

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## The Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

OF THE THREE truly 'world religions' Buddhism is the oldest. Like the other two, Christianity and Islam, it claims to be true for all people and has given rise to a civilization just as rich and diverse as its western counterparts. All three can claim a universal reference; all three have inspired extraordinary movements of missionary expansion. At which point the similarities seem to dry up. Revelation confronts a personal quest for truth; devotion appears to clash with a stoic realism; faith in the one God, the all-compassionate, encounters a mystical sense of a profound emptiness at the heart of all reality.

It is obvious that the religions which find their origins in the Middle East are very different from those which belong to the sub-continent of India. They are not to be neatly contrasted as 'life-affirming' and 'life-negating'—however much truth there may be in the contrast between 'prophetic' and 'mystical'. Less obvious is the source of that difference. Christians find the central focus of their faith in God the Father of Jesus Christ. Muslims deny the fatherhood of God but still speak of the oneness and sovereignty of Allah dominating the life of the community and demanding *islam*—submission. The monotheism of semitic religion begins with the creator God who gives value to all human life. Buddhism, by contrast, seems to be thoroughly anthropocentric. As a product of the 'renouncer' tradition of India, Buddhism arises from the experience of the Buddha—the 'enlightened one': no God-man, but, in the *Theravāda* word, an *atideva*, one 'beyond the gods', a supreme being who has discovered the truth about the world and out of his universal compassion preaches it to all suffering sentient beings. The *Mahāyāna* apotheosis of the Buddha leads to the conception of God-like figures, such as *Avalokiteśvara*, the *Bodhisattva* of universal compassion, or *Amitābha*, the Buddha of *Sukhāvati*, the Pure Land, a perfect paradise set up as a reward for his devoted followers. But neither can be understood without reference to the earthly Buddha, Siddhartha, the son of a petty chieftain in northern India who achieved perfect enlightenment.

This 'theocentric-anthropocentric' distinction makes for a useful point of departure so long as we remember that dialogue does not begin with a particular theological agenda, but with the concerns and problems which are set by *both* partners. To that extent all dialogue is anthropocentric. Any account of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, therefore, especially one which would consider its implications for Christian theology, must avoid the temptation to short-circuit this process by projecting its own vision

of the other at the start. In fact dialogue takes place at a number of different levels. Pride of place tends to be given to the philosophical, but we would do well to remember the equally important scholarly debate about the origins and meaning of Buddhism which underlies it. Secondly, there is a more practical dialogue which is going on between monks of both traditions, but increasingly touching the lives of layfolk as well: the meditative-mystical level. Finally there is another dialogue, that which looks at social, ethical and—in Third World countries—political problems. Naturally these divisions are not precise and fade into each other at various points. Nor are they all equally important to the British scene with which I am personally most concerned. They do, however, provide us with some guidelines. My main aim is to show how an account of the theological significance of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in any part of the world has to take account of the interdependence of these three major areas.<sup>1</sup>

The first requirement of dialogue is clearly tolerance and a willingness to learn; the second is accurate knowledge of the tradition. A recent dialogue in which I was involved focussed on the founders. A Buddhist nun spoke about 'what Buddha means to me' and surprised many of the Christians by admitting that she found very little sense of devotion in the person of Buddha. For her the Buddha's teaching, the *Dharma*, was far more central—an attitude which is fairly typical of the conservative *Theravāda*. A Mahāyānist in the same group, on the other hand, found far more spiritual support in repeating ancient *mantras* and recalling the Buddha's attributes. Like Christ, Buddha is a title—an interpretation of the significance for others of a particular life. But the interpretations differ; Buddhism, like Christianity, has its schools and divisions. Dialogue, as in this case, sometimes underlines the differences within a tradition more than those *between* traditions. Attention must be paid to the historical context within which a tradition develops as well as to the history of interpretation and to an assessment of the state of scholarship itself.

