Buddhism in the Early European Imagination: A Historical Perspective

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The article deals with the main historical and cultural approaches of Europeans to Buddhism in various Asian areas. The intention of author is to turn to discussion of those peculiar forms in which the knowledge of Buddhism was presented. This study sets out its aim to explore the way of engagement of the West with the Buddhist tradition, emphasizing the early period of the encounter and those initial imaginative constructions and early discourses that shaped the nascency of the scholarly discipline. Conclusion is made that Buddhism has been represented in the Western imagination in a manner that reflects specifically Western concerns, interests, and aspirations. Europeans saw themselves as possessing the criteria upon which the judgement of the religious, social, and cultural value of Buddhism rests. Buddhism was constructed, essentialized and interpreted through Western images of the Oriental mind that provided ideological strategies and a hermeneutic filter.

Je risque l'hypothése que l'Inde n'a jamais été découverte
ni inventée, mais qu'elle a été construite,
fabriquée par le processus même de la mémorisation
de stéréotypes archaïques issus des perceptions
grecques du monde indien.
Catherine Winberger-Thomas[1]

India and the East are rich in Western fantasies being from time to time described with all the qualities of a dream. The existence of a world religion known as 'Buddhism' has been a largely unquestioned assumption both in academic scholarship and in popular conceptions of 'religion'. However, 'Buddhism' is the term for which there is no equivalent in Asian languages. Neverthless, the knowledge of Buddhism

[1] Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, "Les yeux fertiles de la mémoire. Exotisme indien et représentations occidentales", in *L'Inde et l'imaginaire*, dir. Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, E.H.E.S.S., 1988, 9.

was very much limited and the study of Buddhism in the West came rather late on the scene in comparison to the study of other Indian and Asian philosophical-religious traditions. It took some time before scholars were even able to conceive the congeries of seemingly desparate phenomena united by the common rubric "Buddhism". Buddhism has profoundly touched the Western imagination in a surprisingly widespread way and has done so for well over a several hundred years, evoking a sustained fascination. The Western 'imagination' is certainly a sweeping term and the social routes of fantasies are intricate.

Thus, let us look at the main periods of the reception of Buddhism in the West world, trying to reveal the approches it unfolds. My intention is to turn to a discussion of those peculiar forms in which the knowledge of Buddhism was presented. This study sets out its aim to explore the way of engagement of the West with the Buddhist tradition, with an emphasis on the early period of the encounter and those initial imaginative constructions and early discourses that shaped the nascency of the scholarly discipline.

Early contacts with Buddhism

The Buddha and Buddhism were apparently never explicitly mentioned in "Greco-Roman texts of pagan origin and literary pretension".[2] Buddhist monks were known in the later Hellenic world, and the Indian Emperor AŚoka (3rd BCE) patronized and propagated Buddhist teachings beyond his borders, sending monks with the Buddha's message Westwards: to the Greek kings Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy II of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatus of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene and Alexander of Epirus, and translating some of his Buddhist-inspired edicts into Greek and Aramaic. Around that time, Milinda (known as Menander in Greek sources) became the first Greek king that adopted Buddhism and the ruler of the north-west Indian Sagala kingdom, a society whose political and social structure was Greek but whose cultural and spiritual values were largely Buddhist. *Milindapanha* (Milinda's Questions) is one of the best-known texts in PāIi, the record of a dialogue between the king Milinda and a Buddhist monk NāIgasena.

Information about Buddhism had filtered through to the early Christian world. It was from the Church Fathers, and most notably from Clement of Alexandria around

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[2] A. Dihle, "The Conception of India in Hellenistic and Roman Literature", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Sodiety* (1964): 15–23. Of the same opinion was also Sylvain Levi, "Malgré les relations ininterrompues du monde hellénique avec l'Inde, puis l'expédition d'Alexandre jusqu'aux derniers temps de l'Empire romain, la littérature grecque a presque ignoré l'existence du bouddhisme, ou du moins l'a fort mal connu" (Sylvain Levi, "Le bouddhisme et les Grecs", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* XXIII (1891): 36). Recently the same was again concluded by Klaus Karttunen, "We can thus safely conclude that early Hellenistic literature knew hardly anything about the Buddha" (*India and the Hellenistic World*, Studia Orientalia 83, Helsinki, 1997, 63).

200 A.D., that Europe heard the first mention of followers of the *Boutta*. In his *Stromata*, Clement of Alexandria spoke of the origins of philosophy which "flourished in antiquity among the barbarians, shedding its light over the nations. And afterwards it came to Greece". After listing the prophets of Egypt, the Druids and the magi, Clement continues: "The Indian gymnosophists are also in number. And of these there are two classes, some of them called Sarmanae and others Brahmans [...]. Some, too, of Indians obey the precepts of Boutta whom, on account of his extraordinary sanctity, they have rised to divine honours".[3] When Christians first noticed the parallels between the story of Buddha and that of Christ, they were disturbed by the possibility that the account of Jesus in the New Testament might not be the unique revelation they believed it to be. So about two centuries after Clement, Hieronymus (347–419) mentiones Buddha telling us that he was born from the side of a virgin.[4] Both Gautama and Jesus had miraculous births, followed by the prophesy of a wise man about their future destiny; both fulfilled earlier expectations; and both encouraged their followers to spread their message to the whole mankind.

