

Book Review

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Le bouddhisme mondialisé. Une perspective sociologique sur la globalisation du religieux. By Raphaël Liogier. Paris: Ellipses, 2004, 638 pages, ISBN 2-7298-1402-7 (cloth).

Reviewed by

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Raphaël Liogier, a French sociologist and political scientist, presents this book as the "theoretical and empirical achievement (1)" (p. 91) of the research he has been carrying out on Buddhism in France for the last fifteen years. Indeed, the book covers a very broad range of issues and themes revolving around the Westernization of Buddhism. Liogier undertakes nothing less than to uncover the overarching processes that have led to the constitution of a Westernized form of Buddhism — both in Asia and in the West — and to shed light on the specifics of this phenomenon as it has evolved in France. The book's focus and originality reside in an extensive and in-depth, multi-level, socio-political analysis of the history of Buddhism in the modern era, of Buddhist organizations and groups that are operating transnationally, and of the discourse of eminent Buddhist leaders such as the XIVth Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh. The book is divided into five main parts, in addition to a preface, a preliminary remarks chapter, and a conclusion.

The book's preface concerns the predominant but diverse academic ways of understanding religion in Western and modern societies. Here religion is either seen as facing a process of secularization or desecularization, as dissolving or as reappearing. Liogier criticizes the postulated characteristics of what many call postmodern religion, one of these being a political disinvestment in "religious affiliation." Even if many groups and individuals claim their Buddhist belonging is "spiritual" and not "religious," Liogier argues that Westernized Buddhist traditions have developed an original political position (p. 8). In effect, the author suggests the present situation is one of "religious disinvestment as regards the national level, parallel to a reinvestment on the transnational level." (p. 9) As far as religious beliefs are concerned, religious and particularly Buddhist discourses have adapted themselves to modern societies in which religious organizations are in competition against each other (p. 10). Liogier claims that Buddhist beliefs, rather than becoming more and more individualized or fragmented, are unified by means of reinterpretations that construct a kind of Buddhism that is more modern than modernity itself (p. 13). These beliefs are being assimilated in different ways according to the socio-economic status of Buddhist groups, either more rationally or more emotionally (p. 13), but this does not impede the development of an overall Westernized Buddhist "solidarist-universalist" tendency valorizing self-expression, global awareness, body-mind balance, and holistic health (p. 16-17).

In his preliminary remarks, Liogier states his three central hypotheses. First, that Westernization of Buddhism, defined as the transformation of Buddhism in reaction — be it positive reactions of adaptation or negative ones of identity withdrawal

— to the Western cultural complex (p. 22), constitutes a unified system of beliefs and practices. Second, that a phenomenological approach, as a methodological prerequisite of neutrality, is necessary for a proper study of Western Buddhism, in order to take seriously and to contextualize appropriately the claims of Buddhist leaders and followers. He then states that the practical distinctions between Westernized Buddhist traditions are less matters of fundamental differences than of "aesthetic choices." (p. 23-24) Finally — and this is Liogier's main argument — the generating and dynamic element in the Westernization of Buddhism is a specific system of socio-political representations. This system, which Liogier calls the "individuo-globalist ideology," is the only common denominator in what seems to be a very heterogeneous phenomenon. Most importantly, it supports a socially engaged form of Buddhism that manifests itself through intense social activism and proposes an alternative model for society (p. 24).

In the book's first part, Liogier argues that Westernized Buddhism, rather than being oriented in an other-worldly mystical fashion, as asserted by Weber, has become a very active religion in the midst of society, and thus shows many of the features of an inner-worldly ascetic tradition. Also, if one is to study properly the Westernization of Buddhism, Liogier insists that one needs to take into account the many conditions that have had an effect on Buddhism's evolution both in Asia and in the West (p. 51-52, 54). The "solidarist-universalist" tendency of Buddhism, which promotes the individualization of responsibility together with the awareness of the globalization of the consequences of action (p. 79), produces an "individuo-globalist" ideology — "ideology" understood as

a non neutral interpretation of what is and/or should be from a political standpoint (p. 66, 67) — by stressing that the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the individual and the global can be "pacified" and reconciled (p. 80-81).

