

4-1993

Buddhist " Protestantism" in Poland

Malgorzata Alblamowicz-Borri
University of Paris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alblamowicz-Borri, Malgorzata (1993) "Buddhist " Protestantism" in Poland," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol13/iss2/5>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

BUDDHIST "PROTESTANTISM" IN POLAND

by Malgorzata Ablamowicz - Borri

Malgorzata Ablamowicz - Borri (Buddhist) received a master's degree at Université de Paris X. This article is a resume of her thesis.¹ She also presented this topic at the UNESCO at the Tenth Congress of Buddhist Studies in Paris, July 18-21, 1991. Currently she lives in Santa Barbara, California.

I. Phases of Assimilation of Buddhism in the Occident

I propose to divide the assimilation of Buddhism in the Occident into three phases:

1. The first phase was essentially intellectual; Buddhist texts were translated and submitted to philosophical analysis.

In Poland, this phase appeared after World War I when Poland gained independence. Under the leadership of Andrzej Gawronski, Stanislaw Schayer, Stanislaw Stasiak, Arnold Kunst, Jan Jaworski and others, the Polish tradition of Buddhist studies formed mainly in two study centers, Lwow (now in Ukraine) and Warsaw. These scholars did not publish in Polish, but in German, English, and French. The events of World War II led to the end of this tradition. In the beginning of the war the Warsaw library and university burned down, and Lwow was annexed by the Soviet Union. During the war most of the Polish orientalists were killed and the others (Stasiak, Regamey, Kunst) had to emigrate after the war to England, Switzerland and the United States.

¹This presentation is a summary of my master thesis: The Social and Economic Aspects of Modern Implantation of Buddhism in Poland, submitted in 1991 at the Nanterre University - Paris X, under the direction of Prof. Alexander W. Macdonald and Prof. Anne-Marie Blondeau. I particularly concentrated on the community *Karma Kagyu* (in Tibetan transcription: *kar-ma bKa'-brgyud*) of Tibetan Buddhism to which I belonged.

2. In the second phase, philosophical analysis and translation of scriptures were integrated by the Theosophist movement by which means Buddhism acquired a less exotic character. Along a different paths of transmission a few Western Buddhists became monks.

This process occurred in Poland in the early seventies, within the Union of the Polish Brethren (the Methodist Church). The hermeneutical explorations within this organization led many of its members to Buddhism through other Oriental religions and philosophical systems. It became a precursor of the development of the third phase, since some of the early converts were the ones who later established larger communities based on Buddhist teachings.

3. In the third phase, Western interest in Buddhism has lost elitist features, and convert communities have begun to develop on a scale of hundreds and thousands of members. In Poland, a rapid growth of convert communities commenced in the late seventies and the early eighties (the most massive influx of practitioners occurred after the imposition of martial law in 1981). The social emergence of Buddhism in the seventies was facilitated by contacts with Polish emigrants converts to Buddhism. Those living in the United States and in Denmark were the most important.

II. Buddhist Societies in Poland

Urszula and Andrzej Urbanowicz received The Three Pillars of Zen by P. Kapleau² from their emigrant friends who were disciples of Kapleau's master, Yasutani *roshi*.³ This book, which they afterwards partially translated, inspired them to regularly practice *zazen*.⁴ In 1974, they built, without any financial help from abroad, two small houses to accomodate the participants of the first *sesshin*.⁵ After the *sesshin*, they wrote about the group and its practice to P.Kapleau. He visited them during his journey to Europe in 1975, and a society

² New York: Harper and Row, 1961. Philip Kapleau, an American, is one of the first three Western teachers in Buddhism.

³A Japanese term, the title of a *Zen* master.

⁴A Japanese term, which means the meditative practice without object taught in *Zen*. The *Zen* tradition emphasizes the meditative practice and the experience of enlightenment in spite of the ritual practice and intellectual analysis. (Fischer-Schreiber, I., Ehrhard, F.-K., and Diener, M.S., THE Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen. (Boston: Shambhala, 1991). Hereafter Shambhala.

