

**A Debate on Buddhism in Hungary at the Turn of the 20th Century:
Christian theologians and intellectuals versus pro- and crypto-Buddhist
public intellectuals**

「20世紀転換期のハンガリーにおける仏教論争 --

キリスト教神学者と親仏教知識人を中心に」

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Abstract

This paper aims to add further insights to the author's previous papers about the early period of the reception of Buddhism to Hungary by focusing and analyzing the works of some Hungarian Catholic and Protestant Writers and theologians (E. Szeghy, J. Kiss, P. Vay, J. Baranyay, Ö. Kovács, S. Kiss, M. Szlávik, Kovács J., S. Brassai, etc.) on Buddhism and by comparing them to the writings of some “pro-, proto- or crypto-Buddhist” public intellectuals (Lénárd, Rohonczy, etc.) of the same period. The paper also brings some new analytical approaches to the attention of the readers.

Keywords: turn of the 20th century, Buddhist studies, translations of Buddhist texts, early pro- and crypto-Buddhist intellectuals, Catholic and Protestant writers and theologians, Christianity and Buddhism, pessimism, nihilism, agnosticism, Lénárd, Rohonczy, social issues of the Hungarian society

Introduction

This paper aims to add further insights into the author's previous papers about the early period of the reception of Buddhism in Hungary by focusing on the works of some notable Hungarian Catholic and Protestant writers and theologians on Buddhism and by comparing them to the writings of some “pro-, proto- or crypto-Buddhist” writers of the same period. In addition, it brings some additional analytical approaches to the attention of the readers.

First of all, it is worth recalling my attempt to outline the three major periods of the reception of Buddhism in Hungary. Needless to say, such periodization is arbitrary, but it can still be of great help to guide us through the long timeline of events.

1. The first period lasted from the mid-19th century to the end of the Second World War.
2. Buddhism under the socialist regime. From approximately 1947 until 1989.
3. Buddhism after the socialist regime. The third period begins from about 1989.

In my previous paper, I pointed out, among other things, that the first period in Hungary was a period when Hungarians made their first tentative but rather increasingly systematic efforts to get to know the “East”, and the Eastern religions¹. Getting to know Buddhism was an intellectual tour de force mostly by intellectuals, artists, early orientalists, art collectors, and diplomats. This was predominantly a “text-only”, “printed Buddhism” period, but it meant the emergence of a Hungary-based Oriental Studies and Asian-related museology. Hungarians played a notable role in several major scientific discoveries related to Buddhism, like geographer Lóczy, who brought the attention of Sir Aurel Stein to the Dunhuang’s Caves of the Thousand Buddhas and thus gave way to the rediscovery of them, and Hungarians like Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and Sir Aurel Stein, who were active in the foundation of the academic discipline of Buddhology and Tibetology.

As this was the first stage of modern tourism, when travel conditions were improved with a high pace, Hungarian travelers like Péter Vay also began to write extensively on Buddhism-related issues². In Asia, art shops ran by Hungarians in Shanghai and Yokohama were beginning to trade Buddhist objects with all others, and at the same time the first art collections of Asian art in Hungary led to the foundation of the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts. In the same period, Buddhism also influenced the Hungarian Japonisme, which borrowed many direct and indirect elements from it. A Hungarian painters’ circle led by József Hollósy was among the first that had proto-Buddhist activities including some of the first publications dealing with Buddhism as a religion that could be practiced by Westerners.

Meanwhile, the origin of the Hungarian nation was widely seen by the Hungarian society as rooted in the “East”. This helped the development of pseudo-mythical interpretations about the nation's past and the surge of interest in and affinity for dealing with Buddhism.

¹ Attila Király, “History of Hungarian Buddhism and the Influences of Buddhism in Hungary until the 1920’s,” *Electronic Journal of Central European Studies in Japan*, no. 3 (October 2017) (2017), <https://www.josai.ac.jp/jices/ejces/index.html>.

² See my references to his works later in this paper.

The Hungarian Theosophical Society (Magyar Teozófiai Társulat) can be seen as an intellectually spiritual endeavour of Hungarian bourgeois intellectuals from 1906 to 1950, and its adherents communicated Buddhism and other Eastern religions to Hungary within a syncretic framework in combination with spiritually occult doctrines³.

It is worth mentioning here the significance of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Some notable Hungarian writers, namely Mór Jókai⁴ and Elek Gozsdu⁵ included Buddhist themes and elements in their writings, and thus opened the pathway to other later writers to devote some of their literary works to Buddhism and other Eastern Religions (e.g., Dezső Kosztolányi, Lőrinc Szabó, Sándor Weöres)⁶.

Pro-buddhist writers and Catholic and Protestant intellectuals

The birth of Hungarian literature on Buddhism is closely related to the emergence of Western Buddhology and the publication of the first string of monographs and large-scale series of translations from original Buddhist texts. It was Györgyi Fajcsák, who first examined a large portion of the Hungarian essays and books on Buddhism written by theologians and religious thinkers, and who gave a succinct summary of the beginnings of Western Buddhist studies⁷.

³ Györgyi Fajcsák, “‘Bevezetés a Buddhó tanába’ - A buddhizmus magyar nyelvű irodalma és művészeti kapcsolatai a 19–20. század fordulóján (‘Introduction to the Teaching of Buddha’ - The Hungarian Literature of Buddhism and its Relations to the Fine Arts in Hungary at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries),” in *Bolor-Un Gerel - Kristályfény: Tanulmányok Kara György Professzor 70. Születésnapjának Tiszteletére I. Volume. Szerk. Birtalan Ágnes És Rákos Attila (Bolor-Un Gerel. Crystal-Splendour. Volume I. Essays Presented in Honour of Professzor György Kara’s 70th Birthday. Ed. by Birtalan Ágnes and Rákos Attila)* (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, Belső-Ázsiai Tanszék - Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Altajisztikai Kutatócsoport (Eötvös Loránd University, Department of Inner Asia Studies - Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Research Group for Altaic Studies), 2005), 253–66.

⁴ See Mór Jókai's novel, originally published in 1903: Mór Jókai, *A mi lengyelünk (Our Polish)*, vol. 66, Jókai Mór összes művei (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969). Mór Jókai, *A mi lengyelünk (Our Polish)* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 2010).

⁵ See the novel “Nirvána” of Gozsdu. Elek Gozsdu, “Nirvána,” in *A magyar irodalom legszebb novellái – A századforduló* (Budapest: Palatinus, 2006), 94–114.

⁶ Among others, Károly Alexa deals with the Eastern-motif in the Hungarian literature. Károly Alexa, “Bevezetés egy tervezett antológiához: A Kelet-motívum a magyar irodalomban (Introduction for a Future Anthology: The Motif of the East in the Hungarian Literature),” *Magyar Művészet* 2016, no. 2 (2016): 137–41.

⁷ Györgyi Fajcsák, “A kereszténység (a Világ világossága) és a buddhizmus (Ázsia világossága) a 19–20. század fordulójának magyar valláselméleti munkáiban (The Christianity (the Light of the World) and the Buddhism (the Light of Asia) in the Hungarian Religious Theory Works of the Turn of the 19–20th Century,” in *Misszió, Globalizáció, Etika - Matteo Ricci Szellemi Öröksége (Ed. Ferenc Patsch SJ)* (L’Harmattan Kiadó, 2011), 189–207; Fajcsák, “‘Bevezetés a Buddhó tanába’ - A buddhizmus

Influenced by the formative period of Western Buddhist studies, Hungarians were originally interested mostly in Theravada Buddhism, as it was interpreted as the purest form of the original Buddhism, but gradually Northern Buddhism also caught their attention. With the exception of Kőrösi, the main languages which early Hungarians were reading Buddhist texts and Buddhist history were German, French and English, not just because these were the languages Western Buddhist studies were established on, but also because this most suited the Hungarian intellectual tradition⁸.