The question of connection between Gnostic thought and Buddhist *PrajñUpUramitU* literature has been debated since the very beginning of Western studies of Buddhism. It is now widely accepted that the Gnostic religious movement incorporated various ideas from oriental traditions. The Gnostic system with the most likely mark of Buddhist influence is that of Basilides who lived in Alexandria in the 2nd century. Theologian J. Kennedy argued that Basilides' theory "was Buddhist pure and simple – Buddhist in its governing ideas, its psychology, its metaphysics; and Christianity reduced to a semi-Buddhist ideal as a result".[5] The most distinctively Buddhist of his ideas are those regarding the nature of the self. For Basilides, 'the soul is not a single entity', he believed that due to admixture of prosartemata – parasitic emotions (similar to Buddhist *kleŜas*) – the rational psyche finds itself in a state of 'primitive turmoul and confusion', from which it must strive to free itself, a task which results in salvation for a minority of saints. Although Basilides' system was theistic, his definition of God approaches that of *nirvUEa*: *ouk on theos* – 'non-being God', unknowable, unutterable, and inconceivable. Not by chance, Kennedy argues that Basilides learnt the principles of Buddhism from the Indian community in Alexandria and then built them into his own system of Gnostic Christianity.

An explicit reference to the Buddha was made in Babylonia in the religious system of Mani (216–76). In Mani's time, there were also Buddhists living in the eastern parts

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[3] *Stromata* I, 15, 71. Cit. from: G. R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago, 1968, 5.

[4] A. Dihle, "Buddha und Hieronymus", *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 2 (1965): 38–41.

[5] J. Kennedy, 'Buddhist Gnosticism, the System of Basilides', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1902): 383. Also E. Conze, "Buddhism and Gnosticism", in *Further Buddhist Studies*, Oxford, 1975, 15–32; I. J. Schmidt, *Über die Verwandschaft der gnostisch-theosophishcen Lehren mit den Religionssystemen des Orients, vorzüglich des Buddhismus*, Leipzig, 1828.

of the Persian Empire. Mani began his mission by travelling to north-west India, which at the time was a flourishing centre of Buddhism.[6] He declared,

> Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zarathustra to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this propecy in this last age, through me, Mani, messenger of the God of truth to Babylonia.[7]

It is possible that he modelled his order on the organization of the Buddhist communities he observed there. The relation between Mani's 'Elect' and 'Hearers', for example, is similar to that between monks and lay supporters in Buddhism. In the West, Mani was presented as the final incarnation of Jesus, in the East as the Buddha of Light, and his dualistic doctrine provided a convincing explanation for the apparent predominance of evil. Neozoroastrian manichean views filtered into Christianity nonetheless through Augustine of Hippo, the most influential of the Church Fathers who had for nine years been a Manichean Hearer.

It seems that in the following centuries no knowledge of Buddhism have reached the West. From A.D. 1000, a version of the life of Buddha in the form of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat influenced the Western Christian ascetic ideal. The monk Euthymius from Mount Athos translated from his native Georgian into Greek an account of two Christian saints from India: a Christian hermit called Barlaam and the converted prince Josaphat. Based on the highly popular Sanskrit Buddha's biography *Buddhacarita* by AŜvaghoṣa (2–3 centuries A.D.), this is the story of the Buddha's renunciation, which most likely found its way westwards through the Manicheans of Central Asia who adopted the legend of Buddha's renunciation to their own ends. An Arabic text of the story, translated from the Iranian Pehlevi dialect, appeared in the 8th century in the Manichean community of Baghdad. So the Sanskrit 'Bodhisattva' became the Uigurian 'Bodhasaf', later Arabic 'Yudhasaf', then Georgian 'Iodasaph', Greek 'Iosaph', and finally Latin 'Josaphat'.[8] From Latin this text was translated into many Western languages. Although never canonized, in the 16th century Barlaam and Josaphat were, by popular demand, assigned a place in the Roman Catholic roll of saints, their day being 27 November.[9] It was widely believed in Europe that the story of

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[6] See: Geo Widengren, *Mani und Manichäismus*, Stuttgart, 1961, Chapters II, VII. On Manichean encounters with Buddhism in Central Asia, see H. J. Klimkeit, "Gottes- und Selbstfarhrung in der gnostisch-buddhistischen Religionsbegegnung Zentralasiens", *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 35 (1983): 236–47.

[7] Quoted from D. M. Lang, *The Wisdom of Balahvar. A Christian Legend of the Buddha*, London, 1957, 25.

[8] Paul Peeters S.J., "La première traduction latine de 'Barlaam et Josapath' et son original grec", *Analecta Bollandiana* XLIX, 3 (1931): 306–7. See also J. Sonet, *Le roman de Barlaam et Josaphat. Recherches sur la tradition manuscrite latine et française*, Louvain-Namur, 1949; Annie et Jean-Pierre Mahé, *La Sagesse de Balahvar. Une vie christianisée du Bouddha*, Paris, 1993.

