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Title:

Gender Equality and Digital Counterpublics in Global Buddhism: *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia

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Gender Equality and Digital Counterpublics in Global Buddhism: *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia

Abstract

Gender discrepancies persist in Buddhist societies and institutions, linked to cultural and religious beliefs and practices that allocate a lower status to women. In some Buddhist traditions, nuns cannot ordain to the same level as monks; most Buddhist archetypes of enlightenment remain male; and men hold positions of power and privilege within the majority of Buddhist organisations. This paper focuses on recent controversy surrounding *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia, and the role of the Internet in these debates. This paper draws on data collected in interviews with key figures in Buddhism in Australia, including Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim, Ayya Nirodha, Ajahn Brahmavamso Mahathera and Bhante Sujato recorded as part of the *Buddhist Life Stories of Australia* research project. We argue that the international Buddhist women's movement, and its allies are creating and using digital counterpublics to advance gender parity in contemporary Buddhism, and that online activism has accelerated the pace of progressive social change but that it has also been used by more conservative actors to try to thwart these changes and maintain their authority, although less successfully.

Keywords

Buddhism, gender, Internet, digital counterpublics, Australia.

Introduction

Buddhism is a religion that in contemporary Western societies is typically viewed positively, and equated with peace. This is not always the case, given that Buddhism has played, and continues to play, a significant role in direct and structural violence, as events in Myanmar and Sri Lanka linked to Buddhist nationalism attest. Countering gender inequality is also an ongoing issue facing Buddhist communities. Our previous research has examined the global Buddhist women's movement's use of the Internet as a "digital third space" (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012) to challenge patriarchal authority and for

women's empowerment (Tomalin, Starkey and Halafoff 2015). This paper focuses on how the structural violence of gender inequality is being countered by Buddhist women and men practicing Thai Forest Buddhism in and beyond Australia, through offline and online activism. We present a detailed case study of recent Thai Forest *bhikkhuni* ordination in Australia and in particular the use of digital "third spaces" to spread awareness of gender equality by Buddhist counterpublics. In so doing we provide further evidence of how digital activism is playing a critical part in the reshaping of contemporary Buddhism.

This paper draws on data obtained from interviews with prominent Australian Buddhist leaders Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim, Ayya Nirodha, Ajahn Brahm and Bhante Sujato, conducted as part of a digital oral history research project on 'Buddhist Life Stories of Australia'¹ and related to offline and online debates regarding Thai Forest *bhikkhuni* ordination in Australia. These *bhikkhuni* ordinations generated significant online activity and we argue that this provides an example of the increasing use of digital counterpublics by the Fourfold Buddhist sangha (community) of *bhikkhunis*, *bhikkhus* (monks), lay women and men, drawing on both traditional Buddhist principles and modern digital activism to advance gender parity in contemporary Buddhism.

In the first part of the paper we provide some background on Buddhism and gender inequality, introducing the issue of the *bhikkhuni* ordination and why it has been so controversial in some settings. This is followed by a theoretical discussion of third spaces and digital counterpublics. Next, we present our case study on *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia. The analysis of the case study focuses on two main research questions. First, what role has the emergence of a digital

public sphere and a digital counterpublic played in campaigns for gender equality within Buddhism? Second, what difference has the Internet made to struggles for authority within Buddhism and other religious traditions?

Buddhism and Gender Disparity

While Buddhism is predominantly an Asian tradition, it has had a long and significant presence in so-called Western societies of Europe, the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Beginning with migration from Asia in the 19th and 20th Centuries, it has also attracted sizable numbers of converts. One of the attractions of Buddhism in Western societies is its perceived emphasis upon gender equality. Despite this perception, structural violence against women remains prevalent in contemporary Buddhist societies in Asia, and inequality in Buddhism also affects women's practice in the West. This is evident in the persistent view that it is preferable to be reincarnated as a man than a woman, in the fact that nuns must follow more rules than monks and typically receive less financial assistance, and in the forbidding of high ordination – *bhikkhuni* ordination – for nuns in some traditions (Wilson 2011; Owen 1998; Tomalin 2006; Tsomo 2009).

