

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE as THEOLOGICAL EXCHANGE

An Orthodox Contribution to Comparative Theology

ERNEST M. VALEA

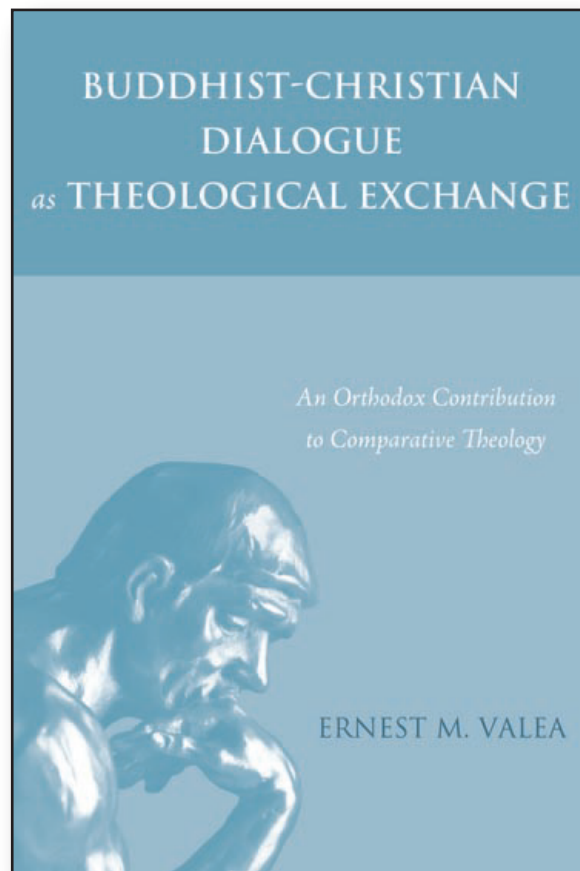
This book is intended to encourage the use of comparative theology in contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue as a new approach that would truly respect each religious tradition's uniqueness and make dialogue beneficial for all participants interested in a real theological exchange.

As a result of the impasse reached by the current theologies of religions (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism) in formulating a constructive approach in dialogue, this volume assesses the thought of the founding fathers of an academic Buddhist-Christian dialogue in search of clues that would encourage a comparativist approach. These founding fathers are considered to be three important representatives of the Kyoto School—Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani, and Masao Abe—and John Cobb, an American process theologian.

The guiding line for assessing their views of dialogue is the concept of human perfection, as it is expressed by the original traditions in Mahayana Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity. Following Abe's methodology in dialogue, an Orthodox contribution to comparative theology proposes a reciprocal enrichment of traditions, not by syncretistic means, but by providing a better understanding and even correction of one's own tradition when considering it in the light of the other, while using internal resources for making the necessary corrections.

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Ernest M. Valea presented this book as his PhD thesis at the University of Wales (2013). He is the author of *The Buddha and the Christ: Reciprocal Views* (2008).



“Ernest Valea has written a book that is remarkably clear, wonderfully perceptive, and enjoyable to read. It is accessible to specialists and the general reader alike. In introducing Romanian Orthodox sources into the current debates in Christian-Buddhist Studies, Valea is extremely original . . . [This book] is highly recommended as both a significant contribution to the field and also an extremely clear and stimulating introduction to the state of the discipline.”

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Centre for Buddhist Studies, University of Bristol

“A weighty theological contribution characterized by impressive scholarly coverage of modern trends within comparative theology. Using the concept of human perfection as Buddhahood in Mahayana Buddhism and as Theosis in Orthodox Christianity, Valea is bringing the most significant voices within the two traditions into conversation, generating fresh insights and breaking new ground for Buddhist-Christian dialogue. [A] thorough, thoughtful, and thought-provoking discourse inviting the reader to engage with the Other in the pluralistic, multireligious world of today.”

—PARUSH R. PARUSHEV, Director of the Institute for Systematic Studies of Contextual Theologies with the Centre for Just Peacemaking Study and Research,
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Introduction

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE IS A vast domain to explore. There can be little doubt that the dialogue between these two seemingly most different religions on earth has drawn more interest than that of any other pairing in interfaith dialogue. We can see it reflected in the huge amount of literature it has produced and the many formal and informal meetings between its representatives. One could wonder, why are Christians more interested in engaging in dialogue with Buddhism, than for instance with Judaism, or Islam, which are much closer to Christianity? A possible answer may be that both are considered missionary religions and as such are not bound to a specific culture or nation (as are Judaism, Hinduism or Shintoism). Another reason could be found in the quite recent meeting of the two religions on Western ground, and in the challenge brought by Buddhism to a traditional Christian culture in addressing contemporary issues. By its very nature as a religion without God and with all the resources one needs to meet its demands to be found in oneself, Buddhism appears to be very attractive to a Western secularized society. As we will see in this book, its philosophical tenets have posed a challenge to Christian theologians as well, and not a few of them have responded by reinterpreting traditional Christian doctrines.

This book does not aim to be an encyclopaedic introduction to Buddhist-Christian dialogue. My goal is twofold. First, I want to bring the rich tradition of Orthodox Christianity into dialogue with Buddhism, and more specifically Romanian Orthodoxy through the voice of its best known theologian—Dumitru Stăniloae. Although the study of world religions is part of the curriculum in Orthodox faculties of theology, Orthodox theologians who have actually engaged in interfaith dialogue are few,¹ and Romanian

1. One exception is the American Orthodox theologian John Garvey. His book *Seeds of the Word*, a welcome engagement of an Orthodox theologian in the field of interfaith dialogue, is mostly a general and descriptive introduction to world religions, and has only a last chapter dedicated to the actual dialogue with other religions.

Orthodox theologians even fewer. In fact I am aware of just one Romanian Orthodox theologian, Nicolae Achimescu, who actually engaged in an academic dialogue with Buddhism, which resulted in a PhD thesis with the University of Tübingen.² Given the rich resources of Orthodoxy, it is a pity that it is so weakly represented in interfaith dialogue.

Second, since the three classical approaches to interfaith dialogue—exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism—have reached an impasse,³ I felt the urge for a return *ad fontes* in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and to perform an assessment of its founding fathers. They provide important insights for adopting a new approach in interfaith dialogue called comparative theology. I expect that pursuing this double interest, both in Orthodox theology and in the classics of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, will result in an Orthodox contribution to comparative theology. Hence my research question: What is the possible contribution of Orthodoxy to the approach of comparative theology in Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

An explanatory note is needed here on what kind of “dialogue” I refer to, given the different meanings it bears in interfaith encounter. A first important distinction is made by Michael Barnes between a dialogue centred on content and one centred on form. The first “privileges the meaning of what is said over the act of speaking,” while the latter takes “the encounter itself” as of primordial importance over the issues that are actually discussed.⁴ I will use “dialogue” in its first meaning, for the participants in Buddhist-Christian dialogue I refer to in this book are mostly concerned with the actual exchange of ideas and concepts expressed in their traditions. Another classification of “dialogue” follows the fourfold distinction stated in the Catholic encyclical *Dialogue and Proclamation*, as four specialized forms of interreligious dialogue:

2. Achimescu, “Die Vollendung des Menschen in Buddhismus. Bewertung aus orthodoxer Sicht” [Human Perfection in Buddhism. An assessment from an Orthodox perspective], University of Tübingen, 1993, translated in Romanian as *Budism și Creștinism*. The goal of Achimescu’s research is to evaluate “whether and to what extent Orthodox mystical theology is echoed in Buddhist mysticism, and more important, whether they are in total divergence” (p. 13). The reference point of his approach is stated as the non-negotiable doctrine of the “true salvation in Jesus Christ,” and only from this perspective does he engage in researching a “possible” dialogue with Buddhism (p. 18). Here and elsewhere the translation from Romanian is mine unless otherwise specified.

3. Fredericks explicitly speaks of the “impasse” to which the classic theologies of religions have led in his *Faith among Faiths*, 10.

4. Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 20. He affirms that his “interest lies in the second sense, following Levinas” and his emphasis on actually relating to and meeting the “other” (ibid., 20–21).

- a. The “dialogue of life” is about cultivating neighbourly friendship among lay adherents of different faiths who share their personal preoccupations and concerns;
- b. The “dialogue of action” expresses a shared concern for issues that affect humankind as a whole, such as social justice, the lack of education, the environmental crisis and peace;
- c. The “dialogue of theological exchange” is centred upon the actual discussion and debate of doctrinal issues between specialists of each tradition, which can be common or divergent beliefs;
- d. The “dialogue of religious experience” takes place between persons who share their personal spiritual experiences (mainly Christian and Buddhist monastics), or engage in common prayer and meditation, while respecting each other’s symbols and rituals.⁵

I chose to centre my assessment of Buddhist-Christian dialogue on theological exchange, for this is the primary interest of the scholars I refer to in this book. As representatives of a certain *faith*, our religious experiences and what we think of life and action depends on our foundational beliefs, and we all start with theological assumptions, even if they are not clearly stated. Persons involved in interfaith dialogue first of all represent a *faith*, and only as such express their views of life, action and religious experience. However, I am not suggesting that a dialogue of life or action is not important. Believers of different religions, as well as persons with no religious affiliation at all, should cooperate on social issues despite differences in religious beliefs. They can, and should, cooperate as citizens of the same world. However, my book is focused on a real theological exchange in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Although there are other issues on which dialogue can be centred, such as “secularization, world peace, human suffering, or the damages visited upon the environment,” they are always indebted to theological or philosophical core beliefs.⁶ Catherine Cornille affirms that it is easy to proclaim a common interest in world peace, or the environment, but when it comes to finding a theological basis for it in one’s own tradition, things get complicated, since “for any believer, the compelling force of a particular criterion will ultimately lie not in its neutrality or commonality, but

5. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42. This document was issued by The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples in 1991.

6. Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 96.

in the fact that it arises from or coincides with one's own deepest religious beliefs and principles."⁷

My guiding thought is that we should not look for a unifying spirituality that would eradicate theological differences, as an alleged guardian of peace and reciprocal understanding. What we should seek instead is a way of dialogue between religious traditions that can respect all, that can deal with disagreements and cherish the religions as they are. Therefore, in the first part of this book, in chapter 1, I will start with a recapitulation of the classic approaches in interfaith dialogue and an evaluation of the impasse to which these approaches lead. Exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism each follow a set of theological presuppositions and try to formulate an account of how people who belong to other religious traditions can be saved. Since these approaches usually do not encourage an in-depth study of other traditions, they risk forming *a priori* judgements of them, or even (in the case of pluralism) integrating them in a syncretistic scheme that would compromise both the Buddhist and the Christian traditions. Therefore I will explore the new approach of comparative theology, which seems to provide a better solution for building an honest interfaith dialogue by its emphasis on knowing other religious traditions on their own terms and on learning from them in a non-syncretistic way. In chapters 2 and 3 I will describe the view of human perfection as we find it expressed in the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity and propose it as a criterion for assessing the current positions expressed in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Since both Christians and Buddhists strive for perfection, the positions they express in dialogue should be consistent with the ideal of perfection stated by the original traditions. In the final chapter of the first part (chapter 4) I will focus on pluralistic views in Buddhist-Christian dialogue and the phenomenon of dual belonging.

As a result of the impasse reached by the current theologies of religions in offering a constructive approach for both Buddhists and Christians engaged in dialogue, in the second part of this book I will explore the thought of several scholars whom I consider to be the founding fathers of contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue. These scholars are three important representatives of the Kyoto School: Kitaro Nishida, Keiji Nishitani and Masao Abe, and John Cobb, an American Process theologian.

The start of an academic Buddhist-Christian dialogue was given in Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century when, following the trend of assimilating Western culture, several leading figures of the department of philosophy of the University of Kyoto took the initiative of critically

7. Ibid., 107.

assimilating Western philosophy. As a result, the Kyoto philosophers met Christianity and were drawn into a dialogue with it. This initiative was followed much later in the West at the University of Hawaii's Department of Religion. For the first time Buddhist and Christian scholars formally met at the first International Buddhist-Christian Conference in 1980, which was followed in 1981 by issuing the journal called *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. In 1983 Masao Abe and John Cobb, the pioneers of this dialogue, started the "North American Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter Group" with 25 theologians, to reach 200 at its 1986 meeting, and 700 at the 1987 meeting.⁸ In 1987 was founded the American "Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies" (its Japanese counterpart had already existed since 1982), which was followed in Europe by the establishment of "The European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies" in 1996 at the University of Hamburg's Academy of Mission (now the "European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies"). The scholars involved in these initiatives produced a vast amount of literature over the years, which exceeds by far that of any other pairing in interfaith dialogue.

Although I make references to other scholars involved in contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue, in the second part of this book I focus on the four representatives mentioned above and assess their thought in light of what is stated in chapters 2 and 3 to be the ideal of human perfection in the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity. As my interest lies in a real theological exchange between these traditions, I will then formulate an Orthodox Christian contribution to comparative theology. This contribution can only be imagined if the rich traditions that engage in dialogue are not corrupted by syncretism, but rather respect each other and learn about the other traditions' values on their own terms.

8. Leonard Swidler, "A Jerusalem-Tokyo Bridge," 9–10.

PART 1

Contemporary Buddhist-Christian
Dialogue and the Issue of Doctrinal
Presuppositions

1

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in the Context of the Three Classic Theologies of Religions—Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism—and Comparative Theology as a New Approach in Interfaith Dialogue

BOTH THE BUDDHA AND the Christ sent their disciples to proclaim their message to the ends of the earth.¹ Does this mean that Buddhists and Christians should use dialogue as a means for converting the other to their own views? Seeking the best for one's neighbour as Christian salvation or Buddhist enlightenment is understandable as motivation for those who seek to convert the other, but it is not what defines *dialogue*. In general terms, a real dialogue involves two sides in search of common ground, mutual understanding and peace. In my specific approach of dialogue as theological exchange, I follow James Heisig's definition of dialogue, as it would apply in matters of doctrinal views in Buddhist and Christian traditions, as meaning "arguing, discussing, criticizing, and making up one's own mind in words read and heard, spoken and written."² We can discern three well-defined stands currently expressed in Buddhist-Christian dialogue: exclusivism,

1. The Synoptic Gospels end with Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:46–48) and a similar command is issued by the Buddha in the *Mahavagga* I,11,1: "Go ye now, O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men, Let not two of you go the same way."

2. Heisig, *Dialogues*, 115.

4 PART 1: CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

inclusivism and pluralism.³ Fredericks defines them as attempts “to understand the theological meaning of the diversity of religions in keeping with the doctrinal requirements of a home tradition.”⁴ As such, these three categories are theologies of religions, for they follow a soteriological interest and try to answer the question of how can those of other religious traditions be saved?

1. Exclusivists hold that salvation or liberation can be attained only by following one’s own religious tradition. Christian exclusivists see Buddhists as lost and in need of conversion as the only means of avoiding eternal damnation, while Buddhist exclusivists see Christians as lost in ignorance and in need of converting to Buddhism to find enlightenment, as the only way to escape from the maelstrom of rebirth.
2. Inclusivists are more moderate with regard to the other traditions. They acknowledge a salvific or liberating truth in the other tradition, but only as an inferior path to one’s own. Christian inclusivists see salvation for Buddhists as mediated by Christ as the Logos at work in all humans. Buddhist inclusivists see Christ as one of the many *bodhisattvas*, who used skilful means for the Jews living in Palestine in the first century AD and for many others who did not come to know the path opened by the Buddha. Although salvation or liberation is possible for people of other faiths, it is nevertheless seen as an exception to the general rule.
3. Pluralists hold that Buddhism and Christianity are both valid as means for attaining salvation or liberation, for neither is superior to the other. Eventually both Christians and Buddhists will reach their expected destinations or even one situated beyond what they currently expect.

These short definitions do not reveal the complexities of each of the three typologies. In the following sections I will briefly summarize the thought of several important participants in Buddhist-Christian dialogue and assess the strengths and weaknesses of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. I will focus as much as possible on Buddhist and Christian authors who have actually engaged in interfaith dialogue and avoid others who do not have a “hands on” approach to it. An exception to this course of action will be the next section, on exclusivism, for its proponents usually have little contact with the other traditions.

3. To my knowledge, this threefold classification of the approaches taken by Christians to define relationships to other religions first appears in Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

4. Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, *New Comparative Theology*, xiii–xiv.

1.1 EXCLUSIVISM IN BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER

Perry Schmidt-Leukel defines exclusivism as the belief that “salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion.”⁵ All that is needed for salvation or liberation is already there in the tradition itself, and only there, so that any “help” from outside would only corrupt one’s way to achieving it. Of the four forms of dialogue mentioned by *Dialogue and Proclamation*, mainly the first two forms (of life and of action) are open for exclusivists.⁶ When exclusivists engage in a dialogue of theological exchange, interfaith dialogue can become a means for seeking the conversion of those of other traditions. This is not a negligible aspect. Barnes comments on the enthusiasm for dialogue today, saying that it “does give the impression that it is simply another tool” or “a more subtle way” for proselytising.⁷ Although this is a charge brought mainly to Christians, we will see that it applies equally to some Buddhists engaged in interfaith encounter.

Christian exclusivism is linked to the traditions in which no revelation at all is granted to other religions and, as a result, the human being is seen as totally incapable of relating to God. Unlike in Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, which hold that the image given to humans at creation is not completely destroyed by sin, Protestant theology holds that the fall has led to the total corruption of the human being. One of the strong voices of Protestant Christian exclusivism is Karl Barth. His rejection of other faiths as leading to salvation is based on a strong belief in God’s sovereignty to reveal himself, and in seeing the act of the creation of the world and of humankind as an act of his absolute free will.⁸ Since human beings are sinful and totally incapable of saving themselves by means of their own wisdom and strength,

5. Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 93–94.

6. Harold Netland, an Evangelical Protestant, argues that exclusivists have four reasons for engaging in informal interfaith dialogue: 1) they need to follow the model of Jesus and Paul to become aware of their audiences’ beliefs, 2) to prove that they “take the other person seriously” for they are also created in God’s image, 3) to understand the others’ values and assumptions in order to be more “effective in evangelism,” and 4) as a mark of respect for those of other faiths (Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 297–9). When it comes to formal interfaith dialogue, Netland follows the missiologist David Hesselgrave and finds five arguments for it: 1) to discuss the nature of dialogue itself, 2) to promote freedom of worship, 3) to promote social involvement for the sake of those unfortunate of every society, 4) to “break down barriers of prejudice, distrust, and hatred,” and 5) to better comprehend what separates us and clarify “similarities and differences” to the Christian faith (ibid., 297–301).

7. Barnes, *Religions in Conversation*, 112–13.

8. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 301.

