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The Structure Buddhist-Christian Conceptual Dialogue

CHRISTIAN CONCEPTUAL DIALOGUE WITH BUDDHISM

The focus of conceptual dialogue is doctrinal, theological, and philosophical. It concerns a religious tradition's collective self-understanding and worldview. In conceptual dialogue, Buddhists and Christians compare theological and philosophical formulations on such questions as ultimate reality, human nature, suffering and evil, the role of Jesus in Christian faith, the role of the Buddha in Buddhist practice, and what Christians and Buddhists can conceptually learn from one another. Historically, Christians have encountered Buddhists since the first century CE.[1] Yet until the sixteenth-century Jesuit missions to China and Japan led by Mattaeo Ricci and Francis Xavier, respectively, precise knowledge of Buddhist teachings and practices were generally inaccurate and uninformed. As knowledge of Buddhism gradually made its way into the West, Christian encounter with Buddhism was more monological than dialogical for cultural and historical reasons peculiar to both traditions. Serious Western attempts to understand Buddhism in its own terms did not begin until the emergence of scholarly research in the field of history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*) in the nineteenth century, which provided the historical context for Christian

1. The first textual reference to Buddhism in Christian literary sources appears around the year 200 in the *Miscellany* (*Stromateis*) of Clement of Alexandria, who wished to show that Christian *gnosis* was superior to every other form of wisdom:"And there are in India those who follow the commandments of the Buddha, whom they revere as a God because of his immense holiness"; cited in Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 307.

contemporary encounter with the world religions in general, and with Buddhism in particular.

Most Christian theological reflection on Buddhism was exclusivist in nature because its main purpose was to demonstrate the superiority of Christian faith and practice as the sole vehicle of humanity's salvation. Serious theological challenge to this agenda began to appear in the summer of 1980, when David Chappell organized the first "East-West Religions in Encounter" conference at the University of Hawaii. The structure of Christian theological reflection on Buddhism has since changed from an exclusivist monologue to dialogical encounter, at least in liberal circles of contemporary Catholic and Protestant thought. The initial "East-West Religions in Encounter" group is now permanently organized as the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies (SBCS). This society and its journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, have evolved into an important international forum for worldwide support of the continuing dialogue now occurring between Christians and Buddhists.

Contemporary Christian encounter with Buddhism reflects the pluralism of post-modern and, some would argue, post-Christian, cultural and religious diversity because Christian encounter with Buddhism, as is Buddhist encounter with Christianity, is itself pluralistic. This pluralism is rooted in the history of Christian encounter with the world religions since the first century, a history in which there have existed a limited number of theological options for considering other religious traditions. Most Christian responses were exclusivist and rejected non-Christian religions as idolatrous coupled with the goal of replacing them through the conversion of their followers. Hellenistic paganism was viewed in this way. Or the Greek and Roman philosophers could be seen as possessing limited goodness and truth, which is fulfilled and perfected in Christianity. The mainly inclusivist Christian response to Neoplatonism by the church fathers and mothers illustrates this possibility, where Christians sought to convert Neoplatonists to Christianity while at the same time preserving this tradition's attainments. Sometimes a non-Christian tradition was viewed as nonreligious, in which case it could be allowed to continue along side of Christianity. In the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries in China treated Confucianism in this way.

By the second half of the twentieth-century Christian theology of religions within some liberal circles took a new direction when many theologians recognized the validity of non-Christian religious traditions. Accordingly, much Christian scholarship on non-Christian religions focused on developing a neutral methodology for the comparative study of religions. Tolerance became

a central theological virtue. Partly as a negative reaction to this trend, neo-orthodox writers reasserted theological exclusivism by claiming that Christian faith is not one religion among others, but is not a religion at all. For example, Karl Barth, Emile Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined "religion," including "Christian religion," as a human activity, whereas what is crucial in Christian faith is God's decisive action and response to the world through Jesus Christ. Responding to God's act in Christ is "faith," not "religion." Because of the influence of Protestant neo-orthodoxy following the Second World War, theology and history of religions developed independently of one another as specialized academic disciplines with little interdisciplinary contact.

In neo-orthodox theology, no salvation apart from explicit faith has usually meant commitment to doctrinal propositions, particularly the doctrine of justification by faith through grace alone. So when Barth wrote that Christian faith is not "religion" because "religion is unbelief," meaning "man's attempt to justify and sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God,"[2] he set the essentials of Protestant neo-orthodoxy's approach to Buddhism in particular and non-Christian religious traditions in general: no "religion," including Christianity understood as a "religion," has any truth that can lead persons to salvation because all "religions" are inventions by sinful human beings seeking to establish a saving relationship with God by means of their own contrivances. The opposite of "religion" is Christian faith, which is not a "religion" but a "witness" to a different reality, namely, "God's condescension to us" through Christ. Christian faith always rests on God's prior action of breaking into the conditions of existence through the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus as the Christ. In regard to Buddhism, Barth once took note of the similarity between the doctrines of faith and grace in Christian and Japanese Pure Land Buddhist traditions. But he dismissed this aspect of Buddhist doctrine as an inferior expression of what Christians experience through faith in Christ.[3]

While it is clear that most Christians have understood that participation in Christian faith and practice is the exclusive means of salvation, this has not always implied the absence of God's saving action for non-Christians or the inability or unwillingness to incorporate truth perceived in non-Christians traditions into Christian self-understanding. But from the time of Constantine the Great (280?–337), when the church began transforming itself into a sacred institution claiming both religious and secular authority over the lives

2. Barth, "The Revelation of God and the Absolutism of Religion."

3. Ibid., 340–44.

of Christians and non-Christians, what is today called "theology of religions" in Christian circles took on a hard-line exclusivism: all human beings must become Christian in order to be in a saving relationship with God. This idea, later promulgated by the Council of Florence (1438–45) as the doctrine of "no salvation outside the church" (*extra ecclesiam nulla sallus*), is the classical form of Christian theological exclusivism. In pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic theology of religions, "no salvation outside the church" meant no salvation apart from participation in Catholic sacraments and ethical teachings. When the Second Vatican Council published the "Dogmatic Constitution of the Church" and the "Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" in 1964 and 1965 respectively, Roman Catholic theology of religions and its conversation with Buddhism took on a more inclusive character.

