sugar, feeling homesick, and the textures of healing. In hindsight, I would say that rich ethnographic material emerges precisely at the point where you begin to see your analytical questions reflected in the most mundane and seemingly unrelated or insignificant occurrences.

Finally, MC presents a symbolic, even mythical, journey through the stream of life. In a poetic animation of winds and sands, he conveys the sensations that flow from an encounter with difference.

[MC]:

A stream, from its source in far – off mountains, passing through every kind of description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered:

'The Wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.'

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

'By hurtling in your own accustomed way, you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.'

'But how could this happen?'

'By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind.'

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that it could ever be regained?

'The wind,' said the sand, 'performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.'

'How can I know that this is true?'

'It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years. And it certainly is not the same as a stream.'

'But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?'

'You cannot in either case remain so,' the whisper said. 'Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.'

When it heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly it remembered a state in which it – or some part of it? – had been held in the arms of a wind. It also remembered – or did it? – that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing, to do.

And the stream raised its vapor into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many, miles away. And because it had its doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in its mind the details of the experience. It reflected, 'Yes, now I have learned my true identity.'

The stream was learning. But the sands whispered: 'We know, because we see it happen day after day: and because we, the sands, extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.'

And that is why it is said that the way in which a stream of Life is to continue its journey is written in the Sands. (Shah 1970: 23–24)

The Discussion

Yichi Zhang [YZ]: It seems that, especially Tom and MC, you both describe facing something very different from what you were accustomed to—whether in the imagined battle with the bear or in this metaphor of 'the stream'. Tom, how do you think your imaginative response connects to your encounter with difference in the field? How does the imagined monastery you have described connect to the one you experienced?

Do you think this experience links with joy and excitement because you are encountering differences? For MC, I wonder, how are sentiments of excitement or suffering, when encountering socio-

cultural differences, connected to your research on religion? Can that sometimes tip into a description of the field verging on exoticisation?

MC: I think, we just cope with our circumstances… We use whatever tools or methods we have to get by. This is usually a reflection of the many values we hold as human beings. These categories aren't essentialised, but we take them wherever we go, or wherever we practise them. That's why I think what we are dealing with is beyond 'religion'.

YZ: Can you give us one example?

MC: Sure. Say that you're in the field with people who are doing something that you don't feel comfortable with. It can be many things, but in this case it's gambling. In order to get into the network, you're expected to participate in it in some way. But given your own moral compass, budget constraints, family history, trauma, or other implications that jeopardise something you care about, you just can't bring yourself to do it. So you check out. Maybe that means this aspect of the research isn't so important that you're willing to sacrifice something you hold dearly. Fieldwork forces you to reconsider who you even are. That's what I mean when I say 'values', and also how I think this part of conversation gets lost when we talk about the category of 'religion'. All human beings have values. But then not all human beings consider themselves 'religious'. Why should people who practise their own values be expected to call themselves 'religious' or not? Why can't we just say we are practitioners of 'x' or 'y' principles?

LB: Listening to you, MC, I'd be interested to know how you would perceive the monastery I've worked in. Briefly put, the founder received asylum in France for his work as a peace activist during the Vietnamese war. The monastery had undergone many changes, starting in the 90s but especially in the 2000s. It is a Buddhist monastery located in southwest France, which is the 'hub', but there are also many other monasteries across the world, of the Plum Village tradition. One could argue that what makes this young Buddhist tradition distinctive is the monks' views on their positionality as 'Buddhist monks'. When asked about whether they consider themselves a Buddhist, some would say absolutely, but many would sort of relativise this statement by saying that they are a human being *practising* Buddhism; or *living the life* of a Buddhist monk. There are also monks who would say they are Catholic Christians, practising Buddhism.

