

memory is "interpretation." In order to be remembered, an experience—in its symbols, beliefs, and rituals—has to be framed in terms of historical and cultural categories. Thus, the core-experience in all religions, insofar as it is remembered, tends also to be interpreted in such diverse ways as to form various philosophical, theological, and exegetical schools.

In Buddhism, the core-experience lends itself to be classed as gnosis or "liberative knowledge"; the corresponding Christian experience falls under the category of agape or "redemptive love." Each is *salvific* in that each is a *self-transcending* event that radically transforms the human person affected by that experience. At the same time, there is an indefinable contrast between them, which largely determines the major differences between the two religions, differences quite obvious even to a casual observer. And yet, it must be recognized that both gnosis and agape are *necessary* precisely because each in itself is *inadequate* as a medium not only for experiencing but also for expressing our intimate moments with the Ultimate Source of liberation. They are, in other words, complementary idioms that need each other to mediate the self-transcending experience called "salvation." Any valid spirituality, Buddhist or Christian, as the history of each religion attests, does retain both poles of religious experience—namely, the gnostic and the agapeic. The movement of the spirit progresses through the dialectical interplay of wisdom and love, or, to put it in Buddhist terms, through the complementarity between *prajñā* and *karuṇā*, and in the Hindu tradition, the sapiential spirituality known as the *jñāna-mārga* and the affective-active paths called the *bhakti-* and *karma-mārga*.

But in order to appreciate and dialogue about both the differences and the complementarity between the core-experiences of Buddhism and Christianity, one must enter into their collective memories. Buddhism and Christianity are both vibrant with vitality today because each has developed its own religious system (of doctrines, rites, and institutions), which can make the original experience available to contemporary society. Hence the conclusion is unavoidable: a Christian who wishes to enter into a core-to-core dialogue with Buddhism must have two qualifications: (1) a preliminary empathic apprehension of the real nature of the other religion's core-experience, and (2) an uninhibited willingness to make use of the religious system that the Buddhist offers to the Christian as the only means of access to that core-experience—in other words, a readiness to enter into a *communicatio in sacris* with Buddhists.

Elsewhere I have gone into greater detail concerning the complementarity between the Buddhist and Christian core-experiences and concerning what a *communicatio in sacris* between the two religions would entail.¹ In this chapter I shall take up the third level of dialogue, that of interpretation (which is ancillary or preparatory to the "real" dialogue that takes place when we so "communicate" that we enter into each others' core-experience). My focus will be on one of the most challenging interpretative difficulties in the Christian-Buddhist encounter, one that motivates the other contributors to this book in their search for a "pluralist theology of religions": the problems that arise

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The Buddha and the Christ: Mediators of Liberation

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Interreligious dialogue is carried out on three different, but essentially related, levels: the levels of *core-experience*, *collective memory*, and *interpretation*.

The "core" of any religion is the *liberative* experience that gave birth to that religion and continues to be available to successive generations of humankind. It is this primordial experience that functions as the *core* of a religion, at any time, in any given place, in the sense that it continuously re-creates the *psycho-spiritual mood* proper to that particular religion, imparting at the same time its own peculiar character to the *socio-cultural manifestation* of that religion. It is precisely through recourse to this primordial experience that a religion resolves its recurrent crises and regenerates itself in the face of new challenges. In fact, the vitality of any given religion depends on its capacity to put each successive generation in touch with that core-experience of liberation.

The medium by which the core-experience is made available to successive generations is precisely the "collective memory" of that experience. A religion would die as soon as it is born if it failed to evolve some *means of perpetuating* (the accessibility of) its core-experience. Religious beliefs, practices, traditions, and institutions that grow out of a particular religion go to make up a "communication system" that links its adherents with the originating nucleus—that is, the liberative core of that religion. This is why a religion fades out of history even after centuries of existence when its symbols and institutions lose their capacity to evoke in their followers the distinctive salvific experience that defines the essence of that religion. Did this not happen to the great religions of ancient Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Mesopotamia?

Integral to the functioning of the communication system of the collective

when *christology* is confronted with the competing claims of *buddhology*.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, interpretation has reached a high point in the doctrine of the buddhahood—"buddhology," as I shall call it in the following considerations. Similarly, insofar as Christ is the very core of Christianity, christology is both the axis and the acme of all Christian hermeneutics. It should be noted that my emphasis on the essentially hermeneutical character of both buddhology and christology is not intended to deny either the theoretical validity or the historical basis of such interpretations. As already argued, interpretations are a necessary means of communication; and as such they reveal the capacity of a given religion not only to *define* (limit) but also to *redefine* (expand) the boundaries of orthodoxy in the process of allowing its theoretical framework to accommodate the intellectual achievements and historical challenges of a given era.

