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A Radical Buddhism for Modern Confucians: Tzu Chi in Socio-Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The new Taiwanese religious movement Tzu Chi raises interesting issues for the study of religions. First, as a Chinese form of Buddhism, it embodies an attempt to reconcile or even merge the cultures and mindsets of two utterly different civilizations, the Indian and the Chinese. Secondly, it casts doubt on the presupposition that a sect, as against a church, demands of its members exclusive allegiance. Thirdly, it shows that an emphasis on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy may be modern as well as archaic. Fourthly, it also suggests that the view that secularization is tantamount to a narrowing of the domain of religion cannot be taken for granted. In the case of Tzu Chi there is probably some overlap between the last three issues, in that they show that generalizations about sects formulated by western sociologists have taken Christian sects as their model and may not be universally applicable.

Keywords
Tzu Chi, Humanistic Buddhism, karma, orthopraxy, lay Buddhism, gender, authority, Confucianism, pragmatism

One of us (YSY) has recently published a book: *Taiwan's Tzu Chi as Engaged Buddhism: Origins, Organization, Appeal and Social Impact*.[1] This article is intended as a follow-up to that book. The book examines Tzu Chi from a sociological angle; this article intends now to look at it historically, dealing especially with the influences that have formed it and how to place it in a historical context. We shall also take the opportunity to mention a few developments since the book was written.[2]

1. Hereinafter *TTC*. Leiden and Boston: Global Oriental/Brill, 2012.
2. Since this is a moving target, we record that almost all of this article was written in December 2012.

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However, anyone looking for a fuller recent description of these should turn to Mark O'Neill, *Tzu Chi: Serving with Compassion*.

Tzu Chi is a new religious movement (NRM), a recognized category in the sociology of religion, and in our book we have examined it in that light. There is a substantial literature describing and analyzing NRMs, some of it of very high quality. In quantity, American and British work preponderates.[3] Therefore it is not surprising that in most cases the NRMs are described against a Christian background, taking mainstream Christian traditions and the Western culture associated with those traditions as the standard of comparison. Even the fine monograph on Soka Gakkai in Britain by Bryan Wilson and Karel Dobbelaere, which influenced our research and presentation considerably, paid little attention to the fact that it was all about a Buddhist sect originating in Japanese culture. This is no criticism of that admirable book. It seems to us, however, that it may enrich the picture if we come from another angle by comparing this Taiwanese Buddhist NRM with Buddhist tradition and with the mainstream religious culture of China.

Before embarking on this venture, we must pay tribute to the discussion of Tzu Chi by Richard Madsen in his *Democracy's Dharma*. Madsen did his fieldwork a few years after us, but he was able to publish more quickly. Both works are sociological but we think they complement each other well, for Madsen's is more macro-sociological, ours micro-sociological. We think that this article will carry the complementarity further. Madsen shows how Tzu Chi and the other movements he discusses are 'based on Chinese religious traditions' (p.139) and even declines to label them NRMs (p.150); everything he says about earlier Buddhism applies only or mainly to Chinese Mahāyāna, which he occasionally equates to the entire Buddhist tradition.[4] We, by contrast, shall show how Tzu Chi in important respects harks back to the earliest Buddhism — something which Madsen discusses as a theoretical possibility but does not instantiate (pp.148–150).[5]

We are well aware that Buddhism is nearly two and a half millennia old and has in that time spread over a vast and culturally very diverse area. China too has an ancient culture of comparable antiquity. If we were to attempt to isolate some notable feature of Tzu Chi, e.g., its treatment of the dead, and run through the similarities and contrasts between that feature and all the varieties of practice and associated belief to be found in the whole history of Buddhism and that of China, our treatment of just that one feature would probably result in a whole indigestible volume, in which it would be hard to see the wood for the trees, and the attempted characterisation of Tzu Chi would probably get lost. With an

3. This is not to deny that the founding fathers are, in our view of the subject, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

4. For instance, when he refers to 'an affirmation of the fundamental interconnectedness of all things' (p.150).

5. Despite the preferences of sinologists with other specialisms, we also choose to follow Madsen's sensible policy in transliterating Chinese: 'Standard academic conventions would have led me to reproduce all Chinese names in pinyin. However, a desire to make this book as useful as possible to a wide range of non-Chinese speaking audiences has led me to depart from [those] conventions. I have thus rendered all proper names in the form in which they are commonly romanized in Taiwan ... For example, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Association is written as *Tzu Chi*, because this is how it is spelled in Taiwan and in English language literature put out by Tzu Chi itself [and on their website]. ... [I]f one searches the Internet for [the pinyin] equivalent *Ci Ji*, almost nothing appears' (pp. xi–xii).

initial attempt such as ours, it is safer to err in the other direction: despite the major risk of — need for? –over-simplification, we shall choose to look through one window into the vast mansion of the Buddhist tradition, and to treat Chinese culture similarly. At least this procedure will give us a chance of presenting a few rather clear conclusions.

In the case of Buddhism, we shall focus on the earliest Buddhism, that of the Buddha himself and his immediate disciples. We are aware, inevitably, that there is a widespread dogma in American academia that nothing can be known of this Buddhism, but we have answered this criticism[6] and shall stick to our guns. In tracing the influences which have caused Tzu Chi to consider itself a Buddhist movement, we shall not entirely confine ourselves to the earliest Buddhism, but that will be our point of departure for the comparison. In the case of Chinese culture, we shall focus our comparison on the Confucian tradition as it is still lived in Taiwan, the birthplace of Tzu Chi.

INTRODUCING TZU CHI

Tzu Chi was founded in a small town in eastern Taiwan in 1966 by a lady who has become known by the title and name Master Cheng Yen (b.1937). She still heads the movement. It is a lay movement. It is reasonably estimated now to have ten million members; about two thirds of them are women.[7] It has many branches overseas,[8] including one, officially permitted by the Chinese government, in P.R. China. The movement began as a medical charity, and this has remained its most salient feature. In 1991 it began to undertake disaster relief, both in Taiwan and overseas; since about 2000 it has also invested great effort in recycling and other environmental issues. It has its own hospitals (now six) and university.

At the end of our book, we wrote:

> The absence or at least unimportance of many traditional Buddhist teachings and practices has made the Tzu Chi movement one of the most secular religions in the Chinese Buddhist world, perhaps indeed in the Buddhist world anywhere. By 'secular' I here mean that its aims concern this world rather than the next, and furthermore that the means it prescribes for attaining those ends are of the kind generally accepted as rational. (*TTC* p.229)

At first glance, some observers tend to doubt whether Tzu Chi is really a religious movement at all. But they are mistaken.[9] The founder and Master has no doubt at all that the movement is Buddhist and the very name she gave it has a Buddhist resonance;[10] there is also a fascinating ambiguity, at least among her

6. See Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (hereinafter *WBT*). The whole book, as well as other publications cited therein, will serve to refute this facile ultra-scepticism; but for a summary see especially Chapter 13.
7. Initially this proportion was far higher. Male membership, notably in the upper echelons, began to grow dramatically in the 1990s, when many husbands of female Commissioners joined their wives in the movement (Madsen: 37).
8. Currently it is claimed by a senior Commissioner to exist in 74 countries.
9. Only legally are they correct. Tzu Chi 'is incorporated under Taiwan's law as a charitable foundation, on a par with secular foundations' (Madsen: 39).
10. The full name of the movement in pinyin, with English translation, is *Ciji gongder hui*, 'The Buddhist Compassion Merit Society'.

followers, about her relationship to Guan Yin, the bodhisattva who personifies compassion throughout the Chinese Buddhist tradition: is the Master some kind of embodiment of Guan Yin, or is Guan Yin merely her model and inspiration? Acquaintance with the Master's published writings also reveals her concepts and feelings to be shot through with Buddhist teachings. No one in the movement who considers the matter has any doubt that Tzu Chi is part of the broader movement in modern Chinese Buddhism known as 'Humanistic Buddhism' (*ren jian fo jiao*) (see below).

SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF MEMBERSHIP

Let us now begin our historical comparison by looking at the composition of Tzu Chi: who joins it? While there are important respects in which Tzu Chi seems startlingly different from the earliest Buddhist community, it is at this initial point that the similarity is especially striking. Scholars associate the rise of the Buddhist movement with a specific social change in ancient India: the beginnings of urbanization,[11] the development of long distance trade, and a sharp rise in surplus income associated with the creation of what one might call a middle class, consisting mainly of businessmen but also of state officials serving the relatively stable kingdoms which were coming into being. All this was associated with monetization. Before this, cultural hegemony lay with a hereditary priestly class, the brahmins; this hegemony, along with its hereditary principle (embedded in the caste ideology which the brahmins propounded) was challenged by the new urban class and by rich peasant proprietors with whom they were often connected.[12]

We have shown that a very high proportion of Tzu Chi's members are people who have moved from the countryside to the towns, especially to the city of Taipei.[13] Moreover, very many of these are in business, while many of the others hold white collar jobs connected with modern bureaucracy (*TTC* p.116 table 5.4).

To put it in a nutshell, both the Buddha and Master Chen Yeng have offered a new kind of order and stability to those who have experienced great social change. Traditional social hierarchy and its associated rituals mean little to such people. They have been offered an individualism based on free will and personal responsibility, but not one (like modern existentialism) which has no room at all for any kind of cosmos, any stable and predictable principles by which one can orient oneself. Both teachings prescribe a way of life based on ethics, which is far more important to adherents than any metaphysical theory. Indeed, the central ordering principle is itself ethical: karma, the law of moral causation. Of this, more below.

When we write 'both teachings' we do so only because we have taken comparison as our starting point. They are in this respect the same. Master Cheng

11. Like others, we leave out of account the civilization of the Indus Valley, including the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. That was in a quite different part of India and went into steep decline round the middle of the previous millennium, i.e., fully a thousand years before the Buddha.

12. For our view of the sociology of early Buddhism, see Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism* (hereinafter *ThB*) pp. 73–83 = sections 'Buddhism as Religious Individualism' and 'An Ethic for the Socially Mobile'.

13. *TTC* p.110 table 5.2. On professional women, see Madsen p.37.

Yen derives her central message of individual responsibility and the paramount importance of ethics from the Buddha. This only appears surprising when one reflects how few other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the intervening centuries have so perfectly preserved these two principles, the primacy of ethics and individual responsibility, as the foundation of their teaching.

LINGUISTIC CHARACTER OF THE MOVEMENT

Thus Tzu Chi seems to us to appeal particularly to those who are joining the middle class and leaving a very different, agrarian world behind them; and in these terms the resemblance to the earliest Buddhism is striking. This resemblance is reinforced by the linguistic orientation of the movement. The Buddha rejected the use of Sanskrit, the hieratic language of the brahmins. He used, and told his followers to use, the vernacular, their true mother tongue. In his case, this was a form of Middle Indo-Aryan, also called Prakrit. (The Pali language in which the earliest full set of scriptures (the Pali Canon) is preserved is a form of Prakrit. Though Theravāda Buddhists believe it to be the language which the Buddha spoke, that is not quite accurate.)

Analogously, the language of Tzu Chi is a form of Chinese known as Hokkien.[14] All the other forms of Buddhism established in Taiwan use Mandarin, a form of Chinese which is based on the dialect of Beijing but formalized into the Chinese *lingua franca*. The written language of all Chinese speakers is Mandarin. The great majority of the people of Taiwan, on the other hand, have Hokkien as their mother tongue. Hokkien and Mandarin are not mutually intelligible. Mandarin is the language of government, education, and most forms of public communication. Tzu Chi has created liturgy in Hokkien and that is its spoken language, though Cheng Yen's published work is inevitably in Mandarin. Inevitably, because only very recently have attempts been made to create a written Hokkien and it is not yet standardised. Thus Hokkien is the analogue to Prakrit in the Indian society where Buddhism was born, while Mandarin is the analogue to Sanskrit, and the analogy between the relationships could hardly be closer.

If for a moment we broaden our focus, what has just been described is characteristic of Protestant movements across religions. Members carry individual responsibility for their behaviour, which is prescribed primarily in ethical, not in ritual terms. They therefore do not want any kind of linguistic barrier which marks off their religious practice from the rest of their daily lives, and it is essential that they fully understand the meaning of what their leaders and other fellow-religionists are communicating to them. Moreover, they evangelise in their mother tongue, just as their leaders do, and speak the language of their target audience. They are normally well enough educated to use their mother tongue competently, but tend to be less at ease in the language of those dominant in their society.[15]

BEING A LAY BUDDHIST

Let us now look at the system of statuses within the movement. Tzu Chi is a lay movement. The broad picture (we postpone certain complications at the top of

14. Some refer to this as the Southern Min dialect (DeVido 2010, 36–37).

15. This is particularly true of the movement's older generation, that of the founder.

the movement) is that there are several different statuses for the laity,[16] and one may get promoted through the ranks, but all ranks remain laity and almost all live at home with their families. The vows they take are unlike those taken by monastics in Buddhism (or, come to that, in Christianity); they are all compatible with normal lay life.

At first glance, this is in striking contrast to the Buddha's following. Though that can be classified in various ways, the most important is that it consisted of those ordained to the monastic life and those not ordained, the laity. (Each category was further divided into male and female members.) The monastics and the laity could be described as two interdependent but very unequal moieties: the laity provided the monastics with their material necessities, and in return the monastics provided the laity with the Buddha's teachings, a far greater benefaction. While a lay person might attain any spiritual status, including even the highest (*arhant*), it was envisaged that normally only the monastics reached that goal. Monastics were renunciates who did not participate in economic or family life, but were organized into their own community (Saṅgha means 'community') and bound by its rules. The Saṅgha was a total institution[17] and Saṅgha members could be described as full-time Buddhists, a degree of commitment very different from that expected of a lay person. As a corollary of this, ordination into the Saṅgha promised an exclusive allegiance, while participating in Buddhism as a layman did not. According to doctrine, anyone who had shown reverence to the Three Jewels — the Buddha, his teaching and the Community — by taking 'refuge' in them (declaring one's reliance on them) was considered a Buddhist layman; but in practice the category must have been more fluid, depending on choice and context.[18]

That in the eyes of society laypeople were not expected to show exclusive allegiance to one tradition was a general feature of ancient India: 'it was the duty of the householder to feed anyone who came to his door, just as it was the duty of a king to protect all holy men in his realm' (*ThB* p.77). In this respect too Tzu Chi follows the ancient model. Considering that the decision to join the movement is by no means casual and involves a conspicuous commitment, it came as a surprise in our research to discover that 'over half of [the members] surveyed were still practising more than one religion' (*TTC* p.125).

