



Exploring Asian Religions in Europe: An Introduction

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Abstract

In the last fifty years there has been an increasing interest in alternative “spiritualities” in the European context, which have crystallised to a significant extent around “Eastern” religious forms. Whereas an important impulse has certainly been given in this respect by Orientalist views, the role played by missionaries in the transmission of Asian religious forms to Europe has been equally important. Still another major factor behind the transmission of “Eastern” religions to Europe is migration, which is becoming more and more relevant with the increasing number of immigrants from Asian countries. Against this general framework, the articles collected in this special issue attempt to shed more light on selected aspects of Asian religions in the European context, with particular attention to institutional, semi-institutional, and more informal practices, still relatively understudied areas (e.g., parts of Eastern Europe), and broad historical developments.

Keywords

Asian religions – Religion in Europe – Orientalism – mission – migration – informal religiosity

About fifteen years after the publication of Colin Campbell's *The Easternization of the West* (2007), it is perhaps not trivial to try and reflect again on the influence of religious forms imported from East, South, Southeast, and Central Asia on the European context. Campbell interpreted the powerful influence of the "East" on the "West" both as an indicator and a consequence of profound changes occurring especially in contemporary North American and European societies. As it is well known, for the British scholar, the impact of this cultural shift is far ranging and includes aspects such as the focus on impersonal life forces, the preference for intuition over rationality, the rehabilitation of myth, and, of course, the expectation of a "planetary" (as well as individual) spiritual evolution. Even without subscribing to the specific theoretical implications of Campbell's thesis, it is apparent that especially in the last fifty years there has been an increasing interest in alternative spiritual "grand narratives" in the European context, which a series of historical junctures and concurrent dynamics have helped to crystallise to a significant extent around "Eastern" religious forms.

An important impulse has certainly been given in this respect by Orientalist views, initially elaborated and divulged by groups of intellectuals at the intersection with European colonialism,¹ and further developed in more recent times into one of the main themes of contemporary mediascapes. As such, Orientalism (with its reversed version, viz. Occidentalism) in its various articulations still provides one of the frames of references for imagined communities of European/global spiritual seekers as a sort of preferential highway (with all its interruptions, diversions, blocks, and gates) for the two-way global cultural flows between Europe and the "East." To be sure, such imagined communities and, more in general, the flow of these religious forms to Europe (which are, as any other cultural items, not purely "Eastern" but already the product of long processes of hybridisation) are not only virtual but also physically represented by the mobility of religiously-minded individuals and groups between the central, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nodes of global Asian religiosity – the international travels of students of meditation and martial arts, as well as the organisation of international meetings on related topics being two representative examples.

From a related perspective, the role played by missionaries in the transmission of Asian religious forms to Europe has been equally important. Whereas it was often through the work of Christian missionaries that these cultural forms were initially selected, imported, and incorporated in various guises

¹ See, for example, King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

within Western knowledge systems,² starting in the twentieth century Asian religions themselves have progressively become active players in global mission. A large number of Asian-based traditional religions and new religious movements with ties especially (but not only) with Buddhism and Hinduism³ have long established their institutional presence in European countries, with some of these branches acquiring a relatively large membership (e.g., Soka Gakkai International in Italy) or providing the starting point for the creation of autonomous local religious institutions/centres. It has also become clear that between these forms of institutionalised Asian religions and the domain of informal spiritualities (e.g., aspects of the New Age movement, practices related to yoga and meditation), there is also another dimension that can be roughly categorised as semi-institutional, with instances as diverse as trans-sectarian groups and Christian meditational practices based (either directly or indirectly) on Asian sources.

Still another major factor behind the transmission of “Eastern” religions to Europe is migration, which is becoming more and more relevant with the increasing number of immigrants from Asian countries. Already ten years ago, according to the data provided by the Pew Research Center, Europe was the destination of: 8% of all international Hindu migrants (c. 850,000); 14% of all Buddhist migrants (c. 1,040,000), the two major countries of origin being Vietnam and China; and 17% of all “migrants from other religions” (c. 1,570,000), a category “including Sikhs, Jains, followers of traditional Chinese religions and many smaller religious groups.”⁴ The dimension of Asian immigrant religion in Europe (as elsewhere) is inevitably multifaceted since it can refer to different and sometimes overlapping types of religiosity such as the continuing adherence to traditional institutions and new religious groups, the commitment to specific Asian Christianities, the rediscovery of traditional/modernised practices in the destination country, the use of informal/personalised religious practices, and the somehow elusive domain of religion understood as a cultural (“non-religious”) practice.

