

Comparative Studies of Buddhism and Christianity

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THE PROBLEM OF METHODOLOGY

The study conference of the International Association for the History of Religions which met in Turku in 1973 to discuss the topic of "Methodology of the Science of Religion"¹ brought together a number of distinguished scholars from the Western world to debate issues relating to studies of religions from all parts of the world. The conference was considered necessary because Religious Studies was going through something of a methodological crisis.

Since this crisis was brought about largely by an accelerated appreciation of the facts of cultural relativism, one might have expected a far wider and more even spread of national and cultural backgrounds amongst the participants. Whatever the reasons for the restriction of the conference to Western participants,² the restriction was there, and should be noted. It may well be, as Werblowsky argued, that cultural background makes no significant difference to one's ability to practice what is called the "Science of Religion," for the scientific method should be the same wherever it is practiced (Werblowsky 1960). The issue at stake at Turku, however, was not the practice of the science of religion, but the problem of the very methodology of that science. And the problem of methodology has been, as Sharpe observed, "wide open" since the atmosphere of evolutionism which temporarily united disciplines as disparate as anthropology, history and comparative religion

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1. A detailed account of the proceedings is to be found in Honko 1979.
2. For my definition of "Western" see the list of participants in Honko 1979, pp. xi-xiii.

began to dissolve at the beginning of this century (Sharpe 1975, p.68).

While the problem of methodology remains with us, its solution seems to become more, rather than less, remote with the passage of time. None of the disciplines outside Religious Studies seems able to deal adequately with religion (for the object of sociological study is society, not religion, the object of history is history and not religion, and so on). The most persuasive plea (persuasive partly because it reflects the status quo) is for a diversity of methods and approaches, but the very fact that such a diversity needs to be argued for (and is not by any means acceptable as a meta-methodology) indicates some inherent instability. A methodology consisting of many methodologies sounds like no methodology at all. Such a state of affairs is unsatisfying, as the Turku conference agreed. It may also be inevitable, as Honko suggested in his review of the conference (Honko 1979, pp.xxviii-ix).

Strange loops and the "reflexive effect." Part of the reason for the proliferation of methodologies has been that the objects of study of the science of religion increasingly are acquiring the capacity to answer back. The more our attention is concentrated on "living" religions, and the more familiar spokesmen for such living religions become with the categories and concepts of the science of religion, the more complex the picture becomes. This is a consideration which is directly relevant to studies of (and sometimes funded by) large and sophisticated modern religious movements such as the Unification Church and Sōka Gakkai (to take the two perhaps most obvious examples) but it is also, and in principle no differently, relevant to studies of traditions as long-standing, complex and highly articulate as are mainstream Buddhism and Christianity.

If we add the further complication that many scholars of religion also belong to the traditions which they are studying or comparing, and frequently act as spokesmen for these traditions (as though a cat one was vivisecting start-

ed to discuss the ethics of the operation),³ then in trying to establish a workable methodology for the scientific study of religion we find ourselves in what Hofstadter calls a "strange loop"—that is, a complex semantic and epistemological process which somehow always returns to the point from which it started, though in a subtly transformed way (Hofstadter 1980, pp.10-24). This is also one meaning of the "hermeneutical circle." The exploration of such strange loops, perhaps involving several sets of religious scriptures, a range of wisdom traditions and a pyramid of hermeneutical devices, can acquire a religious tinge in itself.

Final patterns. In the course of the Turku conference it became clear that some approaches were not considered helpful by most of the participants. "A theological element occurred in various contexts," reports Honko, "but never at any stage succeeded in gaining control of the discussion" (Honko 1979, p.xxiii). No alternative method predominated, however, and though the conference as a whole seemed to favor "soft" methodologies over "hard" ones, this preference was uneasy, even defensive (Honko 1979, p.xxviii).

In the course of the discussions Eric Sharpe raised a possibility which also led nowhere at the time, that there might be no underlying *ratio*, no final pattern to be discovered by any methodological procedure. This was characterised by Werblowsky as the kind of question asked by younger scholars and students—it might be thought naive, but should be taken seriously (Honko 1979, pp.209-210, p.216).

