

The Bible in the Contemporary World

*Exploring texts and
contexts – then and now*

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SPCK

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CHAPTER 11

I chose this topic as one that could contribute to mutual understanding between Christians and Buddhists. Buddhism seems to me a religion focused exclusively on the transformation of self (recall the Buddha's refusal to answer questions not directly related to this), whereas Christianity appears to me rather as a religion that is about all kinds of things, perhaps because it is primarily about God. But, whether or not this contrast is valid, it is certainly true that Christianity is also vitally concerned with the transformation of the self.

past, present, and expected future. The human self has no independent being, outside of relationships, and no timeless existence outside of the temporal reality that we can only describe in narrative. I am who I am in my relationships with others, and I am who I become in the narrative of my life. From the Christian perspective, I believe, these make me who I really and truly am, the self that, redeemed and healed in every way, God will finally take into eternity.

The self exists within, indeed is part of, the flux of events in this temporal, spatial, and material reality. It is therefore characterized by both continuity and difference. There are major discontinuities in the life of the human self that might put in question the claim to continuous identity. I suggest that from the Christian perspective there are two kinds of discontinuity, and that an account of these may best highlight comparisons and contrasts between Christian and Buddhist teaching about the self.

First, there is the transformation of self that occurs in the transition from the false self to the true self. This is the transition that occurs decisively in Christian conversion, symbolized in baptism as a ritual act of dying and rising to new life, but which also must continue to occur throughout Christian life in this world, as continual experience of repentance and renewal. There are a variety of ways in which biblical and Christian language speaks of this transition. Paul speaks of dying to sin, and also of having been crucified with Christ and rising to new life in Christ. We shall return to this connection with Jesus Christ. But at this point it is most important to identify the difference between the old, sinful self that is left behind and the new, authentic self that one becomes.

Note: This essay originated as a contribution to a day of Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

God and to others, living for God and for others, realizing itself to be given by God and by others. It is not self-created but God-given. Its world is radically reordered, with God, the source and the goal of all things, at the center. This means that the true self lives, in a sense, from and to a center outside itself. As a unique and particular individual, it has its particular place in reality, from which it must view and relate to the rest of reality. Its perspective is relative to its own spatial, temporal, and material location in the world, as must be true of all finite creatures. But it can transcend this perspective through its openness to God and to others — its loving obedience to God, its empathic, loving identification with other people, its loving appreciation of all creatures. Its identity is formed in these relationships of love, so that its own concerns are taken up into the divine concern for all creation.

As for the narratival aspect of this self, the common images of rising from death to new life or of being reborn to a new kind of life convey the sense of a radically new beginning, a story that now arises from God's grace. This is what Paul means in the statement, often quoted in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20). This does not mean that there is no longer a unique personal subject, no self at all, but that instead of Paul's pre-Christian attempt at self-creation, living from his own resources, he now lives from the grace of God in Christ. This is clear from the way he continues: "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). We shall return to the christological aspect of this.

But is this new identity wholly discontinuous with the old? Paul here comes as close to suggesting that as he can, but even here there is a continuity of Paul's "I" without which his claim would not make sense. There is continuity, but it is not a continuity the self maintains for itself through its transformation. It is continuity given by God in the grace that transforms the self. The false self and its world were never, of course, entirely false from start to finish; they were a sinful distortion of God's good creation. God's grace does not simply replace, it reforms and renews, it takes what is good of the old, what is redeemable of the old, into the new. Even those Christians who undergo the most revolutionary kind of conversion experience subsequently find that their awareness of a completely fresh start is consistent with realizing how much of what they previously were has gone into the making of the new. The old self's self-serving narrative has to be written, seen, and evaluated from a new perspective, but it cannot be

The Christian Way as Losing and Finding Self

disowned. It becomes itself part of a new narrative of grace. Paul's identity will forever be that of the persecutor of God's people who became, through God's disruption of that narrative, quite the opposite.

There is also another kind of discontinuity in the Christian understanding and experience of the self. This is not transition from false to true, but a feature of the true self's narrative. It is memorably expressed in a saying of Jesus that occurs no less than six times in the four Gospels.¹ In most occurrences there are interpretative additions to the saying, but in its simplest form it is:

Whoever seeks to gain their life will lose it,
but whoever loses their life will keep it. (Luke 17:33)

The Greek word here used for "life" (*psyche*) strongly approaches the meaning "self," so long as the self is understood to exist in the concrete life of the individual in relationships and history.

The first line describes the mistake made by the person who embraces their false self. The attempt to secure one's life by living it for one's own benefit is bound to fail, because death comes to everyone and is the end of what the selfish person is trying to keep. To live one's life as though one owns it and can use it and keep it for oneself is an illusion that death will brutally destroy, as the rich fool in Jesus' parable discovered. That life is given by God and cannot be secured but only received from him emerges undeniably but too late when God takes it back at death (Luke 12:16-21). But there is also a sense in which living for oneself destroys life already before death. In grasping and hoarding life for their own enjoyment, selfish people find the real fulfillment they seek escapes them even before life itself escapes them in death. The true self cannot be found that way.

