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Geopolitics of Buddhism

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Geopolitics of Buddhism

André Laliberté¹

Abstract

This paper argues that Buddhists still lack an international organization that could help them present a unified voice the way that the World Council of Churches does for non-Catholic Christians, or the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, for all Muslims, whether they are Sunni or Shia. There exist international organizations that claim to speak on behalf of Buddhists the world over, but they compete against each other. The basis of this competition has little to do with the differences between the Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna schools, but owes a lot more to competition between Asian great powers, in particular China and India. The paper will demonstrate this by first presenting an historical account of the different attempts to create a unified Buddhist international organization, along with different transnational Buddhist institutions.

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Then it will review the divisions that have prevented, so far, the creation of such an organization.

Introduction

There are no Buddhist organizations on the international stage that are dedicated to the advancement of Buddhist perspectives on public issues comparable to the way the World Council of Churches (WCC) expresses the views of non-Catholic Christians in world affairs,² or the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) does for Muslims.³ Such an organization could provide Buddhists with a platform to articulate their views on a host of issues such as care of the global commons, disaster relief, sustainable and equitable growth, as well as peace. Without a forum made of independent Buddhist associations, like the churches that are members of the WCC, or government delegates representing their Buddhist population, like those representing Muslims in the OIC, it is even less likely that Buddhists could establish anything comparable to the Christian Democrat International (CDI), which brings together political parties influenced by Christian values.⁴ The present essay examines what has prevented so far

² <<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/>>. The WCC includes churches from the Anglican, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox traditions, and the Catholic Church has observer status.

³ <<http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/home/?lan=en>>. Although the OIC claims to represent all Muslims, it still cannot represent the interests of Indian Muslims, which constitute altogether the third largest group of Muslims in any country worldwide, because of Pakistan's opposition.

⁴ The Christian Democrats International has changed its identity in 2001 as the Centrist Democrat International <<http://www.idc-cdi.com/>> because member parties wanted to attract people of other faiths than Christianity. The Christian Democrat Association of America, which covers all the parties in South and North America, maintains its Christian identity: <<http://www.odca.org.mx/>>.

Buddhists from establishing in global society anything comparable to the WCC or the OIC.

The world knows a lot about Catholics and other Christians' views on international affairs thanks to the declaration of the Pope and prominent clerics heading international ecumenical organizations (Hanson; Buss), but little about Buddhists' views, with the exception of those of eminent leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh (Avedon; Puri; Queen and King). In these last two cases, moreover, these voices are not unanimously approved by all their coreligionists, some of whom denounce them. Christians and Muslims have created many international associations for the promotion of their distinctive perspectives on a wide range of issues, from education to human rights. Some of these associations are involved in humanitarian aid (Clarke; Ferris; Krafess); others promote peace and reconciliation (Bouta, Kadayifci-Orellana, and Abu-Nimer). Finally, some of them provide a forum where different denominations or sects can debate how to solve intra-religious or inter-religious differences (Jukko). Buddhists, however, have had much more limited success in establishing such association. Looking at the role of religions in international relations, Jeffrey Haynes noted, in his study of relations between Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia, that there is no influential international Buddhist network that can influence the policies of these three countries, where Buddhists represent a majority of the population (Haynes 351). Why?

To answer this question, this essay proceeds as follows: it first reviews the numerous attempts by Buddhists to establish a global international organization after World War Two, up until 2016, when as many as three global Buddhist organizations claim to represent all Buddhists: the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB), the World Buddhist Forum (WBF),

and the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC),⁵ none of which has succeeded in being recognized as the ultimate authority for the entire global Buddhist community the way the WWC has tried to do for most of the global non-Catholic Christian community (Pratt). Then the essay proceeds with a discussion pointing to the two factors that have prevented the constitution of a common Buddhist perspective on global affairs.

The first of these factors is the context of the Cold War, which upheld a stark division between Buddhist associations that were created as a response to top-down pressure by communist parties to impose a single identity to Buddhist national associations, and most other Buddhist associations in non-Communist countries that were self-governed and self-reliant, and relatively more immune from state interference. The second factor is the undercurrent of nationalist passions that have emerged during the colonial era: they were dormant during the Cold War, but after the end of the latter, they have re-emerged in new forms.

The Attempts to Achieve a Unified Buddhist International Presence

According to the tradition, the Buddhist *saṅgha* established five Councils to settle disputes between different points of view in the first centuries of Buddhist development in India. Amartya Sen saw in these Councils one piece of evidence to demonstrate the importance of Buddhism in international relations, and also its capacity to reconcile differences (19). Buddhists in China and India today celebrate the fact that Buddhism is an Asian religion by pointing to the scholarship of the two eminent Chinese

⁵ I have attended the 2012 WBF in Hong Kong and the IBC inaugural meeting a year after in Delhi. The Global Buddhist Congregation, convened in 2011, had served as the preparatory meeting to the IBC. See <<http://www.asokamission.com/app/global-buddhist-congregation>>.