If we turn to how Tzu Chi compares in these areas with traditional Chinese culture, we must begin by saying that among the Chinese multiple allegiance to various religious traditions has always been the norm. In fact, 'allegiance' is probably not the right word: one is expected to practise whatever one finds effective for oneself and socially acceptable. For most people under most circumstances, whether one calls a belief or practice Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist or animistic has not been an issue. The one great exception to this has been the Buddhist Saṅgha, both male and female, which has remained a visibly distinct institution with its own dress, life style and world view. In other words, the distinctiveness of the Saṅgha has been preserved in the mainstream of Chinese Buddhist tradi-

16. See *TTC* pp. 139 ff. The movement stresses that they do not consider the ranks to constitute a hierarchy; they are said to be functional.

17. A total institution is one which decisively influences every aspect of the lives of its members. A national army is an example.

18. See *ThB* pp. 76–78 for a detailed analysis.

tion, along with the salience of the clerical/lay divide. (This is not to claim that individual Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns have all kept well away from other religious influences.)

Against this background, we see that Tzu Chi is a 'lay movement' in a very distinctive sense only intelligible in its historical context. Our research found that 'the more the members were involved with Tzu Chi the more religiously exclusivist they would become'.[19] Thus in this important respect (as indeed in others[20]) Tzu Chi turns its laity into a kind of Saṅgha.

One must recall that throughout its history in China, Buddhism has had to contend with Confucianism, because in the latter a person's overriding duty is to serve their biological family, and the Buddhist Saṅgha flouts this ethos. Thus those who decide to join Tzu Chi but remain with their families can feel easy in their consciences that at least they have remained true to this principle. The more they decide to live by Buddhist values, the more they may well be attracted to ordination; but Tzu Chi allows them, by following family life, to have this cake and eat it. This may well be one reason why the Master has often been known to discourage members from taking ordination.

Despite Tzu Chi's being a lay movement, why then are there complications at the head of the movement? Does Tzu Chi really bypass Buddhist tradition and abolish the clerical/lay distinction?

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT LAY LEADERSHIP AND GENDER ROLES

At this point we turn to the apparent anomalies at the top of the Tzu Chi hierarchy.[21] Master Cheng Yen was herself ordained as a Buddhist nun by a leading Chinese monk, the Ven. Yin Shun, in 1963, early in her career and before she lived in any religious community. The ordination was totally irregular, in that ever since the early career of the Buddha himself ordination as a monk or nun has had to be carried out as a communal ritual. In a similarly unorthodox fashion, the Master has herself ordained about 150 women as nuns, who live with her at the movement's headquarters, The Abode in Hualien. She ordains only females (*TTC* p.179). The Master and all the other nuns observe all the rules incumbent on Buddhist nuns elsewhere; but their lack of a traditional ordination disqualifies them from having that status in the eyes of other Buddhists. This does not, however, appear to disturb anyone in Tzu Chi. Innovating yet further, the Master has recently created a special status, available to both men and women, called *qin xiou shi*, 'pure unmaterialistic people'. They take vows like monastics and observe almost all the traditional rules, but do not shave their heads or avoid handling money. Those accepted in this role are highly educated and expected to take a leading part in the movement as a whole. This illustrates how Tzu Chi combines features inherited from ancient Buddhism with radical innovations.

19. *TTC* p. 152. This applies to Taiwanese Buddhists. On the other hand, since we did our fieldwork, Tzu Chi when working overseas has admitted to membership Muslims and Christians, who also retain that identity. See O'Neill 2010, 103–104, and p. 245 below.

20. Madsen here draws a contrast even with mainstream Christianity: 'Tzu Chi ... made the laypeople prime movers in charitable work' (p. 31).

21. Every account of Tzu Chi we have seen refers to it as a hierarchy, for its system of ranks is obvious, whereas members assert that it is egalitarian. Our account of its ideology will explain this discrepancy: spiritually, all are regarded as equal, i.e., of equal ethical potential.

We suggest that there is an ambivalence here, and it is connected to questions about the position of women. The Buddha clearly regarded women as intrinsically equal to men, notably in their capacity for spiritual progress, including the attainment of Enlightenment. But he made different dispositions when he had to decide on the interaction of women with men. Women could not take leadership roles: a Buddha is never female, and every nun had to defer to every monk, regardless of age or spiritual standing.

Most Chinese, unlike the Buddha, have held women in general to be spiritually inferior to men. In China, that a woman could not be a leader was obvious in every walk of life.[22] There were still nuns, but it was virtually impossible for a nun to attain eminence or be held up as a model.

Thus for Cheng Yen, a woman, to found and lead a religious movement has been an extraordinary feat. To present herself unambiguously as a lay Buddhist would have made her position even more precarious. She therefore created a position in which she could say, as it were, 'I may be a woman, but at least I am ordained!' Once she was there as a nun, it was not possible wholly to deny ordination to other women; but at least she has tried to limit the number of nuns and de-emphasise the importance of taking that role.

In the same way, Cheng Yen seems to have been remarkably skilful in promulgating a view of women's role which harmonizes with that of the Buddha but will not give offence to those born into a Confucian tradition. She teaches 'that men are wise and strong, just like the columns of a hall ... [They are] more energetic and more powerful than women, whereas women are soft and gentle like water'. Duties within the movement are assigned accordingly. Women are 'to respect their husbands and to give priority to fulfilling their domestic duties before searching for their own salvation'. At the same time, there is no suggestion that women are inferior: 'she claims that women have the same potential as men, and she urges women to focus on the bigger projects of life (*zuo dashi*)'.[23] She is not trying to impose rigid roles on men and women, but to improve relationships between the sexes, especially in marriage; and our interview material strongly suggests that in this she has often succeeded.

Our book fully illustrates the vital role that women have played and still play in the movement, even though in recent years more roles have been found for men. However, this has happened without creating any hint of a feminist ideology.

CONTACT WITH OTHER RELIGIONS

The very idea of founding a lay Buddhist movement may well have come to Cheng Yen from Japan.[24] In Japan ever since the thirteenth century there have been lay Buddhist movements, and today they are prospering. The largest and best known of them is Soka Gakkai.

One can certainly say in general that Japan has had a strong influence on Taiwanese Buddhism, since Taiwan was a Japanese colony from 1895 to 1945.

22. Some may argue that there are now many nuns in charge of Buddhist temples in Taiwan, but we believe that this has come about mainly through a shortage of monks.

23. *TTC* p. 85, which see for more detail.

24. Madsen pp. 139–140 has brief but useful remarks about this. We are aware that there have been lay Buddhist movements in China too.

The Master has never visited Japan and we are not in a position to give a precise and definite account of her contact with Japanese Buddhism, but she has taken at least one correspondence course in it, and maintains contacts even today. Possibly even more important, she first left home, and lived for several years, with a nun, Ven. Hsiu Tao, who had been trained in Japan (*TTC* pp. 62–64).