Barth's exclusivist theology of religions in particular, and Protestant neo-orthodox theology in general, did not take the world's religions seriously as objects of theological reflection. Nor did Catholic theology. But after the Second World War, voices arose within Protestant and Catholic circles that paid more critical attention to the world's religions. Two important transitional Protestant figures in this regard are Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann, both of whom set important precedents for the development of theological encounter with Buddhism and other religious traditions.

After Tillich's encounter with important Buddhist philosophers in Japan and the publication of his *Christianity and the Encounter with the World's Religions*, he concluded that his "method of correlation" was inadequate for judging the truth of non-Christian traditions. Tillich's method of correlation, deeply influenced by Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy, asserted that the universal questions all human beings have about the meaning of existence are most completely answered by the Christian revelation. He did not seriously entertain the possibility that there might be more adequate Buddhist or Hindu or Islamic answers to these universal questions. But his experience in Japan taught him that there might be some questions and answers in Buddhist tradition that might correlate more adequately to the structures of existence than Christian answers to these same questions. Consequently, Tillich began reflecting on how Christian encounter with religious pluralism might deepen both Christian theology and Christian experience. Unfortunately, Tillich died before he could develop his evolving insights into a systematic theology of religions.[4]

4. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with the World's Religions*; and Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 3–68.

Similarly, Moltmann wrote of the need for Christian encounter with the world's religions as a means not only for Christian renewal, but the renewal of non-Christian religions as well. But before Christians can enter dialogue with non-Christians, two historic prejudices governing Christian interaction with the world's religions must be explicitly renounced: the absolutism of the church and the absolutism of Christianity. Moltmann's theology of religions is intentionally inclusivist. For him, faith as trust in God's actions for humanity and the entirety of existence, past, present, and future—not trust in theological or liturgical systems—makes dialogue with non-Christians not only possible, but theologically necessary because the reality Christians encounter in the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus as the Christ has also encountered human beings through non-Christian experience and practice.[5]

Since conservative and fundamentalist Protestant theologians have taken an essentially exclusive stance toward the non-Christian religions, including Buddhism, the Protestant theologians cited in this chapter represent, in various ways, the liberal end of the Protestant theological spectrum that has followed the precedents set by Tillich's and Moltmann's encounter with the world religions. Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic theology of religions is marked by an inclusivist approach that gives Roman Catholic encounter with Buddhism more theological unity than generally found in liberal Protestant circles. The two most important contemporary voices of current Catholic theological reflection on religions pluralism are Karl Rahner and Hans Küng, whose theologies of religions provide the foundations for most contemporary Catholic theological encounter with Buddhism. Rahner's theology of religion is centered on his notion of "anonymous Christianity," according to which devout Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, or Sikhs encounter the same reality Christians encounter through faith in Christ, only do not realize it. They are "anonymous Christians." Accordingly, the missionary task of the Church is to encourage anonymous Christians to become explicitly Christian through conversion to the Church's teachings and participation in its sacraments.[6]

Since Küng has been more intentionally engaged in Buddhist-Christian dialogue than Rahner, a fuller explanation of his encounter with Buddhism will be offered later in this chapter. For now, it will suffice to note that Küng's general theology of religions assumes that the world's religious traditions,

5. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 151ff. Also see De Martino, trans., "Dialogue East and West."

6. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, 131. Also see essays in other volumes of *Theological Investigations*, especially vols. 6, 9, 12, and 14.

by which he means all religious traditions other than Roman Catholicism, should be understood as "extraordinary ways of human salvation." The Catholic Church, however, is the "ordinary way." Therefore, persons may attain salvation through the particular religious traditions available to them in their historical and cultural circumstances, since God—whose fullest self-revelation is through Christ—is also at work in the extraordinary ways of non-Christian teachings and practices. But compared with the extraordinary ways of salvation, the ordinary way of the Church seems, in Küng's view, the fullest expression God's self-revelation through Christ. Since neither Küng nor Rahner evaluate non-Christian religious traditions as valid avenues to saving truth in their own right, but rather as "preparations for the gospel," the Church should undertake missionary efforts to non-Christians while simultaneously recognizing the truths of non-Christian traditions.[7]

Protestant neo-orthodox encounter with Buddhism is monological in nature because of the exclusivist structure of its theology. Post-Vatican II theology of religions is structurally inclusivist and is also thoroughly monological in its encounter with Buddhism. But since 1980, forms of Christian conceptual dialogue with Buddhism have emerged that have pushed the boundaries of Christian theological reflection in directions unimaginable before 1980. This has involved appropriating Buddhist doctrinal and philosophical traditions into Christian theology as a means of creatively transforming contemporary Christian thought and practice. Three Western theologians, two Protestant and one Roman Catholic, one historian of religions, and three Asian theologians will serve as examples of Christian writers pushing the boundaries of Christian theology of religions by their intentional appropriation of Buddhist thought into the structure of their theological reflection.

John B. Cobb Jr.

Few Protestant theologians have conceptually engaged Buddhism more systematically while incorporating Buddhist thought into their theologies than process theologian John Cobb, who is one of the first major Protestant theologians to appropriate the scholarship of history of religions, particularly in regard to Buddhism, as an object of his theological reflection. The foundation of his particular dialogue with Buddhism is a process he calls "passing beyond dialogue."[8] Passing beyond dialogue does not mean the practice of

7. Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 89–116.
8. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, chap. 2.

ceasing dialogue, since theological reflection is itself a dialogical process. Rather, "passing beyond dialogue" names the process of continual theological engagement *in* dialogue as a contributive element of one's continued growth in Christian faith. Cobb assumes the same process will occur for Buddhists as well, who, faithful to Buddhist tradition, go beyond dialogue with Christian tradition.

For Cobb, dialogue is itself a theological practice that involves two interdependent movements: (1) in dialogue with Buddhists, Christians should intentionally leave the conventional boundaries of Christian tradition and enter into Buddhist thought and experience, (2) followed by a return to the home of Christian faith enriched, renewed, and "creatively transformed," which is the goal of "passing beyond dialogue." The purpose of interreligious dialogue for Christians is "creative transformation," defined as a process of critically appropriating whatever one has learned from dialogue into one's own faith and practice, whereby one's faith is challenged, enriched, and renewed. For Christians, the image of creative transformation is Christ, who explicitly provides a focal point of unity within which the many centers of meaning that characterize the present "post-Christian" age of religious pluralism are harmonized. Because he thinks that no truths can be contradictory if really true, Christians can and should be open to the "structures of existence" of the other "religious ways" of humanity.[9] But the appropriation of Buddhist doctrines into one's Christian theological reflection does not entail imposing Christian meanings foreign to Buddhist experience. Conceptual dialogue that leads to the creative transformation of Christian faith should falsify neither Christian nor Buddhist experience.

