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Special issue : Christian Self Understanding in the Context of Buddhism

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CURRENT DIALOGUE

December 2011

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Editorial

Current Dialogue, published by the World Council of Churches for more than 25 years, is one of the oldest and most respected international journals in the field of Christian interreligious engagement. It has been a particular joy for me to be able to restart its publication after a gap of a couple of years.

So it is excellent that this issue provides such a rich feast. It is a 'special edition' which contains the majority of papers presented at a WCC consultation held in December 2009 which explored 'Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism.' The consultation was organised by Rev Dr Shanta Premawardhana, and on the page opposite he introduces the consultation. The meeting was one of a series that has been organised by the WCC in recent years, exploring Christian self-understanding in the context of particular religions. It is intended that papers from the consultations relating to Islam and to Judaism will appear in *Current Dialogue* in June and December 2012. I want to pay tribute both to Shanta Premawardhana and to Rima Barsoum, my predecessors at the World Council of Churches, for their hard work both in organising these consultations and for taking responsibility the initial stages of preparing the material for publication.

A key task for me in the first half of 2012 will be to take forward the insights from these specifically targeted consultations (as well as meetings relating to Hinduism and Indigenous Religions) . I will be working with an ecumenical group to provide an overall report on 'Christian self-understanding in the context of religious plurality' which will be presented to the meeting of the WCC Central Committee next August. I am sure that it will provide some interesting material for future issues of *Current Dialogue*.

We have taken the opportunity of the gap in the publication of *Current Dialogue* to update and rationalise the mailing list of subscribers. We are intending to continue to publish both in hard copy and electronic form, although we hope that increasingly people will be able to receive and read it electronically. If you are not already a subscriber to *Current Dialogue* but would like to be, please contact my colleague Marietta Ruhland on Marietta.ruhland@wcc-coe.org and ask for your name to be included. Without the help and hard work of both Marietta and Yvette Milosevic the journal would not have been able to appear at this point in time and I give thanks to them for their excellent support of me in my first months working for the World Council of Churches.

Clare Amos

Programme Coordinator for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation
World Council of Churches

Introduction to Special Edition of Current Dialogue Christian Self-Understanding in the Context of Buddhism

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana

While questions about how Christians should relate to people of other religions, and articulating the theological justifications for doing so, are as old as the church itself, they need to be re-stated for each generation. In the past few centuries, when the colonial missionary movement was strong, the realization that in many colonized countries there were religious people who were devout adherents of ancient faith traditions, and whose deeply held beliefs and devout lifestyles were exemplary had begun to dawn. This raised many new questions about missionary theology and methods.

Indeed, when the International Missionary Conference convened in Edinburgh, Scotland, a century ago, the question of how Christians relate with people of other religions was a significant part of the agenda. Following that momentous event, and throughout the past century, ecumenical leaders, theologians and congresses sought to address why and how Christians should engage with people of other religions. The history of such engagement is well catalogued by Wesley Ariarajah in his *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Protestant Ecumenical Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.

The 21st century brought with it a new set of questions. The role of religion in public life, including massive geo-political changes, shifts in religious demographics, religious people's participation in terrorism and violence, as well as religions' potential as agents for justice and peace are but a few of the serious questions that needed to be addressed in the contemporary context. It was this realization that led the 2006 Porto Alegre General Assembly of the World Council of Churches to engage the question of Christian self- understanding in the context of many religions. In the years that followed, the WCC has engaged in several consultations to address this question in relation to particular religions. The present volume contains the presentations made at, and the final statement from the consultation on Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 9-12 December, 2009.

Given the multiplicity of theological traditions within the ecumenical movement, reaching a comprehensive theological agreement on any question is a significant challenge, and this one particularly so. Agreement on the necessity of working towards such a consensus itself signals the heightened awareness Christians throughout the world have of the importance of this question. In many contexts, the peace and harmony with which Christians and their other religious neighbors have lived in for centuries have been challenged in recent times. Local and global politics, the spreading neo-liberal globalization, and a new missionary movement that is not particularly attentive to local cultures and religious sensitivities have created new tensions.

The missionary movement's alliance with the colonial political and economic power structure sullied its motivations from the outset. The British East India Company, the economic engine of the British colonial period, initially did not trust the missionaries and did not want them in the colonies. However, when it became clear that conversions of Buddhists in Sri Lanka, for example, would also lead to a subtle shift in their political allegiances and make them look more favorably towards the British, reducing thereby the chances for revolt, missionary activities were encouraged.

Conversion to Christianity requires a hard change of identity. In cultures where religion, ethnicity, language and political affiliations are often intertwined, a hard change of identity in religion threatens

the integrity of the convert's other identities. Converts to Christianity therefore lost their credibility in their own cultural/ethnic/language groups, creating an uncomfortable and often unnecessary tension. These tensions were exacerbated because evangelistic methods that some Christian missionaries used were aggressive by any measure.

In the middle of the last century, as the colonial period ended, the churches in formerly colonized countries had an opportunity to articulate a theology that is appropriate to their context, and to find ways of ministry indigenous to their cultures. In multi-religious contexts, such theologies included their Christian self-understanding in the context of those particular religions. In Sri Lanka, theologians such as the late Rev. Lynn de Silva, a Methodist, and Father Aloysius Peiris, a Jesuit, were in the forefront of articulating alternative theologies of relating to Buddhists. New institutions that arose in the 1960s, such as the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, the Theological College of Lanka and the Tulana Centre for Study and Research continue to articulate such alternative theologies. In locating the consultation in Sri Lanka, the WCC sought to take this context seriously and engage these institutions that have a strong track-record in this work.

Serious political events and challenges that occurred in the past decades have caused considerable anxiety among certain factions of Sri Lankan Buddhists. A war that lasted some thirty years, often inappropriately framed as a Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict, was one of the sources of this anxiety. The religio-ethnic demographic of Sri Lanka, where Buddhists are mostly Sinhala and Hindus are mostly Tamil, while Christians are both Sinhala and Tamil, made the Christians' loyalty to the government's war against a brutal Tamil terrorist group, suspect in Buddhist eyes. Strong statements critical of the government's excesses and calls for justice and action issued by the churches, particularly through the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, added to this suspicion.

Another source of anxiety is the influx of new missionaries beginning in the late 1970s, who are suspect of offering allurements and incentives to potential converts. While the facts of these accusations are debatable, the public outcry against such perceived action is demonstrative of the anxiety. If the colonial missionary movement softened the population's penchant for revolt against an oppressive political system, the political argument goes, the present missionary movement will soften the population's opposition to the coming economic globalization, which is arguably more insidious and therefore more dangerous, and must be even more strongly condemned. International NGOs, some of them Christian-based, who arrived in large numbers with vast amounts of money in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami are have been subject to scathing criticism in the media for the same reason. Such anxieties resulted in expressions that are atypical for Buddhists: for example, the formation of a political party that is made up entirely of Buddhist monks with the express purpose of protecting Buddhism from these influences, and other segments of the Buddhist population turning violent.

The vandalizing or burning of churches and the beating or killing of pastors and church leaders, have unfortunately become somewhat routine in the past couple of decades. The consultation noted with regret, that during its meeting, in a town less than ten kilometers from the hotel where the consultation was taking place, a Roman Catholic church was vandalized. While such acts are condemnable, it is also important to note that like the atypical responses noted above, these incidents of violence should be seen in the context of the unresolved hurts of 500 years of colonial oppression.

At a more formal level, the report of a Buddhist Commission appointed by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 2009 catalogued instances of alleged unethical conversions that have occurred since the liberalization of the Sri Lankan economy in 1978. This Commission harks back to its predecessor, the

Buddhist Commission of 1956, which similarly catalogued atrocities committed by Christians throughout the colonial period. The 2009 report recommended to the government that “unethical” conversions be outlawed. Accordingly, legislation that outlaws conversions by “force, allurements, or any fraudulent means” has been introduced in the Sri Lankan parliament (although not yet enacted), that entails a punishment of five years imprisonment (seven years if the converted is a minor or a mentally disabled person) and a fine equivalent to USD 5000. The consultation was clear that it needed to take the issues of local context of its host country in to serious consideration.

The varieties of Buddhist schools of thought have historic roots in many Asian countries. In the latter half of the past decade, however, it has seen significant growth in adherents in Europe and North America, offering greater opportunities for Christians to encounter this great world religion. Many Christians, not having any idea of how to engage the non-theistic world-view of Buddhists have experienced greater difficulty thinking about dialogue with Buddhists, than with the monotheistic traditions. At the same time, however, many Christian theologians in the west have begun to seriously engage these questions. The consultation therefore included Christian theologians from traditionally Buddhist countries as well as those from Europe and North America.

The consultation featured two key note presentations: Father Aloysius Pieris whose presentation rooted in the Sri Lankan context, outlines Buddhists self-understanding and offers a proposal for how the churches’ beliefs and behavior need to take that into account, sets the tone for the entire consultation. Professor Elizabeth Harris in her response points out how the Buddhist attitudes of the 19th century, which were hospitable to Christians, shifted because of Christians’ unwillingness to be reciprocal in their hospitality towards Buddhists. Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel who presented the second key note address places himself in the global context. Indeed, while historically Buddhist Asian countries are host to one or the other schools of Buddhism, several western countries now host a variety of Buddhisms, creating a new opportunity for Buddhist ecumenism.

One section of the consultation dealt in greater depth with the Sri Lankan context. This included an examination of the distinctive contribution of Rev. Lynn de Silva to Buddhist-Christian dialogue, offered by Dr. Leopold Ratnasekera. Another section examined the contexts of other historically Buddhist countries and the churches’ relationship to other schools of Buddhism in other contexts. While this consultation primarily focused on the Sri Lankan Theravada tradition, it acknowledged the need to address other traditions as specifically in subsequent consultations. The consultation also noted the distinctive contribution of monastic dialogue to Buddhist-Christian relations and the need to examine its role. On the global scene, the presentations moved towards examining the growing phenomenon of dual-belonging, where some Christians (not as many Buddhists) are exploring how they might be Buddhist-Christians — not 50% Buddhists and 50% Christians, but 100% in both. Prof. Rose Drew in her paper addressed this question in depth.

The consultation also included participants from our partner ecumenical networks: Faith and Order and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, as well as the World Evangelical Alliance. Although invited, the inability of the Vatican representative to be present was noted by the consultation. The paper by Dr. Prabho Mihindukulasuriya, representing the World Evangelical Alliance offers a strong Evangelical critique of some of the assumptions that those who engage in interreligious dialogue tend to make.

In its final statement the consultation noted one important weakness of its deliberations: that its necessarily academic orientation precluded from participation voices of those who are most closely engaged in the day-to-day work of Buddhist-Christian dialogue at the grassroots. As these

consultations go forward, it urged that the WCC consider ways to engage such voices. Indeed, the final outcome of these deliberations will be determined by whose voices are heard, and who's at the table.

Finally, it has been my privilege to shepherd this process of consultations towards a Christian self-understanding in the context of many religions over a period of three years. A comprehensive understanding of this question arising from the many consultations will make a critical contribution to the on-going work of Christians' engagement with those of other religions in dialogue and cooperation.

A Report of the Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in the Context of Buddhism

Colombo, Sri Lanka, 9-12 December, 2009

A consultation on Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism brought together Christian scholars of Buddhism and Christians living amongst Buddhists from around the world, to Pegasus Reef Hotel in Sri Lanka. The consultation which was held from 9-12 December 2009 also included a Buddhist monk who served as an observer of the process. While the consultation included Christian self-understanding in the context of historically Buddhist countries, because it was held in Sri Lanka, that particular context was an important concern for the deliberations.

The programme included key note presentations by Professor Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Father Aloysius Pieris, and panel discussions featuring the Sri Lankan context, the context in other historically Buddhist Asian countries and the global context of Buddhism. The following is a compilation of the main questions that were under discussion.

1. Socio Political Issues

In most countries in South and Southeast Asia, Christians are distinct minorities and are sometimes persecuted. While this could at times lead to a sense of vulnerability in their relationship to the larger community, we recognized that they are often remarkably faithful and resilient. This may partly be due to centuries of grappling with the challenges of being faithful witnesses to Christ in pluralistic societies.

We also noted that Christians have to deal with a legacy of suspicion left over from the colonial period. In the popular consciousness, Sri Lankan Christians are considered to have a western orientation, and are consequently considered anti-national. The historical

memory of the discrimination experienced by Buddhists has not been adequately addressed or healed. This, together with aggressive methods some have used in more recent waves of evangelization, has led to anti-Christian violence. We noted with sadness the attacks on a Roman Catholic church, its priest and people, during the week of our consultation, in a village near Ja-Ela not more than 10 kms from where we held our meeting.

We recognized that in some countries Buddhist communities are also vulnerable. In these situations Christians have a responsibility to stand in solidarity with Buddhists.

Christians in the post independence era have made serious attempts to root themselves more firmly in the Sri Lankan soil. There have been conscious attempts to indigenize their theological self-understanding as well as their forms of worship, using, for example, local music and art.

We recognized that some Christians have been accused of using aggressive and insensitive evangelization methods leading to questionable conversions. If the accusation is true, we condemn such behaviour as well. The Sri Lankan churches are concerned by the possibility that legislation to restrict or prohibit such conversions will lead to restrictions on their rights of freedom to worship, practice and manifest their faith.

While we condemn the attempts of certain western Christian agencies to use charitable aid for proselytizing purposes, for example, following the tsunami of 2004, we are concerned that such legislation can create a prohibition on all Christian charitable projects.

2. Mission, Witness and Evangelism

The present project of Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding has been conducted in partnership with the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism and Faith and Order. We are grateful for the representative colleagues from these two networks with whom the Programme on Interreligious Dialogue has always worked in close cooperation. The present project also works in partnership with the Vatican and the World Evangelical Alliance. While we lament the absence of a Vatican representative, we are grateful for a representative from the WEA at our consultation.

While we have a general consensus that Mission, Witness and Evangelism are imperatives of the gospel, we have different approaches to how these should be interpreted. We considered whether it would be desirable for all people in the world to become Christian. Some participants in our discussion felt that the world would be poorer if there were no Buddhists in it, and felt the same way about other religious traditions as well. We recognize that not all Christians share this view, and where this view is not shared, the evangelistic impulse is rightly perceived as an existential threat by Buddhists. The members of the consultation agree that Buddhism should be respected and affirmed.

Rather than understand that the aim of evangelism is to bring Buddhists to the Christian fold we asked whether the work of Christ should be described as the conversion of all people, including ourselves, away from greed and hatred towards the reign of God (and its equivalent in Buddhism).

The consultation noted that as early as the 19th century, Buddhist monks had exercised remarkable hospitality to Christian missionaries that had not been reciprocated. They had recommended an ethic based on mutual respect, transparency and non-violence. This invited the question of how we can encourage

Christians today to learn from that Buddhist experience to exercise hospitality. In the case of Sri Lanka, the consultation noted that this process is under discussion.

The consultation affirmed the importance of embedding such dialogical principles in the work of the church. For example, the consultation included a Buddhist monk as an observer with the conviction that our theologizing should not be done in isolation from our Buddhist colleagues. As another example, we noted that whenever Christian communities have access to money for charitable purposes, efforts should be made to distribute those funds through interreligious channels.

3. Theological Categories

A paper on Lynn de Silva's study on the self in Buddhism and Christianity helped us focus on the question of complementarity, mutual challenges, and points of convergence and divergence. It helped us to focus on how far Buddhist categories of thought may help Christians gain new insights into their faith and enrich their understanding of reality.

Many theological issues were raised and remain questions. We recognized that they should be commended for further study, and that where possible, be engaged dialogically. The following are crucial examples of questions that lead to deeper Christian self-understanding:

- Can Buddhist understandings of transcendent reality offer insights into the way Christians understand God?
- Can the Buddhist concept of *anatta* and the Buddhist identification of *tanha* as the cause of *dukkha* help Christians interpret more radically its own message of anti-greed?
- Can the practice of meditation in Buddhism and Christianity be mutually enriching?
- Can Buddhism and Christianity be legitimately interpreted as orientating people towards a single salvation or liberation, or

are they paths leading to different salvific ends?

- Are we prepared to acknowledge that a Christian for whom the person of the Buddha as the embodiment of the *dharmma* has become meaningful, remains a Christian? Conversely, are we prepared to acknowledge that a Buddhist, for whom the person of Christ embodying the reign of God has become meaningful, may remain a Buddhist?
- Can the Buddhist emphasis on non-attachment and the Christian emphasis on self emptying help us all avoid the idolatry through which race and ideology become absolutes?

Reflecting on questions such as these drew us into conversation into how in-depth dialogue between Christians and Buddhists could be mutually transformative. Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism must incorporate a humility that allows for mutual transformation.

We noted that in western societies, traditional Christian concepts and language may no longer evoke genuine religious experiences for many people. We suspect that the converse may be in true in Buddhist societies. We inquired whether deeper dialogues between Christians and Buddhists could have a renewing influence on both religions in this regard.

4. Mutual Transformation and Comple-mentarity

How far can mutual transformation go? We recognize that religious identity and experience can be multi-faceted and that today there are people who identify themselves as both Buddhist and Christian. This necessarily challenges the church to rethink and redefine its life and identity.

These issues occupied a significant portion of the consultation's attention. Difficult questions are involved and will continue to demand our attention. One of the questions we would like to

see further explored concerns whether there are helpful and unhelpful forms of integrating insights we gain from Buddhism.

Concerns about syncretism must be carefully examined and should not become an impediment to the necessary openness to interreligious learning and transformation.

5. Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

We noted that monastic interreligious dialogue has been a fruitful form of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the modern period for over 40 years. We noted that this is a specialized form of dialogue which we must encourage churches to support.

6. Theological Education and Formation

Given that the issues arising from encounter with Buddhism touch upon central theological issues, the consultation recommends that the study of other religions and of interreligious dialogue becomes a regular part of theological education and formation and has its impact on the way we teach all of our theological subjects. This consultation recognized the implications of the above concerns for theological education curricula, and the formation of future lay and ordained ministers of the church.

7. Methodology

We recognized that there was an inherent limitation in our consultation in that our primary approach was academic. This created a situation in which we may have excluded some who engage in interreligious encounter and other forms of dialogue such as those who engage in dialogue at the grassroots level, and those connected with dialogue through creative arts. These persons do not always have the opportunity to document these dialogues in the format that we are used to. We recognized that we need to extend our approach so that we learn from their efforts.

This consultation represents a progression in the World Council of Churches' (WCC's)

engagement with Buddhism. The consultation noted that while Christian self-understanding is an important conversation, dialogue with Buddhists also needs to be sustained. The consultation affirmed the shift in WCC's methodology to engage other religious communities in local contexts. However, this consultation focused mainly on Theravada

Buddhism and did not fully address Christian self-understanding in the context of other traditions of Buddhism. The consultation recommends that before the process of Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding is completed, consultations on Christian self-understanding in the context of other traditions of Buddhism also be held.

Participants at Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Buddhism Colombo, Sri Lanka, 9-12 December, 2009

Rev. Adrian Aaron
Sr. Dr. Katrin Åmell, O.P.
Metropolitan Dr. Geeverghese Mor Coorilos
(Bishop George Mathew)
Rt. Rev. Duleep de Chickera
Dr. Rose Drew
Prof. Dr. M. David Eckel
Rev. Shirely Faber
Rev. Keerthisiri Fernando
Rt. Rev. Kenneth Fernando
Dr. Elizabeth Harris
Rev. Dr. Eun-Kyu Kim
Rev. Dr. Arthur Ko Lay
Prof. Dr Christine Lienemann
Ms Neena Mahadev
Mr. Prabo Mihindukulasuriya
Rev. Dr. Ruwan Palapathwala
Major Alister Philip

Rev. Dr. Aloysius Pieris
Mr. M. R. Ranasinghe
Rev. Fr. (Dr) Joseph Leopold Ratnasekera
Rev. J. C. S. Rohitha de Silva
Rev. Jerome Sahabandhu
Prof. Dr. Perry Schmidt-Leukel
Rev. Dr. Martin Sinaga
Ven. Dhamma Vihari
Mr. Godfrey Yogarajah

National Christian Council Staff

Ms. Vinodi Fernando
Rev. Dr. Jayasiri Peiris

WCC Staff

Rev. Dr Shanta Premawardhana
Mrs Yvette Milosevic

The Belief and the Behaviour of the Church in the Lankan Buddhist Context

Aloysius Pieris, s.j.

A Preliminary Clarification

I am invited to spell out the Christian church's self-understanding against the background of the Sri Lankan Buddhist context and accordingly indicate what the church would believe and how the church would behave in that context. I was apprehensive that this way of formulating the topic on the part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) could generate an adverse reaction on the part of some sectors of the World Christian Community, here and abroad, on the ground that it is not the Lankan Buddhists that determine the beliefs and behaviour of the church; that it is God's revelation culminating in Christ that had pre-determined our beliefs and behaviour in any country at any given time.

To avoid a controversy, that might need another congress at another venue on another occasion, and to prevent this assembly from playing Emperor Nero instead of attending to a burning issue, I have re-worded the topic in the title of this discourse. This is to express the mind of the organizers who intended something like the following: "Belief and Behaviour of the Church in Sri Lanka: How does/should it come across to the Buddhists?" Or more concretely: "Does our behaviour communicate our beliefs? Do our beliefs need reformulation in the Buddhist context so that they may not be misinterpreted?" This is what I am going to discuss.

My second observation is that to answer these two questions, the Church has to set aside its own outsider's reading of the Buddhist context and strive to respond to the Buddhists' own perception of it. Now the Buddhists in general perceive this context as a Sinhala Buddhist ethos which defines this country as an Island of

Righteousness (Dharmadviipa). Hence the first step in my discourse is to spell out the Sinhala Buddhists' own Self-Understanding. My thesis is that the ancient and traditional self-understanding of the Sinhala Buddhists went through a change during the 19th century (i.e., the British Period). Dr Elizabeth Harris, who will speak after me is a specialist in this matter and will provide us with the background knowledge required for my presentation. Hence I shall offer only a very general reflection on that particular period (Part I, b) after giving a brief description of what went on before the 19th century (Part I, a). Then I shall take up the Christian response for discussion (Part II).

PART I

The Lankan Buddhist Context according to the Sinhala Buddhists' Self-Understanding

(a) *The Antecedents to the 19th Century Events*

I have observed that the designation "Sinhala Buddhism" (Sinhala Buddha-agama) is conspicuously absent in the day-to-day parlance of the Sinhala people; rather it is the phrase "Sinhala Buddhist". (Sinhala Buddhaya) that we consistently hear and read about. This is an important distinction often ignored when discussing the Lankan Buddhist context. My surmise is that the English term "Sinhala Buddhism" was originally an invention of non-Buddhists and/or Sociologists, and refers to Buddhism inculturated in Sri Lanka on the analogy of Thai Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism and so on. In the Sinhala Buddhists' self-understanding, however, Buddhism in Sri Lanka could not be "Sinhala Buddhism"; rather their claim (exceptions not denied) is that the original Buddhism, which disappeared from the land of

its origin, has been preserved here in this country. To call it "Sinhala Buddhism" would be to particularize it as a local version of the original Buddhism rather than the original Buddhism itself. Hence a Sinhala equivalent of the phrase "Sinhala Buddhism" is not heard in conversations and writings so much as the expression "Sinhala Buddhist". Sociologically however, we do notice a species of popular Buddhism which has absorbed many pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist cults as well as certain practices and beliefs taken from *Mahayana*. This is neatly contrasted with *aadi-budu-samaya* or "early Buddhism" which is what Lankan Buddhists claim to have preserved for posterity.

Today the search for early Buddhism through a 'return to the sources' (a movement begun in the middle of the 20th century) has brought a new understanding of "Sinhala Buddhism" in the works written by Buddhists in English. D.J. Kalupahana, a Sinhala Buddhist Scholar of world standing, has suggested that the Buddhism of the Mahavihara Tradition in Sri Lanka, taught in monastic seminaries today, is not the original Buddhism but is the work of Indian Commentators such as Buddhaghosa et al, whereas the authentic "Sinhala Buddhism", (i.e., the Canonical or Scriptural Buddhism that has been preserved by Sinhala People) is found in such literature as the Sinhala poetical work *lo-veda-sangaraava*.

In my doctoral and post-doctoral research so far published, I have already documented instances where the Pali exegetes deviate from canonical Buddhism. For instance, Nirvana in Buddhaghosa is a return to the Brahman-Atman of the Vedantins, a far cry from what the Buddha had taught. The next authoritative exegete, Dhammapala offers a logical proof for the existence of Nirvana whereas the Buddha declared that it is beyond logic and rational inference. Kalupahana's thesis that authentic Buddhism of the Canon is found among the Sinhalese, but not in the commentarial tradition, has not settled down in the Sinhala Buddhist consciousness, here, nor widely studied in the

international academe. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is an essential part of the Sinhala Buddhists' self-understanding that they have been "destined to be the custodians of early authentic Buddhism".

The *Mahavansa* (The Great Chronicle), the record of the Sinhala Buddhists' self-understanding, insinuates that it was only the Sinhala People, of all nations, that Buddha had singled out for a special mission. This chronicle claims that this country was hallowed as an Island of Righteousness thanks to a triple visit from the Buddha (Mv 1:84), and that it was on the very day that the Sinhala People landed on the shores of this country that the Buddha also attained parinirvana or the final release (Mv VI:47), but not before he commissioned the chief of gods to protect the island as well as the Sinhala People, predicting that his doctrine is going to be established one day in that country (VII: 1-4).

Though this legend is not found in the Pali Canon, it is a fact that the Pali Canon (which contains the earliest available version of the original Prakritic Buddhism, which was later ousted from India) has been preserved in Sri Lanka and committed to writing by the Sinhala Monks in 88 BCE; and it is from here that missions went forth to South East Asia. This historical event seems to corroborate the Sinhala Buddhists' self-understanding that they are a people specially chosen by the Buddha for the mission of conserving and spreading his true message. Note that in the 5th century CE when this chronicle was compiled, the focus of the "election", so to say, was a people in view of a religion, and certainly not a "race" in terms of a 'language'. The racial and linguistic component took another fifteen centuries to assert itself due to certain circumstances which will be discussed later. Even the war between the Sinhala King Dutugamunu and the Tamil King Elaara, which took place in the middle of the 2nd century BCE is not interpreted in the Chronicle itself in terms of a Sinhala-Tamil conflict (as it is done today) but as an attempt to restore Buddhism to its rightful place, as Ananda Guruge has suggested.

But the next big conflict in the island was triggered off by a Tamil aggression in the middle ages. The Cholas from the South Indian Tamil State (which the Mahabharata refers to as Draavidya) invaded the island and destroyed the Anuradhapura Kingdom and its rich thirteen century old Buddhist culture within a short time. The Magha's persecution, which followed, saw the Buddhist libraries burnt and Buddhist monks fleeing the country as refugees. Here again the motive of the Dravidian invaders was not racial or linguistic; it was economic exploitation which, Spencer (the Historian of South Asia) defines as the "politics of plunder", a characteristic of the times. Kingdoms were plundering one another's wealth. Unfortunately, both these aggressive invaders in the Sinhala Buddhist Culture happened to be racially Tamil.

Undoubtedly, the damage wreaked upon the Sinhala people, their religion and culture by the South Indian invasions and aggressions was colossal and irreparable. It changed the entire political map of the country and the Sinhala Buddhists of our own times suffer from a "dangerous memory" of this event as the Tamils of Sri Lanka do of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom – except that the Tamils of our times had the fire-power to take a military option, while the medieval Sinhala Buddhists simply withdrew to the South, though the long-term damage to the state of Buddhism in the country was irreversible. Yet it would seem that the racial-linguistic component was not yet accentuated despite all these political crises. Even as late as the two pre-colonial centuries, say the 14th and the 15th, our Sinhala Buddhist monk-scholars were accustomed to master not only Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese but Tamil as well. They did not seem to show any racial or linguistic bias. In their self-understanding, they were a chosen people rather than a chosen race.

The Portuguese period and the Dutch period saw a decadence in the religious domain; the situation of Buddhism in the Kandyan Kingdom (where the colonization had not yet taken place) was distressing and a great reform was undertaken by Buddhists in the middle of the

18th century. This reform was an internal process of renewal according to Kitsiri Malalgoda; it was not directed against another race or religion or culture. Even the attempt at dethroning the Hindu Tamil King Sri Wikrama Rajasingha on the part of the Kandyan chieftains (an event, which ushered in the British takeover of the whole Island) was not motivated by racial, religious or linguistic concerns, according to Colvin R. de Silva. This Hindu-Tamil King was neither anti-Buddhist nor anti-Sinhalese but had unfortunately violated the principles of Buddhist economics based on the Lake and the Relic Mound (Daagaba). Symbolically, the earth dug out to form a lake is heaped to form a relic mound. This combination of Buddhism and agriculture accounted for the economically prosperous nation, which we have a glimpse of when we read the literature of the middle ages. Sri Wikrama Rajasingha, according to de Silva, thought otherwise and created a chaos: he was bent on beautifying his Capital by turning a highly productive stretch of paddy fields into a lake (which we see to this day in Kandy). In order to carry out this economically futile project he drained all the manpower from the neighbouring villages, i.e., the farming male population, and thus dealt a severe blow to both the economy and the production of the people's staple food. His race and religion or his mother-tongue had apparently played no significant role here. Thus even as late as 1815, in the final days of the Kandyan Kingdom, the Sinhala Buddhists did not seem to show any trace of racial or linguistic bias.

(b) Five Significant Events of the 19th Century

(1) It was in the British period and specially in the maritime provinces that the Buddhist revival (already begun in the 1750s merely as an internal reform) took an anti-minority turn. It was a reaction against the privileges that the English educated minority of Christians, Tamils and Burghers were alleged to have enjoyed at the expense of the Sinhala masses whose Dharmadvipa had by now become a British

colony. Notwithstanding many positive elements that the country derived from the colonial rule, the chosen people felt they were also a persecuted people; and the chosen and persecuted people became a chosen and persecuted race. The racial-linguistic component entered the Sinhala People's understanding of their mission to conserve Buddhism. The Sinhala Buddhists began to see themselves as a numerical majority politically reduced to a racio-linguistic and religious minority. This is one aspect of the Sinhala Buddhist's self-understanding that we Christians must treat with great respect and sensitivity, as Seelan Kadiragamar, a Tamil himself, advised some South Indian Tamil critics of Sinhala Buddhists during a seminar organized by the Ecumenical Institute recently.

(2) The British period saw also the beginnings of Buddhist-Christian polemics initially in the form of public debates which generated a plethora of apologetical literature, in which some of the Buddhist responses were quite rationalistic while others were abusive and even scurrilous. Obviously it was Christianity that started the debates at a time when Buddhists were ready for dialogue. The Christians were in power and the powerful opt for confrontation and conversion, not for conversation. Today the Buddhists are in power and Christians are pleading for dialogue. This is an important ingredient of the current Buddhist context.

(3) Another feature of the 19th century polemics was the introduction of rationalism into Buddhism. The Buddhist polemics of that century (continuing to the 20th) was regularly fuelled by the anti-Christian literature imported from such rationalistic organizations as the Nationalist Secular Society in England. Here again the Christian missionaries. Misinformation circulated earlier in Europe about Buddhism being a superstitious religion was debunked when in the 1880s Europe discovered the Pali Canon and the profound thought it contained. The tables were turned:- Christianity is superstitious and Buddhism is rationalistic and is the only religion that accords

with modern science. The apologetics that present Buddhism as a rationalistic and scientific alternative to all theistic religions, specially Christianity, is now an inalienable feature of the Lankan Buddhist context — despite warnings to the contrary coming from more circumspect scholars such as K.N. Jayatillake and Ven. Dr Walpola Rahula.

(4) Orientalism, a Western perception of the East, too, had a considerable impact on the formation of the Sinhala Buddhist Consciousness during the British period. The Western recognition of the Sinhala language as having an Indo-European origin, reinforced by the "Aryan myth" and confirmed by the Sanskrit roots of the Sinhala language, did influence the Sinhala Buddhists' self-understanding as a people belonging to a non-Dravidian race. Though the Tamils masses and the Sinhala masses were equally alienated from the English educated elite, and though Tamil and Sinhalese elite were fighting together for independence, the interest that the monk-scholars of the pre-colonial centuries showed in the study of the Tamil language, seems to have waned while the absence of Buddhist missions to the Tamil areas of the country and the restriction of Buddhism to the Sinhala people became a national disaster, as Sunil Ariyaratna has demonstrated in his excellent work *Demala Baudhaya (The Tamil Buddhist)*. So the Sinhala Buddhist resurgence begun by Hikkaduwe Sumangala Thera in the South and the Tamil-Hindu renaissance initiated by Arumuga Nalavar in the North in that same 19th century, ran on parallel lines that have never met even to this day. The Church which caters to both ethnic groups was not capable of inter-racial reconciliation within its own fold, while on the other hand, it was perceived by the Buddhists as part of the ethnic problem rather than part of the solution. Therefore National Reconciliation has become a top priority in the agenda of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

(5) Finally, there is the persistence of Occidentalism, an Eastern misperception of the West as the source of all evil, the serpent that

creeps into the Asian paradise and corrupts its people. In today's [2009] most popular teledrama, titled 'Pabhaa', currently broadcast on a state television channel, only the villains of the play bear Christian names (Reginald, Norbert, Michael, Nelia, Mervyn). This is not an isolated instance. In a very popular novel, 'Akkarapaha' (turned into a film), the source of moral corruption in a traditional Buddhist family is a Christian Burgher girl. In one teledrama the underworld thug was always shown wearing a cross round his neck. I do not think the script writers and novelists do this deliberately. It is a subconsciously acquired conviction that it is with European-Christian colonization that the Island of righteousness turned out to be what it is today. Its people were till then pure, innocent and morally correct and the land was an unspoilt Eden. There is no doubt that colonization had its evil effects but the pre-colonial history of the Island shows darker sides, too. The Pali Commentarial literature reveals that during the economically prosperous period of around the period 5th to 7th century, the consumption of all kinds of meat and liquor was an accepted custom. It was not the Europeans who introduced it. The Mahavamsa itself does not whitewash the rulers or the ruled. The country was going through ups and downs in economics, politics and religion prior to colonization.

