

The emerging Euroyâna

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ALTHOUGH A COMPARATIVE NEWCOMER, Buddhism is gradually gaining the status of a generally accepted European religion. Increasing numbers of new practitioners are attracted by a religious tradition that has come to Europe in a colourful form shaped by the major cultures of Asia. For the Buddhist communities themselves the most interesting question is probably whether this fascination with an apparently exotic religion reveals only a temporary fashion or whether the Buddha's message will be established as a true alternative to Christian culture. For Christians, on the other hand, the main issue concerns the motives for these rather silent conversions, as they obviously indicate some inadequacy in the spirituality offered by the churches.

Buddhism in Europe today covers a wide spectrum of social realities, from its position as an official state religion in the Russian Kalmyk Republic, which has a traditional population of Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhists, to a relatively recent presence in countries which traditionally have a Catholic majority. The following reflections will not present a sociological overview of the dissemination of Buddhist groups in European countries. The main issue will be to underline the impressive capacity for inculturation which this ancient religion repeatedly showed on its way from India to such different worlds as China, Korea or Japan.

A 'third turning of the wheel'

Because of the uncertainty of varying degrees of affiliation, obtaining reliable statistics on the figures of European Buddhists is quite difficult. At times it proves almost impossible to distinguish between serious Buddhist communities and other groups that simply propagate 'oriental' ideas. For instance, one of the most evident cases of an unfounded claim to Buddhist roots is that of Scientology, which has a conflicting orientation but attempts to dress up its commercial interests with some exotic glamour.

At present, a fascinating development of a Western, and particularly European, Buddhism is taking place; in traditional terminology one might consider this a 'third turning of the wheel' after the constitution of the classical Buddhist confessions of Theravada and Mahâyâna. Not

unlike the ancient period of intense cultural exchange in the wake of an early 'globalization' of commercial relations along the Silk Road, Buddhism today faces once more the challenge of succeeding in the face of a different world-view, with similar difficulties in translating its sacred texts, developing a new terminology and adapting to formerly unknown cultural and religious traditions. It is the birth of a new and ultimate vehicle, a 'Euroyâna', that is going to make Buddhism truly a world religion in the sense that it will have entered into the most distant culture, in terms of both geography and underlying religious ideas.

Buddhist mission to Europe originally began under the great Indian Emperor Ashoka (third century BCE) with a few sporadic missions to Epirus; it finds its completion today as a late consequence of colonialism with a massive arrival of Asian immigrants as well as with European seekers who are reaching out for a new cultural synthesis. The latter, rather passive mission, by way of questioning, greatly resembles the early model of the famous dialogue between the Greek king Milinda (Menandros) and the Buddhist monk Nâgasena (documented in the *Milindapañha*, first century BCE).

Two complementary mission strategies

The contemporary religious landscape closely resembles the pattern of the two interacting halves in the symbolic representation of the Tao. On one side, Western Christianity has established its presence in all cultural areas of the world whereas, on the other side, virtually all religious traditions of the world can be encountered in any local Christian community. In the case of the Buddhist-Christian encounter, the polarity of interaction is currently shaped by a dynamic inculturation process that reflects complementary mission strategies. Differently from Christianity, which has largely followed the biblical directive of an outgoing mission ('Go into all the world and proclaim'), Buddhism has known how to entice the curious to 'come and see' and thus familiarize themselves with the way of the Buddha.

Such an indirect mission is countered with the observation that, historically, Europe has not been the source of any of the great religious traditions of the world; it has, however, willingly accepted and amalgamated them with its own native traditions (Graeco-Roman, Germanic, Slavic). The splendid world of medieval Christendom with its homogeneity of religious, political and cultural dimensions held together under one spiritual authority appears as a bright and unsurpassed *summa culturae* which in turn has been exported into other parts

of the world, through mission, colonialism, and economical and technical dominance. The historic arrival of Christianity in Europe (Acts 16:9: 'Come over and help us') seems symbolic of the European capacity for welcoming other traditions if they prove helpful. The present situation of spiritual restlessness seems ideally suited to welcoming once again a religious tradition from abroad into the integrative process that is going to shape the cultural pattern of the new millennium.