As detailed below, the Master has created a wholly novel way of dealing with death and funerals. The rituals are entirely carried out by lay members, with no role for a priest or any kind of functional equivalent. This recalls that in the Soka Gakkai too, death is dealt with only by laity — which is no less innovative in Japanese than in Chinese culture. Moreover, it shows how calling Tzu Chi a lay movement is not merely a matter of formal roles and statuses but goes to the heart of its ethos. The exclusion of any kind of clerical status is what we venture to call a cross-cultural characteristic of Protestantism, which upholds the priesthood of all believers, and is thus at the same time a big step towards secularization.

Moreover, it would be cavalier not to note that even if Japan may be more of a model for the Master than Christianity, the presence of Protestant missionaries in Taiwan means that the role of the laity in Protestant Christianity cannot have escaped her notice.

WHITHER EXCLUSIVITY?

The rapid extension of Tzu Chi overseas in recent years has reached a point where exclusivity becomes a fascinating issue. In 2011 Mr Rey-Sheng Her, a senior Commissioner[25] in the movement, wrote: 'Although a Buddhist movement, Tzu Chi is inclusive with thousands of non-Buddhist volunteers including Christians in South Africa and Muslims in Indonesia'. He continued: 'Conversion or proselytism is not a concern of Tzu Chi. By practicing altruism it is hoped that Christians will become better Christians and Muslims better Muslims'.[26] Though that is surely not the writer's intention, this does suggest a further move towards secularization.

Perhaps further research will reveal how the Christians and Muslims in question see this situation.[27] What does seem clear, however, is that at least some of Tzu Chi's leadership is prepared to go very far indeed in disregarding doctrinal orthodoxy as a criterion of membership in the movement.[28] If 'Tzu Chi seeks to provide a way for people of all faiths to become closer [to] their "god" and join together in protecting the environment',[29] does it make sense to look for a doctrinal core to Tzu Chi in any normal sense of the term?

25. *TTC* pp. 132ff.
26. These quotations are from a private document, a proposal for a book he intended to write with Professor Peter Clarke. (Prof. Clarke's death put an end to the project.)
27. 'Some Jesuit priests in Taiwan told me that they thought that a Catholic could be a full member of Tzu Chi without in any way compromising his or her faith'(Madsen p. 32).
28. Madsen notes that members of the board which controls Tzu Chi's operating expenses 'are not necessarily committed devotees of Buddhism' (p. 38).
29. Same source as previous footnote.

THE POSITION OF DOCTRINE

The answer to the last question must be 'Yes', given that the three volumes of the Master's *Still Thoughts* continue to be reprinted, translated, and accorded such prominence. Nevertheless, the role of doctrinal belief in the movement and the relative importance of orthodoxy and orthopraxy are a crucial topic for our comparative inquiry into the movement's character.

The Buddha often summed up his teaching as being about moral conduct (*śīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and insight (*prajñā*), sometimes adding release (*vimukti*), the goal, to make a set of four.[30] He regarded himself as revealing the path to release from rebirth within *saṃsāra*, the otherwise everlasting cycle of life, death and rebirth, which one could translate as 'keeping going'. This is a path which each individual must tread for themselves. Just how this compares with what the Master Cheng Yen teaches we shall return to below. However, it would be easy, once one begins to examine such details, to overlook two massive similarities between her teaching and the Buddha's. The first is the relation of teacher to followers, the second the emphasis on action.

DOCTRINAL AUTHORITY

For concision, let us refer to two short passages in the Pali Canon. First: Once a group of villagers called the Kālāmas told the Buddha that various teachers would visit them and preach their doctrines, but they were confused about which to follow. The Buddha answered that on such matters everyone has to make up their own mind. One should not take any teaching on trust, but test it on the touchstone of one's own experience to see whether it led to harmful behaviour.[31] Second: When the Buddha had become very weak in old age, he recovered from a bout of illness. His attendant Ānanda, expressing his relief, said that he took comfort from the thought that surely the Buddha would not die without making some pronouncement about the Saṅgha. The Buddha replied:

> What does the Saṅgha expect of me? I have taught without making any distinction between insiders and outsiders, not with a teacher's closed fist. If anyone now thinks that he will take charge of the Saṅgha or that the Saṅgha is specifically concerned with him, he should make some pronouncement about the Saṅgha. I have no such thought, so why should I make any pronouncement? I am eighty years old and have run my course ... So each of you should live relying on himself and nothing else, relying on the Teaching and nothing else.[32]

Though we cannot point to quotations from Master Cheng Yen which match these precisely, they do accord with the evidence for her general attitude. So far,

30. E.g. *Dīgha Nikāya* II 81.

31. *Aṅguttara Nikāya* I 188–193.

32. *Dīgha Nikāya* II 99–100. Our translation of the last sentence omits the metaphor. The original more literally reads: 'having oneself/Teaching as an island, having oneself/Teaching as a refuge'. The Pali word for 'island', *dīpa*, is a homonym of the word for 'lamp', and this has led some modern interpreters so to translate it. They no doubt have in mind such expressions as 'by his own lights'. The commentary, however, takes it as 'island', which shows that, rightly or wrongly, they interpret the reference to be to the common Indian comparison of life in this world to a flood which one tries to cross but which can carry one away.

she has not made any arrangements for her succession, whether by an individual or by some governing council, and we are told that when asked she says, very much as the Buddha did, that her followers are individuals with minds of their own and should therefore be guided by their consciences. Here again we encounter an ideology advocating the priesthood of all believers.

The contrast with what has actually happened in Buddhist history is striking. Presumably because the Buddha so clearly refused to appoint a successor, there has never been any attempt to claim that some individual is the head of the Saṅgha worldwide. Indeed, one can safely predict that that will remain unthinkable. On the other hand, the Saṅgha has over time split into innumerable branches. Originally splits were always over divergences in *Vinaya*, monastic practice; but these were not always produced by disagreements, but could arise simply from geographical separation. Politics too came to intervene: local rulers created hierarchies so that they had an individual and/or small council whom they could interact with and hold responsible. Therefore there are heads of local Saṅghas all over the Buddhist world, and institutional arrangements for appointing their successors. This has always been true of Chinese Buddhist monasteries, and the Chinese government has been much concerned that Buddhist and other religious institutions should have official leaders through whom the government can wield its authority.

What about the general responsibility of individuals to decide matters for themselves and take nothing on trust? This is a subtle matter, not one of black and white: there is no clear dividing line between having authority and being authoritarian. On the Buddha's advice to the Kālāmas, quoted above, we have written:

> [A] careful reading will show that the Buddha is confident, to say the least, that following his advice will lead his audience to accept his teaching. His appeal is that of the new man who finds himself at variance with accepted authority; it contains no implication that his own understanding of the truth might be either defective or valid only subjectively. To use the formulation of Steven Collins:[33] the Buddha is saying not 'Make your own truth' but 'Make the truth your own'. (*ThB* p.72)

With very few exceptions,[34] people join a religious group because they trust in some authority and want to be guided by it, however it may be embodied. The use of authority by religious leaders is often far more a matter of demand from below than authoritarian inclinations from above. The entire public stance of Tzu Chi harmonizes well with the Buddha's advice to the Kālāmas; and yet the outside observer notices that the Master does indeed exercise considerable authority. It is not necessary to go into any detail to make our point; but she has to be consulted on all important decisions, and goes on regular tours round Taiwan to inspect the branches and visit local groups of members. To judge how she wields authority one should not compare her with, say, a modern Christian denomination, but with the traditions of Chinese society. That society in today's Taiwan is still permeated by Confucianism, an extremely authoritarian ideology which demands that every person act according to their place in the family, in which the

33. Personal communication.

34. Some extreme and comparatively small Protestant sects such as the Exclusive Brethren come to mind.

senior males rule the roost, and in the wider society, to which the family analogy is applied. Conformism and obedience to authority are widely demanded. That members of Tzu Chi are supposed, at least when on duty, to dress in the same uniform and have the same haircut strikes Westerners as almost militaristic, but has no such resonances for Confucians.

