

Buddhist – Christian Dialogue

**Four Papers from The Parliament of
the World's Religions, December 2-9,
Melbourne, Australia**

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Buddhist - Christian Dialogue

The Parliament of the World's Religions,
December 2-9, Melbourne, Australia

Sunday, December 6, 2009, 11:30am–
1:00pm

The program of the Parliament paraphrased this workshop in such words as those below. Its four papers stimulated much interest and flowed together in a productive manner that elicited a lively interaction. For that reason, the essence of these papers has been reproduced here for wider appreciation.

The program included four parts and aimed to foster a spirit of enquiry and openness:

- *Participants were offered examples from the Canonical gospels, the Gospel of Thomas, as well as writings from Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, and others.*
- *The workshop presented approaches to objectless meditation, and explored its vital place in uncovering wisdom.*
- *Presenters showed how issues raised by dialogue in contexts of pluralism could be explored collaboratively by Buddhists and Christians by retrieving strands of tradition such as compassion, empathy, care and forgiveness.*
- *A recently released book was introduced, 'Dharma as Man', which is an ancient story read each evening by an old man to his young son in rural India. It is a universal tale condensed to combine the world's stories, which renders Jesus' life into Buddhist concepts in an ancient Indian setting.*
- *There was a discussion of how traditions might better understand their shared vocation to alleviate suffering through interreligious dialogue and shared inter-spiritual contemplative silence.*

Presenters:

Dr Lindsay Falvey is a professor of the University of Melbourne, where he was previously Chair of Agriculture, Dean of Land and Food Resources among other roles. A life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge, he writes on religion, agriculture and sustainability from multi-religious perspectives.

Dr John May has a doctorate in Ecumenical Theology, Muenster and a doctorate in History of Religions, Frankfurt. He was Ecumenical Research Officer in Papua New Guinea from 1983-1987 and Associate Professor of Interfaith Dialogue at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin from 1987-2007. He is from Melbourne originally.

Dr Vincent Pizzuto is Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of San Francisco. He has a PhD in New Testament theology from Leuven, Belgium. Vincent was ordained to the priesthood in the Celtic Christian Church (an independent Catholic church) in 2006, in which he now ministers to a small contemplative community. He has a number of publications and his primary theological interests lie in New Testament theology and Christian mysticism.

Dr Padmasiri de Silva is a Buddhist philosopher in the Theravada tradition and has written a number of books about Buddhism in the modern context. He has held teaching positions in Sri Lanka, Singapore, the US and New Zealand, and is a research associate with the School of Historical Studies at Monash University.

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Dharma as Man: The Gospel Story in Buddhist Terms

Lindsay Falvey

Dr Lindsay Falvey is a professor of the University of Melbourne, where he was previously Chair of Agriculture, Dean of Land and Food Resources among other roles. A life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge, his Ph.D., higher doctorate (D.Agr.Sc.) and honorary D.Agr.Techn. are from Queensland Melbourne and Thaksin universities respectively; he writes on religion, agriculture and sustainability from multi-religious perspectives. <lindsay.falvey@gmail.com>

Summary: *The book, 'Dharma as Man' is styled as a novel to relate the Christian Gospel story in Buddhist concepts in an Indian setting. That story is read aloud by an aging father to his precocious young son over several evenings in a parallel story. The book is the product of a series of similar adventures in Buddhist-Christian dialogue beginning with inspiration from agricultural research drawn from interpretations of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's lectures in Chiang Mai in 1967, which led to a series of vaguely related publications. The first was a 2000 academic book of Thai agriculture, which led to a 2002 translation of an earlier talk given by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. Then came the 2002 Buddhistic version of the so-called 'Q' document of the possibly original sayings of Jesus as the book 'The Buddha's Gospel', which was later followed by a studious book comparing sustainability in Buddhism and Christianity, 'Religion and Agriculture'. Then followed a 2007 novella 'Reaching the Top' about a young man's search for meaning and a 2008 'translation' of the most existential and Buddhistic book of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes, into rhyming couplets of Buddhist concepts. Now comes the latest product, 'Dharma as Man' – it is not religious in any belief-based sense and is part of all these attempts to explain the sameness of the underlying messages of the two traditions, retaining their down-to-earthness, humour and at times, anti-social characters.*

Introduction

Religion is invoked as the cause of so much confusion and violence involving all mainstream traditions. Religious dialogue is often seen as a means of defusing some of this misguided passion. It is also seen by some as an end in itself – a reason for theologians to have conferences – even ‘Parliaments’. But to me, these all miss the point. Just as religion is more an excuse than a reason for differences, so the essence of religion is not amenable to discussion of differences under the rubric of dialogue. And this is because, quite simply, the essence may be better understood by seeking parallels and similarities that point to the same underlying message. This is not a glib recital of such trite statements as ‘all religions teach us to be good ...’, it is the result of countless great minds across millennia who have been open to a world beyond their own cultures. It is what, for example, Alfred North Whitehead meant when he paraphrased two traditions in the words; ‘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 [Jesus] life’.¹

It is in that spirit that I discuss my recent book, ‘Dharma and Man: A Myth of Jesus in Buddhist Lands’. It is, for me at least, a bridge between traditions that have formed large parts of my life, and which I now see commencing their own dialogue in Western society. I will later explain why I wrote that book, but first let me describe the process that led to it.

In 1967, in Chiang Mai Thailand, a momentous step in Buddhist-Christian dialogue occurred. At the Thailand Theological Seminary of what is now Payap Univeristy, the

¹ A.N. Whitehead (1996) *Religion in the Making - the Lowell Lectures*. Fordham, New York.

Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture invitee in that year was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk already well-known as an interpreter of essential Buddhism. Published in English as an approximation of his Thai lectures under the title 'Christianity and Buddhism',² the content of his lectures heralded a novel approach to dialogue. I have since had the privilege of reading a doctoral thesis prepared by a Thai Christian at a UK university³ in which the original Thai lectures were referred to and was surprised to discover that the more accessible English version is more a paraphrase than a translation of the lectures. Given their significance, I assume a translation has since been conducted or is in train.

Why was Buddhadasa's presentation so significant? The reason I give this paper is that he attempted to use Christian terminology to explain the essence of Buddhism – not Thai Buddhism, but essential Buddhism. Not only did he note such matters as others had done and continue to do, such as the similarity of Matthew 5:17⁴ to the Mahasihanada Sutta Majjhima-Nikaya 12/37/46⁵ and the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12 to Dhammapada 129-130,⁶ but he also open-mindedly sought equivalents to Christian concepts that are routinely denied to exist in Buddhism. The obvious example is God. If one had to define the role that Buddhadasa saw God fulfilling for the Christians with whom he came in contact, then he chose Dependent Origination (Conditioned Co-Production). This, I consider to be extremely generous, and of course it is fraught with

² Buddhadasa Bhikku. (1967) *Christianity and Buddhism: Sinclair Thompson Memorial Lecture 5th Series*. Thailand Theological Seminary, Chiang Mai. Pp 125.

³ Bantoon Boon-Itt (2008) *A Study of the Dialogue between Christianity and Theravada Buddhism in Thailand, as presented by Buddhist and Christian Writings from Thailand in the period 1950-2000*. Ph.D. Thesis, Open University, St. John's College, Nottingham.

⁴ 'do not suppose that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete'

⁵ 'the Tathagata, the perfected one, appears in the world for the gain of the many, the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world'

⁶ 'Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'

potential for misunderstanding. But it is consistent with his thesis that everyday language allocates only superficial meanings to the words about personal development or spiritual matters. This approach led to deep understanding such as his disciple Santikaro explained about the paradox of Matthew 10:39 – ‘he who loses his life for my sake will find it’ being correlated by Buddhadasa with the loss of the egotistical self.⁷

I have dwelt upon this point in order to emphasize its centrality to the approach of the works I am discussing, and in particular to ‘Dharma as Man’, which itself is an evolutionary product of a path defined by periodical milestones, some in the form of publications.

Milestones in Publications

My first foray into the field was to include a chapter on ‘Agriculture, Environment and Values’ in a detailed book entitled ‘Thai Agriculture: Golden Cradle of Millennia’.⁸ This was a comprehensive and in some cases subjective collation about the origins and evolution of Thai agriculture from diverse Thai and global resources. That unusual chapter included some aspects of Thai Buddhism with its inclusive animistic attitudes that had been fostered in recent decades into environmental language. Research for the chapter brought me into deeper contact with words of Buddhadasa whom I quoted in that otherwise academic book.

