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Buddhist Monks and Christian Friars: Religious and Cultural Exchange in the Making of Buddhism

ABSTRACT

There is a global consensus that various traditions practised throughout parts of Asia can all be linked to one cohesive religion called 'Buddhism'. However, there is a long history as to how the West came to that consensus. Prior to the Iberian exploration, it was common to divide the religious world into four categories: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and all others under various permutations of superstition, heathenism or paganism. This article explores the rich encounter and exchange between Iberian friars and Buddhist monks, particularly in Siam (modern-day Thailand) that catalysed the identification of a common tradition in Asia thought to be centred on the person of the Buddha. It argues that one important part of the history of the identification of Buddhism as a single and *bona fide* religion begins with the encounter in the sixteenth century of Spanish friars with Buddhism. The social and political strength of institutional Buddhism in Siam, coupled with recognition of similar religious life and appreciation of ascetic values between monks and friars, triggers the identification by the friars of a distinct religion across Asia. The friars made the case that they were witnessing people with their own religion, distinguishable from undifferentiated superstition or idolatry. The consensus of the friars introduced an ideational core for the idea of Buddhism, based on one founder common to traditions in East and

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South-east Asia. These arguments set a foundation for Buddhism as a religion thought to closely mirror Christianity.

Keywords: Buddhism, history of religions, early modern Christianity, cross-cultural exchange, Marcelo de Ribadeneira, Siam, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the 1580 Iberian Union of Spain and Portugal there was chaos and confusion over the jurisdiction of religious orders and the geographical claims of the *padroado*. Yet, Spanish friars based in the Philippines decided to take a risk. They interpreted the new political reality liberally and reasoned that they had a right to spread the gospel to all the earth. This included lands under Portuguese control such as South-east Asia and Japan, which also was monopolised by Jesuits. A group of Discalced Franciscans travelled extensively and shared their experiences of encounter. These stories are told by Marcelo de Ribadeneira in his extensive synthesis of the history of Asia.[1] The friars' shared experiences are parsed together in a rich collection of stories, descriptions, letters and analysis. In Siam (modern-day Thailand), the friars had an awakening through cross-cultural exchange with Buddhist monks and lay people. They visited temples and went on alms walks. They debated with Buddhist monks who resembled them in dress, lived together with a common spiritual practice, and were committed to poverty. They witnessed the monks' strong integration of politics, society and religiosity. Lay people in Siam even treated the friars like Buddhist monks by giving them alms. The missionary exchange resulted in a process of mutual recognition between Buddhist monks and Christian friars: they have *religion* like us, and they are *religious* like us. The encounter triggered the identification of a distinct religion across Asia thought to be most powerfully visible in Siam. At the centre of this story is one of the earliest accounts of identifying a common religious core connecting the varieties of traditions in East and South-east Asia into a single conceptual entity. In doing so the friars conceptualised Buddhism as a single religion, broad in scope across the East, centred on one founder. In what follows I examine Discalced Franciscan missionaries to Siam in the late sixteenth century to show that missionary encounter and exchange with Buddhism in Siam carried seminal weight in the early modern construction of Buddhism because that form of religion was deemed the most like Christianity in structure and religious life.[2]

UNEARTHING THE PRE-HISTORY OF 'BUDDHISM'

Current popular and scholarly consensus assumes that various traditions practised throughout parts of Asia are linked to one religion called 'Buddhism'. The dominant scholarly narrative about the history of Buddhism contends that it emerged as a distinct religious entity only in the nineteenth century. This dominant narrative argues that the category of Buddhism emerged amid convergences of the European Enlightenment,[3] British colonialism,[4] Victorian ideals,[5] the development of Orientalism[6] and the nineteenth-century European philological and philosophical preoccupation with texts and ideas from the East.[7] Others argue that the early identification of Buddhism is intertwined with Protestant assumptions about religion.[8] Some of the historiography views the identification of Buddhism as a religious category in the nineteenth century as concomitant with the coinage of the term. Richard King, for example, puts the 'discovery' of Buddhism in the same context as orientalist constructions of 'Hinduism'.[9] Tomoko Masuzawa addresses the question of Buddhism's origins most directly: 'In early modern times, there was no "Buddhism" to consolidate disparate observations gathered in and about Asia.' Further, she argues, until the nineteenth century:

> Buddhism had only recently been recognized as 'the same' tradition in diverse regions of South, South-east, East, and Central Asia. Until that time, neither European observers nor, for the most part, native 'practitioners' of those various devotional, contemplative, divinatory, funereal, and other ordinary and extraordinary cults that are now roundly called Buddhist had thought of these divergent rites and widely scattered institutions as constituting a single religion.[10]

Few scholars, however, have attempted to trace or explain the roots of the presumed 'sudden' emergence of Buddhism as a coherent category in the nineteenth century. How did this recognition happen? What specific encounters triggered the identification of these vastly different practices and belief as the same? What values and assumptions were employed to present Buddhism as a religion akin to and rivalling Christianity?

