

## JESUS AND BUDDHISTS

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**M**OST WRITING ON INTER-FAITH TOPICS in Christian circles concentrates on how Christians come to terms with ‘other religions’. This essay is going to be different: it will explore some Buddhist accounts of Jesus. To do this, I shall use a set of categories—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism—that some Christian writers on inter-faith relations consider inadequate.<sup>1</sup> But if they are detached from the Christian theological concept of ‘salvation’ they can be seen to indicate, in a way that remains quite valid, three general tendencies present within us all when we view the ‘other’:

- the tendency to draw nonnegotiable distinctions based on difference
- the tendency to embrace the ‘other’ within one’s own conceptual framework, playing down difference
- the tendency simply to co-exist with difference.

If interpreted in this way, the categories can be a helpful analytical tool, particularly if one adds a fourth tendency:

- the attitude of mind that recognises difference not as the ground for adopting a nonnegotiable position, but as an opportunity for enrichment and challenge, even for self-interrogation.

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<sup>1</sup> This typology was first used in Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religion*, (London: SCM, 1983) to describe three attitudes towards the salvific potential of other faiths. It has been criticized because of its dependence on the concept of salvation, a predominantly Christian concept.

Here are examples of the kinds of view I have in mind:

- ‘There is so much that is different between Jesus and our own holy teachers that I cannot see him fitting into our structures at all although he was a good man’—an *exclusivist* tendency;
- There are so many similarities between the teachings of Jesus and our own beliefs that Jesus must either have had some contact with our beliefs or simply be one of our own spiritual teachers’—an *inclusivist* tendency;
- ‘Since all religions teach the same basic message in spite of differences, Jesus can stand as an equal alongside all great spiritual teachers’—a *pluralist* tendency.

I will not concentrate on the last, the pluralist tendency. There is a simple reason for this: I have not discovered many Buddhists who have voiced it. The closest I have found comes from nineteenth-century Sri Lanka in the words of a member of the Buddhist monastic Sangha to Rev James Selkirk, a Baptist missionary, in June 1827:

. . . that English people worshipped Jesus Christ, and that Sinhalese people worshipped the Budha, that they were both good religions, and would both take those that professed them to heaven at last.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Drawing Nonnegotiable Distinctions: The Exclusivist Tendency***

Exclusivist theology tends to legitimate polemics, and Buddhist representations of Jesus have indeed sometimes been polemical. In order to score points against Christianity, Buddhists have presented Jesus as a womaniser, a delinquent, a fomenter of discord, a user of alcohol, an abuser of his mother, and a false messiah.<sup>3</sup> Such views contribute little to courteous inter-faith encounter. Far more

<sup>2</sup> James Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon after a Residence of Nearly Thirteen Years with an Account of The Church Missionary Society's Operations in the Island and Extracts from a Journal* (London: Hatchard, 1844), p. 379. For a more detailed exploration of the issues here, see: Elizabeth J. Harris, ‘Double Belonging in Sri Lanka: Illusion or Liberating Path?’ in *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), edited by Catherine Cornille, pp. 76-92.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Dr V. A. Gunasekera, *The Buddhist-Christian Dialogue on Women and Feminism: a Refutation of a Christian Critique of the Buddha's Position on the Question of Women, together with an Examination of the Views of Jesus on the Same Subject*, The Buddhist Society of Queensland Tracts on Buddhism, No. 12 (Toowong: Buddhist Society of Queensland, 1994).

significant for our purposes are the views of Buddhist practitioners who are not interested in scoring points, but have nevertheless reached a stage where nonnegotiable distinctions are inescapable, because of their difficulties with how Jesus is presented in the gospels or in Christian tradition. Two problems occur again and again for such Buddhists: Jesus and anger, and Jesus as saviour.