⁷ Santikaro Bhikkhu (2001) *Jesus and Christianity in the Life and Works of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu*. In Perry Schmidt-Leukel in cooperation with Thomas Josef Götz OSB and Gerhard Köberlin (2001) *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus: Papers of the Third Conference of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies* (St. Ottilien 1999). Published by Eos-Verlag in St. Ottilien, 2001. Pp. 179. Pages 80-103.

⁸ L. Falvey (2000) *Thai Agriculture: Golden Cradle of Millennia*. Kasetsart University Press (international distributor, White Lotus), Bangkok. 490pp http://www.iid.org/books_thai.php [also published in Thai - see http://www.iid.org/books_thai_version.php]

It was this exposure that led me to visit his forest temple at Suanmokh and eventually to translate a talk given by Buddhadasa to Agricultural Officials in 1991 at Chaiya under the title Agri-Dharma.⁹ The lecture may be best approached as a significant religious teaching using agriculture as an example, rather than as a discussion on agriculture for religious persons. Nevertheless, the key role of agriculture as a means of illustrating such traits as acquisitiveness and separation from the natural environment form part of the extensive Buddhist literature with which Buddhadasa had been imbued by a lifetime of study and spiritual practice.

The translation summarized it thus, 'This lecture to agricultural educators and officials uses dual meanings of key words as a mechanism to explain the deepest teachings of Buddhism in terms related to agriculture. It begins by interpreting the essential truth of and indeed the etymological origins of Dhamma as a duty and the performance of one's duty. It uses the Thai word for nature to introduce the linkage between the Dhamma and responsibilities of everyday life as a duty because life may be considered as borrowed from nature. In this context looking out for oneself selfishly is seen as the opposite of moral or natural behaviour, yet it is recognised as the basis of current society and agriculture. Development of society, economy, and one's spirituality are explained in terms of correct or unskilful development, with the conclusion that the primary duty of humans is their personal spiritual development to understand the true nature of all existence. An analogy of life and rice cultivation includes introductory historical and contextual comment before relating moral behaviour to traditional rice cultivation conducted communally to everyone's best ability to provide a harvest of personal peace and calm.'

⁹ A Lecture by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu to Agricultural Teachers and Officials on 25 March 1991 at Suan Mokkhapharam, Chaiya, Surat Thani Province, Thailand, translated by L. Falvey from tape transcribed by Lerchat Boonek (2001).
<http://www.iid.org/publications/buddhadasa.pdf>

From this experience, I found two trains captured my mind. One was a detailed and learned study that evolved after four years into the book 'Religion and Agriculture: Sustainability in Christianity and Buddhism',¹⁰ which analysed the roots of the popular morality of environmentalism. It concluded that the essence of neither tradition related to modern environmental evangelism. I shall not discuss that work further in this paper, except to note what I continue to feel is an often underappreciated and critical source of agriculture as the means for our urban sedentarization and occupational specializations that produced the great codified religious traditions. The second train developed into consideration of similarities between the essential nature of early Buddhist and pre-Christian writings, which found expression as 'The Buddha's Gospel'.

'The Buddha's Gospel: A Buddhist Interpretation of Jesus' Words'¹¹ took as its base, sayings that some theologians assert may be attributable directly to Jesus, free of the later additions that make the Gospels part of the rich literature of the New Testament. These possible words of Jesus elicited by textual analysis come out as a group of sayings of different levels of probability of age and authenticity in a document simply referred to as 'Q', which refers to 'source' or 'quelle' in German. These words seemed to me to be so similar to those of the oldest Buddhist scripture, the Dhammapada, and so I undertook to render them into Buddhist terminology, thereby revealing their common theme. The book included some discussion of the congruence between the two traditions in terms of shared elements of history and practices.

¹⁰ L. Falvey (2005) *Religion and Agriculture: Sustainability in Christianity and Buddhism*. c.350pp. Institute for International Development, Adelaide.

http://www.iid.org/publications/Religion_Agriculture.pdf

¹¹ L. Falvey (2002) *The Buddha's Gospel: A Buddhist Interpretation of Jesus' Words*. Institute for International Development, Adelaide. Pp74.

<http://www.iid.org/publications/buddhasgospel.pdf>

The process of preparing 'The Buddha's Gospel' was personally developmental, and the text itself attracted some interest, such that a summary was introduced, in another connection with Chiang Mai, in a presentation to the International Conference on Religion and Globalization conference of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture in 2003.¹² Of course, the idea of rendering one tradition into the words of another is not unique, but it is not usually undertaken by scholars within specific disciplines and in many cases is in fact frowned upon. Unbound by any such conventions, I naively persisted and enjoyed an entertaining international correspondence that followed and further stimulated by own self-understanding.

The experience of communicating about spiritual matters brought me into contact with a wider circle, and interestingly brought a number of equally secular friends into a closer interchange. And from these discussions, it seemed to me that a common experience could be detected, which I again attempted to capture in print. It proved evasive until I finally found that the only communicable form within my limited capabilities, was fiction. Never having written fiction before – in fact not having read much unless it was deemed 'high quality' – I needed to challenge my own prejudices, for surely I would not be able to meet my own arrogant standards! By 2007, these efforts had yielded fruit in the form of a short novel.

Entitled 'Reaching the Top: All Paths are True on the Right Mountain',¹³ the story deals with a group of friends in everyday life, and their search for something more in that life. It is described as 'the story of Lazuli, an average man with ordinary problems which, in his case, were enough to open his mind to something wonderful. Something that was already right in front of his nose – a mountain in the

¹² Conference organised by John Butt. Paper later published as Falvey, L. (2003) *The Buddha's Gospel: A Buddhist Interpretation of Jesus' Words*. Quest 2(2): 43-62.

¹³ L. Falvey (2007) *Reaching the Top: All Paths are True on the Right Mountain*. Pp68. <http://www.iid.org/publications/reachingthetop.pdf>

middle of his city that was virtually ignored. Improbable? Possibly, but then the events that follow somehow seem as natural and important as anything could be. And the story is simple, based on climbing a mountain and coming down again. But while access to the mountain is easy, it seems very few are interested in it. Lazuli and his colleagues resolve to explore the forgotten mount, their paths reflecting their individual characters, and the most common outcome is boredom leading them to return to the more interesting diversions of everyday life. But for Lazuli and his friend, and a few others they meet on the way, a new discovery awakens in them and they are never the same again – they are content. A short and positive tale; a parable.’

Presenting this in the form of a novel seemed to work, for there was more and positive feedback from readers than I was used to. I learned the power of the novel in appealing to emotions as well as intellect for multilayered subjects. Nevertheless, I remained intrigued by the work of geniuses of the millennia past, and in reading of them learned with interest that Western sages of recent centuries had often noted the more Buddhistic than Hebraic tones of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes. Having filed this observation away, it resurfaced during some mundane professional work in Saudi Arabia, just as many of my creative moods emerge in remote places. The calm pace of that misunderstood culture and the long quiet evenings gave rise to a Buddhist rendition of that old text in rhyming couplets, a homage to poetry of the original language that I could not read. This was printed cheaply as the ‘Pranja Anthology’¹⁴ – ostensibly under the name of Qoheleth, the narrator of the original.

It is described thus, ‘Ecclesiastes, the Greek name for the Hebrew book of that is transliterated as *Qoheleth*, forms

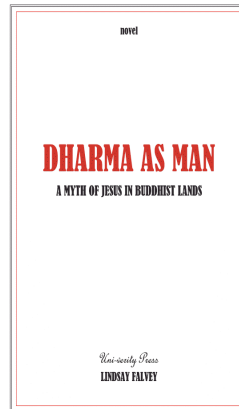
¹⁴ *Pranja Anthology* (The Book of Ecclesiastes rendered into Buddhist concepts in rhyming couplets). Pp38 (2009) http://www.university.org/publications/pranja_anthology.pdf

part of the wisdom literature of the Talmud and the Old Testament. Meaning something like ‘to gather’, it also evokes ‘anthology’, like a gathering of flowers, although it actually meant a religious gathering as in the Greek Εκκλησία. Across the ages its similarity to Buddhist notions has been noted, which leads to this rendering of Ecclesiastes in rhyming couplets based on a Buddhist understanding of life. Hence it is a gathering of the inflorescence of wisdom – *pranja* in Sanskrit – a “Pranja Anthology”.’