[9] A church was dedicated to Josaphat in Palermo, Sicily, while the church of Saint-André d'Anvers in France housed one of his relics. The first European to notice similarities between the

Barlaam and Josaphat was an account of the second conversion of India to Christianity, the first having been achieved by the Apostle Thomas. Hereby, the legend unintentionally introduced into medieval Europe the rudiments of the Buddha's life heavily overlain with Christian dogmas.

Missionary perception of Buddhism

From the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries there had been a succession of missionary contacts with Buddhism: Willem van Ruysbroeck, Marco Polo, Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, Ippolito Desideri, John of Monte Corvino. Dominician, Jesuit, Capuchin, and Fransican missionaries to Japan, China, and Tibet all had encountered Buddhism and reported their findings to the curious West. It was always customary to describe other religious traditions in terms of the Christian religion, which offered the only model then understood for such descriptions. During the Dark Ages, Europe in its introverted isolation had pieced together a bizarre image of the East drawn from ancient Greek and early Christian sources. Missionaries fully expected to encounter weird quasi-human monsters, based on the accounts of Herodotus and Megasthenes, more recently elaborated for popular consumption in the 'Alexander Romances', wildly imaginative legends then circulating as a fictional correspondence from Alexander to Aristotle. Compounded with stories of St Thomas's mission in India, those legends gave rise to the fantasy of a powerful Christian kingdom in the distant East, ruled by Prester John who would unite the world under the Papal banner.

Most probably the Flemish Franciscan friar Willem van Ruysbroeck during his short stay in the Mongolian capital of Karakoram in 1254 became the first European to encounter Central Asian Buddhists and to take part in an interfaith dialogue. He was a confidant of Louis IX of France, who gave him official backing in the form of a letter requesting the Mongols to allow him to undertake his mission to preach the Gospel and offer comfort to the Christian slaves.[10] His purpose was religious rather than diplomatic, and he devoted considerable attention to the diverse religious groups at the court. This is from him that Europe received its first account of Buddhist monks, their temples and practices. He was unaware of the difference between Buddhists and Taoists, both of whom he refers to as *tuin* (Chinese *tao-in*, 'man of the way') whom he emphatically dismissed as 'belonging to the Manichean heresy'. Despite Khan's tolerant attitude,

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story of Barlaam and Josaphat and its Indian original was Portuguese historian Diogo do Couto in 1612. This insight did not cause him to doubt Josaphat's authenticity, but led him to conclude that Josaphat was the model on which the life of the Buddha was constructed. The whole story only came to light when the French scholar Laboulaye gave the first accurate account of its origins in 1859.

[10] Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, London, 1990, 11. Some ten years earlier, two bulls of the Pope Innocent IV to the Güyük Khan, 'the Emperor of the Tartars', as he was then called in Europe, were entrusted to a disciple of St Francis, an elderly friar called John of Plano Carpini, who reached Khan with his diplomatic mission in August 1246. See Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, London, 1971.

William's uncompromising aproach was unwelcome and he was expelled from the Mongol court, having in his eight-month stay converted only six souls.

A bit later Marco Polo, who served as a functionary in Kublai Khan's bureaucracy for nearly twenty years, provided Europe with a more detailed account of popular Buddhist practices than did Willem van Ruysbroeck, but hardly a more accurate one. Marco Polo, a trader and adventurer, regarded the Buddha simply as the chief of all the idols he saw on his travels. Even after his visit to Ceylon in 1393, when he became the first European to learn both the outlines of the historical Buddha's life and the connection between Gautama and the 'idols' of Central and Eastern Asia, his attitude was not substantially altered. However, impressed with the Buddha's sanctity, in his *Description of the World* (*Divisament dou Monde*) he commented, "for a certainty, if he had been baptised a Christian he would have been a great saint before God".[11]

A disciple of Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier (1506–52), was shocked by the moral of the Japanese Buddhist monks and lay people and initially thought that Buddhism was a modified form of Christianity. Later this Spanish Jesuit poignantly conveys the contrast between the inflexible convictions of the Christians and the open, 'non-thinking' attitudes of the Japanese Zen Buddhists. In a Latin biography of Francis Xavier, Jesuit Bartoli in 1664 wrote that "It is in any case certain that Xaca (Shakyamuni) was one of the most famous gymnosophists of India. His father was a king in the Gangetic basin and his surname 'Buddha' means a wise or lettered person. He lived about a thousand years before Christ".[12]

In his Chinese writings another Jesuit, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) ridiculed both the Buddhist belief in rebirth and the prohibition against the killing of animals. Upon hearing of the doctrines of non-self and transparency, he concluded that Buddhism was nihilistic and devoid of positive values.[13] His Eurocentric bias led him to believe that the Buddhists were displaced Pythagoreans whose doctrines had spread from Greece to India and thence to China.

The Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri was probably the first European to reach Lhasa in 1716 and, having mastered the spoken and written languages, he pored over *Kangyur* and *Tengyur*, Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, in order 'to obtain a complete insight into that false religion. I compared one book with another, made notes, and copied everything that might furnish me with weapons to fight the enemy".[14] Desideri never

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[11] Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*, Berkeley, 1960, 256.

[12] De Bartoli, *De vita et gestis S. Francisci Xaverii libri quatour*, Lyon, 1666, 153; quoted from: Henri de Lubac, *La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l'Occident*, Paris, 1952, 117.

