

ON COMPARING BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Michael Pye

Introductory

The modern historical consciousness now prevalent in east and west alike has created new tasks and new opportunities in the interpretation of Buddhism and of Christianity. This consciousness has two fundamental implications for both traditions which cannot be escaped by anybody who seriously reflects on them. The first is that historical criticism of the authoritative reference points of faith, especially of the origins of each of the two faiths, has long made it impossible to find there any absolute refuge, however important those reference points may continue to be in locating the meaning of tradition. The second is that elementary knowledge of the history of culture makes it impossible to maintain an intellectually viable interpretation of one religious tradition in grand isolation, as if it were sealed off from the influence of all others and as if it had no structural analogies with others. The result is that the sense of religious superiority frequently enjoyed and communicated by teachers within Buddhism and Christianity is no longer excusable. To say this is not to preclude the possibility of preferential judgments in the long run. Nor is it to overlook that cluster of problems still remaining for both traditions which may initially be referred to as the question of absoluteness (as in Ernst Troeltsch's *Die Absolutheit des Christentums*). It is merely to assert that the base-line for contemporary and future interpretations of either Buddhism or Christianity, or both, must be a recognition of the full availability of both traditions, and indeed of other religious traditions and general features of human experience.

If two traditions or more are held in view while interpretation proceeds, some kind of comparative reflection becomes inevitable. Yet this all too easily turns into oversimplified rejection of the tradition least accessible to the interpreter, or in some cases to a naive acclamation of what is alien. Persons attending to these matters may be unduly affected by chance features in their own personal development, or they may be constrained to adopt certain attitudes because of official positions which they hold in

religious organisations. All too often like is not compared with like. Monologues pass each other in the wind. There seems to be a need therefore for some charting of a framework for relaxed comparison, some attention given to an appropriate structure for reflection, some indication of the range of features which need to be considered. The purpose of this paper is to suggest an outline which may be useful in this connection and which at least may be thought to have some validity in terms of the study of religion as an academic pursuit.

Relations between Buddhism and Christianity have usually been rather guarded, when not actually polemical. The oldest polemical writing is probably the Japanese work *Ha Daiusu* (i. e. *Contra Deum*) written in 1620 by the ex-Christian convert Fabian, and it remains instructive. Since then eirenic works have also been written, but the sense of rivalry has not altogether departed. Influential Christian theologians such as Barth and Tillich have reacted to the existence of Buddhism in ways consistent with their theologies, but without really grasping the significance of Buddhism in a positive way. For their part Buddhist writers not infrequently make passing references to Christianity which pick on some isolated feature yet betray inadequate understanding of the real tensions and strengths in the Christian tradition. For example, it is sometimes supposed that the Buddhist teaching of *anātman* (Japanese *muga* 無我) is a refutation of a presumed central Christian doctrine of the soul, while in reality Christian doctrines of the soul or the self are by no means as straightforward as may first appear, especially if one reckons that early borrowings from Greek thought are not necessarily essential equipment for Christians in later centuries.

It might be thought that the best way to get over inadequate and unduly argumentative relations at the conceptual level would be to abandon them altogether and to shift the meeting of the two traditions on to the level of religious practices. One thinks here of shared meditation programmes, shared efforts to maintain or develop moral standards or shared efforts to secure world peace. There is clearly some merit in this course, but only some. The conceptual problems will in fact remain as long as humans have heads. Not only that, religious practice or even *jissen* (実践 'actually putting into practice') undisputed though its priority may be as an existential concern, almost always is found to come trailing ideas, both in Buddhism and in Christianity. It is sometimes thought that Buddhism does not have this characteristic, but in reality

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Buddhist meditation cannot be separated from a Buddhist perception of the way the world is, as is clear from the classic Buddhist meditation instructions. Conceptual reflections such as these present ones should therefore be recognised as a form of mental work which is in some way relevant to religious practice, and which is indeed at least as necessary in its own way as the physical construction of buildings for religious purposes. In short, what might at first seem like a pure reliance on religious practice may be a form of self-deceit, though not dishonourable, and may represent a form of escapism from difficult but real conceptual questions.

If such escapism is disallowed, some coherent framework is needed which permits the meaning conveyed by each of these two complex traditions to come to light at one and the same time. The present argument suggests a framework which is illustrated by incidental discussion of some of its features. The reader will realise that substantive discussion cannot really go beyond suggestions and pointers in the space of one article. In any case it must be admitted that the writer is still reflecting on many of the sub-issues which press for treatment in the context of the overall framework, and indeed he will probably never achieve the competence to deal with them adequately.

