

Becoming a Dialogian:

How to do Buddhist-Christian Dialogue without really Trying

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THE PROBLEM OF PLURALITY:

We all learn in high school that the word 'absolute' means something or someone existing by and for itself and without any rivals. It is a clear, crystalline word with a feeling of electric blue about it, humming with a thin, mechanical whine that says 'I Am What I Am'. The opposite of 'absolute', we further learn, is 'relative'. That is a messier word. It is like a stew pot full of this and that. Philosophically, no sense can be made of it and, we are informed, professors will have nothing to do with it. They leave it alone and turn to the thin blue whine of the Absolute.

Armed with these words, we may attempt to understand religion, starting with the one we know best. I was brought up a Protestant, and we went, now and again, to Church. Next door to us there lived a lady who was Roman Catholic, and she went, nearly every Sunday, to something mysterious which she called Mass. On the Sundays when she could not go (for she was not in the best of health) a priest would come on Mondays to visit her and do we knew not what.

When I asked about the difference between us and our neighbour, I was told that there were Protestants, who were like us, and therefore right, and Catholics, who were Irish, and therefore wrong. And, since our entire street was Protestant except for that one Catholic lady, this explanation seemed fair enough. Some people just didn't understand things and, not being quite normal, they didn't even realise that they didn't understand, like the gentleman further down the street who was in his twenties but had not been required to go away and fight in the war because he was retarded. He kept pigeons instead, and talked to us children about them. Pigeons was all he knew. He didn't understand about the war, any more than we did.

When I went to Public School (what in America would be called a Prep School) everybody was supposed to be Protestant, and we were required to attend Chapel each morning before classes. Those who did not attend, for whatever reason, were beaten. Except, there was one convincing reason for not attending Chapel: that one was not, or rather (since we children did not understand these things) one's family was not, Protestant. One could then obtain what was called a Permanent Leave-Off from Chapel and, while the rest of us sang hymns, work out in the gym. Supervision was no problem, since the gym master, fortuitously, was Catholic, and did not attend Chapel either.

Out of the whole school, only two boys had Permanent Leave-Offs Chapel. One came from a Catholic family, the other from a Communist one, where the delicious rebellion of Publically Declared Atheism blew like a clean wind (we imagined) round his house.

Once again, it was clear to me what was going on. There was one true religion, and a few people who just didn't understand. They were rebels, Irish or retarded.

But then, behold! I discovered that most subversive of all legal institutions: the Library. Our local library was not a big one, but it had a section on religion, and in it were books not only on Protestantism (which I did not want to read, since I heard about it every morning) but also on other forms of Christianity, and even on other religions altogether. And, it appeared, most of the world was not Church of England. There were genuine options.

I was fascinated and, at the age of about sixteen, I began to read avidly anything I could find on what we then called Comparative Religion. Not having a bookstore in our village, I saved up my pocket money and wrote off to Penguin for copies of everything they then had on any living religion other than Christianity (and other than Judaism, which I assumed, having heard Christian sermons and never having met a Jew, was a dead religion upon which Christianity was based). For each religion, I purchased a survey and a major text. The postman brought the world to my front door in a magical package of books, and I went through the books into the world.

In the privacy of my own heart, I converted to one after another of these awesome systems. I left for the desert around Baghdad and became a Sufi. Lord Krishna sang and danced with his thousand mouths and ten thousand limbs on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, just for me alone. The narrowness of my regimented schooldays fall away into the openness of the Buddha Mind as I read the Dhammapada under a large, patient tree in an old garden in Surrey. I read the Analects of Confucius straight through like a novel (certainly the very worst way to read Confucius) and smiled in satisfied incomprehension.

And so came the fateful evening when I emerged from my bedroom to inform my parents that I had become a Buddhist. I had been reading all about it, I explained, and it was clear that I was already a Buddhist. It was as if I were remembering something from a past life. 'That's nice dear' commented my mother, 'have you done your homework yet?'