The Occidentalism of today is only an indication that the Christian West has left a bad taste in the Sinhala Buddhists' mouths. The latest weapon of the Christian West is believed to be the NGO's and INGO's. There is much agitation against them. The latest novel that won the National Award this year [2009], 'Podu Purusaya' by Sunethra Rajakarunanayaka is hailed by a much respected Sinhala Buddhist literary critic Gunasena Vithana as a long overdue exposure of the NGO syndrome so destructive of the local culture and its values (Lankadeepa, 08.12.2009, Vimansaa, Literary Supplement, p.3).

The Lankan Buddhists' context according to the Sinhala Buddhists' own self-understanding is a collage of all these five elements. Our beliefs

and behaviour should be geared, among other things, towards correcting their impressions of authentic Christianity whilst acknowledging our past mistakes.

PART II

The Church's Beliefs and Behaviour vis-à-vis the Sinhala Buddhists' Self-Understanding

In spelling out the Christian praxis in response to the self-understanding of the Buddhists, I am proposing here a summary of what some of us Christians (not necessarily the official church) have been doing here during the last five decades in Deva Sarana, the Ecumenical Institute, Christian Workers' Fellowship, Centre for Society and Religion, Satyodaya, Tulana, Subodhi, Subasetgedara and many other inter-faith groups who live and work as basic human communities committed to inter-human justice and peace. Their experiences proclaim a programmatic message which is at once simple and dangerous as the Gospel of Christ.

(a) First of all let us remember that the non-theism of the Buddhists and others, is not a problem for YHWH of Moses, the Father of Jesus; nor should it be for us. God who is revealed on the Cross is very much concerned about idolatry leading to Deicide, rather than about non-theism. The polemics of the 19th century, in which Christians tried to prove the existence of God to the Buddhists, was an evangelical disaster. God defies rational argument but reveals Himself to the humble hearts. A person who has truly experienced God does not speak about God; God speaks through that person. The God of Moses and Jesus does not suffer from an inferiority complex – taking revenge (as our politicians do) on those who do not recognize Her or seek Her help; rather being the true God, She rains down Her goodness on all people, be they believers or non-believers, and does not fight atheism but condemns idolatry as the source of all evil; for idolatry is absolutizing the relative, or adoring

creatures; worshipping Mammon (i.e., the sin of capitalism which divinizes money and monetizes God). It is the sin in the eyes of God. Whenever and wherever my race, my language, my colour, my creed, or anything or any person or any ideology becomes my God, my Absolute and my ultimate concern, there I bring injustice and death. The ultimate consequence of idolatry is deicide, as Jesus proved on the cross: "It is me your God that you kill when you rob my people of their life". Our mission is not against atheism but against idolatry which is an attempt on God's life. And what is idolatry? Greed says St Paul (Col. 3;5). Our mission is to join the Buddhists in the eradication of Greed, both individual and organized. Eradication of Greed (i.e., elimination of idolatry) is the common task Buddhists and Christians are called to be engaged in by the Signs of the Times. We are partners in a common mission and not rivals in a conversion race. The beatitudinal spirituality of Jesus and Greedlessness (also known as *appicchataa*) in Buddhism coincide perfectly, except for the theistic framework of Jesus and the non-theistic approach of the Buddha. The practice of this common spirituality is a compulsory requirement of our mission as well as of theirs. There is no other way to win back our credibility which we have lost before the Sinhala Buddhists.

(b) Secondly, let us be humble and self-effacing like the God of Moses. In Psalm 18:36 of the Masoretic Text which the Jews recite even today, the psalmist says: *Hashem anwarka tervanii* (God you become so humble before me that you make me feel great). It was not "miraculous signs" that proved Jesus' divinity (for the gentiles of his time also performed such acts, as in the time of Moses), but by showing himself to be as humble as YHWH, his Father, associating himself with the spiritually humble and the socially humbled. The only "miracle-sign" Jesus claimed to perform was the fate of Jonah, by which he meant the humiliating death which he survived through his

resurrection. We need a non-triumphalist, a self-effacing church today. That is precisely what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world : to do our job of bringing peace and reconciliation through justice without drawing the attention to ourselves. If at a meal, salt attracts our attention to itself, either through lack or excess, it has failed in its mission. If no one mentions salt, it is a good meal. So is light. Light is not to be the centre of attraction; if you look at the Sun, you do not see anything. If people see the world in the light that we project and the light that we are, but not us blinding them, we have fulfilled our mission. Salt and light are our models. Let us play our roll unnoticed. Our triumphalistic presence is anti-gospel and can make us a threat to the Buddhists rather than an encouragement for their practice of *appicchata*, their version of the beatitudinal spirituality of Jesus. Hence the following two recommendations:

(1) In all our works of love and service which bear witness to our beliefs, the NGO syndrome must be avoided by the way we handle the funds. Most charitable institutions receive funds from the West and the fact that it is the minority group of Christians (i.e. churches) that handle them suggests an atmosphere of neocolonialism, something that puts off the Buddhists and confirms the occidental bias. Brian de Kretser at Prithipura shared the responsibility of handling the money with representatives of other religions and no religion. We too run a Centre for the Education for Hearing Impaired Children (CEHIC) at Dalugama with funds which I and Sister Greta (the foundress) collect every month from donors, for a highly specialized auditory-oral education which we impart free of charge (since selling education to the poor is simony), but the money is entirely handled by a board of parents and volunteers, mostly Buddhists, so that Sister and I have to ask their permission for any expenses involved in the school. That is how we made the constitution; we Christians who founded the institute renounced all power coming from money so that we might gain

authority. Authority is credibility. That is what the church lacks today in this country.

(2) All the churches in this country must get together and make a “crisigenic” decision as the Council of Jerusalem did (Acts 15) when it changed a divinely revealed law of circumcision using the authority Jesus gave the church (*halakah*). You and I are gentile followers of the Jewish Messiah Jesus because of that decision. It solved one crisis created by Judaizers in Antioch, but the solution given by the Council of Jerusalem was a crisigenic decision in that it created another crisis (questioning not only the circumcision but the very Law itself) whose resolution finally changed the map of the world. A similar “crisigenic” decision has to be made today with regard to our mission mandate. Unlike in the first decades of the church described in Acts 2, when Greek and Roman religions were on the wane and Christianity was called providentially to fill in the vacuum, here in our context Buddhism is alive and assertive. Instead of worrying about conversions from other religions or “proselytism” which Jesus ridiculed in Matt. 23:15, we must work for the transformation of the nation, with the Buddhists’ collaboration, into a reign of righteousness, justice and peace where all religions, races and linguistic groups can live in harmony. To make a disciple of a nation is a divine mandate that enjoins us to encourage all religions, specially Buddhism in this country, to spread its message of greedless life, characterized by non-selfish love (*araaga*), forgiving love (*adosa*) and sapiential love (*amoha*). We have a precedent in Acts 15 where a crisigenic decision was taken with a view to reformulating an ancient missionary policy on conversion by reading the Signs of the Times.

(c) Two areas in which Buddhists and Christians can meet for a fruitful dialogue without any fear of the occidental bias are Monastic Lifestyle and Mindfulness Spirituality.

(1) Thomas Merton saw the dialogical potentiality of monasticism and started an inter-

monastic movement in Bangkok (1968). There was a follow-up in Bangalore (1973) and another in Kandy (1980) in both of which I participated as a Resource Person. There, I heard the delegates calling for a monastic witness to Christianity specially in Buddhist countries as an evangelical imperative. In Sri Lanka the initiative came from the Anglican church (Yohan Devananda’s Deva Sarana, in Ibbagamuwa) way back in 1959, but not yet from the Benedictine Monks who have been here since the 19th century and were challenged in the aforementioned inter-monastic congresses to produce an indigenous monastic community in which even Buddhist recluses could feel at home. Note that the pioneering missionaries in Asia were the Asian churches such as the Nestorians who traversed as far as Tibet and the Far East, centuries before Europe was Christianized, and their secret was their Christian witness to Asian monasticism, as if to say, “Asians we are with you in this great spiritual tradition of yours”.

(2) As for mindfulness spirituality, I have been a voice crying in the wilderness for the last thirty years! We certainly made a mistake in the West despite the warning of the great Greek Father, Basil, (the sole feminist among the Church Fathers, all of whom were misogynists) when he warned against the “contemplation-action” paradigm of the Greeks, as an anti-biblical desire to “see” God whom you can only “hear” in this world, and associated monastic spirituality with a mindfulness spirituality. He insisted that biblical spirituality is one of mindfulness or remembrance. I have no time here to develop this suggestion further but I have done it elsewhere (See the bibliography below).

The Greek Orthodox church, which was not a slave to Greek philosophy as the medieval Catholic Church had been (and still is in some of its official documents) but adhered to the spirituality of their non-Christian ancestors, have developed the notion of *nepsis*, vigilance, watchfulness which is essential for a spiritual person, i.e. a “discerning person” (*anthropos*

diacritic). It is the exact homologue of Buddhist *appamada*, watchfulness or mindfulness that ensures immortality (*amatapadam*). Furthermore, in the nascent Christianity it is not only vigilance and mindfulness of God's recurrent visitations as well as of God's past interventions that constituted spirituality, but significantly also "mindfulness of the poor", the one and only thing that the first Council of Jerusalem recommended to its ministers (Gal. 2:10), and the only thing all the subsequent councils failed to remember until we come to Vatican II. This paradigm shift in our spiritual praxis is an essential condition for lessening the gap between Buddhists and Christians, notwithstanding the non-negotiable difference with the regard to the belief in God.

(d) This brings us to the most thorny challenge to all religions in our country, mostly to the church: that of National Reconciliation. We are a wounded nation, and a divided nation. A war is apparently won, but the hearts of millions remain yet to be won before peace can be restored for good. This is an area where our beliefs need to be radically reformulated and our behavioural patterns changed accordingly. There are two theological areas wherein the church has to change its stance.

(1) The first is the human rights language lavishly used in church circles and the little attention given to the biblical discourse on human responsibilities. The former is very essential to highlight violations and bring the violators to books. It pertains to the Law. Now, the Law is essential to reveal sin, says St Paul but the Law cannot save us from sin; only love can. But love does not speak in terms of rights but in terms of responsibilities. Cain was his brother's keeper and was responsible for the life of Abel. We are all responsible for the lives of

others. The Rights Discourse pertains to the Law that rightly exposes the sins against injustice, but provides no room for forgiveness and reconciliation. In one seminar when I referred to the human rights violations against the Tamils from 1958-1983, the Sinhala Buddhist participants questioned my silence about the atrocities of the Chola invasion and Magha's persecution which were incomparably more colossal, and irreversibly ruthless! Each party fights for and is concerned with the violated rights of its own. Rights language in itself is incapable of bringing reconciliation. Even the Buddhist Scriptures, speak of responsibilities and not of rights. The Christians, both Tamil and Sinhalese, must re-learn this biblical language of mutual responsibility, love, service, forgiveness, which are the ingredients of reconciliation.

(2) Our Chalcedonian Christology over-emphasized the incarnation, by which the Word became flesh, i.e., a particular person in a particular culture, speaking a particular language. Many historians of these Councils (e.g. the Jesuit Cardinal Alois Grillmeyer) have complained that Chalcedonian Christology had neglected the soteriological implications of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord. We speak of his racial linguistic particularity as essential but we forget that in his death and resurrection, Jesus manifested himself as the Christ in whom gender, race and class are transcended (Gal. 3:28). Thus Jesus was not caught up in the nationalism of the zealots (the JVP, JHU, LTTE of his time) but opted for a humanism by making his Spirit-animated humanity the new temple of worship – "neither on Mt Sion (of the Jews) nor on Mt Garizim (of the Samaritans) but in Spirit and Truth". Could the church, in its beliefs and behaviour, show itself to be as divinely human as God was in Christ, in whom race, gender and class discrimination are totally absent?

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Reply to Dr Aloysius Pieris S.J.: What would a Christian church incarnated in the Buddhist context of Sri Lanka believe, how would it behave?

Elizabeth J Harris

The question that Aloysius Pieris was asked to address concerned both the belief and behaviour of the Christian Church in Sri Lanka. In addressing this, he placed particular emphasis on the forms of awareness that should precede belief and behaviour. With what levels and what types of awareness should Christians in Sri Lanka live? I would agree with him completely that there must be historical awareness, particularly of the nineteenth century, when, under the yoke of British imperialism, the seeds of mistrust towards Christianity that had been present long before finally flowered into full-blown antagonism. There is not space in this response for me to explore the whole narrative of this but let me point to some key aspects of it using the research I have done into the subject over two decades.¹

Key to the development of antagonism between Buddhists and Christians in the nineteenth century was the contempt towards Buddhism displayed by western Christian missionaries. In the course of my research, I came across the record of a conversation between an Anglican Bishop and a Buddhist monk in 1863, written by the former. It included this:

*They were moved when I said that I came to them (the Buddhist monks) as the teachers of the people, feeling sure that if they could be convinced that my Religion was true they would wish to teach it instead of their own. They told me that nothing had more turned them against Christianity than finding themselves treated with marked contempt by its professors.*²

This, together with other archival evidence, has convinced me that the main cause of antagonism between Christians and Buddhists during the nineteenth century was not that

Christians preached their faith or that some Sri Lankans converted as a result. It was not the differences between the two religions. It was that the Christian missionaries showed contempt towards what Buddhists held dear in their preaching and writing, representing Buddhism, for instance, as pessimistic, nihilistic and in league with the devilish.³

Overt antagonism was not present when the British missionaries began to arrive in the second decade of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, archival evidence shows that members of the Buddhist monastic community, at this time, generally sought a co-existence model of inter faith relations that was governed by a code of conduct rooted in respect and tolerance. They had already experienced Roman Catholicism under the Portuguese and the Dutch Reformed Church under the Dutch, and were well aware that Christianity differed from Buddhism. Probably some were distrustful towards it. Folk stories that belittled Christianity were, after all, in circulation.⁴ Generally, however, their preference was for a mode of co-existence that would allow Buddhists and Christians to live alongside each other without acrimony. And they demonstrated this attitude through the hospitality they were willing to extend to the early missionaries. William Harvard, Wesleyan missionary, wrote to his mother exultantly but with a note of surprise that he had been allowed to preach in a Buddhist *vihāra* (monastery). The year was 1816, two years after the first Wesleyan missionaries had arrived.⁵ Other monastic communities allowed the missionaries to stay overnight if they were travelling away from home. Some were even given precious Pali manuscripts and taught Pali. Robert Spence Hardy, another Wesleyan missionary, wrote retrospectively and with some accuracy:

*They would have been willing to enter into an alliance with the servants of God, and would have had no hesitation in worshipping Jesus Christ if they (the missionaries) would have worshipped Buddha. According to their ideas, Jesus Christ was a good man, as Buddha was a good man; and if Buddha was only regarded as the best, what should hinder the formation of a compact between the two systems, that would have brought the whole of the Sinhalese people under one religious rule?*⁶

As the nineteenth century progressed, a shift in attitude took place. To quote my recent book, 'The wish for co-existence and tolerance receded, as the Buddhist monastic community realised that the missionaries were not going to reciprocate their courtesy but were bent on proselytising'.⁷ The monastic community, I am sure, felt a sense of betrayal at this lack of reciprocity. The consequence was a robust and brave wish to defend what was seen as a threat to the *dhamma*, the truth that the Buddha taught. So a new phase in Buddhist revivalism began, predicated on anti-Christian sentiment.

The missionaries had judged the early attitude of Buddhists to be foolish. They had expected a struggle as the two religions battled over truth claims but found what they mistakenly judged to be apathy or overconfidence⁸. Some found the revival easier to deal with. They could understand it better, because the Buddhist attitude to the religious 'other' had, in defence, moved closer to their own.⁹ In the accounts I have written of this, I have quoted Wesleyan missionary, Thomas Moscrop, who declared in 1894, at a missionary meeting in Birmingham:

*You have already made the inference, Buddhism is alive; but have you made the further inference, drawn by us on the field, that it is alive because Christianity has proved itself to be alive; that it has felt our grip and become alarmed, aggressive?*¹⁰

The contempt shown by the missionaries towards Buddhist belief and practice was central to this development. Those westerners

who did not show contempt, such as scholar civil servants, Robert Childers, John Dickson and George Turnour, always received respect.

One of the most tragic aspects of this, in my opinion, was that the process led to mutual demonization. In defence of Buddhism, Buddhists threw back at Christianity the accusations that Christians had thrown at them. It was Christianity that then became nihilistic, irrational and uncivilised. At the Panadura Debate in 1873 – a public Buddhist-Christian debate – the main Buddhist debater, Ven Gunānanda, attempted to prove, with literalistic references from the Old and New Testaments, that the God of the Christians was really a demon.¹¹ Theosophists from the West, who, after the debate, came to aid the Buddhist revival, used the same kind of vocabulary. Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934), for instance, began his professional life as an Anglican clergyman but rejected this for theosophy, Buddhism and esotericism. He lived in Sri Lanka from 1886-89, helping the Buddhist revival. He was the first editor of an English-medium journal in Sri Lanka called, *The Buddhist*. This is what he wrote of the Christianity of the missionaries:

It cannot live in peace with any other form of faith. It holds that there is but one saviour, but one inspired book, and but one little narrow grass-grown path that leads to heaven. Such a religion is necessarily uncompromising, unreasoning, aggressive and insolent. It has held all other creeds and forms in infinite contempt, divided the world into enemies and friends and amply verified that awful declaration of its founder, 'I come not to bring peace but a sword'.¹²

In this quote, Leadbeater goes to an extreme. Yet, the kind of sentiments he expressed moved into the twentieth century to inspire the periodic Buddhist-Christian mistrust that arose. They helped to inform the 'Occidentalism' among Sri Lankan Buddhists that Aloysius Pieris mentioned, which includes a continual watching for possible conspiracies against Buddhism that

could be linked with the West and Christianity. One thing, therefore, that a contemporary Christian church must avoid, if it is to be incarnated in a Buddhist context such as Sri Lanka, is a theology of contempt that could increase Buddhist-Christian mistrust in the present. Not only, though, should Christians be aware of history. They must develop an awareness of Buddhist self-understanding and the judgements that Buddhists tend to make about Christianity, often out of ignorance, in the present. Let me illustrate this with conversations from my period of residence in Sri Lanka that I have used in my book, *Buddhism for a Violent World*. In 1993, a few weeks before I left Sri Lanka, I was at a lunch party and fell into conversation with a young Buddhist woman. This is how I described it:

After hearing that I was a Christian and had studied Buddhism for over seven years, she expressed amazement that I had not converted and added something like this, 'But you only have a lesser goal, you only worship a god. You don't have nibbāna.' I could see where she was coming from. In Sri Lankan Buddhism, there are gods but they are in need of the Buddha's teaching, for the heavens in which they reside are within the round of birth and rebirth. The Buddha is described in the Pali Canon as 'teacher of gods and humans'. These gods can be petitioned for mundane blessings but they have nothing to do with gaining ultimate liberation. Many Buddhists in Sri Lanka assume that Christianity is only about the worship of one of these gods. If they do think beyond this, the image they often have of the Christian god is of an inscrutable external force that metes out punishment and joy arbitrarily, leading to fatalism in devotees. Buddhists in Sri Lanka also express surprise when told that Christians sometimes meditate or sit in silent contemplation.¹³

In the same chapter, I also mentioned Professor Lily de Silva, an inspirational teacher of Buddhism and Pali in Sri Lanka. She once shared with me that Christianity had always appeared 'thin' to her, because it did not set

down a path towards liberation. I wrote:

It seemed to her to encourage people to escape personal responsibility by placing everything at the feet of God. 'Christians in church just seem to praise and expect God's grace to do it all!' she declared. Set against her knowledge of the Pali texts, this, frankly, seemed ridiculous.¹⁴

If Christians are to be incarnated within Sri Lanka, in a Buddhist context, misconceptions such as these must be challenged through both formal encounter and a dialogue of life. Yet, there is another side to this coin. Christians must also try to overcome their misconceptions about Buddhism, by learning from Buddhists about what they believe and practise. This two-way process should be part of what the church looks like, where Christians live in a minority amongst Buddhists. Some Christians still believe Buddhism is idolatrous. Some condemn it as syncretistic. Perhaps the most common accusation is that Buddhism cannot offer a salvific path or liberative truth because Buddhism has no Saviour. Buddhists would want to challenge Christians on all three. All three, in fact, bear false witness against Buddhism and are the result of a refusal to seek an understanding of Buddhism that is rooted in Buddhist self-understanding.

I have pointed to two awarenesses that Christians should develop if they are living in a country such as Sri Lanka, a majority Buddhist country that has suffered the burden of European colonialism. The first is an awareness of the damage that a theology of contempt can wreak on Buddhist-Christian relations. The second is an awareness that both Christians and Buddhists have misconceptions about the other, misconceptions that are hard to shift, because, on both sides, they are linked to issues of belief. On the Theravāda Buddhist side, they are related to difficulties in recognising that the Christian God may be different from the Buddhist 'gods'. On the Christian side, they involve difficulties in recognizing how a non-theistic religion can be affirmed as possessing salvific goodness.

Before closing, I would like to outline two models of the kind of action that might help Christians avoid both a theology of contempt, and misunderstandings between Buddhists and Christians. The first is a dialogue of life that has no evangelistic agenda. My own awareness of this model was influenced by a visit, in 1987, to Alukalavita, a Buddhist village near Buttala, in the Province of Uva, in the south of Sri Lanka, to stay with Father Michael Rodrigo, a Catholic priest, who, after an academic career, chose to establish a small non-proselytising Christian community there. At the heart of his non-threatening presence in Alukalavita was a dialogue of life rooted in spiritual values and the deep respect Rodrigo already had for Buddhism. As Rodrigo himself documented, the attitudes of Buddhists towards his presence changed considerably over the years that followed. At first there was suspicion, since the villagers believed he had come to proselytise. When they realised that proselytisation was not part of his agenda, suspicion changed to trust and love.¹⁵ By extension, the attitudes of the villagers to Christianity as a whole changed from mistrust to respect. Sri Lanka has the inspiration of other pioneers to draw on also: Aloysius Pieris himself; Yohan Devananda, Audrey Rebera and others. My first model, therefore, is a non-proselytising dialogue of life that has the potential to lead to mutual enrichment and mutual learning.

My second model is actually based on the co-existence model that I believe the Buddhist monks sought at the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of their first reactions to aggressive preaching by Christian missionaries was to send petitions to the colonial government that both protested against the actions of the missionaries and also suggested principles of tolerance and respect that would redress their grievances. It is significant that the principles were very similar to those recommended in a Code of Conduct

on inter faith relations that several Christian denominations in Britain accepted in the 1990s. The Code was originally produced by the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom and its principles included the following: learning to understand what others actually believe and value and letting them express them in their own terms; always seeking to avoid violence in our relationships; being honest about our beliefs and religious allegiances; being straightforward in our intentions; respecting the right of others to disagree with us.¹⁶ It, therefore, endorsed mutual respect, transparency and honesty – the reverse of the contempt and the wish to undermine ‘the other’ that was present in the nineteenth century missionary enterprise. Christians from both the evangelical and liberal wings of the churches were able to accept it.

This is a model that encourages respectful debate and conversation about differences and misconceptions. This is the kind of debate pioneered by Sri Lankan Methodist minister, Lynn de Silva, who was one of the first Christians in Sri Lanka in the twentieth century to call for an intellectual debate on the differences and similarities between Buddhism and Christianity in a context of mutual respect.¹⁷ It also demands absolute transparency from both Buddhists and Christians. Christians, for instance, if they were true to this model, would not move into a new geographical region for the purpose of church growth without making contact with Buddhist leaders to explain what they wanted to do. In addition, any acts of violence, verbal or non-verbal, against what Buddhists hold dear, would be avoided.

I believe that there is biblical backing for both these models and that a church incarnated in the Sri Lankan context should be able to affirm both, recognising their differing roles. If these are combined with the ‘awarenesses’ that I have outlined, which echo the words of Aloysius Pieris, then I believe the Christian church of Sri Lanka would be truly incarnated in its country.

¹ See for example Elizabeth J Harris, 2006, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter: religious, missionary and colonial experience in nineteenth century Sri Lanka*, London & New York: Routledge, particularly pp. 191-204; Elizabeth J Harris, 2010, *Buddhism for a Violent World: A Christian Reflection*, London: Epworth Press, particularly pp. 131-136.

² Bishop Claughton writing to Revd E. Hawkins from Colombo, 13 January 1863 (Ceylon Letters Vol. II their faithUSPG Archives), quoted in Harris, 2006: 189 and Harris, 2010: 119.

³ See, for instance, Harris, 2006, particularly: 53-61; 101-109.

⁴ See Richard F. Young and G.S.B. Senanayake, 1998, *The Carpenter Heretic: A Collection of Buddhist Stories about Christianity from 18th Century Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Karunaratne & Sons, which is a translation of folk stories from the Dutch colonial period in Sri Lanka that ridicule Jesus. Mentioned in Harris, 2006: 192.

⁵ See Harris, 2006: 192.

⁶ Robert Spence Hardy, 1865, *The Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission, South Ceylon*, Colombo: Wesleyan Mission Press: 286, quoted in Harris, 2006: 193 and Harris, 2010: 132.

⁷ Harris, 2010: 133.

⁸ Harris, 2006: 195

⁹ Harris, 2010: 134

¹⁰ T Moscrop, 1894, 'Christianity and Buddhism in South Ceylon: a missionary speech' in *Monthly Literary Register* (Colombo), II, New Series 12, December 1894: 285-7. Quoted in Harris, 2006: 201 and Harris, 2010: 134.

¹¹ See Harris, 2006, *Theravāda Buddhism and the British Encounter*: 202; Harris, 2010, *Buddhism for a Violent World*: 135

¹² C.W. Leadbeater, 'Wesak/Wesak Compliments' in *The Buddhist*, I, 22: 172-4, here 173-4, quoted in Harris, 2006, *Theravada Buddhism and the British Encounter*: 204 and Harris 2010: 135. See Harris 2006: 139-147 for further information about the theosophists in Sri Lanka

¹³ Harris, 2010: 147.

¹⁴ Harris, 2010: 148

¹⁵ See Michael Rodrigo, 1993, 'The Hope of Liberation Lessens Man's Inhumanity: A Contribution to Dialogue at Village Level' in R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*, London: SCM: 189-210. See also Harris 2010: 139-144 and Elizabeth J Harris, 2000, 'Competition, Co-operation and Reconciliation in Inter Faith Relations' Part Two of a series on Evangelism and Dialogue, *Thinking Mission* series: London: USPG.

¹⁶ The Inter Faith Network of the United Kingdom was founded in 1987 to bring together, on an equal playing field, nine faith communities, inter faith groups and educational institutions promoting inter faith dialogue. Its Code of Conduct, *Building Good Relationships with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs*, can be downloaded from www.interfaith.org.uk

¹⁷ See for example, Rev. Lynn de Silva, 'The Christian Attitude to Buddhism' in *Daily News*, 2 August 1966: 6. One of his best known publications was, 1975, *The Problem of Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue (then the Study Centre for Religion and Society).

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The Transformation of Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Buddhism

Perry Schmidt-Leukel

1. Which Buddhism?

When we reflect on “Christian Self-Understanding in the Context of Buddhism” the first question that will naturally arise is about which kind of Buddhism we have in mind (given that the particular kind of Christianity is already defined by the “we”). This question will relate, in the first instance, to the diversity of Buddhist *traditions, branches and schools*, and also to their *national or local specifications*. By way of its numerous branches Buddhism has developed a wide spectrum of different viewpoints and different emphases that open up different perspectives when related to Christianity. Buddhist-Christian relations are markedly different, for example, in Sri Lanka, Korea, China¹, Japan or the USA.

Yet this diversity of Buddhist schools and traditions is not the only aspect that I have in mind. When looking at religions, or religious traditions, we should not forget that we look at people, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith once emphatically reminded the academic world.² Hence there is a diversity of Buddhisms in terms of a diversity of Buddhists. In relation to Christianity this is most relevant when we ask what kind of exposure to Christianity these Buddhists have had. Let me mention some examples: There are Asian Buddhists whose Buddhism is still strongly informed by those who developed their understanding of Buddhism as part and parcel of their *reaction against Western and Christian colonialism*. Similarly, the Buddhism of *Christian converts to Buddhism* will be markedly different, in its relation to Christianity, from the Buddhism of those who *never had any problematic history with Christianity* as, for example, in the case of the Tibetan Buddhists. In some parts of the world, e.g. in Korea, the painful experience with

foreign colonial dominion was not with a Christian but with a Buddhist nation. Hence it is no surprise that Christianity could gain far more support in this nation than in many others. Yet this again is a fact that can easily create feelings of caution and concern on the side of the Korean Buddhists.

Another phenomenon in this context is the Western development of what might be named “*Buddhism light*”, that is a kind of Buddhism that is not only losing its bonds with Asian Buddhism but also its religious roots and is turning into some psychology or life-style “without beliefs”³, or even degenerating into a commercial offer of superficial spirituality.

Often Western admirers and Eastern apologists have presented Buddhism in a very idealised and romanticised way, not infrequently thereby contrasting a purportedly entirely peaceful, non-violent, tolerant, open-minded, liberal, ecological, rational, scientific, etc Buddhism with a Christianity that is accused of exemplifying all of the opposite features. There are indications that this romanticised image of Buddhism is getting its cracks and might ultimately give way to a more *balanced and realistic perception*.⁴ This is basically a healthy and wholesome development. Yet in relation to Christianity this development has its own ambiguities: On the one hand, it could encourage Buddhists to venture a more self-critical analysis of their own tradition and thereby make them more sensitive in relation to the problematic aspects that are shared by all religions, including their own. On the other hand, it may nourish new forms of Christian superiority claims and thereby drive Buddhists into a position of renewed apologetic defence. The latter is hardly a desirable situation, and it will be a challenging task for the future to

develop ways of justified and necessary criticism of religion, whether intra-religious or inter-religious, without gaining from this any polemical or apologetic capital.

Finally, I would like to mention one further type of Buddhism: the *Buddhism of Buddhist-Christian dual-belongers*.⁵ They too understand themselves as Buddhists, not as 50% Buddhist and 50% Christian but as being both 100%. Reflecting Christian self-understanding in the context of the Buddhism of Buddhist-Christian dual-belongers will obviously be very different from a reflection in relation to those who would consider this kind of double-belonging an impossibility.⁶

So when we consider Christian self-understanding in the context of “Buddhism” we need to take into account the kind of stance that the respective Buddhists have in relation to Christianity. For this has not only an impact on their version of Buddhism but, as a result, also on the corresponding self-understanding of Christians in relation to these specific forms of Buddhism. If these differences between various Buddhisms are neglected, certain statements that Christians make or made in relation to a particular kind of Buddhism might all too easily be mistaken as an assessment of Buddhism in its totality and hence create unnecessary irritations.

2. Buddhism and the Question of God

A crucial issue for Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism has always been, and still is, the question of God. In the 19th century, when modern Western interpretations of Buddhism emerged, we basically find two different strands: Some Western interpreters regarded Buddhism as a kind of atheism while others saw it as a form of mysticism.⁷ If Buddhism was perceived as atheistic, Christian theologians interpreted it as a false philosophy and as standing in an antagonistic relationship towards Christianity. If, however, Buddhism was understood as a form of mysticism, it was held

to be continuous with, though nevertheless inferior to Christianity insofar as it was lacking the proper, namely personal, or better three-personal, concept of God.

Today, I think, we can affirm with some degree of certainty that at least traditional Buddhism, whether in its early *pre-mahāyānist* or its later Mahāyāna forms, was not “atheistic” in the Western sense of the word. The question is to a large extent of a hermeneutical nature. In the West, the naturalist denial of a transcendent reality took the form of atheism because the dominant concept of transcendence was “theistic”. Denying God meant denying transcendent reality. This was markedly different at the time of early Buddhism. Buddhism was – and to a large extent still is – “non-theistic”, that is, it denies the idea of a personal creator-God but it does not deny transcendence as such.⁸ In classical Buddhism *nirvāṇa* is clearly affirmed as a “transcendent” (*lokuttara*) and “unconditioned” (*asaṅskṛta*) reality. There was a group at the time of early Buddhism which did indeed reject transcendence in whatever form, namely the materialist Cārvākas. Yet early Buddhism was very critical of them precisely because of their denial of afterlife and ultimate salvation.