Buddhist presence in Europe is primarily the result of a diffusion of ideas rather than of a systematic mission. Over the last centuries, Buddhism has been perceived as a kind of religious and ethical humanism, attractive primarily because considered a valid alternative to dogmatic and institutional forms of religion. The European heritage provides a broad stream of ideas that has prepared the ground for a formal conversion to Buddhism; the Christian and humanist traditions of the West explain many of the motives that have set in motion a process of independent searching. In this regard, European Buddhism represents the latest phase of an ongoing process of spiritual emancipation that, with the arrival of Asian ideas, finally has found its integrative element. To understand this emerging pattern, one needs simultaneously to study the canon of Buddhist texts and the history of Western humanism.

Glimpses into history

The cultural crisis in the wake of colonialism has prompted both a revival within traditional Asian Buddhism and the conviction that there is an important mission towards a spiritually impoverished Occident. Yet the path for the diffusion of Buddhism in the West has also been prepared by a stream of European thinkers. In a first period, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, European intellectuals came into contact with Eastern lore and were attracted by a congenial philosophy. Some, such as Friedrich Schlegel, discovered a 'most romantic' nature mysticism, others, like Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American Transcendentalists, were attracted by the monistic idealism, while still others followed the pessimistic world-view of Arthur Schopenhauer or Richard Wagner. On the one hand, this process of literary and philosophical encounters continued on a wider basis; the names of Hermann Hesse (*Siddhartha*), Bertolt Brecht, and Carl G. Jung stand for a broad reception of Oriental ideas. On the other hand, diffused feelings about a 'decline of the Occident' (Oswald Spengler) have prepared the ground

for a positive reception of Oriental ideas as a dawning 'light of Asia' (Edwin Arnold, 1879).

A second current, advocating a convergence of Eastern religions and Western occultism, can be dated from 1875, with the foundation in New York of the Theosophical Society by H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott. Leaving aside here the influence of Olcott on the revival of Buddhism in Śrī Lanka, it can be observed that the theosophical mediation of Buddhist ideas to the West has created a very distorted image of an 'atheist' religion in sharp contrast to Christianity. A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), based upon spiritualist theories, has become a reference text for most theosophists and has created the myth of a 'perennial religion' that finds its purest expression in Buddhism. The objectives of the Theosophical Society found their ideal vehicle in the propagation of Buddhism, reducing it, however, to a gnostic-occult tradition that has impeded an objective approach to the genuinely religious aspects of Buddhist practice. Some leading Western Buddhists, like Christmas Humphreys and Edward Conze, have been members of the Theosophical Society. The esoteric and psychological reductions of such a 'perennial religion' of humankind have, incidentally, anticipated basic tenets of the contemporary New Age movement which favours Buddhist meditation as a technical tool for mental well-being. Religious pragmatism, metaphysical scepticism as well as doctrinal and ethical relativism seem to find viable models in Buddhist practice.

A third phase of missionary encounter began with the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) and the subsequent activities of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870–1966) in the West. While Dharmapala, under theosophical influence, emphasized the renaissance of traditional Buddhism as compatible with Western religion, Suzuki simultaneously popularized Zen Buddhism in the West and Swedenborgian ideas in Japan. His many expositions of Buddhist thought have influenced many generations of Western seekers and have established a solid tradition of American Zen as an alternative religion. This wave of Buddhist propagation has now reached Europe as well.

The literati of the beat generation, for example Jack Kerouac and Gerry Snyder, have further popularized this form of Buddhism. Circles of intellectual dropouts, who attempted to live the style of the *beau sauvage* in urban settings, have linked Buddhism with alteration of consciousness. Even new Western-style Buddhist sutras have been composed. What the historian Ernst Benz labelled as 'Zen-snobism'

has become an underlying stream of the counter-culture of the sixties; New Age centres are its most active promoters. In Europe, some independent meditation masters, like Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1896–1988), have created a type of European spirituality integrated with many Buddhist ingredients.

The problem of taking cuttings of Zen practice from its Buddhist roots to graft onto the tree of Christian contemplation has become acute with the establishment of a Christian Zen tradition by Japanese Zen Masters like Harada, Yasutani, Yamada and Kubota, who accepted Christian practitioners. Fr Hugo M. Enomiya-Lassalle SJ (1899–1990) has become the most prominent figure, giving rise to a new lineage of 'authorized' transmission. Under the guidance of Yamada Roshi more than twenty non-Japanese Christians (from India, the Philippines, the USA, Canada, Germany and Switzerland) have been granted authority to transmit the teaching; still, it has never been clarified to what extent they can be considered authentic Zen masters. Fr Willigis Jäger OSB expresses the matter succinctly: 'Many can argue whether a Christian can validly do Zen or teach Zen, or not. The fact is, I am doing it.'