This issue leads us to the main topic of this paper: the survey of the writings of Hungarian Catholic, Protestant and Unitarian thinkers and theologians on Buddhism and that of their “pro-, proto-, or crypto-Buddhist” counterparts at the turn of the century⁹. A common characteristic that surely impresses every reader of the essays and writings of these thinkers and public intellectuals is that although neither of them was equipped with the necessary methodological paraphernalia of Buddhist studies, both groups sought passionately and whole-heartedly to develop their own interpretation of Buddhism by reaching out to the burgeoning Western Buddhological works, the translations of pali and sanskrit texts, and in some cases, by doing their own field trips in Buddhist countries. The different waves of the growing western academic literature on Buddhism all made their marks on these early Hungarian theoretical works. In order to elaborate their own opinions on Buddhism, both pro-Buddhist and Christian intellectuals were eager to study as thoroughly as possible the scientific literature of Western Buddhist studies just like the theological works of Western religious intellectuals investigating Buddhism. Györgyi Fajcsák, the first Hungarian researcher who examined some of the writings of the following Hungarian Catholic and Protestant writers, theologians, and Hungarian intellectuals on Buddhism took notice of the same thing¹⁰.

magyar nyelvű irodalma és művészeti kapcsolatai a 19–20. század fordulóján (‘Introduction to the Teaching of Buddha’ - The Hungarian Literature of Buddhism and Its Relations to Fine Arts in Hungary at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries).”

⁸ Another exception is the below-mentioned Brassai and, of course, the indologist József Schmidt. József Schmidt, *Buddha élete, tana, egyháza (Ázsia világossága) (The Life, Teaching and Church of Buddha - the Light of Asia)* (Budapest: Kazinczy-kiadás, 1920).

⁹ The terms “pro-, proto- and crypto Buddhist” are by the author of this paper.

¹⁰ Namely she surveyed the works of János Kiss, Ernő Szeghy, Sámuel Brassai, József Baranyay. Fajcsák, “A kereszténység (a Világ világossága) és a buddhizmus (Ázsia világossága) a 19-20. század fordulójának magyar valláselméleti munkáiban (The Christianity (the Light of the World) and the Buddhism (the Light of Asia) in the Hungarian Religious Theory Works of the Turn of the 19-20th Century”); Fajcsák, ‘Bevezetés a Buddhó tanába’ - A buddhizmus magyar nyelvű irodalma és művészeti kapcsolatai a 19–20. század fordulóján (‘Introduction to the Teaching of Buddha’ - The Hungarian Literature of Buddhism and Its Relations to Fine Arts in Hungary at the Turn of the 19th–20th Centuries).”

Thus, the comprehensive study of the works of early Western scholars and a thoroughly engaged attitude to understand Buddhism was considered essential to these Hungarian intellectuals¹¹. Let's draw up now a list of these Western scholars and intellectuals and their most significant works that were read and consulted by the Hungarians. All of the below-listed works were generally consulted by many, but at least by one of them.

The works of Spence Hardy (*Eastern Monachism, Manual of Buddhism*)¹², Max Müller (*The Sacred Books of the East* from Oxford)¹³, TW Rhys Davids and the Pali Text Society¹⁴ in Great Britain, as well as those of Carl Friedrich Köppen¹⁵ and Oldenberg¹⁶ in Germany, and of the French Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire¹⁷, and Eugène Burnouf¹⁸ were among the most popular ones. This is similar to the works on Chinese Buddhism (Samual Beal¹⁹) or some westernized approaches to Buddhism, such as, for example, Subbhadra's or Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*²⁰. Literary works also drew the attention of Hungarians: for example, the poem *Light of Asia* of Edwin Arnold²¹. There was a strong interest in comparative religious studies and comparative

¹¹ Nowadays, fortunately most of the following works can be found in the Oriental Collection of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences or in digital archives, like the Hungarian Arcanum, the French Gallica, the Project Gutenberg or The Google Book Project. In the following notes I will mention only their original bibliographical data.

¹² Spence Hardy was originally a missionary on Ceylon. Spence Hardy R., *Eastern Monachism* (London: Bridge and Oakey, 1850); R. Spence Hardy, *Manual of Buddhism In Its Modern Development*, 1853; Edmund Hardy, ed., *Der Buddhismus Nach Alteren Pali-Werken* (Münster: Aschendorffschen Buchhandlung, 1890).

¹³ Max Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East*, 1879.

¹⁴ T.W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890); T.W. Rhys Davids and J. Estlin Carpenter, *Digha Nikaya*, vol. I (London: Pali Text Society - Oxford University Press, 1890); Rhys Davids, *Dukapattana (Part of the Abhidhamma Pitaka)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1906).

¹⁵ Carl Friedrich Köppen, *Die Religion des Buddha*, 1857; Carl Friedrich Köppen, *Die Religion des Buddha / Die Lamaische Hierarchie Und Kirche* (Berlin: Ferdinand Schneider, 1859).

¹⁶ Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha, Sein Leben, Seine Lehre, Seine Gemeinde* (Göttingen, 1881).

¹⁷ Jules Barthélemy-Saint-Hilaire, *Le Bouddha et sa religion (3e édition revue et corrigée) / par J. Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, ...*, Librairie académique (Paris, 1866).

¹⁸ Burnouf was a French orientalist in the 19th century. Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien* (Paris : Maisonneuve, 1876), <http://archive.org/details/introductionlh00burnouft>.

¹⁹ Samuel Beal, *Buddhism in China*, 1884.; Samuel Beal, *Abstract of Four Lectures on Buddhist Literature in China* (London: Trubner & Co., 1882).

²⁰ Henry-Steel Olcott, *A Buddhist Catechism* (Colombo, Ceylon: Theosophical Society, Buddhist Section, 1881). For Subbhadra please see the below note.

²¹ Edwin Arnold, *Light of Asia* (London: Trubner & Co., 1879).

theological studies (Aiken²², Falke²³, Ellinwood²⁴, Parks²⁵, Berry²⁶, Seydel), and the studies of Western Christian theologians (J. Freeman Clarke²⁷ etc.) or missionaries in Asia (Samuel H. Kellogg²⁸, Joseph Edkins²⁹, P. Bigandet³⁰ etc.) and Western Buddhist or pro-Buddhist writers (Arthur Lillie³¹) and philosophers, religious thinkers (like Paul Carus³²). The Hungarians even consulted special dictionaries of Eastern languages (like *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* of Childers³³). To a lesser degree, the works of Japanese scholars of religious studies and leading intellectuals are also cited in their works (e.g., Anesaki Masaharu). Needless to say, Protestant intellectuals were more interested in the works and theological accomplishments of Protestant thinkers, than in those of Catholic intellectuals and vice versa³⁴.

Let's turn now our attention to those two Hungarian groups of intellectuals who consulted these works. First, in chronological order, the Hungarian authors who were favorable towards Buddhism and produce “pro-, proto-, or crypto-Buddhist” publications.

The publication of the first pro-Buddhist works was organized by **Simon Hollósy**, a painter from Máramaros (present day Romania). His younger brother, József Hollósy translated the book of the German Buddhist, Subhadra Bhikkshu (pen name for Friedrich Zimmermann,

²² Charles Francis Aiken, *The Dhamma of Gotama the Buddha and the Gospel of Jesus Christ - A Critical Inquiry into the Alleged Relations of Buddhism with Primitive Christianity* (Boston: Marlier and Company, 1900).

²³ Robert Falke, *Budda, Mohammed, Christus: Ein Vergleich Der Drei Persönlichkeiten* (Gütersloh: Bertelsman, 1897).

²⁴ Frank F. (Frank Field) Ellinwood, *Oriental Religions and Christianity A Course of Lectures Delivered on the Ely Foundation Before the Students of Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1891*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892).

²⁵ Leighton Parks, *His Star in the East: A Study in the Early Aryan Religions* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1887).

²⁶ T. Sterling Berry, *Christianity and Buddhism* (London: Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1890).

²⁷ James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1899).

²⁸ The American Samuel H. Kellogg worked as a Presbyterian missionary in India. Samuel H. Kellogg, *The Light of Asia and the Light of the World: A Comparison of the Legend, the Doctrine, the Ethics of the Buddha with the Story, the Doctrine; the Ethics of Christ* (London: Macmillan, 1885).

²⁹ Joseph Edkins was a Presbyterian missionary in China. He wrote linguistic books and a book on Chinese Buddhism. Joseph Edkins, *Chinese Buddhism: A Volume of Sketches, Historical, Descriptive, and Critical* (London: Trübner, 1880).

³⁰ Bigandet was a missionary on Burma, and was studying Burmese Buddhism. P. Bigandet, *The Life or Legend of Gaudama - The Buddha of the Burmes* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1911).

³¹ Arthur Lillie, *The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity* (New York: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1893).