Buddhist scholarship in Britain has tended to emphasize the *Theravāda* end of the spectrum. This is mainly due to historical circumstances. While French scholars had access to the *Mahāyāna* through their colonial empire in Indo-China, the British experience began in the island of Ceylon where the ancient *Theravāda* tradition had flourished for over two thousand years. The Pali Text Society, founded by T. W. Rhys Davids in 1881, has been responsible for making available to the West the fullest and most coherent account of Buddhist teachings. Fullest, however, does not necessarily mean oldest or most reliable. Contemporary Buddhist scholarship is more conscious of the—admittedly fragmentary—texts preserved in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese. *Theravāda* can now no longer be accepted as the sole record of 'original' Buddhism. Hence the inter-faith theologian notes two developments: a re-evaluation of the *Mahāyāna* and a concern with the methods of social anthropology.

The story of the West's intellectual encounter with Buddhism is told in Guy Richard Welbon's extremely readable *The Buddhist Nirvāna and its western interpreters*. The more 'ecumenical' spirit in contemporary Buddhist scholarship is reflected in the survey edited by Charles S. Prebish, *Buddhism, a modern perspective*, while the work of the late Richard H. Robinson on *Mādhyamika* and David Snellgrove on Tibetan Buddhism has done much to change the perception of *Mahāyāna* in the English-speaking world. Theologians will find much to admire in the work of Paul Williams, himself a *Mādhyamika* scholar and practising Buddhist. As its title implies, his recent book, *Mahāyāna Buddhism, the doctrinal foundations*, is an attempt to explain the inner coherence of an enormously confusing mass of beliefs, theories and practice. Williams accepts totally the doctrinal diversity of Buddhism but sees this 'not as a scandal but something to be proud of, indicating a richness and multi-faceted ability to aid the spiritual quest of all sentient, and not just human, beings' (p 1). His scholarship is impeccable and his control of sources, both primary and secondary, quite extraordinary. Not only does he provide a highly plausible theory of *Mahāyāna* origins but makes much of the traditional interpretation of the texts—notably the vexed question of the meaning of *śūnyatāvāda*, the doctrine of nothingness—accessible to the Christian theologian.

Western interpretations of Buddhism are forever requiring adjustment—if only because Buddhism has long ceased to be a purely eastern phenomenon. At the same time a more accurate knowledge of the different traditions as they are actually lived may help Christians to correct some of the unhappier stereotypes which sprang from the nineteenth century quest for the 'pure gospel of original Buddhism'. A major influence here is Richard Gombrich, whose recent social history of *Theravāda* is a notable example of how the study of context can complement the more traditional concentration on the textual tradition. Steven Collins writes more as a philosopher concerned for the broader questions of cultural hermeneutics but, as with the work of the anthropologist, Michael Carrithers, the Christian theologian is given a thoroughly reliable account of an enormously varied tradition, but—above all—a tradition which is quite radically *distinct* from anything Christians are used to thinking of as 'religion'. Although very different in their approach, the one an academic historian of religion standing outside the tradition, the other very much an 'insider', Collins has much in common with Williams. Collins focusses very precisely on the issue of personal identity which is raised by the *Theravāda* doctrine of *anattā*, or 'no self'. His main concern is to give a positive interpretation of a concept which, more often than not, has been misunderstood by western theologians and philosophers alike.

Together with the interpretation of its correlate, the more celebrated and enigmatic *Nirvāna*, the nature of what Collins calls 'Selfless Persons'

leads us into the heart of the Buddhist tradition. The temptation is to take off into the heady realms of scholastic metaphysics, the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*. Collins resists this. Like Gombrich he is anxious to overcome the narrow interpretation of Buddhism as a purely monastic tradition. The influence of the laity whose traditional role is the support of the *saṅgha* goes beyond that of providing food and shelter. Not only does he manage to explain much of Buddhist philosophical terminology to the western layperson, he also draws our attention to the rich imagery—of houses, rivers and vegetation—in which it is embedded. Attention to these, insists Collins, will make us more conscious of the extent to which unanalyzed and unconscious metaphors dominate western thinking. To talk of the physical body as a house, for example, should not be interpreted as an attempt to show how there is something unchanging in the human person. The correct and properly *Buddhist* context in which house-imagery has to be interpreted is that of the noble eightfold path. In the classic text, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, this is depicted as the movement of the householder, 'leaving home for homelessness'. The house is, in fact, an image of a world of constant flux and movement.