The specific forms of creative transformation that Cobb seeks in his particular dialogue with Buddhism are interrelated with his commitment to the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead. For example, dialogue with Buddhism, he believes, can help Christians understand how inadequately theology has reflected on the nonsubstantial character of God and human selfhood. To make this point, he incorporates the Mahayana Buddhist doctrines of "emptying" (Sanskrit *śūñyatā*) and "non-self" (Sanskrit *anātman*) into his doctrine of God. What does Buddhist philosophy mean when it teaches that an event (for example, a moment of human experience) is "empty"? As Cobb accurately interprets this Buddhist teaching, "emptying" means: (1) that the experience is empty of substance, so that the moments of a person's experience are not unified by an enduring "I" remaining self-identical through time;

9. Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 21, 58.

(2) the experience lacks all possession, since whatever constitutes it does not belong to it; (3) the experience does not possess a form that it imposes on its constituent elements; and (4) the experience is empty of substantially permanent being. Since all events are constituted by "non-self" because they are "empty" of "self-existence" (*svabhāva*), there are no permanent "things."

Cobb contends that there are remarkable affinities between these Buddhist notions and Whitehead's doctrine of the "consequent nature of God," as well as biblical portrayals of God and human selfhood. God's "consequent nature" names God's relation to temporal processes in their entirety. It is God's aim at the concrete realization of all possibilities in their proper season.[10] For Cobb, this means that God is "empty" of self insofar as "self" is understood as an essence that can be preserved by excluding "other" things and events.[11] It is at this juncture that he and other process theologians separate themselves from classical Christian theism. In his view, theology should reject notions of God as an unchanging substance as well as the immortality of the human soul—notions rooted in Greek philosophy—by reappropriating biblical, especially Pauline teachings. In other words, dialogue with Buddhism, mediated through Whiteheadian process philosophy, brings theological reflection into closer alignment with biblical tradition, given the fact that traditional Christian teaching of God as an unchanging substantial essence, as well as the doctrine of an immortal soul, are in harmony neither with biblical tradition nor the "structure" of Christian experience.

It is not only Christian tradition that can be creatively transformed through dialogue with Buddhism. Since Buddhism and Christianity are different "structures of existence," Buddhists will experience the process of creative transformation through dialogue with Christians differently. While the specific character of this process is up to Buddhists to decide for themselves, Cobb suggests that there are areas where Buddhists could learn from Christianity. For example, in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism (*jōdo shinshū* or "True Pure Land School"), Amida Buddha is ultimate reality personified as compassionate wisdom that brings all sentient beings into the Pure Land through his "other-power" without regard to a being's "self-power." Cobb suggests that dialogue with Pauline-Augustinian-Lutheran traditions of "justification by faith through grace alone" can deepen Buddhist understanding of this form of religious experience, thereby deepening the personal dimension of its own traditions. Here, the experience of "faith through grace" and the

10. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 31.

11. See Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 136–42.

experience of Amida Buddha's compassionate "other power" provide a common experiential entry point for Buddhist-Christian dialogue.[12] Furthermore, Buddhists can learn much from the Christian doctrine of the incarnation: in the life, death, and resurrection of a human being living two thousand years on the fringes of the Roman Empire, human beings encountered God incarnated within the rough and tumble of historical existence. For Christians, this means that the experience of faith and its doctrinal interpretations are historically contextualized.

Buddhists, particularly in Japan, are beginning to incorporate historical research into Buddhist thought. Yet Cobb claims that Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists have not yet worked through the problem of the relation of history to Buddhist faith and practice. In Cobb's words, Buddhists can "indeed find in Gautama himself and in the history of Buddhism much to support it. However, there is nothing about Buddhist self-understanding that leads to the necessity of finding the requisite history solely in India and East Asia."[13] Like Christianity, Buddhism intends universality and like Christianity, Buddhism too needs an inclusive view of all things. Today, such a view must include world history. World history includes the history of Israel and Jesus. Therefore, including the history that supports Christian claims about the graciousness of God into its own particular history supports, as it universalizes, Jōdo Shinshū claims of the universal compassionate wisdom that characterizes ultimate reality personified as Amida Buddha.

John B. Keenan

Perhaps the most radical attempt to reinterpret Christian theology through the categories of Buddhist thought is John P. Keenan's reading of Christian tradition through the lenses of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, particularly the idealist metaphysics of Yogacāra ("Way of Yoga") philosophy and Mādhyamika ("Middle Way") epistemology, as a means of clarifying New Testament understandings of Christ.[14] Keenan sees his theological task as developing new forms of christological thought capable of expressing faith in ways relevant to post-modern experience of the relativity of all normative claims about reality. Accordingly, Keenan's theological construction of a "Mahayana Christology" focuses on demonstrating how the Christ that was incarnate in the historical

12. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 128–43.
13. Ibid., 139.
14. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ*, Introduction.

Jesus is also the "heart of wisdom" attested to in the Gospel of John, the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Epistle of James.[15]

By "heart of wisdom" Keenan means experiential apprehension of the structures of existence as interdependent, an apprehension he believes is at the core of both Buddhist and biblical traditions. A second goal of Keenan's Mahayana Christology is to regain contact with biblical meanings as a means of reinterpreting orthodox christological traditions in a manner spiritually relevant to a post-modern, post-Christian age characterized by religious pluralism.

