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*Le Culte du Nant, Les Philosophes et Le Bouddha.* By Roger-Pol Droit.  
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The overwhelming success of *Le moine et le Philosophe* by Mathieu Ricard and Jean-François Revel (Paris: Éditions Nil, 1997), a dialogue between the atheist philosopher J-F Revel and his son, a monk in the Tibetan tradition, is one of the many signs of an increasing interest in Buddhism. Along with this comes official recognition: in January 1997, the Buddhists obtained fifteen minutes on the Sunday morning religious programs. *Le culte du Nant*, a study of the philosophical conceptions of Buddhism in the nineteenth century, helps to give to this ongoing interest and social acceptance an historical perspective. In contrast to the contemporary positive view of Buddhism, this book explores the negative image of Buddhism among philosophers of the past century. Roger-Pol Droit analyses how, from around 1820 to 1890, Buddhism has been represented as a dangerous form of nihilism by many influential writers. Interestingly enough, this interpretation appeared at the very moment when knowledge of Buddhism became clearer, giving evidence of the contrary. Thus it is on the logic, itinerary and consistency of such an imaginary Buddhism that *Le Culte du Nant* sheds light. After pointing out the contribution of this book to the field of history of ideas, this review will suggest how it can be useful in other areas of Buddhist studies.

As noted by the author (p. 17), *Le Culte du Nant* takes root in a previous book of his, *L'oubli de l'Inde: une amnésie philosophique*, (Paris: PUF, 1989, and a corrected and expanded edition in *Biblio-Essais*, Paris: Le livre de Poche, 1992). This study suggested that the discovery of Buddhism was a turning point in the process of the elimination of India in the study of philosophy. Here R-P Droit scrutinizes how Buddhism is shaped, mainly by German and French philosophers, into a desire for nothingness, a quest for annihilation, "contrary to the very essence of desire, as to human nature and to the very nature of any religion" (p. 22, my translation).

To understand what was at stake in this image of "Buddhism," the author chooses to exclude all occurrences of what we now recognize as Buddhism prior to 1820, the moment when the term was labeled by scholars like Michel-Jean François Ozeray (*Recherches sur Buddou ou Bouddou* [Paris: Brunot Labb, 1817]; analyzed in chapter 2, pp. 61-67) or Eugène Burnouf. Such a choice does not mean that older references are to be ignored; rather, it stems from the fact that there is no reason to assume a continuity from ancient references like *Megasthène Indica* to thirteenth and fourteenth century travelers' accounts or the missionary interest in Chinese or Japanese "paganism" in the sixteenth century.

Focusing on a period spanning from 1820 to 1890—the 1893 World Parliament of Religions serves here as a spectacular turning point—R-P Droit constructs a coherent corpus, that of contemporaries of the scientific "inven-

tion of Buddhism." Within this period, *Le Culte du Nant* looks for changes in the image of Buddhism, inflections in the definition and attitudes towards its supposed nihilism.

The first of the three parts is about the beginning of the interpretation of Buddhism as a form of nihilism. The starting point is 1784, the first meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, the birth act of indianism. This first period ends in 1831 with the death of G. W. F. Hegel, who described Buddhism as making "nothingness the principle, goal and end of everything" (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, 1830). In the second part, R-P Droit explains how Buddhism came to be seen as a threat (1832, E. Burnouf is elected to the Collège de France, the starting point of a scientific study of Buddhism; 1863, the height of the controversy on Buddhism as nihilism in France, England and Germany). The third part, beginning with a growing number of scientific studies on Buddhism and ending in 1893 (the World Parliament of Religions) shows the decline of this conception of Buddhism.

An impressive chronological bibliography closes the book, a chronological presentation of studies on Buddhism from 1638 to 1890 based mainly on Shinsho Hanayama's *Bibliography on Buddhism* (The Hokuseido Press, 1961), which is as learned as it is difficult to find. Such a bibliography is not only a good presentation of a bibliography difficult to find, it's almost, as noted by the author, a fourth part demonstrating the changes in the Western definition of Buddhism.

*Le Culte du Nant* demonstrates a constant effort to understand the changes of attitudes towards Buddhism from the texts and their contexts rather than from anachronistic judgments. The material presented here is not unknown to Buddhist scholars: Philip C. Almond (*The British Discovery of Buddhism* [Cambridge University Press, 1988]) has demonstrated that from 1800 to 1850 a shift occurred from a mythological view to an historical approach to the Buddha. Other historians like J. W. de Jong or G. R. Welbon have given accounts of the birth of a scientific study of Buddhism.

But this contribution is the first from a philosopher. R-P Droit shows how the different images of Buddhism make sense within the different philosophical systems. For example, this method helps to demonstrate that Hegel's views on Buddhism are to be understood as consequences of his philosophy of history, where the negation is a necessary, if transient, moment.

*Le Culte du Nant* is not only valuable for philosophers, but can be useful in other areas of Buddhist studies as well, because it emphasizes that the idea of a "meeting" between Buddhism and the West is greatly dependant on the "host" culture's history and concerns. To neglect this aspect could only lead, as demonstrated with talent in Stephen Batchelor's *Awakening of the*

*West* (London: Aquarian Press, 1994) to write a "fiction"; that is, a narrative.

To sum up the contribution of this book to the field of Buddhist studies, one could point out that little effort has been devoted to the historical construction of "Buddhism" as an object for scientific investigation. So, when describing Buddhism as pragmatic and aiming toward a therapy of human suffering—a definition that would be accepted by most of the Westerners interested in Buddhism today—this book also suggests that this definition might be just as influenced by Western concerns and fears as the previous definition. Such a call for a reflexive approach could be related to the essays edited by Donald Lopez (*Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism* [University of Chicago Press, 1995]) which demonstrated the need to reassess our very definition of Buddhism.