Rationality and religion. The tendency of younger scholars and students is to become older scholars and students and so, eight years after Turku the question of whether religion has an underlying *ratio* or pattern is still seriously asked. The question is important because rationality is seen as the

3. Ninian Smart calls this phenomenon "the reflexive effect" (Smart 1973, pp.4-6, 40-41).

key to a scientific approach. Since, in the West at least, the independence of science was often hard-won, and emerged from within a restrictive theological or religious framework, rationality and religion have often been viewed as opposites, and a successful analysis of religious action is often likely to be one which exposes the nature of religious belief or practice as fundamentally illusory or irrational.

This has been a constant problem for phenomenology, which in seeking to preserve the sphere of the religious (in the sense of the believer's own understanding of the significance of his religious actions and beliefs) has often found itself defending the irrational—in other words it has been unable to penetrate beneath the surface of religious claims and counter-claims. Consequently a phenomenological account of religious behavior often seems less convincing (because it has less explanatory power) than, say, a sociological explanation. A sociological explanation, however, is likely to take as its premise—implicitly or explicitly—the view that religious ways of thinking are less rational, and therefore less truth-revealing, than its own.⁴

Multiple layers of meaning. Two helpful points can be made here, I think, to help heal the rift between science and religion. The first is that scientists are less complacent about the straightforward rationality of their own premises than they used to be, for as the psychologist Charles Tart has shown, scientific statements about the ultimate nature of things can be literally indistinguishable from religious statements (Tart 1975, p.111).

The second is that one of the weaknesses of the phenomenological approach, which might be characterized as its excessive politeness in the face of absurd or unlikely truth-claims, can be dispensed with reasonably easily

4. For an illuminating debate on these issues see the collection of papers by Bryan Wilson and others in the recent issue of this journal, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 9/1 (1982).

through the recognition that religious systems are endemically sectarian, that doctrinal standpoints emerge in response to other doctrinal standpoints, and that practically every religious tradition or sect has emerged into public knowledge within a context of competing views of the world and competing value-systems. This means, for instance, a follower of Tenrikyō may believe that the center of the universe lies in the village of Shōyashiki in Yamato, but this "belief" should not be understood from the point of view of the science of religion as a complete account of the contents of the consciousness of that follower, for the belief also implies the refutation, or anticipation, of alternative views of which the believer is undoubtedly aware.

The Tenrikyō devotee is to a greater or lesser extent aware that other people do not regard Shōyashiki as the center of the universe, and he will have a view about the status of this alternative belief or opinion. He may for instance think that people who do not realize that Shōyashiki is the center of the universe are misguided, or unlucky, or obtuse. The essential point is that the believer is aware of alternatives, and to this extent his religious belief can never be considered as a naive manifestation of a single perspective.

The awareness of alternatives is an especially important factor in any account of the religious standpoint of Buddhist or Christian communities, where believers are often acutely aware of sectarian, ideological and individual alternatives to their own beliefs. This is also a characteristic of primitive societies' religions, as Mary Douglas showed in quoting Vansina's account of three independent thinkers among the Bushong who maintained complex personal beliefs but nevertheless took their full part in the religious "system" of the tribe, despite apparent inconsistencies (Douglas 1966, pp. 78-79).

Moreover, this has a bearing on how we view sectarianism, for the fact of sectarianism within what is normatively conceived of as a single religious tradition

(Christianity and Buddhism both provide excellent examples of a weak unity of strong diversities) which modern ecumenically-minded theologians and Buddhologists tend to regret, and which anti-religious theorists seize on as evidence of the inchoate and irrational nature of religious thought, is actually to be seen as a rich source of multiple meanings, and an illustration of the way in which human thought functions at multiple levels of awareness, for the science of religion.

As an example which also happens to involve a Buddhist-Christian comparison, Leon Hurvitz once commented that the average Chinese Buddhist's view of the Lotus Sutra (which is an Indian work translated into Chinese) resembled that of the middle-American fundamentalist, who *knows* the Bible was not originally written in English, but the fact has not penetrated his consciousness. In the same way, all kinds of religious beliefs to some extent conceal or imply their opposites and alternatives, and no one involved in a religious system is totally unaware of this aspect. Religious teachings are no doubt creative, but they are not creative *ex nihilo*. In practice, this means that a phenomenological approach to, say, Japanese Catholicism should include also all the Protestant, Buddhist, Shinto other religious and non-religious criticisms and counter-views of which Japanese Catholics are aware and in the context of which they define their own religious standpoints—no religion is an island.

