

# HEGEL'S PROJECTED NIHILISM: A Study of Orientalized Buddhism



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## ABSTRACT

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's historical analysis of Buddhist philosophy not only fails as a sound interpretation of that tradition, it also well-exemplifies the Western practice of Orientalism as elucidated by Edward Said. I attempt to demonstrate this in three major parts: the nature of Orientalism as a concept and practice, the Orientalist analytical process that Hegel employs in judging Buddhism as well as religions in general, and how Hegel's understanding does not work against a more charitably interpreted Buddhist defense. Moreover, I argue that the Orientalist erroneousness of Hegel's reading deeply complicates his hierarchical philosophy of world history.



## I. INTRODUCTION: THE DEEP PROBLEM OF HEGEL'S ANALYSIS

Few figures in the history of Western thought represent the mindset of Orientalism better than the German Idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Moreover, few prominent systems of thought originating from the so-called Orient have been as significantly marred by the reductionism of Orientalism, both in its popular reputation as well as with the opinions of scholars, as Buddhism. Uncoincidentally, these two subjects are related. Hegel, as he and others did with many other rich systems of thought born in Asian countries, imperialistically swept the systematic philosophy of Shakyamuni Buddha and his many intellectual successors into his grand vision of a hierarchically structured world-system of religions. In doing so, Hegel ultimately served as one of the first prominent intellectual figures of the West to cement the popular superficial understanding of Buddhism as a form of crude nihilism. Through his reductive and instrumentalizing attempt to reveal Buddhism as a religion that is supposedly obsessed with indeterminate Nothingness, and therefore as inferior in the ordering of history (an understanding of the religion which he gained through superficial and secondhand European accounts), Hegel's obfuscating analysis exhibits some of the essential attributes of Edward Said's conception of Orientalism. Moreover, the fact of Hegel's Orientalism, the fact of his erroneousness, both in his interpretation of Buddhism and in his subsequent use of it in constructing his Eurocentric view of religious history, poses a deep challenge for his overall system as it is oriented around the latter formulation. The problem of Hegel's Orientalism is not just that his descriptive interpretation of Buddhism is significantly false, but that this hermeneutic inaccuracy puts his historical-religious teleological project into question.

## II. WHAT IS ORIENTALISM?

Although Said employs multiple definitions of the term, the broad meaning of Orientalism, relevant to the aim of analyzing Hegel's comparative philosophy, is encapsulated in the West's self-defining through a negative characterization of the Other. However, for the purpose of briefly noting the influence of Hegel's views on the history of Buddhism's Western reception, it is also worth mentioning another meaning. Orientalism may also be conceived as an epistemic representation of the discourse of power between the West and the East, more materially speaking.<sup>1</sup> This dynamic, in which the act

of portraying another culture in a certain way subordinates them in the eyes of the depicting society, is naturally influenced by the intellectual culture of the aforementioned society. Hegel, as one of the most influential intellectuals in the history of Western thought, consequently, has a clear role in bringing about this initially conceptual and subsequently social subordination upon the culture of Buddhism. This is all rooted, of course, in Hegel's system of thought itself. What Hegel's system of thought employs is notably comparable to the more theoretical methodology of Orientalism introduced above. This is the conception of Orientalism which is centered around an idea of the Orient as one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other."<sup>2</sup> The Orientalist mindset uses the Other—that is, the Middle East and Asia—to establish oppositional binaries which portray the West in a positive light and the East in a negative light. One of the most prominent and impactful of these binaries is the supposed distinction between European rationality and non-European irrationality.<sup>3</sup> It is in this way that the philosophical nature of Orientalism is revealed, as a comparative venture in forming the essences of both Western and Eastern civilization. Of course, this comparative venture is, ultimately, a misrepresentative one in, at the very least, how it portrays the essence of Eastern peoples and their thought.

In trying to categorize the Orient as embodying some kind of negative aspect contrary to the Occident, the methodology which an Orientalist uses to establish this dichotomy is inherently based in overgeneralizing readings of a handful of popular cultural texts. In attempting to exhibit the Orient as irrational, among other attributes, Orientalists tend to focus on the most superficially representative pieces of text within a broad tradition and then extrapolate judgments from such texts about the culture as a spatiotemporal whole. An example of this sort of analysis would be that of Gustave von Grunebaum, an Austrian historian who strongly inherited the discourse of Orientalism concerning Arab culture. Von Grunebaum attempted to show that Islamic culture, in particular, is a monolithic, authoritarian, and irrational entity through, in part, "half-a-dozen references to Islamic texts drawn from as many periods as possible."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the study which leads von Grunebaum to make such assertions of Islamic culture being based in irrationality is a study which is not founded in systematic analysis. Rather, it is founded on the glossing-over of perhaps the most obvious of literature. This reinforces Said's claim

2 Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

3 Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified August 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>.