This may seem a strange pedigree for the book I am introducing here but it is, as I see it, part of a series of conditions that have led to the book ‘Dharma as Man’.

Dharma as Man

‘Dharma as Man: A Myth of Jesus in Buddhist Lands’¹⁵ is a novel that builds on these preceding works. It may appear similar to ‘The Buddha’s Gospel’ introduced above, yet it relies equally on the other works for its inspiration and approach. The cover describes it thus: “Dharma as Man” is an ancient story read each evening by an old man to his young son as they sit on a veranda in rural India. They read of a wise man, of the myths that grew up about him according to customs of storytellers of that era. They trace his attempts to relate his journey of personal development to live within the rhythm of the cosmos. It is a universal tale condensed to combine the world’s stories, which renders Jesus life into Buddhist concepts in an ancient Indian setting. It is not a religious book, and so will appeal to open-minded Atheists,



¹⁵ L. Falvey (2009) *Dharma as Man: A Myth of Jesus in Buddhist Lands*. pp250. Uni-verity Press, Australia <http://www.uni-verity.org>

Animists, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Judaists, Muslims, Taoists ... and Zoroastrians. Its fluid style is uninterrupted by the copious endnotes and glossary which discretely indicate sources and translated ideas that add multiple layers to the saga. The life of this enlightened Dharma is our own essential psychological path told through the gospel stories freed from God and dogma.' The following paragraphs are taken from sections of the book itself that describe its purpose and structure.

In this story, Dharma is a man searching for and finding insight and then trying, often without success to convey his experiences to others. He does it by using the ideas of his time, just as the Buddha does in his story, and which the modern storyteller explains sometimes in up-to-date terms. Thus Dharma speaks of gods but doesn't advocate belief in them, let alone see himself as one. Jesus is named Dharma to convey his life and teachings as being a presentation of the truth.

Who would want to read a rendition of Jesus' life in Buddhist terms? A wide and disparate audience I am told. Perhaps it is those who recall our underlying culture and seek clarity in place of belief. Or perhaps it is those who have not been offered any understanding of their own cultural origins, and who seek some spiritual dimension to life. While I cannot distil it down much further, I expect that readership will range from confident Christians to bemused Buddhists, which means both theists and atheists, and both those who like spiritual parables as well as those who just like a good story. Some have called it the greatest story ever told – it isn't, but it is a version of a universal human story, and as such may well be widely read.

It is the same story told by different cultures. It doesn't belong to Christians any more than to Buddhists or to any other '-isms'. In fact the gospel story so differs from Church doctrine that it could well be of a different religion – Jesus-ism. Such a thought may make some Christians

wary of a rendition of 'their' familiar story into Buddhist language. Likewise, Buddhists attached to 'what the Buddha said' may shy away from sharing enlightenment with a 'lesser' religion. For while both groups revere 'their' respective didactic fables, such fixed views might see this book as only entertaining fiction. This would lay it open to judgement in terms of fashions in storytelling style. And I suppose in that way it would disappoint. Its didactic fable style, optional footnotes, glossary and references seem misplaced in a novel. So such a story might suit neither cross-carrying Christians nor belief-based Buddhists, neither secular sophists nor authoritarian atheists. So, such a story might be widely ignored.

Widely read or widely ignored, our highest human potential is described in its pages. The unthinking replacement of a belief-based 'Buddhism' for the West's own cultural foundations is one of the motivations for the book. Exotic icons, colourful rituals, mind-diverting practices and ascetic ethics easily appeal to those without foundation in their lives. But I foresee such beautifully graven Buddha-images falling as their clay feet crumble under the heavy projections laid on their shoulders. Well has it been said that to reject one's cultural foundations is often naïve and usually dangerous to one's mental wellbeing.

Western cultures grow out of a Judeo-Christian tradition. Whether we like it or not, we derive much from the Bible, and even from the myth of Jesus in the gospels. Anyone who has studied the gospels with an open mind cannot help but be impressed by their multi-layered depths. Their allusion to, indeed appropriation of, Old Testament passages and quotidian terms to convey their spiritual message is a masterpiece in communicating the non-rational truths that so often escape formal religion. But learning from such genius requires us to have a level of biblical literacy and history that is as uncommon today as in illiterate times. No wonder its message is confused. The approach that I have taken here is to use Buddhist language and concepts to interpret the gospel story. From

that perspective, it might be seen as an attempt to clarify the confusion that surrounds the gospels and Jesus.

This book is not a defence of one or other religion. Rather, it is an explanation of Christianity through Buddhism. Its message is rationally simple yet experientially demanding. And it is not amenable to institutional control. Perhaps that is why its various iterations across the millennia have been sidelined, suppressed or ignored as heretical or synchronistic. Why should it be any different today? My response is that I think it can be – because we have wide access to other knowledge, other traditions and other worldviews. Also, we now acknowledge that we enjoy unprecedented material wealth yet feel insecure. We suffer ever-increasing psychological or spiritual poverty, in my view because we ignore the way things really are. That is what this ancient story is about. It is the same story that is the life myth created for Buddha and for Jesus, and for other seers.

The spiritual context of the message is congruent with Buddhism. In terms of temporal context, it seems likely that the iconoclastic Jewish sects of Jesus' time were pursuing separated and disciplined lifestyles. Far from being marginal groups, they were the culmination of centuries of Jewish insights independent of temples or priests. Jesus and John the Baptist may have belonged to such a group. This would explain their esoteric and scriptural knowledge, their lifestyles and their rejection of the socially respectable beliefs in resurrection. Furthermore, it would explain the hands-off approach ascribed to the ruling powers, for contrary to many fanciful beliefs, the area was under the beneficial peace of Roman rule. It was less oppressive than all contemporary alternatives.

In this world, 'Jesus-ism' and 'Paul-ism' were two of many sects when chaos accompanied the decline of Roman protection after CE70. Like others, they saw themselves as the interpreters of the truth of 'Israel' and gave new

interpretations to ancient teachings. But because sages know that patching an old garment with new cloth tears the old fabric, so the new fabrications aimed to replace the old rather than just patch it. And in Judaism it did, such that one definition of Torah is said to be 'the constant re-interpretation of Torah' or if you like, a continual 'dialogue' on personal spiritual development. But at the same time, Jesus' teachings seem to have been marginalised by Paul's version. And this easy interpretation combined with political expediency to find a religion for the populace in the interests of stability and control produced a religion that was to become powerful and expansionary, Christianity.

Christianity was thus from its beginning distant from the teachings of Jesus. Distant from the human existential quest played out by that gifted Jew, which was so similar to that which had occurred in Bihar in India 450 years earlier. Now we are distant in both time and space from those insights, and we write and read in such different tongues from the lost languages of Buddha and Jesus, and from those of our own ancestors. Thus we are doubly distant from the original teachings. And we are agents of this powerful and erroneous meme for second-hand self-transcendence. And make no mistake, we are its agents whether we like it or not, whether we rebel against it or not, whether we practice some other culture's religion or not. Just read any major Western newspaper where we are conspicuously espousing a package of world-solving advances that assume Christian values.

These same values continue to pervade us when we adopt a foreign spiritual tradition. We seem prone to fall in love with the exotic while failing to see its underlying sameness of intent. Just as surely as our Western tradition is mired in the mud and blood of bitter struggles, so are all the others. In all cases the earnest seeker looks beneath such superficial abuses of traditions to see their real intent. And when we do this, we see the same motivation in all traditions – the 'perennial philosophy' of Aldous Huxley if

you like. It is from that basis we can ‘translate’ others’ metaphors into our own language and vice versa, which is what this book – ‘Dharma as Man’ – does.