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it is only God who can grant them salvation and only through Jesus Christ.⁹ As a result, all religions should be seen as mere human creations aimed at justifying us before God, and religion *per se* is deemed as “unbelief,”¹⁰ for it attempts to replace the divine revelation in Jesus Christ with “a human manufacture.”¹¹ In Barth’s theological vision it would be meaningless to search for contact points with other religions, as any such attempt would only minimize the revelation we already have in Jesus Christ, God’s special revelation in human history.¹²

Although Barth seems to adopt a more universalistic approach to world religions in the later volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*,¹³ a universal redemption is seen as *potential*, and as such must be taken up personally by humans, Christians and non-Christians alike. Barth does not support a Spirit-centred theology according to which the Holy Spirit would provide a sufficient revelation in other religions. When he says that “[I]n this sense Jesus Christ is the hope even of these non-Christians,” he refers to a *potential* redemption until a real knowledge of Christ becomes actual in the form of the particular Christian revelation reaching non-Christians.¹⁴ In his words, “It must be said that he (the non-Christian) is not yet these things (‘the recipient, bearer and possessor’ of the Holy Spirit), because he does not yet know Jesus Christ” and as such the non-Christian “still lacks them.”¹⁵ However, before criticizing Barth’s position as destructive for interfaith dialogue, we must be aware that his criticism is aimed first of all at man-made Christian traditions which departed from the fundamentals of the Bible, against the liberal theology of the nineteenth century and its compromise to

9. In Barth’s words, “everything has actually been done for us once and for all in Jesus Christ” (ibid., 308).

10. Ibid., 300.

11. Ibid., 303.

12. Barth, “Religion as Unbelief,” in *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2, 297–324.

13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4/3.

14. Ibid., 356.

15. Ibid., 355. In other words, “the Holy Spirit, i.e., Christ acting and speaking in the power of His resurrection, is not yet among and with and in certain men, i.e., that He is not yet present and active in them in the subjective realisation corresponding to His objective reality. The Holy Spirit Himself and as such is here a reality which is still lacking and is still to be expected” (ibid., 353). As such, Barth can still be taken as a Christian exclusivist. In the same volume he states very boldly: “Salvation is for all, but the covenant, which as such is God’s glad tidings, is not concluded with all. It is the covenant of Yahweh with Israel fulfilled in the Christian community as the body of Christ. Not all peoples are Israel . . . Not every revelation is revelation of reconciliation. Not every attestation of revelation is thus witness of this revelation. Not all knowledge, therefore, is Christian knowledge, nor all confession, however true or significant or clear or brave, Christian confession. Not all men are Christians” (ibid., 222).

rationalistic humanism, and only by extension at other religions (of which he had no close encounter). Although we can easily categorize his position as exclusivistic, he did not aim to write a theology of religions.

It is not only in Christianity that we find exclusivists. Buddhists can be equally exclusivistic in affirming the Buddhist path as the only one effective for reaching liberation. A notorious case of exclusivist Buddhist-Christian encounter is the famous Buddhist-Christian controversy that took place in 1873 in Sri Lanka, known as the Panadura Debate.¹⁶ It was a debate in which the speakers—David de Silva and F.J. Sirimanne on the Christian side, and Gunananda Thera on the Buddhist side—each tried to prove the falsity of his opponent's tradition.¹⁷ As we can expect, such an approach is doomed to fail, for it is based on a wrong methodology. At Panadura each side was “fighting” against the other on the premises of its own doctrinal assumptions, which naturally led to condemning the other as false. Buddhism will always be wrong when seen from the Christian premises of a permanent God, and conversely, Christianity will always be wrong when considered in the light of emptiness as the ground of being. A more promising methodology in interfaith dialogue would suggest that one can be wrong only if not consistent with the premises of his or her *own* religious tradition. In other words, a Christian engages on a wrong path when misrepresenting his or her own premises, and *mutatis mutandis* for the Buddhist. Otherwise one could no longer speak of a dialogue between true Christians and true Buddhists. No wonder then that the Panadura Debate did not lead to further dialogue, but to isolation of the Buddhist and Christian communities in Sri Lanka.¹⁸

16. Abhayasundara, *Controversy at Panadura*.

17. For instance, David de Silva tried to prove how wrong the Buddhist *anatman* (not-Self) doctrine is, for it would imply that nothing survives death, and as such we are nothing but animals and moral effort is useless. Gunananda Thera in his turn attacked the character of God as displayed in the Old Testament, arguing that God cannot be omniscient, for he was sorry for creating the world (according to Genesis 6:6). These are just two brief examples which prove how superficial each side's knowledge was of the other.

18. It was only with Lynn de Silva that a proper Buddhist-Christian dialogue was reopened in Sri Lanka. He founded the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo in 1962 and one of the first journals on Buddhist-Christian dialogue in 1961, called *Dialogue*.

1.2 A FINE BALANCE BETWEEN EXCLUSIVISM AND INCLUSIVISM IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH FOLLOWING VATICAN II

The Catholic Church is by far the most active of the Christian traditions in interfaith dialogue and in formulating a position on other religions. Following Vatican II, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* states that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” and acknowledges that world religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”¹⁹ The declaration appreciates in Buddhism that it “realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world” and that it teaches its followers how “to acquire the state of perfect liberation.”²⁰ Nevertheless, we are reminded that the “fullness of religious life” is to be found only in “Christ ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6).”²¹

In order to express what kind of a theology of religions is supported by the *Nostra Aetate*, whether it is exclusivistic or inclusivistic, we need to understand the context in which it was planned and issued. It was first planned as a declaration on the relationship of the Church with Judaism in the aftermath of the Shoah, was then extended to expressing the Church’s relationship with Islam, and then extended to other world religions. By its positive tone on other religions, while still proclaiming that salvation is found only in Christ, its real intention is to hold exclusivism and inclusivism in a healthy and creative tension. As such we find the Catholic Church both reaffirming the traditional doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ alone and a healthy openness towards all people of good will.²² This dual orientation of the *Nostra Aetate* towards both respecting the freedom and good will of other religionists and against compromising the integrity of Christian teaching can be taken as a strength and an encouragement for interfaith dialogue.²³

19. *Nostra Aetate*, 2. However, nothing is said of what specifically these “rays of truth” may consist of.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. In the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* it is said: “For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes* 22).

23. In *Lumen Gentium* we find that salvation is open to people of other religions on two conditions: 1. “through no fault of their own (they) do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God;” 2. “moved by grace (they) strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.” Therefore salvation is open “to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived

The encyclical *Dialogue and Proclamation* restates both the Church's mission of making Christ known to the world, and that of not holding back from dialogue with other religions. This document explicitly affirms that the two elements, proclamation and dialogue, are "both viewed, each in its own place, as component elements and authentic forms of the one evangelizing mission of the Church."²⁴ As such they are foundational and uninterchangeable as "authentic elements of the Church's evangelizing mission."²⁵ At a time when uncritical openness towards other religions was sensed as a threat to the integrity of Christian doctrine the Vatican issued the *Dominus Iesus* declaration. Its purpose was "to set forth again the doctrine of the Catholic faith in these areas, pointing out some fundamental questions that remain open to further development, and refuting specific positions that are erroneous or ambiguous."²⁶ Properly understood, the *Dominus Iesus* is not a reinstatement of exclusivism. The Church is reminded that "the followers of other religions can receive divine grace," but also that "*objectively speaking*" these religions "are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation."²⁷ Therefore Christians must be aware that the "solutions that propose a salvific action of God beyond the unique mediation of Christ would be contrary to Christian and Catholic faith."²⁸ As such, "the elements of goodness and grace which they (the other religions and their scriptures) contain" are received "from the mystery of Christ,"²⁹ and as a result, the highest value that could be attributed to the religious rituals and prayers of non-Christians would be that "of preparation for the Gospel."³⁰

In the official documents of the Catholic Church interfaith dialogue is seen as a missionary tool, a part of the Church's "evangelizing mission"³¹ and must not in any way detract the church from proclaiming

at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life" (*Lumen Gentium* 16). *Dialogue and Proclamation* (29) acknowledges the presence of the Spirit in other religions and the possibility that by a "sincere practice of what is good in their own religious tradition" these people would "respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ."

24. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 2.

25. *Ibid.*, 77.

26. *Dominus Iesus*, 3.

27. *Ibid.*, 22.

28. *Ibid.*, 14.

29. *Ibid.*, 8.

30. *Ibid.*, 21.

31. *Ibid.*, 22. This view is repeated by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 55.

that “*salvation comes from Christ and that dialogue does not dispense from evangelization.*”³² Christ is still to be seen as “the one Savior of all” and the fulfilment of history,³³ and thus other ways of salvation cannot be seen as “parallel or complementary to his (to Christ’s mediation).”³⁴ This means that the dialogue initiated by the Catholic Church is one “oriented towards proclamation,”³⁵ for the Church “*alone* possesses the fullness of the means of salvation.”³⁶ But at the same time dialogue is a “method and means of mutual knowledge and enrichment”³⁷ and Christians can expect “to be transformed by the encounter.”³⁸ As we can see, dialogue and proclamation, openness towards other religions and holding fast to tradition, represent the two poles between which we find expressed the attitude of the Catholic Church towards interfaith dialogue.

1.3 INCLUSIVISM IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Inclusivism acknowledges that salvific or liberating knowledge does not belong to a single tradition, but nevertheless claims that one’s own mediates it in a way superior to all others. On the Christian side, inclusivists hold that Christ is the only true way of salvation, while other religions may be acceptable ways towards God for those who never heard about Christ, or were prevented from understanding the gospel by their culture or by Christians who misrepresented the teachings of Jesus. Christian inclusivists can be classified as structural inclusivists and restrictionist inclusivists. According to D’Costa, the first group considers Christ as the “normative revelation of God” but that salvation is still possible for those who haven’t heard about him, through participation in their religions. Those in the second group also see “Christ as the normative revelation of God” but non-Christian religions are not salvific, and Christ saves non-Christians despite their religion.³⁹ A

32. *Redemptoris missio*, 55.

33. *Ibid.*, 6; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 28.

34. *Redemptoris missio*, 5.

35. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 82.

36. *Redemptoris missio*, 55. The Catholic Church affirms it must not give up its belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his indispensable role for our salvation, for “such language is simply being faithful to revelation” (*Dominus Iesus*, 15). In the end, Jesus Christ is “the instrument for the salvation of *all* humanity (cf. *Acts* 17:30–31)” (*Dominus Iesus*, 22).

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 47.