A particular case of Buddhist presence in Europe is Tibetan Buddhism. Largely because of the particular political situation and the uncontested appreciation of the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader, this most intricate form of Buddhist practice has won many followers. While there is, on the one hand, the attempt to create a specific Western tradition (Chogyam Trungpa [1939–1987], Lama Anagarika Govinda [Ernst L. Hoffmann, 1898–1985] and his *Arya Maitreya Mandala*, Ole Nydahl [1941–]), it is, on the other, largely the traditional outlook that attracts. Esoteric rituals and temple work, intense meditations and monastic discipline point to a genuine desire to undergo serious religious training over a long period. Recognition in 1987 of the Spanish boy Osel Hita Torres as reincarnation of the deceased Lama Yeshe discloses the obvious attempt to give Tibetan Buddhism a truly European face.

Some Euroyâna varieties

The silent spreading of Asian values once more challenges European receptivity and capacity for synthesis. It needs little imagination to characterize the next millennium as a multi-religious paradigm. Typical of periods of cultural transition, which have lost the stabilizing support of traditional institutions, is the free play of integrative dynamics. Since Buddhism is primarily a path and a condition of mental awareness

rather than a fixed set of doctrines, it will be a determining component in the emerging cultural equilibrium. On the horizon appears the question about the predominant elements that emerge from the dialectical polarity between host and accommodated culture; the winning 'code' will determine the general outlook of the leading cultural framework of the future. Here lies the enormous challenge of the present transition where religious preference increasingly expresses a personal affinity rather than a traditional upbringing.

Not unlike the five disciples whom the Buddha admitted into his original sangha, the emerging Euroyâna draws on several different 'identities' which represent the colourful mosaic of interacting cultural streams, namely: mainstream Buddhists or Christians, respectively engaged in mutual dialogue while retaining their traditional religious identities; 'Buddhist Christians', i.e., Christians who have integrated Buddhist elements into their predominantly Christian faith practice; 'Christian Buddhists', i.e., baptized Christians who have intentionally converted to Buddhism and who display the particular attitudes of any religious converts; and relativistic practitioners who indiscriminately accept any religious element from the two (or more) traditions, 'transcending' a confessional affiliation in favour of a hypothetical world religion ('New Age').

To its serious practitioners, Buddhism overcomes all limitations of philosophical or psychological theories; it is perceived as a true religion which transcends human yearning towards a higher truth. Systematic training in mindfulness, earnest search for inner tranquillity, and harmony with surrounding nature develop a capacity to recognize the original nature of things in their impermanence, selflessness, imperfection. Profound analysis of suffering and existential passivity (*dukkha*) as well as of the ever-changing interdependence of all phenomena (*pratītyasamutpada*) lead to a radical liberation from illusions and attachment and inspire ethical principles of universal compassion. The character of *nirvana* (the gradual extinction of vanity) has to be understood in soteriological perspective, not as ontological reality. The Buddhist path to salvation goes beyond language. The representation of God as 'Person' appears anthropomorphic to Buddhists; yet Christianity also has an apophatic theology which approaches God as the secret mystery of being beyond all imagination. The enormous challenge of an emerging European Buddhism consists in developing a hermeneutical approach that will be compatible with the conceptual framework and theological language of Christianity.

Particular conditions that favour a western Buddhism

Religious affiliation has largely become a question of mentality, and modern pluralistic culture fosters religious preference on the basis of a deliberate choice instead of a traditional upbringing. It seems that Buddhism is attractive for people of all walks of life, offering a choice of practices that prove helpful in creating an inner experience of a transcendent reality, however that may be understood and named.

A meeting with Western Buddhists opens almost certainly with the stereotyped phrase: 'According to my practice, Buddhism is . . .', intending by 'Buddhism' not simply any of its traditional schools, but rather a comprehensive 'way of life' that equally integrates philosophical and practical orientation. Such a personalized Buddhist worldview may cover a wide range of aspects, from a preference for an existentialist or nihilistic philosophy to a declared hostility towards church practice, from issues of political non-violence to an ecological-holistic vision of the universe. One chooses the kind of Buddhism that pleases one best. Western 'searchers' thus find a subtle philosophy of life and a challenging ethic that includes the material environment as well as all living beings. As such it is attractive to the intellectual élite who look for a religious orientation that allows rational reflection and offers detailed explanations of the mysteries of life. At the same time, it appeals to emotionally orientated people since it allows them to develop inner qualities such as loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion and equanimity. Buddhism promotes a culture of silence and offers a systematic cultivation of the mind through its meditative practices. Both its rituals and artistic expressions appeal to aesthetic sentiments, while the practice of martial arts supports a harmony of body and mind. Based on subtle observation of mind and behaviour, it appeals to people who are interested in psychological therapies. In a word, the various facets of Buddhism positively match the desire for a holistic eco-psycho-somatic well-being which currently is considered in Western societies as equivalent to religion. The increasing complexity of life demands a value-orientation that is all-encompassing, coherent and single-minded.

