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0521413974 - Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: A Comparative Sociological Study of Monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and Medieval Catholicism

Ilana Friedrich Silber

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This book explores the social position of virtuoso ascetics in two civilizations – traditional Theravada Buddhism and medieval Catholicism – in which they achieved a position of considerable prestige and cultural ascendancy. In both settings, it is argued, virtuoso asceticism was able to give rise not only to prominent monastic institutions, but also to a broader cluster of processes – a “virtuoso complex” – that developed into a major axis of social and cultural organization. Emphasizing the combined impact of religious–ideological premises, institutional features of the monastic organization, selected characteristics of the macrosocietal context, and patterns of virtuoso radicalism in shaping the precise expression of the virtuoso complex in each case, the study exposes historical similarities and differences that have not been given due attention in either Weberian or other macro-comparative accounts. Virtuoso asceticism, in this perspective, emerges as a vital factor not only in the rise of the West, but also in the ideological expansion of the Buddhist East. Moreover, it is shown to entail a range of characteristics clearly distinct from those usually subsumed under the better-known category of religious charisma. Merging Weberian sociology with the Maussian tradition of gift analysis, and criticizing the neglect of meaning in current comparative historical sociology, the author also argues the need for a multidimensional approach capable of better addressing the part played by religious orientations in shaping the institutional strength and ideological power of religious elites in the historical framework of the great traditions.

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ILANA FRIEDRICH SILBER

Hebrew University, Jerusalem



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*In memory of my father
who taught me the reality of ideals
and to my mother
who taught me her love for the world of ideas*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction	1
Part I: Virtuosi and society: elements of a comparative macrosociological approach	
1 The Weberian legacy	25
2 Monasticism and social order: a multidimensional comparative perspective	38
Part II: Virtuosi and society in Theravada Buddhism	
3 Ideological groundings: hierarchy and ritualized exchange	57
4 Virtuosity institutionalized: the Sangha in social context	80
5 Virtuoso radicalism: the triumph of a sociological complex	105
Part III: Virtuosi and society in medieval Catholicism	
6 Ideological groundings: plurality and conditional exchange	119
7 Virtuosity institutionalized: monasticism in social context	137
8 Virtuoso radicalism: a self-defeating triumph	173
Part IV: Virtuosity, charisma, and social order	
9 Virtuosity and the virtuoso–society complex	187
10 The virtuoso complex compared	199
Conclusion: Religious virtuosity as ideological power: some implications for the comparative study of civilizations	211
<i>Bibliography</i>	223
<i>Index</i>	245

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[More information](#)

Preface

One of the true rewards in bringing this book to its completion is the opportunity to properly acknowledge intellectual debts incurred along the way. My greatest debt is to Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, who first introduced me to the ambitious horizons of comparative historical sociology in general and to the importance of religious traditions in the dynamics of civilizations in particular. His influence on my work goes much beyond the explicit references to his writings in either the body of the text or the footnotes – although I am well aware that he would have handled the topic in a very different manner. I have also had the privilege of benefiting from the encyclopedic knowledge and prodding guidance of R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, one of the very few true comparativists in the study of religion. Stanley J. Tambiah's rich amalgam of anthropological, historical, and macrosociological traditions of analysis first triggered my interest in Theravada Buddhism. His encouragement at an early stage bolstered my confidence to undertake the daunting task of juggling many different worlds of scholarship. I wish to put on record my deep gratitude to Steven Collins, who commented on two earlier versions of the manuscript and, above all, lent me precious intellectual support at times when the cost of crossing the boundaries of disciplines and fields of expertise seemed to become overwhelming. I also thank Michael Carithers, as well as an anonymous reader, whose critical comments spurred me on to produce what I hope is a better book. Jessica Kuper's commitment to the book and friendly handling of the publishing process greatly helped me bring the manuscript to its final form.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

fellowship from the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Hebrew University that sponsored my postdoctoral work in the department of Anthropology at Harvard University; and the repeated financial support I received as a fellow researcher at the Truman Institute, which also kindly financed editorial work on the manuscript. Many parts of this book have been written in the library of the Van Leer Institute, a unique haven of cultural and intellectual life in Jerusalem, and I am grateful to the institute's director, Yehuda Elkana, for his steady hospitality.

Finally, this book may well not have come to completion without the unfailing confidence of Michael Silber, who shared with me, as both husband and historian, this prolonged experience in academic single-mindedness and asceticism. Romy and Mika lent their precious presence and, luckily, never let me completely submit to the virtuoso imperative.