

Plebeian freethought and the politics of anti-colonial solidarity: Irish Buddhists in imperial Asia

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Abstract

This paper explores the politics of a remarkable, if minor, conjuncture in world history. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Ireland saw a combination of (partially) successful land reform pushed by massive peasant resistance and a (partially) successful breaking away from the world's leading imperial power. This dramatic transformation, with few parallels close in place or time, was closely associated with processes of ethno-religious sectarianism and intensifying conflict between a declining Anglo-Irish imperial service class and a conservative Catholic nationalism, which marginalised labour and women's movements as well as alternative cultural discourses.

As is well known, a number of defectors from the Anglo-Irish caste (such as WB Yeats) explored the universalist new religious movement of Theosophy as an alternative way of positioning themselves in Irish (or, occasionally, Indian) nationalist politics and culture. What is less well known is that a number of Irish people, some Anglo-Irish and some Catholic plebeians by upbringing, "went

¹ This paper draws on joint work with Alicia Turner (York University, Toronto) and Brian Bocking (University College Cork) on the life and context of U Dhammaloka. Some of my own early research findings on Dhammaloka have been published in the *Journal of Global Buddhism*; those findings have been largely superseded by our joint work. Thanks are due to David Landy (Irish Palestinian Solidarity Committee), Brian Bocking and Alicia Turner for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

native" and became actively involved in Asian anti-imperialist and anti-missionary politics in Burma, Japan, Ceylon and the young Soviet Union.

As Buddhists or Buddhist sympathisers, they were typically organisers and writers within Asian-led organisations, and in some cases played significant roles in the development of local anti-colonial cultural nationalisms, framed in religious and anti-missionary terms at a point when the relationship between Christian missionary activity in Asia and British imperial policy was at its height. This anti-colonial religious nationalism paralleled and, perhaps, drew on the experience of Irish Catholic nationalism.

This paper attempts to understand something of this experience, situating it in the context of other kinds of anti-colonial and anti-racist solidarity of the period, and comparing it to contemporary international solidarity movements. In particular, it focusses on the unexpected relationship between one of the most effective of these activists, the anti-missionary polemicist, international Buddhist organiser and working-class Irishman U Dhammaloka, and plebeian freethinking (atheist) movements in the west. It situates this relationship in the complexities of radical anti-clericalism in Ireland, plebeian spiritualism and radical free-thought in Britain, America and Germany during this period, and the positioning of Buddhism as "a philosophy not a religion".

The paper concludes by exploring the extent to which this politics represented an "alternative future" or utopianism, the limitations and collusions involved in these experiences, and what if anything can be learnt for the contemporary politics of international solidarity with radical religious movements in the majority world, from the role of Buddhism in dalit liberation struggles in India, anti-colonial politics in Tibet and democratic movements in Burma to the role of indigenous cultural nationalisms in North America, Mexico and the Andes.

Introduction

In the opening year of the 20th century, a Buddhist monk issued a provocative declaration calling on Burmese people to rise up and resist the onslaught of missionary Christianity. Here, as elsewhere in Buddhist Asia, a cultural nationalism grounded in religious revival proved over the next half-century to be a very powerful tool in building movements of opposition to British imperial power in particular. The monk in question – whose religious name was U Dhammaloka – was in many ways a classic agitator; internationally connected and founding organisations across Southeast Asia, he held extensive speaking tours, distributed very large numbers of pamphlets, engaged in strategic confrontations with authority and on at least two occasions wound up in court. Reviled by missionaries and much of the colonial press, he was immensely popular among Asian plebeians in several countries.

Dhammaloka, however, was not Burmese but Irish, probably of working-class background and certainly with years of "hoboing" in the US preceding his involvement in the Asian Buddhist revival; and the anti-Christianity of his Buddhist commitments was underpinned by a stream of connections with the European and North American freethinking (atheist) press. This paper discusses Dhammaloka along with a series of other, equally unlikely, turn-of-the-century Irish people whose solidarity and practical involvement with anti-colonial and cultural nationalist movements in Asia was mediated through Buddhism – as they understood or constructed it in the light of the politics of religion, culture and nationalism in Ireland. It asks how we can understand this peculiar form of international solidarity which linked (to misquote one Irish supporter of imperialism) "Britain's newest colonies with her oldest" (Ito 2003: 58), and what if anything we can learn from the experience today.

The politics of religion in Ireland

The Irish Revolution of the late 19th and early 20th century provides a classic expression of Gramsci's insight that in some kinds of society the "war of position", the gradual conquest and remaking of class relations and the institutions of "civil society", must necessarily precede a successful "war of manoeuvre", the dramatic episodes of taking power within the state. The failure of the 1916 Rising, the partial success of the War of Independence (1919 – 1921), with its dual-power institutions, and the subsequent Civil War (1922 – 23), constituted one of only two successful independence movements in western Europe (the other being Norway, in 1905); as a result of this and earlier insurrectionary histories, Irish nationalists had considerable prestige among their international peers.

The revolution's success rested above all on the successful displacement of aristocratic landlords by peasant ownership of farms, driven by the Land War of 1880 – 1892, which transformed rural class relations; probably one of the few cases in which popular action has forced a non-revolutionary state into extinguishing a land-owning class. This transformation too was ambiguous; it rested on a shift towards commodity production at the long-term expense of subsistence farmers, and was politically allied to the development of national capital, backed by the church and state against the urban proletariat (most decisively in the 1913 Dublin Lockout), the first-wave women's movement, and landless labourers.

This "war of position" was crucially linked to processes of ethno-religious sectarianism. Leaving aside the sectarian politics of Belfast in particular, which took a different form, the main form this took was the intensification of conflict between a declining Anglo-Irish imperial service class and a culturally conservative Catholic nationalism. The half-century following the devastating famine of 1845 – 47 saw an intense investment in the (re-)construction of the Catholic church – subject to penal laws as recently as 50 years previously – as one of the main forms of popular organisation in Ireland, matched where possible by a revival of both Anglican and nonconformist churches (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1995).

Although other elements of cultural nationalism – particularly in sports, language and high culture – were significant, there is little doubt but that religion was the dominant aspect of sharpening processes of ethnic identity construction, or that

these ethno-religious identities were linked to issues of class and nationality in particular. Religion, then, was the first language in which Irish people in this period spoke politics, from the micro-politics of sexuality to the macro-politics of states and institutions (Inglis 1998).

