Introduction

Although modernity and religion, through much of the twentieth century, were perceived as being in some degree of conflict (Gorski and Altinordu 2008: 56), Weber’s prediction of the disenchantment of the world has not come to pass. Instead, as the chapters in this volume amply illustrate, while modernity has rephrased religion, it has not obliterated it. The permutations of the encounters with modernity (or modernities) with religion have been variable and have taken shape, and been expressed, in numerous ways. The spatial articulations of the resulting new ways of being religious that have emerged out of the conversation with modernity have been profound, and serve to both express new religious modes and also to shape them. In Vietnam one of the


2 In this essay I use ‘modern,’ ‘modernist’ and ‘modernity,’ fully aware that there is some ambiguity to the terms and a great deal of disagreement about their meaning and usefulness. Following Anthony Giddens (1991), I use ‘modernity’ in a general sense to refer to the “institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact” (Giddens, 1991: 14–5). The modes and behaviors of modernity that are most prominent include industrialism, capitalism, and the nation-state, which exercises a pervasive surveillance. It also includes the rational organization of other institutions, like the religious, political and educational. Finally, it is marked in the religious field by the religious and the secular being demarcated and traditions being differentiated. Talal Asad adds to my understanding of modernity by pointing out that modernity is a ‘project—or rather, a series of interlinked projects,’ in the sense that it is always ongoing. Asad sees that the project, “aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market—and secularism” (Asad, 2003: 13). Finally, it should be noted that it is a global project, but as Roland Robertson notes, globalization entails a process of the local becoming global and then being turned local again, which he terms ‘glocalization’ (Robertson, 1995). This means that there are multiple ways in which modernity is negotiated and made local—modernity is not uniform.
most persuasive expressions of a modern way of being Buddhist has been in the form of Zen (V. Thiền), which is presented as a rational and secular tradition, and is the topic of this chapter.

The new interest in Zen Buddhism in Vietnam originated in the center and south in the 1960s. While stalling from 1975 until some time in the mid-1990s, it has spread to northern Vietnam in the last decade, and at the same time has moved from being a minor elite curiosity to becoming a popular movement. This new Zen takes as its reference a golden age of Buddhism in Vietnam during the Lý and Trần dynasties (11th to 15th century) and is viewed as a purer and truer form of Buddhism. In truth, however, its essence is oriented more towards a globalist or modernist Buddhist discourse than it is a replication of Buddhism from a bygone era. It is influenced by many of the same ideas and pressures that have brought about transformations in what is often viewed as ‘Western Buddhism,’ which was in turn influenced by the central tenets of the Buddhist reform movements that took place in Asia at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th. This chapter is based on archival work, three months of ethnographic work done at a new Zen center on the outskirts of Hanoi in 2011 (called Thiền viện Sùng Phúc, or Sùng Phúc for short), and an earlier brief stint at the same place in 2004–2005. This paper will look at how relatively new ideas of Buddhism that originated in the Buddhist Reform Movement (Chấn hưng Phật giáo) of the 1920s and ’30s have influenced the new spaces that are being created by one particular group. This new space articulates a form of Buddhism heavily imprinted by modernist ideas that is quite different from the usual Buddhist spaces found in Vietnam. The group that established the Zen center, called Trúc Lâm Thiền Tông, was founded by a southern Vietnamese monk named Thích Thanh Từ, who currently resides at the organization’s main monastery in Đà Lạt. The new spaces, I will show, project a kind of Buddhism that is thoroughly modern, centralizing the figure of the historical Buddha in a way that befits its modern status as a ‘world religion.’ It also rationalizes Buddhism so that it is in line with the construction of Buddhism as a scientific, and even ‘secular,’ religion.

Zen in Vietnam

I first encountered this group in 2004 on the outskirts of Hanoi, where they had constructed a large and modern meditation center and monastery. Since

---

3 I use ‘Zen’ here as the general term while recognizing that properly it is a designation for the Japanese meditation tradition, while it is Chan in China, Seon in Korea and Thiền in Vietnam.