⁵A Japanese term, which means an intensive and strict practice of *zazen* during several days.

organized under his aegis. It was legalized in 1980, and today it has one thousand regular practitioners.⁶

One of the Kapleau's followers, W.Czapnik, was deeply inspired by Tibetan Buddhism. A Polish emigrant in Denmark gave him advice to write to Ole Nydahl, a disciple of the XVIth Karmapa and the Danish representative of the *Kagyū* school of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1976, he brought Karmapa's teachings to Poland. Ole Nydahl's group--the *Karma Kagyū* community--was legalized in 1984. It has two thousand regular followers, and the Refuge (a formal engagement in practicing the Buddhist teachings) has been transmitted to about twenty thousand Poles.

Later, W.Czapnik also invited a Buddhist teacher of the *Kwan Um Zen* (the *Chogye* tradition of the Korean Buddhism). In 1978, a Polish group was founded in connection with the visit of Seung Sahn Soen Sa Nim. His group was legalized in 1981. Today it also has two thousand members (the only other *Chogye* group in Europe is in Spain). The teachers of these three traditions regularly visit Poland, and each of the groups has at its disposal one or more independent practice centers.

In 1983 and later, further communities came into existence: *Jodo-shin-shū*⁷ and *Rinzai Zen* schools in the Japanese tradition, *Gelugpa* (Tib., *dGe-lugs-pa*) and *Dzogchen* (Tib., *rDzogs-chen*)⁸ schools in the Tibetan tradition. Toni Packer, a former disciple of P.Kapleau, also founded a meditative group; she, however, does not classify her group as a Buddhist one.

III. The Characteristics of Polish Buddhism

The following interpretation does not exhaust all existing motives for being a Buddhist in Poland; I only tried to give a general and simplified overview of the facts I collected in my fieldwork. In my methodology I was inspired by the article "From Monastery to Meditation Centre: Lay Meditation in Modern Sri Lanka."⁹ In this article Sir Richard Gombrich is analysing "fundamentalism" and "anticlericalism" as the "Protestant" secularizing

⁶A regular practitioner is, in my opinion, a Buddhist who meditates in the meditative posture; in the *Karma Kagyū* community, members practice on the average from ten minutes to one hour and half daily.

⁷One of the Japanese Buddhist schools in which the repetition of *Amitabha*'s name and the faith in its power guarantee a rebirth in *Amitabha*'s Pure Land (*Jodo-shin*).

⁸The transmission lineage was moved to Tibet by Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in the 8th century; the *Dzogchen* is a non-gradual practice method crowning the highest *tantra* teachings.

⁹In Denwood P. and Piatigorski A., Buddhist Studies (London: Curzon Press, 1982).

tendencies in the Buddhism of Sri Lanka. In the importance accorded to the lay meditation and lay meditation centre, I found a parallel between Sri Lanka and Poland. Strong secular or "Protestant" tendency of Poles demonstrates as the lack of interest in the monastic vows, the absence of the Tibetan lama - resident (Tib., *bla-ma*, the title of teacher in Buddhism). A tension arises in the process of adaptation, naturally strengthened by juxtaposition of the "orthodox" transplanted Buddhism with the secular Western culture where the monastic standards of behavior are not attractive.

Until the end of the Communist rule, all adults were required to be employed with a registered enterprise; the meditative lifestyle would be classified as "parasitism" and possibly prosecuted. In order to remain true to the "orthodox" Buddhism, the "Protestant" tendency is often called *yogi's* behavior.¹⁰ The non-monastic and modernizing shape that Polish Buddhism took, results from specific social and economic circumstances in the seventies and the eighties as well as, in the *Karma Kagyu* community case, the Protestant background of O. Nydahl and the connection between Protestant and Buddhist communities.