I will add something here on a personal level. Preparing for this conversation, I actually thought a lot about what makes a field site religious. Or rather, how does a fieldworker recognise the religiosity in a field site such as the monastery. Of course, you can go at this question in a very straightforward way and look for specific things such as sites of worship, the materiality of the space, the sacred architecture, monastic practices such as praying and chanting, etc. But for me, during my time living there, I couldn't really disentangle what

it meant for me to experience Buddhism (or a Buddhist lifestyle) from what it meant to experience the field site per se. I was asking myself, is living here making me more Buddhist? In what kind of relationship to Buddhism is it putting me?

My interlocutors would usually talk about these questions in relation to practice. A lot of them liked to discuss a practice called walking meditation. They might say that they used to be very frustrated with the practice and would suffer every time they did it. And they do it almost every day, so it can quickly develop into an aversion. They might say they didn't know how to enjoy the walking sessions, which in turn made them feel anxious. But a lot of these monks would go on and say that now, some years later (in some cases it took ten years!), something clicked. Something shifted. They tuned in. Nowadays, walking meditation has become their favourite practice.

So, I thought that, perhaps, my initial introspections regarding whether I was becoming more (or less) Buddhist should be understood in the light of the monks' understanding of religious practice as the potential for transformation. For many monks, being Buddhist means to live this kind of life, to learn as they go, to develop ways in which they can meaningfully relate to this lifestyle, and to allow oneself to be transformed by engaging with it.

TO: I think we're pinpointing that the question goes beyond what you do at your fieldsite. We are rather looking at the question of what the fieldsite is when you are studying a religious context. In order to

render our research projects intelligible within academic discourses, [we say] this is Islam, this is Buddhism, this is Christianity. But in terms of participating in a fieldwork context, I think it's about moving beyond that. Because religion itself is in some sense surely about moving beyond. Perhaps this is what I am try to get at (or get away with) with my silly story, where the monastery becomes an imaginative stimulus.

But to provide some actual ethnographic context, the monks are in very fundamental ways taking the religion with them all the time. Particularly through the liturgical rituals, which the monks engage in every day of their lives. For decades and decades, they're returning to the church, celebrating the Eucharist daily, chanting psalms. Every activity in the monastery – manual work, scholarly work, eating... – it all gets drawn into the cycle of ritual repetition. You're constantly waiting for the bell to summon you back to church. It is articulated as a kind of pilgrimage, or at least a process – a deepening of experience, which is what the monks are talking about when they speak about joy. But I think this is more than a 'feeling'. To use Charles Taylor's term, it's like a journey towards a kind of 'fullness' of human experience, which is very much something you carry within you as well expressing it in some form, for example in writing. But it also incorporates the journey itself. Perhaps, Yichi, this is where the question of encountering difference comes in.

LB: It is perhaps the very point at which, as anthropologists, we begin to sense a place in the kind of way you just described, Tom, that is the moment of our initiation into difference. That is, our initiation into the specificity of the community in question. As you have, one would naturally begin to ask where this idea of fullness comes from. As well as how it manifests. Is it pure joy or is it also excitement? Can it also feel like anxiety or suffocation? I find that it is quite crucial to grow into the habit of asking questions about what lies implicit in our interlocutors' statements, rather than to try to superimpose our own questions and to search for ethnographic 'evidence'.

I came to the field with the question of how one can recognise that something is Buddhist. It is a question that invites thinking about categories and borders, which in part was my reaction to anthropology of Buddhism's long and sometimes messy history of trying to grasp its object of study. Who counts as a Buddhist? Does one have to be part of a community of practice in order to 'qualify' as Buddhist? Must such a community follow a particular textual tradition? For a long time, anthropologists took part in the Western search for an 'authentic', if not 'original', Buddhism.

But once I arrived at the field site, I felt like I profited from allowing myself to be overwhelmed by the 'data'. To the extent that I forewent the boxing-in and paid attention instead to what my interlocutors were saying, and what they were doing. This is how relevant questions that were pertinent to my field site began to surface. It

turned out that for my interlocutors, Buddhism is associated with a certain quality of life. Moreover, a certain quality of suffering. That is, for Western monks above all, Buddhism is about establishing a conscious relationship with one's internal suffering, having to do not only with practice per se but also with the specific habitus of this monastery.

