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**Buddhism and Christianity:  
A Positive Approach**  
(With Some Notes on Judaism)

*M. O' C. Walshe*



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by

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## Author's Note

This essay, like previous ones by me on *Buddhism and Sex*, and *Buddhism and Death*, simply reflects my personal attempt to find, as a Buddhist, some honest answers to certain problems and questions. In trying to answer these questions for myself, it may be that I can be of some assistance to others who seek to do the same. I am by no means unaware of the magnitude of the task here undertaken, even in this brief outline form, nor of my presumption in undertaking it. Still, it may be of some use, at least as a starting point. I have called this 'a positive approach' because that, I am convinced, is what is needed: an un-polemical approach based on love, respect, and as much understanding as possible, with a willingness to accept as well as offer friendly criticism.

To explain my own approach to Christianity and my qualifications, such as they are, for writing this, it may be as well to state the following. Though of mainly Irish descent, I was not brought up as a Roman Catholic (or any kind of Christian): in fact, like many non-Catholic Irish I grew up (in England) with a certain anti-Catholic bias which it took me long to overcome. At school I attended Church of England chapel services and received a grounding in basic Anglican doctrine of a somewhat conventional nature, for which, however, I am grateful. My subsequent studies have led me into some of the by-ways of

mediaeval scholasticism among other obscure matters, and have also helped me to realise that things are not always what they seem.

My qualifications for discussing Judaism are even more tenuous, but since some acquaintance with this ancient faith is essential to an understanding of the origins of Christianity, I have done my best. A book I have found very helpful here is *The Authentic New Testament* by Hugh J. Schonfield (London 1955), a rendering by a Jewish scholar which might usefully be consulted side by side with the Authorised Version and/or the New English Bible. In quoting from the New Testament I have made *ad hoc* renderings based on these three versions, with occasional reference to the Greek.

Finally, and importantly, I sincerely hope that nothing written here will strike any Christian or Jewish reader as either offensive or seriously inaccurate. In any case it is not my purpose to offer a critique of Christian ideas. Modern Christians are no less critical than I am of certain traditional views.

M. O' C. W.

*To my Christian and Jewish friends.*

# **Buddhism and Christianity: A Positive Approach**

## **1. The Problem**

Hostility towards Christianity (or any other religion) is not, of course, a proper Buddhist attitude. Those who are aware of such feelings in themselves should seek to discover their roots and thus come to terms with them. Some suggestions about this will be given below. Ignorance is very understandable especially since 'Christianity' is a label that covers many things and a great diversity of attitudes, sometimes mutually contradictory. But in approaching any religion the only fair way to judge it (if we must pass judgement at all) is by considering its best and not its worst manifestations. Intolerance is fairly rare among Buddhists (though not quite unknown), but unfortunately it used to be the besetting sin, indeed the official attitude, of many Christians. All that has changed greatly in recent years. Christians and

Buddhists today can and often do meet one another with mutual respect and that brotherly love that both are enjoined to practise, agreeing to differ without acrimony, and perhaps each learning something of value from the other.

Most people would probably agree that the two greatest teachers mankind has ever known were Gotama the Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth (or the Christ). Their teachings, as transmitted, have much in common as well as some significant differences. We shall seek to explore both the differences and the common features, trying as far as possible to avoid being trapped by mere words or entangled in the 'jungle of views.' For example, it is sometimes said that Buddhism is not a religion because it is not theistic, and so conflicts with some dictionary definitions of 'religion.' But this merely shows that dictionary-makers are ignorant and fallible like the rest of us, and bound by the concepts of their own culture. Religion is the quest of the Transcendental which, by definition, cannot be defined. Buddhists consider that for that very reason it cannot have the personal qualities of 'God.' Christians disagree, but still insist that man cannot comprehend the nature of God. As the Athanasian Creed helpfully puts it, regarding the Trinity: 'Not three Incomprehensibles but one Incomprehensible.'



Christianity and Buddhism can both be termed 'religions of salvation,' even if the expression sounds more Christian than Buddhist. In both, there is a supreme goal to be attained, which in Christian terms is sometimes called 'the peace of God which passeth understanding.' Buddhists would omit the words 'of God,' but the rest is perhaps as good a phrase as we can find to describe, or rather designate, Nirvāna. It may be suggested that the fundamental basis of all religions worthy of the name can be found in the famous statement on Nirvāna found in the Udāna:

There is, monks, an Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded. If there were not this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there *is* this Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded.'

For most people this is a matter of faith—or scepticism. But there are those for whom it is a fact of experience. Christians would find this statement perfectly acceptable as far as it goes, though they would add certain things to it, most of which would

not be acceptable to Buddhists. Still, both would agree that this mysterious, indeed incomprehensible 'Unborn' (to use the Buddhist term) is the guarantee of deliverance. *How* this deliverance can come about is another matter concerning which, indeed, Christians differ among themselves. But in considering—and not minimising—the differences between Buddhism and Christianity, we should never lose sight of this fundamental agreement at a very deep level—so deep indeed that it can all too easily be overlooked or denied. We can express this agreement schematically thus:

### **Unborn**

Buddhist Nirvāna	Christian God
(impersonal)	(personal)

Thus, without arguing about who is right, we can say that the terms 'Nirvāna' and 'God' both refer to the Unborn which, being incomprehensible to the ordinary mind, is differently interpreted. It may be objected that the two terms 'Nirvāna' and 'God' are not strictly parallel, since Nirvāna corresponds not so much to God as such, but to the 'peace of God.' However, consideration of at least some types of Christian mysticism may suggest that this is possibly 'a distinction without a difference.'

We should realise, too, that when theistic believers speak of God they may have many different concepts in mind. Thus when Jews and Christians refer to God they certainly mean, in one sense, the same God, yet differently conceived, since the Jewish concept of God's unity excludes (in the Jewish view at least) the Christian Concept of the Trinity. We can also find, especially among modern theologians, a bewildering variety of Christian conceptions of the nature of God, but all have the same ultimate reference. Clearly, to the ordinary way of thinking, not all of these different ideas can be right (though they *could* all be wrong, and must necessarily be inadequate). And yet, as the great Cardinal Cusanus (1401–64) declared, God is 'the coincidence of opposites' wherein all differences are reconciled, and the Hwa Yen (in Japanese Kegon) school of Buddhism seems to teach something very similar, though of course without the theistic reference. Whether or not we think we understand this idea, it may be as well, as we proceed, to bear some such thought in mind.

## **2. What is Christianity? The Jewish Background**

To attempt to 'define' Christianity in all its variety would be a hopeless task. As a short cut, let us take the Apostles' creed, which is familiar to Roman Catholics and Anglicans alike:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell, on the third day rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty, and thence He shall come again to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

This is not of course found in the Bible: it is in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and is recited almost daily by Anglicans throughout the year. As the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, 'it is terse in expression, and lacks theological explanations.' It lacks more than these: it omits all reference to the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. It is the frame without the picture. And it is, too, a highly

'supernatural' or, if we prefer, 'mythical' framework. Very many Christians today would probably defend its retention in the Prayer Book purely on the grounds of tradition, accepting its validity as a genuine statement of their personal belief only with great reservations or qualifications. In any case, it certainly does 'lack theological explanations,' even the very basic one of why the Son of God was born on earth and crucified.