### *Jesus and Anger*

Within several conversations I have had with Buddhists, Asian and Western, the incident of Jesus turning over the tables in the temple has arisen. One western Buddhist nun once told me that this was the one incident in the Christian gospels that persuaded her that Jesus was not an enlightened being. She simply could not fit Jesus' reaction into her idea of what one who is free from mental defilements would do.<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is that, within Buddhism, anger is always a negative quality. It is a symptom of greed or hatred, both of which have to be rooted out if enlightenment is to arise. Her reaction, therefore, was normative, not exceptional, as this further example from a Japanese Buddhist, Soho Machida, suggests:

Jesus may have acted in the name of righteousness; but from the standpoint of common sense, his violent act does not sound like that of a sacred being. In the eyes of the merchants and shoppers whom Jesus interrupted, he must have appeared more like a demon.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhists do not believe that humans should be silent in the face of injustice. It is a question of the method of approach. Effective, discerning, wise action, they would argue, cannot arise if anger is present. For anger is part of the unenlightened mind. As such it should be recognised rather than repressed; ultimately, however, it should be transformed into an activist compassion, rooted in wisdom. There is no place in Buddhism, therefore, for a righteous anger that expresses itself by turning over the tables of those involved in temple trade. 'Why

<sup>4</sup> Defilements (*kilesa* in Pali) are mind-defiling qualities that have to be rooted out if enlightenment is to be attained. In the Theravada tradition, there are ten: greed, hatred, delusion, conceit, speculative views, sceptical doubt, mental torpor, restlessness, shamelessness, lack of moral dread.

<sup>5</sup> Soho Machida, 'Jesus, Man of Sin: Toward a New Christology', in *Buddhists Talk about Jesus: Christians Talk about the Buddha*, edited by Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 59-73, here p. 68.

couldn't Jesus have used the art of persuasion and reasoned argument?' a Buddhist might ask. 'Surely that might have changed minds more effectively than action which could only provoke anger in return!'

### *Jesus as Saviour*

More problematic for some Buddhists, however, are the twin emphases on Jesus as God and Jesus as Saviour, as 'other power'. The difficulties are compounded when 'final' and 'only' qualify the latter. Buddhism is non-theistic. Although Buddhists attribute to the Buddha some of the qualities that Christians attribute to God, and although deities occur within Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha is not a God and Buddhists do not look to a creator or sustainer of the universe. The enlightenment of the historical Buddha, *Siddhartha Gotama* (Sanskrit: *Gautama*), elevated him to a state far above the human in the eyes of most Buddhists; but most revere him as one who shows the way rather than as a saviour. The idea of one's 'own power' is therefore most important to Buddhists, as this verse from the *Dhammapada*, one of the best-loved holy texts within Buddhism, indicates:

By oneself is evil done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone, by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself—no one can purify another.<sup>6</sup>

Self-sacrifice for the good of others has a hallowed place in Buddhist narrative tradition. For example, Theravada Buddhists believe that every era of time produces one Buddha, and that each of these prepared for Buddhahood through mastering ten 'perfections' (Pali: *paramita*) in numerous rebirths. One of the perfections is *dana parami*—the perfection of giving, which involves a willingness to give one's life for the good of other beings.<sup>7</sup> However, the idea that the death of one individual can act as the direct cause of the salvation of others is implausible, even a little ludicrous, to many Buddhists. A useful insight into the strength of this barrier is a compilation of articles already cited that has been published by Continuum:

<sup>6</sup> Verse 165, translation taken from Acharya Buddhakkhita, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Within the Theravada Canon, in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the *Sutta Pitaka* is a book called the *Jataka*. This gives 547 stories of the former lives of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama. A number of these show the Buddha-to-be sacrificing himself for the good of others.

*Buddhists Talk About Jesus: Christians Talk About the Buddha.* Generally speaking, the Christians who talk about the Buddha have less difficulty than the Buddhists who talk about Jesus. The first Buddhist writer, for instance, José Ignacio Cabezón, appeals to the Buddhist perspective on 'own power', claiming that 'no being has the capacity to decide whether or not we will be saved', and that liberation is gained through a 'long and arduous process of radical mental transformation'. He finishes:

Together these various tenets make it impossible for Buddhists to accept a messianic creed of the traditional Christian sort. Jesus may have been an extraordinary human being, a sage, an effective and charismatic teacher, and even the manifestation of a deity, but he cannot have been the messiah that most Christians believe him to have been.<sup>8</sup>

Rita Gross, in the same collection, is well aware, as an academic in dialogue with Christian academics, of the different faces of Jesus in scholarly discourse: the Jesus of the gospels, the historical Jesus, the Jesus of the early church, the Jesus as understood through doctrines such as the Trinity. She chooses to engage with Jesus the only saviour, because it is the most widely accepted face within the Christian communities she knows. She comes up with statements such as:

Exclusivist claims in religion, I would argue, are among the most dangerous, destructive, and immoral ideas that humans have ever created.

