



Czech Perspectives on Buddhism, 1860–1989*

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Abstract

The article discusses the development of concepts of Buddhism in Czech culture from the end of the nineteenth century until 1989. The analysis is based on scholarly contributions but also looks at a number of popular works written by Czech authors. Its main intention is to trace the background of particular views on Buddhism and its interpretations within the changing contexts of philosophical and political interests.

Keywords

Buddhism, Czechoslovakia, academic study of religion, nationalism, communism, post-colonialism, Orientalism

1. Introduction

The following article analyses the changing views and conceptions of Buddhism which appeared in Czech academic writing during a century long period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike in some previously published works on the topic of the Buddhist studies in Czechoslovakia,¹ it is not the aim of this article to bring a complete list of names and bibliographical data; rather

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¹ For detailed biographies and bibliographical data see Dušan Zbavitel, *Oriental Studies in Czechoslovakia* (Prague: Orbis, 1959); Jan Marek & Timoteus Pokora, “Asian Studies in Czechoslovakia,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 22/3 (1963), 357–366; Jaroslav Průšek, “Dvacet let,”

it focuses on some characteristic features of the interpretations, as well as evaluations of Buddhism(s) within their specific historical and political contexts.

This topic was inspired by recent scholarship in the field of western receptions of Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular—by extensive works of Donald Lopez,² Martin Brauen,³ Martin Baumann,⁴ and others.⁵ In reference to this discourse I would like to point out several issues which arose during my studies of images of Buddhism in Czech culture. It is not only the question of validity of existing concepts of western reception of Buddhism in the Czech environment, such as the applicability of the term ‘Protestant Buddhism.’ Underlying is also the question as to what extent such an approach can contribute to the understanding of the topic itself, or, to turn the question around, in what respect such questioning may become problematic, especially if our query remains limited to the existing concepts.

As Martin Baumann has pointed out, “Buddhism was not sent from abroad, but it was fetched from within by Western orientalists.”⁶ The images of Buddhism created by scholars, writers, philosophers, etc. are always unique, and even though we can recognize similar models fitting to the description of Buddhism, each portrait of Buddhism bears its special meaning and associations. Scholarly attachment to existing conceptions also carries the danger of essentialism, emerging from the dualistic antagonism between ‘East’ and ‘West’ that was introduced by processes of Orientalism.⁷ In order to avoid too simplifying conclusions I attempt to present respective images of Buddhism as portraits that emerge in ever new constellations

Archiv orientální 33 (1965), 169–174; Miroslav Opl (ed.), *Asian and African Studies* (Moscow: “Nauka” Publishing House, 1967); Josef Kolmaš, “Buddhist Studies in Czechoslovakia,” *Bulletin of Tibetology* 11 (1974), 5–10.

²⁾ Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁾ Martin Brauen, *Traumwelt Tibet: Westliche Trugbilder* (Bern etc.: Paul Haupt, 2000).

⁴⁾ E.g. Martin Baumann, “Culture and Valuation: Early German Buddhists and the Creation of a ‘Buddhism in Protestant Shape,’” *Numen* 44 (1997), 270–295.

⁵⁾ Luboš Bělka & Dušan Lužný, “Podoby buddhismu na Západě,” in: Donald Lopez, *Příběh buddhismu. Průvodce dějinami buddhismu a jeho učení* (Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2003), 209–221.

⁶⁾ Baumann, “Culture and Valuation,” 274.

⁷⁾ Alexander Lyon Macfie (ed.), *Orientalism: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 4–6. The editor points out that Said’s theory is to a certain extent ahistorical; other

from the interference among the preconceptions of Czech scholars, social and political interests of their times, and also from the influences of foreign academic discourses in Czech contexts.⁸

The analysis is based on the published works of scholars written in Czech or Slovak languages, comprising their scholarly works, encyclopedic entries, and philosophical treatises. Some popular works are also taken into account, mainly for the early period when publications of works on Buddhism were limited. For this reason, the article is structured chronologically in order to show discursive changes over time and the various influences on the field of Buddhist studies.

Particular portraits of Buddhism(s) are confronted with several important questions. To begin with, each 'portrait' of Buddhism is informed by various disciplines and cultural fields, ranging from philosophy to literature, and of course this strongly influenced the scope and focus of interest. It must be emphasized from the outset that unlike in other European countries, in Czech and Slovak Republics there has never been any specialized institution exclusively devoted to Buddhist studies; these have always been performed in the context of other disciplines, such as philology, Indology, Sinology, and for a certain period also the study of religious. Although there were and are specialists on particular topics of Buddhist studies, there is no separate institute dedicated to this discipline.

Secondly, the concept of a 'religion' in general and its relation to Buddhism in particular needs to be examined. As Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out, there is no evidence for a term 'religion' *in general*; therefore religions as objects of research are always to a certain extent constructions of scholars which reflect their ideas about what religion is, or what it should be.⁹ This issue concerns a whole set of particular questions:

- (a) What kind of cultural and historical aspects influenced the concept of a 'religion' in general within Czech society and how did this concept

critiques think that Said's theory would, in its final consequence, condemn any attempt for representation of 'the Other.' See Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?," in: Stuart Hall & Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London etc.: Sage Publications, 2005), 87–107, p. 95.

⁸⁾ I have been inspired mainly by the non-essentialist approaches toward cultural identity. See, e.g., Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, et al. (eds.), *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage, 1997).

⁹⁾ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

change? To be sure, this question alone would require a separate article, but the issue must be examined at least in its basic form here.

- (b) Was Buddhism considered to be a ‘religion’ or something else?
- (c) What were the attitudes toward Buddhism with respect to the evaluation of a ‘religion’ in general?

Finally, these questions inevitably bring up the questions of classification of Buddhism, the representation and evaluation of particular schools of Buddhism.

2. The Image of Buddhism in Philosophical and Political Contexts of the Late Nineteenth Century

At the end of the nineteenth century very little information on Buddhism was published in the Czech language. However, even these rare descriptions reveal interesting associations. Three notable aspects of the early period can be observed: (a) The relative lack of interest of contemporary Czech philosophers in Buddhism as a serious topic for discussion; Buddhism remained on the outskirts of Czech philosophical discourse; (b) the early publications addressing Buddhism were less connected with attempts to acculturate Buddhism in Czech lands than in other countries (such as Germany); (c) romantic views of Buddhism are very rare, possibly as the consequence of the previous feature. All three aspects will be addressed in my subsequent analysis.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the scholarly discourse in Czech lands was strongly influenced by historicism and an emphasis on linguistic studies, both motivated by the search for national roots. For Czechs, who had belonged to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy for centuries, this process of national revival turned into a struggle for national rights by the political establishment. Along with political efforts, scholarly works, with various disciplinary backgrounds, were written in order to support the usage of Czech language in public life. They spread the idea of integrity of Czech national history and culture. As a part of this enterprise, a large encyclopedia in the Czech language was created.¹⁰ Characteristically, the editor in chief of the first volumes, František Ladislav Rieger (1818–1903), was also an important figure on the Czech political scene.

