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From the Faith of Lamas to Global Buddhism

The Construction of Buddhist Tradition in Russian Trans-Baikal from the Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT The article invites readers to reconsider the history of Buddhism in Russian Trans-Baikal as a gradual process of negotiation and redefinition that involved different actors: lamas, Russian imperial officials of various levels, Orthodox missionaries, Buriat national activists, Saint Petersburg Orientologists, modern Buddhist reformers and conservatives. The process involved the construction of the centralized and subordinated confessional group out of scattered communities of lamas in the course of the nineteenth century, Irkutsk Orthodox Diocese's attempts first to downgrade the faith of lamas to idol-worship and then to normalize 'corrupted Buddhism', and the 'discovery' of the larger Buddhist world by some Buriat lamas and their attempts to bring it back to 'authentic forms'. The article shows what exactly had brought Russian officials and then Buriat Buddhists themselves to the idea that their religious tradition, which historically was labeled merely as Lamaistvo, is a part of the emerging conception of global Buddhism.

KEYWORDS Buddhism, Buriats, Russia, Trans-Baikal, tradition, reinterpretation of tradition

Introduction

In 1905, a group of Buriat political activists submitted a petition to the then prime minister of the Russian government Sergey Vitte. Among other things, the Buriats requested to alter the name of their religion: [1]

> In the unanimously shared opinion of authoritative scholars and the educated elite, Buddhism has long ago been recognized a religion of sublime morality. Meanwhile, in Russian geographic textbooks approved by the Ministry of People's Education as well as in many other publications, especially in those issued by [Orthodox Christian] missionaries, we Buddhists are referred to as heathens and [2]

> equated to idol-worshippers. Systematic cultivation of such views on Buddhism and Buddhists in Russian schools and among the population, firstly, does not respond to reality; secondly, insults our religious sentiments; and thirdly, imposes on the Russian people and society a perverted understanding of us, the Buriats, as of idol-worshippers ("Chastnaia Zapiska," n.d., 1).[1]

[3] The request was satisfied only partially: a special clause was introduced into the 1905 Edict of Toleration that forbade further reference to the Lamaists as idol-worshippers and pagans (*Polnoe Sobranie* 1908, 237–38). From this time on, the terms 'Buddhists' and 'Buddhism' gradually replaced the long-used terms 'Lamaits' and 'Lamaistvo' (Lamaism) (Lopez 1998, 15–45).[2] It may seem an insignificant shift of terminology, but I argue in this paper that the shift was the outcome of a continuous evolution of Russia's understanding of the "strange Oriental religion" some of its numerous subjects were following even before they joined Russia.[3]

[4] In fact, this shift happened much earlier, some 50 years before 1905. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that Russian Orthodox missionaries had to recognize that the 'faith of lamas' (*lamskaia vera*) they were struggling with in the Trans-Baikal and Irkutsk regions for the souls of shamanist Buriats[4] was a part of a larger religion that took its roots from far-away India. Before I start discussing how, in the course of the eighteenth to nineteenth century, the loose and fragmented groups of lamas[5] were organized into a centralized confessional group and how their faith evolved into the peculiar European conception of Buddhism not only in the eyes of the Russians but also of the Buriat followers of this religion themselves, let me outline the theoretical frame of my study.

Invented Buddhism

[5] Talal Asad argued that religion as a distinct category is a European conception tightly connected with Christianity and uncritically applied to other forms of beliefs outside of Pax Christiana at the time of European colonialism. In his view, it was the outcome of the Reformation and Enlightenment that Christianity in Western Europe was separated from the state and education and relocated to the family and personal spheres only. As a result, the European mind has been bifurcated between the religious and the secular, and religion as a distinct category came into application on a par with such concepts as politics, society, science etc. Thus, Talal Asad claims in his 'Genealogy of Religion',

1 Here and further all the excerpts from original sources are given in my translation from Russian and Mongolian.

2 The Russian terms 'Lamskaia vera' (Faith of Lamas) or 'Lamaistvo' most probably originated independently from the Chinese 'la ma jiao' and European 'Lamaism'.

3 The Buriats themselves historically referred to their religion as the Teaching of Burkhan or Buddha. The old Mongolian terms burqan-u šasin or buddha-yin šasin (literally 'Religion of Buddha') are ubiquitous in Dharma histories and biographies of eminent lamas composed by Buriat chroniclers in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Yet in the narratives of the dissemination of Buddhism, the Dharma spreads linearly from India to Tibet, Mongolia, and then Russia. This one-dimensional vector excludes any sidelines. In addition to the Buriats, the Russian empire incorporated the substantial Kalmyk population, the majority of which followed Tibetan Buddhism, just like their Buriat counterparts.