[13] Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Metteo Ricci*, London, 1985, 249.

[14] Filippo de Filippi (ed.), *Desideri: An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia, S. J. 1714–1727*, London, 1932, 104. Desideri himself composed four texts in Tibetan, however, his memoirs remained lost in Pistoia until 1875 and were not published until 1904, nearly two hundred years after their composition. His Tibetan texts languished in the Jesuit archives in Rome and were first translated (into Italian) in the 1980s. For overviews of the early period of Western contacts with Tibet, see also: G. Woodcock, *Into Tibet (The Early British Explorers)*, London, 1971;

realized that what he was studying was Buddhism, and treated the 'absolutely wrong and pestiferous' Dharma of 'these blind pagans' as an obscure and unknown cult peculiar to Tibet.

During the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries missionaries came in contact with Theravada Buddhism in Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Indochina and with different forms of Mahayana Buddhism in China, Tibet and Japan. Their knowledge was based upon what they observed, and on discussions with Buddhist priests, but very rarely on the study of the Buddhist literature itself. For this reason it was very difficult to gain a clear notion of the main Buddhist ideas. Important exeptions were a mission of Desideri to Tibet and a visit to Siam as an envoy of King Lois XIV of Simon de La Loubère in 1687–88. He published *Description du royaume de Siam* (1691), containing translations of some Buddhist texts form PD̃i, or as he called this language – *balie* or *baly*.

As early as in the sixteenth century begun the tradition of publishing letters of missionaries in the series *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*. In one of such letters, in 1740, the Jesuit Father Pons working in south India came up with a name for this newly discovered religion, treated as a heresy, *bauddhamatham* – 'Buddha's point of view'.[15] Despite all their prejudices, Jesuits at least recognized Buddhism to be a vital aspect of the cultures in which it was practised. However, after the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1563, the Counter-Reformation became increasingly aggressive, in line with the policies of colonial expansion in Europe. For Christians, there could be no question of any dialogue with Buddhists as equals for the simple reason that truth could never be balanced against error, reciprocit was inconceivable.[16]

Many people derived their knowledge of Buddhism from writings connected with the newly regenerated activities of Protestant missionaries and works like Spence Hardy's *A Manual of Buddhism*, written in 1863 to help missionaries understand Buddhism, serve to propagate the very religion they were seeking to displace. The Jesuit missionaries knew something of Buddhism in its Chinese and Japanese forms, but were largely ignorant of its teachings, and treated it for the most part, along with Taoism, as little more than a popular superstition. This is an illustration of the existence of colonization, assimilation and the subordination of alternative perspectives and movements within India before the arrival of Europeans.

However, till the nineteenth century these various discrete and unconnected references to Buddhism made little impact on the understanding of Buddhism in the West and "remained in Western consciousness merely as disparate accounts of the

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J. MacGregor, *Tibet – A Chronicle of Exploration*, London, 1970; C. Markham, *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, New Delhi, 1971; G. Sandberg, *The Exploration of Tibet*, Delhi, 1973.

[15] See W. Halbfass, *India and Europe. An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, Delhi, 1990, 44.

[16] See more in the study of Henri de Lubac, *La Rencontre du Bouddhisme et de l'Occident*, Paris, 1952: Chapitre II: La découverte missionnaire, Chapitre IV: *Les apologistes chrétiens.*

West with indistinct aspects of the Orient".[17] And till that period the knowledge of Buddhism was almost exclusively derived from non-Buddhist sources and not based on the textual analysis. Before that time, even the very concept of Buddhism did not yet exist. In various shapes and forms Buddhism had been identified and written about since the seventeenth century, even though often confused with, or seen as just a heretical sect of Hinduism.

Beginning of academic Buddhist studies

By the time when India had become part of the British Empire, the only remnants of Buddhism existing in the land of its origins were the archeological artefacts and palm-leaf manuscripts. And for that reason the early Western conceptions of 'Buddhism' failed to distinguish it from other religions. Prior to the nineteenth century, the understanding of the distinctive identities and geographical extent of Buddhism was sparse, and interest in it was overshadowed by the involvement of the West in Confucianism and Hinduism. The term 'Buddhism' seems to have arisen at around the beginning of the nineteenth century and Buddhology is an offshoot of Indology, Sinology and classical philology. In the words of Stephen Batchelor,

> throughout the course of the 18th century three interconnected factors were gestating that would help give birth to what we know as 'Buddhism'. These were the emergence of the rationalist Enlightenment, the decline of religious authority and the consolidation of colonialism.[18]

The story of the irruption of Buddhism into nineteenth-century European culture must begin with Brian Houghton Hodgson who as an official of the East India Company in Nepal came into possession of 400 hitherto unknown Buddhist manuscripts written in Sanskrit and Tibetan, and in 1837 dispatched them to Calcutta, London, and Paris. Acccording to him, the aim of his studies was "to seize and render intelligible the leading and least absurd of the opinions and practices of these religionists", and he had "no purpose to meddle with the interminable sheer absurdities of the Bauddha religion and philosphy".[19]

Almost twenty years Hungarian Alexander Csoma de Körös (1784–1842) spent working for the British goverment in India and Tibet, preparing the first publication of the Tibetan grammar and dictionary. Despite the aura of romantic surrounding, he even strove for establishing a link between scientific knowledge and colonial power, and tended to dismiss much of Tibetan Buddhist writings as 'wild metaphysical

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[17] Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1988, 8. See also an analogous study by Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912*, Bloomington, 1992.

