

Buddhism in Ireland: the inner life of world-systems

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Abstract

This article uses a world-systems perspective to analyse the development of Buddhism in Ireland, in particular the post-1990 period which saw a tenfold increase in those formally identifying as Buddhist. This shift is a result both of Ireland's new positioning in global economic and migrant flows, and of the changed ethno-political meaning of religion in Irish society. More broadly, Buddhism has moved from an exotic or counter-cultural positioning to a partial respectability. Nonetheless many practical problems remain in negotiating a Buddhist identity in Ireland.

Cet article adopte le concept du système-monde pour analyser le développement du bouddhisme en Irlande, faisant attention surtout à l'après-1990, période pendant laquelle le nombre de ceux qui s'identifient comme bouddhiste s'est multiplié par dix. Cette progression résulte à la fois de la nouvelle situation de l'Irlande dans les flux économiques et migratoires, et d'un changement dans la signification ethno-politique que revêt la religion dans la société irlandaise. D'une façon plus générale, le bouddhisme perd son image exotique ou contestataire pour s'intégrer peu à peu à la culture dominante. Malgré cela, des problèmes pratiques continuent à se poser dans la négociation des identités bouddhistes en Irlande.

Keywords

Religion, Buddhism, theosophy, migration, creolisation

Introduction¹

The encounter between Buddhism and Ireland has a long history. Roman imperial trade links brought a Sri Lankan Buddha statue to Co. Meath; patristic church scholarship brought some information about Bactrian Buddhism; while accounts of Alexander the Great's encounter with Indian ascetics were available in medieval Ireland. Records of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Franciscan and Polo journeys through the kingdoms of the Khans were widely distributed in a variety of forms, while early modern travel narratives and those of sixteenth and seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries were even more extensively available. The reception history shows that a certain

¹ This introduction draws on the research published in Laurence Cox, *Buddhism and Ireland*, Sheffield, Equinox, 2013. Thanks to Carmen Kuhling for comments on an earlier draft and Richard Cox for assistance with the French-language abstract. Remaining errors are entirely mine.

degree of awareness of Asian Buddhism has been present in Ireland for many centuries, in both Catholic and Protestant contexts, among clerics and in secular literature; by the early modern period, contemporary eyewitness accounts were available not only to the wealthy but also in pirated or serial editions, while the Alexander material in particular may have been used in hedge schools.

As British trade and colonisation penetrated Buddhist Asia from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reaching its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ever-larger numbers of Irish people, Catholic as well as Protestant, came to have first-hand encounters with Buddhism: as sailors and merchants, soldiers and colonial officials, missionaries and scholars. Deepening levels of awareness were represented not only in Irish universities training future members of the Indian Civil Service and diplomatic corps, but also in art and literature, museum holdings, newspaper reports and popular culture from the names of racehorses to bestselling novels.

Two such novels, Kipling's *Kim* and *The road to Mandalay* – the latter by Roscommon author Bithia Croker – show respectively an Irish soldier's orphan becoming the disciple of a Tibetan lama and an Irish deserter becoming a Burmese monk; and in fact most publicly known Irish Buddhists in this period were to be found in Asia. These included John Bowles Daly (?1845 – 1914?), who organised lay, modernist Buddhist schooling in Ceylon in the early 1890s in competition with Christian missionary schools; the Japanese Buddhist initiate Capt. Charles Pfoundes (1840-1907), who set up the first Buddhist mission in the west (London, 1889-92²) before returning to Japan as a very public Buddhist; the atheist Buddhist monk U Dhammaloka (?Laurence Carroll, ?1856-1913?) whose pan-Asian career of preaching, publishing, educating and organising was structured by opposition to a colonial enterprise identified with “the Bible, the Gatling gun and the whiskey bottle”³; and in a somewhat later period Lobsang Jivaka (Michael Dillon, 1915 – 1962), a pioneer transsexual and committed anti-racist who died in a Ladakhi monastery. Such figures were heavily involved in the Asian Buddhist revival, which paralleled Irish ethno-religious nationalism of the period, and often drew on their Irish perspectives to interpret colonial and religious politics in Asia.