Against this general framework, the articles collected in this special issue attempt to shed more light on selected aspects of Asian religions in the European context, with particular attention to institutional, semi-institutional,

2 The global work of the Jesuits since their inception in the sixteenth century is in this regard almost paradigmatic. See, for example, Banchoff/Casanova, *The Jesuits and Globalization*.

3 The literature available on these traditions and their offspring in Europe is constantly increasing. Some recent examples of European-scale approaches are Jacobsen/Sardella, *Handbook of Hinduism in Europe* and Borup, *Japanese Buddhism in Europe*.

4 Pew Research Center, *Faith on the Move*, pp. 35–47.

and more informal practices, still relatively understudied areas (e.g., parts of Eastern Europe), and broad historical developments. As for the latter, in his article “Inventing Global Buddhism: Why Do European Buddhists Meditate?”, *Laurence Cox* takes his cue from Charles Pfoundes’s (1840–1907) first Buddhist mission in London and the experiences of various contemporary Irish and British Buddhist converts/sympathisers, in order to explore how meditation became a key aspect for the globalisation of Buddhism. As aptly illustrated by Cox, this was the result of a long trial-and-error process, which eventually, also thanks to the input of Asian Buddhist modernism, led to the selection of “practice” as the most effective way of establishing a meaningful institutional presence of Buddhism in Europe.

In connection with institutional aspects of Buddhism in Eastern Europe, *Piotr Czarnecki*’s “Origins and Development of Buddhism in Poland” focuses on various strands of this tradition in the Polish context and suggests some similarities with developments in other Western countries. Czarnecki provides a detailed historical overview, exploring early Orientalist influences, the first communities of practitioners in the late 1960s during the years of the anti-religious communist regime, and post-1989 developments (after the Freedom of Conscience Act), which led to the consolidation of Buddhism as a significant (and growing) religious minority in contemporary Poland. In his “Hare Krishna in the Czech Republic after Thirty Years: Success or Failure?”, *Dušan Lužný* analyses the development of the neo-Hindu-related International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in another Eastern European country based on Rodney Stark’s (1934–2022) model of religious success and the concept of collective memory. Lužný characterises the trajectory of ISKCON in the Czech Republic as rather unsuccessful in absolute terms, while acknowledging that it can be seen as a limited success when one takes fully into account two specific features of Czech society, that is, its high degree of secularisation and the small number of immigrants from India. “Asian NRMS in the Czech Republic: Consequences of Their Recognition by State in the Era of Religious Freedom” by *Martin Fárek* and *Artur Boháč* has instead a more general focus on the same national setting, with attention to the issue of governmental recognition of Asian new religious movements. One of the interesting points made by Fárek and Boháč is that no Asian-related new religious movement has been officially accredited by the Czech state yet (with some groups being more interested than others in this matter, depending on their degree/type of institutionalisation) also because this evaluation process revolves around patterns (e.g., credo, governing body, priesthood) typical of Christian churches. New insights on the Cao Đài tradition in France are subsequently offered by *Jérémy Jammes*