The specifically Christian textual sources of Keenan's Mahayana theology lie in the wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible and Christian experience of Christ as the wisdom of God incarnate in the historical Jesus and all things and events in space-time (John 1:1–14). He believes that the Mahayana Buddhist name for this Wisdom is "Emptying" or *śūñyatā*, which in Buddhist tradition has no theistic connotations whatsoever. Nevertheless, Keenan asserts that what Mahayana philosophy describes as "wisdom," meaning the apprehension of the interdependence of all things and events as empty of independent and permanent self-existence or "own-being" (*śvabhāva*), is philosophically and experientially similar to biblical teaching regarding Christ as the Wisdom through which God creates and sustains the universe. It is in this sense that Wisdom or the Logos is incarnated not only in Jesus, but also in all things and events in the universe at every moment of space-time. For this reason, it seems to Keenan, Buddhist teachings about interdependence and non-self clarify Christian experience of interdependence and the "emptiness" of all things and events of permanent "own-being."[16]

Another example of how Keenan applies Mahayana philosophy to the service of Christian theological reflection is his interpretation of how the historical Jesus incarnates the Logos. According to his Mahayana interpretation of the historical Jesus, Jesus—like all phenomenal things and events—is empty of any unchanging essence that might identify Jesus and serve as an unchanging definition of the historical Jesus as a "Jesus-self" that remains self-identical through time. This does not mean that we cannot form any notion of what Jesus was like, for the Gospel traditions and the writings of St. Paul point to a clearly identifiable human being. Yet the historical Jesus possesses no clearly identifiable selfhood beyond Jesus' dependently co-arising words and actions recorded in the biblical texts. There is no permanent selfhood for Jesus at all, since all things and events—including human

15. Ibid., 221–39. Also see Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading*, 3–43.

16. Keenan, *The Meaning of Christ*, 225–29.

beings—according to Mahayana philosophy *and* biblical tradition, are empty of permanent selfhood.

In place of seeking an understanding of Jesus as the Christ in terms of identifiable metaphysical essences, for example as was done in the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, Keenan argues that Christian theology should shed all essentialist metaphysics by concentrating on the themes of emptying and non-self. Nowhere did Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels cling to permanent selfhood. The Gospel of John and the Synoptic Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Epistle of James specifically identify Jesus with wisdom, meaning in its New Testament context, an immediate awareness of God as Father (Abba).[17] Matthew identifies receptivity to wisdom with a childlike disposition unspoiled by learning coupled with non-clinging to permanent selfhood (Matthew 18:1–10). Or, as understood through the lens of Mahayana Buddhist thought, the primary motif of the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Epistle of James is a call for conversion away from a "sign-clinging mind" that would equate faith with a single doctrinal position to a mind that is receptive of the Spirit and thereby aware of God as Abba, which Keenan believes is the heart of "Christian Wisdom." "Jesus disappears in the reality he proclaims. In Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist terms, he is a finger pointing at the moon."[18]

Hans Küng

Unlike Cobb and Keenan, Hans Küng's conceptual dialogue with Buddhism does not lead him to incorporate Buddhist doctrines into his theology as a means of creatively transforming Christian tradition. Küng's theological interpretation of Buddhism presupposes Vatican II's theology of religion. Specifically, he employs a comparative methodology in his theological engagement with Buddhist traditions, noting that post-Vatican II Catholicism has irrevocably committed itself to dialogue with the world's religions. Relying on scholarship in Buddhist studies as well as his personal participation in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Küng's method is concerned with pointing out what he perceives are the similarities between Christian and Buddhist doctrines and practices, as well as the incommensurable differences. His theological goal is the clarification of differences in order to help Christians gain accurate comprehension of Christian faith while simultaneously helping Buddhists obtain clearer understanding of Christianity.

17 Ibid., chaps. 38–42

18. Ibid., 228.

The starting point of his conversation with Buddhism is his comparison of the historical Jesus and the historical Buddha, and the roles of Jesus and the Buddha play in Christian and Buddhist tradition. Küng first notes "a fundamental similarity not only in Jesus' and the Buddha's conduct, but also in their message": both were teachers whose authority lay in their experience of an ultimate reality; both had urgent messages, although the content of each differed, which demanded of people fundamental changes of attitude and conduct; neither intended to give philosophical explanations of the world nor did they aim to change existing legal and social structures; both worked from the assumption that the world is transient; both taught that all human beings are in need of redemption and transformation; both saw the root of humanity's unredeemed state in human egoism, self-seeking, and self-centeredness; and both taught ways of redemption.[19]

Yet in spite of the similarities Küng perceives between Jesus and the Buddha as historical figures in the history of religions, what he characterizes as "the smiling Buddha" and the "suffering Christ" reveal not only incommensurable difference between Christianity and Buddhism, but also several "tensions" inherent within Buddhism itself that Buddhists might address through conceptual dialogue with Christian thought. As Küng interprets the history of early Buddhism, after Gautama achieved his Awakening, he spent the next forty years of his life teaching and gathering an inner circle of disciples to form the first monastic community in the history of the world's religions. This monastic community (*samgha*) grew and was supported by a larger lay community of unordained men and women. The Buddha taught detachment from the rough-and-tumble of political and social existence, counseling his monks to seek Awakening by withdrawing into the practice of meditation, and his lay followers to live in society as nonviolently as possible in order to acquire positive karmic merit in the hope of achieving a better rebirth in a future life. The Buddha was quite successful in his lifetime, and he died peacefully after forty years of teaching and forming his monastic community.

Jesus was altogether different. His public life lasted at most for three years and ended in a violent death. His whole life, Küng argues, was a life of suffering without a trace of success in his lifetime. When he died, he was alone, deserted by even his closest disciples, the image of the sufferer pure and simple, which the earliest Christian community interpreted as an act of supreme self-sacrifice that demonstrated God's love for humanity. Jesus was not a teacher of monasticism, and demanded that his followers take up a life

19. Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 322.

of social engagement with the forces of injustice and oppression in the world based on love for neighbors and compassion for the poor and the oppressed. Jesus was not a monk and he did not create a monastic community as the central path for his followers. Monasticism, although still practiced in several different forms of Christian tradition, is not central to Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God nor is it central for Christian faith or a necessary means for salvation. Salvation is eternal life in the kingdom of God, into which all are welcome who follow Jesus' way of selfless love directed toward all. For Jesus the sufferer not only exudes compassion, but also demands it as the defining expression of the community that follows his way.

Gautama also knew suffering, which was his first Noble Truth: all existence is suffering (*duhkha*). The key to release from suffering, the Buddha taught, lies within human beings. Self-discipline in the practice of nonviolence toward any living thing and the practice of meditation are the sole requirements for the achievement of Awakening, the attainment of which leads to no further rebirth in the realm of samsaric suffering. Awakened ones, that is buddhas, are eventually "extinct," no longer involved in the cycles of rebirth that constitute existence. Accordingly, the Buddha is a paradigm, a model against which his followers are taught to test and measure their own progress toward Awakening. The emphasis of Buddhist practice is self-effort, not reliance on a power outside of one's self-efforts: in following the Buddha's example, one becomes *like* the Buddha. For Buddhists, the Buddha is the one who shows the way to Awakening.