4 In the mid-nineteenth century, only some 60% of the Buriat population were followers of the Buddha. Geographically, the overwhelming majority of them was living to the east of Lake Baikal. The so-called "western Buriats" adhered to ancient beliefs and cults (shamanism, worship of ancestors, other types of animism, etc.) and were partially baptized in the course of the nineteenth century.

5 The term 'lama' comes from Tibetan 'bla ma', which is an equivalent of Sanskrit 'guru', or spiritual teacher. Lama is a general term for Buddhist religious specialists. Lamas are not necessarily monks: there is a substantial percentage of married lamas.

> My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes (Asad 1993, 29). [6]

Talal Asad and other theorists argue that the uncritical application of the term 'religion' in the studies of non-European cultures and societies results in the wrong conception of religion as a trans-cultural and trans-historical phenomenon. However, such an understanding is a by-product of the intellectual history of Europe and has little to do with what is erroneously defined as religion in, say, Asia of pre-colonial time. [7]

Talal Asad is not the only intellectual calling for a reconsideration of the term 'religion'. Many other researchers agree with this view. It is curious that Buddhism is a very convenient object for such a revision, as its status as a religion has been contested for a long time. Here, I refer not only to Buddhism's reputation of being a "strange" religion without a God and soul that has amazed European observers from the time of Hegel and even earlier. I mean here the critique expressed by modern Buddhologists who follow Philippe Almond in claiming that Buddhism is, first of all, an abstract construct created in early nineteenth-century Western Europe by a group of orientologists-textologists. [8]

> … what we are witnessing in the period from the later part of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the Victorian period in the latter half of the 1830s is the creation of Buddhism. It becomes an object, is constituted as such; it takes form as an entity that 'exists' over against the various cultures which can now be perceived as instancing it, manifesting it, in an enormous variety of ways (Almond 1988, 12). [9]

This construct was essential for the attempts to unite all diverse cults and institutes that existed at that time in south and southeast Asia into one conceivable whole. This deconstruction of Buddhism as a European concept may prove to be productive in the analysis of the history and sociology of those Buddhist traditions that dynamically reciprocated with European societies. The idea is to imagine the history of this interaction as a continuous process of reconsideration and renegotiation of the content of the term 'Buddhism', the conscious or unconscious construction of Buddhist communities into distinctly organized confessions. In other words, I will try to trace how, in Russian Trans-Baikal, where from the seventeenth century onwards the majority of the indigenous population followed what would later be defined as Buddhism, transformed into what Europeans themselves understood as a distinct religion and how the specific Russian understanding of what normative Buddhism should look like influenced the self-identity of the colonized Buriat Buddhists and prompted them to reform the established order of the sangha. In this article, I will try to show: [10]

- how, under the influence of Russian religious policy, loosely organized and disunited groups of lamas and their followers were shaped into what Russians conceived as a distinct confessional group; [11]
- how the understanding of lamas and their followers changed in the eyes of Russian authorities, Orthodox missionaries, and Russian society in general;
- how under pressure of these changing views the lamas themselves came to a new understanding of what constituted global/transnational/authentic/pure Buddhism that brought them to the idea of the normalization of their vernacular tradition.

Another important aspect touched in this paper is the problem of correlation between innovative and traditional in the Buriat Buddhist reformism of the early twentieth century. I will mention how Buddhist reformist leaders, while calling for drastic changes in the Buddhist economy, social standing of the sangha, as well as monastic discipline and curricula, paradoxically advocated returning to the imagined "authentic" Buddhist tradition. Curiously enough, the urgent plea for this olden tradition of moral purity and strictness was sparked by contemporary European imaginations of what "real" Buddhism was about and how it was degraded to caricature forms in some vernacular traditions, especially in its Tibetan version. The Buriat reformers were reluctant to emphasize the idea of introducing something new but instead called for the restoration of what had been lost. Furthermore, their opponents, withstanding the fervor of reformists to change the established order, also saw their mission in preserving the tradition. Following Alasdair Macintyre, we can argue that in this Buriat Buddhist case, tradition embodied "continuity of conflict" (Macintyre 2007, 222). Both parties counterposed each other's various versions of how genuine Buddhist sangha ought to look like. [12]

Unknown Faith

Moscow Russia, which was rapidly expanding its borders, encountered Tibetan Buddhism in the Trans-Baikal region in the mid-seventeenth century. At least, first testimonies of lamas, or *labas*, in Russian documents date back to that time. The earliest of these testimonies, that of Cossack officer Moskvitin, dated to the 1650s, contains the following account: [13]

