Introduction

This book is written as a record of the religious literature as inspired by an impressive solar deity, which emerged from a Mahayana polytheistic universe and attained over the centuries trans-local eminence and unequivocal soteriological authority. Its transformation into a pan-Asian religious phenomenon, known as Pure Land Buddhism, is closely linked with the astral legends of buddha fields (Skt. buddha-kṣetra), or pure lands. Despite the salient role of pure lands for the expression of Mahayana Buddhism in India and its growth beyond, for the most part their cultic legacy has had little impact on Western academic studies of Buddhism, which, if they dealt with the subject at all, have been preoccupied with the advent of Buddha Amitābha and his Pure Land in China and Japan.

There are several explanations for this neglect and lack of emphasis. To start with, there are regrettably few accurate and readable translations of indigenous Pure Land scriptures currently available in Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan—a reality of the scholarly world that reflects a lack of academic curiosity in a tradition that superficially resembles monotheism. Moreover, the obscure origins of buddha fields and their insignificant presence in Śrāvakayāna Buddhism have led a number of scholars and proponents of a European construction of a “pure and original Buddhism” to adopt a condescending or dismissive attitude toward the soteriology of pure lands, which is often disparaged as the wishful thinking of simpletons grasping for a better life in heavenly realms after death.

A serious charge raised by purists against the doctrine of future birth in a pure land is that it appears antithetical to the strict codes of self-reliance promulgated in Śrāvakayāna Buddhism. Furthermore, failing to appreciate the various degrees of nuance concerning pure lands may seem to challenge the Mahayana ideal of bodhisattvas, whose foremost intention is to endure countless incarnations and personal trials in order to bring liberation to others in this world. To this list of reservations we may add the denigration of Pure Land traditions for being merely “devotional,” as if devotional religion is a category different from and subordinate to Buddhism. In response, Galen Amstutz rightly contends, “All Buddhism is devotional, [for] it deals with experiential transformations which in all cases pose ideals empirically ‘external’ to the starting status of the devotee.”
This is as much a truism in Mahayana as it is in so-called Theravāda Buddhism. Peter Bishop expands upon these concerns:

The one-sided technocratic fantasy about Tibetan Buddhism can also be seen in the comparative failure of Pure Land Buddhism to stimulate the Western imagination. Despite the overwhelming popularity of Pure Land beliefs in Tibet (and in all other Mahayana countries), it has received very little emphasis in Western commentary. This may be because such Buddhism is not readily reduced to a technique, nor is it conducive to scientific status, and in addition it relies almost totally upon faith. Hence Pure Land beliefs do not easily fit the dominant scientific image that the West seems to want of Buddhism. (1993, 87)

Bishop, however, may be guilty of the very stereotypes he critiques if he is suggesting that Pure Land soteriology has not been subjected to a discerning and prodigious interweaving of Mahayana doctrines and contemplative prescriptions by many Tibetan and East Asian scholars of Buddhism. Moreover, Western commentators have not been blind to the importance of Pure Land literature in Tibetan Buddhist contexts, as signaled in the works of Matthew Kapstein (2003), Tadeusz Skorupski (1995), and Peter Schwieger (1978).

It is my aspiration that this work, a religious history of Pure Land literature in Tibet, will illuminate and problematize some salient aspects of this neglected tradition and clarify many of the misconceptions concerning the soteriological orientation of pure lands in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. This work has had a long gestation; an earlier version was submitted as a doctoral thesis at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, in 2006. Its present incarnation incorporates substantial revisions and new material, which may be attractive to a wider readership interested in the Indian origins and Tibetan developments of the genre of Pure Land literature known as bDe-smon (pron. de-mön). Broadly defined, the bDe-smon encompasses a wide range of scriptures, such as Pure Land aspirational prayers, commentarial literature on Pure Land theology, and Vajrayana forms of devotion to the deity, which articulate a shared typology of liberation and faith in the buddha field of Buddha Amitābha.

There are, of course, many meaningful ways of handling the textual material with which the present study will not be concerned. This book will not address the various ways of reception of these narratives: their social, philosophical, and anthropological articulation across different times, places, and cultural locations. Nor will it offer a comprehensive study of the literary genres in which pure land narratives are inserted, any more
than providing a structural examination of these narratives as myths, psychoanalytic categories, or objects of cross-cultural comparison.