And later:

I object to the Jesus of popular religion as interpreted by major strands of Christianity not because this interpretation is unedifying or crude, but because this very widespread and prevalent interpretation is *dangerous, destructive, and degraded*.<sup>9</sup>

Gross finds these versions of Christian faith objectionable because they condemn religious people who are outside Christianity; they refuse to recognise that people of other faiths might have spiritual gifts; and they

<sup>8</sup> 'A God but not a Saviour', in *Buddhists Talk About Jesus: Christians Talk About the Buddha*, pp. 17-31, here p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> 'Meditating on Jesus', in *Buddhists Talk About Jesus: Christians Talk About the Buddha*, pp. 32-51, here pp. 34, 36.

speak with a vocabulary of judgment and excommunication, a language, which, if not shrugged off with laughter by the ‘other’, can be deeply offensive and damaging.

At the end of the collection of articles, Grace Burford, a western Buddhist, is given the task of responding to the Christian articles on the Buddha. She finds herself mystified by how the Christian writers seem profoundly attracted to the Buddha and yet remain Christian. Eventually she suggests that, whereas Buddhism is a religion of ‘own power’, it is belief in ‘other power’ that binds the Christian writers to their faith, and that this constitutes an unbridgeable difference between the two religions. She ends in this way:

I appreciate help, and know that nothing I do is truly independent (see the Buddhist explanation of dependent co-arising). I might want cosmic grace, even. But I don’t conceive of that grace as coming from a personal God who saved all humanity by incarnating in Jesus, or as being required by some innate deficiency in myself that has to be fixed by someone else. For me, grace lies in the interdependency of things and that is enough. So give me a map, lend me your car (or raft?), show me a shortcut, even protect me along the way if you can—but do not make the trip for me!<sup>10</sup>

The advantage of the approach adopted by Cabezón, Gross and Burford is that it takes the witness of the majority of Christians to Jesus seriously. It does not attempt to submerge it or to alter it by appeal to Buddhist categories. It does not attempt a reinterpretation. Difference is taken seriously, and in some cases the only conclusion the writers can reach is that there are points of nonnegotiable difference between the two religions in their attitude to their respective ‘founders’. The result is that a mirror is held up to Christians, however unflattering the image. The disadvantages are that the diversity of views within both the Buddhist and Christian communities can be overlooked, as well as the very real touching points between Buddhism and Christianity.

### ***The Inclusivist Tendency***

It is the inclusivist tendency that I have found most frequently when exploring how Buddhists respond to Jesus. According to the definition I

<sup>10</sup> Grace Burford, ‘If The Buddha Is So Great, Why Are These People Christian?’ in *Buddhists Talk About Jesus: Christians Talk About The Buddha*, pp. 131-137, here p. 137.

have outlined, it is an approach that draws Jesus into the thought forms of the faith of the perceiver, sometimes with scant regard for how most Christians understand themselves.

At one end of a spectrum of inclusivist Buddhist perspectives is the claim that Jesus learnt from Buddhists in the so-called hidden years, and incorporated much that was Buddhist into his teaching as a result. For instance, Holger Kersten and Elmar R. Gruber, in *The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*,<sup>11</sup> argue that the strength of the parallels between the life and teaching of Jesus and those of the Buddha are so great that Jesus must have been taught by Buddhist missionaries to the Bible Lands. The truth of this is masked, they suggest, because references in the gospels to Indian beliefs such as reincarnation were suppressed by Christian exegetes and translators. The story of Nicodemus is quoted as one example. 'Except a man be born again and again' is how they would render Jesus' reply to Nicodemus. They place particular stress on two Buddhist texts, the *Dhammapada* and the *Udana*, canonical texts in the Theravada Buddhist tradition predating Christianity; and they claim 'the instructions of Jesus' were based on them, particularly the teaching within Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

At one point, a direct parallel is made between Matthew 15:17-20 (Authorised Version) and passages from these two texts:

Man does not purify himself by washing as most people do in this world. Anyone who rejects any sin, large and small, is a holy man because he rejects sins.  
(*Udana* 33:13)

