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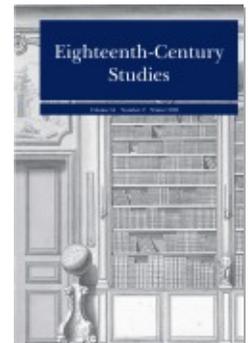
## Voltaire's Understanding of Buddhism

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# VOLTAIRE'S UNDERSTANDING OF BUDDHISM

*Benjamin Hoffmann*

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In *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason*, Guy G. Stroumsa situates the emergence of the modern study of religion in the context of three major phenomena: “the great discoveries, the birth of modern philology, and the wars of religion,” which “deeply transformed intellectual and religious attitudes” and ultimately led to the “formation of a new kind of intellectual *curiositas* and the birth of comparative religion.”<sup>1</sup> Insisting on the significance of the work undertaken by such thinkers as Thomas Hyde, Athanasius Kircher and Bernard Picard, Stroumsa declares that Voltaire is not the “main character” in the European invention of the science of religion and the correlative popularization of knowledge on religious phenomena.<sup>2</sup> The French *philosophe* nonetheless displayed, throughout his long and turbulent career, a passionate curiosity for the variety of religious beliefs around the world and greatly contributed to the dissemination of the remarkable differences in their doctrinal and metaphysical contents.

A believer in God who did not believe in the divinity of Christ, a deist who adored a sublime but remote Creator of all things, Voltaire discussed varied religious systems in diverse literary forms (tales, plays, essays, etc.), in particular in his two collections of philosophical texts: *Lettres philosophiques* (1733) and *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764).<sup>3</sup> While the former is focused on the English nation and insists upon the peaceful cohabitation across the channel of various branches of Christianity (such as Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, and Nontrinitarianism), the

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latter is a voyage around the religious world commenting on both monotheistic systems (e.g., Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism) and polytheistic creeds, including Graeco-Roman Paganism and the Ancient Egyptian religion. By presenting the extreme diversity of faiths around the world and across history, Voltaire tried to challenge the centrality of the Catholic Church in France. Eager to promote religious tolerance, the *philosophe* accumulated the proofs of existence of a multiplicity of competing creeds as a way of convincing his readership that no faith can reasonably allege to possess the ultimate truth when the same claim is shared by countless rivals. Conceived as an attempt to identify a core of ethical conducts and religious practices shared by all creeds across the world despite doctrinal divergences, Deism embodied Voltaire's hope to get rid once and for all of intolerance and its most ferocious expression, fanaticism.

While Voltaire's interest in religious expressions beyond the boundaries of Christianity has been the object of numerous studies, his reflections on Buddhism, a creed that predates Christianity by some five hundred years, have attracted little interest so far.<sup>4</sup> Buddhism is nonetheless the object of numerous observations made by Voltaire, from his 1756 *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* to the *Lettres chinoises* of 1776, a text published two years before his death. This fact alone calls for a remark. The academic study of Buddhism is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, initiated by the first accurate translations of Buddhist texts from Pāli, Chinese, Mongolian, Tibetan, and Sanskrit. Author of an *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien* (1844), the orientalist Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852) is regarded as one of the very first Europeans to have dedicated himself to the study of Asian religions, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, before the first translations into European languages of Buddhist sacred texts, the Western world had already acquired a knowledge of this religion thanks to the encounter between European travelers and Asian informants. Thus, the introduction of Buddhism to Europe largely predates its academic study, as the first Western mention of the Buddha appears in the *Miscellanies* (c. 203 CE) by Clement of Alexandria,<sup>6</sup> while the 1549 mission to Japan led by Francis-Xavier substantially informed the Western understanding of Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> This encounter led to countless intellectual misunderstandings painstakingly retraced by App who insists on the playing out of what he calls the "Arlecchino mechanism": a projection of the familiar onto the unknown that led Westerners to see a false familiarity between the tenets of Christianity and Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, when Voltaire starts writing about Buddhism during the mid-eighteenth century, he is the heir of several centuries of Western commentaries on this religion. In particular, he familiarized himself with Buddhism thanks to the abundant literature on China produced by Jesuit missionaries (notably the *Mémoires* of Father Louis Le Comte, the *Description de la Chine* by Father J.-B. Duhalde, and the voluminous *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, by the Jesuits)<sup>9</sup> while Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* complemented his information and drew a comparison between Buddhism and Spinozism on the basis of a perceived monism common to both systems.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Voltaire found in the *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1723–1743) a number of details about the Buddha's biography, which he particularly used, as we will see, to draw a parallel with the miraculous birth of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Finally, he knew the reports of Louis XIV's embassies to Siam (Thailand), especially the widely read book by La Loubère which includes numerous observations about this Buddhist country.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, it is somewhat misleading to connect in the title of the present essay Voltaire's name to the word "Buddhism," as in the countless pages this *philosophe* dedicated to the Far East, there are no mentions of the word "Buddhism" or the name "Buddha." However, Voltaire's wide erudition and intense curiosity for Asia did include extensive knowledge of what we call Buddhism today, as well as information about its founder, Siddhārtha Gautama (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE): he just knew them under different names. When Voltaire speaks of Buddhism, he usually calls it the religion of "Fo," the Chinese name for the Buddha (佛/Fo). He also names it the "sect of the bonzes" or "bikkhus" ("Buddhist monks"), as well as the "religion of Saka," a simplification of the word "Śākyamuni" (which means "sage of the Śākyas," Śākya being the name of the clan to which Buddha's family belonged). Finally, Voltaire also uses the expression the "cult of Sammonocodom," which is the French rendering of one of Buddha's Thai epithets meaning "the mendicant Gautama": the "śramaṇa" or "mendicant." To simplify matters, I will keep using the word "Buddhism," instead of one of Voltaire's longer and more controversial phrases, such as "the sect of the adulators of Fo."

The available knowledge on Buddhism was still limited during Voltaire's time and plagued with inaccuracies, many of them due to translation issues between European languages and the three main sources of information during the Early Modern period: Chinese, Thai, and Japanese informants.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Voltaire knew of Buddhism through the filter of sources that tackled the specificities of the Buddhist faith with greater or lesser success and was unaware of the complex differences of teachings existing within the Buddhist world, in particular the differences between the various Buddhist schools. While Voltaire's knowledge was insufficient for him to be aware of the existence of different trends in the development of Buddhism, he was nonetheless familiar with its diffusion throughout the Asian world and thus considered it a far-reaching religious phenomenon, since he spoke of Siamese, Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, and Japanese Buddhists. In addition, we will see that he was conversant with a series of core ethical precepts and metaphysical beliefs common to followers of the Buddha, which made him a particularly well-informed European commentator of Buddhism for his time.

