

# Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian

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O N E W O R L D

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# 1

## NIRVANA AND GOD THE TRANSCENDENT OTHER

It's a universal experience, I suspect, that growing up is not only a wonderful and exciting and rewarding experience; it is also, and often even more so, a painful and bewildering and frustrating ordeal. That's natural. To leave the familiar, to move into the unknown, and to become something we weren't can be scary and demanding.

If this is true of life in general, it should also be true of religious faith. More precisely, if figuring out who we really are as we move from childhood to so-called maturity is for most of us a process in which progress takes place through grappling with confusion, we should expect the same process to operate in figuring out who God is. That has certainly been my experience. As I've grown older, my faith in God has, I trust, grown deeper, but that's because it has been prodded by confusion. No confusion, no deepening.

Just why human growth makes for problems in religious growth has to do with the natural process of growing up. Our spiritual intelligence and maturity have to keep pace with our emotional intelligence and maturity. How that syncopated growth takes place, if it does at all, will be different from person to person. But I think there are some general reasons, especially for people in the United States, why this syncopation lags. For many Christians, while their general academic education matures with their bodies and intelligence, their religious education (if they had any) all too often ends with eighth or twelfth grade. They have to face adult life with an eighth-grade, or teenage-level, religious diploma.

That can make for difficulties, mainly because being a grown-up means taking responsibility and thinking for oneself. That requires

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finding reasons in one's own experience for affirming, or rejecting, what one took from Mom and Dad with a child's trusting, but often blind, faith. And making connections between an adult's experience and a child's image of a Divine Being up in heaven running the show may be as impossible as fitting into your high-school graduation suit or dress twenty or even ten years later.

Add to such tensions the fact that we live in a world (more vocal in Europe than the U.S.) in which scientists keep answering the questions for which we thought God was the response, or psychologists and political scientists keep pointing out how religion is a more effective tool for manipulation than for maturation, and it becomes even clearer why passing from religious childhood to religious adulthood runs into the kind of problems that either block or terminate the process.

Way back in 1975, the very first graduate theology course I taught (at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago) was titled "The Problem of God." For me, and for many, the problem remains. As I try to sort out and identify the different faces of my God problem – or, the reasons why I so often find myself wincing when I hear or read how we Christians talk about God – I find three discomforting images: God the transcendent Other, God the personal Other, and God the known Other.

In no way can I provide neatly packaged answers to a lineup of questions that have teased and tormented many a mind much more erudite than my own. But I do want to try to explore and better understand – for myself and for others – how Buddhism has helped me grapple with such questions and even to come up with some working answers.

In what follows in this chapter (and in subsequent chapters) I hope to carry on what John Dunne in his wonderful little book from back in the 1970s, *The Way of All the Earth*, called the "spiritual adventure of our time:" the adventure of *passing over* to another religious tradition in as open, as careful, and as personal a way as possible, and then *passing back* to one's own religion to see how walking in someone else's "religious moccasins" can help one to understand and fit into one's own.

That's what I'll be doing in the three segments that make up the structure of each of this book's chapters. First I'll try to sketch as clear a picture as possible of the struggles I'm experiencing in a particular area of Christian belief and practice. Then I'll pass over to how a

Buddhist might deal with these struggles and questions. And finally I'll pass back and try to formulate what I have learned from Buddhism and what I think can make for a retrieval and a deepening of Christian belief.

#### MY STRUGGLES: THE TRANSCENDENT OTHER

Somewhere, Carl Gustav Jung stated that according to his experience with his clients, when religious people move into the territory of middle-age, they start having problems with a God imaged as a transcendent Other – that is, as a Being who exists “up there” or “out there” in a place called heaven. That certainly describes me and my problems. In fact, though I may have been a late bloomer in many aspects of my life, in this area I was, according to Jung’s forecast, quite precocious. By my mid-twenties I had growing difficulties in wrapping my mind as well as my heart around the picture of God as Other. As I have struggled, it’s become clearer to me that otherness itself is not the real problem. There have to be others, especially certain “significant others,” in our life if it is going to be healthy and fruitful. Wouldn’t God merit a place on the top of my list of significant others?

The stumbling stone has to do with the way God is portrayed as different from all the other significant others in my life. He (for the rest of this section it feels appropriate to use the traditional male pronoun for God) is the *transcendent* Other. Or as I was taught during my years of theological studies in Rome back in the 1960s, God is the *totaliter aliter* – the totally Other, infinitely beyond all that we are as human and finite beings. In his transcendence, God is, we were taught, infinitely perfect, infinitely complete, happy unto himself, in need of nothing. “*Ipsum esse subsistens*” was the Latin label we memorized – God is “Self-subsistent Being,” Being who originates from himself, who is dependent solely on himself, and could be happy all by himself.

#### **An Other in need of no other**

Admittedly, this image of God as Self-subsistent Being is more a legacy of Greek philosophy than biblical narratives (though some Bible scholars see its roots in the declaration of God as “I am who I

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am” in Exodus 3:14). When I thought about this, I realized that this means that God is an Other who really doesn’t need others, and so in his self-sufficiency cannot really be affected by others. In fact, that’s pretty standard Christian theology: God does not have any needs that would make him dependent on creatures – needs that would tarnish the perfection and self-sufficiency of God. Theologians through the centuries (conditioned, I might add, by the Greek and very male notion of perfection as self-sufficiency) have acted as bodyguards around God, making sure that no one really touches him. To be touched and changed by something that is not God – that would be, as it were, a weakness that is not permitted by God’s infinite otherness.

