

Buddhism and Christianity as Complementary

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I

CHRISTIANS BELIEVE that God is the God of all and that in Jesus Christ God effected in principle the salvation of all. This universalistic conviction has forced Christian thinkers to reflect about the meaning of movements other than Christianity especially when they have some apparent power and goodness in themselves. The study of cultures and religious Ways other than Christianity is a theological imperative for Christians.

In the last two centuries the cultures and religious Ways of Asia have become increasingly important for Western intellectuals, and in the last two decades they have taken on importance for millions of ordinary Western Christians. The reality of Asian Ways is no longer known only through reading and travel. They have penetrated Western culture and life and offer a vital alternative for serious-minded Westerners. In this situation the urgency of theological reflection is enhanced. Western Christians can be grateful that Eastern Christians have been involved in these questions for generations. Japan is now the world center for the encounter of Buddhism by Christians.

The experience of the early church is instructive for us as we face our new situation. In the New Testament itself the religious Ways of the Gentiles are viewed primarily as idolatrous. We should not be contemptuous of this treatment, for of course the practise of the masses of Gentiles *was* idolatrous. But the New Testament writers themselves were influenced by Platonic and Stoic modes of thought and expression, and as the thinkers of the early church encountered the work of the philosophers in its purity, they could not dismiss Greek thought simply as idolatrous.

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The church's struggle to come to terms with philosophy still continues. Within Protestantism there have been many who see the appeal to philosophic reason as itself a sophisticated and dangerous idolatry. Nevertheless, viewing Christian history over all, we must say that Christians decided that one could be both a Christian and a philosopher. Furthermore, Greek philosophy entered constitutively into the structure of Christian thought throughout the Middle Ages; and during most of the modern period as well, theology and philosophy have been deeply intertwined.

When Christians encounter the great Oriental religious Ways they face different challenges, which are yet analogous. These new challenges have evoked analogous responses. Despite notable exceptions, prior to World War I the dominant response was to view Asian religious Ways as idolatrous. As in the case of the New Testament, there was some justification. Even today as tourists visit Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia or Japan, much of what they observe is, at least superficially, idolatrous or superstitious.

However, as Christian thinkers during this period became aware of the profound philosophy, the meditational practises, and the personal faith present in these Ways, they could no longer dismiss them as merely idolatrous or superstitious. Serious theological reflection on their meaning has become imperative. It is still in its early stages. I will list four approaches to the understanding of the relation of Christianity to Buddhism, none of which I find satisfactory. I will then make my own proposals.

First, some Christians concentrate on the similarities with Buddhism. Buddhism can be seen as a partner which shares the same essential convictions and experience. Differences are then viewed as matters of cultural accretion, language, imagery, and emphasis. Discussion consists in discovering how the other tradition identifies and describes central elements experienced in one's own. This was Tillich's approach when he visited Kyoto.

Second, some Christians who have been more impressed by the differences have accepted the image of many paths up the same mountain. Although the Ways are quite different, it is thought that they are all means of achieving salvation. Even if salvation is conceived differently, it is held that in fact it is one and the same for all. This view is popular among followers of some Oriental Ways, especially in India.

Third, some Christians who hold fast to the universal meaning of Jesus

Christ view the several paths not as attaining salvation but as diverse preparations for the Gospel. Just as the Judaism of the Old Testament prepared the Jews for the Gospel, so also Hellenistic culture prepared the Gentiles, and Oriental Ways prepared the peoples of the East. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is then to be expressed in the diverse cultures and languages of humankind rather than to be bound finally to Judaism. Roman Catholic theology, especially since Vatican II, has leaned in this direction.

Fourth, when the differences between Christian and Buddhist teaching are still more fully appreciated, some Christians come to the conclusion that they are irreconcilably opposed. In their view, if Christian teaching about God and the soul is correct, then Buddhist teaching must be erroneous insofar as it differs. However attractive are the achievements of Buddhism in art, culture, and personal life, the Christian response must be to try to correct its errors and convert Buddhists to the truth. This has been the dominant view of Christian missions in the past even when there was considerable appreciation of Buddhism.

I want to defend a fifth position. This agrees with the stress on differences between Christianity and Buddhism, both in their beliefs and in their goals. But it holds that these differences need not amount to theoretical contradictions. Both can be true. *I* believe that both *are* true. In this case we have much to learn from each other about features of reality and types of experience little developed in our own traditions.