The goal of the present study consists in retracing what Voltaire understood of Buddhism and what he made of this understanding. For this purpose, it will cover three related questions. First, what were the content and limits of Voltaire's comprehension of Buddhism, and to what extent was it representative of the available knowledge in eighteenth-century France? Second, how did he choose to use his actual knowledge of Buddhism; that is, to what argumentative goals did he apply what he understood of Buddhism? It is indeed one of the main contentions of this article that Voltaire commented on French religious controversies through his description of the Buddhist faith. We'll see that he used Buddhism as an argument in a rhetorical war against Catholicism where it could play the contradictory roles of ally or foe, depending on the varying circumstances of his intellectual fights. Finally, a last question will concern the evolution of Voltaire's description of Buddhism. While Voltaire does not hesitate to exaggerate the analogies he perceived between Buddhism and Catholicism, in order to transform the former into a proxy to attack the latter, he also demonstrates a genuine curiosity toward some of the most metaphysical beliefs of Buddhism, in particular the belief in reincarnation. In order

to clarify this evolution, I will study the three works, referred to above, published by Voltaire over two decades: the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* of 1756, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* of 1764 and the *Lettres chinoises* of 1776.

### BUDDHISM AND CONFUCIANISM IN THE *ESSAI SUR LES MŒURS ET L'ESPRIT DES NATIONS* (1756)

One of the earliest mentions of Buddhism in Voltaire's work can be found in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, a work undertaken in 1741 and published for the first time in 1756. This monumental book, comprising one hundred and seventy-four chapters, starts with an overview of China and India, portrayed by Voltaire as the most ancient civilizations on earth, and continues with a description of Europe until the beginning of the century of the Sun King. Unlike Bossuet's *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle* (1681),<sup>14</sup> where the course of events demonstrates the constant intervention of Divine Providence, Voltaire's *Essai* reveals the action of human progress due to the light of reason, and shows that progress is neither linear nor continuous, but often delayed or halted by obscurantism, fanaticism, and superstition.<sup>15</sup>

Voltaire's description of Buddhism takes place in the essay's second chapter, entitled "De la religion de la Chine" [Of the Religion of China]. This description has to be read within the context of the larger argumentative goals of the *Essai*, in particular its attempt to change the perspective widely accepted by Voltaire's compatriots on the centrality of Western culture in world history. China plays a preeminent role in this rhetorical campaign as the ancientness of its civilization allows Voltaire to belittle the early traditions of Christianity and to contradict the Bible's narrative on the origins of the world. While Bossuet places the creation of earth four millennia before Christ, Voltaire insists that China's empire was established more than four thousand years before his time, which allows him to question the reliability of the Bible and portray a civilization that vastly predates the coming of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Voltaire's interest in China has an additional source, which is his enthusiasm for Confucius and what the Jesuits called "Confucianism"—a flawed concept which has its roots in the West. Indeed, it would be more exact to talk about the *ru* or *rujia* school (儒家—"the school of the Scholars") of which Confucius is not the creator, but rather a major intermediary.<sup>17</sup> Voltaire borrows the concept of Confucianism from the Jesuits and summarily presents it as a religion that "consists in being just," thus reducing its teaching to its simplest element while failing to mention ancestor worship, in all probability owing to the conflict of Confucius' reverence for the past with the underlying belief in progress that runs through the *Essai*.<sup>18</sup> Only five years before its publication, Voltaire had already dedicated the final chapter of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, to the "Rites Controversy," a bitter dispute among Roman Catholic missionaries on the compatibility of Chinese ritual practices with Catholic belief.<sup>19</sup>

Of Confucius himself, Voltaire gives a doctored picture, presenting him as a deist *avant la lettre*. Voltaire indeed introduces him as an interpreter of the divine who knew it through the sole use of his reason, and who did not claim to have received a supernatural revelation: "il n'est point prophète, il ne se dit point inspiré;

il ne connaît d'inspiration que l'attention continuelle à réprimer ses passions" [he is not a prophet, he doesn't claim to be inspired; he knows no inspiration other than the continual effort to repress his passions] (*E*, 31–32).<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Voltaire's portrayal of Confucius is highly problematic. Far from deriving his knowledge of the divine through purely rational means as Voltaire asserts he did, Confucius actually claimed that "he enjoyed a special and privileged relationship with Heaven and that, by the age of fifty, he had come to understand what Heaven had mandated for him and for mankind (*Lunyu* 2.4)."<sup>21</sup> Arguably, there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the Confucian concept of "Heaven" (天/*Tian*) that can be explained by a number of reasons: a "paucity of information," as "traditional Confucian writings seldom contain direct discussions of *tian*"; the absence, in Chinese tradition, of a "discipline parallel to theology" and its "systematic inquiry about the nature of God"; and a propensity, among Confucian thinkers, to "write as if they all knew and agreed on what *tian* is."<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Voltaire consistently leaves out from his account of Confucian thought anything having to do with metaphysics, in order to keep intact the portrait he wants to paint of Confucius: that of a wise man chiefly concerned with ethical preoccupations. This choice points to the rhetorical use of Confucius in Voltaire's argument, his cult becoming proof that an alternative to Christianity could form the basis of a harmonious social system, a society enlightened by the power of reason rather than by the light of revelation. Voltaire saw in Confucius not only a major model but a veritable source of inspiration for his own work, placing an image of the great Chinese philosopher, along with a portrait of Socrates, in his library in the Ferney castle.<sup>23</sup>

It is in the context of this rhetorical use of Confucianism that Voltaire presents Buddhism in the *Essai*, as a foreign import directly threatening the enlightened cult promoted by the author of the *Analects*:

Mais, dans le premier siècle de notre ère, ce pays fut inondé de la *superstition* des bonzes. Ils apportèrent des Indes l'*idole* de Fo ou Foé, adoré sous différents noms par les Japonais et les Tartares, *prétendu dieu descendu sur la terre*, à qui on rend le *culte le plus ridicule*, et par conséquent le *plus fait pour le vulgaire*. Cette religion, née dans les Indes près de mille ans avant Jésus-Christ, a *infecté* l'Asie orientale; c'est ce dieu que prêchent les bonzes à la Chine, les talapoins à Siam, les lamas en Tartarie. C'est en son nom qu'ils promettent une vie *éternelle*, et que des milliers de bonzes consacrent leurs jours à des *exercices de pénitence* qui effrayent la nature. Quelques-uns passent leur vie enchaînés, d'autres portent un carcan de fer qui plie leur corps en deux, et tiennent leur front toujours baissé à terre. Leur *fanatisme* se subdivise à l'infini. Ils passent pour *chasser des démons*, pour *opérer des miracles*; ils vendent au *peuple la rémission des péchés*.

[But in the first century of our era this country was over-run by the *superstition* of the Bonzes, who brought from India the *idol* "Fo" or "Foe," which is worshipped under different names by the Tartars and Japanese; a *so-called divinity descended to earth*, to whom they *worship in the most ridiculous fashion*, and consequently the manner most appealing to the common people. This religion, born in India almost one thousand years before Christ, has *infected* East Asia; this is the God that the Bonzes preach in China, the Talapoins in Siam, and the Lamas in Tartary. It is in

his name that they promise *eternal life*, and that thousands of Bonzes devote their days to such *acts of penance* shocking to human nature. Some spend their whole life in chains, others wear an iron yoke that bends their bodies double and holds their heads down to the ground. Their *fanaticism* is proliferated ad infinitum. They are said to *cast out demons* and *work miracles*, and they *sell to the people the remission of their sins.*" (E, 35, my emphasis).]

