Could David Hume have known about Buddhism? Charles Francois Dolu, the Royal College of La Flèche, and the global Jesuit intellectual network.

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1. Introduction

Both philosophers and Buddhist scholars have long noted the affinities between David Hume's empiricism and the Buddhist philosophical tradition.[1] The conventional wisdom, however, has been that these affinities must either be the result of an independent convergence or of a general "oriental" influence on 18th century philosophy and letters. This is because very little was known about Buddhism in the Europe of the 1730s, when Hume was writing *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Buddhism had died out in India, Japan was closed to the West, and European scholars in the Chinese court focused on the elite Confucian and Taoist traditions.[2]

I will show that, in spite of this, it was possible for Hume to have had contact with Buddhist philosophical views. The link to Buddhism comes through the Jesuit scholars at the Royal College of La Flèche. Hume lived in La Flèche from 1735-37 and wrote the *Treatise* there. In particular, Charles Francois Dolu was a Jesuit missionary who lived at the Royal College in La Flèche from 1723-1740, overlapping with Hume's stay. He was a sophisticated and well-traveled man, who had extensive knowledge both of other religions and cultures and of scientific ideas. Dolu had had first-hand experience with Theravada Buddhism as part of the second French embassy to Siam in 1687-1688. Buddhism was the official religion of Siam and members of the embassy interacted extensively with the "talapoins" -- the European name for Siamese Buddhists. In 1727, just eight years before Hume's visit, Dolu also had talked with Ippolito Desideri, a Jesuit missionary who visited Tibet and made an extensive study of Tibetan Buddhism from 1716-1721. Desideri studied the *Lam Rim Chen Mo* of Thongkhapa, one of the central figures of Tibetan

Buddhist philosophy. Desideri's unpublished book describing Tibet was one of the most extensive and accurate accounts of Buddhist philosophy until the 20th century.

Dolu and Desideri were part of a network of philosophically, culturally and scientifically knowledgeable Jesuits, with connections to both La Flèche and Asia. They included Jean Venance Bouchet, the notable Hindu scholar, Jean Richaud and Jean Fontaney, distinguished astronomers who made discoveries in India and China, and Joachim Bouvet who was a mathematical advisor to the Chinese Emperor and corresponded with Leibniz. There is increasing recognition of the mutual influence between European and Asian intellectual traditions in the early modern period.[3] The story of Hume and the Jesuits suggests that there could have been contact between Buddhist ideas and one of the founding fathers of the European Enlightenment.

2. David Hume and the Jesuit College at La Flèche

It is always frustrating that so few people save great men's letters before they become great. But the lack of information about Hume's early life is particularly problematic. Hume's magnum opus, *The Treatise of Human Nature*, was written when he was an unknown in his early twenties, and yet it contains almost all his original philosophical discoveries — his later work was largely elaborations or reworkings of the ideas in the *Treatise*. We know something about the influences on those ideas but much is still obscure.[4] In an early letter, Hume himself cites Malebranche, Descartes, Berkeley and Bayle as prerequisites for understanding the *Treatise*, but he also makes it clear that he has taken the general skeptical view much further than they have.[5]

However, we do know that from 1735-1737, at the time he wrote the *Treatise*, Hume lived at La Flèche, a short walk away from The Royal College, established by Henri IV. It was the second

most important Jesuit college in France, exceeded only by Louis Le Grand in Paris. It had an extensive library, with 40,000 volumes. Descartes was an alumnus.[6]

There are only four letters from Hume's three years in France and only one from La Flèche, plus a later letter referring to his time there. Hume always described his time at La Flèche with great fondness. His brief autobiography talks about "The three years I passed very agreeably in France," and says, "I there laid down the Plan of Life which I have steadily and successfully pursued."[7] He wrote later about his "perfect tranquility in France."[8] In his one letter from La Flèche, written just after he arrived, he says he is engaged in constant study, and extols the virtues of a good library — the La Flèche college library was exceptional — compared to University courses and professors. And for reaping all the advantages of both travel and study, he says, "There is no place more proper than La Flèche . . . The People are extremely civil and sociable and besides the good company in the Town, there is a college of a hundred Jesuits, which is esteemed the most magnificent both for buildings and gardens of any of that Order in France or even in Europe."[9]

In 1762 Hume wrote a reply to George Campbell, a distinguished Scots academic who had attacked Hume's argument against miracles on religious grounds. He describes how his argument originally occurred to him "as I was walking in the cloisters of the Jesuit college of La Flèche, a town in which I passed two years of my youth, and engaged in a conversation with a Jesuit of some parts and learning, who was relating to me and urging some nonsensical miracle performed in their convent when I was tempted to dispute against him: and as my head was full of the topics of my Treatise of Human Nature, which I was at that time composing, this argument immediately occurred to me." He didn't convince the Jesuit who was "very much graveled" at first, but at last observed that Hume couldn't be right because in that case you would have to reject the Gospels as

well as the specific miracle in question. "Which observation," Hume says dryly, "I thought it proper to treat as sufficient answer."[10] Though this letter might seem dismissive of the Jesuits it is worth noting that it is addressed to Campbell - in the 18th century defending nonsensical miracles was not just a Jesuit practice, nor was it a sign of intellectual backwardness.

Hume was gregarious all his life — he loved talking about ideas, and later in life established clubs to encourage intellectual exchange. The Jesuits also had a long tradition of intellectual discussion. It seems likely that during the time he wrote the *Treatise* Hume was talking with the Jesuits at the Royal College. Although officially regressive, recent work emphasizes the extent to which the Jesuits in the late 17th and early 18th century participated in scientific and intellectual developments, particularly in a global context[11]. In early 18th century Europe, the Jesuit community probably knew more about Asian religious and philosophical ideas than anyone else.