In terms of the relations between intellectual disciplines it is proposed that the key discipline for developing an even-handed approach to the interpretation of Buddhism and Christianity is neither Christian theology nor its Buddhist equivalent but the historical and comparative study of religion. Taken together, the historical and comparative study of religion are the central elements of the scientific study of religion or *Religionswissenschaft*, to which of course various other disciplines contribute in varying degree. This discipline proceeds phenomenologically in the sense that it treats the experience of the believer as its primary datum, without being sociologically or psychologically reductionist, nor yet adopting *a priori* positions about the truth or falsity of any particular belief system. Thus the historical and comparative study of religion, as an intellectual discipline, is able to play a mediating role between the Buddhist and Christian traditions, taking each with full seriousness, and providing a basis of knowledge, and indeed of understanding, on which renewed interpretative essays can build. Naturally the usefulness of this basis will depend on the correctness and judiciousness with which it is developed, so that prior reflection over a wider comparative field is also of some significance.

While academic writing on the nature and structure of religion has suggested many variations, the present writer considers that the simplest while most comprehensive view of any religious phenomena recognises four interrelated dimensions which together constitute the believer's religious experience. These have already been discussed elsewhere (*Comparative Religion* 1972), but in brief they are the conceptual (including symbolic, mythic, etc.), the behavioural (including both ritual and moral action as the case may be), the social (that is, the social extension of the religion as perceived and experienced by its members) and the psychological (here in the limited sense of the attitudinal profile and the state of mind and sensibility of the believer). Of course the sociological and psychological study of religion also have a major task of functional explanation, but that is secondary to the study of religion phenomenologically conceived. These four dimensions are all of equal importance and it is misleading to give priority to any one of them. In particular it is unsatisfactory to regard either belief systems or ritual and practice systems as the main focus of 'religious experience' as is commonly done. Neither should the dimension of sensitivity or feeling be simply equated with 'religious experience', as was done in the work of James, Otto and Wach. This error represents a protestant emphasis on the value of subjective feeling and no doubt illustrates a fundamentally healthy reaction to what the protestant tradition has perceived as the ritualism and scholasticism of catholicism. It is of course not without significance when religious believers or practitioners themselves stress the importance of one or other of these four dimensions; but at the same time they may not themselves be analytically aware of the way in which their experience is conveyed through the other three. For the observer it is methodologically important to maintain all four in steady view and to see the religious experience of the believer as constituted in some way or other by them all.

In addition to these four major dimensions, in terms of which any example of religion can be characterised without undue stress, there is what might be considered 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. If this fifth dimension is

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clearly perceived and fully used by the practitioners of religion, many of the problems caused by an inordinate sense of modernity subside into insignificance. It is only when the routines of intermediate tradition are ignored that a religious message seems to have to make a gigantic leap from the time of the origins of the faith, or from some presumed age of archaic experience, forward to the consciousness of modern man. Even when such leaps are encouraged, as in the work of a Bultmann or of an Eliade respectively, the relation of the first meaning to its reception by modern man remains extremely problematic. At the same time it could well be argued by theologians and their Buddhist counterparts that the values and meanings most deeply required by humanity today or at any time have all been carried forward in one way or another by the complex traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity, which have themselves in many ways adopted modernity and even contributed to it. Thus it is surprising that the importance of the workings of tradition, or the dynamics of religion through time, has not yet been widely recognised in the literature of the science of religion. This fifth dimension of religion is indeed the link between the deep past and the present, between messages lost and messages transmitted, between those who have in the past perceived the central meanings offered by the religions and those who may do so in the future. Yet this is already to flex the springboard for further interpretations, and before enthusiasm disturbs the picture unduly it is desirable to take a sober view of the four elementary dimensions of religion as these appear in Buddhism and in Christianity. In order to illustrate the procedure in outline some reflections will now be offered on each of these dimensions in turn. Depending on the point of view and experience of the reader some of the points made will no doubt seem quite elementary and perhaps over-simplified; yet that is one of the unavoidable characteristics of a comparative approach which seeks to achieve a degree of even-handedness with respect to two traditions.

Social dimension

Christianity belongs to a family of religions, consisting mainly of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are all strong in consciously intended social meaning. One of the keynotes of Israelite and thence Jewish religion has always been Torah; law, that is, in the special sense of a law for the people of God which they are bound, in a

covenant with God, to maintain. Torah provided stipulations for all aspects of social life, and it represents such a strong identification of religious consciousness with the social life of the Jewish people that in modern times it has been considered possible by some to maintain Jewishness while being agnostic or even atheistic in matters of belief. In the Muslim faith an almost equally strong emphasis on the ordering of social life, based on the Koran and subsequent Islamic law, can be seen as a follow-through to the Jewish heritage with an opening of the divinely sanctioned order to diverse peoples.