An important aspect of the attractiveness of Buddhism is the nature of its truth claim which is methodologically articulated according to a certain heuristic inclusiveness. The honorific title of 'Buddha', the Awakened One, attributed to Siddhartha Gautama by his disciples when he had experienced the supreme truth, acknowledges him as the peerless teacher, though not the exclusive embodiment of the saving truth.

Ultimate wisdom stands independent of the preaching of the Master; it may equally be found in all spiritual traditions, and the first timid steps on the way of mindfulness are as important as its final realization. Parmananda Divarkar has described this structural contrast between West and East as triangular and circular systems.¹ According to him, the Semitic, or West Asian, religions resemble a triangle made up of creed, code and cult, held together by a book at the centre; in contrast, the East Asian religions appear as concentric circles around a core experience of transcendent reality. These widening circles of consciousness, communication, and communion describe the initial awareness of the saving reality by a privileged individual, then a sharing with others of the experience, from which arises a fellowship of kindred spirits, associated with one another in different ways and degrees of bonding. While the triangle appears as closed in on itself, promising a security within at the price of a constant defence against all manner of dangers lurking on the outside, the concentric circles open outwards embracing ever larger areas and allowing for a variety of possibilities within a broad unity. Throughout the centuries, Buddhism has been able to maintain its identity, drawing sustenance from this kind of abiding experience without much need for an outward defence of its position. In this perspective, throughout the vicissitudes of history Buddhism has maintained a positive tension between a dogmatic system (*Buddhasasana*) and a world-transcending experience (*Buddhadharma*), which today allows a creative acculturation to the particular experience of Western 'searchers'.

Meeting points in dialogue

The main areas of Buddhist-Christian encounters can be grouped according to four dimensions. A *dialogue of life* takes place in families with mixed religious affiliation. It covers a wide range, from authentic sharing of personal experience to mutual accusations of sectarianism. This can be a problem between generations or between couples. New fields of inter-faith encounters open up in mixed neighbourhoods, schools and inter-faith prayer groups. Problems of mutual participation in religious feasts or rites for the celebration of mixed marriages have to be addressed, as well as a revision of educational material both for school and adult education.

A *dialogue of common action* for the integral development of people has been initiated mainly by the network of 'Engaged Buddhists'. A particular European initiative is the Plum village near Bordeaux,

founded by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–). The centre's programme of 'contemplation in action' rivals in its outreach the Christian community of Taizé in the practice of integral spirituality. In the field of humanitarian aid, the Buddhist lay movement Risshô Kosei-kai offers relief work in Bosnia. The same movement has recognized the peace activities of the Catholic lay movement *Comunità S. Egidio* by its 1999 Niwano Peace Award.

Dialogues of theological exchange are organized occasionally. The creation of a European Network of Buddhist–Christian Studies, inspired by the American Society for Buddhist–Christian Studies, is under way. Following its international conference on 'Buddhist perceptions of Jesus' in 1999 it is now organizing a fourth European conference to be held in Malmö (Sweden) in 2001. The pioneering interpretations of Buddhism by European theologians such as Romano Guardini, Henri De Lubac, or Hans Urs von Balthasar, have not only influenced the position of the Second Vatican Council, but are still a source of inspiration for theological work.

Although not strictly theological, an enormous input to *academic dialogue* has been provided by *contemporary philosophy*. E. Husserl, M. Heidegger, M. Blondel, among others, have attracted and still attract Asian students. The Japanese 'Kyoto School' (founded by Kitaro Nishida) is only one example of the attempt to develop a global philosophy. Specific European contributions to Buddhist studies have been made in the field of philological and textual studies, beginning from the epoch-making translation of the Lotus Sutra by Eugene Burnouf (1852), the edition of the *Sacred books of the East* by F. Max Mueller, and the publications of the Pali Text Society.