The situation in Ireland was quite different. Although we have evidence of Irish people becoming Buddhist at home, between the first such figures (in the 1871 census) and newspaper appearances in 1971 and 1972, not a single Irish person so far as is known came fully “out of the closet” as Buddhist in a hundred years. In the sectarian Ireland of this period, the social and personal costs for doing so were evidently too high; it is also worth noting that much employment entailed religious requirements and that blasphemy legislation in these islands was successfully invoked as late as 1921, resulting in a sentence of nine months' hard labour.

Ireland was not, of course, unique in this: the “race treason” involved in colonial Asia of crossing colour lines, dressing like a “native”, converting from a Christianity which increasingly legitimated empire, engaging in the ritual poverty and begging involved in becoming a Buddhist monk, and obedience to Asian hierarchies was a serious threat to the fragile claim to supremacy of a small

² Brian Bocking and Laurence Cox, “Rewriting the history of UK Buddhism: the first London Buddhist mission of 1890”. Paper to Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religion conference, UCD, May 2013.

³ Alicia Turner, “The Bible, the bottle and the knife: religion as a mode of resisting colonialism for U Dhammaloka”, *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 14 no. 1, 2013, pp. 66 - 77.

number of whites and an empire which in much of Asia did not last a lifetime, and a very strong personality was clearly required to do so⁴.

Apart from Buddhist immigrants in Ireland⁵, early Irish Buddhists were almost inevitably converts from established religious denominations, and it is no surprise that their motivations involved a search for something they could not find within actually-existing Christianity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the evidence suggests that Buddhism was valued in particular for its overt pacifism and tolerance by contrast with the Irish history of wars of religion, persecution and sectarianism; its freedom from association with colonialism and the “spiritual imperialism” of the missionary enterprise; and for its perceived rationalism as a religion not requiring commitment to a belief in miraculous elements.

Converts thus contrasted the religion of their own upbringing with the progressive reform movements of the Buddhist Revival on ethical, political and intellectual grounds. By contrast, it is unlikely that meditation – today the defining feature of western Buddhism – was a significant concern for converts before the second half of the twentieth century. Put another way, since the primary meaning of religion in the Ireland of this period was a political and polemical one, it is unsurprising that converts shared this approach to religion even while making different choices in these terms; the association with ethno-religious anti-colonialism was another shared feature, and Irish Buddhists (like Irish colonial officials) read Asian realities through Irish spectacles, not always mistakenly.

At home, if Theosophy in Britain or America served as a launching-pad for early convert Buddhism, this was not the case in Ireland. Irish Theosophy enabled participants from mostly Protestant backgrounds to find a new place to stand in the context of rising Catholic nationalism and imminent independence⁶: an interest in Celtic legend, peasant folklore and esoteric Christianity enabled a self-positioning as authentically Irish which has had a lasting impact on Irish religious culture. Today’s “Celtic Christianity” is in some ways a second-generation descendant of this position, as is the self-legitimation of some contemporary Catholic groups as local and indigenous, reviving the holy wells and pattern days that the late nineteenth century hierarchy sought to eradicate⁷. In India, Irish Theosophists like James and Margaret Cousins or the Irish-identifying Annie Besant took a Hindu orientation as part of the Indian nationalist movement, as did Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), albeit without passing through Theosophy to get there.

The first Buddhists in Ireland appear in census reports between 1871 and 1911 (after which “minor religions” were not reported in the census until 1991); in the publications of international Buddhist organisations such as the Maha Bodhi Society, the London-based Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland and the San Francisco Buddhist mission; and in personal accounts. Mostly fragmentary,

⁴ Laurence Cox, “Rethinking early western Buddhism: beachcombers, ‘going native’ and dissident Orientalism”, *Contemporary Buddhism*, Vol. 14 no. 1, 2013, pp. 116 - 133.

⁵ Migrant Buddhists in the early censuses include a male “Hindoo Buddhist” in Munster in 1901 (perhaps entered as such by the head of household); the Ceylonese domestic servant Narmo Kollagaran in Ballyhooly, Cork in 1911; also in 1911 Elizabeth and her daughter Isobel Warrington, Indian-born theosophists staying with Dublin Buddhists; and at least between 1910 and 1917 Oswald Reeves, a British-born member of the Arts and Crafts movement. Of these probably Reeves and the older (Mrs) Warrington were converts.

⁶ Selina Guinness, “Protestant magic reappraised”, *Irish University Review*, Vol. 33 no. 1, 2003, pp. 14-27.