3. Charles Francois Dolu

Who did Hume talk to? Who might be candidates for the Jesuit "of some parts and learning"? The triennial Jesuit catalogs listed all the members of all the Jesuit colleges, including their birthplaces and dates and brief details of their expertise and history. There were 34 official Jesuit fathers at La Flèche in 1734 and 40 in 1737. There were also students and "coadjutors" -- assistants performing menial labor (57 in 1734 and 52 in 1737) making up the "hundred Jesuits" Hume described. [12] A number of these fathers were "of some parts and learning" and had connections to Asia.

Robert Besnard was rector in 1734. Born in 1660, Besnard had been associated with the supporters of Malebranche, a strong influence on Hume, who had been active at La Flèche in the first part of the 18th century.[13] Yves-Marie André was Malebranche's biographer, correspondent

and most fervent disciple and taught philosophy at La Flèche from 1706–1709. André was persecuted by the authorities and his followers at La Flèche recanted by the 1720's though, like him, they remained in the order.[14] André reported to his own pupil, Le Quens, that Besnard was a good philosopher who had similar ideas but that, unlike André himself, he had avoided conflict with the authorities — "bon homme quoique habile."[15]

There were also eight ex-missionaries at La Flèche in Hume's time. Michel Pernet had been trained as a missionary to China and had visited Batavia, now Jakarta, before being turned back to Europe by the Dutch.[16] The 1737 rector, Jean Phillipe Bunou, had published treatises on barometric pressure and on geography and taught in Quebec.[17] Gabriel Baudon, who was at La Flèche in 1734 and 1737, corresponded extensively with other Jesuits in both the Indies and China. In 1741 his student Père Roy brought two Chinese converts, Fathers Liou and Tsao, to La Flèche.[18] (Baudon is also interesting as the likely source for "the nonsensical miracle" that Hume described. Both the Jansenists in La Flèche (dismissively)[19] and the Jesuits (approvingly)[20] report that Baudon became a cult among the locals, particularly women, who claimed that he had performed miracles.)

However, the most interesting of the Jesuit fathers in Hume's time, and the one with the closest connections to Buddhism, was Charles Francois Dolu. Dolu was born in 1655 in Paris. He was the son of Jean-Jacques Dolu, who had been the intendant of New France, and had aristocratic connections. He entered the Jesuit order in 1674 and took his vows as a spiritual coadjutor in 1687,[21] just before he joined the French embassy to King Nair in Siam. He was one of fourteen Jesuits who went to Siam. In 1688, after a revolution that deposed Nair and led to the expulsion of the Europeans, he fled Siam for Pondicherry in India where he was a missionary until around

1710.[22] In India, he figured in the Malabar Rites Controversy — a debate over whether indigenous religious practices could be incorporated into Christian missionary rites.[23] In 1713 he accompanied the Duchess of Alba to Spain. In 1723 he retired to La Flèche where he stayed until his death, at 85, in 1740.[24]

The 1687 Siamese embassy was a follow-up to an initial 1685 embassy. Both voyages were documented by several of the participants, particularly Guy Tachard, the Jesuit leader.[25] The second voyage was recorded by Tachard, by Ceberet, the trade envoy, and most significantly by Simon De La Loubere, the diplomatic envoy.[26] La Loubere composed a detailed, accurate and widely-read description of Siam, which included a section on the Siamese religion — a form of Theravada Buddhism.[27] The motivations for the embassies were complex, including diplomatic, political, military and trade ambitions on both sides. The Jesuits in the embassies, however, were primarily involved in evangelization and astronomy.

As part of the embassy, Dolu had first-hand experience with Buddhist practice. The Jesuits interacted extensively with the "talapoins" — the European term for the Siamese Theravada Buddhist monks. In fact, three of the Jesuits, including Jean Venance Bouchet, lived in the Buddhist monastery, and followed its rules, in order to learn the official language of the court. The monastery was close to the official house of the remaining Jesuits, and the fathers living with the monks visited the others every day.[28] It is likely that their reports contributed to La Loubere's account of Siamese religion — La Loubere was only in Siam for three months and during that time was ill and heavily engaged in diplomatic negotiations.[29] Indeed, La Loubere himself says that the second volume of his book, which contains descriptions of Siamese religion, linguistics,

mathematics, natural history, and astronomy, and includes translations from Pali, the language of Theravada Buddhist texts, was written by other unspecified authors.[30]

Dolu also seems to have had the typically Jesuit combination of evangelical fervor and ethnographic openness. Dolu fled Siam to Pondicherry after the revolution with Bouchet, the missionary who had lived in the Siamese monastery, and they worked closely together. Once in India, Bouchet became an observer and recorder of Hindu religion and culture, as well as the superior of the mission. Like other Jesuits in India, he adopted many Hindu ascetic practices including vegetarianism and Hindu dress.[31]

Dolu was deeply committed to evangelizing the Indies. In 1700 he wrote a letter from Pondicherry celebrating Jesuit conversions that appeared in the *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses*[32], a collection of Jesuit travel writings. But he had also felt the conflict between evangelization and a sensitivity to the native religious traditions. Dolu, in concert with Bouchet, organized ceremonies for Christian converts, such as parades, funerals and weddings that were heavily influenced by Hindu practice and tradition. In the Malabar rites controversy, which was initiated by the more conservative Capuchins, Rome investigated and condemned the practices. However, the Papal reaction was somewhat ambiguous and the practices continued — indeed, the Jesuits argued that conversion would be impossible without them.[33]

Dolu also had scientific interests. Dolu was eighty when Hume arrived at La Flèche. He had been shaped during a period in the mid to late 17th century, when the Jesuits were close to the forefront of intellectual and scientific progress.[34] The Jesuit members of the two Siamese embassies were closely tied to the Royal Academy of Science in Paris. King Nair, like the Kang Xi Emperor, had specifically requested European mathematical and astronomical advice. Two of the

members of the 1685 Siamese embassy, Jean Fontaney and Joachim Bouvet, went on to China where they became distinguished mathematicians and astronomers and scientific advisors to the Emperor. (Fontaney also later was a rector of La Flèche — Bouvet had been educated there.)[35] Fontaney and Dolu corresponded, and in 1703 Dolu sent a pound of quinine to Fontaney to treat the ailing emperor.[36]