YZ: I guess a further question from there is that, how does that initial encountering of troubles and unease transform into feelings of joyful participation and recognition of others? How, in practices, are connections made?

MC: I think we're talking about embodiment, and how people make connections between their shared experiences, or even beliefs and practices...Unfortunately, I think there is a semiological, or semantic challenge with this. So, when people communicate with each other, there can be disconnects between 'signifier' and 'signified'. Like, what someone says is different from what someone else understands. Even if they are using the same words.

Let me give an example here. I am going to say a word for all in the audience and do your best to remember the image that pops up in your mind: 'Apple.' So, what colour was it?

Audience: It was green.

Audience: Mine was red.

Audience: White.

Audience: Black.

Audience: Mine was in a painting actually.

MC: It was in a painting? Was anyone's apple not in a painting?

Audience: Banana. I thought of a Banana.

MC: So, we even thought of what it wasn't. Brilliant. Anyone else? What was its colour, where was it, is it hanging from a tree? Was someone holding it? Was it lying on the ground? All these differences in the image that popped into our minds are important because they demonstrate that, even if we are talking about the same thing with the same word, our understanding of it can be quite different...

The main point here is that if this can happen with the word 'apple', it can also happen with the word 'God' or 'religion'. Really stretch your mind on that... This goes back to my previous point on why 'religion' is understood as something embodied for some but not shared by all. But if everyone is human... everyone embodies something... that is why I question if these categories are useful anymore...

To give another example, something like 'the day of judgement' in the Abrahamic religions, or 'the afterlife.' The literal, physical, ontological meaning, doesn't have to be the only one. What if this was also a way of saying that someone's actions have consequences? Would anyone here deny that their actions have consequences? If not, then in some sense, we are all 'believers' in a time (day) of reckoning (judgement), i.e. we accept that our actions are not without effects... If understood

this way, the atheist, and religious person don't sound very different. These are the connections we can make in anthropology...

TO: I would mention something about Benedictine hospitality here, in terms of frameworks in which we can conceptualise God and religion beyond discursive boundaries. Within the Rule of St Benedict – which is a sixth-century document acting in some sense as a foundation stone of Benedictine life – it is specified that monastery premises must always incorporate a guesthouse. It is assumed that there will always be guests passing through the monastery. And that is still the case today. Visits are usually limited to one or two weeks, and guests' activities and movements are somewhat restricted; so, they're not allowed into the cloister, for example, or other monastic spaces unsupervised. Nevertheless, the guests share the routines of the liturgy, continually returning to the church and – if they are Catholic – taking the Eucharist.

But there is no requirement for guests to be Catholic. Many of them are, but many are just people who latch onto the monastery as a place where they feel safe, as a kind of refuge. These may be people with mental health issues, for whom NHS services are inadequate. Those participating in the monastery are therefore very diverse. The place opens up in a universal way onto all kinds of differences. Despite their backgrounds, generally, people find peace in the monastery, something articulated repeatedly by guests.

There is of course a gendered aspect to this, as it is usually only men who are allowed in the guesthouse and certain monastic spaces such as the refectory. Although separate accommodation is usually available for female guests, who are just as diverse; and in fundamental ways they are included no less than men – women are excluded from particular spaces within the monastery, but not from the fundamental liturgical routines (all are able to attend worship in the church) or the larger journey to which these rituals invite. Again, the strongly delineated monastery centre nevertheless opens onto a transcending of identity, each person assumed to be following their own paths towards God.

So, there is an openness there. That's the point. There is very little effort to proselytise or convert people in the monastery guesthouse – I never saw that happen. It is simply rendered as a place where people can share in the movement beyond. As far as the monks are concerned, all these religious concepts are realised through the concept of hospitality.