While there is no doubt that women played a significant role in the early Buddhist community, including Buddha's stepmother Mahapajapati and wife Yasodhara who both later became prominent teachers, women currently often occupy a lower status than men in Buddhist institutions and societies, due to cultural and religious norms and beliefs. It is reported that Mahapajapati asked the Buddha to ordain her three times before he finally agreed to do so and it was not until Ananda, one of

Buddha's closest male disciples, interceded on her behalf that he changed his mind. While the Buddha unequivocally stated that women were equally capable as men to reach enlightenment, they were given an additional eight conditions (*atthagarudhammas*) to monks that they were required to follow. These additional instructions are often cited as being at the core of persistent gender inequality in Buddhism. However, there is ongoing debate whether these eight conditions were actually imposed by Buddha or added subsequently by his followers, and not all *bhikkhuni* have taken these vows (Gross 1993; Tsomo 2009). During the Buddha's lifetime, the Buddhist *sangha* (community) is reported to have been more egalitarian with women taking ordination as *bhikkhuni* and becoming respected as *arahants* (enlightened beings) and teachers, however gradually women and nuns became marginalised. The *bhikkhuni* lineage spread from India to Sri Lanka, and then to China, Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan, yet it subsequently died out in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, and there is a lack of conclusive evidence that it was ever established in Cambodia, Laos, Mongolia, Thailand or Tibet although there is some evidence of *bhikkhunis* in Burma (Tsomo 2004, 2009).

Since 1987, Sakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha), the International Association of Buddhist Women has held bi-annual international conferences bringing together Buddhist nuns, laypersons and scholars from across the world to revive *bhikkhuni* ordination globally and challenge gender inequality more generally (Sakyadhita n.d.). In more recent years, a strengthening global Buddhist women's movement has increasingly used digital activism to advance its cause through a number of websites, blogs, Facebook

pages and Twitter accounts, belonging to Sakyadhita and newer organisations such as the Alliance for Bhikkhunis and the Yogini Project (Tomalin et al. 2015).

Cyber Sisters, Third Spaces and Digital Counterpublics

Scholarship on digital religion argues that while the Internet has revolutionised and democratised modes of religious communication, 'it also abounds with misinformation [...and...] religious bigotry' (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005: i). Campbell (2012, 65) identified five primary traits of “networked religion” on the Internet, namely “networked community, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multisite reality”. We have argued that ‘digital activism’ be added to this list, as evidenced in our study of the Buddhist women’s social movement’s online activities and also drawing on the work of Hoover and Echchaibi (2012, cited in Tomalin et al. 2015). They state that “a wide range of old traditions, new traditions, non-traditions, hybridic traditions, and aggressively ‘anti’ traditions, are finding a place in digital space” (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012, 3, 5). They further explain how such digital “third places” or “third spaces”, “describe something alternative to other, prior, or dominant domains” that “unsettles the singularity of dominant power narratives”, enabling social action (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012, 6, 13-15). In our earlier paper, we argued that the Buddhist women’s social movement has applied this type of disruptive and critical reflexivity in its online and offline activities. ‘Cyber sisters’ have created offline and online third spaces to foreground the power of women in Buddhism by posting and blogging images, narratives and texts related to historical and contemporary *yoginis* and *dakinis* (female accomplished practitioners, teachers and representations of wisdom) which question and

usurp dominant patriarchal narratives within Buddhism. They have done so not only as a form of digital activism but of Buddhist practice, consistent with fulfilling a *yogini's* and *dakini's* responsibilities to spread wisdom throughout the world to assist all beings to become enlightened and thereby free from suffering and oppression (Tomalin et al. 2015; Hass n.d; Simmer-Brown 2001). We also argued that this global Buddhist women's movement has made increasing use of the Internet in awareness raising and activism and building connections among supporters (Tomalin et al. 2015). Transnational links within *and* between Buddhist traditions have been better facilitated through the opportunities provided by the online environment enabling information to be shared, events to be popularized and counter positions to be established and developed.

