

Boundaries of Religious Identity: Baptised Buddhists in Enköping

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Enköping is a municipality in Uppsala County, in east central Sweden. The municipality has a total population of 38211 (1 Nov 2004), fairly equally distributed between the town and the rural area. The town itself dates its history back to the 12th century. Enköping is situated by the rich farmlands close to lake Mälaren. The town has been a major crossroads for commerce and has several manufacturing industries, a hospital and the Army Signaling Regiment. The municipality used to be the main producer of horseradish for the Swedish market and the monkey wrench was invented and first manufactured in Enköping. Enköping today is a pleasant, even if a somewhat unexciting town, which in 2003 won the international award “Best small town in the world/most liveable community” in the “Nations in Bloom” contest.

Enköping is the focus of a locality study, inspired by the Kendal Study (Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, Lancaster University) and carried out by the Church of Sweden Research Unit between 2004 and 2006. As part of the Enköping Study the Church of Sweden Research Unit sent out 2000 questionnaires in September 2004 to randomly selected inhabitants (16–76 years of age) in the municipality. We received 1045 replies, which is a satisfactory return rate considering the nature and size (18 pages and 45

questions) of the questionnaire. Women, people over sixty and Swedish born people are slightly over represented.

In this paper I will take Q 27 as my point of departure. We asked:

To what extent do you regard yourself as...
(Tick one box for each alternative)

	<i>Com- pletely</i>	<i>Fairly much</i>	<i>Mode- rately</i>	<i>Fairly little</i>	<i>Not at all</i>
a Christian	164	109	303	204	191
b Muslim	9	4	4	8	860
c Jew	2	3	4	9	861
d Buddhist	4	4	13	24	837
e Hindu	2	1	3	5	859
f Believer	75	80	176	174	387
g Spiritual	36	47	133	133	530
h Religious	24	33	129	162	533
i Seeker	24	60	86	84	632
j Atheist	43	49	40	49	698
k Doubter	24	66	110	97	587

A note on terminology:

The designations “believer” and “doubter” are fairly common in the Swedish language. A “believing Christian” or just “believer” is often a member of a Free Church. It can also mean that a person is not “just” a cultural or nominal Christian but has a personal relation to the faith content of the religion.

A “doubter” is usually seen as having a more positive relation to religion (“doubting Thomas”) than a sceptic or agnostic, but agnostic would be the closest synonym.

“Spiritual” (*andlig*) has a narrower connotation in Swedish than in English. The expression “I am spiritual but not religious” is virtually unknown in Swedish.

The table invites reflection and a lot of cross tabbing. In this presentation I will focus on those who identified themselves as “Buddhist” in the questionnaire. The distinguishing feature of this group are the two lower categories of engagement: there are

more people who identify “moderately” and “fairly little” with this religion than what we find in the other religious groups (apart from Christianity). In the following I will identify two categories of Buddhists which I call “strong Buddhists” and “mild Buddhists”. The strong Buddhists are those who identify with one of the two upper categories (“completely” or “fairly much”), the mild Buddhists those who identify with one of the two lower categories (“moderately” and “fairly little”).

We thus have a group of “mild” Buddhists, persons who are attracted to Buddhism and who, when given the opportunity not to choose between the world religions, chose both Buddhism and Christianity – in mild forms.

In the survey, Buddhism appears as the second-largest religion in Enköping. Is Enköping a centre for Buddhism in Sweden? No, there is in fact very little visible Buddhist presence in the town. There is no Buddhist monastery or temple. The closest Buddhist Centre is a FPMT (*Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition – Tibetan in the tradition of Lama Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche*) Centre in Västerås, some 30 km west of Enköping.

There are very few “cradle Buddhists” in Enköping. Thailand is the only Buddhist majority country represented in the survey; three of the respondents were born in Thailand. A recent census gave the number of persons with Thai origin in Enköping as about 100. From other Buddhist majority countries, Enköping has received 35 persons from Sri Lanka, 25 from South Korea (if South Korea is to be regarded as a Buddhist majority country), 15 from China, 15 from Taiwan and 12 from Vietnam. Many children adopted by Swedish families were born in Sri Lanka, South Korea, China and Vietnam. It is highly likely that many (maybe even the majority) of those who have listed these countries as their countries of origin were adopted by Swedish (Christian) families. Many of the Thai people are either in the restaurant business or Thai women married to Swedish men.

There is, of course, also the possibility that there are some second or third generations Swedish Buddhists, but it is not likely that they make up a significant proportion of those who have identified as Buddhists in the survey.

We can safely assume that most of those who identify as Budd-

hists are Buddhists by choice, not “cultural” or “ethnic” Buddhists. Furthermore, they have to a large extent had to create the Buddhism with which they identify, as Buddhism is almost totally invisible in Enköping. Apart from a few small shrines in Thai restaurants, some books by the Dalai Lama in the bookshop and possibly a few CDs with guided meditations in the health food stores, the Buddhist presence is hardly noticeable. The Christian presence, on the other hand, is both visible and taken for granted. Circa 80% of the inhabitants in Enköping belong to the Church of Sweden. The main church in town is an impressive 12th century stone church dedicated to Our Lady. There are two Free Church congregations: one Pentecostal-Baptist and one Reformed-Baptist, each of them has c. 200 members. There is also a group of Syrian Orthodox Christians, but no Orthodox church. The Roman Catholics borrow one of the Church of Sweden churches for regular celebrations of the Eucharist led by a priest from Uppsala.