The traditional explanation of this central tenet of Christianity is to be sought in the story of the *Fall of Man*, which is told in 'mythical' form in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Adam and Eve, our first ancestors, tempted by the serpent (later equated with Satan, or the devil), disobeyed God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and thus lost the pristine innocence. They were expelled from the Earthly Paradise (the Garden of Eden) and deprived of the eternal life with God which should have been their due. Thus sin and evil came into the world and all men inheriting 'original sin' from their first parents fell into the devil's power and at death all went to hell. Originally the 'eternal life' meant for Adam and Eve may really have been everlasting existence in the Earthly Paradise, and the 'hell' to which they went was not a place of fiery torment, but *Sheol*, 'the pit'—the dismal abode of shades which Jews and

Babylonians alike expected as the universal post-mortem lot of all, whether good, bad or indifferent. At any rate, by 'man's first disobedience,' God's original plan was frustrated, and redemption only became possible—in the Christian view—by God's Son taking on human nature and, by the sacrifice on the Cross, vicariously redeeming sinful mankind.

In the Jewish scriptures (the 'Old Testament') the conception of God develops from that of a tribal deity to a universal and omnipotent ruler, the Jews being his chosen people. Thus the Jews developed, for perhaps the first time in history, a true system of monotheism. We find references to a coming saviour or deliverer who is called the Messiah ('the Anointed One'), though opinions differed as to whether the new kingdom he was to establish was to be an earthly or a spiritual one. In any case the Messiah was later interpreted by Christians as the Christ (Greek *Christos*, meaning 'anointed,' being the translation of the Hebrew word). Under Persian influence, Jewish belief about life after death underwent a revolution. God (Yahweh or Jehovah) was opposed by an evil principle of great, indeed almost equal power, which was finally identified with the fallen angel Lucifer (the devil of Christianity). Notions of a final judgement, with a heavenly reward for the virtuous, and hellish punishment for the wicked, evolved. This view, held

by the Pharisees, was largely carried over into early Christianity, though the Sadducees denied the existence of an after-life. There are also slight but definite indications of a belief in some form of reincarnation held in some quarters. The story of Christ's mission and death, and subsequent resurrection, is told in the New Testament. In the Christian view, Christ is the earthly manifestation of the second person of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit). Whatever many modern Christians, including theologians, may say today, the Apostles' Creed does represent in outline some of the most important things, that most orthodox Christians have believed implicitly, and literally, since very early times. (Many still do). If we regard it as 'myth' rather than literal fact, we should remember that myths generally conceal profound truths, and therefore deserve to be treated with profound respect.

### **3. Who Was Jesus?**

Central to any consideration of Christianity is the personality of the human Jesus—whoever we may think he really was. For some, his very existence is

doubted. They are not likely to be right. But the important thing is this: even supposing for the sake of argument that the man called Jesus, who may or may not have been the Son of God, did not deliver the Sermon on the Mount, somebody did—and that somebody was a very great teacher. There are discrepancies and problems in the gospel narratives about the life of Jesus, but these are really only of secondary importance. We may assume the following: Jesus was born in Palestine a few years before the traditional date, i.e. not later than 4 B.C. The country was under Roman domination but with a native ruler, Herod (37–4 B.C.). It was a time of great unrest and strife which was destined to end with the destruction of Jerusalem and its great temple in 70 C.E.

This led to the dispersal of the Jewish people, and in fact Jerusalem would not again be in Jewish hands until 1948. The leaders of Jewish society were the Pharisees, (who accepted the 'new' Messianic ideas and insisted, not always hypocritically, on purity of life and strict observance of the ritual laws), and their rivals, the influential Sadducees (who rejected such 'new-fangled' notions as an after-life). In addition there were the ascetic Essenes and various hot-headed nationalist groups such as the Zealots.

His emergence was preceded by the appearance in the Jordan valley of a strange ascetic figure whom some



took to be a reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. (This is but one indication that a belief in some sort of reincarnation was not entirely unknown in contemporary Palestine). This was John the Baptist, perhaps a member of the Essene sect. He proclaimed the coming kingdom of God and called upon the people to repent and wash away their sins in the Jordan. Jesus submitted to baptism by immersion and thereupon had an experience, variously described in the different gospel versions, which finally convinced him and John, that he was indeed the Messiah, as prophesied in the form of the 'suffering Servant of God' in the book of Isaiah.

Immediately after this experience, Jesus withdrew for a period into the desert, where we are told he was subjected to various temptations by Satan. There is considerable general similarity here to the story of how *Māra* tempted the newly enlightened Buddha. At the end of forty days Jesus emerged from the wilderness strengthened in this conviction of his calling, and began his independent ministry. John was shortly afterwards arrested and decapitated. Meanwhile Jesus gathered a group of disciples around him, traditionally twelve in number. They included Matthew the tax-gatherer, the traditional author of the first of the four gospels, the brothers Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew, who were fishermen in the

Sea of Galilee, and their associates, James and John, the latter of whom is credited with writing the fourth gospel, which differs markedly from the other three. Among the twelve was also Judas Iscariot, who later betrayed Jesus, and whom Buddhists will compare with Devadatta, though the latter's machinations against the Buddha were less successful.

As Jesus went about from place to place teaching with his disciples, he also healed the sick. We need not today be surprised or sceptical about these so-called miracles, since there are people today with healing powers, and there is no reason to doubt that Jesus had such a gift, quite irrespective of our views about his divinity. Nor shall we quibble here at the use of the traditional word 'miracle,' which after all simply means something wonderful. His most famous sermon is that known as the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the Beatitudes, (beginning with 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.') and also the injunction to 'Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you, and pray for those who treat you spitefully and persecute you.'

To the Pharisees he said, 'The kingdom of heaven is within you' (Luke 17:21). This saying has been variously interpreted and translated. The Greek words *entos humōn* can also mean among 'you,' but the

rendering 'within you' (as in the Authorised Version) is surely right. The Pharisees did not know that the kingdom was to be found within, just as in the well-known Zen *kōan* the dog said 'Wu!' ('no' in Chinese), not knowing that he had the Buddha nature. The Pharisees, of course, expected the coming of a material kingdom. In fairness, it should be stated, however, that there is evidence that some Pharisees at least were better than their biblical reputation.

It is not surprising that Jesus was hated by the 'establishment. The Pharisees even banded together with their deadly rivals, the Sadducees, to trap him. He was regarded as a dangerous subversive, the more so because, when eventually he openly claimed to be the Messiah, they took him to be a political rebel against the Romans and their Jewish adherents, as indeed did some of his own followers. The result was inevitable. He was betrayed to the Romans with the connivance of one of his own disciples, Judas Iscariot. However, just before the end there came an episode which cannot be passed over in even the most rapid survey because it was to prove of central importance to almost all Christians: the Last Supper. St. Matthew's Gospel says:

And as they were eating Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples saying: 'Take it and eat. This is my

body.’ And he took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to them, saying: ‘Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins [Ex.24:8]. But I tell you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my father’s kingdom (Matt.26:26–29).

On this story is based the sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion, in which according to Roman Catholic belief, the bread and wine, on being consecrated by the priest are actually converted into the body and blood of Christ. Since the Reformation, however, the Protestant view has been that the Communion service is a commemoration of the Last Supper but does not involve such a miraculous transformation of the bread and wine (transubstantiation).

