CHAPTER ONE

CREATING IMAGES OF JAPANESE BUDDHISM AND CULTURE

Japanese Buddhism and Culture at the World’s Parliament of Religions

In a recent presentation of Japanese Buddhism for an English-reading audience issued by the Japan Buddhist Federation (JBF, Zen nihon bukkyōkai 全日本仏教会), “the only federation of traditional Buddhist denominations in Japan”, with the ambitious task of introducing the “essence of Japanese Buddhism”, Buddhism seems to have acquired a privileged status over all other religious traditions, while the well-known and often abused dichotomy ‘East-spirituality/West-materialism’, with some hints at the superiority and ‘uniqueness’ of the Eastern (read Japanese) civilization is implied. What deserves attention here, in the discussion of the encounters of cultures and the way of presenting them, are the modalities chosen to promote Buddhism in a 2004 publication, which, while condemning Christianity and Islam for dismissing other religious traditions (here, in particular, Buddhism) as “minor or inferior”, has remained entrapped in the same discriminatory mechanism. It is therefore worth quoting a passage of the preface at length here:

With the indiscriminate terrorist attack in the United States on September 11 of 2001 and incessant war and conflict among monotheistic Christian and Muslim zealots also happening elsewhere in the world presently, conscientious people have become aware that Buddhism offers something to remedy the tension and contribute to world peace. In other words, while Christians and Muslims tend to adhere to their own God as absolute and almighty, they seem to disregard other religions as minor or inferior. On the other hand, Buddhists recognize that the Buddha nature is entailed in every sentient being, and are relatively generous toward other religions. This is the reason why Buddhism has become spotlighted.

What emerges from the above quote is that unlike Buddhism, monotheistic religious systems, being intolerant towards other religions,

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2 Ibid., x. See also viii–ix.
3 Ibid., vii (italics added).
are somehow dangerous and not suited for contributing to a peaceful society; Christians and Muslims are attached to their god(s) and are centred only on human beings, while Buddhism, marked by a broader view which includes all sentient beings, is thus bestowed with a higher status. Such features make “conscientious people” become aware of the alternative offered by Buddhism. In addition, among the East Asian countries, Japan was the only one able to create its “own unique culture during the period of isolation when they [the Japanese] avoided being colonized by the advanced nations of the West”, while assimilating and integrating those Eastern civilizations and their Buddhist background, which greatly affected the Japanese, with that of their “indigenous civilization”. However, Japan, which “was forced to open its doors at the beginning of the 19th century … was greatly influenced by Western civilization”. Yet, the booklet further asserts that:

In order to catch up with the advanced nations of the West, the Japanese differentiated the merits and demerits of Eastern and Western civilizations, and tried to absorb the good portions of both and integrate them into their own civilization. This successful integration seems to owe mainly to the Japanese flexible and inquisitive spirit and their diligence nurtured by the influence of Buddhism.

Such a picture of Japanese Buddhism portrayed in the twenty-first century seems to be nothing but the remake of a series of past representations of Japan and its culture, made for a non-Japanese audience, but which are at the same time useful at the internal level. As a matter of fact, they functioned to strengthen the prestige of Japanese culture and religious tradition abroad, which could serve as a tool in the struggle for power within Japan (for example, to enhance the prestige of Japanese Buddhist institutions) and in the Asian context (for example, to reinforce Japanese wartime ideology).

The first major international stage for the presentation of Japanese Buddhism to the ‘West’ was the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. This event led, years after, to a predominance of Zen Buddhism over the other denominations, which has characterized

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4 Ibid., vii–viii.
5 Ibid., viii.
6 Ibid., viii.
7 In this respect, see for example the section on Okakura Kakuzō’s English writings below.