

## Press release

### “Buddhism is not a pop religion”

Scholar of religious studies Perry Schmidt-Leukel of the Cluster of Excellence presents a comprehensive introduction to the history and the present of Buddhism – author refutes numerous Western clichés – “take off rose-coloured glasses” – Buddhism was and is less peaceful than thought – not a religion “without god” – discrimination against women – environmental protection ambivalent – tense relationship towards Western principles such as liberalism and human rights

**Münster, 4 July 2017 (exc)** According to scholars of religious studies Western observers see Buddhism too much through “rose-coloured glasses”. “Whereas it was perceived as pessimistic and nihilistic before and to a certain degree still today, numerous clichés now prevail of Buddhism as an easy pop religion, peaceable and tolerant, as a spirituality without dogmas and beliefs, even without god,” the scholar of religious studies and Anglican theologian Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel of the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics“ describes in his new introductory volume “Buddhismus verstehen (Understanding Buddhism)”, now published in German by Gütersloher Verlagshaus. Buddhism is often not even considered as a religion in the West, but “as a psychology of wisdom, a lifestyle or a stylish worldview, particularly suited for the somewhat slackened, but wealthy, post-modern intellectual.” This may also be attributed to the dissatisfaction with ecclesial forms of Christianity, but has nothing to do with the reality of today’s Asian Buddhism and classic Buddhism, the scholar explains, who does research on the relationship of the world religions towards each other at the Cluster of Excellence.

The introductory volume covers two and a half thousand years of the history and the mindscape of Buddhism. The scholar of religious studies refutes numerous older and newer clichés by referring to a number of Buddhist sources as well as historical and theological comments. Buddhism is not simply a “religion without god, just because it does not circle around a creator deity”. To this day, people resort to violence in its name. Important Buddhist tendencies decline Western principles such as liberalism, individualism, human rights and democracy, he continues. The fact that for a long time women were discriminated against in a similar way as in other world religions also differs from the positive image in the West. In its principles, Buddhism also puts the human being before nature and thus is far from always being “nature-friendly” as claimed by the modern eco-Buddhism. “After all, the variety of tendencies and regional manifestations of Buddhism as a world religion is widely unknown in the West,” says Schmidt-Leukel. “It is rather that each religion has an enormous spectrum of inner-religious, sometimes contradicting manifestations.”

### Buddhism and politics

In the volume subtitled “The history and mindscape of an unusual religion”, the academic outlines the development of Buddhist beliefs, from the basic teachings of early Buddhism to its manifold further developments. He also examines the relationship between Buddhism and

politics as well as Buddhism and modern age in many facets. He explains the significance of Buddha Siddhārtha Gautama in the course of time, of meditation, ethics and community, of the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Tantrism as well as Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. A particular challenge is the attitude of Buddhism towards the multiplicity of religions in many countries, says Schmidt-Leukel. “Just like all other religions, Buddhism ought to rethink its claim to be superior to other religions.”

The book was first published in English (“Understanding Buddhism”) by Dunedin Academic Press in Edinburgh. The work has been praised widely, for example by the British religious philosopher John Hick and the Buddhist “Vipassanaforum” which called the volume one of the best introductions to Buddhism. At the Cluster of Excellence Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel heads the project C2-16 “Interreligious Theology”. He has published many works on this subject. Recently a compendium on the relationship between Buddhists and Christians in Asian countries marked by Buddhism, “Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia”, was published in English by EOS Editions in Sankt Ottilien. (dak/vvm)

## **Clichés and their rectification – core content from “Understanding Buddhism”**

### **Religious beliefs – a religion without god?**

Regarding the Western belief of Buddhism as a “religion without god” the scholar of religious studies Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel explains: “Whether this view of Buddhism is correct depends on what is defined as ‘god’.” Traditional Buddhism believes in the existence of many gods that are “part of this world”, and not transcendent. If one defines “god” as a transcendent reality, then the Buddhist gods actually do not qualify. “However, classic Buddhism does see Nirvana as a transcendent and ultimate reality. It is considered an ‘unconditioned’ and ‘deathless’ reality. This comes very close to the concept of God and, looking at it this way, Buddhism is not at all god-less.”

“However, Nirvana is not the creator of the earthly world,” Schmidt-Leukel continues. “Nirvana is the destination and the condition of final liberation, whereas Christianity, Islam or Judaism see ‘God’ as redeemer as well as creator of the world.” Buddha criticised believing in a creator god if this comprised an understanding of the world that everything was predetermined by the creator. “Then people would no longer be responsible for their own spiritual development. This would undermine any motivation to walk the Buddhist path of liberation.”

### **Gender roles – women-friendly tendencies?**

The role of women in Buddhism is ambivalent according to Schmidt-Leukel. “Whereas the Buddhist teaching does allow the equal treatment of men and women in religion, this has not been the practice for a long time.” Early Buddhism established the order of nuns and thus enabled women to take a religious path of life. “The nuns however were subordinated to the Buddhist monks in almost every respect and were even made responsible for the decline of Buddha’s teachings.” The Buddhist tradition also asserts that “a Buddha needs to be male”. A woman thus can only become a Buddha after being reincarnated as a man. “From today’s perspective, this male bias is conflicting with the Buddhist principles of ‘detachment from all forms’.”

This contradiction between Buddhist insight and practiced gender inequality may be attributed to “the patriarchal cultural context” in which Buddhism developed, as related by Schmidt-Leukel.