4 Said, *Orientalism*, 298.

1 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 6.

that one of the central dogmas of Orientalism are “abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a ‘classical’ Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities.”<sup>5</sup> This is also exemplified by another reference of Said’s where he refers to the tendency for Arabists and Islamologists to forcefully apply doctrinal aspects of the Koran to entire particular cultures in the modern Islamic world.<sup>6</sup> While, in this specific case, the dogma of Orientalism pertains to the specific studying of “classical” texts and extrapolating from those texts, this sort of principle can be generally applied to the practice of exclusively using readily available texts taken in isolation to make abstractions, which lead to judgments about the whole system. Hegel’s analysis of non-Western religions functions in precisely this manner.

### III. ORIENTALISM AND THE HEGELIAN PROJECT

The Orientalist nature of Hegel’s incorrect reading of Buddhism into his world system is found in how he structured this system hierarchically and reductively as well as in the manner by which he derived it from other scholarly sources. In terms of its own theoretical content, Hegel’s writing on Buddhism is Orientalist in how he seeks to show the philosophical superiority of Western Christianity over Buddhism, and how he instrumentalizes a projected image of Buddhism to this end. Like the common Orientalist dichotomy between the rational Occident and the irrational Orient, Hegel tries to display the concretely grounded and dialectically mediated nature of Western metaphysics as a distinct accomplishment contrasted by the abstractness of Buddhism. Moreover, Hegel was able to write on this false, culturally biased dichotomy merely through the reading of the sparse and superficially documented sources on Buddhism that existed at the time. Hegel gained most of his knowledge on supposedly Buddhist concepts from the inherently incomplete encyclopedia, *Allgemeine Historie*, on Buddhism that was available during his life. Through its German mistranslations, this source provided Hegel with the term “Nothingness” as the ultimate metaphysical view of Buddhism, or what was in actuality the mistaken misinterpretation for “emptiness.”<sup>7</sup> The severity of this interpretative mistake will be shown later. While Hegel cannot be blamed for the lack of accurate knowledge available on what was, at the time, such a distant tradition, he can

in fact be blamed and deemed a pernicious Orientalist for using the little crude information that was available to construct a Eurocentric worldview. Like the Orientalists, which Said studied in his analysis of the power relations between the West and the Middle East, Hegel took the most readily available and obvious resources for a Westerner and used those texts in isolation to extract widely judgmental claims from them. Even if Hegel had the best possible intentions in his thought, believing not that the West ought to be brought up at the intellectual expense of the East, but rather, simply that the West has attained a more sufficient rationality for the East to learn from, only makes Hegel’s project more Orientalist. His genuine belief, as a matter of purported objective fact and not merely as a result of subjective supremacist intentions, in the categorical inferiority of non-Western philosophy reveals the Orientalism (par excellence!) of his thinking. In other words, even if Hegel’s own intentions were not explicitly Orientalist, his acts of judgment—in which he declared to himself in the manner of, “well, this is just the way it is,” that an entire non-Western intellectual culture is rationally inferior—nonetheless were.

Even with his analysis of religion as a whole, Hegel shows a tendency towards the instrumentalizing of other systems of thought towards Western idealistic ends. His philosophy of religion is characterized primarily by how religion dialectically unfolds into more actualized forms over time. As Hegel says, “The whole of philosophy is nothing else but a study of the definition of *unity*; and likewise, the philosophy of religion is just a succession of unities, where the unity always [abides] but is continually becoming more determinate.”<sup>8</sup> When Hegel speaks of unity and its becoming more determinate, he is referring to the process of reality constituting itself dialectically throughout history, or more specifically, through the process of sublation. Sublation is what occurs when two supposedly opposed concepts in history overcome their inherent contradictions and achieve a greater resolution. This dynamic is in essence what is meant by the dialectic, for Hegel.<sup>9</sup> Starting from this philosophical foundation, Hegel then seeks to show how the reality of religion is determined in this way just as well. Starting from the abstract concept of religion, Hegel attempts to demonstrate how particular real-world religions arise and how, eventually, they become synthesized with an abstractly universal idea of religion into the ultimate individual consummate form. For Hegel, this consummate religion, not unexpectedly, turns

5 Said, *Orientalism*, 300.

6 Said, *Orientalism*, 301.

7 Timothy Morton, “Hegel on Buddhism,” in *Romanticism and Buddhism: Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, ed. Mark Lussier (College Park: University of Maryland, 2007), para. 1-42, <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/buddhism/morton/morton.html>.