39. D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 7.

similar classification is used by Kristin Kiblinger as “open” and “closed” inclusivism.⁴⁰

The best known form of Christian inclusivism is Karl Rahner’s doctrine of “Anonymous Christianity.” It is a “structural” or “open” type of inclusivism.⁴¹ On the Buddhist side, inclusivism is the position of the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who holds that Buddhism is uniquely effective in mediating the attainment of enlightenment, while other religions may be seen as skilful means for helping their followers to advance towards it little by little. Another Buddhist inclusivist whose views I will mention is John Makransky.

1.3.1 Rahner’s “Anonymous Christianity”

Rahner’s inclusivism acknowledges salvific value in other religions following two doctrinal assumptions. The first is that the whole creation is sustained in existence by God’s grace, and Christ as the eternal Logos is already at work in all humans through the Holy Spirit. For one who has not heard the Christian gospel faith in Christ is present as “the searching memory of the absolute saviour.”⁴² Since God’s love is unbiased, it must be that “a universal and supernatural salvific will of God . . . is really operative in the world.”⁴³ Rahner’s second assumption is that a non-Christian can attain salvation “through faith, hope and love” and since these virtues are to be found in other religions as well, they must play a role “in the attainment of justification and salvation.”⁴⁴ The terms coined by Rahner as “anonymous Christianity” and “anonymous Christian” involve the belief that one can be “a child of God . . . even before he has explicitly embraced a creedal statement of the Christian faith and been baptized.”⁴⁵ By the work of the Holy Spirit people of other faiths are already connected to the Church of Christ and thus can justly be called by the name of “anonymous Christians.”⁴⁶

40. Kristin Beise Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, 28.

41. Other representatives of Christian inclusivism are Clark Pinnock and John Sanders. Both are Evangelicals and hold a “closed” form of inclusivism. See Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God*, Sanders, *No Other Name*.

42. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 318. This “searching memory” is the capacity of receiving God’s gift in Christ, or in his words, “the anticipation of the absolute saviour which searches and watches in history” (ibid., 320).

43. Ibid., 313.

44. Ibid., 314.

45. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12, 165.

46. In other words, anyone who does not suppress the truth of God, “but leaves it free play” is led by “the grace of the Father in his Son,” and “anyone who has let himself

Nevertheless, Rahner is keen to remind us that salvation is possible only “in view of the merits of Christ,”⁴⁷ who is “the incarnate Logos of God who reaches fulfilment in his earthly reality through death and resurrection.”⁴⁸ Non-Christian religions should then be seen only as “provisional manifestations, destined to be replaced” by the revelation in Christ.⁴⁹ This means that “the historical expansion of Christianity . . . coincides with a progressive abrogation of the legitimacy of these religions.”⁵⁰

Several Christian theologians have criticized Rahner’s inclusivism for leading to undesirable results. On the one hand it does not encourage one to actually know other religious traditions. Fredericks calls Rahner’s inclusivism “praiseworthy,” but given its impact on interfaith dialogue it would still be “inadequate to the challenge facing Christians today,” for it “does not lead Christians to learn about other religions as a creative response to religious diversity.”⁵¹ On the other hand, it would discourage mission. Hans Küng criticizes Rahner’s thesis of “anonymous Christianity” for discouraging mission by including non-Christians in the church by simply relabeling them *anonymous* Christians.⁵² Henri de Lubac admits that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of non-Christians, thus accepting “anonymous Christians,” but not “anonymous Christianity,” for it makes conversion to Christianity and discipleship in following Christ unnecessary, and it devalues the uniqueness of Christ and the incarnation.⁵³

However, when criticizing Rahner’s inclusivist views, we must be aware of the limitations he himself acknowledges for his work. He affirms that his inquiry is based on the Bible and the Catholic tradition and therefore must be seen in the context of “an inquiry in dogmatic theology, and not in the history of religion.”⁵⁴ Therefore he aims to offer only “provisional hints”⁵⁵ that theologians involved in the study of other religions must evaluate in further research.

be taken hold of by this grace can be called with every right an “anonymous Christian” (Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6, 395).

47. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 316.

48. *Ibid.*, 318–9.

49. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10, 47.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 32.

52. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 97–99.

53. Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 153–56.

54. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 312.

55. *Ibid.*, see also *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, 39–40, and vol. 18, 288–300.

1.3.2 Orthodox Inclusivism—“Seeds of the Word” in Other Religions

The theological fundament for Orthodox inclusivism is the view that, unlike in Protestant Christianity, the doctrine of the fall allows for some preservation of God’s image given to humankind at creation. As a result, an Orthodox theology of religions cannot be fully exclusivistic and allows Orthodox theologians to see other religions, including Buddhism, as “expressions of the human being in search of God, as the human aspiration for salvation.”⁵⁶ The Romanian Orthodox theologian Achimescu follows the tradition started by St Justin Martyr of recognizing “seeds of the Word” in non-Christian traditions.⁵⁷ In Achimescu’s words, “all people, be they Buddhists, Christians or otherwise, participate to a so-called ‘Cosmic Liturgy,’ as all serve—directly or indirectly—God and Jesus Christ and all partake, on various levels, of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸

In a way similar to Rahner, Achimescu speaks of a “‘Church’ outside Christianity, to which belong Buddhists as well” but which nevertheless should be considered only as a state of “preparation for the true Church of Christ” and as such is a “Church” only in a state of promise of God, awaiting its fulfilment in the actual knowledge of Christ.⁵⁹ Although Achimescu’s approach appears to be exclusivistic at times,⁶⁰ his soteriological convictions

56. Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 343.

57. In his *First Apology*, St Justin Martyr says: “We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists”; (Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, ch. 46). In his *Second Apology*, chapter 8, he speaks of the Stoics and the poets who wrote “on account of the seed of reason (the Logos) implanted in every race of men.” In chapter 13 he affirms that “all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the sowing of the implanted word that was in them.” We find a view similar to that in the Catholic decree *Ad Gentes* (11) where it speaks of “the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations.”

58. Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 334. The concept of the “Cosmic Liturgy” is taken from Stăniloae, who speaks of it in his *Spiritualitate și Comuniune*, 14–16, and in “Liturgia Comunității,” 388–9.

59. Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 336. In a similar way, the American Orthodox theologian John Garvey affirms that “the Buddhist who is moved to compassion by the teaching of the Buddha . . . will be saved because in all these movements of the soul and heart there are seeds of the Word. That Word, we must as Christians insist, is Jesus Christ, who alone is the salvation of human beings” (Garvey, *Seeds of the Word*, 126).

60. For instance, he expresses his firm conviction that “our salvation and the salvation of the whole world has come *only through Jesus Christ*” (Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 19). Here and elsewhere the emphasis in quotations belongs to the authors quoted unless otherwise specified.

do not give way to intolerance towards adherents of other religions.⁶¹ In a similar way to the thought expressed in the *Nostra Aetate*, he argues that “Orthodox theologians want to take all positive elements in other religions as opportunities for mutual understanding” and as “forms of seeking God.”⁶² All other religions are said to be driven by the search for the lost paradise and as such “need the true salvation” which is in Jesus Christ.⁶³ As such Buddhism is seen as a “simple worldview conceived by the means of pure analysis and self-knowledge” while Christianity is “a religion by excellence, which is founded on a supreme authority, that of the revealed God.”⁶⁴ As we can see, a firm proclamation of Orthodox beliefs is stated as foundational for dialogue with other religions. However, what is lacking is an openness similar to that of the Catholic Church for an actual dialogue with these religions. This is a project to which my book aims to contribute.

1.3.3 The Dalai Lama’s Openness to All Religions

Buddhist inclusivism originates in the Mahayana doctrine of skilful means, according to which non-Buddhist teachers, whether historical or legendary (for instance the *kami* in Shintoism), are *bodhisattvas* who use skilful means for bringing people closer to enlightenment.⁶⁵ This line of thought is followed by Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935), the 14th Dalai Lama. In his vision, the purpose of different religions is “to cure the pains and unhappiness of the human mind” and therefore each of us needs to pick the one “which will better cure a particular person.”⁶⁶ In an interview he expressed his view that “Buddhism is the best,” but this does not mean it is the “best for everyone.”⁶⁷

61. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

62. *Ibid.*, 23. In a similar way to the *Nostra Aetate*’s acknowledging “rays of Truth” in other religions, Peter Bouteneff argues that “Orthodox Christians *admit truth in other faiths*” (Bouteneff, “Foreword,” in Garvey, *Seeds of the Word*, 11. However, there is no statement on which these truths in other religions may actually be.

63. Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 23.

64. *Ibid.*, 25.

65. I will refer to the doctrine of skilful means in section 2.5.

66. Dalai Lama, *Spiritual Advice*, 16. In an interview he expressed his thought that the purpose of all religions is “to make man a better human being” (Dalai Lama, *Universal Responsibility*, 22).

67. Interview taken by James Beverley. The same thought is expressed in an interview published in *Universal Responsibility*, 20. From an ultimate point of view, *nirvana* can be achieved only by Buddhists, for liberation is a state in which “a mind that understands the (empty) sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the (empty) sphere of reality” (Dalai Lama, “‘Religious Harmony’ and Extracts from the Bodhgaya Interviews,” in Griffiths, ed., *Christianity through Non-Christian Eyes*, 169).

