

## Research Article

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### Debates on Atheism, Quietism, and Sodomy: the Initial Reception of Buddhism in Europe

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### Debates on Atheism, Quietism, and Sodomy: the Initial Reception of Buddhism in Europe

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#### Abstract

The westernization of Buddhism starts in the sixteenth century with the first Jesuit missionary letters from China and Japan reporting about the peculiar "religion of the Fo." Via these reports the Jesuits formed a picture of Buddhism, which was to influence the understanding of Buddhism in Europe until the twentieth century. The Jesuit reports on Buddhism not only comprehended information regarding the Buddhist teachings and practices, but also they were a broadside against religious and political enemies of the order in Europe. The same applies for the interpretation of Buddhism by European theologians, philosophers and academics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The stereotypes of Buddhism resulting from this are more a mirror image of European intellectual history of religion than a serious effort to come to an understanding of Asian religions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century European Buddhism is not only the religion of Buddhists, but Buddhist practices and teachings are being integrated in a Christian context and find themselves as part of forms of New Age religions. The current manifestations of Buddhism in Europe, however, started with the Jesuit missionary letters from Japan and China in the sixteenth century. In doing so the Jesuits formed a picture of Buddhism, which during the centuries was exposed to quite different religious, political and social interests. Very swiftly Buddhism developed from a religion of eyewitnesses (missionaries, travellers) into a head-and-book religion, put down in writing by people who had never ever visited Japan or China, let alone talked to a Buddhist.

Thus the condition of today's research in history of religions regarding the early reception of Buddhism in Europe demands a deeper look into the past than what has been done so far. In my opinion, propositions stating that Buddhism was first "born" due to the social and intellectual alterations of the Enlightenment in the West (Stephen Batchelor), that the early western interpreters of Buddhism were not capable of distinguishing Buddhism from other religions, or the view

that India was the country of origin of Buddhism first supported during the middle of the nineteenth century (R. King), simply cannot be maintained. Another example is Donald S. Lopez Jr., who writes as follows: "Buddhism was born as an object of western knowledge rather late in Oriental Renaissance." (The Oriental Renaissance dates to between 1680 — 1880; Lopez argues for around 1800 as the natal hour of Buddhism in Europe)(1). Similar theories neglecting the early reception of Buddhism in Europe could be listed without trouble. Perhaps the reason behind this is the deliberate or unconscious idea that the more recent the statement regarding Buddhism, the more credible and scientific it becomes.

A close reading of sixteenth century missionary letters indicates that Jesuits of that period already knew more, in particular concerning Buddhism as a lived tradition, than many an Orientalist of the nineteenth century.(2) But the dating of the early reception of Buddhism in Europe also reveals a predisposition, which still has not become extinct even to this day, to accept a religion as an object of knowledge only when its religious scripture is at hand. This prioritization of the written word ignores the relevance of the early reception of Buddhism in Europe. The "late birth" of Buddhism in Europe, however, also coincides with the labour pains of Indology and Science of Religion as academic subjects. Thus the Buddhist discourse obtained its legitimacy and scientific authority, which fortunately was to differ prominently from the "falsified" information of the missionaries and the travel authors. Apparently the idea endures that pre-written and pre-scientific sources regarding Buddhism are either apologetic (missionaries) or, as in the case of the travel authors, only served to stimulate the baser instincts in order to develop the sale of their books. Naturally the missionary letters were permeated with apologetics and the travel writers exaggerated, but this hardly distinguishes them from the works of the Indologists and scholars of religion of the nineteenth century. The fact that the early reception of Buddhism in Europe was based on something other than the spread of Buddhist sutras does not mean that the second-hand information of the missionaries and the travel writers had less influence on the developing and changing understanding of Buddhism in Europe.

Perhaps one still could argue for the neglect of this type of reception of Buddhism, had it not included characterizations of Buddhism that not only influenced eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars, but to this day are an essential element of the European discourse on Buddhism. The westernization of Buddhism is therefore by no means only a phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; instead it commenced in the sixteenth century with the first Jesuit missionary letters, which reported about the extraordinary "religion of the Fo."

All Jesuit missionaries were obliged to maintain contact by letter with the General of the Society in Rome or with their priors in the home provinces. This policy was already initiated by Ignatius of Loyola (1491 — 1556) with the intention of strengthening the feeling of belonging of the missionaries, being dispersed throughout the world, to the Society of Jesus. Furthermore it was an instrument of control to supervise the missionary work outside Europe as well as the situation in the provinces of the order. In addition, the Jesuit order from the beginning used the letters as propaganda for the Jesuit mission. (3)

These letters, which could be up to a hundred pages long, and were summarized in the so called annual letters, were revised and translated into the most different languages, a task given to stylists within the order who were talented in foreign languages. Thus prepared, the order passed on the letters to the different Jesuit houses, schools, universities, scholars, and to the rich and the powerful. The revised missionary reports became a part of the teaching materials at the Jesuit educational establishments, were quoted at the Sunday sermons, or were prepared as pieces of art at the Jesuit theatres, where this genre was able to reach out also to non-Jesuits. (4) They were also included in periodical letter collections, such as *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (1702 — 1776) or *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages etc des Chinois* (1776 — 1814).

The annual letters, which were intended for large audiences, were submitted to a more severe censorship in order not to give a negative picture of the Jesuit order, Christianity or the missionary methods. The same applied for the different documentations or dissertations that were elaborated by the Jesuit order on behalf of popes or regents, for example on Japanese history, geography, or the Chinese language. Thus, a considerable change in the primary sources had already taken place before a large audience was able to get in contact with Buddhism.