After questioning by the Jewish authorities, Jesus was handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate, who yielded reluctantly to strong pressure and sentenced him to death. The horrid ritual of crucifixion took place. According to St. Luke, Jesus uttered the prayer, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34), but this is not mentioned in the other gospels, and even some manuscripts of Luke omit it.

The words are surely genuine, but sadly they seem all too seldom to have been remembered, and in fact narrowly escaped deletion from the record. Jesus died relatively quickly, after a very few hours, and that might have seemed the end of the story.

Instead, it was the beginning. Jesus had said that he would rise again from the dead, and so he did. He made a number of appearances to his disciples over a period, it is said, of forty days. As in the case of the so-called healing 'miracles' we need not doubt that such appearances took place, irrespective of our views about his divinity. They had the effect of heartening his dispirited disciples and confirming their wavering faith. The teacher had died and risen again, and the history of Christianity had begun.

*Note on Sacrifices.* The Eucharist as established by Jesus is regarded by Roman Catholics as a 'bloodless sacrifice' which re-enacts the sacrifice on the Cross and also replaces the Jewish sacrifices in the Temple. It was only in the Temple at Jerusalem that animal sacrifices were made, not in the synagogues, which were not regarded as 'temples.' Hence with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. the practise of such sacrifices ceased in Judaism, while it was never a feature of Christianity. It also never became a feature of Islam. With the virtual disappearance of such sacrifices in India, largely under Buddhist influence, this

unpleasant feature of most ancient religions has become rare in the world today.

## **4. The Christian Church**

If St. Paul was not the 'founder' of the Christian Church, he was at least its principal propagator. Originally a Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, he was converted after a vision of Christ, and thereafter wrote, worked and travelled unceasingly to spread the new faith not only among the Jews, but throughout the Roman world, eventually dying as a martyr in Rome under Nero. The Christians were regarded as an intolerable nuisance by the Romans and frequently persecuted, until finally the emperor Constantine (d. 337) himself adopted Christianity, after which the Christians soon began persecuting others. Rome itself soon became a main centre of Christianity, and the Bishop of Rome (the Pope), being regarded as the successor of St. Peter, became supreme head of the Church in the West, and indeed a kind of 'spiritual heir' to the defunct Roman Empire. Thus to Jewish spirituality and Greek philosophy (which has left very obvious traces in St. John's Gospel), was added the

Roman concept of authority, though in the East the Orthodox Church centred at Byzantium (now Istanbul), and several smaller churches, maintained an independent existence. Henceforth, till after 1500, the only 'official' faith in the West was what we today know as Roman Catholicism.

The general dogmatic view of mediaeval Christianity was largely established by St. Augustine (d. 430), and was elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). It assumed that this earth is the centre of the universe, and the course of history began with the Creation (dated by the 17th century English Archbishop, Usher, at 4004 B.C.) and will end with the Last Judgement. The time of the Last Judgement is unknown, though it was widely expected to occur in 1000 C.E. until this was disproved by events. Some main points of doctrine, as still taught in the Roman Catholic Church are:

Through the disobedience of Adam, the first man, all men became sinful ('Original Sin'), and all went to hell until the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the cross. He had two natures, divine and human. Thus he lived a perfect human life, and suffered and died as a man. Redemption is available to all men through grace and by the sacraments which are administered by the appointed

ministers of the Church, who are specially ordained, acknowledge the authority of the Pope, and are bound to celibacy. Those outside the Church, or dying in mortal sin, go to hell, which is everlasting. Those who have committed venial sins for which full penance has not been done go to Purgatory, a place of temporary punishment, until they are sufficiently purified to enter heaven.

Of these articles, most are a matter of faith concerning which there is no arguing. But the doctrine of everlasting hell is a major stumbling-block for many who might be sympathetic to the rest, and voices have from time to time been raised against this teaching. On the face of it the texts do seem to show that Jesus taught the doctrine of an eternal hell. Modern Catholics, however, often stress that we cannot know if any particular person has been assigned to hell, which may, therefore, be empty.

An essential feature of mediaeval Christianity is the importance of monasticism. Whether there is a historical link with Eastern monasticism of the Buddhist type is a question we cannot enter into, but it is significant that two different cultures should have developed such an institution, which seems to go so much against the grain of human nature. Those who



have grown up against a background of Protestantism often scarcely realise the extent to which monasticism still plays a living role not only in the Roman Catholic but also in the Orthodox Church. The ideal of ascetic self-restraint as a way of purification was a fundamental one in early Christianity, and often led to excesses of self-mortification. But in Western Christendom the wise rule established by St. Benedict (529) was a model for all subsequent monastic orders. Here, despite all theoretical differences, Christian and Buddhist *practice* approached each other closely, though it was the mendicant orders ('friars' not 'monks') founded in the early 13th century by St. Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi that came nearest to the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. And something of the same ascetic spirit outside the monastic orders is seen in the rule of celibacy for all clergy in the Roman Catholic Church, and for bishops in the Orthodox Church.

By 1500 the Church had become corrupt and worldly, culminating in the flagrant immorality of the Borgia Pope Alexander VI (1492–1503). All previous attempts at reform had been ruthlessly suppressed, but in 1517 Martin Luther, a learned German monk, aided by the recent invention of printing, led the successful revolt known to history as the Reformation. Luther rejected Papal authority, taking the Bible as the sole source of revelation. He rejected the doctrine of purgatory, and

insisted that faith alone was necessary for salvation. The political interests of many of the princes favoured the Reformation, and soon Europe was divided into Catholics and 'Protestants.' In England Henry VIII suppressed the monasteries and made himself head of the Church. Gradually a church of England developed, combining some 'Catholic' features (such as the continuity of bishops) with the new Protestantism. Finally, with the growth of the empire, the Anglican communion became worldwide (in the U.S.A. it became the Protestant Episcopal Church). Another branch of Protestantism was the one instituted at Geneva by Calvin with its sombre insistence on predestination. But the concept of religious freedom was slow to take root. The Calvinists in particular persecuted those they disapproved of almost as fiercely as the Catholics had done.

Catholics and Protestants alike considered missions to the 'heathen' of great importance. While early attempts to spread the religion of peace and love by fire and sword were eventually abandoned, the effort went on by more peaceful means, especially in those parts of the world colonised by Europeans. The reverse process, with the recent introduction of Buddhism and other 'exotic' faiths into the West, may be seen by some as poetic justice.

## 5. Facing the Dark Side

Regrettably, there are certain dark sides of traditional Christianity which must be squarely faced. The horrific record of the Inquisition, which extorted confessions from 'heretics' by torture and then condemned them to be burnt alive, is something the Roman Catholic Church in particular has had to live down, and no Catholic today would attempt to defend this tragic chapter in the Church's history. Yet the Church *has* triumphed over that grim aspect of its past, while in the present century we have witnessed equal horrors perpetrated in the name of worse causes. We should waste no time in condemning further that which Christians themselves abhor and condemn as strongly as any outsider can. Let us instead seek to understand, if we can, the causes of such ghastly aberrations, causes that are more specific than the general depravity of human nature. Two such causes may perhaps be fairly adduced: the obsession with martyrdom, and the doctrine of hell. These are, of course, interconnected.

