8.2: Comparing Buddhism and Christianity as Whole Traditions

Reflecting on the surveys of ways of being religious in Buddhism and Christianity just completed, we find that several initial or preliminary observations can be made. First, because each tradition taken as a whole is so complex and diverse, it is clear that few simple generalizations for the purpose of comparison will fairly characterize either tradition as a whole and may very well seriously misrepresent one or more of its parts. The framework of ways of being religious makes clear how each tradition is a highly complex combination of diverse subtraditions having different priorities with respect to ways of being religious. Buddhism is not just one thing, nor is Christianity. It is clear, for example, that not all of Buddhism can be characterized as centrally concerned with the monastic, mystical quest for nirvāṇa, and that not all of Christianity can be characterized as focused on sacramentally participating in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world, or on cultivating a devotional relationship with him as one’s personal lord and savior—at least not without taking up the partisan judgments of specific subtraditions of each. So also, it is clear that, for a comparison to be fair, care must be taken to compare the best expressions of any ways found in one tradition with the best expressions of whatever ways are found in the other tradition, along with the tendencies in each for degeneration in actual practice. The point is that it would be unfair to juxtapose, say, sophisticated and articulate lamas (spiritual masters) of Vajrayana Buddhism with unsophisticated but devout laypersons from the Evangelical Holiness tradition (say, a Church of the Nazarene congregation), or to place examples of the best expressions of, say, Roman Catholic sacramental worship in Ireland alongside examples of the worst expressions of Theravada monasticism in Thailand. In other words, one should respect the complexity of each tradition, recognize the strengths and weaknesses of its subtraditions, avoid presumptive generalizations, and practice the principle of charitable tentative interpretations concerning what one does not yet know well.

Second, although the surveys above have not made this point very evident, the meanings of central concepts in each tradition are in certain fundamental respects impossible to pin down with exactness in a manner that permits straightforward comparison of concepts from one tradition with those of another. The central concepts in each tradition are in significant ways ambiguous, at times revealing significantly different meanings (or dimensions of meaning)
depending on the way of being religious and historical tradition of interpretation in which they are taken up. They often do not mean what they first appear to mean, especially to an outsider unfamiliar with their implications in lived practice. Another way of putting the same point is to say that the meaning of key concepts in significant respects is given in terms of the implicit, lived practice of the tradition (including ideal practice, degenerate practice, and everything in between), and also in terms of the way that lived practice varies according to each specific subtradition and the way or ways of being religious that are centrally emphasized in that subtradition. Thus, for example, Buddhists talk of an impersonal law of *karma/kamma* that governs all sentient existence, an irrelevance of whatever gods there may be to salvation, and a necessary extinction of self to attain *nirvana/nibbana*—concepts which at first glance seem alien to a Christian frame of reference. So also Christians talk of the destiny of all life being ordered by a personal God, salvation as available only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and an eternal life of fellowship with God for those who are made new in Christ—concepts which at first glance appear alien to a Buddhist frame of reference, indeed, concepts apparently directly at odds with the Buddhist concepts just mentioned.

But are these concepts what we initially and with seeming confidence take them to be? To what extent do our understandings of them reflect (or fail to reflect) their function in lived practice among members of their respective traditions and subtraditions, and (insofar as our understandings of them do reflect lived practice) not just the practice that we, consciously or unconsciously, happen to favor personally? My point is that abstract comparison of doctrines of Buddhism and Christianity is liable to be seriously misleading apart from a sensitivity to how doctrinal concepts function in lived practice. What first looks like a fundamental difference and disagreement in doctrine—for example, the respective understandings of the self in Buddhism and Christianity—may turn out to be not such a difference after all (at least not the significant difference it was first thought to be). The self that is to be extinguished in Buddhism is ultimately not identifiable metaphysically with the self that experiences transformation in Christ in Christianity; however, the latter conception of self must undergo what St. Paul calls the death of “the old Adam.” And what first looks like a fundamental similarity or agreement in doctrine—for example, the respective ethical teachings of Buddhism and Christianity, an apparent common subscription to the Golden Rule, and a common esteem for the virtue of compassion—may turn out to be a significant divergence (or at least not the commonality it was first thought to be): Christianity aims to align itself with God's intention as Good over against Evil while Buddhism aims to transcend the opposition of good and evil. Important qualifications need to be made on both sides of this issue, however, that make the divergence not as great as these words suggest.

Furthermore, these concepts (but even more so, other fundamental concepts in each tradition) shift in meaning as one moves from one subtradition to another: "Buddha" as one shifts from Theravada lay devotion to Rinzai Zen *koan* meditation, and from the latter to Pure Land Buddhism or the marathon running meditation of Tendai monks; or "Christ" as one shifts from Orthodox hesychastic practice to participation in a Roman Catholic high Mass, or from the latter to Mennonite social action or a Charismatic "prayer and praise" gathering. The point again is that with basic theological and philosophical concepts, too, there is a complexity that is easily overlooked, making straightforward comparison problematic and fraught with tripstones to the unwary.

