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HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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BUDDHA GOES WEST

Richard Gere, Tina Turner, Allen Ginsberg, Brad Pitt – these well-known figures are all fascinated by Buddhism, and are famous examples of the ever stronger influence of this Asian religion on western culture. At the same time, the cultural transfer into the west – and into other languages with it – is in turn having an effect on Buddhism itself. Professor of Religious Studies, Michael von Brück, has been investigating the reciprocal effects caused in the convergence of Buddhist and Christian cultures for many years. He asserts that religions are not firmly established, but are subject to a constant change process instead.

In the west, he is treated as a superstar. When he visits Germany, for example, politicians of every color line up in waiting, and he is guaranteed all public attention. Ever smiling, it seems he is everybody's darling: the Dalai Lama. In Germany, he is perceived and celebrated as an indefatigable fighter for the peaceful liberation of Tibet from the clutches of the Chinese oppressors. One is just as hard pressed to find harsh words on the Dalai Lama in the German media as one is to find a true discussion of his aims, which are characterized above all by his double role as a spiritual and an earthly leader of Tibet. The most recent example of just how shallow this public portrayal can often be is the recent awarding of the 2008 German Media Award to the Dalai Lama. Chief editors of prominent German media voted to award it to him because his message has become "a power of good beyond cultural or religious differences in global politics", with the Dalai Lama as a benevolent admonisher floating above all religions and conflicts. This one-sided and occasionally even distorted perception of the high representative of a special manifestation of Buddhism is helping to drain the meaning from this persuasion, and to blur its distinction from Christianity, for example.

The encounter between Christianity and Buddhism has been beset with misunderstandings from the outset. "Up until and into the 20th century, Buddhism was a culture of negation, of nihilism, as a retreat from the world; psychologically experienced, but politically naive,"

explains Michael von Brück, professor of religious studies. The critics – from Christian missionaries to Hegel, to the Marxist historical theoreticians and modern protagonists of progress – seldom asked how such an apparently world-detached religion could shape a culture over millennia, legitimize Buddhist kingdoms and create a cultural bond that unifies all of Asia, “a continent that from south to north and east to west is otherwise linguistically, culturally, economically and socially completely different, even opposite.” For more than a decade, the Religious Studies Program of LMU Munich has been endeavoring to bring about greater clarity here by drawing a properly discerning picture of Buddhism and its sometimes very different manifestations.

The west’s first major venture into Buddhism began during the colonization of parts of Asia by European powers in the 17th to 18th century. In the west, Buddhism was first perceived as a rational, worldly religion, in contrast with Christianity’s belief in miracles and other-worldly promises of transcendence. “This went so far that it was customary to understand Buddhism not as a religion, but as a philosophy – which has had a lasting effect to this day,” reports Michael von Brück. “This ascription then became popular in the Asian countries themselves, such that apologists of Buddhism against Christianity – and against the verdict that religion was something pre-scientific – emplaced Buddhism as a rational and psychological system of awareness, and intended to separate it from the religious background altogether.” This self-ascription, as a reflection of western projections, had very concrete political ramifications, and was exploited as a counter-concept to repel the European colonialists, in the wake of whom missionary Christianity was spreading. Encounters with the unknown, as evidenced by this example, frequently lead to a change in the perception of one’s own cultural standards.

“RELIGIONS ARE DISCOURSES”

“My theory,” Michael von Brück puts forward, “is that cultures and religions are not something fixed, not something you can name like an object in a describable and definable sense; rather, religions are discourses.” They are cultural discourses, the theologian further explains, in which many facets converge and in which economic, political, spiritual, artistic, literary-theoretical and even media-specific traditions intersect. Religions are accordingly subject to constant change. In the encounter with other cultures, they can even be downright reinvented – as was the case when Buddhism expanded from India into China, for example. “Not only does it get mixed in with Taoist and Confucian ideas there, it also takes on entirely new connotations in this new language realm.” All in all, Buddhism developed many systems and schools that are even contradictory or in conflict with each other. The school of thought is different in the Indian languages from that of Chinese, for example, where analogies are formed and much is explained by imagery, so that a lot of room is left open for interpretation, Michael von Brück stresses. “The rhetoric changes in the translation into Chinese, for example, when compared to the systematic portrayals we know from Sanskrit and Pali, and the respective manifestations of Buddhism have also had an effect on school and theory.”



▲ The Dalai Lama speaking at the European Parliament. In western societies, he is perceived and celebrated as an indefatigable fighter for the peaceful liberation of Tibet from the clutches of the Chinese oppressors. One is hard pressed to find a true discussion of his religious conceptions.