Following Hill, we deepen the “notion of digital counterpublics” as “rooted in Nancy Fraser’s (1990) conception of the ‘subaltern counterpublic’” (2018, 288) where marginalized or subaltern groups form their own counterpublics to “develop oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, 123). Fraser presents a feminist critique of the “bourgeois masculinist” public sphere, of theorists such as Habermas, where “a public sphere is that of a body of ‘private persons’ assembled to discuss matters of ‘public concern’ or ‘common interest’” (1990, 58). Discussion in the public sphere “was to be open and accessible to all; merely private interests were to be inadmissible; inequalities of status were to be bracketed; and discussants were to deliberate as peers” (1990, 59). She argues that this “account idealizes the liberal public sphere” (1990, 59) while at the same time is premised on “masculinist gender constructs” (1990, 59) based upon “gender norms enjoining feminine domesticity and a sharp separation of public and private spheres” (1990, 61). She envisions a different concept of

the public sphere, where instead of a “single, comprehensive, overarching public” (1990, 66) history tells us:

that members of subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians-have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Perhaps the most striking example is the late-twentieth century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic (1990, 67).

In this paper we foreground the specific contribution of the online environment towards awareness raising and activism regarding campaigns for gender equality in Buddhism, through the emergence of a *digital Buddhist feminist counterpublic*, particularly with respect to the revival of the *bhikkhuni* ordination and backlashes against it, taking the Australian ordinations as a case study for this.

The paper also builds upon recent literature in digital religion studies that examines “how religious actors negotiate the relationships between multiple spheres of their online and offline lives” (Lovheim and Campbell 2017, 5). In addition we argue that Cheong’s assertion that “new mediations grounded within older communication practices serve as the lifeblood for the evolving nature of religious authority and forms of spiritual organizing” (2011, 25) is especially relevant for consideration of the relationships between gender and religion in the digital age. We are interested in the extent to which traditional gender hierarchies are replicated in the digital domain and whether there are ‘special features’ of this realm of social action that are likely to promote and achieve greater gender equality and challenge traditional systems of authority.

Thai Forest Sangha *Bhikkhuni* Ordinations in Australia

Women have played a central role in the history of Buddhism in Australia, and national Buddhist organisations including the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils (FABC) and the Australian Sangha Association (ASA) have long been committed to addressing gender disparity (see, Halaffof, et al. 2018). Prominent Buddhist women, including German-born Ayya Khema and Australian-born Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim, were largely responsible for this progressive stance on gender in Buddhism in Australia, but it has also been strengthened by high profile male advocates, in particular British born Australian, Ajahn Brahmavamsa (Ajahn Brahm) Mahathera, and Australian born Bhante Sujato (Halaffof, et al. 2018). As at the time of the Buddha, calls for female high-ordination were also made possible in collaboration with male supporters.

German born Ilse Ledermann, later known as Ayya Khema following her ordination, one of the first students of British born Theravadin monk Phra Khantipalo who was arguably the most influential 20th Century Buddhist teacher in Australia. She financed the purchase of land north of Sydney to establish a Theravada monastery in the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest tradition, Thai Forest Wat Buddha Dhamma in 1973 (Croucher 1989; Adam 2000, Wat Buddha Dhamma n.d. (a)). Venerable Chi Kwang Sunim, formerly Debbie Cain, was another of Phra Khantipalo's early students who assisted with the establishment of Wat Buddha Dhamma. Ven. Chi Kwang travelled to Korea following Phra Khantipalo's advice that the *bhikkhuni* in Korea had better access to education and enjoyed a higher level of respect compared to the nuns in Thailand. She returned to Australia in the mid-1980s as a highly respected nun and teacher in the Korean Zen tradition (Sunim 2015).