¹⁰ František Ladislav Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný* (Prague: Kober & Margraf, 1860–1874).

This first Czech encyclopedia, which was created with the aim to uplift Czech culture, includes entries on “Buddha,” “Buddhism,” “Buddhists,” and “Buddhist philosophy,” written by Ignác Jan Hanuš (1812–1869), a philosopher who nevertheless was mainly interested in Slavic mythology and literature. Surprisingly, we also find an extensive entry on “Lamaism,” written by the writer Jakub Malý (1811–1885), while no other Buddhist school is included.¹¹

Detailed description is dedicated to Buddha Sakyamuni, who is presented as a revolutionary who strived for “uprooting the Brahmanic religion and its social organization.”¹² Two aspects of his teaching are presented as essential, one of them being the role of Buddha as a social reformer and liberator of lower classes from the clasps of Brahmanic hierarchy. Second, allegedly the most important characteristic of Buddha’s teaching is the impermanence of all things, which was interpreted as an opinion directly opposing the teaching and ritual practice based on the Vedas. The opposition between traditional religion of Brahmins on the one hand, and Buddha’s teaching on the other, was overemphasized by putting stress on the allegedly ritualistic, mechanical, and mass character of Brahmanism that contrasted with supposedly individual spiritual path of Buddha’s followers.

Buddha is presented here as “an awakened, bright, a sage enlightened by god, prophet,”¹³ who supported constant search for god. The idea of god within Buddhism is further elaborated in the entry on “Buddhist philosophy.” The author explains that according to the Buddhist philosophy, all things in the world are groundless and they only head toward final termination, which, however, might lead to an “infinite rest within god.” This is a general idea of god, without any specific characteristics but with the assertion that he should be the only goal of life. Anyone who abandoned “nothingness of the world” can become a Buddha—the awakened.¹⁴

There are several aspects of this encyclopedic presentation that deserve further attention. Behind the praise of social equality of Buddha’s teaching we can identify not only socialist ideas, but also the Czech struggle for national emancipation within the German speaking milieu of the

¹¹ Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný*, vol. IV (1865), 1142–1143.

¹² Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný*, vol. I (1860), 939–940.

¹³ Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný*, vol. I (1860), 839.

¹⁴ Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný* I (1860), 940.

Austro-Hungarian monarchy.¹⁵ The negative attitude toward “Brahmanic clergy,” as well as the social hierarchy they introduced, closely corresponds with perceptions of the Catholic Church in the Czech lands, because it was associated with the Hapsburg establishment and therefore considered to be a source of oppression.¹⁶

In this respect such presentation of Buddhism might correspond with the concept of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ that also bears the aspect of “protest against the religion in power.”¹⁷ However, this aspect did not apply to the contemporary Czech society. As will be shown below, Buddhism was rarely presented as a religion that opposed Christianity or its prospective substitute. Rhetorics of nationality and tradition played an important role.

The negative attitude against the Catholic Church can not at all be identified with the attitude toward religion or religiosity in general.¹⁸ The underlying complexities are reflected in contemporary debates about the role of religion within modern Czech society, especially after independence. Individual spiritual quests were often evaluated positively and the role of religion was one of the important issues that many scholars and politicians addressed, including the first president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk.¹⁹

Even though institutionalized religiosity associated with Catholicism was criticized, there can be no doubt that Christian concepts and terminology strongly influenced the early Czech academic discourse on Buddhism. It is not only the vague idea of ‘unity with god,’ identified with Buddhist ‘awakening,’ that we can find in the first Czech encyclopedia. A similar interpretation of Buddhist *nirvana* was brought forth later, as well, particularly in the context of comments on “Eastern mysticism”²⁰ by theologians and occultists.

¹⁵ More about the development of religiosity and the confessional affiliation of Czechs during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Zdeněk R. Nešpor, “Nation statt Konfession: Der Niedergang konfessioneller Wahrnehmungsmuster in Böhmen an der Wende vom 18. zum 19. Jahrhundert,” *Historisches Jahrbuch* 126 (2006), 191–219.

¹⁶ Helena Pavlincová & Břetislav Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství: Pokus o typologii* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1999), 200.

¹⁷ Baumann, “Culture and Valuation,” 285.

¹⁸ For more details see Zdeněk R. Nešpor, “Brněnský výzkum religiozity z roku 1930: současná interpretace,” *Religio: revue pro religionistiku* 15/1 (2007), 87–108.

¹⁹ Pavlincová & Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství*, 185–223. For more on Masaryk’s ideas about religion see Helena Pavlincová, “Masaryk a idea nového náboženství,” in: Emil Voráček (ed.), *T. G. Masaryk, idea demokracie a současné evropanství* (Prague: Filosofia, 2001), 207–214.

²⁰ František Krejčí, *O filosofii přítomnosti* (Prague: Jan Laichter, 1904), 64–65.

The influence of the Christian conception of ‘religion’ in the first Czech encyclopedia is even more explicit within the description of ‘Lamaism,’ which was presented as having many similarities with Christianity probably due to the activities of Nestorians in these regions.²¹ Unlike the previously described understanding of Buddhism, in which presence of Christian concepts was most possibly unintentional, in this case it is obviously a consequence of the fact that the early European images of ‘Lamaism’ were created by Christian missionaries.²²

An important aspect, already pointed out by Lopez,²³ is also obvious: ‘Lamaism’ was not considered to be a specific branch of Buddhism, but rather an exotic religion which arose from a mixture of Buddhism, shamanism, and the “ancient religion of Tibetans.”²⁴ In the context of a quest for ‘genuine’ and ‘original’ Buddhism, this concept resulted in strongly negative views of Tibetan Buddhism, as will be demonstrated later.

Evolutionary connection between Buddhism and Christianity can also be observed in another early work dealing with Buddhism—a three volume treatise called *Teachings of Ancient India* written by František Čupr (1821–1882).²⁵ His work presents, for the first time, Czech translations of several Indian classical texts, although he did not use primary sources but relied on translations available in European languages.²⁶ The author’s main intention was to describe the evolution of religious thinking as a process that culminates in Christianity. Čupr presented Indian philosophical and religious traditions as an integral complex²⁷ that influenced the evolution of Christianity in many ways.²⁸ Buddhism in particular may have been, in his opinion, a source for some Christian religious practices:

[During the prayer with Buddhist *mala*, note J. R.] one constantly mechanically repeated: Namah Amitábha, in China then: Om! Mani padme! hum, later Omitto Fo; or it was believed that the merit was the bigger the more

²¹ Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný*, vol. IV (1865), 1142.

²² For more details see e.g. Lopez, *Prisoners*, 15–45; Brauen, *Traumwelt Tibet*, 15–33.