Jesus was crucified, and thereby, according to the traditional teaching, redeemed mankind. Christians were frequently persecuted by the Romans and others,

and many, by enduring death in various unpleasant guises, came to be venerated as 'martyrs' (i.e. witnesses to the faith). Their cult sometimes assumed morbid forms. Later, Protestants who had suffered under the old Church were similarly revered and lurid accounts of their sufferings were published, such as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, a grisly book once considered good reading for Protestant children.

The idea that a loving and almighty Father should cast any of his children, however depraved, into eternal torment is one that most people find unacceptable today. This doctrine greatly exercised the minds of a number of distinguished Victorians, including W.E. Gladstone and the Rev. C.L. Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll. If Jesus really taught this doctrine of eternal punishment, he was more rigid than the Pharisees, who held that the wicked would only be condemned to the fire for twelve months. The problem is a grave one. We know that Jesus' words are often quoted differently in different gospels. In some passages this doctrine is ascribed not to Jesus but to John the Baptist. In fact, it is ascribed unambiguously to Jesus only in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. We are thus perhaps justified in attributing this view to the personal prejudices of some of his reporters, or even to mistranslation, for Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the gospels are in Greek. Nevertheless, the belief in

eternal punishment passed into orthodox Christian teaching. In fact with the rejection of belief in purgatory the Protestants were left with the stark opposition of Heaven and Hell.

This, then, is the dark side of traditional Christianity. The preaching of hell-fire provoked a moral revulsion that cannot be overestimated. A God, it can be urged, who sinks so disastrously below the moral values he has himself implanted in man, loses all credibility. It must be admitted that this doctrine, or the hangover from it, accounts for a great deal of the hostility to Christianity shown by many people including, it seems, even some Buddhists. Whatever the excuses, such an emotional attitude of violent rejection needs to be examined with care.

In the first place, such an attitude, however 'justified,' is not and can never be a proper Buddhist reaction. Because Buddhists do not share the Christian God-concept, it has been seriously suggested that to 'curse God' is a useful therapeutic exercise. Few Buddhists are likely to feel the need for such a proceeding, though Victorian atheists delighted in it. They thought of it as a splendid shock—therapy—for other people! But a little reflection might suggest the following: either God does not exist, or he does. If he does not, then to curse an empty concept is rather pointless, while if after all he does exist, than either he is an all-

loving Father who will overlook and forgive such childishly insulting behaviour, or he is not. In the first case to curse him would be unfair, and in the second case it might be unwise.

Those who seriously harbour any such thoughts are obviously themselves full of *dosa*, the unhealthy root of hate, which may fix itself on a variety of objects. 'God' is unlikely to be the sole target of their aggression. There are, of course, proper Buddhist procedures for dealing with such unhealthy tendencies in oneself: the practice of mindfulness, and the cultivation of the *brahma-vihāras*. Feelings of anger, like other feelings, should be observed dispassionately and not clung to. There is also the more specific practice of developing loving kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karunā*). Those who hate others really hate themselves, and in the practice of *mettā* we first extend loving kindness to ourselves and then to others. This is in fact a positive technique for carrying out that difficult Christian (and Jewish) injunction: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.' Christians and Jews put the love of God before this; Buddhists might reflect that, as we have seen, 'God' can be taken as a kind of shorthand symbol for the Unborn which is the guarantee of liberation, and we can surely, with a clear 'Buddhist conscience' extend our love to *that*. Jesus also said: 'Love your enemies,' a precept which many

Christians have found singularly difficult even to remember, let alone practise. Unless our response is rather less inadequate than that of such Christians, we have no right to call ourselves Buddhists. And if we *do* see 'God,' or the God-concept, for whatever reason, as some sort of enemy, then this points to some inadequacy in ourselves which calls for investigation.

Perhaps we can find a reason for a concept we find so abhorrent as the hell-fire doctrine. In the Buddhist scriptures too we find descriptions of quite horrific hell-states which, though not eternal, are said to be fantastically long-lasting. While less offensive as being finite and not the creation of a loving father, these too are, to say the least, difficult to believe literally, even though we may well accept that those who have behaved monstrously in this life may encounter as a *karmic* result some very unpleasant conditions in a future state. Fear of retribution is not the best reason for avoiding wrongdoing, but it remains a valid one if we have any conception of justice, human, divine or *karmic*. And even the best of us may be spurred on to greater efforts by fear of the consequences of failure. Thus many who embraced a life of austerity as Buddhist monks or Christian ascetics may have felt the need to frighten themselves as well as others to avoid backsliding. In this way the tendency arose to exaggerate the awful consequences to be expected by

those who fail the test. Actually, the Buddhist doctrine of *karma* and rebirth, or the kindred Hindu teaching, provides a more adequate framework for man's long struggle up the ladder to perfection. Many have found such a notion attractive on the grounds of justice, whether they personally accepted it or not, and though it has been officially frowned on by the Christian churches, there seem always to have been some Christians who gave it their assent, including Giordano Bruno in the 16th century and, in modern times, the distinguished Congregationalist Dr. Leslie Weatherhead (d. 1965). There have even been Roman Catholics who have given credence to the idea, such as the 19th century Italian Archbishop Passavalli.

While it cannot be proved from the Bible that Jesus did not teach the existence of an eternal hell, the evidence that he did so is not conclusive, and many who are not Christians find it hard to impute such a doctrine to him. Buddhists should view with sympathy the efforts of Christians to emancipate themselves from a dogma which for too long has cast a deep shadow on their faith. We can regard this, in the sense of C.G. Jung, as the 'shadow side' of Christianity, and meantime profitably devote our own energies to coping with our own shadow or, as Jesus said, the 'beam' in our own eye.



## 6. Digging a Bit Deeper

Christianity has left its indelible mark on the whole of Western civilization, and in some measure on the whole of the world today, irrespective of whether people accept its teachings or not. There are dedicated atheists today who take a passionate and informed interest in old churches, and every Classical scholar knows that but for the devoted labour of generations of Christian monks, inspired by St. Benedict, the whole body of Latin classical literature would have been irretrievably lost. There is indeed a school of thought, largely of Roman Catholic inspiration, which looks back nostalgically to the Middle Ages as the 'Age of Faith' from which we should seek the solution to many of our modern problems. Though this view is exaggerated, it still betrays a genuine perception of an important, if partial, truth. We should not despise the Middle Ages (roughly 560–1500 C.E). Life in mediaeval times was brutal and squalid for everybody and not, as today, only for some people. To the modern view it was incredibly inconvenient. Yet in some respects it had a richness we have almost completely lost today, and which we still marvel at. It is no accident that surviving mediaeval cathedrals everywhere can stand comparison as sheer works of

art with any modern secular building that can be named. This is quite simply because they were built 'to the glory of God.' And however dim, fitful and even downright contradictory men's vision of what they called God may have been, its inspiration was sufficient to draw them out of themselves. This graphically illustrates the fact that—directly contrary to some trendy theories—the real inspiration of art is at least in a broad sense fundamentally religious. Indeed the very word 'inspiration' implies the idea of a 'breathing into' the artist, whether by the Holy Spirit or by, for instance, Apollo and the Muses. The relation and the parallel between the arts and religion is a matter we shall have to consider briefly later.