Jesus is renamed Dharma to convey his life and teachings as being an expression of the truth. In the same way so are other characters and places in the story named in Sanskrit, Pali or Thai to reflect similar meanings of their Hebrew, Greek or Latin origins. Or they may be the name of a character from the Buddha’s story for a similar role in the Jesus story. This can be simple parallels such as angel being rendered as ‘deva’ or disciples as ‘sangha’, but also includes John the Baptist being rendered as ‘Devapatha’ – divine path preparer,¹⁶ and more humorously Herod as ‘Suukaputra’, a Greek pun on his name.¹⁷

Rendering a well-known story through another culture’s concepts, especially a story that is the psychological mortar of many people’s defences, is bound to attract criticism. The product may well deserve criticism, but the process should not. Consider this. It is often forgotten that the written words of both Jesus’ and the Buddha’s stories are not in the languages they spoke and were written well after they had died. Jesus may have spoken in Aramaic and the Buddha possibly in Kosala or Magadhi Prakrit, but their stories are recorded in Greek and Pali. Both may well have been illiterate in any case. So scriptures about their

¹⁶ Devapatha here means ‘path of the gods’ or ‘divine path preparer’ and refers to John the Baptist in the Jesus story. In Dharma’s story as for Jesus, *Devapatha* is his slightly older cousin who has had similar spiritual practice and training and who initiates a method of spiritual development that Dharma continues, just as John does for Jesus in that story.

¹⁷ Suukaputra means son (*putra*) of a pig (*suuka*) and is used in Dharma’s story mainly to represent the character of Herod (*Suukaputra* II) in the Jesus story. It follows the suggestion that Herod (*Suukaputra* II) could, in a Greek (the language of the Jesus story) pun be rendered to mean ‘son of a pig’. This ancient pun may arise from family factional problems surrounding *Suukaputra* II’s succession, which had led him to execute his two sons. This in turn is supposed to have inspired the Emperor Augustus’ pun that it was preferable to be Herod’s (*Suukaputra* II’s) pig (hus) than his son (huios), possibly intending an incidental insult to Jews in the service of Rome, such as Herod (*Suukaputra* II).

lives and teachings are always second-hand interpretations in second languages. To interpret them into another set of concepts or language as done here is little different; that is unless one has a superstitious belief in words.

The above paragraphs are taken from a section called



'How to Read this Book' at the end of the story of 'Dharma as Man', and that is followed by 'A Note on Historicity' that similarly aims to

contribute to the constructive dialogue that highlights the sameness of spirit in these two of the world's spiritual allegories. It is not an attempt to revise history for that has been better done elsewhere. Ever since the West has reconnected to the East, similarities between Hebrew, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and other traditions have been noted by the curious, from Schopenhauer¹⁸ to Schmidt.¹⁹ Across decades, many have argued that the New Testament displays Indian origins, and our secular age allows these to now be weighed. Incidents relating to walking on water provide one example.²⁰ Word coincidences also present arresting similarities, as do other congruent teachings and parallel parables, life and miracle stories.^{21,22}

¹⁸ Schopenhauer (quoted in Zacharias P. Thundy (1993) *Buddha and Christ. Nativity Stories and Indian Tradition*. Brill, Leiden.)

¹⁹ Perry Schmidt-Leukel (2004) *The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2004*

²⁰ Norbert Klatt (1982) *Literarkritische Beiträge zum Problem Christlich-Buddhistischer Parallelen*, Köln. Quoted in Gruber, E.R and Kersten, H. (1995) *The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*. Element, Dorset.

²¹ René Salm (2004) *Buddhist Christian Parallels: Compiled from the Earliest Scriptures*. <http://www.iid.org/publications/rfinal.pdf> <http://www.iid.org/books.php>

²² Amore, R.C. (1985) *Two Masters, One Message*. Kuala Lumpur.

Various German references are offered – some of which may not usually be quoted in English works, and all of which seeks here to show similarities across a range of analytical approaches. However, seeking historical parallels is beset with temptations to exaggerate as a counter to the belief-bases of entrenched religions. So, while Gruber and Kersten²³ present a credible thesis in the main, Kersten's earlier work²⁴ about Jesus living in India is an exaggeration. The subheading of 'Dharma as Man' was initially 'A Myth of Jesus in Buddhist India' as still belied by the international cataloguing entry inside the front cover, and the word 'India' was changed to 'Lands' simply to avoid confusion with cultish beliefs of Jesus having being in India. That is not what this work is about and from my viewpoint such speculation is both irrelevant and counterproductive.

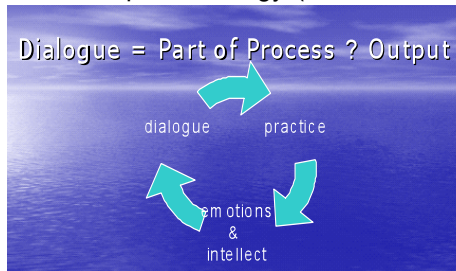
As the description of historicity concludes, 'such curiosities are pointless. For what does it matter who said what first? What matters is the meaning of the message. And in "Dharma as Man", the essential message that Dharma relates is the same as that in all enduring spiritual and psychological teachings. If there is an historical reason for this, it does not have to be that this is somehow 'the Truth' to believe in. It is more likely a common understanding of the functioning of our minds, and hence it appears through history wherever wise men met – and they probably did actively seek to meet each other. From that perspective, everything becomes clearer, including history, science and philosophy. I commend the thought-experience; it is the great path to the experience of oneness.'

This discussion has been cast in terms of dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, and presentation of idealized life stories, fictional or otherwise forms part of the process of communication. Other forms include

²³ Gruber, E.R and Kersten, H. (1995) *The Original Jesus: The Buddhist Sources of Christianity*. Element, Dorset.

²⁴ Holger Kersten (1994) *Jesus Lived in India: His Unknown Life Before and After the Crucifixion*. Element Books, UK.

scholarship or theology (a term now curiously adopted in



Buddhist scholarship) and spiritual practices. However, rather than see these as feeding into dialogue and then becoming an end

in itself, I see these as contributing to an iterative process where dialogue, practice and means of engaging the intellect and the emotions such as idealized lives, interact to the benefit of the practitioner's understanding,

So 'Dharma as Man' offers an interpretation of Jesus' life using Buddhist concepts. If essential Buddhism is a clear exposition of universal spiritual concepts, then Westerners attracted to Buddhism may beneficially acknowledge their cultural conditioning and engage this in their understanding of themselves. Just as Buddhism assimilated its essential teachings into various cultural forms as it progressed across Asia, so it is evolving to interact with the West and its underlying Judeo-Christian culture. A Buddha today might say, 'not by magic mantras, not by colourful ceremonies, not by marathon meditations, not by respect of any image of me or any archetypal Bodhisattva will you find enlightenment, but by reflection on yourself as part of all things'. Certainly the hero of this story, Dharma, would say it. And I think this is what Jesus was saying too.

Towards 'Collaborative Theology' – Buddhist and Christian

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'Theology' is usually thought to be a Christian project, once the proud Queen of the Sciences, now apparently discredited by the advance of science itself. Yet seen in historical perspective theology has been an eminently rational undertaking, a centuries-long effort of self-definition, self-transmission and identity-maintenance on the part of all the main Christian traditions. The enterprise of theology has at its disposal immense resources – libraries, institutes, seminaries, faculties, universities – and in many settings still enjoys great prestige; by the same token it is also closely monitored by such institutions as the Magisterium or teaching authority of the Catholic Church and by an academic consensus of scholars. Theology amounts to what might be called an 'immanent hermeneutic' of continual self-interpretation in the languages of Christianity's Jewish origins, of Greek philosophy, of Latin jurisprudence and of the countless vernaculars in which Christian faith has been articulated.

Christianity is by no means unique in this respect: all the so-called monotheisms, including a number of schools within Hinduism, have been faced with comparable problems in trying to account for divine transcendence in or beyond the phenomenal, transient world of empirical experience, though in the cases of Judaism and Islam, in which great philosopher-theologians wrestled with these very problems, the emphasis is perhaps more on jurisprudence, the recourse to *Torah* and *Shari'a* for answers to questions of practical living. When we come to

Buddhism, however, the question becomes more difficult, because here there is no 'self' or 'soul' to save, no God or Absolute distinct from the interconnectedness of all things, no substance or 'own-being' (*svabhāva*) even of the basic elements of reality, but only the co-origination of everything in mutual interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) that constitutes the world.