⁷ See for example Micheál MacGréil’s revival of the Mám Éan pilgrimage in Co. Galway.

these accounts nevertheless show a continuous although small presence of Buddhism in Ireland from 1871 until Buddhists started to come “out of the closet” in the 1970s.

“An Irish Gael” and the years of silence

The best-attested Irish Buddhists of this period are those with access to the “intellectual means of production”, mostly professional writers or public figures. The historical record thus privileges educated groups and men. If figures like the ex-hobo monk U Dhammaloka, whose life I am currently researching⁸, enable us to redress the class balance to some extent, attention to the life of Vivian Butler-Burke enable us to explore women’s experience. Dhammaloka as Catholic-born Buddhist and Butler-Burke as Irish-American also help with the overrepresentation of Anglo-Irish figures in the written record.

In 1928 the Maha Bodhi Society’s *British Buddhist* published one of a series of pseudonymous articles by their members and correspondents about their route to Buddhism. This particular article, by “an Irish Gael”, thus offers a rare glimpse into the internal spiritual lives of Irish Buddhists of this period⁹. Starting “I was always an alien in my family and my race (I mean the European race)”, the piece discusses the “horrified” reactions of her parents at her childhood resistance to Christianity and refusal to conform. Like other “Irish Orientalists”¹⁰, she contrasted an (implicitly colonised) Celtic identity to a colonising, European one, laying the groundwork for an identification not only with colonised *Asian* cultures but also with “that other, freedom-loving, so-called Indian race of the west” (a few years later she made what was then an arduous journey to visit Navajo territory) – not a common analysis on the part of Irish-Americans¹¹.

Like AE a natural mystic, she had “an intense love and reverence for Nature, an absolute faith in a spiritual, unseen world, a sense of comradeship with the beings of that world, a sense of love and brotherhood with all Nature’s children, animals and birds and plants, and a feeling of love and thankfulness for all beauty”. This was perhaps a family trait: her grandfather told her “tales of the Irish fairies he had known and played with as a child”. Having as a child explored many varieties of unorthodox Christianity and Judaism and used museums to encounter Greek and Egyptian paganism, she eventually encountered Edwin Arnold’s best-selling *The light of Asia*, a long Victorian poem about the life of the Buddha: “It was my religion that I found expressed”.

Her journey is expressed in terms which fit well with Tweed’s discussion of the “esoteric” type of American Buddhist in the period¹², but she also returns repeatedly to make connections between what we would now call “Celtic spirituality” and Buddhism, a theme which has become important to many Irish Buddhists today. She does so, however, in disconcertingly literal terms: “I would be ungrateful if I did not admit the help and inspiration that have come to me from the Shining ones of

⁸ See <http://dhammalokaproject.wordpress.com>.

⁹ An Irish Gael, “How I found Buddhism”, *British Buddhist* May 2472 (1928), pp. 6 - 8. Thanks are due to Alicia Turner for this reference.

¹⁰ Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, Syracuse, Syracuse UP, 2004.

¹¹ Robbie McVeigh, *The racialization of Irishness*, Belfast, Centre for Research and Documentation, 1996.

¹² Thomas Tweed, *The American encounter with Buddhism 1844 – 1912*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

Ireland, our Sidhe or Devas¹³ I have more than once felt waves of Buddhism in the air here, enveloping me with its spirit”.

“An Irish Gael” was almost certainly Vivian Butler-Burke (1881? – 1937). Apparently born in Ireland, she was the daughter of a mixed marriage whose parents emigrated to the US. On their death, she was left wealthy but evidently very isolated, and she moved to Ireland around 1920. A strong Republican, it appears that her house was used by the anti-Treaty side during the Civil War and she was part of a Republican Memorial Committee with the Celticist poet Ella Young. In 1921 she wrote to Tucholsky’s *Die Weltbühne* seeking support from the German left in opposition to British atrocities in Ireland (and mentioning a supportive reply from Romain Rolland)¹⁴. In 1931 she corresponded with Gandhi about articles she had written and published in support of his movement¹⁵.