Engaging with alternatives. It should also be noted in this connection that scientific standpoints have to be established thoroughly in just the same way as religious standpoints in relation to existing views which they may wish to overthrow, and that this is another point of convergence for scientific and religious approaches. As an illustration, Sigmund Freud's intention to establish psychoanalysis on a scientific basis necessarily led him into explanations of phenomena hardly related to therapy, such as the origins of morality and the history of the Jewish people. In moving so

far from the center of what he intended to be essentially a clinical therapeutic method he acknowledged the fact that every opinion, however well-supported it is, must also engage with all alternative opinions and world-views in order to be firmly established.

In the same way, the motive for the study of comparative religion in mainland China today lies in the recognized need for Marxist-Leninist ideology to be thorough—that is, for it to take account of the realities of all possible alternative ideologies (including religious ones) in order to become strong itself. In fact the desire to undermine a view different from one's own is one of the most compelling motives for studying that point of view in all its ramifications, and is one of the reasons missionaries often become the most assiduous students of "other" religions.

Relative perspectives. However, in trying to establish a scientific perspective, one is eventually led into the area of cultural relativism, as is increasingly seen nowadays in the Japanese case, where Western ideologies, psychologies and models of social and religious development which have been thoroughly tested only in relation to Western materials often seem unable to come to grips with the Japanese data. This is not a subject which it is necessary to pursue in detail in the pages of this journal. The rationality of the presuppositions of much that is considered scientific in the West is being called increasingly into question, and we are now much more used to dealing with the idea that different individuals see the world differently, that patterns are dependent upon perspective, and that our perception of the world is exactly that—a perception.

Ideas like this have been available for a long time, but in the West at least we have confined them to philosophical speculation and we have not applied them within the social sciences and the humanities so readily as in the physical sciences. It may be that cheap air travel has helped accustom us to thinking relatively; the experience of passing rapidly from one time-zone to another for instance

prevents us from ever again asking naively what "the" time is.

Quite apart from experiences of this kind, a sense of the essential arbitrariness of social and cultural patterns is induced by the cumulative process of "answering back" referred to above, whereby cultures and beliefs which formerly existed as objects of study have, through the agency of able spokesmen—including comparative religionists—been able to challenge the presuppositions of the studying culture. Even so, whether one accepts the idea that meaning depends on perspective depends upon one's perspective.

BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

In what way do the general issues raised in this preliminary discussion contribute to the particular topic of comparative studies of Buddhism and Christianity? Firstly, the question of who participates in certain types of discussion forces us to ask who takes part in comparative studies whose area of inquiry extends to cover both Buddhism and Christianity and at the same time is restricted to cover only Buddhism and Christianity.

The answer is that it is usually Buddhist or Christian scholars who are interested in a field of study so defined—by which is meant of course scholars and students of religion whose background or affiliation is Buddhist or Christian.

Blind spots in Buddhist-Christian studies. The modern encounter at a fairly sophisticated level between Buddhism and Christianity—"those two great shapers of East and West" as Ninian Smart described them in his 1979-80 Gifford lectures⁵—is a matter of historical fact. The

5. "The Varieties of Religious Identity," lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh. The following year's lectures, on the subject of Islamic cosmological doctrines, were delivered by Seyyed Hosein Nasr, but it was not made clear in Smart's lectures which point of the compass is being shaped by Islam. Is this a blind-spot in Buddhist-Christian studies?

mutual distrust of Buddhism and Christianity as territorially competing religious traditions over the last few centuries (a distrust instructively documented in the case of Japan), and the impulsion for them to come to terms (that is, to syncretize) in the latter part of the twentieth century as two religious traditions engaged *inter alia* in territorial competition with avowedly antireligious or nonreligious ideologies and philosophies such as Marxism, is also a matter of historical fact.

Since Buddhism and Christianity are both traditions with a consciously maintained, past and future oriented historicalist dimension, so both traditions have a strong interest in their respective (or even joint) futures. Hence spokesmen for both traditions, even in their role as scholars of religion, tend naturally enough to be resistant to analyses which predict the demise of either or both of these religions. Perhaps this resistance, manifest as one voice of the secularization debate, is a shared blind-spot of Buddhism and Christianity, but it is something for which we should also be grateful, for the essentially theological impulse which lies at the heart of the traditional phenomenological approach to the study of religion has been responsible for preserving (and also re-presenting) the integrity of a "religious" dimension in respect of data classified as religious. Because there is life in religion, we can investigate religion in life.