Nevertheless, despite these reasons for hesitation, a few comparative observations are worth venturing. These will be deliberately focused on relative weightings and combinations of ways of being religious in each tradition. Many other sorts of comparison are possible and, given the above cautions, doctrinal comparisons are certainly to be commended. Please note that these remarks are only a beginning to the worthwhile observations that can be made. I am only attempting to exemplify what can be done.
Most of the principal differences between Buddhism and Christianity, whether superficial or profound, are rooted in differences between their respective central stories. Certainly the peculiarly different prioritizing of ways of being religious in each is rooted here.

Buddhism, with a few exceptions, has all along given central priority to the way of mystical quest, usually in close conjunction with the ways of reasoned inquiry and right action and paradigmatically embodied in a monastic expression of some sort. The life of a Buddhist monk, pursuing Enlightenment through meditation, study, and the moral discipline of a monastic community whose structure is supposed to be based on merit alone, straightforwardly recapitulates the quest of Gautama for Enlightenment. Even the usually present but very much subordinated aspects of the way of shamanic mediation in Buddhism (with the exception of that found in Vajrayana, where they are not so subordinated) recapitulate features of shamanic mediation that may be found in the central story. Aspects of the way of devotion in the story are pretty much limited to laypersons in their relations to the Buddha, which is to say persons who are unable or are not ready to undertake the full rigors of monastic life, which merely formalize the Buddha's own quest for nirvana/nibbana. Explicit discouragement of the expectation of divine assistance found in the story and in Gautama's teaching—in large measure a reaction to degenerate versions of such expectation in the Hinduism of Gautama's day (late Vedic religion)—certainly militated against a fuller emergence of the way of devotion.

For the way of devotion to find full expression in Buddhism, as in East Asian Pure Land Buddhism, an initially peripheral story had to be brought into central or near central place—namely, the story of the Buddha Amitabha, his previous life as Bodhisattva Dharmakara, and the total dedication of his infinite powers to assist all sentient beings to attain Enlightenment. Basically the same sort of thing was required for the fuller flowering of the way of reasoned inquiry in Mahayana than in Theravada and for the new and different forms of meditation that emerged in Mahayana and Vajrayana.

The severely subordinated status of the way of sacred rite in most of Buddhism appears to be due to the repudiation of a degenerate sacramentalism and high caste status of priests (based not at all on merit) that characterized the Hinduism (Vedic religion) of Gautama's day, a repudiation clearly expressed in the central story. Except for the emergence of the Tantric scriptures and Vajrayana, sacred rite would have been mostly limited to a formalization of Buddhist behavioral practices (e.g., sitting meditation, begging for food, initiation into the monastic community), of Buddhist devotion (e.g., paying homage to the Buddha, his teaching, and the monastic community), and of recognition and transference of merit (i.e., achievement of Enlightenment-oriented values as a kind of spiritual capital usable for good). Except perhaps in connection with the last of these, such ritual activities have generally been regarded as nonsacramental, not themselves efficacious in drawing near to and coming into right relationship to ultimate reality. (I suspect that the use of sacred traditional arts in Japanese Zen may constitute an exception to this generalization.) With Tantric extensions of the central story, however, sacred rite (plus some elements of shamanic mediation) was taken into direct relationship with mystical quest and fused with it, such that the central way of being religious in Vajrayana became focused on participation in a set of esoteric sacred ritual meditations manipulating supernatural powers in pursuit of nirvana.

In Christianity, the central Gospel story establishes a very different set of precedents. Which precedent is set depends very much on what version of the story one happens to concentrate on. There are four different entire books that present themselves as "Gospels" in the New Testament, each with a somewhat different content and a different slant. Moreover, there are many much shorter versions of the Gospel story, some more concrete, some more abstract, found throughout the other writings of the New Testament—yet all versions purport to be authentic re-tellings of the same set of sacred-historical happenings while making different emphases and drawing out different meanings. So, at the level of the New Testament...
Testament, we already have different tellings of the Gospel story involving different ways of interpreting its significance and calling for different ways of being religious. It seems to me that the New Testament Gospel tellings, taken together, rather than assigning one greater weight relative to the others, give no clear and unambiguous prioritizing among ways of being religious in Christianity. For that very reason, it should be no surprise that there are such different prioritizing of ways in different Christian subtraditions.