But wait a minute. This is only half the picture of God in Christian doctrine. The God of Abraham and Moses and Jesus is also a God of love. Christianity affirms that the God who is infinitely other, infinitely perfect and powerful, is also a God who infinitely loves. Creation is the supreme sign and expression of that love, and it is so, theologians explain, precisely because this God, who in his self-sufficiency and perfection didn’t have to create, did so! To do something that one doesn’t have to do, to give of oneself even when one in no way needs to – that, say the theologians, is love at its finest.

But is it? Here is where I stumbled again. In my thinking as well as in my praying, in my efforts to image and in my efforts to feel the Divine, I could not see how Christian teaching succeeded in holding together God’s infinite otherness with God’s infinite love, or God’s transcendent being beyond this world with God’s immanent action in this world.

To start with, if we believe that God is love and that creation is the expression of this love, but then immediately add that God did not have to create, it sounds like God did not have to express his love. But what kind of a love is that? A love that can just exist, without finding expression? *Is there such a love?* Can we imagine a person being full of love but never showing it, or putting it into action? Theologians respond by explaining that God’s inherent, infinite love is expressed within himself, between the relations that make up the Trinity. So God’s love could be satisfied with being only an internal, self-love? ... Hmmm. We have words for such love. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I have to be honest. A love that doesn’t need to be expressed just doesn’t make sense – or it’s a bit sick.

### **Creation from scratch**

Further problems in reconciling God's love in creation with traditional understanding of God's transcendent otherness arise from the way Christian doctrine has understood creation. I'm supposed to believe in a "creation out of nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*). God produced the world from scratch; he had nothing to work with. Theologians have insisted on this (it's not that clear in the Bible) for two reasons: to make sure that there was nothing around before creation (because it would have come from somewhere else besides God) and to make sure that God didn't spin out the world from God's self (because that would have put the world on God's level and so undermined the divine transcendence). So there's a clear line of demarcation between God and creation; it's the line between Producer and produced, between the totally Infinite and the totally finite, between the Transcendent and the immanent. For me, the line of demarcation feels and looks like a chasm.

But that, Christian theology announces, is precisely the marvel and mystery of Christianity. It proclaims a God who has crossed the chasm! A God who, already among the people of Israel, has chosen to enter history. And that choice and that entrance have come to their total and final fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, for in him God has become history by becoming human. The transcendence of God, for Christians, has become immanent and present within creation, for Christians believe in a God who not only acts in history but becomes incarnate and "takes flesh" in history.

Here we're touching the very heart of Christianity, and as I will try to explain in Chapter 5, this is why I remain a Christian. But problems still remain in bringing together in a coherent, engaging manner the abiding Christian insistence on the transcendent otherness of God and a convincing affirmation of God's action and incarnation in the world. To summarize in what I hope is a not too simplistic statement: given the chasm-like dividing line between God and the world, God's engagement in our history turns out to be one way, preferential, and, in its highest incarnational form, one time.

### **A one-way street**

It's one way because given the Christian insistence on the perfection and unchangeability of God, God can certainly make a difference in the world. But the world can never make any difference for God. I



remember my guarded perplexity when Father Van Roo, S.J., teaching us the “*De Deo Uno*” course (“On the One God”) at the Gregorian University in Rome, carefully led us through the distinction that God’s influence on the world is real, but the world’s influence on God is “*rationalis tantum*” – loosely translated, only figments of our mind’s imagination. If the world *could* affect God, the professor clarified, it would tarnish his perfection and independence.

So God’s action in history is a one-way street. But it also seems to be a street constructed rather preferentially, in some neighborhoods but not in others. What I’m getting at is something I’ve heard frequently from my undergraduate students: God seems to play favorites; he acts here, but not there; in Jewish history but not in Canaanite history. This pushes us back to the transcendent divide between God and the world. Since they’re two totally different realms and since God is in total charge, his actions in history and the world have to cross a divide. God has, as it were, to build bridges.

And bridges, if I may extend the analogy, are built here and there. If they were everywhere, there would be no divide! This makes God’s actions in the world interventions rather than natural or spontaneous happenings. And the interventions are “choices:” God freely chooses to act because, remember, he doesn’t have to act. But then his choices seem to be selective, preferential, as if God loves some of his children more than others.

This last difficulty hangs heavily on what Christianity proclaims as the best of its good news: that this transcendent God has “come down” from his transcendent heaven and has identified, or become one with, his creation. The Divine was “made flesh” (John 1:14). Here the chasm no longer exists. Here we have the marvel of God’s love – to “give up” the privileges of divinity, to cross the divide, and become like us in all things except sin. Miraculous, marvelous, incredible as it is, however, it still bears, for me and for many Christians, all the problems of a preferential intervention. This miracle of God becoming human happens not only at a particular time, within a particular people; it also happens, Christians insist, *only once*. Only in Jesus, nowhere else. We’ll explore this issue more carefully in Chapter 5. For the moment I’ll just state my struggle: while I’m perplexed by God having to “come down” in order to be part of this world, I’m even more puzzled over why he did so only once.