Weekly church attendance in Enköping is 3,4 % (all Churches), monthly church attendance 9,5 %. 75% of the children are baptised (CoSw) within one year of their birth and 36% of the 15 years old are confirmed (CoSw).

In this rather massively Christian environment we find 44 persons out of 1045 who call themselves Buddhists. In the following we must remember that we are talking about very few people and no claims can be extrapolated beyond the very people who have answered the questionnaire. There are thus no claims to representativity, but we can read the figures as testimonies from individuals who have chosen to call themselves Buddhists: what is their Buddhism like and how do they negotiate their chosen Buddhism with their Christian environment?

Firstly, we can see that the majority of those who identify as Buddhists also identify as Christians:

	<i>Comp.</i>	<i>Fa</i>	<i>Mod.</i>	<i>Fa</i>	<i>Not B</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>much B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>little B</i>	
	4	4	13	24	
Comp. C	1				
Fa much C	1		3	6	
Mod. C		1	6	5	
Fa little C		2	2	10	
Not C	2	1	2	2	

Many of those who call themselves Buddhists have not chosen Buddhism instead of Christianity; they have chosen both. We can see that it is far more common to be Buddhist *and* Christian, than to be exclusively Buddhist. Even some (the majority, in fact) of the “strong” Buddhists combine their Buddhism with Christianity (5 out of 8). This is even more evident when we turn to the “mild” Buddhists: 32 combine Buddhism with Christianity, while 4 chose Buddhism only.

Among the strong Buddhists we find 5 women and 3 men, among the mild Buddhists 18 women and 18 men (with the men in majority 15/8 in the lowest category “fairly little”). Education-wise, the Strong Buddhists are not university educated (only one of them has a university degree) whereas there are 12 university educated persons in the “fairly little” category. This is in line with the general picture that there is negative correlation between university education and strong religiosity.

Almost all the Buddhists make use of the Church. Not only are they baptised, confirmed and got married in the church; their children are also baptised and confirmed.

	<i>Comp. B</i>	<i>Fa much B</i>	<i>Mod. B</i>	<i>Fa little B</i>
	4	4	13	24
Baptised	3	3	12	23
Confirmed	3	2	12	15
Church Wed	3	3	3	11
Child Bapd	2	3	5	11
Child Confd	1	2	3	5
Other rel. rit.	2	1	1	29

One person has stated that they had a “Buddhist wedding”. This is the only instance where a specifically Buddhist rite is mentioned. The high figure for “other religious rituals” among the “fairly little Buddhists” should not be interpreted as religious rituals in religions other than Christianity. The majority of those who gave specifics (not only Buddhists) wrote things like “attended funeral”, “received communion” or “helped a neighbour”.

If the Buddhists in Enköping are so Christian, what are their specific Buddhist traits? There is one activity that is closely linked

to defining oneself as a Buddhist, and that is meditation. Of all the 1045 responses 15 persons stated that they meditate regularly, out of these nine identified as Buddhists. The practice of meditation is thus a distinguishing feature of the Buddhists in the study. Two “completely Buddhists” meditate regularly; the other two have tried meditation. All who identify as Buddhists have at least heard of meditation. The majority of the Buddhists, however, do not meditate regularly and a third of those who meditate regularly are not Buddhists. The more a person regards herself as Buddhist, the more likely she is to practice or have practised meditation. Among the “fairly little Buddhists” (24 persons) 14 had only heard of meditation but never tried it, 2 practised regularly and 8 were no longer practising meditation.

In Q 23 we asked about religious experiences:

23. Have you experienced anything of the following?

- That you have received the help in life that you have needed as a direct answer to prayer
- That you have felt God’s presence
- That you have felt the presence of some kind of spirit
- That you have been filled with infinite peace
- A strong spiritual experience in nature
- A strong spiritual experience in connection with the birth of a child
- A strong spiritual experience in a Church, Mosque, Synagogue etc
- A strong spiritual experience in connection with the death of someone
- That you have been in contact with a deceased person
- That you have had an out-of-body experience
- Near-death experiences of some kind
- That you have had telepathic contact with someone
- That you have been able to predict the future in a supernatural way
- That what has happened in your life seems to have been pre-ordered

Those who identify as Buddhists tend have many spiritual experiences:

	<i>Comp. B</i> 4	<i>Fa much B</i> 4	<i>Mod. B</i> 13	<i>Fa little B</i> 24
Answer to prayer	2	3	2	4
God's presence	3	1	4	4
Presence of spirit	4	2	5	11
Infinite peace	2	2	6	8
Nature	3	2	5	12
Childbirth	1		2	9
Place of worship	2	1	4	1
Death	2	1	1	3
Out-of- body	2	2	2	3
Near-death	1	1		1
Telepathy	2	1	3	2
Premonition	2	1	2	3
Pre-ordered events	2	3	3	4