These competing identities also had international ramifications: from the competing historical narratives told in religious-controlled schools, of triumphant British imperialism or betrayed Catholic nationalism, to identification and (for elites) future careers in the "two empires": the British empire, then at its global height, and with an army and civil service which both recruited heavily from Ireland, (Mac Éinrí 2006) and the developing "spiritual empire" of Irish Catholic institutions abroad, both among the Irish diaspora and in newly colonised countries. Plebeians could also make a career, for example as Catholic privates in the Army, but this made for more complex and (on occasion) contested narratives (Nagai 2006).

Religious defection

In this context, with the long-term writing on the wall for what had once been the Anglo-Irish (and hence Protestant) Ascendancy as aristocracy, as unquestioned state class and as supplier of officers and civil servants to the British Empire, it is unsurprising that some of its most creative offspring defected, in whole or in part, from a doomed caste, and equally unsurprising that they sought a resolution of their future in alternative religion.

The most immediately available such religion was the universalist new religious movement of Theosophy, itself a response to the encounter with other civilisations mediated through empire (Franklin 2008). Through Theosophy such defectors could explore the possibility of setting aside an identity as Protestant or non-conformist, in favour of an endless range of possibilities: identification with peasant folklore and with pre-Christian Celtic myth, with esoteric Christianity and with occultism, or with Indian religion, particularly Hinduism.

Figures such as the writer and politician WB Yeats, the co-operative organiser and mystic AE (George Russell), and the novelist James Stephens all took this route, seeking an alternative way of positioning themselves in Irish politics and culture

after the end of empire. More importantly for our purposes, figures such as the writer James Cousins, his wife the suffragette Margaret, and the Fabian and feminist Annie Besant (who identified as Irish) moved to India and became closely involved in Indian nationalist politics via the "Hindu route" through Theosophy – as did, in parallel, Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), who also became an active Hindu nationalist². Defection from an imperial caste, then, could result in anti-imperial solidarity grounded in cultural nationalism³.

While Irish Theosophy was certainly driven in the first instance by the search for a new religious identification from which to legitimate continued involvement in the politics of nation-states, the examples given above show that there were also other concerns, and other kinds of actors involved. Feminism, and women's search for religious legitimacy outside the space defined by conservative Christianity, was one of these strands (Singh 2006).

Another, which we shall see surface more strongly in relation to Buddhism, was the inheritance of plebeian anti-clericalism and rationalist suspicion of Christianity, existing perhaps more as a flavour than a coherent position: yet AE the organiser of agricultural cooperatives (and mystic), Besant the Fabian (and Hindu) and Stephens, survivor of an industrial school and writer of philosophical novels, were all in their different ways working through some of these issues.

² See Guinness (2003, 2004) on the politics of Theosophy in Ireland.

³ David Landy notes that contemporary distant issue movements, which are less frequently contesting their own states' empires abroad, need not entail the same degree of defection; or perhaps we might want to distinguish between "safe" DIMs (which also existed in the 19th century, for example the campaign against suttee in India) and "dissident" ones.

Early Irish Buddhists, international organising and anti-imperial cultural nationalism

These "Irish Theosophists" are well known for their contributions to Irish culture, and in some cases to Indian politics. Rather less well-known, but in some ways more interesting, are their counterparts who became Buddhist, or Buddhist sympathisers, in the same period. Unlike Theosophy, and its possible outlets in peasant folklore, Celtic myth and esoteric Christianity, Buddhism offered no public place to stand in late 19th or early 20th century Ireland – and although Buddhists appeared consistently (and anonymously) from the 1871 census on, the first Irish person to "out" themselves publicly as a Buddhist in Ireland was DA Marks in 1972, 101 years later.

Irish Buddhists of this period – the late 19th and early 20th century – are in this respect more similar to the "Hindu Theosophists", in that they "went native", crossing the lines of colonial power and racism which were intensely marked in imperial Asia during this period, and becoming actively involved in Asian anti-imperialist and anti-missionary politics in Burma, Japan, Ceylon and the young Soviet Union. While we know (as yet) of no women who took this route, the Irish Buddhists were less uniformly Anglo-Irish, including both Catholic and plebeian backgrounds alongside Protestant and elite upbringings.

They stand fairly straightforwardly within a broad Buddhist revival, or what has been called "Buddhist modernism" (MacMahan 2008), which – under the twin impact of imperialism and missionary activity – reformulated Buddhist practice in line with the needs of an emerging urban educated elite, developing forms of preaching, meditation, education and so on which enabled this remade Buddhism to act as a central force in anti-colonial national identity formation across Buddhist countries from Ceylon to Japan.

Dramatis personae

A series of brief biographical sketches is helpful at this point⁴. The dates given are those of their Buddhist-related activity. It should be clear in what follows that we are not discussing a movement, but rather the careers of migrants who joined movements abroad on the basis of a particular shared identity. They are, almost by definition, extremely unusual both among Irish people of the day and among Asian cultural nationalists of the day; my contention in this paper however is that their experiences can tell us something interesting about both.

Koizumi Yakumo / Lafcadio Hearn (1890 - 1904)

Son of an Anglo-Irish military officer and a local Greek woman, Hearn was brought up in Dublin in ever-declining fortunes as both parents abandoned him and he was passed onto an aunt who had converted to Catholicism. As she lost her money to an adventurer, his prospects vanished and he was sent to seek his fortune in the US at the age of 17, where he became a journalist. Unsurprisingly, given these premises, his tastes were Gothic, and he made his name in New Orleans writing on local murders and on Creole culture.

However, he had also encountered Fourierist and anarchist ideas in his first job, as a printer, and from the 1870s was attracted by Buddhism, to such a point that his journal was dubbed "the Infidel Sheet" by local clergy. His Louisiana career was badly affected by his marriage to a black woman, and in 1890 an editor sent him to Japan, where he became an English teacher and eventually a university lecturer, married a Japanese woman and took up Japanese citizenship, being eventually given a Buddhist funeral.