In terms of my fieldwork in the monastery, I was one of the guests, one of those who constantly leave and return – despite the fact that I could stay a bit longer due to my privileged position as a researcher. But I would run into the same guests all the time on different occasions. Because people get attached to these places. They feel increasingly at home despite the apparent constraints (particularly on women) which are placed on guests' participation in monastic life.

Forms of segregation do exist, but this does not prevent people – *including* women – from forging ever-deeper relationships with the monastery in their own ways. Without being channelled into Catholicism in any deliberate or explicit way, they find ways to participate in the transcending invitation of these liturgical cycles.

MC: Tom, would you say that those institutions are carriers for principles, or carriers for values? In other words, the institution's purpose is to make sure people seriously contemplate how they should treat other people? Or am I looking at it in too much of a functional manner?

TO: Well…I mean, that does happen. Because guests begin to care for the space. As they integrate into the monastery, they develop an interest in looking after the place. In care. So, people participate in manual work, dusting and cleaning. Or more broadly, when you sit with other guests in the refectory, you share the food. You need to help each other out. You are being integrated into an ethical principle, if you like.

But it's not a kind of legalistic principle presented to you in the abstract. It's one which is articulated through those embodied rituals of return which seem to draw people in because of that transcending potential.

LB: Another thing about institutions is hierarchy. In the context of the monastery, as Tom has already pointed out, one of the difficulties of participation is that as a guest, you may be hierarchically at the very

bottom. You are not at home there. However, you are welcome to stay, in that there is a place and space for you. Indeed, to respond to Yichi's question, I recall the exact moment when, for the first time, I felt that I was immersed in a community of practice.

It happened during a meditation session when a very young monk stood up in the middle of the session and quite aggressively walked out of the session. I decided to open my eyes and peek to see that he was crying, his face glowing red. In a few moments, one of the elder monks stood up and followed him outside. It became very clear at that moment and after follow-up conversations with the monks that my experience of having major difficulties waking up at the sound of the bell early in the morning and going to the meditation hall was in fact very common. In fact, many monks had difficulties going to the meditation sessions. They felt a lot of anxiety. There were monks who did not want to go at all, but pushed themselves, out of respect for others. It is deemed an imperative of monastic life to make an effort towards keeping the practice as communal as possible.

So, going back to Yichi's question, for me personally, and very subjectively, the biggest point of difference from the get-go was a self-imposed one, i.e. the fact that I felt like I was not properly appreciating the monastic lifestyle. It was a major relief, somehow, to have realised that the monks were struggling just as much as I was. It was only then that I realised I had been participating as an 'equal' all along. It helped me loosen up quite a bit.

MC: Something that might be relatable here, Luka, did you try participating in the meditation yourself and take that home with you?

LB: I did, but I've found it difficult to replicate the practice at home. Firstly, there is no single element of practice, it is a whole conglomerate. But more importantly, community and habitus are key. Many experienced monks reported having lost touch with their training while living alone outside of the monastery, for example while taking care of their elderly parents. Interestingly, there is a paradox at play here, because the monks emphasise the monastery as a site of freedom from some of the constraints, distractions, and responsibilities of the 'outside world'. But despite the poetic character of freedom, it is instead a highly situated and curated experience of freedom that is at play there.

Giovanni Masarà [GM]: I was just about to ask something on that front. What has been the relationship for you between your experience of prayer or practice or meditation and articulating it in text? On the other hand, how do your personal philosophy, analytical stances, or ethnographic writing intersect with modes of theology encountered in the field?

MC: I want to connect your first question to Luka's point on hierarchy. For me all practices depend on the authoritative sources, whatever they might be, people, scripture, revelations, nature, etc. The social situations I wrote about are predominantly about the polemics I had with people using these sources. In this process, the authoritative

sources become interlocutors, especially if they are embodied by people you engaged with. I do wonder if the literature that exists on this has ever treated the authoritative sources that way...