The *Maha Bodhi* journal, part of Anagarika Dharmapala’s anti-colonial movement, mentioned her as “a valued member of the British Maha Bodhi Society” (1929). Recent research has shown that she was something more than that, and in fact established Ireland’s first Buddhist centre. In 1927, she wrote to *Buddhist India*¹⁶, responding positively to an enquiry about establishing a Buddhist centre in Ireland¹⁷ “I sincerely hope it will be possible to bring some Eastern students and Buddhists here. My house is centrally situated although very quiet and it has a spiritual atmosphere...” Her house, on 11 Harcourt Terrace in Dublin, was indeed centrally located, and its “Shrine Room” became the venue for a number of Buddhist events. The Sinhala reformer AP de Zoysa¹⁸, completing his PhD in anthropology in London, spoke at a series of meetings in February 1929; a Buddhist study circle was proposed at this time and may have taken place¹⁹. The centre continued in operation at least until 1935, when Wesak (the festival commemorating the Buddha’s enlightenment) was celebrated by a nine-day series of evening lectures, with afternoon talks at the weekend, by William Hayes. Hayes was a Unitarian minister, close to the Buddhist Lodge in London, who founded the “Order of the Great Companions” as an inter-faith organisation which Butler-Burke also participated in²⁰. In 1936 she was listed as the Irish contact for the Maha-Bodhi Society.

Thus for at least six (1929-35) and up to nine (1927-36) years Butler-Burke was responsible for Ireland’s first-known Buddhist centre. If this achievement has subsequently been forgotten, this is not least because she was careful not to publicise her own Buddhist affiliations within Ireland; all the material above has been gathered from international Buddhist contexts, and publicity for the Irish events did not mention her name. This is hardly surprising: Butler-Burke was clearly strongly introverted, and the Ireland of the day was not kind to religious dissenters. For those without resources, the pressures could be intense: *Angela’s Ashes* shows us “Mr Timoney”, an ex-soldier

¹³ In Buddhist myth the *devas*, or gods, are not creators or enlightened, but have magical powers and often support practitioners of meditation. The equation between *devas* and Irish fairies was common in this period.

¹⁴ *Die Weltbühne*, Vol. 17 no. 1, 1921, pp. 186-191.

¹⁵ <http://www.gandhimedia.org/cgi-bin/gm/gm.cgi?direct=Writings/Correspondence/1931&img=420>

¹⁶ This was the organ of the All-India Buddhist Conferences, organised by Nepalese reformer Dharmaditya Dharmacarya with the participation of other leading Buddhists such as Nyanatiloka, Sankrityayan, U Chandramani, Lama Govinda etc. Thanks to Douglas Ober and Alicia Turner for this information.

¹⁷ *Buddhist India*, Vol. 1, 1927, p. 242.

¹⁸ Father of post-colonial feminist scholar Kumari Jayawardena.

¹⁹ *Maha-Bodhi*, Vol. 37, 1929, p. 179.

²⁰ Her correspondence with Gandhi is on Great Companions notepaper and it is likely that the articles she mentions were in the Order’s quarterly *Calamus*, then being published from Dublin.

whose Indian wife was shot by the Army in a “disturbance” and whose Buddhism is expressed in pacifism and critical commentary on the Church. A “known Buddhist and a danger to good Catholics around him”, he is eventually institutionalised in the “City Home” on the intervention of the local bishop²¹.

Even though Butler-Burke’s American upbringing, the death of her parents and her independent wealth freed her from many of the social sanctions used against non-conformists during this period, it still took great determination to persevere. That even her friend Micheál MacLiammóir thought she was eccentric speaks volumes; his autobiography preserves some anecdotes from her final years. She was a backer of the Gate theatre, and when MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards performed with Orson Welles (who had made his stage debut at the Gate) in Illinois she brought them to “Taos, and Santa Fe, and Mesa Verde ... and the Painted Desert and the sacred Kivas and all the rest of it”. His final comment is “She died there in 1937, on her way back to Santa Fe”²².

A new Ireland – and its Buddhists

From the 1970s onwards, Irish Buddhists were able to start coming “out of the closet”, albeit in fits and starts. A Buddhist Society appeared briefly at the then-New University in Coleraine in 1971, hardly a propitious time or place. In 1972 DA Marks of Blackrock wrote to the *Irish Times* as a Buddhist, pleading for religious tolerance (in the context of the debate on the special position of the Catholic Church in the constitution) and in a second letter arguing that contraception and abortion were matters for one’s personal conscience. The cultural changes shaped by (re-)industrialisation and the extension of education, by the civil rights, women’s and environmental movements, and migration (Irish migration to and from other western societies, and the arrival of migrants from those societies) were starting to make new religious identities publicly possible.