The second line describes, by contrast, the way of the true self. Those who give up the foolish attempt to keep their lives for themselves, who, in other words, deny themselves and live for God and for others, find their lives given back to them by God. Does this finding of life (as in some versions of the saying) or keeping of life (in other versions) occur before or after death? The various contexts in which the Gospels place the saying show that they certainly envisage martyrdom, as the extreme case of losing one's life, but some of the contexts require a broader application to the

1. There are probably four independent traditions of the saying: (1) Mark 8:35; Matt. 16:25; Luke 9:24; (2) Matt. 10:39; (3) Luke 17:33; (4) John 12:25.

renunciation of self throughout a life of discipleship to Jesus (see especially Luke 9:23-24).

Intriguingly, with whichever sense of losing life one starts, one finds it includes the other also. Take, first, the person who expends their life in self-giving for God and for others. This is the life that is possible through radical trust in God, not needing to secure oneself through selfish clinging to life because one has entrusted oneself wholly to God. Such a person finds their true self in such self-giving. They find their true self continuously given them by God as they give themselves for God. But for someone who so lives out of trust in God, it is inconceivable that the extreme act of self-giving, the death of a martyr, should fall outside the scope of the saying. If self-giving is the way to true life, then a fortiori, should it be required of one, martyrdom must be.

Alternatively, one can begin with the saying's reference to martyrdom. Someone who gives up their life in the service of Christ entrusts their life to the power and faithfulness of God. All self-concern is transcended through faith in God. The one who thus gives their life will find it given back by God in resurrection beyond death. But if the receiving of one's true and eternal self is thus through the giving of oneself, this must also be true of all self-giving short of martyrdom. In the self one receives anew from God at every stage of self-expenditure, one is already becoming the self one will receive at the resurrection. Then it is not one life that one loses (mortal life lost in death) and another that one gains (eternal life in resurrection), but the same self that one is in self-giving one receives from God both now and eternally.

This key saying of Jesus (along with much that coheres with it in the New Testament and Christian tradition) therefore characterizes the way of the true self as one that is not a continuous line of maintaining one's self-identity, but a continually broken line, in that the true self lives in self-giving and self-denial. But as the self is continually given, so it is continually received afresh from God. This is life lived as gift of God. The self that knows itself to be given by God lives in giving itself, to and for God and others, and thus constantly receives itself as gift from God and from others. Here too it is God's grace that creates the continuity through the discontinuity. True self-identity is not found through maintaining it, but received through God's gift. This makes it intelligible that even through death, the final disruption of the narrative of the self, the continuity of the self is given by God. The false self that clings to life cannot survive death, but the true self that lives in self-abandonment to God receives itself again beyond death.

The Christian Way as Losing and Finding Self

From the perspective of Christian theology it will seem extraordinary to have said so much without explaining its christological basis — that it is “in Christ” that Christians understand the true self to be found. But I have proceeded in this way for the sake of ease of exposition. Now that we have understood the two patterns of the narrative self — first, the loss of the false self and the finding of the true self, and second, the losing and finding of the true self — we can see how they are based in Jesus Christ and who he is for us.

Jesus lived and fulfilled his own saying, as the Gospels clearly indicate. In his self-expenditure in life and death he did not seek to preserve his life but gave it up for all of us. Losing it he found it in God's raising him from the dead. But Jesus is no mere example or paradigm of this pattern. Jesus is the one who gave his life for all of us, and so his resurrection is also for us all. As Jesus throughout his life received his life from God, never as a gift purely for himself, but always as life to be given for others, so his risen life, received from God beyond the absolute self-giving of his death, is given to him for others. The resurrection of Jesus is God's gift of Jesus' self to and for us.

Now we must see how the two patterns of the narrative self are given to us in Christ and realized for us in union with him. The key to this is the notion of loving identification, that is, the kind of love that is able to go out of itself in self-giving and truly to identify with others in their own situations and needs. It is through this kind of love that the true self transcends the self-enclosed concern of the false self, and finds itself in identification with others. It is this kind of love that binds us together with Christ in an identification initiated from his side and reciprocated from ours.

First, consider the loss of the false self and the finding of the true self. This is the place for Paul's claims that we have been crucified with Christ, as though our false selves were put to death when Jesus died on Golgotha. Jesus' self-giving for us entailed his loving identification with us in all the sinfulness of our false selves. His love could not truly reach us if it could not reach us in our false selves and liberate us from them. Thus our false selves were put to death in his death, and our true selves are given us in his risen life.

Second, consider the losing and finding of the true self. Finding our true selves in Christ, we identify with him who loved us, follow his way of self-giving for God and for others, and thus continually find ourselves afresh in him. The Christian self both gives and finds itself in the love of Jesus Christ.