> Some of their idols are of silver, half-arshin size, gilded. Those idols and painted faces are exposed in accordance with their faith in felt mosques. They have books of their creed, they are written on paper, and the paper is identical to Russian paper. These Munghals pray to their idols and painted faces on their knees and read their books in their own language, and they put their folded palms to foreheads and then prostrate, stand up again and read the books out loud (Rumiantsev and Okun' 1960, 1:357). [14]

We can see here how the Russian observer uses the available lexicon in order to define a vaguely familiar phenomenon: 'idols', 'mosque', 'books', 'worship'. Moskvitin understands what he sees broadly as faith. [15]

In seventeenth-century Muscovy, faith was seen as a universal characteristic of human nature. Yet it was diverse, depending on customs or ritual which varied from one people to another. The faith of lamas as a belief system was ambiguous: on the one hand, it resembled paganism (worship of "idols", sometimes of ugly, monstrous appearance); on the other hand, it looked like other organized religions Russians were familiar with (books, houses of worship, clergy). The faith Russian conquistadors encountered in the areas to the east of Lake Baikal was simplistically referred to as 'the faith of lamas'. This group of religious specialists (we do not even know whether these early lamas were ordained monks) was considerably small and loosely organized, consisting of small communities without one centralized authority (Tsyrempilov 2013, 55–63).[6] Early Russian administrators knew little about it and did not [16]

6 The scarce accounts of these earliest lamas that arrived in Trans-Baikal from Tibet and Mongolia can be found in various eighteenth-century Russian archives and Buriat historical chronicles. After Russian and Qing authorities agreed about the delimitation of the borderline between their empires in 1727, some of these lamas remained on the territories under Russian control. In 1741, the Irkutsk Governor General reported about 150 lamas.

seem eager to learn more. As one Russian official would later recognize: "Russians had a very vague understanding of Lamaism, and this is not surprising that we completely missed its content paying attention only to its external ritualistic forms" ("Lamaity Vostochnoi" 1905).

From 1721, with the creation of the Moscow Patriarchate, Russia embarks on the construction of a confessional state. This means that confessional affiliation in Russia becomes the main marker of identification for its numerous and diverse subjects. Russia's entire social structure is now based on confessional principles (Werth 2017, 46–73). It is not surprising that in this process, all confessions become, to a certain degree, state offices. This, of course, inevitably brings Russia to the idea of hierarchical toleration with the Russian Orthodox Church on top of the pyramid. As was formulated in the Complete Set of Laws of Russian Empire: [17]

> The freedom of faith is granted not solely to the Christians but also to Jews, Mohammedans and heathens: all peoples existing in Russia praise the God Almighty in different languages and in accordance with the law and confession of their forefathers, blessing the reign of Russian monarchs and praying to the Creator of the Universe about prosperity and strengthening of the Empire (*Polnoe Sobranie* 1908, 237). [18]

It was the government's prerogative to decide which of the existing belief systems deserved the status of organized religious order, or *veroispovedanie*. In some cases, as in the case of the faith of lamas, the government hesitated to qualify them as distinct religious confessions at all. Before we start analyzing what exactly Russians viewed as the fundamental characteristics of every confessional group, let me briefly outline general features of Tibetan Buddhist communal organization. [19]

Communal Organization of Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhist traditions historically evolved in the form of independent lines, each ascending to a particular patriarch or guru. These lines were differently organized in terms of prevailing models of monasticism and types of spiritual practices (Snellgrove and Richardson 2003). Upon arrival in Tibet and later Mongolia, Buddhism did not meet strong opposition of any well-organized alternative belief system. Despite heterogeneity of interpretations and forms of spiritual practice, Tibetan Buddhists lived and acted in a largely homogenous religious landscape. [20]

Another important characteristic of Buddhism both in Tibet and Mongolia was the absence of a centralized monastic system and a high level of monastic autonomy within each line or tradition. The Ganden Phodrang, or Gelukpa-dominated Tibetan government, based in Lhasa, incorporated a significant clerical segment but exercised, for the most part, only loose authority over monastic institutions within its jurisdiction. It never attempted to unify the foundations of internal organization within even the Gelukpa school (Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969; Goldstein 1991, 6–20). As for Inner and Outer Mongolia, after becoming a part of the Qing empire, each Buddhist monastery came to be liable to Lifanyuan, or the Board of Colonial Affairs, but the administration was run through the direct liability of each monastery to the government and no locally centralized system was ever created. Limitations on the number of monks were never widely practiced. [21]

Conversely, the Tibetan monastic system strove to recruit large numbers of males. In Tibet, for example, monks constituted up to 20% of the male population (Goldstein and Paljor 1985, [22]

16). In the Tibetan Himalayan principalities, Tibet, as well as Inner and Outer Mongolia, state governments officially patronized Buddhism and guaranteed it a privileged status. Buddhist Dharma was viewed as the most precious value, and supporting and promoting it was a natural and noble task.