Buddhism denies not just the concept of a permanent ground to human experience but the very sense of uniqueness or individuality in the experiencing subject. Everything is a flux of becoming; the 'self' may no more be isolated than the Real may be described in concepts or reduced to an exercise in logic. The Buddha's silence says more about *Nirvāṇa* than many a learned treatise. Which is not to say that his teaching of *Dharma* does not have a positive role to play. For the Buddhist, linguistic forms are strictly functional. Like a boat they are to be used to enable the traveller to cross to the further shore; once on the other side they can safely be abandoned. This ruthless pragmatism which ultimately renounces all distinctions or—to put it another way—sees everywhere only 'emptiness', the absence of any concept of inherent existence, is what most obviously differentiates Buddhism from Christianity, leading to many a tedious question about whether it is appropriate to call Buddhism a 'religion', a 'philosophy', a 'way of life' etc. The current development of Buddhist studies should give us food for thought. Buddhism is often regarded as 'atheistic', but such a term only makes sense in an overtly theistic context when we know what it is we are supposed to deny. Nor are any other of the endless western 'isms' which surround interpretations of Buddhism any more successful. The radical thinking of Don Cupitt, for example, is less a response to Buddhism than it is used to illustrate his over-riding Christian concerns.<sup>2</sup>

A much more positive attempt to engage the whole 'Buddhist atheism' controversy is to be found in Raimundo Panikkar's *The silence of God*, subtitled provocatively *The answer of the Buddha*. The book, published in Spanish some twenty years ago, records in typically idiosyncratic fashion

the author's personal journey into Buddhism. Its origins are to be found in a contribution to an encyclopedia of contemporary atheism. Buddhism, quite simply, is an 'atheistic religion': a way of salvation which eschews all dogmatism and speculation about the Absolute. What is necessary is what is to be done. Panikkar provides all the most controversial texts on four key areas: the denial of the self, *Nirvāṇa*, the nexus of conditioned origination and the fourteen propositions which, according to the tradition, the Buddha 'answered' with his famous silence. But perhaps the most useful aspect of Panikkar's work is his determination to place Buddhism within the wider framework of Indian speculative philosophy. For the Indian mind the problem is not the existence of the unconditioned over against the conditioned but the nature of the relative *vis-à-vis* the Absolute. That everything which exists should be One is not a controversial point; the difficulty is over the nature of the Many, the multiplicity which makes up this world and the variety of sentient beings it contains.

The Indian wonders not about God or the beyond, but about the religious dimension—a dimension at once transcendent and immanent—of cosmic existence, human existence included. The Indian wonders about the invisible dimension of this visible world—a question of pure faith, then (p 61).

Another fully developed—but more manageable—theological account of the Buddhist-Christian encounter is the thesis developed by John B. Cobb which looks for a mutual transformation of Buddhism and Christianity. Although comparatively short and including lengthy introductions on the development of the dialogue movement and western interpretations of Buddhism, the book records Cobb's dialogue with the *Mahāyāna*, and particularly the devotional *Amida* or Pure Land tradition. Cobb questions the assumption made by some Christian theologians that Buddhists and Christians deal with the same 'transcendent ground of reality'—the one noumenal beyond the phenomenal. The concept of *Śūnyatā* is clearly not to be equated with God as an object of worship, still less as creator. But neither is it obvious that it has the same connotations as Eckhart's Godhead, the apophatic Absolute beyond all images, or is simply another version of Sankara's advaitic experience of the union of Brahman and *Ātman*. Cobb defines *Nirvāṇa* in Theravādin terms as 'the cessation of all craving or clinging, including attachment to God, to self, and to understanding' (p 76). Put like this, he says, *Nirvāṇa* is a simple matter. The difficulty lies in practice and in the overcoming of the concept of the self as ego, as a substantive and independent entity.

