

Non-Self and Emptiness in Buddhism: Negations or Affirmations? Prospects for interfaith dialogue with Christianity

Course: *Buddhism: Texts and Traditions (HPPD 7007)* by Dr. David Morgans

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Introduction

In this essay we will deal with some of the fundamental concepts and teachings of Buddhism: the non-self and emptiness. At a first glance, at least for someone coming from a Christian tradition and who never had any encounter with Buddhism, these two concepts seem to negate positivity and in this light Buddhism might appear as a pessimistic religion/system with notes of nihilism and nihilistic claims. But as some recent interfaith encounters between Christians and Buddhists took place, there is much more to what might appear on the surface.¹ By employing the comparative theological method, we will try to understand how Buddhism and Christianity relate to such concepts as self/no-self, emptiness and what role meditation plays in these two religions.

In the world of globalization and constant cultural and religious encounters, today religions and representatives of religions have many opportunities to interact with each other on many different levels. Understanding other faiths and their teachings has many advantages and it creates a more tolerant and inclusive society. In this respect, interfaith dialogue – be it academic, theological, practical (dialogue of life) – is an important tool to build bridges between religions for peaceful coexistence and cooperation in certain areas. This essay will be an attempt to try to understand what non-self and emptiness mean in Buddhism and if there are ways that Buddhism and Christianity can talk to each other with open mind and sincere heart at least taking these concepts as starting points for interfaith dialogue.

Particularism and Comparative Theology

We will start by defining the comparative theological approach and its role in one of the interreligious models of interreligious dialogue, namely particularism. Particularism, together with

¹ See: Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, ed., *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity. Essays and Explorations* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, U.S.A., 1990), p.5.

exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism is one of the typologies in the field of interreligious dialogue (IRD).² It has gained prominence in the last few decades as a response the three latter approaches in IRD. In a nutshell, particularist view on the diversity of religions and faiths is that it claims that every single religion is particular in way that there are profound (and irreconcilable) theological, philosophical differences that cannot be sort of brought together and mixed as if to form some common platform. As Marianne Moyaert puts it,

Particularism is especially wary of generalizing theories on a common ground, on mutual experience or purpose or on focusing on faith traditions as they are *practiced*. Reducing a living faith to a system of abstract schemas ignores the way in which faith is always experienced concretely. One should never abstract the particular elements of a religious tradition from the way that the adherents of that tradition practice them.³

Each and every religion is a distinct system with its own beliefs, dogmas, teachings, rituals and practices that cannot be reduced to some universal abstract understanding of what religion is. One of the dominant approaches in particularism is comparative theology⁴ which aims at understanding a “lived” religious experience within one religion and how similar/different that experience is from another religion. In the words of Francis Clooney, one of the “spokesperson[s]”⁵ of comparative theology,

Comparative theology -- comparative and theological beginning to end -- marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.⁶

² For a summary of these typologies please see Adam Y. Wells, “A Tree With Many Branches: Abrahamic Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 27/1, 25-44 doi: 10.2143/SID.27.1.3275090 as well as Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness” in *Modern Theology* 28:1 January 2012, pp. 25-52.

³ Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness” in *Modern Theology* 28:1 January 2012, p.35.

⁴ Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, Edited by Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, and Iain Torrance Print Publication Date: Sep 2007 Subject: Religion, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Online Publication Date: Sep 2009 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199245765.003.0037: “Today, however, the proximity of religions to one another is greater than ever and the resources for understanding religions other than one's own are unprecedented; accordingly, the opportunities are greater and responsibility more acute, and so it has become nearly impossible to justify not studying other traditions and taking their theologies into account in light of contemporary canons of learning. While theology can never be reduced to a single task, theological reflection in its mature form always stands in a dialogical relationship to the theologies of other religions, both in general and with respect to (nearly) every topic. This commits the theological community to the practice of what will here be termed ‘comparative theology’, the practice of rethinking aspects of one's own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition.”

⁵ Ulrich Winkler. “What is Comparative Theology?” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*. Edited by David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik, and Judith Gruber. Currents of Encounter Series; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011, p.240.

⁶ Clooney, Francis, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. Crescas, Hasdai, 1998), p.10.

Buddhism vs Christianity: no self vs self?

Belief in God is one of the fundamental differences between Buddhism and other faiths and religions. Some even question whether Buddhism is a religion since it does not have a concept of God. Another essential difference is that most religions have a concept of soul – whatever this individual substance might be in different religions. In Buddhism, the prevalent teaching is that there is no soul, no self. And this makes Buddhism different from other religions. In the words of the Dalai Lama,

Perhaps the chief difference between Buddhism and the world's other major faith traditions lies in its presentation of our core identity. The existence of the soul or self, which is affirmed in different ways by Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is not only firmly denied in Buddhism; belief in it is identified as the chief source of all our misery. The Buddhist path is fundamentally a process of learning to recognize this essential nonexistence of the self, while seeking to help other sentient beings to recognize it as well.⁷

The above cited words might give one an idea that Buddhism is diametrically opposed to other religions, at least when the idea of self/non-self is concerned. However, when analyzed in depth, the teaching of non-self is much more subtle than as it appears on the surface. It is necessary to see the reasons for this teaching in Buddhism and why it was introduced.