The focus of Buddhist-Christian dialogue on the level of interpretation is the historical figure of the founders of these two religions, who are believed to play a soteriological role in the lives of their followers. This claim is not made by the adherents of other religions. This is what makes Buddhist-Christian dialogue a dangerous exercise. Far from being a religious conversation about Jesus and Gautama, or a comparative study of their different historical and cultural backgrounds, it can easily explode into a kerygmatic confrontation between Jesus interpreted as *the Christ* and Gautama interpreted as *the Buddha*.

GAUTAMA INTERPRETED AS THE BUDDHA

The Buddhist cultures of Asia project a composite picture of the Buddha. Prof. D. J. Kalupahana, a Buddhist, offers us a slow-motion replay of the process by which the scriptural portrait of the extraordinary human teacher grew, in the minds of his followers, into the Transcendent Being of the Mahayanists.² The figure of the human teacher (*satthā*) that Kalupahana draws out of the Pali scriptures was not omniscient; nor was his experience of nirvana thought to be different from that attained by his disciples. Quite unlike Jesus of the New Testament, Gautama of the *Tripitaka* (early Buddhist scriptures) did not seem to have clearly claimed that the Saving Truth or the Liberating Path was identical with his own person. He was only the Pathfinder and Truth-discoverer.

But it would be a grave mistake to think of him as a Socrates or a Plato, a mere founder of a school of thought. The kind of Buddhism that Europe imported in the nineteenth century was a "religionless philosophy" and its founder seemed more of a thinker than a holy man.³ He came to be presented as an religious person, beloved of rationalists and agnostics, and noted for the "scepticism of his style."⁴ This description disregards the fact that the Buddha had listed "logic, inference, and reasoning" among the means that cannot lead to the Truth⁵ and put "scepticism" among the five hindrances on the path to nirvana⁶ and as one of the three fetters to be freed from.⁷

Much more perceptive in this regard was Clement of Alexandria who was

one of the founding fathers of Christian gnosticism; he sensed that the Buddha was more than a mere teacher of a philosophy. According to Clement, those who observed the Buddha's *Regula (Monastica)*, "regarded him as divine" (*hos theon teimetasin*)—that is to say, more than human, on account of his superlative sanctity (*di'hyperbolon semnotetos*).⁸ It was his sanctity that the medieval Christians celebrated liturgically when they raised St. Joasaph (= *bodhisattva*) to the altars!⁹

This is also the image that emerges clearly from the Buddhist cultures in Asia: a saint recognized as such by his followers and therefore revered as the noblest of beings that has ever set foot on earth, higher than the highest of gods, his sanctity alone being the root of his authority over all things in heaven and on earth.

The *locus classicus* that parallels the "Who do people say that I am?" of Matthew 16:13 is found in the *Anguttara Nikāya*.¹⁰ "Could you be a god?" asks a Brahmin, and Buddha's answer is "No." "A *gandhabba* (demigod)?" "No." "A ghost?" "No." "A human being?" "No." The questioner pursues: "What, then, could you be?"¹¹ The answer begins with a reference to the Buddha's perfect purity: like the lotus that sprouts and grows in water but remains unsullied by that water, so is the Buddha born and nurtured in this world but untouched by it, as one who "has overcome the world" (*lokaṃ abhibhuyya*).¹² Then comes the long-awaited answer: "Remember, Brahmin, that I am Buddha"¹³—for what distinguishes him from all other beings is his spotless purity.

The legend that describes the Buddha's mother, Maya, as a virgin both *ante partum* and *post partum* (before and after giving birth) is a symbolic variant of the simile of the lotus, and is iconographically expressed in the form of a white elephant,¹⁴ just as in Christian art the dove represents the Holy Spirit hovering over Mary to make her the virgin mother of Jesus. In the first centuries of Buddhism, no artist dared to paint or build a human figure of the Buddha; he could not be classed under any category of being, all of which he transcended by his infinite purity. Instead, the early Buddhists resorted to symbols: the riderless horse represented his Great Renunciation (i.e., his leaving home for the forest); a tree with no one seated beneath it represented the enlightenment; the wheel symbolized the first sermon, his death was signified by the *stūpa*, the funeral mound. But when statues did begin to be made in later centuries, they were frequently of gigantic proportions, suggestive of the superhuman stature of his personality. Even today in Theravada countries, to impersonate the Buddha on the stage or in a film is considered blasphemous.

In the medium of the spoken and written word, as in the case of the plastic arts, there was a struggle to formulate this inexpressible dimension of Buddhahood, a dimension that in no way eclipsed Gautama's humanity but in some way transcended it. Though "doetism" (*lokottaravāda*) was rejected as a heresy especially in southern Buddhism, the Mahayanists equated the Buddha with the *Dharma*, the eternal Truth that preexists Gautama,¹⁵ similar to the way that Jesus of Nazareth was recognized as the preexistent *Logos* in the fourth Gospel.