The best religion for Christians is Christianity. From the Dalai Lama's Buddhist perspective, Jesus was a *bodhisattva* teaching a suitable truth for his followers in a particular historical and cultural setting. In his words, "at a certain period, certain era, he appeared as a new master, and then because of circumstances, he taught certain views different from Buddhism."⁶⁸ Therefore, Buddhists and Christians should not stumble over philosophical contradictions such as the uniqueness of Jesus or the issue of a creator God. Such contradictions are real, but should not deter us from achieving "permanent human happiness." For some people the idea of a creator God is "beneficial and soothing" while for others the rejection of this idea is "more appropriate."⁶⁹ Ultimately, belief in God is just another instance of using skilful means. As a result, the importance of Buddhist-Christian dialogue lies in improving the horizontal dimension of existence. He exhorts us: "Let us just be side by side—helping, respecting, and understanding each other—in common effort to serve mankind."⁷⁰

For the Dalai Lama interfaith dialogue should not be about arguing and proselytising. Religionists should rather exhort each other "to follow their own beliefs as sincerely and as truthfully as possible," for all world religions are helpful ways of guiding people of different inclinations to the best fulfilment.⁷¹ The reason why the Dalai Lama is so confident in affirming that all religious traditions can provide suitable spiritual guiding is his belief in rebirth. He argues that since even Buddhists need many lifetimes to reach *nirvana*, how much more will adherents of other religions also undergo rebirth, so "there is no hurry" to reach liberation.⁷² This conviction makes him very respectful towards other religions. However, he is not a pluralist, for he affirms that the many rebirths one has to endure will eventually lead him or her to find enlightenment in a Buddhist tradition. In the specific case of Christians, the Buddhist doctrine of the six realms of rebirth would

68. Same interview as above. In one of the sermons delivered at the John Main Seminar in 1994, in which he comments on key passages in the Gospels, he praises Jesus as being "either a fully enlightened being or a bodhisattva of a very high spiritual realization" (Dalai Lama, *Good Heart*, 83).

69. Dalai Lama, "Religious Harmony," 167–68.

70. *Ibid.*, 164. The Dalai Lama is against a syncretistic mixture of Christianity and Buddhism, which would be an attempt "to put a yak's head on a sheep's body" (*Good Heart*, 105. The same warning appears in *Ancient Wisdom*, 237.) However, he argues that Christians can use Buddhist meditation, ideas and practices for "the teachings of love, compassion, and kindness are present in Christianity and also in Buddhism" (*ibid.*, 167.).

71. *Ibid.*, 169.

72. *Ibid.*

allow them to reach a personal afterlife in the *Tushita* heavens.⁷³ Nevertheless, immortality in a Buddhist heaven has a limited lifespan, lasting only until one's merits are exhausted, when a new human existence necessarily follows. True liberation can only be *nirvana*, and thus he is consistent with Buddhist inclusivism.

1.3.4 John Makransky and the Superiority of Buddhism

John Makransky teaches Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College and is also a Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher installed as a lama in the *Nyingma* Tibetan tradition. Although, as an inclusivist, he holds that there are countless ways in which truth expresses itself and thus all religious traditions “are limited by historically conditioned assumptions,”⁷⁴ he is very clear on the superiority of Buddhism and its unique effectiveness for achieving enlightenment. The practices taught by the Buddha not only lead one to achieving “fullest enlightenment,” but among all other versions of salvation the Buddhist path leads to “the most complete form of liberation possible for human beings.”⁷⁵ Therefore he rejects the pluralist demand that each religion should renounce its claims of superiority “of practice and goal.”⁷⁶ Even if one would be concerned only with the horizontal dimension of existence, Buddhist practices should be seen as “uniquely effective for undercutting” violence in our world.⁷⁷

Makransky's view is that the ultimate truth on which all religions feed is the *dharmakaya*, as formulated in Mahayana Buddhism,⁷⁸ but this does not mean that their followers will all reach “the same soteriological result.”⁷⁹ A theist's belief in a personal God as Ultimate Reality hinders the realization of emptiness.⁸⁰ A Hindu type of yoga practice would allow one to realize some aspect of the Buddha nature, but not the doctrine of not-Self and *shunyata*.⁸¹ Christian rites, such as the Catholic Mass, could be of help in cutting grasping and in raising awareness on human nature, but remain

73. Ibid.

74. John Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism: Reflections Toward a Contemporary Buddhist Theology of Religions,” in Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist Attitudes*, 64.

75. Ibid., 66.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. I will refer to this doctrine in section 2.8.

79. Makransky, “Buddhist Inclusivism,” 61.

80. Ibid., 61–62.

81. Ibid., 62.

just skilful means which point to the need of realizing the ultimate truth of emptiness.⁸² In short, other religious rites and beliefs are of some worth, but cannot provide liberation from rebirth, for only Buddhist practices offer a “direct knowledge of the Absolute.”⁸³

1.3.5 The Paternalistic Character of Inclusivism

In conclusion to this section on inclusivism, I need to note its weakness of forming an *a priori* judgement of other religions and of ignoring what is particular to them. Inclusivists can consider other traditions as being fulfilled by their own only at the cost of ignoring fundamental doctrines that build up those traditions. In the words of Paul Knitter, inclusivists “don’t really let that otherness reveal itself to them because they have already *included* the other in their own world of seeing and understanding.”⁸⁴ It is untenable to claim that one’s own tradition can better grasp what all others are really after, especially as most inclusivists have limited knowledge of other traditions. In its essence, to look at Buddhism through the lens of Rahner’s inclusivism is to claim that Buddhists do not know that their real goal is Christ and as such that they are anonymous Christians. In a similar way, Achimescu claims that the Buddhist “forgets” that the world is the creation “of the personal God.”⁸⁵

There is little doubt on how a Buddhist would meet such a working methodology, for it does not leave much space for dialogue.⁸⁶ Although the Dalai Lama seems to have a more balanced position on Buddhist-Christian dialogue by respecting all religious traditions, his inclusivism is as paternalistic as the “Anonymous Christianity” of Rahner.⁸⁷ On the one hand,

82. John Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives,” 360. He affirms he attends the Catholic Mass as a Buddhist, despite being aware that it “inscribes fundamental Christian doctrines of the Cross, Resurrection, Body of Christ—the agapeic dynamism of trinitarian reality” (ibid., 360).

83. Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives,” 359.

84. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 218.

85. Achimescu, *Budism și Creștinism*, 322.

86. In fact, as Achimescu admits, it leaves a very “poor” space for dialogue (ibid., 332). His book is aimed at helping us realize the significant difference between Buddhist liberation and “the real salvation in Jesus Christ” and how far Buddhists are “from the Church of Jesus Christ, in which one can truly be saved” (333).

87. According to D’Costa, the Dalai Lama’s position on other religions is a “strict form of exclusivist Tibetan Buddhism of the dGelugs variety” which proves that “inclusivism always finally collapses into exclusivism,” and understanding this “helps dissolve the Romantic European view of the ‘tolerant’ and ‘open’ East” (D’Costa, *The Meeting of Religions*, 78).

as I argued elsewhere, when assessing the “Jesus as *bodhisattva*” hypothesis from the perspective of history, given all the persecutions, religious wars, hatred and delusion sown in history in the name of Christ, to name him a “*bodhisattva*” would lead us to the contradictory conclusion that he was more a source of delusion than a guide towards enlightenment.⁸⁸ On the other hand, Christians cannot accept the “many rebirths” view for reaching salvation. Makransky is even more rigid than the Dalai Lama when it comes to acknowledging the value of other religions. His inclusivism hardly offers space for Buddhist-Christian dialogue, since all religious traditions, not only those of Buddhism, claim to offer a direct knowledge of their Ultimate Reality, and to possess the best means to achieve it.

1.4 JOHN HICK’S PLURALISM AS A “COPERNICAN REVOLUTION” IN THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

Given the non-dialogical nature of exclusivism and the paternalistic tone of inclusivism, it may seem that a better option in interfaith dialogue would be pluralism, for, as Race argues, it “moves beyond the controlling images of any of the religions.”⁸⁹ There are two major kinds of pluralists. First there are those who attempt to identify a common “something” among religions, a common Ultimate Reality, or a common goal which all pursue. The best illustration of this view is the mountain peak which can be reached by several different paths. Knitter calls them “mutualists”⁹⁰ because they not only attempt to reach the same peak, but can also help each other to achieve it. When criticized for being unrealistic, its proponents claim that the true goal of religion is beyond what has been formulated so far by the traditions, i.e., there is a more fundamental Ultimate Reality which makes agreements still possible. As representatives of this group from the Christian side we have John Hick and Perry Schmidt-Leukel. A possible Buddhist candidate for this view is Thich Nhat Hanh.

A second kind of pluralism is one that does not seek for commonalities, and lets each religion define its own path and peak to be reached. Religions should be respected as they are and allowed to be totally different.

88. Valea, *The Buddha and the Christ*, 184–86.

89. Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, 30.

90. Knitter, “Buddhist and Christian Attitudes to Other Religions: A Comparison,” in Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist Attitudes*, 90. D’Costa calls the first category “unitary pluralism,” the second “pluriform pluralism,” and adds a third category—the “ethical pluralism” of those who place emphasis not on questions of Ultimate Reality, but rather on ethical concerns such as justice and peace (D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions*, 9–18).

Knitter calls them “particularists,”⁹¹ for they emphasize and hold dearly to the particular aspects of each religious tradition. A Christian representative of “particularist” pluralism is Mark Heim. In this section I will assess the pluralism of John Hick, and leave the other proposals to chapter 4.

John Hick (1922–2012) went through a dramatic shift in his religious stand towards other religions. At the age of 18, while a law student, he had the religious experience of being “born again” in the Presbyterian church and became a Christian of a “fundamentalist kind.”⁹² But his certitudes were shaken by his encounter with the plurality of world religions. It led him to leave the “Ptolemaic theology” of the uniqueness of Christ as *the* way of salvation and call for a “Copernican revolution” in the theology of religions in which all gravitate around the same God.⁹³ For this reason he considers the Catholic attempts following Vatican II, which allow some degree of revelation to other religions, to be unhappy compromises resembling the “epicycles” theory of earlier astronomy to correct the aberrations of Ptolemy’s earth-centred universe.