Yet Buddhism too, as it spreads out once more into contexts of secularity and pluralism in Asia and the West, is having to come to terms with its own diversity and with religious 'others'.¹ The result is an incipient Buddhist ecumenism which is making some Buddhist thinkers aware of Buddhism's own internal 'buddhological' problems, in a conscious analogy with theology as pursued by their Christian colleagues.² There is an opportunity here to go beyond what has come to be called 'comparative theology', as practised, for example, with extraordinary virtuosity by Francis X. Clooney in bringing Hindu and Christian theologians into dialogue.³ Possibly because of its Roman Catholic context, but also no doubt in order to maintain clear lines of demarcation between vastly different bodies of thought, one notices in such work a certain 'standing back' from the objects of investigation, a methodological disinterestedness such as that which characterised the phenomenology of religion. What I envisage is rather a *collaborative* theology arising out of the reciprocal engagement of thinkers from very different traditions on the assumption – a large one, which would need to be justified – that the problems they are dealing with are genuinely shared, if not identical. This raises

¹ See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions* (St Ottilien: EOS-Verlag, 2008), for a preliminary survey of the area.

² See John Makransky, *Buddhahood Embodied* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997); Roger Jackson and John Makransky, eds., *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

³ See Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

many thorny methodological issues which we cannot deal with here.⁴

Buddhists, it is fair to say, tend to be preoccupied with practice according to the lineage to which they belong, if indeed they are not simply 'cultural Buddhists' according to the traditions of the country in which they live. In both cases, there is an underlying assumption of the self-sufficiency and in this sense the 'truth' of the Buddha way. As is well known, the Buddha is said to have advised his followers not to concern themselves with metaphysical questions about the nature of reality (the so-called 'silence of the Buddha'). Yet the early Buddhists were immediately involved in attempts to justify their radical teachings to the guardians of Brahmin orthodoxy and the many schools of critical, even sceptical thinking among their contemporaries. For a thousand years in India there developed an elaborate tradition of intellectual self-articulation, which took on radically different forms as Buddhism moved into the vastly different cultures of China, Korea, Japan and Tibet. Early Indian thought has been well called 'philosophising in the mythical', but it is true to say that Buddhism arose in a philosophical context not unlike that of ancient Greece and quite unlike that of ancient Israel, in which every innovation was subjected to lively intellectual enquiry. In the case of the Buddhists, for example in the *Abhidhamma* or scholastic analyses of the Theravādins, this was always directed to clarifying the issues that arise in meditation practice, and the context of such investigations, especially once the great universities came into being in places like Taxila and Nalanda, was always the *vinaya*, the monastic discipline of the communal life. Yet, in a way quite analogous to the scholastic theologians of the Christian Middle Ages in Europe, this thinking was also philosophical, and to a very high degree of logical, psychological and ontological sophistication.

⁴ See J.D. May, "The Dialogue of Religions: Source of Knowledge? Means of Peace?", *Current Dialogue* No. 43 (July 2004), 11-18.

It is thus no surprise to learn that, like the Christians after them, the Buddhists erected immense doctrinal structures, uninhibitedly using rational argument to state and solve problems arising from the interpretation of the *dharmā*. The result, in both cases, was the elevation of Gautama and Jesus to the super-human, trans-worldly status of an 'Enlightened One' (Buddha) and an 'Anointed One' (Messiah, Christos). If it is permissible to use a term like 'divinisation' in both cases, then, historically at least, they are at least comparable, and in both cases these processes led inevitably to the paradoxes of transcendence-in-immanence:

- According to St Paul "God was in Christ", and for St John "the Word became flesh", yet nowhere in the Synoptic Gospels does Jesus explicitly claim to 'be' God. However, he soon became the object of worship in the strict sense reserved for God by his first Jewish followers ("the Word was God", according to the Prologue of St John's Gospel, and in the testimony of St Thomas the risen Jesus is "My Lord and my God", whose resurrection body transcends physical existence). This posed the problem of affirming the full humanity of Jesus in a way that was not docetic (mere appearance or illusion, what Karl Rahner once called 'God in a man-suit'). On the other hand, attempts like that of Arius to say that it was not Godself but 'only' the Logos, patterned on the Platonic Demiurge, who took on human form had to be refuted (hence the definition "true God from true God" by the Council of Nicaea in 325). This poses the problem of how to reconcile Jesus with monotheism, and it was resolved – at least verbally – in the great Christological definitions: In Christ there is the one divine Person of the Son, yet subsisting in two natures, divine and human, united yet distinct and unconfused; from this in turn flowed the necessity of defining the Trinity of divine Persons participating in the one divine nature (Council of

Ephesus, 431), in order to safeguard the divinity of the Son. These dogmatic formulae depended, however, on the appropriation and reinterpretation of Greek philosophical terms, and by today it is not too much to say that the meanings of 'nature' and 'person' as understood by the Fathers have been reversed.⁵

- As a Fully Enlightened One (*samyuk-sambuddho*), the man Gautama lived for another forty years as a 'living liberated one' (*jīvanmukti*), a 'non-returner' whose passions were completely extinguished. There are already the seeds of a paradox here: if the Buddha is in any case not a Self or distinct individual (*anattā*) and is already 'in' Nirvana, how can he continue in earthly existence? After his death, described as his *parinirvāṇa* or definitive passing into Nirvana, he is 'beyond telling', literally inconceivable and beyond the reach of language, yet his followers wished to think of him as somehow present and active in the world, the object of knowledge and even of devotion (*bhakti*, originally a Buddhist term). In controversy with their Indian opponents, who regarded Buddhism as a heresy, the Buddhist thinkers initiated an intensive doctrinal development in order to answer questions such as: Are those who have reached final liberation (*arhats*) still subject to temptation? Can Nirvana be attained by all? How can one explain the continuity of individual identity throughout life and a succession of rebirths? What is the exact ontological status of liberated ones in this life? Do the ultimate constituents of reality (the *dharma*s) have any reality of their own (*svabhāva*)? In grappling with these questions the various schools put forward doctrinal innovations: the Sautrāntikas resolved all existents into transitory 'moments' (*kṣaṇa*); the Sarvāstivādins claimed that all (*sarva*)

⁵ For a further discussion of these matters in a comparative context see J.D. May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), 136-147.

dharmas, whether past, present or future, ‘exist’ (*asti*); the Yogācāra or meditation school proposed that all experience and objects of experience may be interpreted as ‘mind only’; and so on. Out of these developments there emerged the teachings of the Mahāyāna ‘middle way’ or Mādhyamika schools on the ‘Three Bodies’ (*Trikāya*) of the Buddha and the transcendent Buddha-nature, on which more will be said below.

Jesus ‘is’ God; the Buddha ‘is’ in Nirvana: in order to make these unique statements plausible it was necessary in each case to undertake an immense intellectual effort, which resulted in the imposing cathedrals and temples of doctrine which now confront one another in proud independence.

My proposal is that these doctrinal developments may not be without similarity, which is not only interesting in itself (thus opening up the prospect of comparative theology) but may offer the possibility of real theological collaboration if it can be shown that the underlying problems they address are indeed shared and the conceptual systems in which they arise are really compatible. The challenge would be to show that the establishment of such common ground, at first unwittingly but now explicitly in a joint project, is the result, perhaps inevitable, of similar historical processes, for instance:

- Buddhists appear to have developed, quite independently, equivalents of the Christian concept of ‘grace’, relying on the ‘other-power’ (*tariki*) of transcendent Buddhas such as Amitābha (Jap. Amida) or transcendent Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara (Jap. Kannon, ‘he/she who hears the cries of the world’), who, over and above the ‘own-power’ (*jiriki*) of individual effort favoured by other traditions such as Zen, enable those who show good faith (Shinran’s *shinjin*) to attain salvation in a Buddha-field or Pure Land.

- Christians, in a kind of counter-movement, correcting a tendency to anthropomorphise the Divinity and become all too dependent on divine intervention, developed an apophatic *theologia negativa* in order to safeguard God's transcendence by affirming the ultimate unknowability or ineffability of God and criticising any attempt to objectify the divine (Eckhart's *Deitas* beyond *Deus*; Tillich's 'God beyond God'; the later Rahner's references to God as 'the mystery').