Koizumi Yakumo played a significant role in the development of Japanese cultural nationalism, following the forced opening of Japanese trade with the west in the 1850s and the Meiji revolution of the 1860s. His position as university lecturer

⁴ This account leaves out early Irish Buddhists in Asia without any apparent political interest of this kind, notably Captain C Pfoundes in Japan, an early eccentric and ethnographer who was initiated into various sects of Shingon (Tantric) Buddhism, and in Ladakh Lobsang Jivaka (Michael / Laura Dillon), the world's first female to male transsexual by plastic surgery. See Cox and Griffin 2009 for more references on Jivaka and on Kipling's fictional *Kim*.

located him as an imported moderniser, whose role was to help Japan catch up with the West; his particular contribution, however, was to use this prestige to defend the cultural world of "old Japan", particularly its peasant and Buddhist aspects in a context of imperial Shinto. In this his strategies were sharply opposed to the "New Buddhism" of the Meiji, which argued for a reconstructed and modernised Buddhism, in line with imperial policy.

In this approach, he drew consciously on Yeats' romantic identification of the essence of a country or people with peasant folklore – a position mediated for both Koizumi and Yeats by a colonial context where their emotional identification with the places and images of their early years were contested by Catholic nationalists, leading them to look for a position from which they could be truly of a place, and a lifelong search for such identification.

In terms of this role in the development of Japanese cultural nationalism, three things can be noted. One is the sharpness of Koizumi's "going native": adopting Japanese citizenship cost him a massive drop in salary and constant financial worries. If his previous marriage, to the illegitimate daughter of a slave, had caused scandal, he now consciously chose to avoid association with westerners in Japan, and again found himself on the far side of sharp racial boundaries. Secondly, his personal politics were sharply anti-imperialist in the context of the day: regarded by the British consul (himself Irish) as an extreme nationalist, he supported the Boers against the British and the Japanese against the Russians. Thirdly, his personal response to Buddhism was intellectually mediated above all by a prior commitment to agnosticism, and repeated attempts to synthesise his understanding of Herbert Spencer with his understanding of Buddhist theory and his love of Japanese folklore and landscape.

John Bowles Daly (1889 - 95)

John Bowles Daly had been trained as an Anglican clergyman and on his own account abandoned work in London's East End on finding that Christianity was not meeting the needs of those he worked with. He became a spiritualist, and eventually a Theosophist, while publishing a series of populist books from a liberal and free-thinking nationalist perspective – *Radical pioneers*, a collection of

hagiographies of Wilkes and other liberal activists; a collection of Swift's writings on Ireland; a set of lives of leaders of the 1798 uprising; and a plea for the development of Irish industry in opposition to what we would now call dependency. Never very strong on questions of agency, his writing was always primarily concerned with the question of modernisation through technical rationalisation – Ireland's, Ceylon's, or India's – willing to work either with movement organisations or to appeal to authority in this pursuit.

In this context, Daly had a long-standing interest, for reasons which remain unclear, in Buddhist Ceylon and in particular in Buddhist education; and in 1889 he travelled with the indefatigable Theosophist organiser Col. Olcott to Ceylon to help develop the Buddhist Theosophical Society schools. BTS schools were part of the modernising Buddhist nationalism of the day, counterposed both to the Christian mission schools, and to the traditionalist, temple schools run by village monks. As such, Daly was working above all with the new urban lay Sinhala Buddhists, who were developing their identity as the future national elite through this combination of modernisation and cultural nationalism.

The details are somewhat unclear, but it seems that Daly reorganised the flagship Mahinda College in Galle and was its principal before resigning in conflict with Olcott and the Trustees over questions of discipline. This job evidently came against a broader backdrop of study and travel, in the course of which he claimed to have visited 1300 monasteries. Subsequently this expertise was employed by the colonial authorities when he was appointed commissioner and wrote a report on the disestablishment of monastic landholdings. It is not clear to what extent this represented a modernising position or the influence of missionary politics; around this time Daly moved to India, apparently defeated by the Ceylonese experience, which he does not refer to in later writings, where he also seems to have reverted to a broader mysticism, Theosophist in content but critical of the Society.

Maurice Collis (1912 - 1934)

Similarly to Koizumi Yakumo, the Anglo-Irish civil servant and writer Maurice Collis transposed a Yeats-inflected emotional identification with the Irish landscape and folklore to a love for the magical aspects of Burmese Buddhism. His

political evolution, however, was very different. Starting with what he subsequently admitted was a naïve belief in the beneficence of empire, his work as a magistrate in Burma (whose conquest had only been completed in 1885) led him to a sharp critique of its daily reality, an understanding of its purpose of economic exploitation and a series of increasingly difficult choices.

Introduced by his friend the Orientalist Gordon Luce to the modernising nationalists of the Burmese middle class, and shocked by Luce's own ostracisation by westerners for marrying a Burmese woman, Collis was treated as a sympathetic magistrate by Buddhist authorities, who suspended the normal rules (aimed at police and military tourists) barring the wearing of shoes at pagodas – an experience which left him personally deeply uncomfortable and feeling like an intruder.

In 1929 and 1930, two rulings – the first criticising a white employer whose bullying had led to a servant's suicide, the second jailing an officer who caused a traffic accident injuring two Burmese women – led to an outcry among the colonial community and his removal to increasingly trivial posts, eventually forcing his resignation.

Politically, the war of independence and the atrocities of the Black and Tans had turned Collis into a sympathiser with Irish nationalism, and he had no difficulty in seeing the parallels with Burma. In his view British policy had made a home rule settlement for Ireland (and hence the continuation of the world he had come from) impossible, and he hoped – increasingly in vain – that this could be avoided in Burma.

Collis' response to Saya San's uprising (1930 – 32) is worth quoting at length as an illustration of how he saw Burma through Irish spectacles⁵:

All the Burmese one had met in Rangoon, the members of parliament, the bar and the professional class, pinned their faith on the grant of a new constitution and were as much surprised as was the government. It was a magical rebellion. The old Burma which I have described, the Burma that dreamed of a saviour king, believed that a saviour king had come...

⁵ Alicia Turner notes that Collis is here following the projections of the colonial state in picturing Saya San as magical and millennial, and that he was in fact far more political and bureaucratic than Collis gives him credit for.