Why was Buddhism, especially Tibetan, successful in Poland and not in other communist countries?¹¹ The main cause is the Polish identity crisis following the communist military dictatorship in 1981.¹² I established in my research that 67.6% of the Polish converts were practising Catholics before taking the Refuge. It was no coincidence that the most massive influx of people was to Buddhism, especially Tibetan, whose mysticism is more similar to the Catholic faith than the more abstract systems. Catholicism, the religion of 88% of Poles,

¹⁰Two forms of devotional practices belong to the Buddhist "orthodoxy": the yogic tradition and the monastic one. There is a tendency in the West to make a sharp distinction between these traditions. In Tibetan Buddhism it is possible to classify individual Buddhists as representing one of two quoted traditions, yet their attitudes cannot be fully described by this bipolar division.

¹¹The *Gelugpa* school in the Soviet Union was the only Buddhist group present legally in Eastern Europe outside Poland until 1988.

¹²The Polish Catholic identity was built up over several centuries. Some historical events were meaningful:

a. In the 17th century, the turning point of the Swedish-Polish war was ascribed to the protective action of Virgin Mary of Czestochowa, the most important Catholic sanctuary in Poland.

b. The Polish king, Jan III Sobieski won the battle of Vienna in 1683, ending the threat of a Turkish invasion of the West.

c. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Catholic Church was the only institution able to preserve Polish culture and identity under foreign dominance.

d. The final success of Poles in the Polish-Soviet war in the 1920s was ascribed to an intervention of the same Virgin Mary on behalf of the Polish army.

e. Under the Communist rule, the spiritual efficacy of the Catholic Church merged with its political and historical efficacy. In its political, social, and economic activities, it was an important power opposed to the Communism.

constitutes not only a religious but also a political power. Most of the Polish Buddhists believe that the Communist government tolerated non-Catholic and non-Christian religious groups in order to counter the influence of the Catholic Church.

The martial law, proclaimed in 1981, seriously hurt the credibility of the Catholic Church. Its political defeat led to the loss of trust and the loss of faith. The Poles, especially the young ones, began to seek a "reliable" faith. Buddhism was seen as a new system of thought in Poland and as a religion unrelated to the current Polish politics.

The third phase converts, unlike the earlier ones, have been attracted more by the "pure" religion: intensive practice of meditation, retreats, spiritual reorientation of the main life goals, than by the Buddhist philosophy. The discarded identity has left traces of the former faith in the new one. Some Polish Buddhists say that Polish Buddhism has theistic features. The concept of devotion to the *guru* corresponds to one's abandoning to God's will and protection in a situation of objective helplessness.

The success of Buddhism was related to its efficacy in dealing with frustrated expectations and with suffering. The most powerful method was visualisation; the action of visualizing in meditation was supposed to bring the situation under the control of the meditating person. Through visualisations of Buddhist gods or one's *guru*, "a closer [almost tangible] presence of the god" and greater feeling of security could be achieved. I documented a few cases of identifying Jesus with the Buddhist conception of the *bodhisattva*¹³ or visualising Jesus in the traditional Buddhist meditations. Another function was fulfilled by the apotropaic ("magic") Buddhism: in the Tibetan tradition, for example, one visualises being protected against police prosecution by Buddhist gods and goddesses, or by *vajra*, a potent Buddhist symbol of purity and indestructibility.

IV. Karma Kagyu - a Case Study

Buddhism was introduced into Tibet from India in the 8th century. Its doctrinal background was provided by the *Mahayana* philosophical schools: *Madhyamika* and *Yogacara*. It is a form of the Indian *Mahayana* Buddhism combining monastic life with the esoteric tradition of the *Vajrayana*.

The *Kagyu* school, founded in the 11th century by Marpa, is one of four principal schools in Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁴ The *Karma Kagyu*, a subdivision of the *Kagyu* school, was

¹³A being freed from suffering who delays his final entering into *Nirvana* until all sentient beings are liberated.