### **Dualism is the problem!**

Even though many of my teachers at the Gregorian University in the 1960s may have been overly conscientious in their determination to guard God's transcendent untouchability, even though God's otherness may weigh more heavily on my generation's shoulders than on my children's, still, for many contemporary Christians I know that there is a deep-reaching, fundamental problem in the way Christians image and talk about God-the-Other. I'm going to give the problem a philosophical name, but it points to a personal malaise that many Christians feel at least once a week when listening to Sunday sermons or singing Sunday hymns.

Christianity, throughout most of its history (because of its historical conditioning, not because of its inherent nature), has been plagued with the problem of *dualism*. My dictionary defines dualism as: "a state in which something has two distinct parts or aspects, which are often opposites." My own simplistic definition would be: dualism results when we make necessary distinctions, and then take those distinctions too seriously. We turn those distinctions into dividing lines rather than connecting lines; we use them as no-trespassing signs. We not only distinguish, we separate. And the separation usually leads to ranking: one side is superior to and dominant over the other. Thus, we have the dualism of matter and spirit, East and West, nature and history, male and female, God and the world.

Here's our problem, I think. We Christians (we're not the only religion to do this) have *distinguished* God and the world, or the Infinite and the finite. Such distinctions are right and proper; indeed, necessary. But then we've made much too much of our neat distinctions. We've made these distinctions too clear, too defined. We have so insisted on the infinite distance between God and the world that we've ended up not with God and creatures on two ends of the same playing field but in two different stadiums! We have so stressed how different, how beyond, God is from creatures that our attempts to "connect" the two turn out to be contrived or artificial or partial or unequal.

That's the problem with dualism: it so stresses the difference between two realities, it so separates them, that it cannot then get them back together again and show how the two belong together, complement each other, need each other, form a genuine relationship with each other. That's it! That's the crux of the problem: Christian

dualism has so exaggerated the difference between God and the world that it cannot really show how the two form a unity.

Of course, what I have summed up in these pages does not represent all of Christian tradition and experience, and even of Christian theology. But it does echo the dominant voices and reflect the prevailing images not only in popular Christian beliefs but in much of the “standard teaching” of Christian churches. So much of Christian belief and spirituality is burdened with what I have called the dualism between God and us. The “God all out there” (C.G. Jung), the God “above me” or “coming down to me” is a God I find hard to believe in. So do many of my Christian friends and students. If there is in Christian tradition and experience a God within, a God who lives, and moves, and has being within us and the world, we need help in finding such a God.

Buddhism, I believe, can provide some help.

#### PASSING OVER: NO GOD, JUST CONNECTIONS

I’ll never forget the jolt I experienced as I made my first efforts to study Buddhism during my freshman year of college at Divine Word Seminary, Conesus, NY. (It was a private study, since the seminary curriculum then did not have space for “non-Christian” religions.) I was amazed. No – bewildered, stupefied. Buddhism didn’t have a God! I had heard some talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s proposal for a “religionless religion.” But Buddha’s proposal for a “Godless religion?”

So in my first encounter with Buddhism I felt like I had hit a brick wall. Such a wall, I was later to realize, provides the safest way to begin the study of a religion not one’s own. It keeps us from doing what we are all too inclined to do – to read our own perspectives and beliefs into the other religion and to declare that it’s “really saying the same thing.” Religions may have much in common, but they also have much, perhaps even more, that makes them different. And if there are any two religions between which the differences outweigh the similarities, I think it’s Buddhism and Christianity. That’s what makes the dialogue between the two so difficult, and so rewarding.

#### **God gets in the way**

So with my dialogical sails drooping, I slowed down and allowed Buddhism and Buddhists to speak to me. I was told, by books and by

Buddhist friends, that Buddha did not necessarily want to deny the existence of God. He just didn't want to talk about God or anything else that was formally religious. Why? I suspect it was because he wanted to talk about something else, and we can surmise that he was afraid that God-talk, like any other talk, would get in the way. He wanted to talk about what he discovered in meditation under the Bodhi Tree (Tree of Awakening) in the town now called Bodhi Gaya in northern India, after he had left his princely home and family some six years earlier to begin his search for how to deal with suffering and figure out what life's all about. He wanted to share *that* experience. That was more important, for him, than talking about God or Brahman (the Absolute in Hinduism); in fact, it took the place of talking about God! For Buddha, experience was more important than talk.

But what was this experience he wanted to pass on? Before I try to answer that question, I have to bring up the Buddhist reminder that we can never find the right words to answer it. Still, the records tell us that under the Bodhi Tree, Buddha's eyes were opened (that's what the title "Buddha" means). He saw things as they really are. He experienced Enlightenment or Awakening. And the content or object of that Awakening later came to be called *Nirvana*. So this is what counts most for Buddhists – to be Enlightened and to come to the realization of *Nirvana*.

### **A short first sermon**

In order to attain some, always-limited, grasp of what Awakening feels like and what *Nirvana* is trying to get at, we have to do a quick review of Buddha's first sermon. He preached it shortly after his Enlightenment to some of his old spiritual buddies and fellow searchers in Sarnath, or Deer Park, on the outskirts of the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. The contents of the sermon were "the Four Noble Truths," which made for one of the simplest and yet most effective sermons ever preached. Since that memorable day sometime around the end of the 500s BCE, Buddhists have been reminding themselves and trying to realize that:

- 1 Suffering (*dukkha*) comes up in everyone's life.
- 2 This suffering is caused by craving (*tanha*).
- 3 We can stop suffering by stopping craving.