Jesus said: 'Man does not live by bread alone.' This fact was realised in the Middle Ages when physical bread was hard-earned and only too liable to fail altogether; after all, a real effort *was* made by the Church—however inadequately sometimes in practice—to provide that spiritual nutriment (out of 'super-substantial bread' as St. Matthew's gospel has it in the Latin version) that was rightly deemed essential. For this reason it is probable that some mediaeval people, though physically perhaps half-starved, may have still felt more satisfied than their modern descendants who possibly suffer not from too few but from too many 'square meals,' but whose religious sense has

atrophied.

The decline in the religious sense can be traced back, with some accuracy, to the period which followed the (inevitable and necessary) break-up of the mediaeval Church at the Reformation. This coincided for various reasons with man's growing belief that he could 'conquer nature'—meaning of course, not his own unregenerate nature, which he has still so signally failed to conquer, but his physical environment. The course of this process was brilliantly demonstrated recently by the late E. F. Schumacher in his posthumous *Guide for the Perplexed* (1977). The title is taken from a work by the greatest Jewish mediaeval philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). Schumacher showed how modern man's religious sense has increasingly atrophied under the influence of thinking like that of Descartes (1596–1650), a brilliant mathematician who sought to reduce the whole of philosophy to the consideration of what can be weighed and measured, thus eliminating at a stroke all those imponderables which alone give meaning to our existence.

It is precisely on this basis that 'the march of science' developed; but we can now see all too clearly that such a view is inadequate. Despite all the undoubted material benefits and conveniences that 'science' thus understood has brought, it emphatically has not

brought the expected millennium, and indeed may yet succeed in destroying the world. Descartes was a Christian who found a place for God in his thinking, but the logical conclusion of his approach led to the systematic rejection of all religious conceptions. For some, this culminated in the view that all history is determined purely by economic forces, and that all man's 'cultural' (including religious) activities and ideas are nothing but a 'superstructure' erected on this materialist basis. The fact that the proponents of this view are now able to impose it officially on a large part of the world, and even to threaten to impose it on the rest of us, no more proves its validity than the fact that the mediaeval Church was, in its time, similarly able to impose its view on most of Europe. In fact, argument for argument, it could well be claimed that the mediaeval Church had rather more of truth on its side than its modern atheistic counterpart, whose reactions to any signs of opposition are so depressingly similar.

In fact there is an important, if little known, parallel to the 'superstructure' theory. In his book on the greatest of German mystics, Meister Eckhart, the Japanese Buddhist scholar Shizuteru Ueda (1965) used the expression 'mysticism of infinity with a theistic sub-structure,' following a suggestion by Rudolf Otto (1926). Though scarcely so intended, this neatly

reverses the 'superstructure' theory. We might adopt this terminology, replacing 'mysticism of infinity' with 'intuition of the Unborn.' This higher perception is the primary thing for Eckhart, on which the 'theistic substructure' may be said to depend. The wider application of the principle comes with the recognition that what applies in superlative degree to Eckhart applies to a lesser extent also to others whose 'intuition of the Unborn' was feebler than his.

We have seen that monasticism played as large a part in mediaeval Christianity as it does in Buddhism, and it may well be considered that the abolition of this institution in the Protestant churches was a further contributory factor to the decline of the religious sense. The presence within the community of a group of people who are wholly committed to the religious life to the extent of renouncing worldly pleasures acts in fact as a powerful stimulus to the whole community—a vital leaven which informs the whole lump. Of course monasticism, like everything else, is liable to fall into corruption (often exaggerated by cynics), but as long as there are good monks—and nuns—who are exemplars and teachers to the laity, their influence is profound, going much deeper than the conscious level, a fact that is little appreciated in the West today. At the very least they are a constant reminder that it is possible to live—and even to live happily—without

being a slave to one's sense-desires, and that in fact, bread apart, 'man does not live by sex alone.'

## 7. Christian Mysticism

What is termed 'mysticism' has a long history in the Christian Church. It has frequently been an object of suspicion. the Catholic Church has always sought to control its mystics lest they slip into heresy, while the Protestants have often rejected it partly for its 'Catholic' associations, and partly because of its alleged 'pagan' origins in Neoplatonism, as well as its affinities to various Oriental schools of thought, including Buddhism. In the author known as 'Dionysius the Areopagite' (ca. 500), we find notions of that negative theology expressed in the 14th century *English Cloud of Unknowing*, as well as the classical threefold way of the mystic's progress, the way of 'purgation, illumination, and union.' The word 'mysticism' comes from a Greek root meaning to close the eyes or mouth, and has associations with the ancient Greek mysteries. One definition is 'an immediate knowledge of God attained in this present life through personal religious experience.' If we

equate this with a true 'intuition of the Unborn,' we can assert that it is in fact the indispensable basis of the religious life. Any 'religion' is dead, or sterile, if *no* such intuition informs it. Let us glance briefly at one of the greatest of Christian mystics, the German Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328).

Eckhart was a prominent member of the Dominican order, who taught at the University of Paris and held high office until he was accused by the Archbishop of Cologne of spreading heretical doctrines among the common people. His case was referred to the Pope, and in 1329, after his death, twenty-eight of his propositions were condemned. His case has remained controversial to this day, though the majority view now is that he remained—if only just—within the bounds of orthodoxy. About a hundred of his German sermons have been preserved, in which he constantly pursues the theme of the 'birth of the Son (i.e. Christ) or the Word, in the soul.' This birth takes place in the peak (or spark, or castle) in the soul, and the man in whom it takes place is said to be deified, 'just as the bread and wine at the Eucharist become God.' The way to achieve this birth is by radical detachment from all earthly things, for 'all things are pure nothing,' since God alone has being. The 'power of the soul' by which, through divine grace, this is achieved is the 'higher intellect.' It may be fairly urged that

those who condemned Eckhart's views as heretical did so because they were unable to rise to his level of consciousness.

Eckhart said, 'To get at the kernel, you must break the shell.' We may compare Eckhart with Nāgārjuna, the great Buddhist philosopher and founder of the *Mādhyamika* ('Middle Way') school, who 'broke the shell' of traditional Buddhist formulations. In the freer atmosphere of ancient India he was able to get away with this as Eckhart was not. Yet much of what Eckhart had said was put a little differently by the great Cusanus (Nikolaus von Cues, 1401–64), who nearly became Pope. One of the most learned men of his age, Cusanus took a prominent part in the (not very successful) efforts to reform the Church after the scandals of the Avignon papacy. His work *De docta ignorantia* uses mathematical symbolism to show how man can never attain by finite means to a perfect knowledge of God who is infinite, and who is called by him in a famous phrase 'the coincidence of opposites.' In the same spirit he strove for unity within the Christian world and even beyond it, boldly declaring, 'Hence there is a single religion and a single creed for all beings endowed with understanding, and this religion is presupposed behind the diversity of rites.' If only the spirit of Cusanus had prevailed, the religious history of Europe would have taken a



decided turn for the better.

## 8. Contrasts

It would not be honest to pretend that there are no differences between Buddhism and Christianity, and before going further we should once more consider these. In doing so, we are at once confronted with the question of 'level.' Obviously, at the 'fundamentalist' level the differences are greatest, and it is fair to point out that at this level Buddhism may claim an advantage: it really is pretty difficult in the present age to maintain a fundamentalist view of Christianity based on a literal interpretation of the sources (i.e. the Bible), whereas the difficulties of accepting Theravada Buddhism in this way are very much less. The Pāli Canon, despite its enormous length, is remarkably self-consistent and it contains very little which a modern Western-trained mind (unless conditioned to reject *all* religious ideas) would find totally unacceptable, though much may be unfamiliar.