Voltaire's account of Buddhism is strewn with countless errors. The most crucial one is also quite common in his time and concerns the so-called divinity of Buddha.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to what Voltaire claims, Siddhārtha Gautama is not revered by Buddhists as an omniscient God but as a person who has achieved awakening (*bodhi*), as the teacher who has revealed to mankind the path leading to the abolition of suffering. Thus, calling him a "divinity," or a "god" is a complete misconception that leads Voltaire to miss one of the key features of Buddhism, namely its status as a religion that does not place an Omnipotent Creator at the origin of the world. Additionally, Voltaire presents Buddhism as a cult plagued by superstitions, which offers a striking and intentional contrast with the rational and enlightened Confucianism he previously extolled in the same chapter. Voltaire's critical assessment follows the Jesuits' opinion on this matter, as the missionaries had generally shown contempt for Buddhism: "[U]nder the influence of the Confucianist scholars, who remained hostile to the mystic doctrines of the Buddha and Lao-tzu, the Jesuit missionaries had formed the conception of one single Chinese religion, rationalist and untranscendentalist. Outside the cult of Confucius and its religious and ethical implications, there was nothing but superstitions."<sup>25</sup>

This characterization of Buddhism as a superstitious cult also has implications with regard to the social category most apt to obey its precepts, its main followers being part of "the common people" (E, 35). We are thus faced with an opposition that pits Confucianism against Buddhism on social grounds. Of the former, Voltaire writes that it was embraced by "les empereurs, les *Colaos*, c'est à dire les mandarins, les lettrés, et tout ce qui n'est pas peuple" [the emperors, the *Colaos*, that is the mandarins, the scholars, and by all who were above the common people (E, 31)], while the latter is "pour l'usage du peuple, comme des aliments grossiers faits pour le nourrir, tandis que les magistrats et les lettrés, séparés en tout du peuple, se nourrissent d'une substance plus pure" [for the use of the vulgar, as a coarse sort of food proper for their stomachs, while the magistrates and the learned, who are in every respect separated from the common people, feed on a purer substance (E, 27).]

Voltaire's insistence on the social category to which belonged the followers of Buddha is both a consequence and a reinterpretation of earlier documents on Buddhism. In *The Birth of Orientalism*, Urs App presents the first European report on Japanese religions, which reached Europe in 1558.<sup>26</sup> Entitled the *Sumario de los Errores* [Summary of Errors], this document contains a survey of Japanese religions, including Buddhism, and makes an influential distinction between two Buddhist doctrines: "an exoteric or outer one for the simple-minded people and an esoteric or inner one for the philosophers and literati."<sup>27</sup> Voltaire was probably acquainted with this distinction through *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, whose section on northern Vietnam refers to "Xaca's

two doctrines.”<sup>28</sup> Admittedly, the distinction between the Buddha's two doctrines does not always correspond to a division between the commoners and the elite. In some texts, it reflects a contrast between two techniques to reach enlightenment: one, which is conform to the highest teachings expounded by the Buddha, and another set of techniques (named *upāya* or “expedient means”), adjusted to people's situations and capacities for comprehension. While this tradition does not directly oppose two social groups within the Buddhist community, Voltaire interprets it as a social divide and only retains the information gathered on the exoteric trend in order to stage an opposition with Confucianism instead of a contest between two competing doctrines within the same religion.

In doing so, Voltaire ultimately intends to identify Buddhism with Christianity while Confucianism plays the role of an oriental form of Deism. In the above quoted excerpt, when Voltaire speaks of Buddhism, he uses expressions that would be applicable to the Christian God, such as a divinity “descended to earth.” Similarly, the Buddhist monks might as well be members of the Catholic church if we follow Voltaire, who asserts that they “devote their days to acts of penance,” “cast out demons,” “work miracles,” and “sell to the people the remission of their sins.” Voltaire, as we shall see in the following parts of the present essay, actually had a more sophisticated understanding of Buddhism than this excerpt might lead us to believe. He knew, for example, that the Buddha did not claim to be a god, just as he understood that the belief in reincarnation is not tantamount to faith in immortality—for the simple reason that reincarnation implies a succession of lives, separated by the repeated experience of death. His goal here is to heap on Buddhism all the accusations of superstition he could not directly address to the Catholic Church without provoking the wrath of the censor.

The allusion to monks selling “the remission of sins” to the people is indeed an indirect reference to indulgences. According to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, it is possible to minimize the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins by performing certain acts (in particular pilgrimages, prayers, mortifications, or gifts), a practice that led over time to a lucrative business. Voltaire harshly criticizes this practice in the “Expiation” article of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770–1772), in which he traces the history of indulgences and denounce them as a mercantile enterprise.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Voltaire's allusion to the members of the clergy who “work miracles” resonates with his condemnation of all miracles in his works while hiding a reference to one of the most famous religious affairs in eighteenth-century France, the affair of the “Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard.” Between 1727 and 1732, miraculous recoveries and fits of devotion in the form of convulsions took place around the tomb of the deacon François de Paris (1690–1727). Louis xv eventually forbade all access to the Cemetery of Saint-Médard, forcing the “Convulsionnaires” to meet in private where they engaged in flagellation and crucifixion. A fierce opponent of the Jansenists, Voltaire attacked their belief in miracles in the article “Convulsions” of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*.<sup>30</sup> In the *Essai*, Buddhist monks become an unlikely proxy for Jansenists, while the description of their religion hides the true nature of his initiative: a fierce charge against the Catholic Church. In sum, Voltaire's understanding of Buddhism implies a voluntary blurring of this creed and the Catholic faith in order to champion a reinvention of Confucianism that drives home his main point: the

superiority of deism over all other religions, since it is the only one that it is not marred by superstitions.

When all is said and done, there is an ethnocentric perspective in Voltaire's interest in Asian cultures that ultimately contradicts the apparent open-mindedness of the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* and his bold decentering of the West on the stage of world history—particularly bold, indeed, as Voltaire's history starts with China and not with the Creation of the world by God as Bossuet did in his work (*Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*, 7). As demonstrated by his account of Buddhism, what truly matters to Voltaire are, ultimately, the intellectual and religious fights taking place at home, rather than a dispassionate understanding of foreign cultures and non-Abrahamic religions. In *Unfabling the East*, Jürgen Osterhammel observes an inherent tension within the representation of Asia by Europeans, travel narratives being at the same time “projections of the European imagination and attempts to grasp reality with the epistemic toolkit of the time.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Osterhammel invites us to recognize the playing out of two competing tendencies in the depiction of Asia by eighteenth-century travelers, a reinvention of this unknown world confirming Westerners' assumptions and, concurrently, a genuine attempt to understand that world through the use of the linguistic and intellectual instruments at the travelers' disposal. Chiefly interested in argumentative efficiency, Voltaire does not shy away from talking about Christianity through a so-called discourse on Buddhism, even if it's at the expense of reinventing the latter in order to accentuate the analogies with the former or, to borrow Osterhammel's terms, of “projecting” preconceived ideas on Buddhism instead of “grasping” the specificities of this religion thanks to the documents at his disposal.<sup>32</sup>

In that respect, the ambiguous nature of Voltaire's curiosity for Buddhism mirrors the double-faced nature of the Enlightenment's interest in Asia, in which the thirst for knowledge cannot be separated from a thirst for power. Acknowledging the fact that no other culture in the modern age surpassed the Europeans in their curiosity about foreign lands, Osterhammel nonetheless observes that “the resulting accumulation of knowledge cannot be isolated from the process of European and colonial expansion. Knowledge of the Other and appropriation of what belonged to the Others went hand in hand.”<sup>33</sup> In Voltaire's case, the accumulation of knowledge about Buddhism embodies a case of cultural appropriation in which the very meaning of what has been learned is transformed into an indirect comment on Western cultural and religious phenomena. Much the same way the Enlightenment's quest for knowledge was never a disinterested one, as it satisfied curiosity at the same time as it laid the groundwork for colonial undertakings, Voltaire uses what he learned of Buddhism to integrate this knowledge within the structure of an argument against Catholicism. In the realm of discourse, this rhetorical inclusion parallels the very concrete land-appropriation of the colonial project, Buddhism being integrated within the nexus of European religious controversies the same way people, land, products, and artefacts were being absorbed at the same period by colonial powers.