All six ways find precedent and encouragement from different parts of the New Testament. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, a strong precedent is set for a Christian way of right action, perhaps coupled with shamanic mediation: the emphasis there is upon action, following Christ, doing what he did to usher in the Kingdom of God by the power of the Spirit. In early Christianity, they seem to have given strong encouragement to the way of right action in so-called Jewish Christianity and Ebionite Christianity, but these subtraditions did not survive for long. Persons drawn to the way of right action in different Christian subtraditions in every age have found authorization and encouragement from these three Gospels (plus the Letter of James). Similarly persons drawn to the way of shamanic mediation have looked to these Gospels, the Book of Acts, and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where Jesus' and his Apostles' miraculous healings, exorcisms, and other supernatural empowers by the Holy Spirit are clearly presented and discussed. The three Gospels by themselves contain little that directly encourages the other ways of being religious. Except for references to John the Baptist, Jesus facing temptation alone in the wilderness, and his spending time alone in prayer, for example, there is little to encourage mystical quest. With the writings of John (the Gospel, his three Letters, and the Book of Revelation), however, there is a strong encouragement given to the way of mystical quest and the way of sacred rite, especially when combined with the Letter to the Hebrews. The way of reasoned inquiry also gets some encouragement from the Gospel of John (especially in the prologue) and in some of the writings of Paul.

But what Paul most strongly encourages and gives extended theological rationale for is the way of devotion. It is no accident that it was Luther's renewed reading of Paul's Letter to the Romans that launched the Protestant Reformation. Mainstream Protestant Reformers were strongly impressed with Paul's condemnation of perfectionist degenerations in Pharisaic Judaism, combined with Jesus' criticisms of spiritless and egoistic degenerations in Pharisaic Judaism, and the relevance of each to degenerations perceived in sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism. As a result, those Reformation leaders set the precedent of suspicion toward, and subordination of, the way of right action to devotion in most of Protestantism until modern times-indeed, toward anything one might presume to do to earn God's favor, hence also toward the spiritual disciplines of mystical quest and the activities of sacred rite (even at times for sacramental Protestants).

What we find, then, in the different subtraditions of Christianity are different prioritizings of ways of being religious on the basis of a certain overall reading and interpretation of the New Testament, giving certain texts within the New Testament canon a weightier interpretive authority over others.

Buddhism's subtraditions also differ from a selective prioritizing of scriptural texts, except that Buddhism has had a much less clearly defined canon of scripture than has Christianity. The distinctively Mahayana scriptural texts are not accepted as authentic or authoritative by Theravada Buddhists, and the distinctively Vajrayana scriptural texts are accepted neither by other Mahayana subtraditions nor by Theravada.

The somewhat more lax attitude in Buddhism toward defining the limits of scripture reflects another deeper difference. As earlier noted, Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam the fundamental conviction that God has decisively acted in history and revealed himself and his redemptive purposes for humankind; he has made himself known-has
communicated himself-in and through certain particular people in particular historical, cultural, and geographical circumstances. One implication of this is that, for Christianity, God and his redeeming message would not in certain essential respects be known apart from his having revealed himself. In other words, ultimate reality is not, as a result, just there, in itself, inert and impersonal, waiting to be discovered; it has made itself known and knowable in Jesus Christ. Thereby, ultimate reality has revealed itself as self-disclosing, as intentional, and as self-relating (i.e., relating itself in covenant relationship to those who hear and respond in confident trust)-in short, as personal. And evil is thereby disclosed as resulting from a breakdown of relationship with God, requiring and motivating his venture in Christ to restore that relationship with his creatures. This makes Christianity not only in an essential respect historical but also an emissary religion. Christianity purports to carry a saving message of divine revelation to all who will hear-and more: a saving relationship to God himself.

Buddhism, by way of contrast, speaks of Gautama as discovering (actually, "waking up" to) the eternal saving truth that he taught (the Dharma/Dhamma). So also, it regards that truth as more or less impersonal (perhaps better phrased as nonpersonal or transpersonal), a matter of natural law, always there, waiting to be discovered by a Buddha, taught by him to others, and, in turn, personally verified by his followers. Though most persons in this era happen to hear of the saving truth of the Dharma/Dhamma only because it was passed on to them from the Buddha's teaching, it is inessential that it came from Gautama. The teaching is not unique. Indeed, in principle if not in practicality, it is something they could discover for themselves. Evil and suffering are explained as the product of ignorance, attachment to the pleasant, and antipathy toward the unpleasant—a problem, in short, between yourself and yourself, a failure to realize what you ultimately are, not a failure to measure up to the expectation of a transcendent God or a breakdown in a relationship with him. The central story teaches these things. Nevertheless, Mahayana scriptures and teachings qualify them somewhat and speak of Gautama and all other Buddhas as compassionate manifestations of the dharmakaya ("dharma body" or "essence of buddhahood") at the heart of the entire universe, and in the Pure Land scriptures of Amitabha as compassionately reaching out to the lost and fallen so that they too can attain salvation. (Even Theravada speaks of the Buddha as being himself the manifestation of Dhamma.) In these respects, some Buddhist teachings at least begin to sound a little like revelation, to speak of ultimate reality as having personlike characteristics, and to be a kind of message to carry to the unsaved. So also, evil begins to appear as if it were a movement against the compassionate grain of the universe, such that it requires the compassionate heart of the universe to take initiative to be rectified.