The religious dimension. However, the very idea that certain aspects or elements of life are "religious" while others are not, which may have been useful as a corrective at some times and in some circumstances, contains its own contradictions and hence is limited, because it rests on the assumption that the existence of a religious dimension is consensually denied from the point of view of a truly scientific perspective.

But from within the Buddhist and Christian traditions no distinction is actually made between what is religious and what is not, except in the very limited sense that cer-

tain activities, buildings, scriptures and so forth demand a more reverential attitude of mind than is normal. For the Christian, this is God's world, and everything is in that sense "religious." For the Buddhist, a parallel situation obtains because everything is ultimately understood and experienced in Buddhist terms.

This is an ideal picture in the sense that it assumes greater consistency of self-understanding than is normally found amongst the adherents of either tradition, but we can at least say that insofar as someone conceives himself to be a Christian or a Buddhist, this constitutes his ultimate frame of reference.

Insiders and outsiders. At the same time, of course, Christians and Buddhists do not believe that the generally sacred character of the world makes non-Christians or non-Buddhists into religious people. For both traditions it is important that one "becomes" a follower. There may be salvation outside the church, or nirvana to be obtained by plants and stones, but insofar as these possibilities ever become relevant to the practical situation of the church or sangha, the decisive element of entry into the religious community, lay or monastic, by birth or by initiation, is always present. The primary difference between the two traditions here is one of time-scale rather than of principle; Buddhists as a rule view life in terms of a series of births and deaths, Christians in terms of one decisive lifetime only, so that matters become correspondingly more urgent.

The outsider, the social scientist for instance, precisely does not share this Christian or Buddhist view that all the world is a sacred place. Typically, he sees religion in itself as only one aspect of a world which is in principle amenable to explanation and investigation in terms other than religious ones. Consequently, one of the greatest problems for the student of religion who wants to preserve the category of the "religious"—that is, who wants to say that the science of religion deals with data which either are not or

cannot be adequately understood by other academic or scientific disciplines such as history, aesthetics or socio-biology (and who typically holds some religious belief of his own)—has been the problem of translating religious perspectives into scientifically acceptable ones. This problem may be expressed in terms of the Japanese distinction between *uchi* (insider) and *soto* (outsider) contexts, and means in essence that a theologian or Buddhologist can in practice legitimately say things as a priest which he cannot legitimately say as an academic.

But as Peter Berger pointed out some time ago in *The Sacred Canopy*, to make any differentiation between these contexts is impossible except on the basis of some theological *a priori* "...but I for one cannot get myself into a position from which I can launch theological *a prioris*. I am forced therefore to abandon a differentiation that is senseless from any *a posteriori* vantage point" (Berger 1967, pp.185-187). For Berger this means that, being unable as a responsible member of the academic community to present his beliefs as knowledge, he is forced to abandon the *uchi/soto* distinction and admit that every presupposition, religious or not, is in principle open to question.

Science and warmth. The problem, then, is to develop a truly scientific methodology for the study of religion which transcends the *uchi/soto* distinction by explaining the data that does justice to the understanding of the believer, but is nonetheless rational and scientifically acceptable. In the case of comparative studies of Buddhism and Christianity we need to be working towards an understanding which is scientifically based on the data presented by these two traditions, which goes beyond any narrowly theological perspective (theological perspectives need not in principle be narrow but they usually are, as Tillich discovered when he came to Japan) and yet at the same time respects the understanding of the believer.

It is not particularly difficult to develop a methodology by which to understand Buddhism and Christianity which is

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based on historical, philological and sociological fact, and which transcends a narrow theological viewpoint; the problem lies in the last qualification—that it must do justice to the understanding of the believer. This is what Smart called dealing with the material both scientifically and at the same time "warmly" (Smart 1973, p. 3).

The reductionist view which sees religion as illusory in a variety of ways, and at the opposite extreme the kind of theological sociology which interprets virtually every kind of civil or social action as "religious" are both equally "cold" in this respect, for they fail to fulfill this last qualification. Warmth is a sensation, a relation between two things (here the observer of religion and the observed) and it is the maintenance of this warmth which characterizes understanding, and the successful transmission of this warmth which characterizes a good explanation, of religious data.