THE BUDDHA AND HIS COMMENTATORS IN THE  
*DICTIONNAIRE PHILOSOPHIQUE* (1764)

Published eight years after the *Essai*, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* contains alphabetically arranged articles on a great array of topics, with a clear interest in religious institutions, traditions, and controversies. Buddhism is discussed in various articles throughout the text, in particular in the article "Catéchisme chinois" [Chinese Catechism], which offers, in the form of a dialogue between prince Kou and a disciple of Confucius called Cu-Su, what essentially is a new variation on the themes developed in the *Essai*.<sup>34</sup> Once again staging an opposition between Confucianism and Buddhism, Voltaire extolls the former at the expense of the latter by insisting on the superstitions plaguing the cult of the so-called God Fo. In the course of this article, Voltaire particularly insists on one aspect in the historical Buddha's biography: the role played by a white elephant in his birth. Prince Kou declares: "Le dieu Fo ne m'en impose pas davantage [que Lao-Tseu], *quoiqu'il ait eu pour père un éléphant blanc*, et qu'il promette une vie immortelle" [The God Fo does not impress me more [than Lao-Tzu], *although he had a white elephant for his father* and promises immortal life].<sup>35</sup> Mentioned in *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*,<sup>36</sup> the "white elephant" is the object of a dream the Buddha's mother had: "For twenty years they had no children," the story says about Queen Māyā and King Śuddhodana, but one night she "had a strange dream, in which she saw a white elephant entering into her womb through the right side of her chest, and she became pregnant."<sup>37</sup> Voltaire makes good use of the white elephant story in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* because of its flagrant similarity with the circumstances surrounding the conception of Christ: the white elephant in Queen Maya's dream is an oriental equivalent of the Holy Ghost who visited the Virgin Mary, allowing Voltaire to mock the Christian dogma of immaculate conception through a direct attack on the miraculous circumstances surrounding the birth of Buddha.

The similarities between the birth of the Buddha and the birth of Christ are explored in particular in the "Eighth Question," of the article "Religion" (*D*, 357), in which Voltaire stages an oriental controversy mirroring the religious debates taking place in the Christian world. This controversy opposes the Chinese bonzes to the Siamese talapoins (a word commonly used by eighteenth-century philosophers to talk about Buddhist monks):

Un bonze prétend que Fo est un dieu ; qu'il a été prédit par des fakirs ; qu'il est né d'un éléphant blanc ; que chaque bonze peut faire un Fo avec des grimaces. Un talapoin dit que Fo était un saint homme dont les bonzes *ont corrompu la doctrine*, et que c'est Sammonocodom qui est le vrai dieu. Après cent arguments et cent démentis, les deux factions conviennent de s'en rapporter au dalai-lama, qui demeure à trois cents lieues de là, qui est immortel et même infaillible.

[A bonze asserts that Fo is a God, that he was foretold by fakirs, that he was born of a white elephant, and that every bonze can by certain grimaces make a Fo. A talapoin says that Fo was a holy man whose *doctrine was corrupted* by the bonzes, and that Sammonocodom is the true God. After a hundred arguments and denials, the two factions agree to refer the question to the Dalai Lama, who resides three hundred leagues

from there, and who is not only immortal, but also infallible (*D*, 357, my emphasis).]

This passage might have been inspired to Voltaire by the Samyé Debate (792–94), which opposed Indian and Chinese Buddhists in front of the Tibetan king, Khri-srong-Ide-btsan, and centered on the question of whether enlightenment is attained suddenly or gradually.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the Eighth Question's debate departs widely from this possible model and evolves into a blatant caricature of Buddhism whose exaggerations serve to accentuate the analogies Voltaire perceived between Buddhism and Christianity. Cultural inaccuracies indeed abound in this paragraph. "Fakirs," for example, are not Buddhists but Sufi Muslims ascetics, while the arbitrage of the Dalai-Lama does not correspond to reality. Indeed, the Dalai-Lama is not the spiritual leader of all Buddhists throughout the world but only of Tibetan Buddhists, and did not gain political rule and religious authority in Tibet before the ascension of the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642. In this text, Voltaire is simply using what he knows of Buddhism to evoke a controversy reminiscent of the religious fights that have been plaguing Europe from the Renaissance to his time. This text indeed creates a semiotic system in which one has to recognize a European equivalent shrouded behind an oriental mask: the Chinese bonzes replace the Catholic priests, the Siamese talapoins who accuse them to have "corrupted" the teachings of their leader are projections of the Protestants who had similar grievances against the Roman Church, while the Dalai Lama is portrayed in a leadership position corresponding to the role played by the Roman Pope in Catholicism.

The conclusion of the "Eighth Question" indeed makes a mockery of Christians portrayed as Buddhists. Voltaire shows the members of the two "sects" gratefully encasing the Dalai Lama's excrements in "little chaplets which they kiss devoutly" (*D*, 357), a clear allusion to the cult of holy relics throughout the Christian world. Similarly, the conclusion of the debate in which the Dalai Lama gives preference to the Chinese monks who defended him against vindictive Siamese talapoins has to be read as a displacement in an oriental context of the French war of religions. It is striking to see Voltaire have an intuition of the actual division of the Buddhist world between the two "vehicles" of Mahayana Buddhists (here, represented by the Chinese monks) and the Theravāda Buddhists (represented by Siamese talapoins), a division that has indeed been problematically compared to the fracture of the Christian world between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>39</sup> That being said, Voltaire's goal consists, once again, in criticizing the ridiculous and eventually disastrous consequences of religious superstitions in the Christian world—even if it is at the expense of caricaturing the followers of a different faith.

In some respects, Voltaire's use of Buddhism to criticize Catholicism was anticipated by Pierre Bayle's thinly disguised polemic against the Catholic Church in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.<sup>40</sup> In the article "Japon," Bayle indeed suggests a number of parallels between Buddhist bonzes and Catholic monks. Observing that "Les Bonzes peuvent être comparés à nos moines" [The Bonzes can be compared to our monks], he underlines in the footnotes dubious practices shared by both religious communities:

le célibat mal observé, les tromperies cachées sous les apparences d'une morale rigide, le profit des enterrements, le secours envoyé aux âmes

séparées du corps, fourniraient beaucoup de comparaisons. Je suis persuadé que plusieurs personnes n'ont pu lire les extraits de Mr. Cousin (auteur du Journal des Savants cité ci-dessous) sans s'écrier intérieurement, *c'est comme chez nous*.