Hence there has been, from very early times, a desperate effort to create buddhological titles from terms judiciously selected from the religious vocabulary of contemporary cultures. A random survey has come up with forty-six such titles used in the Pali scriptures.¹⁶ Some describe the Buddha's "person" as such (*maḥāpurisa* = Supreme Person; *maḥāvira* = Great Hero; *purisuttama* and *naruttama* = the Most Exalted of persons; *maḥājūti* = the Brilliant, etc.); others indicate his relationship with other humans (*vinayaka* = Leader; *purisa-damma-sāraṭhī* = Trainer of tameable persons; *sāraṭhinam varuttama* = the Most Excellent of guides, etc.); still others point to his supremacy over the whole of creation (*lokanātha* = Lord of the Cosmos), and so on.

As one scholar has observed,¹⁷ the long series of epithets cited in the *Upāli Sutta* of the Pali canon¹⁸ recalls the *stotra* (i.e., doxological) literature known as *sata-nāma* ("hundred names") so characteristic of Hindu devotionism. The first impression one gets is that here affective or devotional spirituality (*bhakti-mārgā*) has replaced the gnostic spirituality (*jñāna-mārgā*) which is proper to Buddhism. The fact, however, is that almost all these epithets refer to the Buddha's gnostic detachment and his internal purity.

Since Buddhahood is conceived as the pleroma of gnosis (*prajñā*) and agape (*karuṇā*); one can therefore easily understand why Pali commentators linked these two buddhological qualities with the two most hallowed buddhological titles—namely, *arahān* (the Worthy One) and *bhagavān* (the Blessed One), respectively. The former implies gnostic disengagement from the world, and the latter connotes his agapeic involvement with the liberation of all beings as well as his sovereignty over the whole of creation.¹⁹ These two epithets occur in the most ancient doxology (used even today at the beginning of any liturgy): "Hail to him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the supremely Enlightened One!" The exegetes claim that by gnosis (proper to the *arahān*), Gautama crosses the ocean of *samsāra* and reaches the further shore of nirvana, but by agape (proper to the *bhagavān*) he also gets others across.²⁰

The convergence and concentration of *prajñā* and *karuṇā* in the Buddha (which explains, respectively, his absolute purity and his soteriological impact on the final destiny of others) has also earned for him such titles as *lokavidū* (Knower of the World) and *lokanātha* (Lord of the Cosmos), already in the canonical writings.²¹ Also in the subsequent postcanonical literature, his transcendental status and his cosmic lordship began to be indicated through a long string of buddhological epithets such as "King of Kings," "Self-existent," "Self-luminous," "God above (all other) gods (*devātideva*)."²²

Some eminent Buddhist scholars (e.g., Kalupahana, quoted above) would question the orthodoxy of this development. Perhaps its scriptural roots should be traced back to what we might call the catechetical method or the pedagogy of the Buddha. The scriptures testify that he changed the god-infested cosmos of his contemporaries into an anthropocentric universe wherein humans who fulfill their innate capacity to realize the metacosmic goal of nirvana were held to reach a state far above the level of gods. Thus he divested the gods of all salvific power; even their cosmic influence was restricted to

helping or harming humans in their day-to-day temporal needs. The canonical writers make their point when they portray the highest deity of the Brahmanic religion crouching in reverence before the Buddha and his disciples.²³

This catechetical procedure of the Buddha was continued as a missiological technique in later times in that missionaries did not uproot the cosmic religiosity of the people whom they converted but gave it a metacosmic orientation not only through the doctrine of nirvana but also by installing the Buddha as the sovereign lord immediately *above* and yet wholly *beyond* the local deities of each culture.

This seems to be the origin of what I alluded to as "the composite portrait" of the Buddha emerging from Buddhist cultures. This certainly is what "Gautama the Buddha" means for millions of Asians today. He is as much the Great Being (*maḥāsatta*) to be revered and praised, the Lord (*bhagavān*) to be loved and trusted, as he is a human teacher (*satthā*) to be followed and a saint (*arahān*) to be emulated.

This portrait was brought out in clearer focus during a buddhological controversy that erupted some years ago in Sri Lanka. A renowned Buddhist layman and writer, a humanist and socialist, Dr. Martin Wickramasingha produced a Sinhalese novel based on the life of the Buddha, eliminating the mythical and the miraculous elements from the scriptural accounts and focusing on Siddhartha's *human* struggle not only for his own nirvanic freedom but also for *social* transformation. This novel provoked a massive public protest on the part of monks and laity. The great monk-scholar, the Venerable Y. Pañnārāma, who spearheaded this protest movement, compiled a two-volume refutation of the buddhological and other inaccuracies said to be contained in the novel.²⁴

In his critique of the novel, the venerable monk complains that, among other things, in portraying the character of Siddhartha as a human seeker, the novelist had overlooked the quality specific to Siddhartha's Buddhahood.²⁵ Yet, lest he be accused of docetism (*lokoitaravāda*), the monk insists that his criticism should not be construed as a plea for retaining the mythical and the miraculous elements at the expense of Gautama's true humanity. To prove his orthodoxy, he quotes extensively from one of his devotional poems addressed to the Buddha, indeed a credo in the Buddha's historical humanity:

Had I sensed thee not to be a human
Never, never indeed would I find in me
Any love, regard, or fear for thee!