- 4 To stop craving, follow Buddha's Eightfold Path (which consists essentially of taking Buddha's message seriously, living a moral life by avoiding harm to others, and following a spiritual practice based on meditation).

To understand why these Four Noble Truths make sense, and why they work, we have to ask: just why does *tanha* cause *dukkha* – why does selfish craving bring on suffering? Inherent in the answer to that question, Buddhists tell us, is something else that Buddha came to realize under the Bodhi Tree: they call it *anicca*. Usually, this word is translated as *impermanence*: everything that exists (and if God exists, it includes God as well) is in constant movement, constant flux. Nothing, absolutely nothing, remains just what it is. For Buddhists, the most basic fact or quality of the world is not *being*, as it is for most Western philosophers and theologians: it's *becoming*. To be is to become, one can "be" only if one is in motion. (We can note an immediate difference here from what we heard about the Christian God: for Western, Christian theologians, to call God perfect means he doesn't change; for Buddhists, if we call God perfect, it means that God is the most changeable reality we could imagine!)

But just why is everything impermanent and in constant change? The answer has to do with what might be called the flip-side of *anicca*: *pratityasamutpada*, or, technically, "interdependent origination." More simply: everything changes because everything is interrelated. Everything comes into being and continues in being through and with something else. Nothing, Buddha came to see, has its own existence. In fact, when he wanted to describe the human self, or the self/identity of anything, the term he used was *anatta*, which means literally *no-self* (we'll look at this more carefully later). We are not "selves" in the sense of individual, separate, independent "things." Rather, we are constantly changing because we are constantly interrelating (or being interrelated). So, if for Buddha we are not "beings" but "becomings," now he clarifies that we are "becomings-with."

Now we can understand why selfishness causes suffering. When we act selfishly, when we crave, when we try to possess and hold on to something as our own, when we refuse to let go – we are acting contrary to the way things work. It's like swimming against the current, or trying to catch and hold a bird in flight. Selfishness causes friction. It makes harmful sparks fly because it rubs the wrong way against

reality. For Buddhists selfishness is not so much sinful as it is stupid. (But like Christian sin, it causes suffering, for self and others.) It's not that Buddhists are against enjoying other persons or things; they just warn us against trying to hold on to them and think we own them. As soon as we do, sparks will fly and people will get hurt.

### **What Buddhists are after**

So this is the experience that the Buddha had and that Buddhists seek – they want to become Enlightened to the real truth of the Four Noble Truths, to the reality of the impermanence and interconnectedness of everything, and to the freedom and peace that result when they wake up to this reality of impermanence. This is what Buddhists are after, what counts most for them. As Christians seek God, Buddhists seek Awakening. You might say that for Buddhists, Awakening is their “Absolute.” But does this mean that the Absolute for Buddhists is a personal experience? Well, yes and no. Yes, Enlightenment is, first of all, one's own experience. It has to be, for if one “doesn't get it,” there's no “it” to talk about.

But there is an “it” – that is, Enlightenment is an experience of something. And that something is the way things are, the way they work. It's not a “thing” as we usually use that word; it can't be located here or there, like everything in the world, but even more so, it does not have its own existence. (I told you that Buddhists insist that what they're talking about is beyond words.)

Yet they do use words to get at the contents, or the reality, of Enlightenment. After *Nirvana*, one of the most common terms in Buddhism is *Sunyata*. Elaborated within the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism (the reform movement that set in a few centuries after Buddha's death), it meant, literally, *Emptiness* – but not emptiness in the purely negative sense of nothingness (like a room that is empty), but emptiness in the sense of being able to receive anything (a room that can be filled). The root “su” means empty/full – “swollen,” not only the hollowness of a balloon, but the potentiality of a pregnant woman. *Sunyata* attests to the reality that everything does not find its own existence in itself; rather, it is open to, dependent on, and therefore able to contribute to what is other.

In this sense, *Sunyata* reflects the literal meaning of *Nirvana*: to be blown out, that is, to have one's own existence blown away and so, blown into the existence of others. Other terms that Buddhists use to

point to what they're after offer us slippery handles on what is really ungraspable.

That which became manifest in the historical Buddha is termed *Dharmakaya*, the "body of *Dharma*." "*Dharma*" here indicates both the infinite, unknowable truth of Buddha's message, and the power this truth has to transform.

More practically and personally, Zen Buddhists speak of Emptiness as the "Buddha-nature" that inheres in all sentient beings. Humans, through following the Noble Eightfold Path, can realize and express Buddha-nature in their lives. This mysterious, interrelated Buddha-nature is really our true nature, and we can experience it when we let go of our selfishness and allow ourselves to interact, in giving and receiving, with everything else in the interconnected fabric of reality.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a modern practitioner, scholar, and popularizer of Zen Buddhism, translates *Sunyata* more freely but more engagingly as *InterBeing*. It's the interconnected state of things that is constantly churning out new connections, new possibilities, new problems, new life. More teasingly and perhaps more challengingly, Pema Chödrön, the American teacher of a Tibetan style of Buddhism, likes to refer to *Sunyata* as *Groundlessness*. There is, happily, no solid, unchanging foundation to life, no place to stand permanently, since everything is moving in interdependence with everything else. When we realize this and swim with the Groundlessness rather than against it, both letting it carry us and moving with it, then swimming becomes not only possible but enjoyable.

