

Buddhism in second life: Anthropologist studies spirituality in virtual reality

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A Kansas State University researcher is studying how religion—particularly Buddhism—fits into new forms of virtual reality.

Jessica Falcone, assistant professor of sociology, anthropology and social work, studies South Asian cultures and religions, particularly Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Several of her current research projects focus on Buddhist communities, particularly the growing presence of Buddhism in the world of [virtual reality](#).

For one project, Falcone is studying Buddhism and Buddhist holy objects in [Second Life](#), an online [virtual world](#).

"I'm interested in looking at why Buddhist communities are developing on Second Life," Falcone said. "I want to know what their religious practices and materials look like in a virtual space."

Users of Second Life develop an avatar for the virtual world. Buddhists who use Second Life develop their avatar and can participate in religious events, such as group meditation sessions in virtual temples. The virtual temples replicate real-world temples and include a large Buddha statue, Falcone said. Avatars walk in the temple, collect their cushions and sit with other avatars to meditate.

"I want to understand why this is happening in a [virtual space](#)," Falcone said. "For some Buddhists, they may be living in an area without a Buddhist community and this may be the only place where they can

practice their religion with other people. It is a way for them to come together and listen to teachings or to do group meditation sessions, even though it may not be possible in real life."

For other Buddhists, the virtual religious world complements their real-life practices, Falcone said.

"They may have a temple or community nearby, but there is something appealing about going online and being able to spend their lunch break in meditation," Falcone said.

Falcone noted that other religions—including Christianity, Sikhism and Islam—are experiencing virtual communities on Second Life, and other groups and organizations also are creating virtual communities. For example, universities can create classrooms on Second Life and avatars can attend classes. Businesses have created virtual meeting places for employees.

"It is interesting to me and fascinating as an anthropologist that we are replicating some of our cultures in these virtual spaces," Falcone said.

"For the Buddhist groups in particular, it seems there is a real effort to replicate their real-life practices, rather than innovate them. There is not much interest in doing experimental practices or trying new things because it is a virtual world."

Because much of the content on Second Life is user-generated, Buddhist users can create their own virtual temple or place to pray. During real-life prayer, Buddhists tap bowls to sound the beginning and ending of their meditation. In Second Life, users have created bowls and tried to replicate the sounds the bowls make. Users also have created animations for avatars to sit in the proper position when meditating.

"People are making this user-generated content that is helping them to

replicate and live a Buddhist life in very similar ways that you would find in real life," Falcone said.

Falcone also is finding that some people are discovering Buddhism for the first time on Second Life. People who may not be Buddhist but use Second Life may come across these Buddhist temples and engage with the virtual community.

Falcone has given talks about her research at a religious studies conference and a Virtual Buddhism conference. She is currently finishing an article about Buddhist sacred objects in [virtual](#) reality.

Falcone also is writing a book about spiritual globalization and the Maitreya Project that was slated for Kushinagar, India. Kushinagar is where Gautama Buddha died and is an important pilgrimage site among Buddhists.

The Maitreya Project was planning to build a 500-foot-tall Maitreya Buddha statue in Kushinagar, which would have made it the biggest statue in the world. The statue was supposed to be a gift to India from a transnational Buddhist group called the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. But thousands of local farming families would have lost their farmland and houses to build the project and spent several years protesting the project. Just a few months ago, the Maitreya Project decided to move its project away from Kushinagar.

"It was an interesting conflict involving a Buddhist group that wanted to build a giant statue to symbolize love and kindness," Falcone said. "Yet, for many years, they seemed to be pushing forward this project at the expense of these farmers in India. I studied the conflict from the perspectives of various stakeholders. Even though the project has been moved, it is a fascinating and important story of disparate cultural values."

Falcone spent 14 months in India gathering research for the book and was funded by the American Institute for Indian Studies. In the past, during the immediate aftermath of 9/11, she performed ethnographic research while spending time embedded with Sikh-American and Hindu-American communities in the Washington, D.C., area.

Provided by Kansas State University

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