



Lionel Obadia. *Bouddhisme et Occident: La diffusion du bouddhisme tibétain en France*. Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan (Collection Religion Sciences Humaines), 1999, 272 pages, ISBN 2-7384-7570-1.

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The title promises a contribution to Buddhist studies' "subdiscipline" — Buddhism in the West — focusing on Tibetan schools. However, Obadia's study differs from books on this field already under review in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, especially for methodological reasons. Obadia is interested in the diffusion of Buddhism as a world religion (*religion universelle*) as a sociologist and anthropologist who bases his study firmly within the framework of a distinctive tradition of the sociology of religion. Fundamental to his analysis is the emphasis on a difference between the diffusion of Buddhism in Asia and "*en occident*": in Asia it resulted from cultural expansion, which is a process not relevant to Buddhism's growth in the Occident. Another difference Obadia emphasizes for methodological reasons is between "*religion native*" and "*religion électorale*" (p. 3). Since this difference becomes blurred, for instance, in the case of immigrant groups from Asia, Obadia explicitly labels the presence of Buddhism in the United States a "particular case" (p. 102ff) [all English translations in this review are my own]. Therefore the term *occident* in the title and throughout the study seems to be more than a French language convention; it denotes a focus: Buddhism in continental Europe.

Concerning sociological concepts of religion, Obadia's starting points are Max Weber's "types of religion," including the respective concepts of

institutional (bureaucratic) dimensions, and Durkheimian positions. Obadia applies arguments from Pierre Bourdieu's "*champs religieux*," including an emphasis on symbolic systems and that trend of the sociological study of ideologies which came to focus on the importance of social and cultural forces in the production of knowledge. Thus the reader finds intradisciplinary discussions of currently dominating, partially joining trends in the sociology of religion, for example when Obadia formulates his thesis and findings on contemporary Buddhism — as a religion in the classical sociological sense — arguing against the “paradigm of modern religious individualism” and the rational choice theory based concept of a religious market (especially in chapter eight, *Le Bouddhisme, une religion “moderne”?* [p. 111 ff.]). This should make this book part of a renaissance of the sociology of religion, which started shortly before the 1990s and seems by now to be displaying a decisive trait of revivals: exhuming and/or updating. In this case the focus is on the Weberian concept of religion, an attempt to make it fit the sociological study of Buddhism.

On the last page Obadia risks a forecast: Tibetan Buddhism's strength and rapid growth — partially overlooked by Christian competitors on the "*champs religieux*" — might result in the status of the fifth of France's religions (p. 248). However, such a statement is already beyond Obadia's motivation for “rethinking the presence of Buddhism.” He is interested in an apparent paradox: the negation of a social process which is or at least should be empirically obvious since it results in a fact that fits the concept of conversion. Obadia emphasizes that there must be two inseparable complementary poles of all sociological description, “the individual and its social environment” (p. 127). Although Obadia focuses also on biographies of individuals, the findings he raises with the help of sophisticated methodological tools (p. 182ff) are a kind of additional proof of his central thesis: conversion as the social process ending with a “*véritable adhésion religieuse*” is due to the missionary work of religious Asians (p. 94). Without that, “the diffusion of Asian religious topics stayed a purely intellectual predilection” (p. 95).

As the reader might expect by now, Obadia's key terms are those which tend to be avoided in recent contributions to Buddhist studies' “subdiscipline,” Tibetan Buddhism in the West: “mission/missionary” in a range of compounds (*l'activisme missionnaire, Le Bouddhisme en tant que religion missionnaire, l'implantation d'un bouddhisme missionnaire*), apologetics (*traditions apologétique, le réseau des apologistes*), church/sect, and so on. There is not much of a discussion of these terms, except for a statement made *en passant* that anthropologists and sociologists never hesitated to transpose Christian religious concepts when functions of insti-

tutions and roles in social and cultural life are to be described and analyzed (p. 84). The most irritating terminological choice is “propaganda,” which is used according to a custom that began in sixteenth-century Europe (*La propagande religieuse des Tibétains*) (p. 143).

By highlighting these choices, I do not mean to criticize them, but rather to point to a danger for Buddhist studies: we risk missing fruitful insights if we ignore studies where terminology, drive for knowledge [*Erkenntnisinteresse*], or manner of presentation seem to convey that the authors miss the point. These remarks may do for a general introduction to a more systematic and detailed summary including some skeptical comments and concluding with an elaboration on the fact that the 1990s witnessed several books and articles on “Buddhism and the West.”

There are three distinct parts outlined in Obadia’s introduction. However, the book contains thirteen chapters, each being subdivided by as many as nine subtitles. Since chapters one through four are introduced as “devoted to an examination of the propagation of Buddhism from a historical point of view, thus pointing to the emergence of different forms of interpretation of Buddhism” (p. 6), we are not surprised to find an overview from the third century CE up to the nineteenth century’s learned or wisdom-seeking circles. They mark the end point of two phases: “diffusion of decontextualized and poorly understood religious notions [and] the acknowledgment of a specific philosophico-religious system” (p. 73). These stages contribute to, but are distinct from, the third phase, where the missionary work of Asians triggers the first conversions. The founders of and contributors to the Theosophical Society, the Pāli Text Society, and the World Parliament of Religions are classed within the third phase.