For this position to be correct, reality must be more complex than either tradition, by itself, has recognized. It is very clear that in Western Buddhist scholarship in general, at least until quite recently, the questions that have been asked of the Buddhist texts have been questions that could be understood and answered already in Western experience. Nirvana has been understood either as this-worldly or other-worldly, and these categories were understood in the sense they had gained in the West. If Nirvana was other-worldly, then it was either literal extinction or else mystical union with God. If it was this-worldly, then it could only be some form of moral excellence or psychological fulfilment. The scholarly students of Buddhism alternated among these views.

Some Western philosophers have been able to think through to categories that transcended Western common sense and in doing so to come closer to grasping Buddhist thought and experience. Friedrich Schopenhauer is an example. Despite his lack of scholarship he understood Nirvana

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better than did the Buddhologists. He could do so because his own philosophical imagination brought him to conceive of the radical extinction of the will as the door to a wholly different mode of being.

In the twentieth century Martin Heidegger offers an effective way for the Western mind to approach Buddhism because he also penetrates to a mode of experience radically new for the West and approaching the experience of Buddhist enlightenment. Indeed, Heidegger may well be the most Buddhist thinker the West has produced. His later work provides an important basis for Western understanding of Buddhism.

Schopenhauer and Heidegger illustrate how philosophical thought can break through the established categories of the Western mind and open it to an understanding of Buddhism. They do not, however, support my thesis of the distinct truths of Buddhism and Christianity. For them, if the truths are different, this would be because one penetrates less deeply than the other. Divergences must express different levels of apprehension of one truth. I am arguing, in contrast, that Christianity and Buddhism lie on different lines of development that cannot be compared as more superficial and deeper.

My position is closer to another philosopher, F. S. C. Northrop. In *The Meeting of East and West* he describes their relation as complementary. This requires a concept of reality that allows the mind to move in two different directions from its primary experience. Northrop describes the common starting point as the differentiated aesthetic continuum. From it the West moves to attention to the differentiating forms, the East, to the underlying undifferentiated continuum.

I do not find the details of Northrop's analysis either adequate or convincing, but I am grateful for the basic model. Northrop sees East and West as profoundly different, but he holds that the truths they realize and treasure are complementary rather than contradictory. He is able to do this, again, because of his philosophical vision, which encompassed dimensions of reality poorly articulated in the West.

Northrop was a student of Alfred North Whitehead, and his work shows Whitehead's influence. However, he intentionally simplified Whitehead's philosophy and accepted only limited aspects of it. It is my belief that a richer use of Whitehead's conceptuality can allow a more varied grasp of alternative Eastern views and a deeper penetration into Buddhism while retaining the idea that Christianity and Buddhism complement one another.

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Whitehead's own view was that Christianity and Buddhism represent the culmination of Western and Eastern religious developments, that both are in decline, and that neither can regain its vitality except as enriched through the other. I share his conviction, and I am trying to use his general perspective in order to show how Christianity can be enriched through its contact with Buddhism.

II

One major point of apparent conflict between Christianity and Buddhism is about the self. Christianity emphasizes the self, whereas Buddhism declares it an illusion from which we are to be freed. There is no doubt that between most Christian formulations and most Buddhist ones there are strict contradictions. My question is whether the contradictory statements are necessary to the contending parties.

It is essential to Buddhism to deny that there is, metaphysically speaking, such an entity as a persisting self. Any doctrine of a self-existent, self-contained entity of this sort must be refused. If Christian doctrine requires affirmation of a substantial or transcendental self, then there is irresolvable metaphysical contradiction between Christianity and Buddhism. However, it is by no means evident that Biblical thinking involves either substantialist or transcendental views. On the contrary, they appear foreign to the Biblical frame of mind. There is, certainly, some notion of what we would call a personal self, but the hypostatization of this self developed only through interaction with Greek philosophy, and much of what is most strictly contradictory to Buddhism began with Descartes.

On the Buddhist side, it is clear that the denial of the self is not a denial that in ordinary experience there is a strong connectedness among successive experiences of a single person. In this sense the factuality of a personal self is far from denied; it is presupposed in the idea of *karma*. What is denied is that this special connection between these experiences is metaphysically given or that there is a common subject to whom they occur. And what is proposed is that full realization that ideas of a metaphysical unity or of an underlying subject are illusions can break the factual bondage of present to past and future.