From the later 1990s in particular, Buddhism (and other minority religions) became less stigmatised, in particular in the Republic. The point should not be over-emphasised: 70% of convert members of new religions today conceal or have concealed their religious identities, with 68% having experienced discrimination, mostly in relation to work, accessing services or in social contexts²³. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the decline of sectarianism and Ireland’s (re-)insertion into increasingly global flows of capital and labour played an important role in enabling what in the 1970s and 1980s had often been a marginal and counter-cultural identity to become increasingly respectable.

The changes can be tracked to some extent in census data, but with caution. Returning to the pre-independence censuses, we find one (1871), two (1881), one (1891), three (1901) and six (1911) Buddhists listed²⁴; yet with one possible exception, *none* of these are identical with the individuals

²¹ Frank McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998, p. 178.

²² Micheál MacLiammóir, *All for Hecuba*, London, Methuen, 1946.

²³ Olivia Cosgrove, “Religious discrimination in Ireland”. Paper to Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions conference, UCD, May 2012.

²⁴ Only one of these is for Ulster, a proportion which roughly corresponds to the later proportion between the Republic and Northern Ireland.

we know through Buddhist organisational records or personal memoirs. There is a good reason for this: the census question on religion is widely interpreted not as a question about personal *belief*, still less *practice*, but rather as one on ethnicity and background²⁵, meaning that census returns systematically underestimate the number of those who identify as Buddhists in other contexts.

When in 1991 the census returns for minor religions started once again to be published, there were 986 self-reported Buddhists in the Republic, a figure rising to 3,894 in 2002, 6,516 in 2006 and 8,703 in 2011 (with perhaps another 1,000 in Northern Ireland) – roughly comparable to other non-imperial European countries. The proportion of Asian Buddhists to western converts represented approximately half of the total at each point in time. Thus (unlike e.g. Islam where migrants predominate), there are two independent dynamics at play, one of migration and one of conversion – or perhaps more accurately the increased social acceptability of identifying as Buddhist. In the 1991 census, only 264 individuals were Irish (26%); by 2006 the figure was 2175 (33%) and in 2011 it was around 3300 (38%).

Probably reflecting the same dynamic, the proportion of women has risen over time, from 75% of the male total in 1991 to 120% in 2011. The recent figure is unsurprising: in contemporary societies women tend to predominate among practitioners (but rarely leaders) in most religions. The lower proportion of women during Buddhism's less "respectable" phase is perhaps best explained by gendered access to resources – and women's greater role in negotiating family, school and social relationships in particular, where participation in religiously-marked rituals and institutions is more important than in workplaces; as Buddhism has become more acceptable the cost of publicly identifying in this way has declined.

Importing and exporting

Jan Nattier's analysis of American Buddhist organisations²⁶ controversially distinguished between "import Buddhism", sought out by locally-based groups, "export Buddhism", led by missionaries from other countries, and "baggage Buddhism" brought by migrant communities. These categories do not always distinguish different traditions, let alone the quality of practice in any context, but do indicate different organisational histories which have real implications.

The earliest Buddhist centres had an "import" character: founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s by small groups of Irish-based practitioners making contact with Buddhist teachers abroad: this is the case, for example, for Samye Dzong in Kilmainham, the Zen Meditation Group in Tallaght (now Insight Meditation Group), and Dzogchen Beara. In the later 1980s and early 1990s, western teachers arrived from abroad to establish "export" organisations in Ireland, such as the Galway Zen Centre, the Dublin Buddhist Centre, or Passaddhi in west Cork.

Subsequently a wide range of other traditions have arrived; equally important, however, is the situation of those who "practice with" a teacher or tradition abroad (who may not have local

²⁵ Malcolm Macourt, "Mapping the 'new religious landscape' and the 'New Irish'." Pp. 28 – 49 in Olivia Cosgrove et al. (eds), *Ireland's new religious movements*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011.