The last important point in the book's first part is Liogier's five-fold classification of contemporary Buddhism into ideal-typical "tendencies" (p. 102-108). The "pietist-culturalist" tendency represents current traditional Asian Buddhism that still incorporates many local beliefs and folk traditions. Also in Asia, one can identify the "nationalist-moralist" tendency that shows up as an anti-modern and anti-Westernization trend. It promotes a strong Asian identity and is at the same time in conflict with existing institutions. The "elitist-culturalist" tendency is purely Western and is a rather intellectual anti-monotheism owing something to the thought of Nietzsche. The other Western-only tendency, the "intimate-individualist," gathers individuals in part familiar with the New Age movement. Last is the "solidarist-universalist," tendency mentioned above, identified with Westernized forms of Buddhism in Asia and with emerging modernist trends in the West. Its ideology is anti-capitalistic, pro-democracy, and universalist; it promotes social engagement through a global vision; and it supports the establishment of a transnational ethic. We find this tendency at the core of "Engaged Buddhism," significantly represented by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh.

The second part of the book endeavours to outline the main socio-political elements in the development of the "solidarist-universalist" tendency and its "individuo-globalist" ideology. The narrative must start, Liogier argues, with the history of the Westernization of Buddhism in Asia. The pressure of Western

culture upon Asian cultures over the last century has been crucial in provoking a reaction and a reactivation of Buddhism in Asia, and, in this respect, the political dimension of the Westernization of Buddhism cannot be overlooked (p. 118). Liogier examines recent developments of Buddhism across Asia, bringing into light roles that many eminent leaders and groups have played in this process. Here Liogier underscores the modernization of Buddhism on the one hand, and the increasing politicization of this Buddhism on the other. The "solidarist-universalist" Buddhism that emerged out of this process was eventually exported to the West by means of a two-fold strategy of increasing awareness of particular humanitarian issues, and promoting spiritual/religious values for individuals.

The third part of the book presents "solidarist-universalist" Buddhism as it manifests itself in the West, mainly in Europe and in North America. Liogier provides demographic and institutional details to support a more precise account of the "indivíduo-globalist" ideology produced and diffused by this specific Buddhist tendency. By distinguishing a "belonging without believing" kind of Buddhism from a "believing without belonging" one (p. 229n1), he asserts a significant difference between the traditional Buddhism practiced by Asian immigrants on the basis of cultural fidelity, and the Buddhism chosen individually by culturally French people (p. 258). Accordingly, this part of the book focuses on quantifying the number of Western ("convert") Buddhists, describing the history of their organizations, and identifying networks constitutive of "solidarist-universalist" Buddhism. After introducing "transversal Buddhist organizations" which are developing beyond specific religious affiliations and national

boundaries, Liogier furthers his analysis of the "indivíduo-globalist" ideology by analyzing discourses by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh (p. 298-312). Liogier retraces Buddhist sources that have been at the core of modernist and politicized reinterpretations of traditional Buddhism on the part of Buddhist personalities such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Thich Nhat Hanh (p. 312-364). In the end, Liogier synthesizes his notion of a "unified ideology of Engaged Buddhist traditions" (that is, the "indivíduo-globalist" ideology) grounded on

the valuation of democracy parallel to a criticism of economic liberalism; the construction of utopian models based on ideas of participative democracy and balanced economy; the exploitation of humanitarian causes as means of proselytizing in Western countries on the one hand, and as means of exercising political pressure in Asia on the other; the valuation of the environment which justifies a global, world-wide management of problems, and a non-violent relation not only to the natural environment but also to the social, which implies a pacifist engagement; the priority of generalized and egalitarian education; the priority of the rural over the urban; the emphasis on the revolutionary function of women; the emphasis on the revolutionary function of the laity... (p. 364)

The core feature of this ideology is its dialectic between the individual and the global, both revolving around an adapted notion of the "environment." In it, an intensive dimension (the individual) is intrinsically interrelated with an extensive one (the world).