²³ Lopez, *Prisoners*, 43.

²⁴ Rieger (ed.), *Slovník naučný*, vol. IV (1865), 1142–1143.

²⁵ František Čupr, *Učení staroindické* (Prague, vol. I [1876], vol. II [1878], vol. III [1884]).

²⁶ Milan Fujda, *Akultura hinduismu v českém okultismu: Sekularizace a zrod moderní spirituality* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Brno: Masaryk University, 2007), 65.

²⁷ Milan Fujda, “Classical Yogic Scriptures and Acculturation of Hinduism in Czech Lands,” in: Lukáš Pecha (ed.), *Orientalia Antiqua Nova* V, (Plzeň: Aleš Čeněk, 2006), 39–51, p. 41.

²⁸ Pavlincová & Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství*, 187.

often these words are pronounced. This mechanism of praying was transmitted together with a ‘rosary’ to Catholicism, where it is still present, e.g. in the practice of frequent repetition of the Lord’s Prayer.²⁹

Čupr’s ideas were not very influential in Czech culture.³⁰ He obviously was more interested in his own theory than in particular details of any of religious traditions treated by him.

We find an entirely different view in a new edition of the Czech national encyclopedia that was published only a few years after Čupr’s work. The author of the entries on Buddhism was Josef Zubatý (1855–1931) who was an expert on comparative linguistics and at the same time deeply interested in philology and Indology. He referred to Senart’s theory of the origin of the figure of Buddha in myths about the solar god, even though he considered it invalid.³¹ As a basis of Buddha’s teaching he claimed four “holy truths” which he explained clearly. Contrasting the entries in the first edition, Zubatý claimed that Buddhism is “an attempt for a religion without god.”³² Soteriology is focused on achievement of the state of *nirvana*, which can be characterized as the end of suffering and reincarnation. Over against a widespread opinion in his time, however, Zubatý points out that the idea of termination of one’s existence in Buddhism does not imply a pessimistic inclination of Buddhist doctrine.³³ But Zubatý did conform to some of the other popular views of Buddhism, including the idea of the non-ritualistic character of ‘original Buddhism’ and also the commonly held opinion regarding the degenerate character of Buddhism outside of India. In his article, Zubatý also briefly mentions the history of the spread of Buddhism and presents an overview of Buddhist literature, along with a list of secondary literature that comprises several important works in various European languages.³⁴

In 1906, Zubatý elaborated his concept of Buddhism more detailed in one of his articles in the journal *Pražská lidová revue* (“Prague Popular Revue”). Here, he presented Buddhism as a “religion without god,” focused on practical aspects of individual life by propagation of good moral behavior

²⁹ Čupr, *Učení staroindické*, vol. I, 300.

³⁰ Fujda, “Classical Yogic Scriptures,” 43. See also Fujda, *Akultura hinduismu*, 65.

³¹ Josef Kořán (ed.), *Ottův slovník naučný*, vol. IV (Prague: J. Otto, 1891), 836–839.

³² *Ibid.*, 837.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 838–839. Among cited works are translations and works of F.M. Müller, T. Rhys Davids, E. Burnouf, H. Oldenberg, H. Kern, V. Vasiljev, R. Spence Hardy, E. Hardy, and Subhadra Bickshu alias Friedrich Zimmermann.

and a teaching that emphasizes one's own effort on a spiritual path. Rituals, prayers, or sacrifices are considered as useless, although Zubatý admits that in some regions, such as Tibet, "idolatry" is fully developed. Finally he stresses that Buddhism was the first religion to propagate love to all fellow creatures, not only an equal status of humans.³⁵ His philological background and international activities³⁶ enabled Zubatý to reflect on recent European scholarship, mainly in French and German. At the same time, his interpretation of Buddhism was not motivated by any confessional interests.

The relative lack of more detailed publication dedicated exclusively to Buddhism motivated Czech philosopher Alois Lang to write a book of some hundred pages called simply *Buddhismus* ("Buddhism") that was published in 1904 with the intention to reach a wide public.³⁷ Lang's work is based on secondary literature and translations into European languages. Unlike Zubatý, however, he almost exclusively used German literature—with the only exceptions being the works of Theodor Stcherbatsky³⁸ and Eugène Burnouf.³⁹ He knew works of other authors such as Thomas Rhys Davids or Paul Carus from German translations. Although Lang responds to the theories of Émile Senart,⁴⁰ Hendrik Kern, and other scholars, he bases his presentation mainly on Hermann Oldenberg's works⁴¹ because he considered him to be "the best expert of that time."⁴²

Again, Buddhist teaching is presented as a revolt against Brahmanic ritualism, which the "educated social levels" did not follow anymore.⁴³ Interestingly, Lang dedicated one separate chapter to the attitude of Buddha toward women, which might be ascribed to the political atmosphere of that

³⁵ Josef Zubatý, "Buddhismus," *Pražská lidová revue* 2/3 (1906), 59–61.

³⁶ He was a member of many academic societies all over Europe: German, French, English, Polish, Finnish, and others.

³⁷ Alois Lang, *Buddhismus* (Moravská Ostrava: R. Papauschek, 1904), preface.

³⁸ Theodor Stcherbatsky, *Teoria poznania i logika po učeniu pozdnějších budhistov* (St. Petersburg: Tip.-Let. Gerol'd, 1903–1904).

³⁹ Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1844).

⁴⁰ Émile Senart, *Essai sur la légende du Buddha* (Paris: E. Leroux, 2nd, rev. ed. 1882).

⁴¹ Oldenberg's works cited by Lang include: *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 3rd 1897), *Die Religion des Veda* (Stuttgart & Berlin: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1894).

⁴² Lang, *Buddhismus*, 19–20. This opinion corresponds to the statement of M. Baumann, that Oldenberg's work *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* "served to popularize Buddhism more than any other work at that time". Baumann, "Culture and Valuation", 274.

⁴³ Lang, *Buddhismus*, 34.

time and to discussions on women's rights.⁴⁴ Buddha's attitude toward women is described as benevolent and compassionate; at the same time, women supposedly represent delusion of samsaric life and form a dangerous obstacle on the path to enlightenment. Celibacy is considered here to be a *conditio sine qua non* of the final 'salvation.'⁴⁵

Such an exalted position on Buddhist ethics is only the starting point for the author's detailed reflection on the, supposedly, purely negative core of Buddhist teaching, culminating in the following statement:

Original Buddhism, which in fact seems to represent a critique of prevailing Brahmanic dogmatism, leads in its consequences to a pure negation. Speculative negation of any individual reality (God, soul, world) culminates in nihilism and denies any form of religion or cult. This practical aspect is only a consequence of theoretical negation and leads through the basic negative character of its ethical teaching toward dead quietism. Original Buddhism can by no means be called a religion—it is and always will remain a philosophical attempt. Its alleged cult is formed only by a transparent veil that cannot conceal its true face.⁴⁶

The author's final argument is based on comparison between Christian and Buddhist love, which he understands as being completely opposite. For a Buddhist, according to Lang, love and affection represent potential sources of suffering; therefore Buddhists strive to escape it. Lang claims that there is no self-sacrifice in Buddhism and that Buddhist compassion is in fact "concealed egotism."⁴⁷

Lang interprets later developments of Buddhist schools as a shift from a more philosophical character of "original Buddhism" to religious forms, which are merely a "monstrous imitation of Buddha's teaching."⁴⁸ As many other scholars of the first half of the twentieth century, too,⁴⁹ Lang considered

⁴⁴ A new law concerning the rights to vote was being prepared at that time and finally came into force in 1907 however, it was a big disappointment for women, because it ignored their rights. Women in Czech lands were allowed to vote for the first time only in 1920.