[ill-observed celibacy, deceit hidden under the appearance of a rigid morality, profit-making out of burials, and solace dispatched to souls separated from the body, would afford a great many comparisons. I am convinced that many people could not read the excerpts from Mr. Cousin (author of the Journal des Savants quoted below) without thinking to themselves, *it is just like it is at home*.]<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, Voltaire's deployment of Buddhism to comment on the flaws of Catholicism does not ape Bayle's method as both *philosophes* use markedly different rhetorical techniques. Bayle's signature approach consists in creating a paradoxical interplay between the main text and the footnotes, in which the importance they commonly have is reversed. D'Alembert was one of the first commentators to observe this phenomenon, as he declared: "le dictionnaire de Bayle n'est qu'improprement un *dictionnaire* historique; c'est un *dictionnaire* philosophique et critique, où le texte n'est que le prétexte des notes" [it is incorrect to call Bayle's dictionary an historical *dictionary*; it is a philosophical and critical *dictionary*, in which the texts serves as a pretext for the footnotes.]<sup>42</sup> Highlighted by its very title, the inherent duality in Bayle's dictionary is mirrored by the dual structure of the text's body: "If the main articles are mostly *historiques*, the Remarks are to be mostly *critiques*: it is here that Bayle weighs opinions, corrects the errors of other historians, and engages in discussion with commentators across the centuries."<sup>43</sup> In accordance with this structure, the core of Bayle's attacks are indeed displaced to the footnotes of the article "Japon." There, Christianity is for example described as "une religion sanguinaire, meurtrière, accoutumée au carnage depuis cinq ou six cent ans" [a bloody, murderous religion, accustomed to five or six-hundred years of carnages].<sup>44</sup> Voltaire's argumentative technique is radically distinct from Bayle's. While Bayle's remarks clearly articulate the similarities he perceived between Catholic and Buddhist monks—but does it within the more discreet space of the footnotes, printed in a smaller font—Voltaire uses narrative fragments, such as the depiction of the debate between Chinese bonzes and Siamese talapoins in the "Eighth Question," to solicit his reader's active participation. Indeed, it becomes the reader's responsibility to decode the Buddhist signifiers in order to recognize their respective Catholic signified. In other words, Bayle creates an interplay between the text and the footnotes, whereas Voltaire exploits the freedom afforded by the liminal space between what is apparently said and what is indirectly conveyed.

Despite these differences, both *philosophes* never lose sight of the fact that Catholicism, rather than Buddhism, is their true enemy. Bayle's article "Japon" indeed finishes with a striking warning against the dangers of cultural misrepresentation, as he observes that the available knowledge in the West about Buddhism should be taken with precaution since it mainly derives from catholic priests: "il ne faut jamais condamner les gens sur le témoignage de leurs ennemis : il est bon de s'informer s'ils conviennent que l'on ait représenté fidèlement leur doctrine" [one should never condemn people on the testimony of their enemies: it is worth inquiring whether they agree that their doctrine has been faithfully represented].<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Voltaire evolved towards a more accepting view of Buddhism, as the article “Sammonocodom” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* complicates the representation of Buddhism in his work by establishing a distinction between the Buddha and his commentators, a distinction he did not make in the *Essai* or elsewhere in the *Dictionnaire*.

Postulating that later traditions have devalued a series of wise teachings, Voltaire presents the Buddha in the company of major spiritual leaders while looking for a common denominator between their ethical instructions. Voltaire starts by asserting an underlying identity in the ethics preached by very different guides, such as Brahma, Zoroaster, and Mohammed (*D*, 390), before focusing his attention on the monastic rules of Buddhism and Christianity. While the analogy between these two religions was used elsewhere in the *Dictionnaire* as a way to mock Christianity through Buddhism, it plays a new role in this article in serving to demonstrate a core of shared ethical aspirations:

Les règles que *Sammonocodom* donna aux talapoins ses disciples sont aussi sévères que celles de *saint Basile* et de *saint Benoît*.

« Fuyez les chants, les danses, les assemblées, tout ce qui peut amollir l'âme.

N'ayez ni or ni argent.

Ne parlez que de justice, et ne travaillez que pour elle.

Dormez peu, mangez peu, n'ayez qu'un habit.

Ne raillez jamais.

Méditez en secret, et réfléchissez souvent sur la fragilité des choses humaines » (*D*, 391)

[The rules that *Sammonocodom* gave to his disciples the Talapoins are as severe as those of *St. Basil* and *St. Benedict*.

“Avoid songs, dances, assemblies, everything that might soften the soul.

Have neither gold nor silver.

Speak only of justice and work only for justice.

Sleep little, eat little, keep only one robe.

Never mock others.

Meditate in private, and reflect often on the fragility of human affairs.”]<sup>46</sup>

In the *Essai*, Voltaire disparaged Buddhism as a collection of superstitious beliefs, good only for the least educated in Chinese society. Here, this list of precepts is presented in a completely different light: as a compendium of wise recommendations that could be adopted by all people looking to live an ethical life. Precisely, it is the universal validity of these precepts that matters most to Voltaire. While providing a “somewhat idiosyncratic but not inaccurate list of these rules,” a list he was able to compile after closely reading the reports written by Jesuit-missionaries in China, his goal consists first and foremost in highlighting a shared goodness, present in the teachings of all spiritual leaders, the Buddha included.<sup>47</sup> Far from being described as a self-proclaimed God, the Buddha appears in this article as one of the great spiritual leaders in history, one who taught ethical principles that share a fundamental rationality with the lessons given by such counterparts as Zoroaster or Mohammed. In other words, Buddhism is no longer described as a superstitious religion, only destined to be followed by the least educated among

Asian people: it is a pure collection of moral teachings that have come to be mixed with miraculous elements.

Indeed, Voltaire wants to demonstrate the eventual degeneration of moral teachings into blind superstitions, a phenomenon that occurred in the case of Buddhism as it did in all other faiths—with the exception of Catholicism, to which he ironically pays his respects:

Par quelle fatalité, par quelle fureur est-il arrivé que dans tous les pays l'excellence d'une morale si sainte et si nécessaire a été toujours déshonorée par des contes extravagants, par des prodiges plus ridicules que toutes les fables des *Métamorphoses*? Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas une seule religion dont les préceptes ne soient d'un sage, et dont les dogmes ne soient d'un fou? (On sent bien que j'excepte la nôtre, qui est en tous sens infiniment sage). (*D*, 391)

[By what fate, by what fury, did it happen that in all countries, the excellence of such a holy and necessary morality has always been disgraced by extravagant tales, by prodigies more laughable than all of the fables of the *Metamorphoses*? Why is there not a single religion whose precepts do not come from a sage and whose dogmas are not of a madman? (You understand that I make an exception of our religion, which is infinitely wise in every sense).]<sup>48</sup>

Voltaire's answer to his own question involves a distinction between the lawmakers who were content to give reasonable and useful precepts and the disciples of the first disciples and the commentators, who did not sufficiently rely on the wisdom of their leader (*D*, 391). He indeed explains that the latter feared to be insufficiently respected if their guide was not in some way portrayed as a supernatural being. They are responsible for the metamorphosis of the Buddha into a mythical creature, finding it absolutely necessary to say that "Sammonocodom's mother was a virgin when she gave birth to him, that he was born on a rose and that he became god."<sup>49</sup>

In so doing, the "odious commentators" (as Voltaire calls them) are responsible for contaminating "very good precepts" with "impertinent doctrines" (*D*, 391), a contamination that may have unforeseen and less than desirable consequences. Indeed, Voltaire imagines that the followers of the Buddha are likely to formulate the following reasoning: "Mes talapoins m'ont trompé sur la doctrine ; ils pourraient bien m'avoir trompé sur des maximes qui contredisent mes passions" [My Talapoins have deceived me about the doctrine; they may just as well have deceived me about the maxims that contradict my passions] (*D*, 392).<sup>50</sup> In the end, Voltaire points out the disastrous effects of adding miraculous dogmas to sound ethical precepts, given that the realization of the dogma's absurdity may very well encourage the abandonment of the precepts as well, especially when they are supposed to contain the ardor of worldly passions.