Contrary to the dominant historiography on the identification of Buddhism as one and the same religious entity across Asia, the basic conceptual framework for the category of Buddhism was introduced by missionaries in the early modern period. A comparison to the development of the concept of Hinduism will be useful here. The initial steps in the conceptualisation of Buddhism, as with Hinduism, involved a process of moving from a plurality of varied and distinct traditions to a

single conceptual entity. Those encountering traditions in India pieced together – to name just a few divergent traditions – practices and beliefs around the Goddess, Siva, Vishnu, and pilgrimages to holy rivers as connected through a single organising principle.[11] Western missionaries and observers in Asia, and perhaps even Buddhist practitioners,[12] were faced with a variety of regional traditions from Sri Lanka to Japan with different languages, different names for the Buddha, saints and *bodhissatvas* that resembled the Buddha, different iconography, beliefs and practices. It was not readily apparent, let alone assumed, that all this variety had any underlying unity nor that, for example, the figure of 'Xaca', the name for the Buddha in one school, was the same as 'Amida', the name used by another school, whom some observers described as a goddess.[13] The move from heterogeneous practices and traditions to an identification of an undergirding homogeneous core is a necessary step in the development of the concept of Buddhism and the pre-history of the nomenclature 'Buddhism' that gained traction in the nineteenth century. Prior to this term or the emergence of any of the 'isms', people were happy simply to refer to followers of the teacher Xaca, Budh or Amida, or to the religion of the East, the main idolatry of the East, the doctrine of the East, or the religion of Budh, to name just a few designations, just as they were content to refer to Islam prior to that term gaining traction by referring to the Moors or Mohammedans. Buddhists themselves did not begin to incorporate the term Buddhism self-referentially until the nineteenth century.[14]

Scholarly inquiry into the history of the early modern identification of Buddhism as a major religion in Asia is just beginning. Urs App's historical study of oriental philosophy provides the most obvious case of the early modern identification of *buppō* (Buddha law or *dharma*) as a religion in Japan by Jesuits from 1556, perhaps not explicitly but certainly implicitly. App also criticises those who espouse a nineteenth-century periodisation for identifying Buddhism as a religion.[15] App's study is primarily interested in engaging with doctrinal ideas and their influence on orientalist thought that begins with the Jesuits in Japan. Yet an important set of protagonists contributing to the early history of Buddhism were the Franciscans, who were deeply interested in the social and institutional dimensions of other cultures. As Stroumsa has noted,

> the interest in the sociological dimension of these phenomena (which can be understood only within the societies in which they appear) comes directly from the writings of the Spanish *frailes*.

> The transformation of the concept of religion permitted, in dialectical fashion, a more precise and better comprehension of religious facts.[16]

The first stages in the process of identifying Buddhism as a religion were spurred not so much by the missionary encounter with disembodied ideas as by processes of cultural and social exchange.

FROM RELIGION TO RELIGIONS

What pre-understanding about religion did missionaries have when they encountered Buddhist traditions in Asia? Prior to Iberian exploration and expansion, the West commonly divided the religious world according to two taxonomies. The first was a heresiological schema whose conceptual horizon was that of true religion set against heresy. This schema was inherited from the Latin apologetic tradition in the Augustinian opposition between 'true' and 'false' religion, or between religion and superstition.[17] As an example, the Flemish Franciscan William Rubruck's account of the religious phenomena in China in the thirteenth century did not distinguish between Buddhists and Taoists, both of whom he referred to as *tuin* (Chinese *tao-in* [Dao ren, Tao Jen], 'man of the way'). Fr Rubruck also attributed the teaching he encountered to Manichaean heresy.[18] In the European mindset Christianity represented religion in general and stood in opposition to other traditions deemed as heresy, superstition or sectarian deviation.[19] By the sixteenth century a more common categorisation of religion was a fourfold schema: (1) Christianity and its many sects; (2) Judaism; (3) Mahometism (Islam); and (4) 'idolatry' (alternatively described as paganism or heathenism).[20] European overseas trade and colonial expansion made possible a wealth of encounters with different cultures and peoples that spurred new discourses about religion. In this sense, the process of labelling different Asian traditions as one connected religious entity is tied to a paradigm shift from 'religion' to 'religions'.[21] Buddhism emerged from undifferentiated idolatry as the first tradition to be understood as a religion of the same calibre as Christianity.