8 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 379-80.

9 Mario D’Amato and Robert T. Moore, “The Specter of Nihilism: On Hegel on Buddhism,” *Student-Faculty Collaborative Research Publications* 28 (2011): 26-27, [https://scholarship.rollins.edu/stud\\_fac/28/](https://scholarship.rollins.edu/stud_fac/28/).

out to be Christianity.<sup>10</sup> This status is attained through its thoroughly mediatory elements, as conceptually embodied by the idea of the Trinity. For Hegel's view of Christian theology, the Father represents a purely immanent conception of God as "in and for itself," and the Son represents the differentiation of God into the world, as well as its reconciliation with God the Father. Along with the Holy Spirit as religious community, this view of the mediated Trinity "articulates the complex life of God, which unfolds from self-identity through differentiation and otherness to completion and wholeness."<sup>11</sup> Because God, for Hegel's conception of Christianity, does not simply reside within itself as pure Being, but rather dialectically includes itself in the specific determinations of our perceivable or conceivable reality, it is a more rational and in fact the rational system of religion. By contrast, in Hegel's view as shall be soon shown, Eastern religions such as Buddhism have not surpassed conceiving of the ultimate *qua* merely immanent or abstractly immanent, and are thus inferior.

Altogether, this reflects Hegel's broader perspective that, historically, the West stands as the ultimate end of progress, whereas the East may always resemble its lesser stages.<sup>12</sup> Despite the West and non-West being coeval and equally inhabited by rational human beings with remarkable forms of thought, the various cultures of the non-Western world are taken as mere prior steps leading up to the pinnacle development of the West. It is in this sense that, in the fashion of a typical Orientalist scholar, Hegel seeks to instrumentalize the meaning of the East towards the end of a positive construction of the West; that is, he takes an image of a philosophy that is purported to be a truthful description of said philosophy and uses it to uplift European intelligence into supremacy. With Hegel's altogether Eurocentric understanding of the philosophical history of religion presented, his interpretation of Buddhism and the role that its intellectual culture plays within his system will now be shown.

#### IV. THE HEGELIAN-ORIENTALIST CRITIQUE OF BUDDHISM

Overall, Hegel sees Buddhism as a philosophy dedicated to the indeterminate universal reality of Nothingness. In other words, this idea of Nothingness is the basis of all reality. Furthermore, as Hegel

says, "If an analysis of these various forms were attempted, they would lose their quality; for in themselves all things are one and the same inseparable essence, and this essence is Nothingness."<sup>13</sup> The Buddhist, for Hegel, views ultimate reality as nothing more than an all-encompassing Nothingness, in that any form that is supposedly determinate or individual is, in actuality, ultimately reducible to this Nothingness. One may tentatively describe Nothingness in this sense as pure Nothingness. This is useful for these purposes, because it more clearly reflects Hegel's notion of absolute, or pure Being. This relation is evident, for Hegel, in that when one considers pure Being—you have nothing but Being in itself without any specifiable determinants. In other words, you have Being as a purely abstract concept. Because Being is completely abstract when considered in this manner, it is in fact no different from pure Nothingness. It is for this reason that Hegel says that "The Nothing which the Buddhists make the universal principle, as well as the final aim and goal of everything, is the same abstraction" as pure Being. Hegel would say, then, that the highest metaphysical principle of Buddhism is that "the Absolute is the Nought."<sup>14</sup> The practical implications of this doctrine, by Hegel's interpretation, amount broadly to the goal of uniting oneself with Nothingness. This specifically results in the attainment of doing nothing, absolutely, thus reaching a sort of complete detachment from all activities.<sup>15</sup> Altogether, Hegel seeks to characterize Buddhism as a kind of nihilism, not in the sense that Buddhism posits that there is no meaning to life or reality, but in the sense that it worships Nothingness *qua* total nihility, both theoretically and practically. Hegel's critique of Buddhism, then, as an inferior system of thought, is that it reifies and worships the abstract.

#### V. INTERPRETATIVE RECTIFICATION: "EMPTINESS," NOT "NOTHINGNESS"

Through a rectified understanding of Buddhist "Nothingness" instead of "emptiness," one may see that Hegel's assessment of Buddhism as a fanatical school of nihilism is deeply erroneous. If one is to examine systematic Buddhist philosophy as it has manifested itself under the dominant discursive trends of the Mahayana sect (this sect in particular being the main instantiation of Buddhism that German scholars encountered, as with the encyclopedia referenced

10 D'Amato and Moore, "The Specter of Nihilism," 29-30.

11 Peter C. Hodgson, "Hegel's Philosophy of Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 244-45.

12 Heinrich Dumoulin, "Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century German Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42, no. 3 (1981): 460, 10.2307/2709187.