For those who undertake the path of interfaith dialogue, especially within academic and scholarly circles, such questions are of essential importance as the answers to them shed light upon the understating of the other. Another reason why it's important to look at this concept is because the doctrine of no-self *seems* nihilistic and some authors charge Buddhism of nihilism:

Recent years have seen a considerable growth of interest among Western philosophers and psychologists in aspects of Buddhist thought about consciousness and selfhood. Some time back, Derek Parfit noted parallels between his "reductionist" account of personal identity and the Buddhist idea of *anatta*—"no self," as it is usually translated. Subsequently, not only reductionists but outright eliminativists about the self have also claimed that their views have significant affinities with Buddhism. Meanwhile a number of philosophers have published works addressed to Western philosophical audiences, expounding and defending Buddhist views of the self and a fascinating recent anthology, *Self, No Self?* sets up a debate between both Buddhist and Advaita views from the "East" and both phenomenological and analytical accounts from the "West."⁸

⁷ Taken from the Introduction by Nicholas Vreeland from *Dalai Lama. A Profound Mind: Cultivating Wisdom in Everyday Life* (New Zealand: Hachette Australia, 2011).

⁸ Anthony Rudd, "No Self? Some reflections on Buddhist theories of personal identity" in *Philosophy East and West* 65 (3):869-891 (2015).

At a first glance, this teaching of Buddhism does seem to present a pessimistic view of reality. To deprive ourselves of any self, of any reality would translate into a meaningless and pointless existence. So what is actually denied when Buddhism teaches that there is no self?

If we look deeper at this particular teaching, then what comes up is that what is rather being denied is the self that causes one's sufferings. And, as the goal of Buddhism is to eliminate suffering, to liberate us from suffering then this belief in a self which has no real existence is a logical consequence of such teaching.

For Buddhism, the problem starts when we try to have the notion of self. Usually, we have some kind of notion of self which we would identify with many different aspects, in a way clinging to some material (physical aspects) or immaterial realities (views, thoughts). On the other hand, we know that all reality is constantly changing and therefore our self, or that with which we identify ourselves, is also constantly changing. In this way we undergo the change and all of this causes the dukkha, the suffering or the unsatisfaction.

Buddhism is a spiritual practice, way of liberation. But what is it that needs to be liberated? If we say that there is no self, then there is some contradiction. Much confusion and misunderstanding would have been avoided had the Buddha explained what he meant by the concept on non-self. Unfortunately, we don't have an account of the Buddha's explanation in this regard. Moreover, it is believed that when he was asked a question of whether the self exists, he remained silent.

Perhaps, the teaching on the five khandhas will shed some light on the meaning on the non-self. The five khandas are the characteristics, the aggregates, the "bundles" of processes that make up one's mind and body.

Usually when questions were asked of him, there would be explicit answers, giving explanations, analytical thinking and examples. In the case of the question about the self (no-self), Buddha did not give an answer – in fact, his answer was silence.

It seems that a negative answer to the question of whether there is a self, comes from later times, when Buddhist monks started to hold public debates on various issues pertaining to the teachings of Buddhism. Although warned by the Buddha not to enter into such debates, the followers of the Buddha did participate in the debates and there is a documentary evidence in the *Kathavatthu*, an Abhidhamma text from the first century of common era attributed to the time of King Ashoka, that contains a “no” answer to the question of self.

The Buddhist philosophical approach to being and existence is rather an advanced, subtle and complicated. Explicitly not part of the eightfold path teaching, this teaching is one of the three marks/characteristics of existence:

1. Everything is changing/impermanent
2. Everything is unsatisfactory/suffering
3. And everything is non-self.

It does not literally mean that the self has no positive implications at all -- and in one of the sutras Buddha actually does present a positive view of the self. Here it (the self) is a locus, a place of ethical activities. The strong sense of ethics and morality does position Buddha's notion of self in a way: oneself becomes a sort of protector to balance self-control and moderation in thought, words and actions. So the notion of self comes out in the ethical teaching and many aspects of the Buddhist philosophy do imply that there is a self. But what is actually meant that there is no self?

The milieu of ancient India is the context where Buddhism was born and developed and in that particular context, dominated by religious views of Jainism, Hinduism and other religions, the notion of an eternal and everlasting self was a very important one. In some regard, in those religions the self was identical with the universe.