There was a confluence of all the visionaries. The mediums gathered and were possessed by the spirits; the spirits spoke through them and promised victory. The alchemists prepared the elixir, the magicians were at hand with their magic diagrams. The hosts of fairyland were besought for help, the divinities of tree and stream and hill, those who resided in stones and old sites, the guardian ghosts, and those of paradise, the superior spirits, the King of Heaven himself. All these sweet fairies among whose haunts I had been wandering nearly twenty years were now summoned with music and dancing, aroused with offerings of fruit and flowers, adjured with incantatory verse... (1953: 192 – 3)

Collis' own politics, naturally, remained resolutely rational; despite his love for Burmese culture and folklore, he was clear that the future lay with the urban, educated, constitutional nationalists. In 1931, home on leave, he brokered private meetings between a Burmese nationalist delegation and leading Irish nationalists – the Treaty signatory Robert Barton, the extreme nationalist Maud Gonne McBride (who told the Burmese to get everything in writing when dealing with the British) and AE, mentioned above. By 1934 Collis had been forced out of Burma, and spent much of the rest of his life as a (very accomplished) writer, focussing among other things on the Asian encounter with European colonisers.

Patrick Breslin (1920s - 1930s)

Very much "from the other side" in terms of background, Patrick Breslin holds the unenviable distinction of being one of only three Irish people to fall victim to Stalin's purges⁶. As a leading young leftist of petty-bourgeois Catholic origins, he was a member of the first Communist Party of Ireland and its successor organisations, the Workers' Party of Ireland and the Irish Worker League and an associate of James Connolly's son Roddy and the revolutionary military strategist Jack White.

Breslin, however, had also been a regular attender at Theosophist meetings and an associate of the astrologer and Theosophist Cyril Fagan. He had rejected Catholicism at the age of 14 and seriously considered the propositions of "Indian mysticism" (presumably as mediated by Theosophy) before rejecting them. Sent by James Larkin to the International Lenin School in Moscow, Breslin defended spiritualism and the materialist character of "materialisations". This, however, was

⁶ Most of the information in this section is drawn from McLoughlin 2007.

not the grounds for his purging (at a later point, the criminal psychologists who examined him as a prisoner noted that his positions were "concrete, real and in line with the views expressed in the literature on these matters").

Purged from the party and the ILS for his petty-bourgeois origins and independence of thought (he later suffered from alcoholism), Breslin remained in the Soviet Union as a journalist and translator for Soviet papers. His first wife Katya had had a mystical experience while visiting the Buddhist temple in St Petersburg as a teenager⁷, and family history records that Breslin shared this interest, which fits with his spiritualism and exploration of Theosophy . Her interest, however, also led her to become a translator of Japanese, and hence politically suspect; his purging followed hers, and he died in transit to a labour camp in 1942.

U Dhammaloka / Lawrence O'Rourke (1880s? - 1911?)

I will discuss U Dhammaloka in more detail below; here I want to note simply the points that are relevant as comparisons to the other early Irish Buddhists involved in Asian cultural nationalism or anti-imperialist work. He was probably born Lawrence O'Rourke in Dublin in the second half of the 1850s, in a working-class or declining artisanal family; as a young man he emigrated to the US, holding a series of transient manual jobs in between living as a hobo. After perhaps two decades of this he worked his way from the West Coast to Asia, winding up in Burma, where he converted to Buddhism and ordained under the name of Dhammaloka, somewhere in the late 1880s or 1890s.

From a point somewhere in the 1890s, Dhammaloka started to become an increasingly public figure, as a touring preacher and polemicist against Christian missionaries, as founder of Buddhist organisations in Burma, Singapore and Siam and networker with Buddhists in India, Nepal, Ceylon and Japan, and as an energetic writer and self-publicist, publishing Buddhist tracts, engaging in

⁷ This had been founded by the Lithuanian Buddhist Karl Tennisons, whose Buddhist commitments won him the support of the 13th Dalai Lama. This was presumably instrumental in gaining the allegiance of the migrant Buryats and Kalmyks, Siberian minorities who had been converted to Buddhism by (Gelugpa) Mongolian Buddhists.

newspaper controversy and in correspondence with Germany, the US, Canada and Britain.

Dhammaloka's take on Buddhism was very much as "rational religion": as Asian culture in opposition to western and to Christian missionaries in particular, and as strongly associated with temperance. In particular, his tracts included the works of Thomas Paine and other rationalist critiques of Christianity, and his western correspondents were virtually without exception free-thought publications.

Individuals in solidarity movements

In noting these five individuals, it should be clear that I am in no sense proposing "Irish Buddhism" as a social movement in this period, and I am not primarily interested in the contribution these individuals made to cultural nationalism or anti-imperialism in their adopted countries – a contribution which was relatively significant in the case of Koizumi Yakumo and U Dhammaloka, but non-trivial in the other three cases. Rather, I am interested in what these examples tell us about the nature of international solidarity in this context, where cultural nationalism and anti-imperialism in Ireland were mirrored in Buddhist Asia by an international Buddhist Revival, driven by both Western and Asian organisations – and in contexts where the prospects for the success of either, and the attraction of collusion with empire, varied hugely.

Firstly, these figures were to varying degrees "going native" in a world marked by sharp divisions of race and culture and by imperial power. Koizumi married a Japanese woman and Breslin a Russian (his second wife was Irish); Dhammaloka took monastic vows, while Collis sabotaged his own career by associating with Burmese and refusing to treat whites and Asians differently as a judge (Daly is an exception). Equally or more importantly, they were primarily located within and dependent on Asian-led organisations, as varied as the Buddhist sangha and nationalist benefactors (Dhammaloka), a range of Soviet institutions (Breslin), the Buddhist Theosophical Society (Daly), and Japanese schools and universities (Koizumi) – but all fitting within the general rubric of developmental nationalism. Collis is the only one primarily dependent on western or colonial institutions.

Their political activities obviously varied hugely, from Collis' personal acts of solidarity via Breslin's somewhat lackadaisical journalism to Koizumi and Dhammaloka's much more effective publicistic activity and to Daly and Dhammaloka's organisation-building. So too did their political perspectives taken on their own terms, in a scale running from Daly's technocratic modernism via Collis' liberal nationalism and Dhammaloka's pan-Asian cultural revivalism to Koizumi's visceral anti-imperialism and Breslin's communism.

Thirdly, there was an important nexus between their own religious evolution and cultural nationalisms in Asia. Daly, Koizumi, Breslin and Dhammaloka all shared an early rejection of Christianity along free-thinking, agnostic and / or spiritualist lines, not as independent personal decisions but as mediated through spiritualist and theosophical societies, free-thinking and anarchist organisations. (Collis' personal evolution is unclear in this respect.) In Asia, the choice of developing or deepening an interest in Buddhism led them into alliance with the cultural nationalisms of Ceylon, Burma and Japan (this was clearly not true for Breslin).