Arguably, a religious history of Buddhist traditions in Tibet should attempt to strike a balanced representation of traditional Tibetan references (i.e., literary, political, doctrinal, and so on) and current academic research, which may question the veracity of historical narratives composed for and by Tibetans. In Tibet as elsewhere, collective memory may not always be historically credible, but since both sides of articulation serve to instantiate positions drawn from an inventory of possibilities—idealized representations of religious sentiments as history on the one hand, and the reduction of religion to the material conditions of its appropriation on the other—they are given elaboration in this book. Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet is as much about the ways in which it is traditionally configured as a syncretism of tenets, motifs, and rituals as it is as a subject of critical inquiry into the historical circumstances of the cult’s categorization and persistence. The question is not whether myth and history can coexist side by side, but the ways they do coexist in Tibetan traditionalism with its specific forms of fidelity toward narrative continuity and wholeness against the foreclosing literary rationalization and reduction of contemporary historiography.

The writing of any religious history of texts is an eclectic process of differentiation and selection, and I have taken special care to substantiate visibilities of religious creed in Tibetan texts representative of Sukhāvatī’s cultic and theological coherence. Hence, the present variety of literature is in agreement with what the Tibetan commentarial tradition considers its major and most admired works of the genre. Furthermore, the choices in this book draw from canonical and paracanonical sources, scriptural collections, and ritual cycles of teachings from all major schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and represent for the most part institutionalized exoteric and esoteric traditions of Tibetan Pure Land spanning from the ninth century to the present. Interviews with Tibetan Buddhist scholars and practitioners, as well as my own participation in Pure Land rituals and teachings conducted in India, Germany, and Greece from 1999 to 2011, informed a wider frame of religion not limited to the subtleties of Mahayana doctrine but also in relation to more arresting kratophanies, the manifestations of the deity’s alleged power—its capacity for providing protection, healing, prophecy, and spiritual success in this world and in the afterlife.

It should be clear from the start that the term “Tibetan Pure Land Buddhism” is employed both as a generic term for useful comparisons with analogous developments in India and China (i.e., Pure Land Buddhism
vis-á-vis the Mahayana “cult of the book”), and as an empirically specific category for differentiating other Tibetan cults linked with their own divinities, collection of rituals, scriptures, communities, and so forth. Nothing in the material presented in this book can be seen to imply or remotely suggest that there has ever been a sectarian, self-conscious movement of Pure Land Buddhism in Tibet. Nor can we speak in any meaningful way of Tibetan Pure Land orientations independently of the doctrinal and contemplative aims of Buddhism in Tibet at large. Therefore, there has been no conscious effort to sustain an argument that binds the textual sources in an overarching notion of historical contextualization, while I have refrained from elaborating over the construction and deconstruction of the terms “Tibetan,” “Pure Land,” and “Buddhism,” as these are merely designations that derive their sense and meaning in comparative and historically embedded contexts.

Given the diversity of ritual, credal, and literary redactions of Pure Land literature and its relation to the many subdisciplines of Tibetan studies, I often delved into several other areas, such as history, politics, art, archaeology, and textual studies, but I have refrained from lengthy discussions in the main text concerning the latest interpretations and academic debates. I have utilized endnotes in several ways, resulting in informative but often lengthy sub-texts. Some readers may wish to skip the notes, bearing in mind that they are intended for those who will find the bibliographical references, clarification of concepts and terms, allusions to scholarly discussions, and suggestions amenable to future comparative and general research.