Ven. Chi Kwang became a *bhikkhuni* at a significant Fo Guang Shan *bhikkhuni* ordination in 1989 for many nuns from diverse traditions in Los Angeles, co-organised by Ayya Khema (Sunim 2015). Ven. Chi Kwang returned to Australia and was involved in early discussions about and then later the formation of the FABC and the ASA, with Ajahn Brahm. One of the ASA's main aims was "to support the ordination and the development of education for Buddhist women to the highest levels to become *bhikkhuni*" (Sunim 2015; Brahm 2015a; Sujato 2015).

Ajahn Brahm is an internationally renowned Buddhist teacher in the Thai Forest Tradition. Originally from London, he studied for nine years in Thailand with Ajahn Chah before coming to Australia. The contemporary Thai Forest Tradition has its roots as a reform movement within Buddhism in Thailand that began in the 19th century as a response to the perception that Buddhism had strayed away from the original intention of the Buddha, with lax monastic discipline and a lack of adherence to the texts (Wat Buddha Dhamma n.d (b), Wat Buddha Dhamma History Project n.d). The Forest Tradition has become particularly popular in the West and today has 19 branch monasteries across the globe in Thailand, Australasia, Europe and North America (Forest Sangha n.d (a)). The first in the UK was Cittaviveka Forest Monastery in West Sussex in 1979, established by North American born Ajahn Sumedho (Forest Sangha n.d (c)), and in Australia the Bodhinyana Monastery (est. 1983) of which Ajahn Brahm became the Abbott (Brahm 2015a).

It is clear that men were prominent in setting up the Thai Forest Sangha outside of Thailand, not least because this reflected the traditional gender hierarchy within Thai Buddhism where women do not have positions of leadership. Ajahn Brahm was

committed to improving the situation for Western Buddhist women, but was initially limited in what he could do within the confines of the Thai Forest Tradition. He raised funds to set up Dhammasara Monastery, the first nun's monastery in Australia, in 1998, with Ajahn Vayama, a student of Ayya Khema's being the first nun to move there, living in a caravan in tough conditions before any buildings were erected (Brahm 2015a, Weekes n.d). According to Ajahn Brahm, she was "a pioneer" and the one who really "got it started," even though this took a considerable toll on her health (Brahm 2015a).

Two other important figures in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia are Ayya Nirodha, formerly Elisabeth Gorski, and Bhante Sujato. Gorski attended a retreat at Wat Buddha Dhamma and first met Ayya Khema, with whom she had an immediate connection. She bought land between Sydney and Canberra in 1986, originally with the intention of creating a retreat centre, which later became Santi Monastery, and offered it to Ajahn Brahm who became Santi's Spiritual Director. In 2001 she moved to the Dhammasara Nuns' Monastery where she was the first *sramaneri*, 10 precept nun, in the Thai Forest Tradition to be ordained in Australia in 2003 (Nirodha 2015).

Bhante Sujato travelled to Thailand in the early 1990s, where he ordained as a monk in the Forest Tradition in 1994. He returned to Perth and lived at Bodhinyana Monastery in 1997 for three years to study and work with Ajahn Brahm. He spent the following three years in isolated retreats in Malaysia and Thailand. In 2003, he returned to Australia and become the Abbott of Santi Forest Monastery, transforming it into a nun's community. Bhante Sujato lived there until he returned to Bodhinyana in 2012 (Sujato 2015) and after he left, Ayya Nirodha returned to become the Abbot (Nirodha 2015).

Ajahn Brahm, Ajahn Vayama, Bhante Sujato and Ayya Nirodha were among the earliest advocates for *bhikkhuni* ordination within the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest Tradition in Australia in the early 2000s (Sujato 2009b). While at Santi, Bhante Sujato began researching the issue of *bhikkhuni* ordination and it became clearer to him that the arguments against it, regarding lineage and legalities, simply “didn’t stand up” (Sujato 2015). He presented his findings to monks who opposed *bhikkhuni* ordination, but this did not seem to make any difference and he realised that “there was actually something else going on here” and that people’s irrational “fears and insecurities” were what was standing in the way. He started communicating with many *bhikkhuni* particularly in the lead up to *The International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages* in Hamburg on July 18–20, 2007, a scholarly event where His Holiness the Dalai Lama was present and offered his support (Sujato 2015).