But to answer your question on meditation, yes, there was a lot of meditating, and reflecting on the sources... And in the position of the ethnographer, we can place ourselves in relation to those sources, and engage with them how our interlocutors engage with them, as long and as far as you feel comfortable, of course, like I mentioned earlier... But yeah, you place yourself in the position to get the emic [perspective]. Does that answer your question a little bit?

GM: Yes, but it raises another one.

[The audience laughs]

GM: It is about home. My question is: is it really a chance that this engagement with Islam for you seems to be like a transcendental fever? Do you get to choose that? What I also want to ask ~~is~~ if you think is it possible to write about it without personal commitment…I don't know, for example, Luka, what is your relationship with Buddhism right now? And I think these questions relate~~s~~ to home in the following way: I have been to Christian monasteries, and they were similar to what Tom talked about, and I think that the very common experience, as you have said, is that people felt more at home there than their 'usual place'.

I think there is a sense that you only end up being at home there when you participate. I don't know if that feeling of home [and belonging] persists after your departure from the field, when that fever is over.

MC: For me 'home' is wherever you can freely practise your values.

GM: If I may add a last question, is God a participant in your research?

LB: To be honest, in the context of the Plum Village monastery, I couldn't address this question even if I wanted to. You mentioned theology as a 'looming other', but the majority of my interlocutors did not engage with theological treatises on Buddhism. They mostly read books written by the founder who has recently passed away. He summarised some of the Buddhist traditions in an accessible language, but in doing so he already contextualised them in a specific way which resonated with his own convictions. So, I did not really have many theological discussions with the monks. I tried to, a couple of times, but their 'theology', if you will, is very practice-oriented, so we would usually end up talking about practice instead. There was little to no talk of reincarnation, of Nirvana, of God. Indeed, the founder preferred to think of the Buddha as a role-model and inspiration.

However, I have been working on a parallel project for a year and a half now, in Ljubljana, which is about the construction of selves and narratives in contemporary Catholic theology. With Catholic intellectuals in Slovenia, especially those engaging with apophatic theologies, it is all about the presence of God as an agent in the world, but especially as an agent within oneself. As a result, it becomes

difficult to disentangle what is human from what is divine; what is 'of the earth' from what originates in a beyond. As well as whether the 'beyond' is in this world or some other. This has important consequences, anthropologically speaking, because it makes space for God to be reflected in ethnographic writing as a presence which prevents religion from being completely humanised. This lifts the burden off the sociocultural as 'the ground of all that matters', to paraphrase Amira Mittermaier (2021: 26). Thus, I see this position as pushing against what Yasmin Moll (2018: 257) criticised when she wrote that 'even when we [anthropologists] question secular suppositions, we only do so from the secular presupposition of divinity as unnecessary for the labour of analysis.'

MC: Moll also recently wrote 'Can there be a Godly ethnography?' (2023) which also raises the question, from our view, of whether there can ever be something such as a 'Godless ethnography' if our values and principles are so woven up in our work.

TO: Khaled Furani's book *Redeeming Anthropology* (2019) is quite interesting on that front. He is asking, is anthropology really so different from theology? Especially in relation to this notion of God as a 'looming other' that Luka mentioned. I think this perspective really brings out that theological potential in anthropology.

But I would highlight the problem of having to write in this dreadful language that inherits the particular ideology of anthropology.

Yasmin Moll is also pointing towards this intractable paradox [between the inherent theoretical tendency and the secularised language of anthropology]. I think it is potentially really quite boring to carry on hammering at that paradox with these abstract terms.

MC: The binary between 'the secular' and 'the religious' feels like a non-existent thing because everyone values 'something.' In ethnography, you're trying to ascertain what people are valuing to make statements or to perform anything. Unfortunately, these values can be made into 'idols' through our own scholarship.

TO: It's all about idolatry. Furani talks about the way certain anthropologists, particularly in the French tradition, have found that their scientific ethnographic tomes have not exhausted their fieldwork. And so, they've written literary accompanying pieces, such as Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1997). This is the problem that really interests me. How do you escape the confines of academic discourse?