As to Christianity, the New Testament had already suggested a complex attitude towards Torah. This is seen both in the Gospels, where Jesus is portrayed as challenging rigid and repressive applications of Torah which failed to meet human realities and needs, and also in the epistles of Paul, where Torah is seen as something which binds humanity in sin so that man's condition needs to be transformed by grace. Nevertheless the growing Christian Church maintained the Old Testament containing the Torah, along with the New Testament, as a revelation of God's will, and not only was the Church seen as the people of God or as the 'true Israel', but eventually there were attempts to order whole societies in accordance with God's law, the most famous being probably the theocracy of Calvin's Geneva. Even when the Christian churches have not held politically dominating positions, they have frequently displayed strong social concerns, right up to the Industrial Missions of modern times, which seek not individual conversions but the Christianisation or sanctification of the very structures of industry. The reason for this social concern, whatever form it takes, is that it is a central presupposition of Christianity to place a high value on open, loving relations between persons deemed to be equal before God. Thus the Church, as the caring community of the elect, seeks to transform society at large into a moral and caring community on a wide scale.

It is easy to contrast these tendencies in Christianity with a picture of Buddhism which emphasises impersonality and plays down relations between persons, hence attaching little importance to community. Tillich argued that this was a major difference between the two traditions, and even went so far as to say that as a result democracy could not be expected to thrive in Buddhist countries. Such a view is probably faulty. It has arisen no doubt partly because of some real features of Buddhist teaching which may have received more emphasis among western observers than they enjoy in practice

among Buddhists, and partly because of a strong assumption that it is the community of monks alone which contains Buddhists. On this basis it is easy to see Buddhists as a series of individuals seeking enlightenment more or less independently from each other, and forming a sangha only out of convenience. Yet such a view overlooks the real social forms of Buddhism. The presuppositions and ideals of Buddhist social forms are indeed different from those of Christianity but that does not mean that they are non-existent. Disciples of the Buddha are in fact supposed to aid each other on the path to enlightenment, following the example of their teacher, and this mutual support takes its main social form in the arrangements for regulating the sangha. The arrangements include, in theory at least, the possibility of expulsion, which indicates the serious intent of the provisions. A significant feature in the early period and still today in Theravada Buddhism is the regular *uposatha* meeting for self-examination at which members' minds are concentrated on the goal which they share.

Mutual interdependence on the path towards Buddhahood is however a much wider concept than if it pertained to the sangha alone, for it extends right through the whole natural community which supports the sangha. The support of laity was almost certainly elicited and received during the Buddha's own lifetime, as all ancient sources agree, and certainly the Buddhist religion emerged very early as a civilisational force and not just a matter to interest a few miscellaneous individuals. This civilisational impact has recently been written up with particular emphasis by Trevor Ling in his work *The Buddha* (which incidentally contains very little about the Buddha himself), where the political compacts given classical form in the Asokan model are given prominence. Indeed from the early legends onwards right through the later history of Buddhism it is possible to see a tripartite relationship between sangha, king and people in which the sangha legitimates the monarchy, the king rules the people benevolently, while the people in their turn give support to the sangha. This is expressed diagrammatically and in more detail in the present writer's own short *The Buddha*. A similar pattern was reflected in the Japanese Buddhism of the time of Shōtoku Taishi (574-623) and indeed again in the recent aspirations of the Nichiren Shōshū Sōka Gakkai which has taught of a 'third civilisation' (*daisan bunmei* 第三文明) and, although politics and religion are constitutionally distinct in Japan, of a mysterious union between king and Buddha (*ōbutsu myōgō* 王仏妙合).

However the social extension of Buddhism among the people is not just a question of some kind of social or political compact. It has another feature centering on the relationship between the sangha and the people, which can be seen as a complex network of karmic relationships, binding together whole families and generations as they progress towards enlightenment and nirvana. For this reason aspects of Buddhism sometimes known as 'popular Buddhism', 'household Buddhism' or 'funeral Buddhism' should not be written off as being merely the performance of necessary social functions. On the contrary this extension of Buddhism should be appreciated as a meaningful social dimension of Buddhist experience. Of course not everybody who takes part in a routine Buddhist activity is doing so because of an individual intention to achieve enlightenment in the near future. Social obligations undoubtedly play a much larger part in the minds of those concerned. Nevertheless there is also usually a real sense of a karmic connection linking all those who take part. Indeed it is probably correct to say that social connections are seen in this perspective as being *at the same time* karmic connections. In the case of Japanese Buddhism one may see here a conflation between the connections obtaining between one particular social group within society which is essentially limited, and the universalist karmic perspective of Mahayana Buddhism in general. It is one of the points at which the social experience of Buddhism syncretises with the elemental forces of Japanese society. Similar arguments could be advanced with respect to other Buddhist countries.

