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MADE YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN

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## Indian Prophet or Father of Arabian Paganism?

*The Buddha and the Buddhists in  
the History of India*

Buddhism was not entirely a newcomer when it first arrived at the doorsteps of the Islamic world under Mongol auspices. Eastern Iran had been a center of Buddhist activity, mainly in the second and third centuries AD. After the expansion of the Islamic world during the seventh century, Muslims continued to encounter Buddhism through the ruins that dotted the area, and especially through the Indian Buddhists' contribution to the Arabic translation of Sanskrit medical texts in ninth-century cosmopolitan Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> Yet the period of Indian influences was short. From the ninth century onward, the distance between the Islamic and Indian worlds grew considerably.<sup>2</sup>

This new reality meant that Islamic knowledge of the current state of the Buddhist world remained rather stagnant. A "frozen" image of Buddhism emerged and was crystalized in Islamic scholarship, while Buddhist communities and traditions were undergoing considerable change across Asia.<sup>3</sup> By the eleventh century, Muslim contacts with real-life Buddhists became rare. Famous Central Asian scholar Biruni (d. 1048), indeed, lamented that he was unable to find a single Buddhist informant with whom to consult on the Buddhist doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

With the establishment of the Ilkhanate during the 1260s, the distance between the Muslim and Buddhist worlds shrank almost overnight. The influx of Buddhist monks from across Eurasia into the eastern Islamic world provided opportunities for the exchange of knowledge. While Muslim authors generally chose to ignore the presence of the newcomers, the encounter with the Buddhists at the Ilkhanid court provided us with one of the most elaborate and accurate medieval descriptions of Buddhism, included in the chapter on the *History of India, Sind, and Kashmir* in Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Histories*.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Towards a Buddhist theism

Davide Andrea Zappulli

Department of Philosophy, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T, Canada  
Email: zappulli@student.ubc.ca

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### Abstract

My claim in this article is that the thesis that Buddhism has no God, insofar as it is taken to apply to Buddhism universally, is false. I defend this claim by interpreting a central text in East-Asian Buddhism – *The Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* – through the lenses of perfect being theology (PBT), a research programme in philosophy of religion that attempts to provide a description of God through a two-step process: (1) defining God in terms of maximal greatness; (2) inferring the properties or attributes that God must have in virtue of satisfying the definition. My argument comprises two steps. First, I argue that, since PBT is a method for providing a description of God starting from a definition of God, any text that contains a PBT *ipso facto* contains a notion of God. Second, I argue through textual evidence that *The Awakening* articulates a PBT, concluding that it contains a notion of God. Since the method of PBT leaves open what descriptions are to be inferred, my argument allows me to conclude that a text contains a notion of God without previously committing to any particular conception of the divine, which makes it particularly versatile and powerful.

Keywords: Buddhism; God; One Mind; perfect being theology; suchness

### Introduction

Among the world's religions, Buddhism is often regarded as special, if a religion at all. One reason that people often advance in favour of its exceptionality is what they take to be the Buddhist attitude towards God: in a word, denial. Buddhism is often characterized as an atheistic religion. This, of course, allegedly puts Buddhism in stark contrast with the major religious traditions of the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact, for those of us who have been educated in a broadly Western setting, religion, if not the same as belief in God, seems at least to entail it. Buddhism is different, we are told.

In this article, I will try to convince you that this claim, insofar as it is taken as applying to Buddhism universally, is false. In support of my claim I will utilize a central East Asian Buddhist text, the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (大乘起信論 *Dasheng qixin lun*). I will show that the *Awakening* contains a notion of God by using the method of perfect being theology, an influential research programme in philosophy of religion, arguing that since the *Awakening* contains a notion of God as defined by this method the general claim that Buddhism is atheistic is false.

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MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
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The structure of the article is as follows. The first section provides examples of the widespread claim that Buddhism is universally atheistic and sets my motivation for writing the article. The second section introduces the tradition of perfect being theology and explains how I will use its method to formulate my argument. Then, the third section turns to the interpretation of the text and is divided into two parts: in the first, I provide an interpretation of the metaphysical picture of the *Awakening*, while in the second, I argue that the *Awakening* contains a form of theism. Finally, I address two objections in the fourth section – one directed at my use of perfect being theology and one at my interpretation of the text – and give a brief conclusion in the fifth section.

### Buddhism: a religion without God?

It is very common among scholars of Buddhism to unequivocally deny that Buddhism has a God. To achieve a better understanding of the content of this claim, let's consider some notable instances of it:

Buddhists have no objection to the existence of the Hindu gods, although they deny completely the existence of God as spoken of in e.g. orthodox Christianity, understood as the omnipotent, omniscient, all-good, and primordially existent creator deity, who can be thought of as in some sense a person. (Williams (2000), 4)

If we expect all religions to be theistic, then Buddhism might not qualify as a religion. [...] Indeed Buddhism explicitly denies that there is such a thing as the God recognized by Western monotheism, that is, an eternal, all-powerful and all-perfect creator. To most people this denial is tantamount to atheism. So if we are to count Buddhism as a religion, it will have to make sense to say there can be atheistic religions. (Siderits (2007), 7–8)

Most people would say that religion has something to do with belief in God. God, in turn, is understood as a Supreme Being who created the world and the creatures in it. [...] If belief in God in this sense is the essence of religion, then Buddhism cannot be a religion. Buddhism holds no such belief and, on the contrary, denies the existence of a creator god. (Keown (2013), 3–4)

Claims like these seem to have acquired the status of basic remarks that Buddhist scholars make at the beginning of their introductory university courses.<sup>1</sup> But what exactly are they saying is absent in Buddhism? As you can see, their claim is not that Buddhism is incompatible with the existence of deities like the ones we find in polytheistic religions, such as Ganesha in India or Apollo in ancient Greece. In fact, in its expansion around the world, Buddhism has often absorbed pre-existing religious beliefs – including beliefs regarding the existence of deities – reinterpreting them within its framework rather than rejecting them. The claim they make is, instead, that Buddhism is incompatible with a monotheistic God seen as a supreme or absolute being.

Although there are exceptions,<sup>2</sup> the claim that scholars are making is not the circumscribed claim that a certain set of Buddhist thinkers or traditions are atheists – which would be very plausible<sup>3</sup> – but the claim that *all* Buddhist doctrines are. My argument in this article is directed against this general claim. As I said, I will argue that such a claim is false by showing that the *Awakening* – which is a central text in East Asian Buddhism that greatly influenced traditions such as Huayan (see Van Norden and Jones 2019) and Shingon (see Hakeda (1972)) – does advocate for a form of theism. To formulate my argument, I will need the tools of perfect being theology, so let me explain its method.