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“Buddhism in the Global Eye:  
Beyond East and West”

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Modernized Buddhism & Secular Religion:  
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On August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the Sixth Annual Tung Lin Kok Yuen Canada Foundation Conference “Buddhism in the Global Eye: Beyond East and West” commenced at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Co-sponsored by The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhism and Contemporary Society at UBC and The Modernization of Buddhism in Global Perspective Project (SSHRC Insight Grant), the conference was attended by Canadian and international scholars in Buddhist Studies.

Featured in the first panel titled “East/West-West/East,” Dr. Victor Sōgen Hori's presentation directly addressed the conference's theme. He confirmed the prevalent mistaken notion that the West is the sole agent of change in the modernization of Buddhism. The perception, he

cited, was exemplified in James William Coleman's *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition*<sup>1</sup> which defined modern Buddhism to be egalitarian, gender-neutral, inclusive and non-sectarian. In Coleman's view, Westernized Buddhism is more authentic than its Asian counterpart since it more closely resembles the original Buddhism. Dr. Hori said the definition was problematic because it not only distorted Buddhist teaching but also ignored Asian agency in the modernization process.

Analyzing an event he named "Buddhism became a world religion," Dr. Hori argued that in the nineteenth century, modernization of Buddhism began first in Asian countries. Second, the religious modernization during the period was a bi-directional process in which the West secularized the concept of religion while the Asian countries modernized the concept of Buddhism.

### **The Secularization of the Religion Concept in the West**

In the nineteenth century, the West's conception of "religion" experienced a shift in meaning. The Christian-centered theological notion of religion gradually gave way to a secular understanding. Claims of Christianity's supremacy were replaced by a more non-judgmental approach in valuing religious credibility. This transformation, as Dr. Hori suggested, was a sign of the modernization of religion in the West.

The modernization process can be partly attributed to the introduction of non-Christian religions in the West. In case of Buddhism, the nineteenth-century public's knowledge of the religion mainly came from

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<sup>1</sup> James William Coleman, *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2002)

works of Orientalist scholars such as F. Max Müller or T. W. Rhys Davids. Their version of Buddhism, though, was a construction which was infused by secular Western ideals rather than a faithful representation of the religion. Buddhism was portrayed as a rational and humanistic religion which aligned with science, rejected superstition, did not have authoritarian church and had a harmonious relationship with other religions. As prominent philologists with advanced reading knowledge of the old Pali texts, these scholars claimed to know the closest form of original Buddhist rituals and teachings and declared other later-developed traditions like Mahayana Buddhism to be corrupted versions which were marred by mythology, idolatry and superstition.

The modernization process was further consolidated by an emergence of the “world religion” concept. Characterized by a transcendence of ethnic and national boundaries, the concept contributed to the dismantling of the Christian-centered theological perception by welcoming Buddhism into its conceptual fold. Not only did Christians learn that Buddhism had been widely practiced in Central, South and East Asia by great number of adherents but they also discovered that the religion had been established several centuries Before Christ (B.C.). Thus, the possibility emerged that the religion had influences on Christianity. Dr. Hori said that the pressure of including Buddhism in the category “world religion” had encouraged the modernization of the “religion” concept in the West.

### **The Modernization of Buddhism in Japan**

As the West was occupied with the emergence of the secular concept of religion, there was a parallel modernization process taking place in Asia. Choosing Japan as a case-study, Dr. Hori analyzed the modernization process in the nineteenth century on the Asian front. He argued that the

Japanese had to learn a new concept, “religion,” before they could begin creating a new Buddhism.

The modernization process took place during a disruptive historical period in Japan. In 1854, the Tokugawa Shogunate was forced to sign the Convention of Kanagawa, the first of several unequal treaties which put an end to its national policy of isolation. The treaty was considered a humiliation to the Japanese as it relegated the country to the “barbarian” status in the segregated international hierarchy of nations in which Christian Westerners, considered civilized, stayed at the top while other nations, considered barbarian and savage, remain at the bottom. Thus, an elevation of the national status to the “civilized” was perceived to be a required condition for a re-negotiation of the treaty. It was within this context that the persecution of Buddhism under the Meiji government occurred. It was believed that an eradication of superstition and any Buddhist practices which were not in line with scientific rationality was necessary in order to civilize Japan. As a result, from 1868 to 1871, the Abolishing Buddhism and Destroying [the teachings of] Śākyamuni (*hai-butsu kishaku* 廃佛毀釋) movement led to confiscation of land, destruction of property and demolition of several monasteries.