Thus the social dimension of Buddhism should be characterised positively on at least three levels: relations within the sangha, relations between the sangha and the socio-political order, and the sense of karmic continuity, dependence and responsibility which pervades the Buddhism of the people. It is only on such a basis that a comparative view of the social dimension of Buddhism and Christianity should build. The comparative approach should not be developed on the negative basis of pointing out what one tradition lacks in terms of the other, but, initially at least, by characterising positively what each tradition does entail in its own terms. Equally, this social dimension should not be treated in either case as a *mere* social function, but should be recognised as a value-bearing dimension of experience for those involved. The importance of this becomes especially clear if one considers its close relation to the behavioural or ritual dimension in which the believer may be caught up at many points in his life.

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Behavioural dimension

Religious action can be loosely divided into formal rites of various kinds and religiously patterned behaviour performed in the context of life in general. The former is more specific, more evident, more structured, while the latter merges imperceptibly into the total range of human behaviour. Both are of considerable importance in both Buddhism and Christianity, so that in a broad sense it is possible to compare like with like.

The overt rites of Buddhism and Christianity have a major underlying similarity in that they are the rites of a universal religion of salvation or release which has made itself at home in a whole at range of natural societies. In unmixed form the rites of such universal religions are quite different from the rites of primal religions which have a single social basis. Bearing in mind that both universal and primal religions have (1) rites which centre on individuals and (2) rites in which the whole group is the main focus, the range of rites can be expressed diagrammatically as follows:

	(1) individual focus	(2) group focus
(P) Primal	rites of transition	seasonal rites etc.
(U) Universal	rites of initiation	rites of reinforcement

Rites in the P/1 category are Van Gennep's well known rites of transition (*rites de passage*) which see the individual through birth, adolescence, marriage and death. Naturally these are also social rites in the sense that they enable a society to manage changes in the relative position of the individuals within it. However they take place when the life-stage of specific individuals requires it. By contrast the rites in the P/2 category are the new year, spring-time and harvest festivals, rites connected with special occupations, and any others which rehearse the needs and aspirations of a single society. In a pure state, a universal religion of salvation or release also has two kinds of rite. Those which centre on the need of an individual, in category U/1, are above all the rites of initiation such as baptism and confirmation in Christianity and receiving the precepts (Japanese *jukai* 受戒) in Buddhism. The so-called initiations of primal religion are quite different since they mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and are more or less inevitable for all the members of a given society, whereas initiation in a religion of salvation or release implies voluntary entry into a group

distinct from the natural society of which the person is also a member. The fact that in many situations these two are conflated will be referred to again below. In category U/2 may be placed rites which strengthen the select body or celebrate its central concerns. In early Buddhism this was above all the *uposatha*, though other rites now come into this category too depending on the sect, while in Christianity the main rite in this category has been in some form or other the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. These rites may be called rites of reinforcement in that they consolidate the position of members in their faith and discipline. Naturally this four-fold analysis of rites has a very wide application and many other specific examples and variations could be adduced.

The picture becomes interestingly more complex however when we consider the overall history of Buddhism and Christianity, for the simple reason that as these extremely adaptable religions spread from region to region and from age to age they shared to a varying extent in the functions of primal religion. Thus Christianity rapidly developed a religious framework for birth, adolescence, marriage and death, infant baptism becoming a birth rite and confirmation becoming an adolescence rite. Similarly Buddhism became of great importance as a funeral religion in various countries, while in Theravada Buddhism ordination took on a partial role as an adolescent rite for boys or young men involving them in separation from society, temporary monkhood and then a return to adult household life. In the more dominantly social category P/2 Buddhism and Christianity also took on a seasonal form. Christmas marked the winter solstice, and Easter marked spring with a popular emphasis on natural regeneration evidenced by bulbs, eggs, and so on. Christianity also provided agricultural rites in the form of Rogation-tide and Harvest Festival. Buddhism developed less in this respect, leaving more room for existing religious systems such as, in the Japanese case, Shinto. However Buddhism has become strongly affected by the sense of calendricity running throughout Japanese religion in general. One has only to think of the 108 soundings of the temple bells at midnight on New Year's Eve (*joya no kane* 除夜の鐘), signalling the passing of the old year, or of the two and a half million folk who make their New Year's visit (*hatsumōde* 初詣) not to a Shinto shrine, or not only to a Shinto shrine, but also to the famous Buddhist Temple Sensōji, at Asakusa in Tokyo.