The *dialogue of religious experience* has perhaps produced the most fragrant flowers in the garden of mutual encounters. Out of their common concern for radical metanoia (transformation of the mind) both traditions have cultivated a monastic tradition. By sharing their contemplative life, consecrated men and women initiate a 'core to core dialogue' (Aloysius Pieris). Over many years, intense spiritual exchanges have been taking place in various monasteries under the able guidance of DIM (*Dialogue interreligieux monastique*).

Response of the European Church

In May 1999 a consultation on the presence of Buddhism in Europe was held in Rome under the auspices of the Catholic Bishops Conferences of Europe (CCEE) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious

Dialogue. The task of the participating bishops, theologians and specialists in interreligious dialogue was to review the situation of Buddhist-Christian relations in their respective countries and to offer a pastoral reflection on this new reality, trying to overcome earlier comments by Pope John Paul II (in his *On the threshold of hope*) and Cardinal Ratzinger, that had provoked sharp reactions from the Buddhist world. While former apologetic positions had been understood in the light of the reception of Buddhism in the Western philosophical tradition as a largely negative world-view, the reflections were now focused on exploring some reasons for the growing interest of baptized Christians in this ancient tradition of spiritual wisdom which lets the Church rediscover important elements of her own tradition such as mystical experience, silence, respect towards all created beings, and an attitude of love and compassion. This dialogical attitude is reflected in the final statement that was sent to all European Episcopal Conferences:

The Church sees in Buddhism a serious path towards radical conversion of the human heart. From the Church's own concern to be awake to the Lord's presence, she cannot but be respectful of a tradition which draws attention to the salvific potential of the 'here and now'. The practice of mindfulness creates a sense of a wider silence which nourishes the attitude of compassion. This often overflows into commitment and action. These and other Buddhist practices also encourage those 'fruits of the spirit' – inner peace, joy, equanimity etc. – which accompany an intense spiritual discipline.²

However, the adherence to a Buddhist world-view raises questions about all the central themes of Christian theology, especially about the nature of the creator and the mystery of creation and salvation. Pastorally the dialogue asks how the Church is to respond to those 'post-Christians' who have embraced a very different way of conceiving that mystery. In their recommendations the consultation called upon Christians first and foremost to offer hospitality to Buddhists. For Catholics to be hospitable to Buddhists means, in the first place, recognizing that the Church is a community which is itself formed by the loving dialogue of God with humankind, and is called, therefore, to live out this dialogue in its relationship with all people as partners in a common pilgrimage. This hospitality implies a renewal of the Church's evangelical responsibility, especially at this critical moment in the transformation of European society at the beginning of the new mil-

lennium, towards all those who, for whatever reason, find themselves seeking for spiritual enlightenment outside the visible bounds of the Church. In their search for truth they claim to be seeking for an alternative to what is often perceived to be sterile dogmatism. They often feel the Church to be overly institutionalized, relying upon outdated and incomprehensible language. Many complain of missing an adequate initiation into personal prayer, meditation and the experience of integral salvation.

Among pastoral priorities it is recommended that attention be given to the provision of adequate resources for formation and information. Pastoral centres with responsibility for catechesis should take into account the needs arising from the growing presence of 'new' Buddhists in Europe. The activities of these centres imply the need for specialists and the formation of people competent to identify principles of spiritual and theological discernment and to exercise a *diaconia veritatis* (*Fides et ratio* 2, 50). Ways need to be found to bring together adequate resources and reliable materials for education at both school and adult levels, for celebration of inter-faith encounters between Buddhists and Christians, and for various sensitive pastoral issues, such as the spiritual accompaniment of inter-faith marriages, hospital and prison chaplaincies etc.

In short, the dynamics of a Buddhist inculturation into the spiritual landscape of Europe are calling the Church to an intense dialogue on the level of spiritual experience, urging her to translate the bold mission statement of John Paul II into a pastoral programme of witnessing to a Christian identity nourished by the experience of God: 'My contact with representatives of the non-Christian spiritual traditions, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation.' In the shrinking world of today, this concluding vision of the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (91), on the missionary mandate of the Church, still has to be spelled out in the context of an emerging Euroyâna.

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NOTES

- 1 'What is wrong with our religion?', *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998), pp 916–919.
- 2 The *Domus Aurea Paper*, quoted in *Pro Dialogo*, Bulletin 102, 1999, p 343.