Nevertheless, there are both, contemporary Buddhists and contemporary Christians, who still present Buddhism as atheism in the naturalistic, that is, transcendence-negating sense. As far as they are Christians, it usually has something to do with their polemical-apologetic interests.⁹ As far as they are Buddhists, it is usually due to the respective “Christian history” that they have had. That is, they are either informed by the anti-Christian effect of anti-colonial Buddhism or they are Christian converts to Buddhism, or, as in the case of Paul Williams, ex-converts or better re-converts who still stress the antagonism between Buddhism and Christianity.¹⁰ For those Christians who continue seeing Buddhism as atheism, the only appropriate Christian self-understanding is to constantly remind oneself and one’s fellow Christians of the duty, as they

perceive it, to work towards the conversion of Buddhists to Christianity.¹¹

Christians who reject the understanding of Buddhism as atheism can be distinguished broadly into two camps: On the one hand we still find those who realise that Buddhism is indeed aware – in its own ways – of transcendence, yet honestly believe that the Buddhist understanding of this reality is seriously deficient. The Vatican declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), although not specifically related to Buddhism, is as much an expression of this position¹² as is Mark Heim's influential book *The Depth of the Riches*, where Buddhism's awareness of transcendence is interpreted as an authentic but only partial and deficient grasp of some aspects of the divine Trinity.¹³

This, however, is not the whole scenario. Today we find a number of Christians – among theologians as well as, I guess, ordinary believers – who hold that the Buddhist concepts of transcendence are not inferior to their Christian counterparts but are just different or even complementary and are basically of equal soteriological validity. The general idea is that Buddhist concepts of transcendence are expressive of different but nevertheless equally valid and equally salvific experiences of the same transcendent reality. That is, not different expressions of the same experience, but expressions of different experiences with the same reality! “*Nirvāṇa*”, “*Dharmakāya*” or “*God*” are not different words for the same thing. They have different meanings and are part of different conceptual contexts. As such they relate to different experiences, which can, however, be understood as different experiences with the same ultimate reality.¹⁴ This is, of course, what John Hick has so lucidly suggested in his seminal, though frequently mis-understood or misrepresented work *An Interpretation of Religion*.¹⁵ It is also the conclusion that such a careful and meticulous pioneer of Buddhist-Christian dialogue as Lynn A. de Silva arrived at, after having contemplated the self-understanding of Christianity in relation to

Buddhism for decades. De Silva took off by assuming that Buddhist understanding of transcendence is genuine though deficient and needs to be complemented and fulfilled by Christianity.¹⁶ Yet towards the end of his life he understood that Buddhism and Christianity complement each other, that they are different but nevertheless on the same plane.¹⁷

Many Christians who do not see Buddhism as deficient but simply as different, feel that the traditional Christian understanding of transcendence can be enriched by studying Buddhism. They feel that the strong and earnest Buddhist emphasis on the ineffability of ultimate reality can function as a much-needed antidote to Christian dogmatism, an insight that had already been expressed by the late Thomas Merton after his famous Polonnaruwa experience.¹⁸ The admittance that the reality to which Christians refer by the term “*God*” is not only beyond human understanding but also beyond everything that human words might express, is of course a traditional, perfectly orthodox, but unfortunately too often neglected Christian teaching. It is a cause of great concern that a document like *Dominus Iesus* denies that human language and concepts set limits to our capacity of expressing the truth about *God*¹⁹, thereby contradicting the overwhelming bulk of the Christian theological tradition. In this respect, Buddhism might even help Christianity to find back to its own previous orthodoxy.

On the other hand, the view that Buddhist notions of transcendence are different but not inferior to the Christian ones entails that Christianity is not in principle superior to Buddhism. This is of course a dramatic change in Christian self-understanding but one that might turn out to be entirely justified. It does not only do justice to the Christian tradition of acknowledging the infinite difference between the nature of *God* and all finite human glimpses of it, it also implies that the different conceptions of transcendence in Buddhism and Christianity, particularly when understood as reflecting different experiences with transcendence, might be mutually enriching.²⁰ This involves that not

only Christians might learn from Buddhism but that Buddhists too might gain inspiration from Christian insights. I will come back to this later.

3. The Nature of Doctrine

If ultimate reality is beyond human words and concepts – as it is equally affirmed by Theravāda, Mahāyāna and the Christian tradition – what then is the nature of all the various doctrines and teachings? In the West, Buddhism is often presented as a “religion” or *weltanschauung* that is entirely non-dogmatic. This, I guess, is highly misleading although there is an element of truth in it. While Theravāda tends to be comparatively “dogmatic” in its approach to the teachings of the Tipitaka, it never denied – at least theoretically – statements like the famous parable of the raft. This parable implies that Buddhist teachings pursue the practical purpose of getting over to the other shore of Nirvāṇa, which is ineffable. Yet it was the great Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna who drew from this the conclusion that *all* the taught doctrines need to be considered as conventional or relative truth, and not as truth in the ultimate sense, which remains beyond human words and understanding. This does not mean that Nāgārjuna would relativise the Buddhist teachings in relation to the teachings of other religions. For Nāgārjuna relative truth is indispensable for reaching the absolute truth²¹, and apparently for him only the Buddhist doctrine is this indispensable “relative truth”. I have not come across any indication that Nāgārjuna would, for example, also include any Vedic teachings among the kind of conventional truth that leads to the ultimate, liberating insight. However, Buddhism might be able to expand its own self-understanding in relation to other religions along those lines. The question is therefore: Can Buddhism see the teachings and corresponding practices of other religions also as rafts that take you to the other shore? Can it accept them as different sets of conventional truth that guide their followers equally well to the ineffable ultimate – as different though

nevertheless equally valid *dharma-gates*?²²

Buddhist thinking about the nature of its own doctrines has been interpreted in the West as akin to certain features of contemporary deconstructionist philosophy. Be that as it may. For Christians it does not only remind them of their own apophatic tradition, it raises the question of how Christian doctrines are related to forms of Christian experiences. This touches a vital nerve. To me it seems evident that much of the loss of Christian credibility in Western society is due to the fact that Christian language no longer speaks to the people, and is no longer understood by the people, because it no longer elucidates and no longer evokes genuine religious experiences. The gigantic gap between Christian official language and the reality of the peoples’ experience is for Christianity an issue of life and death. Christian life dies wherever this gap widens and deepens – Christian life flourishes where this gap is bridged, regardless by what kind of bridge. This explains the success of Pentecostal forms of Christianity which seem to revive the world of the New Testament and it was also true in relation to the “base communities” of Latin American liberation theology which promised to translate the New Testament’s message of *sōtēria* “salvation/liberation” into something experiential in terms of social and political change. The Buddhist understanding of doctrine as something that needs to be understood in relation to experience should be seen by Christians as of vital importance: We need to find ways of expressing the Christian teachings that elucidate the experiential dimension of these teachings and thus present them as a true life option. Personally, I do not believe that Pentecostalism and Liberation Theology are the only ways of how this can be achieved.

Another important insight that emerges from the Buddhist version of deconstructionism²³ is the insight into the fabricated nature of our identities. Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism might crucially mean: to take into account the Buddhist deconstruction

of the “self” in relation to our various religious self-identities! We all know that in the name of religious identity, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist, horrendous suffering may be inflicted upon those who are perceived as not being part of this identity or as being a threat to this identity. The recent violent history of Sri Lanka provides another sad example of this general fact. Yet, the insight that our self-concepts are human constructs, whether on the individual or on the collective level, may help us to construct our identities in ways that are less exclusive and less likely to inflict suffering upon others. In the end, it might even direct us to letting go all sorts of religious labelling and seeing each one of us as just the unique and unmistakable individual that each of us is, without thinking of ourselves or our neighbours in such stereotypes as *the* Christian, *the* Buddhist, *the* Hindu, *the* Muslim, etc.²⁴

4. Buddhist Practical Methods

The awareness that Buddhist doctrines are intrinsically and inseparably related to specific forms of experiences, to a way of living and a religious practice that can bring these experiences about, is probably the most important factor in changing the Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism during the past five decades. What has transformed the Christian view of Buddhism was not in the first instance a better understanding of the Buddhist teachings but the serious participation in Buddhist practice, or, to be more precise, the better understanding of Buddhist teachings as it was enabled by entering into Buddhist practice. I think it is hard to overestimate the impact that Christian practice of Zen-Meditation and – though to a lesser extent – Theravāda or Tibetan forms of meditation have had on the Christian understanding of Buddhism and thereby on the Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism. Buddhist practice has opened up for many Christians a way of how to regain a meaningful and experiential spiritual life beyond the options of evangelical/pentecostal practice or political activism.

Learning how to meditate has attracted Christians to Buddhism, and learning how to reinterpret Christian teachings in the light of meditational experiences has kept them going on that path.

Yet there is a much deeper dimension to this than one might guess at the first sight. Buddhist meditational practice can change the whole attitude towards religious life. For everything that one does or does not, that one believes or does not believe, that one explores or rejects, assumes the character of an exciting journey. Buddhist practice can foster an understanding of Christian practice that is not prefigured by the Christian milieu and not dictated by the force of a homogenous Christian society nor understood as an act of duty or as obedience to unquestionable command-ments but rather as an attractive and profound *path* that is worth to pursue because it is so close to the heartbeat of life. I dare to say that under the impact of Buddhist practice many Christians have rediscovered the original meaning of Christian life as a “way”.²⁵

This aspect, I guess, might also be an important motive behind the so-called intermonastic dialogue. Monastic life can be regarded as a very specific, 24-hours a day, form of meditational practice. Monastic life is dedicating oneself wholeheartedly and exclusively to specific forms of spiritual practice. Through intermonastic dialogue Buddhist and Christian monastics may therefore achieve a mutual understanding that penetrates deeply into the spiritual realm of the other. But I am not a monk and I do not want to speak too much about things of which I have no insider experience. Yet I strongly feel that the intermonastic dialogue is – and needs to remain – one of the central beams in the architecture of Buddhist-Christian relations.

The Christian entry into Buddhist practice is presumably the most important factor behind the development of hybrid identities.²⁶ Although there are some few cases of Christians who are primarily attracted to the intellectual

expressions of Buddhism²⁷, in most cases it was or is apparently the adoption of Buddhist practices that led Christians to developing religious double identities. This may also explain why there are apparently far more Buddhist-Christian dual-belongers with a Christian background than those, if any, with a Buddhist background. This imbalance might look differently if Buddhists felt comparatively attracted to forms of Christian spiritual practices as *vice versa*. That the practice of Buddhist forms of meditation by Christians is a gateway to various kinds of multi-religious identities was perhaps already foreseen by the Vatican when in 1989 it issued its warning that attempts to harmonise Christian and Eastern meditation may lead to syncretism.²⁸ Moreover, the text refers to an attitude of self-sufficiency (“To remain in oneself”) as the real danger of misguided forms of meditation (cf. no. 19). However, the then Cardinal Ratzinger’s remark of 1997 about Buddhism as a sort of “spiritual auto-eroticism” was presumably not directed against Buddhism as such but was meant to highlight a problematic feature of a widespread Western perception of Buddhism.²⁹ It would indeed be an absurd accusation given that the spiritual goal of Buddhist practice is precisely the liberation from all forms of self-centredness.

5. Salvation

This takes us to an issue that – in addition to the question of God – can be seen as the second most crucial question in Buddhist-Christian relationship, the issue of salvation. When Christians and Buddhists proclaim a message of salvation and when both strive for salvation as their ultimate goal are they moving into different, perhaps even opposite directions? Or are they pursuing complementary, similar or even identical goals?

In the late 19th and early 20th century the predominant view was that Christians and Buddhists move into opposite directions. One reason for this was the widespread Christian perception of Buddhism as a form of

transcendence-negating atheism. Another reason, though probably more influential in Protestant than in Catholic circles, was the exclusivistic claim that salvation is found in no other name than the name of Jesus Christ, a claim that was either presented in an evangelical form or along the lines of Karl Barth’s so-called “Dialectical Theology”. Despite decades of fruitful theological dialogue, the view that Buddhism and Christianity pursue irreconcilable goals has not yet disappeared. An infamous reoccurrence were the statements in Pope John-Paul II’s book *The Threshold of Hope* where he accused Buddhism of having a pessimistic and escapist concept of salvation. His statements did not only provoke angry protests from the Buddhist side during his visit to Sri Lanka in 1995, but also some dialogical and rather constructive efforts to amend the picture.³⁰ These discussions made it clear that the Pope’s position depended on earlier Christian misinterpretations of Buddhism, which are interconnected with the perception of Buddhism as atheism and are equally questionable. However, as it is usually the case, these more balanced and differentiated views never reached the same broad audience and thus tended to have a much smaller impact.

An interesting and perhaps symptomatic example of how exclusivistic perceptions may nevertheless change among Christians is the development of Mark Heim’s understanding of Buddhist Nirvāṇa. In his 1985 book *Is Christ the Only Way?*, which was written from a largely evangelical perspective, Heim already suggested that God might allow Buddhists to arrive at their desired goal of Nirvāṇa, but that, from a Christian point of view, this Nirvāṇa is “not noticeably different from hell”.³¹ Ten years later, in his work *Salvations* which made him a rather famous theologian, because this book appeared to be based on a Christian adoption of post-modernist – and hence in some circles quite fashionable – philosophies, he seemed to allow in a more neutral way for a diversity of radically different, even incommensurable “salvations” or religious ends without making any attempt of assessing those ends or of

integrating them into one overarching religious or metaphysical narrative. This interpretation of Mark Heim's book pleased post-modern intellectuals but was nevertheless not entirely faithful to the text itself. For even in *Salvations* Heim still suggested – in line with his earlier views – that “Christians may rightly continue to view the achievement of these alternative religious ends as something to be avoided, even in cases carrying some measure of the meaning of ‘damnation’.”³²

Meanwhile, Heim has further elaborated on this understanding in his book *The Depth of the Riches* (2001), where – in contrast to *Salvations* – he now confines the word “salvation” to the Christian end. As mentioned before, according to Heim other ends, including the Buddhist one, are valid and indeed worth of being pursued only in so far as they participate to some extent in that reality that constitutes the goal of Christianity: the Trinitarian God. While Christian salvation, according to Heim, is in its essence the participating vision of the communion of the Trinitarian persons, other ends can be salvific only to a lesser extent and only to the degree that they are based on the participating vision of a reality that might be understood by Christians as an aspect of the Trinity. The perfect selflessness of Buddhist Nirvāṇa or the insight into emptiness in Mahāyāna may thus be seen as glimpses of the perfect selflessness and emptiness of the three Trinitarian persons in their complete self-emptying by remainderlessly focussing on each other.³³

I am not going to discuss Heim's ideas here any further, but want to highlight just two points:

First, they make it clear – and I think rightly so – that the Christian assessment of the Buddhist soteriological end corresponds to and depends on how it is related to the respective Christian end. Christian self-understanding is correlated with the Christian understanding of the Gospel. And Christian self-understanding in the context of Buddhism corresponds to the correlation of the Gospel and the Buddhist message of liberation (*vimukti, vimutti*).

Second, Heim's model does in fact not leave any room for diversity within the concept of “salvation”. In the end, only the Christian end constitutes “salvation”. Other religions' ends and the respective paths can be seen, from Heim's Christian perspective, as salvific – to some degree – only if they exhibit a certain nearness to the Christian concept. Hence, it is quite consistent that Heim has now rejected his former talk of “salvations” in the plural. This however shows that his model is far away from being “more pluralistic” than religious pluralism as he himself and others had claimed.³⁴

Heim's approach – which is just a new version of classical inclusivism – is not the only theological possibility to relate the Buddhist and Christian paths of salvation. Pioneers of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, like Lynn de Silva or Aloysius Pieris, have already decades ago suggested the model of complementarity. De Silva, towards the end of his life, explained this as the complementarity of “intimacy” and “ultimacy” as two fundamental features of human experience of transcendence. Within Christianity, “intimacy”, which corresponds to a personal representation of transcendence, has become more prominent, while in Buddhism “ultimacy”, with the corresponding non-personal concepts of transcendence, took the lead. But both aspects are present in both traditions and belong together.³⁵ Pieris, as it is well known, speaks of the complementarity of “wisdom” and “love” (or “*gnosis*” and “*agape*”) as the two “complementary idioms that need each other to mediate the self-transcending experience called ‘salvation’.”³⁶ I would like to add a third possibility of how to describe this complementarity, that is, the complementarity of non-attachment and loving involvement. It is commonly known that overcoming attachment is as much a crucial feature of Buddhist spirituality as loving concern for the world is within Christianity. Yet these two central values are not opposed. They could deteriorate into opposite qualities if the one had no inner affinity towards the other. But this is not the case. Buddhist non-attachment is genuine only if it is accompanied by unrestricted, non-

discriminating “loving kindness” or “compassion”. And loving involvement with the world needs to be accompanied by genuine freedom from the world. Non-attachment and loving involvement are not just complementary, they are mutually conditioning. Each of the two protects the other against degenerating into what Buddhaghosa (4th to 5th centuries CE) called its “near enemy”, that is, a spiritual attitude that looks similar but is in fact the essential opposite: Without love, non-attachment would become cold indifference and without non-attachment, love might just be a camouflage of selfish greed.³⁷

Understanding the Buddhist and the Christian path of salvation not as identical but as complementary provides us with a more satisfactory solution than Mark Heim:

First, it agrees that any talk about the salvific character, or not, of other religions needs not to presuppose a uniform concept of salvation. The question is rather of a criteriological nature: Can Buddhists, within the context of their concept of salvation, identify the Christian path as “salvific”? And conversely, can Christians, within the context of the Christian understanding of salvation, identify the Buddhist path as salvific? My suggested answer is: Both can if they understand the complementarity of both paths. Second, this view does not deny or trivialise the differences between both paths. On the contrary, it understands these differences as an opportunity for mutual learning and transformation.

In 2008 Catherine Cornille published her book *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*³⁸ which I regard as one of the most profound and important publications in the field. The book is not that pessimistic about dialogue as its title might initially suggest. It describes the virtues that real dialogue requires and honestly raises the question whether religions are capable and willing to develop them. A central virtue, according to Cornille, is “humility” understood as “openness and receptiveness toward the truth of the other religion”.³⁹ Such openness implies that one’s own religion is not perfect,

that there is something important to learn from others. “Most religious faith”, as Cornille states, “is based on a belief in the fullness and sufficiency of one’s own religious teachings and practices”⁴⁰ and is thus little or not at all inclined to admit the possibility of learning something essential from the religious other. However, if the Buddhist and the Christian path of salvation are complementary, there can be mutual learning.

As I have said so far, Christians learned from Buddhists to modify a too strongly theistic understanding of God and rediscovered the importance of the apophatic tradition. Christians in dialogue with Buddhism have begun incorporating Buddhist soteriological pragmatism into their own understanding of doctrine, or better, of the function of doctrine. Christians have studied meditation under Buddhist masters and the incorporation of Buddhist practice into their own Christian spiritual practice has been and still is changing their self-understanding as Christians up to the point of developing dual religious identities. Yet can anything comparable be observed among Buddhists?

Certainly, Buddhists involved in dialogue with Christians, as for example Thich Nhat Han, Masao Abe, or Sulak Sivaraksa, to mention just a few names from different Buddhist traditions, have all affirmed that Christianity challenges Buddhism to rediscover the spiritual importance of social responsibility, which demonstrates that the complementarity I just mentioned, is operative in this process. But today I would like to raise a question that goes further: Can Buddhists learn from Christians in relation to central features of Christian spirituality like forgiveness and hope? Like us Christians, Buddhists are human, which means, Buddhists too become guilty. Buddhists too experience despair. Buddhism has its own traditional ways of coping with despair and guilt – one’s own as well as the guilt of one’s neighbour. But how conducive are these Buddhist ways towards hope and towards forgiveness? Are hope and forgiveness qualities that Buddhists can assess

as spiritually wholesome? Or are they to be seen as forms of illusion? The Christian understanding of hope and forgiveness is grounded in their understanding of transcendence itself. Can Buddhists understand this? Can they share this? Do they want it? That is, can Buddhists identify in their own understandings of the transcendent features that would also support forgiveness and hope? Supposedly the different traditions of Buddhism will produce different answers to these questions. Nevertheless, the questions, I feel, concern all of them. Yet it is not for me to give the answers.

6. Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ

The focus in which the various rays of Buddhist-Christian theological encounter are bundled is the relation between the Buddha and the Christ. Within the context of “Buddhism light”, but also within modern anti-Christian Buddhist polemics or anti-Buddhist Christian polemics, the Buddha is usually presented as being “merely” human, not God, as being just a teacher, not a saviour. From various Buddhist perspectives this can be presented as an advantage over Christianity: The latter’s elevation of Jesus to the status of God and saviour is seen as an expression of its mythological, irrational, at best spiritually immature, at worst spiritually harmful nature. From a polemical Christian perspective this contradistinction carries the opposite values. Here it marks that the Buddha was merely man, while Jesus Christ is God, that the Buddha was merely a teacher, alongside many others, while Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the only lord and saviour.⁴¹

As early as in 1926, Alfred North Whitehead tried to break up the narrowness of this contradistinction by famously suggesting:

*The Buddha gave his doctrine to enlighten the world: Christ gave his life. It is for Christians to discern the doctrine. Perhaps in the end the most valuable part of the doctrine of the Buddha is its interpretation of his life.*⁴²

Buddhist-Christian dialogue has moved a good deal into the direction that Whitehead pointed out: Christians have started to inquire into Buddhist interpretations of Jesus. And Buddhists also inquire into Christian views of the Buddha. Interestingly this has happened simultaneously – and without coordination – within the *Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies*⁴³ in the US and the *European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies*.⁴⁴ Although the old opposition between merely man and God incarnate or between teacher and saviour is still very much present in these inquiries, gradually a more fully and more complicated picture emerges: The Buddha, according to the Buddhist tradition – not only according to Mahāyāna – is not merely man, but is beyond and above the saṃsāric categories of “gods and men”,⁴⁵ is, in a sense, a “nirvanized” human being, someone who has become transparent to that reality which is beyond *saṃsāra*, someone who is the visible Nirvāṇa and the visible Dharma.⁴⁶

So the Buddha too is seen as an “embodiment” or “incarnation” of the transcendent: he is the Dharma that became “body”/“kāya” – an idea that we already find in the Pāli Tipitaka⁴⁷ and that later became so prominent in Mahāyāna. Jesus Christ appears in the New Testament initially as a teacher, but as a teacher in the prophetic tradition, that is, as someone who speaks under the influence of the Spirit of God. Seeing Christ as God incarnate means that not just his teachings but his whole existence functions as a revelation of God. Not just his words, his being is an embodiment of the Spirit. If the Buddha’s life embodies the Dharma, Christ’s life embodies what he called the “reign/kingdom of God”, the merciful relation in which God stands to us. The Buddha and the Christ function in their own ways as mediators of a transcendent reality which itself is the ultimate source of any hope for salvation or liberation, a hope that is manifest and mediated through the Buddha and the Christ. Michael von Brück and Whalen Lai once called them “‘gifts’ from the dimension of the ineffable who have become word”.⁴⁸

For those Christians who see Buddhism and Christianity as complementary and who believe not that Dharma and God are the same, but that both concepts point in different ways to the same transcendent reality, the insight into the mediatory role that both traditions ascribe to the Buddha and the Christ inevitably triggers two further questions⁴⁹: First, is it theologically possible to assume more than one incarnation? Second, what might it mean existentially to accept both, the Buddha and the Christ as mediators of the transcendent?

In response to the first question, various theologians, both Protestant and Catholic have argued that from a Christology that is true to its New Testament roots, that is seeing Jesus as the embodiment of the Spirit, the notion of multiple incarnation is not impossible. To the contrary, everybody should live by the Spirit and to the extent that he or she does so, he or she incarnates or embodies God's presence in the world.

The response to the second question is given by the Buddhist Christian dual believers. They have embarked on a life journey that tries to follow both masters and we need to listen to them how they integrate and how they relate the Buddha and the Christ existentially. Paul Knitter has given his own personal answer in the title of his most recent book: *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*.⁵⁰

7. The wider horizon

Let me conclude with a few remarks about the wider theological horizon, in which I perceive the sketched developments of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I should like to highlight just two aspects which lead to two consecutive conclusions.

First, the different dialogues of Christianity with other religions, in particular Christianity's dialogue with Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism need a stronger degree of integration. I see the danger that, for example,

in dialogue with Islam and Judaism we might emphasize monotheism as common ground and might downplay the incarnation while in dialogue with Buddhism and some forms of Hinduism we might emphasize the non-theistic apophatic tradition and talk – as I just did – about the possibility of plural incarnations. However, if dialogue is not diplomacy but a serious form of theological learning we need to strive for consistency. We need a doctrine of God in which the theistic and apophatic elements are well integrated and a Christology that understands incarnation in a way that does justice equally well to what we learn from Jews and Muslims as to what we learn from Buddhists and Hindus.

Second, interfaith dialogue is no longer confined to the dialogue between Christianity and other religions. Today there is a lively dialogue between Jews and Hindus, between Jews and Buddhists and, slowly growing, between Buddhists and Muslims. Further, there are the more difficult, but one day perhaps better developing dialogues between Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Muslims and – perhaps the most difficult one – between Buddhists and Hindus. Whatever is going on theologically in these dialogues will have implications also on Christianity's dialogue with these religions. That is, an integrating movement is taking place that is, thank God, beyond Christian control.

The first conclusion to which these developments lead is that we need to take seriously what Wilfred Cantwell Smith once called a "World Theology".⁵¹ That is, we need to be serious about the prospect of an interreligious theology. Christian theological thinking will have to take into account increasingly other religious traditions as sources of genuine theological insight. Or to put it differently, theology can no longer be done on the basis of just one segment of the religious history of humankind but ideally on the basis of all of it. But this can be done only as part of an ongoing interreligious colloquium, in which all parties learn from each other.

The transformation of Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism is just part of this wider process which will generate comparable transformations on all sides. This entails, and that is my second conclusion, that we need to rethink, or drastically revalue the idea and fact of “syncretism”. The fear of

“syncretism” blocks the bolder attempts of learning from other religions and allowing oneself to be transformed by what one learns. So what is so bad about “syncretism” that it is allegedly so important not to be syncretistic? I feel that this whole issue urgently needs to be revised.

¹ On the comparatively less well known situation of Buddhist-Christian relations in mainland China see Ching Feng. *A Journal on Christianity and Chinese Religion and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2003) and vol. 5, no. 1 (2004).

² See his famous essay “Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?” (1959), reprinted in: W.C. Smith: *Religious Diversity* (ed. by W.G. Oxtoby), New York: Harper and Row 1976, 138-157, especially pp. 142ff.

³ See, for example, Stephen Batchelor: *Buddhism Without Beliefs. A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*, London: Bloomsbury 1997.

⁴ See, for example, Bernard Faure: *Unmasking Buddhism*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2009. The myth of a thoroughly peaceful and non-violent Buddhism has been effectively undermined by recent studies like Brian Victoria: *Zen at War*, New York: Waterhill 1997, or Tessa Bartholomeusz: *In Defense of Dharma. Just-war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka*, London – New York: RoutledgeCurzon 2002. See also: P. Schmidt-Leukel, “War and Peace in Buddhism”, in idem. (ed.): *War and Peace in World Religions*, London: SCM 2004, 33-56.

⁵ Cp. Rose Drew: *An Exploration of Buddhist Christian Dual Belonging* (forthcoming).

⁶ E.g. Ernest Valea: *The Buddha and the Christ. Reciprocal Views*, (no place) 2008, p. 188f: “... each is wrong when seen through the eyes of the other. Therefore my aim has been to show that they are *different*, that their teaching cannot be blended, and that one cannot belong to both traditions.”

⁷ Cp. Guy R. Welbon: *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and Its Western Interpreters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1968. For a detailed analysis see P. Schmidt-Leukel: “Den Löwen brüllen hören”. *Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft*, Paderborn: Schöningh 1992, 9-141.

⁸ For a summary and critical discussion of the traditional anti-theistic Buddhist Arguments see P. Schmidt-Leukel: “The Unbridgeable Gulf? Towards a Buddhist-Christian Theology of Creation”, in: idem. (ed.): *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation. Karmic or Divine?*, Ashgate: Aldershot 2006, 109-178, especially pp. 123-141.

⁹ As a good recent example of this is Keith Yandell, Harold Netland: *Buddhism. A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*, Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press 2009, 175-212. It is rather typical for this approach that the basically correct statements about Nirvāṇa (*ibid.* pp. 22-26) remain without any consequences regarding their discussion of the God-issue (pp. 161ff).

¹⁰ Cp. Paul Williams: *The Unexpected Way. On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2002. For a discussion between Paul Williams, José Cabezon and myself, see: John D’Arcy May: *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity*, St. Ottilien: EOS 2007, pp. 67-154.

¹¹ According to Paul Williams, Thomas Aquinas – whom he takes as a model – “would have respectfully sought to convert the Buddhists to Christianity”. P. Williams: “Aquinas Meets the Buddhists: Prolegomenon to an Authentically Thomas-ist Basis for Dialogue”, *Modern Theology* 20, 2004, 91-121, p. 92.

¹² Cp. *Dominus Iesus* no. 22 on the “followers of other religions”: “... *objectively speaking* they are in a gravely deficient situation”.

¹³ Cp. Mark Heim: *The Depth of the Riches. A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001, for example pp. 186ff, 210f, 218f.

¹⁴ That these experiences are indeed related to the same transcendent Reality is nothing that we could “know” in any sense of indubitable knowledge. We cannot even “know” with demonstrable certainty that there really is a transcendent reality. Our experiences of this reality could, after all, be illusory. Yet, they could also be genuine. And so it is a possible hypothesis to assume these different experiences are in fact related to the same ultimate reality, a hypothesis that is (among other indications) supported by the “fruit of the spirit” that accompanies those experiences or grows out of them.

¹⁵ John Hick: *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Basingstoke 1989.

- ¹⁶ Cp. P. Schmidt-Leukel: *Transformation by Integration. How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity*, London: SCM Press 2009, pp. 113ff.
- ¹⁷ Cp. Lynn A. de Silva: "Buddhism and Christianity Relativised", *Dialogue N.S.* 9, 1982, 43-72.
- ¹⁸ Cp. the entry of Dec. 4th, 1968 in: *The Other Side of the Mountain*. The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. 7, ed. by Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper 1998, 323.
- ¹⁹ Cp. *Dominus Iesus* no. 6.
- ²⁰ A related, though different approach, is usually taken by Process Theology. It also affirms the need for mutual enrichment and even mutual transformation, yet this is not grounded in the idea of different experiences with the same transcendent reality but in different experiences with different – but interrelated – absolutes. Cf. David R. Griffin: "John Cobb's Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism", in idem. (ed.): *Deep Religious Pluralism*, Louisville: WJK Press 2005, 39-66. An exception, however, is the approach taken by Paul Ingram. Despite his nearness to process theology, he nevertheless sees Buddhism and Christianity as differently related to the same transcendent reality. Cp. Paul Ingram: *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2009, especially pp. 1-28.
- ²¹ Cp. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās* 24:9-10.
- ²² Buddhism's relations to other religions are discussed systematically and historically in P. Schmidt-Leukel (ed.): *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions*, St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag 2008.
- ²³ For the attempt to link Mahāyāna Buddhist hermeneutics to French deconstructionist philosophy see: Joseph S. O'Leary: *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1996.
- ²⁴ This has been penetratingly argued by Hasan Askari, partly as a result of his experiences with inter-faith dialogue within the WCC. Cp. Hasan Askari: *The Spiritual Quest. An Inter-Religious Dimension*, Pudsey: Seven Mirrors 1991, pp. 120-139.
- ²⁵ Early Christians were known as "followers of the 'way'" (Acts 9:2; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4, etc).
- ²⁶ On Buddhist-Christian dual belonging see: Rose Drew, *An Exploration ...* (fn. 4); Harold Kasimow, John Keenan, Linda Klepinger Keenan (eds.): *Beside Still Waters. Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications 2003; John D'Arcy May (ed.): *Converging Ways?* (fn. 9); Paul Knitter: *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, Oxford: OneWorld 2009; and *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003).
- ²⁷ Cp. John P. Keenan: *The Meaning of Christ. A Mahāyāna Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1989; idem. *The Gospel of Mark. A Mahāyāna Reading*, Maryknoll: Orbis 2005.
- ²⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation" (1989), no. 12.
- ²⁹ Cp. Leo Lefebure: "Cardinal Ratzinger's Comments on Buddhism", in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 18, 1998, 221-3.
- ³⁰ See the special issue of *Dialogue N.S.* 22, 1995 on "Pope and Buddhism", and B.L. Sherwin, H. Kasimow (eds.): *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1999.
- ³¹ Mark Heim: *Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World*, Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press 1985, p. 146.
- ³² Mark Heim: *Salvations. Truth and Difference in Religion*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1995, p. 163.
- ³³ Mark Heim: *The Depth of the Riches*, pp. 187f, 210.
- ³⁴ Cp. Mark Heim: *Salvations*, p. 129: "A More Pluralistic Hypothesis".
- ³⁵ Cp. Lynn A. de Silva, "Buddhism and Christianity Relativised", *Dialogue N.S.* 9 (1982), 43-72.
- ³⁶ Aloysius Pieris: *Love Meets Wisdom. A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Maryknoll: Orbis 1988, p. 111.
- ³⁷ Cp. *Visuddhimagga* IX (p. 325).
- ³⁸ Catherine Cornille: *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Crossroad Publishing 2008.
- ³⁹ Ibid. p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 178.
- ⁴¹ Cp. Yandell, Netland: *Buddhism. A Christian Exploration and Appraisal*, pp. 203-211.
- ⁴² A.N. Whitehead: *Religion in the Making*. Lowell Lectures 1926, New York: Fordham University Press 1996, p. 56.
- ⁴³ Rita Gross, Terry Muck (eds.): *Buddhists Talk about Jesus, Christians Talk about the Buddha*, New York – London: Continuum 2000. First published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 19 (1999).
- ⁴⁴ P. Schmidt-Leukel (ed.): *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus*, St. Ottilien: EOS 2001; "Christian Perceptions of the Buddha", in: *Swedish Missiological Themes* 90/1 (2002).
- ⁴⁵ Cp. *Aṅguttaranikāya* 4.36.