The most common comparative reflection on this state of affairs is that Buddhism has usually effected some kind of compromise with the natural religions of its host

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countries, while Christianity, like Islam, has swept away indigenous religious practices to dominate the whole of life by itself. While there is some truth in this, it should not be overlooked that Christianity has in fact ingested much regional lore and custom in a complex indigenisation process, while the same is true of Islam, especially in Indonesia. Indeed, since Christianity has if anything produced a greater range of rites than Buddhism to suit the primal level of religious needs, the matter could be stated quite conversely, though unfashionably, namely that it is Christianity which has shown the more comprehensive adaptability, while Buddhism on the whole has maintained a more severe distance as a religion of separation and release. However that may be, it should be recognised in long-term discussion that the ritual dimension of both Buddhism and Christianity represents a complex interplay between rituals which facilitate the soteriological meaning of the religion over against natural life, and rituals which in various ways accommodate to the requirements of natural society. Not only that, but most Buddhist and Christian rituals display both of these aspects, so that they can only be properly understood in terms of a syncretistic and ambiguous function.

The second main area of religious behaviour is the less formal one of religiously motivated action within the believer's total range of ordinary action. On this matter reference must be limited here to the question of the status of ethical action in the two traditions, for this is often misunderstood in both cases. In the case of Christianity it is often presumed that the religious sanction for ethics is rigidly authoritarian. However this is a misleading view which fails to do justice both to New Testament materials and to much of later Christian practice. The whole thrust of Christian ethics in the New Testament was towards (a) the interiorisation of law, and (b) the universalisation of law, that is, of course, of religious and ethical law. Jesus is recalled in the Gospels as relating divine law to human needs and by no means as simply reasserting the Jewish religious law in some new authoritarian fashion. In the case of Buddhism it is frequently supposed that ethics are secondary or even irrelevant and that Buddhism is essentially an amoral religion. This impression is sometimes reinforced by Buddhists themselves, especially in the Zen tradition, who stress that Buddhist enlightenment lies beyond the distinction between good and evil. Since the western observer usually feels obliged to be interested in enlightenment he may easily overlook the fact that the vast majority of Asian Buddhists do not expect early enlightenment.

Yet for Buddhists in a pre-enlightenment condition, or a pre-nirvanic condition, karmic differences do matter, and hence moral guidance is not insignificant. There is indeed the broad difference between the two traditions that in Buddhism moral effort is essentially a preliminary, while in Christianity it is usually considered to be contemporaneous with and essential to the spiritual life. Nevertheless this difference can be exaggerated.

The above problem about the status of ethics in the two traditions may arise in part simply because ethics are frequently considered as an independent and coherent category in their own right. In reality ethics merge into wider questions about the assumptions and values of daily life, attitudes towards family life, work, society, and so on. Therefore it might be more fruitful to begin with a more comprehensive characterisation of what might be called the *meaning-in-life* of Buddhism and of Christianity, including reference to ethically conceived behaviour but also to a wider range of behaviour less formally but no less importantly inspired by religious values and attitudes. For the present the main point to be noted is that the comparison of Buddhism and Christianity should not have built into it from the very beginning an artificial and misleadingly rigid view of ethics. It is not necessary to expatiate on the intimate connections which this dimension of religion clearly has with the psychological and conceptual dimensions to which we now proceed.

Psychological dimension

Although this is called the psychological dimension for convenience it should be recalled that the expression is used in the limited sense of the states of mind, attitudinal profile and sensibility of the believer. Just as the social dimension considered earlier referred to the social extension of the religion as perceived and experienced by the believer, so too does the psychological dimension in this sense refer to the subjective extension of the believer's awareness or sensibility. We are not concerned at this point with functional explanations of religion which would correlate religious experience with non-religious factors such as neurosis or sexual repression, etc.

This dimension is particularly difficult to deal with because, while each of the four dimensions is in constant relation to the other three, it is in practice all but impossible to discuss this dimension at all without speedy reference to the conceptual

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dimension. Another difficulty is that it is often all too rapidly assumed that it is this dimension which itself alone constitutes religious experience. However it is erroneous and misleading to restrict 'experience' to the subjective sensibilities of religion, as is implied in the title and content of William James' extremely influential work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The experience of the believer is more appropriately seen as pervading all four of the dimensions currently being considered. However these notes of caution do not mean that the religious consciousness or state of mind is not open to consideration. Indeed it would be superficial to ignore it.

With this dimension too the comparative picture is not as simple as might at first appear. The main constitutive feature common to most phases of Christian sensibility is probably a sense of trusting dependence. This has found prominent expression in the work of protestant theologians such as Schleiermacher, but the feeling of which he wrote has a long heritage and many variations among Christians of almost all persuasions. Connected with this feeling are representative Christian values such as respect for personhood, desire for truthful speech, love, and so on. For Buddhism the main constitutive feature of spirituality can probably be declared to be a sense of detachment. This means that religiously directed feeling ranges over the experience of passions and the experience of the cooling of passions. It may not be inappropriate to say that while Christianity involves an acceptance, through suffering, of created existence, which in the last analysis is positively affirmed through the sense of resurrection, Buddhism by contrast leads to a withdrawing away from facticity or from the specific variety of ordinary life, at least in so far as passion-directed attachment is involved.