These appear to be complementary movements: from remoteness to presence in the Buddhist case, from too much familiarity to the 'infinite qualitative difference' (Karl Barth) between creature and Creator, from a 'positivistic' Christology to the Spirit, the 'unknown One beyond the Word' (Hans Urs von Balthasar), in Christian theology. We perceive a dialectic of God as Being/Non-being, Person/Non-person – in *both* traditions.

At the core of the Buddhist doctrinal developments stands the symbolic structure known as the *Trikāya* or 'Three Bodies' of the Buddha.⁶ This was elaborated in order to accommodate the insights of the *Mahāyāna*, the 'Great Vehicle' which in contrast to its traditionalist *Theravāda* rival (dubbed condescendingly by the Mahāyānists the *Hīnayāna* or 'Lesser Vehicle') allowed for new and startling revelations, far transcending those contained in the Theravāda Pāli canon. These dimensions of the *dharma* remained concealed because of the Buddha's use of 'skilful means' (*kauśalya-upāya*) to accommodate his teaching to the less mature minds of previous ages. In texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, which may have been composed as early as the second or third century CE and became immensely influential in Chinese and Japanese

⁶ In what follows I draw on an initial attempt to sketch out the basis of a collaborative Buddhist-Christian theology; see J.D. May, "Creator Spirit: A Narrative Theology of the Trinity in Interreligious Relations", Declan Marmion and Gesa Thiesen, eds., *Trinity and Salvation: Theological, Spiritual and Aesthetic Perspectives* (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2009), 161-180, here especially 171-175.

Buddhism, the Buddha is represented as a transcendent being illuminating the entire cosmos with the brilliance of his teaching (*dharma*) and the perfection of his nature (*dharmatā*).

The resulting systematisation of these developments distinguished a ‘manifestation’ or ‘transformation body’ (*nirmāṇa-kāya*) of the historical Buddha, which in terms of Christian orthodoxy would have to be called docetic; a ‘body of communal enjoyment’ (*saṃbhoga-kāya*), in which Buddhas appear in their full glory to delight the minds of Bodhisattvas and the eyes of the enlightened; and the formless ‘body of the transcendent Buddha-nature’ (*dharmakāya*), a conception which seems reminiscent of Hindu rather than Buddhist thought but which plays an important role in East Asian Buddhism.⁷ This yields the following schema:

Buddhology

Dharma-kāya
(eternal Buddha-nature)

Sam̐bhoga-kāya
(body of communal bliss)

Nirmāṇa-kāya
(earthly manifestation body)

Christology

Eternal Word

Risen Christ

Historical Jesus

We may take the term ‘body’ as a metaphor for something very like what ‘person’ represents in Trinitarian theology. The *Trikāya* doctrine, which may be traced back to the Yogācāra or ‘meditation consciousness’ school in the fourth century, while not an exact equivalent of the Trinity, is yet an invitation to reflect with Buddhists on the levels of

⁷ For a succinct presentation, using slightly different translations from those employed here, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), 108-112.

intelligibility involved in historical mediations of transcendence.⁸

In the background is the question of how a person, who has been liberated from all constituent factors (*khandhas*, the five 'groups' of constituents which condition our 'clinging' to existence, hence *upādānakkhandha*)⁹ and defilements (*kleśas*) or 'cankers' (*āsavas*), can continue in an earthly existence as a 'living liberated one' (*jīvanmukti*), as the Buddha did for a good forty years after his enlightenment. The shape of the problem, as we have seen, is not unfamiliar to Christians: How can the divine nature 'indwell' a human nature "without confusion or change, without division or separation"? (Council of Chalcedon, 451; note the double negatives, which rule out 'heretical' options while leaving the central mystery undetermined). Does this entail, for example, such a God-man's having two intellects and two wills? If *nirvāṇa* is radical 'emptiness' (*śūnyatā*), how could a Buddha walking the earth or appearing in glory embody it? Yet Buddha 'is' *śūnyatā*, just as Jesus 'is' God. It was the kind of problem implicit in *both* formulations that gave rise to the doctrine of the Trinity in the first place; it is perhaps comforting to know that the Buddhists have their own version of it.

Buddhist thought yields even more radical possibilities of collaboration. One would not normally think of the 'three factors of existence' (*tilakkhaṇa*), transitoriness (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness or 'suffering' (*dukkha*) and the unreality of the individual ego (*anattā*, 'not-self') as a trinity, but the pioneering Sri Lankan theologian Lynn de Silva began the process of interpreting them in these terms, getting as far

⁸ According to Makransky, the later Mahāyāna of India and Tibet postulated not three but four Buddha-bodies in order to ensure that the transcendent Buddha-nature 'without conditions' (*asamskṛta*) can be operative for the liberation of all beings bound to a 'conditioned' (*samskṛta*) existence, a distinction which also applies to the consciousness of a Buddha. His thesis is that the Madhyamaka thinkers wanted to show that Buddhahood is not simply incomprehensible, as the earlier Yogācāra school had maintained, but can be thought.

⁹ In particular the cognitive and conative 'formations', *sankhāras*. These five 'aggregates' do *not* amount to a substantial 'self' or 'soul', leaving Buddhists with the question *who* or *what* actually experiences liberation or *nirvāṇa*.

as developing what he called the “*anattā-pneuma* concept” in order to show that what the not-self teaching means for Buddhists is equivalent to what the Spirit means for Christians.¹⁰ Had he lived to complete it, the full schema would have looked like this:

<i>Tilakkhaṇa</i> (characteristics of existence)	Trinity
<i>Anicca</i> (transitoriness)	God the eternal (Father)
<i>Dukkha</i> (unsatisfactoriness, suffering)	God the redeemer (Son)
<i>Anattā</i> (not-self, no-substance)	God the sanctifier (Spirit)

The correlations involve an audacious linking of what appear to be polar opposites: the absolute transcendence of God with the insubstantiality of existence; the expression of God’s love in redemption with the source of our suffering in this very transitoriness; and the all-sustaining Creator Spirit with the emptiness at the core of the self and all being.

Emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Jap. *ku*) or Absolute Nothingness (Jap. *mū*) was to become the ultimate expression of this powerful dialectic, which attained its definitive form in the work of the third century CE philosopher Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school which he inspired in order to correct tendencies to ‘Brahmanise’ Buddhism by positing some kind of substantial Absolute. Form is emptiness and emptiness is form, just as *saṃsāra*

¹⁰ See Lynn A. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1979, orig. 1975); Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2005), 456-457.

and *nirvāṇa* are interchangeable; each is a manifestation of the other. This applies to language and concepts as well, ultimately indeed to *sūnyatā* itself: emptiness too is empty.¹¹

It is important to note in conclusion that these abstract doctrinal problems reappear in the fields of ethics and praxis, in both traditions:

- The fundamental Buddhist principle of non-duality can have the effect of removing the basis for ethical discrimination between good and evil, which may have been a reason for Japanese Buddhism's moral paralysis in the face of growing militarism and imperialism in the period leading up to the Second World War; though the practice of becoming one with the aggressor is in a certain sense equivalent to Jesus' admonition to "love your enemies", for critical Buddhists there is a real question about the possibility of a 'return' from the realisation of Emptiness to the murky ambiguities of history.
- Social activism, to which Christians instinctively turn when confronted with suffering and injustice, can fall prey to self-delusion and self-righteousness unless it is corrected by spiritual awareness and a capacity for introspection, practices at which Buddhism excels; in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, 'If you want peace, *be* peace'.
- Over-emphasis on sin, which can occur in either tradition, promotes moral rigorism, but the Christian doctrine that human sinfulness is 'original' and ineradicable has led to a somewhat one-sided reliance on the expiatory sacrifice of God's Son as the only adequate 'price' to be paid for our redemption; over-emphasis on ignorance (*avijjā*) as

¹¹ See J.D. May, "Nothingness-*qua*-Love? The Implications of Absolute Nothingness for Ethics", Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *Probing the Depths of Evil and Good: Multireligious Views and Case Studies* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2007), 135-150.

the root of human suffering and delusion, on the other hand, promotes what Christians call Gnosticism or salvation as awakening through self-attained liberating insight.