⁴⁶ Cp. Aṅguttaranikāya 3.54-6; Saṃyuttanikāya 22.87; Itivuttaka 92.

⁴⁷ Cp. Dīghanikāya 27.9.

⁴⁸ "Jesus der Christus und Gautama der Buddha sind 'Geschenke' aus der Dimension des Unaussprechlichen, die zu Sprache geworden sind." M. von Brück, W. Lai: *Buddhismus und Christentum. Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog*, München: C.H. Beck Verlag 1997, p. 314.

⁴⁹ See also my dialogue with Lama John Makransky on the relation between the Buddha and the Christ in: P. Schmidt-Leukel (ed.): *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue*, London: SCM 2005, pp. 149-211.

⁵⁰ P. Knitter: *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, Oxford: Oneworld 2009.

⁵¹ W.C. Smith: *Towards a World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1981; Maryknoll: Orbis 1989.

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Response to Perry Schmidt-Leukel's paper *The Transformation of Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Buddhism*

Christine Lienemann-Perrin

I am very much impressed by the profound knowledge of Buddhist thought which Perry has presented to us. His knowledge is evidently based on experiences and insights gained in a long-standing encounter with Buddhists. I am saying this as a person with little expertise of Buddhism and with hardly any personal experience of the Buddhist way of life. What can then be my task in responding to his presentation? I will make some comments at two levels: (1) A short appraisal of the paper within the confines of the Christian-Buddhist relationship; (2) Then I will move to my own background: the former World Council of Churches reference group and its paper on *Religious Pluralism and Christian Self-Understanding*. I try to link some aspects of these two papers.

1. Christian-Buddhist Relations

Perry's paper has a concrete and specific focus: The transformation of Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism. I will briefly recall six aims achieved in the paper:

1.1 Correspondence

The paper discloses and identifies some correspondences or analogies between the Christian and the Buddhist traditions. Perry mentions e.g. concepts of transcendence found in both religions in spite of their different forms. Asserting this, it is no longer possible to postulate an antagonism between Buddhism and Christianity. Another example of such a correspondence is implemented by the so-called dual belongsers: they can perceive both Buddha and Christ as mediators of the transcendent. This is, of course, a controversial statement among other partners in interfaith dialogue.

1.2 Re-Conceptualisation

The paper re-conceptualises Christian faith in the context of Buddhism to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the Christian tradition. The famous statement by Paul Knitter: "Without Buddha I could not be a Christian" reminds us of the experience that in knowing two religions we get a wider understanding of our own religion. Bilateral inter-religious encounters do not endanger, but enrich one's own faith. It can have a win-win effect on both sides.

1.3 Complementarity

Several times the paper identifies complementarities between Buddhism and Christianity. The realm of ethics is a good example for that. Perry refers to the complementarity of detachment and loving involvement¹ He also mentions two concepts of transcendence expressing complementary experiences of what he calls "the same transcendent reality". Further on he pleads for a mutual recognition of two salvific paths.

1.4 Accountability

Accountability is a way of understanding Christian mission (cf. 1 Peter 3, 15: "Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you"). In this sense, Perry tries to account for the Christian hope in a conversation face to face with Buddhists. He therefore uses language and images comprehensible to them. This is a convincing approach to communicate one's own faith to religious 'Others' so that mutual learning and transformation can take place (p. 13).

1.5 Difference

Another aim of the paper is achieved in the sense that it identifies differences between Christian and Buddhist self-understandings.

Perry emphasizes that differences do not have to be sacrificed or hidden for the sake of living Christian faith in a Buddhist context. In his comments on the two different ways of salvation he tries to hold difference and equality together and to avoid the denigration of “the Other”. On what conditions is it possible to implement a hermeneutics of difference in an interfaith relationship? Reactions of suspicion on the side of people of other faiths can only be avoided in an atmosphere of mutual trust and deep friendship.

1.6 Questions

Provided there is a friendly and trustful atmosphere, it is even possible to ask critical questions to the religious ‘Other’ – as Perry is doing. He asks: “Can Buddhists learn from Christians in relation to features of Christian spirituality like forgiveness and hope?”

Conclusion:

To my mind, the six mentioned aims are basic virtues of every sincere interfaith encounter. Perry’s paper reflects this kind of relationship at its best. What is striking to me is that according to Perry’s presentation all these aims are best reached by the so-called Buddhist-Christian dual-belongers.² The dual-identity-approach is explicitly or implicitly qualified as the most convincing way of being accountable as a Christian to Buddhist partners in dialogue. I have two questions: Should we in our meeting focus basically on dual-belongers? Would this not mean that we have to exclude other relationships between both religions and people of both faith communities?

When I am now shifting to my comments on the second level, it is my intention to relate at least some aspects of Perry’s paper to the text which has been published by the former reference group³, and to take a glance at our future task on behalf of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

2. The Self-Understanding of World Christianity in a Religiously Plural World

2.1 Individual and common Christian self-understanding

In his paper, Perry focuses on individual faith. He rightfully does justice to the individuality and uniqueness of each human being’s personal faith. He suggests “letting go all sorts of religious labelling and seeing each one of us as just the unique and unmistakable individual that each of us is, without thinking of ourselves or our neighbours in such stereotypes as the Christian, the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim etc.”. While not ignoring the uniqueness of the personal faith of each individual, the reference group will have to focus more on the self-understanding of Christian communities. Looking at the task of the reference group it has to shift from “my” faith to “our” common faith. The question of ‘our’ identity as a community of faith will be an indispensable element of our endeavour. Therefore we cannot avoid to struggle with the ecclesiological implications of Christian self-understanding. What is needed is a re-thinking of the *notae ecclesiae* and an exploration of new shapes of the Church which are doing justice to the many different contexts of the world. At the same time the contextualized churches should remain identifiable as manifestations of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

2.2 Which Buddhism? Which Christianities?

Perry’s differentiation of various Buddhisms asks for an equivalent differentiation on the Christian side: Which Christianity are we speaking about? What we should have in mind, at best, is World Christianity including all its manifold facets. Since this will not be a realistic approach, we have to carefully select some representative examples of Christianities in different contexts.⁴ We cannot avoid developing certain types of Christianities living under specific conditions. At the same time we must be aware that such types are constructs and generalisations which do not reflect exactly the reality of existing churches.

2.3 Relationship between bilateral and multilateral religious encounters

How close should Christianity come to another

religion? Perry's explications and experiences give evidence that Christian individuals who more than anyone else try to be accountable to people of other faiths can indeed go very far in the context of a bilateral inter-religious encounter. May and can indeed Christian communities, churches or even World Christianity do the same? In his last chapter Perry refers to the limits of such an endeavour. Quite often a specific interfaith dialogue is working well as long as it is confined to two partners. To express it in my own words: interfaith dialogue can reach some consistency only as long as it takes place "behind the back" of other religions. As soon as other faiths join and form a round table, the consistency disappears. Therefore Perry pleads for the search of "a Christology that understands incarnation in a way that does justice equally well to what we learn from Jews and Muslims as to what we learn from Buddhists and Hindus".

2.4 Hermeneutics of hospitality

I doubt that this ambitious approach will ever work as he hopes. The vision behind it is to minimise as far as possible the aspects of Christian self-understanding which are offensive to either one or several, if not all other faiths. In regard to this point I would like to comment on the "hermeneutics of hospitality" as an approach to deal with the same problem in a far more modest way. The former study group on *Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding* opted for the metaphors of hospitality, hosts and guests. Through these metaphors it has taken into account that in inter-religious encounters a remarkable distinctiveness remains between people of different faiths – a distinctiveness which, to my mind, is legitimate and has to be respected. People of a specific faith can and should offer hospitality to people of other faiths without expecting them to become a member of the house (e.g. without trying to "convert" them). In general, guests are leaving the guest house again after a while as what they were before: "religious others".⁵ This does not preclude that guests are enriching the members of the house

in their self-understanding – and also that guests are enriched by learning from their hosts. Furthermore, guests are adapting to a certain degree to the rules of the hosts while these, on their part, observe certain rules of hospitality. Consider that people of the same faith are sometimes in the situation of being hosts, sometimes they are guests in another 'religious house'. They have to learn both roles – as Jesus did when he sometimes welcomed people of other faiths, sometimes accepted the hospitality of them. In short: A hermeneutics of hospitality tries to combine the recognition of difference with friendship and togetherness.

2.5 Building a house of religions

In my home city, Berne in Switzerland, a house of religions will soon be erected. It will host Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Alevites and Christians.⁶ All of them – including the Christians who are members of the Ethiopian-Orthodox Tewahedo Church – share a migrant background and represent small religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities in Switzerland. Every religious community will occupy its own part within the house and furnish it according to its own religious rules. In the centre of the house, a large hall will provide space for inter-religious and inter-cultural encounters between all religious families residing in the house of religions. Because every religious community lives next door to another community, it is unavoidable to recognise and respect the different self-understandings of every single group. A code of conduct for all house members has to be signed and respected for the peaceful coexistence of the house. At the same time, the communities are expected to take part in a culture of mutual learning. They are invited to participate in the religious life of others as far as their own identity allows it. This very practical experience and fascinating common journey in my home city is for me a test case on a local level of what we are looking for at a global level: re-framing Christian self-understanding in a religiously plural world.

5.6 Apophatic theology

After having glanced at the purposes of the

former reference group let me come back again to one of the main insights of Perry's paper. He mentions several times that in dialogue with Buddhist thinking apophatic theology can be rediscovered in the Christian tradition. We read: "Christians learned from Buddhists to modify a too strongly theistic understanding of God and rediscovered the importance of the apophatic tradition." It seems to me that apophatic consciousness could – and in fact can – be strengthened as a common ground for Buddhists and Christians when they communicate on the 'ineffability of ultimate reality'. Apophatic consciousness resonates in a passage of the first letter of John (1John 3. 1-3):
1 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.
2 Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when it appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.
3 And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

The letter containing that passage is addressed to a Christian congregation amidst a crisis of identity. It exists as a small religious minority

among people of other faiths somewhere in Asia Minor. Their self-understanding is affected not only by the fact that "the world" does not acknowledge them as children of God. Far more they are irritated because a part of the congregation has left and went its own way due to different theological opinions. But John tries to strengthen the weakened self-understanding of the remaining minority lost in isolation by confirming that they really are children of God: "Beloved, we are God's children." But then, he immediately continues with an apophatic stance: "it does not yet appear what we shall be." A reservation is always inherent in the Christian self-understanding. It preserves Christians from doctrinal certainties about themselves and about God until the end of times. Their final identity will be disclosed to them only when they will see God "as he is". Knowledge of God and self-knowledge are interrelated. But God's children have to know that full knowledge of God and full self-knowledge are reserved to a reality beyond time and space. Nevertheless, the phrase: "it does not yet appear what we shall be" opens a space for widening our religious horizons, for re-evaluating our limited theological insights, for re-formulating our faith in view of both, the interfaith encounters and the heart of Christian faith.

¹ That insight has been elaborated in Aloysius Pieris' seminal book *Love Meets Wisdom. A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989,

² They are also labelled as religious double identities (p. 9); dual religious identities (p. 14): Buddhist Christian dual belongsers (p. 16).

³ Preparatory paper No 13: "Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding, in: Come Holy Spirit, heal and reconcile!" *Report of the WCC Conference on World Mission and Evangelism*, Athens: Greece, May 2005, ed. by Jacques Matthey, pp. 113-124.

⁴ Differences have to be addressed at several levels: a) differences of contexts: politics, law, religious neighbours, cultures, society; b) difference of behaviour towards society; c) difference of concepts of God, salvation, Christ; d) difference of size: minority, majority; e) denominational differences.

⁵ During the consultation in Colombo, Perry was right to mention that in certain cases guests may leave hosts as people who have become friends of the house and may come back again and again. This is certainly true for 'dual belongsers'.

⁶ Jews and Baha'i, while not aspiring for a site in the house of religions, are also involved in the project.

Seeking self-understanding as Christians in a Buddhist context

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I – HISTORICAL NOTE

This is written in the context of Sri Lanka, which is considered as the impeccable seat of Theravāda Buddhism, holding infallibly to the doctrine of the Elders who claim to have preserved without tinge of change what the Buddha himself taught. In fact, Sri Lanka prides herself as the country in which the translation into Sinhala of the Buddhist Canon (Tripitaka) was done. It was first brought to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda Théra in the 3rd century BCE and subsequently written down in ola leaf books in the 1st century BCE. at the Aluvihāra temple in Mātālé, fourteen miles away from the hill capital of Kandy.

This translation came up in the Buddha Jayanthi series as a result of a resolution taken at the sixth Council held in Burma during the Buddha Jayanthi (2500th anniversary) celebrations in 1956. It will be remembered too that in 5 CE, Buddhaghōsa the famous Indian scholar monk and commentator translated some fourteen very early commentaries of the Tripitaka written in Sinhala into Pāli. He came to Sri Lanka for this specific work, since early Pāli commentaries were lost in India.

Buddhism is the major religion in Sri Lanka since 3rd century BCE ever since King Dēvānampiyatissa and his kingdom was converted to this religion. Over the years it has withstood all onslaughts from within and without against its religious practice and institutions. Now and again there have been resurgences in face of threats and challenges. The most modern resurgence followed political independence from the British colonial rule since 1948 and with the new spirit surging from the Jayanthi (Jubilee) celebrations in 1956. Embedded in the 1972 constitution is the

commitment of the State to give Buddhism pride of place (art. 2). It has also been used often as an ideological tool in national politics which made other minority religious groups a bit concerned about their position. Buddhist nationalism has once again risen in a subtle manner in the context of the ethnic conflict that even led to full-scale war in recent times.¹ The question therefore can legitimately be asked as to how a Christian self-understanding can be formulated in such a Buddhist context?

II – CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

1. *The Understanding of “Self”*

Anattā or Non-self is a concept that is at the core of Buddhist interpretation of human existence. It is intimately linked to two other concepts: *aniccā* (impermanence) and *dukkā* (suffering) which thus form the *Ti-Lakkhānas*, or the three-fold characteristics of existence (*bhāve*). *Anattā* is ego-lessness and the wholesale denial of the “I” and whatever is me, mine etc. the individual (*puggala*) being an accidental aggregate of five elements called the “*pancakkhandas*” namely: matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and *viññāna* (consciousness). There is hence no permanent enduring substance called self in any individual. Death is the dissolution of the individual into these five elements. Something of *viññāna* passes through to a new birth, thus causing rebirth.

Liberation precisely is coming to the awareness of ego-lessness and trying one’s best to destroy this radical illusion of the ‘ego’ which in fact is also the root cause of karmic re-birth. Attachment to whatever smacks of the ego leads to sorrow and it is plain and simple ignorance (*avijja*) that has to be overcome with

the pursuit of wisdom through insight into the way things are: the world of the phenomena or the phenomenal world which is the most ir-real.

The *pañcha-sīla* which consists of not stealing, not lying, not giving into sexual misconduct, not taking intoxicating drinks and not injuring any living thing is an ordinary man's basic means of getting over this attachment (*tanhā*) to the ego and gaining victory over illusions and thereby in some way tide over the cycle of *samsāric* existence or continuous birth. The most perfect way of liberation and moral perfection which the Tripitaka cites in many of its suttas is the "*Attañgika Magga*", the Eight-fold path which is presented as the fourth noble truth of Buddhist teaching, the path of conquering suffering and its roots through disciplining of senses, of the mind and finally acquiring the necessary wisdom (*paññā*).

2. A Christian Approximation

a) Is there anything in Christian terminology that would come close to this concept that denies the egoistically-bent self which Christianity too would deny as impermanent and wrong and hence to be jettisoned through some spiritual discipline? In which case, it is this egoistic self that has to be crucified so that the real self which is the "Image of God" be built up?² God's image in man could never contain a selfish and ego-filled self. The new self renewed in the power of the Holy Spirit displaces this wrong and sinful self in order to recreate and restore the lost image of God and thus configure us to Christ.

b) By turning to the Old and New Testament literature, we find some concepts and ideas which might help us solve this riddle. In the Old Testament there is:-

Ruach: man as creature is "*anattā*". But, in relationship to God, he is image and likeness of God. The nature of this relationship is because of the "Ruach" of Yahweh which is God-given. Man in himself therefore is not immortal, but is truly destined to immortality.

Nephesh: It simply means "man" or even animal. At death *nephesh* goes out.

Psyché: *nephesh* is similar to this New Testament idea of *psyché*. *Psyché* always exists in the body. It means life, vitality, aliveness (Rom 11:3; 16:4). This is also the seat of feeling, thought and will. In the Book of Acts, it is used in reference to persons, but it is person as a whole and not an entity within the person. The interesting revelation is that *psyché* is not immortal except when sanctified by "*Pneûma*", that is as a whole person (Heb. 10:39; James 1:21; 1 Pet. 1:9)

Psyché-Sarx (soul-body). This psycho-somatic reality has a close resemblance to *Nāma-R pa*, which is the basic anthropological analysis of the individual in Buddhist philosophy. Hence, there is no implication at all here of an immortal soul. This is the biblical combination that comes closest to the *anattā* idea linked to *Nāma-R pa* identification of the individual. Just as man is a unity of *nāma-r pa* in Buddhism, so in the Bible, man is a unity of *psyché-sarx*. Further, just as in Buddhism there is no soul entity within the *nāma-r pa* complex, so does the Bible leave no room for a notion of an immortal soul within the *psyché-sarx* unity of man. A Christian author Lynn de Silva concludes saying: "Thus we could, in a sense, speak of a biblical doctrine of *anattā*. We could put the matter thus: Psychosomatic creatureliness is *anattā* (i.e. soulless and substanceless)."³

Pneûma: (Spirit). This New Testament term is one that refers to the individual man when used descriptively as a concept of the authentic self. It also has connections with the Divine Spirit, the ground of being and the power that creates community and posits the self. Lynn de Silva explains this in detail when he establishes that Spirit as constitutive of personality:

Spirit is the power of life that constitutes personality. Throughout the Bible it is maintained that God is the source of life, and as religious thought developed "Spirit" as the breath of God came to be associated with the life created by God, particularly with human life. "Spirit" as breath carries with it the idea of God's dynamic creative activity manifest particularly in

persons. However, Spirit as the power of life is not identical with any substratum or separate entity within man, neither is it anything added to the organic structure which is animated by it. Spirit is rather the power of animation itself. It does not create a 'soul' in the individual; it is not a part added to the organic system; it cannot be located in the individual. Spirit is the dimension in which personality actualizes itself, not as a separate entity, but as an identity within a unity. This personal aspect can never be understood apart from the relationship in which the self exists.⁴

3. Anattā-Pneûma Combination

Anattā-Pneûma combination takes us beyond the *Psyché-sarx*, enabling us to understand what is really permanent of the person in an individual, but not alienating person from its collective and social dimension – that of community of persons. This is going beyond Buddhism where we are not lost in the impermanence of the individual only. It is clear that the community aspect is totally absent in Buddhist anthropology though the *pañcha-sīla* touched on social virtues and the Dhamma has a clear teaching on virtues that instil the discipline and ethics of social relations and behaviour as taught in the *Sigalovāda sutta*. In Christianity, it is the spirit that can be seen as the category of self-transcendence. A person in that case reaches beyond himself to the other with whom he is related and is thus reaching out to transcend himself.⁵ The self as spirit transcends not only his body, not only his mind, but his very self, that is, the differentiated self. In transcending oneself, one ceases to be an ego-entity. But self-hood is always being fulfilled by being transcended. It is through this transcending that the ego is negated and the authentic self is affirmed. Lynn's basic conviction is that it is only in a personal-communal structure that the identity of the self is to be found and not in isolation.⁶

Authentic being is found only in relationship and not in isolation. This living relationship makes of man an authentic being. As Martin Buber puts it,

man is dialogic. "In the beginning is relation".⁷ Heidegger too enlightens us on this dimension of personality discovered communally in shared existence: "All existence is co-existence".⁸ So, the "I" is co-efficient with the "Thou" and *to be* is *to be related*. This kind of reasoning is not possible in Buddhism since it closes in on the single individual who has to battle out the liberation of its own individual self.

4. The Popular Perceptions

All that has been said above is highly philosophical, analytical and understandable to the scholarly mind. But, what does an ordinary lay Buddhist or the majority of ordinary temple-going devotees understand about themselves: their individual identity, their pertaining to a religious community and their eventual destiny regarding the future?

In general, a devoted Buddhist would compel himself to practice the *pañcha-sīla* and would go to places of worship to listen to the *Sangha* propound the doctrine and seek for inner peace and tranquillity. By offering *poojas* to the Buddha statue and the Bō tree etc. they would hope to gain merit and be reminded of the impermanence of existence as when offering a tray of flowers before the statue or a relic of the Lord Buddha⁹. The deeper meaning of such gesture is not the worship of the Buddha, since this is not possible in Buddhism, but a type of veneration or profound respect to a teacher who unravelled a path of moral perfection and personal liberation from the universal existential feature of suffering in all its forms. They would also perform acts of compassion and generosity and the veneration of the *Sangha* (order of monks) taking it as a means of earning merit for a better life in the future. In addition, in the social consciousness there is the need of working towards a violence-free world of compassion and justice to all based on *ahimsā* (non-violence). Those in authority are expected to rule in justice and righteousness with compassion towards all, especially those who are the poorest and the most helpless.¹⁰ In the public proclamation of the Dhamma, the

spiritual element of detachment from greed (*tanhā*) in all its forms is very much stressed. The need to look for mental and inner peace is very much encouraged. The education of the young in the ways of good Buddhist discipline is being pursued in the schools and temple instructions.

III – CHRISTIAN SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND ITS MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

1. The general experience of religiousness. Christians must accept that their religious beliefs are just one among many. One of the characteristics of Buddhist religiosity is the recognition of impermanence (*aniccā*) and the importance of fighting greed (*tanhā*)¹¹ in every form. Buddhism insists on simplicity of life and even a distinctly outward expression of religiousness.

2. Today's Christian mission is engaged in the triple dialogue with people of other faiths, cultures and the poor. This is Asia's path to evangelization, the spreading of the Gospel values and building up God's kingdom based on those values. Both Buddhists and Christians concur on the categorical need to stress transcendence and with it all transcendental values that go beyond the mere ephemeral, empirical, material and socio-cultural dimensions of human existence. This vision and life-perspective has to be globalized and socialized to the maximum possible. Even in Sri Lanka with its in-roads of the secular spirit and materialistic outlook, a joint Buddhist-Christian effort has to be launched in defence of and fostering of the spirit of transcendence. Buddhist and Christian doctrines, whether Nibbāna-oriented or God-oriented, are both conducive to this undertaking. Christian self-understanding is therefore one of solidarity and communion with Buddhist basic spirituality and social culture of transcendence and other-worldliness.

3. Whatever may be understood to be *Anattā*, one point is clear: wrong self that seeks its own and is infested with selfishness and greed

has to be conquered. In Christian sense, with the renunciation of this wrong self along with the manifestations of its various types of selfishness and idolatrous worship of self¹², emerges the true redeemed self, a rediscovery of the image and likeness of God, stained and lost by sin. This true inner self living in the spirit and putting on the new spirit of Christ is really a spirit-filled (a *pneûma* charged) personality or an individual. This is explained in St. John's Gospel in terms of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This unity and communion puts us in touch with God, the supreme self-less spirit. For, God is spirit: *pneûma*. It is this renewed person that is immortal and will be destined to union with God for all eternity. That which is designated by the biblical concepts such as psyche, *nephesh*, *sārx* and *sōma* have nothing to do with this spirit-filled "pneumatic" reality of the person. They in fact have been transcended and superseded.

4. There is the risk in many a religiously oriented culture of the double danger of politicisation of religion¹³ and the infection of structures with values contrary to religious values, as for example unjust structures and those infected with different forms of collective greed such as the sphere of business enterprise and means of livelihood. Christianity condemns them as structural forms of sin or social sins while Buddhism would condemn them as evil forms of livelihood while teaching the imperative of "right livelihood" (*samma-ajīva* of the 8-fold path of moral perfection) as found in the fourth Noble Truth.

Christians and Buddhists are very much united in this social ethic and can in dialogue, cooperate and collaborate in weeding out these evils and bring the much enacted grand rituals of their churches and temples in line to spill over to the social engagement for achieving a better and just society.¹⁴ We need a better conscious socially engaged Buddhism and Christianity in a world in which social changes happen rapidly in many ways. Deterrents too are needed to tide over this challenge.

5. A problem that has become acutely wearisome is how to carry on evangelism in a situation that demands transmission of the Gospel through dialogue. Do dialogue and proclamation go together?¹⁵ Can they be reconciled at all? Can they be identified as some try to do today in today's theology and missiology? The important way out is through contextualization and inductive approach in this matter. This requires great and careful discernment of the way of the Lord to enable the Word of God to break loose. Certainly, as a church fully in love and communion with Christ it knows very well that Christ in person is the Kingdom and apart from him there is no such kingdom. We cannot be satisfied in our radical faith with just discovering the rays of light¹⁶ or seeds of the Word¹⁷ in all religions and cultures, with these serving as evangelical preparations¹⁸. The question is what do we do with these so-called rays and seeds? We are here faced with the task of perfecting them.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our faith and awareness as Christians are always challenged by the socio-religious and cultural context in which given Christian communities live and work. Positive points well understood and rightly integrated into theological education can be of immense help in contextualizing the practice of our faith and inculturating¹⁹ our faith itself. Both these processes help in the indigenization of Christianity. It is also good to educate our own faithful in this multi-dimensional catechesis that is demanded by the pluralism and multi-culturalism so typical a characteristic of our time. Evangelization has to be an inter-active process and movement between culture and faith, and in the context of this reflection

between a religious culture (Buddhist) and Christian faith.

Authentic and original Buddhism is not meant to be a religion. It is a philosophy of life: a path of moral perfection and interior enlightenment arising from an illumination from within. The veneration of the Buddha himself is only a symbolic mark of respect and is neither adoration nor worship. The Buddha is the supreme teacher²⁰ of the noble truths about sorrow and its extinction which he discovered and communicated to his followers. He is not even an intercessor who can mediate salvation to a Buddhist. According to the classic pedagogy of the Kālāma Sutta²¹ of the Anguttara Nikāya, it is only through personal experience that one discovers what is true and false as well as what is morally right and evil. The radical thesis of Buddhism – its clear standpoint – is that one is a refuge to oneself: *Attahi attano Nātho* (Dhammapada 160).

A Christian self-understanding in a Buddhist context would lead us to appreciate two things: insistence on transcendence through right knowledge and the demanding imperative to eradicating greed which is the root cause of all evil: above all, the evil of the illusion of a false-self, a selfish self. Christianity is in solidarity with Buddhism in both these decisive areas of ultimate concerns. Solidarity in dialogue and a shared spirituality in depth will help us to appreciate these precious common ideals. We can share and also work together with these, in order to foster a true religious spirit that will insist on an other-worldly reality (*Nibbāna*) as expressed in classical text "Udana 80-81"²² (the unborn, unoriginated reality) and building up a social spirituality of compassion (*karunā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

¹ The war was interpreted by many as a form of terrorism waged for political freedom of the minority Tamils in the North and East of Sri Lanka. It was understood as a liberation armed struggle for freedom and dignity by those who initiated it (LTTE). The government however launched humanitarian operations of a military nature against this terrorism, finally subduing it militarily.

² Romans 7:24; 8:12-14; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:22 etc..

³ Lynn de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, Colombo, 1975, p. 80.

⁴ Op. Cit, p. 87

⁵ Idem, p. 89

⁶ Idem, p. 90

⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (English Translation), T & T Clark, 1937, p. 18

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (English Translation), Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1962, p. 117

⁹ In such religious gestures a devotee reminds himself of the reality of the Buddha's aniccā (impermanence) doctrine, recalling that in the same way as this fresh flower fades, so will I fade away.

¹⁰ Cfr. The Dasa-Rāja Dhamma or the ten virtues which a wise ruler or a king is called upon to practise.

¹¹ Tanhā (greed) as we know concur with hatred (*dōsa*) and ignorance (*avijjā*) as the triple root of evil that can poison the three doors of moral action in Buddhism, namely the body, mind and speech.

¹² Cf. St Paul's letter to Romans which defines immorality as idol worship and the fate that befalls those who give themselves to immoral ways of living. The natural repercussions of ill effects are sure to follow such behaviour.

¹³ François Houtart, *Religions and ideology in Sri Lanka*, Colombo, Hansa, 1974

¹⁴ Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Vatican City, 2004

¹⁵ Cf. *Proclamation and Dialogue*, Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, Rome, 1971, where these terms are clarified and their connection is explained.

¹⁶ A term introduced by Justin the Martyr (103-165 CE), a second century Christian apologist.

¹⁷ A theological term pioneered by Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c. 211 CE), one of the second century theologians and a president of the Catechetical school of Alexandria.

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339 CE), historian and exegete.

¹⁹ Inculturation is a two-way process: it involves both adapting ourselves to a given culture and transforming that very culture as well in the light of the Gospel values.

²⁰ Cfr. Dhammapada 276

²¹ Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry (PTS: A.I.188)

²² Cfr. *Buddhist Texts through the Ages* ed. Edward Conze et al., Harper & Row, NY, 1964, p 95.

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Minority Christian Identity in the Context of Majority Buddhist Identity in Sri Lanka

Keerthisiri Fernando

Introduction, Scope of Study and Method

In this short paper I intend to examine the identity issues of the Christian minority in the surroundings of the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka. This is done by considering sociological realities connected to Buddhist and Christian identity with theological inputs that have been necessarily associated with the identities of these world religions. Hence this paper highlights theological issues in so far as they are empirically intertwined with the identity concerns of the people of these two scripture-based religions in Sri Lanka.

Although this study mainly discusses the issue of Christians in the context of Sinhala Buddhism, to enhance the scope of this research other realities such as the Tamil ethnic presence are taken into consideration appropriately. Through scrutiny an effort is made to investigate the possibilities of contributing to ethno-religious harmony in Sri Lanka by understanding the identity of Christians in the bosom of Buddhism. Yet it is not the intention of this paper to have an extensive analysis of the Buddhist and Christian communities and post-war situation in Sri Lanka.

This brief research is done by locating the Sri Lankan context in the global realities and research appropriately. The substance of this paper is obtained from written literature and the living experience of the writer of this research. Other necessary information and views have been accessed from the writer's previous research in Sri Lanka and the UK.

A very brief introduction to the social history of the Christian community in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka Buddhism is the majority religion

(69%) and Christianity is one of the minority religions (7.6%) of the people of this land. Although almost all the native Buddhists in Sri Lanka are Sinhala people the reverse is not the case. Just over half out of the 7.6% Christian minority are Sinhala. Slightly under half are of Tamil ethnic origin.¹

The continuous existence of the present day Christian community in Sri Lanka can be traced to the arrival of the Portuguese at the beginning of the 16th century. This was followed by the Dutch in 1658 CE and then the British in the year 1796 CE. The Portuguese introduced Roman Catholicism while the Dutch established the Dutch Reformed Church, and under the British colonial rule many so-called Protestant denominations such as Methodist and Baptist were initiated along with the religion of the colony called the Anglican denomination.

Although all these colonial powers protected and used their brands of Christian denominations for their own benefit to run the colony, there are some unique features which need to be recognized. The Portuguese were involved in mass conversion and used many visual aids and symbols in proclaiming Roman Catholicism. Their priests were celibates and did not depend on a salary from the colonial government. They led a simple life and became involved with the common people in their everyday activities. The Dutch introduced the Dutch Reformed Church by prohibiting all the other religions including Roman Catholicism. They were particularly against Roman Catholicism as the Dutch belonged to the reformed camp who were against the Roman Catholics whose head was the Bishop of Rome (the Pope). Under these circumstances the Dutch persecuted the Roman Catholics, which created pandemonium among the Roman

Catholics in Sri Lanka. The British allowed the flow of many denominations and gave religious freedom to all religions, although special privileges were granted to the Anglican Church.²

In 1948, after political independence, Christians lost the many privileged positions that they enjoyed under the colonial regime. Under these circumstances some Christian denominations initiated processes such as indigenisation and inculturation to face the challenges of the postcolonial era. Generally until the mid 1970s the foreign contacts of the Christians were very much restricted. After that time, with the introduction of the market economy in the context of so-called globalisation, once again Christians were able to have a close connection with their foreign counterparts. In this background many new Christian denominations have been introduced to Sri Lanka.