Before I can elaborate on the Jesuit interpretation of Buddhism, the question must be raised whether the Jesuits or the various travel writers were at all able to distinguish between Buddhism and other religions or between different Buddhist traditions. The answer to the first question is a clear yes. The Jesuits could, for instance, differentiate between Taoism, which they called "the school of Lao-tzu" and Buddhism. The answer to the second question is "sometimes" or "if they thought it was necessary." The Jesuits admittedly named different Buddhist traditions like "Jenxii," "Xenxus" (Zen Buddhism), "Foquerus" (Nichiren Buddhism), "Omitose" (Amida Buddhism) or "Ickois" (Jodo-Shin-Shu Buddhism), but they are lumped together and evaluated "en gros." The Jesuits mostly met Buddhism in the form of the Mahayana. Mahayana Buddhist schools such as Zen Buddhism or Amida Buddhism were predominant in their most important mission areas (Japan, China). Until the nineteenth century a differentiation between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism was irrelevant in the European Buddhist reception. Neither in the writings of Jesuits nor in those of the travel writers can a wider difference be observed, indicating whether a report originates from Pegu (Burma) or Siam, from Theravada Buddhist countries or from China and Japan. With this in mind I have to emphasize that, for example, the accusations against Zen Buddhism or Amida Buddhism at the same time were a critique aimed at the entire Buddhist tradition and vice versa.

Ingrained in the religious, political and social circumstances of their times and bearing in mind their self-conception as Jesuits, the Jesuit missionaries in Japan and China did not have anything good to report about Buddhism. For them the Buddhists were atheists, quietists, and sodomites. Their religion was idolatry or superstition; their teachings were against any reason and their monks disobeyed their own rules and cheated on the people in order to make themselves rich. The travel writers drew up similar descriptions in their books, which were becoming

more and more popular.

It is the focus of my work to scrutinize what has become of these descriptions of the Buddhist religion on European territory. How was the information of the missionaries and the travellers interpreted and conveyed in Europe? In order to summarize this, I would like, in due course and together with some of these accusations, to undertake a time journey looking at the history of religion in Europe. I would like to start with a description of Buddhism as atheism.

### Buddhism as atheism

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the discussions about atheism, which hitherto almost exclusively had taken place in theological circles and which mainly had served to highlight each party's own orthodoxy, had conceived new seeds of discontent. (5) Because of the mission reports and the travel literature, the well-tryed argument that if all people believe in God, no reasonable man can question the existence of God, began to need explanation. These writings not only reported about people who had not yet heard of God, but even of a state (China), which apparently was governed rather successfully by non-believers. Moreover, the Cartesian assertion that the material world was incapable of putting across knowledge about an immaterial entity, gnawed at the ethnological/historical proof of God's existence. Another catalyst of an updated atheism discussion was the resurgence of the ancient philosophers since the renaissance, who when read accurately partially spread disbelief. And then there also were the natural scientists, who presumptuously questioned the existence of God. And during the Rites Controversy, time and time again clashes occurred over the question whether Confucius was a heathen, a pantheist or atheist.

The Rites Controversy, which started in the beginning of the seventeenth century, not only influenced the discourse on atheism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but also affected the interpretation of Buddhism as a whole. (6) This controversy concerned the Jesuit missionary strategy, which had pursued a policy of tolerance and adaptation to Chinese culture, and had been attacked by other Roman Catholic missionaries as intolerable compromise with heathen beliefs and practices. The Jesuits accepted, for example, the ceremonies honouring Confucius as a civil rite, which they thought had nothing to do with idolatry. They also allowed converts to continue to perform the cult of their ancestors, as an expression of respect, not worship. The Church finally condemned the Jesuit standpoint in 1742 with the papal decree *Ex quo singulari*, thus ruining the Jesuit mission. This action convinced the Chinese that Christianity was a dangerous sect, and it was officially proscribed. However, in 1939, almost two centuries later, the decree was rescinded by Pope Pius XII, who authorized Chinese Christians to observe the ancestral rites and also to take part in ceremonies honouring Confucius.

From today's point of view it can be hard to appreciate why the Rites Controversy caused such intense and frenzied discussions all over Europe for more than a hundred years. It was not confined to ecclesiastical circles but the entire intellectual elite of Europe felt compelled to express an opinion on this matter. In the late seventeenth century, Pierre Bayle (1647 — 1706) described the debates as follows: "The whole of Europe is ringing with their missions; they

accuse each other at Rome; congregations of cardinals, the Sorbonne, princes, authors are all of a flutter, and have worked themselves up into quite a frenzy over them" (Delumeau 1977:94-95).

The Jesuits tried to defend their standpoint by secularizing and de-ritualising Confucianism. They represented Confucius in their writings as a respectable scholar guided by high moral and social standards. It was this secularized Confucianism which attracted attention in Europe and made Confucius into a hero of the Enlightenment.

In contrast to an idealized Confucianism compatible with Christian religiosity, the Jesuits described Buddhism as idolatrous. Buddhism was considered an antithesis of Confucianism. The virtues of Confucius were opposed to the vices of Buddha. Confucianism represented the true China while Buddhism was a foreign religion imported from the suffocating areas of India. The Jesuit interpretations of Confucianism and Buddhism were broadly accepted by the supporters of the Enlightenment, although while the Jesuits thought of the Confucians as heathen but with high potential to become good Christians, les philosophes regarded Confucians as solid empirical evidence that atheists could successfully run a state.

But what did Christians, Protestants and Jesuits actually mean when they used the term "atheist" as an insult in the sixteenth century? A first answer is given by a Protestant from Lausanne, Pierre Viret, who in 1564 wrote the following in his book *Instruction Chrétienne*:

For when Saint Paul, in the epistle to the Ephesians, called the pagans 'atheists' he declared that not merely those who denied all divinity were without God but also those who did not know the true God and followed strange gods instead of him (Febvre 1982:132).

Thus an atheist was somebody who believed in the "wrong" God, in a God that one did not believe in himself. With this not only heathens, Jews, and Muslims were potential atheists, but also apostatizing Christians. Catholics saw Protestants as atheists and vice versa. Naturally Buddhism could be placed into the multitude of atheist religions without great difficulty. This sort of conception of atheism perceives therefore no contradiction in characterizing a Buddhist as an atheist and polytheist at the same time.

But how would one become an atheist? For the orthodox the matter was clear. Atheism is not the result of human reason, but a mental problem, an indisposition of the mind, which prevents salutary Christian thinking. (7) Apart from the devil, the causes triggering off this "monstrous melancholy" were poison spread by scepticism, immorality, curiosity, intellectual conceitedness, slothfulness, stupidity, ambition, and literature.