13 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 187.

14 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Logic: Being Part One of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Pacifica: Marxists Internet Archive, 2009), 229.

15 Dumoulin, "Buddhism and Nineteenth-Century," 462-63.

above), one may see that this metaphysical concept which Buddhism espouses is not concerned with nothingness in the relative, void-like sense, but instead specifically regarding the idea of self-existence, or inherent existence. It is in this sense that the term “emptiness” is preferable, as this Buddhist philosophy simply sought to show that no entities in existence have a metaphysically independent status; that is, all things are interdependent or relational, or “empty” of inherent existence.<sup>16</sup> As it turns out, Buddhist doctrine in actuality could not possibly worship nihilism, because that would entail that nothingness exists in itself, which is an impossibility according to the metaphysical notion of emptiness: “For a Buddhist, to say that emptiness is absence of determination is a determination.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, Hegel’s critique of pure Nothingness, in fact, has rather little to do with the ultimate metaphysical views of the systematic Buddhist philosophy which he claimed to understand. Rather, Hegel’s attribution of pure Nothingness to the core of Buddhism is more like a projection of his own conception of the dialectic onto the world—this dialectic, with regards to the development of religion, ultimately culminating in what he saw as the inherently more dialectical form that is Christianity. In his own religion, Hegel saw the accomplishment of critically logical thinking in religion; Christianity was to be given the prime seat philosophically. But, by Hegel’s own view, if the Christian God is to be conceived as absolute insofar as “Absolute spirit is utterly connected with everything: it is nothing but relationality,” then how can a religion in which, as expressed above, the ultimate truth is nothing else but the absolute relationality of all things be any worse off?<sup>18</sup>

The projection aspect of Hegel’s view must be stressed: what we see with the error of Hegel’s analysis of Buddhism is not only just error in itself, but, more importantly for Hegel’s own beliefs, its impact on his view of history. Hegel claims that the history of religions must be understood as a progression, as a unified development that positively unfolds more and more over time, becoming more and more united with itself. With this in mind, for Hegel, the societies of the world variably express this progression through their unequal roles in its hierarchy. By this view, although the West was indeed once just as undeveloped, non-Western regions of the world such as India or China reveal the way in which societies may be merely following the progress of the West from behind through their comparative inferiority. Hegel thus claims to offer a view from nowhere, having supposedly attained a kind of absolute or totalistic knowledge of the world and the nature

of its advancement. Now, we may see that the falsity of his particular judgments of Buddhism (alongside what are likely equally problematic interpretations of other non-Western religious-philosophical traditions) complicates this absolutizing view strongly. While Hegel claimed to have demonstrated a form of transcendentally systematic knowing of religion, in actuality, the interpretation that he employed in the foundational premises leading up to his absolutist conclusion has been revealed to be little more than a spurious mapping-onto with what are really Hegel’s own notions. Hence, his conclusions are anything but transcendent; rather, they are more so utterly provincial in how they derive from what are veritably Western notions which could only describe Buddhism inaccurately.

## VI. CONCLUSION: HEGELIAN HISTORY CHALLENGED

As a matter of methodology, interpretation, and instrumentalization, Hegel’s philosophical treatment of Buddhism is Orientalist. Methodologically, Hegel drew his reading of Buddhism as a whole from inherently limited non-Buddhist resources which were marked by crucial mistranslations. Interpretatively, using the most essential mistranslation of “Nothingness” as opposed to “emptiness,” Hegel showed the result of his Orientalist methodology through his misunderstanding of the core concept of the Mahayana Buddhist view; he interpreted the philosophy to be engaging in a conceptual reification, when in fact it was itself a critique of reification. Finally, this untrue representation of Buddhism was used to prop up Western philosophy and religion. Hegel’s Western judgment believed that the wrongness of the East played an essential role in exhibiting the rightness which the West had attained. Each of these stages in the process of his Orientalist analysis also play a role in displaying how this very attempt at elevating the West fails. Given that Hegel’s glorifying of his own cultural sphere hinges on the relative deficiencies of Eastern thought, exemplified in particular by Buddhism, the actual non-existence of these perceived deficiencies proves that this self-aggrandizing view of history is untenable. A more careful and charitable reading of the non-Western philosophical traditions of the world will tend to, as has been demonstrated with the case of Buddhism, reveal rational theories that are certainly comparable to those of Western traditions. Consequently, a historicist view, which places one culture above the other, will generally not stand.

16 Morton, “Hegel on Buddhism,” para. 29.

17 Morton, “Hegel on Buddhism,” para. 40.

18 Hodgson, “Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion,” 245.



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