Given the overall orientation established by these differences, it is no surprise that Buddhism should give such high priority to a philosophical pursuit of the way of reasoned inquiry (combined, to be sure, with the way of mystical quest), whereas Christianity should in general eye it with suspicion lest it depart from the content of divine revelation or downplay the sovereign and paradoxical personlike qualities of divine reality. Nevertheless the way of reasoned inquiry pursued as the systematic, expository study of scriptures has an esteemed place in most of the subtraditions of each religion, though in some clearly more so than in others. It is only to be expected, as well, that the way of mystical quest should be so confidently recommended and systematically pursued in Buddhism, not being dependent, as it is claimed to be in Christianity, upon the sovereign intervention of divine grace to be fulfilled. Characteristically, mystical quest in Christianity is more dynamic, more uncertain, more an adventure than in Buddhism, and tends to culminate in an intimate uniting of the mystic with the "person" God is (i.e., one of the persons of the Holy Trinity or the abyssal essence of God that discloses itself in the persons of the Trinity) rather than what is said to be an utter loss of individuality and distinctness in nirvana. The high priority placed on wisdom and mystical quest in Buddhism naturally encouraged the development of a class of highly trained intellectuals and highly sophisticated experts in religious psychology and
spirituality—a kind of hierarchy of spiritual merit and wisdom (as open, to be sure, to corruption as any other religious hierarchy). Partly for the reasons just mentioned, this specific sort of hierarchy in Christianity never did develop to the same extent. One can find it somewhat in the Roman Catholic tradition as far as theological study and recognition among members of religious orders are concerned, and one can find it as well to a limited extent in Eastern Orthodoxy in the esteem shown to monks and nuns of profound spiritual achievement, but hardly ever in Protestantism (though it can be found somewhat in Lutheran and Reformed [e.g., Presbyterian] theological study).

Given the differences between Christianity, as focused on the saving revelation of a personal God, and Buddhism, as focused on the discovery of saving truth concerning the impersonal laws governing human suffering, it is natural that the way of devotion should find prominent expression in Christianity and little room to emerge in Buddhism apart from the legitimation offered through the Pure Land scriptures. And given the utter uniqueness yet universal significance of the events of which the Gospel speaks, it is a matter of course that a sacramental return to them (or sacramental representation of them) in the sacred rite of Holy Communion (known also as the Divine Liturgy, the Mass, the Eucharist) should prove to be central to most of Christianity, whereas in Buddhism it is not the unique events of Gautama's life itself that are seen as saving but only the appropriation and implementation of the universal truths that he made known. Consequently, there is in Buddhism less need for sacred rite to establish access to the means of salvation.

In the case of Vajrayana, with its peculiar esoteric fusion of mystical quest, sacred rite, and shamanic mediation (supported by reasoned inquiry and right action), there seems little that corresponds to it in Christianity. At first consideration, anyway, it is hard to find anything that comes close, especially anything that might correspond to the private ritual meditations found in Vajrayana. On the other hand, a Tibetan Vajrayana sadhima (corporate ritual meditation) or the Japanese Shingon goma (fire ritual for purification), both elaborate, semipublic, sacred rites, appear akin (despite their esoteric meditative and shamanic significance) to high sacramental ritual in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican Christian traditions. And occasionally one can find shamanic-like interpretations of Christian sacramental ritual (e.g., as mediating supernatural power), and there exists a considerable body of literature on what is called sacramental mysticism in these traditions—but these are never the primary focus.

On further thought there is another possible correspondence. It is important to see that some (by no means all) Tantric practices involved apparent violations of some of the basic rules of Buddhist monastic life. The same was true of Tantric practices within the context of classical Hinduism. In consequence, they were as a rule not looked on with favor by non-Tantric Buddhists and, in some cases, with hostility. This was one of the reasons for their esoteric or secretive status. So, if we are to try to find something comparable in the Christian tradition, we should look for expressions within the tradition that have been subject to serious question, persecution, and possible suppression. Among the variety of expressions of Christianity officially judged heretical (i.e., to be distortions of Christian truth) and which have been subject to persecution over the centuries, there are a few that have involved esoteric rituals and shamanic practices in connection with primary emphasis upon a mystical quest—namely, Christian Gnosticism and Christian Hermeticism. Nothing comparable to what is publicly available about Buddhist Vajrayana is known about them, but increasingly thorough studies are becoming available. Comparative study here is simply waiting to be carried out.