Thus one does not attain atheistic convictions through sanity and reason, but it is human volition that makes one an atheist. It are the immoral human beings with perverted habits who want to become atheists. It is their depraved morals that debunks them as atheists. (8)

So for the Jesuits and their readers in the sixteenth and seventeenth century the Buddhists were atheist, not just because they did not believe in God but because they believed in the wrong God, namely the Buddha. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the conception of atheism in Europe changed. It probably was Pierre Bayle who expressed this most effectively. He came to the conclusion that superstition was worse than atheism, that a state of atheists was possible and that atheism did not inevitably have to lead to moral decadence.

A glance at the criticism of superstition within the early German Enlightenment offers an approach to develop this alteration in the European discourse of atheism. With their criticism of superstition, men like Christian Thomasius (1655 — 1728) were positioned between orthodox Christianity and more radical atheist philosophers such as Pierre Bayle or later Paul Henry d'Holbach (1723 — 1789).

For Thomasius an atheist is not only a human denying God but somebody who believes God and creatures to be one and the same thing, or someone who submits God to a higher fate and therefore one who must repudiate God. An atheist becomes what he is due to far too meticulous reflection on outward things. He wants to know more and more and in doing so he stretches the limits of reason, in consequence of which he lapses into an intellectual hubris, precluding the ability to genuine realization of God. Reason becomes foolishness and self-love.

In contrast to this, the one committed to idolatry, the one who is addicted to superstition, is one who, contrary to all reason, takes for God what cannot possibly be God (Cp. Pott 1992:95). While the atheist used his apprehension too excessively, thinking has become stagnant in the case of the superstitious one. Also the moral consequences for which atheists and superstitious individuals have to account are different.

According to Thomasius the atheist, since he does not believe in God, cannot make God the object of his love. And in the same way that he is unable to love God it is also impossible for him to love his fellow man. Only his existent, but nevertheless errant mind prevents him from ruining himself with his immoral life. It is self-love which saves him from the worst. In Thomasius' thinking this atheistic pseudo-morality lowers the atheist to the animal level.

Hence Thomasius condemns superstitiousness even more than atheism. Both lack the true faith, but while the atheist at least can keep his *cacoethes* under control, the superstitious individual utterly turns into the victim of his passions. With the Enlightenment proceeding, the ratio of reason increases until men like d'Holbach assume atheism to be the logical consequence of reasonable thinking. While the atheist was able to improve his reputation during the eighteenth century, the supporters of the Enlightenment impetuously attacked the superstitious individual. Superstition offered them an excellent starting point to demonstrate Christianity's unreasonableness. Obviously lacking the gift of apprehension, the superstitious individual was diametrically different from the picture that the supporters of the Enlightenment had of themselves. They opposed superstitious religions like Christianity and Buddhism using their natural and rational deism or atheism.

For the reception of Buddhism by enlightened philosophers this had the following consequences. The atheistic Buddhism of the sixteenth century had turned into a superstitious Buddhism since the end of the seventeenth century. Accusations stating that Buddhism was atheistic increasingly vanished during the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment's attitude of criticism towards religion and its hostility towards Christianity bestowed the term atheism with positive connotations, making an assumption of this term for Buddhism impossible. For the philosophers, Buddhism, exactly like Christianity, was a religion of superstition, which apparently contradicted the laws of nature and rationality. In the words of Leibniz the Buddha was an "accursed idol." But one ought to bear in mind that the philosophers of the Enlightenment admittedly were part of a group of influential intellectuals that affected the reception of Buddhism in the eighteenth century, but they were small in numbers and they were not the only voices. In what follows, I would therefore like to dwell on the Jesuit's Jean Baptiste Du Halde's understanding of Buddhism to demonstrate that even Catholic scholars were influenced by the changing discourse of atheism in the eighteenth century.

In 1735 the voluminous work of the French Jesuit Jean Baptiste Du Halde (1674 — 1743) *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique et Physique de L' Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise* was published. Swiftly after the first release it was translated into all the major European languages (English, 1736, 1741; German, 1747). Du Halde himself never was in China but instead he relied totally on his missionizing brothers in the Jesuit order and in isolated cases on travel reports. Du Halde conveys that the Buddha called together his followers shortly before his demise: "...and then, to crown all his Impieties, he disgorged all the Poison of Atheism" (Du Halde 1741:650). This came about because Fo conceptualized his teaching in parables and metaphors only during the last forty years, but that he now would reveal the intrinsic secret of his doctrine: "Learn then, sayed he to them, that there is no other Principle of all Things but Emptiness and Nothing: From Nothing all Things proceed, and into Nothing all will return, and this is the End of all our Hopes" (In italics in the original; Du Halde 1741:650).

In Du Halde's writing the Buddhist Shunyata doctrine becomes the primordial and the "real" teaching of the Buddha, who therewith did not preach anything other than atheism. But this atheism, in Du Halde's opinion, fell on deaf ears among the followers of the Fo. Most of them remained with their old teachings, which were all but atheistic: "...and their Doctrine is directly opposite to Atheism" (Du Halde 1741:650). At this point it is very interesting — and I will later return to this — that even the Jesuit Du Halde apparently seems to differentiate between superstition and atheism.

The superstitious Buddhists, who remain loyal to the old, idolatrous doctrine, continue to devote themselves to their rituals and their brainless speculations. They follow the "exterior Doctrine:" "The last word of Fo, when he was dying, gave rise to a sect of Atheists among a few Bonzas: But the greater Part of them was not able to shake off the Prejudices of their Education, persevered in the first Errors their Master had taught" (Du Halde 1741:651). In contrast to the "interior Doctrine" the exterior doctrine is more suitable for the common people, who due to their limited power of comprehension have to be introduced to the

interior doctrine by means of the exterior doctrine.

The Jesuit differentiation between "interior" and "exterior" doctrines of Buddhism had its parallels in the Catholic differentiation between the "exterior" appearance of religious ceremonies and their "interior" meaning. The separation of a ceremony's exterior from its interior dimension was in particular used by Jesuits in their defence against Protestant accusations of alleged Catholic idolatry. This delimitation made it possible for the Jesuits to come to the defence of Catholicism but also of "pagan" religions such as Confucianism. Although they criticized the "exterior" rituals of the Confucians, they however discovered an "interior" core of truth behind it. In my opinion, the reason why the Jesuits did not use this dichotomy for their evaluation of Buddhism in its positive sense is based on the fact that even with the best intention the Jesuits were not able to bring together the interior doctrine of Buddhism and the interior doctrine of Christianity. Atheism, nihilism, and mortal souls simply could not be understood from an "interior" point of view.