But the historical Jesus as the Christ, for Christians, *is* the way. That is, Jesus *became* the way of salvation, meaning eternal life in the kingdom of God made manifest in his life, death, and resurrection. Salvation comes through trust in Jesus as the Christ expressed through active and loving social engagement with the world in the struggle to create a human community based on love and justice. The model of this community is the kingdom of God, partly realized in the community of faith called the church and completed in the future when God finally achieves God's intentions in creation. Thus salvation in Christian tradition and Awakening in Buddhist tradition are not identical concepts or experiences, even though Christians can learn much from the practice of meditation. Even so, Küng believes Buddhists indeed experience salvation through Christ's "extraordinary" working through the practice and traditions of faithful Buddhists, some of whom have attained Awakening. While Christians can and should be open to Buddhist experience and can learn much from Buddhist insights regarding interdependence,

suffering and its causes, the ordinary way of salvation is through faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Winston L. King

King was an important historian of religions whose scholarship in this academic field became the foundation of his theological encounter with Buddhism. Drawing on years of academic engagement in Buddhist studies and his participation in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, his primary theological interest was the clarification of the purposes of genuine interreligious dialogue. For King, the essential purpose of dialogue was not "dialogical action," his designation for what Buddhists now call "social engagement," meaning humanistic cooperation among faith traditions in resolving social issues. Nor is dialogue the sharing of spiritual techniques in the practice of "interior dialogue." While recognizing the importance of both forms of interreligious encounter, the essential purpose of Buddhist-Christian dialogue, indeed of Christian dialogue with the world religions in general, is addressing the doctrinal "sticking points" between religious traditions. For King, Buddhist-Christian conceptual dialogue does not involve incorporating Buddhist concepts into Christian theological reflection because the moment one does so, one ceases to be Christian or Buddhist.[20]

Still, King believed that genuine interreligious dialogue requires that participants be committed to their own religious tradition while simultaneously remaining open to the possibility of conversion to the religious tradition of one's dialogical partner. Such a dialogue is more than mere friendship and toleration of differing points of view. Dialogue requires openness to deep change, which for King implied willingness to face one's own incompleteness. For this reason, he thought few persons ever seriously engage in interreligious dialogue. Therefore, since doctrinal issues are at the heart of interreligious dialogue, King pointed to three doctrinal issues that generate non-negotiable differences, meaning core teachings so necessary to both traditions that they are not open to challenge.[21]

First, King doubted that Christian theism would ever have much to contribute conceptually to most Buddhists, while Buddhist non-theistic teachings about ultimate reality will not have much conceptual appeal for Christians.

20. W. L. King, "Interreligious Dialogue." Also see W. L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity*, chap. 1.

21. W. L. King, "Interreligious Dialogue," 50–55.

Second, Christian and Buddhist conceptions of human selfhood are likewise incommensurable. Regarding the third area, "religiously inspired social action," King thought that Christian tradition is much more socially engaged in the struggle against human and environmental injustice than Buddhist tradition, and therefore Christians do not have much to learn from Buddhists. Thus he argued that because Christian faith and practice focus attention on the world in a way that is foreign to Buddhist teaching and practice—because of Buddhism's teaching that Awakening is experienced by means of meditation as a timeless moment that transcends the flux of historical space-time realities—Buddhists in dialogue with Christians might deepen their sense of history and help Buddhists become better prepared for social engagement.[22]

Seiichi Yagi, Masaaki Honda, and Lynn de Silva

A number of important East Asian and South Asian theologians have engaged in theological dialogue with Buddhism as a means of reinterpreting Christian faith through elements of the Buddhist worldviews of their cultures. Within the context of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, the most important are Seiichi Yagi, Masaaki Honda, and Lynn Ade Silva. Honda and Yagi are Japanese theologians who live in a culture permeated with Buddhist images and ideals and whose theological reflections are in large measure a response to the creative presence of Buddhism in a culture in which Christian faith and practice are foreign. As do Cobb and Keenan, Yagi and Honda—though in different ways—intentionally expose their Christian experience to interpretation through the lenses of Buddhism, much as the church fathers and mothers filtered their Christian experience through the lenses of Hellenistic philosophy. Which is to say that both are committed Japanese Christians who focus on translating the deepest levels of faith through the categories of Buddhist thought and practice in an effort to integrate Christian tradition more coherently with cultural traditions that are non-Western.

Yagi is a biblical scholar who is known for using the techniques of literary and historical criticism to compare the religious consciousness of Paul with that of Shinran (the thirteenth-century "founder" of Jōdo Shinshū) and the consciousness of the historical Jesus with that of Zen masters. By specifying three kinds of religious experience—the communal, the individual, and the interpersonal—he develops an interpretation of Christian experience of the transcendent whereby the religious experience of Paul is correlated with

22. Ibid., 55.

Shinran, while Jesus' awareness and articulation of God parallels those of Zen statements in which there is neither a dualistic awareness nor a focus on concerns pertaining to the usual self. He concludes that the structures of Christian and Buddhist experience are similar, which, he argues, establishes a foundation for Asian theological reflection that transcends the usual categories of Western philosophy.[23]

Whereas Yagi uses biblical studies and comparative methodologies for theological reflection on Buddhism, Honda grounds his theology on his interpretation of foundational Christian doctrines, especially the doctrines of the two natures of Christ, the Trinity, and creation *ex nihilo*. Rejecting the epistemological assumptions of Greek philosophy and Cartesian epistemology, he rethinks these key Christian doctrines through the categories of the Japanese Zen Buddhist philosopher Kitaro Nishida, especially Nishida's "topological logic," or what Honda calls "the Buddhist logic of *soku*" or "not same, not different." He thus claims that the structure of the Buddhist and Christian "spiritual fact"—the simultaneously irreversible and reversible relation of the Dharma and God to the world—are identical. For this reason, in expressing the deepest awareness of God, the origins of the universe, and the self, Christian truth claims should be expressed in the awareness of *soku*, and therefore beyond the capacity of doctrines to completely capture or articulate. The result is a transformed vision of Christian theology, which remains committed to Christ, yet appropriates the insights of Buddhist experience and doctrine.[24]

Few Christian thinkers are in explicit dialogue with the Theravada (Elder's School) Buddhist tradition. Lynn de Silva, who worked in Sri Lanka, is an important exception. In similarity with Honda and Yagi, the question that guided his theological reflection is how Christian faith can be articulated in forms meaningful to South Asian Christians apart from Western cultural norms. Since Theravada Buddhism underlies the culture of not only Sri Lanka, but also all of South Asia—with the exception of Vietnam, where Mahayana forms of Buddhism predominate—de Silva interpreted Christian experience through the lenses of the Buddhist tradition of his culture. In so doing, he believed he was not falsifying Christian tradition. In his view, the importation Western cultural norms and thought forms as a means of inter-

23. See Yagi, "Paul and Shinran, Jesus and Zen"; and Swindler, *A Bridge to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue*, chaps. 1–4. Also see Yagi, "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in Japan."