³² Paul Carus, *Buddhism and Its Christian Critics* (Open Court Publishing Company, 1899).

³³ Robert Caesar Childers, *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (London: Trübner, 1875).

³⁴ Like for example Kováts J. who read American and Protestant theologians and thinkers like Ellinwood, Parks, Berry, Carus, J. Freeman Clarke, etc. (see below).

1852-1917), and effectively influenced other artists with his religious thoughts³⁵. This book was later re-translated by a theologian from Debrecen, Lajos Eröss, whose work was consulted by some of the Christian theologians the author of this paper will deal with³⁶. The *Káté* also influenced the writing of a Hungarian novel³⁷.

The fruits of Western academic Buddhist studies had a considerable influence on the writing of the first major Hungarian Buddhist work, the two-volume long *Dhammó* which was published at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was written by the Orientalist turned businessman, **Jenő Lénárd** (1878-1924)³⁸. Jenő Lénárd (1878-1924) was of Jewish origin, and he was a philosopher, orientalist, and writer. In 1907, he took part in the foundation of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Nothing illustrates his open-minded intellectual attitude more than the fact that later, in 1909, he joined the Evangelical Lutheran church³⁹.

The third person, who should be mentioned here is **János Rohonczy**, who published his work *A modern vallás - A XX. század vallásos mozgalmái* (The modern religion - the religious movements of the XX. century) under the pen name Révkomáromi⁴⁰. He later became a member of the “Theravada (Buddhist) Circle” in the 1930s with László Vágó, György Kovács and the painter Péter Boromissza, which was the first established Hungarian Buddhist group.

The subtitle of his book says that the publication discusses the religious movements of the 20th Century, the moral teachings of Christianity, its church policy, its religious purposes and Buddhism and its relation to Christianity. The book was written partly as an answer to the

³⁵ Bhikshu Szubhádra, *Buddhista Káté Bevezetésül Gótamó Buddha Tanához Az Európaiak Használatára (Buddhist Catechism - Az Introduction to the Teachings of Gotamo Buddha for Europeans)* (Máramaros-Sziget: Mayer és Berger Könyvkereskedése, 1893).

³⁶ Bhikschi Subhadra, *Buddhista Katekizmus - Bevezetés a Gótamó Buddha Tanába. A német szövegű 6-ik kiadás után magyarra fordította Eröss Lajos (Buddhist Catechism - Az Introduction to the Teachings of Gotamo Buddha. Translated by Lajos Eröss Based on the 6th German Edition)* (Debrecen: Hegedűs és Sándor, 1906).

³⁷ The novel *Buddhista káté (Buddhist Catechism)* of Dezső Farnos, a teacher in Transylvania, was published originally in Nagyenyed. It was published the second time in Budapest. Dezső Farnos, *Buddhista káté (Buddhist Catechism)* (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1901).

³⁸ Lenard's work is a massive, nearly seven hundred-page-long accomplishment. Jenő Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha Tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha)* (Budapest: Lampel Rt., 1912).

³⁹ He gave a solid intellectual breeding ground to his son. His son, Sándor (Alexander) Lénárd was a 20th century “Renaissance man”, who was a physician, poet, musician, language teacher, painter, and the translator of Milne's Winnie the Pooh into Hungarian.

⁴⁰ (János) Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, *A modern vallás - A XX. század vallásos mozgalmái (The Modern Religion - the Religious Movements of the XX. Century)*, 2nd ed. (Budapest: Pesti Könyvnyomda Részvénytársaság, 1913).

essays published by the below-mentioned Ernő Szeghy⁴¹ and János Kiss⁴². Divided into three chapters, it examined the Jewish and Christian religions, the current state of Christianity, church politics, and the Buddhist religion.

In fact, some of these pro-Buddhist works were in part written as a response to those Catholic and Protestant intellectuals, theologians, and religious thinkers that will be introduced in the following part of this paper. Catholic intellectuals might have felt themselves instructed towards the study of Buddhism by the *Aeterni Patris* Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, which aimed to revive and revitalize the scholastic philosophy and the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas⁴³. Indeed, as we will see, not only the below-mentioned Catholic, but also the Protestant intellectuals disapproved the confusing cacophony of the different worldviews and cultural influences, and warned their contemporaries by prophesying the risks these new spiritual influences, including Buddhism, were supposed to bring to the old continent.

Let us now have a glimpse on the list of the Hungarian Christian intellectuals who also formulated their views on Buddhism in the same period. The list begins with the Catholic and continues with the Protestant thinkers, and thus it is not strictly in a chronological order. Most of them published their essays and tractates in religious journals, magazines, and periodicals or in independent publications printed by one of the religious publishers⁴⁴. One of them was the *Hittudományi Folyóirat* (Theological Periodical), which was a Catholic theoretical journal⁴⁵. In 1907 it merged with the *Bölcséleti Folyóirat* (Journal of the Philosophy), and from 1914 it merged into the *Religio* (Religion). Another Catholic journal was the *Katholikus Szemle* (Catholic Review), published from 1889 to 1991 by the Szent István Társulat⁴⁶. Another one was the *Theologiai Szaklap* (Theological Special Journal), which was an Evangelical

⁴¹ Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, 120–31.

⁴² Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, 147–48.

⁴³ Leo XIII, “Aeterni Patris (August 4, 1879),” Vatican, Leo XIII, Encyclicals, 1879, http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_04081879_aeterni-patris.html. See also Györgyi Fajcsák’s comment on the *Aeterni Patris*. Fajcsák, “A kereszténység (a Világ világossága) és a buddhizmus (Ázsia világossága) a 19-20. század fordulójának magyar valláselméleti munkáiban (The Christianity (the Light of the World) and the Buddhism (the Light of Asia) in the Hungarian Religious Theory Works of the Turn of the 19-20th Century.)”

⁴⁴ For example, by the Szent István Társulat (Saint Stephen Company), one of the oldest publishing companies in Hungary, established in 1848. Enjoying the support of the Hungarian Catholic Church it publishes mainly Catholic printed products.

⁴⁵ The digital version can be found here: “Hittudományi Folyóirat 1890-1913 | Könyvtár | Hungaricana,” accessed December 9, 2020, https://library.hungaricana.hu/hu/collection/katolikus_gyujtemenyek_pazmany_htk_hittudomanyi_folyoirat/.

⁴⁶ See the footnote about the Szent István Társulat.

journal published from 1902 to 1918⁴⁷. Another one was the *Keresztény Magvető* (Christian sower), which was launched by the Unitarian Church in 1861, and which is still published, longest-running Transylvanian Hungarian theological and church history journal⁴⁸.

János Kiss (1857-1930) was a Catholic writer, priest, and a university professor. Kiss published an essay about the comparison of Buddhism and Christianity in 1890: *Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága* (The light of Asia and the light of the world)⁴⁹.

Ernő Szeghy (1872 – 1952) was a Catholic theologian and Cistercian monk. From 1900 to 1903 he lived in Japan as the teacher of the son of Ambassador Béla Adamóczi Ambró in Tokyo. He conducted his researches on Buddhism by travelling and doing field trips in Japan and Asia. Szeghy published various essays and books on Buddhism. In 1893 he wrote a short article with the title “A Buddha-vallásról” (On the religion of Buddha)⁵⁰. Then, in the *Katolikus Szemle*, he wrote another essay, “A buddhizmusról” (About Buddhism) in 1902, and later published the book *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység* (The Buddhism and Christianity)⁵¹. He devoted a book to Japan, which contains passing remarks on Japanese Buddhism⁵². As he was one of the most prolific Christian theologians writing on Buddhism, and one of the few who really had the chance to live in Japan (three years), visit Buddhist countries (Burma, Siam – Thailand, Ceylon), and visit temples and observe daily Buddhist practices, it is worth to deep dive into the content and structure of some of his writings in a later paper. Because of his experiences, he was one of the few writers able to give his insights not only into the Hinayana, but the Mahayana Buddhism as well.

Another Catholic intellectual was **József Baranyay**, professor in the archbishop’s lyceum in Eger city, who published in the *Hittudományi Folyóirat*, a lengthy two-parts essay in 1905

⁴⁷ Among other places, the digital version can be found in the Digital Storage of Hungarian Evangelical Church. “Theologiai Szaklap,” Magyar Evangélikus Digitális Tár (MEDiT) - Kategória Site, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://medit.lutheran.hu/site/kategoria/25>.