After Du Halde had held forth about the abstruse imaginations and rituals of the "exterior" Buddhists in considerable length, towards the end of his writings he starts to speak about the "interior" doctrine of the Buddhists (Cp. Du Halde 1741:657). According to Du Halde only a few initiates, provided with "sublime genius," actually are capable of understanding this interior doctrine. For Du Halde the interior doctrine gives evidence to what nonsense and intellectual extravaganza the human mind is capable of.

They teach that a Vacuum, or Nothing, is the Beginning and End of all Things; that from Nothing our first Parents had their Original, and to Nothing they returned after their Death; that the Vacuum is what constitutes our Being and Substance; that from this Nothing, and the Mixture of the Elements, all Things were produced, and to them shall return; that all Beings differ from one another only by their Shape and Qualities, in the same Manner as Snow, Ice and Hail differ from each other;...[They] loose their Shape and Qualities, but remain the same as to Substance (Du Halde 1741:657).

This substance or this principle is pure, free of alterations and possesses the simplicity, which represents the perfection of every being. This principle does not possess energy, power or comprehensibility. It is the point that its essence is empty of comprehensibility, deeds and wishes. To achieve this, states Du Halde, one must meditate. At this point Du Halde's report on the Buddhist Shunyata doctrine of the "interior" Buddhists, which so far had been rather objective, becomes more polemic.

In order to live happily we must continually strive by Meditation, and frequent Victories over ourselves, to become like this Principle, and to this Purpose must accustom ourselves to do nothing, to wish for nothing, to be sensible of nothing and to think of nothing; Vices or Virtues, Rewards or Punishments, Providence and the Immortality of the Soul are quite of the Question; all Holiness consists in ceasing to be, and in being swallowed by Nothing. The nearer one approaches the nature of a Stone, or the Trunk of a Tree,

the more perfect he is; in short, it is in Indolence and Inactivity, in a Cessation of all Desires, in a Privation of every Motion of the Body, in an Annihilation of all the Faculties of the Soul, and in the general Suspension of all Thought, that Virtue and Happiness consist. When a Man has once attained this blessed State all his Vicissitudes and Transmigrations being at an end, he has nothing to fear afterwards, because properly speaking he is nothing; or if he is any thing he is happy, and to say every thing in one Word, he is perfectly like the god Fo (Du Halde 1741:657).

Already in the beginning of his report Du Halde made clear that atheistic poison was running through the veins of the "interior" Buddhists. Looking at what was quoted above, he now completes the stereotypes used for the Christian interpretation of Shunyata. According to Du Halde, to accomplish a state of absolute inanimateness by virtue of meditation, the Buddhists must cease thinking and feeling. Here Du Halde obviously saw quietism lurking; and the Jesuits were extremely critical of quietism.

In the European contexts the Jesuits connected quietism with Jansenistic bigotry, which apparently contradicted the Jesuits "via activa". The "via contemplativa" exercised by the Jesuits (Spiritual Exercises) was however thought of as a preparation to be able to practice the active cure of souls more effectively. According to the Jesuits it therefore could not be compared to the passive bigotry of the Jansenites. To release oneself from social life was against the fundamental laws of the Jesuits.

According to Du Halde's view, the inanimate meditator merges into nothingness, thereby averting further reincarnations. Nothing remains except for the nothingness/emptiness, in which also the god Fo lingers. In this way the meditator becomes like the god Fo, because also that god is nothingness. This rendition of the Buddhist Shunyata doctrine comprises an implicated accusation of nihilism. However, I cannot imagine how Du Halde could have drawn other conclusions. The accusation of nihilism was long-lasting and in the beginning of the twentieth century D. T. Suzuki (1869 — 1960) still tried to resist it. Du Halde and his Jesuit primary sources lacked the insights in Buddhist philosophy needed to avoid such misinterpretations. And what they read and heard, they appraised in accordance with the interpretive parameters stipulated to them by the Christian faith and the occidental philosophy tradition. Of course there were atomists, materialists and other misbelieving riff-raff, but the conception of a nothingness as the last principle was out of any serious discussion.

Du Halde makes Confucian scholars, which are harsh on the "interior" doctrine of Buddhism, the mouthpiece of his indignation. According to Du Halde the Confucians controvert the "interior" Buddhists:

...with all their Might, proving that this Apathy, or rather this monstrous Stupidity, of neither doing nor thinking of any thing, overturned all Morality and civil Society; that Man is Superior to other Beings, only in that he thinks, reasons, applies himself to the Knowledge of Virtue, and practices it. That to aspire after this foolish Inactivity, is renouncing the most essential Duties, and

abolishing the necessary Relation of Father and Son, Husband and Wife, Prince and Subject; that in short if this Doctrine was followed, it would reduce all the Members of a State to a Condition much inferior to that of Beasts (Du Halde 1741:657).

This was an assessment of Buddhism and its doctrines, which even the French Jesuit Du Halde could sign. The asocial effect of the interior doctrine of Buddhism is focused by the Confucian critique and hence in that of Du Halde's. The quietism of petrified bonzes, not thinking and not feeling, displaces the humans even under the level of animals. The atheistic interior doctrine of Buddhism was a threat to the social order. At this point Du Halde indirectly enters into the stormy debate that took place during the Enlightenment, over the question whether an atheistic state with moral values would be possible. Here Du Halde argues against such a thesis, which had haunted people's minds since Pierre Bayles had published his "comet book." (9) Du Halde sees a qualitative difference between superstition and atheism. The superstition of the exterior doctrine of Buddhism is formed and conditioned by the intellectual backwardness of its followers, pitiable beings who are impelled by their passions and fears. It is the religion of the common people, an easy prey for the cunning bonzes. Du Halde concedes at least intelligence to the atheistic Buddhists who practice the interior doctrine, even though they misuse it for atheistic/nihilistic trains of thought.

