

## **The Harlequin effect**

Harlequin is a character in comedy and pantomime with a shaved head, masked face, chequered tights, and a wooden stick or sword. His name comes from the most popular Italian Commedia Dell'arte<sup>1</sup> character called Arlecchino, a zanni or comic servant, originating around 1590. Arlecchino is a light-hearted, nimble and astute servant, often acting to thwart the plans of his master, and pursuing his own love interest, Colombina, with wit and resourcefulness, often competing with the sterner and melancholy Pierrot.

Arlecchino appears as Harlequin in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, inheriting his physical agility and trickster qualities, but his name comes from a mischievous “devil” character in medieval passion plays. He has come to be the most famous of comic characters in western literature. What is of instructive interest to us here is that Arlecchino or Harlequin characteristically thinks that the whole world is exactly like his family and acts accordingly.

The remarkably perceptive scholar of Buddhism, Urs App, throughout his book *The Cult of Emptiness*, skillfully uses “the Arlecchino mechanism”<sup>2</sup> or “Harlequin effect” to show how “the comic as well as tragic potential of such projection of the familiar on the realm of the unknown” can be applied to “the Western discovery of Buddhist thought and the invention of oriental philosophy” (the book’s subtitle), more specifically, how the Christian European colonials understood Buddhism during their early encounters.

Historically, **colonialism** began with Catholic Europe, when Spain and Portugal “shared” the heathen world to Christianize them, with the mediation of perhaps the most worldly of religious figures, the Borgia Pope, Alexander VI. He mediated the Treaty of Tordesillas (1492), which drew an imaginary line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, running from the North to the South Poles. Portugal could conquer all the lands 180 degrees west of the line, and the Spanish, everything to the east.<sup>3</sup>

The Catholic kings of Portugal and of Spain believed that it was their sacred duty to establish Catholicism in their newly conquered lands to convert natives (who were regarded as not fully human until they converted) and a means to secure loyalty to the Crown among its new subjects. This urgency, and also to counter the tide of the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe, forced the Pope to officially accept the formation of the Jesuits or Society of Jesus in 1540, as the intellectual and activist vanguard to spread Catholicism to the conquered.<sup>4</sup>

Among the most important of the early Jesuits was Francis Xavier (1506-52), who established missions and proselytized in India in 1542, as well as in the East Indies (including Malacca or

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<sup>1</sup> Freely translated as “comedy of the art of improvisation,” which characterizes this theatrical form that originated in Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> Urs App, *The Cult of Emptiness: The Western Discovery of Buddhist Thought and the Invention of Oriental Philosophy*, Rorschach (Switzerland) & Kyoto: UniversityMedia, 2012:11. M Kapstein: “The story told here is wonderfully engaging, enlivened by App’s dogged antiquarian researches, which take him to his authors’ original manuscripts and annotated copies in order to uncover the precise genealogies of the ideas in play. *The Cult of Emptiness* is a model of scholarly detective work.” (review, [History of Religions 54,4](#) May 2015:459-466).

<sup>3</sup> Page & Sonnenburg (eds), *Colonialism: An international Social, Cultural and Political Encyclopedia*, 2003:496, 551, 585 f. See also Christianity and colonialism: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_and\\_colonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_colonialism).

<sup>4</sup> Page & Sonnenburg, *Colonialism* (op cit), 2000:301 f.

Melaka) and Japan. A former soldier, like many other members of the highly disciplined order, Xavier was first sent to Portuguese colonies in India. He then went on to Japan, and finally China, where he died of fever in 1552. Although he failed to convert China or Japan, it is estimated that he made over 30,000 conversions in his decade in Asia.<sup>5</sup>

The holy gag began, according to App's account, when Francis Xavier decided that the Japanese word for "God," conforming to his Christian conception of the Supreme Being, was "Dainichi," the Japanese name for the cosmic Buddha Vairocana. He exhorted the Japanese to worship God: "Dainichi wo ogami are!" but the Japanese heard "Pray to Vairocana!" Little wonder that Xavier was widely accepted by the Japanese then as a Western – that is, Indian -- devotee of Shingon Buddhism (App 2012:14)!

Within a few years, however, the Jesuits saw the joke which they had themselves cracked. They frantically worked to remove any use of potentially troublesome Japanese terms from their tracts: Dainichi, for instance, was replaced by Dios (App 2012:17, 47). As a result, their Japanese writings sounded more and more creole ("rojak"), where Japanese verbs and connectives were used to link Portuguese and Latin nouns.

As they researched more deeply into the religions of Japan and of China to write a catechism for the natives and to inform their European readers, they gained deep familiarity with the Japanese language and some classical Chinese. Besides their own experts, they had the collaboration of learned Japanese converts, such as the apostate Tendai monk Paulo Chōzen (d 1557) (App 2012:34 f), and the father-son team of doctors, Paulo and Vicente Tōin (53–59).

The Latin texts of the Catholic missionaries named a luminous first principle in Latin as *Ixin*, which turned out to be the "One Mind" (Jap. *Isshin*), found in many East Asian Buddhist traditions. The reality, however, is that it was almost clearly identified with the teachings of the Chinese Chan master Zongmi (780–841) in his "Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity," developed in the lineage of his disciple, Huangbo.

The One Mind, identified with emptiness, Buddha-nature, and the destiny of the enlightened, was understood by the Jesuits to be the amoral core of Buddhism. Yet, the Buddhist clergy exerted moral control over the Buddhist masses through promises of rebirth in heaven and threats of hell, just as in Christianity.

To a significant extent, the Harlequin effect also occurred early in Chinese Buddhism. The early 5<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the times of Dàoshēng (c360–434), were noted for the meeting of Buddhist and Daoist traditions. It was the heyday of "concept-matching" (*géyì* 格義), where difficult Buddhist terms were translated by what were viewed as their Daoist cognates, so that Buddhist concepts were understood in the light of neo-Daoist ideas.<sup>6</sup>

It was the time of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and their doctrine of emptiness, a notion that resonated with the neo-Daoist ideas of nothingness or non-being (*wú* 無). Indeed, even today, if we closely examine the Chinese Mahāyāna conception of "emptiness," it is easier to understand and accept it, if we are learned in Daoism rather than if we are trained in early

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<sup>5</sup> Page & Sonnenburg, *Colonialism* (op cit), 2000:302.

<sup>6</sup> See **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, [SD 40b \(2.2.3\)](#).

Buddhism. The Harlequin effect becomes clear once we are familiar with the history of Buddhism in China.<sup>7</sup>

The Harlequin effect is more widespread in religion – including Buddhism – than we might know (or want to know). For, it is wishful thinking, pure biases, half-knowledge or sheer ignorance that create the kind of religion, the Buddhism, that we champion. Or worse, our perception of Buddhism is fed and fabricated by our admiration for other religions, pursuit of wealth and status, and eccentricities, rather than any true interest in personal development or self-awakening.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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<sup>7</sup> See **How Buddhism Became Chinese**, [SD 40b](#), with detailed references.