These cultural nationalisms – like the institutions of the Soviet state for Breslin – represent key ways in which newly hegemonic developmentalist nationalisms (the Soviet and Meiji states) and would-be hegemonic nationalist elites (in Burma and Ceylon) set out to conquer or remake "civil society", in opposition – as far as our Irish Buddhists are concerned – to missionary Christianity. It should be noted that this period saw the traditional "hands-off" approach of the Indian Civil Service, which preferred to work through comprador elites and leave native religion, law and custom to itself as far as possible, increasingly challenged by the need to mobilise popular support for empire and hence its legitimation through Christianity.

These experiences were old in Ireland, which had undergone the reverse evolution in colonial policy, from the failure of penal legislation and attempts to convert Catholics to the *modus vivendi* reached between the Church and the colonial administration, which saw effective control over the schooling and health care of Catholics increasingly handed over to religious institutions – a model often preferred by Irish administrators such as William Gregory in Ceylon or Justice Twomey in Burma.

Conversely, the use of cultural nationalism, and specifically the articulation of ethnic identity around religion in an implicit opposition to imperial power which had the merit of being largely immune from direct attack in the 19th and 20th century context, was by now a central part of Irish life, in particular since the success of Daniel O'Connell's emancipation movement in the first half of the 19th century; and I think there is a case to be made that these Irish Buddhists were importing something of their own "tacit knowledge" in support of those Buddhist revivalists who were pursuing the same strategy. Not, obviously, that Asians needed someone else to suggest the idea that religion could provide an effective strategy for organising nationalist movements, any more than the Irish had earlier; but rather that Irish Buddhists found this a particularly easy link to make, and – particularly in the cases of Dhammaloka and Koizumi – did so at an early point with great confidence that was itself helpful.

Another and broader way of putting the general case is to suggest that the increased pro-imperial involvement of metropolitan populations via support for missionary activity in colonial Asia (an involvement in which Irish people were of course active in very large numbers) also called forth an anti-colonial religious nationalism which could hardly have been effective had religion not become a central legitimating part of colonisation. The move from a freethinking, spiritualist, anti-clerical or socialist identity in Ireland – in opposition to both dominant forms of Christianity – became a Buddhist or Buddhist-sympathising one in Asia, in response to the colonial form of Christianity and in solidarity with Asian Buddhists. In pursuing these strategies – more or less successfully – Irish Buddhists were also connecting with the central, ethno-religious issue of Irish politics.

Finally, the various kinds of anti-colonial and anti-racist solidarity of the period come out nicely in the various kinds of organisations which mediated these Irish Buddhists' activity. The Comintern, which brought Patrick Breslin to Moscow, is at one extreme as a conscious organisation of international anti-imperial solidarity (and of course many other things besides). Maurice Collis' connection-making between (by then successful) Irish nationalist revolutionaries and Burmese nationalists is a less formal type of interaction between nationalisms, albeit one more common in the history of relations between Ireland and India (ref.)

The Buddhist Theosophical Society which employed John Bowles Daly was a local inflection of a supposedly universal religious organisation which did become a major actor at one point in Indian as in Irish or Ceylonese politics. Such organisations – whether initiated from the West, Asian-based such as Anagarika Dharmapala's Maha Bodhi Society or founded by westerners in Asia such as Ananda Metteyya's Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland (founded to carry out missionary activity in reverse) – were a key part of the Buddhist Revival (McMahan 2008).

On a less centralised basis again, Buddhist organisations mirroring Christian missionary ones were a staple of the Asian scene, often with few or no interconnections; in this category fall bodies such as U Dhammaloka's "Buddhist Tract Society", Young Men's Buddhist Associations and the like. Because of their largely independent origins, they pursued very different politics – the Ceylonese YMBAs were anti-Christian, whereas the Burmese organisation may even have been founded by a Christian (Alicia Turner, pers. comm.) At times there were bilateral relationships, such as between Ceylon and Burma, which drew on prior interactions between the monastic sanghas, and attempts, often based in Japan, to assert a general hegemony over Buddhist activity in Asia; but these networks rarely seem to have been particularly effective.

Finally, the equivalents of anti-racist activity in this period often took the form simply of asserting that "natives" represented a high level of "civilisation", asserting the validity of their religion as against that of the west, breaching boundaries through marriage or friendship (becoming "pro-Burman" in the worst charge levelled against Maurice Collis), or genuinely acting – for example in a court of law – on the proposition of formal equality.

Contemporary international solidarity movements of course continue to explore these different models, and often with equally erratic success, not least because of the inherent challenge of "distant issue movements" (Landy 2009). There are some notable differences: the direct calquing of organisations on others has become rarer (though the World Social Forum is a notable exception), perhaps because the lesson of how to organise in modernity really only needs to be learned once in its broadest outlines. The relatively straightforward models of earlier anti-imperialist internationalism, still evident in e.g. Bandung and the Non-Aligned Movement,

have been shaped by the uneven history of national and socialist liberation movements – and even more so the history of those states after independence – to produce a more varied organising terrain. In this new world, "one-size-fits-all" organising models are perhaps at a bit more of a discount, and those which are geared to "an ecology of knowledges" (de Sousa Santos 2006) are probably doing rather better. In general, however, the world these organisers occupied is recognisably the same as ours in practical terms.

U Dhammaloka and plebeian freethought

In this next section, I want to focus on one of the more unexpected aspects of these international relationships, that between Irish Buddhists and Buddhist sympathisers in Asia, and agnosticism, free thought (atheism) and spiritualism in the west. Koizumi moved from atheist influence through agnosticism towards Buddhist sympathies; Daly from spiritualism to Theosophical Buddhism and back towards mysticism; Breslin from spiritualism to Buddhist sympathies; and Dhammaloka consistently attempted to combine free thought and Buddhism⁸.

This combination seems paradoxical, but as Logie Barrow (1986) shows, in this period in England at least, spiritualism was as frequently a plebeian option, seeing itself as scientific and opposed to religion, as it was the more aristocratic option which (in England) tended towards an alternative religion and ultimately towards Theosophy. If it has often been said of "Protestant Buddhism" – the jointly constructed Buddhism of Theravada modernisers and British Orientalists – that it argued for a rational religion which promised morality without God, then plebeian spiritualism argued (in Barrow's words) for a democratic epistemology in which everyone could have access to the afterlife without Christianity or mystery. In this latter manifestation, spiritualism was an ally of free thought and not its enemy, strange though this seems over a century on; and the anti-Christianity and political radicalism of plebeian free thought made it an important "nursery culture" for working-class Liberalism and, later, socialism (Barrow 1986).