⁴⁸ The digital version can be found in the Dspace Repository.

⁴⁹ János Kiss, “Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World),” *Pázmány HTK Hittudományi Folyóirat (1890-1913)* 1 (1890): 47–75, 306–23. János Kiss, *Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World)* (Budapest: Pallas, 1890).

⁵⁰ Ernő Szeghy, “A Buddha-vallásról (On the Religion of Buddha),” *Vasárnapi Újság (Sunday Journal)*, 1893, 619–20.

⁵¹ Ernő Szeghy, “A buddhizmusról (About Buddhism),” *Katolikus Szemle* 16., no. VII. (1902): 635–55; Ernő Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Christianity)* (Budapest: Szent-István-Társulat, 1909).

⁵² Ernő Szeghy, *Történelmi, föld és néprajzi vázlatok (Japan. Sketches about Its History, Geography and Ethnology)* (Budapest: Szent-István-Társulat, 1909).

on the comparison of Buddhism and Christianity with the title “Buddha, a bölcselő - Krisztus, a megváltó” (Buddha, the Wise - Christ, the Savior)⁵³.

The last Catholic thinker to be mentioned here is the count and titular bishop **Péter Vay**. I am only mentioning him here and the subsequent chapter will not include his writings, given that these were mostly travel books that dealt only tangentially with Buddhism. He finished his studies in Rome, and then traveled the world several times. He was commissioned by the government to purchase Japanese artwork for the Museum of Fine Arts. During his Japanese trip in 1906, Vay visited Japanese Buddhist sites and wrote several books on his travels⁵⁴.

Moving to some non-Catholic Christian intellectuals, one of the earliest accounts on Buddhism from a Christian perspective was written by a professor of religious philosophy of Nagyenyed⁵⁵, **Ödön Kovács**. In his monumental, 388-page-long book, *A Vallásbölcsészet Kézikönyve* (Handbook of Religious Philosophy)⁵⁶, he presented and gave the definition of religious philosophy, including Hegel's work, the religion of natural peoples, the basics of Brahmanism, Buddhism, and the Zend (Zarathustra) religion. Then, after the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, he discussed Christianity and Islam, and surveyed the different ethnic groups and backgrounds behind the religions, including the Semites, Mesopotamian peoples, Phoenicians, and Israelites.

In this book, the main points of the 35-page-long chapter on Buddhism are: the life of the Buddha, the recording process of the teachings of the Buddha and the Buddhist synods⁵⁷. He compared the figure of the Buddha with that of Jesus, and Buddhism with Brahmanism,

⁵³ József Baranyay, “Buddha, a bölcselő - Krisztus, a megváltó (Buddha, the Wise - Christ, the Savior),” *Hittudományi Folyóirat* XVI. (1905): 49–71, 351–86.

⁵⁴ Péter Vay, *Korea of Bygone Days*, ed. Ágnes Birtalan (Budapest: Terebess Publications, 2001); Péter Vay, *Kelet császárai és császárságai (Emperors and Empires of the East)* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1906); Péter Vay, *Nippon esztétikája. A japán festészeti iskolák, azok mesterei és műemlékei (The Esthetics of Nippon. Japanese Painting Schools, Their Masters and Masterpieces)* (Budapest, 1907); Péter Vay, *Kelet művészete és műízlése (Art and Taste of the East)* (Budapest, 1908); Péter Vay Gr., *A keleti féltekén (On the Eastern Hemisphere)* (Budapest: Franklin-társulat, 1918). See also for further bibliography on Vay here: Attila Király, “Some Additional Remarks on the History of Hungarian Buddhism and the Influence of Buddhism in Hungary at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries: Explorers, Collectors, and First Accounts on Japanese Buddhism and the Buddhist Connection to Japonisme in Hungary,” *Electronic Journal of Central European Studies in Japan*, no. 4 (December 2018), <https://www.josai.ac.jp/jices/ejces/index.html>.

⁵⁵ Nagyenyed (Aiud in modern Romania) was one of the main educational centres in Transylvania from the medieval times.

⁵⁶ Ödön Kovács, *A vallásbölcsészet kézikönyve (Handbook of Religious Philosophy)*, vol. VI., *Protestáns Theológiai Könyvtár 3* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat - Magyarországi protestáns egyház, 1876).

⁵⁷ Ödön Kovács, “A buddhizmus (The Buddhism),” in *A Vallásbölcsészet Kézikönyve (Handbook of Religious Studies)*, vol. VI., *Protestáns Theológiai Könyvtár 3* (Budapest: Franklin Társulat - Magyarországi protestáns egyház, 1876), 104–39.

Sankhya philosophy, Christianity, and Gnosticism. He quoted from the sutras, although he left unclarified his sources. He discussed the teachings of the historical Buddha, the doctrine of transmigration, the “fourfold high truth” (the Four Noble Truth), the concept of Nirvana, the moral commandments, and the Buddhist metaphysics (a 12-member causal chain). He also mentioned the fact that there were more Buddhists than Christians in the world at the time of the writing of the book. He read extensively for his study Saint Hilaire and Max Müller.

Next, I should introduce **Sámuel Brassai** (1797-1897), a polyhistor, professor of the Sanskrit language, linguistics, history, mathematics and professor at the Unitarian College and University of Kolozsvár (present-day Romania). Brassai wrote the article “Buddhismus” (Buddhism) in the *Keresztény Magvető* in 1909⁵⁸.

As for the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, I should mention two names here. **Mátyás Szlávik** (1860-1937) was a philosopher and professor of Evangelical theology. Because of his professional career, he settled to the Northern part of Hungary, today's Slovakia. He originally studied in Rozsnyó (in Slovakian: Rožňava), then studied theology in Eperjes (in Slovakian: Prešov) and became an instructor there as well. His essay, Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed, and Christ) was published in 1911⁵⁹.

Samu Kiss was an evangelical writer. His essay “A Buddhizmus és a Kereszténység” (Buddhism and Christianity) was also published in the same year⁶⁰.

István Kováts J. (1880-1965) was a pastor of the Reformed Church and professor of the Academy of Reformed Theology. He originally studied law and then became interested in theology. He had excellent oratory skills and became a member of Parliament nominated by the Independent Smallholders' Party. He came up with two publications on Buddhism in the *Theológiai Szaklap*, “A Nirvána” (The Nirvana) and the “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység” (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity)⁶¹. Both essays were published later independently⁶².

⁵⁸ Sámuel Brassai, “Buddhismus (Buddhism),” *Keresztény Magvető*, 1890, 1–19.

⁵⁹ Mátyás Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ),” *Theológiai Szaklap* 9, nos 1-4. (1911): 299–308.

⁶⁰ Samu Kiss, “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (Buddhism and Christianity),” *Theológiai Szaklap* 9, nos 1-4. (1911): 241–64.

⁶¹ István Kováts J., *A Nirvána (The Nirvana)* (Pozsony: Wigand Ny., 1908); István Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” *Theológiai Szaklap*, 1912, 268–99.

⁶² Kováts J., *A Nirvána (The Nirvana)*; István Kováts J., *A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity)*, Kókai (Budapest, 1912).

Last, I would briefly mention a Protestant intellectual, **Pál Farkas**, who was a pastor of the Reformed Church and published a major study on the ethics of Buddhism in 1932, entitled “The Ethics of Buddhism - Based on the Fourth Noble Truth”. Farkas dealt in detail with the “Noble Eight Path”, meditation and wisdom (*pannya*), and the moral teaching of Buddhism⁶³. His painstaking analyses of Buddhism had theological undertone in many places. However, given that this writing was already the product of a later period, I will address it in a later paper.

Let us call the group in favor of Buddhism group A (pro- or proto-Buddhists: Lénárd, Rohonczy) and that of the Christian intellectuals group B (Szeghy, J. Kiss, Baranyay, Brassai, Szlávik, S. Kiss, Kováts J. ⁶⁴), and let’s try to group and classify their analytical patterns, shared features, noticeable differences, and critical and provocative comments.

Similarities and shared points in the writings: group A and B

From a structural point of view, the authors were often following not only the organization, but the argumentation of foreign essays as well. For instance, Szlávik wrote his work “Buddha, Mohammed, and Christ” based on Falke's writing⁶⁵, and János Kiss' work was based on Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*⁶⁶. Although in many cases, the starting point of their research on Buddhism is, understandably, the figure and oeuvre of Csoma (consider, as examples Brassai and Lénárd⁶⁷). The authors always, with some exception, pair their presentation of Buddhism with a comparison with Christianity, and they seek to contemplate on the social, spiritual, and philosophical currents of their age (socialism; spiritualism, nihilism, rationalism, atheism, the works of Schopenhauer, etc.).