Let us consider briefly the difference between the founders of Buddhism and Christianity as seen by their respective followers. Each was in a sense a man

—a perfect man—and at the same time more than a man. Each was in a sense unique: Jesus as Christ absolutely so, the Buddha at least relatively 'unique' in the sense that Buddhas appear only at vast intervals of time, so that Gotama was the only Buddha for this age. They attained their particular status, however, as it were from opposite directions. The Christ was God—or an aspect of God—who had descended from heaven in order to be born as a man; the Buddha had attained his status—in the course of this life—as the culmination of innumerable human lives of unexampled effort, in order to rise decisively above human (or any kind of 'relatively' superhuman) status and become the supreme 'Teacher of gods and men.' In modern jargon we might say they represent two different 'models' of the Transcendental in man—the 'God-man' and the 'Dhamma-man.' Jesus said: 'I and my Father are one' (John 10:30).

The Buddha declared: 'He who sees me sees the Dhamma.' Each taught a Way to be followed, and in some sense *was* that 'Way.' Each is an exemplar to be followed, and indeed one of the most influential books of Christian devotion ever written was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis (d.1471); yet still there is a difference. The Buddha is an exemplar and teacher to be followed; the Christ is *also*, and most importantly, a sacrificial victim by whose death on the Cross

mankind may be saved. This sacrifice is repeated (in the Catholic view) or commemorated (according to the Protestants) in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Man, in the Christian view, can never *become* God: the creature is eternally distinct from the Creator. In Buddhism, a man *can* become a Buddha by following the almost inconceivably difficult path of the Bodhisattva (in the Theravada school as well as in Mahayana Buddhism). Christianity offers no real parallel to this. Both religions grew up against a background of original polytheism, which they transcended in different ways. Buddhism did not formally reject the gods of an earlier pantheon, but devalued them; before the rise of Christianity, Judaism had long since elevated the one time tribal god to the status of Creator of heaven and earth, and Christianity incorporated the Jewish concept of the Messiah as an aspect of Deity.

Just as Buddhism differs at its apex from Christianity, by having no God-concept, so too at the human level it differs similarly by having no soul-concept. It is not the place here to discuss the intricacies of the *anattā* doctrine in Buddhism, but there is a sharp contrast here between the Christian emphasis on the importance of the human soul and the Buddhist view of the impersonality of all things including our 'selves.' In the next section it will be indicated that

even this difference is perhaps less total than appears, but it would be wrong to pretend that no difference exists.

Other consequences flow from the difference between a theistic and a non-theistic religion. Thus there are different attitudes towards the question of good and evil, and the rule of justice. Mediaeval theologians could even spend their time debating whether a thing is good because goodness is an absolute principle, or simply because God just decided that certain things are good. And too, with the virtual collapse for many of the traditional Christian concepts of heaven and hell modern Christians are left with a largely unresolved dilemma as to what they should believe about an after-life, and the rewards and punishments for their actions. The gradually growing uncertainty about this contributed, along with the development of an increasingly materialist scientific outlook, with all its obvious practical successes, to the tremendous decline in the religious sense which is so notable today—even though it looks as if a reaction has now set in.

## **9. Points of Contact**

It was necessary to stress the differences before discussing the very real points of contact between the two religions. These are at various levels which call for discrimination. Superficially, a surprising number of resemblances can be found: celibate monks or clergy with shaven heads; the gesture with palms together which in Buddhism (as in India generally) denotes veneration or greeting and, in Christianity, prayer (and hence can be misleading); the use of incense, anointing and holy water; rosaries; the representation of saints or divine persons with a nimbus or halo (really an aura)—these are some of the most obvious features. And since Buddhism shares some of these things with Hinduism, we may also note the striking resemblance between the Hindu practice of bathing in a sacred river to wash away one's sins, and the activities of John the Baptist. Some of these resemblances may be coincidental or due to cultural transference, but they may too point to some deeper affinity.

In attempting a serious comparison of concepts and terms in the two religious systems, we are faced with many difficulties—both superficial resemblances and superficial differences can turn out to be misleading. There is also the problem of language: those who cannot read the texts in the original are at the mercy of translators whose competence may vary. The

difficulty can be vividly illustrated by comparing two or three of the thirty-odd English translations of the Dhammapada. One might be forgiven for not realising that all were meant to be renderings of the same work! Only when we have avoided these elementary pitfalls can we begin to attempt a true comparison.

We have considered the differences between the conceptions of the respective founders in Buddhism and Christianity, among which is the fact that the Buddha is a teacher but not a saviour. Yet we do find something similar to the saviour-figure in (especially but not exclusively) Mahayana Buddhism: the Bodhisattva. Of course, the figure of Christ cannot be wholly equated with that of a Bodhisattva without falsification, but there is a considerable resemblance. Likewise, the emphasis in Lutheran Christianity on the necessity of faith in the saving power of Christ has been compared to the similar stress laid in the Pure Land schools of Buddhism (such as the Shin school of Japan), on the need for faith in Amitābha Buddha, who is held to represent the *Dharmakāya* or Ultimate Truth. However, here too caution is necessary, and it would be misleading to attempt too close an equation of the Christian *Trinity* with the *Trikāya* ('Three Bodies') of Mahayana Buddhism (even though there is perhaps a certain parallel between the *Nirmānakāya*—the human manifestation of the Buddha-principle—

and the human Christ).

Probably the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Buddhism concerns the twin questions of 'God' and the 'soul.' And it is perfectly true that the two systems cannot be entirely reconciled on these points. Nevertheless, the difference can to a certain extent be legitimately 'relativised.' As regards the God-concept, this has already been referred to in connection with the Udāna statement about the Unborn (see section above sub-titled: '1. The Problem'). It need only be added here that in some Christian thinking today little more is said about God than is said there about the Unborn.

In discussing such matters, and especially the idea of the 'soul,' we have to bear in mind the very important question of levels of truth, which is very clearly stated in Buddhism in terms of the distinction between *paramatthasacca* or 'ultimate truth' and *sammutisacca* or 'conventional truth.' Thus the *anattā* doctrine certainly denies the reality of an enduring 'soul' or 'self' according to ultimate truth, but in terms of conventional truth such a thing exists. In fact, for the Buddhist, 'salvation' (to use the Christian term) consists precisely in the realisation of this *ultimate* truth, whereby the relative truth is transcended. Some Christian mystics come close to this idea: thus Eckhart declared that 'all creatures are pure nothing.' He

meant that only God gave them being, which is not, of course, identical with the Buddhist conception.

In fact, the ordinary 'unenlightened' person whether Buddhist, Christian or anything else, lives by the light of 'conventional' truth which, in daily life, is extremely important. In Buddhism, one characteristic of the *arahat* or enlightened being is that he creates, no fresh karma, though he may still be subject to the results (*vipāka*), painful or pleasant, of past karma. So karma is only produced by those whose thinking is still determined by 'conventional truth.' Such beings are said to be 'owners of their karma, heirs of their karma.' This brings us to the field of ethics, and here we find a great similarity between the precepts of Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity, even though the reasons given for moral behaviour differ. For those who suppose that religion consists of 'living a good life' in the sense of behaving decently, there might seem little to choose between Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and perhaps even Humanism. But there is rather more to it than that.