The Problem

The main problem unearthed by this research paper is identified as the tension between universality and particularity of two major religions existing in an island nation called Sri Lanka at the southern tip of India. To understand this problem the following explanation presented by Gunasekara, explaining the characteristics of a universal religion, can be considered useful.

Principle of Universality. There must be nothing in the basic beliefs of the religion that confines it to a particular nation, race or ethnic group. Thus if there is a notion of a “chosen people” then this characteristic is violated.

Non-Exclusiveness of Membership

Any person could be an adherent of the religion concerned, and be entitled to the same privileges and obligations as every other person. This of course does not require every follower of the religion to be of the same level of achievement, but only that some external factor like race or caste prevents individuals from full participation in the religion.

Wide Geographical dispersion

The religion must have demonstrated an ability to find followers amongst a variety of nations or ethnic groups. Thus even if a religion satisfies the first two requirements but has not been able to spread beyond its region of origin, it may not qualify to be a universal religion. Thus Jainism is not generally regarded as a universal religion although its principles are universal in scope and it is non-exclusive.

Non-Exclusiveness of Language

The practices of the religion which require verbal communication should be capable of being done in any language. The authoritative version of its basic texts may be maintained in the original language in which the original expositions were given, but translations of these should be valid, provided that they preserve the sense of the original texts.

Independence of Specific Cultural Practices

The practices of the religion should be free from the cultural practices of a particular group in such matters as food, dress, seating, etc.. Each one of these criteria raise problems but they have to be satisfied to a significant extent if the religion is to be deemed a universal one.³ Although in Sri Lanka these two religions, Christianity and Buddhism, basically endeavour to abide by these factors, in creating the identities of the adherents they have the tendency to shift from these features. The dynamics of this inclination create a variety of issues integrally connected to the identities of these religious categories. Hence through this paper it is expected to elaborate this phenomenon to contribute to the area of this research.

Basic Theoretical Framework

The nexus between ethnicity and religion is the foundation of the theoretical framework of this paper. This is done by taking account of the theory created by Yang and Ebaugh from their extensive research done on this subject. According to these two scholars the nexus between ethnicity and religion can be identified in three main categories. They are the “ethnic

fusion” in which religion is considered as the foundation of ethnicity, “ethnic religion” where religion is one of the many foundations of ethnicity, and thirdly “religious ethnicity” in which case an ethnic group is associated with a particular religion shared by other ethnic groups.⁴ This framework is enriched by the theory presented by Hans Mol and others on boundary maintenance and change handling of the religious groups.⁵ This is done to examine the creation and recreation of Christian identity in the context of dynamic Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka.

An Analysis

In a country like Sri Lanka, where beliefs and philosophies are taken seriously, in all endeavours, these aspects play a vital role in determining behaviour patterns of people in society. In this background it is indisputable that these features have been an integral part of the happenings in Sri Lanka. Hence folk beliefs and organised religious beliefs amalgamated with ethnicities have become the key factors in both fuelling tension and also showing the capacity to reduce tension to have a better understanding of each other in society.

Up to the present day Buddhism has existed for almost 22 centuries in Sri Lanka. Along with Buddhism, rituals, ceremonies and practices connected to Hindu religiosity have been surviving in this island land. As Middle Eastern and South Indian traders have been visiting Sri Lanka for a very long time, with the rise of Islam in the seventh century, gradually Islam also was established in Sri Lanka.

Beginning from the 16th century with the introduction of Christianity under the colonial regime, the well-established Buddhist identity has been undergoing drastic changes in Sri Lanka. To face the challenges posed by the colonial powers Buddhists have progressively been strengthening their identity on ethno-religious lines. This process, which began as a colonial reality, has been developing in many directions to recreate the denied honour of the Sinhala Buddhist under colonial rule.

Sociologically speaking, Buddhist revivalists came to have a “love-hate” relationship with the Christians, which became prominent after mid 19th century. Bond has explained this in the following manner:

Protestant Buddhism the response of the early reformers who began the revival by both reacting against and imitating Christianity.⁶...

In this process Buddhist revivalists started establishments such as schools and organisations by adopting and adjusting the structures of the Protestant church. Buddhist worship, rituals and ceremonies went through drastic changes. For instance, Buddhist revivalists started Buddhist carols or Bhakthi Gee by adapting the form of Christian carols.

On the other hand, after political independence in 1948 CE, Christians have been trying to become effective by adopting, adjusting and adapting many phenomena from the Buddhist philosophy and culture in Sri Lanka. These are aspects such as church architecture, music and cultural symbols from the traditional Buddhist context in this country.

After political independence in 1948 CE, slowly but steadily the majority Buddhists have been strengthening their identity with the Sinhala ethnicity. Over the years the consciousness of Buddhists as the chosen people of the soil and of Buddhism as the foundation of their Sinhala ethnicity have been increasing, creating many decisive issues in Sri Lanka. This has contributed towards the creation of an identity crisis for Sinhala Christians who do not share the same philosophy, although they share many cultural elements with Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

The encounter of Buddhism and Christianity over five centuries has been a theologising experience for both these religions in Sri Lanka. However, the very word “theology” in Christianity has raised many issues for Buddhists who believe in a religion where God or gods are not at the centre of their faith.

Regarding this Smart has noted,

*The thought that you could have a religion which did not in any straight sense believe in God was a novel thought in the West and still has hardly been digested.*⁷

Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka have been strengthening this position to claim that the saving power according to Buddhism is within human beings without necessarily getting assistance from any supernatural entity.⁸ Davies has explained this in the following manner:

*deepest kind of mystical experience and quest can exist independently of theism*⁹...

This belief has been used at times directly and indirectly to counteract Christianity in which theologically God is the centre of all realities. Consequently Buddhists have been working hard to achieve their goals with human efforts, often reminding themselves of a famous saying of the Lord Buddha: "One's own hand is the shade to his own head."

Although it is not required to believe in God or gods to be a Buddhist, the pantheon of gods has a very significant place in popular Buddhist worship. However in Buddhist belief these gods are "much lower than the Lord Buddha."¹⁰ At the same time, according to Buddhist belief these gods are lower than human beings as well.

Yet the interaction of ordinary Buddhists in certain Christian worship activities is a visible reality in Sri Lanka. In this regard it is highlighted by some scholars that anthropologists have misapprehended certain behaviours of ordinary Buddhists. The following observation by Gunasinghe highlights this reality:

A Buddhist Sinhalese who takes a vow at a Catholic church will not imagine that he is taking a Buddhist vow, for there are no such vows in Buddhist practice. A Buddhist who wishes to benefit from the laying on of hands by a Catholic

*priest does not look upon the ritual as a Buddhist act. The distinction that a Buddhist makes in such situations is not a matter of form: it is a matter of fundamentals. Anthropologists seem to deal often only with form and not fundamentals, and to that extent their findings call for caution.*¹¹

Not only anthropologists but also some Christians have not grasped this issue of form and fundamental of the conduct of these Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Although in the purview of this study it is not possible to elaborate this matter, for better understanding between Buddhists and Christians this needs to be studied carefully.

In the recent past Buddhists have been accusing Christians, saying that they convert Buddhists through unethical means. In this regard, apart from inflammatory writings, there have even been physical assaults on Christian churches. Efforts have even been made to bring legislation to prevent this so-called unethical conversion. Although in a short paper of this nature it is not possible to elaborate all the issues related to this reality, let us highlight some important concerns.

First of all the fact should be taken into consideration that today the Christian minority as a community does not enjoy significant political or military power in Sri Lanka. Then the question is why some Buddhists are threatened by some of their activities? Today the Christian minority is about 7% and is geographically well spread in Sri Lanka. They use all three main languages of Sri Lanka (Sinhala, Tamil and English) equally in their activities. Ethnically Christians are comprised almost equally of Sinhala and Tamil, the two main ethnic groups of Sri Lanka. Among Christians the literacy rate is almost 100% and the knowledge of English, the international language, is higher than in the other groups in Sri Lanka. The percentage of international relationships of Christians is also better than the other groups in Sri Lanka. These realities clearly show that Christians have a disproportionate representation in Sri Lanka. In

other words it can be said that the Christian minority has been living with a majority psychology owing to these facts.

On the other hand Buddhists mainly confine themselves to the Sinhala language for their activities, and almost all the Buddhists ethnically belong to the Sinhala category. Unlike Christians, the majority of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka live in rural areas where they are not much exposed to international realities in the world. These circumstances have caused these Buddhists to develop a minority psychology in this country.

The tension between Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups has been making Sinhala Christians vulnerable in the area of boundary maintenance for the identity making of this group. These Sinhala Christians were often forced to have a dichotomy in their identity in Sri Lanka. In this dichotomy this Sinhala Christian group has been identifying religion-wise with Tamil Christians while ethnically they were doing the same with Sinhala Buddhists. Therefore this

state of affairs has created an identity crisis for the Sinhala Christians in the bosom of the Sinhala Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

The brief analysis shows that Christians and Buddhists have been living with a kind of xenophobia in Sri Lankan society. Christians have been expanding their boundaries with the international realities, perhaps with little attention to the contextual realities around them. On the other hand Sinhala Buddhists have been strengthening their local identity with the Sinhala ethnic group that have developed phobias for many groups including Christians. This shows the necessity of keeping both global and local realities in proper balance and tension by both Buddhists and Christians in Sri Lanka.

Hence it is clear that the mutual enriching and enhancing of these two world religions both sociologically and theologically could inspire “xenophilia” instead of the prevailing xenophobia in Sri Lankan society.

¹G. P. V.Somaratna,, *Sri Lankan Church History* (In Sinhala) , Marga Sahodaravaya, Nugegoda. Sri Lanka 1992

² G. P. V. Somaratna *Sri Lankan Church History* (In Sinhala) , Marga Sahodaravaya, Nugegoda. Sri Lanka, 1992

³ V.A. Gunasekara *An Examination of the Institutional Forms of Buddhism in the West with Special Reference to Ethnic and Meditational Buddhism*, The Buddhist Society of Queensland, PO Box 536, Toowong Qld 4066, Australia, 1994. < <http://www.buddhanet.net/bsq14.htm> >

⁴ F. Yang, & H.E. Ebaugh, ‘Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants :The Impact of Majority/ Minority Status in Home and Host Countries’, *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, 40:3, 2001, p.369.

⁵ Hans Mol, (Ed) *Identity and Religion: International, Cross Cultural Approaches*, Saga Publication Ltd, 28 Banner Street, London, 1978. p.2.

⁶ G. D. Bond, *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka*, , Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1988 p.5.

⁷ N Smart, ‘The Contribution of Buddhism to the Philosophy of Religion’, in *Buddhist Contribution to World Culture and Peace*, Edited by N.A. Jayawickrama, Mahendra Senanayake, Sridevi Printing Works, 27, Pepiliyana Road, Nedimala – Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 1984, p. 89.

⁸ D.J. Davies, *Meaning and Salvation in Religious Studies*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1984, p.1.

⁹ N. Smart, ‘The Contribution of Buddhism to the Philosophy of Religion’, in *Buddhist Contribution to World Culture and Peace*, Edited by N.A. Jayawickrama, Mahendra Senanayake, Sridevi Printing Works, 27, Pepiliyana Road, Nedimala – Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 1984, p. 90.

¹⁰ L.de Silva, *Buddhism : Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka*, Ecumenical Institute, 490/5, Havelock Road,

Colombo 6, Sri Lanka , 1980, p.63.

¹¹ S Gunasinghe,. 'Buddhism and Sinhala Rituals', in *Buddhist Contribution to World Culture and Peace*, Edited by N.A. Jayawickrama, Mahendra Senanayake, Sridevi Printing Works, 27, Pepiliyana Road, Nedimala – Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, 1984, p.38.

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The Significance of Buddhism for Christian self-understanding in the West

Ruwan Palapathwala

Introduction

Today, it is an undeniable fact that Buddhism has come to play a significant role in shaping the religious landscape of the globe. Since the socio-cultural and political history of the West has been predominantly influenced by Christianity since the 3rd Century CE, the increasing influence of Buddhism in the West is a significant development that should be taken seriously to inform our Christian self-understanding in the West.

Without reference to Buddhism, Christian self-understanding in the West, as I will argue, will remain impaired and subjugated to the obsolete colonial worldview and the present homogenising global force – globalisation – which promulgates the ideals of Christendom in the forms of capitalism and neocolonialism. In this context, Christian “self-understanding” is not only a matter of a cerebral process of intellectual self-examination, but a way of being and orienting ourselves – living and acting – to be God’s people with a profound understanding of the world in which we live.

What is Buddhism?

“Buddhism” is a philosophy of life which had its genesis in the teachings of Buddha Gotama who was born around the year 600 BCE at the foothills of the Himalayas in modern Nepal. However, as a result of the classification of religions in the nineteenth century, in contemporary times, Buddhism is also called a “religious tradition” and sometimes a “faith tradition”.

Buddhism is made up of several schools of thought which are either branches or

adaptations of the three main traditions: *Hinayana* (the “Small Vehicle” which is also known as Theravada, the “teaching” or the “tradition” of the Elders), *Mahayana* (the Great Vehicle) and *Vajirayana* (the Diamond Vehicle). The Buddhism which is practiced by an increasing number of westerners is either a tradition that represents one of these three traditions or a more eclectic form of “Buddhism” which is made up of elements from all three traditions that can be easily adapted to contemporary religious, ethical, political and economic thought forms. This eclectic form of Buddhism is known as *Navayana* (the new vehicle) or Western Buddhism. The Dalit Buddhist Movement in India also claims the status of being a *Navayana*.

In a nutshell, Buddhism explains that the human being is an embodiment of “five instruments of clinging” to the phenomenal world: i) mind and matter; ii) sensations; iii) perceptions; iv) mental formations, and; v) consciousness which are without substance, subject to change and thus tainted with suffering. Hence, for one to have a fixation about an ego-centric self – the attachment to the self-idea – is both the source and basis of existence and suffering in all its forms; it is the pretext to live an ignorant and a delusional life which, in effect, cultivates the necessary conditions (*karma*) for the re-materialisation of the constituents of the five instruments of clinging (popularly, this process is misunderstood as “reincarnation”).

The human being who is ignorant of the true nature of existence, Buddhism teaches, thus subjects him/herself to many circles of birth, decay and old age, disease and death. Understanding the true nature of this state of affairs in life is enlightenment which facilitates the ending of the re-materialisation of the

constituents of the five instruments of clinging. This is salvation – the realization of the deathless (nirvana). This attainment is possible through following the Eight-fold Path which is considered to consist of three-part practical steps. Firstly, ethical conduct – Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood; secondly, mental development – Right Effort, Right Attentiveness, Right Concentration; and thirdly, wisdom – Right Aspiration and Right Understanding.

Background to Buddhism's Influence in the West

Predominantly, Buddhism's influence in the West is important for Christian self-understanding in two respects: firstly, to highlight the necessity of departing from the apparent theological apathy towards religions other than Christianity – an unfortunate heritage from the colonial missionary enterprise – and secondly, to underline the invaluable commentary Buddhism provides on the consequences of three developments in the West which defines the situation of the world in general and the West in particular. These three developments are: advancements in technology, the propagation of the market-based economy and the spread of globalisation.

Theological Apathy towards Other Religions: It was only a century ago that Buddhism and other religions of Asia – the so-called “Oriental religions” – were considered primitive and “pagan”. This theological apathy is inherent in the “Western” character of and the outlook on Christianity, which are expressed in the superior position it has come to assume for itself above other world religions and in the political forces of neocolonialism and the market forces of capitalism and globalisation. To that degree, the Christianity we know in the West is, in many respects, an embodiment of the values and ideals of Western civilisation.¹

A careful study of the issue of Christianity's superiority shows that it is not a biblical fact but

a representation of the mentality of the European Enlightenment which has come to be reflected in the predominantly Eurocentric theology of the church. In the minds of the missionaries of the post-Enlightenment era, colonising the “world” went almost hand-in-hand with Jesus' Great Commissioning in Mark 16:15 where He is quoted as having said: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” Like some of the propagators of the Enlightenment, these missionaries believed that their values should be universally applied – they tended to see Europe as the most enlightened and advanced part of the world. They perceived Europe to be more civilised than the rest of the globe which, in effect, led to the dangerous opinion that other countries and races must be colonised, exploited or bettered, and converted to their particular view – that is, to Christianity.

To cite an example, this mentality was represented in a more refined form by a particular line of thought developed by Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923). He was a representative of a German school of thought known as the *Religionsgeschichteschule* (the School of History of Religions). Along with a few others, Troeltsch promulgated the idea that Christianity represented the highest form of religion in the development of religion throughout history.² This idea had a formative influence on many Continental Christian theologians of the last century and thus, in my view, they subconsciously made it difficult for themselves to develop a genuine theology of religions when it became necessary – especially in the period that followed the Second World War.

There is a further, less conspicuous reason to make Christianity superior (in the eyes of Christians at least) over other religions. Long before the period preceding the European Enlightenment and the discovery of various non-Christian religious phenomena through the colonisation of many parts of the world, religions as we know them today were not clearly defined and categorised as “religious traditions”, “faiths” or “-isms”. In fact, none of the religions that has an “-ism” – for instance, Hinduism, Jainism,

Buddhism, Daoism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism and so on – were “-isms” in the sense we have come to understand the term – that is, as a distinctive doctrine, system, or theory. This “-isming” was largely a product of what is known as British empiricism which was the eighteenth century philosophical movement in Great Britain which maintained that all knowledge comes from experience.

Classification of various phenomena which were either philosophies of life, or religious cults, or both into categories of thought or ideologies is somewhat responsible for the misunderstandings we have faced in the past and continue to face in the present. This categorisation has led to the unfortunate practice of comparing and contrasting one religious “-ism” with another, and especially with Christianity as the criterion.

However, since about the time of the end of the First World War, these religions have ascended to prominence and proved that they have a great capacity to both articulate the cultural ego of some of Asia’s decolonised nations and to be alternatives to Christianity, which had suffocated under the influence of modernity. While the former is evident in the postcolonial nationalist movements in Asia – Sri Lanka and India, for instance – the latter is visible in the popularity Buddhism and other Asian-born religions have gained in Western societies.

Technology, Market-based Economy and Globalisation: Today, many have come to acknowledge that while our forbears over the last century were responsible for many beneficial advances in science, unfortunately – along with advances in technology – they are also chiefly accountable for creating destruction and devastation in a fashion that humanity had never experienced before. Some examples of the vast scale of the destruction which technology has brought upon humanity are: the two World Wars, the Stalinist terror, the *Shoah* (the Holocaust), the atomic bombing of Japan, the war in France, the hostility in Algeria, the

depression in the industrialised West in 1929 and the devastation in Vietnam after 1945, concentration camps, vast scale genocide in the African continent, the tragedy of former Yugoslavia, the two Gulf Wars, the current war in Afghanistan, the widening gap between the rich and the poor worldwide and damage to the environment.

The World Council of Churches came into existence as a prophetic reaction to some of these developments at the end of the Second World War. Its very first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 (August 22 - September 4) was a reaction to the postwar situation, and was clearly reflected in its general theme: “*Man’s Disorder and God’s Design.*” It recognised this moment in history as a “fateful moment” and commented on the times as “... a moment of peril for all mankind which is without precedent in the whole human history. Frustration and fear grip the minds of men and women. This is true not only of the masses who feel themselves caught in a fate over which they have no power, but hardly less of their leaders who hold in their hands the guidance of events which they are unable to control”.³

The Assembly also identified that “man’s disorder” was not only the result of the war as such but also a reflection of the “sickness of civilisation” which had been far advanced before the war, but which was aggravated by it.

The irony about all these developments is not that such “advances” took place in the West, but that the “Christian tradition”, which evolved as an inseparable partner of the Western tradition, provided much of the “cultural resources” – that is, symbols, meanings and ideologies which provide legitimacy to the collective actions of the political players of a civilisation – that were responsible for such events and developments. The “just-war” theory is one such ideology of the West.

Historians such as Max Weber and, lately, Randall Collins have shown the extent of the church’s role in the birth and flowering of

capitalism. While Max Weber located the origin of capitalism in Protestant cities following the European Enlightenment, Randall Collins has shown that capitalism had already existed in the Middle Ages in rural areas, where monasteries – especially those of the Cistercians (Religious of the Order of Cîteaux, a Benedictine reform, established at Cîteaux in 1098 by St. Robert, Abbot of Molesme in the Diocese of Langres) – began to rationalise economic life.⁴

According to Collins, it was the church that established what Max Weber called the “preconditions of capitalism.” These include the rule of law and a bureaucracy for resolving disputes rationally, a specialised and mobile labour force; the permanence of institutions which enabled transgenerational investment and sustained intellectual and physical efforts, together with the accumulation of long-term capital, and a zest for discovery, enterprise, wealth creation, and new undertakings. By the time of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century the capitalist ethos was so well established that it was able to flourish in a more secular environment with religion facing diminution in the post-Enlightenment years to follow.

These developments in the market economy have predominantly contributed to the modern Western tendency to measure the character and the success of the world predominantly in political and economic terms, facilitated by the spread of one political system – democracy – and mass industry. In this respect, globalisation is the process by which these political and economic ideologies are brought into effect.

Globalisation has created a crisis by integrating all scientific, cultural, political and economic activities of humanity into one worldwide network. It has begun to detrimentally affect every culture because its technological and economic principles tend to purposely impose supra-techno-economic, value-free and global structure over and

against them. Thus both Western and non-Western critics of globalisation have been quick to react against the neoliberalist tendencies of globalisation which de-emphasise or reject government intervention in the domestic economy. The focus on free-market methods and the opening up of foreign markets by political means, using economic pressure, diplomacy, and/or military intervention have proved destructive to local identities. Furthermore, multilateral political pressure exercised through international organisations or treaty devices – such as the World Trade Organisation and World Bank – have reduced the role of national governments to a minimum. In every instance, success is measured by economic gain.

It is somewhat ironic that as globalisation and its older brother – capitalism – had their birth in the West and that, through certain historical anomalies which I explained earlier, they are associated with the forms of Christianity prevalent in the West. While quite clearly the world has stepped onto a stage fondly called “post-Christian” one could see that the residues of Christendom have not totally disappeared – they continue to live in the legacies of capitalism, neo-colonialism, and neo-liberalism – another name for globalisation.

While the word *neo-colonialism* has many connotations, one clear manifestation of it is the contemporary forms of imperialism. As we witnessed with regard to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the unjust and oppressive expressions of Western political power are examples of contemporary imperialism. As Kwame Nkrumah observed nearly four decades ago, among many other expressions, neo-colonialism is also expressed through the imperial power of new actors such as the United States or international financial and monetary organisations. He also showed that because of the nuclear parity between the two superpowers – the USA and at that time the former USSR – the conflicts between the two take place in the form of “limited wars” which are waged in neo-colonial territories.⁵

The Significance of Buddhism for Christian Self-understanding

Based on the above brief account, I argue that the pervading influence of Buddhism in the West is a direct response to these issues and more pertinently to the breakdown of the spiritual fabric of Western society. In that respect, Buddhism's ascendancy to popularity is both a challenge and a superior alternative to the predominant and globalised Western world order and its cause in history at present – that is, its continuous exploitation of its "(Christian) cultural resources" through the forces of capitalism, globalisation and neo-colonialism. In that respect, an understanding of Buddhism's influence can provide a clear commentary on the world's situation. In conjunction with such a commentary one could see how the teachings of Buddhism are perceived as:

- an antidote and cure for the unbearable saturation of materialism, consumerism and individualism being experienced at present in the West.
- an alternative to a civilisation tainted with blood spilt over continuous "religious and political" wars.
- offering "non-theological" practical answers to these ills outside the Judeo-Christian and Islamic worldviews and conceptual frameworks.
- an ethical, practical and rational guide through life without placing any metaphysical importance on God (Who is wrongly blamed for the demise of the Enlightenment ideals).
- an alternative to scientific naturalism and the loss of the sense of mystery and moral responsibility.

• a means to revitalise the depleted spiritual sap of the Western civilisation. Fr Aloysius Pieris SJ, goes so far as to say: "...[the] contemporary West, in allowing itself to be seduced by the mystique of the East, may probably be indulging in a massive sociological ritualisation of a deep psychological need to sharpen its Oriental instinct blunted by centuries of misuse".⁶

In these respects, the commentary Buddhism gives of the world presents a clear context and a dimension for our Christian self-understanding and a challenge to appraise our Christian self-understanding in the West which had been – and continue to be – interwoven with the developments that I have outlined.

The commentary Buddhism gives brings to the fore three important considerations for defining and understanding ourselves in the world: i) the ascendancy of Buddhism in the West as well as in their native lands as a clear indicator of the failure of the Christian-Western influence on the world situation since the European Enlightenment; ii) the negative effects of the world-order based on market economy and globalisation, which are secular expressions of the vision of Christendom in post-Christendom – one world order; and iii) the superiority complex of Christianity as a Eurocentric worldview.

These present new challenges to all Christians, in general, and to Christians in the West, in particular, as we attempt to understand ourselves and engage with the world meaningfully in the present. The historical time in which God has made Buddhism a decisive factor in our self-understanding is kairoitic – a divinely appointed moment in our history to which we cannot afford not to respond.

¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Christianity and the West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future.' *First Things* 48, Dec 1994 pp.18-23.

² *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, Richmond VA: John Knox, 1971

- ³ Henry P. Van Dusen, *General Introduction, Man's Disorder and God's Design* Vol, London: SCM, 1948, p.9
- ⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. Talcott Parsons, London: Allen & Unwin, 1976; Randall Collins, "Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism", *American Sociological Review* 45, 1980, pp.925-42.
- ⁵ Kwame Nkrumah , *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965.
- ⁶ Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 8.
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Christian Self-Understanding and the Question of Dual Belonging

Rose Drew

Growing interaction between religious traditions in the West today means religious identities are increasingly formed under the influence of more than one tradition. It is not, for example, uncommon to hear of Christians who attend Buddhist meditation classes or read books by popular Buddhist figures such as the Dalai Lama. Although fewer we also find Christians who have entered so deeply into Buddhist thought and practice that Buddhism has come to seem to them as much their own tradition as is Christianity. Terms such as 'multiple belonging' or 'dual belonging' become appropriate where individuals are firmly rooted in – and identify themselves as committed adherents of – both traditions.¹ In the most unequivocal cases of Buddhist Christian dual belonging, people practise within both traditions, belong to a Buddhist and a Christian community, identify themselves as being Buddhist and Christian, and have made a formal commitment to both traditions (usually through baptism² and the taking of the three refuges³). John Dunne describes the temporary adoption of a religious perspective other than one's own in terms of "passing over" and "coming back"⁴. For some Buddhist Christian dual belongers, their identity is the result of a process (or many processes) of passing over and coming back in which they have found it neither possible nor desirable to return to precisely the place which they left, for they find themselves and their understanding changed by this process, to such a degree that the religion of the other is no longer perceived as 'other', and passing over to it comes to seem as much a return home as the return to the perspective and practices of the tradition in which they were raised.

What are we to make of this phenomenon? Is it possible to be a faithful Christian *and* a faithful Buddhist? How are these traditions combined

in thought and practice? In 1990 Sallie King (a Zen Buddhist and a Quaker) wrote:

*I am intrigued by the condition of those of us who have more than one worldview in our hearts and minds. ... [E]ach worldview exists as an intact package. But it is not alone. There is another intact package functioning there.How, then, do we live? ... Unfortunately, this condition and all its intriguing possibilities is very little explored.*⁵

While Buddhist Christian dual belonging has, over the last decade, begun to receive attention, there is still much exploratory work to be done. My recent doctoral research has sought to contribute to this work. Focussing on Buddhist Christian dual belongers living in the West who were raised in a Christian context and came to Buddhism later, I explored in detail the theological, philosophical, and practical questions to which this significant contemporary development gives rise. In this paper, I will point to some of the main themes and conclusions of my research and will suggest that, rather than posing a threat to the Christian tradition, dual belongers have much to contribute to it.

My Interviewees

At this early stage in academic attempts to understand the phenomenon of dual belonging, discussing the questions to which it gives rise with reference to the experience of actual dual belongers seems likely to be the most fruitful approach. Hence the writings of, and interviews with, six "pioneers" provided a concrete context for my research. All these individuals have publicly identified themselves with both traditions. Five are based in the US and are internationally recognised figures in the field of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the other is a UK-

based Anglican eremitic nun and Buddhist teacher. I will introduce them, briefly.

The late Roger Corless was Professor Emeritus of Religion, Duke University, and co-founder of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and its journal. Originally from the UK, he had lived in the US since the 1960s. He was a Roman Catholic and a Tibetan Buddhist in the Gelugpa tradition (though his Buddhist practice increasingly incorporated Pure Land elements). Corless first identified himself publicly as someone who practised both Buddhism and Christianity in 1986.⁶ He did not, however, regard himself “as a Buddhist and a Christian” but as “an entity that is able to function authentically in both Buddhism and Christianity”.⁷ When he died in 2007 (just months after I interviewed him), his memorial service included Buddhist and Christian elements.

Originally from the Philippines, Ruben Habito has lived in the US for more than twenty years, and is Professor of World Religions and Spirituality at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas. He is a Roman Catholic (a former Jesuit priest) and a Master in the Sanbō Kyōdan School of Zen. (During his training in Japan, Habito became one of the first Roman Catholics to have *kenshō* confirmed by a Japanese Zen Master.⁸) He is Founding Director of the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas. Habito explains that he aspires to live as a Buddhist “through and through” and also to “live thoroughly in the Spirit of Christ Jesus”⁹.

John Keenan is Professor Emeritus of Religion, Middlebury College, Vermont. He is an Episcopalian (former Roman Catholic) priest. He has spent most of his academic career translating Mahāyāna texts from Chinese into English, and writing ‘Mahāyāna theology’ on the basis of those texts, “borrowing Mahāyāna philosophical themes and grafting them onto the Christian mystic tradition”¹⁰. He is the only one of my interviewees who is not strictly a dual believer, since he has no Buddhist practice and

does not understand himself as a Buddhist as *such*. Rather, Keenan describes himself as a “Mahāyāna Christian”. He sees himself as *philosophically* Buddhist, and he interprets the Gospels and Christian theology through the lens of Mahāyāna philosophy.

Sallie King is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is a Zen Buddhist and a Quaker.¹¹ King publicly claims a “double religious identity” and has had this dual commitment for more than twenty years¹² She is happy to be described as a “Buddhist-Christian” or a “Buddhist-Quaker” (350)¹³ but emphasises that she understands herself as “100% Buddhist and 100% Quaker”: it’s not a fifty-fifty commitment (348).

Originally from Germany, Maria Reis Habito lives with her husband, Ruben Habito, and their two sons in Dallas. She is the International Program Director for the Taipei Museum of World Religions, Director of Global Family for Love and Peace, and Co-director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute. She has previously held academic posts and has published work in the fields of Buddhist Studies and Interreligious Dialogue. Reis Habito is a Roman Catholic and a disciple of a Taiwanese Buddhist Master who has Chan, Theravāda, and Tibetan ordinations (hence all these influences are present in her own Buddhist thought and practice). She also practises within the Sanbō Kyōdan Zen tradition. She has identified herself as a “Buddhist Christian”,¹⁴ and says that she identifies equally with both traditions (430).

Sr. Ruth Furneaux (also known by her Buddhist name, ‘Kashin sama’¹⁵) is an eremitic Anglican Christian nun, and a Zen and *Satipaṭṭhāna* practitioner and teacher. Having spent time living in Buddhist and Christian communities, Furneaux was living alone in a small hermitage near Chepstow in the UK when I interviewed her. Her formal practice includes sitting meditation (a combination of formal *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *shikantaza*—just sitting), self-administered Eucharist, saying the Divine Office

and the Buddhist Sōtō Zen Office, walking meditation, *chi* work, and Zen brush work. Furneaux explains that she feels “at home within Buddhism and within Christianity”, but prefers to avoid identity labels: “What I say is my colours are nailed to the cross – you can see it in my habit – but I also wear the cross and lotus: the cross is emerging from the lotus”.¹⁶

The Buddhist Christian’s Challenge

My research focussed on how reflective dual belongers, such as my interviewees, combine the thought and practice of these two traditions in their lives and whether it is possible to be faithful to both. The challenge facing one as a dual believer is, I suggest, two-fold. Firstly, one must find satisfactory ways of integrating the Christian way of thinking and being and the Buddhist way of thinking and being, such that dual belonging does not involve turning a blind eye to apparently outright contradictions nor entail being pulled in opposite directions by one’s religious commitments. Secondly, one must at the same time ensure that the unique character, insight, and integrity of each tradition is preserved and what is special and attractive about each is not lost.