My Lord is indeed a Man!
Man in body and thought
In virtue and action!

Yet, going beyond common humanity
He bore a Splendour Transcendent!²⁶

Then, presuming himself to be the Buddha's contemporary, he expresses his longing to nurse his aging Master, to touch and massage his limbs, kiss his feet, and wash his ailing body.

It is very clear that for this defender of orthodoxy, Buddhahood implies a *truly transcendent* dimension of a *truly human* being. Both these aspects are proclaimed with as much firmness as the *verus deus* and the *verus homo* are affirmed of Jesus in traditional christology.

There is also a third aspect implicit in this credo: the soteriological role of the Buddha. In the orthodox Theravada stream, the Buddha is never regarded as a savior. His soteriological role is restricted to his discovering and preaching the *dharma* (the eternal salvific Truth that preexists him) and to the forming of the *sangha* (a community that, like him, realizes this Truth and continues to preach and practice the Path that leads to it). But once the *dharma* was equated with the Buddha, and the *sangha* was devalued (as happened in certain Mahayanist schools, e.g., in Amidism), Buddha became the savior who grants the grace of salvation to those who invoke him in faith. An agapeic religiosity using a personalist idiom has become a characteristic of such schools of Buddhism.

The more intricate element in the Buddha's soteriological influence is his *cosmic lordship*, at least as far as popular religiosity is concerned. However, no recognized anthropologist has really shown so far that the masses ever confuse this lordship with the cosmic function of gods and spirits. Yet, the cult of gods—that is, this cosmic religiosity—includes as one of its manifestations the *socio-political* regulation of human life. This is at the root of the "Divine Right Theory of Kingship," which the Buddha categorically rejected in favor of a social contract theory.²⁷ Yet the feudal societies that hosted Buddhism in Asia continued to be dominated by the older theory. Hence, the socio-political order, even in Buddhist cultures, continued to be associated with cosmic religiosity to which Buddhism imparted a metacosmic orientation by placing the Buddha, the *dharma*, and the *sangha* above and beyond the socio-political order.²⁸ The kingdom of Thailand continues this tradition.

Nevertheless, the social dimension of Buddhist ethics is being reclaimed from oblivion and reexpressed as the Buddha's vision of a just political order for today,²⁹ so that social justice is regarded at least as an inevitable by-product of Buddhist soteriology. An extreme example of such reclaiming can be found in *Dalit Sāhiya* ("Literature of the Oppressed") produced by the schedule castes of Maharashtra in India. Many of them embraced Buddhism as a doorway to social emancipation. The following poem addressed to the Buddha, the liberator of the oppressed, is a sample of *Dalit Sāhiya*:

Siddhartha
Never do I see you
In the Jetavana
Sitting in the lotus position
With your eyes closed

Or in the caves of Ajanta and Werule
With your stony lips touching
Sleeping your final sleep.

I see you
Speaking and walking
Amongst the humble and the weak
Soothing away grief
In the life-threatening darkness
With torch in hand
Going from hovel to hovel.

Today you wrote a new page
of the *Tripitaka*.

You have revealed the
New Meaning of suffering
Which like an epidemic
Swallows life's blood.³⁰

This indeed is a new interpretation of the Buddha's soteriological role. The belief in his cosmic lordship is hermeneutically extended to the socio-political structures whose radical transformation is believed to be possible under the Buddha's soteriological influence. Undoubtedly, this is "a new page in the *Tripitaka*," as the poet declares.

JESUS THE CHRIST IN THE CONTEXT OF BUDDHOLOGY

The "missionary buddhology" that installed the Buddha as cosmic lord in so many Asian cultures anticipated by centuries the missiology of Paul who did the same with Christ in the Hellenistic cultures that he evangelized. He preached and confessed Jesus to be the Lord of all creation, whom all beings "in heaven, on earth, and in hell" adore in fear and trembling (Phil. 2: 6-11). Far from suppressing the Hellenistic belief in "cosmic elements," Paul acknowledged their existence and their power to enslave human beings (Gal. 4:3) and cause disobedience (Eph. 2:2). Though they appear to be gigantic powers arrayed against humankind (Eph. 6:12), they have all been decisively domesticated by the risen Jesus (Col. 2:15). Thus by liberating us from this "dominion of darkness" (Col. 1:13), Christ has made himself "the head" of all such cosmic forces (Col. 2:10). In other words, he is at once the metacosmic power and the cosmic mediator because in him the whole of existence—in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible—is recapitulated and reconciled (Col. 1:15-16).³¹

Undoubtedly there is a striking parallelism, though not strictly a similarity, between the two confessional formulas, the buddhological and the christologi-

cal. No wonder that in some Asian countries, the first Christian encounter with Buddhism was to push the Buddha out and install Christ in his place. The Buddhists replied in kind!