Empirical philosophy of Buddhism: one needs to experience that which one comes to understand and in this way Buddhism is very similar to the empirical philosophy of David Hume.

All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are suffering. All dhammas (all things conditioned and unconditioned) are no-self. These are the three basic factors of all existence.....It is in order to penetrate these truths we practice the Noble Eightfold Path. We equip our minds with power through the abandoning of the five hindrances; then we can actually uncover these truths by experiencing the deep states

of meditation.....What is impermanent, subject to change, is suffering, and that by its very nature cannot be taken to be 'me', 'mine', or a 'self'. Whatever is taken to be a self will cause suffering (SN 22, 59). In fact, the permanent happiness of a self is impossible.”⁹

Suffering, the dukkha, is caused by the clinging or attachment. The only way we can actually liberate ourselves is to dismantle that attachment and get rid of the self. In other words, by sort of letting go of our self, we find true liberation or enlightenment. Contemplating on no-self might lead us to experience the emptiness or nothingness. And yet, there would still be a danger, a temptation, to cling to that concept of emptiness and thus regain the self. It is by finding this that we lose it. This does sound paradoxical (and this is somewhat similar to the Christian teaching on the paradox of our will, as taught in the New Testament in the writings of St Paul).

Is this view of Buddhism where the anatta theory claims there is no self a reductionist view, an eliminativist view? A nihilistic view?

Among the important doctrines of Buddhism is that there is suffering and this is actually one of the four noble truths. Waking up to the reality of things is the goal of Buddhism. Understanding the true nature of things and of ourselves liberates us and leads us to enlightenment.

At the core of the problem is ignorance, which is also the beginning of independent origination. Being ignorant means that we are ignorant about who we really are. Usually, people identify themselves with various things. One's personality could be that s/he is a mother, a father, a doctor, a teacher, etc. One could also identify oneself with what s/he feels: anger, joy, etc. In our minds we usually do have a concept of who we really are.

One of the practical implications of the no-self teaching in Buddhism is in the ethical sphere.¹⁰ (This is somewhat similar to the Christian moral teaching where it is the “human person”-the self and his/her free will that becomes the category to measure the human behavior and responsibility.) Once we realize that everything is interconnected, this should make us aware of our actions and responsibilities towards everyone and everything. As Mitchell Verter puts it:

⁹ Brahm, Ajahn (2005). *Dhamma talks*. Available at: http://dhammatalks.net/Books3/Ajahn_Brahm_ANATTA.htm (Accessed: 27 April 2019).

¹⁰ Please see: Sharon Todd, “Experiencing Change, Encountering the Unknown: An Education in ‘Negative Capability’ in Light of Buddhism and Levinas” in *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 201, pp. 240-254.

The realization that everything is always changing is a fairly common insight. Many Buddhist traditions, however, understand this observation not merely as knowledge about the ontological character of existence, but more importantly as something that leads to a type of ethical awareness. Realizing that all phenomena are radically contingent, radically interconnected, and radically impermanent alters our existential orientation toward the world. Once we understand the world is beyond our control and that we can never find our own selves in it, once we realize that we are vulnerable to both pain and pleasure—to both wounds and balms—we can begin to quell the attachment that causes us to suffer.¹¹

All reality does not have a self and this implies that no thing exists as an independent, isolated being. But rather it exists as a relation in constant change. Such kind of teaching is to be understood in the context of Hinduism where being is affirmed to have a self, a bigger self and a smaller self. For Buddhism, consciousness is always a relation to something

The illusion of having a self is the origin of suffering. And it is only through the enlightenment that our mind awakes and sees the reality as it is.

So, most probably, this kind of teaching was developed as a reaction to Hinduism and Brahmanism which do teach that there is a self. Epistemologically, for Buddha, we can know things only if we experience them.

According to the Buddha, if there is a soul, it is not something that survives after the body dies. Through the practice of meditation, one is able to come to an understanding that the self is a composite thing, a phenomena.

According to this doctrine, there is no "self" in the sense of a permanent, integral, autonomous being within an individual existence. What we think of as our self, our personality and ego, are temporary creations of the *Skandhas* (the groups or aggregates that make up a person). *Anatta* or *anatman* is sometimes misunderstood to mean that nothing exists, but this is not what Buddhism teaches. It's more accurate to say that there is existence, but that we understand it in a one-sided and delusional way.¹²

What is meant by the theory of *anatta* is denying the substantiality to the self. In other words, the doctrine of *anatta* denies the view that the self is a substance independent of processes making up a person.

¹¹ Verter, M. (2013) The Flow of the Breath: Levinas Mouth-to-Mouth with Buddhism, in: L. Kalmanson, F. Garrett and S. Mattice (eds) *Levinas and Asian Thought* (Pittsburgh, PA, Duquesne University Press), pp. 225–239. p.236.