According to the *Mercure de France*, which excitedly chronicled the second embassy, the 14 Jesuits of the 1687 expedition were selected from over 150 candidates,[37] and they were explicitly chosen for their scientific talent. They were named as official Mathematicians to the King. They brought a 12-foot and 6-foot telescope to the Siamese palace, observed a lunar eclipse, and planned to build an observatory.[38] Their astronomical observations were coordinated with the Academy.[39] La Loubere's book includes an analysis by Cassini, the Royal Astronomer, of Siamese astronomical observations that the Jesuits had collected[40] and Cassini also coordinated the observations.[41] P. Thomas Gouye published the Jesuits' reports to the Academy in 1692. [42] Gouye includes general reports of the Jesuits' findings and specific scientific reports by several of the members of the embassy, especially Jean Richaud.

In Siam, Richaud calculated the longitude of major cities, observed the satellites of Jupiter and the comet of 1689, and measured deviations of the compass. He also consulted closely with King Nair's astrologer and provided an account of the Siamese calendar and system of astronomical calculation, presumably the source of the analysis in La Loubere's book.[43] Along with Dolu and Bouchet he escaped from Siam (with the telescopes) and went to Pondicherry where the three lived and worked closely together. He continued extensive observations, corresponded with Cassini, and discovered that Alpha Centauri was a binary star — the first recorded telescopic

astronomical observation in India and the fourth recorded observation of a binary star anywhere (Fontaney had made the third observation in China.)[44]

So Dolu, at the least, worked closely with Jesuits with strong scientific interests. There is also a separate indication of Dolu's own interest in natural philosophy. In 1701 the *Memoires Pour L'Histoire et Beaux Arts*, printed by the Academy of Science, reviewed C. Biron's *Curiosites de la Nature et de 1'Art.* Biron's report of natural curiosities from India included a square stone from Calcutta with medicinal uses "The traveller obtained this square stone through the liberality of P. Dolu, Jesuit of Pondicherry." 'There was never,' he says, 'a more polite and generous man, nor one more learned about the natural world.'"[45]

Finally, there is a brief but telling personal description of Dolu from 1715 in the correspondence of Bottu de Saint-Fonds — a cultivated gentleman of Lyons who befriended Dolu. Saint-Fonds reports that, as an amusement, he had invited Dolu to lunch with Robert Challes, a well-known and intensely anti-Jesuit writer who had also traveled in Siam and India. Rather than the expected tempest, however, "I found myself in the midst of the gentlest breezes. Challes though a complete original and the wiliest of humans, is nonetheless an honest man, and as for P. Dolu, the name of the missionary, under a wild beard, he is a Jesuit per omnes casus, that is to say, polite and politic and he understands raillery better than a man of the world."[46]

In sum, Dolu knew about both other religions and cultures, including Buddhism, and about natural philosophy, and he was apparently both urbane and witty – characteristics that would surely have appealed to Hume. Moreover, Dolu had another source of knowledge about Buddhism, beyond his Siamese experiences and his conversations with Bouchet. That source was Ippolito Desideri.

4. Ippolito Desideri and Tibetan Buddhism

Ippolito Desideri was known in his lifetime by a single letter he wrote in 1716, early in his visit to Tibet. The letter was published in 1722 in *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses* and was reprinted often in the 18th century.[47] But the ms. of his unpublished account of Tibet and related letters and depositions were only published in the 20th century. These papers were collected by Luciano Petech in 1952 in a magisterial Italian critical edition of missionary documents.[48] There was also an abridged and edited version of the ms. published in 1904[49], an even more heavily edited English translation in 1932,[50] as well as a 1938 English translation of other letters and documents[51] both since occasionally reprinted. A 1987 biography describes an additional ms.

found in the archives,[52] and many of Desideri's Tibetan manuscripts have also been published in Italian.[53] More recently there have been a number of articles about Desideri and a complete bibliography.[54]

Desideri came from a prosperous family in Pistoia. He joined the Jesuit order and, for somewhat mysterious reasons, conceived a grand mission — to convert Tibet to Catholicism. As soon as he was ordained, he set out from Rome for India. In 1714 he left for Tibet from Delhi and nine months later arrived in Leh, now in Northern India, making his way by foot over the Himalayas. (He vividly describes crossing mountain abysses over a single vine rope bridge.) After another grueling eight-month-journey he reached Lhasa in 1716.

When he arrived at Lhasa, the Khan and the Dalai Lama welcomed him enthusiastically. The welcome did not diminish when he announced that he was a lama himself and intended to convert them all to Catholicism. Instead, in a typically Buddhist response, they suggested that, in that case, it would be a good idea if he learned Tibetan and studied the Tibetan religion. If he could actually explain why his religion was superior, they would convert.

Desideri accepted the challenge. He took six months to learn Tibetan. Then he spent the next five years in the monasteries and universities of Tibetan Buddhism. These monasteries were among the largest academic institutions in the world at the time. Over 20,000 monks lived and studied there.[55] Like the medieval universities of Europe they combined theology with logic, epistemology and metaphysics. The monks valued argument and Desideri noted that they had mastered all the rhetorical techniques of the most brilliant Europeans (see also Goss).[56] There was a 12-year-long set curriculum and Desideri tried to pursue it. He studied the Kanghur — the canonical collection of Tibetan Buddhist texts — and the *Lam Rim Chen Mo* of Tsongkhapa, the

summa of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. He reports that he translated the *Lam Rim Chen Mo* into Latin, though the translation is lost. He also composed a series of Christian apologetics, arguing specifically against fundamental Buddhist tenets, in Tibetan verse.