In fact, in the polemical mood of the late nineteenth century, when the anticolonial movements had, by historical necessity, to be anti-Christian, the great Buddhist revivalist, Anagarika Dharmapala, took delight in making odious comparisons between the two founders.³² The "Nazarene carpenter," as he referred to Jesus with disdain, had no sublime teachings to offer, and understandably so, because his parables not only reveal a limited mind, but they also impart immoral lessons and impractical ethics!³³

Jesus as a human personality was an utter failure. He made no impression on the public during the three years of his ministry. No thinker or philosopher took the least notice of his philosophy which helped to create imbeciles. The few illiterate fishermen of Galilee followed him as he promised to make them judges to rule over Israel.³⁴

In Dharmapala's speeches and essays, Jesus is reduced to the stature of a spiritual dwarf before Buddha's gigantic personality.

But let us humbly acknowledge that this species of Buddhist revivalism owes its anti-Christian thrust to an initial Christian offensive aimed not only against the doctrine but also against the *person* of the Buddha through the written as well as the spoken word.³⁵

The peak of this revivalism, as one sociologist sees it,³⁶ manifested itself in the proliferation of Buddha statues in the major towns of Sri Lanka's western coast; it was an attempt to reaffirm Buddhism, as a socio-political force, against Christianity. May I add my own explanation: Was it not also an attempt to put the Buddha back where he belonged in the urban culture of the westernized Buddhist elite presumably because in that elitist culture the cosmic lordship of the Buddha, taken for granted in the rural areas, was eclipsed by the colonial impact of Western Christianity?

There is also a less aggressive way of affirming the supremacy of the Buddha over Christ and vice versa. The Hindu theology of religions has pioneered this technique. Hinduism neutralizes the challenge of the other religion by absorbing it into its own theological framework. Brought under the Hindu salvific umbrella, Jesus and Gautama become Hindu avatars (incarnations) whom the Christians and Buddhists can hardly recognize as the Christ and the Buddha, respectively.

This ancient theology of religions prevails today on the frontiers of the mainstream churches. The Buddha is accepted as a precursor of Christ, a "holy pagan" preparing the way for Christ the only Savior, as Daniélou, following Guardini, seems to have maintained.³⁷ Marco Polo's spontaneous observation about the Buddha ("Had he been a Christian, he would have been a great saint of Jesus Christ.") had already anticipated this inclusivist theology of religions. In fact, it was as a saint of Jesus Christ that the medieval church accepted the

Buddha in the Joasaph cult, as mentioned earlier. No Buddhist is going to be flattered by this condescension. Yet this theory has deep roots in the New Testament approach to the patriarchs and prophets of Judaism—the same approach that Islam adopts toward Jesus!

In the same way, many a well-meaning Buddhist condescends to give Jesus a niche in the Buddhist *Weltanschauung*. At best, Jesus receives the welcome given to a *Bodhisattva*, being full of compassion but still on the way to Buddhahood! This is about the maximum that Buddhists can concede to the founder of Christianity. If they concede one bit more to Jesus, they would cease to be Buddhist.

We are, therefore, obliged to conclude that both the exclusivist and the inclusivist theories of religions end up asserting the supremacy of the Buddha over the Christ, and vice versa. There seems to be no way of avoiding the exclusivist model. This is the impasse that any "dialogical" theology of religions, even in its most inclusivist form, runs into. Is there no other way of seeing the problem? Or, another *starting point*?

I believe that the *false start*, which leads theologians into blind alleys, is their obsession with the "uniqueness" of Christ. At the risk of anticipating my conclusions, I would suggest that the real debate is about the "uniqueness" of Jesus in terms of the "absoluteness" that Christians indicate with titles like *Christ*, *Son of God*, and the like—the same absoluteness that Buddhists indicate with similar terms: *dharma*, *tathāgata*, and the like. To put it more precisely, the crux of the problem is whether it is Jesus or Gautama who is *unique* in the sense of being the *exclusive medium of salvation for all*. That Jesus is unique is obvious even to Buddhists, just as Christians would hardly question the uniqueness of Gautama. Is not each one of us unique? The issue is whether Jesus' uniqueness consists of his absoluteness as conveyed by certain christological titles, and whether the uniqueness of Gautama should be understood in terms of the absoluteness that the word *dharma* or, as in certain schools, *Buddha* seems to convey.

Note that in this context "the Absolute" has a soteriological connotation. Christians know it as the *mysterium salutis* (mystery of salvation) and have learned to distinguish three dimensions in this mystery: (1) *source* of salvation, (2) *medium* of salvation, and (3) *force* of salvation. This is what the "economic Trinity" is all about. In the scriptures these three aspects are distinguished as *theos*, *logos*, and *pneuma*, respectively; or, more anthropomorphically, as the Father, the Son, and the Consoler/Advocate, who are conceptually clarified in Chalcedonian christology as three distinct *persons* sharing one divine *nature*.