[18] Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture*, London, 1994, 231.

[19] G. R. Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago, 1968, 36.

speculations'.[20] Moreover, the early Western Orientalists were also influenced by the ideological positioning of brahmanical Pundits in India, particularly in the tendency to represent Buddhism as little more than a branch of the vast Hindu banyan tree.

As the founding father of the discipline of Buddhology in the West, Eugène Burnouf (1801–52) has rightly been seen. His mastery of both Sanskrit and PU̍li, combined with an exacting philological intellect, made Burnouf an ideal person to construct from his flesh field of unexamined documents an intelligible scheme of ideas which would henceforth be the prototype of the Europeand concept of Buddhism. In 1844 he wrote his monumental *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien*, the work which was immensely influential in spite of its somewhat negative perception of Buddhism whose teachings were described as 'naive'.[21] In the nearly six hundred densely packed pages he offered Europe the first detailed scientific survey of Indian Buddhist history, doctrines and texts. That work was the first attempt in the Western scholarship to construct a rational framework and organizational structure for the study of Buddhism and provided a sourcebook for an entire generation of scholars and intellectuals.[22] His methodology of drawing data firsthand from Buddhist texts rather than from secondhand reports of missionaries and colonialists became a standard in the field of Buddhist studies, in spite of the fact that he drew much of his material from B. H. Hodgson. He was the first to establish a clear distinction between the northern and southern branches of Buddhism, and it was his emphasis on the latter as the more ancient and 'pure' version of Buddha's teaching that led to the pre-eminence in the European mind in the nineteenth century of the southern Theravada tradition, the northern MahU̍yU̍na school remaining largely neglected until the following century.

For the first part of the nineteenth century the Buddha was no, in any modern sense of the term, a historical figure; rather he was one aspect of a complex comparative mythology and chronology, a semidivine being. The Buddha was vaguely conceived of as a mythic god in the Indian pantheon. In 1856, Horace Wilson admitted that various considerations cast doubts on the accounts of the life of the Buddha and "render it very problematical wheter any such person as Sakya Sinha or Sakya Muni, or Sramana Gautama, ever actually existed".[23] James Mill's extremely critical account of Indian religion and culture in 1817 established a norm for European attitudes to Hinduism.[24]

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[20] Theodore Duka, *Life and Writings of Alexander Csoma de Körös*, London, 1885, 108. Also Frédéric Lenoir, *La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'occident*, Editions Albin Michel, 2001, 91–93.

[21] However, it seems that the first essay published in Europe on the Buddha was by Michel-Jean-François Ozeray, *Reserches sur Buddon ou Bouddon, instituteur religieux de l'Asie orientale* (Paris, 1817), and the book in English to include the word Buddhism in its title was *The History and Doctrine of Budhism* by Edward Upham in 1829 (London).

[22] A more systematic survey of the history of Buddhist studies is given by J. W. de Jong, *A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America*, Varanasi, 1976.

[23] Horace H. Wilson, "On Buddha and Buddhism", *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 16 (1856): 247.

[24] "Volumes would hardly suffice to depict at large the ritual of the Hindus, which is more tedious,

Buddhism was being favourably compared with degrading Hinduism as a protest against a despotic, tyrannical, oppressive and corrupt priesthood, and the institution of caste that it supported. The variously depicted Indian indolence, laziness, inactivity had therefore their spiritual counterparts – Buddhist mysticism, meditation, nirvana, etc. The leading British Orientalists of the late Victorian period saw in Buddhism a rationalist and humanist reaction against the priestcraft of the sixth century B.C.E. India, subsumed under yet another of the 'isms' of the Western study of Asia – Brahmanism. Standing in sharp contrast to the spiritual and sensuous exoticism of modern India, such Buddhism was also a fitting candidate for a classical status, because like the civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt, and unlike Hinduism, the Buddhism of India was long dead.[25]

Within the early Western accounts of Buddhism there was a tendency in the mid-nineteenth century to portray the Buddha as an Indian version of Martin Luther and Buddhism as a form of Hindu Protestantism. Buddha was presented as a social and religious reformer, like Mohammad or Guru Nanak, reacting against the metaphysical, ritualistic and social excess of the Hindu brahmanical priests. As Max Müller wrote, "the ancient history of Brahmanism leads on to Buddhism, with the same necessity with which medieval Romanism led to Protestantism".[26] Evidently, the analogy between the Buddha and Luther, betwen Buddhism and Protestantism served not only to illuminate Buddhism, but also for anti-Catholic polemic. Very often such anti-Catholicisim was combined with or replaced by an anti-Socialist polemic in the context of which Buddha was considered as a radical social reformer rejecting the pretensions of the secular ruling class or aristocracy. In both cases Buddha was praised because of his compassion and sympathy which were most often remarked upon, and he was respected as "an ideal Victorian gentelman".[27]