Close scrutiny of specific words used to describe other traditions shows that it is misleading to assume that missionaries in the early modern period 'discovered' either Buddhism or religion. They were instead creating the idea of Buddhism by making a case for why it should be considered religion. It was common to contrast 'religion', a category associated with Christianity, with what was deemed a 'sect' or 'superstition'.

As Brent Nongbri cautions, we must examine original texts because translators and interpreters of ancient and early modern sources have anachronistically inserted religion into them, or have interpreted period writers to be talking about the more contemporary concept of religion.[22] Early missionary writings in the Philippines also portrayed non-literate societies as not having religion or doctrine, as in the account by the Jesuit Pedro Chririno in 1600 in the Philippines, who employed the terms 'doctrine', 'religious', and 'religion' only for Christianity and reserved the term 'superstition' for local beliefs and practices.[23] In the Americas it was common from some of the earliest accounts to portray natives explicitly as having no religion.[24] The Jesuit Matteo Ricci was reluctant to use the word 'religion' about the Chinese, observing that 'there are no religions in China.' However, he identified 'three main sects' in China: followers of Confucius, Laozi and Fo.[25] Attention to the semantics used to describe traditions in Asia will help to trace the earliest moments of the term 'religion' in the early modern period. In Japan, St Francis Xavier knew Buddhist monks by the name *bonzes* and could recognise that there were competing 'sects'. Like other missionaries, Xavier had a high regard for Japanese people and initially thought their religion could be an offshoot of Christianity.[26]

A closer investigation of the application of the category of religion shows the beginnings of the shift in the classification of the religious landscape. Similarly, the application of the term 'religious' to personnel carries important weight in making the case for a single unified religion.[27]

Monks and Friars: A Story of Encounter, Exchange and Mutual Recognition

Travel and exposure to new traditions spurred new paradigms about religion. A surge of missionary travel by Spanish friars occurred during the period known today as the Iberian Union, or united crown of Spain and Portugal (1580–1640). Spain and Portugal had carved out different spheres of influence. According to the royal *padroado/patronato*, mainland South-east Asia was in the Portuguese sphere and the Philippines were in the Spanish sphere. The period of the united crown, coupled with disputes and uncertainty over the jurisdiction of missionary orders, allowed a window of opportunity for Spanish missionaries to go to South-east Asia from their base in the Philippines. Before a clear course of action was determined on who had jurisdiction over the orders, the Spanish friars embarked on missionary ventures by attaching themselves to

Portuguese, and occasionally Spanish, merchants who took them to Siam in return for saying Mass and providing confession.[28]

An important source for the early identification of Buddhism as a religion is the synthesis of Marcelo de Ribadeneira. Fr Ribadeneira was a Franciscan missionary in the Spanish-administered Philippines who was well travelled across Asia. His monumental history, *Historia de las Islas del Archipiélago Filipino y Reinos de la Gran China, Tartaria, Cochinchina, Malaca, Siam, Cambodge y Japón* (1601), synthesises the mission and travels of Franciscan missionaries and martyrs throughout Asia in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The work was also one of the earliest Western accounts of religion in Siam and South-east Asia to be circulated in Europe.[29] Ribadeneira's extensive account of South-east Asia and Siam is based on the eyewitness reports of several fellow missionaries. It includes reports from, among others, Jerómino de Aquilar, the commissioner of the mission who arrived in South-east Asia in 1582, Pedro Ortiz's mission with Discalced Spanish friars in 1596, and several Portuguese Discalced friars who went there from Malacca, including one who stayed permanently.[30] Ribadeneira also drew on his own first-hand experiences as a traveller to Japan and conversations with missionaries there and in the Philippines, as well as accounts he gathered from written letters. By the time the book was published he was able to build on the knowledge of missions in Japan and China in addition to other lands in mainland South-east Asia and the Philippines. The province of San Gregorio Magno in the Philippines became a centre of activity for the Discalced Franciscans, including the sending of missionaries to various parts of Asia and even back to New Spain. The scope of Ribadeneira's *Historia* is rare for its time. The significance of the scope is important because Ribadeneira could gather information from a wide range of encounters with Buddhism, from East and South-east Asia, and engage different branches and schools of Buddhists. This breadth of exposure was crucial to his ability to identify Buddhism as a major religion in Asia.