The arguments Du Halde uses against these atheists give evidence of his knowledge about the ongoing religious discourse in Europe. In 1735, the time when Description was accumulated, Du Halde could not cope with the atheists, using accusations of sodomy and deviltries; if he wanted to be taken seriously he had to apply his critique using present-day questions. (10) The enlightened spirit of Du Halde's time was open for the social implications of different forms of religions, as the enthusiasm for Confucianism's social politics clearly showed. Had Du Halde held on to the old schemes of faith and morality, faithlessness and immorality, he would probably have reached a loyal, already proselytized audience, but not the scholars who were critical towards the church. The supporters of the Enlightenment were only too well aware of the social values of the religions and therefore they most certainly took Du Halde's objections against Buddhism and atheism seriously.

It might be surprising that the Jesuit Du Halde, in accordance with the style of the Enlightenment, differentiated between superstition and atheism, but in his office as publisher of an influential academic newspaper Du Halde was in focus of the intellectual discourses in France. And at the beginning of the eighteenth century they took place under the sign of Enlightenment theories. Du Halde was one of the Jesuit "scriptores librorum," a group of men who were the "journalists" of the Jesuit order in Paris (Cp. Northeast 1991:3). In their hands lay the publication of Mémoires de Trévoux, in which academic topics were debated. But directed by the "scriptores," scripts and books addressing the most diverse areas of expertise were also prepared. Jesuit journalists like Du Halde maintained constant contact with "worldly scholars," with whom they kept in lively, cooperative interchange.

As the journalistic spearhead of the French Jesuits, it was the task of the

scriptores to observe the academic world, to criticize and to contribute their own articles. But between the Jesuits and the supporters of the Enlightenment there existed not only a professional contact via the written word. Often the Jesuits and the enlighteners had been to the same Jesuit schools and thus they received the same education (Bayle, Voltaire, Diderot, Fontanelle a.o. were former Jesuit pupils). Moreover it was mostly Jesuits who brought up and educated the children of the aristocracy and who administered the confession for their parents. In this way a network of personal relations between Jesuits and the intellectual and political elite of France developed, a fact that all parties appreciatively used to their own advantage.

The professional and the private contacts of the Jesuits and the supporters of the Enlightenment certainly were one reason why they respected each other, even though they had different opinions. In addition it had been the policy of the Jesuits to keep themselves out of politics and to forbear from excessively gross polemic. For this reason a propitious climate for dialogue between Jesuits and supporters of the Enlightenment developed, even though difficult topics such as atheism and morality were on the agenda (Cp. Northeast 1991:34-44). The situation first changed in the middle of the eighteenth century, as extremes increasingly came to a head and the Jesuit order had to fight for its survival, and when a new generation of scriptores took up the nib and fell back into the well known apologetic and polemic schemes. The target of the Jesuit critique now was mostly Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and his thesis of the virtuous atheist. Up to that point the Jesuits had treated Bayle with noble reserve; admittedly some objections were raised against his assertions, but at the same time they praised him for his learnedness over and over again (Cp. Northeast 1991:40-44). But the growing popularity of Bayle's ideas alarmed the Jesuits, which in the 1730s gave way to deal more critically with Bayle's idea of moral atheists with the capability to run a state. For example, the Jesuit Charles Porée (1675 — 1741) did not question Bayle's learnedness, instead he brought an action against his position for "...its lack of moral purpose: based on impious and therefore unreliable sources..." and therefore his "...irreligious argument can never stem from sincere conviction but is always motivated by deliberate ill-will, the 'libertinage du coeur' which alone gives rise to 'libertinage de esprit'?" (Northeast 1991:42.).

Here the honorable Porée fell back on an obsolete critique of atheism, which saw atheism not as a result of the mind, but instead as the fruit of moral shortcomings. Using this line of argumentation the Jesuits accused Pierre Bayle of malice aforethought and questioned his moral integrity. That in turn evoked moroseness among the Enlightenment inspired friends of Bayle. The positions of both parties became increasingly obdurate and polemic gained the upper hand.

It is this context in which Du Halde's critique of Buddhist atheism must be understood. Unlike Porée, Du Halde does not place the atheists' immorality in the foreground but rather the aspects of atheism that destroy the public order. Du Halde places emphasis on atheism's social consequences, which in time demoralize the community, and the state from the inside. In Du Halde's writings atheism becomes a social, collective problem and not so much one of personal moralistic preferences. This does not mean that Du Halde thinks of the atheists as virtuous people, he merely does not use Description to constantly rub in their immorality. Doing so Du Halde keeps the atheism discussion on a textual level,

without offending the supporters of the Enlightenment personally. In my judgment this was a clever move by Du Halde, considering that he was willing to carry on with a fruitful dialogue with the critics. The enlighteners thanked him by repeatedly referring to Du Halde in their own works and by accepting his Description as credible literature.

During the nineteenth century the former atheistic Buddhism that had mutated to the superstitious Buddhism, developed into an atheistic Theravada Buddhism and a superstitious Mahayana Buddhism. Indologists and scholars of science of religion had discovered the "real" Buddhism in the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism, and without a doubt it was atheistic.

Japanese Zen Buddhism can in this matter serve as a good example of the negative attitude towards Mahayana. It was seen as an abhorrent variety of the already degenerated and superstitious Mahayana Buddhism. This prejudice against Zen Buddhism did not only exist in Europe but Zen Buddhism was also fiercely criticized in its Japanese homeland. In course of the political and social shifts of the Meiji restoration the leading religion of the Tokugawa period turned into a superstitious, asocial and parasitic religion, an obstacle on Japan's way into a modern, rosy future.

While an atheistic, rationalistic Theravada Buddhism, compatible with the latest findings of science and psychology, soon was able to attract followers on European soil, Zen Buddhism, like other schools of Mahayana Buddhism, continued to be the victim of prejudice. In the case of Zen Buddhism it was the merit of D. T. Suzuki and later Rudolf Otto (1869 — 1937), to react to these accusations and to deliver an adequate answer. (11) Concerning the description of Zen Buddhism as atheistic, the two responded with an ingenious reply. Due to the differentiation of Zen Buddhism and Zen, between the forms of expression in consequence of the history and culture of this religion (Zen Buddhism) and its non-historical, universal, indescribable and, for rational thinking, inaccessible essence (Zen), descriptions like "atheistic" become less important. To describe a religion as atheistic only makes sense if one is moving about at the level of its cultural and historical forms of expression. The absolute essence, the numinous or the pure experience, is neither Christian, nor Zen Buddhist nor atheistic but it can be experienced by Christians, Zen Buddhists, and Atheists.