Monks Faxian (337–422) and Xuanzang (602–664), who visited India to learn and translate Buddhist scriptures back in China (Li; Sen *Realignment*).⁶ However, by the time of their visit, there could hardly be an international Buddhist community aware of its unity. Buddhism had been steadily declining in India since the Gupta empire era (approx. 320–550) (Harvey 140–141). Meanwhile, between Faxian and Xuanzang’s visits to India, two waves of persecutions targeted Buddhist institutions in China (567, 574–577), followed by two others in 845 and 955. Although these persecutions failed to eradicate the religion, they reduced its economic and political influence in China (Ch’en 389).

A gulf of over a thousand years separates this ancient history and the contemporary world. As conventional historiography East and West notes, while Buddhist teachings spread far in Northeast Asia to Japan and in South Asia as far as Sri Lanka and Indonesia, it almost completely vanished in its former heartland of India. And while Buddhism became the most important religion in the Chinese world between the third and tenth centuries, few people in Western Europe were aware of its existence before its “discovery” in the colonial era. Precluding the idea that Buddhists could have spoken with one voice before the end of World War Two, an important piece of scholarship, inspired by postcolonial theory and the critical study of “Orientalism,” argues that “Buddhism” is a production of the colonial discourse (Lopez). Yet, monarchies influenced by Buddhist monastic orders were a reality in the Thai, Burmese, and Cambodian kingdoms (Swearer), and Buddhist institutions were important actors in the

⁶ This celebration is evidenced by the Xuanzang memorial hall at Nālandā University in the Indian state of Bihar, a Sino-Indian undertaking to honor the monk’s visit to India. This mainly academic cooperation contrasts with the Indian unease over Chinese plans to turn Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha in Nepal, into a major site for religious tourism.

social and economic scene in China (Gernet and Verellen), Japan (McMullin), and Korea (Vermeersch).

Although postcolonial studies have rightfully alerted us to the dangers of making facile generalizations and warned us about the dangers of reifying disparate rituals and social practices into a perennial and coherent “Buddhist religion,” they may have focused too much on the colonial discourse and too little on the agency of the people under colonial rule. Anne Blackburn noted that most scholarship about Buddhism during the colonial and postcolonial era used a framework that emphasized the Asian colonies’ responses to the impact of European colonial contexts. In her book on Sri Lanka’s Buddhists during the nineteenth century, however, she brings forth an important corrective and, looking at the regional dynamics of connections between Buddhists in South and Southeast Asian nations, she emphasizes the importance of paying more attention to Asian contexts (Blackburn). In other words, she opens up the possibility that there were interactions among Buddhists before and during the colonial era that were independent of Western influences.

Making an appropriate assessment of Buddhist actors’ agencies in international affairs during the colonial era is certainly complicated by the fact that different paradigms are used to approach the study of Buddhism’s impact on global politics, depending on whether one studies Buddhism in the colonial world in South and Southeast Asia or whether one studies Buddhism in East Asia. The study of modernity in Asia by East Asian scholars, as the scholar of post-colonialism Tani Barlow has noted, has relied excessively on the paradigm of Indian colonialism to study all of Asian colonialism, thereby obscuring important differences within the region (Barlow). What can be ascertained so far, nonetheless, is that there have been few attempts to help Buddhists speak with one voice on the international stage during the colonial era (Frash). In the post-colonial

era, there have been many international Buddhist organizations and associations, but as I will make clear below, Buddhists have not established a coordinated association that could speak with authority on behalf of all of them.

Some of the earliest attempts to create international Buddhist associations resulted from the initiative of Buddhist associations from post-colonial societies where the Theravāda tradition is predominant. In most of the countries where the Mahāyāna tradition prevails,⁷ the conditions for the institutionalization of Buddhist organizations, let alone their internationalization, was precarious at best, because of war in Korea and Vietnam, or political instability in China. The first international organization whose membership includes national Buddhist associations, the WFB, was founded in 1950 in Colombo.⁸ Although Freiburger mentions the founding of the WFB as the first worldwide all-Buddhists meeting (59–61), this should be qualified by the fact that the Chinese Buddhist community, the largest in the world, was not really represented. Although a few expatriate monks moved from China to Taipei after 1949 and sought to play that role, this became increasingly unsustainable as they grew older and remained cut off for four decades from their followers in Mainland China.

Most of the member organizations belonged to the Theravāda tradition, even though the WFB boasted that this was the first meeting ever of representatives of the three traditions of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.⁹ At the date of its founding, the WFB counted 129 delegates from twenty-seven countries, and grew over the years into an ever more inclusive institution. It steadily expanded and in 2000 it incorporated in

⁷ In these countries, Buddhism is not the religion of the majority of the population, with the exception of Japan.

⁸ There is very little scholarship on the history of the WFB.