Shortly after Desideri arrived in Lhasa several Capuchin monks also arrived, following up an earlier unsuccessful attempt to found a Capuchin mission. The Capuchins claimed priority and Desideri was ordered back. Desideri left Lhasa as ordered but only returned home to Italy in 1727. On the way, he spent time in various missions in India, including a year working in the Jesuit mission at Pondicherry, where Jean Venance Bouchet was still the superior. When he returned to Rome, he devoted himself to convoluted legal battles with the Capuchins, and to the preparation of a book about his experiences in Tibet. In November of 1732, after 11 years, the Vatican declared that Tibet would officially be the turf of the Capuchins, not the Jesuits. Desideri could never go back. He died four months later.

Desideri traveled through France in 1727, on his way from India to Rome. In fact, by the time he got to France, he was something of a celebrity. In Paris, he was invited to Versailles and Fontainebleu, was the guest of the King's confessor and met the Royal children and the King himself. The ms. of his book available in English only includes a passing reference to La Flèche. But a somewhat different Italian ms., as transcribed in Petech's book, contains the following passage. "On the 31st (August) around noon I arrived at our Royal College at La Flèche. There I received the particular attention of the rector, the procurator, Père Tolu and several other of the reverend fathers. On the 4th I left La Flèche."[57] So Desideri spent five days in La Flèche. He came there after five days at the Jesuit college at Rennes, a near-by college that had close ties to La Flèche, and he visited three other French Jesuit colleges on his route home. There is no Tolu listed

in the Jesuit catalogs so “Père Tolu” must have been Dolu, who is listed in the 1727 catalog.

Dolu and Desideri had much in common. Both had worked in Pondicherry, and both knew Jean Venance Bouchet there. They had both been deeply and passionately committed to evangelization. But both men also had experienced the tension between the typically Jesuit interest in indigenous religions and the demands of orthodoxy, and both had struggled with the Capuchins. It is not surprising that Desideri singled out Dolu for his “particular attentions”.

4. Desideri’s Manuscript

Desideri’s manuscript describes Tibetan Buddhism in great and accurate detail. An entire book, 22 chapters long, is titled “Of the false and peculiar religion observed in Tibet.”[58] There are several extant versions of the ms.[59] One was discovered by Carlo Puini in a private Italian collection in 1875, and published in Italian in 1904. It is now in the library of Florence. It is possible that this ms. was sent by Desideri to his brother in Pistoia.[60] The other mss. are in the Jesuit archives in Rome.

The Florentine ms. is the earliest. It is addressed to an unidentified superior at the French Jesuit mission in Pondicherry. Desideri had promised to send his colleague an account of Tibet, he says. And accordingly, he had written a description of his travels during the eight-month-long sea voyage home (typically, he returned from India to France by way of America, stopping off at Martinique). Jean Venance Bouchet, Dolu’s colleague, was the mission superior at the time and may have been the intended recipient. The Florentine ms. itself is not in Desideri’s writing — it had been copied from the original by several different hands. According to Petech, the Florentine ms. is typical of the travel accounts that regularly circulated among the Jesuits. Some, though by no means all of these reports, were eventually published in places like the *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses*,

like Desideri's earlier letter. In general the Jesuit institutions were ambivalent about publication and there was strict censorship, but they encouraged communication within the wide-spread Jesuit community.

The other mss. are revisions and partial revisions of the Florentine ms. and two final fair copies of the revised version. The final versions are dated June 1728 — six months after Desideri got back to Rome and five years before he died. The final versions seem intended for publication and we don't know why they were never published. The religious content of the book may have meant that it was unable to get past the Jesuit censors. Interestingly, one of the final mss. is missing the section on the Tibetan religion, which is in the earlier versions. It is also possible that this section was circulated separately.[61]

In the introduction to the second version of the book, rather than specifically addressing his superior in India, Desideri says he is writing because "When I returned through France and Italy to Tuscany and Rome, I was strongly urged by many men of letters, by gentleman and by important personages to write down in proper order all I had told them at different times."[62] And he goes on to specifically mention that an account of the religion of Tibet "founded on the Pythagorean system and so entirely different from any other deserves to be known in order to be contested."[63] This not only shows that Desideri discussed the contents of his book with the French Jesuits but also suggests that the revised version was intended for them.

In the ms. Desideri explains karma, reincarnation and meditative practice. He describes the Buddha, down to the earrings, lotus flower and serene expression, and tells the classic story of his life. Moreover, as we will see, Desideri outlines some of the philosophical foundations of Tibetan Buddhism, in what is essentially a paraphrase of sections of the *Lam Rim Chen Mo*. The only thing

missing is the word Buddha — Desideri calls him Sciacchia Thubba, The Great Legislator of the Tibetans. Desideri recognized that the Tibetan religion had originated in India, but in the manuscript he does not connect it to the religion that had been dismissively described by the Jesuits in China or to Siamese or Ceylonese religions. Of course, "Buddhism" itself is a much later term, not used in the tradition itself.

5. Hume, Dolu and Desideri

There is reason to believe that Hume knew about the second embassy to Siam, possibly even before he reached La Flèche, and almost surely before the *Treatise* appeared. La Loubere's book was translated into English in 1693 and continued to be highly respected and widely quoted throughout the 18th century. He was particularly widely cited in philosophical discussions of atheism, most notably, by Locke and Bayle, who were both likely influences on Hume. Locke explicitly, and centrally, refers to La Loubere's account of Siamese religion in his discussion of whether God is the result of an innate idea. "These [earlier examples of atheism] are instances of nations where uncultivated nature has been left to itself, without the help of letters and discipline, and the improvements of arts and sciences. But there are others to be found who have enjoyed these in a very great measure, who yet, for want of a due application of their thoughts this way, want the idea and knowledge of God. It will, I doubt not, be a surprise to others, as it was to me, to find the Siamites of this number. But for this, let them consult the King of France's late envoy thither, who gives no better account of the Chinese themselves."[64]

Bayle includes an entire article on Sommona-Codom (the Siamese term for Buddha) in the Dictionary, quoting both La Loubere and Tachard extensively,[65] as well as referring to them in another article.[66] The Sommona-Codom entry is largely devoted to an argument that virtuous

conduct need not require a belief in the existence of God. We know that Hume was very interested in atheism and in his early memoranda there is the following entry, implicitly contradicting Locke. "Tis a stronger objection to the argument against atheism drawn from the universal consent of mankind to find barbarous and ignorant nations Atheists than learned and polite ones. Baile." [67] Nearly twenty years later, in the *Natural History of Religion* Hume begins by stating, in very general terms, "Some nations have been discovered, who entertained no sentiments of Religion, if travelers and historians may be credited."[68] Later, he refers to the penitential excesses of the "talapoins"[69] — the European term for Siamese Buddhists.