As a result of his interaction with his colleague Abe while teaching at the Claremont Graduate School, Hick realized that he needed to accommodate Buddhism in this theory of religious pluralism and switched from “God-centredness” to “Real-centredness,” which would be a more “familiar” term for all religions.⁹⁴ His fundamental assumption became that all religions have a partial knowledge of a hidden Ultimate Reality (the “Real”) and thus none is entitled to make exclusivistic claims. In Kantian terms, he affirms that religions are “phenomenal manifestations of the noumenal Real-in-itself”⁹⁵ or “different ways of experiencing, conceiving, and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”⁹⁶ As a result, the purpose of every religion, including Christianity, would be “the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.”⁹⁷

There are two serious issues with Hick’s approach. First, since the “noumenal Real-in-itself” cannot be captured in words, his own version of religious pluralism must also belong to the “phenomenal manifestations”

91. Knitter, “Buddhist and Christian Attitudes,” 90.

92. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 14.

93. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 131.

94. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 11.

95. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 46.

96. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235–36.

97. *Ibid.*, 36. In his view, the element that identifies “a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real” is the “production of saints,” for they all display similar moral qualities (*ibid.*, 307).

of the Real and be seen itself as one of the many which gravitate around it. In other words, it cannot be allowed to offer a higher perspective on Ultimate Reality than all others. Second, Hick found the concept of *shunyata* as taught by Abe to be “remarkably like” his view of “the Real” and “the perfect expression of the key concept that is required for a religious understanding of religious plurality.”⁹⁸ But by acknowledging that “the Real” is equivalent to *shunyata*, he no longer is consistent with the equal stand of all religions before a common centre. Buddhism would be closer, if not possessing the centre itself.

Referring to the “uniqueness” of Christianity, Hick argues that Christology followed a development similar to that of the doctrine of the Buddha. As in early Buddhism the Buddha was seen as a man who found enlightenment as a result of his earnest search for truth, and only later, in the Mahayana, was proclaimed the incarnation of a pre-existing Buddha,⁹⁹ in a similar way the theologians of the early church proclaimed the man Jesus to be the incarnation of a pre-existing Son of God. This parallel development would allow us to find an equivalence between the *Trikaya* doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, in which “the transcendent Buddha is one with the Absolute,” and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which proclaims that “the eternal Son is one with the Father.”¹⁰⁰ In Hick’s view, the proclamation of Jesus to be the Son of God would be a result of “a tendency of the religious mind” of exalting the founder of a certain tradition¹⁰¹ and therefore language of incarnation should be reinterpreted, for the incarnation is just “a mythological idea, a figure of speech, a piece of poetic imagery.”¹⁰² A similar reinterpretation is needed for the story of the resurrection, for in his view one cannot be sure what really happened back then in Palestine.¹⁰³

As we can see, Hick either ignores or plainly rejects essential Christian doctrines. His view of the Real is incompatible not only with all Christian traditions, but with Buddhist traditions as well. As we will see in the next

98. John Hick, “The Meaning of Emptiness,” in Abe, ed., *A Zen Life*, 147–48; see also Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 60–64. However, he is wrong in stating an equivalence between the Buddhist *dharmakaya* and the Hindu *paramartha-satya*, which represents the substantial ground of being (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 287).

99. Hick, “Jesus in the World Religions,” in Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate*, 169. In his words, “the human Gautama has been exalted into an eternal figure of universal significance” (ibid.).

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid., 170.

102. Hick, *God Has Many Names*, 74.

103. Hick, “Jesus in the World Religions,” 170.

chapter, there cannot be any substantial reality in Buddhism which could have the role of Hick's "Real." Therefore Hick's view of religious pluralism is far from being fair to either Christian or Buddhist traditions. In the end, his theory of the "Real" is both paternalistic and unrealistic.¹⁰⁴ It is an unrealistic attempt to formulate a higher ground in interfaith dialogue, above the particular traditions, and thus susceptible to formulating a new one.¹⁰⁵

1.5 COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY AS A NEW APPROACH IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

We have seen that the three theologies of religions discussed in this chapter each have their positive and negative aspects in dealing with the tension between commitment to one's own tradition and openness to others. As Cornille observes, "strong religious commitment coincides with religious intolerance, while attitudes of openness toward the truth of other religions somehow go together with a looser relationship to the truth of one's own tradition."¹⁰⁶ In this context we must ask ourselves whether it is possible to find a practice of dialogue which avoids the risk of a particular tradition-centred arrogance (Buddhist or Christian) on the one hand, and an unprincipled accommodation on the other. A possible answer can be found in the new approach of comparative theology, which promotes both commitment to one's tradition, but without being bound to exclusivism, and openness towards other religious traditions, but without compromising one's own. This new approach was started by Francis Clooney and James Fredericks in the late 1980s as an attempt to "suggest a way in which we may rethink faith by means of a critical reflection on the texts and practices of other religious paths."¹⁰⁷

A fundamental requirement of comparative theology, in Fredericks' words, is "to understand the Other in a way that does not annul the Other's alterity."¹⁰⁸ As such, this approach would leave space to the Other, and not

104. As Fredericks argues, "[P]luralists, like inclusivists, enter into interreligious dialogue knowing more about other religious believers than these same believers know about themselves" (Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 109).

105. For a further criticism of Hick's pluralism see Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 231–46.

106. Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 59.

107. Fredericks, "Introduction," in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, ix. The term was already in use in the nineteenth century. Of the history of its use see Clooney, "Comparative Theology," in Webster et al., eds., *Oxford Dictionary of Systematic Theology*, 653–59.

108. Fredericks, "Introduction," in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, xiii.

subsume his or her tradition into one's own. Comparative theology avoids the extremes of demonizing the others and withdrawing from dialogue, on the one hand, and that of assimilating other traditions to the extent of forgetting our own identity, on the other. In contrast to exclusivist approaches such as that of the Panadura debate, Clooney emphasizes that "[c]omparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith."¹⁰⁹ And in contrast to a pluralist approach, one can speak with confidence of a genuine faith to which he or she claims allegiance. As Clooney defines it, comparative theology "marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition" and only from that precise framework does one "venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions."¹¹⁰ Following this approach, a religious tradition can enrich the other not by syncretistic means, but by providing a better perception of one's own when viewing it in the light of the other. In other words, interfaith dialogue can help us to appropriate the truths of our own religious tradition in a new and unexpected way by looking back on ourselves through someone else's eyes.

A theology of religions is concerned mainly with answering the question of how those of other religious traditions can be saved and less with familiarizing theologians with those traditions on their own terms. In contrast, in the words of Fredericks, comparative theology "does not start with a grand theory of religion in general that claims to account for all religions"¹¹¹ and does not look for a "lowest common denominator" of all religions, including Christianity.¹¹² As a scholar who has applied the method of comparative theology to Buddhist-Christian dialogue, he invites Christians to cross over "into the world of another religious believer," to learn "the truths that animate the life of that believer," and then to return to their home tradition "transformed by these truths now able to ask new questions about Christian faith and its meaning for today."¹¹³ In other words, Christians should "learn something about Buddhism on its own terms,"¹¹⁴ and only afterwards build a theology of religions. One is entitled to build an exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist theology of religions only after knowing the "Other" on his or her

109. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 15–16.

110. *Ibid.*, 10. As Fredericks argues, "loss of commitment to the home tradition may make the work of comparison no longer theological" (Fredericks, "Introduction," in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, xiii).

111. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 167.

112. *Ibid.*, 167–8.

113. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians*, xii.

114. *Ibid.*, and Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 170.

own terms, not just on the basis of a set of strong theological convictions on the “truth” of one’s own faith.¹¹⁵ The outcome of the comparative work is neither an apologetic tool aimed to counteract other religions, nor a syncretistic blend of traditions, but mutual learning across religious borders. As one can expect, Fredericks argues that “sometimes the correlation will be a recognition of similarity, sometimes of difference.”¹¹⁶

However, we cannot ignore the fact that the comparatist theologian (hereafter called a comparatist) starts to look at other religious traditions with a set of foundational convictions that will influence the outcome of his or her comparative study. Since there always exists a given faith to which the comparatist belongs, even if not explicitly made known, Kiblinger expresses her concern that one’s “theology of religions predetermines the outcome” of comparative theology.¹¹⁷ Therefore a comparatist should disclose his or her theological views in order to be aware and make readers aware of the presuppositions and limitations of this approach. Kiblinger insists that:

we cannot skip over getting clarity on our theological presuppositions about the other and just jump into the practice of reading, because so much hangs on *how* we read, which is determined by our theology of religions in the first place.¹¹⁸

In other words, between comparative theology and the theology of religions seems to exist a reciprocal influence of which we must be aware. A certain theology of religions is already at work when the comparatist performs a comparative study. The two leading figures in comparative theology, both Clooney¹¹⁹ and Fredericks¹²⁰ disclose their views in matters of upholding a certain theology of religions by declaring themselves to be Catholic inclusivists.¹²¹ Therefore I must be aware that in formulating an Orthodox contribution to comparative theology, I must operate on the basis of an Orthodox inclusivism. Following Clooney, I need to “articulate a viable understanding of the ‘other,’ in which the encountered ‘other’ is not

115. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths*, 9.

116. Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, xi.

117. Kristin Kiblinger, “Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology,” in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, 25.

118. *Ibid.*, 29.

119. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 16.

120. Fredericks, “Introduction,” in Clooney, ed., *New Comparative Theology*, xv.

121. For Clooney the inclusivist position appears as “the most useful” for it maintains a “distinctive tension between an adherence to the universal claim of one’s own religion and an acknowledgement of the working of the truth of the Christian religion outside its boundaries” (Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 194–95).

manufactured to fit the comparativist's prejudices and expectations."¹²² In my view, in order to meet this demand and to follow a dialogue of theological exchange in which to involve Orthodox Christianity, I need to state a theme of common interest for both Christians and Buddhists which should act as a precise doctrinal lens through which I could appropriately assess Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Although it is not easy to find a theme of equal interest for both Christians and Buddhists, after much pondering I take it to be the concept of human perfection as defined in the tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy,¹²³ and in the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.¹²⁴ One is called deification (*theosis*) and the other Buddhahood.