⁹ <<http://www.wfbhq.org/organization/headquarters.html>>.

its ranks the European Buddhist Union.¹⁰ In 2014, it comprised 181 organizations in thirty-nine countries on five continents.¹¹

The WFB's headquarters are located in the country of residence of its president. It was based in Colombo from 1950 onwards, when Dr. Malasekera, a Sri Lankan national, was elected to lead the organization, and moved to Rangoon in 1958 following the election of Hon. U. Chan Htoon. Following the revolution of 1963 in Burma, the WFB asked Thai delegates to take charge of the WFB activities, and in its ninth general conference in 1969 the WFB decided to have the permanent seat of the association based in Bangkok, when Princess Poon Pismai Diskul was elected that year to head the association. In 1984, Professor Sanya Dharmasakti succeeded her. Fourteen years later, the President of the Thai Red Cross, Phan Wanamethee, became director.¹² The WFB convenes a conference every other year and uses these gatherings to bring together its different regional centers and discuss ways to implement its mission: the propagation of Buddhism, as well as "the promotion of solidarity and unity of Buddhists all around the world." The tenth general conference, held in Sri Lanka in 1972, established the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth (WFBY), and the twentieth general conference, convened in 1998 in Australia, created the World Buddhist University. The last conference, the twenty-fourth, was held in 2010. The unsettled political situation in Thailand did not present an auspicious context for convening WFB meetings for the years 2012 and 2014. In a dramatic and largely unreported development, the WFB 2015 meeting was held in Xi'an, in Northwestern China, and confirmed the admission of the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) into its ranks.

¹⁰ <<http://www.e-b-u.org/>>.

¹¹ A complete list is available at <<http://www.wfbhq.org/index.php>> at the link to the WFB's regional sites.

¹² The WFB's site mentions him as President in 2010; it is unclear if he was nominated again or if he is still in charge in 2014.

Despite its commitment to be apolitical, the WFB could not avoid being embroiled in politics. On the one hand, the political relevance of the WFB is precluded by its own charter, which specifically indicates that: “the World Fellowship of Buddhists refrains from involvement directly or indirectly in any political activity.”¹³ On the other hand, the WFB’s structure reflected for decades the international architecture that prevailed during the Cold War, with Buddhists residing in Taiwan claiming representation for all Buddhists in Mainland China, while Chinese Buddhists, who had their own institutions from 1954 to 1966, were denied this possibility. The WFB was an obvious platform to criticize the persecutions against Buddhists instigated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from 1966 to 1976 during the Cultural Revolution. The BAC, which was revived in 1981, had to wait for another two decades before the WFB admitted it.¹⁴ In this way, the WFB’s institution was more conservative than the United Nations, which recognized Taipei as the capital of “free China” until 1971, or even the United States, which granted diplomatic recognition to the PRC in 1979.

The World Buddhist Sangha Council (WBSC), also founded in Colombo in 1966, is another organization based on the same corporate model as the WFB, representing national Buddhist institutions, this time monastic and clerical associations.¹⁵ The WBSC is now headquartered in Taipei, at the same address as the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China

¹³ <<http://www.wfbhq.org/organization.html>>.

¹⁴ The BAC represents all three forms of Buddhist practice existing in China. The Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, and Theravāda practices, however, are translated in Chinese as if they are ethnic practices: Mahāyāna being Chinese, Vajrayāna being Tibetan, and Theravāda being associated with minorities in Southwest China. This is problematic because many Chinese have embraced “Tibetan” Buddhism, along with Mongols and other minorities.

¹⁵ <<http://www.wbcs886.org/English/E-index2/E-index.html>>.

(BAROC). Like the WFB, the WBSC has served as a forum for Taiwan-based Chinese Buddhists, and the only difference is the more prominent influence of Taipei in providing support to the activities of the WBSC. The third, fifth, and seventh conferences were held in Taiwan, and an important proportion of the members in the governance structure of the association are Taiwanese.¹⁶ Although the WFB and the WBSC are broad-based forums regrouping national associations, there are other transnational institutions that cater to more specific needs of Buddhists, whether lay Buddhists, women, or youth. Some of them being more focused, they can play an important role in articulating Buddhist perspectives on important issues such as social justice and gender equality.

For decades, the three centers of activity for Buddhist international associations were Colombo, Bangkok, and Taipei, reflecting the diversity within Buddhism, but also the specific vitality of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Taiwan. Recently, however, two other international organizations have emerged that vie for the promotion of Buddhism on the world stage, each with its own claim of authority over the entire community: the World Buddhist Forum (WBF) and the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC). These two organizations aimed at attracting the global Buddhist community but they have fallen short of achieving that goal.¹⁷ Both organizations never asserted that they would try to supplant the WFB or the WBSC, but the WBF and the IBC are still at an early stage of development, and the possibility of state sponsorship, direct or indirect, may facilitate the attainment of that objective in the long run.

The first WBF resulted from cooperation between the Buddhist Association of China, the Hong Kong Buddhist Association, and two important monks from Taiwan, Hsing Yun, and Wei Jue. The CCP was one of

¹⁶ The last activity recorded by the WBSC was a conference at Medan, Indonesia. <<http://wbsc886.org/English/E-index2/E-long/E-Meeting%20in%20History.htm>>.

¹⁷ There was almost no coverage for each event in Western media.

the primary sponsors of that event, via the China Religious Culture Communication Association, an institution led by Ye Xiaowen, the director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs. As we have seen above, the BAC had been excluded from the international Buddhist institutions such as the WFB and the WSBC; the organization of the four WBF meetings every three years after 2006 provided an opportunity to assert a rival claim to the leadership of Buddhism, made more credible with the decline of the WFB in 2010. The first of these four WBF meetings, organized in Hangzhou, welcomed delegates from all over the world. The second one, held in Wuxi in 2009, also included events in Taiwan, sending hereby a strong message about the willingness of Buddhists on both sides of the Taiwan Straits to overcome the constraints existing in the political sphere. The third WBF, held in Hong Kong in 2012, asserted the same theme of Chinese unification, and introduced to participants the Panchen Lama, the preference of the CCP for the succession of the Dalai Lama. Largely ignored outside of Buddhist circles, the event laid bare the enormous divisions within the global *saṅgha*, between those who convened in Hong Kong and thereby showed support to the CCP choice, and the many other Buddhists, who were considered unwelcomed because they had sided with the Dalai Lama's views. The WBF was not a venue in which Buddhists could exercise a self-governance independent of outside interference.