### **A verb or an adverb?**

At this point a Christian like myself, who is trying carefully and respectfully to pass over to Buddhist teaching and experience, will find him or herself asking: "But what *is Nirvana*?" Does it really exist in itself? Or is it just a universal description of how everything is and acts? Is it a "verb" (a real activity within it all) or is it just an "adverb" (a description of how everything acts)? (I know, grammarians will remind me that you can't have an adverb without a verb ... Maybe that's the point I want to make.)

These are typically Christian or Western questions, and yet Buddha is said to have faced such bewilderments in his own life. In general, he responded in a way that was meant, I suspect, to increase

the bewilderment to the point of exploding it into a new insight. “Your question does not fit the case!” Or: “What you’re asking doesn’t make sense for what I’m talking about.” He went on to “explain” that it is incorrect, or inappropriate, or misleading *both* to say that “*Nirvana/Sunyata* exists” *and* to say that “*Nirvana/Sunyata* does not exist.”

In other words, you can’t talk that way about what Buddha is trying to get people to experience and realize. *Nirvana/Sunyata* (or InterBeing/Groundlessness) is not something that “exists” the way we think everything else exists. It is not a “thing” as we experience other “things;” indeed it is a no-thing (another term some Mahayana Buddhists use). Whereas other “things” have their existence in and through interconnectedness, *Sunyata* or *Nirvana* is their connectedness. To use a term not found in the original Buddhist texts but adopted by contemporary Buddhists, *Sunyata* or Groundlessness might be imaged as a process, indeed, *the* process itself by which and in which and through which everything has its being. Whoops ... I mean its becoming.

Another image that might be used for *Sunyata* is that of an energy field. It is the field in which and by which everything else is energized to interact and inter-become. Such an energy field “exists” with and through all the activities within it and could not exist without these activities. And yet, it cannot be reduced or boiled down to these activities. A well-known cliché might fit here: *Sunyata* or InterBeing is the sum of its parts and yet greater than all those parts put together. I’m struggling for words and symbols here as I try to pass over; I hope these are appropriate.

### **It’s right here, now!**

With this image of InterBeing as an energy field, we Christians can better appreciate what Buddhists, especially of the Mahayana traditions, are leading us to when they go on to insist that “*Nirvana* is *Samsara*.” This is a brain-teaser meant seriously to push us into a sense or feeling of the *non-duality* between what for Buddhists is Ultimate (what counts most for them) and what for all of us is this finite world. “*Samsara*” is our everyday, work-a-day, suffer-a-day life – our constantly changing, constantly relating worldly existence. This finite reality we call daily life is where we find *Nirvana* or Emptiness, for *Samsara* is *Nirvana*.



Or, expressed both a bit more concretely and abstractly in another Mahayana declaration: “Emptiness is Form, and Form is Emptiness” – that is, the transcendent, abstract reality of Emptiness is found in and gives expression to every concrete form in the world: people, animals, plants, events. You can’t have all these individual forms without Emptiness; but you can’t have Emptiness without these individual forms.

It seems to me that this is what we earlier called *non-duality* at its paradoxical best. A distinction is made and held between *Nirvana* and *Samsara*, or between Emptiness and Form; they are not two ingredients that can be boiled down to a common mush. Rather, in their distinctiveness, they are bonded in an essential interdependence that does not allow for a neat separation of one from the other. As Raimon Panikkar, a pioneer and sage of interreligious dialogue, has put it: in real non-duality – in this case, *Nirvana* and *Samsara* – the interrelating partners are *not two*. But neither are they *one!* Can Christians say something similar about the relationship between God and creation? It’s time to pass back.

#### PASSING BACK: GOD THE CONNECTING SPIRIT

To remind myself of what I hope to do in these “passing back” segments: I want to try to describe as clearly as I can how my passing over to the way Buddhists experience and talk about *Nirvana/Sunyata/InterBeing* has served as a guide and a light in grappling with my “problem of God.” In doing this, I want to be sure to show how this guiding light from Buddhism has, as it were, shone in two directions: backward and forward. It has helped me, I think, both to look back and rediscover or retrieve what has been part of Christian tradition all along, and it has enabled me to look forward in order to recreate my tradition and explore how “new treasures as well as old” can be drawn out of my Christian storehouse (Matt. 13:52).

#### **Becoming mystics again for the first time**

Marcus Borg has written a widely helpful book about the need for Christians to retrieve the correct understanding of Jesus, which, he claims, would be a much more appealing picture of Jesus. He titled the book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. I think the same can be

said about the need many Christians feel to retrieve their mystical traditions: they need to become mystics again for the first time. Karl Rahner, one of the most respected Catholic theologians of the past century (and my teacher!), recognized this need in a statement that has been repeated broadly: “In the future Christians will be mystics, or they will not be anything.”