¹² Morad Nazari, "The Buddhism's concept of non-self (Anatta or Anatman)", p.2 at: https://www.academia.edu/25320149/The_Buddhisms_concept_of_non-self_Anatta_or_Anatman

If what we would call a self does not actually have a substantial existence and what we call “I” is reduced to various physical and spiritual/immaterial aggregates, then how do we explain rebirth? Who/what gets to be reborn? This and similar questions do pose a challenge for the Buddhism as a teaching and these questions have to be answered. Other related questions are what is that actually suffers and what is the purpose of life, if there is no self?

According to Andrej Ule, it’s not easy to give a satisfying answer to this question:

Is it possible to understand this position without positing a certain “something” that stays the same throughout the rebirth process, or at least throughout one’s lifespan? This and similar questions have been a major bone of contention for Buddhist thinkers and they were never adequately solved—perhaps because they cannot be “solved” by a theory, but a vivid, yet ineffable meditative insight.¹³

All reality, all experience and all beings are a simply a function of dependent origination. Dependent origination is the infinity of causation. All beings, all experience and all persons are unreal and lack self-actuality and self-agency. These assumptions are the mythical Gotama’s foundational views of human experience and existence. These ‘as if’ views are the foundational assumptions of early Buddhism.

What we call a ‘being,’ or an ‘individual,’ or ‘I,’ according to Buddhist philosophy, is only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates (*pancakkhandha*).¹⁴

Essentially, ignorance is the idea of a permanent, independent self. It is this conception of an “I” opposed and separate from the people and things around us. Once we have the notion of an “I,” we have an inclination to favor those things that sustain this “I” and to be averse to those things that we think threaten this “I.” It is this conception of the self that is the fundamental cause of suffering, the root of the various negative emotions – desire, anger, ill-will, envy and jealousy.¹⁵

Buddhism presents an analysis of what might be considered a being, taking into consideration bodily (material) and spiritual (immaterial) “parts” of a human being. It also asks a question

¹³ Andrej Ule, “The Concept of Self in Buddhism and Brahmanism: Some Remarks” in *Religious and Spiritual Practices in Asia: Continuity and Change*, Vol 4 No 1 (2016) , p.84.

¹⁴ Rahula, Walpola. 1967. *What the Buddha Taught* (Revised Edition. London: Gordon Fraser, 1978), p.20.

¹⁵ Fundamentals of Buddhism, p.76.

whether any of these parts could be identified with a self (something permanent, non-changeable and substantial). Apparently, the answer is a “no.”

The gist of the Buddhist critique of the notion of ‘self’ is then this. It cannot be denied that there is a complex of experience going on; this can be conveniently analyzed by way of the five aggregates. But where precisely in all this is the constant, unchanging self which is having all these experiences? What we find when we introspect, the Buddha suggests, is always some particular sense datum, some particular feeling, some particular idea, some particular wish or desire, some consciousness of something particular. And all these are constantly changing from one moment to the next; none of them remains for more than a mere moment. Thus, apart from some particular experience, I never actually directly come across or experience the ‘I’ that is having experiences. It is something entirely elusive.¹⁶

Would a distinction between a self and a person be helpful here? If I am to identify with a self that is continuously changing and impermanent. A person, on the other hand, is rather a continuum of causally related psychophysical processes that plays a role in the world. In fact, the word *person*, in English, captures this perfectly. The word comes from *persona*, a mask, or a role in theatre.¹⁷

If we assume that there is no self, then who or what is it that gains the insight and the consciousness/awareness of the fact that there is no self? In other words, is this knowledge something theoretical and epistemologically based? For the Buddhist tradition, knowledge and insight is not mere theory – it comprises experience and can be described as experiential: we truly learn and know something if we experience it. Therefore, while a metaphysical self is denied existence and being, the process of getting to know “passes” through something which must have some sort of existence. It seems that in Buddhism only the processes exist. The harsh criticism and the denial of the metaphysical self in Buddhism leads to the theory that all things are impermanent. Everything undergoes a change all the time.

The teaching of the three main characteristics of all phenomena – everything is impermanent, there is suffering and there is no self – reflects the main goal of Buddhism: nirvana.

If we come to an understanding and acceptance of the claim that everything is impermanent, then we lose our detachment to things. There is no more clinging and we detach ourselves from them.

This, in turn, leads us to nirvana.

¹⁶ Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 137.

¹⁷ See Jay Garfield, “Why There Is No Self: A Buddhist Perspective for the West” at: <https://iai.tv/articles/why-there-is-no-self-a-buddhist-perspective-for-the-west-auid-1044>

The cosmology of the Buddhist teaching is a cycle of continuous causes and effects that have no beginning.