²⁶ "Who is a Buddhist?", in Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka, *The faces of Buddhism in America*, Berkeley, UC Press, 1998, pp. 183 – 195.

centres), and those whose relationship to Buddhism is primarily mediated through reading, the Internet and tools such as CDs, mobile phone apps, and the like. Most Buddhist traditions do not place a huge emphasis on exclusivity and in any case have few tools to enforce it, so that many of those who identify as “Buddhists” do not have a specific affiliation in the sense which has traditionally been expected of Christians, for example, and existing centres could only contain a small proportion even of those ticking “Buddhist” in the census.

More broadly, the question of “who is Buddhist?” assumes a western version of religious affiliation which is equally problematic for the study of Muslims²⁷, while membership itself has less soteriological significance for most Buddhists than in most Abrahamic religions. For converts, too, one of Buddhism’s attractions is often that it is perceived as not involving the same exclusivity, institutional power relations and identification that converts have experienced in their own upbringing. Thus rather larger numbers of people than either those in the census or those who might call themselves Buddhist in other contexts actually *resist* identifying as Buddhist while nonetheless being primarily oriented towards a particular Buddhist group, practice or doctrine.

Creolisation and the politics of building bridges

A larger group again retain an ethnic religious identity but draw more or less strongly on Buddhist meditation, books, courses, retreats etc²⁸. Sometimes this operates within a rhetoric of religious universalism; however, the strong critique of syncretism by then-Cardinal Ratzinger, and the rise in evangelical attitudes among some Protestants, has encouraged a situation where Buddhist meditation techniques in particular are often adopted without their origins being acknowledged, part of a general religious trend in the west away from liturgy and doctrine and towards “spirituality” and “experience”. From the Buddhist side, the development of secular meditation techniques, under the broad rubric of “mindfulness”, has facilitated their presence in health and educational contexts in particular²⁹.

Conversely, many of those who *do* identify as Buddhist remain under some pressure to participate in Catholic rituals and institutions: baptism, schooling, first communion, Christmas, funerals etc.), often but not only for family reasons, and participation is common (as of course it is for nominal Catholics and non-believers). Scholars of religious studies use the metaphor of creolisation to discuss the results of such fluid situations, suggesting that what commonly occurs is the use of a new (in this case more or less Buddhist) *vocabulary* with an inherited (in this case broadly Catholic) *grammar*³⁰.

This popular creolisation, but also the development of religious tolerance on the island, is often represented by statements such as “We all believe in the same God in the end”³¹. Like the term “inter-faith” (faith not being a defining feature of most forms of Buddhist identity), such statements are meant as offers of inclusion, but on Christian terms. The Irish experience of sectarianism, in turn,

²⁷ Oliver Scharbrodt, “Islam in Ireland”, in Olivia Cosgrove et al. (eds), *Ireland’s new religious movements*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2011, pp. 319-337.

²⁸ Stephen Skuce, *The faiths of Ireland*, Blackrock, Columba Press, 2006, p. 129.

²⁹ Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism: continuity, diversity and identity*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

³⁰ Tweed, *op. cit.*

³¹ The handful of Buddhist celebrities who are willing to accommodate such statements, such as the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh, are particularly popular in Ireland.

means that rejecting such statements can easily be experienced as aggressive or intolerant: difference is fine so long as all “faith traditions” are the same *really*³². Of course, the point for converts in particular is usually a desire for something *other* than their birth religion, adding another dimension of tension.

Asian Buddhists in Ireland

This complexity is not unique to converts. I noted above that approximately half of all those identifying as Buddhists since 1991 have been “born Buddhists” from Asian backgrounds, but here too census figures simplify complex realities. In East Asia in particular, religious syncretism is common, and perhaps half of all *Asian* Buddhists in the Republic are ethnically Chinese (mostly from the People’s Republic, Taiwan and Malaysia), with Japanese and Vietnamese the next-largest groups³³. Just as the Irish abroad often develop a stronger cultural identification, so too some Chinese individuals report a stronger interest in Buddhism – not least because it is widely recognised and approved in Ireland. Some members of Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) may also identify as Buddhist for census purposes. However, there is no Chinese Buddhist temple in Ireland (although there have been some lower-key forms of organisation), and indeed few public manifestations of ethnic community Buddhism of any kind.