Ajahn Brahm was also motivated to address gender equality in Buddhism, as his scholastic training enabled him to find support for gender equality and *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Buddhist texts “as there is no reason why not”...“politically, morally and legally” (Brahm 2015a). He also stated that the main obstacles to Thai monk’s support for *bhikkhuni* ordination was “fear,” and particularly a “fear of getting into trouble and bucking the system,” and “denial” indicating that many of them were “out of touch” (Brahm 2015a). Ajahn Brahm felt that the Thai Forest communities at Santi, Bodhinyana and Dhammasara were trying to “bring these things back” and to live more as Buddha intended, using the *vinaya* and *suttas* “to give us a basis for critiquing and improving... the tradition” (Sujato 2015).

Ajahn Brahm described that when, in 2009, four nuns from the Dhammasara nun's community, including Venerables Vayama and Nirodha, requested to become *bhikkunnis*, the Bodhinyana Sangha and lay community discussed the proposal in detail over the Rains Retreat (an annual retreat for Buddhist monastics). All eventually agreed that the nuns' request be granted, emphasizing that this was a full *sangha* decision, of nuns, monks and lay persons including those from the diaspora Thai community, not simply Ajahn Brahm's decision alone to perform the *bhikkhuni* ordination on the 22nd October 2009 (Brahm 2015a; Sujato 2009b). The ceremony generated a great deal of controversy, not least because it was the first Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordination in Australia, and the first *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition internationally (Brahm 2009; Sujato 2009b).

A detailed account of the events of that day, and those leading up to and immediately following it, were recorded by Bhante Sujato, on his widely read *Sujato's Blog* on the 31st of October, 2009 (Sujato 2009b). He begins:

22nd October 2009: remember that date. That's when it all changed. That's when the Sangha of Bodhinyana Monastery and Dhammasara Nun's monastery, with the support of an international group of bhikkhunis, performed the first Theravada bhikkhuni ordination in Australia, and the first bhikkhuni ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition anywhere in the world. Here's how it all came about.

There have been no new additions to the blog since August 2015, and although it began as a platform to share information about the 2009 ordinations (with Sujato writing in 2010 that 'articles on *bhikkhuni* ordination evoke the most comments and response[s]'). *Sujato's blog* became a hub for the reposting and dissemination of material by others on this topic, including those who participated in the ordinations, those who felt that this was

the beginning of a positive change within Buddhism and wanted to see more women benefit from it, and those who opposed the ordinations.

Bhante Sujato explained that he started the blog in the wake of the 2009 *bhikkhuni* ordinations in order to counter “widespread misinformation” regarding what had occurred, given that there was hesitancy to discuss this issue publicly. What he found was that a great number of people, mainly women, shared his views and concerns and thanked him for providing this forum, “to finally put these things in the public sphere” (Sujato 2015). Particularly following the excommunication of Ajahn Brahm from the Thai Forest Sangha, which also meant that the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery had been removed as a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong (Ajahn Chah’s main monastery in Thailand), practitioners in the Western Thai Forest Sangha wanted to know what had happened and the blog became their main source of information on this, albeit this information being presented by those supportive of the ordination and who had directly participated in it. On the 7th November 2009, Ajahn Brahm also posted on *Sujato’s Blog* to explain why he had agreed to the ordinations and why he had been expelled. He explained that although the Mahatherasamakom (supreme Monks’ Council of Thailand) did not permit the ordination of *bhikkhunis*, he was “under the impression that the ordination of *bhikkhunis* outside of Thailand was not contravening the rulings of the Mahatherasamakom since he had been informed by the head of the Monks’ Council that ‘Thai Sangha law does not extend outside of Thailand’” (Sujato 2009c). Ajahn Brahm was summoned to a meeting at Wat Pah Pong on Sunday 1st November 2009 and refused to recant the status of the new *bhikkhunis* (Sujato 2009c).