I am interested in the way in which this two-fold challenge is grappled with when it comes to the areas of thought and practice in which there is potential conflict between the traditions. For example, central to Christianity is faith in a personal God, whereas Buddhism recognises no such God. How, then, do dual belongers deal with this apparently serious disagreement? Dual belongers, moreover, have two key figures at the centre of their spiritual lives: Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha. Can the nature and significance of these figures, and the relationship between them, be understood in a way which is faithful to both traditions and internally coherent? And how do dual belongers relate to each of these figures in their religious lives? Buddhism and Christianity can also be interpreted as having significantly different understandings of the nature and goal of the spiritual path. How then do dual belongers

conceive of the nature and goal of their spiritual lives: Can Buddhism and Christianity be legitimately interpreted as orientating the dual believer towards a single salvation or liberation? And, finally, how do dual belongers combine the *practice* of Buddhism and Christianity, and is it possible to do justice to both traditions in this regard?

There is not the space to tackle these questions here,¹⁷ so I will simply share some very general conclusions.

The Achievement of Coherence

My investigation revealed that through a process of increasing familiarity with, and deepening understanding of, Buddhist and Christian thought and practice, it is possible for dual belongers to arrive at a coherent world-view and self-understanding informed by both traditions. As Habito says, while these traditions need to be acknowledged as distinct from one another, through their mutual assimilation in one’s own life, “one comes to see them, no longer as contradictory nor as just adventitious mixing, but...as an integral perspective” (155). He explains that there is an area in his life where the Christian and the Buddhist conceptual frameworks, though different, have found their intersection and he is “trying to live within that intersection” (141). Exploring this intersection, I found that there are orthodox strands of thought within both traditions which make it possible to conclude, from a combined Christian *and* Buddhist perspective, that there is one transcendent ultimate reality; that Jesus Christ and Gautama Buddha mediate ultimate reality, each in his own unique way; and that what the salvific/liberative path requires in the here and now is the replacement of egotistical, selfish ways of being with loving, wise, and compassionate ways of being (regardless of what the precise nature of the end of that path may be and regardless of how many lives one may have in which to pursue it). These agreements all contribute to the area of intersection which gives Buddhist Christian dual belonging its coherence.

I will just say a little more about the agreement between Buddhist and Christian thought which I take to be most fundamental to the coherence of a dual believer's religious life and world-view, and that is the affirmation – shared by Buddhists and Christians – that there is no more than one ultimate reality. This affirmation is crucial, since it becomes the hook upon which both the dual believer's distinct religious commitments can be hung. Jacques Dupuis points out that "every religious faith constitutes an indivisible whole and calls for a total commitment of the person" and suggests that it may, therefore, "easily seem a priori impossible that such an absolute engagement might be divided, as it were, between two objects".¹⁸ But authentic dual belonging does not require this impossible – or at least undesirable – division of absolute commitment, because the singularity of wholehearted and unambiguous religious commitment depends, not on commitment to the thought and practice of a single tradition, but on commitment to one ultimate reality; dual believers simply orientate themselves towards that Reality *through* more than one tradition.

Catherine Cornille – a key voice in the emerging debate on dual belonging – asserts that religious belonging involves "abandonment to a transcendent reality mediated through the concrete symbols and rituals of a particular religion. Surrender is thus not to the ultimate as such, but through – and in the end – to the teachings and practices embedded in a concrete religious tradition".¹⁹ But this claim is inconsistent with the traditional recognition on the part of Buddhists and Christians of the limitations of all concepts and symbols with respect to that Reality which transcends them. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith puts it, authentic faith, "is concerned with something, or Someone, behind or beyond Christianity, or Buddhism"²⁰. Hence, King is able to say that she has "one faith" in that which is "before Buddhism and Christianity" (365). "I *most* identify with that", she explains (364). Buddhism and Christianity "just offer...tools. They offer languages for me to try to speak" (390).

The Dialogue Continues

One might worry that, since the coherence of the Buddhist Christian's world-view depends on the identification of various agreements between the Buddhist world-view and the Christian world-view, dual believers may end up unduly emphasising these agreements and downplaying divergences and areas of tension as a result. Add to this the fact that cross-fertilisation inevitably occurs between the dual believer's Buddhist and Christian perspectives, and the risk of eroding potentially important distinctions between these traditions appears high. However, the reflections of my interviewees suggest, on the contrary, that thoroughgoing dual belonging fosters appreciation of the uniqueness of each of these traditions. It is, after all, *in virtue* of the distinctiveness of each that people belong to both.

As one discovers converging strands of thought within one's Buddhist and Christian perspectives, those perspectives gradually integrate, giving rise to a coherent world-view informed by both. But this does not mean that one gradually merges Buddhism and Christianity into a single conceptual or ritual system. Habito, for example, is at pains to emphasise that he is not interested in creating "a hodgepodge of Christian elements and Buddhist elements", and describes this as "an irresponsible way of approaching spirituality" (153-4). All my interviewees made similar points, emphasising the distinctiveness of each of these traditions and likening them to different languages, each of which retains its distinct integrity even when one appreciates its overlap with the other and allows cross-fertilisation between them. Some emphasised strongly that each tradition has its own particular strengths, and that it is being able to draw on these respective strengths that makes dual belonging so worthwhile.

I found that the distinctive strengths of each perspective tended to mirror the subtle tension between the different salvific/liberative

emphases of these two traditions – Christianity on *loving involvement*, Buddhism on *wise non-attachment*. Buddhism seems to place greater emphasis on non-attachment than love, and Christianity, greater emphasis on love than non-attachment, but in both these traditions, non-attachment and love are understood as developing in a relationship of mutual dependence: If love is not accompanied by non-attachment, it is not unconditional but self-serving (one seeks one's own happiness and not simply the happiness of others). If non-attachment is not accompanied by love, it becomes indifferent to the suffering of others and fails to show compassion and empathy. This means that it is possible, from a Buddhist and a Christian perspective, to see the respective emphases of these two traditions as complementary.

There was much in the reflections of my interviewees which affirmed this existential complementarity, though some reflections also made it clear that holding the respective emphases of these two traditions in tension was sometimes a *challenge*. The ongoing dialogical to-and-fro inherent in the attempt to find and maintain the right balance between the Christian emphasis and the Buddhist emphasis was particularly evident with respect to some of the questions with which King and Reis Habito have found themselves grappling.

One issue they both raised had to do with whether *preferential love for one's children* contains an element of attachment and, if so, whether this tells us that we should not feel preferential love for our children or whether it tells us that not all preferential love is negative. King feels that the Christian tradition is more affirmative of this familial preferential love than Buddhism (352), and that this is an issue over which Christianity challenges Buddhism: "...preferential love – is there a place for that? Is that *just* delusion?" asks King (375). However, she nevertheless finds that "[t]he other way round...there's a Buddhist strength too: preferential love can easily slide into clinging in a destructive way", reflects King, and

the Buddhist emphasis keeps one alive to this possibility (375).

Another, related focus of the internal dialogue between the respective emphases of these traditions has, for King and Reis Habito, been a sense that the Christian world-view accords value to individuals *qua* individuals whereas the Buddhist world-view seems to construe this emphasis as a form of egocentrism. King particularly appreciates the fact that Quakerism, unlike Buddhism, values her *children* as unique individuals. "In Buddhism", says King, "valuing a person as a unique individual is not [even]...on the radar screen, much less something they focus on" (419). According to Buddhist teachings of *anātman* – or not self – reflects King, "ego's the whole problem", and she laughs to admit that she thinks that is right too. "[A]m I fostering ego in my children?", wonders King; "I don't know" (419). Reis Habito tentatively suggests that the sense of a person's uniqueness and the valuing of particular human relationships are aspects of the Christian world-view by which Buddhists could perhaps be inspired. She also points out that Buddhists are cautious about such issues "precisely because when you say 'I'm unique and God loves me' that very easily...translates into 'I'm special' and then this 'I', again, is becoming so strong... Buddhists are very careful in not giving rise to a wrong notion of 'I' that's absolutised" (498).

As King's and Reis Habito's reflections make clear, although the strengths of each perspective are appreciated, *insofar* as each tradition is allowed to retain its own distinctive emphasis, it does not seem that these two perspectives are integrated into an entirely unified focus; their strengths do not perfectly fit together. However, what their reflections also suggest is that the respects in which Buddhism and Christianity *refuse to fully coincide* are *precisely* the respects in which most is gained from dual belonging, for it is this divergence which makes the presence of each perspective most valuable to the other; and it is the points at which they *converge* which make each of them aware of this, since both agree that the tension

between their respective emphases helps keep each of them 'in check'. Rather than downplaying the distinctions – and even disagreements – between Buddhism and Christianity, dual believers call as much attention to them as they do to the *overlap* between these traditions.

Dual Belonging is Not “Supermarket Spirituality”

The reflections above also illustrate that we are not dealing here with a superficial mixing of bits and pieces of Buddhism and Christianity which displays no regard for the integrity of these traditions. Multireligious identities are sometimes seen as, or associated with, a superficial “pick and mix” approach to religion, to what Peter Phan calls a “postmodern form of syncretism in which a person looks upon various religions as a supermarket” from which one selects whatever one likes, “without regard to...truth values and mutual compatibilities”²¹. No doubt there are some people with multireligious identities whose immersion in the traditions from which they derive nourishment is shallow, who harbour many ill-considered and incompatible beliefs, who pick only the bits of a tradition they like and reject the rest, and who drop commitments which become demanding; but is this not also true of many who know only one tradition? Indeed, I suggest that, in important respects, dual believers are actually *less* susceptible than others to the risk of superficiality since they are less able to take their commitments *for granted*, the presence of two complete and distinct perspectives being a potential source of *genuine existential angst* unless one submits to the challenge of investigating both in order to try to understand how they fit together.

My interviewees demonstrate that it is possible to be thoroughly immersed in two traditions, to achieve a considerable degree of overall coherence, and to take the demands of both traditions seriously without reservation. The very fact that they have sustained their commitment to both traditions over many years,

despite experiencing tension (as well as overlap) between them, should provide sufficient evidence that these are not people who jettison their religious commitments when they become challenging. Moreover, King, for example, feels that the areas where the traditions challenge *each other* are areas of growth for her. She explains that deciphering the nuances in the Buddhist message about non-attachment was “a matter of looking more deeply and coming to a point of clarification about it, but it was clarification which came about because of the challenge of Christianity” (377).

Questions remained in certain areas for all those I interviewed (as they do for reflective *single* believers), but their reflections suggest that it is not necessary to have all questions answered in order to follow a salvific/liberative path informed by these two traditions, and Buddhism and Christianity do not need to be experienced as consistent in *every regard* in order for one to draw valuable inspiration from both.

What do Dual Belongers Contribute to Christian Self-Understanding?

But even if it is possible to reconcile the thought and practice of Buddhism and Christianity to such a degree that one can be faithful to both traditions, we might still ask, from a Christian perspective, what the influence of dual believers on the Christian tradition will be. What do they bring to the Christian community? What positive contribution might they make to Christian self-understanding? As Paul Knitter acknowledges in his recent monograph reflecting on his own Buddhist Christian identity, the question is an important one. Unless dual belonging is to be considered an entirely personal matter, it must be something that is shared with one's Christian community. And as Knitter admits, “if you can't share and celebrate and explore your spiritual beliefs and practices with your community, you may not really belong to that community”.²² So what will the results of this sharing be?

I suggest their primary contribution is threefold. Firstly, dual believers encourage fresh perspectives on Christian practice. This is particularly true of their recognition of the spiritual value of meditation – a recognition from which many Christians stand to benefit. As Ursula King argues, the neglect of meditation in churches is a problem. “There is far too much emphasis on the spoken word and external action”, contends King. “In contemporary culture we are externally overstimulated by words, images, and constant noise, which seem to drown the quiet search of our inner being”²³. She suggests that many people today are seeking a new wholeness and that is why so many people are turning to meditation, in need of “a time and place for quietness and spiritual nourishment”. Annewieke Vroom, reflecting on how she has been influenced by her encounter with Buddhism, shares a diary-entry which supports King’s sentiments:

*Sitting in church I feel suffocated with form. The images, the songs, the sermon, the communion – the fullness of it all is overwhelming. Where is the emptiness? Even in the two minutes silence we need to pray. I long to sit on a pillow and meditate. I feel estranged from my own place of worship*²⁴

Vroom explains that although her loyalty to the Christian tradition is not exclusive, she feels a greater commitment to the Christian tradition than to the Buddhist, and wants to assist in *developing* the Christian tradition in order to help it *survive* in Europe. Yet she feels that if it had not been for her contact with *Buddhism*, she might well have lost contact with Christianity altogether²⁵. These reflections suggest that the integration of meditation into Christianity, which dual believers help facilitate, will, for many, have a sustaining and renewing influence on their Christian practice.

Secondly, dual believers influence Christian self-understanding by encouraging and facilitating Christian participation in dialogue. Michael Amaladoss contends that people who feel at home in two symbolic worlds, moving

with ease between them and living in a religious fellowship with both communities, “are obviously called to be mediators”²⁶. Reis Habito’s reflections suggest she has often found herself in precisely this role: “you talk from within but you can also talk from without and you can explain things in a double way”, says Reis Habito. “[I]t makes ... [people] very much wonder where this openness can come from and where this acceptance of the other can come from ... So, in that sense, ... to have both traditions in me is a great blessing maybe also for others” (491). Crucially, through their pioneering dialogical efforts, Buddhist Christians demonstrate to their fellow Christians that complete openness to the insights of others need not lead to a weakening of Christian commitment.

Indeed, my interviewees found that, in coming to identify with a second tradition, their Christian faith was, in fact, *strengthened*. As one endeavours to discover the respects in which Buddhist and Christian thought converge, one is prompted by one’s new perspective to interrogate one’s original perspective and, in so doing, to clarify and deepen it, and to appreciate its truth more profoundly as a result. Hence, Fabrice Blée insightfully describes the process which leads to genuine dual belonging as a “twofold conversion” inasmuch as it involves coming to share the Buddhist vision and to appreciate its truth, and at the same time returning to the heart of Christianity²⁷. As well as encouraging a greater openness to the insights of other traditions, dual believers may also help renew the faith of their fellow Christians more directly, by sharing their deepened understanding with them.

This brings us to the third main contribution of dual believers. Through their assimilation of Buddhist insights into Christianity, and Christian insights into Buddhism, dual believers help expedite the mutual transformation of Christianity and Buddhism, often stated as an aim of dialogue. John Cobb argues that if Christianity is a *living* movement, then it requires Christians today to commit themselves to the

task of learning from other traditions: “In faithfulness to Christ I must be open to others”, contends Cobb. “When I recognize in those others something of worth and importance that I have not derived from my own tradition, I must be ready to learn even if that threatens my present beliefs”²⁸. Dual belongsers *exemplify* this readiness to learn, and *accept* the risk that accompanies it. The dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity is, for dual belongsers, *internal* and central to their spirituality. It is, therefore, likely that the transformation of Christian self-understanding resulting from this dialogue will move *faster* in their lives than it will in the Christian tradition at large. Hence, the reflections of these pioneers may point us in some of the directions future global theology will take as, increasingly, Christians – along with their brothers and sisters in other traditions – come to see themselves as heirs to the whole religious history of humankind and to embrace, within the context of dialogue, the challenge of working out how the insights of the various traditions of the world relate to each other.

In his groundbreaking 1981 work, *Towards a World Theology*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith presented “World Theology” as a kind of permanent interreligious colloquium, generating theologies which, although Christian or Buddhist, say, are also “more than” Christian or Buddhist²⁹. In line with this vision, the self-understandings of dual belongsers reveal a Christianity transformed by dialogue—a Christianity which recognises its own uniqueness, while at the same time recognising, and benefitting from, the distinctive strengths of others. As Blée says, dual belonging involves

“having two religious universes linked in dialogue inside oneself, each being welcome in its originality and deepened in its specificity”. Yet, at the same time, dual belonging opens up a way of being “in which the other’s universal truth becomes mine”³⁰.

Thus, the transformation of Christian self-understanding which Buddhist Christian dual belonging helps facilitate is not only no *threat* to Christianity, it actually *strengthens* the tradition in its universality *and* uniqueness, making its survival more likely. Through their integration of Buddhist insights, dual belongsers help *broaden* Christianity making it more *comprehensive* and hence more worthy of its claim to *universality*. Yet at the same time, through their deepening appreciation of the *distinctiveness* of Christianity, they help make Christians more aware of the particularity of the Christian tradition, of the historical contingencies which have helped shape it, and of its unique spiritual genius and, hence, of its specific contribution to global dialogue. Conversely, barricading the doors of the Church, in the hope of keeping the influence of the other out, only *weakens* Christianity’s claim to universality and *fails* to demonstrate its unique contribution to global dialogue.

“So, with my Buddhist-Christian practice and hybrid identity, am I on the cutting edge or the outer edge of my Christian community?” asks Knitter. I believe his hope is justified, that he is on the *cutting* edge, and “that this ‘edge’ is leading to what some call ‘a new way of being church’ – a church that lives and finds life through dialogue”³¹.

¹ Cornille takes Christian Buddhist and Jewish Buddhist multireligious identities to be the most common manifestation of this phenomenon in the West (2003: 43). The prevalence of Buddhist Christian multireligious identities seems borne out by the significant internet presence of people identifying themselves as both Buddhist and Christian, some online groups having many hundreds of members. See, e.g., ‘A Christian Buddhist Gathering Page’: <http://webpace.webring.com/people/tj/jmalcomson/christianbuddhist.html> (last access May 2010). This site is run by John Malcomson, a self-identified “Christian Buddhist”, who explains: “We discuss the similarities between Christianity and Buddhism as well as whether being a Christian/Buddhist or Buddhist/Christian is valid or possible”. See also ‘Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network’: <http://buddhist-christian.org/> (last access May 2010), and Joseph Anderson’s blog, ‘Lotus and Lily Field Notes’: <http://www.lotuslily.net/> (last access May 2010). For further relevant links, see Victoria Scarlett’s ‘Links for Buddhist-Christian practitioners’: http://www.lotuslily.net/?page_id=260.

² Together with personal faith, baptism is traditionally understood as the criterion for Christian identity, although, since infant baptism means baptism is not always one's own choice, Christian practice and community membership are perhaps more accurate indicators of lived Christian identity.

³ The Buddha is the teacher of the Dharma (the truth about the way things are and how to act in accordance with this truth) and the community of accomplished disciples established by him is known as the Saṅgha. The taking of refuge in these 'three jewels' is often realised in the recitation of a threefold formula: 'To the Buddha I go for refuge; to the Dharma I go for refuge; to the Saṅgha I go for refuge.' As Rupert Gethin explains, this is "essentially what defines an individual as a Buddhist" (1998: 34).

⁴ J.S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth: Experiments in Truth and Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1972. P.ix

⁵ Sallie B. King, 'Toward a Buddhist Model of Interreligious Dialogue', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 10, 1990 pp. 121-126.

⁶ Roger J. Corless, 'The Mutual Fulfillment of Buddhism and Christianity in Co-inherent Superconsciousness', in Ingram, P.O. and Streng, F.J. (eds.), *Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Mutual Renewal and Transformation*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986, pp. 115-136.

⁷ Roger J. Corless. *Profiles in Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Roger Corless*. Online transcript, 1996. <http://innerexplorations.com/catew/9.htm> (last access May 2010), p.10

⁸ *Kenshō*—literally "seeing the nature" in Japanese—is an initial awakening experience (a seeing of one's Buddha Nature. This experience can then be enlarged and clarified through further practice in daily life).

⁹ Ruben L.F. Habito, 2007. 'Being Buddhist, Being Christian: Being Both, Being Neither', in D'Arcy May, J. (ed.), *Converging Ways? Conversion and Belonging in Buddhism and Christianity*, Klosterverlag Sankt Ottilien: EOS, 2007, p 179.

¹⁰ John P. Keenan 'Mahāyāna Theology: A Dialogue with Critics', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 13 , 1993, p. 32.

¹¹ King's branch of Quakerism is associated with the Friends General Conference and maintains the original Quaker practices of unprogrammed Meeting for Worship and eschewal of paid ministry.

¹² Sallie B. King, 'A Pluralistic View of Religious Pluralism', in Knitter, P.F. (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*, New York: Orbis Books, 2005, pp. 88-101.

¹³ Where a page number appears without a publication reference, I am referring to my unpublished interview transcripts.

¹⁴ Maria Reis Habito 'On Becoming a Buddhist Christian', in H. Kasimow , J.P. Keenan, L. Klepinger Keenan (eds), *Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians and the Way of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom 2003, pp.201-213.

¹⁵ 'Kashin' means 'fruit/result of Shin'. Furneaux translates 'Shin' as 'heartmind/Spirit/God' (letter from Furneaux to Drew dated: 23/1/06).

¹⁶ Furneaux: 91-92. The wooden symbol she wears over her habit is a copy of a ninth century Chinese Nestorian cross.

¹⁷ They are treated in detail in the monograph based on my doctoral thesis, which is forthcoming with Routledge in 2011.

¹⁸ Jacques Dupuis 'Christianity and Religions: Complementarity and Convergence', in Cornille, C. (ed.), *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, New York: Orbis, 2002, p.64.

¹⁹ Catherine Cornille, 'Double Religious Belonging: Aspects and Questions', *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23, 2003, pp. 43-49.

²⁰ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 1962. *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962 [1991 edition] p.13.

²¹ Peter C Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, New York: Orbis, 2004, p.62.

²² Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* , Oxford: Oneworld, 2009, p.216.

²³ Ursula King 'A Response to Reflections on Buddhist and Christian Religious Practices', in Gross, R.M. and Muck, T.C. (eds.), *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* New York and London: Continuum, 2003 [essays originally published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 21 (2001) and 22 (2002)], pp. 140-9.

²⁴ Annewieke Vroom, 'Struggle for loyalty: the impact of studying another religion' (paper given at the Sixth Study Conference of the European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies, St. Ottilien, Germany: 10-13 June 2005) p. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.* pp.3-4

²⁶ Michael Amaladoss, 'Double Belongingness in Religion: An Anthro-Theological Reflection' (paper given at the 'Voies de l'Orient' second European Pastoral 'Assises'. Brussels, 11-14 November 1999, p.5 A longer version was published as 'Double Religious Belonging and Liminality: An Anthropological Reflection', *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 39 [2002]: 297-312 and, in French, as 'La double appartenance religieuse', in Scheuer, J. and Gira, D. [eds.], *Vivre de Plusieurs Religions: Promesse ou Illusion?* [Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier / Les Éditions Ouvrières, 2000]: 44-53).

²⁷ Fabrice Blée, 'Which Christian-Buddhist Way? For an articulation of the *twofold* religious *belonging*?' (paper given at the 'Voies de l'Orient' second European Pastoral 'Assises'. Brussels, 11-14 November 1999, pp.1-2. A French version was published as 'Quelle voie chrétienne-bouddhiste?', in Scheuer, J. and Gira, D. [eds.], *Vivre de Plusieurs Religions: Promesse ou Illusion?* [Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier / Les Éditions Ouvrières, 2000]: 151-160).

²⁸ John B. Cobb, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way beyond Absolutism and Relativism*, Knitter, P. (ed.) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999, p.45).

²⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981, p.112).

³⁰ Fabrice Blée Op. Cit p.2

³¹ Paul F. Knitter Op. Cit. pp. 216-217

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What can Christians learn from Zen?

Sr Katrin Åmell OP

I am very honoured and grateful to take part in this consultation at the initiative of the World Council of Churches. I have been invited to say a few words about Christianity and the Zen tradition. Although I have written a PhD thesis on Zen in the Catholic context in Japan,¹ my work as Director of Ecumenical Theology within the Christian Council of Sweden for the last six years has not allowed me to pursue my earlier research. Therefore what I will share with you is mainly based on my previous work and experiences. Almost at the same time as I received the invitation to participate in this consultation I had the opportunity to meet Paul Knitter in Stockholm and also obtained his latest book, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*.² When reading this book I was reminded of my earlier reflections on the subject of what Christians can learn from Zen. Instead of enumerating some general observations about the benefits of Zen meditation, I will rather highlight some points from Knitter's book and try to add some more personal, pastoral reflections which in my opinion seem to have relevance in today's Church and society.

1. First, I want to mention the very complex issue of *the Christian notion of God*. Much has been written on this subject, of course, and so I will only touch on it briefly here. We believe that God entered history through the incarnation. Through Jesus Christ God became one of us, although still God. However, there is a tendency to make God too human, too like us, like a "super person" with power to arrange everything as we want it. As we know, Buddhists refuse any concept of God, and most definitely of God as a "super person". I think this Buddhist refusal can be a corrective, in the sense that it liberates us from too anthropomorphic ideas about God. It is also quite clear in Christian theology that God can never be grasped through human ideas or understanding. God is always much

more, God is beyond all our imagination. Fortunately, God is above all Mystery. This mystic dimension is inherent in the world and in every human being. Here we find relations to the Buddhist understanding of Ultimate Reality, *Sunyata*, or whatever this is called. It is also on this mystic level that we have the most obvious meeting points with Buddhists. This is how I have understood it myself in the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and especially the exchanges between Zen Buddhist monasteries in Japan and Catholic monasteries in Europe. This is a dialogue based on religious experience. It has gone on for more than 40 years and it is generally considered a very fruitful form of Buddhist Christian dialogue.

In Buddhism experience of the awakening is more important than different attempts to explain what Ultimate Reality is. Christianity has advanced systems of expounding what we believe in, but we have to develop further the experiences of faith – the mystical dimension. A well-known quote from the famous Catholic theologian Karl Rahner is that "In future Christians will be mystics or they will not be anything". What Rahner called "future", a couple of years after the end of the Second Vatican Council, is now present times. With the strong accent on experience, Buddhism could to some extent help Christians in their spiritual quest for God as mystery, present in ordinary life, and also help them rediscover their own mystical sources. Many Christians who have been in contact with the Zen tradition have seen it as a light from outside. This new perspective has helped them to deepen their own faith and rediscover their own spiritual richness. – Much more could be said about this, but I want to continue with something related to this issue.

2. How do we talk to others about God and our Christian faith? How do we *transmit faith* to the

next generation? These questions concern evangelisation and catechism. Very often all our words have a tendency to be too affirmative and too definitive, as if we have been able to say all there is to say. This strong affirmative language might give the impression that God is a limited being instead of the Sustainer of everything. Usually, we use a childish language in catechism for small children thinking that the message would be more easily understood that way. But children can understand and receive impressions also without simplified words. They are open to symbols, for emotions of love, for what is in the atmosphere, and I have witnessed in Japan as well as in Sweden how children can sit in silence together with other people for a long while. What we remember from our own childhood are not simplified words, but the atmosphere and the persons who took care of us, whether they loved us or not.

I think that Buddhism can contribute to a renewal of the Christian apophatic theology, as we know that whatever we are trying to say about God is inadequate and that the Divine Mystery is always beyond our language. The importance is that we can transmit our experience, that there is always much more than what we can say. Otherwise, we run the risk that people might think that what we have said is exhaustive. Many adults, who have been catechised as children, are still on that faith level, even if they have developed all other aspects of adult life, like in their professional work, responsibilities, intellectual reflections etc.. It is important when talking about Christian faith to others that we transmit that there is always something more to know, something more to receive, something more to be open for, something more to wonder about. When I was in Japan for field studies many years ago I stayed most of the time in a convent with Dominican Sisters. Once we watched a television programme on the Zen Buddhist symbol where someone is pointing with a finger to the moon. The Sisters tried to explain the meaning of this symbol to me. The moon represents the ultimate goal, whatever we want to call it, the awakening, God, or something

else. The finger is useful because it indicates where the moon is, but it is very important to understand that the finger is just a finger, not the moon. In his latest book Paul Knitter comes back several times to this symbol. The finger can represent many things, words and doctrines about God, priests, ecclesial hierarchy or institutions. This simple Zen image can help us remind ourselves of two things: the finger itself must be aware that it is just a finger, not the moon; people, who look at the finger must not stop there, only see what it is pointing at. We have to let the eyes leave the finger and focus on the moon – the ultimate mystery.

3. The third and last point I want to underline is *the opposite of the growing individualism* in our modern societies, also in Asian countries. It has to do with the Buddhist teaching on *pratityasamutpada*, “interdependent origination”. Here it is not necessary to develop the teaching of the twelve links of *pratityasamutpada*, just to mention the fundamental meaning, that everything is interrelated and that everything is changing all the time. In our world today it is easy to establish this. Just think of globalization, the financial crisis, climate change – all these challenging questions reminding us that we are very dependent on what is happening in other parts of the world. Interdependent origination is related to *anatta*, no-self, which is difficult for westerners to understand. But I think we can realize that selfishness is connected to individualism and that this is harming others as well as ourselves. In fact, it is a refusal to see that everything is interrelated. As it is a denial of reality it causes us suffering. All forms of Buddhist training, which have the aim of ridding ourselves of our small egos, are certainly good. In Zen tradition this is striking. We can think of the way of sitting together in the *zendo* (meditation hall), the processions from one place to another in monasteries, the *samu*, the manual work together during *sesshins* (retreats) etc..

According to Knitter, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh translates *Sunyata*, emptiness, with “InterBeing”. In fact, this word makes more sense. Everything is interrelated in the great

InterBeing. Even if it is risky to say that *Sunyata*, InterBeing, corresponds to God in Christianity, we can see similarities with this and the Trinity, where all is about relationships. In classical theology the relations in the Trinity are described as *perichoresis*, co-indwelling, which is also a spiritual source for all Christians and

Christian communities. Thoughts about InterBeing, *perichoresis* and the interconnectedness of everything can serve as strong correctives to individualistic tendencies in our societies today and also help us to become less influenced by these destructive trends.

¹ Katrin Åmell, *Contemplation et dialogue. Quelques exemple de dialogue entre spiritualités après le concile Vatican II*. The Swedish Institute of Missionary Research: Uppsala, 1998.

² Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*. Oneworld Publications: Oxford, 2009.

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Without Christ I Could Not Be a Buddhist: An Evangelical Response to Christian Self-Understanding in a Buddhist Context

Prabo Mihindukulasuriya

I. Introduction

The safe outrigger

In his 1850 account of Christianity in British Ceylon, Sir James Emerson Tennent documents “a curious illustration” of the tendency among Sinhala Buddhists to append formal Christianity to their traditional way of life and thought:

A Singhalese chief came a short time since to the principal of a government seminary in Colombo, desirous to place his son as a pupil of the institution, and agreed, without an instant's hesitation, that the boy should conform to the discipline of the school, which requires the reading of the Scriptures and attendance on the hours of worship and prayer; accounting for his acquiescence by an assurance that he entertained an equal respect for the doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity. “But how can you,” said the Principal, “with your superior education and intelligence, reconcile yourself thus to halt between two opinions, and submit to the inconsistency of professing an equal belief in two conflicting religions?” “Do you see,” replied the subtle chief, laying his hand on the arm of the other, and directing his attention to a canoe, with a large spar as an outrigger, lashed alongside, in which a fisherman was just pushing off upon the lake, “do you see the style of these boats, in which our fishermen always put to sea, and that that spar is almost equivalent to a second canoe, which keeps the first from upsetting? It is precisely so with myself: I add on your religion to steady my own, because I consider Christianity a very safe outrigger to Buddhism.”¹

This exchange is a particularly eloquent local example of a phenomenon that has and always

will accompany the cross-cultural process of Christian evangelization. When considering the opportunity of genuine conversion, the individual or community involved in that process will naturally ask (whether given that option by the evangelist or not) how their former beliefs and practices will relate to this new commitment to Christ. Is there any possibility of holding both old and new commitments together? If so, how? If not, why? The World Council of Churches' consultation on Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism (Colombo, 9-14 December 2009) carried the general consensus that among the many possible configurations of religious identity formation, the option of “dual belonging” (understanding oneself as both Buddhist and Christian at the same time) was the most enlightened. In presenting an evangelical response I shall take the opportunity to focus on the proposition of Buddhist-Christian dual belonging and its underlying presupposition of religious pluralism.² But I will also reflect on the consultation's broader theme of Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism from within my own context of contemporary Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Evangelical evaluative standpoint

Evangelicalism may mean different things to different people. Yet on the issue of self-understanding, the insistence on personal conversion to Christ as a relational commitment over and against any prior “religious” affiliation (even to denominational Christianity) will be broadly acknowledged as an evangelical peculiarity.³ This placing of Christ as the identity-giving center of an individual's life has decisive implications for Christian self-understanding in any context. With regard to self-understanding in relation to persons,

institutions and traditions of other religions, in this instance Buddhism, my evangelical response is, perhaps predictably, one of critical affirmation. I shall explain the tension of my response by describing both its negative and affirmative aspects. The negative part of my response is based on the New Testament claim that an authentically Christian identity can have only one true centre – the Lord Jesus Christ, who draws us into communion with the triune God. To accommodate any other loyalties at the centre effectively constitutes an identity that is something other than Christian. Therefore, I shall critique initially the proposition of religious pluralism, which is almost always assumed as the basis for interfaith discourse. The affirmative part is based on the New Testament's proclamation of Christ's incarnation and resurrection, which together affirm and transcend our encultured humanity and the meanings of their necessarily particular identities. Under Christ's renewing lordship we are then freed and enabled to discover, explore and nurture inherent or adopted identities in order to love our God and neighbours more integrally with our whole selves.