⁴⁵ Lang, *Buddhismus*, 44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 117–118.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁹ These opinions were voiced in, e.g., Karl Friedrich Koeppen, *Die lamaistische Hierarchie und Kirche* (Berlin: Ferdinand Schneider, 1859); Gustav Mensching, *Buddhistische Symbolik* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1929), 1, 29; Charles Bell, *The Religions of Tibet* (Oxford: Clarendon

Hinayana to be the orthodox form, which, to a certain extent, followed the original teaching of Buddha, whereas Mahayana subsequently turned into polytheism and ritualism. The most reproachful form of Buddhism can be found in Tibet, where Buddhism merged with shamanism and the “cult of Shakti (indecent cult of Astarte).”⁵⁰ Thus, Lang comes to the conclusion that “Buddhism, no matter from which angle it is perceived, failed to appreciate nature, duties, and the dignity of the human being.”⁵¹

Lang’s critical presentation of Buddhism raises questions about the actual relationship between Czech and foreign scholarship and its consequences. Obviously, at the beginning of the twentieth century the image of Buddhism was very vague and opposing opinions were voiced depending on the authors’ disciplinary background. Whereas the philosophers such as Čupr or Lang tended to fit Buddhism into their own theories of religion what reflected their personal opinions, philologist Zubatý was better informed about the results of contemporary research carried out by other European scholars and his presentations of Buddhism did not bear imprints of his personal standpoint. At first glance, the conclusion seems attractive that the early portraits of Buddhism—with their emphasis on the original teaching of Buddha, the non-ritualistic character of Buddhism, the negative views of Mahayana and Vajrayana—bear signs of a ‘Protestant shape.’ However, taking into account aspects of the wider social context should prevent us from jumping to such a conclusion.

Until the 1920s there was no significant effort to introduce or propagate Buddhism in Czech lands and even after this period the activities of the Czech Buddhists were far less noticeable than, for instance, in neighboring Germany. Leopold Procházka (1879–1944) certainly occupies a prominent position among Czech Buddhists of the first generation, because he is an author of several popular books on Buddhism.⁵² But his works represent rare evidence about any activity of Czech Buddhists during the period of the First Republic. Although we know about the existence of a *Czechoslovak*

Press, 1931), 31; Laurence Austin Waddell, *Tibetan Buddhism: With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology* (New York: Dover Publications., 1972), 30, first published as *The Buddhism of Tibet, or Lamaism* (London: W. H. Allen & Co. Limited, 1895).

⁵⁰ Lang, *Buddhismus*, 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵² Altogether, Procházka published seven monographs on various aspects of Buddhism; see Zdeněk Trávníček, *Leopold Procházka: První český buddhista* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2002).

Buddhist Society, which was part of the *Mahabodhi Society* (founded in 1891), no further details about its activities are known yet.⁵³

Unlike some of the German ‘Neo-Buddhists,’ Procházka was not oriented against Christianity. Quite the contrary: he dedicated one of his works to the analysis of those features that both traditions have in common.⁵⁴ It is obvious that the situation was different than in Germany where the early discourse on Buddhism was strongly associated with Buddhists or sympathizers with Buddhism who were oriented against Christianity, partially also because some of them were of Jewish origin.⁵⁵

The question is whether the ‘Protestant’ features that are visible in Czech discourse on Buddhism are the result of scholars’ own preconceptions or whether we can assume that these features were taken over from western discourse. With the situation in Germany in mind, I am inclined to the latter option. Firstly, in Czech discourse there was no common trend in the presentation of Buddhism that would serve a certain goal, be it confessional or political. The emphasis on Buddhist philosophy and ethics, partially a product of western scholarship (Pertold), was in fact used as an argument on both sides—for condemning as well as supporting Buddhism. Secondly, in the atmosphere of national revival during the first decades of the twentieth century Buddhist ideas were still quite distant to the Czech public.

Apart from works dealing with Buddhism as such, we can also find publications on various discourses existing on the field of Buddhist studies. Already in 1907 and 1908, an article by the Indologist and politician Emil Franke (1880–1939) was published that dealt with contemporary interpretations of Buddhism.⁵⁶ Not only did he refute Schopenhauer’s views on Buddhism; he also pointed out that there is no unified Buddhism, rather there are various traditions in different Asian countries. Franke strongly warned against publications that dealt with Buddhism from the point of Theosophy or mysticism. He designated theosophist ‘catechisms’ as products

⁵³ Trávníček, *Leopold Procházka*, 18. As Trávníček points out, further research in this field is needed.

⁵⁴ Leopold Procházka, *Buddha a Kristus* (Pilsen: privately published, 1933). Trávníček, *Leopold Procházka*, 56.

⁵⁵ Baumann, “Culture and Valuation,” 280.

⁵⁶ Emil Franke, “Buddhismus,” *Česká revue* 1 (1907–1908), 262–268. Emil Franke, “Buddhismus II,” *Česká revue* 1 (1907–1908), 345–349.

of ‘Neo-Buddhism’⁵⁷ rousing from nineteenth-century India and therefore not to be identified with Buddha’s teaching.⁵⁸ Unlike some of his contemporaries, Franke did not consider Buddhism to be a pure philosophy. Rather, he described it as practical ethics, as a practical instruction leading toward final liberation from suffering. By explaining the *anatta* nature of the whole world he also refuted the interpretation of Buddhism as pantheism. At the same time, he notes that this idea is not identical with nihilism, because Buddhism does not deny empirical reality. Finally, Franke defined Buddhism as a kind of pessimism that is nonetheless not “extreme” but brings a solution to the pessimistic view of life—the path to *nirvana*.⁵⁹

Franke’s critical article clearly shows the breadth of issues that we find in most treatises on Buddhism published at the beginning of the twentieth century. His article also reveals an emerging debate—even if not very influential in the broader Czech milieu—about the suitability of Buddhism for Czechs.