In such a brief statement some doctrinal signposts are inevitably drawn into play to indicate these dominant attitudes. However, it may be that the kind of language in which the attitudes or perceptions are most easily set forth does not do justice to the kind of subtlety required for a comparative consideration. For example, second thoughts obviously arise with respect to the above brief statement if one considers the nature of faith in Pure Land and True Pure Land Buddhism. *Tariki* 他力 after all does mean other-power, and it is sincere reliance on the power of the original vow of Amitābha Buddha which is given centrality in these cases. It may be said that this sense of reliance on *tariki* is really untypical, while it is the *jiriki* 自力 of Zen Buddhism which is more truly Buddhist. However the reality is that both of these principles are

widespread throughout Buddhism as a whole. The starkly accentuated contrast between *jiriki* and *iariki* represents a tension found in the *de facto* attitudes of most Buddhists, though usually it is more softly drawn. Thus some modification of the picture first drawn above is probably necessary at least from the Buddhist side.

The characterisation of Christian feeling probably also needs modification. Above all, while a sense of dependent creaturely existence may be viewed as the elementary form of Christian sensitivity, the presumed resting place at the end of the Christian way (*ᾠδὸς* — a New Testament term) is not life under its present empirical forms, but post-resurrection life, which is essentially mysterious. This mystery should not be underestimated as a factor in Christian sensitivity. Even when it is said that resurrection is a reaffirmation of creation, the manner of reaffirmation remains mysterious. Moreover since in this mystery finitude is overcome, presumably so too are the conceptual discriminations which belong to finitude, at least that is, such conceptual discrimination which Buddhists regard as an aspect of ignorance in the technical sense.

Further features of Buddhist and Christian feeling which demand careful reflection are the attitudes to the self and to the external world (both touched on in principle above), the attitude to reason and the role which reason is supposed to play in the religious consciousness, and so on. Of course all such reflections tie in closely with the problem of making comparisons of a conceptual kind, to which we now turn.

Conceptual dimension

The conceptual dimension of religion includes doctrinal statements and formulae but also much more. It refers to all mythical and symbolic projections of religious consciousness, including their expression in art of all kinds. In terms of ideas it includes both those which are unthinkingly carried over from previous cultures and those which are consciously selected and emphasised in new religious initiatives. Therefore it is not possible to light upon two clear-cut sets of doctrines and compare them item by item. Many doctrines in both Buddhism and Christianity, if not all, have a complex status because they arise in the context of myth, in the assumptions and arguments of a particular time, in symbolic presentation, and so forth.

Two further elementary cautions should be made. Firstly, literalistic interpretations should not be fastened on to religious concepts which the believers themselves consider

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subtle or mysterious. This danger is particularly important with regard to the various forms of Japanese Buddhism, some of which at first sight appear simplistic and even un-Buddhist to western observers. It is also particularly important with respect to some central doctrines of Christianity such as the doctrines of God, creation, incarnation and resurrection. The last is an especially instructive case, for the New Testament narratives on the resurrection of Jesus are themselves contradictory, or as some would say, complementary, in treating the resurrection at once as a physical wonder and as a mystery. Thomas can feel the wounds of Jesus with his own hands, *and* Jesus can stand among his disciples without entering a room in the normal way. Secondly it should not be lightly assumed that there is or even ought to be a simple unity of view maintained within one religious tradition. Admittedly this may be called for at times by representatives of one of the traditions. Thus in theory the Buddhist sangha is supposed to agree about whether or not a particular dialogue or set of sayings represents the teaching of the Buddha, as may be inferred from the teaching on authority in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. Christianity too is supposed to be a religion of unity, and schismatic divisions are reckoned by almost all to be a scandal while yet from some points of view necessary to preserve true doctrine. The unity of the Church is also strongly symbolised by the body of Christ partaken in the Eucharist. The reality is however that quite different emphases are possible within each tradition even while they remain clearly Christian or Buddhist. Nor do these emphases necessarily contradict the kind of unity which is proper to each tradition. For example, Buddhism in one phase may emphasise separation from the world, following the Buddha as a model of nirvana, while in another phase it might emphasise immersion in ordinary life on the basis of recognising the Buddha-nature of all existence. Christianity may be understood essentially as a theocentric faith with Christ playing a secondary role in the action of divine providence, but then again it might be understood as radically christocentric, with man's knowledge of God being formed mainly through his experience of Christ.