The Bodhinyana and Dhammasara communities, and the authorities which were critical of the 2009 *bhikkhuni* ordination, also used the Internet to clarify their positions following these events. For instance, the Administrative Council of Wat Nong Pah Pong invited well-known *vinaya* (monastic code) scholar American-born Thanissaro Bhikkhu to review the ordination process. He wrote a letter outlining his interpretation of its validity where he argues that the ordination was invalid on the basis that the *vinaya* do not allow for the ordination of more than one *bhikkhuni* simultaneously (Thanissaro 2009). Both this letter (Thanissaro 2009) and a response to it from a number of key practitioners and teachers in the tradition (Buddhist Scholars Response 2009) were the subject of a post on *Sujato's Blog* (Sujato 2009c). Although interesting, this is not the place to rehearse the various objections and counter-objections to the ordinations, but before we move on to address our research questions, two additional web-based responses to the controversy over Ajahn Brahm's stance on the *bhikkhuni* ordination and gender equality in Buddhism will be briefly mentioned. These comprise two online petitions that were circulated widely.

The first was in support of the four new Australian *bhikkhunis* and Ajahn Brahm (Ekachai 2009; Sujato 2009a), with 2674 signatories from 63 different countries, and was “a means for members of the four-fold *sangha* to express their deep concerns...about the events surrounding and challenging the *bhikkhuni* ordination in Perth, Australia, in October 2009, and the placement of women in the tradition” (iPetitions 2009). The second petition gained 5116 signatories from 93 countries, in response to Ajahn Brahm's removal at the last minute from the programme of the 2014 United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) convention in Vietnam where he had planned to deliver a speech on *'Theravada*

Buddhism and Millennium Development Goal 3: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Theravada Buddhism,' (Barker 2017, 374; Avaaz 2014). Once again, the news of the ban spread rapidly online and Ajahn Brahm's paper was consequently seen and read by many more people than the conference attendees, being published by *Tricycle*, a popular US based Buddhist magazine, with wide international readership both in print and online (Brahm 2015b).

Ajahn Brahm and Bhante Sujato also participated in the Sakydhita conference in Yogyakarta in June 23-30, 2015, soon after which Ajahn Brahm stated:

The momentum is huge, it's unstoppable... you realise the female *Sangha* has arrived, and if anyone saw that, they'd say trying to fight this, or trying to keep your head in the sand... you're wasting your time... there's huge momentum... it was really impressive to see how many people that were there, and what can be done... (Brahm 2015a).

Bhante Sujato stated that the *bhikkhuni* issue has provided the impetus for extensive global communication, mainly online, across diverse traditions, which he felt monks had less occasion to do, and that this has led to the creation of a strong community of support that extends now beyond this issue. Ajahn Brahm also explained how important it was for senior internationally "well-known, famous" monks such as himself to show support for the *bhikkhuni*, as "if you have that platform," if people listen to what you say and read your books, it was important "to use it" (Brahm 2015a). He also noted that he could carry out the *bhikkhuni* ordination now as he was "too strong" and the authorities "can't suppress someone with such a big following" (Brahm 2015a).

On September 4, 2016, another *bhikkhuni* ordination, for Ayya Vajira, Ayya Dhammavati, and Ayya Santacari, was held in the Big Cave at Santi Thai Forest Monastery. Ayya Nirodha and Ven. Chi Kwang Sunim were both present at the

ceremony. The ordination was confirmed when the *bhikkhunis* visited Ajahn Brahm and the monks at Bodhinyana monastery on September 22, 2016. News of this event was also shared and celebrated online, with Santi's (2016a, 2016b) website including many photographs and the following description: "Theravada Bhikkhuni Upasampada is very rare... Everyone felt touched deep in their hearts."