The first four WBF meetings were all intensely political and parochial despite their claim to be global events: they were focused narrowly on the improvement of cross-strait relations and the future of Tibet, with the preference of the CCP of China clearly affirmed. Even within the confines of the Chinese-speaking sphere, however, Buddhists are divided among themselves. While Hsing Yun, the China-born founder of the Taiwan-based Foguangshan monastic order promoted the WBF with his counterparts from the BAC and Hong Kong, many Taiwanese Buddhists

have disapproved of his close cultivations of links with the CCP.¹⁸ As far as the goal of creating an international organization representing Buddhists, however, the WBF has failed to achieve its goal: the third and fourth forums were events open mostly to Chinese-speaking delegates.¹⁹

In the meantime, and prior to the Third WBF meeting, the Ashoka Mission,²⁰ based in Delhi, organized the Global Buddhist Congregation (GBC), a preparatory meeting for the establishment of the IBC.²¹ The Ashoka Mission, a small NGO, organized a first meeting with the hope of having the Dalai Lama as Chair and the then Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, as honorary Chair. The timing of the event coincided with a round of talks between Chinese and Indian diplomats on the boundary dispute between the two countries, which was canceled after the Indian government refused to annul the GBC meeting. The Chinese government had interpreted the GBC joint chairing by the Prime Minister and the Dalai Lama as an Indian government endorsement of opposition to CCP rule in Tibet, and therefore as interference in China's domestic politics. The CCP, however, had failed to understand that in contrast to the WBF, which was supported by the Chinese state, and behind it, the CCP itself, the GBC was primarily a private event. The Ashoka Mission at the origin of the GBC was founded by a Cambodian monk in 1948, and led since

¹⁸ Hsing Yun sees himself as Chinese and he denies there exists a specific identity to Taiwan, a view espoused by the CCP but which goes against that of the overwhelming majority of the island's residents.

¹⁹ At the time of writing, preparation was underway for the event to be held again in Wuxi.

²⁰ <<http://asokamission.in/>>.

²¹ I attended the deliberations preceding the preparatory meeting. The event was low-key and people in the Indian government were not present and were not interested in supporting it openly.

1975 by Lama Lobzang, a monk born in Ladakh who served as Vice-President of the WBSC. In 2013, the GBC attempt to create an international Buddhist association came to fruition with the organization of the first IBC conclave in Delhi. The composition of its governing body was far more representative of the Buddhist world community than the WBF, with a glaring exception: the absence of representatives from the Chinese Buddhist community, with the exception of delegates from Hong Kong.²²

To these partly-successful attempts at creating international organizations representative of all Buddhists, we can add a number of functional organizations. Although they are international, these organizations are inclusive only of specific categories of Buddhists, on the basis of age, gender, and interest, so they cannot be considered inclusive Buddhist organizations. Some of them, like the World Fellowship of Buddhist Youth, a youth branch of the WBF, are related to existing international Buddhist associations. Others, however, are independent. One of the most noticeable is the International Network of Engaged Buddhists,²³ which counts fifty-nine organizations in twenty-three countries. This is the closest thing to an international association of Buddhist-democratic parties. It brings together lay Buddhists committed to issues such as social justice, climate change, women's empowerment, peace, and development. It is headquartered in Bangkok and was founded in 1989 by a famous Thai lay Buddhist, Sulak Sivaraksa, alongside the Dalai Lama and other famous Buddhist leaders such as Thich Nhat Hanh. Most organizations belong to

²² <<http://www.internationalbuddhistconfederation.com/app/index.php?r=front/default/page&alias=organization>>.

²³ <<http://www.inebnetwork.org/ineb>>.

the Theravāda tradition,²⁴ and only three countries in East Asia have partner organizations participating in that network: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

The Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women is another organization that aspires to have a universal appeal among Buddhists.²⁵ Founded in 1987 in Bodhgayā and sponsored by the Dalai Lama, it is dedicated to the unity of Buddhist women and the promotion of their interests. Since its founding, it has met fourteen times, most recently in Indonesia.²⁶ Sakyadhita has local representatives from eighteen countries, but counts only eight national branches. Five of the latter are located in Western countries.²⁷ Other Buddhist organizations that claim to be international are often more regional in scope and limited to a handful of countries' national associations or have a limited mandate. One example is the World Buddhist Scout Brotherhood (WBSB), which was founded in 2003 in Bangkok as an autonomous international body of Buddhist Scouts, within some of the national member organizations of the World Organization of Scout Movement (WOSM), and which participated at eight international Jamborees until 2011.²⁸

Another category of international Buddhist associations comprises organizations based in a specific country with large numbers of followers abroad; their members' primary allegiance goes to the leader of

²⁴ Out of the fifty-nine organizations, thirteen organizations are found in Thailand, five in India, and five in Burma.