[23] The Manchus officially shared this understanding. Although they repeatedly attempted to limit ecclesiastic rule in Tibet and put the monastic segment in Mongolia under direct imperial control, on the symbolic and practical level the Manchus pursued the policy of patronage and support rather than discrimination of and opposition to Buddhist Dharma (Elverskog 2008).

[24] The lamas that remained to the north of the borderline, between the empires of Qing and the Romanovs, found themselves in entirely different political circumstances. In 1727, they were forbidden to maintain relations with their co-religionists abroad; in 1741 their number was limited to only 150. In the 1760s, some monks and their lay followers even planned to flee to China because of circulating rumors of alleged plans of the Russian government to ban the 'faith of lamas' within its jurisdiction (Natsagdorj 2015, 17). Whether it is true or not, Russian authorities clearly realized that a hardline policy in the distant, peripheral, and weakly controlled area of Trans-Baikal could be dangerous. In 1767, one of the most authoritative lamas of the region, Damba-Darzha Zaiaiev, was elected as a deputy to the Legislative Commission and visited Moscow and Saint Petersburg. There, he had two audiences with the then empress of Russia, Catherine the Great, who benevolently agreed to include the faith of lamas in the list of tolerated confessions ("Jayaγ-a Mĝanbu-Yin," n.d., 12).

[25] Russian officialdom had only a vague understanding of the faith of lamas. But some officials realized that this faith (*veroispovedanie*) could not be reduced to primitive paganism due to its complex organization, the existence of clergy and houses of prayer, and, most importantly, religious centers abroad. Its doctrine definitely incorporated the idea of morals, which was especially important to cameralism-inspired Catherine. However, to upgrade this faith to the level of a religious group of full value, some efforts had to be exerted. During the next 70 or 80 years, the government, on various levels, embarked on what can be characterized as building the church of lamas, following the template it was using to build autocephalous Muslim, Greco-Roman, Judaist, Catholic, and Lutheran churches (Werth 2017, 48–64). The main template came from the experience of dealing with the Russian Orthodox Church.

[26] Any confessional group had to rest on the following principles of organization:

[27]
- a centralized system of religious bureaucracy directly liable to provincial and imperial governments;
- autocephaly, or administrative autonomy from foreign authorities;
- an elected and appointed accountable administrator;
- limited estate of clergy with due obligations and privileges;
- stationary houses of prayer;
- hard local communal borders (parishes);
- a written statute;
- no alternative sources of power;
- suppression of the supernatural and rationalization.

[28] All communities of lamas and their followers were now made liable to one monastic center, Gusinooziorsky datsang, which used to be the residence of the Pandito Khambo Lama, the chief lama elected every seven years from among abbots of all the monasteries (Ermakova 1998, 58). In the late eighteenth century, the Russian government promoted the construction

of stationary monasteries. Under orders of the East Siberian government, each Trans-Baikal administrative unit had to raise funds to build at least one monastery (Galdanova et al. 1983, 22). The lamas now were qualified as clergy and exempt from taxation and bodily punishments (Ermakova 1998, 58). As a result, within the period from 1770 to 1850, Russian imperial authorities created a centralized Buddhist church, consisting of a network of parishes, with an accountable religious bureaucracy at its top.

To achieve this, the Russians used the existing model of relationships with the Orthodox [29] church. Like in the case of the dominating religion, the Buddhist church was also liable to the government and in fact functioned as a governmental body. Every aspect of its daily activities was regulated by a special written statute: the 1853 Regulation of the Buddhist Clergy. Of no less importance was that the newly created church was autocephalous, with administrative liability to Urga or Lhasa effectively blocked by Russian authorities. All alternative sources of religious power that were institutionalized in the remaining Tibetan Buddhist world (reincarnations, oracles, wandering Tantrics) were either forbidden and persecuted by the police and border force or just ignored.[7] Thus, the faith of lamas achieved the status of an officially recognized religious group and was incorporated into the confessional structure of the empire.