24. Honda, "The Encounter of Christianity with the Buddhist Logic of *Soku*."

preting Christian faith to South Asian Christians constitutes a falsification of Christian tradition for South Asians.

De Silva's engagement with Buddhism focused on the "problem of the self." According to him, the Buddhist doctrine of "non-self" (Pali *anatta*; Sanskrit *anātman*) enshrines an essential truth about human existence, which is in accord with not only contemporary science, but also the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. While the idea of an immortal soul is an established belief for most Christians, it cannot be supported by biblical texts. Furthermore, biblical images of selfhood are corroborated by the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. It other words, the Buddhist doctrine of non-self reveals the meaning of selfhood in the biblical texts—meanings that are lost when biblical texts are read through the lenses of Greek philosophical notions about the soul. In the biblical tradition, the self is an interdependent psycho-physical unity of "soul" (*psychē*), "flesh" (*sarx*), and "spirit" (*pneuma*) that bears close resemblance to the Buddhist analysis of the self by means of the Five Skandhas or constituents of existence (form, feeling, perception, impulses, and consciousness). Consequently, Buddhist *and* biblical views of the self agree that there exists no immortal soul that remains self-identically permanent through time.

Not only does the Buddhist notion of non-self clarify biblical notions of selfhood, it also clarifies the doctrine of the resurrection. For if persons are constituted by non-self, the question remains: what continues after death? In contrast to the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, the biblical answer is the doctrine of resurrection. Resurrection does not mean the survival of an immortal soul or a reconstituted corpse. For if the doctrine of non-self corresponds to reality, transience and mortality are cosmic facts and death is the end of existence. There cannot be survival after death unless, and only if, God re-creates a new being. This, according to de Silva, is the truth of the biblical teaching of resurrection interpreted through the lenses of the doctrine of non-self. Resurrection is an act of God by which he creates what St. Paul called a "spiritual body." To explain the meaning of "spiritual body" de Silva employed a "replica theory," according to which at the moment of death, God creates an "exact psycho-physical replica of the deceased person." It is a new creation. But because it is a re-creation, the spiritual body is not identical with the self that existed in an earthly body. It is an exact psychophysical replica. The doctrine of the resurrection as a "replication" is, he believed, a way of meaningfully reconceiving "the hereafter while accepting the fact of *anātta*."[25]

25. de Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, 7.

BUDDHIST CONCEPTUAL DIALOGUE WITH CHRISTIANITY

Like Christian tradition, Buddhism began as a missionary movement whose goal was to engage with non-Buddhists "for the welfare of the people, for the tranquility of the people, out of love for the people of the world" by means of converting non-Buddhists to Buddhism.[26] However, pluralist approaches to non-Buddhist religious traditions do not have much historical precedence in Buddhist history. This is not surprising since pluralism as a theological or philosophical interpretation of the fact of religious diversity is a specifically contemporary phenomenon. Still, Buddhist attitudes toward non-Buddhist traditions have ranged from exclusivism to acceptance of other religions as inferior, but pragmatically useful for gaining worldly benefits such as health and prosperity. Rarely have Buddhists acknowledged that Buddhism is equally conditioned and fallible as other religious traditions, or accepted non-Buddhist teachings and practices as having equal validity with those of Buddhism. In fact, most Buddhists engaged in conceptual dialogue with Christians argue that pluralism constitutes an inauthentic Buddhist response to religious diversity, so that a Buddhist form of the "pluralist hypothesis" seems not to have been an option in the history of Buddhism's encounter with non-Buddhists.

As I shall note more fully below, Buddhist responses to pre-modern and post-modern non-Buddhist religious traditions are filtered through certain key doctrines, such as the Mahayana doctrines of "emptying" (*śūñyatā*) and "two truth" (Sanskrit *Satya-dvaya*) epistemological theories. For example, there are numerous examples scattered throughout early Buddhists texts describing the Buddha's meeting with various representatives from different religious groups and giving a variety of religious responses to them. Some of these responses were quite critical. The Buddha was apparently critical of a number of Vedic Hindu practices, for example animal sacrifices and the caste system, because such practices and social systems foster violence. At other times he appears to have accepted, while subordinating, other religious practices, such as veneration of the gods. Often he accepted, but modified other practices such as worship of the six directions, the meaning of being a true Brahmin or "priest," and meditation traditions having their roots in Yoga. In East Asia, Buddhism always coexisted with Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto with varying

26. *Vinaya, Mahavaga* I:10, from Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha*, 83; also cited by Chappell, "Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue," 5.

degrees of accommodation and assimilation.[27] Even in South Asian Theravada Buddhism, where Buddhism became, and remains, the dominant religious tradition, worship of the gods and honor to ancestors has not ceased among most practicing Buddhists.

Besides the rejection of some non-Buddhist religious traditions and practices, there are other examples of Buddhist views of non-Buddhists religious traditions that are also quite similar to those of first- and second-century Christianity. Buddhist responses to non-Buddhist religious traditions were sometimes inclusivist, sometimes exclusivist, sometimes highly negative, and often monological in structure. Doctrinally, non-Buddhist religions were sometimes depicted as not necessarily false, but rather inadequate, distracting, distorted, or evil. Ritual initiation into Buddhism by means of "taking the Precepts" usually meant explicitly vowing not to follow other religious teachers or to study other religious traditions.

But in the nineteenth century these patterns of Buddhist interaction with non-Buddhist religious traditions began to assume a more explicitly dialogical form as Buddhists became more acquainted with worldwide religious pluralism. Specifically, Buddhists became more interested in socially engaged dialogue than conceptual dialogue with non-Buddhist traditions in general and Christian tradition in particular. This is so because Buddhist tradition is hardwired to a specific worldview in a way other religious traditions are not. Change or delete any item from this worldview, Buddhism ceases to be Buddhism. All schools of Buddhism, in their own distinctive ways, are theoretical interpretations of this worldview.