I want to explore some of these encounters with relation to U Dhammaloka in particular. In essence, there are three aspects of this Buddhist-atheist relationship worth noting. Firstly, his known discourses as a Buddhist polemicist in Asia are above all anti-missionary discourses in which the dominant tone is an anti-Christianity derived from aggressively rationalist western sources. Secondly, he was in mutually supportive correspondence with, and noted by, American, German and British free-thought periodicals. Thirdly, while most of this is likely to be traceable

⁸ I have not yet been able to establish Collis' personal background in these matters, but from the tone he would seem to be simultaneously sceptical of religion and attracted by it – wishing, as Thomas Hardy said, "that it might be so". So far I have found no evidence, however, of interest in any organised form of religion or anti-religion.

to his American years, it seems plausible that elements of the anti-clericalist tone have plebeian, Irish Catholic roots.

The net effect, I want to argue, was to make a connection between the Asian Buddhist revival – in Dhammaloka's hands, rationalist and modernising, confrontational and anti-missionary, mass-mobilisation and distinctly "unrespectable" – with comparable elements in western free thought, as mediated through his own, working-class Irish, take on these matters. I will start from Dhammaloka's end.

Organising against Christianity

The bulk of commentary on Dhammaloka by missionaries and the English-language papers of "the colonial community" in Asia is unremittingly negative, revolving around three interrelated criticisms. Dhammaloka was criticised for not being a gentleman in his behaviour or his education; for his antagonistic relationship to Christianity; and for being Irish. No doubt he would have pleaded guilty to all charges.

As noted, his background was working-class or declining artisan, with perhaps two decades of life as a travelling and intermittently employed manual labourer preceding his becoming a Buddhist monk. He was clearly self-educated, but effectively so for his own purposes – if he was unable to sustain a single argument at book length, he was more than capable of defeating missionaries in debate and of delivering short, powerful speeches and pamphlets. This self-education was characteristic of many working men of the period in the UK as a whole, and remains a strong characteristic of working-class Irish culture. Elsewhere (Cox 2009) I have noted the parallel between Dhammaloka's working life and James Connolly's in terms of employment; the two were rough contemporaries.

Dhammaloka's lack of suitable gentility, which went together with an ability to make friends in the most unlikely places and across languages and countries, was very much bound up with an Irish persona – and accent, which commentators made much of. Along with his class and education, it marks him out as distinctly unrespectable, even before his adoption of monastic rules which set him further apart from the social norms of colonists in Asia.

This lack of respectability combined with an antagonistic relationship to Christianity which – in the eyes of the same commentators – distinguished him sharply from genteel western Buddhists such as his contemporary in Burma, Ananda Metteyya (Allan Bennett), who treated Buddhism above all as philosophy and sought rather to introduce it to educated people in the west rather than use it "to hurl the little streets against the great", as Yeats put it. By all accounts, Dhammaloka's language was inflammatory, and this proved the basis for two charges of sedition, the second of which was successful and was upheld on appeal.

We can note here the occasion of the first (unsuccessful) sedition charge, which arose out of a confrontation between Dhammaloka (who as far as we know had no personal role as pagoda trustee) and a police officer who insisted on visiting a pagoda while wearing his shoes. Here Dhammaloka positioned himself, dramatically and publicly, as defender of local Buddhist purity against (Indian) disrespect, and seems to have become very popular as a result.

More generally, there seems to have been much missionary and newspaper concern that he was disturbing the simple faith of the Burmese and turning it into something it was not supposed to be, a source of tensions with Christian missionaries and – behind the missionaries – empire. His was not Collis' uprising of the fairies and the fortune-tellers, but something potentially much more dangerous: an urban, ethnically-based mass movement.

David Landy suggests the useful concept of "constructive misrecognition": that western freethinkers and Buddhist revivalists (like some radical Islamists and their western supporters today) found it strategically useful to misunderstand, or misrepresent, each other in the pursuit of local aims which are politically compatible even if ideologically incompatible; and there may indeed be aspects of this. I would rather suggest, however, that Buddhism *could* plausibly be constructed as atheist; that many Asians (most powerfully perhaps the dalit leader BR Ambedkar) did precisely that; and that the alliance with western freethinkers and progressives more broadly was part of this process.

To move to the mass aspect of things: Dhammaloka, as noted, was an effective organisation-builder in Burma and Singapore at least, was associated with organisation-building in Japan and had links with Siam, India, Nepal and perhaps Ceylon. Much of this was presumably facilitated by the revival of international links

between Buddhist sanghas, and by the development of other international bodies such as the Maha Bodhi society, Ananda Metteyya's organisations for bringing Buddhism to the west, and perhaps the Theosophical Society.

One of his main concerns was publication, typically in English and in relatively short forms: brief tracts and declarations, the texts of speeches and letters to the newspapers. Along with these, he republished (in some cases with extensive editorial additions) a range of free-thinking texts under the aegis of his Buddhist Tract Society – texts which were usually notable for their stinging attacks on Christianity but rarely if ever related to Buddhism. Printing, and even more so distribution, of written material remains an important organisational challenge for social movements today, and the scope of the operation must remain somewhat in doubt, but it seems that we are talking about print runs in the thousands, and sometimes the tens of thousands, at least for the shorter works.

An interesting and as yet unanswered question arises in relation to linguistic issues. Dhammaloka was clearly able to make himself understood in a number of Asian languages, but when giving a formal speech or writing expressed himself in English. On one occasion we have a record of interpreters (perhaps the same people who appear as distributing his tracts in other accounts). While urban educated Burmese people spoke and read English by this stage (and Dhammaloka had privileged relationships with one such newspaper editor), his natural audience clearly did not. This does not seem to have stopped him being popular in rural areas and among social groups who are unlikely to have had any significant level of English; but it may perhaps account in part for the ultimate failure of his organising efforts, if he was unable to have more than basic conversations in person with his natural constituency, and had to rely on educated assistants for campaigning purposes.