Between Paganism and Religion

It is true that the Russian Orthodox Church, being subordinate to Russian secular authorities, [30] enjoyed privileged status in the Russian empire and always vigilantly protected its prerogatives. The network of missionary strongholds at the periphery kept on expanding Orthodox ecclesiastic territories, primarily at the expense of so-called heathens. The overall confessional composition of the empire was hierarchical, with the Russian Orthodox Church at the top. Other Abrahamic monotheist religions (sects were excluded) were viewed as mature types of religion of full value and constituted what can be metaphorically defined as the "Second World" of tolerated confessions that, in the distant future, were still destined to dissolution. They could be persecuted, like the Polish Catholics or Old Believers, but in general their religious status was viewed as valid. At the bottom of this hierarchy were different types of so-called pagans that constituted the "Third World": various animist, shamanist, and polytheist belief systems. Some of them, like followers of the Volga Cheremis cult of Kugu Sorta, tried to achieve some sort of institutional organization (Werth 2001, 144–72),[8] but the Russians were very reluctant to elevate the status of such marginal groups to religious ones. Transference from the Third World to the Second one was virtually impossible.

The 'faith of lamas' belonged to the Second World even before the Russians realized it was re- [31] lated to the broader phenomenon of Buddhism. Russian missionaries, who had a *card-blanche* from the government for the conversion of heathens, were very concerned that Lamaism, in their eyes bearing all explicit traits of idol-worship, had a higher status than it deserved. From its establishment in the early eighteenth century, the Irkutsk and Nerchinsk Orthodox Mission demanded to downgrade the faith of lamas to idol-worship in order to open the avenues for baptism of Trans-Baikal Buriats. In their numerous reports to the Russian government, the missionaries insisted that Lamaism did not deserve the status of religion. In these attempts,

7 See more on this in Tsyrempilov (2012). Interestingly enough, this model of asymmetrical power relations was internalized by the Buddhists themselves, and when they were given a chance to change this system, between 1905 and 1925, the Buddhists themselves invariably returned to this model of relationships.

8 Paul Werth demonstrated how followers of this movement tried to bring their native cult to a sort of monotheism.

they deliberately referred to it as 'superstition', 'unspiritual bigotry', 'idolatry', 'oriental sorcery', and 'witchcraft.'[9] By the mid-nineteenth century, the Orthodox circles realized that this strategy did not work. This cardinal reconsideration of their approach to the issue of the lamas is the result of the European discovery of Buddhism.

The Russian Discovery of Buddhism

By the 1840s, European Orientologists had not only coined the term Buddhism but also determined that this tradition originated in India and, in a somewhat degenerate form, spread over China, Tibet, and 'Tartary' (Almond 1988, 20–24; Lopez 1998, 32–33). These new studies, based primarily on Sanskrit texts, forced Russian missionaries to embrace the idea that the 'faith of lamas' in Siberia and lower Volga was nothing other than Buddhism. This important step was taken by an influential Russian missionary and intellectual archbishop, Nil Isakovich, who recognized *lamaistvo* (Lamaism) as Buddhism in his celebrated book *Buddhism in Relation to its Followers,* published in 1858. In his book, Nil not only draws a direct link from the original Indian Buddhism to Siberia but also portrays Siberian Lamaism as a complex philosophical system (Nil 1858). [32]

After Nil's authoritative opinion found the support of other active missionaries, the Anti-Lamaist Department of Kazan Theological Academy, which opened in 1854, was subsequently renamed Anti-Buddhist Department (Protivobuddiiskoe otdelenie) (Geracy 2009, 54–56). This change of taxonomy allowed missionaries to initiate an entirely new strategy. From the 1870s to '90s, Orthodox priests stopped demanding to banish the 'Lamaist superstition' completely. They proposed instead a very different strategy of normalization of 'the distorted Buddhist tradition of Siberia' to the standards of 'authentic' Buddhism, which they had learned about from the works of such European Buddhologists and writers as Eugene Burnouf, Hermann Oldenberg, and Edwin Arnold. This understanding of Tibetan Buddhism as a 'spoiled' version of authentic Buddhism of south and southeast Asia was normative for European and Russian societies of the late nineteenth century (Schmidt 1836, 13–14). The evolutionary model of the history of Buddhism, suggested by Thomas Rhys-Davids and other students of the Anglo-German school of Buddhology and based on intensive textological studies of the Pāli canon, placed Tibetan Buddhism at the latest stage of a gradual degeneration of the original Indian version. Russian missionaries and their sympathizers swiftly reinterpreted the idea in their favor. Now what the faith of lamas should look like became more important than what it actually looked like: [33]