Buddha has enabled me not only to understand and feel but to be kicked in the stomach by the truth of Rahner’s words. Yes, it is a question of survival! Unless I retrieve my Christian mystical tradition, I’m not going to be able to hang in there with my imperfect, often frustrating church. Buddha has called me “to be a mystic again.” But—and this will be hard to explain—the “again” is also a “first time.” With what I’ve learned from Buddhism, I have been able to retrieve parts of the rich content of Christian mysticism as it is present both in the “professional mystics” of church history (Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich) and also in the New Testament writings of John’s Gospel and Paul’s epistles. But because of my passing over to Buddhism, it’s been more than only a retrieval. It has been for me not just a matter of pulling out of my Christian closet the mystical mantles that were covered with dust but already there. I’ve also been able to *add to* the mystical wardrobe of Christianity. What I’ve added has “fit” what was already there, but it is also something really new. So, I’ve returned to Christianity’s mystical closet again but also for the first time. Let me try to explain.

When Buddha refused to talk about God in order to make way for the experience of Enlightenment, he was making the same point, but even more forcefully, that Rahner was getting at in his insistence that Christians must be mystics: “God” must be an experience before “God” can be a word. Unless God is an experience, whatever words we might use for the Divine will be without content, like road signs pointing nowhere, like lightbulbs without electricity. Buddha would warn Christians, and I believe Rahner would second the warning: if you want to use words for God, make sure that these words are preceded by, or at least coming out of, an experience that is your own. And it will be the kind of experience that, in some way, will touch you deeply, perhaps stop you in your tracks, fill you with wonder and gratitude, and it will be an experience for which you realize there are no adequate words. Rahner listed all kinds of ways in which such experiences can take place in everyday life – falling in love, hoping when there is no hope, being overwhelmed by nature, deep moments of

prayer or meditation. Often, or usually, such experiences happen before there is any talk or explicit consciousness of “God.” They happen, and some such word as “God” or “Mystery” or “Presence” – or “Silence” – seems appropriate.

To put this more in our contemporary context, Buddha has reminded me and all of us Christians that any kind of religious life or church membership must be based on one’s own personal experience. It is *not* enough to say “amen” to a creed, or obey carefully a law, or attend regularly a liturgy. The required personal experience may be mediated through a community or church, but it has to be one’s own. Without such a personal, mystical happening, one cannot authentically and honestly call oneself religious.

But with it, one is free both to affirm and find meaning in the beliefs and practices of one’s church, and at the same time one is free to criticize one’s religion, which means to stand above, to confront, but at the same time to have patience with one’s religion. Both Buddha and Jesus, because of their own extraordinary mystical experiences, were able to criticize bravely their own religions of Hinduism and Judaism respectfully (Jesus, to the point of getting into serious trouble) but also to affirm and preserve what they found to be true and good in those religions. Mystics are both loyal followers and uncomfortable critics – which, it seems to me, is exactly what Christian churches need today.

### **Using my Buddhist flashlight**

I’ve used the word “experience” a lot in the preceding section, mainly in insisting that without some kind of a mystical experience, religion is merely empty sham or shell. I need to say more about just what I mean by “mystical experience.” And that will require me, with the help of Buddhism, to say more about what my fellow Christians and I might mean by “God.”

Perhaps the first or dominant adjective that scholars of comparative mysticism use to describe what they mean by mystical experience is *unitive*. There’s no one way to unpack what they are getting at. To have a mystical or personal religious experience is to feel oneself connected with, part of, united with, aware of, one with, Something or Some-activity larger than oneself. One feels transported beyond one’s usual sense of self as one grows aware of an expanded self, or a loss of self, in the discovery of something beyond words. Philosopher of

religion John Hick describes mystical experience as the shift from self-centeredness to Other-centeredness or Reality-centeredness.

Certainly, our description of Buddhist Enlightenment squares with this unitive characteristic of mysticism, even though Buddhists, while strong on loss of self, use deliberately slippery terms for *what* they're connected with: Emptiness, Groundlessness, InterBeing. Christian mystics, on the other hand, are very clear about what they are united with. Christian mystical literature abounds with expressions such as "one with Christ," "temples of the Holy Spirit," "the Body of Christ," "Spouses of Christ," the "Divine indwelling," "participants in the divine nature."

The excitement, and the rigors, of my passing over and back from Buddhism to Christianity were launched when I began to explore connections between such Christian mystical exclamations and the Buddhist experience of *Sunyata*. I remember the zest but also the hesitation I felt when back in the early 1970s at Catholic Theological Union I started to ask my students and myself whether the Buddhist notion of dependent origination and InterBeing might open the doors to a deeper grasp of what Thomas Aquinas saw when he announced that God *participates* in creation, or that we participate in God's being.

Or even more eagerly, I asked whether the Buddhist claim that *Nirvana* is *Samsara* can help us make sense of Rahner's philosophical description of "the supernatural existential" – that is, his startling but perplexing claim that our human condition is not just "human" or purely natural because from the first moment of creation humanity is infused and animated by the grace of God's very presence. In other words, the "Natural" is really the "Supernatural!" Or could the Buddhist teachings on InterBeing throw dynamic light on Paul Tillich's elegant proposal (at the time quite revolutionary) that God can most coherently be understood as the Ground of Being?