²⁵ <<http://sakyadhita.org/home/ourhistory.html>>.

²⁶ The meetings of the organization have occurred in nine Asian countries, covering all the traditions.

²⁷ They are the US, Germany, the UK, France, and Canada.

²⁸ The site of the WBSB, <<http://www.wbsb.info/>>, has ceased working after the *coup d'état* of May 28, 2014, in Bangkok. The information is archived at <<http://archive.today/RvNxE>>.

these international organizations rather than to the leaders of the national Buddhist associations. These organizations are transnational rather than international, having headquarters in the country where they were founded, and subordinated branches in other countries. This category includes traditional Buddhist sects that have members abroad, such as Ch'an/Zen. They are transnational to the extent that they have one headquarters or holy center, in contrast to international organizations like the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which is an association regrouping different organizations. The Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), a Buddhist lay association founded in Japan in 1930, is one of the best known among such types of associations (Baffelli; Fisker-Neilsen; Kisala). In 1960, its third leader Daisaku Ikeda established branches in the United States and then in Latin America, and by 2013 there were members of the SGI in 190 countries and territories.²⁹ The diverse composition of the board of directors for SGI branches abroad suggests that they have attracted many non-Japanese followers (Metraux).

Not all organizations of this type have been as successful as the SGI. Some Buddhist associations that have a large following within their country of origin have established an international identity, but this presence often means expansion among nationals who are living abroad. Hence, the Dhammakaya, a large lay organization in Thailand (Mackenzie), has set up an open university offering courses on Buddhism in Asia, Europe, and America, but most of its information is in Thai language, suggesting a limited reach to non-Thais.³⁰ The Lotus Foundation International in Burma provides another example of a Buddhist association that advertises itself as global in scope but is more likely to be limited to Burmese

²⁹ <<http://www.sgi-usa.org/aboutsgi/threefoundingpresidents.php>>.

³⁰ <<http://www.kalyanamitra.org/2554/>>.

nationals overseas, as its exclusive reliance on the Burmese language in its website suggests.³¹

Taiwanese Buddhists have been more successful in establishing transnational Buddhist associations with a broader appeal, and their achievements compare to those of the SGI in terms of geographical scope. The Foguangshan monastic order in its lay affiliate, the Buddha Light International Association, as well as the Tzu Chi Foundation, have branches in all continents, and have managed to recruit members outside of the ethnic Taiwanese and Chinese communities.³² These transnational organizations are independent of the BAROC, the national association established in Taiwan to represent, theoretically, all Chinese Buddhists. Because of their independence from BAROC, like their Japanese, Thai, and Burmese counterparts mentioned above, they are not components of the international associations such as the WFB or the WSC. Nevertheless, they are perhaps the most important actors in the world of global Buddhism with Chinese cultural heritage. They have the leadership, human resources, sometimes even the financial and political support that can allow them to exercise influence beyond the confines of Buddhist communities, through their philanthropic activities. In sum, a wide diversity of organizations exists on the world stage, but none of them can claim to speak for all Buddhists. The next section discusses factors that have prevented Buddhists the world over from speaking with one voice.

³¹ <<http://www.lotusfoundationmm.org/>>.

³² On Tzu Chi, see Huang, on Foguangshan and the BLIA see Chandler.

Why Has an International Organization for All Buddhists Eluded Them So Far?

Despite their internal differences, non-Catholic Christians and Muslims have built international institutions where they could exchange views. In the case of the former, the World Council of Churches (WCC), this is a bottom-up process, whereby churches agree to disagree on political issues and on some moral issues. Most Christian churches of the different Protestant denominations are independent of their governments in most countries, a condition that has facilitated the bottom-up approach to create an international organization. The WCC may not be a universal organization because some churches are not members. Moreover, some churches are not independent of state interference: the China Christian Council, which works closely with the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, was created in 1991 under pressure from the Communist Party to dissolve denominational pluralism under one structure. The same could be said for the churches of the Eastern Orthodoxy, which have more centralized structures and are closer to states. Yet, the WCC has an independent authority to debate on matters of interest to the majority of non-Catholic Christians all over the world; it is not an inter-governmental body.

The case of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the international organization with the strongest claim to legitimately speak on behalf of Muslims, is very different: the process leading to its creation is top-down. The OIC was created from the initiative of governments where Islam represents the religion of the majority of the population, in order to coordinate their actions “to safeguard and protect the interest of the Muslim world.”³³ In most countries where Islam represents the religion practiced by the majority of the population, authoritarian governments have prevented the creation of religious institutions that are too independent

³³ <http://www.oic-oci.org/oicv2/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en>.

from the state, thereby encouraging the constitution of monopolistic institutions empowered by complicit religious establishment. In a few cases, such as Iran, the clergy represent the source of supreme authority. In that latter form of government, the creation of national Islamic association is still top-down; the same principle of a state-directed structure that speaks with one voice for the religion prevails. A major impediment in the creation of a Buddhist international organization was that Buddhists in different countries preferred—or were compelled to rely upon—one of these two models of institutionalization at the expense of the other. The context of the Cold War made these two approaches irreconcilable: governments that have adopted a Leninist structure of government, whereby the state granted to a single association the monopoly of representation and control over the affairs of a religious community, were more likely to favor a top-down approach to the creation of an international Buddhist association, while Buddhists living in societies where there already existed a plurality of institutions, preferred a bottom-up approach to create an international institution representative of their own diversity. The end of the Cold War did not mean an end to this divergence in approach, however. Nationalist currents active during the colonial era, mostly dormant during the Cold War, have reasserted themselves. I expand on these two structural constraints below.