Evil is done through the self; man defiles himself through the self. Evil is made good through the self; man purifies himself through the self.  
(*Dhammapada* 12:9)

Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught. But those things which proceed out of the mouth came forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands defileth not a man.  
(Matthew 15:17-20)

Similarly, Kersten and Gruber isolate Jesus' walking on water, and the miracle of the loaves and the fishes as stories taken over from Buddhist precedents, seeing significance in the fact that they follow one another in the gospels:

<sup>11</sup> (Shaftesbury, Rockport and Brisbane: Element Books, 1996). What follows draws on pp. 90-98.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:15-21, Mark 6:35-44; Luke 9:13-17) obviously derives from the introduction to *Jataka* 78. There it is reported that with the bread in his alms bowl the Buddha satisfied the hunger of 500 disciples and all the inhabitants of a monastery, and much bread remained.

The central section of the book is simply called 'Jesus—the Buddhist'.

There is not time to explore in detail the argument put forward by Kersten and Gruber. They were not the first to suggest that the remarkable parallels between the lives and teachings of Jesus and the Buddha must be due to the influence of Buddhism, and they will not be the last. The book stands at the far end of the inclusivist tendency to appropriate the 'other'. I am not sure whether Gruber and Kersten are practising Buddhists, but their writings are certainly influential among Buddhists. I have had *The Original Jesus* quoted to me favourably by Buddhist friends, with the implication that there should be nothing to prevent Christians and Buddhists being allies—after all, Jesus taught Buddhist truths.

At the other end of the spectrum are contemporary Buddhists who have come into contact with Jesus through dialogue with Christians in the present, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and the Sri Lankan monk and artist, The Venerable Hatigamma Uttarananda. Both an inclusivist tendency and a constructive approach to difference, my fourth category, can be seen in them.

***The actions  
and words of  
Jesus embody  
'mindfulness'***

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and a Zen master, now in exile in France. He began a journey into Christianity and the gospels in the context of inter-monastic encounter and social action, through friendship with Christians such as Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King. When he assesses the person of Jesus, it is evident from his writings that he draws on both these interests, as well as on his rootedness in Buddhist meditation. What leaps out at him from the gospels as a result is that the actions and words of Jesus embody 'mindfulness'. The concept of mindfulness—*sati* in Pali—is central to Buddhism. It is a form of meditation that is intended to spill over into everyday life. At its simplest, it is the practice of constant awareness of the present moment. The *Satipatthana Sutta* of the Theravada Canon isolates four 'foundations' for such practice: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the emotions or feelings, mindfulness of the mind or consciousness, and mindfulness of what is translated as 'mind objects', for example a



subjective desire for sensual pleasure.<sup>12</sup> The aim of such practice is to develop a state of clear, unbiased awareness that can lead to effective action in the world, free from reactions conditioned by greed, hatred and delusion. Seeing Jesus in this way, he writes:

To me, mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both are agents of healing. When you have mindfulness, you have love and understanding, you see more deeply, and you can heal the wounds in your own mind. The Buddha was called the King of Healers. In the Bible, when someone touches Christ, he or she is healed. It is not just touching a cloth that brings about a miracle. When you touch deep understanding and love, you are healed.<sup>13</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh has written two books on Jesus: *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *Going Home: Jesus and the Buddha are Brothers*. In both he stresses action, path, and experience when comparing the two figures, not belief or dogma. More important for him than faith in Jesus is putting Jesus' teachings into practice, embodying them. In keeping with the non-theistic nature of Buddhism, he avoids speaking of God as objective reality. He is quite ready, however, to equate compassion in action, which he would see as lying at the heart of Buddhism, with the Holy Spirit of Christian thought, and even with what Christians would call God. Whether it springs from Buddhism or Christianity, the most important need in his eyes is that mindfulness and compassion should be released into the world. With this understanding, he is able to write:

Before I met Christianity, my only spiritual ancestor was the Buddha. But when I met beautiful men and women who are Christians, I came to know Jesus as a great teacher. Since that day Jesus Christ has become one of my spiritual ancestors. As I have mentioned, on the altar of my hermitage in France, I have statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and also an image of Jesus Christ. I do not feel any conflict within me. Instead I feel stronger because I have more than one root.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The *Satipatthana Sutta* is found in the *Majjhima Nikaya* of the *Sutta Pitaka* of the Theravada Canon. See 'Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness' in *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhima Nikaya)*, Vol. I (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1993), pp. 70-82.