> The Lamas, according to the foundations of their faith Buddho-Lamaism (sic) are only monks, necessarily ascetics rejecting the world and observing celibacy, chastity, beggary and mortification of the sensual. Through self-reflection, introspection, transcendental contemplation they have to achieve personal tranquility. Therefore, the lamas have no obligations for secular, non-monastic followers (Voronets 1888, 4). [34]

> Naturally, such strictness against communication of the lamas with their lay followers in the empire that patronizes them comes not from intolerance but from the [35]

9 These terms were widely used by Orthodox missionaries and polemicists in various journals published by the Orthodox mission, especially in Pravoslavnyi sobesednik (Kazan) and Eparkhial'nye novosti (Irkutsk).

idea of protection of rules introduced by Buddha Shakyamuni himself (Ermakova 1998, 81).

However, these proposals to assume a more stringent policy towards domestic Buddhists were doomed to failure. By the late nineteenth century, Russia tried to increase its influence in Buddhist Asia and create a positive image in the eyes of the Buddhist population in Mongolia and Tibet. Thus, Russian authorities on the upper and provincial level were reluctant to change the established state of affairs, especially due to the lobby of hawks like Esper Ukhtomsky, who viewed lamas as an indispensable resource for the promotion of Russian interests in Asia (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2006, chap. 3; Andreev 2001, 163–80). [36]

Buriat Lamas Discover Global Buddhism

Another important trend was the rise of the global Buddhist movement that was facilitated by the complex process of the formation of the so-called Protestant Buddhism in Ceylon, discoveries of the Archaeological Survey of India, and the rise of Buddhist revisionism in East Asia. By the 1890s, this development brought the leader of Sinhalese Buddhist revivalists, Anagarika Dharmapala, to the idea of the global Buddhist brotherhood (McMahan 2008, 89–116). The Mahabodhi Society, established in 1891, sought for the integration of diverse vernacular Buddhist traditions into the global Buddhist community. [37]

Tibetan Buddhist leaders stayed aloof of this movement, which involved Buddhist communities in South and East Asia (Lopez 2008, 250).[10] Yet it is still unknown that the Buriat lamas, being part of the larger Tibetan Buddhist world, were the earliest Tibetan Buddhists that attempted to contact Anagarika Dharmapala and his Mahabodhi Society[11]. In 1898, the Khambo Lama Choindzin Iroltuiev (1843–1918) undertook a pilgrimage to south and southeast Asia, visiting Siam, Ceylon, and India, where he seems to have established relations with Anagarika Dharmapala ("Otnoshenie Departamenta" 1907, figs. 2a–2b).[12] [38]

Another prominent Buriat Buddhist monk, Agvan Dorzhiev, in his tireless attempts to draw Tibet into the sphere of Russian influence, travelled by sea from India via Ceylon, China, and Japan. In his travel notes, Agvan Dorzhiev mentions that he paid visits to various temples and monasteries in Ceylon and Japan (Dorzhiev 2003, 53; Snelling 1993, 71). These trips constitute the earliest contribution to the Buriat discovery of the globalizing Buddhist world and transformed an understanding of its boundaries.[13] These modernist tendencies may have brought a small group of the Buriat lamahood to the idea of reform. The Buriat Buddhist Renovation movement achieved mature form only by the 1920s, but early Buddhists reformers began to call for changes in the early twentieth century. [39]

10 In Donald Lopez's explanation, Tibet was never colonized by a European power and was isolated from modern developments in the remaining Buddhist world.

11 The first Tibetan who joined the Mahabodhi Society was the eminent Tibetan Buddhist monk Gedun Chopel, but this happened as late as the 1930s. See Lopez (2014).

12 There is no documented evidence of alleged contacts between the Khambo Lama Iroltuiev and the representatives of Maha Bodhi Society. But documents preserved in the Russian State Historical Archive account for a connection between the Iroltuiev and Anagarika Dharmapala.

13 Some documents testify that Russia tried to block this development. In 1907, Anagarika Dharmapala tried to reestablish contacts with the Khambo Lama Iroltuiev via the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The letter was redirected to the Ministry of the Interior, which seems never to have forwarded the letter to the Khambo Lama (see "Otnoshenie Departamenta" 1907).