Such strong cautionary remarks may make the activity of comparison seem too hazardous to be worth undertaking. Yet it should not be overlooked that the very applicability of these remarks to the two traditions in question itself indicates some fundamental similarities. Other basic parallels combine to make comparison unavoidable, even though pitfalls abound. To start at bedrock, both are universal systems for

the realisation of meaning in life. Both assume that man has a fundamental problem and offer ways of solving it which include at some point statements about the way the world is. This in turn means that both systems are in principle open to some kind of philosophical testing, even though both systems have well tried defence habits against the probes of independent reason. However the application of philosophical tests of consistency and meaning goes beyond the initial comparison which can be made on a historical and phenomenological basis. Though the statements 'about the way the world is', to use the common philosophers' phrase, may not always be immediately obvious, and the religious person himself, especially on the Buddhist side, may even claim that he does not make such, nevertheless there is a sense in which each religion points to what is presumed to be the ultimate nature of reality. Furthermore both religions propose rather mysterious conclusions about man's destiny, even while allowing less mysterious pictures thereof to communicate these mysteries to the majority. This point was already made with respect to the Christian concept of resurrection, but it applies equally to related concepts such as 'the kingdom of God' and 'eternal life', which both break into ordinary life and go beyond it. The nature of life with God, just like the nature of God, can only be approached with the greatest of care, and negative terms are frequent. For Buddhism the nature of a Buddha's existence after nirvana, if indeed 'after' is the right word, remains an undetermined question. Even a bodhisattva, still active in the world of ordinary life, 'does not take his stand anywhere' (to use Conze's regular phrase), and indeed cannot without forfeiting the freedom from attachments which enables him to release others. Similarly the Son of Man was said to have nowhere to lay his head.

Such ideas may all seem remarkably diverse if closely regarded, yet comparison is always partly a question of scale and focus. They may seem much more similar to each other when jointly contrasted with quite different systems such as the Shinto religion or rationalist or political ideologies. In so far as there are similarities it may be preferable to approach them by means of a neutral structure of some kind, for example by elucidating each system in terms of the pattern: man's present condition, the condition seen as a goal or aspiration, and the route or method for realising the aspired condition. It is however very difficult to devise such a structure which does not already imply some kind of doctrinal nuance. It would be helpful to move through a series of focuses,

some of which are right for the broader scale of comparison but known to be deficient in some respects, and others of which are suitable for attending to the comparison of more detailed points but which run the danger of overlooking major similarities.

Whatever the scope of a comparative reflection the conceptual dimension of religion should always be recognised as containing a wide range of conceptual activity including philosophically refined doctrine, myth and symbol, semi-explicit assumptions and popular belief-systems which in one way or another convey, or betray, the central concerns of the tradition in question. It should also be remembered that the conceptual dimension of religion constantly moves together with religious feeling or spiritual stance, with some kind of socio-religious extension experienced by the believer, and with religious action of various kinds. It is not really possible specifically to refer to all of these at once, simply because of the limited nature of speech or writing. However reflection on one dimension should never proceed in such a way that it performs an injustice with respect to another. Furthermore all four of these dimensions are subject to change as a matter of course, which leads to consideration of the fifth dimension.

The fifth dimension

Since religion is subject to the passage of time religious leaders and believers are forced to respond to ever-lengthening perspectives. In particular the transmission of religion from one culture to another whether geographically or chronologically means that new cultural elements are introduced to the tradition and new demands are made upon it. Two of the strongest religious drives relevant to such shifts of tradition are (a) mission, and (b) reform. Though both of these concepts have played a classical role in the way in which the history of the Christian Church has been perceived, they are both equally relevant to Buddhism. Both of these drives are more or less widely present at the level of conscious reflection among teachers and preachers in the two religions, and to a lesser degree among the believers generally. Less clearly understood, though no less important for an understanding of the nature of religious tradition are (a) the way in which the elements of one religious tradition coexist, from time to time, with other religious and cultural elements of various kinds (see syncretism, below), and (b) the procedures by which the available resources of a tradition are selected and interpreted by its exponents (see hermeneutics, below). It is thought that these four

categories together, though not all of quite the same provenance or status, may be adequate to aid the discernment of those patterns in religious change and religious consistency which can summarily be described as the dynamics of religious tradition.