<sup>13</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (London, Sydney, Auckland and Johannesburg: Rider, 1995), pp. 14-15. See also *Going Home: Jesus and the Buddha are Brothers* (London: Rider, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, pp. 99-100. The quotations which follow are to be found on pp. 185, 65, 55-56, 154.

When he looks later at parts of the gospels that have been interpreted in exclusivist ways, he does not take at face value the exclusivist Christian approach to them but draws on Buddhist categories to re-interpret and re-invent, as in the examples below:

It is necessary to die in order to be reborn. As soon as you experience impermanence, non-self and interbeing,<sup>15</sup> you are born again . . . Jesus said that unless you are reborn as a child, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

He then comments on what Jesus says in John 15:

‘I am the true vine. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.’ This is close to Buddhism. Without mindfulness, we cannot bear the fruit of love, understanding, and liberation. We must bring forth the Buddha in ourselves. We have to evoke the living Buddha in ourselves in order to become more understanding and more loving.

And of John 14:6:

When Jesus said, ‘I am the Way,’ He meant that to have a true relationship with God, you must practise His way. In the Acts of the Apostles, the early Christians always spoke of their faith as ‘the Way’. To me, ‘I am the way’ is a better statement than ‘I know the way.’ The way is not an asphalt road. But we must distinguish between the ‘I’ spoken by Jesus and the ‘I’ that people usually think of. The ‘I’ in His statement is *life* itself, His life, which is the way. If you do not really look at His life, you cannot see the way. If you only satisfy yourself with practising a name, even the *name* of Jesus, it is not practising the life of Jesus. We must practise living deeply, loving, and acting with charity if we wish truly to honour Jesus. The way is Jesus Himself and not just some idea of Him.

It is not surprising, therefore, that he feels able to write:

I do not think there is much difference between Christians and Buddhists. Most of the boundaries we have created between our

<sup>15</sup>This term is a coinage of Thich Nhat Hanh’s, and means something close to ‘interconnectedness’.

two traditions are artificial. Truth has no boundaries. Our differences may be mostly differences in emphasis.

To my knowledge, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was not in contact with social activists such as Martin Luther King. In recent years, however, Christians involved in meditation, in non-violent action, and in inter-faith dialogue have drawn him into conversation. In 1994, for instance, he was asked to participate in the John Main Seminar, an annual event organized by the World Community for Christian Meditation in honour of its founder. In advance, he was given eight passages from the New Testament, which included the Beatitudes, and accounts of the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. Each session began with silent meditation, something the Christian participants were familiar with. Then the Dalai Lama read one of the Bible passages and commented on it with the aid of an interpreter. Questions followed. The account of the seminar, published in 1996, shows the Dalai Lama commenting freely on the resonances he has discovered between Christianity and his own tradition. Rarely does he conflate the two. Yet, when asked specifically about the person of Jesus, his instinctive response was to draw Jesus into Buddhist categories:

For a Buddhist, whose main object of refuge is the Buddha, when coming into contact with someone like Jesus Christ—whose life clearly demonstrates a being who has affected millions of people in a spiritual way, bringing about their liberation and freedom from suffering—the feeling that one would have toward such a person would be that of reverence toward a fully enlightened being or *bodhisattva*.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from saying that Jesus was a Buddha, this is the highest tribute that he could have given to Jesus, from within his own tradition. A *bodhisattva*, in the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, is a being who has gained enlightenment through mastering six moral perfections: giving, morality, patience, effort, meditative concentration and wisdom. Through this, he or she has become the epitome of wisdom and compassion. *Bodhisattvas* also make a vow that they will help others

<sup>16</sup> *The Good Heart: His Holiness the Dalai Lama Explores the Heart of Christianity—and of Humanity*, edited by Robert Kiely (London, Sydney, Auckland and Johannesburg: Rider, 1996), pp. 82-83.

towards liberation and not pass beyond the round of suffering and rebirth until all beings have gained enlightenment.