This tridimensionality of the mystery (and process) of salvation is implicitly acknowledged in the soteriology of practically all major religions, as I have suggested elsewhere.³⁸ In Buddhism, however, the first dimension is not seen as the source of salvation, but seems to be affirmed as the final metacosmic destiny of an individual's cosmic and human history: *nirvana*. Because there is no primordial source of salvation, there is no doctrine of creation (*ex nihilo*),

and consequently no doctrine of eschatological consummation, and no theory of grace.

But Christianity sees the source not only as the Alpha, but also as the Omega point of history. Hence, in its agapeic framework, this world and human life itself appears to be *consummated* (fulfilled, perfected) in the *eschaton*. This species of extrapolation characteristic of Christian theology contrasts neatly with the apophatic language of Buddhist gnosticism that sees nirvana as the utter *cessation* rather than the consummation of all that constitutes reality as we now know and experience it. Furthermore, nirvana is the cessation of the human *individual's* history, whereas the *eschaton* is the consummation also of the *collective* history of humankind.

There is, however, a significant point of convergence. Both religions insist: (1) that a positive human endeavor (an *ascesis*) is a necessary condition for the arrival of final liberation, and yet (2) that this final liberation (the absolute future or the further shore) is never really the result of human effort, for nirvana is beyond the categories of *phala* and *aphala*—that is to say, it defies all human causation, while similarly the *eschaton* is believed to “break in” from the other side of the human horizon.

Though these distinctions and qualifications are necessary when speaking of the source of salvation, there is a greater agreement when we come to the medium of salvation. Salvation implies a paradox: the inaccessible “beyond” (source) becomes one’s salvific “within” (force), and the incomprehensible comes within the grasp of human insight. This is possible only because the Absolute contains within its own bosom a mediatory and revelatory self-expression—that is, an accessible dimension: the *Dharma*/the *Logos*. The transhuman horizon stops receding only because there is a path (*mārga/hodos*) leading toward it. For, in the beginning was the WORD by which Absolute Silence came to be *heard*—and the ICON by which the Invisible was brought within our *sight*!

But how could we humans, who have *dust* as our origin and destiny (Gen. 3:19), ever respond to this medium (*dharma/mārga/logos/hodos/word/icon*) unless we are equipped with a “response-apparatus” commensurate with that medium? No wonder that all religions seem to postulate a certain *given* capacity within us to seek and find the Liberating Truth, or (as in theistic religions), a certain innate *force* by which the Absolute draws us toward Itself. This “given capacity” appears as the “Spirit” in the Christian’s vocabulary.

The Buddhist postulates this capacity in the context of the twofold doctrine: “no soul” and “no God.” Because no Primordial Source of liberation is admitted (“no God”), human beings, who are merely a fluctuating series of psycho-physical events without any permanent substratum (“no soul”), have to rely on their own “self” or *citta* for liberation (*atta-sarana*).³⁹ This *citta* is therefore that which is developed toward the full attainment of Absolute Freedom or nirvana. The idea of a *given* human potentiality for the realization of liberating truth is the most significant presupposition in Buddhist soteriology, though it is never explicitly analyzed.

Having thus clarified the three aspects of salvation in Buddhism and Christianity, I can now proceed, with the aid of a common vocabulary, to juxtapose buddhology and christology, keeping in mind that both are expressions of the *interpretative* level of religious consciousness (as explained at the beginning of this chapter).

Let us note first that there is an “ascending buddhology” and a “descending buddhology,” if we may borrow terms from Christian theology. The former defines Buddhahood in terms of a distinctive way of attaining nirvana not attributed to *arahāns*. The term *arahān*, which used to be a buddhological title, is now popularly and frequently used as a synonym for disciples who attain nirvana in a manner different from the Buddha. The Buddha is therefore a human being who has reached a state that makes him a category of his own, as explained above. This buddhology constitutes the principal orientation in Southeast Asia. But in northern Buddhism the tendency seems to be to equate the Buddha with the eternal preexistent *Dharma*. Gautama, then, would be the human manifestation or incarnation of this revelatory medium of salvation. All buddhological titles are human efforts to express the transhuman dimension of the Buddha in the context of one or the other buddhology. The belief in his cosmic lordship is an interpretive extension of these two basic affirmations.

Christology interprets Jesus as the exclusive medium of salvation for all, the *Logos*, the image, the word, the path, and so on. But as in buddhology, so also in christology, it is not the interpretation that saves! What mediates salvation is the medium itself, in whatever linguistic idiom it may be experienced, recognized, and named. Nor are the titles in themselves salvific. Such titles as “Christ” are only human categorizations limited to a given culture. What mediates liberation is the medium to which one culture as much as another can decide what name to give: Christ, Son of God, and so forth, or *Dharma*, *Tathāgata*, and so forth—each according to its own religious idiom.