¹⁴The other three schools are following:
- the oldest one, *Nyingmapa* (Tib., *rNying-ma-pa*), is supposed to be created in the 8th century by Padmasambhava, the Indian *yogi*;

established in the 12th century by the first Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (Tib. Dus-gsum mKhyen-pa).¹⁵ At present, it is the most successful Buddhist school in the Occident. Its spiritual practice is based on a highly developed rituals containing a deep psychological significance.¹⁶ Among them, meditations with visualisation of *buddhas*, recitation of sacred syllables, *mantras*, and prostrations or symbolic gestures, *mudras*, are essential.¹⁷

The founder of the Polish *Karma Kagyu* community was Wladyslaw Czapnik (born 1920, died 1989), originally the president of the Union of the Polish Brethren. When Buddhist teachers started to visit Poland (a few of them were also invited by W. Czapnik) and local Buddhist centers emerged, W. Czapnik affiliated the *Karma Kagyu* community with the UPB in order to be able to meet and publish legally.¹⁸ UPB tolerated this arrangement until the community was legalized in January 1984.

Ole Nydahl (born 1940) is another person whose activity has been at the core of the Polish *Karma Kagyu* community. He is the master of more than 70% of those followers who have a regular contact with the lamas and he has transmitted the Refuge to about 70% followers of Tibetan Buddhism. Nydahl is not a monk; in his teachings, he does not insist on ritual; instead, the practical application of the Buddhist teachings become more emphasized. Denmark, O. Nydahl's homeland, is a nominally Protestant country. Perhaps Protestant tradition had an influence on the non-ritualistic and non-monastic attitude of O. Nydahl.

The community bought a run-down historical building in Kuchary (a village close to Plock in central Poland) in 1985 for little money. The two-story building measures 900

- *Sakyapa* (Tib., *Sa-skyapa*) was formed in the 11th century by Atisa, the Indian scholar;
- *Gelugpa* (Tib., *dGe-lugs-pa*), the latest of the four schools, founded in the 14th century by Tsongkhapa (Tib., Tsong-kha-pa), the Tibetan renowned reformer and scholar. (**Shambhala**)

¹⁵The spiritual authority of the *Karma Kagyu* school is Karmapa whose fourteenth incarnation died in 1981, and the next one has not yet been found.

¹⁶**Shambhala** and Conze, E., Le Bouddhisme: Dans son Essence et son Developpement (Paris: Petite Bibliotheque Payot, 1971).

¹⁷In all four schools, *Ngondro* (Tib., *sngon-'gro*), the fundamental practice, prepares for more advanced and individualized ones; it is known in the Occident as Four Preliminary Practices. Each of them has to be accomplished 100,000 times: 1) prostrations with *Vajrayana* Refuge, 2) purifying meditation on *Vajrasattva*, 3) *mandala* offerings, and 4) the meditation on master through *Guru yoga*.

¹⁸The groups were "registered" - legalized by the communist government (the Bureau of Religious Confessions). This was important, since all non-registered religious groups could be prosecuted for meeting or publication. Even though a number of Buddhist texts were illegally published before legalization (this activity could be punishable by at least two years of imprisonment), I did not hear about any case of serious prosecution.

square meters (9,000 square feet) and is surrounded by a 7 hectare (17.5 acre) garden. After 7 years, the residents' work on its rehabilitation is almost finished. The main resources came from the visiting Western Buddhists (mainly Germans, Finns, and Danes in form of individual gifts and assistance by Western groups). Also members temporarily working in the West brought back their earnings, and Polish Buddhists had roofing contracts in Finland. The *Karma Kagyu* community has very limited resources. With only one fledgling independent practice center¹⁹ the most important are not the prospective monks, but those who actively contribute their labor ("the moving meditation").

V. Conclusion

The Polish centers were the only ones in the former communist countries: they were attracting followers from Hungary, the former German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union to participate in teachings or initiations given by the Tibetan lamas or other teachers. Poles have accompanied O.Nydahl during his visits to the East European countries. A Polish monk, Rinchen (born 1958), is a teacher for the Russian *Karma Kagyu* communities in St. Petersburg and Moscow since 1990. They try to help Russian and other fellow Buddhists by inviting them to Polish centers, extending to them free lodging and meals, finding them work, or giving them money. Thus the Polish Buddhists who were greatly helped by the Westerners now act in the same way towards the other communities.

¹⁹Up till now twelve urban centers were "registered"; these are rented apartments or halls.