A further interesting passage from the record of this seminar comes when the Dalai Lama comments on John 12:44-50: 'I have come into the world as light, so that no one who has faith in me should remain in darkness'. It is significant that he ignores the question of 'other power' and brings Buddhist categories to bear:

The Tibetan word for faith is *day-pa*, which perhaps might be closer in meaning to confidence or trust. In the Buddhist tradition, we speak of three different types of faith. The first is faith in the form of admiration that you have toward a particular person or a particular state of being. The second is aspiring faith. There is a sense of emulation; you aspire to attain that state of being. The third type is the faith of conviction.

I feel that all three types of faith can be explained in the Christian context as well. For example, a practising Christian, by reading the Gospel and reflecting on the life of Jesus, can have a very strong devotion to and admiration for Jesus. That is the first level of faith, the faith of admiration and devotion. After that, as you strengthen your admiration and faith, it is possible to progress to the second level, which is the faith of aspiration. In the Buddhist tradition, you would aspire to buddhahood. In the Christian context you may not use the same language, but you can say that you aspire to attain the full perfection of the divine nature, or union with God. Then, once you have developed that sense of aspiration, you can develop a deep conviction that it is possible to perfect such a state of being. That is the third level of faith. I feel that all of these levels of faith are equally applicable in both the Buddhist and Christian contexts.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Constructive Appreciation of Difference***

It is through art that The Venerable Hatigamma Uttarananda, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, has expressed his encounter with Jesus. At Tulana Research Centre in Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, are several of his works, including a mural of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and a painting of the gospel story of the woman taken in adultery. The process started for Ven Uttarananda through dialogue with Aloysius

<sup>17</sup> *The Good Heart*, pp. 112-113.

Pieris SJ, Director of Tulana, to whom I am indebted for the account that follows. In the early 1980s, Ven Uttarananda, already an artist, was involved in an organization seeking to educate Buddhist monks about the need in Sri Lanka for inter-ethnic justice. With the intention of holding an exhibition of paintings on Christ and the Buddha, he read the gospels and studied Pieris' collection of Christian art. Pieris suggested to him that in his portrayal of Jesus he should not duplicate themes already central to Buddhism, but rather concentrate on what he saw as specific to Christianity. Taking this to heart, one of his first choices was Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.<sup>18</sup>

The mural that resulted now greets visitors to Tulana. It translates the foot-washing story into an Asian context. The disciples are dressed in the robes of Asian renunciants, and carry black bowls to receive gifts of food. They enter the home of a lay person. Instead of a servant bending down to wash the feet of the renunciants, however, it is the master of the house who does this, overturning the customary practice.



<sup>18</sup> The story of this and other works of art done for Tulana Research Centre by Buddhist artists is told in Aloysius Pieris, *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), pp. 127-137.

One of the renunciants holds up his hand in a gesture conveying that something significant is happening.

What is important here is that Ven Uttarananda, searching for the unique in Christianity, chose Jesus reversing power structures, the master becoming slave or, as Pieris terms it, 'Jesus: God of slaves—the slave of God'. As for the picture of the woman caught in adultery, in the middle there is a palm raised in the classical *abhaya mudra*, the 'do not fear' position. A nail mark in the centre shows it to be Jesus Christ's. Around the palm, male aggression swirls and, at the foot of the picture is the woman, imprisoned by this hatred, but also released through Jesus. What is chosen by Uttarananda here is Jesus the champion of the victim and the unmasker of hypocrisy.



Ven Uttarananda's engagement with Christianity in Sri Lanka arose within a context of ethnic conflict, of a scandalous gap between rich and poor, and of violence against women. He was painfully conscious of all of these, and was thus drawn to discover Jesus as challenger of the *status quo*. His approach illustrates the fourth of the tendencies I identified at the beginning, in spite of the inclusivist elements in the mural of Christ washing the feet of the disciples. Difference and uniqueness are taken seriously but they do not become barriers. They become instead sources of inspiration and challenge for both Buddhist and Christian.

### ***Working Towards a Christian Response***

My Buddhist speakers have given Jesus a number of faces.

- The angry Jesus, betraying a lack of discernment and of equanimity
- The Jesus who is so inextricably connected with exclusivist christologies that he becomes an oppressive force
- Jesus, the epitome of mindfulness, of meditation in action, and embodiment of the Way all must follow
- Jesus the bodhisattva, master of the perfections which include patience and wisdom
- Jesus the overturner of the structures of the powerful and unmasker of hypocrisy.