Besides, Buddhism was viewed essentially as a system of pessimism. An analysis of human suffering and the way to release from it, these elements that constitue the contents of Buddha's teaching delivered in the form of the four noble truths in the Deer Park near Benares became crucial in emphasizing the most negative side of Buddhism. As Herman Oldenberg put it clearly, "the four truths give expression to Buddhist

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minute, and burthensome; and engrosses a greater portion of human life than any ritual which has been fund to fetter and oppress any other portion of the human race" (James Mill, *The History of British India*, London, 1817, 1: 245). Peter J. Marshall in his study remarks, "Even if some intellectual curiosity about Hinduism was aroused, the attitude of the great mass of Europeans who came into contact with it was always either ridicule or disgust. Books were filled with accounts of a multiplicity of deities, repellent images and barbarous customs" (Peter J. Marshall (ed.), *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1970, 20).

[25] On such portrayal of India, see Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India", *Modern Asian Studies* 20, 3 (1986): 401–46.

[26] Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, Vol. 1: Essays in the Science of Religion, London, 220.

[27] Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Cambridge, 1988, 79.

pessimism in its characteristic singularity".[28] Such attitude was predominant during the whole nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth centuries. Pessimism was explained as a natural expression of the Indian character, a result of their world-weariness, but also was seen as having its roots in its own peculiar doctrines, or rather perhaps, in the absence of those characteristics taken as definitive of a religion: the absence of belief in a personal God, in heaven, in prayer, in providence and resurrection, in a gracious divine Spirit, in an atoning Saviour. The European interpretation of the Buddhist concept of suffering was permeated by its understanding of rebirth and karma, the doctrines that were viewed with horror, as an outrageous nonsense, as fatalism, as fearful doctrines.[29] For example, in 1866 a student of E. Burnouf, Barthélemy St Hilaire argued that "the Buddhists have so monstrously exaggerated the idea of transmigration that the human personality is lost sight of and confounded with the lowest things on earth".[30] This aesthetic distaste for the doctrine of rebirth and karma had its teological roots deep in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

That is why the religion of optimism – Christianity – was effectively contrasted with the philosophy of pessimism – Buddhism. And, as Philip Almond has rightly remarked, "it was because pessimism itself was the dark side of the general façade of optimism that the ninetheenth century has erected."[31] Treatment of the Buddhist soteriological concept *nirvÜ̃a* as annihilation of the individual, the final extinction of personality clearly reflected such attitude. For theistic and positivist Europe, it was extremely puzzling why a religion which in other respects was so admirable should have as its *summum bonum* such an apparently negative aim.

And overall, Buddhist theory was seen as providing insufficient motives or sanctions for the moral life; especially the doctrines of karma and rebirth were considered detrimental to the practice of morality. At the same time, Buddhism provided a striking verification of the claim that theism was not absolutely essential to the cultivation of a moral and virtuos life and practical morality of a high type may be realised without faith in the existence of personal God.

By the beginning of the ninetenth century, the similarity of Mahayana Buddhism to Catholicism had become familiar in European accounts of China, Tibet and Mongolia. By the mid-nineteenth century, the work of professional Orientalists in the academies of Europe had come to claim authority over a mere reportage of a traveler. From that time, contemporary Buddhism in the East is seen as being in a general state of decay, as a direct result of the growth of idolatry. A typical example of the negative view is Susie

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[28] Herman Oldenberg, *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, His Order*, London, 1882, 212.

[29] On Western imagination of the concept of karma and rebirth in the Buddhist tradition, see: G. Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist and Greek Rebirth*, Berkley, 2002.

[30] Barthélemy St Hilaire, *The Buddha and His Religion*, London, 1895, 134.

[31] Almond, 1988, 83.

Carson Rijnhart, a medical missionary who traveled in Tibet from 1895 to 1899. In her account of this journey, she writes:

> [...] For the great mass of them we found to be ignorant, superstitious and intellectually atrophied like all other priesthoods that have never come into contact with the enlightening and uplifting influence of Christian education. They are living in the dark ages, and are themselves so blind that they are not aware of the darkness. Ten centuries of Buddhism have brought them to their present state of moral and mental stagnation, and it is difficult to believe that any force less than the Gospel of Christ can give them life and progress in the true sense.[32]

And the image of decay, decadence, and degeneration emerged as a result of the possibility of contrasting an ideal textual Buddhism of the past with its present Eastern state. This provided an ideological justification for the missionary, colonially enterprises of a progressive, thirving Christianity against debilitated Buddhism.

Much of the information about such parallels in the ceremonies and forms of rituals, and satanically inspired resemblances of Buddhism to Catholicism was mediated through the works of Catholic Missionaries.[33] Europeans saw Buddhism as approaching as near to Christianity as was possible for a merely human system to come. Certainly, the exclusive truth of Christianity was contrasted with the irredeemably false nature of Buddhism, which, however, was considered as a divinely ordained preparation for the Christian fulness of revelation. Still, theologically important was the claim of some scholars that Buddhism had significantly influenced Christianity and played an important role in the origins of it.[34]A good example is a study of Raphaël Liogier, "Jesus has inherited the wisdom of the Buddha, his Asiatic predecessor", he "disseminated the words of Siddharta", and "more, his message flavoured the breath of Siddharta".[35] Its tolerance of other religions and non-violent methods of evangelization were perhaps a single feature of Buddhism which in the eyes of many marked it out as superior to Christianity.