On rereading my spiritual journals in preparation for writing this book, I've realized how much over the years I've struggled, delightfully but sometimes uneasily, with this kind of Christian–Buddhist interchange. But I've come to a point where I have to admit that as the result of those explorations, the God whom I profess every Sunday, the God whom I try to be aware of in my prayer and meditation, the God whom both my head and heart can relate to – this God or my God bears a much greater resemblance to *Sunyata* and InterBeing than to the prevalent Christian image of God as the transcendent Other.

### **Is God InterBeing?**

So let me pose my question point-blankly and unsophisticatedly: is God InterBeing? Or, more carefully: is Emptiness or InterBeing an appropriate symbol for God, especially for men and women over thirty-five, in our so-called modern world? (We'll be talking more about symbols in Chapter 3.) I have come to believe – or better, feel – that it is. Certainly, as much of the contemporary literature on the Buddhist–Christian dialogue indicates, such a God of Emptiness and InterBeing is closer to what Christian mystics try to talk about when they describe their experiences of God. Pointing out similarities between Buddhism and mystics like Eckhart and John of the Cross is, you might say, easy, though always revealing and stimulating.

The theologian in me wants to push the case more broadly. I believe that on the shelves of the general store of Christian beliefs we can find images of God – perhaps a bit dusty – that indicate that Christians do have an awareness of the Divine as the mystery of InterBeing. For me, I needed a Buddhist flashlight to discover them.

As a first example, take the only “definition of God” found in the New Testament. The author of John’s first letter announces that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The author is not saying that God is a Father who loves but that God *is* love. I’m taking the passage literally and carefully when I let this language confirm what I sense and what Buddhists have helped make clear for me: to move beyond, or more deeply into, the common image of God as Father, we can and must speak of love. Why? Because the image of Father tells us (or is supposed to tell us, depending on what kind of father we had) that the very nature of God is love. To love is to move out of self, to empty self, and connect with others. Love is this emptying, connecting, energy that in its power originates new connections and new life. The God who, as Dante tells us, is “the love that moves the moon and the other stars” is the InterBeing of the stars and the universe.

All of this leads us into one of the most distinctive Christian ways of speaking about the Divine: the Christian God, I learned already in first grade, is both one and three, Trinitarian. (Remember? Three matches held together and burning with the same flame?) If all Christian beliefs, as theologians insist, have to be meaningful before they can be true, what is the *meaning* of the Trinity? How does it reflect the way the Christian community has come to experience the Divine? Without losing ourselves in the rich but often tangled

landscape that is the history of Trinitarian theology, we can focus on what is one of the centerpieces of that landscape: to believe in a Trinitarian God is to believe in a *relational* God. The very nature of the Divine is nothing other than to exist *in and out of* relationships; for God, “to be” is nothing other than “to relate.” That, among other things, is what the doctrine of the Trinity tells Christians.

For Christians God cannot be only one, simply because, as the cliché has it, it takes two to tango – and to relate. Therefore, although there is only one God, this one God must be more than one. This is what Christians experienced and learned about God from Jesus. True, he certainly didn’t teach them the doctrine of the Trinity, but from reflecting on the impact he had on their lives, his followers eventually came to see God as three – three energies, movements, “persons” relating with each other; “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost;” or Parent, Child, Spirit.

All of this means that God’s very being, or existing, or identity consists of relating, or inter-existing, or InterBeing. That’s what theologians term the “internal Trinity” – God’s inner nature. But what God is internally, God must be externally. What Christians have seen in Jesus of Nazareth is a God who creates and is present to the world through *relationships*, the same kind of relationships that we say exist in the very nature of God: relationships of knowing, of giving, of loving that bring forth ever more life and existence. Behind and within all the different images and symbols Christians may use for God – Creator, Father, Redeemer, Word, Spirit – the most fundamental, the deepest truth Christians can speak of God is that God is the source and power of relationships.

That sounds abstract. But it’s not. It’s the most basic, and the simplest, thing we can say about ourselves and about God: we exist through relationships of knowing and loving and giving because that’s how God exists.

Here’s where Buddhism has helped me feel or grasp what all this means. To experience and believe in a Trinitarian God is to experience and believe in a God who is not, as Tillich would say, the Ground of Being, but the Ground of *InterBeing!* God is the activity of giving and receiving, of knowing and loving, of losing and finding, of dying and living that embraces and infuses all of us, all of creation. Though every image or symbol limps, Christians can and *must* say what Buddhists *might* agree with – that if we’re going to talk about God, God is neither a noun nor an adjective. God is a verb! With the word

“God” we’re trying to get at an activity that is going on everywhere rather than a Being that exists somewhere. God is much more an environment than a thing.

And therefore, if we Christians really affirm that “God is love” and that Trinity means relationality, then I think the symbol Buddhists use for *Sunyata* is entirely fitting for our God. God is the field – the dynamic energy field of InterBeing – within which, as we read in the New Testament (but perhaps never really heard), “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Or, from the divine perspective, there is “one God above all things, through all things, and in all things” (Eph. 4:6). This presence “above, through and in” can fittingly and engagingly be imaged as an energy field which pervades and influences us all, calling us to relationships of knowing and loving each other, energizing us when such relationships get rough, filling us with the deepest of happiness when we are emptying ourselves and finding ourselves in others.