⁶³ Pál Farkas, *A buddhizmus etikája. A „Negyedik Nemes Igazság” alapján (The Ethics of Buddhism. Based on the Four Noble Truth)*, Theológiai Tanulmányok (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetem, 1932).

⁶⁴ Vay's name was excluded from this list, as he was writing only about Buddhist matters that were related to his travels, although we should acknowledge that his travel reports might be important for us, if we want to understand the way how a Catholic Hungarian was approaching Buddhism in Asia back at these times. I will bring up his name only when there will be some explicit reason to do so.

⁶⁵ Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ)”; Falke, *Budda, Mohammed, Christus: Ein Vergleich Der Drei Persönlichkeiten*. According to Szlávik, an extract of Falke's work was translated by a Lutheran pastor, Béla Kiss and edited into an abridged version. The author of this paper haven't seen this translation.

⁶⁶ Kiss, *Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World)*, 1890. Arnold, *Light of Asia*.

⁶⁷ Brassai, “Buddhizmus (Buddhism),” 1. Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*, 18.

Whereas group B's writers tended to be openly disapproving and judgmental about Buddhism in their final conclusions, all works can be characterized by thoughtful research and by their authors' reflective and contemplative attitude. The authors were all aware of the importance of comparative religious studies and ethnology. These Christian intellectuals and theologians were all very well-trained experts and researchers in their field. Many of the essays and studies are of considerable length, some even 100-150 pages long. Lénárd's book is 500 pages long.

Nevertheless, in the already aforementioned way, the writers were not using original Buddhist texts, they relied entirely upon the works of Western scholars (Spence Hardy, Max Müller, TW Rhys Davis and the Pali Text Society, Köppen, Oldenberg, Samuel Beal, Saint-Hilaire), and the Western comparative studies (Rudolf Seydel, Aiken Falke, Saint-Hilaire) or reached out to the westernized approaches and interpretations of Buddhism (Subhadra, Olcott, Nyanatiloka bhikkhu, Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya). Some examined the literary works on Buddhism (Arnold), or the studies of western Christian theologians (J. Freeman Clarke etc.). In some cases, publications of Japanese scholars of religious studies and public intellectuals were also mentioned in their works (Anesaki Masaharu, D. T. Suzuki)⁶⁸. No original Buddhist texts were used in their studies, just the translations. Without entering here into further detail, let me list up here as a good example the main scholars, philosophers, missionaries and pro-Buddhist thinkers, whose works were used as references by one of the Christian intellectuals, István Kováts J. in his "A Buddhizmus és a Kereszténység": Körösi, Schopenhauer, Hartman, Rhys Davids, C. G. Davids, Samuel H. Kellog, Köppen, Rudolf Seydel, Arthur Lillie Paul Carus, Subhadra Bhikkhu (aka Zimmermann), Edmunds Albert, Freeman Clarke, Monier Williams, Oldenberg, Joseph Edkins etc⁶⁹. Needless to say, at this time a considerable part of the original Buddhist literature was still unbeknownst even to the Western academic world.

A clear exception would be Szeghy and Vay, who were writing in detail about Japanese Buddhism, and the previously mentioned J. Kováts was also referring to Chinese Buddhism.

In parallel with Western philosophical and Christian theological concepts (scholastics, eschatology etc.), it follows from the above that Buddhist concepts are presented primarily in Pali and only partially in Sanskrit or in any other languages.

⁶⁸ About these works see my note in the introduction.

⁶⁹ See the bibliographical data for their works in the footnotes from 10-22. See also Kováts J., *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity)*, 1912.

Writers of both groups tried to examine comprehensively and conscientiously the Buddhist teachings and concepts in their original form (of Southern Buddhism): Buddhist path (*magga*) to liberation, Refuge in the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, the Enlightenment, impermanence (*aniccā*), suffering (*dukkha*), non-self (*anattā*), the five aggregates, the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*), *sīla* (Buddhist ethics), the Noble Eightfold Path, karma, desire, transmigration, gods which originated in Brahmanism, *Adi-Buddha*, etc. These are just some examples of the Buddhist concepts examined in these works. This was the first period when Hungarian religious experts tried to translate and adapt Buddhist terminology to the Hungarian language.

Almost all authors of both groups investigated ardently the word *nibbana* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*) to pinpoint the goal of the Buddhist path, and thus the ultimate meaning of Buddhism.

Nibbana (*Nirvana*) was one of those contentious issues that led some Christian theologians to link Buddhism to nihilism, while others from the same group vigorously refused this idea, emphasizing that it is a misinterpretation of Buddhism to relate it to nihilism. For example, Ödön Kovács denied that *Nirvana* would mean annihilation in Buddhism. In accordance with this, he denied that Buddhism is nihilist or atheistic⁷⁰.

However, generally speaking, the meditative praxises of Buddhism (Sanskrit: *dhyana*, Pali: *jhāna*, or the *vipassanā*), although having an utmost importance in the entire Buddhist praxis, did not really gotten enough attention nor by group A, nor by group B writers. Both groups' methods of explaining Buddhism was rather interpretive, theoretical, and educative.

Group A and B writers were the first Hungarian experts who tried to categorize and summarize the immense Buddhist literature for Hungarian readers. Knowing that they did not have access to the sophisticated philological arsenal of their Western counterparts and predecessors, this was certainly an audacious endeavour. Nonetheless, we find references in their studies to the different part of the Pali Tipitaka, the *Vinaya pitaka* (Basket of Discipline), *Sutta pitaka* (Basket of Discourse) and *Abhidhamma Pitaka* (Basket of Special Doctrine) and particularly to the *Dhammapada*, the *Jataka Tales*, the *Questions of King Milinda* etc. Along with these texts the different Buddhist synods were also introduced. On the other hand, *Mahayana* and *Tantric* texts, just like many other schools of Buddhism were basically not

⁷⁰ As he says: “And in so far as the image of the abstract primordial essence, *Brahma*, *Nirvana* is even more abstract than it, so it has surpassed the speculative thought of all sensual and definite beings, thus excluding all definitions.” Kovács, “A Buddhismus (The Buddhism),” 124. Please see also my further explanation on the critical comments of Christian writers later.

studied by them (not even the theoretical works and key concepts of later Buddhist schools (like the concept of Sunyata or Emptiness).

Identical elements in the comparison of Buddhism and Christianity: A+B

The pro-Buddhists (group A) and the Christian intellectuals (group B) were primarily concerned in their writings with the exploration of Theravada Buddhism (as being the closest form to original Buddhism), and/or with its comparison to Christian teachings (with the exceptions of Brassai and of the translations of Subbharta Bhikku's works). This was further emphasized by the fact that for Christian writers, the meticulous comparison of the life story of the historical Buddha and Jesus was of foremost importance to finally elaborate their critical conclusions on Buddhism.

The number of Buddhist practitioners in the World, and the expansion of Buddhism at the end of the 19th century to Western countries caught both groups' attention. But, as we will see later, it was seen as a potential threat by the Christian intellectuals⁷¹.

Many writers focused on a tedious and meticulous description of the life and death of the historical Buddha in order to compare it with that of Jesus. Simply speaking, the length of their lives and ministries were considered important by the Christian writers. They tended to describe to their readers the Buddha's life and the circumstances of his death in a very detailed way. All important persons in his life were introduced to the readers, as was the region where he lived. Brassai for example wrote the names of the protagonists of Buddha's life in a popular Hungarian transcription: Szuddhódana, Sziddhártha, Sákjamuni, Jaszódhara, Cshanna, Bimbiszára (king of Magadha), Mára, his first disciples, Jásza, Kásjapa, Sáriputra, Meggalána, Ráhula, Kiszagótami, Ánanda, Csunda etc. The Benares region and the other locations of his life are also presented in Hungarian transcription: Kapilavasztu, Rádzsgraha (Magadha), Uruvala, Benáres, presentation of his travels in the Ganges Valley (around Benares), Kuszínagara etc⁷².