3. Buddhism—a New Religion for the Czech Society?

The question whether Buddhism is a suitable religion for the Czech society was first treated in an extensive article written in 1911 by the Indologist Otakar Pertold (1884–1965) who also became the founder of the study of religious as an academic discipline in Czechoslovakia.⁶⁰ Although focusing on Jain religion, he clearly expressed his opinions about Buddhism, too. Pertold formulated a critique of Buddhism as a religious and ethical complex. He also pointed out that Buddhism as propagated in Europe is to a certain extent merely the construct of a number of scholars and philosophers. At the same time, he acknowledged the attractiveness of “original Buddhism” to some Europeans and noted that it “was, in fact, deduced by

⁵⁷ The term ‘Neo-Buddhism’ was often used during the early decades of twentieth century. It even occurs as a separate entry in an encyclopedia published in 1931. See Antonín Dolenský (ed.), *Nový velký ilustrovaný slovník naučný*, vol. III, (Prague: Gutenberg, 1931), 25.

⁵⁸ Franke, “Buddhismus,” 265.

⁵⁹ Franke, “Buddhismus II,” 345–349.

⁶⁰ Otakar Pertold, “Jest buddhismus náboženství vhodné pro Evropana?,” *Volná myšlenka* 6 (1910–1911), 225–227, 260–263. Among his works are *Základy všeobecné vědy náboženské* (Kladno: Jaroslav Šnajdr, 1920) and *Úvod do studia náboženství* (Prague: J. R. Vilímek, 1918). For a detailed bibliography of Pertold see Miloslav Krása (ed.), *Otakar Pertold and South Asian Studies* (Prague: Czechoslovak Society for International Relations, 1986).

them from canonical scriptures.”⁶¹ As a representative of such a reception he names the founder of the *Pali Text Society*, Thomas Rhys Davids (1843–1922). Neo-Buddhists, who attempted to adopt Buddhism for a European cultural environment, are in his opinion not “real Buddhists” but followers of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.⁶²

Comparing the normative ethics of the Pali canon with his own experience from a trip to Sri Lanka in 1910, Pertold ultimately answered the question in the negative: Buddhism is not a suitable alternative to traditional religions in Europe. Buddhism provided modern man neither with an emotional aspect nor with a suitable ethics that would support free will, which Pertold considered necessary for the development of a modern European society.⁶³

Pertold most openly wrote about his views on Buddhism in his travel account entitled *Pearl of the Indian Ocean*,⁶⁴ which describes his two journeys to India and Sri Lanka in 1910 and 1922. For Pertold the actual encounter with practicing Buddhists was very disappointing and he admitted that his preconceptions were simply naive. He expected Buddhists to be just,⁶⁵ with high morality, tolerant, and not devoted to rituals, because he claimed that “Buddhism does not actually have its own cult.”⁶⁶ Sinhalese apparently did not fit into his ideal of a proper Buddhist.⁶⁷ For these reasons his opinion about Buddhism was quite critical, based on the discrepancy he observed between the normative level and actual practice.

In the context of contemporary speculations about the role of religion in modern societies attempts were made to introduce to the Czech public some kind of a ‘new religion’ that was conceptualized in various forms. As a common denominator, though, these conceptualizations stressed the practical value of the proposed ‘new religion,’ meant to replace the diminishing

⁶¹ Pertold, “Jest buddhismus,” 260.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 263.

⁶⁴ Otakar Pertold, *Perla indického oceánu: Vzpomínky z dvou cest na Ceylon (1910 a 1922)* (Prague: J. Otto, 1926). This rather wordy account, consisting of almost 900 pages of text divided into 28 chapters, was published without pagination. However, contents states the page number of the first page of each chapter. Therefore, pagination can be counted according to these numbers. In the following I give the pagination accordingly.

⁶⁵ “[...] if it came to a Buddhist Sinhalese, whom I considered for some time after our arrival as a person who cannot act otherwise than justly” (Pertold, *Perla*, 62).

⁶⁶ Pertold, *Perla*, 149.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 97, 135, 243.

authority of the church. A certain group of philosophers called for a reform within Christian churches, a reform that would be in tune with the Czech reformation movement in the period before Hapsburg rule. As a result of these attempts, in 1920 a new church was founded, called The Czechoslovak Hussite Church. Apart from this group there were also other voices that suggested a ‘new religion’ for modern Czech society, albeit on entirely different foundations. Within this context Buddhism became one of the prospective candidates,⁶⁸ even if only for a few individuals.

Among those who propagated Buddhism as a suitable basis for new ethics and/or religion for Czech society was Rudolf Máša. Even though Máša considered both Christianity and Buddhism to be international religions, after 1921 he came to the conclusion that Buddhism is more suitable for the coming era and thus considered it to be a paradigm that could “boost the morality of humankind.”⁶⁹ In his view, Buddhism is the highest ethical teaching suitable for modern times, because it is atheistic and appeals to one’s individuality and mind.⁷⁰ Máša engaged Buddhism in several books, most concisely in his treatise *On the Origin and Evolution of Religions*.⁷¹ He also praised Buddhism as a system that does not contradict science⁷² and as the most peaceful religion in the world.⁷³ Contemporary search for the so-called “original teaching of the Buddha” strongly influenced his attitude toward later Buddhist schools. Mahayana and Vajrayana were considered to be “degenerated Buddhisms” due to their elaborated cultic sphere. Tibetan Buddhism, called ‘Lamaism,’ was briefly described by Máša as “malformed Buddhism.”⁷⁴ Although Máša was probably in contact with other Czech Buddhists, about their activities in this period only little is known;⁷⁵ his own work was not significantly influential. The lack of published information about these activities also documents

⁶⁸ Pavlincová & Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství*, 202.

⁶⁹ Pavlincová & Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství*, 216–217.

⁷⁰ Rudolf Máša, *O původu a vývoji náboženství*, vol. II (Prague: Fr. Svoboda, 1921), 367.

⁷¹ Rudolf Máša, *O původu a vývoji náboženství*, vols. I–II (Prague: Fr. Svoboda, 1921).

⁷² Máša, *O původu*, vol. II, 367.

⁷³ Rudolf Máša, *Náboženští velikáni všech věků* (Prague: Vydavatelství Volné myšlenky československé, 1924), 45.

⁷⁴ Máša, *O původu*, vol. I, 153. Very similar opinions can be found in the works of other authors such as Emanuel Rádl, *Západ a Východ. Filosofické úvahy z cest* (Prague: Jan Laichter, 1925), 179–180.

⁷⁵ Trávníček, *Leopold Procházka*, 18. Mention could also be made of the first Czech Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition, Martin Novosad (1908–1984), who adopted the name Nyanasatta Thera. For more on him see Trávníček, *Leopold Procházka*, 30–32.

the actual position of Czech Buddhists or sympathizers with Buddhism on the philosophical and social scene of the First Republic.