Obadia discusses a wide range of interpretations and notions of Buddhism, including instrumentalizations for a range of ideologies from nationalist to racist/fascist. Generally Obadia condenses the information from within the framework of his disciplines in a partially interlocked line of arguments for different purposes. First of all, he identifies influences of Western “Buddhisms” on the development of concepts in sociology (of religion) and anthropology. As a result he can explain a lack of attention to the sociologically relevant dimensions of Buddhism, which, in the long run, lead to a problem with the (in)visibility of institutional phenomena (pp. 71–87). Thus Obadia has overcome an intradisciplinary obstacle and simultaneously shown that the missionary character, because it is a necessary element of the sociological concept of world religion (*religion universelle*), has to be taken into account if one is to understand the implantation of Buddhist religion in its institutional dimension.

Moreover, this material serves the purpose of outlining a phenom-

enon which Obadia sums up as being “totally singular in the history of oriental religions, [namely the cumulative effects of] occidental interpretations of Buddhism, which are simultaneously scientist, esoteric, rationalist, and romantic, and reflect a complex of ideological, social, and religious changes that affected Asia and the West (*l’Asie et l’Occident*) at the same time” (p. 237).

Within this phenomenon different “apologetic traditions” can be identified and attributed a role and function as ideologies, which constructively contribute and relate to that pole of the social process Obadia is intending to uncover: the missionary dimension. To be precise, the availability of apologetic arguments and their exploitation is to be seen as that trait of all missionary work which has been traditionally well-developed in Buddhism: pedagogy. It had been overlooked by the founding fathers of sociology because they uncritically based their concepts on the work of scholars interested in a “pure Buddhism.” Thus the decisive element of the institutional dimension remained hidden, although it has always been relevant for the adaptation to novel social environments and enables missionary work to function effectively as the driving force in the social process of conversion (pp. 73ff).

The fact that the reappearance of essential elements of a corpus of arguments, formulated in a century-long process, amounts to a “constant negation of institutional, proselytizing and dogmatic dimensions” is again explained with reference to a Weberian concept. Obadia stresses that there is no reason to point fingers at the clever manipulations of monks and lamas. These simply display a religious *habitus*, found in any highly bureaucratized (a weberian term!) world religion (*habitus religieux ... religion universaliste hautement bureaucratisé*) (pp. 152ff).

Obadia illustrates the reappearance of the above-mentioned corpus by presenting findings from an analysis of contents of written material, which he found circulating in Tibetan Buddhist centers: schedules, periodicals, “practice texts,” and books (chapter nine).

In chapters ten through thirteen we finally arrive at the subtitle’s “presence of Tibetan Buddhism in France.” Quantitative data (pp. 167–179) from different sources illustrate a rapid growth between 1961–1998 (from none to about 140 “*sanctuaires tibétains en France*”) and the strength of different Tibetan Buddhist schools (1998: 61% Kagyupa). Concerning corporate status, we learn that most Tibetan Buddhist centers preferred to be registered under a law concerning associations with cultural and philosophical aims; very few registered as religious associations.

Obadia himself is skeptical about the value of the available quantitative data, since they contribute little to the understanding of social proc-

esses. The remaining chapters are devoted to proving his central thesis with qualitative empirical data and interpretation. He has chosen a biographical approach, focusing on the career of individual converts. From adequately designed interviews trajectories are uncovered. Obadia found that individual decisions are an outcome of a social process. Thus he can explain that there are classical conversion processes taking place where individual action is a “fruit of the missionary work of monks.” The phases of conversion are depicted (p. 188) not as a model, but rather as a summary of further interpretation of findings. In this context Obadia describes the social environment of a (potential) convert; that is, the daily life and events in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in France.

On these pages a number of Tibetan names and terms are given inconsistent transliterations. This inconsistency is a bit irritating, though one name with an obviously erroneous spelling (“Desiredi” on page 21 for “Desideri”) is not Tibetan. There is also a certain ambiguity in the information provided about the author and his work. Is this a version of Obadia’s doctoral thesis presented in 1997? If so, I would have appreciated some more information in the form of an appendix, for example on the number of interviewees, on criteria of selection, and especially on the centers visited, including their school affiliation. Quotations from the interviews and the fact that no long-time training with a fixed traditional curriculum except the three-year retreat is mentioned contribute to my impression that Obadia remained confined to Kagyupa-oriented groups and individuals, which would reflect the fact that this Tibetan school is statistically prominent in France as the quantitative data given on page 176 illustrate.

Where Obadia quotes from books by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in order to illustrate the reappearance of elements of a Western “apologetic tradition” in the “*propagande religieuse*” I missed sociological accuracy. What about the Dalai Lama’s role as the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile? Here at least the especially designed use of the term “propaganda” should be a problem.

Finally some remarks on the recently booming interest in the grassroots of Buddhism in the West. Most names and positions the reader comes across up to page 114 are well known from several books published between the mid-1980s and 1997, the year in which two anthologies appeared (*Mythos Tibet*, edited by Dodin and Raether, and *Constructing Tibetan Culture*, edited by Korom), containing contributions which sum up the results of recent work. I was therefore irritated when I did not find those titles in Obadia’s bibliography, although it contains references up to 1998. But the title *Bouddhismes, philologies et religions* (Bernhard Faure, 1998) in Obadia’s list may indicate that he could draw on French publica-

tions participating in the same area of study. The fact that Obadia is also informed by Antoine Faivre's *L'ésotérisme*, published in 1992, points to another interesting situation of Buddhist studies focusing on the grassroots of Buddhism in the West: it is interested in a social milieu, in the lives and works of individuals living a century or more ago, which are even more important to another recently established field of research, esoteric studies, which, incidentally, has to tackle a fluidity of boundaries well known to Buddhist studies — the study of xy-ism versus the practice of xy-ism. Although not explicitly intended, studies like Obadia's contribute to our remaining awareness of this narrow passage.