THE PERFECT MAN

A new idea. In the second part of this paper I want to suggest an avenue of approach which might open up the Buddhist and Christian traditions to a scientific, yet not reductionist, analysis. It is however far easier to discredit old ideas than to develop new ones.

Doubts about tradition. Within both Buddhist and Christian traditions, to a greater or lesser extent according to denomination or sect, an awareness of the tension between on the one hand the traditional teachings, and on the other hand the findings of historical scholarship, text-criticism and so forth has become a fact of life. Within Christianity for instance, the problem for the theologians and ordinary believers lies not so much in what this kind of research may discover as in the very possibility of there being things yet to discover about Christ and, for example, about early Christianity.

We have witnessed fairly recently the extreme reaction in the English-speaking Christian world to the hypothesis

advanced that Jesus was a married man with a family. No Christian principles were directly threatened by such a hypothesis, but what was threatened once again was the very idea of the reliability of tradition. The notion was being aired that the Christian tradition may be utterly wrong, or at least misinformed, about something as basic as the question of whether Jesus was married or not. (It hardly needs to be said that we still do not know whether Jesus was married or not, or who he might have been married to, any more than we know what he looked like or what his voice sounded like.)

In contemporary Buddhism too, and particularly in Japan, traditional accounts of early Buddhism and the Buddha's life have had to be revised again and again in the light of new knowledge gained by scholarly investigation of Indian, Tibetan or neglected early Chinese sources. In the West, where the weight of Buddhist tradition is hardly felt, Buddhist scholars have been adventurous in theorizing about the origins of Buddhism and the discontinuities between earlier and later forms.

Two very recent studies, one by Graeme Macqueen on "inspired speech" in early Mahayana (Macqueen 1981) and the other on the Sāvakaśaṅgha and the Sōtapanna by Peter Masefield,⁶ for example, support the view that the earliest Buddhist community which existed while the Buddha was alive, saw itself as a closed community, both in the sense that authoritative teachings had to be the word of the Buddha himself⁷ and in consequence of the fact that the transmission of the *dharmma* was something that could only take place between the Buddha and a disciple.⁸ Mahayana

6. "The Sāvakaśaṅgha and the Sōtapanna" (Ms. copy from the author).

7. With minor exceptions. See Macqueen 1981, p. 309, pp. 314-315.

8. "Entrance to the Sāvakaśaṅgha and thus acquisition of this guarantee of enlightenment came about by the direct, personal intervention of the Buddha or, on occasion, of his foremost disciples, in the form of an oral transmission of the *dharmma*..." (Masefield).

Buddhism is then shown to have arisen on the basis of personal inspiration and revelation perceived to have come from the spiritual form of the Buddha, externally to the historical traditional (Macqueen 1981).

Even without these radical reassessments of early Buddhism, which find close parallels in recent studies of early Christianity, Buddhists and Buddhist scholars in Japan have had to come to terms with acknowledged flaws, forgeries and anachronisms in the scriptural tradition, successful heresies, bogus lists of patriarchs and so forth. With determination, each successive challenge to the authority of tradition can no doubt be overcome, but the tradition becomes something which it has not been before when it comes under scholarly scrutiny from within; namely, no longer a reliable tradition but only probably a reliable tradition.

Accounts and events. Perhaps debates about the reliability of religious traditions belong in the nineteenth century, along with the various religious responses to the charge of historical indeterminacy, including an increased emphasis on faith, feeling and religious experience as authenticators of tradition.

Within the Christian tradition, at the level of scholarly reflection on the tradition, there is now a general recognition of the difference between an event (such as the life and teaching of Jesus) and the accounts of that event upon which the tradition is based. It is recognized that there is very little evidence available upon which to reconstruct with any degree of certainty the personality and presence of Jesus. We now know that in the Christian tradition what might be called the "positive" conception of Christ—that which allows us to represent creatively in art, sculpture, literature and imagination the figure of Christ—has been re-invented at every stage of the tradition.

Reinterpretation of the tradition. The ways in which this re-invention on the basis of tradition goes on, and the regularities and patterns which can be discerned in this pro-

cess, are worthy of study in themselves, as Michael Pye recently suggested in his discussion of this subject.⁹ Here I want only to point out one aspect of the process of reinterpretation of tradition which is too readily neglected or treated negatively in comparative studies, namely the fact that understanding and explaining the tradition always involves an awareness of the distance between the present believer and the significant person or event in the past on which the believer's faith and community are founded.