As Bhante Sujato observed, Buddhists have long been using the "best information technology available to preserve and transmit the Dharma," initially using their minds to remember long *suttas*, to developing written languages and using scribes, to the invention of the printing press, and now the Internet. He added: "so these days we tend to think there's some kind of novelty value in Buddhists using the Internet, wow, that's so amazing, but actually that's what we've been doing all along!" (Sujato 2015). What the Internet has uniquely enabled is global engagement with information, be it Buddhist *suttas* and/or on *bhikkhuni* ordination, and among the Buddhist community and the Sangha. As Bhante Sujato explained, these days "we connect using the Internet, and Facebook, and forums... we now have much more of a global Buddhist culture than we did before" (Sujato 2015). In this way, according to Bhante Sujato, the Internet is:

... enabling a kind of decentralisation and education... the traditional Buddhist structures have struggled... in the Theravadin world... the traditional locuses of power and authority have very little web presence... so far they haven't really engaged in that sphere... and to me it seems like those institutions are really being left behind and I think a lot of that is due to the hierarchy and the influence of, the inability to question and change, so you often have very old monks in charge... and they don't understand the internet, that's how they've always done things, so that's how it keeps on being done and nobody goes and does anything new. And I think that's a great shame and... that we should be speaking to people in a language and a form that is meaningful to them... but so far that role, that [global] community building role, has fallen to those of us who are operating outside of those major Buddhist institutions (Sujato 2015).

Bhante Sujato concluded that Australians are known to be “anti-establishment” and “egalitarian,” have a tradition of “telling it like it is,” and are “not so afraid of offending people’s sensibilities.” Australians are more “direct” and comfortable challenging authority than many other cultures and there is a freedom to practice one’s religion, and critique it at the same time (Sujato 2015). These Australian characteristics, noted also in other studies on Buddhism in Australia (Barker and Rocha 2011; Halafoff 2011), may also help explain why the communities at Santi, Bodhinyana and Dhammasara and have been at the forefront of the *bhikkhuni* ordination movement in the Thai Forest tradition. As Ajahn Brahm (2015a) also stated, “we’re working together... this is Australia, but this is also original Buddhism... the very nature of Buddhism in its original democratic form can fit much better into our system,” which is known for questioning authority and for being less hierarchical and class based than other societies. Ven. Chi Kwang Sunim (2015) also noted that while “there is just the beginning growth of the respect and development of women in Buddhism” in Australia, there’s “still a long way” to go for total parity to be achieved.

Analysis and Discussion of Research Questions

Our research questions asked: *what role has the emergence of a digital public sphere and a digital counterpublic played in campaigns for gender equality within Buddhism? And what difference has the Internet made to struggles for authority within Buddhism and other religious traditions?* As we have already demonstrated, transnational feminist networking was already underway in Buddhism since at least the 1970s and 1980s, before the Internet explosion. The creation of a Buddhist women’s movement via an informal

network between organisations and traditions was already apparent, as was the sharing of ‘spiritual labour’ to carry out ordinations. The online environment presents a significant extension to already existing offline campaigns and organisations around women’s equality within Buddhist traditions. This builds on current trends within the literature of ‘digital religion’ that views the online-offline connection as symbiotic (Campbell and Lovheim 2011, 1083). Drawing on Fraser’s concept of subaltern counterpublics, described above, we further argue that today there exists a digital public sphere that serves to extend the scale and range of subaltern counterpublics, and that this provides a suitable framework for theorizing the responses to the 2009 Australian *bhikkhuni* ordinations and the ongoing attempts to address gender imbalances in the Thai Forest tradition in Australia. This case study draws attention to the way in which a schism within a Buddhist tradition over gender inequality (and the extent to which to which this can be resolved within the confines of the formal tradition) is played out online and therefore in public, while previously this would have been more likely been confined to the male elite in a setting that excluded other voices and positions. However, the access that the digital public sphere gives to these issues is not just to women but also the wider lay community within Buddhism and those outside the tradition. We argue that this is a continuation of the forces of “democratization, feminization and hybridity” outlined by McMahan as emblematic of modern Buddhism (2008, 242).