Admittedly, this article shows a striking evolution in the representation of the Buddha in comparison with the *Essai*, as the founder of Buddhism is no longer described as a self-proclaimed idol, fooling his followers with absurd superstitions, but as a philosopher who laid out universal ethical principles that join, in their goodness, the morality formulated by other religious leaders before and after him.

Nonetheless, Voltaire tends to negate the distinctiveness of Buddhism, the same way he negates the vast differences existing in the teachings of the various founders of religions he names in his article. As Donald Lopez points out, Voltaire used the article “Sammonocodom” as “an occasion not so much to discuss the Buddha and his teachings but to decry a tendency that he observes in all religions, past and present: the compulsion of later generations to deify the founder, who was in fact not a god but simply a teacher of morality and ethical precepts.”<sup>51</sup> Generalizing about the common core of very different religious beliefs necessarily leads to minimizing or simply ignoring their actual differences. In the passage quoted above, for example, Voltaire names “meditation” as a common practice to both disciples of the Buddha and of Saint Basil, while the practice designated by this term is in one case a highly formalized contemplative practice, and, in the other, the in-depth study of God’s word. Once again in Voltaire’s work, the Buddha and his doctrine are less studied for themselves than to make a point in a matter close to Voltaire’s heart and closer to his home: the necessity to strip the moral principles formulated by spiritual leaders of the superstitious additions made by their commentators.

#### THE DALAI LAMA AND THE BELIEF IN REINCARNATION IN THE *LETTRES CHINOISES* (1776)

Voltaire also discusses Buddhism in one of his very last works, the *Lettres chinoises*, written in 1775 and published in 1776 when he was eighty-three years old.<sup>52</sup> The complete title of the work is *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares, à Monsieur Paw, par un bénédictin, avec plusieurs autres pièces intéressantes*.<sup>53</sup> As the title indicates, Voltaire’s *Lettres chinoises* are addressed to Cornelius de Pauw (1739–1799), a Dutch philosopher who lived at the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia. After disparaging Native Americans in a book published in 1768, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains*, de Pauw turned to Chinese civilization in his 1774 *Recherches philosophiques sur les Égyptiens et les Chinois*.<sup>54</sup> Drawing parallels between Egyptian and Chinese civilizations was already commonplace when de Pauw undertook his work, since in his *China Illustrata* (Amsterdam, 1667) Athanasius Kircher argued at length that Chinese characters had been derived from Egyptian hieroglyphics. The results of de Pauw’s comparative study are particularly offensive, as he criticizes the “ignorance, servitude, pride, mediocrity, ridicule, dishonesty, and brutality of the Chinese people” and goes so far as to say that “all the praise heaped on this people is a pack of lies.”<sup>55</sup> This last point must have been felt personally by Voltaire, who devoted a great amount of energy to the study of China, presenting it as the country where his religious ideals already were a reality.<sup>56</sup>

In the *Lettres chinoises*, Voltaire responds to de Pauw’s criticism by adopting the epistolary form he already used more than four decades earlier. Just as the *Lettres philosophiques* treats a variety of topics, ranging from the religions peacefully cohabiting in England to the genius of Newton and the treatment of small pox, the twelve texts included in the *Lettres chinoises* explore a wide array of themes, including reflections on Christianity in China, Chinese Law, and the theory of an Egyptian origin of Chinese civilization. While China is the main object of Voltaire’s study, he also ventures into other Asian countries, in particular Tibet in the “Eleventh Letter”, subtitled “Sur le grand lama et la métempsychose” [“On the Great Lama and Metempsychosis” (C, 244–54)].

As demonstrated by the article "Religion" in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire had a dim view of the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists. This view derived primarily from Kircher's *China Illustrata*, which drew on the account of Johann Grueber and Albert d'Orville (who spent two months in Lhasa in 1661), and was widely shared by Voltaire's fellow contributors to the *Encyclopédie*. In an important article entitled "Philosophie des Asiatiques," Diderot observes about the Dalai Lama's followers, "Ils le regardent comme immortel, et les prêtres subalternes entretiennent cette erreur par leurs supercheries" [They regard him as immortal, and the junior priests maintain this error by their deceptions].<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in the article "Lama" of the *Encyclopédie*, Jaucourt sets forth an unrelenting indictment of the Dalai Lama, presenting him as an autocratic leader using superstitious beliefs to keep his people under control.<sup>58</sup> Among the strategies used by this deceitful guide, who is "considered as a God," who "receives marks of humiliations from an altar" and pampers "cherished favorites," the belief in reincarnation is singled out by Jaucourt:

Lorsque le grand lama vient à mourir, on est persuadé qu'il renaît dans un autre corps, et qu'il ne s'agit que de trouver en quel corps il a bien voulu prendre une nouvelle naissance; mais la découverte n'est pas difficile, ce doit être, et c'est toujours dans le corps d'un jeune lama privilégié qu'on entretient auprès de lui; et qu'il a par sa puissance désigné son successeur secret au moment de sa mort.

[When the great lama dies, people are persuaded that he is reborn in another body, and that it is only a question of finding in what body he has chosen to take a new birth; but the discovery is simple, since it must be and always is in the body of a young privileged lama who has been living in close proximity to him and whom, using his power, he has appointed his secret successor at the moment of his death.]<sup>59</sup>

Described as a fraud allowing the conservation of power, the reincarnation process offers a Tibetan variation on the theme of the "union of the throne and the altar" that governed French politics during the ancien régime. While French kings held their power by a so-called "divine right" that theoretically prevented their authority from being challenged, the Dalai Lama is a religious and temporal leader using the belief in reincarnation to directly appoint his successor. In this article, Jaucourt presents the belief in reincarnation as a fanciful tale conveniently hiding political motives; although the Tibetan people genuinely believe in this process, their religious leaders are exploiting it for practical gains: "[Les lamas] vivent dans les honneurs et l'opulence, par la foule d'adorateurs et de présents qu'ils reçoivent de toutes parts" [(The lamas) live in honors and opulence, surrounded by a crowd of adulators and showered with presents they receive from all sides].<sup>60</sup>