Buddhism could not be studied in English universities at that time, so I found myself at King's College, London, 'reading' (as we say) Theology. As a result, I began studying the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, and found that it was not only not silly, it was so profound that no-one really understood it. My Public School Chapel sermons had managed to avoid this issue by talking, instead, of the danger of yielding to Bad Thoughts, things which, although we were not supposed to have, we were all supposed to recognise and manfully fend off. I had never been told how Isaiah, in Hebrew, threw words at you like fiery darts that stuck in your flesh, or how Jesus spoke differently depending on whether you read him in the barely literate Gospel of Mark or the elegantly crafted Gospel of John. And then there was the Mass. Although privately Buddhist I was officially Anglican, but I thought that meant I was Protestant. Now I was introduced to something called High Churchmanship, and went to services that, at first, seemed to me like idolatry: because, as I began to realise, God was here incarnate in Bread, and so was worshipped materially.

I was now in a quandary. Buddhism made sense to me. Meditation worked, and the Four Noble Truths seemed indeed to be true. But, now, Christianity also made sense. In the Bible and the Mass some Power greater, more serene, and more loving than any other power I had known, was trying to contact me. Apparently, it was God, the same God, I presumed, that Buddhism denied.

I did not know what to do, other than to be loyal somehow or another to what I had discovered, even though what I had discovered was self-contradictory. For about twenty-five years I regarded myself, since it was

somehow simpler, as a Christian (becoming, along the way, Roman Catholic) with a strong interest in Buddhism, which I cultivated by formal study at the University of Wisconsin. Finally, the Buddhism erupted and demanded to be taken just as seriously as my Christianity. But in order to do this, I had to examine what the words ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’, that I had learnt as a child, really meant.

A PLURALITY OF ABSOLUTES?

The problem that I had was that I found myself believing in the absolute truth of two absolute systems that were absolutely in opposition. If Buddhism, as I believed, was true, then God could not exist. If Christianity, as I also believed, was true, then God could not not exist. What I realised (and it took me many years to realise this) was that my problem was not ‘Which system is absolute so that the other, therefore, is relative?’ but ‘Why does theory tell me that one has to be absolute and the other relative, whereas experience tells me that both are absolute?’

In coming to this formulation of the question I was helped by science. For about five years I had dabbled in science, having begun my undergraduate career in veterinary medicine, before discovering that I did not really want to know all that there was to know about a sheep, and that I was much more interested in religion. Science had taught me that all theory is an approximation to, or a model of, reality as it is experienced. The best theories are the closest approximations, but no theory is reality, and no theory may dictate reality. Theories are like dictionaries. A dictionary does not, as we might suppose, give the meaning of a word, it describes how the word is used, and from the examples which a good, large dictionary gives, we decide for ourselves what the word ‘means’.

So, it began to seem to me, my teachers who had instructed me on the meaning of the word ‘absolute’ were wrong. They were wrong because they had been repeating what Aristotle (or someone like him) had said, and he was wrong because he had allowed theory to dictate reality. It must be the case, he had told himself, by definition, that there can only be one Absolute.

I then approached my two Absolutes, Buddhism and Christianity, and enquired of them whether they had anything to say on the question of experiencing two Absolutes at one time, and lo! both of them replied in the affirmative.

Christianity told me that God is Being and man is (as St Thomas Aquinas put it) non-being, and man, therefore, can never become God. They are what they are and cannot be mixed, blended, or joined. Yet, it went on to say, in Christ, God had become man such that he is all God and all man. Then, Mahāyāna Buddhism told me that samsāra is suffering and nirvāna is no-suffering. One must be in one or the other, there are no gaps in samsāra which are ‘pieces’ of nirvāna, and when one attains nirvāna, samsāra is ended for ever. Yet truly, it informed me, samsāra is itself nirvāna.

It was the Council of Nicaea, held in 325 C.E., which came up with an intellectually respectable (though mysterious) formula for how Christ could be wholly God and wholly man. The divinity and the humanity each, it taught, entirely enclosed the other, in what it called perichōrēsis or ‘mutual wrapping around’. This became, in Latin, circumincessio, and, in English, co-inherence. Any other teaching, for example, that Christ was entirely God, that his divinity had somehow absorbed his humanity, or that his divinity and his humanity were somehow cohabiting, was declared a heresy. If Christ were merely God, the bridge between God and man would not have been

made. And God and man could not be merely joined, for what third thing could bridge them? Therefore, the divinity and the humanity must each totally enclose the other, so that, as Buddhists would say, they are non-dual.