In certain types of religious transmission, for instance in Zen Buddhism, the direct, anti-intellectual style of teaching is formulated precisely in order to overcome this distance between the present and the past. What is often neglected, perhaps because it is another shared blind-spot in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, is the significance of the fact that successive generations of theologians and Buddhologists have been unable to agree on a re-creation of who or what Christ was, and who or what the Buddha was, and hence exactly what Christianity or Buddhism should entail.

This inability is not simply the inability to explain everything to everyone's satisfaction—the inability of a Christian or Buddhist to communicate what he knows. It reflects, rather, a fundamental problem for both Christians and Buddhists, that both take as their object of worship (or better, "focus" as Smart puts it) a historical man, but a man whom they find indescribable—a perfect man.

Describing a perfect man. A perfect man is indescribable because we do not normally find perfect men in the world.

9. In addition to the four major dimensions of any religious tradition (conceptual, behavioral, social and psychological), Pye identifies "a fifth dimension, namely the extension of the four basic dimensions through time, with the resultant patterns and routines which can be observed running through the traditions as historically known to us. It is this fifth dimension, which the believer views as tradition and where the observer tries to perceive patterned dynamics, which provides the main springboard into new, creative interpretations...." (Pye 1979, p.4).

Describing such a man as the traditions take as their focus is like trying to describe the smell of an unknown flower (very different from a flower which does not exist), or it is like trying to imagine a coelocanth on the basis of a few fossil remains. The Moslem poet Jalaluddin Rumi (died 1273 A.D.) in his *Masnavi* has a poem on "the difference between knowing a thing merely by similitudes and on the authority of others, and knowing the very essence thereof" in which he likens the believer's knowledge of God's nature to the child's knowledge of sexual pleasure. He says:

A child knows naught of the nature of sexual inter-
course

Except what you tell him, that it is like sweetmeats.
Yet how far does the pleasure of sexual intercourse
Really resemble that derived from sweetmeats?
Nevertheless the fiction produces a relation
Between you, with your perfect knowledge, and the
child;

So that the child knows the matter by a similitude,
Though he knows not its essence or actual nature.
Hence if he says "I know it," 'tis not wrong.
And if he says "I know it not," 'tis not wrong.
(Whinfield, 1979, p.154)

Rumi then goes on to apply this analogy to knowledge of a perfect man, in this case the figure of Noah in the Islamic tradition:

Should one say, "Do you know Noah,
That prophet of God and luminary of the spirit?"
If you say, "Do I not know him, for that moon
Is more famed than the sun and moon of heaven?
Little children in their schools,
And elders in their mosques,
All read his name prominently in the Koran,
And preachers tell his story from times of yore;"
—You say true, for you know him by report,
Though the real nature of Noah is not revealed to you.
On the other hand, if you say, "What know I of Noah
As his contemporaries knew him?"

I am a poor ant—what can I know of the elephant?...
This statement is also true, O brother,
Seeing that you know not his real nature...

(Whinfield 1979, p.154)

Rumi says that this impotence to perceive real essence through second-hand knowledge is common to ordinary men, though he states that it is not universal. An awareness of this problem is expressed very clearly in both the Buddhist and the Christian traditions by performative acts of humility. A priest talking about the Buddha or about Christ within his own community accompanies his exposition, and seeds his performance of sacred rituals, with expressions of personal humility toward the perfect man.

It is only when a Buddhist or a Christian is asked to act as a "spokesman" for his tradition (in apologetics or interfaith dialogue, or when he is evangelizing outsiders), that he is obliged by the nature of his new role to pretend to understand that which, within the community, he is happy to admit that he cannot understand.

DESIRE TO MEET THE PERFECT MAN

Real but inconceivable. Reference to the Buddha and Christ as "perfect men" is not intended to set up a phenomenological type of "perfect man" and then somehow squeeze the past and present Christian Buddhist conceptions of their founders into it—a process which would undoubtedly go against the wishes of the majority of each religion's believers. In fact we need to retain the specificity of each; Christ and the Buddha were, after all, different individuals.