The fourth part of the book highlights values produced and diffused individually and collectively by Westernized Buddhist groups, intellectuals, and religious leaders, and explains some observable political behaviors stemming from the internalization of the "individuo-globalist" ideology (p. 371). To begin, on the basis that there is no clear-cut boundary between the political and the cultural (p. 372-374), Liogier argues that an identity crisis is the cause of the Western interest in Buddhism (p. 374-376). He then presents the results of sociological surveys he has conducted in French Buddhist centers, focusing on the question of the "political sensibility" (p. 376) of French Buddhists. He holds that there is in fact no political disengagement but a political reinvestment of French Buddhists on a global scale (p. 397). Globally, a unified Buddhist political culture follows from relations between Asia and the West (p. 413-418). In this way, politicized "solidarist-universalist" Buddhism can appropriately be seen as an "inclusive counter-culture" (p. 450-451) or more adequately as an "alternative culture" (p. 455).

The Soka Gakkai and "Transversal Engaged Buddhism" (which encompasses various Westernized, engaged "solidarist-universalist" Buddhist traditions) particularly hold Liogier's attention, because of their close affinity with "individuo-globalist" ideology and alternative-inclusive Buddhist culture. Liogier devotes the book's fifth part to their in-depth historical and socio-political study. These two forms of Westernized Buddhism share a common ideological background and develop complex strategies to realize their goals. On the one hand, their strategy is to promote "planetary citizenship" in order to solve humanity's problems. On the other, they sensitize people to "new" spiritual values that can

help them overcome the stress of living in a "too" materialist modern world (p. 467). Either in the form of a "Third Civilization" or a "Universal Buddhist Republic," respectively, both the Soka Gakkai and "Transversal Engaged Buddhism" (with the Dalai Lama seen as the latter's chief representative) give way to socially, politically and scientifically legitimate utopian ideals thanks to the mass interest of modern scientists in Buddhism (p. 537-545).

Some aspects of the book need critical mention. To begin with, this is a thick book that would have been more practical had an index been included. The editing lacks thoroughness (for example, a full paragraph is repeated on p. 107) and misprints abound. As regards the scope of the work, any reader familiar with the field in countries other than France will find that these countries are underrepresented. Additionally, the sources the author quotes, when referring to these other countries, are outdated and important ones have been omitted.

Reference to Prebish's and Tanaka's *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), to Williams's and Queen's *American Buddhism: Methods and Findings in Recent Scholarship* (Richmond, Curzon Press, 1999), to Prebish's *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), to Baumann's "Global Buddhism: Developmental Periods, Regional Histories, and a New Analytical Perspective" (*Journal of Global Buddhism*, 2, 2001, p. 1-43), and to Prebish's and Baumann's *Westward Dharma. Buddhism beyond Asia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002) — to name only a few — would have moderated many of Liogier's assertions of the originality of his work (e.g., p. 91, 113, 228). Putting Liogier's work in a broader context, it seems

his attempt to define religion operationally (that is, in non-essentialist terms so that that religion may include Buddhism) is based on a presupposed theoretical and essentialist definition of Buddhism (p. 55-59). One comes to the realization that this attempt is not separable from the modernist Buddhist project which is much concerned with providing a normative and discriminative definition of Buddhism. Finally, though the author states that his methodology must be a phenomenological (that is, neutral) one, political science is the book's main theoretical framework. One discovers that a political perspective has been globalized over other dimensions of the social — in particular, over religion.

Liogier concludes that Buddhism has become popular in the West not primarily due to Western-based demand, but mainly due to a political dialectic uniting Asia and the West beyond specific Buddhist affiliations and national boundaries. This dialectic is at the core of a "third ideological path in response to modernity and neo-traditionalism," (p. 569) that is, a "solidarist-universalist" Buddhism that produces, supports, and diffuses what Liogier calls "individuo-globalist" ideology. Religion in contemporary societies, at least as far as Westernized Buddhism embodies it, is not a wholly fragmented phenomenon, but a massive reinvestment of political issues by means of activism and social engagement. Globalized Buddhism, Liogier states, is dominated by the "solidarist-universalist" tendency, and has become one of many religious forms "being constituted beyond the nation states." (p. 574) We can agree with Liogier that the political dimension of global Buddhism cannot be left out if we are to understand its overt quest for world peace and its proposed solutions to humanity's problems.

Footnotes: (1) All translations are the reviewer's own and he assumes all responsibility in that regard. [Return](#)