Let us take as an example what Tzu Chi calls, in English, the 'ten commandments'. In Buddhism, from the very outset, laymen have had to undertake to follow a short set of rules, of which five always apply: not to kill, steal, misbehave sexually, lie, or take befuddling intoxicants.[35] In English-language Buddhism these are generally known as the 'five precepts'; but some Buddhists argue that they should rather be called 'undertakings', because one only has to follow them when one explicitly promises to do so. Though ultimately it is true that for Buddhism moral quality lies in intention, to insist on this distinction is somewhat unrealistic, for it is unlikely to be present in the thoughts of the practising Buddhist. Surely most people want to undertake and follow these rules because they have the authority of the Buddha and appear as an obvious instance of his good sense.

By the same token, the fact that the Master has laid down ten rules for her followers (the first five of them being the pan-Buddhist ones cited above) shows that she has great authority, but not that she is authoritarian. Her whole leadership style is parental (*TTC* p. 195). Authoritarianism might, on the other hand, be indicated by expulsion from the movement or other imposed penalties. On this matter it is difficult to get data; but the indications are that expulsion is rare. In any case, even though we would like to have more information, it seems safe to say that by the general standard of Chinese organizations Tzu Chi, while promoting uniformity of behaviour, does so without a rigid authoritarian ethos.

ORTHOPRAXY

We turn to Tzu Chi's emphasis on action rather than ideology. It is easy for a Westerner to forget that the primacy of correct belief as a criterion of religious membership is a peculiarity of Christianity and Islam; even in Judaism it is hardly the case, even if the Old Testament may convey to Christians a different impression. Despite the quantity and high quality of Indian theology, in Indian religions too there is more emphasis on orthopraxy than on orthodoxy. Since people in other parts of the modern world are likely to come across Buddhism as a set of ideas and attitudes, they may be sceptical about applying this principle to Buddhism, so let us justify our assertion.

As mentioned above, in traditional Buddhism all who take their Buddhism seriously are expected sooner or later to join the Saṅgha, becoming monks or nuns. They vow to abide by a code called the *prātimokṣa*, which contains a great many rules; but all of these rules concern behaviour. Moreover, if the Saṅgha splits, it can only be over a difference in behaviour, even if it is a matter which may appear to an outsider as trivial, such as whether to shave the eyebrows or exactly how to wear the outer robe.[36]

35. The five new ones include obeying traffic regulations, which in its concern for social order has a particularly Confucian ring. See *TTC* p. 92.

36. This is explained in more detail in *ThB* pp. 111–115. See also Bechert 1996, 215.

A monk's opinions, even over such a matter as whether he follows the Mahāyāna or a more conservative soteriology, are irrelevant to his standing in the Saṅgha. There is just one case which appears to breach the principle that there is no such thing as heresy; but on closer examination, it does not. The offense[37] is for a monk to put forward (not just think, but propound) a particular view: that what the Buddha taught to be obstructions to spiritual progress are in fact not so. The other monks are to ask him three times not to calumniate the Buddha, and the offense occurs if he persists after three such admonitions. (The accompanying tradition tells us that the argument is about whether sexual activity is an impediment to the monastic life — obviously a basic point of discipline.) So this is no exception to the principle that a monk has done no wrong unless he thinks so, and confesses to it, himself.

Mention of this principle takes us to a fundamental feature of the Buddha's teaching: his interpretation of karma. We have tried to show in *What the Buddha Thought* how central this is to his message. The word itself means 'act', 'deed'; in brahminism it referred primarily to ritual action, and both in brahminism and in Jainism it was the quality of one's karma which determined the quality both of one's present life and of one's rebirth. This alone demonstrates the point we are trying to make: that orthopraxy is the central principle in Indian religion. The Buddha, however, made this rather more complicated, for he taught that the moral quality of an act lies first and foremost in the intention behind it. So we might say that for him what counted was not doing the correct thing, pure and simple, but intending to do the correct thing.

PRAGMATISM

What is most relevant to the theme of this article is that:

> the Buddha emphasized that his goal as a teacher was entirely pragmatic. His followers came to know him as the great physician; the *Dhamma* was the medicine he prescribed, the *Saṅgha* were the nurses whose calling it was to administer that medicine.[38]

He also 'described himself as the military surgeon who removes the arrow of craving'.[39]

His teaching was a prescription for action. As Paul Williams has written:

> [W]henever you come across something new, or perhaps even strange, in the study of Buddhism, ask yourself ... 'How might a Buddhist holding or practising that consider that doing so leads to the diminution or eradication of negative mental states, and the increasing or fulfilment of positive mental states?'[40]

While the Buddha certainly had views on soteriology, cosmology, and various other matters well beyond the scope of daily life, it is a recurrent theme of *What the Buddha Thought* that he frequently reinterpreted brahminical metaphysics

37. Pācittiya 68.

38. *WBT*, p.161. Here and for the next few lines we borrow heavily from Chapter 11 of that book.

39. *Majjhima Nikāya* II 260.

40. 2000, 245 (note 1 to Chapter 1).

in a practical ethical sense; of this Chapter 6 in that book provides an extended example.

When we compare this to the teaching of Master Cheng Yen, we find striking similarities and no less striking differences. The Master puts all her emphasis on action, and in particular on altruism. 'Cheng Yen's ideal is a simple, practice-oriented version of the Buddhist vision, without the baggage of its complicated, traditional metaphysics' (Madsen 2007, 24–25). This resonates well with early Buddhism, particularly as preserved in the Theravāda tradition according to which even meditation, let alone metaphysics, played little or no part in the Buddhism of most of the laity.[41] 'For Cheng Yen', Madsen writes, 'the practice of Buddhist compassion is achieved not through self-absorbed meditation, but rather through the outward-looking work of helping others in need'. He goes on: 'Just as one progresses towards achieving enlightenment in Buddhist meditation by steadily pushing beyond one's limits' — so one acts generously first towards family, then to neighbours, then to one's countrymen, finally even to enemies (Madsen 2007, 27). Madsen does not say so, but this recalls precisely how the great commentator Buddhaghosa in the *Visuddhimagga* chapter 9 (fifth century CE) prescribes how to practise the meditation on kindness (*mettā*).

IS THERE COVERT CRITICISM HERE?