Foundational to this worldview is the Buddha's teaching that all existence is implicated in suffering and impermanence (*duhkha* and *anitya*); that we cause suffering for ourselves and others by clinging (*taṇha*) to permanence in an impermanent universe; that release from suffering is possible; that the Noble Eightfold Path is the ethical and meditative practice that leads to the cessation of suffering and the achievement of Awakening (Nirvana). Crucial to the Buddha's teaching about the structure of impermanent existence for not only all sentient beings, but also the entire universe, are the doctrines of interdependence (*pratīya-samutpāda*) and non-self (*anātman*). "Non-self" means that all things and events at every moment of space-time are constituted by the ceaselessly changing interrelationships things and events undergo from

27. This was particularly the case in Japanese Buddhism, where its "philosophy of assimilation" (*honji-suijaku*) had its origins in Chinese and Korean traditions of Buddhism imported to Japan. See Matsunaga and Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*.

moment to moment of their existence. There exists only interdependent relationships undergoing ceaseless change and becoming. Or in more Buddhist language, all things and events at every moment of space-time are constituted by the process of *pratīya-samutpāda* or "interdependent co-arising."

These doctrines are presupposed in every aspect of Buddhist teaching and practice even as they are nuanced differently in the various schools of Buddhism. Applied to human beings, for example, non-self means that we are not embodiments of an unchanging self-entity that remains self-identical through time. All Buddhist teachings are firm in their rejection of permanent selfhood. What we "are" is a system of interdependent relationships—physical, psychological, historical, sociological, cultural, spiritual—that, in interdependence with everything else undergoing change and becoming in the universe, continuously create "who" we are from moment to moment in our lifetimes. We are not permanent selves that *have* these interdependent relationships; we *are* these interdependent relationships we undergo. Since these relationships are not permanent, neither we nor anything else in the universe is permanent.

In some ways, Buddhism is more worldview-specific than, say, Christian tradition, even though the Christian worldview is monotheistic. As noted above, delete any of the foundational doctrines from Buddhism's worldview, Buddhism ceases to be Buddhist, just as deleting monotheism from Christianity's worldview makes Christianity unchristian. Even so, Buddhism is worldview-specific in a way that Christianity is not. A Christian can be a Marxist, a NeoPlatonist, a communist, a Kantian, a Whiteheadian, a Hegelian, a Thomist, a death-of-God theologian, or even "a Buddhist, too," according to John Cobb, provided one is careful to specify what this means.[28] To this date, no Buddhist has claimed "a Buddhist can be a Christian, too."

I do not mean by these observations that Buddhist tradition is inferior to Christian tradition. Nor do I mean to imply that either Buddhism or Christianity are forms of religious imperialism, which is not to say that there have not existed Buddhist and Christian forms of religious imperialism. My intention is descriptive: I am suggesting that a difference exists between the structure of Buddhist existence and the structure of Christian existence which makes it difficult for Buddhists to engage in conceptual dialogue with non-Buddhists from a pluralist perspective. Again, this is not to say that no Buddhists have conceptually engaged with Christianity. In fact it can be

28. See Cobb, "Can a Buddhist Be a Christian, Too?"

argued that the first contemporary Buddhist-Christian conceptual dialogue began in Japan in 1957.

The Kyoto School

The Buddhist origins of this dialogue have their roots in the early twentieth century, beginning with Nishida Kitaro (1879–1945). Under Nishida's leadership, the philosophy department at Kyoto University began a conceptual dialogue with Western culture, particularly Christian tradition, by offering a series of critical analyses based on Buddhist ideals. Several disciples of Nishida—Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1899–1980), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), and Masao Abe (1915–2006)—formed what is known as the Kyoto School. The Buddhist tradition espoused by the Kyoto School was Zen Buddhism coupled with an interest in Western Continental philosophy, particularly Kantian idealism. While utilizing Western philosophical traditions, the Kyoto School also employed Buddhist philosophy, particularly Mādhyamika epistemology and Zen traditions of meditation, to seek the absolute truth, identified as (*śūñyatā*) or "Emptying," that is beyond all rational limits. Perhaps the clearest expression of the Kyoto School's philosophical method and intention is Hisamatsu's *Tōyo-teki Mu* or *Oriental Nothingness*, written in 1939.

Following World War II, Hisamatsu sent his student Abe Masao to Union Theological Seminary for two years to study Christianity under Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Then, in 1957, Hisamatsu himself went to Harvard for the fall semester and engaged Tillich in several meetings that mark the beginning of modern Buddhist-Christian conceptual dialogue. These remarkable dialogues were later published in three issues of *The Eastern Buddhist*, a journal started by D. T. Suzuki.[29] Hisamatsu and Tillich were important thinkers in their traditions, and they were eager to engage in dialogue with one another. Hisamatsu expressed to Tillich that he wished to learn about themes in Tillich's theology such as "God beyond God" and Tillich's understanding of the nature of humanity.[30] Hisamatsu's focus in this concern was what Zen refers to as the "Formless Self" experienced at the moment of Awakening. Thus rather than focusing on what was doctrinally unique in Buddhist and Christian teaching, Hisamatsu wanted to push his conversation with Tillich beyond discursive traditions to seek what is experientially

29. De Martino, trans., "Dialogues East and West," 3 parts.

30. Ibid., (1972) 107.

common to human existence as such. This remains the primary focus of the Kyoto School's conceptual dialogue with Christian tradition. Tillich insisted, however, that except for Christ, human beings located in space-time can only partially realize the infinite reality (which he named "God"), while Hisamatsu argued that everyone could do provided they rejected all finite distinctions at the level of the formless self. This claim led Hisamatsu and his student Abe Masao to the doctrine of the "reversibility" of the ultimate and the finite, of the Buddha Nature and other things, of past and future. This doctrine has since become a point of disagreement not only with Christian and Jews, but also with most other Buddhists.[31]

Abe's interpretation of "reversibility" and his and Hisamatsu's interpretation of Emptying led to conclusions similar to that of Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christianity." Both of these teachers transformed Nagarjuna's epistemological use of Emptying into a metaphysically absolute ultimate reality which is the ground of all religious experience, but which is manifested most clearly in Buddhist, particularly Zen, teachings and practices. Accordingly, Christians who realize the experiential depth of their particular teachings partially glimpse Emptying even if they think they are experiencing God. This implies that Christians are "anonymous Buddhists," although neither Hisamatsu nor Abe explicitly used this terminology. Still, Hisamatsu's conceptual dialogue with Christianity and Abe's conceptual dialogue with Christianity and Judaism represent contemporary forms of Buddhism inclusivism.

