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Reflection on “Buddhism in Indonesia”

A Talk by Prof. Philip Buckley at McGill University

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On January 25, 2018, Dr. Philip Buckley, Professor of Philosophy and titled Chair of the Department of East Asian Studies at McGill University, delivered a talk “Buddhism in Indonesia” in the senior common room of the Birks building. Through his study of the “syncretic” religious landscape in Indonesia, Prof. Buckley argued to perceive Indonesia as a phenomenological “laboratory” in which multi-religiousness becomes an integral part of the cultural identity and everyday reality for the people, both consciously and unconsciously. Professors and students from McGill’s School of Religious Studies (SRS), the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS), and Department of Philosophy attended the talk. Co-organized by McGill’s Center for Research on Religion (CREOR), SRS, and EAS, the “Buddha and the Other” lecture series strives to initiate more interdisciplinary discussions on Buddhism.

Prof. Buckley based his presentation on his experience of participating in the McGill-based Canadian International Development Agency project focusing upon higher education in Indonesia. He began his talk by providing a phenomenological account of the self-other relationship. Drawing on the writings of phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Prof. Buckley detailed how the self and the other

mutually constitute the identities of one another inside a community. And it is this intersubjective "we" that contributes to the formation and development of communal cultures. As such, alterity is an indispensable part of our selfhood.

Articulated in this manner, the self-other relationship offered a perspective for Prof. Buckley to interpret the religious landscape in Indonesia. In this country where religious identity is protected by the constitution order, Buddhists make up less than 1 percent of the population and the majority of Indonesians are Muslims. Prof. Buckley observed that, Buddhism and Islam were never a system closed to the other. On the contrary, followers of different religious faiths enjoy and appreciate their shared cultural memories through visiting significant historical sites, some of which are temples ascribed to no particular religious tradition. Positioning these observations in the phenomenological framework, Prof. Buckley highlighted how alterity was an integral part of the cultural life of religious followers.

Prof. Buckley credited Clifford Geertz's writing on cultural types in *The Religion of Java*, as his source of inspiration. Developing Geertz's viewpoint, Prof. Buckley proposed to view cultures not only as socially constructed entities, but also as the reflections of a collective consciousness. In this way, the notion of culture could help one understand Buddhism in Indonesia: on the one hand, Buddhism as a religion is not assimilated into other religious traditions; and on the other hand, followers of Buddhism co-constitute, with those of other religious traditions, the cultural religious landscape in Indonesia. Prof. Buckley's talk will be followed by the Dr. Christopher Byrne's presentation "Buddhism and the Barbarian in Chinese Zen" on February 15, 2018.