

REVIEWS



Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism*

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THIS absorbing and richly researched book is a close study of Europe's discovery of non-Islamic Asian religions in the eighteenth century and of the way information and misinformation about these religions circulated in European debates. By the time university chairs in oriental languages and Indology were set up in the early nineteenth century, Europeans had already been engaged in the intensive study of Asian religions for 250 years. This great chapter in intellectual history has been underestimated due to a foreshortening of perspective, whereby the nineteenth-century scholarship monopolizes attention, and what went before is dismissed as the random research of eccentrics. App scolds Henri de Lubac for treating the errors of Diderot as a “monkey show” and urges respect for faltering steps that are of great importance in the history of ideas, and that are perhaps no more absurd than our own may appear to posterity (135). One of the reasons why the story App tells is so little known is the tendency of modern scholars to pass over older studies of the history of religion that are presumed to be inept and outdated. Thus Beatrice Bodart Bailey is faulted for omitting two chapters on religion in her translation of Kaempfer (174–75). App provides a perspective in which the interest of this older research can be appreciated anew.

Religious ideologies—first Christian, then deistic, and finally atheistic—prevailed massively in the quest for Asian origins. The learned Jesuit missionaries compiled histories of errors, and the thesis that Asians descended from the race of Ham was exploited for all it was worth. Sadly, their best work slept in archives for centuries. Sometimes they made outrageous claims. Roberto de Nobili declared in 1608 that he was the “teacher of the fourth, lost Veda which deals with the question of salvation” (371).

The anonymous *Ezour-vedam*, probably authored by the Pondicherry missionary Jean Calmette SJ with his confrère Jean François Pons (396–98), uses what was

known of the Vedas to argue that their transmission in India was corrupt and that Christianity represented their true form. “The problem of how to present a new religion as the origin of an older one” sent missionaries back to Eusebius and his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, “the highest peak of early Christian apologetics” (386), which posits an original revelation only poorly preserved by the Jews and retrieved by the Christians. Of the Buddhists, the *Ezour-vedam* says that “their system is to not recognize any purely spiritual substance and no god except for themselves” (398).

This text was to play a key role in exciting European “Indomania.” It had a huge influence on Voltaire, who cites it in the 1761 edition of his *Essai sur les moeurs* as “one of the most ancient manuscripts in the world” (55). It allowed him to find in India rather than China the most ancient form of religion, “a pure cult of a supreme Being.” By a high-handed method of quotation, the text “was massaged until it fit Voltaire’s idea of ancient monotheism and could please a deist” (59) and serve as a weapon against an intolerant church. Perhaps Voltaire did not really believe in the text’s antiquity, but “sensed Jesuit involvement and perhaps even relished the thought of surreptitiously perverting their fundamental intention” (61). He thus “single-handedly transformed some missionary jottings from the South Indian boondocks into the ‘world’s oldest text,’ the Royal Library’s ‘most precious document’” (64). Voltaire’s propagandistic zeal was also nourished by a text discovered, or more likely forged, by John Zephaniah Holwell, the Dublin-born governor of Bengal who created the myth of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Voltaire acclaimed this text, the *Chartah Bhade Shastah*, as the oldest document of monotheism.

The missionaries’ notion of an original pure monotheism, given a deistic twist by Voltaire, who aimed to dislodge the biblical religions from their central position, was soon replaced by the atheistic hermeneutic of Constantin de Volney, author of the best-selling *Les Ruines* (1791), which presents an unflattering portrait of all religions. Inspired by the materialistic atheism of Baron d’Holbach, Volney “was obsessed with the question of origins and with the notion that the Eurocentric view of history had to be replaced by a more global perspective” (477). Thanks to Herder’s discovery of how thought and culture are shaped by the variety of languages, nineteenth century thought on India and China is governed by an ethos of pluralism and historicism, or by the ideal of mutual supplementation of East and West, as in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel or in Jules Michelet’s image of a new age in which Buddhism and Christianity would work together as the spiritual lungs of humanity. Previous intuitions of cultural pluralism and relativity had been far less elaborate and well-founded. App does not trace these ideological undercurrents of the nineteenth century.