The opposite of moral behaviour is called 'sin' by English-speaking Christians and Jews, and *akusala kamma* or 'unskilled action' by Buddhists. In the Judeo-Christian view the sinner will be punished by God, while Buddhism holds that his unskilled action will bring its own retribution. Of course, Jews and



Christians regard sin as above all an offence against God; nevertheless, we find that the words used in both Hebrew and Greek for sin mean literally 'missing the mark,' which is after all not far from the Buddhist idea. The basic moral code for Jews and Christians is given in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2–17), all of which are prohibitions ascribed to God. For the lay Buddhist there are the Five Precepts which are not prohibitions, but undertakings to refrain from: 1. killing, 2. theft, 3. sexual misconduct, 4, wrong speech, and 5. intoxication. The first four of these agree closely with some of the Ten Commandments; the fifth has an equivalent prohibition in Islam but not in the Judeo-Christian code, though obviously drunkenness is not looked on with favour. It is possible to argue about the detailed interpretation of all these Precepts or Commandments, but Buddhists, Christians and indeed most people would agree that some such code is an absolute necessity for any kind of decent living, and would utterly reject the idea that there are no absolute moral standards at all. (Any idea that Zen Buddhism rejects morality is based on a total misunderstanding.)

St. Paul said: 'There now remain faith, hope and love (or 'charity'): these three. But the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor. 13:13), and elsewhere it is said: 'God is love' (1 John 4:16). The Greek word used in these

passages is *agape*, which is close in meaning to the Pāli *mettā*, meaning essentially pure love without sensual or other emotional attachment. It is scarcely necessary to point out that Buddhists and Christians alike are well aware of the ambiguities of the word 'love,' and that slogans of the type 'Make love not war' are a falsification of either teaching. Taken in isolation, the words 'God is love' might seem to depersonalise God by equating him with an abstract quality, but the context shows that this is not intended. But it is interesting to note that in Buddhism *mettā* is the first of the four *brahma vihāras*, the practice of which is said to lead to rebirth in the Brahma-world. And it has already been pointed out that the practice of this represents a Buddhist way of carrying out the difficult Judeo-Christian injunction: 'Love thy neighbour as thyself.'

## 10. Conclusion

The position of religion in the world today is a peculiar one. Despite persecution and repression in some parts, and confident predictions of its forthcoming disappearance in others, not only has it

not vanished, but it has begun to display a vitality and resilience which have astonished and dismayed its critics. True, extraneous factors such as nationalism have often played a part in this. Nevertheless, there can no longer be any doubt that there has in recent times been a real resurgence of what can at least broadly be called 'religion,' though its manifestations have been many and varied, ranging from fundamentalist Christianity through a variety of nationalist-coloured forms (Christian, Islamic and even Buddhist), to the wave of occultism and the sub-cultures of 'hippydom' and drugs now happily past their peak. Not all of these manifestations are desirable, and the dangers of some are obvious. But all point to a disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the apparently triumphant materialist values whether these appear in a 'communist' or a 'capitalist' guise. The fact is that this dissatisfaction goes far deeper than a mere emotional reaction against the shoddy values and the general mental and spiritual impoverishment which are the inevitable concomitants of a purely materialist outlook.

The materialist world-view implicit, until recently, in most scientific thinking is demonstrably inadequate to the task of explaining the world, as a growing number of scientists are coming to realise. ESP phenomena are being studied with increasing seriousness, if

sometimes for the wrong reasons, while the actual evidence for survival of bodily death and even for some kind of reincarnation or rebirth is now so strong that it is gradually but inevitably forcing recognition in some unlikely quarters. Even things like astrology are being regarded with something less than the total disdain which was the standard reaction until only yesterday. All this belongs, admittedly, only to what may be termed the lower reaches of 'religion.' Its main importance is that it breaches the bastion of materialism, thus removing, for a significant number of people, a serious obstacle to faith in something higher. To put it crudely, many educated people now feel able to admit openly that after all, Darwin, Marx and Freud did not know all the answers. For some, this is a new exhilarating experience, and perhaps rather frightening. But the inevitable question arises: What now?

What the new knowledge actually does, in the first place, is to disprove once and for all that basic and yet so improbable assumption of materialistic science (or 'scientism' as it has been called): inanimate matter by pure chance, by some incredible series of flukes, 'contrived' to teach itself to think. We now have *proof*, or as near proof as makes no difference, that what we call 'mind' is autonomous, and that if either member of the pair we call mind-and-matter is subordinate or

illusory, it is matter and not mind. So far, so good. The worrying thing is that this recognition seems at one fell swoop to bring back chaos in the place of science's carefully-ordered cosmos. The attraction of materialism to the scientific mind was that it produced a neat and tidy, ultimately finite system. Actually it still does—as far as it goes. The difference is merely that the mind (*whatever* 'mind' may be) that can grasp such a system is itself outside of that system—which ought logically to have been obvious all along. A stone cannot perceive itself, though a dog can perceive it, while a man can not only perceive the stone but—to some extent at least—'understand' it.

The chaos which this recognition brings can look at first sight almost total. It is like a dream-world in which anything can happen, in which what we yesterday dismissed as superstition can easily turn out to be fact, in which the very criteria of what is probable and improbable cease to be clearly discernible. Once we accept spoon-bending, the result is mind-bending! The temptation to retreat even into the bleak orderliness of materialism may be strong, and what before looked so unbearable may seem comforting by comparison. If we resist this temptation we may find it necessary to come to terms with what used to be called the 'supernatural' (and is better termed the paranormal)—though that does not mean

becoming obsessed with it. But some modern Christians may well find that, 'blinded by science,' they have perhaps rejected too much of their traditional beliefs, without being too sure of how to find the way back.

The traditional Buddhist view of the 'three worlds' may be helpful here. Human existence as normally experienced is in *kāmaloka* or the realm of sense-desires. Beings normally visible to us here are human beings and animals, but there are others: the inhabitants of various 'states of woe,' as well as some happier beings. Some are mischievous, some neutral or benevolent, but all are more or less ignorant, and they pass into, or out of, these various states according to their karmic deserts. Other, definitely happier beings also exist, under the same basic karmic conditions, in *rūpaloka* and *arūpaloka*, the realm of form and the formless world, where consciousness is related to that of the *jhānic* states attainable in this life. These beings are the *devās*, the highest of whom are like the gods of polytheistic religions. But though very long-lived they are not immortal. Likewise they may be wise but are not enlightened. Beyond all these worlds is the *lokuttara* or Transcendental, the Secure Refuge on the 'other shore,' or the Unborn. This is beyond all imagining but not beyond the possibility of realisation in this life.

If we compare this outline with that of traditional Christianity the differences are less great than might have been supposed. One difference is that in the Christian view the various non-visible beings in the different realms are eternally 'fixed' in their present state of woe or bliss; and of course those in the higher realms are termed 'saints' or 'angels and not 'gods.' The only serious Buddhist objection to this scheme in principle would be its total rigidity. It is like trying to capture the film of the eternal flux in a single 'still.' The other main difference is, of course, that for Christians the 'transcendental' realm is occupied by a personal God, who is creator of the whole. It can, however, be urged that on the basis of our present empirical knowledge something rather like the Buddhist view of the 'inhabited' cosmos is beginning to emerge. It will be the task of future scientists, and philosophers of science, to explore it—a challenging task that few as yet have embarked upon.