This kind of sum of various aggregates is nothing else but a cause and effect of other sums which have a relative existence. Nothing points to the fact that human existence (self) is eternal or everlasting. In this light, the self becomes an empty notion, void of any meaning and substance.

The questions of consciousness is an interesting one to explore in Buddhism as it is this concept that reflects or is aware of what is going on.

In any person, the five skhandas constitute the sort of unity of one's existence and they are interdependent: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), idea and perception (*saññā*), formation (*samskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). What is being denied is an idea of a metaphysical and eternal self.

However, they accept the idea of a person, or of an empirical mental being that temporarily and conditionally lives in a given form. Strictly speaking, only the term "person" unifies the complex of constituents of a human being into a unity.

As noted by one of the scholars of Buddhism, Peter Harvey,

The teaching on phenomena as non-Self is intended to undermine not only the Brahmanical or Jain concepts of Self but also much more commonly held conceptions and deep-rooted feelings of I-ness. To feel that however much one changes in life from childhood onwards, some essential part remains constant and unchanged as the 'real me' is to have a belief in a permanent Self. To act as if only *other* people die, and to ignore the inevitability of one's own death, is to act as if one had a permanent Self. To relate changing mental phenomena to a substantial self which 'owns' them: 'I am worried - happy . . . angry' - is to have such a Self-concept. To build a firm identity based on one's bodily appearance or abilities, or on one's sensitivities, ideas and beliefs, actions, intelligence, academic status etc. is to take them as part of an I, a 'me', taking these phenomena as '*mine*'.¹⁸

Nirvana.

Some early canonical passages hint that it may be a radically transformed state of consciousness) (*vinna*). Such passages talk of nirvana as a consciousness 'in which nothing can be made manifest,' and of nirvana being realized when consciousness, through non-attachment, is without any object (*arāmaṇa*) to act as its support (*patittha*): which accords with [item (iv) from page 8.]. Nevertheless, the developed Theravada tradition does not take up this hint. While nirvana is itself seen as objectless, an enlightened person's consciousness is seen to have it as its object. Page 99 of Harvey

So could it be said that what there is is a continuous process, a cycle of events that come and go, due to interdependent origination? In this way, whatever we perceive as a self, would be constituted by these relations of cause and effect. This is somewhat similar to the idea and concept of the Holy

¹⁸ Peter Harvey, "How not to get Confused in Talking and Thinking Around *Anatta* / *Anatman*" (From a talk given at the Buddhist Society May 2017).

Trinity in Christianity. The teaching about the Christian God – in Three Divine Persons – is a teaching about eternal relations of one the same divine nature. The three persons of the Trinity are distinguished among each other precisely by their relations to each other: the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father and so on. The eternal and never-ending cycle within the one and unified entity of the Trinity is expressed in the Greek term *perichoresis*:

Perichoresis is the dance, the continuum of self-movement of the dynamic self-existence of this interrelated Triuneness. John of Damascus finds this metaphor a most appropriate description of the threefold interrelatedness within Divinity [...]. God is not a monistic principle, but a differentiating unity – therefore always differentiated as a continuum of oneness. What we experience as the phenomenal or created world, participates in the divine interrelatedness, i.e., in God's knowledge and love.¹⁹

As was mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Buddhism is not a god-oriented religion. Unlike Christianity and other religions, Buddhism has no belief in a personal, transcendental being. This being said, it must also be said that, according to the Buddhist doctrine, there are divine beings:

While Buddhism is not a religion focused on an all-powerful creator 'God,' it does accept a range of beings and levels of reality which go beyond our everyday world [...]. In the Buddhist world-view, ultimate reality is generally not personalized, as a God, much less as a single God. It is seen in more impersonal terms as a state to be attained or realized: nirvana. The personal dimension comes in when one looks at those who experience this reality: for Theravada Buddhism, *rahats* (saints) and earthly buddhas; for Mahayana Buddhism, Heavenly buddhas and advanced bodhisattvas, who are on the brink of buddahood. 95

In contrast to Christianity, Buddhism, as was mentioned above, did not try to have a teaching on self developed. This strive was actually fundamental for Christianity where from the earliest times the focus was actually on the person of Christ. Greek philosophy came in very handy to theologians who worked out various Christological and Trinitarian teachings and doctrines proclaimed by the early councils.

The idea of an immortal soul is certainly a firmly established traditional belief of Christians, but it is a belief that has entered Christian thinking through the influence of Greek philosophy and is altogether alien to what the Bible teaches about the nature and destiny of man.²⁰

Such terms as person, substance, nature, relations, etc. were crucial in shaping what Christianity presented to the outside world and how it understood itself in relation to the other religions. In Buddhism, the path was pretty much different. While remaining a pretty much a philosophy, it emphasized that all learning should be experiential. In other words, concepts are important but

¹⁹ Michael on Bruck, 56.