I have already mentioned the authority of the first president Masaryk in discussions about a ‘new religion.’ His philosophy of religion included one important condition—that a ‘new religion’ for Czech society should be based on national, Czech, tradition.⁷⁶ This might have contributed to the situation that Buddhism did not gain much support among the public and also did not become a source of significant romantic visions. Another aspect—but one that would have to be explored in more detail—is the possibility that the evaluation of Neo-Buddhists in Czech culture might have been influenced by their German nationality.⁷⁷

4. New Approaches of the Pre-War Period

It was as late as the 1920s that the first extensive works on Buddhism were published, with the intention of informing about Buddhism rather than evaluating it as a basis of a moral revival for Czech society. Of particular importance were the monographs written by the prominent Indologist Vincenc Lesný (1882–1953) who was a disciple of Moriz Winternitz at the German university in Prague. His first book title translates as “Buddhism: Buddha and Buddhism of the Pali Canon”; it was published in 1921.⁷⁸ This publication served as the basis for his subsequent works. The second edition, published in 1948, was significantly extended and revised.⁷⁹

In his works on Buddhism, Lesný also approached the issue of Buddhism in Europe and its suitability for Europeans. Compared to both Pertold and Máša, his opinion is less extreme. For instance, already in his first work he commented on Paul Dahlke’s activities in Berlin⁸⁰ and on Schopenhauer’s interpretation of Buddhism.⁸¹ In both cases he pointed out the differences

⁷⁶ Pavlincová & Horyna, *Filosofie náboženství*, 208.

⁷⁷ Evidence for nationally motivated tensions can be seen, e.g., in the 1881 split of the Charles-Ferdinand University into two separate universities—a Czech one and a German one.

⁷⁸ Vincenc Lesný, *Buddhismus: Buddha a buddhismus pálijského kánonu* (Kladno: Šnajdr, 1921).

⁷⁹ Vincenc Lesný, *Buddhismus* (Prague: Jan Samec, 1948; reprinted in Olomouc: Votobia 1996). In the following, citations are given according to the reprint of 1996, which is identical with the edition of 1948.

⁸⁰ Lesný, *Buddhismus: Buddha*, 20. Lesný’s main objection against Dahlke’s interpretation of Buddhism related to his concept of reincarnation.

⁸¹ Lesný, *Buddhismus: Buddha*, 101.

between western conceptions of Buddhism and the “original Buddhism of the Pali-Canon.” Concerning possible acculturation of Buddhism in Europe, in his books written between 1927 and 1931 Lesný openly expressed his skepticism, because he considered Buddhism to be “an exotic plant” in western countries.⁸² Lesný’s arguments differed from those expressed by Pertold over a decade ago. According to Lesný, it was particularly the teaching of reincarnation that would be most difficult for a European to accept. Unlike Pertold, who severely criticized Buddhist ethics as practiced in Asia, Lesný praised Buddhism for propagating modesty, morality, charity, compassion, and tolerance.⁸³

In his early works Lesný was concerned with the “old Buddhism” of the Pali-Canon, which he characterized as ethical, rational, and atheistic teaching without rituals.⁸⁴ Lesný was very well acquainted with opinions of his contemporaries on certain issues such as the historicity of the Buddha, the conception of *ātman* and its place within Buddha’s teaching, etc. Similar to what Zubatý had proposed decades earlier, Lesný also considered Kern’s and Senart’s theories as unjustified.⁸⁵ In his books he often reiterated the opinions of his colleagues, at the same time being reluctant to propose new interpretations.

However, Lesný’s works were not only based on secondary literature but mainly on primary sources from the Pali-Canon. Lesný argued that Buddhism combined a pessimistic view of life as being full of suffering with the concepts of reincarnation and karma, which attaches certain value to human action. He considered both aspects to be parts of the “original teaching of the Buddha.” As a logical consequence of this combination, in his view of Buddhism, life is not *just* suffering, but it is also a path toward enlightenment.⁸⁶ His interpretation of Buddhism, therefore, might be compared to Franke’s conception that also did not consider Buddhism to be purely pessimistic.

As far as different schools of Buddhism are concerned, Lesný’s opinions were inconsistent and changed over time. In his early works he uses the terms “old Buddhism” and “later Buddhism,” the main distinction between them being the presence of deities and cults. In his first treatise of 1921 Lesný wrote about “a transformation of an atheist Buddhism into a theistic

⁸² Vincenc Lesný, *Duch Indie* (Prague: Státní nakladatelství, 1927), 151.

⁸³ Lesný, *Duch Indie*, 151.

⁸⁴ Lesný, *Buddhismus: Buddha*, 9.

⁸⁵ Lesný, *Buddhismus*, 63.

⁸⁶ Lesný, *Buddhismus*, 78–79.

system,” which occurred some time around the birth of Christ.⁸⁷ Twenty-seven years later, in a preface to a new edition of his book, Lesný admitted that the importance of the study of early Buddhism had been previously overemphasized by scholars, while at the same time elaborated texts of Mahayana Buddhism had been neglected.⁸⁸ Therefore, in this new edition he also paid significant attention to Mahayana and Vajrayana as they developed in other Asian countries outside India.

Lesný's evaluation of Tibetan Buddhism represents an exceptional case. In his early works he expressed a strong aversion against Tibetan Buddhism, which he considered to be a “corrupted Buddhism” since it declined from the original pure ethical system into an idolatry.⁸⁹ But in the new edition of *Buddhism* (1948) we notice a significant shift, which, in my opinion, to a large extent can be ascribed to the influence of works by the French traveler Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969). Her books on Tibet and its religions had been published since the 1920s and had gained much popularity all over Europe. Czech translations appeared already in the early 1930s⁹⁰ and Lesný used her books extensively. His earlier negative approach turned into curiosity and fascination with the ‘mysterious nature’ of Buddhism in Tibet.⁹¹

This shift in views in Lesný's works might be explained as a reflection of concepts already existing in Western Europe, but the further development was interrupted by the Second World War—when any official university education was stopped⁹²—and the subsequent establishment of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Lesný's work on Buddhism remains

⁸⁷ Lesný, *Buddhismus: Buddha*, 245–246.

⁸⁸ Lesný, *Buddhismus*, 5.

⁸⁹ Lesný, *Duch Indie*, 139.

⁹⁰ Alexandra David-Néelová, *O žebrácké holi do Svatého města aneb pouť Pařížanky do Lhasy* (Prague: Česká grafická Unie, 1931) [trans. of *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhasa* (Paris: Plon, 1927)]; *Mystickové a mágové v Tibetě* (Prague: Československá grafická unie, 1934) [trans. of *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet* (Paris: Plon, 1929)]; *V zemi lupičů-kavalírů. První cesta Pařížanky do Lhasy* (Prague: Pražská akciová tiskárna, 1937) [trans. of *Au Pays des Brigands, Gentilhommes. Grand Tibet* (Paris: Plon, 1933)].