### Buddhism as sodomy

The Jesuits' abhorrence and judgement of Buddhistic sodomy was standard in Europe and sanctioned by the Church. The Church condemned all kinds of sexual acts that did not lead to reproduction. Masturbation, anal intercourse and homosexuality were, according to Thomas Aquina, regarded as the worst sins after murder because they were against the divine order. "Men sought from behind what they ought to find in front." (12) Before, Christians had above all blamed Muslim men for these sexual practices, whose preference for young men was notorious. If someone was proved to practise sodomy the punishment was death. Soon the sodomy accusations were inflated and they were liberated from the sexual connotations and transformed into a frequently used slogan used to make one's religious, political and private enemies loose their reputation. Thus for Luther, Turks, Jews, papists and cardinals were sodomites "en gros."

The Jesuit missionaries in Japan and China lament again and again about the sexual laxity of the common people. Matteo Ricci wrote from China: "The entire kingdom is full of public prostitutes, quite apart from the cases of domestic adultery, which are well enough known" (Spence 1985:219). Especially he was shocked about the extent of male homosexuality in China. Around 1610 he wrote: "That which most shows the misery of these people is that no less than the natural lusts they practice unnatural ones that reverse the order of things: and this is neither forbidden by law or thought to be illicit, nor even a cause of shame" (Spence 1985:220).

Among the different Buddhist schools, Matteo Ricci especially criticized the Chan Buddhists, whom he describes as particularly vulgar. Their moral decadence primarily is shown in the attitude of the monks, who make a farce out of their vows of celibacy or even worse — engage in sodomy. Ricci shows no mercy with his Buddhist colleagues: "They live in a truly dissolute way, and not only do many of them have wives and children, which is forbidden by their monastic rule, they are also robbers, and killers of those who pass along the road" (Spence 1985:211).

The Jesuits described the sexual situation in Japan likewise as menacing. There, homosexuality was to their consternation even regarded as honourable (Cp. Schurhammer 1973:170-172). In an open letter from Japan in 1549 the Jesuit Francis Xavier (1506 — 1552) expressed his shock at the extent to which homosexuality was entrenched among the priests of Japanese Buddhism. The priests used the young boys, sent to them to be educated, for their sexual pleasure, and laughed when questioned about it. "The evil has simply become a habit...the priests are drawn to sins against nature and don't deny it, they acknowledge it openly. This evil, furthermore, is so public, so clear to all, men and women, young and old, and they are so used to seeing it that they are neither depressed nor horrified" (Spence 1985: 224).

Accusations of sodomy against Buddhist were particularly prominent in the travel literature. Partially this can be explained by the publisher's demand for good selling books and we all know, sex sells. One example should be sufficient to demonstrate the travel writer's approach to Buddhist moral behaviour. The French Protestant François Caron (1600 — 1673), who lived and worked in Japan for twenty years, wrote in 1645 his *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan & Siam*, a true best-seller. The originally Dutch edition was soon translated into all major European languages (English 1663 and 1671). (13)

Caron's report on Japanese Buddhism turns very soon from more religious philosophical themes to describing the moral of the twelve Buddhist sects. These make taverns out of their temples, where people go to relax: "...they assemble here, and in the presence of their Gods, and company of their Priests, (who are likewise good fellows) they debauch and do those extravagances, which are the concomitants of excess and folly" (Caron & Schouten 1935:43). Ordinary prostitutes are asked to dance and entertain visitors, such as priests. It seems as if no one bothers about these excesses. Because the inhabitants and the priests neither have interest in discussing religious matters, nor in persuading anyone into their faith. Finally, Caron cannot pass over the sodomy accusation: "Their Priests, as well as many of the Gentry, are much given to Sodomy, that unnatural

passion, being esteemed no sin, nor shameful thing amongst them" (Caron & Schouten 1935:43).

Once more I have to accentuate the fact that these accusations were not limited to Japanese or Chinese Mahayana Buddhist but likewise were directed against Theravada Buddhists. Joost Schouten's *Description Of Siam* (1636) may serve as just one example. Schouten, chief of the Dutch East India Company in Batavia, also sees only idolaters in the Buddhists, devoted to a pantheon of gods. He mentions the Buddhist transmigration of souls, eating habits (vegetarian or not), the parasitism of the monks and the decadence and sexual laxity of the Buddhist priests. But his lament over Buddhist immorality could not save his own life. His career took an abrupt ending as in 1644 he was accused and found guilty of sodomy. As mentioned above, the punishment for this in Christian Europe was death. In July 1644 Schouten was strangled in public in Batavia, his body was burnt afterwards and his belongings confiscated.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Jesuits' characterizations of the Buddhists as sodomites were closely linked to the accusation of atheism. The association of faith and morality as well as of faithlessness and immorality was so implicit that everyone drew that conclusion. To live a decent and proper life was only possible within the framework of the right Christian faith. In the course of the seventeenth century, but at the very latest during the Enlightenment, the implicit connection made between faith and morality was looked upon with reservation. To this the Jesuits themselves, certainly not deliberately, added their bit, because during the Rites Controversy they had secularized Confucianism and presented Confucius as a scholar led by honourable ideals and morally irreproachable intentions. By doing so, the Jesuits delivered the empirical evidence that infidels can live a moral life. This in connection with the creeping power loss of the Christian churches during the seventeenth century contributed to the fact that the association of atheism and immorality was interrupted by the supporters of the Enlightenment, deists and atheists of the eighteenth century. Sodomy, homosexuality and immorality had social causes — a worldly problem, not necessarily with religious implications. For Buddhism this meant that the accusations of chronic sodomy to a large extent were moved into the background. If enlighteners vented an opinion on the subject of Buddhism, they would do so under the topic of religion and sodomy had been reinterpreted as a worldly problem. During the nineteenth century accusation of sodomy held against Buddhism only appeared sporadically in cases such as the Christian missionary hardliners or the polemics against the Buddhists after Meiji restoration, 1868. Neither D. T. Suzuki nor Rudolf Otto felt forced to defend Buddhism against accusations of sodomy. The fact that the conception of the immoral Buddhist still was not totally extinct became obvious in the 1960s, when polemic was used against the beatniks and "flower power" Buddhists, who apparently practiced a very free sexual behaviour.