The sections of this work form independent readings that are related to each other in instructive ways; however, it is assumed that this book will be read sequentially to encourage progressively more informed approaches to the interpretation of the Tibetan sources, and often clarifications offered in earlier sections are not repeated in later parts. Luminous Bliss is arranged in three sections. Part One, “Early Pure Land Traditions in India, Tibet, and Central Asia,” is divided in two chapters. It deals with the formulation of Pure Land soteriology in India and the circumstances of its adaptation in Tibet and Central Asia. Part Two, “Pure Land Texts in Tibetan Contexts,” also in two chapters, offers an English translation of the short Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra imported from India during the times of the Tibetan empire and concludes with a survey of Tibetan Pure Land texts in the dGe-lugs-pa, bKa’-brgyud, rNying-ma, and Sa-skya schools of Buddhism. Part Three, “Pure Lands and Pure Visions,” again in two chapters, presents a translation of some of the most innovative tantric practices related to the Tibetan cult of Sukhāvatī from the Treasure tradition.
The work is thus organized into six chapters. “Chapter One: Indian Mahayana Origins and Departures” sketches the soteriological functions of buddha fields in Indian Mahayana literature, followed by the different epithets, features, localities, and forms of the deity and its abode in the literary and archaeological sources. After an overview of Tibetan representations of Buddha Amitābha, the chapter concludes with an introduction of two authoritative Pure Land commentaries in East Asia that were allegedly composed in India but are unknown in Tibet.

“Chapter Two: Pure Lands and the Tibetan Empire” outlines the avenues through which Buddhism was transplanted to Central Asia. The competitive encounters between the Tibetan empire and the Tang dynasty serve as historical background to the presence of the Tibetans in Central Asia and their propagation of Tibetan forms of Buddhism in the colonies of Miran, Turfan, Khotan, and Dunhuang. This chapter situates the importation of Sukhāvatī beliefs in Tibet as part of a widespread transmission of Indian Mahayana traditions and their adaptation as the official religion of the Tibetan empire.

“Chapter Three: The Dharma That Goes against the Ways of the World: The Short Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra with an English Translation from Tibetan” is dedicated to the short Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra, a core Pure Land text widely read in Tibet and East Asia. This chapter introduces the contents and Tibetan editions of the sutra translated in Central Tibet from Sanskrit sometime in the ninth century CE, and concludes with an annotated English translation. A critical analysis of the sutra is presented in Appendix I.

“Chapter Four: Tibetan Pure Land Commentaries” opens with a discussion of the causes for taking birth in Sukhāvatī and introduces the Tibetan genre of Pure Land Buddhism, the bDe-smon. Texts of this genre include prayers of aspiration for taking birth in Sukhāvatī (bde-smon) and commentaries (’grel-ba) composed by eminent Tibetan Buddhist scholars that reflect a typical synthesis of Mahayana sutra-type ascriptions and the ritual observances of the deity endorsed by the esoteric traditions.

“Chapter Five: Tantric Transfer in Sukhāvatī” examines Vajrayana rituals devoted to Buddha Amitābha and Amitāyus. The chapter centers on a unique contemplative practice from the Treasure tradition, the technique of transferring one’s consciousness to the buddha field Sukhāvatī (’pho-ba), and concludes with a brief history and English translation of *The Standing Blade of Grass* composed by Nyi-zla sangs-rgyas in the fourteenth century, which details instructions for the method of transference to Sukhāvatī.

“Chapter Six: The Celestial Treasures of Buddha Amitābha” focuses on Pure Land texts and contemplative instructions drawn from the Treasure
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literature of the rNying-ma and bKa'-brgyud schools. The chapter highlights the importance of the liturgical collection of the Celestial Teachings derived from the pure visions of gNam-chos mi-'gyur rdo-rje (1645–1667). The chapter concludes with an English translation of Mi-'gyur rdo-rje’s Celestial Treasure, Sukhāvatī Sādhana: Empowerment and Oral Instructions, followed with a translation of Invoking the Guardians of Sukhāvatī, a unique visualization and invocation ceremony of Sukhāvatī Protector deities composed by the renowned Tibetan scholar Karma chags-med (1613–1678).

Following the Epilogue, “From Sukhāvatī to Tibet and Back,” are three appendices: “Appendix I. A Critical Analysis of the Orgyan-gling Gold bDe-mdo” offers a diplomatic study of the short Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra utilizing as its root text the Orgyan-gling gold MS. “Appendix II. Means of Attaining the Sukhāvatī Kṣetra: Editions and Liturgical Texts” introduces some known editions and scriptures of the gNam chos bde chen zhiṅ gshur collection. “Appendix III. An Anthology of Pure Land Texts from the Treasure Tradition” lists some representative “revealed” texts of the Pure Land variety.