⁷¹ See for example Szubhádra, *Buddhista Káté bevezetésül Gótamó Buddha Tanához az európaiak használatára (Buddhist Catechism - Az Introduction to the Teachings of Gotamo Buddha for Europeans)*, 22.

⁷² I have skipped here the original Pali-Sanskrit version of the words. Brassai, "Buddhismus (Buddhism)."

It is easy to understand why many of these writers felt so attracted to the topic of the life of the historical Buddha, and why they wanted to give an accurate chronicle of his lifetime events and his death, including an in-depth report about his relationship with his disciples. One reason is that the Buddhist tradition itself shows a great interest to the life of the historical Buddha as many elements of the Buddhist doctrine are deeply rooted in the insights learned during his life experiences. On the other hand, there was a great interest among Christians and Western intellectuals in looking for analogies between Buddhism and Christianity, the ministry of Jesus and the life story of Buddha⁷³. Additionally, some of these authors paralleled the temptation of the Buddha by Mara with the temptation of Jesus⁷⁴.

Looking for analogies and parallels was not limited only to the portrayal of the lifetime events of Buddha and Jesus. Several times, the authors borrowed Christian terminology (along with Western philosophical terminology) to illustrate and outline Buddhist concepts⁷⁵. This was not unusual for both groups. As a result, it happened that some concepts were arbitrarily and mistakenly put next to each other. For example, the “Refuge in the Three Jewels” and the Christian Doctrine of Trinity (the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit). Needless to say, this methodology jeopardizes the formation of a coherent view of Buddhism and can be a breeding ground for misunderstanding. In the case of Christian intellectuals, these attempts can be related ultimately to the positioning of Buddhism in the hierarchy of religions to a lower rank than Christianity.

Both groups found elements of great value in the ethics of Buddhism, and the Christian theologians praised the way how Buddhists were handling animals. Meanwhile, Christian writers found Buddhist ethics contradictable when they compared it to Christian ethics and consequently questioned its ultimate meaning and criticised its “hypothetical” relation to karma.

They also showed interest in describing the institutional organization of Buddhism, focusing on the sangha, and some of the Catholic writers were, on a certain level, fascinated by the similarities between the ceremonial features of Tibetan lamaism and the Catholic Church.

Buddhist concepts of the world (paradise, gods, pretas, human world, hells) were often compared to Christian ones.

⁷³ For example Baranyay, “Buddha, a bölcselő - Krisztus, a megváltó (Buddha, the Wise - Christ, the Savior),” 50.

⁷⁴ Szubhádra, *Buddhista Káté bevezetésül Gótamó Buddha Tanához az európaiak használatára (Buddhist Catechism - Az Introduction to the Teachings of Gotamo Buddha for Europeans)*, 10.

⁷⁵ For example, to translate the Four Noble Truth the expression “Négy üdvigazság” is used in the Szubhádra translation. Szubhádra, *Buddhista Káté bevezetésül Gótamó Buddha Tanához az európaiak használatára (Buddhist Catechism - Az Introduction to the Teachings of Gotamo Buddha for Europeans)*.

Both groups put the religious systems of Buddhism and Christianity next each other in a positive sense, indicating that both were attempts to reform religious systems immersed in externalities (Brahmanism – Judaism). As Gotama “proclaimed a change in the world of thought-emotion,” Jesus also “directed the attention of mankind from the external to the inner: from the appearance to the invisible soul.” The Buddha was not trying to “liberate the body, but the spirit⁷⁶.” Szeghy praised the enthusiasm of the Buddhist teachings to curb passions and desires, and the positive concept of the child love. He commented that the merit of Buddhism is that its morality focuses on actions⁷⁷. Although he later criticised Buddhism for its lack of a moral life ideal, Szlávik stated that the virtue of compassion and love makes Buddhism a brother of Christianity⁷⁸.

During these years, many scholars raised and examined the possibility of an early connection between Christianity and Buddhism and that Christianity may have grown out of Buddhism. There was a lively scientific debate on this issue in the West and this was robustly debated in these early Hungarian writings. Possible Christian influences on Buddhism were also discussed in some of these publications.

Differences 1.: Intellectuals in favor of Buddhism (group A)

Concentrating now on the distinguishing details between the two groups: let us see first group A (“pro- or proto-, or crypto-Buddhist” writers) with a focus on Lénárd and Rohonczy.

In contrast to what the Christian theologians and thinkers read (see the previously mentioned list of Western academic and theological publications), group A consisted of public intellectuals who sought to read more from the Western Buddhist authors of their age (for example Lénárd consulted the writings of the German-born Nyanatiloka bhikkhu and the English Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya). They did not read as extensively the comparative religious philosophical works of Western European and American Christian theologians. Of the authors listed in this paper, it is Lénárd's work that included the most extensive bibliography of the works of Buddhologists and Indologists (Rhys-Davids, Oldenberg, M. Müller, E. Hardy, Neumann Karl Eugen, Monier-Williams etc.), but he also read Japanese authors, among others,

⁷⁶ Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” 1912, 289.

⁷⁷ Szeghy, “A buddhizmusról (About Buddhism),” 306.

⁷⁸ Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ),” 306.

Daisetz T. Suzuki and Anesaki Masaharu. His bibliography contains a very extensive bibliography on Paly grammar books and dictionaries. Lénárd reflected upon the works of János Kiss, Ernő Szeghy, József Baranyay⁷⁹.

In his two volume book on the buddhist teachings “Dammó”⁸⁰, he first devoted a long introduction to the relation of the West with Buddhism: he wrote about Kőrösi, the Pali language, the works of the Pali Text Society, and the misinterpretation of Buddhism as pessimism. He pondered on a possible relation of Buddhism to modern sciences and Western philosophical thought (Schopenhauer, agnosticism, monism). Lénárd was the commentator who gave the most exhaustive and meticulous presentation of the four noble truths of Buddhism⁸¹ in his two volume work, and through this presentation he unfolded in detail the whole set of basic Buddhist teachings on more than 300 pages⁸². In this respect, his work was also structurally different from all the others. He carried on with using the Hungarian transcription of Pali language (e.g., alak (form) – rúpam; érzés (feeling) - védaná, észrevevés (perception) - szannjá). Just like Rohonczy, Lénárd firmly denied that Buddhism can be equaled to pessimism⁸³. Lénárd discussed the concept of Nibbana (Nirvána) at length. He touched lightly upon the Buddhist influence on Western and Hungarian literature⁸⁴, and dealt intensively with the question of the compatibility of Western sciences and Buddhism, while devoting a separate chapter to this question in his book, “A buddhizmus viszonya a jelenkor tudományához” (The Relation of Buddhism to the Science of the Present Age)⁸⁵. He conducted research on Buddhist modernism including the history of Western Buddhism⁸⁶. In a very rudimentary way, he tried to define the place of “neo-Buddhism” in his age from the perspective of psychology, biology, physics, and chemistry⁸⁷.

⁷⁹ Namely: Kiss, “Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World),” 1890; Szeghy, “A Buddhizmusról (About Buddhism);” Baranyay, “Buddha, a bölcselő - Krisztus, a megváltó (Buddha, the Wise - Christ, the Savior).”

⁸⁰ Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha Tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*; Jenő Lénárd, *Dhammó. II. rész. (Dhamma. II. Part)* (Budapest: Lampel Rt., 1913).

⁸¹ In his Hungarian Pali transcript: Arijaszaccsa, originaly in Pali: cattāri ariyasaccāni.

⁸² Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*, 69–276; Lénárd, *Dhammó. II. rész. (Dhamma. II. Part)*, 35–140.

⁸³ Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*, 34–38.

⁸⁴ Lénárd, *Dhammó. II. rész. (Dhamma. II. Part)*, 208–12.

⁸⁵ Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*, 40.

⁸⁶ Lénárd, *Dhammó. II. rész. (Dhamma. II. Part)*, 217–74.

⁸⁷ Lénárd, *Dhammó. Bevezetés a Buddha tanába (Dhamma. Introduction to the Teachings of Buddha.)*, 63; Lénárd, *Dhammó. II. Rész. (Dhamma. II. Part)*, 243–78.