As to the categories of mission and reform, it may be held that these are not appropriate to Buddhism, and indeed it is regrettable that both are drawn from common use in the history of Christianity. If more neutrally derived alternatives can be produced, so much the better. Nevertheless the facts of religious history are that both Buddhism and Christianity have been in principle missionary religions. Indeed this arises from their very nature as universalist religions of salvation or release. In Christianity man is commonly viewed as bound by sin and therefore needing to be brought to a renewed and rectified relationship with God, while in Buddhism man is viewed as bound by karma and ignorance and therefore in need of teaching and other help to be brought to a state of release or nirvana. Hence those involved in either religion are called upon to receive, and to transmit. That Christianity requires this is clearly indicated in the New Testament (e. g. *Matthew* 28; 18-20 and *John* 20; 23, the latter being a commission to forgive sins). It is less commonly realised among observers that there is a canonical basis for such involvement in transmission in Buddhism too, though of a rather different kind. It lies in the Buddha's very decision to teach anybody at all, for at first he was inclined not to. This decision, described in legendary form in the *Mahāvagga* of the Pali Books of Discipline, provides a theoretical beginning for the outward spread of Buddhism based on the Buddha's own resolve. The legend was taken up again in the early Mahayana *Lotus Sutra*, with interesting glosses on the degree of understanding to be expected from his hearers and the modifications which the teaching would therefore require.

It is also quite clear that Buddhism as well as Christianity has been subject to reform movements, which seem to be more or less universally evident in founded religions. Again there is a strong inherent drive, even to the point of religious competition, to seek a correct and effective statement of the presumed original faith. While reformation is closely linked with protestantism in the minds of historians of Christianity, perhaps more consideration should be given to reform motivation in the development of catholicism. In the case of Buddhism reform has been paradoxically linked with development in the case of the origins of the Mahayana as a distinct movement.

This is also true for later exponents of Mahayana, perhaps the most striking cases being the exponents of Zen Buddhism and the fiery Japanese Nichiren, who is certainly better seen as a reformer than as a 'prophet' (*contra* Anesaki).

There are no doubt many features of both mission and reform which deserve detailed comparative study, but the point being made here is that the two together have a tremendous impact on the overall pattern of each tradition. Both lead to new elements becoming a part of the overall tradition so that the sorting and selection process becomes ever more complex for later generations. This developing richness of the traditions eventually demands more widely based theoretical analyses (a) of the manner in which religious and other elements are correlated with each other, and (b) the procedures by which the meanings of the traditions are elucidated.

For the first of these a proper analysis of syncretism is required. The main points of such an analysis have already been broached (see the present writer's 'Syncretism and Ambiguity', *Numen* XVIII 2, 1971), and indeed the matter has been taken up rather differently by others (e. g. Carsten Colpe's 'Syncretism and Secularisation: Complementary and Antithetical Trends in New Religious Movements?' *History of Religions*, 17, 2, 1977). Although the matter remains rather confused in the available literature, it does seem evident that a good theory of syncretism is needed to make sense of a range of interconnected problems. These include questions about indigenisation and acculturation (including the acquisition by universalist religions of rites otherwise provided in primal religions, discussed briefly above) and also questions about the linking and dropping of diverse religious and other elements, the formation of new religions, and so on.

An understanding of the dynamics of religious tradition with the help of such concepts can lead the observer very close to the interests and aspirations of the believers and exponents of the tradition. However even if the above were to be systematically achieved it would still be possible to come one step closer. This would be by sharing in the analysis of the procedures of interpretation employed by religious persons themselves, not forgetting that the latter are nowadays more than ever before sophisticated observers of themselves. This understanding of the work of the interpreters is called hermeneutics, though the term also has a history of extension to the practice of interpretation itself, and an attempt to broach this kind of study in a comparative way has

also been made elsewhere with special reference to Buddhism and Christianity (*The Cardinal Meaning*, 1973, with Robert Morgan et al.). At such points the comparative study of religion can easily become a springboard for sharing in the interpretative efforts of today and tomorrow. At the same time the autonomous integrity of historical and comparative study should be carefully maintained, for otherwise the very value of the analysis will be lost.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the overall pattern of analysis set out above may be useful in providing a sufficiently simple, yet comprehensive and integrated framework for more sustained and detailed comparative work. The specialist reader will no doubt detect many points at which the argument is indebted to others, even where issue is taken, and this debt is gratefully acknowledged. It seemed important however not to obscure the structure of the argument with numerous references, since the argument is essentially a general one. Similarly the reflections offered under the five dimensions perceived are illustrative and often cautionary in intent. They suggest the kind of agenda appropriate to the discussion of each dimension, and, incipiently, the relations which should obtain between the various phases of comparison. Ideally each dimension is linked with all the others, but this is difficult to exhibit constantly. In particular it should be noted that the fifth dimension, that of the dynamics of religious tradition, is linked all the time to the other four, which together should be seen dynamically. It is an understanding of the dynamics of religion which brings the observer closest to the value-forming character of contemporary religious experience.