“Yet this alone is too simple. That one adapted to the prevailing sexist norms may be connected with the ascetic male practice in Buddhism.” It is actually linked with a misogynist mentality. “In Buddhist writings there are many indications that monks saw women as a menace. Either because they could tempt monks to return into laity or because they would seduce monks to break their vow of chastity.” Schmidt-Leukel sees the misogynist tendencies in Buddhism as a sign for the problems that male Buddhists had with their own sexuality. “This could explain why in Buddhist Tantrism, which integrates sexuality in its spiritual practice, the pendulum could swing into to the opposite direction and women were collectively described as ‘heaven’ and ‘highest wisdom’.”

### **Buddhism and politics – seeking a third way**

Buddhism has always been interested in politics, Schmidt-Leukel writes, in fact for the same reasons and to the same extent as it has been interested in ethics. “A morally good behaviour, be it in the private or the public sector, supports the personal spiritual development and the well-being of the fellow human beings. And a behaviour is considered as morally good if it contributes – in keeping with the Dharma, the cosmic law, the teachings of the Buddha – to the diminishing or alleviation of suffering.” Even if capitalism could bring people wealth and avoid poverty, this does not mean, the author claims, that Buddhists felt comfortable with capitalism. Many times they reacted to it with scepticism or rejection as it favours consumerism and a greedy attitude. “Therefore many Buddhists sympathised with communism in Asia in the 20th century. Yet after painful experiences Buddhists today often seek a third way, a Buddhist ‘Middle Way’, in economics.”

### **Western values – rejection of liberalism and human rights?**

Important Buddhist tendencies are critical or even hostile against Western principles such as democracy, liberalism and individualism, as Schmidt-Leukel proves in his work. Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, the influential reformation Buddhist from Thailand, rejected capitalism and liberalism, because according to him both supported greed and selfishness. “According to this tendency, the fundamental objective of politics ought to be the welfare of the community and not the personal interests of the individual. This is why supporters of this direction prefer a socialist system of any kind to political or economical liberalism.”

The classic Buddhist ideal of a state rule is, according to Schmidt-Leukel, that of a monarchy under the teachings of Buddha, “which can neither be reconciled with democracy nor with the concept of a secular state that does not favour any particular religion”. Moreover, under this ideal “human rights would not be guaranteed”: “The concept of human rights is intrinsically connected to individualism – this is why many Buddhists distrust it.” Other Buddhists however supported the idea of human rights by now. “They refer to the strong Buddhist tradition of individual responsibility according to which spiritual development is possible only if one follows one’s own insight freely.”

### **Environmental protection – new tendency of “eco-Buddhism”**

Whether environmental protection makes sense from a Buddhist perspective is not entirely clear maintains Schmidt-Leukel. The life as an animal is not considered a desirable form of reincarnation and in the “Pure Land”, a Buddhist ideal world, neither women nor “real” animals exist. “In the end there is plenty of evidence for the fact,” the scholar of religious study states,

“that Buddhism traditionally promoted an attitude that prefers culture and civilisation to non-human nature, and in this respect hardly differs from Western tradition.”

In the meantime the trend of “eco-Buddhism” has evolved, which in its justification of environmental protection refuses Western and Christian values: “The Christian idea implies that man should subdue and ultimately conquer nature and eco-Buddhism declines this idea.” Among Western environmental activists, eco-Buddhism meets great approval and is seen as a system that ought to replace the Jewish-Christian worldview. Only this way, they claim, the “ecological crisis” could be solved. Schmidt-Leukel sees the reasons for positive approaches towards an ecological commitment in Buddhism in two motives: “The first motive is based on the Buddhist rule that no sentient being may be injured or killed.” This includes the protection of nature as their habitat. “The second approach reverts to the teaching of the universal mutual dependence which is considered as a particularly strong motivation for ecologically sensitive thinking.”

### **Buddhist ethics – not just a moral of avoiding**

According to Buddhist ethics it is mandatory to abstain from actions that cause suffering, Prof. Schmidt-Leukel states. “This is based on the conviction that morality contributes to overcome the causes of suffering. Unfortunately this has led a number of Western interpreters to the wrong conclusion that Buddhist ethics only comprised a passive moral of avoiding. Buddhist texts however generally emphasise that the most efficient way to fight the roots of evil is to practice the opposite behaviour. So positive and active deeds are also a part of the Buddhist moral. (dak/vvm)

**Notes:** Schmidt-Leukel, Perry: Buddhismus verstehen. Geschichte und Ideenwelt einer ungewöhnlichen Religion. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Hans-Georg Türistig (translated from English by Hans-Georg Türistig). Vom Verfasser bearbeitete, erweiterte und autorisierte Ausgabe (edition revised, extended and authorised by the author), Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2017, 367 p., ISBN 9783579085326, €29.99.

Schmidt-Leukel, Perry: Understanding Buddhism (Understanding Faith), Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press 2006, 180 p., ISBN 9781903765180, €15.49.

Schmidt-Leukel, Perry (ed.): Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia, Sankt Ottilien: EOS Editions 2017, 460 p., ISBN 9783830678519, €29.95.

**Image captions:** Scholar of religious studies Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel (picture: Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, Sarah Batelka), book cover (Gütersloher Verlagshaus).

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Some 200 academics from more than 20 disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and from 14 countries do research in the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster (WWU). They deal with the complex relationship of religion and politics across epochs and cultures: from the ancient pantheon and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Middle Ages and the early modern period to the current situation in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. It is nationally the largest research association of its kind and of the 43 clusters of excellence in Germany, it is the only one to deal with religions. The federal government and the state governments support the project in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative with 40.1 million euros from 2012 until 2018.