The impact of the Cold War

One particular feature of the existing Buddhist organizations, as seen in the previous section, is that some of the largest among them in terms of membership, such as the Buddhist Association of China, have been sponsored by governments who did not authorize the creation of independent

associations.³⁴ In other words, in these cases Buddhist organizations are more political institutions than religious ones. They owed their existence to the will of governments who wanted to use them to assert the superiority of their political, social, and economic system over that of other societies, in forums that were otherwise inaccessible to political parties known for their hostility to religion. These national Buddhist associations were closely related to governments, or controlled by them, and could hardly reach out to make cause commune with coreligionists on issues of common interests, especially when religious ideals appeared at the time to clash with those of the state. The Chinese, Vietnamese, and North Korean national Buddhist associations had to profess allegiance to governments that promoted atheism and considered all forms of religion a form of alienation bound to disappear, and therefore looked down on Buddhists as people clinging to values that they believed to be predetermined to wither away once the material conditions of socialist prosperity prevail. Buddhists in other countries who did not have to respond to such pressures from their governments looked at these Chinese, Vietnamese, or North Korean state-sponsored associations as illegitimate and non-representative.

The Cold War between 1947 and 1991 had divided Asia in two camps, even though it left a large space for non-aligned and neutral countries such as India, Burma, and Nepal, who had refused to take sides with the US or the USSR. Buddhist associations in China, North Vietnam (until 1975), North Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Mongolia were corporations created or licensed by the ruling party to represent all Buddhists.³⁵ Among

³⁴ I am aware that Chinese Buddhist individuals may rightly reject this view of themselves as subordinates of their governments, but the latter is keen on ensuring that their spiritual leaders support their policies,

³⁵ The split between China and the USSR between 1960 and 1989 did not change the nature of the divide between states led by a communist party and the others.

non-socialist countries, only Taiwan followed the same top-down approach but relaxed it in the 1960s, when the Foguangshan monastic order and the Tzu Chi Foundation were founded (Jones). This institutional situation contrasted with that of Buddhism in Japan, Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, where no association had a monopoly of representation for all Buddhists. In these countries, lay people and monastics had their own institutions, and different sects could maintain their own separate corporate identity. The international divisions among Buddhists were in some respects starker than those in the political and military arena. The socialist states were opposed to the states allied to the US in the South East Asia Treaty Alliance (SEATO),³⁶ but many other states where Buddhists represent a majority of the population, such as Burma, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, maintained a position of neutrality during the Cold War. Buddhist associations from these neutralist countries, however, did not overrule the exclusion in the World Fellowship of Buddhists of associations from socialist countries. As we have seen above, it is only in the twenty-first century that this attitude was changed, when the World Fellowship of Buddhists finally accepted within its ranks the Buddhist Association of China.³⁷

During the Cold War, governments opposed to communism in Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka tried to enlist Buddhists in the opposite camp (McCargo). In South Vietnam, the Buddhist resistance to the corrupt governments of the Republic of Vietnam during the American War rallied the population against an unpopular government, but once Vietnam became unified under socialism, Buddhists ended up in a situation similar to that

³⁶ Founded in 1955, SEATO dissolved in 1977. This alliance included in South East Asia the following states with a Buddhist majority: Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, along with South Vietnam, a state with a significant Buddhist population.

³⁷ Illustrative of these limitations is the absence of any chapter related to Chinese Buddhism in Ian Harris's excellent edited book on Buddhism and politics in twentieth century Asia.

of fellow Buddhists in China and North Korea, with limited options other than supporting the regime (Do). The end of the Cold War has not entirely dissipated that division, however, and its effects still linger. As the rivalry for the representation of Buddhists the world over between the WBF and the IBC suggests, China and India both claim to be the sole legitimate center of global Buddhism. Chinese can point to the numbers of Buddhist adherents within the country to support that assertion, while Indians could be entitled to host Buddhist global institutions because of an historical legacy: the Buddha, his disciples, and his early followers lived on its soil, and the first states with a Buddhist identity were Indians.

Buddhists have not yet been able to come to terms with the rise of China and its attempt to present itself as a homeland for world Buddhism, and India's response to the latter has not convinced them either. Buddhists have long perceived China as an atheist state opposed to religion, and the BAC was long seen as too close to the CCP regime to deserve any credibility as an independent religious association that could stand up for Buddhists, instead of presenting in religious meetings the point-of-view of the Chinese government. India's attempt to constitute a center for Buddhism was also unlikely to receive support from Buddhists in countries where their tradition is followed by the majority of the population. The Buddhist population of India lives at the margin of the country, and it even constitutes a small community in absolute numbers, relative to that of other countries with Buddhist adherents.³⁸ Although the Cold War is over, the approach of the states where a Communist Party rules has not changed. These governments prefer a top-down approach to the creation of an international organization, with member associations they can control.