²⁰ Lynn A. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1979), p.3.

unless knowledge is experienced, it cannot be totally appropriated. If compared to the approach that Christianity took, at least in its Catholic form, then we must say that dogma and teaching (theological teaching) is of fundamental importance

Another problem with the doctrine of non-self comes up if we consider the topic of reincarnation. If we claim that there is reincarnation, then there has to be something to reincarnate? How do we harmonize this doctrine with the teaching that there is no self? As explained by one of the scholars of Buddhism,

Certainly, [Buddha] taught a doctrine of non-self (anatman). But this was not a non-self doctrine in the sense that it examined metaphysically the existence or otherwise of atman and then decided that it does not exist. The meaning he taught is found in a practical context: there is nothing which one can find as an atman, an 'I', in the sense of continuing for ever and being subject to one's will. The non-self teaching had the practical significance of removing the cleaving to an 'I'. And as there was no special contradiction between the idea of a reincarnating subject and the non-self doctrine, Buddhism took up the reincarnation not in the physical sense but on the 'transcendent' level.²¹

The Buddhist pattern in contrast has been to adjure all conceptual selfhood whatsoever as intrinsically evil, and to glory in its precise opposite – the destruction of the sense of self-hood, the denial of the reality of the self, the illusory quality of self-consciousness, and so on...But we may ask, which self (or self in what context) does Buddhism desire to rid humanity of? For the non-self language of Buddhism should not blind anyone, either non-Buddhist or Buddhist, to overwhelming existential vitality of some sort of selfness in Buddhism... Indeed throughout the Buddhist spiritual discipline in all its varieties and history, a persistent feature strikes the attention: The increasingly “non-selfed” or “de-selfed” self acts increasingly like what the West has sought to designate by its terms autonomous, integrated, liberated, spontaneous, enlarged, or redeemed self, i.e., the achievement of genuine self-controlled, acting-from-within selfhood – though it may be argued that Buddhism achieves a deeper level of subjective spontaneity and integration.²²

What about the concept of emptiness? Is emptiness to be understood conceptually or existentially?

²¹ Trevor Leggett, “Non-self and the Reincarnation” in *The Middle Way*, Vol.80, No.4 (February 2006), .219.

²² Absolute Nothingness, p.13

This negative way of speaking has parallels within Christian theology as well. In the Eastern Theology, at least, there is the whole branch called *theologia apophatica*²³ – the apophatic or negative theology which was in a way led by mystics (those who rather experience God and the grace/energy of God rather than those who theologize or see theology as an academic discipline). For these theologians, God is totally other, the unknowable and all we can say about God is only what he is not: God is not matter, is not knowable, etc. According to George Maloney,

Apophatic theology (from the Greek, *apophanai*, to speak out, to deny) developed within the Christian tradition as a reaction to Eunomius in the 4th century and to other thinkers who overstressed *cataphatic* theology (from the Greek, *kataphasis*, to speak positively or in an affirmative manner) and exaggerated the ability of human beings to form rational concepts—as though they exhausted the reality of God. [...] The essence [...] of apophatic theology [...] has a very positive aspect and provides the basis for true mystical theology. It embraces a positive statement covering an experiential knowledge of God that goes beyond anything that the mere power of human beings can attain outside of God's gift. [...] The apophatic approach is found also in Far Eastern religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Such apophatic terms of negation, common to all true mystical traditions, especially Eastern Christianity and the Far Eastern religions, such as emptiness, void, darkness, and nothingness, are paradoxically positive. Such terms are symbols pointing to God who remains completely "other." God is not known by him who knows Him, not understood by him who understands. He alone contemplates Him who has ceased to contemplate Him. In all knowledge, as though by intuition, the wise man discovers and experiences God.²⁴

In this way, Buddhism and Christianity have something to share in common: the stress on the “negative” approach to the ultimate reality, God in Christianity and nirvana in Buddhism. It must be stated, however, that the nature of the ultimate reality for Buddhism and Christianity is radically different: while Buddhism claims that nirvana is strictly impersonal, while Christian view of the ultimate reality entails a personal character as one of the main features.