In Search of True Buddhism

Unlike other researchers of the Buriat Buddhist Renovationism (*obnovlenchestvo*) (Gerasimova 1964; Damdinov 1997, 79–91; Aiusheeva 1997, 55–65; Zhukovskaia and Abayeva 1983, 129–44; Zaiatuev 1992), who attempted to find the roots of this phenomenon in contemporary developments (the rise of Buriat nationalism, reformist tendencies in Outer Mongolia, parallel trends in Orthodox Christianity, or the strategy of preservation of Dharma in a time of political turmoil), I argue that the Buriat Buddhist reformism, which began in the early twentieth century and emerged as a full-fledged religious-political movement only after the Bolsheviks took Trans-Baikal under firm control in 1920s, is primarily the outcome of the complex process of colonial reinterpretation of Buddhism described above. The leader of the pro-reformist fraction in the Buriat sangha, Agvan Dorzhiev, and his followers proposed a complex program of changes in the organization of the monastic segment which aimed at bringing the Buddhist community closer to the ideals of early Buddhism. The renovationists (*obnovlentsy*) called for the reorganization of the monastic economy by reducing the pressure on lay followers and raising the degree of economic self-sufficiency. They were convinced of the necessity to change established curricula in monastic schools by introducing European disciplines, primarily mathematics and physics. [40]

The view of Buddhism as a nihilistic and pessimistic "Oriental" religion was swiftly being replaced, by the late nineteenth century, by new understandings of the teaching of the Buddha as a rational, 'scientific' system that long preceded and far surpassed western science (McMahan 2008, 92). In his speech given at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Anagarika Dharmapala articulated Buddhism's acceptance of Darwin's ideas of the evolution of the species and emphasized the rationalism of Buddhist conceptions of cause and effect. Even Buddha's atheism, which had always caused discomfort to Western society, now seemed to go in parallel with the notion of modernity and intellectual progress. The new image of Buddhism found fertile soil in what is called the 'Victorian crisis of faith' and soon determined the development of Buddhist Studies. [41]

In contrast to the Anglo-German school of Buddhist Studies, focused exclusively on Pali textual tradition, the Leningrad and Franco-Belgian schools of Buddhology shifted their attention to Sanskrit textology and wider regional interpretations of Buddhism, primarily of East Asian and Tibetan traditions. Fiodor Shcherbatskoi and his eminent students Otton Rosenberg and Evgenii Obermiller rigidly studied scholastic literature in Sanskrit, Japanese, and Tibetan, and in fact discovered the Mahayana school of logic and Madhyamaka's conception of the emptiness to the world. The Leningrad school, particularly its founder Shcherbatskoi, intensively used comparative methods in their studies of Mahayana philosophy to find parallels for Buddhist ideas in European philosophical vocabulary (Lysenko 2008, 32–34; Keown and Prebish 2007, 471). Building his conception on later interpretations of the Yogachara and Madhyamaka schools as reflected in Tibetan exegetical literature, Shcherbatskoi established fruitful relationships with the Buriat lamas, whose consultations strongly contributed to the success of Leningrad Buddhology (Andreev 2008, 159–68). [42]

The new vision of Mahayana Buddhism, promoted by anti-colonial Buddhist activists, their European sympathizers, and new-wave Buddhologists, had a significant impact on how the Buriat Buddhists themselves began to look at their religion. New models of rational and philosophically advanced Buddhism forced the lamas to reconsider the established tradition of monasticism and religious education. Agvan Dorzhiev and his followers criticized alleged [43]

excessive ritualism, low standards of monastic discipline, intellectual conservatism, and economic parasitism of the local Buddhist community. An interesting 1905 appeal of Dorzhiev to Buriat lamas, preserved in a Russian archive, sheds some light on the early argumentation in favor of internal reforms of the Buriat sangha:

> It happened that the scientists of our time hold high opinion concerning the teaching of Burkhan (the Buddha), considering it deep and pure. Seeing our lifestyle, they can say that our monks are unable to observe its purity. They can get the idea that what we follow is not Buddhism but some other religion. In addition, the views of those who seek to harm our faith, that if it is allowed to spread it will bring population to poverty, that our religion is harmful to common people and the state, may prevail. And the followers of the religion of Burkhan (the Buddha) will reject their faith. And this will be the fault of us, the monks, that in these marginal lands doubts and hesitations suppress the precious teaching ("Obrashchenie Agvana" 1905). [44]

This document shows that the Buriat Buddhist reformists were apparently under pressure of the new European understanding of Buddhism as a rational and philosophical intellectual movement. Their program of the normalization of local Buddhism was divided between returning to the idealized Buddhist past and joining global modernizing trends. As the main ideologist of *obnovlenchestvo* argued in 1924: [45]