So far our attention has been almost totally caught up with the academic-philosophical end of the dialogue. But, as is clear from Cobb's highly persuasive reflections, very few of the key concepts make any sense

outside the reality of lived experience. To that extent Hans Küng's dialogue with Heinz Bechert in his *Christianity and the world religions* has a somewhat odd feel to it, being essentially the record of an academic seminar rather than an engagement with living persons. Küng's reading of other faiths is partial; he tends to concentrate on one school (Pure Land in Buddhism) at the expense of a whole variety of interpretations. There is clearly something to be gained from a debate in which Buddhists and Christians argue about the correct interpretation of aspects of their respective traditions. One of the problems is that Buddhist scholarship is still in its infancy; we are, for instance, as Carrithers points out, in the paradoxical situation of having a better idea of what the Buddha thought than of what century he lived in. What then is the alternative? If, as Cobb suggests, we are aiming for a mutual transformation there is no doubt that at the purely intellectual level there are insuperable difficulties. It will be a long time before buddhological scholarship becomes accessible to Buddhists, let alone to Christians. Hence the need to complement this type of dialogue with one which leads into and springs from a direct engagement at the more existential level.<sup>3</sup>

Many Christians, monks and lay, have greatly enhanced their own spirituality through the study and, more particularly, the practice of Buddhist meditation. Thomas Merton is only the best-known. The late Tony de Mello owed much to his experience of the *Theravāda Vipassanā* or insight form of meditation, while a number of Jesuits in Japan have long been engaged in building links with the Zen tradition. William Johnston is probably the best known, if only because of his prolific and accessible output. The drier, more laconic style of Hugo Enomiya Lassalle impresses by the sheer profundity and daring of his observations. A Zen-master in his own right, Enomiya is probably the most reliable guide to the practice of Zen by Christians. For him Zen is not just a useful structure or introduction to 'true' prayer. With copious references to Christian mystics like Ruysbroeck and the author of the *Cloud* he shows how Zen actually strengthens faith while at the same time destroying the reliance on images and concepts which is final impediment to true enlightenment or—as Johnston puts it, in Christian terms—to true conversion. Using the parable of the prodigal son Enomiya shows how traditional 'discursive' meditation leads to a simplification of consciousness which is very similar to that which is developed through the use of the Zen *koan*. Similar yet not the same: in this form of Christian prayer the dualism of subject and object remains. In other forms we may well come closer to the Zen experience and Enomiya does not hesitate to produce a chart of correspondences (and differences) between the stages of Christian and Buddhist meditation.

Many Christians have found in the very simplicity of *zazen* an important contribution to their spiritual lives. Far from leading to a rather empty

syncretism, dialogue with another faith (and still more a practical contact through meditation and social action) ends up strengthening faith, not destroying it. As another, less well-known Jesuit Zen-master, the Indian Ama Samy comments,

When a Christian does Zen, he does Zen as a Christian and not a Buddhist—i.e. he goes into Zen as he is. Therefore there is no question of the Christian putting on the Buddhist faith. The Christian enters as he is, and is challenged by Zen to radical faith, hope, surrender.<sup>4</sup>

Cobb attempts to understand Buddhism by shifting from the intellectual to the experimental. So in his own fashion does Panikkar. Enomiya and Merton move in the other direction. Together they straddle the divide between the intellectual and the contemplative forms of dialogue just as that represented by Lynn de Silva's *The problem of the self in Buddhism and Christianity* shifts into the social form. All in their very different ways show how much the Christian theologian has to listen to the context in which the language of the other is articulated. Thus Cobb finds himself addressing the nature of faith, Enomiya the nature of mystical experience, while de Silva focusses on personal identity. But for all the way forward lies in recognizing what is meant by the concept of perfect freedom or enlightenment—and the human values which this implies. As in all religions, so in Buddhism, the relationship between faith and action is a crucial issue.

What makes humanity 'fully alive'? We speak very easily in the West as if 'person' was by itself an expression of value; in Buddhism re-evaluation of this concept has to be established over against the brahmanical way of thinking about the human person in social, that is to say *caste*, terms which subordinated the individual to the group. Buddhism developed instead the ethical approach which is at the heart of the Middle Way. Thus the familiar picture of the remote impassive sage seated in solitary splendour under the Bo-tree is misleading. The enlightened one who represents the negative judgement on linguistic constructs needs to be combined with the figure of the compassionate one in whom enlightenment becomes effective for others too. Wisdom, *Prajñā*, and compassion, *karuṇā*, are complementary values. Only the one who is enlightened knows how to exercise compassion, but, equally important, only through the exercise of compassion for one's fellow sentient beings does one become fully enlightened.