In this way we argue that the digital public sphere disrupts traditional public-private distinctions that typically marginalize women from playing a role in processes of change within their religious traditions. Against the backdrop of a perceived reluctance to discuss or take seriously the issue of the *bhikkhuni* ordination, as noted above by the interlocutors

in the controversy where it is likely to be dismissed or characterized as a “private” interest rather than one of broad public concern, following Fraser, we instead promote a “conception of the public sphere would countenance not the exclusion, but the inclusion, of interests and issues that bourgeois masculinist ideology labels ‘private’ and treats as inadmissible” (1990, 77). As Fraser stated:

...in stratified societies, subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides. This dialectic enables subaltern counterpublics partially to offset, although not wholly to eradicate, the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups in stratified societies (1990, 68).

We argue that the global Buddhist women’s movement has served as a “space of withdrawal and regroupment” where strategies to give a voice to women in their traditions have been developed and shared, mainly by Buddhist women through the conferences, blogs and websites discussed in our previous article (Tomalin et al. 2015). However, it has also served as a “base and training ground for agitational activities directed toward wider publics”, including men within their tradition, who because of their positions of authority have been able to use the knowledge and momentum gained around issues such as the *bhikkhuni* ordination to launch direct interventions in the tradition to challenge entrenched authority structures and to effect greater equality for women. The online environment has enabled women to participate in building transnational solidarity around the desire for the *bhikkhuni* ordination and to insert their views into traditionally male dominated domains. This suggests that religious change and gender equality movements can benefit from the participation of men who are committed to the cause, even when much of the groundwork has been undertaken by women practitioners and scholars. We are not arguing that men are

more likely to bring about change, but that men and women together can offer the best possibility to for the movement to achieve its ends.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that digital activism has played a significant role in recent and ongoing controversy surrounding *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia. The global Buddhist women's social movement's creation of digital third spaces and activism has led to the formation of glocal subaltern counterpublics, that can offer both online and offline communities of support and rally behind important causes as needed. This is certainly evidenced in the above case study on the Buddhist Thai Forest Tradition *bhikkhuni* ordination in Australia, where these realworld and digital counterpublics oppose patriarchal and hierarchical systems in Buddhism, and challenge them by using traditional Buddhist and modern principles and technologies striving to produce more equal, just and peaceful communities.

Both in this and our previous research on the global Buddhist women's movement, our evidence indicates that the digital counterpublic has exponentially quickened the pace of these changes. It has also helped to gather a broad base of support for Buddhist women's ordination. The effect of this, as the interviewees stated above, is that supporters of *bhikkhuni* ordination are currently outrunning the opposition, who on this occasion have been much slower and less proficient in their uptake of digital activism to promote their conservative position. It remains to be seen how this will all play out in the future. The Buddhist women's movement has its decriers, both from conservative patriarchal systems and also among women, scholars, practitioners and nuns, including

those writing and practicing from within Asian societies and who believe that the global Buddhist women's movement is a Western imposition. Some of these women are conservative as well, while others have a progressive but post-colonial position on the *bhikkhuni* and other gender equality debates. This reflects clashes within contemporary Buddhism, and other religious institutions, between divergent and complex positions regarding authority, equality and emancipation in which the digital is playing a prominent role.

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ⁱ The 'Buddhist Life Stories of Australia' project was initiated and coordinated by Anna Halafoff together with Edwin Ng and Praveena Rajkopal, in partnership with the Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils and the Australian Sangha Association, at Deakin University in 2014-2015. It was a crowdfunded project and recorded 19 digital interviews. The project has produced one academic article "Women and Ultramodern Buddhism in Australia," (Halafoff, Garrod and Gobey 2018) and there are two more forthcoming on characteristics of ultramodern Buddhism in Australia, and Buddhist buildings in Australia. The videos can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/channels/buddhismaustralia>