In the *Lettres chinoises*, Voltaire shares Jaucourt's cynical perspective on the leader of Tibetan Buddhists and broaches familiar themes. The "Eleventh Letter" thus accuses Tibetans to adore the Dalai Lama's excrements the same way French people adore the Saints' relics and follows the trope of deistic critique by insisting on the duplicity of clerics. Indeed, Voltaire tells an anecdote about one of the Dalai Lamas who forced his priests to hide his death for fifteen years, until his son had become of age and could replace him (C, 250–52), an anecdote that underlines the dishonesty of Buddhist clerics and the gullibility of the Tibetan people. Used

by Voltaire as a way to chastise religious deception, this account is historically accurate: the Fifth Dalai Lama passed away in 1682 and his death was not revealed until 1696; and while the Sixth Dalai Lama was not his son, there were rumors that the regent who ruled Tibet during those years was the Fifth's son.<sup>61</sup>

Basing his criticism of the *tulku* institution on historical facts, Voltaire nonetheless undertakes a striking defense of reincarnation, which elevates it to the rank of a plausible theory:

Pourquoi ce système [la réincarnation] ne fut-il reçu ni chez les Grecs, ni chez les Romains, ni même en Égypte, ni en Chaldée? Est-ce parce qu'il n'était pas prouvé? Non, car tous ces peuples étaient infatués de dogmes bien plus improbables. Il est à croire plutôt que la doctrine de la transmigration des âmes fut rejetée, parce qu'elle ne fut annoncée que par des philosophes. Dans tout pays on disputa toujours contre le philosophe, et on recourut au sorcier.

[Why was this system [reincarnation] not admitted by the Greeks, nor among the Romans, nor even in Egypt or in Chaldea? Is it because it was not proven? No, because all these peoples were infatuated with dogmas much more unlikely. It is rather to be believed that the doctrine of the transfer of souls was rejected because it was only announced by philosophers. In all countries, people always rejected the philosopher and gave their credence to the sorcerer (C, 248–49).]

In his 1756 *Essai*, Voltaire directly opposed the philosophical cult embodied by Confucius to the so-called idolatrous worship devoted to Buddha. Nonetheless, the 1776 *Lettres chinoises* enroll the Buddhist belief in reincarnation in the party of reason and philosophy and not in the opposed party of superstition and sorcery to which it belonged two decades earlier. In the rest of the “Eleventh Letter,” Voltaire gives a series of reasons that add substance to his defense of reincarnation by following two complementary lines of argument. His first argument can be described as *metaphysical*, as it involves a reconstruction of God's logic: since He is the creator of all souls, and many fetuses die at birth, it would make sense for Him to “give them other bodies to govern” or “to have them governed by other bodies.” Voltaire follows this line of reasoning by adding that “souls” who have lived in “disgraced bodies” should go on and live in “better made ones” (C, 248). In other words, the belief in reincarnation appears more rational than the belief in the unicity of human life founded on the Bible's word, since it seems more consonant with two underlying tenets regarding God's nature: His perfection and His benevolence. A perfect being, God cannot do something for no reason (as the gratuity of an act signals less perfection than an act reaching a preconceived goal); hence, the creation of a new soul cannot be made in vain. And as a benevolent being, God cannot make a soul the prisoner of a deformed body without the promise of a better one in a future life that compensates it for the challenges of its current embodiment. Voltaire thus establishes a radical and heretical thesis (the occurrence of the process of reincarnation), on premises that are strictly consistent with the tenets of the Christian faith (God is simultaneously *perfect* and *benevolent*).<sup>62</sup>

Voltaire's second line of argument consists in advancing that the belief in reincarnation not only does not offend morality, but actually furthers ethical conducts: “Il est encore évident que cette doctrine ne choque point les bonnes

mœurs; car une âme qui se trouvera logée dans le corps d'un homme pour soixante ou quatre-vingts ans tout au plus devra prendre le parti d'être une âme honnête, de peur d'aller habiter après son décès le corps de quelque animal immonde et dégoûtant" [It is also evident that this doctrine does not offend good morals, for a soul that has been lodged in the body of a man for, at most, sixty or eighty years must resolve to be an honest soul, for fear of living after his death in the body of some filthy, disgusting animal] (C, 248). Without naming it, Voltaire implicitly refers to the belief in karma, which is the law governing the proportionality between the actions accomplished by one individual and the circumstances of his or her current and future lives.<sup>63</sup> Thus, he insists on the moral efficiency of the belief in reincarnation, which can be interpreted as a pragmatic defense of a system on the basis of its capacity to stimulate ethical conduct through the threat of a rebirth into a lower realm.

Despite its condemnation of the Dalai Lama, the "Eleventh Letter" signals a clear evolution of Voltaire's thought regarding Buddhism between 1756 and the last years of his life. In the *Essai sur les mœurs*, what Buddhists call the "three treasures"—the Buddha, the "dharma" (the teaching), and the "sangha" (the monastic community)—were all considered to be agents of a superstitious enterprise whose goal was to maintain the "common people" in a state of submissiveness. The *Dictionnaire philosophique* excepted the Buddha and his ethical precepts from this criticism, while his disciples and commentators were portrayed as the culprits in the corruption of their guide's teachings. Finally, the *Lettres chinoises* condemned the control exerted by the Dalai Lama over Tibetans, while expounding a thorough defense of the concept of reincarnation that directly contradicts the Bible's word.

In conclusion, the doctrinal complexity of Buddhism, its evolution over time, its presence in numerous countries where different schools and practices are adopted, offered Voltaire an extraordinary wealth of information he exploited to realize converging goals: denigrate the Catholic church, extoll Deism, blame the degeneration of ethical teachings into superstitions, and promote a non-Christian metaphysics in which the theory of reincarnation describes convincingly what happens after death. Voltaire followed an opportunistic approach in his description of Buddhism, as he used his knowledge of disparate religious elements to support various arguments against his many enemies and did not hesitate to make, in the course of his long career, contradictory claims about this faith. Buddhism, in other words, was for him a quiver in which he looked for argumentative arrows to shoot at his rhetorical targets, rather than a foreign religious system he studied with the goal of reconstructing its coherence and delineating its specificities. In sum, Voltaire subordinated his reflections on Buddhism to the tactical goals they could play in Western religious, social, and political debates, thus signaling a fundamental difference with the later generation of modern Orientalists who, in the following century, used their understanding of oriental languages and their familiarity with primary-source material to build a more exact understanding of Buddhism and other non-Abrahamic religions. Although Voltaire's comprehension of Buddhism is never free from approximations that can be traced to the errors in his own sources, and to his tendency to privilege argumentative efficiency over the exactitude of his account of doctrinal and historical elements, he nonetheless played a key role in the coming of this new generation of Orientalists, by manifesting an intense curiosity

for a faith that had been disparaged by many of his predecessors, by summarizing and disseminating some of the available knowledge of Buddhism, and by evolving toward a more inclusive and liberal view of Buddhism, a view that resonates with the one the Western world generally holds today.

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NOTES

1. Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010): 11. On the intellectual construction of the category of religion in Early Modern Europe, see also by Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (Cambridge: Polity, trad. Robert Savage, 2014).

2. Stroumsa, *A New Science*, 38.

3. On Voltaire's deism, see René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1956).

4. On Voltaire and Islam, see Djavad Hadidi, *Voltaire et l'Islam* (Paris: Publications orientalistes de France, 1974); on Voltaire and Judaism, Léon Poliakov, *Histoire de l'antisémitisme*, 4 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1968), 3:103–17; on Voltaire and Hinduism, Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2015): 15–76.