### Buddhism as quietism

Contrary to the ups and downs of the allegations of atheism and sodomy directed against Buddhism, the allegations of quietism against the religion of the Fo was more abiding. Despite their own ambiguities, the Jesuits, since their foundation, repeatedly had criticised quietist tendencies within Christianity, such as the

quietism exemplified by the Alumbrados, Jansenists, the Calvinists, or such Quietists as Madame Guyon (1648 — 1717). Hence the Jesuits condemned in their letters from Japan and China to their European readers not only the quietism of the Buddhists but also at the same time quietist lines within the Christian Church. Quietism degenerated into a catchword, that, taken out of its European theological context, was transferred to pagan idolaters. Via the missionary letters the quietism accusation returned to Europe, where Jansenists or Protestants in that way could be related to heathen Buddhists.

The Jesuits, and as their successors interpreters of European Buddhism such as Athanasius Kircher (1602 — 1680), G. W. Leibniz (1646 — 1716), François Marie de Marsy (1710 — 1763) or G. W. F. Hegel (1770 — 1831), viewed the Buddhist meditation practices and the Buddhist Shunyata doctrine as evidence for the Buddhists' highest aim, the liberation from all action and emotion. In this apathy the Buddhist were believed to become equal to their gods in the pagodas. The western interpreters, however, condemned quietism not only for theological reasons, but also because of its asocial consequences. The quietism of petrified bonzes was a danger for state and society, as it had to result in the crash of social life.

An advocate of this kind of interpretation of Buddhism is the German philosopher G. W. Leibniz. He owed his knowledge about China and its religions almost completely to the Jesuits. The reports of Matteo Ricci and Nichola Longobardi (1565 — 1655), who Leibniz only knew through their writings, exerted significant influence on Leibniz. But he also maintained contact with the Jesuits of his own generation. Noteworthy is his well-known correspondence with the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet (1656 — 1732). Furthermore the private library of Leibniz indicates that he read most of the contemporaneous books on China available in Europe, like Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1667) or Louis-Daniel Le Comte's (1655 — 1728) *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine* (1696).<sup>(14)</sup>

In his *Theodicee* (1710) Leibniz compares the concept of a soul within Averroism and Buddhism. Averroism was a theological/philosophical interpretation among scholastics in the thirteenth century based on Averroes' (Ibn Rushd, 1126 — 1198) understanding of Aristotle. Averroes maintained that the soul was divided in one individual part and one divine part. The individual soul dies with the body while the divine part returns to the divine soul which all humans share. Leibniz wrote:

Die Vernichtung von allem, was uns zu eigen angehört und die von den Quietisten sehr weit getrieben wird, dürfte bei Manchem auch nur eine verstellte Gottlosigkeit sein, wie das, was man von dem Quietismus des Foe berichtet, dem Gründer einer großen Sekte in China. Nachdem er 40 Jahre seine Religion gepredigt hatte und sich dem Tode nahe fühlte, erklärte er seinen Schülern, daß er ihnen die Wahrheit unter dem Schleier von Bildern verhüllt habe, und daß alles auf Nichts zurückkomme, welches Nichts das oberste Prinzip der Dinge sei. Dies war, wie es scheint, noch schlimmer, als die Meinung der Averroisten. Beide Lehren können nicht aufrecht erhalten werden und überschreiten die wahren Grenzen (Leibniz

1879:41-42).

According to Leibniz, the negation of an individual and eternal soul is atheism in disguise. Then he draws a parallel to quietism, probably having in mind quietists within Catholicism (Jansenists, Madame Guyon, Miguel Molinos (1640 — 1696, etc.) who are looking for salvation in the union of the soul with God. This concept came close to Averroistic ideas and questioned the existence of an individual eternal soul. In Leibniz's opinion, the averroistic assumption of a mortal soul must lead to an immoral and destructive life-style because there is no individual soul who could be punished or rewarded after death. The religion of Fo still goes one step further. The Buddhists not only deny an individual eternal soul but even the existence of an eternal divine soul. Instead they seek fulfilment in the realisation of their highest principle, called Nothingness, through meditation, through the liberation from all action and emotion.

About a hundred years later the European interpretation of Buddhism as quietism was still alive. G. W. H. Hegel discussed Buddhism more closely in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*. The first quotation of Hegel renders the 300 year old Jesuit explanation of the Buddhist Shunyata doctrine:

...das Nichts und das Nichtsein ist das Letzte und Höchste. Nur das Nichts hat wahrhafte Selbstständigkeit, alle andre Wirklichkeit, alles Besondere hat keine. Aus Nichts ist Alles hervorgegangen, in Nichts geht Alles zurück. Das Nichts ist das Eine, der Anfang und das Ende von Allem (Hegel 1971:403).

According to Hegel, the Buddhist ontology must lead to apathy:

...seine Bestimmung [des Menschen] ist, sich zu vertiefen in dieses Nichts, die ewige Ruhe, das Nichts überhaupt ist das Substantielle, wo alle Bestimmungen aufhören, kein Wille, keine Intelligenz ist. Durch fortwährendes Vertiefen und Sinnen in sich soll der Mensch diesem Prinzip gleich werden, er soll ohne Leidenschaft sein, ohne Neigung, ohne Handlung und zu diesem Zustand kommen, Nichts zu wollen und Nichts zu thun. Da ist von Tugend, Laster, Versöhnung, Unsterblichkeit keine Rede; die Heiligkeit des Menschen ist, daß er in dieser Vernichtung, in diesem Schweigen sich vereint mit Gott, dem Nichts, dem Absoluten. Im Aufhören aller Regung des Körpers, aller Bewegung der Seele besteht das Höchste...da ist er identisch mit Gott (Hegel1971:412).