There is no reason for Christians to deny the accuracy of the Buddhist analysis. Nevertheless, Christians affirm that there is positive value in the

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personal ordering of selfhood from which Buddhists seek liberation. The issue for Christians is complex. The personal self is to be "denied" or even "crucified." But denial and crucifixion are not means of obliteration. They presuppose a strong self which then sacrifices its purposes and desires so that God's will may be done. Denial and crucifixion assume continuity through time and personal responsibility for past and future. Ethical norms play a central role. All of this is very different from what Buddhism means by the realization of no-self.

My view as a Whiteheadian is that Christian and Buddhist doctrines about the universal nature of reality need not differ. There need be no logical contradiction. Buddhism and Christianity should each be able to understand intellectually the structure of existence advocated by the other and partly realized by it. Each should be able to see also the important human values attained in the other's structure, and each should be ready to learn more about these from those who more fully realize them. All this can be said without minimizing the profound differences. Indeed, it is precisely because Buddhism differs so profoundly from Christianity that Christians have so much to learn from it.

This entails that the enlightenment Buddhists seek is quite different from the salvation with which Christians are concerned. This in turn is in apparent conflict with many Christian formulations of the claim of universality. Certainly the claim of universality must be reconceived in a pluralistic world. Nevertheless, such reconception should not be abandonment. Jesus Christ is uniquely bound up with what Christians mean by salvation. This salvation is relevant and available to all. But it differs from and is only remotely related to what Buddhists call enlightenment, a condition which is also relevant and available to all. It is entirely appropriate that Christians witness to the joy of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It is entirely appropriate also that Buddhists witness to the serenity that is achieved in enlightenment. The world needs both universal Ways. For either, in its present form, to displace the other would be a profound loss.

A second area in which Buddhism and Christianity appear to contradict each other centers around the Christian doctrine of God. Buddhism denies the existence or reality of what Christian theology generally has called God. There are at least three features of most Christian teaching about God that clearly evoke Buddhist negation.

Just as the personal self is presented in most Christian theology as sub-

stantial or transcendental, so also is God. Indeed, God is often conceived as the purest instance of substance, completely self-contained, and needing nothing else so as to exist. Buddhism insists that whatever-is is relational through and through, interdependent with everything else. Confronted with this insistence, Christians must ask themselves whether they have truly been faithful to their own Scriptures and experience in depicting God as beyond all real relations or relativity. I believe we have not, and that the encounter with Buddhism can be an occasion for freeing our concept of God from the absolutist straightjacket.

Most Christians have also laid stress on God's radical transcendence. Here again a Buddhist may have to say "No!" If transcendence is understood to be beyond relations and relativity, then we have already seen that Buddhists properly reject this. If it connotes a spatial sense of above and beyond the physical world, it is either simply naive or else bound up with a dualism that the Buddhist rightly opposes. There cannot be a being of a fundamentally different order or type from the remainder of what-is.

But there are other meanings of transcendence which Buddhists need not reject. If transcendence means vast qualitative superiority, then most Buddhists recognize this in Gautama and other Buddhas when these are compared with themselves. There is a sense in which for Buddhists the enlightened state transcends ordinary experience and in which reality transcends our concepts of it. The encounter with Buddhism presses Christians to reconsider what we have meant by God's transcendence. When we do so, we find that the Biblical sense of God's transcendence is qualitative and that our doctrine of God can avoid those types of transcendence which Buddhists legitimately reject.

Most theologians, in the third place, have also identified God with "ultimate reality." To do so attributes to ultimate reality characteristics incompatible with the Buddhist understanding of Nothingness or Emptiness. It is true that there has been the negative way in Christianity, and that some mystics have spoken of the Divine Nothingness in ways that suggest affinities with Buddhism. But when the meaning of Emptiness for Buddhists is fully appreciated, we must agree that it would be deeply misleading to name this God. Buddhist Emptiness is not the God of the Christian scriptures.

Here again we Christians are forced to rethink our theological habits. If ultimate reality is Emptiness, and if Emptiness is not the Biblical God, then

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does the Biblical God have no reality at all? Or is it possible that the Bible does not present God as ultimate reality in the metaphysical sense? If we look openmindedly for the Biblical idea of the metaphysical ultimate, might we not find it in the chaos or nothingness from which God created the world? Was, perhaps, the theological identification of God with ultimate reality or Being Itself a mistake?