⁹¹ Lesný, *Buddhismus*, 375.

⁹² During the Nazi German occupation all universities were closed down; but the Oriental Institute, which was a part of Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, offered courses of oriental languages for the public. Due to the lack of university education these classes were very popular. For details see Karel Petráček, “Patnáct let vývoje orientalistických studií na filosofické fakultě,” *Nový Orient* 15/6 (1960), 123–124; Miroslav Oplít (ed.), *Asian and African Studies* (Moscow: “Nauka” Publishing House, 1967), 87–89.

one of the rare original Czech attempts to present Buddhism in its complexity; since the 1990s, after the restoration of the study of religious,⁹³ the book has been used again in the classroom.⁹⁴

5. Discourses on Buddhism after 1949

After the establishment of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 the political affiliation with the Soviet Union deeply affected all levels of everyday life, including the scholarly discourse. Some scholars left Czechoslovakia, among them Victor Miroslav Fic (b. 1922) who was imprisoned in February 1948; after his escape from a working camp in the coal mines he sought asylum in Canada. In his later works on Buddhism he focused on the spreading of Buddhism in South Asian regions. He also wrote on the history of Czechoslovakia in the period before World War II and on political science.⁹⁵ Yet, his works concerning Buddhism have remained unknown to the Czech public.

The change of political regime also had a significant impact on the institutional level of academic life in Czechoslovakia. The Institute for the Comparative Study of Religious at Charles University, which was founded and led by Otakar Pertold (professor since 1934) and which re-opened in 1945, from February 1949 on was incorporated into the Institute of Ethnography. Thus, the foundational basis of the academic study of religions disappeared and the opportunities for the study of Buddhism narrowed to the context of philology or, later on in the 1960s, to philosophy.

Scholars who wanted to publish their works had to find a compromise between the official ideology—which regarded any religion as an anachronism or as ‘opium of the masses’—and their own ideas. An example is the Indologist Dušan Zbavitel (b. 1925) who mentioned in a 2004 interview that he wrote on historical topics in order to avoid politically sensitive issues of modern India.⁹⁶

⁹³ On the history of the discipline in the period of communist rule see Iva Doležalová, Luther H. Martin & Dalibor Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁹⁴ His book was made available in 1996, when it was reprinted (Olomouc: Votobia, 1996).

⁹⁵ For biographical and bibliographical data see Jan Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo: Čeští a slovenští orientalisté, afrikanisté a iberoamerikanisté* (Prague: Libri, 1999), 129–131.

⁹⁶ Dušan Lužný, “O starověkých upanišadách a dnešním hinduismu (Rozhovor s Dušanem Zbavitelem),” *Sedmá generace* 4/11 (2004), 27–30.

During the 1950s, Buddhist topics were treated in the context of oriental studies at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. But these studies were mainly concerned with philological aspects;⁹⁷ no work was published that in its complexity could be compared to Lesný's *Buddhism*.

Nevertheless, even in this period religion in general and Buddhism in particular became a political issue that could not be ignored. This was the case with topics related to Tibet after the Chinese invasion in 1950. Because of a shared political orientation, Czechoslovakia officially regarded Chinese claims as justified. Several books on Tibet appeared that expressed strongly negative views of so-called 'Lamaism'.⁹⁸ The preceding critique of Tibetan Buddhism, which arose as part of a search for an ethical religion, became a foundation for further objections. It was not only the allegedly mechanical ritual practice but also the power of monastic structures that was severely criticized. Tibetan Buddhism in this context was described as a degenerate idolatry of "devilish things."⁹⁹ The strange logic of communist rhetoric toward religion becomes apparent here, because the notion of a 'devilish' religion probably stems from a missionary context. Related to a proclaimed atheist attitude this remark undermines the coherency of the critique.

In this period the idealized image of Tibet as a 'mysterious land of wisdom' was criticized. A critical and even ironic approach toward 'Lamaism' is indicated already in the title of a popular travel book written by the journalist Karel Beba: "*Mysterious*" *Tibet*.¹⁰⁰ Here, 'Lamaism' was presented as an outdated superstition that will soon be substituted by science.¹⁰¹

Although these critical views were mainly expressed in travel reports and popular works,¹⁰² they were also present in the work of Pavel Poucha (1905–1986),¹⁰³ the founder of Mongolian and Tibetan studies in Czechoslovakia.

⁹⁷ Ivo Fišer, "The Problem of the Setthi in Buddhist Jatakas," *Archiv orientální* 22 (1954), 238–265.

⁹⁸ B. Alexandrov, *Současný Tibet* (Prague: Orbis, 1950); also published in Slovak as *Dnešný Tibet* (Bratislava: Tatran, 1951).

⁹⁹ Alexandrov, *Dnešný Tibet*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Karel Beba, "*Tajemný*" *Tibet* (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1958).

¹⁰¹ Beba, "*Tajemný*" *Tibet*, 13, 37, 39.

¹⁰² Less critical views of Tibetan Buddhism are present in a book called *Země zastaveného času* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1959) written by Vladimír Sís and Josef Vaniš. Vaniš and Sís made a journey to Tibet in 1953–1955. The final result of their work was the film *Cesta vede do Tibetu* ["The Way Leads to Tibet"] that was awarded on the international film festivals in Venice and also in Karlovy Vary in 1956.

¹⁰³ For his bibliography see Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo*, 400–403.

His changing attitudes toward Tibetan Buddhism or ‘Lamaism’ as he called it show an overall radical shift in views caused by the political situation in Czechoslovakia. In 1948 Poucha wrote an epilogue to the Czech translation of the French book *À l’ombre des monastères tibétains* (“In the Shade of Tibetan Monasteries”) by Jean Marqués-Rivière.¹⁰⁴ The book itself contains a lot of fabulous stories and creates an image of Tibet as a mystical land inhabited by powerful and dangerous lamas. In his comment, Poucha referred to the works of Alexandra David-Néel and expressed his curiosity about Tibetan Buddhism and its ritual practice.¹⁰⁵ Like Lesný, Poucha was fascinated by Tibetan Buddhism. When Poucha actually visited the northeastern part of Tibet in the early 1960s, however, his previous interest and curiosity were replaced by severe criticism.¹⁰⁶ Tibetan Buddhism was no more a mystical teaching for him, but an outdated mechanical ritual practice.¹⁰⁷ It is interesting to note that Poucha’s views of Tibetan Buddhism changed in exactly the opposite direction than Lesný’s opinions about the same subject.