Hegel's understanding of Buddhist ontology and the methods and purposes of Buddhist meditation practice doesn't differ from the Jesuits' missionary reports and their interpreters of the seventeenth and eighteenth century on the interior doctrine of the religion of Fo. Even the self-deification of Buddhists through quietistic meditation is preserved by Hegel into the nineteenth century. Moreover, Hegel's reception of Buddhism provides evidence that in Europe the Jesuits still had almost a monopoly on information about Buddhism in the beginning of the nineteenth century, though the Jesuit order had just gone through its most serious crisis since its foundation in 1540, namely the

suspension of the Jesuit order from 1773 to 1815.

In the West the accusations of quietism were not questioned until late in the nineteenth century. First the representatives of the "new" Buddhism (shin bukkyo) in post-Meiji restoration Japan tried to clear up this misconception. They emphasized that Buddhism was not quietist at all, that it was not a religion that existed at the expense of working people, but that Buddhism was a social religion and that Buddhists were productive and helpful members of society, which lived according to the guiding principle that the one who does not work also does not need to eat. Influenced by the political, cultural, and religious changes at home, D. T. Suzuki argued in his articles and lectures for Zen Buddhism's social compatibility. Rudolf Otto adopted this concept of practicing Zen Buddhists and even endorsed the Christian maxim "ora et labora" for them. Here you cannot only feel Suzuki's influence on Rudolf Otto's work, but also Japan's positive image among the German population in the first half of the twentieth century — the Japanese were regarded as the Prussians of Asia. (15)

### Summary

This short history of the idea of Buddhism shows that the reception of Buddhism in Europe can only be understood in the context of the religious, political or social discourses occurring at the time. During the passing on of the Buddhist religion into European culture it was not the subject of faith that was discussed; what really received attention and interest were the theological, philosophical, social, and political questions in Europe, which could be either supported or refuted by Buddhism. Thus the atheistic Buddhists described in the Jesuit missionary letters became unbelieving Protestants in Europe. For the Protestants the Buddhist idolaters became Asian papists, quietist Buddhists became Jansenites and sodomite Buddhists are just like the Protestants, the true whores of Babylon. The Christian martyrs in the Jesuit theatre, which despite the advanced methods of torture used by the Buddhists, imperturbably adhered to their Catholic faith, should not inspire the onlookers to take the next boat to East Asia to defend Christianity in Japan. The destiny of the Japanese martyrs ought to serve as a pattern for the European Catholics, to adhere to their Catholic faith despite all the hostilities from Protestants, Calvinists, and Jansenites. The actual enemy is not a Buddhist, but the non-believers on our doorsteps. The list of how Buddhists fall into decline as empirical support for arguments to harm the religious, political, or private enemy could be continued without great effort.

Through the letters of the Jesuits and the accounts of the travel authors, European ideas and conceptions, taken out of their western context, were applied to the Asian Buddhists. By missionary letters and travel literature these conceptions that were foisted upon Buddhism now made their way back to Europe, where as a result Buddhism could then without problem be compared with the western conditions.

This type of reception of Buddhism is not confined to Jesuits or philosophers of the Enlightenment only, but similar things occurred for example in D. T. Suzuki's and Rudolf Otto's attempts to bring Zen Buddhism closer to a western audience. D. T. Suzuki partially adopted western theological or scientific discourses (e.g. psychology) in order to show that Zen Buddhism is the epitome

of everything Japanese. Rudolf Otto strove to understand the true nature of the Japanese Zen Buddhism on the basis of his numinous philosophy of religion, which was a construct of German religious idealism.

With these comprehensive reflections regarding the reception of Buddhism in Europe I would like to conclude my article. Buddhism had with the help of missionaries and travel writers on its long journey finally arrived in Europe. But how it subsequently established itself in its new home and whether it adapted well in its new environment, is another story of religion, which I cannot tell here.

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Endnotes

(1) Cp. Batchelor 1994:231; King 1999:144; Lopez 1995:2. [Return to Text](#)

- (2) Reg. the Jesuits reception of Japanese Buddhism in the sixteenth century and their knowledge about the Buddhist tradition, cp. Sindemann 2003. [Return to Text](#)
- (3) Reg. Jesuit letters, cp. Correia-Afonso 1969. [Return to Text](#)
- (4) Reg. the Jesuit theatre, cp. Szarota 1979; reg. Jesuit plays on Japan, cp. Schuster 1988:65-125, reg. the Buddhists' part on the Jesuit stage, cp. Offermanns 2002:96-104. [Return to Text](#)
- (5) Reg. atheism in the period from the Reformation to the Enlightenment, cp. Hunter & Wooton 1992. [Return to Text](#)
- (6) Reg. the Rites Controversy, cp. Minimaki 1985, Mungello 1994. [Return to Text](#)
- (7) For more information on atheism as consequence of madness, homosexuality etc., cp. Kors 1990:17-43. [Return to Text](#)
- (8) Reg. the Jesuit discussion about atheism in France during the Enlightenment, cp. Northeast 1991:79-105. [Return to Text](#)
- (9) Pensées diverses écrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne, à l'occasion de la Comète qui parut au mois de Décembre MDCLXXX. [Return to Text](#)
- (10) Reg. Jesuits' criticism of the Enlightenment, cp. O'Keefe 1974. [Return to Text](#)
- (11) The German Protestant theologian R. Otto applied his theory of the numinous experience as the origin and core of all religion to Zen Buddhism. Through his positive rendering of Zen Buddhism, which was strongly influenced by D. T. Suzuki, Otto succeeded in arousing interest in Zen Buddhism in the West. Reg. Otto's reception of Buddhism, cp. Almond 1994, reg. Otto and Zen Buddhism, cp. Offermanns 2002:255-292. [Return to Text](#)
- (12) Hekma 1989:434. Reg. Aquina's interpretation of sodomy, cp. Jordan 1997, chapter seven. [Return to Text](#)
- (13) For more information on Caron and his Mighty Kingdoms, cp. C.R. Boxer's introduction in Caron & Schouten 1935. [Return to Text](#)
- (14) Reg. Leibniz's China sources, cp. Ho 1962. [Return to Text](#)
- (15) Reg. the early reception of Zen/Buddhism in Europe/Germany, cp. Offermanns 2002. [Return to Text](#)