That there is a tension between the metaphysical ultimate—the God of the philosophers—and the ultimate of faith—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—has long been realized by Christians. Emil Brunner noted the difference and opted for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Paul Tillich noted the difference and affirmed Being Itself as the God beyond the Biblical God.

The encounter with Buddhism suggests that when Being Itself is fully understood and experienced it resolves itself into the Nothingness of dependent origination. It not only differs from the Biblical God but also lacks those characteristics of Being Itself that have enabled Westerners to think of Being as God. It thus makes clear that to speak of God at all should be to speak of the Biblical God rather than of Being Itself as ultimate reality. If Buddhist analysis is correct, then the Biblical God must be a manifestation of ultimate reality as dependent origination.

The idea of God or Gods as manifestations of ultimate reality is an old one. Hinduism affirms it emphatically, and Buddhist thought at least allows it. But Christians have resisted this way of understanding God. The tendency to imply that God is one manifestation among others, dispensable to the initiate, is quite unacceptable to Christian theology. If it is recognized that God is not ultimate reality as such, then God must be seen as the one, everlasting and ultimate embodiment of ultimate reality, essential for the occurrence of whatever else may be. Although such a universal manifestation of dependent origination is not envisaged in Buddhist doctrine, I believe there is no contradiction involved and that Christian faith will benefit from clarifying itself in this way.

Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy moves us a considerable distance in this direction. He distinguishes creativity, his name for ultimate reality, from God. His account of creativity—the many coalescing into a new one which is then a part of the many which coalesce again—is remarkably similar to some formulations of *pratitya-samutpada*. God is the primordial, unique, and everlasting instantiation of creativity. Since creativity is ever-

lasting, God did not exist before all creatures, but God plays an essential and constitutive role in the coming to be of each new creature.

If, then, we can affirm both Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God, the difference between Buddhism and Christianity is not a matter of metaphysical truth but of two orientations to the totality of what-is. Both orientations have been present in both Buddhism and Christianity. Yet we may recognize a polarity in the dominant traditions, the former exploring the meaning and value of the realization of ultimate reality, the latter exploring the meaning and value of faith in God.

This duality of directions corresponds to the duality we have noted previously between the extinction of the contingent personal self and its strengthening. To seek the realization of ultimate reality as *pratitya-samutpada* is to move toward freedom from personal selfhood. To attend to God and God's purposes in the world orients me to the future and to the new possibilities of the present in a way that evokes the exercise of will, intensifies personal responsibility, and focuses on hope. This leads to the strengthening of personal selfhood.

III

The position which I am defending is that Buddhism and Christianity are both true, that both embody and express possible and real life-orientations and perceptions of reality. Yet it seems that existentially they preclude each other. To be a Buddhist is to participate in one kind of existence and to seek one kind of perfection. To be a Christian is to participate in quite a different structure.

Even if we are left with this insuperable duality, our encounter is profitable. I have suggested ways in which Christian thought can be stimulated and corrected through the meeting. For Christians there is also intrinsic value in expanding our understanding of the rich variety of experiences and realities. It is a gain also if we can express our truth to Buddhists in ways that do not seem to them immediately false.

Nevertheless, the admission that there is a form of beautiful and admirable experience that is forever closed to the Christian can not but be personally painful. It is also theologically distressing. It would mean that in fact Jesus Christ is not, as we have affirmed, relevant to the Buddhist, for Buddhist enlightenment would preclude any possibility of the salvation

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offered in Jesus.

My hope is that this is not the final word for the Christian in relation to Buddhism. Christians have in the past appropriated complementary truth and practise from other movements. The extent to which the results distort or enrich is always to be critically judged in each concrete case, but I am fully convinced of the importance of the venture. Success is most likely when the danger is fully appreciated and when we are quite aware of what we are doing. In relation to Buddhism the adventure has begun.

It is important that we recognize that to live deeply into Buddhist experience will upset established forms of Christian existence. We cannot simply add a few superficial elements of Buddhism to our present form of Christianity. Also we cannot expect to judge the outcome of an effective relation to Buddhism by the norms we hold before we enter into the relation. Those norms must also be subject to change through the encounter. We cannot enter the relation as Christians unless we are called into it by Christ. But if we are called into it by Christ, as I believe, then we must trust him and not the beliefs and ideas which we now identify with him. The risk is great, but it is the risk of faith itself.