II. Why religious pluralism is a raft that needs to be abandoned

Dual belonging and monocentric pluralism

Before participating in the consultation, I assumed that any proposition of genuine dual belonging would need to posit the soteriological co-centrality of the Buddha and Christ, and would presuppose a polycentric interpretation of religious pluralism. In my reading of Rose Drew's rigorous doctoral thesis *An Exploration of Buddhist Christian Dual Belonging*, I learned that polycentric interpretations fail to provide a coherent theory for the experience of dual belonging.⁴ Drew concludes that monocentric pluralism is necessary despite the reservations of its iconic exponent John Hick on whether dual belonging is strictly possible ("since one cannot reach the summit of a mountain by *simultaneously* walking up paths on different faces of that mountain").⁵ Drew therefore sets

aside a "hard pluralism" that would claim the equal efficacy of two separate "religious traditions" (analogous to two paths up a mountain), and opts instead for a "soft pluralism" which speaks of "the uniqueness of every individual's salvific/liberative journey" in which "a single person employ[s] the insights and methods of more than one religious tradition in order to foster the salvific/liberative transformation," (analogous to two maps of mountain paths from which the climber plots his/her own route). She states that this is possible because, in her view, "...Buddhism and Christianity do not undo each other's work; rather, they are mutually reinforcing and complementary." One may initially comment that this is a radically individualistic interpretation of religious practice, to say nothing of belonging. For such a person will eventually encounter the skepticism of both traditions' mainstream interpreters and faith communities, and find full belonging only in a third community of other such "belongers".⁶

Apophatic theology and the raft analogy

The commonplace appeal to "apophatic" theology as though it were a total admission of God's unknowability, followed by the assertion of "Ultimate Reality" and the way thither as a semantic blank on which an individual is free to assemble an idiosyncratic "mix and match" path is to misconstrue that brilliant insight of Byzantine Christianity. As Maximus the Confessor explained, what was unknowable was the ontological nature of God's being (*divine theology*); which is different from the revealed knowability of his initiatives by which he relates to his creation (*divine economy*), especially in the incarnation and salvation achieved through Christ in history. Furthermore, Gregory Palamas elucidated that "apophatic" theology properly implies that God transcends both positive and negative knowledge. He is not simply "unknowable" but is "beyond the unknowable (*hyperagnotos*)," which is exactly why He had chosen to reveal Himself.⁷

Similarly in the Theravada tradition, the

limitation of language for describing the supramundane (*lokuttara*) by no means precludes the definitive communication of its path and goal. The Buddha categorically reiterated that the “Four Noble Truths” are “real, not unreal and invariable” (*tathâni avitathâni anaññathâni*).⁸

Buddhist analogies such as the “raft simile” or the “finger pointing to the moon” are not admissions of the ultimate inexactitude, relativity or optionality of the *dhamma* as cognitive instruction towards *nibbana*. They only remind the seeker of the *dhamma*’s limited role as mere cognitive instruction (unalterable though it is) because the realization of the goal finally depends on the seeker’s actual practice of it.

As Asanga Tilakaratne clarifies, “Obviously the road-map does not produce the destination. Nevertheless, it is very important to remember that one has to have the road-map until one reaches the destination. It is only at that culminating point that one can get rid of it. Actually, at this point, one naturally loses one’s interest in it.”⁹ Therefore, in Buddhism too, the option of making your own path by amalgamating routes from different maps simply does not exist.

Buddhism and religious pluralism

When I stand within the mainstream of orthodox catholic Christian teaching and profess that the cross of Christ is the only solution to the fallenness of the human condition and that no other solution is as efficacious as the redemptive work of Christ, I am fully conscious of the counter-claim of any knowledgeable Buddhist scholar who will assert with similar conviction that this claim is properly attributable only to the Buddha and his self-discovered path. In his essay *Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism*, Richard Hayes closely examines the oft-repeated claim of the pluralistic openness of the Buddha’s teaching (routinely contrasted with the “narrow exclusivism” of Jesus and/or New Testament writers). He observes that such

proof-texts are merely instances of the Buddha conceding the possibility of attaining lesser goals (union with Brahma, favour with gods and humans, etc.) in contrast to *nibbana* for which his *dhamma* alone showed the way. Hayes cautions that “it would be ideologically anachronistic and intellectually dishonest to try to find anticipations of a now fashionable way of thinking in traditions that evolved in a social and political setting entirely different from that of the present world.”¹⁰ In conclusion, Hayes commends a mutual critique of both (post)modern religious pluralism and ancient Theravada Buddhism:

*It is to be hoped that the recently evolved ideology of religious pluralism will provide a useful challenge to the ideologies found in classical Buddhism and other traditions coming into the modern world from the remote past. It is equally to be hoped that the classical traditions will themselves provide a stimulating challenge to the uncritical acceptance of any new ideologies, including that of religious pluralism.*¹¹

Arguably, most religions (including Christianity) make some provision for what may loosely be termed “inclusivism”. But to profess thoroughgoing pluralism is to posit a completely new religious system altogether. Approaching interfaith dialogue and dual belonging from that basis will predictably evoke the incredulity, even suspicion, of our other-faith neighbours and dialogue partners. Whatever Buddhists feel about what some Christians are doing to their own religion by adopting religious pluralism, they themselves will not accept it as a paradigm into which they will willingly allow the Buddha *dhamma* to be integrated. At least in Sri Lanka, the Buddhist position is clear: the *Dhamma* of the Enlightened One is supremely self-sufficient. It needs neither supplements nor complements.¹² This confidence is expressed by Asanga Tilakaratne writing in the *festschrift* honouring Fr. Aloysius Pieris on his seventieth birthday:

A piecemeal kind of adherence to more than one religion does not make one a follower of

*any religion. Accepting a religion requires one to accept a view of reality unique to that particular religion... It is impossible for one to adhere to more than one paradigm simultaneously. Speaking in the particular context of Buddhism and Christianity, I do not see how one can accept simultaneously the Buddhist world-view informed by the doctrine of Dependent Co-origination and that of Christianity centred around the concept of almighty God. What I think in other words, is that 'core-to-core dialogue' as envisioned by venerable people like Fr. Aloysius Pieris seems to be fraught with serious difficulties.*¹³

The point is that any claim to develop multiple religious belonging on a pluralistic platform is, at best, unconvincing to the thought of mainstream Christianity and Buddhism. At worst, it could be perceived as a novel form of western arrogance asserting the paradigmatic superiority of pluralism over Buddhist ultimacy; paradoxically reminiscent of colonial missionary paternalism.

Sri Lankan Buddhist response

It is most interesting that while 19th century evangelical missionaries grew frustrated by the pragmatic accommodationism of native Ceylonese Buddhists (ever-willing to amalgamate Christianity as a superficial corollary to their existing Buddhist identity, as illustrated by the above narrative), the converse frustration vexed the Theosophists (the pioneer multiple-belongers). The Buddhist leaders of the post-Panadura period apparently showed no positive interest in other religions. *The Old Diary Leaves* of Henry Steele Olcott are strewn with fulminations about the apathy of the Sinhalese towards the eclectic Theosophical agenda. "That is what makes my work so hard among them," he once lamented, "all they care for is the intellectual and moral training of their families," a reference to the establishment of counter-missionary Buddhist schools. "[T]he spiritual is something beyond their grasp."¹⁴ Elsewhere he vented that,

*The Sinhalese are not much given to study... they have no class like that of the Brahmins, who have a hereditary proclivity for philosophical and metaphysical speculation... They neither understand nor wish to understand the contents of other religious systems; and when they speak of themselves as Branches of our Society, it is always with this reservation, that they do their best for Buddhism...*¹⁵

Local leaders of the Buddhist revival grew increasingly suspicious of the generosity and syncretism of their Theosophist sympathizers. The once euphoric partnership eventually ruptured in hostility and recrimination.¹⁶ There is a lesson here. Interfaith dialogue and dual belonging may seem the most obvious (and to some, the only acceptable) responses of Christian liberality towards other faith communities. Well-intentioned though this may be, such overtures will inevitably be perceived as the latest ploy of western Christianity to undermine Buddhism.¹⁷ Having failed to colonize outright, it will be said, the restless agents of Christianity are back; this time on the gunboat of religious pluralism, demanding soteriological free-trade with self-sufficient Buddhism. Buddhist cynicism against these interfaith overtures has been fermenting for many years already. Consequently, they are more respectful of the plain-dealing position of their evangelical "foes" who are more recognizably representative of mainstream Christianity than of the pluralistic "friends" whose self-conceding relativism is perceived as a conciliatory yet unsustainable aberration. So it appears that they would sooner debate with Christians who actually believe in the ultimacy of their own faith than dialogue with those who have somehow conceded that particular self-understanding.¹⁸

Inclusive pluralism and constitutive Christology

The impasse of religious pluralism has been acknowledged by many notable Catholic theologians such as Jacques Dupuis, Claude Geffré and Peter Phan who nevertheless

attribute a salvific role to non-Christian religions. As an alternative they propose an “inclusive pluralism” paradigm which, they claim, holds together both the universality of God’s salvific will (“...who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” 1 Tim. 2.4) and the particularity of God’s salvific act (“For there is one God and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time” vv. 5-6). “Inclusive pluralism” is presented as a revised “Christo-centric” model which affirms both the irreducibly distinct soteriologies of different religions and the soteriological uniqueness of Christ as claimed by Christianity. The contradiction of this double affirmation finds resolution, these theologians claim, by expanding the “normative Christology” of official Catholic teaching to a “constitutive Christology” which will now encompass the wider dynamics previously performed by the theo-centrism of the classic pluralist model. Here there is a fall-back on the patristic “Logos” Christology which postulates the revelatory “seeds” and “shafts of light” of pre-Christian philosophies. The declared motive behind the “inclusive pluralism” alternative is to give the proposed salvific role of other faiths a better grounding in established Roman Catholic theology. Its conclusion: that it was God’s intention from the beginning that there should be multiple paths to salvation, although those paths were all “expressions of the Spirit of Christ ever at work in history and in human hearts” which were not exhausted by the Incarnation.¹⁹

In addition to an exegetical problem involving the patristic interpretation of the Johannine Prologue to which the “*logos spermatikos*” theory is attached,²⁰ the difficulties inherent in the “constitutive Christology” modification arise as soon as the respective roles of “Christ”, “the Church” and “Christianity” begin to be delineated. For instance, when Geffré cautions against the “logic of absolutization” which places “the universality of Christ on the same plane as that of the Church or Christianity”²¹ my evangelical response would be to agree on the

relative disjunction between Christ and the Church, but not on that between Christ and Christianity. This is because, as stated at the beginning, the evangelical confession is that Christianity *is* Christ, and that whatever historical-cultural form the world’s Christianities have taken and will take in the future are all equally validated and authenticated on the extent to which they demonstrate commitment to the transforming lordship of Christ, crucified and risen. Therefore, when Geffré states that “After twenty centuries, no Christianity in history can claim to incarnate the essence of Christianity as a religion of the complete and definitive revelation of the mystery of God,”²² my evangelical impulse is to ask why an attempt to reduce (let alone incarnate) such an abstraction as “the *essence* of Christianity as a religion” was undertaken in the first place. And, again, when he states that “It is by insisting on the very paradox of the incarnation, that is, the union of the absolutely universal and the absolutely concrete, that one is in a position to de-absolutize Christianity as a historic religion and to verify its dialogical nature,”²³ I am impelled to point out that this paradox would lead one to “de-absolutize Christianity as a historic religion” only because one has constructively dismissed the “strong expression” of Colossians 2.6 (that “the fullness of the divinity dwelled in him, bodily”), as Geffré does, with the *non sequitur* that “this identification itself sends us back to the inaccessible mystery of God who eludes all identification.”²⁴ If all that the incarnation ultimately signifies is that God is “inaccessibly mystery” and “eludes all identification” what was the point of it anyway? Rather, is not the paradox of the incarnation quite the opposite: that although God is indeed mystery and eludes all (human attempts at) identification, he nevertheless made himself known to us in the particularly encultured humanity of Jesus of Nazareth? Indeed, Christ’s very cultural particularity is universal *paradigmatically* (just as Israel’s was meant to be for the other nations).²⁵ By demonstrating how He lived in the relative context of *his own culture*, Christ modeled how his disciples must live in the

diverse contexts of *their own cultures* as they enter into deeper relationship with him and do his will.

So, this then is the question: What does it mean to be Christian in a Buddhist context? To answer it, we first need to clarify some confusions.

III. Some clarifications

1. *The syncretism bugaboo*

The religion/culture distinction which underlies the syncretism/contextualization (or inculturation) disjunction is not always helpful for discerning what authentic faith and practice looks like in a new situation. As has been often stated, although “religion” and “culture” may be said to exist as spheres, their complex interplay makes it virtually impossible to extricate one from another. Perhaps it would be easier to talk about “worldviews” (internal perceptions) and “lifeways” (external behaviours); and state that conversion transforms both. Certainly, one’s worldview itself may determine what is “religious” or “cultural”. Secular people who have no religious commitment will still want to have a church wedding, circumcise or baptize their children, celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas simply as cultural activities with no religious intentions at all. Whereas in a premodern society this would simply be inconceivable and routine practices such as opening shop, starting a bus journey, bathing, eating, exercise or taking medicine will be couched in some spiritual signification. Geffré states that:

...[E]specially in Asia, Christianity is confronted with a complex whole in which the cultural and the religious elements are inextricably intertwined. One should thus avoid the illusion that it would be possible to make a clear distinction between the cultural values that might be kept and the specifically religious elements that would need to be discarded. The work of Aufhebung (destruction-assumption) must manifest itself with regard to this cultural-

religious universe in a way that the leaven of the gospel gives rise to a new historical image and form of Christianity [i.e. specific to the context of that Asian culture].²⁶

New Testament examples may be ethically illustrative here. We may see Peter’s refusal to continue table fellowship with the Antiochene Gentiles as a “cultural” choice (to accommodate the strong sensibilities of the Judaizers), since eating a communal meal is not strictly a “religious” activity for us. Yet Paul rebukes Peter’s hypocrisy as a ‘spiritual’ violation (“not acting in line with the truth of the gospel,” Gal. 2.14). For us, Peter’s choice was “contextual”, though Paul rebukes it as “syncretistic”. On the other hand, Paul attributes to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17.23) descriptions that explicitly refer to the pagan god Zeus.²⁷ This would be for us “syncretistic” as the quotations are clearly from pagan religious hymns, but for Paul it was “contextual” (“some of your own poets have said,” Acts 17.28) because the theological statements were true, regardless of its original usage, when attributed to the One he was now proclaiming. The point is that “spiritual” or “cultural”, they are both legitimate resources if they can be unambiguously re-oriented towards the worship of Christ and the service of his kingdom. Just as missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert called for “critical contextualization” in the gospel’s engagement with culture,²⁸ so there must also be “critical syncretism” in its engagement with religions.

2. *The image problem*

When contemplating our Christian self-understanding in relation to Buddhism we face the double dangers of conformity and rejection. On one hand, we can become so self-conscious and apologetic about our Christian “otherness” *vis-à-vis* the Buddhist community that our identity becomes a liability, even a source of self-loathing. Some Christians feel compelled to erase any outward marks of Christianity that might possibly cause offence, and conform to Buddhist conventions so as to seek inclusion and approval by the majority community. On the

other hand, we can become so self-conscious and assertive of our “otherness” that we try at every opportunity to contrast ourselves by reflexively rejecting anything associated with Buddhism. Both these tendencies are reactionary and false to our true identity. There is an intrinsic difference about authentic discipleship that can neither be hidden nor brandished. The metaphors of salt and light (Matt. 5.13-16) are often misinterpreted by those who argue that Christian identity must necessarily be dissolved and diffused in order to enhance the condition of their contexts. The plain intent of the metaphors is quite the opposite, for it calls for the perseverance of its demonstrative qualities: “if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything... In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”, vv. 13, 16). We must be true to who we are (identity), if we are to be useful to others (mission). However, as we are soberly forewarned, to some we will be “the fragrance of life,” but to others who have it on their agenda to deny us any acknowledgement no matter what we do, we will always be “the smell of death” (2 Cor. 2.16). This is because the Cross of Christ is intrinsically a “stumbling block” to all religions and ideologies which encounter its “intolerant” and “incoherent” claims (cf. 1 Cor. 1.23). To attempt to erase that offensiveness is to miss the point entirely. Therefore, learning to obey and worship Christ in contextually meaningful ways must never be done in order to seek the approval or permission of those who resent our distinctiveness. It must be done for the sake of our own integrity as contextualized disciples, regardless of whether the self-appointed “authorities” of our cultural-religious milieu endorse us or not.

3. The question of authenticity

Generally speaking, Western Christians and Asian Christians have different experiences of Buddhism in its many forms. For Western Christians seeking a spiritual supplement or alternative, Buddhism is one among a growing

number of choices (e.g. Native American spirituality, Wicca, New Age, guru-centered Hindu movements, Scientology, etc.). Asian Christians have a different historical and cultural experience of Buddhism, often more ambivalent than that of Westerners who are, arguably, exposed to a type of “therapeutic” Buddhism. Westerners are also exposed to many more varieties of Buddhism while their Asian counterparts are typically acquainted with one dominant local form. What must be emphasized is that Asian Christians must work out their own response to the Buddhist realities around them without feeling in any way pressured to conform to Western interpretations of it experienced elsewhere. Otherwise, we are back to square one; not only having been taught by the West how to be Christian, but now, also to be taught how to be Christian in relation to Buddhism! Similarly, Western explorations of Buddhism (with its application of Christian and other insights) must continue on its own path, and continue to yield fresh scholarly, devotional and ethical results. The difference of perspective engendered by these two experiences within the global Christian community can potentially be most instructive, sobering and encouraging.

4. The light of Logos Christology

As mentioned earlier, some clarification is required about “Logos Christology”. The text that “There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” or “There was the true light which enlightens every person coming into the world” (John 1.9) has often been interpreted to mean that in some mysterious way, the pre-incarnate Christ has been imparting salvific wisdom to every human being; and furthermore, has been doing this through non-Christian religions and philosophies through the ages in all cultures. This was certainly the interpretation of the early Christian apologists Justin and Clement of Alexandria. But this interpretation is more influenced by the Hellenistic concept of *logos spermatikos* (the ‘seed’ of salvific wisdom) of Middle Platonism than a close reading of the Fourth Evangelist.

The key question is: In what way does the text mean that the Light “enlightens” everyone? The word *phôtizei* could mean “to shed light upon” (its primary lexical sense) or “to illuminate inwardly” (a secondary derivative meaning), or even, as John is wont to do, both senses together. As with all the other themes introduced in the Johannine Prologue that are further expanded in the subsequent narrative, the theme of “the true Light” is picked up again in John 3.19-21, where the specific Johannine nuance of “enlightens” is helpfully elucidated:

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

In the context of Johannine Christology, the stated action of the light on persons is that their deeds are “exposed” (Gk. *elengchthe*) and “manifested” (*phanerôthei*), demonstrating the primary sense of “shedding light upon” rather than some sort of inner spiritual or intellectual enlightenment. This leads to the further question: Who is the one “who practices the truth” (an apparent semitism for “acting faithfully” or “honourably”)? The decisive role of Christ in the existential human engagement with good and evil is the exposing of the human heart. As they are encountered by God’s provision of Christ, both the wicked and the righteous may (in the derivative sense of “inner enlightenment” now), awaken to the innermost true motivations of their lives. What has our spirituality, religiosity, morality and humanitarianism really been about? Have they been tragic forms of self-centeredness? To the genuine “practitioner of truth” Christ would make perfect sense. For those who are penitently aware of their own moral inadequacy before a righteous God will never cease to act righteously and sink into despair and cynicism. Rather, they will strive the harder to please God more truthfully. And when they hear the gospel

of God’s reconciliation in Christ, they will readily recognize that he alone has always been the true source of their goodness, and seek refuge in his grace (cf. 18.37b).

IV. Theological Reflections

Having cleared the ground of the more pesky issues that obstruct our task, we may now seek to build a biblical basis that can nurture and sustain our theological exploration.

1. What is “salvific” for God?

The inner response of any human being desirous of receiving God’s salvation is *repentant faith* in God’s grace. This disposition of repentant self-surrender to the justice and mercy of God is authenticated by a life of faithful loyalty to him and the extension of that same justice and mercy towards one’s fellow creatures. This “salvific” disposition is consistently revealed in both Testaments as God’s basic requirement (eg. Gen. 15.6; 18.25; Deut. 23.7; Ps. 51; Prov. 12.10; 1 Sam. 15.22; Mic. 6.8; Jer. 22.16; Matt. 5.1-12; 7.21-23; 18.23-35; Rom. 2.1-16, 26-29; 1 Cor.. 13.1-3; 1 John 3.17; 4.20; James 1.27, etc). Concluding his incisive critique of the pluralistic theologies of three major fellow Asian theologians, Vinoth Ramachandra lays bare this simple truth, which turns our conventional grandiose sentiments about world religions on its head.

The cross... tells us that it is not the “good Christian” or the “sincere Hindu” or the “devout Buddhist” or the “men and women of good will” who are assured places in the kingdom of God. But, rather, that it is the bad Christian, the bad Hindu, the bad Buddhist – those who know themselves to be moral failures, that they have fallen hopelessly short of the kind of life they know (in their better moments) they should be living – it is these who are closer to the kingdom of God. This can be so precisely because salvation is through grace, mediated in the cross of Christ, received by faith. From the perspective of the cross, then, it appears that there are only two kinds of human being: those

who, accepting their wretchedness, lift their eyes to God for mercy; and those who, seeking to establish their own identity, spurn God's mercy and look down on others (cf. Luke 18.9-14). True humanness, as Irenaeus reminded us, is salvation, and it can be received only as gift.²⁹

What Ramachandra has done here is to simply apply universally the contrastive attitudes of religious self-understanding (exemplified by the Tax Collector and Pharisee) which existed in the Palestinian milieu of Jesus' day. The relevance of this story to human salvation is denoted by Jesus' pronouncement: "I tell you, this man went to his house justified" (Gk. *dedikaiômenos*; from *dikaiô*, righteous) – an almost-technical term for salvation.

To the extent that a religious tradition presents God as holy, just, caring for his creatures and worthy of our worship; to the extent that it lays bare our sheer moral self-inadequacy; to the extent that it urges us to place our hope and yearning for forgiveness and acceptance in a righteousness and gracious God; to the extent that it fosters confidence that such a God will decisively intervene to defeat evil and its painful manifestations; and to the extent that it exhorts us to reverently and responsively imitate God's righteousness and mercy in our dealings with one another and the world around us, that tradition may, as best as we can understand from the Bible, be said to lead us on the path on which salvation comes to us (cf. Luke 15.18-20; Acts 17.27). To the extent that a religious tradition (even some forms of "Christianity") that moves us in an opposite direction, again according to what we learn from the Bible, may be said to lead us farther into idolatry, destruction and alienation from God.

In relation to Buddhism, Lynn de Silva observed that the doctrine of *anatta* must necessarily lead to dependence on God rather than to self-effort.

For, Buddhism while it denies the soul, affirms that man has an intrinsic power by which he can save himself. To assert that man has within himself an intrinsic power to transcend

conditioned existence is, from the Christian point of view, to deny the full import of anatta...Christianity can take the meaning of anatta in all its seriousness denying any form of intrinsic power in man – be it karmic force, power of mind or vinnana or continuing memory – by which man can save himself.³⁰

The Gospel takes self-denial to the truest extent because it looks to God's gracious mercy rather than to the self at the critical moment of liberation.

2. Why is Christ 'central'?

Without rehearsing the entire biblical theology of salvation here, it may be pertinent simply to attend some aspects of it that are directly relevant to the discussion of other faiths. The place of Christ in Christian soteriology can hardly be understood outside the biblical narrative. Christ is central to salvation history because he spans the entirety of history from beginning to end. He is the giver of all life at creation and its sanctifier at the consummation. The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are meaningful only in connection to the entire biblical narrative of the earth, humankind, Israel and the nations. Salvation is about understanding our humanness in a particular way – the way shaped by the biblical narrative. We are God's creatures, his children, we are broken by our autonomous disparagement of our relationship with God, we need to be healed. Jesus comes not only to teach us to be better persons, but to begin healing our brokenness on a deeper level, a level we have no control over, let alone an understanding. Christ's redemptive work on the cross is properly called "mystery" not because its salvific achievement is incomprehensible, but because its totality cannot be reduced to a definitive formula by exhaustively interpreting its aspectual and analogical images. Incidentally, the plurality of these soteriological metaphors has been one reason why the cross-cultural transmission of the Gospel is possible. Consequently, it is also the reason why new Christologies are possible from within the

conceptual frameworks of all human cultures.

But the Bible never gives any indication that intermediate salvific interventions have been made through other religious traditions. Universal redemption is promised and longingly awaited. The theme of God's waiting for the right time in universal history, the waiting of his people, the waiting of the nations, and the waiting of reation itself for God to act redemptively pervades the Bible (eg. Ps. 22.27-28; 130; Isa. 51.1-6; 64.4; Zeph. 3.7-10; Mal. 3.1; Luke 2.25; Rom. 8.22; 16.25-27; Eph. 1.9-10; 3.4-11; Col. 1.26-27, etc.). The notion that God has made "salvific" provisions independent of his covenant mediation with Israel is simply absent. Furthermore, the salvation of the nations is never anticipated independently of Israel's own salvation. The nations are always envisaged as being united with the faithful remnant of Israel in their redemption (eg. Ps. 67.1-3; 102; Isa. 2; 19.20-25; 56; 60; Zech. 2.10-11; John 10.16; Rom. 11, Gal. 3.27-29, Eph. 2. 11-13, etc.).

3. Did God "provide" other faith traditions?

The clearest biblical teaching on the role of other spiritual/religious traditions in salvation history may be found in Gal. 4. 8-9 and Col. 2.8, 20-23. The term Paul uses for these traditions is *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (lit. "the basic elements or principles of the world"), a term which evidently encompassed pagan deity-veneration, ascetic ethics and the spirituality that held them together. In both epistles Paul addresses Christians of Jewish and other ethno-religious backgrounds who sought to supplement their salvation in Christ by re-submitting to codes of spiritual veneration and ascetic discipline as *salvific practices* (cf. Col. 2.20-23). Several insights may be gained from the apostolic teaching that follows.

Firstly, the "basic principles" functioned among the nations in a comparable (yet not identical)³¹ manner as the Torah did within Israel. This goes beyond the affirmation of mere individual "conscience" in the Gentile context (Rom. 2.14-

16). Paul here recognizes the external "traditions" in Gentile cultures (Col. 2.8; 20-22) as the ethical counterpart to the function of the Torah in Israel's context.

Secondly, personification of the "basic principles" as "guardians" (*epitropoi*) and "managers" (*oikonomoi*) (Gal. 4.2), parallel to the Torah's role as Israel's "supervisory guardian" (*paidagōgos*, Gal. 3.24-25), is a relatively constructive assessment. The "basic principles" are therefore seen to have exercised a custodial function over human societies: positively, by inculcating ethical virtue, spiritual piety, existential wisdom, and community bonding; and negatively, by restraining, to an extent, humanity's propensity for collective evil.

Thirdly, there is a contingent providentiality about these roles. The nations are said to have been "held in bondage under" the "basic principles" (4.3), as Israel was "under the Torah" (v. 5), "until the date set by the father" (v. 2). Within this allegory, the work of the many "guardians and managers" makes sense only in relation to the purpose that the father has for the children. Yet the role of the "basic principles" is never implied to be independently "salvific". They are "moralistic". It is here that the ambivalence of Paul's characterization of the "basic principles" makes sense.

Fourthly, it is only in relation to the full freedom and inheritance of mature sonship that Christ brings that the "basic principles" are called "weak and poor" (v. 9), just as the Torah would be found to be "weak" (Rom. 8.3) if one misused it as a tool for self-liberation. Indeed, such an attempt would be a pitiful self-enslavement (Gal. 4.9; Col. 2.23). Is it not interesting that the Buddha too rejected the "basic principles" of dependence on *devas* (deities) and extreme asceticism as paths to *nibbana* as part of his own "basic principles"?

The "guardian"/"father" inter-relationship is directly relevant to Christian self-understanding in response to the emotive Buddhist accusation that Sinhalese who convert to Christianity are

thereby “forgetting mother and father” (i.e. their native Buddhist patrimony). In traditional story motif, young princes entrusted to the temporary tutelage of renowned sage learn to honour and care for their *guru piyano* (lit. teacher-father) as their own father. Once they have completed their education, the princes are gloriously reunited with their true *raja piyano* (lit. king-father) who embraces them back into the royal household, assigning them their duties and privileges. The prince never loses his esteem and gratitude for his *guru piyano*; neither is he confused about whose son he really is. Likewise, those of us who have been blessed with a Buddhist heritage and understand in retrospect that it was God who placed the culture of our ancestors under its formative “basic principles”, will never despise or disparage its exceptionally rich ethical, cultural and intellectual endowment. If the Greek and Latin Fathers could express gratitude to God for the wealth of their pagan heritage,³² Christians of Buddhist culture can celebrate with at least as much enthusiasm. For surely, the discerning enjoyment of the wealth of Buddhism is part of the “all things” for which Christ has matured and entitled us (cf. Gal.4.1, 7).

4. What does it mean to be “Christian”?

The NT understanding of conversion has always presented a challenge to the cross-cultural missionary experience of the church. The challenge for the Jewish Christians among the Greeks was “Must one be a Jew in order to be a Christian?” The challenge for Bonhoeffer among the secular moderns was “Must one become religious in order to become a Christian?” The challenge for Panikkar in the Indian milieu was “Must one be spiritually a Semite and intellectually a Greek to be a Christian?” Paul’s answer to the Corinthians was emphatic: “[A]s the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk... Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called... each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called” (1 Cor. 7.17, 20, 24).

For genuine conversion is not an abandonment of one identity for another, but the radical re-orientation of the original identity towards Christ. The examples cited by Paul, of circumcision/uncircumcision (ethno-religious belonging), slave/free citizen (socio-political status) and married/single (family situation), are all equally valid identities. The critical factor is the *intra-identity* transformation that must take place with Christ as its new centre (cf. Gal. 5.6; Col. 3.8-12). This is a radically new Christ-centred *way of being* what one has always been. This is why Christianity infuses indigenous cultures and languages rather than replacing them with sacred languages, dress codes, dietary laws and normative philosophical templates.³³

But what about religious identity? Is intra-identity conversion possible in terms of a person’s religious affiliation? In other words, if one can be a Sinhalese or Tamil *Christianly*, can one also be a Buddhist *Christianly*? This is possible because of what Geffré calls “the originality of Christianity as a religion.”³⁴ As he helpfully reminds us,

*...Jesus did not found a new religion, if by religion we mean a system of doctrinal propositions, symbolic representations, a whole of rituals, a catalogue of prescriptions, and a program of determined behavior. Christian life is not determined a priori. It exists wherever the Spirit of Christ gives birth to a new being in the individual and collective person.*³⁵

For genuine conversion to take place, a person’s initial religious worldview and practices must be taken very seriously. For former worldview conceptions do not simply disappear upon formal conversion. If they are not meaningfully reinterpreted, former beliefs will subsist in an unintegrated and compartmentalized form that is not conducive to a holistic way of life. That is what constitutes *bad* syncretism. To help fellow American converts assimilate their new Buddhist worldview scholar Clark Strand reportedly “leads a Buddhist Bible Study group in

Woodstock, where converts re-read the Bible of their childhood – this time through Buddhist eyes.”³⁶ Likewise, re-reading familiar Buddhist religious-cultural ‘texts’ (literary and otherwise) from a biblical perspective will be an ideal way to integrate a well situated Christian worldview. Some practical implications of the process of being Buddhist *Christianly* are suggested below.

5. Can a Christian “add on” another faith tradition?

It is one thing to critically integrate the religious element of one’s pre-Christian background in the process of conversion and discipleship. But can the voluntary “adoption” of a subsequent religious identity be an authentic option for a Christian? In his examination of the rise of Neo-paganism in Europe in recent years, Christian philosopher and environmental activist Loren Wilkinson came to the conclusion that *Neo-paganism...is an attempt to recover an aspect of being human that is central to the gospel but is often obscured—that is, we cannot be fully human until our restored relationship with the Creator results in a restored relationship not only with other men and women but also with the rest of creation, which is seen and accepted as a divine gift.*³⁷

This acknowledgement is helpful for addressing our question about the possibility of “adopting” Buddhism in the service of recovering a fuller, more holistically biblical spirituality in the West. Western Christianity has suffered successive reductionisms at the hands of Scholasticism, Protestantism, Liberalism and Fundamentalism which have bled the ancient Spirit-filled faith of its earthy vitality and cultural expression. It is quite understandable therefore that the spiritual and aesthetic hunger created by the pseudo-humanism of secular modernity will make seekers look outside the western tradition, including the anaemic Christianity with which it is closely associated. Therefore, certain insights and practices of Buddhist philosophy and spirituality may well be ways of recovering the creational interconnectedness which suffuses

biblical spirituality. Again, Geffré explains this instrumental relating of traditions well:

The originality of Christian salvation in Jesus Christ must be shown as liberation from sin and death and especially as gift of eternal life which has already begun. But at the same time, a greater familiarity with the other religious traditions, especially those of the East, put us on our guard against a conception too exclusively polarized on salvation as liberation from sin. In terms of the confused expectation of our contemporaries, it is important to spell out better all the virtualities of Christian salvation, not only as reconciliation with God, but as healing of the affliction of the human condition and as life wisdom, that is, as reconciliation with oneself and with all creation.