³⁸ According to the Pew Research Center, India ranks ninth, behind South Korea, as the country with the largest number of Buddhists, constituting 1.8% of the world population of Buddhists (Pew).

The Cold War represents an exogenous explanation for the difficulty Buddhists experienced in trying to establish an international institution, but if this explanation is necessary, it is also insufficient. The Cold War was over in 1991, and over a quarter century later, the organizational divisions on the international stage among Buddhists from different nations remain. Chinese, Vietnamese, and North Korean Buddhists are still represented by monopolistic national associations. The refusal of these national associations' leaders to join the international Buddhist Confederation sponsored by Indian Buddhist organizations and their allies, and the exclusion from the World Buddhist forums of Buddhists supportive of the Dalai Lama's authority, remind us of the importance of nationalism as an obstacle to the creation of Buddhist unity.

The pull of nationalism

Nationalism influenced Buddhists in Asia long before the onset of the Cold War. During the late colonial era, Buddhist leaders were important actors in the fight for national self-determination against colonial powers, or against ancient regimes that were seen as unable to preserve their nations against Western powers' interference in domestic politics, as was the case with China. Following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, nationalist and socialist ideas that emerged with the Republican Revolution had inspired among Buddhist reformers a turn towards "humanist Buddhism" at the beginning of the century (Ashiwa and Wank). This trend has resonated with Buddhists speaking Chinese languages in Taiwan, in Malaysia, and among overseas Chinese communities ever since.³⁹ But the influence of nationalism was not always that benign and progressive. The effects of

³⁹ An important part of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and the majority of the population in Taiwan speak Minnanhua, a language originating from the province of Fujian in Southern China.

nationalism could be dangerous when the latter is suffused with expansionist, militaristic, and racist ideas. It can lead to disastrous consequences, when it inspires forms of religiously-sanctioned ideologies of conquest and domination, as was the case with the militarist designs of imperial Japan before World War Two.

As Victoria shows in his studies about the Japanese clergy's attitude during World War Two, it has been taken to the extremes of Daisen Suzuki's war apologetics (Victoria). Less known, but equally important, is the role of violent Buddhism in the resistance to Japanese occupation in Korea during the War (Thikonov), and the doctrinal justification of war in Chinese Buddhism (*Yu Nationalism; Yu Justification*). But for each of these extremes within national Buddhist traditions, there existed important opposition. For example, not all Buddhist contemporaries of Suzuki followed his peculiar views. The leaders of the Nichiren Soto sect's lay offshoot, the Sōka Gakkai, preferred to go to jail rather than support the imperial ideology. After the war, the followers of that movement and the political party that they supported, the Komeito, became ardent defenders, albeit not always effective ones, of the Japanese pacifist constitution (Itoh). In both China and Japan, however, Buddhism was not the religion of the majority, and national identity rested on many other components.

In the new states of Burma, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Laos, on the other hand, the majority of the population professed Buddhism, which represented a central element of national identity. The pressures of nationalism have played a big role, as the national *saṅghas* must relate to, if not comply with, governments (Borchert). This was not a problematic issue in itself, as long as Buddhists believed that the affirmation of national unity went along with the resilience of their tradition. Some of them carried the nationalist agenda throughout the post-independence period for the sake of nation-building and protecting the nation against foreign intervention. But extreme forms of nationalism have also inspired the

saṅgha to support ideologies of national or ethnic supremacy. The cases of ethnic nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka mentioned above remind us that the problem still exists today.⁴⁰ The promotion of a narrow ethnic nationalism against the Tamil minority, based on the resentment over alleged grievances against the overwhelmingly Buddhist ethnic Sinhalese majority, exacerbated the deadly civil war in Sri Lanka (Tambiah). Raghavan argued that the nexus between Buddhism and violence in that country had a historical continuity, and that intolerance against the Hindu Tamil minority has been a constant in the established *saṅgha* (Raghavan). In Burma, the explosion of intolerance against the Rohingya minority since 2012 came as a shock, just five years after monks had peacefully demonstrated against the military junta.

In many of the countries where the state does not oppose the intervention of religion in national politics, the actions and statements of prominent or popular monks and lay people can be detrimental to the constitution of a global Buddhist institution when their views are at odds with those of other Buddhists the world over, or even within the country itself. In other words, it is difficult to build an international organization for Buddhists on the basis of national institutions that do not represent the people on whose behalf they claim to speak. The actions and views of the extremists among the monks and lay leaders in Sri Lanka and Burma shatter the image of Buddhism as a peaceful and compassionate religion (Imtiyaz; Walton). Meanwhile, excluding the representatives from Sri Lanka or Burma in international organizations on the ground of the unacceptable behavior of some of their members is out of the question, especially because these two countries are among the few with Buddhist ma-

⁴⁰ Some of this latter predicament relates to the earlier conditions of inter-communal relations bequeathed by colonial rule, some are more recent.

majorities within their population. This conundrum points to the factors internal to Buddhism preventing the constitution of an international organization for all.