in his “Exploring Caodai Networks and Practices in France: From Individual Itineraries to Interlocked Relations,” which approaches this Vietnamese new religious movement based on ethnographic research. Against the background of Cao Đài’s universalistic ethos, Jammes analyses the data collected at two temples in the suburbs of Paris, which expose dynamics such as the competitive situation between branches, tensions between pastoral and missionary strategies, and the impact of political rivalries. In her “Complications in Defining the Presence of Tenrikyō in Europe While Discussing Its ‘Community’: When Brief Summaries of an Unbound Group Just Won’t Do,” *Margaret Brady* focuses on the Parisian Tenrikyo Europe Center of the Japanese new religious movement Tenrikyō. Brady shows that within this European branch, membership is a fluid concept, with no set criteria to become part of the religious community, with a group of local and pan-European “core members” (mainly Japanese) playing a central role in the inclusion and socialisation of newcomers. Another contribution, “Plum Village: From Settlement on a Modest Local Scale to Global Communication Network” authored by *Benjamin Dorbaire*, focuses on France with a study of the Plum Village founded by Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) near Bordeaux. Dorbaire provides an overview of this centre, with particular attention to the process through which it has eventually succeeded – after initial difficulties and misunderstandings – in becoming part of the local territorial identity. “Exploring Individualisation Processes in Western Buddhism: A Multi-thematic Analysis of Interviews with English and Italian Practitioners” by *Tiziano Bielli* provides a comparative analysis of various groups (e.g., Soka Gakkai International, Sōtō Zen, Triratna Buddhist Community) in Italy and the United Kingdom. Bielli argues that differences between these groups are related to the type of Buddhist tradition rather than the nationality of individual practitioners. On this basis, he aims to provide a contribution to the debate on the existence of “multiple Western Buddhisms.”

In his “Chinese Families and Their Encounter with the Secular: An Ethnographic Study of Chinese Parents and Their Children in Edinburgh,” *Joseph Chadwin* provides an interesting case study of informal aspects of Chinese religiosity in Europe. Chadwin’s analysis, which relies on qualitative research, indicates that Chinese immigrant families in the Scottish capital can be actively involved in religious behaviour despite their self-identification as “irreligious.” Besides acknowledging significant generational differences between parents and children in this regard, this study illustrates the widespread presence of home shrines among these families, and their adherence to a traditional universe of belief populated by ancestors and various divinities. In his article “Globalization and Asian Religions in the Scuola di Meditazione,”

Ugo Dessì focuses instead on the semi-institutional dimension of Asian religions in Europe through the case study of the Scuola di Meditazione (School of Meditation) in Sardinia. This school is an expression of the non-centralised promotion by sectors of the Roman Catholic Church of meditational techniques from Asia (e.g., *zazen*, *Tàijí quán*) to aid the spiritual growth of lay members. As a whole, the Scuola di Meditazione reveals different layers of the globalisation of Asian religions in Europe, including the working of global religious flows (with both direct and indirect cultural imports from the “East”), the interplay with other “world religions,” and the emergence of glocal/hybrid religious practices among individual practitioners.

Finally, in his article “Exploring East Asian Religiosity in Austria: Current State, Desiderata, and Challenges,” *Lukas K. Pokorny* provides a country-specific case study. Following a comprehensive survey of East Asian religiosity in contemporary Austria and divided into five heuristic categories (Buddhism; Christianity; ethnic religions; alternative religious traditions/holistic offerings; and popular religious realities), he examines the existing scholarship and highlights three major thematic lacunae. He then turns to a systematic discussion of the wider challenges the field poses to the scholar of East Asian religiosity abroad, identifying seven items, ranging from linguistic intricacies to systemic discouragement.

While being aware that a comprehensive exploration of Asian religions in Europe can only be accomplished through a large-scale collaborative effort that goes beyond the scope of the present special issue, the guest editors hope that the articles collected here will contribute to deepening our knowledge of this fascinating field of studies.

Bios

Ugo Dessì is FWF Professorial Fellow at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna, and Honorary Associate Professor at the University of Cape Town. Born in Sardinia, he received his PhD in the Study of Religions from the University of Marburg (2006), and his Habilitation from Leipzig University (2012). He has published widely on Shin Buddhism, including *Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism* (Lit 2007), and on the interplay of Japanese Religions with global dynamics, including *Japanese Religions and Globalization* (Routledge 2013) and *The Global Repositioning of Japanese Religions: An Integrated Approach* (Routledge 2017). His last book *Religioni e globalizzazione. Un'introduzione* (Carocci 2019) is a critical introduction to the comparative study of religion under globalization.

Lukas K. Pokorny is Professor and Chair of Religious Studies as well as Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Vienna. Large parts of his current research focus on East Asian religions (specifically Confucianism), millenarianism, new religious movements, and esotericism as well as local religious histories and new, alternative, and Asian diasporic religions in Austria.

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