According to Buddhism, man lives in spiritual estrangement, which causes him suffering and frustration. This suffering, Buddhism asserts, can be overcome if every person directs his focus inward, onto himself. This can be done by a special spiritual exercise in meditation. So, it comes down to a relation of perceptions: "In the Buddhist belief, man perceives himself falsely," explains the scholar. Man is regarded not as a self-constitutive I, rather more as a construct of social networks, of rehearsed interaction patterns and relations. Jesus, on the other hand, does not primarily seek to heal the relationship with one's self, rather the relationship with God. This is fractured from the outset, as the biblical accounts of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel or the building of the Tower of Babel illustrate. According to the Christian view, Jesus preaches a new trust in God. "With that, he heralds in a new era in the horizon of language and imagery of his time," explains Michael von Brück. "The Buddhist and Christian traditions present their beliefs of healing in a different universe of language." His concern is for these different images, myths and languages to be properly correlated. Only that way can a respective understanding between the two perceptions arise – understanding that is in turn the prerequisite for overcoming prejudices and resentments, and possibly even for learning from each other.

While the early, modern disputes between the two religions were largely characterized by academic discussions and religious-political calculation, a new aspect was added in the 20th century: The Jesuit priest Hugo Makibi Enomiya-Lassalle, born in Westphalia in 1898, introduced Zen as an exercise into countless Catholic establishments in many European

A similar thing has been happening since Buddhism started to expand more strongly into the European world in the 19th century. "We are now grappling with how interrelationships of terms taken out of their cultural context and put into other languages, above all into English, can be translated in such a way as to express what is actually meant." And that touches upon an essential point, since one's perception of the world is always conditioned by language, socialization and one's respective cultural background. Michael von Brück takes the word "healing" as an example to explain the translation problem. This metaphor plays a significant role in both religions, but takes a different direction in each of them. In the understanding of Buddhism, for example, Buddha heals the relationship of man with himself.

countries. From there, Zen spread into evangelical circles, into universities and into psychotherapeutic practices. Zen originates from Chinese Buddhism. "Furthermore, Zen is also a practice of mental training, which remains bound to no language, no religion, no cultural forms of expression, but always pursues – in ever new creativity – one single aim: a person who has the same physical and spiritual potentials at all times and in all places, and to allow development of the latter, by which he can outgrow himself," explains Michael von Brück. This spiritual appeal is the root of the fascination that emanates from Buddhism to this day. And for those who hold a more scientific view of the world, there is yet another aspect to the eastern religion that makes it a more interesting alternative to Christianity: This is the perception of Buddhism as a philosophical, rational, psychologically arguing system of awareness training that is superior to Christianity's belief in miracles and hostility towards science. The cosmological model of Buddhism at first appears much more congruent with modern ideas and theoretical models arising from physics or consciousness research – such as a non-dualistic picture of the world that does not require a Creator. "These are aspects that make Buddhism attractive in the west, especially among the educated," says Michael von Brück. The Asian religion is all the more respected for its living role models. "In Buddhism, we have the authentic life experience communicated by people, the mystical dimension, not only in the form of literature, as with Christianity, but also personified in living tradition, in living masters," explains the theologian. This role-model function of certain figures, such as the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, is associated with great appeal – especially in times when many people feel aimless and metaphysically "empty".

AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW ON THE HUMAN BEING

Nevertheless, the Buddhist "community" cannot measure up to the – albeit diminishing – popularity of the Christian church in Germany. At the beginning of the new millennium, Michael von Brück estimates, there were about 250,000 Buddhists in about 600 groups and communities in Germany, "around which varying numbers of interested parties loosely flock." Buddhism draws a good part of its appeal from the fact that every person can change his physical structure and mental pattern by self-reliant consciousness training. Buddhism therefore maintains an optimistic view of the human being, in contrast to the Christian concentration on sin. It is regarded as less submissive to authority, appeals to the individual's autonomous practice and accordingly lands on fertile ground in the individualized conceptions of life in western society. It is this combination that accounts for the allure of Buddhism for many: It exudes the charm of the exotic and at the same time appears to blend effortlessly into the trend towards detachment and separation. In many cases, it is perceived as a kind of fashion religion, as part of a pervasive wellness culture. Buddhism as a source of ideas for the religion supermarket, in which everyone can knock together their own spiritual interpretations according to their own preferences? Michael von Brück sees a danger of Buddhism losing its true character in this development. What is more: such a "sugar-coated" Buddhism presents the economic primate with a spiritual legitimation basis with a self-calming and ergogenic effect to fall back on. On the other hand, he maintains that

Buddhism in itself should not be misinterpreted as an individualistic self-deliverance – as a healing path for the individual. “That is an illegitimate projection of the 19th century European’s individualistic, bourgeois self-perception onto Asia.” Man ought to perceive Buddhism more as a social entity, he stresses: “Man is only what he is from his relations; he exists only in mutual dependency.” The fact that this is not always equally recognized by Europeans who feel attracted to Buddhism is in turn a part of the history of the encounter of two cultures: “What appears as ‘Buddhism’ to us depends on what we want to see in Buddhism, and such points of view change over the course of history.”

Prof. Dr. Michael von Brück has been chair of comparative religious studies at LMU Munich since 1991. The protestant theologian, religion scientist and Zen teacher has been concentrating on Buddhism for many years, and has published, among other things, a historical and systematic work titled *Buddhismus und Christentum* in 1998 and the book *Einführung in den Buddhismus* in 2007 with publisher “Verlag der Weltreligionen” of Suhrkamp Verlag.

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