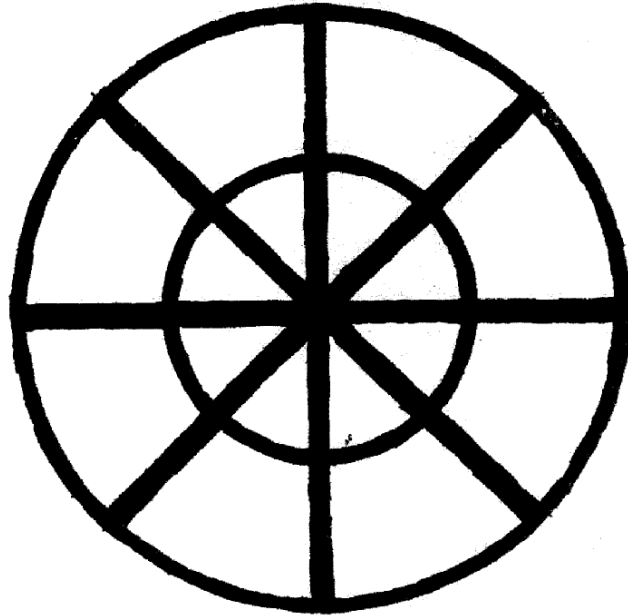
For Buddhism, it was Nāgārjuna, who lived around the first century C.E., who solved certain puzzles about the Dharma by using the word *shūnyatā*, ‘Emptiness’ or, as I like to translate it, Transparency. If *samsāra* were different from *nirvāna*, he noted, we could never hope to escape *samsāra*, since there would be no bridge. But if there were to be a bridge, then *samsāra* and *nirvāna* are the same, and we are, again, stuck in *samsāra*. Therefore, *samsāra* must be wholly *nirvāna* and *nirvāna* wholly *samsāra*, or, as he says, ‘the border of *samsāra* is the border of *nirvāna*; not even the slightest something comes between them’. They are, as Christians would say, co-inherent.

CO-INHERENT CONSCIOUSNESS:

So, from this, I had the way to a solution. If both my Absolutes could speak of co-inherence or non-duality at the heart of their systems, perhaps there was a way they could co-inhere each other. This they could only do in a person, in an actual mind, and it seemed that my next step was to offer my mind to be used in this way. If I did not do that, I should retreat to abstractions, and allow theory to dictate reality.

I had already been received into the Roman Catholic Church. To this I now added, or rather in this I allowed to co-inhere, Taking Refuge in the Tibetan Mahāyāna lineage of Gelugpa.

I now function as follows. When praying or meditating, I function either as a Buddhist or as a Christian. Occasionally, I engage in a very strange and puzzling meditation on Buddhist-Christian co-inherence. When going about my business, I try to exercise compassion according to the principles of Buddhist karunā and Christian agapē. When I study a problem I study either as a Christian or as a Buddhist. Then, if I wish, I can step back from these thoughts and examine the Buddhist and Christian data I have obtained. I have been in dialogue with myself, or, as someone once quipped, I have become a Dialogian, and I have done Buddhist-Christian dialogue spontaneously, without really trying.



*A Visualisation Yantra for Buddhist -
Christian Co-inherence*

BUDDHISM: This is the Dharmachakra or 'Wheel of Dharma' which contains eight spokes for the eight limbs of the Eightfold Holy Path. The first teaching of the Buddha is called 'The Sutra which turns the Wheel of Dharma'.

CHRISTIANITY: This is Christ, symbolised by the first letter chi X of Christos in Greek, on the Cross + and surrounded by the circle of the eternity of the Godhead. It was used by the early Christians.

CO-INHERENCE: A Buddhist symbol is inside (relative to) a Christian symbol (as Absolute) and vice versa, simultaneously.