Alicia Turner notes that until recently monks had preached in Pali or a Burmese-Pali hybrid that would have been largely incomprehensible to mass audiences; in this context it was the fact of hearing the words that produced merit and reinforced social cohesion. In other words, particularly in rural areas, understanding the preaching may have been less important than the fact of seeing a white man in robes. This fits with David Landy's broader suggestion that Dhammaloka's whiteness would have been a boon in bringing the mystique of the more powerful

culture but converting and hence showing the inherent superiority of Buddhism. Both points seem valid, but it should be noted that educated colonials noted above all his Irishness and plebeian qualities – the fact that he was "not a gentleman". Unlike (say) Col. Olcott, whose status and prestige was considerable, Dhammaloka's prestige was only really plausible to those relatively low down the social scale; and as far as we know he never highlighted his whiteness or the significance of his conversion in this way.

Western allies

The link both to organised free-thought in the west and to the Irish anti-clerical heritage can be neatly illustrated through two letters Dhammaloka wrote to the editor of the *Blue-Grass Blade* in 1909. The *Blue-Grass Blade* (1884 – 1910) was a leading radical and free-thought publication based in Kentucky, whose editor was twice imprisoned for blasphemy, being released the second time on foot of a presidential pardon. In writing to the *Blade*, Dhammaloka wrote

I was wondering how you got my address, as I did not think that we 'heathens' in far-off Burma should attract attention from any person of intelligence, except the 'holy and sanctified' Christian missionary.

In his second letter he comments

You ask if there are 2,000 admirers of Thomas Paine in Burma. Yes, and double as many. There were sold in Burma over 10,000 copies of the "Age of Reason" last year, as well as some copies of the "Rights of Man".

I trust this year that we shall do better than last year. You will convey the greetings of ten millions of Buddhists of this province to your Association on the occasion of the great celebration of that grand Hero of Freethought. I am making the necessary arrangements to celebrate the occasion on a grand scale...

We have not translated any parts of the "Age of Reason" as yet, but our Society intends to do this work next year, and you shall receive a copy of the same. We are going to bring it out in three parts, and if the funds permit we shall bring it out in full.

I am sure that every friend of Truth will agree with me that it is time that we should show the bigots and the ministers of every church that Thomas Paine was the real friend of man – in fact, we can call him a Humanitarian of the loftiest type.

Tom Paine was an obvious point of reference for a Catholic-born freethinker in Ireland, and had been for over a hundred years; the *Rights of Man* had circulated widely between 1791 and the 1798 rebellion (Barnard 1999: 62), while in 1825 the Presbyterian moderator commented that "the works of Tom Paine ... were put into the hands of the people. Paine's *Rights of man*, a political work, and *Age of reason*, a 'deistical' one, were 'industriously circulated'... 'not a few of the schoolmasters were men of bad principles, who preferred any book to the Bible' " (MacManus 2002: 36). Paine was thus a traditional point of reference for Catholic anti-clericalism.

The *Blue-grass blade* was one of several western free-thinking journals which either noted Dhammaloka's views and comments approvingly, or with which he was in communication. Unlike the best-known western Buddhists in Asia, however, whose orientation (like Ananda Metteyya's) was always primarily the conversion of westerners in Europe and North America to Buddhism, Dhammaloka's main organising efforts were in Asia, and his main concern seems to have been to source arguments and texts for his anti-missionary polemics – a particularly important concern given his own limited formal education.

These were the declining years of spiritualism and free-thought as plebeian and radical forms of organisation; the rise of socialist organising forms and the general secularisation of everyday life in many metropolitan societies took the urgency out of atheism as a political position, and increasingly tended to relegate it to a preoccupation of liberals such as Bertrand Russell (2004) and among the middle classes where religious belief and practice remained more significant (McLeod 1997) There were important exceptions to this, of course, notably in anarchism and among European émigré communities in the US (Avrich 2006), where the Modern School movement was about to make a significant impact. In Ireland, by contrast, religious sectarianism dominated to the extent that even a Marxist like James Connolly had to distinguish carefully between (acceptable) anti-clericalism and (unacceptable) atheism and anti-Christianity, which in the anti-colonial context would have been the death knell of any form of socialist organising.

There were, then, a variety of limitations to Dhammaloka's activities – the tension between his apparent dependence on urban, educated elites for finance, distribution and interpreting and his orientation to a broader, more plebeian and

less radical audience, and the gradual decline of atheism and spiritualism as important aspects of working-class culture, as well as his own personal quirks and difficulties. Nevertheless I want to suggest that – either measured on the scale of international solidarity movements or on that of immigrants in nationalist movements – he did not do so badly, and that the kind of history he exemplifies deserves greater attention.

Conclusion:

implications for Buddhist solidarity movements today

In conclusion, I want to ask what if anything can be learnt from this experience of early Irish Buddhist solidarity with the Asian Buddhist revival for the contemporary politics of international solidarity with radical religious movements in the majority world, and to what extent an "alternative future" can be glimpsed in this politics.

There is of course a direct legacy, still active today, of the role of Buddhism in anti-colonial and cultural nationalist movements in Asia. This legacy is not always a positive one, most visibly in Sri Lanka, though we could also mention Buddhist involvement in Japanese imperialism (Victoria 2006) and the sponsoring of Buddhist fundamentalism among Chinese Malays in the 1950s counter-insurgency. More generally, Buddhism in Asia is often (though not always) a form of popular self-organisation available for what recent authors (Queen and King 1996) have called "Buddhist liberation movements in Asia", in a range of very different contexts running from anti-colonial politics in Tibet via pro-democracy movements in Burma to *dalit* liberation struggles in India.

Buddhism is of course not the only religion with such a history, but it is one of relatively few cases where (a) radical religious organising in the majority world (b) benefits from conscious international solidarity (c) from those who are not fellow-believers (d) on specifically religious grounds. Most solidarity, for example US Christian support of Jews, international Muslim solidarity or western Left solidarity with popular movements in the Arab world, is either on the grounds of religious similarity / identity or *despite* sharp religious differences. In the case of Buddhism, there is often positive support for Buddhism *per se* among those who are in no sense Buddhist personally.

The other category for which this is particularly important is indigenous religion, notably in the Americas, where four decades of increased self-assertion in the USA, Canada, Mexico and the Andean countries in particular has led to significant involvement of indigenous religion in radical political movements of various kinds, together with differing kinds of international solidarity for this ethnoreligious formation (as well of course as solidarity based on other factors). In both cases, of

course, we are talking of groups which are sufficiently weak "at home" for international solidarity to play a significant role.