There are not many attempts to understand the Christian ideal of perfection by Buddhist scholars. The only one that I am aware of is Medagampala Sumanashanta who successfully completed a PhD thesis on this topic.¹²⁵ He compared and contrasted the Theravada Buddhist ideal of perfection as *arhathood*, as presented by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AD, with the Methodist ideal of perfection as sanctification, as presented by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism in the eighteenth century. His justification for choosing perfection as relevant for both traditions is that "[b]oth Buddhism and Christianity begin with the premise that mankind is imperfect but that Perfection in some sense or other is both a possibility and the true goal or purpose of man's life in the world."¹²⁶ As Sumanashanta did, I also assume that perfection is a theme of ultimate importance for all Buddhist and Christian traditions which will be addressed in this book. Buddhists and Christians alike are meant to strive for perfection, and this should bear fruit in their dialogue. Therefore, in the next two chapters, I will perform a study of human perfection in the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism and Orthodox Christianity, but unlike Sumanashanta, who focused on studying perfection *per se* in two traditions, I will use my findings for assessing several important voices in contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue and then for formulating an Orthodox contribution to comparative theology.

Another principle in comparative theology, as formulated by Clooney, is that "[b]ecause the comparative theologian is engaged in the study of a religious tradition other than her own, she needs to be an academic scholar

122. *Ibid.*, 7.

123. The simple term "Christianity" is used in this book when certain aspects of doctrine are common to mainstream Christian traditions.

124. Although it is notoriously difficult to define *the* Mahayana view on a certain issue all Mahayana Buddhists take Buddhahood as their ultimate goal.

125. Sumanashanta, *A Comparison of Buddhist and Christian Perfection*.

126. *Ibid.*, 1.

proficient in the study of that religion, or at least seriously in learning from academic scholars.”¹²⁷ In order to make sure that Eastern Orthodoxy will be properly represented in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and since my contribution to comparative theology is intended as a *Romanian* Orthodox contribution, I will present the Orthodox view of human perfection as I find it expressed by Dumitru Stăniloae, the most significant Romanian Orthodox theologian. However, this will not be a simple descriptive presentation. In order to keep the proper balance in dialogue I will first bring into discussion the Mahayana Buddhist perspective on human perfection, and then present the Orthodox view in both descriptive and comparative terms. I assume that this double perspective will help me ground an informed basis for formulating an Orthodox contribution to comparative theology which would be respectful towards both traditions.

127. Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 12.

2

An Examination of Doctrinal Presuppositions in Mahayana Buddhism as a Foundation for Assessing Buddhist- Christian Dialogue

Human Perfection as Buddhahood

IN ORDER TO PRESENT the Buddhist ideal of human perfection I will follow four prestigious British scholars of Buddhism: Rupert Gethin, Steven Collins, Peter Harvey and Paul Williams.

Rupert Gethin is Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Department of Religion and Theology, University of Bristol, Director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, and President of the Pali Text Society. His area of expertise is the history and development of Buddhist thought in the *Nikayas* (the collections of sutras of early Buddhism) and the *Abhidharma* (the systematization of the doctrines expounded in the *Nikayas*).

Steven Collins taught at Bristol University (1980–87), Indiana University (Bloomington, 1987–89), and Concordia University (Montreal, 1989–91) before joining the University of Chicago where he currently is Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations. He is also a Council Member of the Pali Text Society. His field specialties include “social and cultural history of Buddhism in premodern and modern South and Southeast Asia” and “Pali language and literature.”¹

1. Source: University of Chicago website, Division of the Humanities/South Asian Languages & Civilizations.

Peter Harvey was Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Sunderland, from where he retired in October 2011. He is one of the two co-founders of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies in 1995 and is currently the editor of its journal, *Buddhist Studies Review*, as well as a member of the editorial panel of the internet *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*.

Paul Williams is Emeritus Professor of Indian and Tibetan Philosophy at the University of Bristol and was the head of its Department of Theology and Religious Studies (2000–2003). He was the initiator and from 1993 the co-director of the Centre for Buddhist Studies associated with the University of Bristol and President of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies.² While Gethin, Collins and Harvey are specialists mainly in early Buddhism, Williams is a recognized specialist in the Madhyamaka philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism, which is foundational for the traditions of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, to which most Buddhists engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue belong.

In the first four sections of this chapter I will refer to the doctrinal foundations of early Buddhism, which we find represented today by the Theravada school in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia. Theravada Buddhists are a minority among Buddhists who engage in contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue. A notable exception follows the initiative of Lynn de Silva and Aloysius Pieris in Sri Lanka, who founded the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo and one of the first journals on Buddhist-Christian dialogue in 1961, called *Dialogue*. Although both de Silva and Pieris are Christians (the first a Methodist and the second a Roman Catholic), they succeeded in engaging Buddhist scholars in Sri Lanka to contribute to a real Buddhist-Christian dialogue. As far as I know, this is the only significant initiative for dialogue between Theravada Buddhists and Christians. Unfortunately, Christian theologians in the West have given little attention to this initiative.

Many if not most Buddhists involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue belong to either Zen or to Tibetan Buddhism, and their core philosophy depends one way or another on, or derives ultimately from, the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, said to have been founded by Nagarjuna in the second century AD. Madhyamaka was an influential school of Mahayana Buddhist thought in India and crucial in the transmission of Buddhist thought particularly to Tibet but also to East Asia. Therefore I will devote

2. Williams was a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism himself for more than 20 years, led Buddhist retreats and made many contributions in the media worldwide as a Buddhist scholar. Although he converted to Roman Catholicism, he is still a fine scholar of Mahayana Buddhism whose writings can provide great help in defining the Mahayana Buddhist ideal of human perfection.

the last five sections of this chapter to the Mahayana tradition and its view of human perfection.

2.1 THE TEACHING ON HUMAN NATURE. THREE MAJOR DOCTRINES

What makes Buddhism so appealing today in the West is its capacity to be a religion without God, the result of an individual's search for truth, which does not require faith in an unseen God, but only in oneself. The man who opened this path is said to have been Siddhartha Gautama (Pali: Siddhattha Gotama),³ a man who lived about two and a half millennia ago in the region of today's northern India and southern Nepal. According to the Buddhist tradition, he renounced worldly pleasures and became a *Shramana*, an ascetic who started from the grassroots of ordinary human experience to reach the ultimate truth. He defeated the veil of illusion and ignorance and became the Buddha ("the awakened one"). Any of us can reach the same truth the Buddha discovered if we are willing to engage on the way he opened. In early Buddhism he was seen as the first in status among many equals to follow him, not as the unique revealer, knower and embodiment of truth. This is one of the major differences between the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, and Jesus Christ, the founder of Christianity. For the first, the message does not depend on the identity of the messenger, while for the second, personal identity and message stand or fall together.

As Rupert Gethin argues, "the story of the life of the Buddha is not history nor meant to be,"⁴ and should rather be taken as a hagiography, a story shaped by the needs of the community that the Buddha has founded. A similar view is followed by Peter Harvey, who emphasizes that in reading the Buddha's story one should realize what is the meaning of the Buddha's life for Buddhists and what lessons must be learned from it.⁵ All that matters is to have his teaching and to follow it. Therefore I will not follow the classic introduction to Buddhism of starting with the life-story of the Buddha. His teaching is all that counts for attaining perfection.

3. When using Buddhist terms I will use the Sanskrit transliterations, except in quotations. In the first four sections, on early Buddhism, whose writings are in Pali, at the first use I will indicate both the Sanskrit and the Pali form, and then just the Sanskrit form. Due to technical limitations I have not used the diacritical marks for Sanskrit and Pali words. Scholars do not need them to recognize these words in their original written form, and the majority of readers have nothing to gain from the diacritical marks.

4. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 16.

5. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 15.

The early Buddhist view on human nature is shaped by three major doctrines, also called the three hallmarks of existence (Sanskrit: *trilakshana*, Pali: *tilakkhana*): suffering, impermanence and not-Self. What they mean and how they define human nature is the content of the first of the Four Noble Truths, which are said to have been formulated by the Buddha at his enlightenment. The First Noble Truth states that the whole of human experience is marked by suffering (Sanskrit: *duhkha*, Pali: *dukkha*). According to Collins, it is of three types:

“Ordinary suffering” is everyday physical and mental pain, contrasted with ordinary happiness, or indifferent feelings. “Suffering through change” is the unsatisfactoriness alleged to be inherent in the fact that all feelings, all mental and physical states are impermanent and subject to change . . . The third form of *dukkha* is “suffering through (the fact of) conditioned existence.”⁶

This quotation introduces us to the heart of the Buddhist view on human nature. Suffering is more than just physical pain; it is a condition inherent to one’s unenlightened nature. Its source is the fact that everything we use to define our identity is in a process of constant transformation, being nothing more than an ephemeral product and an ephemeral cause in a very long series of interlinked events. This ephemeral status of any given being, thing or state one could think of expresses the second major doctrine associated with the First Noble Truth, the doctrine of impermanence (Sanskrit: *anitya*, Pali: *anicca*). It affirms that there is nothing in human nature or in the world of unenlightened experience that is changeless and could be called an Ultimate Reality. Everything in our psycho-physical nature or in the outside world is merely a temporary effect of certain causes, and is itself a cause in a series of further transformations.⁷

The third foundational element of Buddhism is the denial of a self as the core element that would define human nature. This is the not-Self (Sanskrit: *anatman*, Pali: *anatta*) doctrine. According to the early *Upanishads*, which were part of the Buddha’s religious heritage, the self (*atman*) is an eternal and unchanging essence that represents our true nature and which is passing through innumerable bodies until it finally reaches liberation. Buddhism denies that there is any such unchanging element that could

6. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 191–92. See also Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 61 and Williams and Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, 42–43.