It is important to note that Ribadeneira's *Historia* is written from the perspective of the Order of Discalced Franciscans. By 1517 there were two established orders of Franciscans, the Conventuals (who typically lived in endowed convents and monasteries) and the Observants (who emphasised the importance of mendicancy). The Discalced Franciscans, or Alcanterines, were a reform movement, founded by Pedro de Alcantara (1499–1562), that came out of the Observant branch of Franciscans in Spain. Alcantara had a major influence on Theresa of Ávila and the founding of the Discalced Carmelites and advocated strict observance of

poverty and mendicancy going back to the original spirit of St Francis. The movement was marked by going without shoes, and adherents were often called simply *descalzos* (from the Latin *discalceatus,* 'barefoot'). The act of going without shoes or simple sandals was a sign of poverty. The Discalced Franciscans also insisted on mendicancy and were noted for begging for alms.[31] Discalced Franciscans brought with them an understanding of what 'good' religion looked like. The barefoot friars had a high regard for ascetic discipline and took very seriously their commitments to poverty and mendicancy. They lived in common and operated under a well-organised hierarchy of leadership that culminated in the papacy. The Spanish friars also owed allegiance to very strong monarchs who considered themselves to be the guardians of Roman Catholicism, and were responsible for its spread through their own territorial expansion.

Christian friars and Buddhist monks had an affinity in several areas, most notably in the similarities in their overall appearance, and in their ascetic religious practices. The earliest contact of Jesuits with Japanese Buddhists indicates that the Jesuits regarded the Buddhist monks as resembling the Franciscans and Dominicans in appearance and dress.[32] This is probably because the Jesuits adapted a more modern spirituality and dress while the Discalced friars maintained an emphasis on mendicancy and presenting themselves as poor.[33] The Discalced friars also had an outward appearance that displayed similar markers to those of Buddhist monks in Siam: they were barefooted, wore a habit, were tonsured (monks shaved their heads) and collected alms.

Monks and lay people recognised and treated the friars as religious figures deserving of respect and, further, deserving of meritorious gifts just like Buddhist monks. Buddhist lay people, as well the king of Siam in the case of Pedro Ortiz, were generous in giving them alms: 'And despite being foreigners, the gentiles [Buddhist laity] showed themselves to be notably generous and loving, and they gave them alms when they went begging through the streets with their alms bag on their shoulders' (*Y aunque aun extranjeros, los gentiles se les mostraban notablemente afables y amoros, y cuando iban a pedir por las calles limosnas con el alforja al hombro, se le daban*).[34]

The monks and lay Buddhists received the friars in their homes with hospitality and 'love', inviting them to their temples and monasteries (*los recibían en sus casas con mucho amor y les mostraban sus templos y conventos*). Siam already had a Portuguese community whose members had arrived in the capital Ayutthaya in 1511.[35] As a result, the Portuguese

in Siam helped the new friars cross cultural and linguistic boundaries to visit and communicate with Buddhist monks. In this setting, a mutual sharing of experiences developed where friars were invited into temples and exchanged ideas with Buddhist monks, engaging in substantive debates on such subjects as the transmigration of souls, and they were also able to listen to Buddhist monks' preaching.

In Theravada Buddhism monks are generally more highly revered than in the Mahayana traditions. Ordained monks are considered 'unsurpassed fields of merit', and giving alms to an ordained monk bestows on the giver a level of merit (the accumulation of good deeds, of *karma*) unsurpassed by any other good deed.[36] Thus, local observers readily recognised the friars as having parallel religious roles to Buddhist monks. As such, friars and monks engaged in a form of 'intercultural mimesis'[37] in terms of common structures of religious life and organisation. The affinity between monks and friars was mutual and affirmed by the Buddhist laity. The affirmation of the friars in Buddhist terms as 'fields of merit' and the warm reception that the friars received from local monks constituted one of the related dimensions of Buddhist life for which the friars expressed extensive admiration.