What Cheng Yen requires is not altruism as mere sentiment or emotional indulgence, but altruism in practice. When she insists that 'altruism takes effect only when put into action',[42] she would appear to be taking issue with the Buddha's emphasis on the paramount importance of intention; could there be here some echo of Christian criticism of Buddhism? Buddhists all agree that the Buddha's two paramount qualities are love and wisdom;[43] but the Mahāyāna tradition has been dissatisfied with the display of love available in the early texts. We have argued in the *WBT* chapter 6, referred to above, that this to some extent rests on an unfortunate misunderstanding within the Buddhist tradition itself. Even so, it is a fact that mainstream Buddhism has always argued that the Buddha showed his love first and foremost by teaching, thus showing suffering beings the way to escape the cycle of rebirth by attaining nirvana. If one compares him to Jesus, for example, one can point to hardly any stories about his relieving immediate suffering by coming to rescue some ordinary person from a terrible situation. There are more such stories in the Mahāyāna literature, but they tend to be more spectacular than realistic.

Tzu Chi began as a medical charity, starting with the case of a poor woman who could not get hospital treatment because she could not pay the bill, and that down-to-earth hands-on spirit remains characteristic. Since that beginning, another major activity of the movement — and one which must largely account for its amazing growth outside Taiwan — has been disaster relief. If one looks for antecedents in Buddhist history, this reminds one not of early Buddhism but rather of the miracles ascribed to Avalokiteśvara in the *Lotus Sūtra*, even

41. See also next section below.

42. *TTC* p. 82. The context makes it clear that the 'effect' here includes the effect on oneself of doing good — the creation of good karma.

43. This applies to all Buddhas, not just to the one we regard as historical.

though there too the examples given are spectacular and miraculous. When Avalokiteśvara moved from India to China, he became the female bodhisattva Guan Yin, and Cheng Yen's close association (sometimes even identification) with Guan Yin is thus extremely appropriate.

RELIGION FOR THIS LIFE

Early in this article we mentioned that the aims of Tzu Chi mostly concern this world rather than the next, and this is why casual observers tend to question whether the movement is religious. To make a fair assessment of its place in the historical development of Buddhism, one must not lose sight of this point.

When the Buddha taught how to abolish greed, hatred and delusion, so as to attain the final liberating insight, he followed morality (in a progression which is partly hierarchical) with meditation. Master Cheng Yen has preserved the important doctrinal formulation that those are the three human evils (*TTC* p. 91); however, meditation plays astonishingly little part in Tzu Chi. This presents a vivid contrast with many other developments in contemporary Buddhism worldwide. In Buddhist tradition, meditation was almost entirely confined to monastics; under pre-modern conditions few of the laity would have had a life style which gave them much opportunity for the necessary solitude and tranquillity. Now, however, the economically more advanced countries of the world have a huge middle class with enough education and good enough living conditions to make part-time meditative practice an option.

One could argue that the emphasis on ethical action, at the cost of an interest in meditation, puts Tzu Chi in a part of the Mahayanist tradition which would regard the quest for enlightenment through meditation as a more selfish use of time than active work (often physical work) to help the needy. But the interplay of converging influences is probably more complex. In Japanese Buddhism too, especially in its modern movements, there is a strong emphasis on action in this life to benefit society, and not much meditation — at least, as traditionally understood elsewhere — by members of the laity. Moreover, the resemblance with Christianity — both the value attached to charity and the lack of encouragement to the laity to meditate — is obvious. This has probably been mediated to Tzu Chi through the 'humanistic Buddhism' (*ren sheng fo jiao*, literally 'Buddhism of human life') founded in China by Tai Xu, nearly a century ago,[44] which drew inspiration from the Christian missions in China during that period.

Though little concerned with meditation in the traditional Buddhist sense, there is another aspect of mental cultivation on which Cheng Yen lays great emphasis, and in doing so she again seems to echo the Buddha himself. The Buddha attached great importance to a quality which in Pali is called *appamāda*; this literally means 'non-carelessness' and can be translated 'conscientiousness', 'attention' or 'diligence'. The Buddha stated that this quality can gain the ends of both this world and the next. As we have written elsewhere, in psychological terms it is that *awareness* which was the most distinctive contribution of Buddhism to India's (or the world's) soteriological practice. In life in general it

44. This was later developed in Taiwan by Master Yin Shun and others into *ren jian fo jiao*, 'Buddhism of/for humanity'.

is what we have come to call 'mindfulness'; in economic life it is manifested as thrift.[45]

Tzu Chi's general ethos is in harmony with these views, but most particularly in Cheng Yen's constant exhortation not to waste time. For example, the first section of volume 1 of *Still Thoughts* (1996) is entitled 'The Best Moment is Now'. This slant on diligence sounds very un-Indian and we cannot recall the Buddha making any remark specifically about wasting time. Chinese child-rearing, on the other hand, constantly harps on this theme. So in this area Cheng Yen is recalling early Buddhism, but doing so in a Confucian way.

It is not only meditation which Cheng Yen regards as a dubious use of time. Neither chanting nor a daily liturgy is required of Tzu Chi members. In fact, Cheng Yen has a pragmatic approach to all traditional religious practices. When Cheng Yen was asked about daily religious practice, she replied,

> The real function of morning prayer is to be watchful of one's behaviour at the beginning of the day, and night prayer is for self-examination at the end of the day. As long as one does these two things each day, one does not necessarily need to practise other forms of religious prayer. (*TTC* p.93)

Chinese Buddhism has always paid much attention to the recitation of religious texts, usually in classical languages understood by few of the participants; so indeed have most of the other Buddhist traditions. Here Cheng Yen is going much further than the other forms of Humanistic Buddhism; none of them have gone so far in downgrading liturgy. The self-examination which she substitutes has a remarkably Protestant flavour. It is also extremely similar to the daily self-examination prescribed for Theravāda monks and nuns.[46]

CENTRAL RELIGIOUS DOCTRINES

It is time to turn to the topics that accounts of a religion usually start with, such matters as: Where does power lie in the world? What can we aim or hope for after death? What is it all about? For some of these questions it is enough in a brief essay to mention that the movement is Buddhist; it therefore assumes that there is no omnipotent creator God; that we as conscious beings have many lives; that we can make important choices between virtue and vice; that goodness somehow brings rewards; that supreme goodness is attainable, though rarely attained, and can lead to an end of the cycle of rebirth.

In theory, and to a great extent in practice, the ideology of Tzu Chi all comes from the Master. However, she has not produced any systematic work of doctrine.

> [H]er ideas and opinions are scattered among her speeches and writings like Hadith (Arabic: 'tradition') in Islam. Most of them are presented in the form of recorded sayings in a dialectical format of question and answer, and employ very simple language. (*TTC* p.80)

Her most important writings are the books of *Still Thoughts*.

45. *WBT* p. 170. The second chapter of the *Dhammapada*, verses 21–32, is devoted to this topic.

46. The Pali term for this is *paccavekkhaṇā*. We do not know whether it has an equivalent in other monastic traditions.

KARMA AND DEATH

We believe that the best point of departure for explaining the Buddha's doctrine is karma;[47] and that the same is true of Cheng Yen. We have explained above what the term originally meant and how the Buddha changed its basic meaning from action to 'intention'; we have also shown that Cheng Yen disagrees, and finds the essence of karma to lie in its effect on the world we live in, and particularly on other people. For both the Buddha and Cheng Yen, however, the ultimate power in the world is karma, the karma of countless sentient agents.