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[32] Susie Carson Rijnhart, *With the Tibetans in Tent and Temple*, New York, 1901, 125.

[33] As Walter Medhurst summarized in 1838, "the celibacy, tonsure, professed poverty, secluded abodes, and peculiar dress of the priest: the use of the rosary, candles, incense, holy water, bells, images and relics, in their worship; their belief in purgatory, with the possibility of praying souls out of its fires [...] are all such striking coincidences, that the Catholic missionaries were greatly stumbled at the resemblance between the Chinese worship and their own [...] and some of them thought that the author of evil had induced these pagans to imitate the manners of holy mother church, in order to expose her ceremonies to shame" (Walter H. Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects*, London, 1938, 217–18).

[34] Possible historical contacts between Christians and Buddhists are discussed by B. Schneider, "The Question of Buddhism's Influence on Christianity Re-opened", in *Fragments of Infinity: Essays in Religion and Philosophy,* A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Huston Smith, ed. Arvind Sharma, Bridport, 1991, 251–71. Besides, worth mentioning are: W. L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity: Some bridges of Understanding,* London, 1962; D. A. Fox, *Buddhism, Christianity and the Future of Man,* Philadelphia, 1972; M. Pye, R. Morgan, *The Cardinal Meaning, Essays in Comparative Hermeneutics: Buddhism and Christianity*, The Hague, 1973; H. Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism,* La Salle (Ill.), 1974.

[35] Raphaël Liogier, *Jésus, Bouddha d'Occident*, Calmann-Lévy, 1999, 18, 169, 233.

One feature of the nineteenth-century Buddhist scholarship that still prevalent today is the tendency to offer a prescriptive account of Buddhism and to associate 'authentic Buddhism' with the teachings of the founder, a trait that might be called a 'nostalgia for the origins'. Eventually, "Buddha-Dharma first became Buddhism, and then Buddhism became a world religion. By the beginning of the twentieth century it had its own Bible, commandments, fundamental principles agreed to by all 'Buddhist' sects, and its international conferences". [36] The consequence of this trend was that 'pure' or 'authentic Buddhism' became located not in the experiences, lives or actions of living Buddhists in Asia but rather in the university libraries and archives of Europe – specifically in the edited manuscripts and translations carried out under the aegis of Western Orientalists.

The responses of missionaries and of Western scholarship to Buddhism were especially mixed towards the more esoteric of its Tantric, VajrayŪna aspects. 'Tantra', a notoriously vague term used generally to designate an Indian movement that made use of activities traditionally proscribed in the religious path, most notably sexual intercourse, was regarded by the nineteenth and early twenty century orientalists as the most depraved of abominations.[37] Images of sexuality, violence, bestiality, power and magic abound in VajrayŪna texts and continue to color the West's image of Tantric religion. Since the early missionary rapports Tantrism was located as the final, decadent, decline phase of Indian Buddhism. Such regard went back at least to 1730, when the Capuchin missionary Orazio della Penna described the tantric literature of Tibet:

> I have not read this infamous and filthy law of Khiute [tantra], so as not to stain my mind, and because it is unnecessary. For to confute it one must know in the abstract of what it treats, and there is little good or indifferent that is not mixed up with much more witchcraft, magic incantations, and obscenity.[38]

Conceptions of sensual indulgence and sexual depravity of the Tantric tradition suggested to the narrative imagination of the nineteenth century the classical archetype of the "decline and fall". As it was recently shown by Christian K. Wedemeyer, even

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[36] Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination,* London, 1992, 91.

[37] As Hugh B. Urban it expresses, "neither simply the result of an indigenous evolution nor a mere Orientalist fabrication, Tantra is a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish fulfillments, at once native and Other, which strikes to the heart of our constructions of the exotic Orient and of the contemporary West. […] We might say that Tantra serves as a kind of Rorschach test or psychological mirror of the changing moral and sexual attitudes of the past two hundred years" (Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra. Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Berkeley, 2003, 3, 7).

[38] *Narratives of the Mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*, ed. Clements R. Markham, London: Trübner and Company, 1879, 338. On the difficulties surrounding the term 'tantra', see Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness, Uses of the Heart SÎtra*, Princeton, 1996, 78–104.

the disappearence of Buddhism in India was explained by such narration.[39] Because of this, among various forms of Buddhism, exactly Tibetan VajrayŪna was seen as most degenerate and inauthentic, and not deserving the designation of 'Buddhism', and instead was labeled 'Lamaism".[40] And with the rise in Europe of the academic study of Buddhism, 'Lamaism' was the pejorative term used to describe the state to which the original teachings of the Buddha had sunk in the centuries since his death. For those scholars connected with the missionaries, such as M. Monier-Williams, the root cause of the corruption lay in the Buddha himself, who denied the existence of human aspirations to the transcendent, who rejected the possibility of a supernatural force that could aid in the struggle for salvation, who could find no place in his system for a Ruler of the Universe.