- A fundamental issue is the respective attitudes to history in the two traditions: whereas Christians tend to ask can 'hope and history rhyme' (Seamus Heaney), Buddhists, for whom past, present and future are non-dual, usually lack what Christians would call an eschatological perspective, which provides the context for the struggle for justice in a tension between 'already' and 'not yet'. This can go beyond the practice of compassion to condone a 'just anger', something that is inconceivable for Buddhists, whose compassion is directed to the harm their enemies are doing to themselves.¹²

The problems to be addressed in the context of rapid globalisation accompanied by intensifying polarisation of contesting political and religious forces demand collaboration by religious believers who are 'ecumenical' in the original sense, drawing on common reserves of such virtues as compassion, reconciliation, care, forgiveness, hospitality, empathy and sympathy to deal with the world's problems. These cannot be effectively retrieved, however, unless they are demonstratively derived from the religions' deepest spiritual and doctrinal sources. Indeed, the credibility of the religions as healers and reconcilers depends crucially on the spiritual quality of their own relationships to one another. This in turn demands a shared hermeneutic of dialogue orientated to both doctrinal clarification and ethical implementation, which can be constructively translated into a critique of social structures, political institutions and economic processes. At the heart of the example given by both Gautama and Jesus is non-violence, and on this the Buddhist and Christian teachings they inspired allow no compromise. For Buddhists the all-transcending compassion

¹² For many more such examples, see Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009).

symbolised by the Bodhisattva, for Christians the *memoria passionis*, the never-ending celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection, are the source and motivation for a collaboration in both theology and practice that is only just beginning.

Dying Buddha, Dying Christ: An Inter-Spiritual Response to the Amelioration of Suffering through Contemplative Silence

Vincent Pizzuto

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In the brief time that I have, I want to offer two apparently opposing iconic images for your consideration. That of the dying Buddha and that of the dying Christ—the two founders of our respective traditions.¹ And in holding out these two contrasting images, I will offer just a few comments about the way in which each of these point to a shared concern among Buddhists and Christians for the amelioration of suffering throughout the world:

On the one hand, Buddhists and Christians understand the cause of suffering somewhat *distinctly*. On the other hand, both traditions understand the practice of silence (call it meditation or contemplation) as a spiritual discipline which contributes to the alleviation of suffering both of the practitioner—and by extension, to those with whom they encounter. I will suggest that at the root of this shared insight lay the iconic images of our dying Masters—in whose death's we conceive ourselves to participate through the meditative practice of silence.

Having briefly explored this premise, I will conclude by suggesting that these iconic images may well provide a starting point for how our traditions might better collaborate in our response to suffering, not only through

¹ Fr. Thomas Keating, *Heartfulness*, 2009.

inter-religious dialogue, but perhaps more importantly, through what I would suggest is its counterpart: a shared “*inter-spiritual* silence.” This short presentation, then, is a call to action and non-action, a “detachment from” **and** an “entering into” the world’s suffering.

I begin then, with an image of the dying Buddha, most often depicted in a reclining posture, head in hand, and a peaceful smile projecting a serene and reassuring countenance. Surrounded by his beloved disciples he slips silently into the sleep of death. This is the face of the Enlightened One, detached from the tenacious cycle of desires and passions that otherwise imprison us within our own self-induced suffering. Here, in the beautiful face of the Dying Buddha, is Parinirvana. Freedom. Liberation.

By contrast, we call to mind the image of the dying Christ, who hangs crucified, naked, vulnerable, and humiliated. His face, grimacing and distorted in excruciating agony. Abandoned by his own disciples, he gasps his final words in utter despair, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” *This* is the face of Love Incarnate, who has entered into a world bent on an incalculable craze for suffering and violence. But in letting himself be struck down without resistance or retaliation, his own defeat would come to mark his greatest victory over this cycle of hatred and violence in the world. Here in the disfigured face of the Dying Christ, is Salvation. Freedom. Liberation.

Paradoxically, these two contrasting images of the dying Buddha and the dying Christ hold out for us an invitation for deeper comparisons between our two traditions, which point to a shared concern among Buddhists and Christians for the amelioration of suffering throughout the world.

Indeed, these iconic figures speak powerfully of a common call to compassion for others. The image of the Dying Buddha, illustrates his classic adage, “I teach suffering and the end of suffering.” Thus, death, for the Enlightened One, *marks the end of the cycle of suffering*, except in the

case of the bodhisattvas who in an act of compassion choose to reincarnate, so as to assist others toward their own enlightenment.

The death of Christ, however, does not so much mark the end of his suffering, but becomes the very thing, in itself, through which the Divine is “wedded” to human suffering—thus ultimately transforming it. In other words, Christ’s death marks a Divine descent *into* the lowermost abyss of human suffering, so that forever after all human falling becomes a “falling into” the divine compassion.² Christians are thus called to alleviate suffering by *entering into* the suffering of the other; and thus in union with the afflicted-one we help to carry their burden, as does Christ for humanity in his crucifixion.

But in **both** traditions, it is not enough that one simply admire their beloved Master. We are summoned to emulate them, even to *realize within ourselves that* which they already are. The Buddhist is called to his or her *own* Enlightenment, to the realization—as some Buddhist traditions would refer to it—of the fullness of Buddhahood. While the Christian is called to become an “*alter Christus*,” that is to say, ‘another Christ’ in the world, whereby they might profess as St. Paul did: “it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me.”

Without oversimplifying that which remains real distinctions between Buddhist and Christian approaches to meditation, and to the contrasting ontologies which underpin these approaches, allow me in my remaining time to suggest the role that shared silence might play as a ‘skillful means’ of reaching a deeper understanding of our common intention to alleviate suffering in the world. While inter-religious dialogue has certainly helped to foster a deeper intellectual understanding between our traditions, a next step may well be to more intentionally *practice silence* together, as this will lead to a very different kind of understanding between us.

² cf. von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*.

Meditation and contemplation are spoken of in both traditions as an entering into a kind of 'death' of the false self. While articulated differently, these practices nevertheless both serve to unmask illusion—as that which is projected by the mind, ego, or false self. Thus, inter-religious dialogue, while constructive in helping to understand one another intellectually, ultimately serves to construct mental concepts (as I am aware is even being done within this presentation!), which by and large are unmasked as “false projections” in our meditative practices.³

It is for this reason that I am suggesting more attentiveness to shared practices of “inter- spiritual silence” as a counterpart to “inter-religious dialogue.” We must practice in our meditation a kind of death to our over-identification or entrenchment in our identity as Christians and Buddhists. I am not suggesting here any kind of irresponsible syncretism, and I fully support the distinctive commitments we each make to our own spiritual traditions—in both belief and practice. However, where our religious commitments become divisive or conflictual, there is need to unmask the prejudices that accompany our convictions so to discover that deeper Truth which unites us all (even where we might still define that truth differently).

Thus, despite the very real philosophical and even theological differences we identify between Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplation, both practices might effectively be spoken of as *an act* of the practice of 'dying.' For the Buddhist this may be thought of as detachment from passions and perceived desires, until one realizes Nirvana—the extinguishing of all such false obsessions. For the Christian also, contemplation is a practice of detachment from the false self, the ego, and one's passions, as well as the very outcome of one's own

³ Or Rather, in the resulting awakening that emerges from such practices.

life—as the crucifixion starkly depicts. Dying is the ultimate detachment. And Silence trains us in the art of practicing mini-deaths, mini-detachments. It is here where *inter-spiritual silence* may well take its place amidst Buddhist-Christian Inter-religious dialogue.

In other words, if suffering emerges out of ignorance and attachment, I am suggesting that reflecting on the deaths of our respective Masters provides a key to understanding meditative practice as an *entering into* and *liberation from* human suffering, beginning with ourselves—our conceptual attachments—even those of a religious or philosophical nature.

The ongoing practice of shared silence among Buddhists and Christians can lead *both* to a deeper realization of our common mission to ‘embody’ compassion in the world, and thus support one another in greater acts of compassion toward others. As much as death is the “great leveler” so we may think of our shared silent meditation as the “great equalizer.” While words help to clarify distinctions, a practice of shared silence might better open the way to a more keen awareness of our fundamental unity.

Perhaps awaking to this unity is the greatest gift we can give to the world, because therein we gradually eradicate our own falsehood and together become ever more present to the needs and concerns of the other—who is no longer “other” but an extension of myself. Being together in silence, then, is not merely a issue of social justice, but more broadly of fostering global compassion. That is, compassion for *all living things*, for the very planet itself.