His counterpart, Rohonczy discussed religion not only from religious perspectives, such as the dogmas, the differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and church organizations, but also by focusing on the existing problems and inner tensions of the Hungarian society, as well as the unfolding Western colonialism in Asian countries. His book is remarkably multifold, and his writing style is refreshingly simple and disarmingly direct. The book reflected noticeably the *fin de siècle* mood of the Hungarian society. He attacked armament policies and nationalism and talked about the power and financial struggles over religion, the eye-popping richness of the Church, and the issue of civil weddings. He was eager to explore the relationship between social and religious institutional systems. He suggested that instead of the contemporary compulsory religious education, schools should teach general moral education and about all religions in general. His book raised the issues of public health, poverty, cultural services, and social policy⁸⁸. He compared Christian and Buddhist ideas about the world, the purpose of life, sin, morality, personality (“self”), creation and predestination. He dived at length into the meaning of Nirvana, pointing out the unsatisfactory teachings and morality of Christianity, and the lack of true Christian morality in daily life: “The Christian religion is a religion of conquest, because of its principles, it wants to subjugate humanity⁸⁹.” He summarizes the Buddhist religion as follows: “The correct recognition of our own nature and the laws of the universe, and the attainment of eternal peace and permanent existence, the Nirvana, by obedience to these physical, moral, and spiritual laws, which transcends the good and evil, error and suffering, beyond all thoughts and imaginations, and beyond all laws and forms of finality⁹⁰.” He strongly denied that Nirvana should be interpreted as nothingness. By criticizing Christian dogmatism, he emphasized the importance of acceptance religions in their own terms and praised Buddhists by not being lazy. Similarly, in his opinion, Buddhism should be considered acceptable only without dogmatism. Structurally, he did not push a comparison between the two religions built upon a Christian approach, as most Christian authors do, but took a more neutral perspective. In his line of thought, he often broke away from a narrower interpretation of religions, discussing the phenomena of life, death, wakefulness and dream, time and space, matter, spirit, and will, making only loose references to religious traditions, but making his argument by relying on the scientific knowledge and philosophic currents of his

⁸⁸ Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, *A modern vallás - A XX. század vallásos mozgalmái (The Modern Religion - the Religious Movements of the XX. Century)*, 154.

⁸⁹ Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, 144.

⁹⁰ Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, 41.

time⁹¹. On the other hand, he subsequently covered the issue of the compatibility of religions and natural sciences (Chemistry, Physics, Astrophysics (pairing with Buddhist cosmogony), Geology). Meanwhile, he attacked the idea that religion should be reconciled with science at all costs.

We can be reassured that neither Lénárd, nor Rohony were fanatics. Lénárd even joined the Reformed Church a few years later. Both of them had a keen interest to educate the public about Buddhism and explain and clarify its basic teachings, but instead of its devotional practices, they were mostly attracted to Buddhism's intellectual and spiritual realm, so their approach might be seen closer to the so-called modernist interpretation of Buddhism in Asia⁹².

Differences 2.: Christian writers' criticism of Buddhism

Except for Brassai, Christian writers were far more critical of Buddhism. At the end of the 19th and beginning of 20th century, there were more Buddhists (c. 500 million) in the world than Christians, and thus Buddhism was seen by them as a threat to the Western world. Many of them thought of the European Buddhist groups as the spearheads of this threat (e.g., Szeghy).

Several of them also included criticism of Islam in their work - but interestingly, contrary to the current trends, it was not Islam but Buddhism that appeared to them as a threat. Nevertheless, Islam received a lot of criticism from them for its rigidity and lifeless dogmatism⁹³.

As Fajcsák pointed it out, there was a great need at this time to explain Buddhism, but the analyses could be hardly seen as always nuanced. We encounter a series of arguments and counter-arguments in these works⁹⁴. Christian commentators basically discussed Buddhism through Christian eyes, with a Christian approach. The only exception was Brassai, a scholar of the sanskrit language who gave probably the most neutral account on Buddhism⁹⁵.

⁹¹ Révkomáromi (Rohonczy) Schmidt, 65–87.

⁹² Although this is a substantial issue, let me just briefly refer here to one of the articles of Jan Nattier. Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street,” *Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1997, <http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/buddhism-comes-main-street>.

⁹³ See for example in different part of the writings of Mátyás Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ),” *Theológiai Szaklap* 9, nos 1-4. (1911): 299–308.

⁹⁴ Fajcsák, “A kereszténység (a Világ világossága) és a buddhizmus (Ázsia világossága) a 19-20. század fordulójának magyar valláselméleti munkáiban (The Christianity (the Light of the World) and the Buddhism (the Light of Asia) in the Hungarian Religious Theory Works of the Turn of the 19-20th Century,” 207.

⁹⁵ Brassai, “Buddhismus (Buddhism).”

Most of these Hungarian Christian commentators were primarily concentrating on the oldest thought form of Buddhism, the teachings of the Theravada school. The only exception that was Szeghy, who discussed at greater length some other forms and groups of Buddhism, like the Japanese Jodo school, the cult of Amida (the various forms of hells, Jizo, Amida's paradise, etc.)⁹⁶. But Szeghy also went on with his criticism: since Buddhism does not form a coherent system, contradictory schools can emerge from its differences and contradictions⁹⁷. Another exception is Ödön Kovács, who examined the history of Buddhism and its relic cult, as well as Tibetan Buddhism⁹⁸.

A summary and classification of their other observations show that most writers gave devoted a large amount of energy to denying the assumed early Buddhist influence on Christianity during the Antiquity and squelched the possibility of a Christian influence on Buddhism in later years. They argued that although Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist and Catholic rites seem to be similar, they should be seen fundamentally as postulates of human nature which, independently of Gautama Buddha's teachings, were to inevitably develop⁹⁹.

Despite their critical comments, they also sought to understand, both conscientiously and professionally, Buddhist teachings. It is no exaggeration to say that this professional attitude was based on their own personal requirements and expectations, and personal obligations as religious educators working in various institutions.

As mentioned earlier, group B writers were eager to meticulously compare the life events and death circumstances of the historical Buddha and Jesus. There was a great interest in drawing analogies between Buddhism and Christianity, the ministry of Jesus and the life story of Buddha, and to use these, consequently, to expand their critical views on Buddhism.

Christ gave his blood for the Humanity, but Buddha's death was almost ridiculous, commented Szeghy¹⁰⁰. Buddha was given a long lifetime to teach, but for Christ, three years was enough to expound and put into motion his teachings.

Christian writers tried honestly and eagerly to understand the meaning of Nirvana. Some arrived to link the concept of Nirvana Buddhism to nihilism, while others vigorously refuted this, maintaining that it is a misinterpretation of Buddhism to label it nihilistic. For example,

⁹⁶ Ernő Szeghy, "A buddhizmusról II. (About Buddhism II.)," *Katolikus Szemle* 16., no. VIII. (1902): 738–39. See also Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Christianity)*, 54–58.

⁹⁷ Szeghy, "A buddhizmusról II. (About Buddhism II.)," 738.

⁹⁸ Another one was Vay, who wrote about Korean and Japanese Buddhism, but rather as a travel writer, and not as a theologian.

⁹⁹ Szeghy, "A buddhizmusról II. (About Buddhism II.)," 741.

¹⁰⁰ Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Christianity)*, 72.

Kováts provided a lengthy analysis of Nirvana (and compared it also to “Brahman”) and was very committed to grasp the genuine Buddhist meaning of the word. However, after a long analysis, he concluded, that Nirvana should be described as “nothingness”, or “megsemmisülés”, which means in Hungarian “total annihilation”¹⁰¹. Other writers rejected the idea that Buddhism strives to annihilation. Ödön Kovács denied that Nirvana would mean annihilation in Buddhism. He dismissed the idea that Buddhism is nihilistic or atheist¹⁰².

Christian writers expressed their criticism of the lack of “God, the Creator”, the absence of Personal God in Buddhism (e. g. Szeghy, Kováts J., Kiss J¹⁰³), and were dumbfounded by the absence of soul in the Buddhist doctrine. Meanwhile, the later “theist” and “polytheist” developments in Buddhism or anything which looked like similar to the concept of God in Christianity (like the Brahman, or the adi-buddha concept or the bodhisattva cult of the Mahayana tradition) were also powerfully and vigourously criticized and disapproved by them (e.g. Szeghy, Kováts J.¹⁰⁴). Buddhism eventually received serious criticism from everyone for its lack of ultimate God-concept. Prayer in Tibetan Buddhism was also labelled by Szeghy as just a “mechanical rattling”: there is actually no one to pray to, and therefore the prayer is just mere autosuggestion¹⁰⁵.