There is another major issue which affects the entire character of the concept and the resultant ethos. The Buddha is uncompromising in stating that each individual is totally and solely responsible for his/her own karma. My present karma, good or bad, will affect what happens to me in the future, in this and future lives; and what happens to me now is the result of my past karma. Lots of things are to be ascribed to more mundane causes, as dictated by common sense;[48] but it is karma which determines such major matters as whether I am born in comfortable circumstances, whether I win the lottery, whether I am caught in a tsunami, whether I am then one of the few who somehow survive.

There have been two clear-cut deviations from this doctrine, both of them with vast consequences for the history of Buddhism. The first is known in English as 'transfer of merit'. It apparently arose just around the time of the Buddha's death at the end of the fifth century BCE, when money was coming into widespread use. The merit (= good karma) which one has accumulated is treated like a bank balance, and one can give all or part of it to someone else. However, this is a unique type of gift, because the giver does not lose what they give away: they earn merit by being so generous. In other words, giving away merit benefits both the recipient and the giver.

There soon arose subtle theorizing about how there could arise such a flagrant breach of the principle that each sentient being is responsible for their own karma. The general line of argument was that since merit is a matter of intention, therefore mental, nothing was really 'transferred': what occurred was a kind of empathy. It worked like this. If I did something virtuous, such as give a monk a meal, the virtue lay primarily in my good intention. If I then told you about my virtuous deed, you could empathise with that good intention; by so doing you created for yourself karma which could be as good as the karma I had created — indeed, in theory it could be even better.

The situation which created a need for this theory and practice was typically the death of a parent. When a parent dies, the surviving children and/or spouse would like to do something for the departed to improve their chances of a good rebirth. Since a good rebirth depends on having good karma, the only thing that could now be done, it was reasoned, was to give the departed some extra merit. In the few days immediately after death the departed, in some non-corporeal form, was believed to be still nearby. So the thing to do was to conduct a ritual to which the departed was invited. At that ritual, monks were given food (and other appropriate gifts), and the survivors drew the attention of the deceased

47. This is a leading theme of *WBT*; see especially Chapters 1 and 13.

48. See *WBT* pp. 20–21 for more detail.

to this creation of good karma and asked them to empathise and thus generate good karma for themselves.

We must note (though it is not important for the purposes of this article) that with the arrival of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this 'transfer of merit' took a further step away from the original doctrine. The necessary condition for the transfer to take place, that the recipient be aware of what was on offer, was forgotten, so that it became routine, after performing a meritorious act, to dedicate the merit to all sentient beings — even though they could not, of course, be aware of it. This immediately led to the idea that there were virtuous beings, Bodhisattvas, floating around in the world and accessible to invocation, who had inexhaustible stores of merit which they could, out of pure compassion, bestow on anyone and everyone.

The second clear-cut deviation, which is difficult to date, though it is surely ancient, is the idea of collective karma. This is the idea that if people form a close-knit group which commits some act, they all share in the resultant karma, even if they were not psychologically involved in the original act. Thus a company of soldiers who commit a massacre create collective bad karma so that they all will suffer for what has been done, even if some of them were not really involved.[49] This theory is used to account for mass disasters, such as a tsunami, or the vicissitudes of war, and is applied both to bad luck and to good.

In China, the Confucian emphasis on patrilineage has meant that people think that a family line accumulates or dissipates collective karma (which may be good or bad). 'Through meritorious actions of honesty and compassion, a person accrues virtue much as money (capital) might be saved. These accrued virtues become the spiritual inheritance that funds the next generation. A person who squanders the spiritual resources he has inherited from his family has nothing to hand down to his children. ... "[M]oral capital (accumulated merit) is just as important a legacy for one's descendants as land or money".'[50]

In a somewhat imprecise way, the Buddhist doctrine of karma has influenced almost the whole of Chinese culture; but it is in a version which includes both deviations from the Buddha's teaching: transfer of merit and collective karma. How Buddhism here met and melded with Confucianism has been brilliantly described by Francisca Cho (2012, 277):

> The way in which Buddhist ritual provided a way to enhance the indigenous practice of ancestor worship is particularly interesting. The institution of Buddhist monasticism, with its order of celibate monks, seriously clashed with the Chinese concern with preserving and perpetuating the family line. But in the Buddhist ritual system, supporting the monastic order with economic necessities created merit (good karmic fruit) for the donor that could be transferred to his ancestors, ensuring auspicious circumstances in their new lives. Hence an inherently offensive social institution was brilliantly transformed by the Buddhist cosmology of rebirth into a most potent site for the practice of filial piety.[51] What is particularly noteworthy here is both the fact and irrelevance of the clashing conceptual struc-

49. *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* IV.72c-d.

50. Fan and Whitehead 2011, 19. The authors are quoting Judith Berling, who is summarising a 17th-century Chinese novel.

51. See Guang Xing, 'Early Buddhist and Confucian Concepts of Filial Piety: A Comparative Study',

> tures brought about by this blending of Buddhist and Confucian practice. Buddhist merit was dedicated to ancestors in the belief that it would help them attain auspicious new births. But in Confucian practice, propitiation of ancestors was premised on the belief that ancestral spirits hovered and remained close to the living, with the power to bring them fortune or harm. Do ancestors remain with the living, or do they reincarnate? For the Chinese practitioners, resolving the question was of less importance than the added ritual technology for practicing filial piety, which assured the well-being of the living.

This exposition of the Buddhist theory of karma and how it has in China blended with Confucianism has been necessary in order to demonstrate the extraordinary boldness of Master Cheng Yen's version of karma. To put it simply: she rejects both the deviations from the original doctrine here outlined — the transfer of merit and collective karma — and returns to the Buddha's original view (though with her own emphasis on action, as we have described). To match this, she has completely changed death rituals and the treatment of the dead, and virtually removed ancestor worship. It seems astonishing that in a Confucian society anyone could successfully promote a religious movement which does away with ancestor worship; but there can be no doubt that this has happened.

When a member of Tzu Chi dies, there is no traditional Chinese funeral. Instead, a group of members (not only relatives) visit the body and perform a ritual called *zhu nian.* This means 'assistance chanting'; the chanting is of the name of the Buddha A-mi-tuo-fo (Sanskrit: Amitābha), and it assists the dead person to find the way to heaven or some other good rebirth. We have devoted several pages (*TTC* pp. 94–98) to describing Tzu Chi funerary practice and the ideas behind it, so we shall here be very brief.

It is believed, as in some of the earliest Buddhist traditions, that there is an interim period of 49 days after death before the dead person is reborn. As we have mentioned above, there is a problem for Buddhists in societies with strong Confucian traditions (Japan and Korea, as well as China): if a dead person is reborn, how can they at the same time join the group of family ancestors? Tzu Chi comes down firmly on the side of Buddhism and against the ancestors: 49 days after death the relationship with surviving kin is terminated, and by the same token dead ancestors can in general no longer have any influence over their descendants. This means that they do not share collective karma, and Cheng Yen also emphasizes that transfer of merit between them is not possible.

After *zhu nian*, which may last for several days, funerals are held at a funeral parlour and organized and conducted by a team from the movement. They too are quite untraditional. They are not so much occasions for mourning as a kind of party sending off the deceased to start a new life. Moreover:

> Although Tzu Chi provides free funeral services, relatives of the deceased usually donate afterwards to the Movement's funeral fund. ... Cheng Yen asserts that the merit from the donation to the funeral fund cannot be credited to the deceased but accrues to the living donor; and that the only way for the dead to generate merit for him/herself is to donate their body for the public good, e.g., for medical research. (*TTC.* pp. 97–98)

Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, vol.4, May 2013. [footnote inserted by the authors of this article.]