Unlike countries such as France or the US, Ireland does not have large numbers of Buddhists within a single migrant community, and most immigrants are relatively recent; this situation makes organising migrant Buddhism particularly difficult. The longer-established Vietnamese population, some of whose members were Buddhist³⁴, had at one point a temple in Clondalkin, while the Thai community set up the Rattanapadipa centre in Glasnevin in 2011. Soka Gakkai International’s Irish body has had significant Japanese involvement at leadership level since the 1990s, but no public centre³⁵; and there are of course Asian teachers, some resident, in a number of Buddhist centres.

However there is little doubt that the vast majority of Irish Buddhist organisations are *run* by western converts, finding themselves responding at times to the religious needs of different migrant communities in a relatively *ad hoc* way – reversing the American or French situation of community-oriented migrant temples which have had to negotiate relationships with western “seekers” from the 1970s in particular, sometimes conflictually. Barring substantial future Buddhist migration to Ireland, this situation is likely to continue in the sense that ethnically Asian Buddhist temples would have very small constituencies. Perhaps, as with Soka Gakkai, particular centres will provide an appropriate space either for longer-established migrants or for their children. Conversely, it is likely

³² Sinéad Lynch, *Dublin City Interfaith Forum*, MA thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2013.

³³ Most PRC nationals do not identify as religious (Central Statistics Office, *Non-Irish nationals living in Ireland*, Dublin, Stationery Office, 2008, p 50; Richard O’Leary and Lan Li, “Executive summary in English”, Dublin, Dublin University Far Eastern Mission 2007, p. 1); in the 2006 census, of 3,562 Asian Buddhists probably 1,062 were Malaysian Chinese, about 670 mainland Chinese and 336 other Chinese diaspora (there were fewer than 200 individuals from Taiwan, all religions included).

³⁴ Mark Maguire, *Differently Irish*, Dublin, Woodfield, 2004.

³⁵ I would like to correct my *Buddhism and Ireland*, which mentions an SGI centre in Shankill (p. 344); this was in fact a private house which sometimes hosted public events. Thanks to those SGI members who pointed this out.

that much Asian Buddhist practice will remain based in the home, perhaps with the occasional visit by monks or other specialists for festivals or funerals.

All of this means that the common Irish response to “multiculturalism”, which seeks to identify *the* Buddhist position on an issue, *the* Buddhist practice in a particular situation or the needs of *the* Buddhist community³⁶, is fundamentally mistaken, and in its own way represents a form of Orientalism – the desire to ascribe to the Other a fictitious homogeneity, which is hardly accurate even when applied to the “self”. If Irish *Buddhists* often resist labelling in religious terms, and only a small minority can be counted as following the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of any single tradition, they are in this perhaps articulating more visibly a reality of *internal* diversity shared with the purported members of many other “communities”, “faiths” and “traditions” on this island.

Conclusion

In each of the periods discussed above – medieval, early modern, high imperial, Celtic Tiger – the encounter between Buddhism and Ireland has been shaped by world-systemic relationships which shaped developments in particular ways (the reception of travellers’ accounts, ethno-religious contestation within and against empire, a new politics of diversity). From the earliest times, Buddhism has been present as trope as well as reality, an imagined Other (often a philosophical, virtuous or spiritual one) against which to measure the local.

In the present, however, the extreme variety of forms of Buddhism present in Ireland, and their multiple routes – migrant communities, convert organisations, international media – make Buddhism in Ireland even less of a homogenous entity than it has ever been, at the same time as it has become more visible, more respectable and more included within the terms of multiculturalism, interfaith discourses and the like. This is certainly an enrichment, not only for Irish culture but for our relationships to other parts of the world; if Victorian Oriental Studies were geared to the Indian Civil Service, Irish university funding for Buddhist Studies is tied to trade and student links with China and elsewhere. It is perhaps important, as Lopéz cautions in relation to Tibet, not to allow the powerful *image* of Buddhism to take precedence over the voice of actual *Buddhists*, migrant or convert, whose needs and actions may not fit so neatly within the mainstream discourse of what Buddhists *should* be and do³⁷.

³⁶ The Health Services Executive’s *Health Services Intercultural Guide* (Dublin, HSE, 2009, pp. 43 – 45) has a less prescriptive account of Buddhism than many.

³⁷ Donald Lopéz, *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, Chicago, UC Press, 1998.