*In short, the point is not to complete the Christian message with positive elements displayed by other religious traditions but to open oneself up to a mutual fertilization that leads to a better deciphering of the resources hidden in the revelation that has been gratuitously entrusted to us by God.*³⁸

V. Conclusion: The Need for Mindfulness

So, yes, it is possible from an evangelical perspective to endorse the proposition of “dual belonging” because that is what genuine conversion and discipleship must be anyway. In fact, truly integrative dual belonging can only take place within an evangelical conviction that the centrality and ultimacy of Christ makes the reconciliation of all things possible. Yet honest caution is required. Close attention to the spiritual narratives of dual belongsers reveals that difficulties of achieving parity between two traditions is not confined to their cognitive “coinherence” (as coined by Roger Corless) but, perhaps more so, to the very experiential harmony that they set out to seek in the first place. One system of belief will inevitably emerge as the integrative matrix over time. As Gideon Goosen insightfully observes:

The psychology of conversion showed us that the process of integration followed by

*disintegration and then a new integration is normal in human development. There is an inbuilt human need to integrate after a stage of change, growth and disintegration. This applies to intellectual pursuits in general as well as to religious beliefs. I believe that Corless is fighting that inbuilt need to keep his two commitments to Christianity and Buddhism equal and separate. This could be the source of his confusion and extreme tension, and the reason why this category is not common.*³⁹

It is therefore imperative that disciples espousing dual belonging be mindful of their cognitive, affective and conative processes of spiritual-ethical formation. In his much anticipated spiritual autobiography Paul Knitter works out for himself the inter-relationship between the Buddhist and Christian elements of his religious identity over the years. Although

I do not agree with some of Knitter's interpretations of Christian and Buddhist ideas, I do discern an authentic voice in his narrative. Towards the end of his narrative Knitter explains what he means by the book's title, *Without the Buddha I Cannot be a Christian*, with which I wish to conclude:

*As I believe this book makes clear, my core identity as a Christian has been profoundly influenced by my passing over to Buddhism. Even though my primary allegiance is to Christ and the gospel, my Christian experience and beliefs have not dominated nor always had to trump what I learned or experienced through Buddha. There have been many instances in this book where I have recognized, often with great relief, that Buddhism can offer us Christians a deeper insight, a clearer truth. And yet, at the end of the day, I go home to Jesus.*⁴⁰

¹ *Christianity in Ceylon* London: John Murray, 1850; Reprint: New Delhi: Asian Education Service, 1998, pp.240-41 (original italicization). See also the preceding extract from Methodist missionary scholar Rev. D.J. Gogerly entitled 'Theory which reconciles the Buddhists to profess two religions' (240).

² For a recent evangelical response helpfully outlining the main issues raised by 'dual belonging' please read Kang-San Tan, 'Dual Belonging: A Missiological Critique and Appreciation from an Asian Evangelical Perspective,' *Mission Studies*, 27 (2010), 1-15. I am very grateful to Dr. Tan for providing me his article.

³ Bebbington uses the term "Conversionism" to describe this evangelical hallmark. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp.2-17.

⁴ See the critiques of polycentric pluralism as argued by Roger Corless and Process Theology in Rose Drew, *An Exploration of Buddhist Christian Dual Belonging* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2008), pp.47-55. I am extremely grateful to Dr. Rose Drew for making this document available to me.

⁵ For Hick's reservations see Drew, *An Exploration*, pp. 167-68 (emphasis added).

⁶ What then is the difference between this choice of religious practice and that of millions of South Asians, say, who routinely observe an admixture of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and folk religion? The difference is precisely one of self-identity. One confessionally 'belongs' only to one faith community, even though in practice one might 'reach into' (if not "passing over and passing back to" in Dunne's sense) the beliefs and rituals of other traditions. Still, such syncretisms are always open to the periodic correction of each tradition's reformers and revivalists who have only to re-present the tradition's orthodoxy and orthopraxy by appealing to its authoritative sources. This is the positive function of fundamentalism without which genuine diversity may not survive over the long term.

⁷ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 31, 265.

⁸ Quoted in Asanga Tilakaratne, *Nirvana and Ineffability: A Study of the Buddhist Theory of Reality and Language*, Kelaniya: The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, 1993, p. 95.

⁹ Tilakaratne, *Nirvana and Ineffability*, 102 (86-108).

¹⁰ Richard P. Hayes, 'Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism', *Journal of Religious Pluralism*, 1 (1991), p. 96.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Even in the period of Buddhist “openness” to Christianity in early 19th century Ceylon (well documented by Elizabeth Harris, ‘Double Belonging in Sri Lanka: Illusion or Liberating Path?’ in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002, pp. 76-92), the accommodation was clearly conditional: “If, therefore, the supremacy of Buddha (*sic.*) and the absolute perfection of his system were conceded, they saw nothing inconsistent in respecting both systems, – Buddhism as the perfection of wisdom and virtue; Christianity as an approximation to it, though mingled with many errors” (See fn. 1, above).

¹³ Asanga Tilakaratne, ‘Aloysius Pieris s.j. on ‘Inter-religious Dialogue and the Problem of Truth in Religion: A Buddhist Perspective’, *Encounters with the Word*, eds. Robert Cruz, Marshal Fernando, Asanga Tilakaratne, Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, 2004, pp. 395-6. Tilakaratne is assistant editor of *Dialogue* and currently Professor of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Colombo.

¹⁴ Henry Steele Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, Vol. IV, (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1931), 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 216-17.

¹⁶ See Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 250-55; and Susantha Goonatilake, ‘Panadura Vaadaya and Its Consequences: Mischievous Association with Fundamentalism,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, NS Vol. XLIX (2004), pp. 98-101.

¹⁷ These sentiments are characteristically expressed by Kamalika Pieris, a lay Buddhist and regular commentator on Buddhist-Christian issues in Sri Lanka: “...[I]t has been suggested that [there is] an attempt to metamorphose Christianity into a quasi Buddhist appearance by using orange robes and Buddhist ‘ideas’. This, it is suggested is intended to blur the distinction between Christianity and Buddhism, so that a person could be persuaded to move from one to the other without much trauma. There is now an attempt to present Christ as an Asian, on the ground that he was born in West Asia. The Pope [John Paul II] stated in India that Jesus Christ, took flesh as an Asian. This is to make Christianity acceptable to the Asians. The emphasis on inter-religious dialogue is also a part of this transition. Dialogue is fast becoming the common mode of action for the Asian church. It was useful for transmitting the message.” ‘Christian conversion in Buddhist Sri Lanka’ (newspaper article), *The Island*, March 8, 2000.

¹⁸ The above cited article (fn.7) by Susantha Goonatilake concludes with the call, “...[O]pen and public debates like the Panadura Vaadaya should now be restarted.” (109). Similarly, Kamalika Pieris proposes that “The second Panadura Vaadaya will have to return to the theme of the first Panadura Vaadaya – Christian conversions. It will have to examine the place of Christianity in the modern world.” ‘The Need for a Second Panadura Vaadaya: Buddhism as State Religion’, *Lankaweb*, 19/04/2005, <http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items05/190405-3.html> (accessed 24/06/2010).

¹⁹ Claude Geffré, O.P., ‘From the Theology of Religious Pluralism to an Interreligious Theology’ in Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (eds.), *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honour of Jacques Dupuis*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003, p. 54.

²⁰ See section III.4 (below).

²¹ Geffré, ‘From the Theology of Religious Pluralism to...’, 53.

²² *Ibid.*, 54.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵ See Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004, pp. 52-68.

²⁶ ‘Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion’ in Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions*, 98.

²⁷ Minos addressing Zeus declares, “For in thee we live and move and have our being” (Epimenides, *Cretica*); “Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken./For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus./Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity./Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus./For we are indeed his offspring...” (Aratus, *Phaenomena* 1-5).

²⁸ ‘Critical Contextualization,’ *Missiology* 12 (July 1984), pp. 287-96.

²⁹ *Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996, p. 267.

³⁰ ‘Anatta and God’, *Dialogue* (NS), Vol. 2. No. 3 (Nov-Dec 1975), p. 108.

³¹ As the gift of divine revelation the Torah was intrinsically superior to the traditions of the Gentiles in Paul’s thought (cf. Rom. 2.20; 3.31; 7.7, 12; 9.4).

³² For the assessments of Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Augustine of their own philosophical tradition, see Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 4-6.

³³ In Sri Lanka, Christians are the only community that can celebrate their entire religious service in Sinhala or Tamil without the use of a foreign language.

³⁴ 'Double Belonging and the Originality of Christianity as a Religion', 102.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Stuart Laidlaw, 'Awaiting the Dalai Lama' (newspaper article), *Toronto Sun*, October 28, 2007.

³⁷ In John G. Stackhouse (ed.), *What Does It Mean to be Saved: Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, Baker Academic, 2002, p. 154.

³⁸ 'From the Theology of Religious Pluralism to ...', 57.

³⁹ 'Towards a Theory of Dual Belonging' in John O'Grady and Peter Scherle (eds) *Ecumenics from the Rim: Explorations in honour of John D'Arcy May*, Berlin LIT Verlag, 2007, p. 244.

⁴⁰ Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, Oxford: One World, 2009, p.215. I am very grateful to Dr Shanta Premawardena for introducing me to this book.

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“Show Me Your Resurrection”

Prof. David Eckel

The following essay was initially prepared for a recent symposium at Boston College on “Inter-Religious Hermeneutics” (September 25-27, 2009). In this essay I have commented on a distinctive cross-cultural challenge: how to preach the gospel while being informed by the Buddhist tradition. This is a challenge that I face as a scholar of Buddhism and a Christian priest whenever I enter the pulpit in my Boston congregation. I hope these observations will be helpful to our discussion in Colombo. You will see that I have worked mainly within the tradition of Mahāyāna philosophy, leading from Nāgārjuna to Zen. In my introductory remarks at our own consultation in Colombo, I will relate this essay more explicitly to the Theravāda Buddhist concerns that I imagine will be the major focus of our discussion.

In one of his last sustained reflections on the relationship of theology and comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith tells a story about cross-cultural religious influence. The story begins with the figure of Leo Tolstoy, aspiring to leave his life as member of the landed gentry and take up the life of a wandering ascetic. Tolstoy said goodbye to his family and friends with the understanding that he had made a radical turn toward an ascetic ideal. Sadly for Tolstoy and perhaps also for us, he made it only as far as the platform in the local railway station before passing away. Smith points out that Tolstoy’s decision was not an isolated act by an old man who had grown weary of life.¹ It was related to an ascetical model in Russian Christianity that Tolstoy knew well and had come to admire. This model was based on the life of a saint whose name in the Western tradition is Josaphat. According to the legend, Josaphat gave up his life as a prince, became a wandering mendicant, and achieved recognition as a saint. Tolstoy was aware of his impending death and wanted to prepare for it in the style of Josaphat. Who was Josaphat? It is

now well known among historians of religion that the story of Josaphat is the result of complex, multi-stage process of religious borrowing. The Greek (and Russian) tradition received it from the Georgians (“the Christian nation of the East”), who received it from an Arabic source. The Arab tradition had received it from Manichees in Central Asia, and the Manichees had received it from Buddhist monks. As the story traveled across cultures and the saint’s name was transcribed from one script to another, the original “bodhisattva” became “Bodisaf” (Manichee), “Yudasaf” (Arabic), “Iodasaph” (Georgian), and finally “Ioasaph” (Greek) and “Josaphat” (Latin). Tolstoy’s saint was a Russian version of an Arab version of a Manichean version of the *bodhisattva*, or future Buddha. To borrow the words of this symposium, Tolstoy was engaging in a complex act of inter-religious hermeneutics. He was interpreting the life story of the Buddha by putting it into action, without having any reason to know that it originated in a tradition very different from his own.

The story gets even more complicated when it enters the next stage of its development. After he finished his education in England, Mohandas Gandhi went to South Africa to practice as a lawyer. When he experienced the ethnic and racial discrimination of South African society, he began to develop new strategies for social and political action. One of his strategies was to create an ascetical community named Tolstoy Farm, modeled on the principled asceticism that Gandhi so much admired in Tolstoy’s writings. This ascetical ideal translated naturally into the next phase of Gandhi’s work, when he returned to India and applied the political strategy that he called *satyagraha*, often translated as “passive resistance” or simply “truth-force.” Could it be that Gandhi understood the significance of Tolstoy’s ideal because he had a visceral understanding of its origin in India? Certainly it

involved an idiom of ascetical practice that was immediately recognizable to his Indian contemporaries: it was modern, engaged, and strongly political, and yet it was rooted in one of the most ancient narrative patterns of the Indian tradition. The future-Buddha had returned to his homeland in the guise of an ascetical, dhoti-clad, British-educated political activist. And this, too, is just a stage in the process of cross-cultural religious interpretation. Martin Luther King, Jr. blended Gandhi's model of passive resistance with a religious ideal shaped equally by the figure of Moses and the teaching of the Hebrew prophets to give religious form to the American civil rights movement. Does this mean that Martin Luther King, Jr. was in some sense a "Buddhist"? If so, to what degree? And was his appropriation of the *bodhisattva* ideal in any sense "authentic"? Or is there a statute of limitations in religious borrowing? Can we say, when a religious story has passed through the hands of a certain number of different cultures, that it has become the common legacy of humanity and its original tradition can no longer claim the copyright? For that matter, in what sense does the *bodhisattva* ideal "belong" to early Buddhism? The practice of renunciation certainly pre-existed the life of the Buddha. Buddhists could hardly claim to own this pan-Indian ideal.

I ask these questions in a somewhat offhanded way, but they have serious implications for the scholarly dialogue (or, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith preferred, colloquy) of our conference. By telling the story of Tolstoy and Josaphat, Smith was suggesting that world civilization was moving toward a situation in which the boundaries between "religions" (a word that Smith treated with suspicion) were more and more fluid. He wrote his book before many of our present religious conflicts had reached their full level of toxicity. (Although I remember how shaken he was when he returned from Beirut during a period of civil war, and told about a group of Christian militia men with images of the Virgin Mary on the stocks of their rifles.) But there is no question that the simple model of inter-religious dialogue as a "Muslim,"

"Buddhist," "Christian," or "Jew" meeting one another to understand, appreciate, and negotiate their differences has given way to a situation of fluidity, multiplicity, indeterminacy, and change in which each tradition has become deeply familiar to the other, while at the same time becoming a stranger to itself.

A few years ago I pictured the stages of inter-religious dialogue by using the comparison of a play. The first stage is like a snapshot of an individual scene, where the identities of the characters are fixed and their relationships are frozen in place. This stage corresponds to a dialogue in which religions confront one another as static and timeless entities. The second stage shows the characters in motion, with different relationships and different modes of self-expression and self-discovery. This stage corresponds to a dialogue in which the religions are seen in constant evolution. The third stage invites the observer to step onto the stage and become an actor in the play, interacting with the characters and influencing the outcome of the story. In the fourth stage, the observer becomes the play and takes all of the characters into him- or herself. This stage corresponds to the condition of a scholar of religion who has attempted to enter imaginatively into different religious traditions, hear their voices, listen to their self-presentations, and bring those presentations to life, as if speaking from within the traditions themselves.

In this essay I would like to explore the implications of this fourth stage of dialogue, in part because it is the way I have come to think of dialogue for myself after many years of watching the actors in the play, and in part because it is the stage where dialogue becomes most immediate, most visceral, and most risky, where it calls one's own identity most into question and plays closest to the fire of truth. In a sense every scholar plays with this fire when she or he presumes to say that a line of the Qur'an or a passage in the Upaniṣads has a certain meaning. If this hermeneutic activity seems benign, one only needs to be reminded of the identity politics that has made

scholars of Hinduism the targets of threats for transgressing religious taboos. These are the routine risks of scholarship and have their counterparts in almost every tradition. Part of being a scholar is to play close to this fire without being burned. I am more interested in situations that pass from the realm of scholarship to the realm of what might be called first-order religion, or simply religion in the raw, where someone makes religious use of a gesture, idea, practice, doctrine, story, or whatever the primary religious datum may be, in an “other” religious tradition. By “other” I mean that the datum may come from a tradition that is different from the tradition of the person who uses it, or that it is used in a tradition that is different from the one in which it normally resides. To be more precise, I would like to consider what it means for a preacher to preach across the boundary between one tradition and another. As before, I will begin with a story.

Ernest Boyer, Jr. has written about a Zen master who visited St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts.² It was the Zen master’s first visit to the monastery, and he was so impressed by the spirit of prayer and quiet withdrawal that he offered to lead the monks in a retreat. In form the retreat followed the discipline of Zen, with long periods of contemplation mixed with occasional prayers and interviews with the master. What was distinctive was the content of the interviews. Instead of giving the monks a Zen *koan* to consider, the master chose to adapt his teaching to Christian tradition. When the first monk entered the master’s room, the monk saw that the master had two copies of the New Testament in front of him, one in Japanese and one in English. The master said: “I like Christianity. But . . . I would not like it without resurrection.” He leaned forward so that his face was only inches from the monk’s and said: “Show me your resurrection. . . . That is your *koan*. Show me your resurrection.” The master’s words posed a strong challenge to the Christian monk. They pose a clear hermeneutic question to the agenda of this symposium: To which tradition does the sentence “Show me

your resurrection” belong? Should we interpret it as Buddhist or Christian? If the terms themselves are any indication, it must be Christian. The word “resurrection” came from the New Testament that sat in front of the master, and it has no obvious counterpart in the Buddhist tradition. But the factor that makes this sentence distinctive is not its terminology but its use: it functions for the master and monk as a *koan*, a Zen puzzle that is designed to stop the mind in its tracks and lead to a deeper, more direct understanding of the concept in question (if “concept” is even the right word). The master has absorbed a Christian concept, transmuted it, and presented it as a challenge to his Christian listeners in a way that makes them more deeply Christian, but in a Buddhist way. How was he able to do this? I am reminded of Montgomery Watt’s comments about Muhammad’s alleged “borrowings” from Judaism and Christianity in the Qur’an.³ Watt cites Sir Hamilton Gibb’s observation that “borrowing” cannot take place between one culture and another unless there is already something in the borrowing culture that corresponds and is receptive to the religious datum that is being borrowed. But Gibb’s observation, as true as it may be, leaves an unavoidable puzzle. If the borrowed item is already present in some form in the culture that does the borrowing, in what sense is it borrowed? Perhaps it is better to say that the presence of Jewish or Christian tradition in Muhammad’s Arabia catalyzed a rediscovery and reformulation of religious ideas that had already been known but had been unappreciated and undervalued. Certainly that is part of the encounter between the master and the monk. Resurrection is there all along, as it were, but the master’s words make it known in a new way.

I keep Gibb’s observation in mind on the occasions when I am called on to preach in a Christian pulpit. Since my calling is as a college professor and not as a parish priest, I do not generally preach on high holy days. That task belongs to someone else. Instead, I have become a specialist in the Sundays before and

after major holidays, when the congregation dwindles and the regular preacher's creative inspiration runs dry. These Sundays often elicit a reflection on the basic kerygma of the Church: "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). But the emphasis falls less on the kingdom of God or the call for repentance than on the words "at hand." I explore the idea that the gospel moment is present as much on the Sunday after Easter as it is in the high drama of Easter itself. This is a simple message, and it is hardly original, but it has a certain relevance and timeliness for the faithful few who find themselves in church on the low Sundays of the year. When I preach this message, I draw illustrations from the Buddhist tradition without mentioning the name. Sometimes I take a stick and balance it on my finger. Pointing to one side, I say: "The past is gone and won't come back." Pointing to the other side, I say: The future is not here yet." Pointing at the middle, I say: "If the challenge of the gospel is present anywhere, it is in the infinitesimal point of the present."

When I last made this point, I was greeted at the back of the church, by a colleague who is an experienced scholar of religion. He said: "I have heard that you are a Buddhist-Episcopalian, but I did not hear any Buddhism in your sermon. What happened?" I smiled. From my point of view, the sermon was infused from beginning to end with a Buddhist sense of time. The illustration of the stick comes from an episode in the BBC series *The Long Search* in which the narrator reports a conversation with a Zen master. My words about the stick repeat his story almost verbatim. Scholars of Japanese Buddhism would recognize the illustration immediately as an example of the famous passage in Dōgen's *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye (Shōbōgenzō)* on "time-being," where Dōgen says that nothing is left out of the present moment: "Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment."⁴ It is a deliberate import of a Buddhist example into a Christian sermon, and it gives rise to the

same question that was posed by the master's use of the word "resurrection." Is the illustration "Buddhist" or "Christian"? I like to think that it was both, but without using the names. Each tradition was used to spark an interpretation of the other and create a rhetorical artifact that was in every sense "of the moment."

The short description of the theme of this symposium asked participants to reflect on "the dynamics and ethics of inter-religious borrowing." One way to respond to this challenge would be to distill it into a question about truth: In what way is this act of inter-religious borrowing true? Robert Hill, Dean of Boston University's Marsh Chapel, locates the truth of a sermon in the intersection of the preacher's life, the life of the community, and the text out of which the sermon grows. The first two of these factors do not need special comment, except to say that the religious community I serve and the religious world I inhabit have an inescapable inter-religious dimension. To preach without engaging this dimension, either implicitly or explicitly, fails to respond to the life of the community. It is the third factor that needs the most scrutiny, in part because the concept of "text" is so complex. In the sermon I have just described, as in the sermon encapsulated in the phrase, "Show me your resurrection," there is an attempt to be faithful to a Christian text. And not just to any text, but to a text that is considered essential. The Zen master said: "I like Christianity. But . . . I would not like it without resurrection." In my sermon, the governing text was the summary of Jesus' proclamation in the first chapter of the gospel of Mark. This text is "essential" in the sense that it is a necessary criterion against which other Christian proclamations are measured. The Buddhist case is more elusive. Assuming that the gesture with the stick gives a faithful illustration of Dōgen's point, why choose the Zen master Dōgen? Why not choose Shinran, who represents a different Buddhist community and had a different view of time (although he had a similar sense of urgency)? The answer is that, on this particular point, Dōgen has an authority that is larger than his

role as a representative of a particular denomination of Zen. To explain why he has this authority requires an excursion into the tradition's Indian roots.

In the sixth century, the Indian philosopher Bhāviveka set out to classify the traditions of Indian philosophy, including the different traditions of Indian Buddhism. There had been other attempts at classification, and there had been other attempts to refute rival traditions. But the form of Bhāviveka's text was new – with a separate chapter devoted to each rival school – and the genre he created became the dominant textual device to classify and study the diversity of Indian philosophy. The text poses an obvious question: On what do Buddhists differ? One possibility might be their “view” (*darśana*), a word that has also been translated as “philosophy.” Another might be their “doctrine” (*siddhānta*). Both of these are mentioned in the text and have an honorable after-life in the *darśana* or *siddhānta* texts that followed Bhāviveka's precedent. But Bhāviveka's preferred term, especially in his disputes with other Buddhists, is *naya* or *nīti*, a pair of words that come from a root (*ni*) that means to “lead.” A way to capture the sense of motion in these words is to translate them as “approach.” Occasionally Bhāviveka equates these words with another common word *mārga*, which means “way” or “path.” As he develops his account of competing philosophical options in Indian Buddhist tradition, he plays on the metaphorical implications of these words with surprising subtlety, as in this response to the Yogācāras, his principal Mahāyāna opponents: “The opponent's mind is confused and misled by other traditions, and he does not [understand]; to make him understand, one should follow a rational approach (*nāgamāntarasamdigdhaviparyastamatih parah / tasmāt tatpratipattiyartham tanmrgyo yuktimannayah*). This verse pictures Bhāviveka's argument as a form of motion: it is an “approach” to be “followed” (*mrgya*). (The word “followed” is the verbal form of the word *mārga* and often is used to name the action of a hunter pursuing an animal.) Less obvious is

the movement in the word “understand” (*pratipatti*). Literally, the word means to move toward a goal. A more literal English rendering of the word in this verse might be “make progress.” But words for motion in Sanskrit can also mean to know, hence the translation “understand.” The sense of motion even appears in the word “tradition” (*āgama*). This word could be interpreted as a verbal noun that means “coming,” in the sense of “coming down,” as if the opponent were misled not just by what has been transmitted but by the process of transmission itself. For Bhāviveka the language of philosophy is literally in motion.

What, then, is Bhāviveka's “approach”? One of its aspects has already been mentioned. It is “rational”: it involves formal argument and a reasoned investigation of the nature of things. But Bhāviveka's approach is not limited to rationality. When he discusses the categories of Buddhist practice, he says that his approach involves “no-apprehension” (*anupalabdhi*) quotations

Anupalabdhi has sometimes been translated as “no-perception” or “no-grasping.” Both of these translations capture some of its meaning, but it is more helpful to understand it as a mode of cognition that does not reify its object. In this sense, it could be called “non-objectification.” When Bhāviveka explains the approach of “no-apprehension,” he often devolves into a series of conventional Mahāyāna paradoxes. If an opponent asks how to practice the different components of the eightfold path, Bhāviveka says that right vision should be practiced as no vision, right thought as no thought, and so on. This account of the path grows out of Bhāviveka's view of reality, but it also is related to his view of interpretation. The word “approach” reflects a key distinction in Buddhist hermeneutics. Some scriptural texts can be taken literally, and some need further interpretation. The first group of texts has “definitive meaning” (*nītārtha*), while the second has “secondary meaning” (*neyārtha*). More literally, the first group has meaning to which one “has been led” (*nīta*), while the second has

meaning to which one “needs to be led” (*neya*). How should one “lead to” the correct (*nīta*) meaning? By using the correct “approach” (*naya* or *nīti*). When Bhāviveka disagrees with other Buddhists, it is not just about their understanding of reality. It also has to do with their interpretation of scripture.

The point of this exercise in Buddhist philology is not to examine the Indian tradition per se. That tradition is complex and allows many other interpretive options beside the “approach” of Bhāviveka. This point is simply that the example of the stick balanced on the finger lies in a tradition of interpretation with roots that go deep in the Indian tradition. The claim that the gospel is found “in the infinitesimal point of the present” leads back through the works of Dōgen to the canonical traditions of the Mahāyāna. One of the questions addressed by this conference has to do with the “authenticity” of interpretation. I will not attempt to address this question in its totality, except to say that one aspect of an authentic interpretation of an “other” text must certainly be an attempt to place that text within the indigenous interpretive tradition that lies behind it.

But cross-traditional authenticity is not a one-way street. Could the claim that the gospel is found “in the infinitesimal point of the present” be so infused by Buddhist ways of thought that it has ceased to be authentically Christian? On one level the answer is obvious. By its liturgical setting, its timing, and its relationship to the tradition of Christian rhetoric, the statement is easy to identify as a Christian utterance. But it is possible to push the question further and ask whether an interpretive concept like Bhāviveka’s *anupalabdhi-naya* is congruent with the basic assumptions of the gospel. Any consideration of this question has to begin by acknowledging that there are important differences between these two traditions. Bhāviveka used the paradoxes of the *anupalabdhi-naya* to engage in a subtle mockery of theistic religion, claiming in one place that Mahāyāna devotees worship Brahman by the only true method of worship –

by not worshiping Brahman at all. Buddhist antagonism toward the idea of God is aptly expressed in a verse attributed to the Hindu philosopher Udayana. Arriving at the temple one day and finding the gate locked, Udayana addressed God with these words: “Drunk with the wine of your own God-ness, you ignore me, but when the Buddhists are here, your very existence depends on me.”⁵ But Christian tradition offers ample precedent of its own for a critical approach to the concept of God. Some specialists in Buddhist-Christian dialogue have found that Meister Eckhart’s view of a God beyond “God” helps explore points of convergence between Christian and Buddhist views of ultimate reality.⁶ Another useful line of exploration lies in Paul Tillich’s “Protestant Principle”,⁷ not least because Tillich himself used it to open up his understanding of Christianity toward the concept of “emptiness” in Mahāyāna Buddhism. But the importance of these two comparative strategies is not whether Meister Eckhart’s “God” or Tillich’s “ultimate concern” is identical to Buddhist views of the ultimate. (Buddhists themselves had enough trouble agreeing about ultimate reality to make all comparisons elusive.) Their importance lies in their critical methodology, their uneasiness with partial formulations and naive reifications. Wherever they may be moving, they seem to share a critical approach, and in this sense, they walk a path that Bhāviveka would find familiar.

It is not necessary, however, to limit this cross-cultural investigation to the language of theology. Tolstoy encountered Buddhist tradition in the story of a saint, even though the story had long been separated from its roots. The same could be said of the Zen master who asked the Christian monks to demonstrate their resurrection. It is not just theologians and literary critics who “interpret” narrative. The right of interpretation also belongs to the novelists and story-tellers who borrow a story, transform it, and retell it in a different setting. Of the novels that balance on the Buddhist-Christian divide, one of the most challenging is Shusaku Endo’s *Silence*⁸. Endo’s story has to do with a Jesuit missionary in Japan during a persecution that

nearly obliterated the community of Japanese Christians. With harrowing intensity, Endo probes the identity of Christians in Japan and the moral struggle of a priest who tries to minister to his embattled community. Endo pictures Christianity as a tree whose roots have rotted and cannot thrive in the alien soil of Japan, and the priest as a person who has to be humiliated in order to realize his vocation as a priest. His particular humiliation – it could be called his crucifixion – is to renounce his faith and live as a ward of the state. If Endo had given the retreat at St. Joseph's Abbey, his *koan* would have been not "show me your resurrection" but "show me your crucifixion." It is as if Endo were saying that Christianity has to die for it to be truly Christian. Observers of Buddhist-Christian dialogue could connect this point to the kenosis passage in Philippians 2, where Christ is said to "empty himself" and take the form of a servant. The term "empty" leads back to the "emptiness" of Dōgen's "time-being" and Bhāviveka's "noapprehension." As it navigates these concepts and gives them narrative shape, Endo's story raises the same question about cross-cultural identity that was raised by the Zen master at St. Joseph's Abbey. Is the story "Christian" or "Buddhist"? One could argue not only that it is both, but that it is more deeply one by being emptied and taking the form of the other.

These examples of Buddhist-Christian interpretations present various perplexities, but at least they are friendly interpretations. No one is setting out to mock, undermine, or obliterate the other. They are trying to understand and perhaps spark a deeper appreciation on both sides of the inter-religious divide. But what about cases where the intention is just the opposite? Can we imagine an interpretation that is intended not to affirm another tradition's text but to destroy it, and yet does this in a way that

reinforces the message of the text itself? The "text" I have in mind is the monumental figure of the Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. How this image functioned as a "text" would be worth considering. All I will say here is that it clearly invited interpretation. Images like the Bamiyan Buddha serve as devotional objects, but they also deliver a message. By their impassivity and their sense of quiet, they question the preoccupations of ordinary life, including the preoccupation with the Buddha's physical form. It is as if they reduce ordinary life to a shadow. In 2001 the Taliban interpreted the message of the Bamiyan Buddha by surrounding it with dynamite and reducing it to rubble. This was not intended to be a respectful interpretation. The news of the destruction elicited widespread outrage from the international community. Many suggested that the image should be reconstructed in situ or replaced by a replica. A more informed view of this destruction might recognize that the Taliban had created, inadvertently, a very traditional image of the Buddha as an empty niche. Dynamite took the place of philosophical argument and reduced the Buddha to an empty place. It is difficult to imagine, in the present climate of religious hostility, that this act of destruction could be an occasion for respectful inter-religious exchange. But it raises an intriguing set of theological questions about the significance of emptiness in Buddhism and Islam. Each tradition, in its own way, understands the secret language of architecture – empty space. The stone Buddha lasted more than a thousand years before it was transformed into a different kind of icon. Perhaps there will be a time when its emptiness becomes a symbol of rapprochement between Buddhism and Islam. For the moment, I would be content to visit the empty shrine and pay homage not only to the absence of the Buddha, but to the way this absence embodies the ambiguities of cross-cultural interpretation.

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989, pp.7-11

² Ernest Boyer, Jr., *A Way in the World: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984, pp. 82-84.

³ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961 p.42.

⁴ Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*. New York: North Point Press, 1985 p. 77.

⁵ The verse is discussed in George Chemparathy, *An Indian Rational Theology: Introduction to Udayana's Nyāyakusumāñjali*. Leiden: Brill, 1972

⁶ See John B Cobb Jr. and Christopher Ives, *The Emptying God: a Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.

⁷ Paul Tillich *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions*. Foreword by Krister Stendahl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, p.6. See also Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*. New York: Scribner, 1963

⁸ Endo, Shusaku. *Silence*. Translated by William Johnston. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1982.

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