How should Christians react to these? Should Christians simply accept that, in our postmodern world, it is impossible to create one narrative for Jesus, and be content with creating their own Jesus to satisfy their deepest yearnings? Should they ignore not only the views of other faiths but also the variety of perspectives within their own tradition, and simply carry on as they always have done, asserting that their particular take on Jesus delivers absolute truth? Or is there a middle path?

I believe we have to explore this final option, and I would like to put forward four basic principles that may help us do this:

- Jesus is not the possession of Christians alone

- Christians cannot and should not claim for themselves sole authority to interpret the significance of his life and death
- The perspectives on Jesus expressed by Buddhists, and indeed by sincere spiritual seekers whatever their worldview, can be used by Christians as they undertake constructive interrogation of their own faith and seek new patterns of discipleship
- Sometimes that which is most creative can emerge precisely where the difference is greatest between traditional Christian belief about Jesus and the perspectives on Jesus taken adopted by people of other faiths.

When encountering Buddhist views about Jesus, Christians might well say at certain points, 'We clearly differ. We, as Christians, stand here. You stand there. Let it not be a cause for conflict.' But if Christians use such a strategy to avoid asking hard questions about truth claims, they will be the poorer. The more enriching path, I would suggest, is one that invites a certain amount of vulnerability through a willingness really to hear the witness of people of other faiths, and then to re-evaluate, to interrogate, both one's own beliefs and the message that the Christian church is offering to the world.

By now, many readers of this essay will have noted which of the Buddhist perspectives on Jesus they most easily identify with. I imagine that Thich Nhat Hanh might appeal to those seeking to combine meditation with social action, Ven Uttarananda to those who wish to see beyond accepted social or religious norms, and Rita Gross to those who are uncomfortable with exclusivist interpretations of some Bible verses. However, a more challenging path involves engagement with the perspective that one finds most difficult. Those who prefer an exclusivist christological message could engage with the abhorrence such a message creates in some sincere spiritual seekers, or with the re-interpretation of John 14:6 given by Thich Nhat Hanh. Those who, from positions of comfort, see Jesus as the Comforter, or as the one who blesses his beloved with material gifts, should engage with Ven Uttarananda's vision of Jesus as the one who overturns the security of the affluent.



Speaking personally and by way of example, I needed to engage with those who are mystified by the anger of Jesus. The need for righteous anger, about the gap between the world's rich and poor, for example, or racism, was something I accepted without question before my encounter with Buddhism. I can remember using Linton Kwesi Johnson's early poems when teaching English in the late 1970s, poems that spoke of the anger of black young people in the racist Britain of those years.<sup>19</sup> Engagement with Buddhism, however, has led me to reclaim the Christian concept of discernment, which involves developing the ability to identify inner attachments that cloud judgement and fuel unhelpful responses. I still believe anger can be part of the Christian response to injustice, but I can see its dangers in a much clearer light. Buddhism has made me more aware that anger without discernment, without awareness of our greeds and our hatreds, can be counterproductive and dangerous. It has convinced me that the inner task of mental culture is just as important as the external task of fighting injustice. It has turned me towards the inwardness of Jesus, his mindfulness and his need for silence.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, therefore, I would like to urge Christians towards engagement, exploration and self-interrogation when faced with perspectives on Jesus from people of other faiths, in this case Buddhists. This should be undertaken neither in the cosy belief that all religions are the same nor with an impressionability that takes the voice of other faiths as a new gospel, but rather in robust awareness that interaction with views differing from one's own can be creative and indeed transforming. And this brings me back to my fourth tendency, the one that I find most creative. It goes beyond my definitions of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. It affirms that sincere spiritual seekers within other faiths have something to give to us Christians. It enjoins exploration and pilgrimage. May the quest for the historical Jesus go on. May Christians continue to listen to the world Church and the voices of liberation theology. However, my dream is of a Christianity that is able to receive from other faiths, that recognises that it cannot do Christology, or indeed any theology, if it

<sup>19</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread, Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1975).

draws only on the traditions of the Christian Church and Graeco-Roman antiquity. It must engage with the spiritual heritage of the whole world.

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