What is *not* the field of 'science' but of 'religion' is the realm of the Unborn. And here we can usefully distinguish between the 'higher' religions (including both Buddhism and Christianity), and what we may term the 'lower' religions. In these latter, there may indeed be genuine contact of some kind with the invisible denizens of the 'three worlds' (perhaps even the highest), but no 'breakthrough' to the

Transcendental. To such faiths as these—often perfectly 'genuine' as far as they go—the traditional term 'paganism' may fittingly be applied. The Old Testament may possibly be read as the record of the development of 'Judaism' from a lower to a higher religion in this sense, and it seems that in ancient Greece, too, we can catch this very act of 'breaking through' with the emergence of philosophers like Plato, who had a genuine 'intuition of the Unborn.' Both these streams, of course, contributed to the growth of Christianity.

The Unborn cannot be defined, or imagined, or reached by any ratiocinative process. It can, however, be *realised*. But long before this full realisation is attained, it can be more or less dimly intuited. To such an intuition it is 'felt' to be an ultimate refuge in a world of flux. Christians call it God and give it the attributes of a loving Father. For Buddhists this is illegitimate: the Ultimate is 'signless.' This has absurdly led some learned Buddhist book-scholars, finding nothing 'graspable' about it, to equate Nirvāna with total extinction indistinguishable from that postulated by the materialists, only postponed, improbably, to the death of the *Arahat*. They should know better. But Christians too know that they should not try to imagine God. As a Romanian priest, speaking of the Orthodox 'Jesus Prayer,' told Ronald



Eyre, 'The first law, when we begin to pray, is not to "fancy" anything or imagine anything, because God Himself does not come under the sway of the imagination. Fantasy is a stumbling block to our union with God' (*The Long Search*, p. 162.)

True religion is not 'the opium of the people' (rather the reverse, it is the 'awakener'!), nor is it any kind of shallow escapism. It is the way out of *saṃsāra*, the world of flux, to the true and abiding (not 'everlasting' but rather, 'timeless') refuge of the Unborn. And it represents a fundamental human need which we repress at our peril. There are many surrogate religions, and there are even genuine 'lower religions' which actually can lead to a happier life than most people know, but yet stop short of the real goal. Such, for instance, were the systems which Gotama himself found and tried out in the course of his own Great Search. And some of these can be taken today in the form of popular 'meditation schools' and the like. The level attainable by such means probably varies considerably, though it may well be doubted whether most of them attain the heights reached by Gotama's teachers, Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta. The arts, too, can be a surrogate religion (possibly the only one readily available to some), though they can perhaps, too, sometimes function as a genuine 'way' capable of leading to—or at least towards—the real

goal. Great art is fed from unconscious channels which may stem from a true 'intuition of the Unborn.' Lesser forms of art are perhaps fed from sources related to the 'higher worlds,' and so on—right down the scale to a point where the sources of inspiration become distinctly dubious. There might be less confusion about the nature of 'art' if this were clearly recognised. But to discuss this subject adequately would require a separate study.

This essay is written in an ecumenical, not a polemical spirit. It is in no sense a 'critique' of Christianity. There is a shallow view abroad today which claims that the new spirit of ecumenism between churches and even between religions is merely a defensive measure due to the general decline in religious belief. This view has begun to lose the plausibility it at first enjoyed. It is more reasonable to ascribe the new attitude to a deepening religiosity (however vague its outlines may sometimes seem to be) which sees the old polemical spirit as nothing short of a scandal. Of course religion *is* threatened in the world today, but from without far more than from within. From within, there are very evident signs of renewal. In fact, as we have seen, it is the very materialistic values themselves, still outwardly so triumphant, that are being steadily undermined from within. It may be literally true that only through the reassertion of religious values

(perhaps partly through new forms) can mankind be saved from physical as well as spiritual catastrophe.

There are doubtless some irreducible differences in the ways whereby Buddhists, Christians and others would *explain* the world, and still more perhaps that which lies *beyond* the world (and is, therefore, strictly inaccessible to 'explanation'). There is far less difference between their views on how we should live and act *in* the world. The spirit of pure, disinterested love, no matter whether it bears a 'Christian,' a 'Buddhist' or any other label, is the solvent for all our problems, and the only certain recipe against impending disaster, whatever form this may take. It thus makes good sense to pool our 'spiritual' resources in seeking solutions for the common problems of mankind. This is in no sense a call to any form of overtly 'political' action. But if those with specific political commitments are sufficiently imbued with this spirit of love, they will not go far wrong.

The Buddhist doctrine of *anattā* or 'not-self' is a difficult one even for some Buddhists to grasp, but if we think of it in the ethical sense of utter selflessness we can see its practical application. True 'detachment' as preached by Christian mystics and many others, means being 'detached' not from other people's problems and sorrows (or indeed from those of the various other beings with which we share this life on

earth), but from our own worldly impulses: sense-desires, greed for power and influence and self-assertion, anger and hatred. It is, not only, not incompatible with 'love'. It is in fact the only way in which real love—loving one's neighbour as oneself—can find full expression.

## Bibliographical Note

Here only a handful of books will be mentioned (out of a vast number of possibilities) in addition to the versions of the Bible mentioned in the *Author's Note*. I have omitted books on Buddhism, and have deliberately referred, as far as possible, to paperbacks of the Penguin type as these are convenient and cheap. Even out-of-print Penguins can often be found.

*The Life of Jesus* by C. J. Cadoux (Penguin 1948) is useful if it can be found; the old and famous *Life of Jesus* by Ernest Renan (1863), though obviously dated, is also still worth reading. To these might be added the four volumes of *Penguin Gospel Commentaries*, particularly perhaps that by John Marsh on *St. John*. There are also Penguin volumes on *Roman Catholicism*, *The Orthodox*

*Church, and Judaism* by recognised authorities. Another relevant Penguin volume is *How the Bible Came to Us* by Canon H.G.G. Herklots.

For Meister Eckhart my own translation of his *German Sermons* in two volumes (Watkins) is now available, and there is also the Harper paperback selection by R.B. Blakney (1941, but still in print). There is an English translation of the *Of Learned Ignorance (1440) of Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus)* by Fr. G. Heron (Routledge 1954). On Archbishop Passavalli (1820–97) see *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Mystery* by J. Head and S. L. Cranston (New York 1977), p. 179.

The contribution of C.G. Jung to the psychology of religion should not be overlooked. *Jung and the Story of Our Time* by Laurens van der Post (Penguin 1978) provides the best possible introduction.

For a stimulating view of the varieties of living religions *Ronald Eyre on the Long Search* (Collins 1979), based on his TV series of that title, can be recommended. Those who are still worried by the idea of some fundamental conflict between 'science' and religion' could read with profit E. F. Schumacher's *A Guide for the Perplexed* (Fontana 1977), going on from there to Lyall Watson's

*Supernature*, in which the attempt to expand the frontiers of science beyond its materialist limits is made. This book (1973) and its successor *The Romeo Error* (1974), with useful bibliographies, have both appeared in Coronet Paperbacks. On the theme of the latter, see also my **Buddhism and Death** (Wheel Publication 261, Kandy 1978).

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