It seems likely that the young Hume would have seized the chance to talk to someone who had actually been a member of the embassy La Loubere, Locke and Bayle had described, and who had experienced the surprising features of Siamite religion first hand. In fact, by 1735 the octogenarian Dolu was the last surviving member of the Siamese embassies. It also seems likely that Dolu, who was happy to exchange stories of India with the ferociously anti-Jesuit Challes, would have wanted to talk to an intelligent, knowledgeable, and curious, albeit Protestant, young man like Hume. Joachim Bouvet, another Siamese emissary and member of Dolu's Jesuit cohort, corresponded extensively about Chinese Confucian religious texts with the Protestant Leibniz.[70]

La Loubere described the atheism of the Siamese Buddhists — hence the interest in them as the exemplar of a "polite" atheist nation. However, he did not discuss the more philosophical parts of Buddhism, such as the denial of the self. Dolu, however, should have known about these aspects of Buddhist thought as well, from his own experience, from discussion with Bouchet, who had lived and studied with the monks and was interested in other religions, and most saliently, from his relatively recent discussion with Desideri. If Hume had begun talking to Dolu to find out

more about Siamite atheism, he might also have learned about doctrines like "emptiness" and "no self."

It is even conceivable that a copy of Desideri's ms, or sections of it, could have made its way to La Flèche. (We know that Hume learned Italian before he went to France.)[71] We know that at least one version of the book, the version now in Florence, went out to the copyists and the world. And since Desideri wrote the first version on board the ship from India, and, according to a local diarist, had it with him in Tuscany,[72] he must also have had it with him when he visited La Flèche. Such a manuscript could have been quickly copied. In fact, La Flèche even had its own private printing press. Alternatively, he might have sent a copy of the revised version, which was explicitly addressed to the learned gentlemen he had met in France and Tuscany, back when he got to Rome. In spite of Jesuit control of publication, such accounts circulated widely within the Jesuit community itself.

It is more likely though that Hume could have heard about Desideri's discoveries through conversation. Dolu had definitely spoken with Desideri. Moreover, according to the catalogs, 11 other fathers at La Flèche in Hume's time had also been there during Desideri's visit, including Robert Besnard, the Malebranchiste philosopher, and Michel Pernet, the missionary who went to Jakarta. It seems plausible that the Jesuits, especially Dolu, would have discussed Desideri's discoveries about Buddhist ideas with a visitor like Hume, who was interested in similar ideas. This is all the more likely since there would have been no question of endorsing these ideas; the Jesuits would clearly have shared Desideri's view that they were deeply wrong. But the Jesuits had a long tradition of clearly describing ideas that they simultaneously condemned (this had been the Jesuit

response to Copernicanism).[73] Moreover, the Jesuits, unlike other orders, made a policy of seriously studying the cultures they were trying to convert.[74]

7. Philosophical convergences between Hume and Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism

It is interesting in itself that Hume potentially had access to both Tibetan and Theravada Buddhist ideas at La Flèche. At the least, it provides yet another example of just how much global intellectual contact was possible in the early modern period. The question of how this might have interacted with Hume's philosophical work is, of course, much more difficult to determine, and impossible to settle for sure. Hume, in general, emphasizes the originality of his ideas and makes little reference to influences of any kind. He was clearly influenced by a general European skeptical tradition that had many features in common with Buddhism. And Hume would have been no more likely to endorse the Tibetan or Siamese religion as a whole than the Jesuits themselves. The "Pythagorean" idea of reincarnation, and the mythological and tantric ideas which Desideri discusses at length, would certainly have seemed as absurd to Hume as the Jesuit miracle.

Nevertheless, Buddhist ideas might have had an influence. In particular, the very fact of sophisticated and virtuous atheist civilizations, like Tibet and Siam, already interested Locke and Bayle and would have interested Hume as well. But more philosophical aspects of Buddhism would also have been relevant.

The Buddhist tradition is long, varied and complex. Central parts of the tradition such as the doctrines of karma and reincarnation are obviously alien to Humean thinking. Hume's philosophical ideas are also complex and are clearly derived from other early modern European philosophical traditions. Still, the philosophical core of Buddhism is a kind of metaphysical skepticism and empiricism that has a very Humean flavor. The Buddhist tradition rejects the quest

for a metaphysical foundation of experience — an uncreated being or first cause outside of experience itself.

Three forms of this skeptical rejection are particularly relevant for early modern philosophy and for Hume. First, Buddhism rejects the idea of a metaphysically foundational God, though there may be particular gods. This is why writers like Desideri and La Loubere correctly identified it as atheistic, though it might also be described as agnostic. Second, it rejects the idea that there is a metaphysical foundation for our experience of the external world — the doctrine of "sunyata" or "emptiness". Finally, and most radically, the tradition rejects the Cartesian idea that there is even a foundational self that is the locus of experience — the doctrines of "anatman" or "no-self."