The strong criticism of the 1950s, voiced against any kind of religion, slightly faded away during the second half of the 1960s, which corresponded to the political developments. In this period, Buddhism again became a topic worthy of detailed attention. A book entitled *Buddha*,¹⁰⁸ written by Marxist philosopher Zbyněk Fišer alias Egon Bondy (1930–2007), was published in 1968. The author’s aim was to show the philosophical potential of Buddhism, which according to him raised questions that were relevant for the cultural and intellectual situation of the 1960s. His book was reprinted in a slightly revised version in 1995 (one of the reasons for the reprint was the fact that the original edition had been practically unavailable for the public). Bondy paid particular attention to the philosophical interpretation of the Four Noble Truths, which he elaborated in detail. He referred readers interested in Sanskrit terms and historical data to Lesný’s *Buddhism*.¹⁰⁹ Unlike previous Czech scholars who sought either ethics of ‘original Buddhism’ or criticized rituals of Tibetan Buddhism, Bondy in

¹⁰⁴ Jean Marqués-Rivière, *Ve stínu tibetských klášterů* (Prague: Symposion, 1948), epilogue Pavel Poucha.

¹⁰⁵ Marqués-Rivière, *Ve stínu*, 183.

¹⁰⁶ Pavel Poucha, *Do nitra Asie* (Prague: Orbis, 1962), 179.

¹⁰⁷ Poucha, *Do nitra*, 186.

¹⁰⁸ Zbyněk Fišer, *Buddha* (Prague: Orbis, 1968). Revised version published as Egon Bondy, *Buddha* (Prague: Maťa & DharmaGaia, 1995).

¹⁰⁹ Bondy, *Buddha*, 10.

fact argued with Buddhist philosophy, which seemed inconsistent to him in certain regards.¹¹⁰ According to Bondy, the importance of Buddha's teaching lies in its emphasis on "the dissolution of life, without any substitution, as the only positive value."¹¹¹ In Bondy's opinion Buddhism is worthy of the attention of modern man, especially because it presents and questions the contrast: "dissolution of life, or life."¹¹²

In the same year as Bondy's philosophical reflections on the values and the coherency of Buddhism another important study entered the scene, this time deeply rooted in Sanskrit and Pali terminology: "Philosophical Conception of Earliest Buddhism" by the Indologist Ivo Fišer (1929–2004).¹¹³ Unlike Bondy, Ivo Fišer did not question the philosophical concept of Buddhism, but he attempted to interpret it on the basis of primary sources and with reference to the theories of contemporary Buddhology. Along with these scholarly works more popularizing articles about Buddhism were published mainly in the journal *Nový Orient* ("New Orient").¹¹⁴

This growing interest within Czech society in Buddhism was strongly affected by political events of August 1968. Due to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, the political situation changed rapidly; the subsequent process of 'normalization' had its effect on all levels of Czech society, including the situation at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.¹¹⁵ Several scholars left Czechoslovakia for political reasons, among them Ivo Fišer who settled in Denmark and Karel Werner (b. 1925)¹¹⁶ who immigrated to the United Kingdom.

Although the work of some scholars writing after these events touched upon the topic of Buddhism—particularly studies by Tibetologist Josef Kolmaš (b. 1933)¹¹⁷ and Indologist Vladimír Miltner (1933–1997)¹¹⁸—no

¹¹⁰ Bondy, *Buddha*, 187–188.

¹¹¹ Bondy, *Buddha*, 188.

¹¹² Bondy, *Buddha*, 190–191.

¹¹³ Ivo Fišer, "Filosofická koncepce nejstaršího buddhismu", *Filosofický časopis* 16 (1968), 524–544, reprinted under the same title in Prague: DharmaGaia, 1992. For his bibliography see Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo*, 134–135.

¹¹⁴ E.g. Ivo Fišer, "Hinduismus a buddhismus", *Nový Orient* 15/6 (1960), 138–139, 142; Ivo Fišer, "Bráhmánem se člověk nerodí", *Nový Orient* 15/8 (1960), 189–190.

¹¹⁵ The general situation at the institute after 1968 is described by Dušan Zbavítel in the newspaper article "Normalizace orientalistiky", *Lidové noviny*, 29 April 1990, 5.

¹¹⁶ For his bibliography see Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo*, 523–526.

¹¹⁷ For his bibliography see Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo*, 259–262.

¹¹⁸ For his bibliography see Filipický et al., *Kdo byl kdo*, 329–332.

attempt was made to present Buddhism in its complexity until the year 1997 that saw the publication of Vladimír Miltner's book.¹¹⁹

6. Conclusion

As argued in this article, the early phase of Buddhist studies in Czech countries was characterized by a significant interest in social implications of Buddha's teachings, with a strong emphasis on its supposedly 'anti-Brahmanic' character. This interpretation was in tune with a widespread criticism of the Catholic Church, which was considered an 'ally' of the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Also characteristic of this period was the fact that knowledge about Buddhism was largely based on works published by German-speaking scholars. But unlike in Germany, critical voices against Buddhism were directly linked to the contemporary Czech discourses on religion.

During the period following independence in 1918, various attempts were made to conceptualize some kind of a 'new religion.' Although Buddhism was also considered one of the prospective candidates, skepticism toward its suitability for Europeans prevailed. The whole debate was clearly informed by a search for a nationally based religion. At the same time, the question whether Buddhism is acceptable and suitable for Europeans, provoked its detailed study. The first book that presented Buddhism in its complexity was published in the late 1920s and was further elaborated in late 1940s.

Whereas Czech prewar conceptions of Buddhism can to some extent be compared with those existing in Western Europe, the situation changed radically after the establishment of the communist regime in February 1949. During the 1950s, Buddhism gained some scholarly attention, but mainly in the context of political discussion. An example is the depiction of Tibetan Buddhism, which shows a completely different picture on the two sides of the iron curtain; at the same time as Cyril Hoskin alias Lobsang Rampa published his series on "mystical Tibet"¹²⁰ in Western Europe, on the eastern side of the iron curtain 'Lamaism' was severely criticized for its allegedly mechanistic ritualism.

¹¹⁹ Vladimír Miltner, *Buddhismus*, (Ostrava: Scholaforum, 1997).

¹²⁰ First famous book published by Lobsang Rampa was *The Third Eye* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956). For more about him see Lopez, *Prisoners*, 86–113.

During the 1960s a new interest in Buddhism arose, but what can be called the ‘spring time of Buddhist studies’ was a very short period; it terminated with the arrival of the Soviet Army in 1968. In the period of ‘normalization’ no major work on Buddhism was published. A nuanced treatment of Buddhism, comparable to Lesný’s treatise of 1948, did not appear until 1997.

By presenting the historical and political contexts of the various treatments of Buddhism in Czech culture, I have tried to reflect on some of the general tendencies in public and academic discourse on Buddhism in Czechoslovakia. What is more, my intention was to present a broader context of Czech Buddhist studies and to point out some of the most important aspects that interfered with Western European discourses on Buddhism. Thus, the article provides only a general outline; many aspects will have to be addressed in more detail in future research.

What can be gathered from the material presented in this article is the arbitrariness of scholarly concepts. Each of these concepts has to be evaluated in its respective context and with regard to the interests that underlie its construction.

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