Moreover, the concept of kenosis, the emptying out of oneself, which is so crucial in the Christian theology of the Trinity and of the role of Jesus Christ, is another interesting parallel that makes Christianity closer to Buddhism. In the teaching about kenosis, Christ, the second person of the

²³ Piotr Urbańczyk provides with some of the definitions of apophatic theology in Piotr Urbańczyk, "The Logical Challenge of Negative Theology" in *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric* 54 (67), 2018, p.150: "Definition 1.1. Apophatic theology is another name for "theology by way of negation," according to which God is known by negating concepts that might be applied to him, stressing the inadequacy of human language and concepts used to describe God. Definition 1.2. Negative theology is a name given to a tradition within Christianity that confesses God to be so utterly transcendent, so beyond our concepts and names for God, that we must in fact "negate" them in order to free God from such cramped categories. Definition 1.3. Apophatic theology is the doctrine that no affirmative or *positive attributes of any kind* are predicable of God, that God is completely unknown and unknowable, that we can meaningfully say about God only *what He is not* (to speak of Him in *negative attributes*); the doctrine that man's highest knowledge of God is to know that we are *unable to know Him*."

²⁴ G.A. Maloney, "Apophatic Theology" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Gale, 2003, p. 568. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/CX3407700686/GVRL?u=walamp&sid=GVRL&xid=bcd3a751>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2019.

Holy Trinity, empties out himself in order to take the human nature. In the Bible, in the letter to the Philippians there is a verse that says that “[Christ] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7).

The mysterious act takes place without Christ losing his personality though. He becomes the Incarnate God (similar to the concept of transmigration or reincarnation in Buddhism?). This emptying out of himself makes it possible to transform the whole of humanity which is now has access to the primordial state – the state-with-being-with-God. These similarities need to be further explored if one has an interest in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The hermeneutical openness to the other might indeed result in a surprisingly rich and transformative comparative theology of the two ancient traditions and this will make an impact on how to study interfaith dialogue.

The dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity has evolved considerably over the past few decades. The dialogue no longer remains merely at the stage of promoting mutual understanding between the two religions. Going a step further, the dialogue is entering a new stage in which the mutual transformation of Buddhism and Christianity is seriously being explored. This new development is taking place not only in terms of theology or doctrinal understanding, but also in the field of practical spirituality.²⁵

According to James Jills, when speaking about self and non-self, we have to make a distinction between two kinds of speech:

In the earliest texts of Buddhism, the Pali Canon (about 500 B.C.), we come across a distinction drawn between two types of discourse: that of direct meaning and that of indirect meaning. The former type of discourse is said to be one whose meaning is plain while the latter type course is said to be one whose meaning is plain while the latter type needs to have its meaning inferred with reference to the former. In the needs to have its meaning inferred with reference to the former. In the discourses of indirect meaning, words are used which apparently refer to persisting entities such as a self or an I which, according to the Buddha, are merely "expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world which the Tathagata (i.e., the Buddha) makes use of without being led astray by them." That is, although we may use words like "self" and "I," we should not be led into thinking that they actually refer to something, for they are but grammatical devices. This nondenoting aspect of these expressions is something which must be inferred in light of the discourses of direct meaning. In this latter type of discourse, the nonexistence of anything permanent or enduring, such as the self or I, is asserted, and the misleading features of language-those features which lead us astray into the belief in an I-are made explicit. Here there is no need for inference, since the meaning of such discourse is plain.²⁶

The teaching that there is no self is linked to the Buddhist's understanding of nirvana. Most probably the non-self theory was intended to be a therapeutic outlook on life; an outlook that paved

²⁵ Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, ed., *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity. Essay and Explorations* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, U.S.A., 1990), p.5.

²⁶ James Giles, "The No-Self Theory: Hume, Buddhism, and Personal Identity" in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Apr., 1993), pp. 175-200 at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1399612>

the way to elimination of suffering, since the self is connected to the idea of suffering. In this way, the teaching on non-self has a practical dimension to it.

Nirvana, the non-physical state, is a state where there is no more suffering of any type and the concept of no-self would find no place in the state of nirvana. If suffering is caused by the self, and if there is no suffering in nirvana, therefore there to be no self in the state of nirvana.

It is indeed logical that if the teaching on no-self is taken by itself, then Buddhism would be nihilism. However, the teaching on nirvana and emptiness build on the teaching of no-self and they must be seen together as part of the doctrine of Buddhism.²⁷

The teaching of interdependent origination and the teaching on emptiness offer important insights into deep philosophy of Buddhism. The interdependent origination theory says that there is no experience or phenomenon which can be seen separate from any other experience or phenomenon. Everything is dependent on something else. There is a distinction among causal, mereological, and pragmatic conceptual dependence. The essence of the teaching of dependent origination is that nothing in this world has an intrinsic nature and this leads to the teaching on emptiness.

