CHAPTER THREE

TEMPLE AND SOCIETY IN THE NEW WORLD: THERAVADA BUDDHISM AND SOCIAL ORDER IN NORTH AMERICA

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In this chapter we examine the question of social order as it relates to Theravada Buddhists in North America. We maintain that this is a central question in the study of social life. Social order has two forms: the maintenance of regular patterns of interaction and the maintenance of cooperative relations. These two forms operate at the level of relations between individuals; at the level of solidarity, or relations between individuals and the groups to which they belong; and at the level of relations among groups. Historically, social scientists, particularly sociologists, have tended to downgrade religion as a source of social order or to believe that religion is disappearing as a source of order. This tendency has come into question in recent years. The study of immigrant religions has played a notable part in the growing appreciation of the role of religion in maintaining relations among individuals, creating solidarity, and shaping relations among groups.

We look at the growth of Theravada Buddhism in North America as the development of new forms of social order. After addressing theoretical questions on religion and social order, we look at the type of normative structure that Theravada Buddhism provides to its adherents. We then look briefly at the history of this religious presence in American life. Next, we look at the forms of the Theravada social order in North America. We consider common characteristics of interactions among adherents, of group solidarity, and of group relations to others in American society. Finally, we look at how variations among the major Asian immigrant Theravada groups have resulted from their differing histories.

This chapter concentrates on the three largest immigrant Theravada groups: Thai, Lao, and Cambodians. The concepts have been produced by observations and discussions by both authors, either singly or together, with members of these groups in Southeast Asia and at
specific temples in the United States, over a period of twenty-five years.\footnote{For general background see Bankston 1995, 1996, 1997, 2003; Bankston and Hidalgo 2007.} However, in order to apply these concepts on a national and continental scale, we rely on archived news articles and on the ethnographic work of other authors to substantiate and illustrate our ideas.

**Theoretical Background**

The question of social order has attracted less attention from social scientists, especially sociologists, in recent decades than it did in earlier years. When structural-functionalism was the dominant perspective, Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils (1951: 180) described the problem of social order as “one of the very first functional imperatives of social systems.” To decide whether this problem is one that can be legitimately pushed into the background or one that should continue to concern us, we may want to ask just what this term “social order” means. Is it just a mask for the unequal distribution of power and resources, or does it have a broader significance for all social groups and individuals in groups? More specifically within the terms of the present chapter, if it does have some broader significance for all groups, how can thinking about this significance help us to understand the general role of religion in American society and the specific role of contemporary Theravada Buddhism?

In *The Problem of Order* (1994), Dennis Wrong points out that the term “social order” has two closely related but distinct meanings. It can refer to regularity or rule in human social interactions and it can refer to patterns of cooperation among actors. He argues that people develop regularities as norms, roles, and institutions in the course of recurrent interactions. These interactions may differ greatly in character, since they can be products of a wide variety of individual motivations. They may differ in the ways that people cooperate and also in the degrees to which cooperation or conflict characterizes human relations.

Across these two broad divisions of order as pattern and order as cooperation, one can identify three levels at which human behavior can be ordered. First, we can say that social order involves establishing and