The link between the two is the subject of Aloysius Pieris's book, *Love meets wisdom, a Christian experience of Buddhism*. Pieris was a close colleague of Lynn de Silva up till the death of the latter in 1982 and continues to share many of his concerns, particularly the social and ethical teaching

of the Buddha. He acknowledges in de Silva's interpretation of *anātmavāda* a clear link with Christian spirituality and the key concept of *creatureliness*. His recently published collection, *An Asian theology of liberation*, places him in the forefront of theologians committed to the struggle of the poor for justice in the Third World. Together with the volume on the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, it witnesses to the author's over-riding concern to develop a theology based on what he sees as the key factors of life in Asia: the overwhelming poverty and religiosity of the people. Buddhism is part of that religious *milieu* but, more important, through its monastic spirituality Buddhism has made the ancient Indian practice of *sannyāsa* or renunciation part of the religious ideology which affects the lives of all people. The *sangha*, the community of Buddhist monks, has often, especially in its *Theravāda* form, been interpreted in elitist terms; two ideals have been taught, one for the monks, and a secondary, lesser ideal for lay-people, whose purpose seems often to be simply the provision of material support for the few committed to the radical search for the ultimate *Nirvāṇa*. Whatever truth there may be in the distinction, Pieris has another point to make: what distinguishes Buddhism from its Hindu origins is the missionary dimension of the lives of monks and lay-people alike. The two work together. What may be distinguished is the spirituality typical of each: the gnostic and agapeic idioms—the 'language of liberative knowledge' and the 'language of redemptive love'. According to Pieris these are complementary languages to be found not just in Buddhism but within all religions. In his treatment *Gnosis* and *Agape*, *Prajñā* and *Karunā*, Wisdom and Love, represent the key terms within which Buddhists and Christians may pursue the dialogue and learn to challenge one another. Pieris gives many examples. One must suffice. Now that we are all ecologically minded, his words about Buddhist reverence for all living things could usefully be taken to heart: 'Buddhism knows a way of relativizing the world *vis-à-vis* the Absolute without in any way "instrumentalizing" it' (p 86).

At whatever level the dialogue takes place—in learned journals and conferences between academics, in the silence of meditation halls or in joint action pursued by concerned and committed people of faith—the key issue is clear: the nature of human perfection. Buddhism quite explicitly raises the question of what it means to be a person, to be *oneself*. Where is my true identity to be found? The Buddhist answer, contained in the title of Collins's book, is that 'I' exist only in some dialectical Middle Way, as part of a network of relationships with other 'selfless persons'. Today more than ever theologians are aware of the relativity of all cultural forms and therefore of the need to listen constantly to the lessons of praxis. In a multi-cultural society this is the one way; now more than ever the meaning of human personality is found in the dialogue, not in the 'I' or in the 'Thou' but in the relationship which is established



between us. We are only complete insofar as we are prepared to join in the game which all human beings—Christians and Buddhists, members of the great world faiths and those with little faith or none at all—are invited to play.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a slightly different but complementary account, cf Hans Waldenfels, 'Buddhism and Christianity in dialogue: notes on the intellectual presuppositions', *Communio* 15 (Winter 1988), pp 411-422, which, as the title implies, spends more time on theological issues, particularly on questions for Christology.

<sup>2</sup> Hence the comment of Steven Collins that Cupitt does 'no violence to Buddhism' but that his theology owes more to the Christian mystical tradition than it does to a true Buddhist *ontological* selflessness. *Theology* 86 (1983), pp 46-48.

<sup>3</sup> While so much of this aspect of the dialogue has been initiated from the Christian side there are exceptions. No account would be complete without mention of the work and influence of Masao Abe upon whom has fallen the mantle of the late D. T. Suzuki. Abe, who started in the Pure Land tradition, is an uncompromising exponent of Zen. He is the author of innumerable articles, some of which have been collected in his highly influential *Zen and western thought* ed W. R. La Fleur, (London, Macmillan; 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Cf Ama Samy S. J.: 'Inculturation, the case of Zen meditation', *Vidyajyoti*, (Delhi, January 1989), pp 56-61.