A common sociological approach to the study of contemporary religion is to understand specific religions in relation to the process of modernization. The use of a theory of modernization framework would help to eliminate some of the obvious confusion in the literature on Buddhism, in which the same religious changes are described as “Protestantization,” or “Americanization,” or “Westernization,” or “modernization” (Tamney 2007). For example, changes described as Americanization in the United States are perceived as aspects of modernization in Asian countries (Yang and Ebaugh 2001: 283). Further confusion occurs because of the tendency in Asia to describe changes in terms of “reforming” Buddhism, even though the same changes are perceived as modernist elements both in Asia and elsewhere (Yang 2000: 70). As Yang wrote about the increasing power of women in Buddhist groups in the United States and in Taiwan: “This reflects a general modernization trend to which Reformed Buddhism has been trying to adapt in both nations” (2000: 85). In effect, the reformers are developing a modernized version of Buddhism.

Here I briefly describe the modernization process and its implications for religion. Then I use these ideas to understand and integrate some of the findings about Buddhism in this volume.

Modernization

Modernization, as I conceive it, has five basic components: technological development, societal expansion and increasing population density, structural differentiation (i.e., the appearance of new, independent institutions such as an independent “church” or a capitalist economy), the fragmentation of societal culture (pluralism), and the growing importance of the individual at the expense of groups.

The last characteristic has two aspects: individuation and individualism. Individuation means a person has an identity apart from social
roles and group memberships (Coser 1991). Hence, modernization is a process in which people are more and more self-conscious about a personal identity that is increasingly unique. This self-consciousness, in turn, gives rise to individualism, which is the cultural affirmation of the value of the individual, of every individual. As Durkheim wrote: “individualism…is the glorification not of the self but of the individual in general. It springs not from egoism but from sympathy for all that is human, a broader pity for all suffering, for all human miseries, a more ardent need to combat them and mitigate them, a greater thirst for justice” (Durkheim 1973: 48–49). Our understandings of the social implications of individualism continue to unfold.

Late modernity is characterized by affluence (a significant middle class), the spread of tertiary education, and globalization. Late-modern people are more concerned about mental health, self-actualization, and defining the meaning of the good life once necessities are no longer an issue. Reflexivity characterizes this period of modernization. Life is no longer determined by fate or tradition, but by us, Nature, the social world, and the self are perceived as open to control, as opportunities for enacting our ideas. Nothing is sacred in the sense of being unquestionable. Skepticism or doubting is the order of the day. Regarding the self, for example, we need to “define” and “actualize” the self. Personal decisions are guided by our choice of lifestyle; what we eat, how we dress, leisure preferences, choice of work, choice of religion should be consistent with our lifestyle. Such choices would make us authentic, that is, true to our selves (Giddens 1991; Giddens and Pierson 1998).

Globalization is the current stage of societal expansion, a basic feature of modernization. Globalization can be described in relation to personality, social structure, and culture. Individuals borrow from different cultures, a process Kumar (1995: 145) called “cultural cannibalization/” People may eventually come to think of themselves as citizens of the world. Structurally globalization means “an ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences” (Tomlinson 1999: 2). Culturally globalization means the weakening of any relation between place and cultural options; that is, the same options are available everywhere. More immediately, the process refers to the appearance of “globalized cultures”—that is, not a single global culture but cultures sharing some basic characteristics such as support for human rights. In the current global situation, all societies must react to the West because of the political-economic dominance of this region. The long-term implica-