Not even the acclamation “Jesus is Lord” is in itself salvific. For it is not anyone who says “Lord, Lord,” but the person who does the will of the Father who is saved (Matt. 7: 21). To say “Jesus is the Word” is not enough; the Word must be heard and executed for one to be saved. To say “Jesus is the path” is not enough; one must walk the path to reach the end. Moreover, not all who obey the Word or walk the path feel obliged to claim its proper name to be Jesus. For what mediates salvation is not the “name” of Jesus in the Hellenistic sense of the term “name,” but the name of Jesus and *as* Jesus in the Hebrew sense of “the reality” (or salvific medium) that was seen to be operative in Jesus, independent of the name or designation we may attach to it. In fact, knowledge of the name or title is not expected by the eschatological Judge, but knowledge of the path is (Matt. 25: 37–39 and 44–46).

This holds good for buddhology too. Buddhists must agree with their Christian partners that liberation is possible only through what they both accept to be the “revelatory medium of salvation” and not the titles one gives to it. The major function of christological and buddhological titles is to equate the names of particular historical persons with the salvific medium. The real

parting of ways, therefore, begins when either Gautama or Jesus is identified with that medium by means of these titles. It is at this point that dialogue must once more change directions if it will avoid a blind alley, for we are dealing here with kerygmatic affirmations.

A kerygma is always a metaphorical proclamation that cannot be demonstrated rationally. The only convincing proof it adduces is *martyrion* (witness), for we are dealing with soteriology, not philosophy or mathematics. That is to say, liberation is the only proof of liberation! To say Jesus is the medium of salvation is to show the fruits of such liberation in the person who says it. A christology that remains a speculative hermeneutis fails to be a soteriological proclamation about Jesus. A christology receives its authenticity from a transforming praxis that proves that in the *story of Jesus that continues in his followers*, the medium of salvation is operative, though it is not the total mystery of salvation (*totus Deus, non totum Dei*—"entirely God but not the entirety of God"). In Christian theological vocabulary, this medium is designated by titles like "Christ," "Son of God," and the like, as applied to Jesus because this liberation is believed to take place through Jesus the man (therefore through every man and woman in Jesus).

This is the inchoative christology found in Paul and in need of refinement. But in the process of being refined, this christology splits up into at least two incomplete models. (1) The classic (Chalcedonian) model focused too narrowly on the theandric composition of the incarnate *Logos* (Jesus) and on the philosophical problem of "one and many" with respect to the triune mystery of salvation, thus neglecting the whole process of salvation in its cosmic magnitude and in its eschatological dimension. (2) A popular catechetical model stressed the *divine* lordship of Jesus ("Christ the King" reigning in heaven) over a given, unchangeably created cosmos, without defining this lordship in terms of our co-mediation with him in the task of co-creating—that is, transforming this world psycho-spiritually and socio-politically into his kingdom of peace and justice.

Now this co-redemptive role of the corporate Christ, missing in both these partial christologies, is being supplied by the emergent theologies of liberation, which are essentially kerygmatic and critical of the christology of domination—that is, the theology of the colonial Christ, which could not be "good news" either for Buddhists or for Christians!

A liberation christology sees the medium of salvation in the form of *Jesus on the cross*, the symbol of the twofold ascesis that constitutes the salvific path—the *via crucis*: (1) Jesus' renunciation of biological, emotional, and physical ties that bound him to the "world" (*Jesus' struggle to be poor*), and (2) his open denunciation of mammon, which organizes itself into principalities and powers by dividing humankind into the class of Dives and the class of Lazarus (*Jesus' struggle for the poor*).⁴⁰

The first form of Jesus' ascesis focuses on interior liberation, so well symbolized by the Buddha seated under the tree of gnosis. The second involves a ruthless demand for a structural change in human relationships in view of the

new order of love or the kingdom of God, a demand that led Jesus to a type of death reserved for terrorists (zealots) on what has now come to be the tree of agape.

The uniqueness of Jesus (I am not concerned here with the uniqueness of Christ but with the "absoluteness" that titles such as "Christ" were meant to convey) lies in the fact that his claim to be the absolute medium of salvation is demonstrated on the cross by his double ascesis, which, nevertheless, would not be a convincing proof of his claim but an empty boast of his followers unless this double ascesis continues in them as an ongoing salvific process completing in their bodies what is still unfinished in the ascesis of Jesus (Col. 1:24).

This double ascesis is the nucleus around which an Asian theology of liberation evolves into a christology that does not compete with buddhology but complements it by acknowledging the one path of liberation on which Christians join Buddhists in their *gnostic detachment* (or the practice of voluntary poverty) and Buddhists join Christians in their *agapeic involvement* in the struggle against forced poverty.⁴¹ This complementary cooperation is happening today in some basic *human* communities in Asia. Here, co-pilgrims expound their respective scriptures, retelling the story of Jesus and Gautama in a core-to-core dialogue that makes their hearts burn (Luke 24:32). It is only at the end of the path, as at Emmaus, that the path itself will be recognized by name (Luke 24:31).