In conclusion, neither Buddhism nor Christianity can be fully understood without an unflinching acceptance of death. And in their very dying, both of our great founders provide us with an insight into death with all its potential for liberation through ultimate detachment. In order to demonstrate the relevance of this for what I am calling

“inter- spiritual silence,” I have suggested that our meditative practices be approached as a participation in the very **act of dying** of the Buddha and the Christ. For, in both cases their death’s effect a certain transformation, liberation and freedom. In these respective moments of death, it is not the *teachings* of the Dharma or the *words* of the Gospel that transform, but an “action”—that of dying. And thus, it is not through words finally, but rather through silence that Enlightenment and Salvation are ultimately realized.

Transformative Dialogue & Contemplative Traditions: A Buddhist Perspective

Padmasiri de Silva

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Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions

Siddhartha Gotama was the son of the ruler of the Sakyans in North India. As a prince living in India during the sixth century BCE, young Sidhartha was caught up in the very rich intellectual and spiritual ferment of the times. There were diverse philosophical groups ranging from materialists, sceptics, nihilists, determinists and theists. There was also the emergence of young rebels disappointed with the existing Brahmanical order, and Siddhartha too gradually became one of the rebels who finally left the riches of royalty to be a mendicant in the forest. Disturbed by the perennial issues of human sickness, anguish and suffering, he experimented with different techniques of meditation, severe ascetic practice, and ultimately found the middle way between the way of sensuality and asceticism and attaining enlightenment at the age of 35years, preached for 45 years through the length and breadth of India. His discourses given 26 centuries back reached us through an oral tradition, and they were eventually written down in Sri Lanka and later translated to English by the Pali Text Society in U.K. The most important scriptures available in English are the *Middle Length Sayings*, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, *Gradual sayings*, *Kindred Sayings*, and also the celebrated *Dhammapada*, *Itivuttaka* and *Sutta Nipata*. This last work *Sutta Nipata*, is considered to represent a very early strand of Buddhism, and I feel that this work presents a kind of charter for a contemplative philosophy.

The Buddha had a clear knowledge of diverse philosophical theories and in a sermon entitled the Network of Theories (*Brahamajala Sutta*), he examines 62 theories. Thus he was distinguished for his rational analytical skills, which becomes useful in certain contexts. But he declared that knowledge of the scriptures and rational understanding was no substitute for the practice of developing skills of virtuous living, character development and the most important, practice of meditation. The focus of this paper is the Buddhist contemplative tradition. To practice, one should also have a right philosophy of life and in spelling out the conception of man and destiny in the universe, it has been observed that the Buddha also mentions the framework for shared values with other religions: “The early Buddhist conception of the nature and destiny of man in the universe is, therefore not in basic conflict with the beliefs and values of the founders of the great religions so long as they assert some sort of survival (after death), moral values, freedom and responsibility and the non-inevitability of salvation” (Jayatilleke, 1966, 25). Such a religion can be beneficial to humanity though not in attaining the ideal of *Nibbana* (the Buddhist ideal of liberation from the cycle of existence). In fact the basic ethical codes of the major religions are similar, and they reject pure materialism and scepticism and have a message for dealing with human vulnerability to pain, anguish and suffering.

The Contemplative Perspective

In our academic culture most listening is critical listening, paying attention to inconsistencies and developing counter arguments. When we critique the student or the colleague’s writing, we mentally grade them. While this training has its point, we also need to cultivate what is called ‘deep listening’, the deep, open and ungrudging reception of what the other person is saying or presenting. We have also developed a whole culture of techniques focused on speed, accuracy, rigour certainty and

extending this perspective to many avenues in education. But we also need a less deliberative, and a more intuitive and slow approach to deal with situations which are complex, intricate and situations which sound paradoxical, where the normal logic does not work. My original training was in philosophy and in my long academic career the values of critical listening, rational analysis were upheld and was delighted to see Buddhism as a well integrated philosophy. But with my training in counselling, and my practice of meditation, as well developing a methodology of mindfulness-based counselling (de Silva, 2008), I began to see the Buddha as a pioneer of contemplative education, a discipline now emerging in the west with the pioneering work of Jon Kabat-Zinn.

In the context of counselling we slow down, relax, listen and respect the flow of life, instead of trying to control it or dissect it. “Flow” is a state in which people are so absorbed that nothing else matters, and today this quality is recognised as contributing towards many achievements in research, education and even sports. The Buddha’s use of meditation was primarily for the development of self-knowledge and work on the path to liberation from suffering. “When you are grounded in calmness and moment-to-moment awareness, you are most likely to be creative and to see new options, new solutions to problems. It will be easier to maintain your balance and sense of perspective in trying circumstances” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 269).

Three Forms of Meditation

There are three important kinds of meditation: ‘samatha’ , translated as ‘concentration’ or ‘tranquility’ meditation: It is a state in which the mind is brought to rest, focused only on one item, for example the ‘breath’. The mind is not allowed to wander, and when the focus on the breath is maintained for some time with an even rhythm, a deep state of calm pervades. Basically, the different kinds of meditation begin with a ‘samatha’ component. ‘Vipassana’

(insight meditation) is focused on understanding the nature of reality of the objects of perception, bodily processes, thoughts, feelings, or in general the mind and the body as impersonal processes. There is a special focus on three important facets of reality: impermanence, impersonality and suffering and we cultivate gradually a perspective to look at life, which is different from what is seen in the rush and strain of routine life. The third is the practice of universal kindness (metta) blended with compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. All these four meditations should be non-exclusive, impartial and not bound by selective preferences. Such a mind will not harbour national, racial, ethnic, religious or class hatred. While these have social dimensions, they are powerful as meditative states, which gradually get reflected in daily living. In breaking barriers and reaching others, Buddhist practice offers a pathway for reaching others of different faiths and cultures.

It is of great interest to note that the tranquility meditation has parallels in Hinduism, medieval mystic Christian traditions and Sufi Islam. During the last few decades the integration of meditation practice especially with cognitive therapy has brought meditation practice as a way of dealing with the routine management of life stresses and even being integrated into professional training programs. For all these reasons, in my presentation, I have moved out of the usual tool kits of philosophy and theology and drawn my metaphors from counselling.

Transformative dialogue is nourished by 'deep listening'. Issues are not pursued with an adversarial frame of mind that dominated what Deborah Tanner calls the "argument culture" (Tanner, 1998). To understand other points of view, one need to sit side by side and listen together, value listening, value understanding and respect the other than try to persuade the other. This perspective offers a new format for conversation. Instead of using the categories, 'true' and 'false', we begin to see that there are different perspectives of looking at an issue and that all

perspectives have their strength and weaknesses. Often what is called the ‘Truth’ has many sides, like in the story of the elephant and the seven blind men. Daniel Goleman says that cognitive science has well served linguistic and artificial intelligence but “neglects noncognitive capacities like primal empathy and synchrony that connects people” (Goleman, 2006, 334). Developing social intelligence and contemplative education have entered the mainstream of education in schools in a very limited way in USA and this presents a veritable background for inter-faith understanding in schools. There are multiple methods of deep listening and communicative skills that would build trust, friendship and harness group dynamics.

With years of good practice and developing a good understanding a person may get an insight into the nature of the self and the world, but even so if dogmatism and arrogance takes hold of his mind, that understanding is tarnished. Buddhism encourages people to use their understanding to develop a perspective for practice rather than a theory to defend. In a discourse dealing with disputes on theories, he says that arguments generate theoretical quarrels. Even the right view which guides the practitioner is compared to a raft used for crossing the river, after which there is no need to carry it over the shoulders. He also says not to use the *dhamma* for just debate and gossip and personal fame.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness

When the Buddha was asked about the best method to practice for attaining the Buddhist goal, he declared it was the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, thoughts and the laws that govern the body and mind. He has cited several benefits: purification of the being, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, eradication of physical and mental pain, helps to enter the correct path and give an understanding of the final liberation and gain confidence in one’s own practice.

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(* Available on Free Distribution)

All the Discourses of the Buddha, Pali Original and Translations published by the Pali Text Society, along with more recent translations are available.