On the other side of the exchange, the friars drew analogies to religious life and institutions that closely mirrored their own. The religious ideals of the friars made them uniquely poised to interpret Buddhist life within the framework of their own ascetic values and strong religious institutions. The Discalced friars depended on the generosity and almsgiving of others to help maintain their mission within the confines of a commitment to poverty and preaching. To the friars, Buddhist devotees also demonstrated a rigorous commitment to poverty that went beyond their own because monks received the bulk of their material necessities entirely from alms. The friars noted the fact that the Buddhist monks went out on daily alms walks and were completely dependent on the laity for sustenance.

Buddhist monks, like the friars, took a vow of poverty. Yet some friars suggested that the monks outdid them in their commitment to poverty in that they even avoided handling money altogether (*no quieren tomar dinero*).[38] That monks refrained even from touching money was most admirable to an Order that was fervent in its devotion to poverty. It was as if Buddhist monks in Siam were living out the original Franciscan ideal of poverty more completely than the Discalced friars.

Apart from the admiration they had for Buddhist monks for their overall composure, seriousness and commitment to poverty, the friars

also admired the commitment of the laity to almsgiving, the respect they had for Buddhist monks, and their maintenance of religious buildings and institutions. The friars had never seen such lay devotion and commitment to alms as they did in the relationship between the laity and the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic order) in Siam. Lay people were described as 'highly pious' (*muy piodosos*) and 'notable almsgivers' (*notablemente limosneros*), who participated in daily religious activities and generally supported monks and local temples. The friars were greatly impressed by the piety, quality and quantity of almsgiving in the kingdom. Everyone gave gifts, from the poorest up to the king. They not only gave alms of goods and money, but also their labour in contributing to impressive sacred spaces.[39] This admiration for the piety of the locals extended also to the mutual dependence between laity and religious personnel. People relied on the monks for many different aspects of daily life, from giving inaugural blessings on boats to prayer for the ill and afflicted. The range of interactions went beyond the friars' own involvement with lay Christians, a fact that caused them some consternation.

The friars were also quite struck by the King of Siam (Naresuan the Great) and his relationship to the Buddhist *sangha*. The missionaries recounted reports of the great authority of and admiration for a king who was both loved and feared. Public appearances of the king and the royal family were handled with great majesty and reverence. Many public appearances, as when the king and the royal family visited temples to make merits and give alms, were marked by grandeur and veneration. The king also had a high regard for the Buddhist monks and provided them with weekly food supplies. Such admiration was something the friars could relate to, having a great monarch in Philip II of Spain, who was also deeply pious and supportive of Catholicism. Spanish and Portuguese friars were both familiar with a history of strong monarchs who considered themselves to be the guardians of religion.

To the friars, this had much to do with the *sangha* being a highly differentiated and organised institution. Buddhist institutional structures were 'very similar to our own' (*muy semejante a las nuestras*). The friars made a point of observing that the living quarters for monks were 'convents' (*conventos*), the same as theirs, separate from the laity. The monks lived, worshipped and ate communally and took vows of poverty and chastity. Fr Ribadeneira, like colleagues and travellers in the New World, rarely used the term *religiosos* to refer to non-Christian personnel. In the Philippines, by contrast, those leading in rites and ceremonies were termed 'ministers of idols' or of 'demons' (*ministros de*

los ídolos, demonio), not 'religious' (*religiosos*). Buddhist monks, on the other hand, were deemed deserving of being designated as 'religious', like the friars themselves. In fact, they had a variety of religious groups, not unlike the variety of Catholic orders with different rules and practices.[40]

The Buddhist monks, like the friars, had a visible hierarchy: every convent had an abbot leader and a rank of seniority in the community, including novices; there was also a supreme patriarch (*religioso principal*) who spoke for the entire community. The well-defined structure showed that the Buddhist monks, like Christian religious, had a complex institutional organisation with clear leadership. The monks also worshipped at set hours of the day, kept a rigorous schedule and limited eating to twice daily. They not only had holy scriptures, but also employed a different non-vernacular language for ceremonial purposes, which only monks knew (Pali), not unlike the situation with Latin. They even illuminated and decorated their scriptures like Christians did.[41]