Although expressed in different forms these arguments, and particularly the argument against the self, are a crucial feature of both the Theravada and the Tibetan tradition. One of the central Pali Theravada texts is the *Milindapanha* — a dialogue between the sage Nagasena and King Milinda of Greece. Nagasena denies that he exists, and when this view is challenged by Milinda, Nagasena draws a famous analogy to the King's chariot. The chariot is not to be identified with any of its individual parts (the reins, wheels, etc.), but it is not something different from its parts, either. "Chariot" is simply a conventional designation for the combined chariot parts. Similarly, "Nagasena" is nothing but a conventional designation, a name, for Nagasena's physical and psychological parts — his body, perceptions, emotions etc. There is no Nagasena beyond them.[75] Bouchet would have been almost certain to come across this text as part of his training in the Siamese monastery. It seems plausible that Dolu would also have known about it.

In Tibetan Buddhism, and in Thongkhapa, in particular, these ideas are much more explicit and much more clearly philosophical.[76] Nagasena's argument against personal identity is

the focus of many chapters of extended and elaborated discussion in Thongkhapa. (For a clear and extended philosophical treatment of Thongkhapa see Jinpa.[77] Jinpa argues for an affinity between Thongkhapa's view of the self and the skeptical but non-reductionist views of Derek Parfitt. For similar explication of the arguments against the self in Theravada Buddhism, again with comparisons to Hume and William James, see Collins.)[78]

Within the general Buddhist tradition, Thongkhapa argues for a particularly Humean "middle way" position. He argues that there is no foundational, ontological self, but that nevertheless the self-concept is psychologically real. "Thus there are two senses to the term 'self' a self conceived in terms of an intrinsic nature that exists by means of intrinsic being, and a self in the sense of the object of our simple natural thought 'I am.' Of these two the first is the object of negation by reasoning, while the second is not negated."[79] Thongkhapa's "middle way" is reminiscent of the "turn" at the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise* where Hume claims that the skeptical arguments of the first part of the book need not undermine the pragmatics of everyday life.

Desideri studied Thongkhapa extensively and in his writings he captures the skeptical Buddhist empiricism that goes beyond even Cartesian skepticism. Desideri recognizes that "the Legislator", as he calls Buddha, is not a god, and certainly not God. The Tibetans are self-declared atheists: "They not only do not recognize, but they absolutely deny the existence of a Creator of the Universe or a Supreme Lord of all things. In this they may be termed atheists."[80] And yet their introspective practices lead to high moral and spiritual accomplishments: "The rules and directions imposed on the will not only prescribe hatred of vice and battling against passions, but what is more remarkable, lead man towards sublime and heroic perfection."[81]

Desideri also describes the philosophical foundations of Buddhism, the doctrines of "emptiness" and "no-self." Desideri, of course, as a devoted Jesuit, completely rejects the false and peculiar religion. Nevertheless, his commitment to genuinely understanding it is apparent. He describes his successive efforts to understand the central philosophical doctrine of "emptiness" (sunyata). Even the help of the most learned of the lamas leaves him in the dark, but "I continued my task until the dark clouds were pierced by a faint ray of light. This raised my hope of finally emerging into the bright sunshine: I read and reread and studied until, thanks to God, I not only understood but completely mastered (all glory being to God) all the subtle, sophisticated and abstruse matter which was so necessary and important for me to know."[82]

In a succeeding chapter, titled: "Exposition and explanation of another principal and great error of the Tibetans' religion: their denial that there exists any uncaused being in itself, and that any primary cause of all things exists,"[83] Desideri reports the outcome of his efforts and goes on to describe the specific Tibetan philosophical doctrines of "sunyata" and the denial of self.

Desideri clearly knew and understood the philosophical doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism. He discussed them with Dolu and other fathers at La Flèche who also knew the Cartesian and Malebranchiste philosophical traditions, even if they officially rejected them. Dolu independently knew at least something about the Theravada doctrines. In turn these fathers seem likely to have talked to Hume.

It's impossible to know for sure how this might have affected Hume's philosophy but the argument against personal identity is a particularly plausible candidate for potential influence. Hume's argument in the *Treatise*, like Nagasena's "chariot" argument, points to the fact that there is no evidence for a self beyond a collection of particular psychological parts. "There are some

philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self . . . For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist . . . I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement."[84]

The argument is rather isolated within Hume's own philosophical system. It plays no role in his discussions of morals or politics and he did not include it in the *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, his later streamlined presentation of the ideas in the *Treatise*. In addition, it is the kind of argument that doesn't require extensive background to understand, simply reading Nagasena's speech is enough to make its force clear. It is just the sort of argument that might be transmitted through conversation, and also the sort of argument that might stimulate a line of thought even if the source of that thought was not entirely retained. Hume's thinking about personal identity was certainly influenced by European philosophers like Locke and Malebranche among others. But it is characteristic of philosophical influence that many converging sources may result in a philosophically original idea. Moreover, the broader tenor of Buddhist empiricism and atheism would also, at the very least, have resonated with Hume's ideas.

8. Conclusion

More generally, whether or not Hume's philosophical doctrines were specifically influenced by Buddhism, it is interesting to see how much opportunity there was for this kind of

global intellectual contact, even in the early 18th century. At the least, we have to give up the apparently obvious assumption that Hume could not have known about Buddhism in the 1730s. The connection between Confucianism and Leibniz has long been recognized[85] — it is interesting to see a potentially similar connection between Buddhism and Hume. Moreover, in both cases the connection came through the Jesuits. In fact, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries the same relatively close-knit network of Jesuits had access to philosophical ideas from the Hindu, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions, and also knew about contemporary European philosophical ideas. Bouchet and Dolu linked Siam and India, Fontaney and Bouvet linked Siam and China and Desideri linked Tibet to both Bouchet and Dolu — and Dolu, Bouvet, Fontaney and Desideri all spent time at La Flèche. In 1735 Hume, apparently rusticating in the peace of a small town in France, was only one remove from the ideas of philosophers thousands of miles and a cultural gulf away in Siam and Tibet.