In many such cases the perception that the "distant" religion – indigenous or Buddhist – is not religious (or at least, not religious in the same way as "near" religions are) plays an important role, enabling solidarity between groups defined by an ethno-religious identity and distant supporters who share neither the religion nor the ethnicity. Such alliances can be based, for example, on Western perceptions of Buddhism as "more a philosophy than a religion", or of indigenous religion as mystical environmentalism – "seeing the mountain as sacred" and so on.

These perceptions – of the "other's" religion as not religious in the same way and thus a reasonable basis for solidarity from those who do not share it – are harder to achieve for Christian, Muslim or to some extent Hindu-based movements, where solidarity has to take different forms and languages⁹ - sympathy based on shared religious propositions, or solidarity despite difference. Westerners in solidarity with Buddhist and indigenous groups can often express a solidarity which celebrates difference.

It is also, of course, important that Buddhist and indigenous religious identities – or at least their public expression – have long been shaped in this kind of international dialogue, along with the (re-)encounter between different Buddhist countries that helped shape Buddhist modernism, or the organising efforts of networks of indigenous peoples across the Americas. The role of "the west" is clear, for example, in the evolution of the Dalai Lama's thought towards environmental themes and the renunciation of claims to re-establish theocratic rule in Tibet; in Aung San Suu Kyi's very modernist view of Buddhism; in the formation of BR Ambedkar's thought; or in Subcomandante Marcos' articulation of Zapatista thinking and the language of Evo Morales' forthcoming "People's world conference on climate change and the rights of mother earth": these are all ways of speaking which articulate a form of ethno-religious identity which is both progressive and acceptable to potential international supporters.

⁹ It is of course the case that Abrahamic religions share family resemblances, so that it is a more complex proposition to have two different yardsticks for evaluating such religions "at home" and "over there".

This point is often put as critique, in arguing that this makes what is being said unauthentic, or (worse) deceptive. This argument is sometimes valid, but (I want to suggest) not on the grounds of what a religion (or indeed religion as such) essentially "is", rather in terms of the way it is practically organised on the ground. In the situations discussed here, which are not those of uncritical long-distance support for states or powerful nationalisms against other similar actors, but of movements which are relatively weak within the international order, the implication is rather that the need for external solidarity from comparable movements abroad pushes them to stress the generally progressive character of these identities, and to organise themselves in those terms.

As with the dialogue between plebeian freethought and anti-colonial movements, this is not necessarily a bad thing, as is often assumed. It may be particularly significant, as in the case discussed here, of the *formation* of a new oppositional movement, which then stands in particular need not only of allies but also of organising models, a language to articulate and a vision of the future society it seeks. Where these come from is not an irrelevant question: in this case the interaction becomes constitutive of the new movement (see Lopéz 1998 for a nuanced analysis of this in relation to Tibetan Buddhism post-1959).

Coda

Finally, what kind of utopia or "alternative future" is expressed by these processes, and what are its limits and collusions?

There are of course particular themes which are often stressed in specific processes of this kind. Buddhism (for example in relation to China) is often said to be inherently pacifist, while indigenous cultures are often said to be inherently ecological (some are also claimed to embody gender equality).

More generally, however, I think there are three themes worth noting in contemporary solidarity relationships with movements of this kind. The first is the question of difference, touched on earlier. If it is important for such movements to frame ethno-religious identity in terms which are comprehensible by western supporters, it is not necessary for them to attempt conversion. More strongly, as we have seen, part of the attraction specific to Buddhism and indigenous religions is

the belief that they are not comparable to "religion as we know it". Thus underpinning this kind of solidarity is a sense of diversity-with-equality: that it is possible (say) to be deeply moved by the actions of Burmese monks without wanting to be one, and to contrast Buddhism (as constructed in this process) positively with western religion from a standpoint of agnosticism, or religious universalism of the Theosophical kind. Part of the utopia, then, is that other people have distinct and worthwhile ways of living and feeling which need not be shared to be valued and supported.

Secondly, this process pushes towards the articulation of a language of human needs of a surprisingly universalist kind¹⁰. Thus Buddhist rhetorics in this context speak of non-violence and peace, of compassion and loving-kindness, of truth and simplicity, while indigenous rhetorics often stress knowledge of and respect for place, landscape and nature and position speakers and hearers as emotional, embodied and in community.

These positives, of course, are also expressed through the contrast with state repression and propaganda and with capitalist industrialisation, individualisation and alienation, and this is my third theme. While these solidarity processes remain relationships between popular movements, they highlight shared experiences of capitalism and state power, and position as utopia a different world – even where, as often, the practical strategies revolve around attaining a different kind of capitalist state.

This last point marks one kind of limit to this process, as does in a broader sense the practical fact of religion as a marker of ethnic identity. There are also, I think, limitations in the use of religious language itself, as tending often to foreclose broader questions of strategy and analysis. As with our nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish Buddhists, international solidarity with anti-colonial movements defined by ethno-religious identity is relatively good at organising people to resist colonisation and empire; it is relatively weak at developing alternatives that are not capitalist nation states.

¹⁰ Universalisms are not necessarily rationalisms, it should be noted: the language of defending someone's *right* to vote for someone you dislike, to practice a religion you find distasteful, or to speak a language you do not understand is a rather different matter from the argument that "all religions are really one", of which Theosophy was a powerful carrier.

Here, of course, it becomes of interest to return to Patrick Breslin and non-religious forms of solidarity, and in the present to the Zapatistas, and non-capitalist, non-state ways of articulating strategy. As in very different ways with Dhammaloka's use of Buddhism to articulate and act on his radical atheism, the encounter between indigenous ways of speaking and acting and the Marxist inheritance in the EZLN is a fascinating and productive encounter.

This history has of course not reached its end; the capacity of any actors to sustain popular forms of anti-imperial or anti-colonial solidarity (as opposed to states assisting the internal opponents of enemy states, which has a far longer history), whether on a religious, nationalist, socialist or anarchist basis is in practice a recent one, dating back perhaps to the 18th century (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000) and more substantially to the second half of the 19th century. The revival of globally networked opposition to these forms of power makes these experiences of continuing relevance.

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