In 2008, Rey-Sheng Her presented a paper at Tzu Chi University[52] which describes a remarkable development in this custom of donating one's body for dissection by medical students. Donors are now known as 'Silent Mentors', because they teach students anatomy and physiology. Students try to learn about the life of the donor. They then treat the corpses with respect and even ceremony. When they have finished using them, they sew them up again, dress them, and put them in coffins with transparent lids. There is then a memorial service, led by Tzu Chi nuns, before they are finally cremated. At the time of writing, over 20,000 members of Tzu Chi had promised to dedicate their bodies to this programme.

A GOOD REBIRTH IN HEAVEN?

We have shown, as any account of Tzu Chi must, that its emphasis lies heavily on altruistic pragmatism: *that* is 'what it is all about'. But of course it must have some views about what happens next: what awaits us after death? At first glance, Tzu Chi appears simply to follow Mahāyāna Buddhism. Everyone is reborn in a station to match the moral quality of their karma. While according to the Buddha the goal was to escape rebirth, here it is rather to become a Bodhisattva. This means rejecting, at least for the time being, the original Buddhist goal of escape from rebirth, in favour of being reborn in order to exercise more and more compassion for other sentient beings.

Like other movements in Humanistic Buddhism, Tzu Chi believes in the existence of a particular paradise. The Sanskrit name for this paradise is Sukhāvatī, and it is often referred to in English as the Western Paradise or the Pure Land. The oldest Sanskrit texts to describe it probably date to the third century CE. The aim to be reborn there dominated Japanese Buddhism in the thirteenth century, and Pure Land Buddhism is still the largest Japanese Buddhist sect. In the early texts, Sukhāvatī consists, even to the trees and grass, entirely of jewels and precious metals, and everyone there passes the whole time listening to the Buddha's sermons. We have no clue whether this is in fact how followers of Tzu Chi envisage it.

HOW DOES MASTER CHENG YEN FIT INTO THE SOTERIOLOGY?

There is some suggestion in Tzu Chi that, like other movements in Humanistic Buddhism, its ultimate aim is to create this paradise here on earth; the few references in our book to millennialism in the movement refer to such a belief. What interests members of Tzu Chi far more, however, is the nature and the future of the Master, and this seems to be connected to beliefs, or at least hopes, for their own future destiny.

Here again we find between Cheng Yen and the Buddha both a striking similarity and a striking contrast. Both have founded a religious movement which appeals uncompromisingly to reason and to rational action in pursuit of the main goal; their teaching has no room for blind belief and does not demand devotion. In both, of course, that devotion to the leader is nevertheless forthcoming from their followers. On the other hand, the Buddha was forthright in proclaiming his spiritual accomplishment, whereas Cheng Yen says nothing about hers. She seems rather to be following the rule laid down in the *Vinaya* that one should not

52. A version of this paper has been published in the *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, vol.4, May 2013, pp. 47–74 ('The Silent Mentors of Tzu Chi').

proclaim one's own spiritual achievements. Moreover, like the Buddha, she has made no statement about what will happen to her after death, and this has left her followers free to draw their own conclusions.[53]

All her life, Cheng Yen has had a special devotion to Guan Yin, the embodiment of compassion, and drawn inspiration from her (*TTC* pp. 89, 164). Similarly, it is from her that members derive their energy, and they regard her as the embodiment of Guan Yin. We have shown how the trend towards regarding her as a Buddha[54] can be illustrated in the movement's iconography.[55]

It is not only about her own destiny that Master Cheng Yen remains silent. She is altogether reticent about what happens after death (more strictly: once the death rites are over). She has quietly got rid of the deification of ancestors, but several possibilities remain. Do the vast majority of people simply remain in the cycle of rebirth according to their karma? If members of Tzu Chi are likely to have good karma, and therefore a good rebirth, does that mean rebirth in a heaven? If so, in any particular heaven? Is life there eternal?

The sum of these uncertainties would appear, for the moment, to be that members of Tzu Chi, or at least most of them, hope to be reborn wherever their Master is reborn; and that they probably think of that as the Pure Land.

If it strikes outsiders as odd that such important matters — matters indeed regarded as absolutely fundamental in Islam and Christianity — are left undecided, they should recall that Confucius said, 'Since we do not know life, how can we know death?' Besides, even the Buddha discouraged metaphysical speculation.

CONCLUSION

In our title we call Tzu Chi 'radical'; the word means 'related to roots', and here it refers to the roots of Buddhism, the Buddhism propounded by the Buddha himself. 'Radical' is also a political metaphor for drastic innovation, and here refers to how Cheng Yen has broken with tradition.

Our title also mentions 'modern Confucians', referring of course to the Taiwanese who constitute the core of Cheng Yen's audience and followers. To examine in depth how Tzu Chi's Buddhism relates to Confucianism is not our main purpose, but some summary remarks must be made.

A salient and pervasive feature of the Buddha's teaching is how he took religious terms current in his day and infused them with entirely new meanings: making karma, literally 'act' mean 'intention' is a good example.[56] Even here, Master Cheng Yen has followed her own Master. She writes:

> 'Filial piety is the gate to all other good deeds'. But 'the best kind of filial piety ... is to 'abandon the selfish, temporary love we give only to our relatives and close friends and expand our love to include all living beings'.[57]

53. In the case of the Buddha, Theravāda Buddhists generally draw the conclusion from his teachings that he no longer exists, but this simple deduction is avoided by the Mahāyāna.

54. In popular Mahāyāna, the distinction between a Buddha and an advanced Bodhisattva is often disregarded.

55. *TTC* pp. 90–91, figures 4.1 and 4.2.

56. This is explained in *WBT* p.7.

57. Madsen p.25, quoting Cheng Yen's book *Three Ways to the Pure Land*.

Making the world her family, Cheng Yen has turned filial piety on its head. This goes far beyond making Confucian theory 'more flexible', as Madsen puts it (p. 28), let alone just giving Confucianism a Buddhist veneer. The heart of this matter lies in Tzu Chi's truly Buddhist concept of individual agency and responsibility: every individual in the world is to be treated with respect, which 'involves increasing their agency, their ability to take control of their own lives' (Madsen p. 26). 'True compassion [is] not supposed to be used as a means to get the needy to do one's will' (Madsen p. 31). To match this, the Confucian concept of the family and the society based on it is hierarchic: the Tzu Chi 'family' is egalitarian.

We have tried to show that in many ways Tzu Chi's movement and its ideology follow early Buddhism much more closely than they do the Buddhism of Chinese tradition. Cheng Yen's pragmatic insistence on the overriding importance of this life echoes the Buddha himself. She has given that pragmatism a particular focus by founding a movement based on medicine and the care of the sick, a great Christian tradition. When we asked Tzu Chi members what had attracted them to the movement, quite a few mentioned the Christian model of charity (*TTC* ch. 8). But her pragmatism also has Confucian resonances, her language even more so. The way in which Cheng Yen has tailored Buddhism to suit a basically Confucian audience strikes us as a work of genius.

ABBREVIATIONS

TTC	Yao 2012
ThB	Gombrich 2006
WBT	Gombrich 2009

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