Another difference between Buddhism and Christianity is in how the two religions understand the ultimate goal. Whereas for Buddhism, ultimate reality is *shunyata* – which literally translates as emptiness, in Christianity, the goal is a mystical union with the Triune and personal God. Another important distinction that is often made in reference to the core Buddhist teachings is the distinction between “conventional” and “ultimate” truth.²⁸

Meditation

Meditation is a very important practice in Buddhism and in the Buddhist spirituality.²⁹ Two aspects of this practice – the calm and the insight – aim at achieving deep states of concentration and wisdom:

The way of the Buddhist meditation is [...] to look deep into ourselves and to see the very nature of our minds. The principal immediate mental defilements that constitute the obstacles to the path are known as the five “hindrances”: sensual desire, will-will, tiredness and sleepiness, excitement and depression, and doubt.³⁰

²⁷ See: Jonathan Gold, “Without Karma and Nirvana, Buddhism is Nihilism” pp. 213-241 in Jay L. Garfield, ed., *Madhyamaka and Yogacara: Allies or Rivals?* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

²⁸ Please see: Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.147-176.

²⁹ Sarah Shaw, *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation* (Routledge, 2009).

The benign effect of meditation has been attested to by sources that are not Buddhist or even religious. Psychology and sociology would confirm this claim. Meditation is a powerful technique to regain control over one's thoughts and actions. It is a way to empower oneself. Meditative practices

can provide the members with subjective empowerment by giving them a sense of agency, strength, protection, and increased self-esteem.[...] In contrast to the insight meditation movement and its strategy of dissolving the self through realization of the principle of non-self these practices seem to strengthen the sense of selfhood and produce a grandiose persona, something that might appear especially appealing to lower strata of the dispossessed.³¹

As a note of warning, Thich Nhat Hanh writes that meditation on key concepts of Buddhism will not lead one to establish a metaphysical teaching or system. In his words,

The meditation on interdependence is intended to remove the false barriers of discrimination so that one can enter into the universal harmony of life. It is not intended to produce a philosophical system, a system of interdependence.

Try to see . . . that impermanence is a concept, non-self is a concept, emptiness is a concept, so that you will not become imprisoned in the concepts of impermanence, nonself, and emptiness.³²

Meditation plays an important life in Christianity as well. Many of the spiritual practices and mystical traditions value meditation as it helps us purify our minds and hearts and makes the union with God closer. In this way, meditation can serve as another similar practice within Buddhism and Christianity that make dialogue possible. As one of the authors puts it, the spiritual search of modern wo/man invites religions to unite their efforts in offering a renewed vision of humanity, and in this respect both Buddhism and Christianity have a lot to offer:

The search for world community urges us to seek for a form or forms of spirituality that can be shared by people of different faiths and ideologies. [...] The basic criteria for such a spirituality can be derived from the understanding of spirituality in terms of anatta-pneuma. Religions have tended to emphasize inwardness (a characteristic particularly of renascent religions) to the neglect of social action, and ideologies have tended to emphasize social action to the neglect of inwardness. The understanding of spirituality in terms of anatta-pneuma will perhaps help participation in a common spirituality by linking inwardness with action, solitary contemplation with mutuality and transcendence with social involvement, because all these aspects are linked together in the very nature of man, characterized by the three qualities of mutuality, egolessness and transcendence.³³

³⁰ Rupert Gethin, p.175.

³¹ Niklas Foxeus, "I am the Buddha, the Buddha is Me': Concentration Meditation and Esoteric Modern Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar" in *Numen* 63 (2015), pp.1–35, p.20.

³² Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, pp. 55, 92-93.

³³ Lynn A. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1979), p.159.

Conclusion

In an increasingly secularized world, there is a need to rethink some of the teachings within most of religious traditions. The wisdom, intellectual insight and richness of our religions – in this case of Buddhism and Christianity – provide substantial grounds for deep thinking and analysis. This essay tried to delineate the views on self and no-self in Christianity and Buddhism, taking Comparative Theology as our method.

Both religious traditions contain theologies (theological or philosophical views) of non self/self and in some instances we have seen similarities but also pinpointed differences. This leaves us with a good ground for a further theological inquiry into whether a comparative theology of these concepts can emerge from the study of these two specific religions.

In our essay we tried to examine the concept of no-self in Buddhism. Understanding that approaching Buddhism with a Christian framework is not the best method to understand another religion, we attempted to look at such Buddhist teachings as no-self, emptiness and mediation by using the method of comparative theology, finding parallel teachings on the same themes in Christianity. Interfaith dialogue has many different levels and in our essay we attempted to stay on the theological/academic level of the study of Buddhism and regarding some of its key concepts.

One of the contributions that Buddhism could offer to the world today is a richness and depth of its ethics system. Moral responsibility, ethical care of the loving beings, love, compassion and other virtues are so important for any society to grow, develop and flourish. On the hand, the emphasis on the self, the rise of individualism and egoism are issues that plague modern societies. In this respect, both Buddhism and Christianity are good antidotes to the “selfie” culture that is fueled by consumerism, individualism and other alarming trends that have started to take over so many societies and countries around the globe.

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