The bear story was not included in my PhD thesis, by the way. When I wrestled with this problem, I failed. But I think keeping the problem in view, acknowledging the constant shortcomings of this solemn academic discourse, is one way of thinking theologically, precisely by opening yourself to the possibility of something beyond. I mean, is my PhD thesis greater or lesser nonsense than the story about the bear? I think that's an open question.

Concluding Reflections by All Participants

(the conversation seems to remain unfinished...like a religious journey.)

Luka Benedičič

Conversing about religious ethnography may intuitively bring to the fore, as it has been the case in our discussion, plenty of its assumed opposites. Be it the secular, the scientific or the political (depending on context), there seems to be a more-than-analytical specificity that the religious carries, which has the potency to disrupt and/or transform these former categories. On the one hand, I like to think that anthropology, via ethnographic fieldwork, may be practised as a spiritual discipline regardless of the fieldsite. Be it religious or not, every fieldsite requires great amounts of effort and trust into a process that is, ideally, just beyond the reach of what we could have imagined at the start. On the other hand, studying religion has personally been an invitation to open myself up to new pathways towards a source of particular vitality. I experience this as a personal struggle that I am very fond of. Indeed, this makes it easier to be passionate about doing research. And passion, I trust, improves my work.

Tom Ovens

I think what I am trying to get at in my contributions is the question of how we can enter into religion's potentials as a kind of 'movement beyond', considering the process of discovering these potentials to be in some sense precisely constitutive of religion itself. As I briefly speak about towards the end, I think considering anthropology's character as a literary undertaking is one way of doing this; but I also point out that the fieldworker's inevitable encounters with hospitality in the field are probably an important site of participation in religious life. The rhythms of life in the guesthouse worked to entrain guests in diversely analogous ways into the monks' own, ongoing 'pilgrimage' (as they call it) towards God. I am interested in thinking about religion in these terms as a kind of transcending movement towards the other, which – if we can learn to hold the categories of academic discourse sufficiently loosely – bears much in common with anthropology itself. (Bears themselves are also very interesting.)

MC

The categories of 'religion' and 'the secular' are only tools that anthropologists use to arrive at a more fundamental understanding of the human condition. If we fixate on them, it is possible that the nuance of the values that people hold dear are lost. Yes, how people identify in the field is important, but separating them into essential categories of 'belief' or 'non-belief' might not translate across different

languages, contexts, or practices... Since we study relationships, it is possible that how we understand 'identity' as an analytical category depends most on how someone behaves toward their surroundings in the world. Ethnographic fieldwork forces you to confront this at a personal level where categories which you thought you understood take on new meaning, and probably no longer apply. So, we need to use different ways of communicating these realities, perhaps beyond the spoken or written word.

Yichi Zhang

It seems that some participants emphasise the idea that religion (or religiosity, though many would use a different term) is everywhere. Everything, when viewed through a religious lens, becomes a journey contained within a particular presence of the god, spirit, or deity (noting the distinctions in how these terms are used). Conversely, religion becomes increasingly interpreted as 'lifestyle' or 'a way of life'. In an era increasingly defined by categorisation, differentiation, and fragmentation, I wonder whether we are rediscovering a kind of lost universality in religion.

Conducting research in these settings amplifies the spiritual dimensions of human life, which in turn makes me question whether

it is even possible to speak of a purely secular or profane anthropology at all. What, then, are we doing when we undertake ethnographic fieldwork – are we studying human lives, or are we, in some sense, seeking out forms of religious immanence?

This discussion reflects on these questions without offering definite answers. There appears to be a certain 'risk' for anthropologists entering the field: the possibility of being transformed by religious practices of the 'other'. One might instead suggest that to do fieldwork is to move beyond the assumption that the field is secular, and to recognise that one's own spirituality also encounters difference, which brings both unique challenges and the potential for deeper insight.

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