The Franciscans also engaged in philosophical exchanges with Buddhist monks, and here too they saw a number of analogies to Christianity. For example, the friars observed that the monks had 'commandments' (the five precepts): do not kill, steal, drink alcohol ('wine'), sleep with strange women, or lie. Of these precepts, not killing, including the killing of animals, was strongly emphasised within the country and greatly puzzled the friars. In conversations with monks they were apprehensive of the idea of transmigration and reincarnation. This doctrine and the belief that one's soul could be reincarnated was grappled with and debated extensively. At one point in these debates, the friars posited that rationality could not exist in animals, given that they show no signs of rationality of language. To this the Buddhist monks responded that animals clearly communicate with each other and have their own mode of communication.[42] On such doctrines as reincarnation, the monks and friars could not be more different. Yet the friars could admire the fact that such beliefs served as sources or inspiration for religious devotion and good morality. The friars noted that the doctrine of reincarnation led to laws against homicide, creating a people that heeded this law with vigour, and also leading to the virtue of mercy as well as care for animals.[43] In some ways Siam was, at least outwardly, a model religious society. Piety, religious devotion and common-sense law was evidence to the friars of the high development of society and civilisation.

In Fr Ribadeneira's collected observations, Siam, Siamese society and its political system were classed in a short list of what he considered to be sophisticated cultures in Asia. The list only consisted of Siam, Japan

and China. The Siamese, said Ribadeneira, like the Japanese and Chinese, 'possess a good natural understanding' (*tienen bien entendimiento natural*) in their system of governance and justice.[44] To the Siamese, their laws were some of the 'best in the world' (*mejor del mundo*) and were based on religious teaching.[45] Marcelo Ribadeneira was able to see that these doctrines, hierarchical structures and personnel greatly resembled what was witnessed in Japan, China and neighbouring regions. The Siamese were seen to exceed all others in the public presence of religion in daily life, in politics, in the number of temples, in religious art, in the great number of men and boys ordained as monks and in providing free religious education. Friars agreed that what they were witnessing were people who had 'religion', had their own 'manner of religion' and even had 'quite a bit of religion' (*manera de religion, aquella religion, tienen por mucha religion*).[46]

The friars often admired the intersection of religion, politics and culture, and saw the same parallels in society, law and good morality in China and Japan. Siamese society, like civilised China and Japan, was based on a reasonable and orderly interpretation of natural law. Ribadeneira suggested that the similarities in law, doctrine and practice presupposed a shared common source. Like Japan and China, Siam had reasonable laws and social order, and Ribadeneira noted that the origins of the laws, teachings and practices in these three nations came from the same person (the Buddha).[47] Beginning with a plurality of traditions across Asia, he concluded that the traditions in Pegu (Burma), Cambodia, Cochinchina (Vietnam), Patay (Patani, southern Thailand), China and Japan were one and the same. At the time each region used different names for the Buddha. In Siam, they referred to this founding lord as 'Perbeneab'; in China, 'Xaca'; and in Japan, 'Amida'. Ribadeneira was already beginning to work out the origins of the founder both by name and region. Did the Buddha originally come from Siam, then move to Japan, or was it the other way around? He tentatively proposed that the Buddha came from Japan, rather than travelling from Siam to Japan, but other friars noted that some monks disagreed.[48] The crucial interpretative watershed is the claim that despite regional and linguistic differences, this was a single religion based on the same founder. What is remarkable here is that Ribadeneira and his companions were proposing that all the different regions share a common founder. Missionaries were already articulating that the vastly different varieties of traditions, with a host of different names for the Buddha, were one and the same. The friars were already grappling amongst

themselves and with Buddhist monks about the correct origin and geographic diffusion of this single tradition. Yet the breakthrough in conceptualising the religion of the Buddha as a single entity had already been achieved.

CONCLUSION

Sixteenth-century Christian observers of what would eventually be known as 'Buddhism' came to their conclusions through encounter and exchange with Buddhist monks, who not only resembled them in appearance, but who shared similar values of poverty, asceticism, spirituality, hierarchy and discipline. For the friars these values were communal religious life, institutional hierarchy and organisation, and the symbiosis of the political, social, and religious spheres. Buddhists in Siam greatly excelled in these areas, including a commitment to poverty, living off alms, ascetic discipline, and organisation. They also had high regard for a committed monarch who served as the supreme patron and protector of religion. To the friars, Theravada Buddhists excelled in lay devotion, particularly in the form of care and respect for monks, participation in religious festivities and other acts of religiosity.

Spanish friars in the last quarter of the sixteenth century argued that the Buddhist devotion they observed in Siam counted as religion. Like that of Discalced Franciscans, Buddhist devotion was centred on mendicancy, poverty, lay piety and a perceived religious and socio-political interdependence. The friars were cross-cultural agents who saw themselves mirrored in their encounter with Buddhist monks and participated with monks in receiving alms and viewed Buddhist monks as 'religious' personnel with a high degree of discipline and hierarchy. They were equally recognised by Buddhist monks and laity as equivalent religious figures to Buddhist monks.