> Without appropriation of global human culture, which takes more and more prominence today, our lamas are definitely unable to follow the Buddhist religion properly. Without knowledge of general cultural norms and ideas, they won't be able to spread their religion both within their nation and among other peoples as well. To do it they lack knowledge. This is the reason why our lamas need to study European sciences. They need to learn mathematics, natural sciences, cosmology, etc. (Aiusheeva 1997, 61). [46]

These reinterpretations concerned the internal organization of the Buddhist sangha. Following the model of early Buddhist sangha, Agvan Dorzhiev envisaged the Buriat Buddhist community as an economically self-sufficient and autonomous institute that follows strict standards of monastic discipline. In his understanding, only this renewed, modernized, rationalized, authentic, and economically self-sufficient Buddhism had a chance to survive in an age of drastic social transformation. In this context, Buriat Buddhist reformism seems to be an outcome of the previous evolution of the colonial understanding of the faith of Lamas (i.e., that of Orthodox missionaries and European textologists) and attempts to normalize it. The emerging sense of belonging to global Buddhism played an important role and was an entirely new phenomenon. [47]

It is curious that in the Buriat Buddhist reformist discourse, one can see a paradoxical combination of the appeals to the early Buddhist traditions of mendicancy, celibacy, and asceticism combined with arguments in favor of drastic innovations in the life and organization of the sangha. Agvan Dorzhiev, along with his proposals of reforms, used to make repeated references to the ideal of early Buddhism by claiming that contemporary lamas "forgot the doctrine of their primary teacher and changed the precious stone to a cobblestone of the stream of mundane life" (Gerasimova 1964, 162). In response, his opponents accused reformers in "disorganization of religious life of the Buriats" and labeled them as "enemies of precious Dharma" (ibid., 139). They disagreed with the reformers' version of what true Buddhism [48]

should look like and tried to draw the population to their side by using religious prophesies as a powerful argument (ibid.). The numerous prophecies that circulated in hand-written form throughout Trans-Baikal from the early twentieth century exposed one dominating idea: that alteration of the established religious order threatens stability of the sangha and brings people to a catastrophe. Most of the prophecies were ascribed to celestial bodhisattvas or great Buddhist teachers of the past, ensuring that the faithful accepted them as authentic tradition.

[49] From 1922 to 1926, tensions grew notably between Buddhist reformers and conservatives, and both parties fell into mutual accusations, physical altercations, and harassment. And both sides turned to state agencies as supreme arbiters. Soviet authorities, however, supported reformers at local and higher levels, contributing to the schism and hoping this would lead to an overall weakening of the clergy's position. In the summer of 1927, Dorzhiev and his followers organized the First All-Union Religious Convention of Buddhists, which approved a Charter and Provision for the Buddhists of the USSR, in the version put forward by the reformers (Sinitsyn 2013, 66–67). However, these resolutions and reforms could not stem the tide of increasingly intense anti-religious campaigning across the USSR. As a result, in just a few years, Buddhism practically ceased to exist in the Soviet Union in its institutionalized form.

Conclusion

[50] From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, the Buriat followers of the 'faith of lamas' constantly negotiated the principles of their communal organization with the Russian authorities. To fit to the Russian imperial understanding of a standard confessional group, the Buriat sangha had to undergo fundamental structural changes. Centralized religious bureaucracy and the estate of clergy, limited in numbers, allowed Lamaism to enter the elite club of tolerated religions despite tireless attempts on part of the Orthodox missionaries to downgrade it to paganism. With the rise of European Buddhology, Russian conservative society and Orthodox clergy reconsidered their strategy. They recognized Lamaism as Buddhism but demanded to normalize it in accordance with established understandings of "authentic" Buddhism (ascetic and otherworldly).

[51] These views affected the self-reflections of Buddhists themselves. From 1905 onwards, the most progressive faction of the Lamas gained a new understanding of Buddhism as a global religion and came to the idea of reform as a revival of the old model of Buddhist monastic communal organization. After revolutionary events and the Civil War in Russia, the Buddhist reformists organized the movement of Renovation (*obnovlenchestvo*), which called for a reconsideration of Buddhism in terms of worldview (scientism) and internal organization (autonomous self-sufficient commune).

[52] In the end, the efforts of Buddhist reformers proved unsuccessful. From 1927 on, the Soviet authorities launched a full-force attack on Buddhism in Buriat-Mongolia, Kalmykia, and Tannu-Tuva (Uryankhai) that, by 1940, led to the complete deconstruction of the organized Buddhist sangha in the USSR. Immediately after World War II, the Buddhist administration was partially restored but only in Trans-Baikal and under the total control of Soviet authorities.

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