The strong Buddhists score high when it comes to religious experiences. To experience the presence of some kind of spirit and to have a strong spiritual experiences in nature seem to be the most common kinds of spiritual experiences for all the Buddhists. The Swedes are “nature mystics” (shown in other studies), and to have a strong spiritual experience in Mother Nature is the most common type of spiritual experience in the survey (c. 20% of the respondents reported having had such experiences). Experiences of infinite peace together with experiences of the pre-ordering of events come in as the second most common spiritual experiences in the survey – and this is also the case with the mild Buddhists, but not with the strong Buddhists. The strong Buddhists lean towards a theistic spirituality, they report answers to prayer and experiences of God's presence.

This, of course, cannot be taken as being representative of the Buddhists in Sweden, or even in Enköping – the sample is far too small. But it does show that it is possible to identify strongly as a Buddhist and hold views and interpret experiences in ways that are not traditionally part of normative Buddhism. If we turn to the two questions where we explicitly ask about beliefs in God and the after-life, we find the following:

Q 40. Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?

(Tick one box only)

- I believe in a personal God with whom you can have a personal relation
- I believe in an impersonal higher power
- I believe that God is rather something within every human being than something without
- I don't believe in a God or a supernatural power
- I don't know what to believe

	<i>Comp. B</i>	<i>Much B</i>	<i>Mod. B</i>	<i>Little B</i>
	4	4	13	24
Personal God	2		1	2
Impers. Power	1	1	6	5
God Within	1	2	3	9
No supernat.		1	1	2
Don't know			1	6

Q 41. What do you think happens to us after death? Tick one box only in front of the alternative that is closest to your own view.

- There is something after death but I don't know what
- We go either to heaven or to hell
- We all go to heaven
- After death we are reborn again and again into this world
- We reach an eternal state of enlightenment/light/bliss
- Nothing, death is the end
- I have no idea of what happens to us after death
- Own alternative.....

	<i>Comp. B</i>	<i>Much B</i>	<i>Mod. B</i>	<i>Little B</i>
	4	4	13	24
Something	1		4	9
Heaven or hell				
Heaven for all				
Reborn		1	6	4
Eternal bliss			1	
Death is the end		1	2	3
Don't know	2			6
Own alt.	1	1	2	4

A little play with statistics: 50% of those who identify themselves as "completely Buddhist" believe in "a personal God with whom you can have a personal relation", but only 42% of the "completely Christian" believe in such a God. Is it surprising that the Enköping Buddhists are fairly Christian? Or is it more surprising that Enköping Christians call themselves Buddhists? When given the possibility to tick more than one box, Buddhism was an attractive alternative to 44 persons.

What kind of Buddhism is it that they know and have encountered? The survey does not provide us with an answer. But if we draw on knowledge of Swedish culture and combine that with interviews with some of the respondents to the questionnaire, we can suggest three main sources of knowledge about Buddhism in popular culture.

The first source of knowledge about Buddhism is from religious studies, which is a compulsory subject on all levels in the Swedish schools. Buddhism is portrayed as a peaceful, rational way of life. It is suggested that Buddhism is a phenomenon that is more of a philosophy than a religion, that it draws on experience rather than dogma and that peace and happiness for all living beings is at its heart. Buddhism appears to be a religion that has never been involved in violent conflicts. A second source of inspiration or knowledge is the Dalai Lama, especially his *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living which has sold* (2003) 300 000 copies in Sweden. The impact of an international best seller can be questioned – do people read the books that they buy, and if they do, what do they mean to them? Thomas A. Tweed has

coined the term “nightstand Buddhists” for Western people who read Buddhist inspirational books. Carl Bielefeldt in his article “Divisions and direction of Buddhism in America today” (<http://www.americanbuddha.com/carl.bielefeldt.stanford.htm?signature>) uses the term “Buddhist sympathizers” and describes their nightstand reading as “public Buddhism” or “media Buddhism”. The third source of knowledge comes from holidays in Thailand. Thailand has become the new favourite holiday destination for the Swedes. In 2003 54 693 Swedes visited Phuket and 46 986 Bangkok (as a comparison Las Palmas had 73 807 visits and Palma de Mallorca 54 863 visits 2003). Many travellers have given testimonies of the kind, friendly, generous and truly spiritual people they have encountered in holiday resorts in Thailand. This has come to the fore especially in the aftermath of the tsunami in December 2004 (c. 600 Swedish citizens on holiday in Thailand died in the tsunami). Many found comfort both from the team from the Church of Sweden that came to the site of the disaster and from the ministering of the local Buddhist people. The respondents have presumably encountered a friendly, fairly undemanding Buddhism, a Buddhism that gives room for spiritual experiences and affirms the human life. But the Christianity they grew up with wasn't too bad either. It connected them to the past (the beautiful medieval churches) and to people around them. If they are not forced to make a choice between the two religions there are no reasons why they shouldn't choose both. This might well be what religious identity may look like even beyond Enköping.

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