5. On this question, see by Donald S. Lopez Jr., *From Stone to Flesh: A Short History of the Buddha* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2013). On Burnouf, see *From Stone to Flesh*, 173–211 and *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol: An Anthology of Early European Portrayals of the Buddha*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), 12–18 and 234–36.

6. Lopez, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol*, 19–20.

7. On this question, see by Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy* (Rorschach / Kyoto: Univ. Media, 2012).

8. App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, 11.

9. *Nouveaux Mémoires sur l'État présent de la Chine par le R. P. Louis Le Comte de la Cie. de Jésus . . .* (Paris, 1696); *Description Géographique, Historique, Chronologique, Politique et Physique de l'Empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie Chinoise par le Père J.-B. Du Balde*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1735); *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses, écrites des missions étrangères*, 26 vols. (Paris: J. G. Merigot). On Voltaire and China, see Arnold H. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," *PMLA* 47, no. 4 (1932): 1050–65.

10. Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique* [1697], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 3 vols. (Rotterdam: R. Leers, 1702). On Bayle and Buddhism, see App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, 219–37. Bayle draws parallels between Buddhism and Spinozism in the articles "Japon" and "Spinoza."

11. Jean Frédéric Bernard, Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde*, 9 vols. (Amsterdam: J. F. Bernard, 1723–43). On this text, see *The Book that Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World*, ed. Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, Wijnand Mijnhardt (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010).

12. Simon de La Loubère, *Du Royaume de Siam* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgang, 1691). Voltaire mentions the embassy sent to France by King Narai of Siam in 1684 in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* [1751], in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1878), 14:292.

13. On this question, see App, *The Cult of Emptiness*, especially, 9–88.

14. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1681).

15. On the historical work of Voltaire, see José-Michel Moureaux, "Voltaire historien: un chantier qui s'ouvre," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 101, no. 2 (2001): 227–61. On Voltaire's philosophy of history, see Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Historical Philosophy of the Enlightenment," in *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 1–16.

16. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1050–65.

17. On this question, see Thierry Meynard, "La première traduction des *Entretiens* de Confucius en Europe: entre le *li* néo-confucéen et la *ratio* classique," *Études chinoises* 30 (2011): 173–192, 181.
18. Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* [1756] (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1835), 31, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *E*.
19. The "battle of Chinese ceremonies" arose when Jesuit missionaries allowed the cult of the ancestors and the cult of Confucius to their new converts which, ultimately, led to the outlawing of Christianity in China and the expulsion of all missionaries in 1724 by the Emperor Yong-Chen. On this topic, see David Morgan, "Sources of Enlightenment: The Idealizing of China in the Jesuits' 'Lettres édifiantes' and Voltaire's 'Siècle de Louis XIV,'" *Romance Notes* 37, no. 3 (1997): 263–72.
20. All translations from the French are mine, unless otherwise noted.
21. Jeffrey Riegel, "Confucius," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed October 22, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/confucius>.
22. Youngsun Back, "Confucian Heaven (天/Tian): Moral Economy and Contingency," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8, no. 1 (2016): 59–60.
23. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1057.
24. "Philosophie des Asiatiques," in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. D. Diderot and J. Le Rond d'Alembert, 17 vols. (Paris: Chez Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1751–1765), 1:753a. Diderot also calls Buddha an "impostor," a view he found in the travel narrative by Le Comte, *Nouveaux mémoires sur l'état présent de la Chine*, 3 vols. (Paris: Chez Jean Anisson, 1796), 2:133–34.
25. Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," 1064.
26. Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 17.
27. Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 18.
28. Lopez, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol*, 132–34.
29. Voltaire, *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* [1770–1772] in *Œuvres de Voltaire* 55 vols. (Paris: Stoupe et Servière, 1792), 4:254–59.
30. On this question, see Catherine-Laurence Maire, *Les Convulsionnaires de Saint-Médard: miracles, convulsions et prophéties à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).
31. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East: The Enlightenment's Encounter with Asia*, trans. Robert Savage (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), 15.
32. Voltaire used a similar strategy in his play, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète* (1736), where Islam is another proxy to criticize the "Infâme."
33. Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East*, 15.
34. On Voltaire's "Catéchisme chinois," see Hisayasu Nakagawa, "Les Confucianistes, philosophes tolérants dans la pensée de Voltaire," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 48, no. 187 (1994): 39–53.
35. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique* [1764] (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), 70, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *D*. My emphasis.
36. Lopez, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol*, 135.
37. *The Teaching of Buddha* (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 2014), 2.
38. On this question, see David Seyfort Ruegg, "On the Tibetan Historiography and Doxography of the 'Great Debate of Samyé,'" in *The Tibetan History Reader*, ed. Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaefer (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013), 108–22.
39. "[U]nderlying many representations of Buddhism (. . .) was a Protestant-Catholic model. In this model, Theravada Buddhism was interpreted as typical of Protestantism, and Mahayana and Vajrayana were seen as similar to Catholicism. It is true that Theravada has much simpler rituals than Mahayana,

and a much simpler pantheon, but it is ultimately a misleading comparison.” Sarah LeVine, David B. Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 16.

40. On Bayle and Asia, see Simon Kow, *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 41–78.

41. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2:831.

42. D’Alembert, “Dictionnaires historiques,” in *Encyclopédie*, 4:967a.

43. Mara van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 23.

44. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 2:832.

45. *Ibid.*, 2:833.

46. Lopez, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol*, 146–47

47. Donald S. Lopez Jr, “Voltaire and the Buddha,” *The Public Domain Review*, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://publicdomainreview.org/2017/03/08/voltaire-and-the-buddha>.

48. Lopez, *Strange Tales of an Oriental Idol*, 147.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, 146.

52. Voltaire, *Lettres chinoises, indiennes, et tartares, à M. Pauw, par un bénédictin* [1776], in *Œuvres de Voltaire, par M. Beuchot*, vol. 48 (Paris: Lefèvre; Firmin Didot frères, 1832): 186–260, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as C.

53. On Voltaire’s decision to hide himself behind the identity of a “Benedictine,” see Ling-Ling Sheu, “Sur les *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares* de Voltaire,” *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 100, no. 2 (2000): 305–09, 309.

54. On de Pauw and Native Americans, see Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* [1957] (New York: Octagon Books, 1966): 3–38.

55. Sheu, “Sur les *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares* de Voltaire,” 305.

56. Rowbotham, “Voltaire, Sinophile,” 1060.

57. Denis Diderot, “Philosophie des Asiatiques,” in *Encyclopédie*, 1:753a. On this topic, see my article, “Diderot et l’introduction du Bouddhisme en Occident,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 53 (2018): 113–28.

58. Jaucourt, “Lama” in *Encyclopédie* (Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), 11:224b.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. On religious deception during the age of enlightenment, see Justin A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and Its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); and David Berman, “Deism, Immortality, and the Art of Theological Lying,” in *Deism, Masonry, and the Enlightenment: Essays Honoring Alfred Owen Aldridge*, ed. Joseph A. Leo Lemay (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1987), 61–78.

62. On this question, see Paul Clavier, *L’Énigme du mal ou le tremblement de Jupiter* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2010).

63. On this topic, see Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), 32–46.