As Szeghy declared, “there is an insurmountable difference between the Catholic monasticism and the Sangha: The Sangha does not know God, the Sangha leads its members to destruction, to Nirvana, while the (Catholic) monasticism educates them for eternal life¹⁰⁶.”

After all, Buddhism is egoistic, and it is a “life-hater”, commented Szlávik¹⁰⁷, because “life is wrong” according to Buddhism, and thus it is in stark contrast with Christianity, which respects and celebrates human life (Kiss J.). Buddhism does not give the right for continuous

¹⁰¹ Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” 1912, 295.

¹⁰² As he says: “And in so far as the image of the abstract primordial essence, Brahma, Nirvana is even more abstract than her, it has surpassed the speculative thought of all sensual and definite beings, thus excluding all definitions.” Kovács, *A vallásbölcsezet kézikönyve (Handbook of Religious Philosophy)*, VI.:124.

¹⁰³ As Kiss stated: “We are already accustomed and find it very natural that the first and fundamental religious truth is the existence of God, the supreme being: and the second is the definition of the relationship in which the world and especially man is with God. Moreover, religion is commonly defined as: knowledge and reverence of God. And yet Buddhism, which wants to be a religion and really serves the religious needs of millions, does not know God.” Kiss, “Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World),” 1890, 59.

¹⁰⁴ See for example the chapter about God in Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” 1912, 273–78.

¹⁰⁵ Szeghy, “A buddhizmusról II. (About Buddhism II.),” 727.

¹⁰⁶ Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a keresztyénység (The Buddhism and Christianity)*.

¹⁰⁷ Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ),” 304–8.

personal improvement (Szlávik¹⁰⁸), and Buddhist teachings are paradoxical and unsatisfactory in many senses (e.g., Szeghy, Kiss J.). As a conclusion, most writers arrived to emphasize the natural “hierarchy” between religions, and in many cases, their final conclusions included some strong, judgmental expressions. Szeghy even stated at one place about Buddhism, that its system cannot literally be called religion: it is a pantheistic, pessimistic philosophy¹⁰⁹. Kováts also questioned whether Buddhism can be called religion (as it is rather just a philosophical system)¹¹⁰, others like Kiss J. opined that Christianity is the perfect religion, and Buddhism is one of the worst forms of religion.

Some found fault even with the application and usage of the words *rebirth* and *reincarnation* (in Hungarian: lélekvándorlás) in Buddhism as incorrect, because there is no “self” to be reborn (e.g., Szeghy).

They commented that Western Buddhism’s roots in pessimism can be related to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, agnosticism (e.g., Kováts), atheism (e.g., Kováts, Szlávik), egoism (Szlávik), and it can be found in all the confusing ideologies that characterized the turn of the century¹¹¹. As Kováts emphasized, “We see the reason for sympathy for Buddhism in the fact that adherents of various anti-religious tendencies like pessimism, positivism, evolution, and agnosticism all find in Buddhism, at least in part, the doctrines for which they are in favor of¹¹².”

Let us now move one step further towards moral and ethical issues and dilemmas. Buddhist morality and ethics were praised by many of the Christian writers, as an impetus bringing order for Eastern societies, but was also criticized for its lack of deepness and profundity. Szeghy asserted that “its direct influence brought a good direct impact on the peoples of Asia.” “Its moral rules, no matter how volatile they are, have undoubtedly had a noble effect on its followers.¹¹³”

On the other hand, in this sense too, their arguments boiled down to juxtapose Buddhism to Christianity. Christian writers tended to assert that Buddhists do not understand the true meaning of the Sin. Buddhist morality (and compassion) is passive, while Christian is active,

¹⁰⁸ Szlávik, 300–301.

¹⁰⁹ Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Christianity)*.

¹¹⁰ Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” 1912, 274.

¹¹¹ Kováts J., *A Buddhizmus És a Kereszténység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity)*, 1912, 268–69. Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ),” 306.

¹¹² Kováts J., “A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Protestant Christianity),” 1912, 268.

¹¹³ Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység (The Buddhism and Christianity)*, 78.

wrote Samu Kiss¹¹⁴. Christians are building hospitals, and orphanages, so Christianity is socially active, while there is no real social awareness in Buddhism. Life and work is praised in Christianity, and the equality of man and woman are respected in Christianity, but Buddhism is quite an opposite of that. Buddhism was also blamed for its hatred of women¹¹⁵.

Szlávik argued that Buddhists are over-estimating their own power, and it is disastrous that there is no salvation in Buddhism and thus its teaching is opposite of the teaching of the reformed Church (in Hungarian: “keresztyénség”)¹¹⁶. Kováts underlined that salvation can not come from Man, it is coming from God. Christianity gives the right for personal freedom (Szlávik). Christian writers also problematized the lack of faith and the lack of redemption in Buddhism. Szeghy also remarked that it is ill-considered and fallacious that Buddhism does not directly examine the Creation, although it is a crucially important and core issue of a religion¹¹⁷.

Szeghy declared that Christianity is the “natural religion”, so every human being naturally arrives to it. These writers acknowledged similarities between Christianity and Buddhism (monasticism, cult of relics, rosaries, bells), but they argued that all these can be attributed and traced back to the human nature. Szeghy turned here to Tertullian: “Anima humana est naturaliter christiana.” (In English: The human soul is naturally Christian.) The truths and moral principles of Christianity are retraceable to the human nature, so that they arise involuntarily from it.

Conclusion

This was the last period when Hungarian intellectuals living and working in different areas of the former Hungarian kingdom had an opportunity to comment on a new form of religion. Many of these thoughts were initiated in areas which were ceded a few years later at the end of the First World War to neighbouring countries or newly formed states. Some of the religious intellectuals presented here wrote their essays on Buddhism in Transylvania (present-day Romania), i.e., Máramaros (Maramures), Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), and others in Upper

¹¹⁴ Kiss, “*A buddhizmus és a kereszténység* (Buddhism and Christianity),” 249.

¹¹⁵ Kiss, “*Ázsia világossága és a világ világossága* (The Light of Asia and the Light of the World),” 1890, 309.

¹¹⁶ Szlávik, “Buddha, Mohammed, Krisztus (Buddha, Mohammed and Christ).”

¹¹⁷ Szeghy, *A buddhizmus és a kereszténység* (*The Buddhism and Christianity*), 25.

Hungary (present-day Slovakia), Eperjes (Presov). Some of these Hungarian-inhabited areas were returned to Hungary for only a short period of time at the end of 1930s and 1940s, but eventually the wider Hungarian intellectual landscape of the *fin de siècle* in which these essays and books were written on Buddhism never returned.

People became interested in Buddhism primarily through English, French and German academic works and translations. Those who became interested in Buddhism (the Hollóssy-circle, Rohoncy, Lénárd) belonged to the urbanized and more educated segment of the population. They were intellectuals and artists, and their interest in Buddhism was developed on the periphery of the nascent Western Buddhism as a sort of rudimentary, secular proto- or crypto-Buddhism. It was an un-institutionalized, relaxed, and open way to study Buddhism, but they also kept alive and never denied their natural spiritual interest to Christianity. They did not show any kind of “fanatism”, and the ritual practices (meditation, prostration, ceremonies etc.) were not their main targets. Although they were inclined to understand and interpret Buddhism on its own terms, none of them was really visualizing a clear format for a future Hungarian Buddhism. Their writing style was open and educative, and they did not criticize a possible development of multiple religious adherences.

Their counterparts, the Christian theologians and intellectuals also showed a genuine interest in Buddhism. Although they were in favor of Christianity, they tried sincerely and genuinely to understand Buddhism with all professional responsibility. Both groups' publications aimed for a general readership. Although neither group was equipped with the necessary methodological paraphernalia of Buddhology, the group of Christian writers expressed their criticism on Buddhism by using a wide range of the intellectual paraphernalia of Christian philosophers. Many of them were looking at Buddhism as something that possessed certain inherently fraudulent characteristics, and which ultimately contained a smorgasboard of different problem-plagued misconceptions. The absence of sophistication in their analyses of Buddhist teachings can be partly attributed to the fact that none of them had full access at that time to the mesmerizing richness of Buddhist philosophy. They were “religious professionals”, so their adherence to their faith and to the doctrines of their churches shone through their essays and ultimately determined their conclusions.

Notwithstanding, both groups endeavour to understand and give to the Hungarian audience the first sturdy and substantial summaries on Buddhism helped to prepare the scenery for the emergence of Hungarian Oriental Studies.

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