The story of Desideri, La Flèche, Dolu and Hume is a salutary one. It is easy to think of the Enlightenment and its values as a particular invention of a particular historical period in modern Europe. The fact that some of the central ideas in that tradition had been independently formulated in very different places and times suggests a broader view. Moreover, it is striking and encouraging that people as ideologically and culturally disparate as a Tibetan lama, a fervent Italian priest, a Siamese monk, an urbane French Jesuit and a skeptical Scots Presbyterian could nevertheless succeed in understanding and communicating philosophical ideas. The Tibetans, the Siamese, the Jesuits and David Hume may have bridged the geographical, religious, cultural and linguistic abysses that separated them, even if only by a single slender vine rope.

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[1] See, e.g., Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994); T. R. V. Murti*, The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960), 26-27; Nolan Pliny Jacobson, "The possibility of Oriental influence in Hume's philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 19*,* 1 (1969): 17-37; James Giles, "The No-Self Theory: Hume, Buddhism, and Personal Identity," *Philosophy East and West* 43, 2 (1993): 175-200.

[2] Batchelor, *Awakening of the West,* 170-176.

[3] See, e.g., David E. Mungello, *The Great Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lond: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

[4] M. A. Stewart "Hume's Intellectual Development, 1711-1752" in *Impressions of Hume* eds. M. Frasca-Spada and P.J.E. Kail (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[5] Ernest Mossner and Raymond Klibansky, eds. *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1954), 1-2.

[6] Ernest Mossner, *The Life of David Hume, Second Edition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), 100-105.

[7] Ibid., 611.

[8]Ernest Mossner and Raymond Klibansky, eds. *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1954), 1-2.

[9] Ernest Mossner, "Hume at la Flèche, 1735: An Unpublished Letter," *University of Texas Studies in English* (1958): 30-33.

[10] J.Y.T. Grieg, ed., *The Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1932), 361.

[11] See, e.g., Mordechai Feingold, ed. *Jesuit Science and the Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003); John W. O'Malley, ed. *The Jesuits: Culture, Sciences and the Arts 1540-1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[12] Inventory of the Old Society, Provincia Francia, Book 19, 40-44, Book 20, 39-45, ARSI.

[13] Rochemonteix, *Une College Des Jesuites,Vol. 4,* 214

[14] Ibid., 81-106.

[15] A. Charma and G. Mancel*, Le Père Andrè: Documents Inédits Pour Servir À L'histoire Philosophique* (Paris: Hachette, 1856), 383, 432.

[16] Joseph Dehergne, *Répertoire des Jésuites de Chine de 1552 à 1800* (Paris: Letouzy & Ane, 1973), 210.

[17] Camille de Rochemonteix, *Un Collège de Jésuites aux XVIIIe et XVIIIe Siècles: Le Collège Henri IV de La Flèche.Vol. 1 -4* (Le Mans: Leguicheux, 1889), *Vol. 4,* 119.

[18] Henri Bernard-Maitre, "Le Père Nicolas-Marie Roy, S.J.," *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, 29, (1953): 249-251.

[19] Francois Uzureau, "Le Jansénisme A La Flèche", *Les Annales fléchoises et la Vallée du Loir,* 13, (1912): 139-140.

[20] Bernard-Maitre, *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique,* 249-251.

[21] Carlos Sommervogel, *Bibliotheque de la Compagnie de Jesus* (Picard, Paris, 1890-1900), 123.

[22] Michael Smithies, *Mission Made Impossible: The Second French Embassy to Siam 1687* (Bangkok, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002). This volume is an annotated translation of the accounts of Tachard and Ceberet.

[23] D. Ferroli, *Jesuits in Malabar* (Banglaore, India: National Press, 1951); Joseph Bertrand *La Mission du Maduré: d'Après des Documents Inédits, Vol. 4.* (Paris: Poussielgue-Rusand, 1854);

Niccolao Manucci *Storia do Mogor: Or Mogul India 1653-1708, Vol. 4,* trans. William Lyons (London: J. Murray, 1907.) All three of these volumes record similar events involving Dolu though with a marked partisan slant — Ferroli and Bertrand are pro-Jesuit while Manucci is anti-Jesuit.

[24] Sommervogel, *Bibliotheque,* 123. Sommervogel lists Dolu's birth as 1651 and his ordination as 1674 but these dates do not match the dates in the catalogs, which seem more plausible.

[25] Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam des Pères Jésuites Envoyés Pour Le Roi aux Indes et à la Chine* (Paris: Seneuze et Horthemels, 1686), trans. anon, 1688 *Voyage to Siam*, reprinted 1981 (Bangkok,Thailand: White Orchid); Guy Tachard, *Second Voyage du Père Tachard et des Jésuites Envoyés Pour Le Roi au Royaume de Chine* (Paris: Seneuze et Horthemels, 1689), trans. Michael Smithies in *Mission Made Impossible.*

[26] Smithies, *Mission Made Impossible.*

[27] Simon De La Loubere, *Du Royaume de Siam* (Paris, 1691), trans. anon, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (London, 1693, reprinted Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[28] Smithies, *Mission Made Impossible*, 42-45.

[29] Smithies, *Mission Made Impossible*, 56.

[30] La Loubere, *The Kingdom of Siam*, Introduction to Vol 2.

[31] Francis X. Clooney, *Fr. Bouchet's India: An 18th c. Jesuit's Encounter with Hinduism* (Chennai: Satya Nilayam, 2005).

[32] *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses, Vol X* (Toulouse: Sens, 1810), 45.

[33] Ferolli, *Jesuits in Malabar*; Clooney, *Fr. Bouchet's India*; Bertrand, *La mission du Maduré.*

[34] Feingold, *Jesuit Science.*

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[35] *Rochemonteix,* 214, 281.

[36] *Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses, Vol, XVII* (Toulouse: Sens, 1810), 246.

[37] *Mercure de France*, 1687, 333.

[38] Smithies, *Mission Made Impossible,* 45.