Bihikkhu Buddhadasa

An eminent Thai Buddhist, Bihikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–1993), further refined Buddhist conceptual dialogue with Christianity with his "two languages theory": (1) dharma language and (2) conventional language. He interpreted the teachings of varying religious traditions, including Buddhist teachings, as "conventional language" while "dharma language" refers to language that expresses Awakening, which is only achieved through the practice of meditation. So while the conceptual differences between religious traditions are real, all religions are united in the higher truth concerning reality, to which

31. See the interchange between Abe and Christian and Jewish dialogue partners in Cobb and Ives, eds., *The Emptying God*; and Ives, ed., *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness*.

Buddhists and non-Buddhist mystics refer to in the paradoxes of "dharma language," so that all conventional linguistic distinctions melt away.

Furthermore, Buddhadasa argued that there exists a further level of religious experience in which religion itself disappears. He illustrated his theory of three levels of religion with the example of water. First, there are many kinds of water: rain water, tap water, sewer water, river water, which ordinary persons can use and distinguish, which illustrates what he meant by "conventional language." But at another level, when for example pollutants are removed, these conventional types of water turn out to be one substance, which illustrates what he meant by "dharma language." Finally, there is a third level of perception in which water disappears as it is divided into hydrogen and oxygen. So based on this analogy, Buddhsdasa concluded that there exist three levels of perception, each with its proper language: conventional distinctions, shared essence, and voidness.

Buddhadasa's approach to non-Buddhist traditions is similar to that of the Kyoto School, as illustrated in this chapter by Abe Masao. Linguistically structured conventional or relative truth points to, but does not capture, the absolute truth of Awakening that is beyond all language and form. Here, Empting is the absolute truth, underlying all valid religious teachings and practices, that is most fully experienced at the moment of Awakening through Buddhist meditative practices. Consequently, the conceptual dialogue of Buddhist teachers like Hisamatsu, Abe, and Buddhadasa with non-Buddhists is inclusivist in nature. In their own distinctive ways, each affirmed that other religious traditions and practices, including Buddhist doctrines, partially express truth more fully encountered in the achievement of Awakening by means of Buddhist meditative practices. This inclusivist viewpoint is also ingredient in the Dalai Lama's philosophy of religious pluralism: different religious traditions share a common goal that each seeks in their own distinctive ways. Specifically, he asserts that all religious traditions, in spite of conceptual differences, have similar objectives: the improvement of human existence and compassion for other life forms with which we share this planet, respect for others, and sharing other peoples' suffering while working to relieve suffering. At this level, which Buddhists call "social engagement," every religious tradition, in varying ways, share the same "secondary" viewpoints.[32]

32. Tenzin [His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama], *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, 46.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

Christian interest in conceptual dialogue with Buddhism—and other religious traditions—is a reflection of the monotheistic and christological structure of Christian existence. Christian existence starts with the incarnation. Two thousand years ago the first Jewish Christians believed they had experienced God in the life, death, and resurrection of the historical Jesus. The nature of this encounter was experientially clear to the first Christians. But interpreting what their experience implied about the character of God, the structure of community, how Christians should relate to the state, the Christian community's relation to Judaism and the Hellenistic religious traditions surrounding both Christianity and Judaism, and what the resurrection might imply about the possibility of a future beyond death, were matters that required the rational interpretation of experiential events that is called "theology." Theological reflection thus became a pillar of Christian faith and practice, which does not mean that other forms of practice such as social activism and contemplative practices are not important elements of Christianity's structure of existence. But while there is much theological agreement among Christians about the meaning of what the earliest Christians experienced in their encounter with the historical Jesus, there is also much theological disagreement. Nevertheless, theological reflection as "faith seeking understanding" of Christian experience is the center of Christian self-understanding. It has been so for two thousand years.

Accordingly, encounter with non-Christians has always been an important focus of Christian practice. Whenever encounter with non-Christians was dialogical, the primary form of dialogue was conceptual. When conceptual engagement with non-Christians focused on conceptual differences, the resulting theologies were exclusivist and the encounter was transformed into a conceptual monologue employed for the purpose of converting non-Christians to Christianity. When conceptual dialogue with non-Christians lead to appropriating non-Christian teachings and practices into Christian thought, the resulting theology of religions tended to be inclusivist. These patterns remain typical of contemporary liberal Christian conceptual engagement with Buddhism. But Christian pluralist theologies of religion are a rather new phenomenon and represent a minority theological viewpoint. Exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist engagement with Buddhism as well as other religious traditions have been primarily conceptual for most Christins.

Conceptual dialogue with Christianity is not a primary focus of Buddhist interest, which is not to say that conceptual engagement with Christian

tradition has not occurred. While Buddhists have exerted much energy in achieving doctrinal clarity of the meaning of Buddhism's worldview, the primary emphasis of Buddhist practice is achieving release from suffering engendered by the achievement of Awakening—an experience that is only engendered by the disciplined practice of meditation. Conceptual disciplines like philosophy or doctrinal formulation play a supportive and secondary role to meditative practice. That is, the philosophical complexities of Buddhist doctrinal traditions are held to be secondary pointers that have the purpose of guiding the practice of meditation. Or in Buddhist language, they are "skillful devises" (Sanskrit *upāya*). Consequently, Buddhist doctrines are secondary constructs that point the way to Awakening, but only if the mediator does not cling to them. Clinging to a doctrinal construct or a philosophical teaching only increases suffering, for the reality experienced at the moment of Awakening transcends all conceptual pointers, including Buddhist pointers.

Consequently, most Buddhist dialogue with Christianity focuses on issues of social engagement. How Buddhists might act in partnership with Christians and non-Christians to overcome social, economic, and environmental injustice is the topic of chapter 4. But first, it is necessary to review important elements of Buddhist conceptual dialogue with the natural sciences because of its implications for both conceptual and socially engaged Buddhist-Christian dialogue, which is the topic of the next chapter.