An indigenous secular concept of religion also began to take shape during this period. Coinciding with theological discussion in the West, there was a public debate in Japan over how to translate the term “religion” which initiated a discourse of what religion meant, what could be considered as religion in Japan, how much religious freedom should be granted and which Japanese terminology was a suitable translation of the concept. Finally, an old Buddhist term *shūkyō* 宗教 was chosen. The acceptance of the secular conception was noted in the Meiji Constitution (1889) which guaranteed religious freedom. Religions were defined as a matter of private belief although the state reserved the right to control their public expressions. Based on the definition, Christianity and Bud-

dhism were classified as religions. Shinto was not considered a religion because it was not a private but a public matter of loyalty to the nation and the emperor.

In practice, a new form of Buddhism was created in Japan after its persecution. The New Buddhism (Shin Bukkyō 新佛教) is characterized by its rationality, ethics, the absence of sect, accessibility and necessity to the world. It was expected to compete with Christianity as a world religion.

However, a bigger concern at the time was the legitimation of Japanese Buddhism. As Western Oriental scholars disregarded Mahayana Buddhism as a true form of Buddhism, there was a need to justify the existence of one of its branches, Japanese Buddhism. One of the defensive arguments relied on evolution theory which argued that Mahayana Buddhism was an evolved version of Buddhism. D. T. Suzuki contended that comprehension of Buddhism could not be achieved solely via ancient scriptural studies but must also depend on personal religious experience (*satori* 悟 or *kenshō* 見性). Without personal religious experience, one cannot understand Buddhism.

### **The World Parliament of Religion (1893)**

Both modernization processes converged in the World Parliament of Religion in 1893 in Chicago. The event's title suggested a recognition of religious plurality which further advanced the secularization of the conception of religion. However, this was not a welcome move to all religious figures. The Archbishop of Canterbury reportedly explained his refusal to attend the parliament as follows:

The difficulties which I myself feel are not questions of distance and convenience, but rest on the fact that the Christian religion is

the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their position and claims.<sup>2</sup>

Christian delegates at the parliaments were also noted to try proving Christianity's superiority though the effort did not achieve the intended outcome, partly due to Asian delegates' presentations at the parliament. In order to illustrate his point, Dr. Hori analyzed the argumentation tactics of two Japanese representatives at the event: Shaku Soyen and Hirai Kinzo. In his paper, the Zen monk Shaku Soyen argued for the compatibility of Buddhism with the rationality of science. He said Buddhist ontological explanations did not involve an idea of God or supernatural being, which was a criticism of Christianity. In another paper titled "The Real Position of Japan Toward Christianity," the Japanese layman Hirai Kinzo voiced his disagreement over the hierarchy which considered Christians as civilized while the Japanese as barbarians. He supported his argument for equality by reportedly reading the American Declaration of Independence which said all men were created equal. Other Asian delegates such as Anagarika Dharmapala were said to contend that Christianity was Buddhism in the words of Jesus. If one considers these assertions, in addition to Swami Vivekananda's well-received speech concerning Hinduism's role in the modern world, it was clear that the effort of promoting Christianity's superiority at the parliament was thwarted.

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<sup>2</sup> John Henry Barrows, vol. 1 of *The World's Parliament of Religions* (Chicago: Parliament, 1893), 20-2.



## Concluding Words

Dr. Hori's presentation was illuminating as it debunked the myth that in the modernization of Buddhism, it is the West that is the agent of change. Analyzing the rise of Buddhism as a world religion in the late nineteenth century, he captured the complex modernization processes of the conception of religion in the West and in Japan. It was argued that the secularization of the concept of religion in the West was a result of a shift in perception of Christianity as well as an introduction to new religions including Buddhism. At the same time, the modernization process was indigenous to Japan. It emerged out of the interaction between local historical dynamics and contacts with Western secular ideas.

The first panel featured other presentations which included "The Reciprocal Exchange of Ideas on Buddhism and Modernity Between Germany and Asia (1900-1930)" (Sebastian Munsch) and "D. T. Suzuki and the Modernization of Chinese Buddhism" (Jingjing Li). The panel ended with a Q&A session.

## Bibliography

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- Coleman, James William. *The New Buddhism*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2002.