7. A close concept in meaning is that of momentariness, according to which all existence—material or mental, “is produced by a sequence of ‘moments’ (*khana*), of minute, temporally ‘atomic,’ particles” (Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 226).

define us.⁸ What is currently called the “self” is the illusion generated by five interlinked factors called aggregates (Sanskrit: *skandha*, Pali: *khandha*): form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*samjñā*), volition (*samskārah*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). Form is the body with its six sense organs⁹ and the objects they sense. The senses generate *sensations* of pleasure, aversion or indifference. The process of organizing and labeling them into categories is called *perception*. As a result, *volitional acts* are initiated in response to the objects of sensory experience, which bear consequences in this and further lives. Finally, *consciousness* is “an awareness of ourselves as thinking subjects having a series of perceptions and thoughts.”¹⁰ It gives the impression that one is a distinct agent of cognition, that there is a self doing the observing and responding to the objects of perception, when in fact it is only the end result of a process dependent on sensory input.

In a famous discourse the Buddha proceeded to analyze the five aggregates and proved that none of them has the function of the self (*atman*) as found in Hinduism.¹¹ All five are impermanent and to believe otherwise would generate attachments and only lead to suffering. Therefore one should not speculate on whether the Buddha did or did not actually exclude the existence of a self behind the aggregates.¹² The human being is nothing but a series of impermanent physical and mental processes, a mere heap of five aggregates, or to be technically more precise, “a particular, individual combination of changing mental and physical processes, with a particular karmic history.”¹³ As Gethin explains: “My sense of self is both logically and emotionally just a label that I impose on these physical and mental phenomena in consequence of their connectedness.”¹⁴

8. Buddhism rejects the Hindu view of the self (*atman*) as “something wholly free from phenomenal determination, an entity independent of the process of karmic conditioning” (ibid., 95).

9. There are six senses because in Indian philosophy the mind is also called a sense organ, as it senses the world of ideas and thoughts, just as the other five sense the five aspects of the material world.

10. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 136.

11. *Anattalakkhana Sutra*, in Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 901–3.

12. Collins discusses the views of several Buddhist scholars on the issue of admitting or not a substantial self behind the aggregates. Rhys Davids, R. C. Zaehner, S. Radhakrishnan, and Coomaraswamy do not exclude it (Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 7–9), while Oldenberg and Stcherbatsky view the not-Self doctrine as leading to nihilism (ibid., 11–12). Paul Williams argues that if the Buddha had accepted a self behind the aggregates he would have certainly said it. He could not have omitted such an essential doctrine in his teaching (Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 60).

13. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 36.

14. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 139.

The “connectedness” that holds human beings together is affirmed by the Buddha as the chain of conditioned arising (Sanskrit: *pratityasamutpada*, Pali: *paticcasamuppada*), a series of twelve links, each generating the next without the need of a permanent self.¹⁵ What truly characterizes human existence is suffering, impermanence and not-Self. They are interconnected and inseparable. Impermanence leaves no room for a self as a permanent entity to define a human being. Since one is not aware of it, he or she suffers. This “unawareness” of how things really are is called ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidya*, Pali: *avijja*), a fundamental concept in Indian philosophy. Ignorance means alienation from the truth, not knowing the world as it is, and having the wrong picture of it. It is the root cause of human existential suffering.

The Second Noble Truth states that the cause of suffering is craving (Sanskrit: *trishna*, Pali: *tanha*), which is the desire to experience (the illusion of) permanence, of having a self and of living in a permanent world. Craving is more than simply wanting something; it is a deep thirst for the objects of sensory experience. This “thirst” for the wrong things has its roots in ignorance. Human beings are craving for the wrong things because they do not know what or how the world really is. In this process the belief in a self (the “I,” and what is “mine”) as the potential beneficiary of the objects of craving is strengthened. This is so because fundamentally all forms of craving are linked to a hidden belief in a self and its related aspects such as “who am I?” and “what is mine?.”

2.2 KARMA AND REBIRTH

As in other Indian religions, the result of ignorance is that a mechanism of causality called karma becomes operational. Karma is the mechanism which brings about rebirth (*samsara*), i.e., the enactment of another series of five aggregates in a further existence as a sentient being as a result of one’s present ignorance.¹⁶ What one experiences in the present is a consequence

15. The twelve links in this chain are the following: spiritual ignorance, mental constructions, discriminative consciousness, name-and-body, six senses, sensory stimulation, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, and ageing-and-death (“*Mahanidana Sutta*: The Great Discourse on Origination,” in Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 223–26. See also Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 141–42; Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 54–56; Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 62–72).

16. The mechanism of karma was first stated by the Upanishads, which see desire as the key element that starts the reincarnation chain: “And (here they say that) a person consists of desires. And as is his desire, so is his will; and as is his will, so is his deed; and whatever deed he does, so will he reap” (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4,4,5, Navlakha, in *Upanishads*). Here “desire” means thirst for experiencing the illusion of the physical world, and as a consequence what one will “reap” is karma’s retribution in a further life.

of past causes, and present mental states expressed as thoughts and deeds become causes which bear fruit in further existences. Conversely, what one will reap in further existences as a sentient being is the result of what was sown in the mind in his or her present life. The teaching of not-Self doctrine does not involve the annihilation of being at death, nor does it make karma unoperational. In Buddhism, karma and rebirth operate without the need of a self. In other words, it is not a self (*atman*) that reincarnates, but the stream of mental flow is reborn in a new temporary form. In other words, only karmic forces pass from one life to another like a force devoid of ontological substance.¹⁷ To say that a certain *person* is reborn as such or such being is a mere convention of speech.¹⁸ The use of pronouns and names is a conventional method of talking about a particular collection of physical and mental states, or a temporary heap of five aggregates. In Buddhist thought, it is the karmically determinative forces within the mind stream that generate another set of aggregates in the form of a new sentient being. But since we must stick to conventions of speech in order to communicate, I will continue to use pronouns and names, and instead of using the complicated formula “a particular impermanent heap of five aggregates” is reborn, I will simply affirm “a person” is reborn.

After death one can be reborn in one of six possible realms: as a god, a human being, a ghost, an *asura* (an anti-god), an animal or in a hell. These realms are obviously just temporary destinations, as one will stay in a certain realm only as long as the effect of karma lasts. The inferior destinies are the result of letting one’s mind be darkened by the three poisons—greed (*raga*, *lobha*), aversion (*dvesha*, *dosa*) and delusion (*avidya*, *avijja*). Higher forms of rebirth—as that of a god or a privileged human being—are the result of cultivating the opposite states of mind: non-attachment, loving-kindness and wisdom.¹⁹ The gods have attained their status by cultivating

17. In the *Milinda Panha* (5,5) we find two illustrations to explain rebirth without a self: the flame of an oil-lamp is lighted from another lamp without substantial transfer and the verse is learned by the pupil from his teacher also without substantial transfer (Pesala, *The Debate of King Milinda*, 23).

18. Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, 146. According to the distinguished Indian scholar Surendranath Dasgupta, when the Buddha was referring to his previous lives “he only meant that his past and his present belonged to one and the same lineage of momentary existences” (Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, 118).

19. Since these positive states of mind can also lead to enlightenment, to which I will refer later, I must specify that the higher forms of rebirth, as for instance that of a god, are attained as a result of cultivating non-attachment, loving-kindness and wisdom by a Buddhist who does not follow the Buddhist path completely, or by one who is not a Buddhist, but follows these precepts intuitively (for instance the follower of a theistic religion).

these positive states of mind, but their achievement lasts only for a limited time, and therefore one should not simply seek a better rebirth. Gods, as all other sentient beings, are only temporary products of rebirth. They too are ignorant, impermanent and suffer.

Of utmost importance for my whole project is to emphasize the fact that the fundamental doctrines of suffering, impermanence and not-Self leave no room in Buddhism for a creator God as Ultimate Reality.²⁰ All beings are the result of beginningless processes of rebirth. Although, as we have seen, Buddhism does not deny the existence of “gods” and of other supernatural beings, they are mere forms in which a particular heap of aggregates can be reborn, according to the mental states cultivated during a human existence. In Harvey’s words, “Buddhism sees no need for a creator of the world, as it postulates no ultimate beginning to the world, and regards it sustained by natural laws.”²¹ Buddhism does not admit an Ultimate Reality in the form of a permanent and changeless God, for it is a form of delusion and attachment which would ultimately bring suffering and rebirth. All gods were once humans that gained great merits, but will nevertheless suffer rebirth as humans or worse when the store of merits that promoted them to a rebirth as a god is depleted. Despite their merits, they still have not achieved the right knowledge and liberation from illusion.

Since the series of rebirths extends infinitely into the past, the Buddha criticized the idea of a creator God as found in Hinduism, considering it the product of ignorance. According to the first *Sutra* of the *Digha Nikaya* (the *Brahmajala Sutra*), the Hindu creator god Brahma is merely the first product of an everlasting and cyclic manifestation of the world.²² He was the first being to be manifested at the beginning of a new cycle and wished the company of other beings. When he noticed the manifestation of all other beings, Brahma thought he had created them and proclaimed himself the creator god. Therefore theistic Hinduism is nothing but a form of delusion followed by those who accept Brahma’s own delusion. By extension this can be said against the Christian view of God as well. To believe that Buddhist arguments against the concept of a creator God are directed only against the Hindu versions of which the Buddha was aware and not against the God of Christianity “is simply wrong” for, according to Williams, “there can be no creator of everything.”²³

20. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, 5.

21. Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhism*, 36.

22. “Brahmajala Sutta: The Supreme Net,” in Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 75–76.

23. Paul Williams, “Aquinas Meets the Buddhists: Prolegomenon to an Authentically Thomas-ist Basis for Dialogue,” in Fodor and Bauerschmidt, eds., *Aquinas in*