Some Buddhist activists lament the absence of unity as a threat to their religion's survival. The tone of their call for Buddhist unity is very different from those who emphasize the compassionate, pacifist, democratic, and socially progressive nature of the religion. These activists depict Buddhism as a religion under siege, threatened by the cultural forces of globalization and modernization, and directly target the West as the source of that threat. Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar use this kind of rhetoric to justify their attacks against the Rohingya minority, under the pretext that Islam is a threat against their religion. In an editorial to the Buddhist Channel, a website based in Kuala Lumpur that depicts itself as "the world's only dedicated Buddhist news services,"⁴¹ Senaka Weeraratna, a noted commentator in Sri Lanka, wrote that Buddhists lack "an effective institutional mechanism that can lend support when a Buddhist institution, Buddhist community or even a pre-dominant Buddhist nation is in danger" (Weeraratna). Noting that Buddhists lack a quasi-state institution like the Vatican for Catholics, international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, or international non-governmental organizations like the World Council of Churches for Protestant Christians, he identified four areas of growing concerns: conversion to other religions; silencing of Buddhist voices by the media; non-recognition by states; and promotion of secularism. This kind of voice may be that of a minority, but it attracts followers in large enough numbers to represent a threat to peace when it condones extremist and intolerant views (Mahtani). These views, which oppose that of "engaged Buddhism" and other progressive Buddhists, stand in the way of generating unity within that religion. It is sobering to realize that while top-down approaches may

⁴¹ <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=20,212,0,0,1,0#.U4S_5htOXcs>.

impede the creation of a Buddhist international organization, the bottom-up approach can also undermine it when it allows for the expression of extremely divisive figures.

The absence of statements from the international forums such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists, the World Buddhist Forum, and the International Buddhist Confederation to condemn the violent behavior of Buddhist extremists in the name of lofty principles such as non-interference is deplorable. So is Aung San Suu Kyi's reluctance to forcefully express her opposition to persecution against Muslim Burmese citizens. Her prudence can be explained by the frailty of her position as a political leader, but the same cannot be said for the international Buddhist institutions. There exist principled voices among Buddhists who speak out against violence, such as the leaders of the engaged Buddhist movements, from the Dalai Lama to Sulak Sivaraksa.⁴² However, as long as such voices of moderation expressing the values of their religions are shunned by some of the existing international Buddhist organizations, the latter will lack the authority to speak on behalf of their community. The bottom-up way to creating such an international organization does not appear more promising than a top-down one.

Conclusion

Buddhists have failed for decades to create an international association that could promote shared interests. From the WFB to the IBC, none of the putative international Buddhist organizations have succeeded at providing a forum where all Buddhists could meet to discuss matters of importance to all of them. Obviously, like followers of all other world reli-

⁴² <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/dalai-lama-aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-muslim-myanmar-migrant-150528110114964.html>>.

gions, Buddhists speak with many voices, and there exists no single Buddhist perspective on international affairs. But they do have some shared commitments within the Four Noble Truths and the Five Precepts that can inspire social and political action. The comment about the absence of a global Buddhist institution does not deny the global relevance of inspiring Buddhist leaders such as the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh. It does not belittle either the important contributions to global development and peace of international Buddhist associations such as the Sōka Gakkai International or the Tzu Chi Foundation. But instead of a single “Buddhist International,” there are overlapping networks of transnational organizations, competing claims about “engaged” and “humanistic” Buddhism, and isolated cases of Buddhist-Democratic parties that struggle to be heard for a variety of political programs, but they have not created international or regional political associations to share their views. This diversity, in itself, does not constitute a problem; a variety of voices benefit any international institution. Buddhists, however, lack a forum where all the different voices can air their respective views. For the moment, Buddhist associations cannot meet in the same international conclave until the WBF has dropped its opposition to the Dalai Lama and stopped excluding those who support him. An institution that claims to express the views of all Buddhists may also be undesirable if that means including organizations that promote ethnic and inter-religious hatred and thereby condone the violation of the First Precept of not to kill.

Buddhism is more than an ethnic religion; historically, it has adapted to societies as diverse as Japan, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. It is a global religion, has attracted adherents in the West since at least the nineteenth century, and exercises a significant impact on a variety of cultures. As a global religion, however, Buddhism struggles to achieve unity because of the divisive legacies of the different cultures in which it has grown. These legacies risk undermining Buddhism’s universal appeal. In particular, the effects of nationalism on many members of the Japanese *saṅgha* during

the war, and on many clerics in contemporary Sri Lanka and Burma, emphasize the distinctiveness of nation-states at the expense of shared interests. The ambitions of the weightier states of China and India for their own Buddhist communities could only exacerbate this problem. The Communist Party of China claims authority over the matter of the succession to the Dalai Lama and would like the international Buddhist community to support this; besides, it would like to use the WFB as an opportunity for China to showcase its “soft power.” India, which has provided shelter to the Dalai Lama, is also keen on displaying its own version of “soft power,” as a country that is tolerant of religious diversity.

The challenge for Buddhists is to ensure that the diversity within their own ranks does not prevent them from affirming a distinctive perspective on a pluralist global stage. They share an interest in the region, after all, in collectively inspiring leaders to address pressing issues that range from the stewardship of the global commons, disaster relief, sustainable and equitable growth, and inter-communal peace.

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