The appearance of Buddhism came at a time of a tremendous cultural, political and industrial turmoil in Europe. The break-up of European consciousness into its rational and romantic components was crucial in determining the West's understanding of Buddhism.

> At the same time that Europeans were consciously constructing a map of oriental ideas to satisfy their rational intellects, they were unconsciously fashioning 'the contours of an imaginal landscape' that appealed to their romantic longings. No matter wheter they detested or admired the East, a concern common to rationalists and romantics alike was how their images of the Orient could best serve their Eurocentric interests.[41]

Without any doubt, the poem *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold, symphatetically retelling the Buddha's glory, was one the most popular long Victorian poems. First published in 1879, it went through at least a hundred editions in England and America, and was translated into numerous languages. As a result of its popularity, there was an enormous upsurge in the awarness of, and interest in, Buddhism in Europe along with which went a polarization in attitudes towards it. Enormous interest has been shown in the question of the relationship between Buddhism and new, modern science. The doctrine of rebirth appeared to have compatibility with an evolutionary, biological view of the world inspired by Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859). Anti-evolutionary fervour corresponded with the most savage criticisms of the

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[39] Christian K. Wedemeyer, "Tropes, Typologies, and Turnarounds: A Brief Genealogy of the Historiography of Tantric Buddhism", *History of Religions* 40, 3 (2001): 223–59. Also Alex Wayman, "Observations on the History and Influence of the Buddhist Tantra in India and Tibet", in *Studies in the History of Buddhism*, ed. A. K. Narain, Delhi, 1980, 361.

[40] On the European construction of 'Lamaism', see Donald S. Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la. Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, Chicago, 1998, 15–45. The term itself comes from Chinese usage *lama jiao* "the teaching of lamas" from which 'Lamaism' seems to derive. Perhaps the first occurrence of this term in a European language appears in the reports of the German naturalist Peter Simon Palls in 1769.

[41] Batchelor, 1994, 254. More on the perception of the Tibetan Buddhism in the West see: *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*, ed. Thierry Dodin, Heinz Rather, Boston, 2001.

Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, and Buddhism was almost unquestionably assumed to be essentially an atheistic system. Buddhism and biology presented a united front against the biblically inspired view of man as qualitatively unique, and the incompability of both with biblical anthropology appeared threatening to all churchmen. In the nineteenth century, Buddhist philosophy and cosmology were often appealed to as compatible with the Newtonian physics of the day based on the Cartesian premises. Even today comparisons are made between quantum mechanics and the 'new physics' on the one hand with the non-substantialism and non-dualism of MahāyāNa Buddhist thought.[42] Increasingly, connections are also being made between transpersonal and depth psychologies and Buddhist meditative traditions.

Conclusions

By way of concluding, we may say that with the discovery and translation of Sanskrit, PāLi, Tibetan and Chinese texts, romantic and Victorian Orientalism invented and controlled Buddhism, casting it in the role of the mimetic other. In the Western imagination, Buddhism is the most recent of the major world religions, its construction and interpretation reaching back a mere century and a half. Buddhism has been represented in the Western imagination in a manner that reflects specifically Western concerns, interests, and aspirations. Europeans saw themselves as possessing the criteria upon which the judgement of the religious, social, and cultural value of Buddhism could be based. Buddhism was constructed, essentialized and interpreted through Western images of the Oriental mind that provided ideological strategies and hermeneutic filter. These images and provisional theories shaped the course of the initial scholarly research and provided the general structure to the emerging field of knowledge. Indigenous Asian Buddhist cultures were generally cast as the inverse of the progressive, post-Enlightenment civilization of the European colonizers. Thus, these nineteenth and early twentieth century constructions and images of Buddhism are part of the legacy of colonialism and of Christian idiosyncracy.

The history of the Western reaction to Buddhism has been much wider than the limited circles of Buddhologists; it embraces the concerns of science, arts, religions, psychotherapy, cross-cultural psychology, and others. European advocates of Buddhism, from Schopenhauer onwards, have always been impressed by the compatibility of its doctrines with their own way of seeing the world. In fact, there have been many Buddhisms in the Western imagination, although they all grew from the same imaginative context. The ideas of what Buddhism is and what it is not, are very

[42] The striking similarities between Buddhist description of reality and some of the findings of quantum physics have been frequently noted, above all in Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (Shambhala Publication, 1976). For more recent comparisons see: B. Alan Wallace (ed.), *Buddhism and Science: Breaking New Ground*, Columbia University Press, 2003.

much the product of the contingent historical circumstances and the evolution of the modern tradition of interpretation. The task of the early Buddhologists was to create a coherent set of concepts by which the Buddhist cultures can be made familiar and thereby unthreatening to Western interests. It was always customary to describe Buddhist traditions employing ideological and rhetorical dimensions of Christianity, which offered the only model then understood for such descriptions. Thus, the function of Buddhism, and of the East in general, becomes that of helping the West define its own self-image. It is well know that the goal of the Buddhist ethics and meditative practices is 'to see the reality as it is', or speaking in Buddhist terms, *yatha bhuta.* Looking to the future of post-Orientalist Buddhology we might say that its purpose is to approach as close as possible the historical and cultural reality of what Buddhism is.

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