Furthermore, the key building blocks for constructing the concept of Buddhism as a single religious entity were already in place by the late sixteenth century. Friars proposed that all the varieties of 'sects' in Asia in fact shared a common origin. At the core was the idea of one religion, large in scope across the East, centred on one founder, with a community of monastic followers and a common body of doctrine. The religious exchange between Christian friars and Buddhist monks in sixteenth-century Siam formed the first stage in the gradual Western construction of Buddhism. Missionaries had begun to include Asian traditions in the progressive pluralisation of the category of religion.

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NOTES

1 Marcelo de Ribadeneira, *Historia de las islas del archipielago y reynos de la gran China, Tartaria, Cuchinchina, Malaca, Sian, Camboxa y Iappon, y de los sucedido en ellos a los religiosos descalços de la Orden del Seraphico Padre San Francisco, de la Prouincia de San Gregorio de las Philippinas: compuesta por fray Marcello de Ribadeneyra* (Barcelona: Gabriel Graells y Giraldo Dotil, 1601) [History of the Archipelago of the Philippines, and the Kingdoms of Great China, Tartary, Cochinchina, Malacca, Siam, Cambodia and Japan]. I will follow the Colección España Misionera, edited by Juan de Legísima, which standardises spelling but tries to match the original pagination: *Historia de las Islas del Archipiélago Filipino y Reinos de la Gran China, Tartaria, Cochinchina, Malaca, Siam, Cambodge y Japón* (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, 1947).

2 This article follows the work of my Boston University dissertation examining the contributions of Catholic missionaries in the early modern period to the construction of Buddhism.

3 Stephen Batchelor argues that 'Buddhism' as an entity emerged starting with the eighteenth-century rationalist Enlightenment, the subsequent decline of religious authority and the later consolidation of colonialism: Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax, 1994), especially 291ff.

4 Donald Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); see in particular Charles Hallisey, 'Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism', 32ff., for important contributions of the Victorian Era.

5 Philip C. Almond traces some early modern constructions of Buddhism but concludes that those writings failed to constitute a full realisation of Buddhism as a coherent religion across Asia. Almond frames his argument in terms of the nineteenth-century popular discovery of Buddhism through widely distributed texts such as Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* (first published in 1879 in Auckland by Floating Press). See Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

6 Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: Orientalism and History in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

7 Roger-Pol Droit focuses on nineteenth-century philosophers who argue for the identification of Buddhism as a religion of negation. See Roger-Pol Droit, *Le Culte du Néant: les philosophes et le Bouddha* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997).

8 Martin Baumann, 'Culture Contact and Valuation: Early German Buddhists and the Creation of a "Buddhism in Protestant Shape"', *Numen* 44: 3 (1997): 270–95.

9 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (New York: Routledge, 2013), chapter 7: 'Orientalism and the Discovery of "Buddhism"'.

10 Tomoku Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 122: see especially chapter 4, 'Buddhism, a World Religion'.

11 See also Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793–1900* (New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), and Esther Bloch, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hegde, eds., *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

12 Some scholars argue that it is not clear if practitioners considered themselves "Buddhist" before Western labelling. See Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 17; Kristofer Marinus Schipper, *The Taoist body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 3; and John Ross Carter, *On Understanding Buddhists: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in Sri Lanka* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), chapter 1.

13 See for example Ribadeneira, *Historia*, 144, 325, 362–4, for different takes on these figures and their relationship to each other.

14 Hallisey, 'Roads Taken and Not Taken'.

15 Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy*, Buddhism Series (Rorschach, Switzerland: UniversityMedia, 2012), 15, 35.

16 Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 24.

17 For the Augustinian tradition see Stroumsa, *A New Science,* 7. For the historical Latin oppositional distinction between '*superstitiosus*' and '*religiosus*' see Cicero, *De natura deorum* ii.28; Plutarch, *On superstition*; and the quotation of Seneca in Augustine, *City of God* vi.10–11, discussed aptly by Joan-Pau Rubiés, 'Theology, Ethnography, and the Historicization of Idolatry', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67: 4 (2006): 572–3.

18 Audrius Beinorius, 'Buddhism in the Early European Imagination', *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 6: 2 (2005): 7—22, at 11; for further details see Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253–1255* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), 11.