NOTES

1. In an address given at the "Fünfte religionstheologische Studententagung" on the general theme of "Dialog aus der Mitte christlicher Theologie" ("Dialogue from the Core of Christian Theology"), held at St. Gabriel, Mödling bei Wien, Austria, April 1-4, 1986.
2. *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1976), pp. 112-26.
3. I have briefly described these historical circumstances and given the relevant sources in "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism: A Theological Reading of Historical Encounters," *Dialogue* (Colombo) n.s. 7 (1980) 66-67. See also my, "Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians," *Concilium*, 183 (1986) 60-65.
4. S. Cromwell Crawford, "American Youth and the Buddha," *World Buddhism* 18/8 (1970) 199.
5. *Anguttara Nikāya* (PTS edition), Vol. I, p. 188, and *passim*. All Pali texts quoted hence forward will be from the PTS Editions (Pali Text Society, London).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 161 and *passim*.
7. *Majjhima Nikāya*, I:9.
8. *Sīromata*, XV:71.6.
9. For references to sources dealing with the Joasaph cult, see my "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism," pp. 61-62.
10. *Anguttara Nikāya*, II:38-39.
11. In translating this passage, I. B. Horner (*Gradual Sayings*, PTS, 1952, II:46)

insists that the question, as the Pali original has it, is not about what Gautama is but what he *will become*, though the final answer is in the present tense—namely, that he is (already) the Buddha. For a different view, see Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy*, p. 112. See also note 13, below.

12. Compare John 16: 33.

13. Horner (*Sayings*) translates: "Take it that I am a Buddha." This answer is then summed up in the verse that follows: "Therefore, I am Buddha" (*tasmaṃ Buddhō'smi*).

14. Maya is believed to have conceived Gautama at the moment when a white elephant appeared to her in a dream.

15. The proof text adduced by the adherents of this theory is *Itivuttaka*, p. 91, where "seeing the Buddha" and "seeing the *Dharma*" are equated. As for the (eternal) preexistence of the *Dharma*, see *Samyutta Nikāya*, II:25.

16. See B.G. Gokhale, "Bhakti in Early Buddhism," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 15 (1980) 18.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Majjhima Nikāya*, I:386.

19. E.g., *Itivuttak aṭṭhakathā*, I:13, 15–16.

20. *Ibid.*

21. E.g., *lokanidū* in *Digha Nikāya*, III:76, and *lokanātha* in *Sutta Nipata*, p. 995.

22. See Har Dayal, *The Buddhist Doctrine in Buddhist Sanscrit Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1931/1970), p. 24.

23. Cf. *Samyutta Nikāya*, I:235.

24. *Bhāvataraṇa-maga hā Buddha-caritaya*, vol. 1 (1976) and 2 (1978).

25. *Ibid.*, I:20, and *passim*.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

27. Cf. *Aggaṇṇa Sutta*, which is summarized in my "The Political Vision of the Buddhists," *Dialogue*, 11 (1984) 6ff.

28. See the diagram with an explanation of this worldview in my "Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation," *The Month*, May 1979, p. 152.

29. See Piyasena Dissanayake, *The Political Thought of Buddha* (Colombo, 1977).

30. Dayar Powar, "Siddhartha," *Panchasheel*, Oct. 1972, p. 7, translated into English and quoted in J.B. Gokhale-Turner, "Bhakti or *Vidroha*: Continuity and Change in *Dalit Sāhitya*," *Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 15 (1980) 38.

31. Cf. Elias Mallon, "The Cosmic Powers and Reconciliation," *Centro Pro Unione* (Rome), 6 (1974) 18–22.

32. See *Return to Righteousness* (Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters of Anagarika Dharmapala), Ananda Guruge, ed. (Colombo: Government Press, 1965), pp. 447ff.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 448–49.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 475.

35. This thesis is documented in Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 192–255.

36. G. Obeyesekere, "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon," *Modern Ceylon Studies* (University of Ceylon), 1 (1970) 43–63.

37. Jean Daniélou, *Holy Pagans of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, 1957), p. 22.

38. Pieris, "Speaking of the Son of God in Non-Christian Cultures, e.g., in Asia," *Concilium*, 153 (1982) 65–70.

39. For clarification regarding the "self" that is denied in Buddhism and the (empirical) "self" that is identified with *citta*, see my "*Citta*, *Attā*, and *Attabhāva* in Pali

Exegetical Writings," *Buddhist Studies in Honor of Walpola Rahula* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1980), pp. 212–22.

40. See the conclusions in "Buddhism as a Challenge for Christians" (note 3, above) and my "To Be Poor as Jesus Was Poor?," *The Way*, July 1984, pp. 186–97.

41. How this theology spells out what is *unique* to biblico-Christian revelation and liberation is discussed in my "Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?," *Vidyajyoti*, 50/7 (1986) 330–51.