The significance of the concept of the perfect man is however that it emphasizes what both traditions have had in common since the death of their founders, namely an ideal (the historical figure of the founder) who was both historically real and fundamentally inconceivable. Both Christ and the Buddha once walked in this world, and they and their immediate followers stand at the beginnings of

Buddhist and Christian history, but to know this as historical fact is not sufficient for followers of either tradition. Distance is not overcome by one's being aware of it (indeed the reverse is probably the case). Hence the desire actually to encounter the Buddha or Christ is an ultimate value in both traditions, so ubiquitous indeed that its significance is often missed.

How to meet a perfect man? Because it appears impossible to go backwards in historical time, Christians and Buddhists often hope to encounter the focus of their religious devotion¹⁰ either after this life in another world, or perhaps in a dream, a vision or a state of mystical insight where the Buddha or Christ is perceived to be present in spiritual form. This latter method for meeting the Buddha is described for example in the Lotus Sutra, where it is said that the Buddha is only apparently absent from this world, and that he can be seen and heard by anyone who has eyes to see. In other forms of Mahayana the Buddha is said to be ultimately identical with one's own self, so that in penetrating oneself one finds the Buddha. In both Theravada and most forms of lay Buddhism merit-producing activities, sometimes of a very mundane kind, are considered to be the means to lead an individual inexorably towards rebirth in a place and at a time when he or she can meet a Buddha.

Within the Christian tradition forms of mystical devotion are prescribed by means of which one can meet Christ face to face, but other important traditions within Christianity expect this meeting to take place in the future, after death, at the last judgement or in the second coming. "Why dost thou hide thy face?" asks St Augustine, "Happily thou wilt say, none can see thy face and live: Ah Lord, let me die, that I may see thee; let me see thee, that I may

10. In the case of Buddhism, the focus includes all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for whom the Buddha Shakyamuni was the historical prototype. Similarly in the Christian tradition the focus comprises Christ himself and saints who partake of the nature of Christ and reflect him.

die. I would not live, but die. That I may see Christ, I desire death; that I may live with Christ, I despise life" (Grosart 1967, p.73).¹¹

Centrality of the perfect man. If we look at Buddhism and Christianity in this light, we can see anew how overwhelmingly their teachings, ceremonies and practices focus directly or indirectly on the Buddha, or on Christ. Reminders of the perfect man who once was are everywhere in images, prayers, scriptures and gestures.

Often in Japanese Buddhist temples the presence of the Buddha is even more powerfully expressed by being understated, as when a Buddha-image is virtually invisible behind a screen. Similarly in Protestant Christianity the empty cross evokes powerfully the memory of Christ. The centrality of this focusing on the perfect man is so obvious that it can easily be overlooked in comparative studies, but it is also overlooked because the concept of a perfect man cannot be satisfactorily "filled out" or given a positive conception except by this kind of suggestiveness, or by employing the theological language of paradox and praise.

The concrete idea of the perfect man cannot be comprehended except as an exaggeration or a myth by the social sciences. Comparative studies which seek to be scientific have consequently been restricted to viewing Christ and the Buddha either in terms of the subsequent tradition's changing theological view of them, or in the all-embracing sociological category of "charismatic founder." To advance from this impasse, we can put forward a view which is both scientifically legitimate and which does justice to the understanding of the believer. A view of Christ and of the Buddha as historical, but perfect men.

11. Quoted by Francis Quarles (1592-1644) from "S.August.Soliloqu.cap.I." I have not been able to trace this passage in recent translations of Augustine's "soliloquies."

Meaning of perfect man. The idea of the perfect man may seem a simplistic and even reductionist approach to both Christian and Buddhist teachings about Christ and the Buddha, but if we look closely and observe the advantages of this simple formulation it can be seen to fulfill the demands of a number of disparate approaches to the study of religion, as well as providing an adequate means of distinguishing scientific and religious interest in the data of religious life.

In the first place, the concept of "perfect man" is not at all a simple one. As an English term which is not used in any standard theological context it carries no special theological or Buddhological connotations, so that it requires further formulation in order to make sense. Yet all such formulations are bound to fail, because "perfect" and "man" are never combined in ordinary language discourse except negatively (when we describe someone as not a perfect man).

Yet everyone knows (in Rumi's sense of knowledge by similitudes) what a perfect man *would* be if such a one existed—he would be a man in whom the contradictions that we ordinary people experience are removed. It is not necessary to describe such a man—indeed it is impossible to do so satisfactorily—but only to ask the individual scientist, scholar, follower of a religious teaching to consider his own imperfections and to be aware of them. To be aware of what one lacks is to know indirectly what completion or perfection would be. It is important to note that this approach, although it appears to commit the error laid at the door of Schleiermacher, Otto and certain phenomenologists of requiring that we share in a particular religious experience as a prerequisite for understanding and interpreting that experience, in fact does no such thing.