19 J. Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187; see also J. Z. Smith, 'Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit', *History of Religions* 11: 1 (August 1971): 68.

20 Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', 186–7. Examples of titles that use this fourfold classification are numerous. One example is Johann Heinrich Ursin's *Historische-theologische Bericht vom Unterschied der Religionen die heute zu Tage auf Erden sind* (1563). Other examples include Brerewood's *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Languages and Religions* (1614); Meier, *Historia religionum, Christianae, Judaeae, Gentilis, Mohumedanae* (1697). This categorisation endured into the nineteenth century, for examples, Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations, Jewish, Heathen, Mohometan and Christian, Ancient and Modern* (1817); Vincent Milner, *Religious Denominations of the World: Comprising a General View of the Origin, History and Condition of the Various Sects of Christians, the Jews, and Mahometans, as Well as the Pagan Forms of Religion Existing in the Different Countries of the Earth* (1872).

21 Fritz Staal, *Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras, and the Human Sciences*, Toronto Studies in Religion 4 (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 393: 'The applicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has not only led to piecemeal errors of labelling . . . It is also responsible for something more extraordinary: the creation of so-called religions.'

22 Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

23 Pedro Chirino, *Relación de las Islas Filipinas. The Philippines in 1600*, trans. Ramón Echevarria (Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1969).

24 Ramón Pané, *Relación de Indias*, 1496 (Buenos Aires: Editorial Ene, 1954). Pedro Cieza de León echoes this later: natives appeared to have no house of worship and 'no religion, as we understand it': *Parte primera de la Chrónica del Perú* (1553), *Historias Primitivos de Indias,* Biblioteca de Autores Españolas 26, ed. E. de Vedia, 2: 280.

25 Matteo Ricci, *Lettere* (1580–1609), ed. Francesco D'Arelli (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2001).

26 Beinorius, 'Buddhism', 12–13.

27 Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Ernst Feil, *Religio, Die Geschichte eines neuzeitlichen Gruindbegriffs*, 3 vols (Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) are helpful studies on the semantics and use of the term 'religion'.

28 For the disputes over jurisdiction of the orders in the period of the United Crown see Ribadeneira, *Historia,* 161–3, 331ff.; Horacio de la Costa, *The Jesuits in the Philippines: 1581–1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 419–21, 258ff.

29 Nadchaphon Srisongkram, 'Los Franciscanos Españoles en el Siam de la Era de Ayutthaya: La Descripción de Fray Marcelo de Ribadeneyra' (online paper, Catalogación y studio de las traducciones de los franciscanos españoles, Universidad de Valladolid, no date): http://www.traduccion-franciscasnos.uva.es

30 Marcelo de Ribadeneira, *Historia*, 161–3.

31 Lazaro Iriarte, *Franciscan History: The Three Orders of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Patricia Ross (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 176–7; see also Steven E Turley, *Franciscan Spirituality and Mission in New Spain, 1524–1599: Conflict Beneath the Sycamore Tree* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013), 23–8.

32 App, *Cult of Emptiness,* 35–6.

33 For the Jesuit adoption of mental prayer as a modern transformation in spirituality in contrast to the asceticism of the friars, see H. Outram Evennett, 'Counter-Reformation Spirituality', in *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. David Martin Luebke, Blackwell Essential Readings in History (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 48–63.

34 Ribadeneira, *Historia,* 162. All translations are my own.

35 For insights into the Portuguese in Siam see Manuel Teixeira, *The Portuguese Missions in Malacca and Singapore, 1511–1958* (Lisbon: Agencia General do Ultramar, 1961–3), 56, 109.

36 As stated in the Pali *Mahanama Sutta*, see James R. Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravāda Buddhism*, Curzon Studies in Asian Religion (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), especially 19–22.

37 Hallisey, 'Roads Taken and Not Taken'. The term 'intercultural mimesis' was coined to describe a less unilaterally Western representastion of the East. I use it here in the sense of the mirroring and exchange of similar religious practices.

38 Ribadeneira, *Historia,* 165.
39 *Ibid.*, 163–6.
40 *Ibid.*, 78, 172ff.
41 *Ibid.*, 165, 166, 172, 175.
42 *Ibid.*, 169.
43 *Ibid.*, 165.
44 *Ibid.*, 169–71.
45 *Ibid.*, 162–72.
46 *Ibid.*, 171, 173, 175.
47 *Ibid.*, 169–70.
48 *Ibid*, 170, 362–3.