Some scholars, influenced by Edward Said’s polemic against “Orientalism,” speak of an alleged Western “invention” of Buddhism in the early nineteenth century. Roger-Pol Droit says that the nineteenth century discovery of Buddhist nihilism so shocked Europeans that it broke the entente between Western philosophers and Indian wisdom that had been so promising until then. App shows that this revulsion

against Buddhism was already three centuries old. “The assertion of some modern writers [Almond, Droit, Vegeta, Lenoir, Masuzawa] that European Orientalists ‘created’ or ‘invented’ Buddhism in the first half of the nineteenth century is a problem of faulty optics” (185). Contrary to Droit’s assertion that Western knowledge of Buddhism “does not accumulate,” App shows that the information “was rarely forgotten but rather tended to be endlessly repeated and widely accepted” (190). This point is weakened, however, by the fact that much of this information was in reality misinformation.

Kaempfer’s theory that the Buddha was Egyptian, taken up by Diderot, like so many of the incorrect ideas found in App’s story, had a long life, and affected the hermeneutical framework in which Asian culture was apprehended. Perhaps the longest-lasting and most damaging of these ideas was the story of the Buddha’s deathbed confession that he had kept secret the true core of his doctrine: the nothingness of all things. Propagated by the missionary Cristoforo Borri in 1631, it was taken up by various writers, including Pierre Bayle in his famous article, “Spinoza” (1702), and by Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* (1751). Eventually it would be taken up by Hegel, who found it in a German translation of Joseph de Guignes reedited at the time he was writing the last version of his “Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion” (regrettably neglecting better recent sources such as Colebrooke).

Jesuit missionaries had identified Zen Buddhism as nihilism as early as 1551 (138). Foremost authorities taught that Buddhism proclaimed emptiness and nothingness, *le vide et le néant*, as the first principle of all things. Equally deep-rooted was the idea, dominant in Valignano’s Catechism of 1586, that Asian religions commonly worked with one truth for the people, another for the inner circle (139). Some linked the Buddha as the teacher of “a single substance with manifold configurations” (151) with Spinozism, then equivalent to atheism and dangerous to be associated with.

Europe discovered Buddhist Sanskrit texts in the nineteenth century, but engagement with Buddhist texts in the languages of the countries where it remained a living religion had long preceded this scholarly breakthrough. Jesuits in Japan worked on the *Lotus Sutra* in Chinese in 1574; a translation from Pāli was published in 1691; Ippolito Desideri translated Tibetan texts in the early eighteenth century; and the first published European translation of a Buddhist sutra, from Chinese, was published by de Guignes in the 1750s (190). Anquetil-Duperron, as a student of theology at the Sorbonne, decided that “a theologian must be almost universal” (364), to be able to judge the rival claims of the world’s religions. Nonetheless, when Indian and Chinese studies were taken in charge by universities a threshold was crossed. App may underestimate the difference between the scattered individual efforts of previous centuries and the study of Asian culture and religion as a concerted project of the Western academy.

App shows that the European fascination with Asian religion and philosophy had little to do with colonialist ambitions, though it often served other ideological purposes, such as Voltaire’s war against Catholicism. Since the refutation of the

paradigm of Orientalism is in only a small part of the vast picture App draws, his title is regrettable. His brief references to Said are beside the mark, since Said was concerned more with Islamic studies, where a colonialist dynamic may well have prevailed. Said's influence on students of the Western reception of Hinduism and Buddhism is slight in comparison with that of a paradigm established long before him, in works such as Schwab's *La Renaissance orientale*, which revives and continues nineteenth-century notions. That "the European discovery of other Asian religions is strangely absent" (440) in Said's discussion should have discouraged App from linking his research to the Orientalism debate. A theological or even missiological perspective might bring out more directly the sense of these adventures and misadventures in scholarly speculation.

App's fascinating work fills a huge lacuna in the history of ideas, one that most scholars did not know existed. It shows that for the last five centuries Asia and Europe have been more intimately and consistently intertwined at the intellectual level than anyone had suspected. It will no doubt be the foundation stone of future research in the area, as well as bringing a new critical perspective to bear on the many studies that have been devoted to the nineteenth century continuation of the European reception of Asian thought.

REFERENCES

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