There is no requirement there to experience "the holy" or enter another's subjective understanding. All that is required is to be aware of one's ordinariness. This is a very democratic approach which should offend nobody. When we know what a perfect man is not, then we automatically

know what a perfect man is.

Warmth. At this point, a scientific approach to religion which is concerned with Christianity and Buddhism and which proceeds on the assumption that Jesus and the Buddha both existed (which is no more than is attested by the most reliable historical traditions) has to show a little generosity of spirit and allow that Jesus and the Buddha were indeed perfect man. Since this is the overwhelming testimony of the two traditions, and the possibility of the existence of perfect men is certainly not excluded by knowledge obtained through any of the contemporary social or human sciences, we can at least adopt this idea as a heuristic device and see where it leads us, by testing it against various problems encountered in the comparative study of Buddhism and Christianity.

Respecting the believer's understanding. We may recall that one of the first requirements of a scientific approach to religion is that it must do justice to the situation and self-understanding of the believer. In this respect the "perfect man" paradigm is successful for Buddhism and Christianity, since it puts at the center of the analysis that which in each tradition is in fact the central (though not always the most explicitly advertised) focus of religious concern, namely the figure of Jesus in Christianity and the Buddha in Buddhism.

Note also that this concept has the potential to satisfy also the sense of exclusiveness that goes, in greater or lesser measure, with both traditions, because it says no more than that the Buddha and Jesus were both perfect men. The Christian theological or believer may want to fill out this concept of perfect man by saying that Jesus was not merely a perfect man but was also the son of God, divine and so forth. This kind of conceptual attributive formulation remains, however, firmly within the *uchi*-context and hence is necessarily accompanied by the theologian's *uchi*-context confession (which is part of his religious attitude)

that he has only imperfect knowledge and that he is like Rumi's ant, who cannot hope to understand the elephant.

Moreover this kind of positive conception is the sort of formulation that is perpetually being revised and augmented by developments, some of them sectarian, within the tradition. The positive meaning of this kind of formulation will never be clear (and within the *uchi*-context justly so, for the purpose of theology is not to satisfy the intellect but to worship God). Theological formulations moreover cannot deeply concern outsiders to the tradition. The description of Christ or the Buddha as a perfect man, however, does not fall into this trap, being theologically neutral.

Perfect man, not founder. The category of perfect man also differs significantly from the idea of Christ and the Buddha as being "founders" of their respective traditions. There can never be any historical certainty that Christ or the Buddha intended to found the particular traditions which now bear their names. The concept of perfect man allows that such a link between focus and tradition may exist, but is not bound by it.

Man and myth. The concept of a perfect man derives from the remarkable fact that certain individuals existed in particular places at particular times in this world. It is important to remember that what is being advanced here is not a category equivalent to the "myth" of the perfect man, though it is true that what is remembered within the Buddhist and Christian traditions is technically the myth, not the man. The point here is that the Buddha and Christ did exist; the assumption is made that they were perfect men. The implications of the fact of their existence, even though in the distant past and in another place, is precisely what it is important for the science of religion to take account of.

The perfect man then and now. At this point we must borrow an assumption without which none of the human

sciences would be possible at all—namely the assumption that there is a unity of human experience and consciousness through time. This notion of a unity of human experience is acceptable only up to a point, because it may encounter theories of the evolution of human consciousness, but even then, in the case of Buddhism and Christianity which are generally considered to fall within the same evolutionary category, being historically and culturally proximate and even connected, it will stand. From the assumption of a notional unity of human experience—meaning that human beings of two to three thousand years ago were not substantially different from human beings now—we can infer that both Christ and the Buddha, perfect men, existed in human milieux not radically different in terms of moral and spiritual existence from our own.

From this perspective we are able to challenge sociological and scientific reductionist interpretations of human behaviour along the lines suggested already by Charles Tart (1975), on the grounds that contemporary assumptions about human potential and motivation are drawn from limited or incomplete data, or inferred on the basis of faulty reasoning. This, however, is to enter another, quite separate area of inquiry.

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