[39] Thomas Gouye, *Observations physiques et mathematiques, pour servir a l'histoire naturelle & à la perfection de l'astronomie & de la geographie: envoyées des Indes et de la Chine à l'Académie Royale des Sciences à Paris, par les Peres Jesuites, avec les reflections de Mrs de l'Academie, & les notes du P. Goüye, de la Compagnie de Jesus* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie Royale, 1692); Florence Hsia, "Jesuits, Jupiter's Satellites, and the Academie Royale des Sciences," in John W. O'Malley, ed. *The Jesuits: Culture, Sciences and the Arts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

[40] La Loubere, *The Kingdom of Siam,* 186-199.

[41] Gouye, *Observations physiques.*

[42] Gouye, *Observations physiques.*

[43] Gouye, *Observations physiques.*

[44] Ibid.; Rao Kameswara, A. Vagiswari and Louis Christina, "Father J. Richaud and Early Telescope Observations in India," *Bulletin of the Astronomical Society of India,* 12*,* 1, (1984): 81-85.

[45] "Le voyageur tient cette pierre quarree du liberalite du P. Dolu, Jesuite de Pondicheri, 'Il ne fut jamais', dit-il 'homme plus poli, plus genereux, ni plus scavant dans la connasance des choses naturelles."*Memoires pour L'histoire des Sciences et des Beaux Arts*, January, 1701, 856.

[46] "…je me suis trouvé au milieu des plus doux zéphirs. Challes, quoique franc original et le plus ratier de tous les humains, ne laisse pas d'être honnête homme; et, pour le P. Dolu, c´est le nom du missionnaire, sous une barbe sauvage, il est jésuite per omnes casus, c´est-à-dire poli et politique, et il entend raillerie mieux qu'homme du monde." William Poidebard, *Correspondance Littéraire et Anecdotique entre Monsieur de Saint Fonds et le Président Dugas Membres de l'Académie de Lyon 1711-1739* (Lyon: Pacquet, 1901), 21.

[47] *Letttres Edifiantes et Curieuses,* XV (Paris: Nicholas Le Clerc, 1722), 183-209. Reprinted in Abbé Prevost, *Histoire General Des Voyage* (Paris, 1749), 455-460, and in Astley*, New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*, IV (London, 1747), 655-658.

[48] Luciano Petech, *I Missionari Italiani Nel Tibet Et Nepal* (Rome: Libreria della Stato, 1952).

[49] Carlo Puini, *Il Tibet (geografia, religioni, costumi) Secondo la Relazione di Viaggio del P. Ippolito Desideri 1715-21* (Rome: Roma, 1904).

[50] Fillipo de Fillipi, *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri, S.J.* (London: Routledge, 1932).

[51] Henry Hosten, "A Missionary in Tibet: Letters and Other Papers of Father Ippolito Desideri, S.J. (1713-21)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1938): 567-767.

[52] Augusto Luca, *Nel Tibet Ignoto: Lo Straordinario Viaggio di Ippolito Desideri* (Bologna: EMI, 1987).

[53] Ippolito Desideri, *Opere Tibetane di Ippolito Desideri S. J.,* introduction, Tibetan text, and translation from Tibetan to Italian by Giuseppe Toscano, S. J. (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1989).

[54] Enzo Gualtiero Bargiacchi, *Ippolito Desideri S. J.: Opere e Bibliografi* (Rome: Instititutum Historicum S. I., 2007).

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[55] Batchelor, *Awakening of the West,* 187.

[56] Robert E. Goss, "The First Meeting of Catholic Scholasticism with dGe lugs pa Scholasticism," in *Scholaticism, Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives* ed. J. Cabezon (State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, 1998), 65-91.

[57] Petech, *I Missionari,* Vol. 7, 94. "A 31 del medesimo doppo il mezzo de giorno arriva al nostro Real College della citta della Flèche, Quivi speciali ricevei i favori dal R.P. Rettore, dal R.P . Procurator, dal R. P. Tolu e da qualche altro di quei RR PP. A 4 de Septembre partij dalla Flèche."

[58] Fillipi, *An Account of Tibet,* 201-306.

[59] Petech*, I Missionari,* Vol. 5, xxviii-xxxiii.

[60] Enzo G. Bargicachi, *Ippolito Desideri S. J. alla Scoperto del Tibet e del Buddhismo* (Rome: Edizione Brigata del Lioncino, 2006), 96-97.

[61] Petech, *I Missionari,* Vol 5, xxviii-xxxiii.

[62] Fillipi, *Voyage to Tibet,* 49.

[63] Ibid., 49.

[64] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. Alexander Fraser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1894), 97.

[65] Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire Critique et Historique: Cinquième Édition* (Amsterdam: Leyde, 1740), 237- 240.

[66] Ibid., 104.

[67] Ernest Mossner, "Hume's Early Memoranda, 1729-40: The complete text," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9, (1949): 492-518.

[68] David Hume, *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (London: T. Cadell, 1793), 400.

[69] Ibid., 464.

[70] Joachim Bouvet, *Voyage de Siam de Père Bouvet*, ed. J. C. Gatty (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

[71] Grieg, *Letters,* 12-18.

[72] Bargicachi, *Ippolito Desideri, S. J. alla Scoperto*, 96-97.

[73] Feingold, *Jesuit Science.*

[74] Mungello, *The Great Encounter.*

[75] Isaline Blew Horner, *Milinda's Questions: Translated from the Pali* (London: Luzac, 1969).

[76] Tsong-kha-pa *The Great Treatise On The Stages Of The Path To Enlightenment,* trans. by the Lamrim Translation Committee (Ithaca: Snow Lion Press, 2000-2004).

[77] Thupten Jinpa, *Self, Reality and Reason In Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

[78] Steven Collins, *Selfless persons: Imagery and thought in Tibetan Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

[79] Jinpa, 71.

[80] Fillipi, 251.

[81] Ibid., 300.

[82] Ibid., 105.

[83] I am indebted to Michael Sweet for the full translation of this chapter part of his forthcoming unabridged English translation of Desideri's ms.

[84] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), 251-253.

[85] Gottfried Leibniz, *Writings on China,* tr. and ed. Daniel Cook and Henry Rosemont Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).