Loving others, therefore, is not a question so much of “doing God’s will” but, rather, of “living God’s life.” That’s why Rahner used to tell us that there are a lot of people who live God’s life in their actions even though they may deny God’s existence in their words. (And vice versa, a lot of people who say they believe in God but who cancel out that belief in the way they live.)

### **The Connecting Spirit**

Now I can try to make clear why I titled this passing-back section “God the Connecting Spirit.” If there is any word in the Christian vocabulary for God that vibrates sympathetically with language Buddhists use for what they are seeking, it is *Spirit*. Interestingly, “*Pneuma*” or the Spirit of Wisdom was among the very first images that the infant Christian community used in trying to speak about Jesus’ relationship to God; it soon lost out, however, to “Father” and “Son.” My dialogue with Buddhism has enabled me not only to repossess but to be repossessed by the image of Spirit as a symbol for God. Passing back to Spirit after having passed over to *Sunyata*, I can understand and feel “again for the first time” that Spirit points more meaningfully to a pervasive energy rather than to a particular being, that Spirit energizes many things without being contained by any, and that Spirit merges with what it energizes in a manner that is much more a matter of interpenetration than indwelling. The relationship

between the “spirit” (or soul) and the body, Christian theology teaches, is one of mutuality: without the spirit the body cannot live; without the body the spirit cannot act. The same is true of Spirit and creation.

Back in June of 2001, I put it, for myself, this way:

In a very real sense, according to Christian experience and symbolism, the Spirit is given with creation, indeed is the instrument or the power of creation. She is with us from the beginning, grounding and connecting every living being, every being. I can rest in her, just as Cathy [my Buddhist wife] rests in Groundlessness. Utterly mysterious, totally unpredictable, filled and directed by love/compassion, she is the womb in whom I rest and from which I issue moment by moment.

Earlier, in March of 2000, reflecting on Romans 8:9, I wrote:

“The Spirit of God dwells within you.” To believe that is to make life so very different from what it usually is. Here is the Reality out of which I can face all, deal with all, respond to love and hatred, carry on my work of writing and teaching. It is real. The Spirit is truly with me, in me, living as me. It is the “vast openness” that Pema Chödrön speaks of. It is the source of *Maitri* (loving kindness) with which I can be truthful and compassionate to myself and to all who are part of, or touch, my life.

### **Creation: the manifestation of non-duality**

It is evident, I believe, that thinking about or imaging God as InterBeing and relating to God as the connecting Spirit is a major antidote to the dualism that has infected Christian theology and spirituality. It served me as a kind of new pair of glasses through which I saw creation. This new vision was a clarification, a seeing more and seeing more deeply, but it was also a correction for distortions caused by my earlier pair of glasses. As I mentioned before, passing back to one’s own tradition after having passed over to another can lead to repossessing, but also realigning, one’s previous beliefs.

With God as the connecting Spirit, the Creator cannot be “totally other” to creation. If the Divine is felt and imaged as InterBeing, and if the world works and evolves through interbeing, then the act of creation by a Creator cannot be understood as a production of something that stands outside the Creator. The dynamic of the divine life is precisely the dynamic of the finite world. Here I think I’m getting closer to



what Aquinas was trying to express when he described the relationship between God and the world as one of participation. Rahner, too, was trying to push us in the same direction when he mused that even if God created the world “out of nothing,” this does not mean that creation simply sits there, as it were, on the divine workbench for God to admire or tinker with. What God creates, Rahner added, God includes. Therefore, a better image for creation might be a pouring forth of God, an extension of God, in which the Divine carries on the divine activity of interrelating *in* and *with* and *through* creation.

I can hear the objections: this smacks of – or simply is – pantheism. Everything becomes God. But it’s not pantheism. It’s what we called, for lack of a better word, non-duality: God and creation are not two, but neither are they one! Pantheism reduces God and creation to one element. Non-duality, if I remember my chemistry class correctly, is more like a compound substance (or, come to think about it, like a good marriage): two abidingly different actors inhering in, or being who they are through, each other. Christian mystics like Nicholas of Cusa speak of a “*coincidentia oppositorum*” – two “opposite” realities, Creator and created, coinciding, forming an integral unity, with each other. To put a twist on another Latin saying that happens to be the motto of the United States, non-duality is not “*E Pluribus Unum*” (Out of Many, One) but “*E Pluribus Unitas*” (Out of Many, Unity). Spirit and world do not lose their different identities, but neither can they exist without each other.

But here we come to something that *does* smell of heresy, something that seems to oppose traditional Christian doctrine: “Neither can they exist without each other.” That means that the divine Spirit *needs* the world, that Spirit *had* to create the world. This seemingly flies in the face of the “defined dogma” that creation is a free act of God. Freedom, as we heard earlier, is when you do something you don’t have to do. God didn’t have to create because God didn’t need the world.

This may make for a tight case of logic if you start with a Greek understanding of the Divine as “Being Itself.” But if you begin with Jesus’ experience of God-as-love and the subsequent Trinitarian understanding of Divinity as “Relationship-Itself,” then to say that Spirit didn’t have to create would lead to a contradiction. To say that Spirit doesn’t have to create would be like saying we don’t have to breathe. By our nature, we breathe. By her divine nature, Spirit loves. To love means to relate, to give of oneself, to bring forth Interbeing.