IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A BUDDHIST CHRISTIAN?
Notes and Reflections on Experiential Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

By Dann Pantoja
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THESIS

As attractive as it might be for those of us tired of self-righteous religious polemics and religious exclusivism, the idea of a Buddhist Christian is exceedingly difficult at best and maybe impossible, especially if the issue is framed in the usual categories of liberal versus conservative, inclusive versus exclusive. Everything depends on what religion is conceived to be and how inclusion and exclusion are understood to operate.

HOW I APPROACH THIS EXPERIENTIAL DIALOGUE

The question whether one can be a Buddhist Christian must start with an honest desire to know and experience religion, religious doctrine and religious integrity. Let me start with my understanding of these concepts.

Religion. Many general theories of religions have been articulated in the field of Philosophy of Religion.¹ One of my favorites is the one by Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit. He pointed out that we must look at religion in three levels: core-experience, collective memory, and interpretation.² He explains:

The “core” of any religion is the liberative experience that gave birth to that religion and continues to be available to successive generations of humankind. The medium by which the core-experiences is made available to successive generations is precisely the “collective memory” of that experience. Integral to the functioning of the communication system of the collective memory is “interpretation.” In order to be remembered, an experience—in its symbols, beliefs, and rituals—has to be framed in terms of historical and cultural categories. Thus, the core-experience in all religions, insofar as it is remembered, tends also to be interpreted in such diverse ways as to form various philosophical, theological, and exegetical schools.³

³ Ibid., pp. 162-163.
Pieris provides an outsider’s point of view to a phenomenon called religion. His tool for understanding is very helpful for a person who seeks to understand a particular religion as an “objective observer”.

Max L. Stackhouse, in the context of his call for a Christian ethics of globalization, used an observer’s view of religion. He distinguished religion and religions. For him, religion “is one of the indispensable features of common life,” while religions are “the attempts to identify and cultivate life in response to the finding and commissioning Creative Power, variously conveyed and understood through symbols of transcendence, by which life, meaning, and morality are ultimately sustained.”

I understand religion more from a participant’s point of view. Although I have a high respect for the modern epistemological view of objective knowledge, I am beginning to question the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is really objective and hence dispassionate. Can the observer really stand outside the historical process? Can the observer really look into a phenomenon outside the phenomenon? Can we really gain universal, culturally neutral understanding of religion as unconditioned students of theology? I am a participant in my historical and cultural context, and all my intellectual endeavors are unavoidably conditioned by that participation.

My understanding of religion begins with my existential encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. My view of Ultimate Reality of life and of existence has been transformed because my experience of the Christ became my understanding of God’s self-disclosure in the particularity of my historical context. I experienced transformation in the context of a community of faith called church. The God that I encountered in the person of Jesus Christ is the Triune God.

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This particular experience became the point of reference for my growing understanding that God, whom I experienced in the particular person of Jesus Christ, is also the universal God.

Christoph Schwöbel’s comment on this point is significant in my journey:

The offensive universality of the truth claims of Christian faith is grounded in the particular self-disclosure of this particular God, Father, Son, and Spirit in the spatio-temporal particularity of the Christ event in which God is disclosed as the universal source of creation, reconciliation, and fulfillment for creation. This gives the understanding of the universality of God a particular content. Christian theology has expressed this particular understanding of the universality of God by interpreting love as the complete summary of the Christian understanding of God, which expresses the unity of God’s will, action, and being. The attributes in which the universality of God is expressed in Christian theology are therefore to be interpreted from the perspective of this understanding of God as creative, reconciling, and saving love.5

Schwöbel further wrote that “the basis for a theological understanding of the religions is therefore the universality of God’s action and presence in the world.”6 His understanding of religion is noteworthy:

The religions therefore have to be seen as human responses to God’s all-encompassing presence and activity in which God is active as in all forms of created being as the ground of being and meaning and as the source and end of its fulfillment.7

In the current stage of my journey, I understand and articulate religion best as expressed by John Milbank: Religion is the basic organizing category for an entire culture: the images, word-forms, and practices which specify ‘what there is’ for a particular society.8

My religion is also my Weltanschauung.

**Religious Doctrines and Integrity.** I was raised up as a Conservative Baptist. That’s the name of the denomination—Conservative Baptist. I took delight in fighting against reinterpreting ancient wisdom in light of contemporary fads or moods, and I was against in

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6 Ibid., p. 39.

7 Ibid.

any way weakening the strong, unchanging backbone of the faith, fearing that I'll be left with a kind of jellyfish spirituality if the liberals have their way.

I later found out that my friends, who claim themselves to be “liberal theologians”—not the classical kind of liberalism, they insist—are also fighting against pitting faith against honest scientific investigation and turning faith into an anti-intellectual enterprise. I learned to appreciate their fight against obscurantism that is so common among evangelical circles. My liberal friends feel that we, conservatives, have retreated to the private sphere, worrying only about our personal salvation, leaving the world at large to go to hell ecologically, culturally, and in terms of social justice.

The more I listen to both the conservatives and the liberals, the more I am learning that both groups, at least the ones I interact with, are honestly seeking religious truth with honesty and integrity.

I went beyond the liberal-conservative debate. My friends later began to think post-liberal⁹. I also began to ask post-evangelical¹⁰ questions.

I ventured further outside the Christian circle. In Richmond, British Columbia where I live, I met a group of people who are sincerely in search for authentic and holistic life. The quality of their character, their intellectual integrity, and their honest approach to the joy and suffering of human beings attracted me to join their “morning coffee community” in a local mall. I began having serious dialogue with a Tai Chi teacher¹¹ and a Zen Buddhist¹².

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¹¹ Pong Kam Si Fu, a retired bank employee, has been practicing Tai Chi since he was young. He has been teaching me Tai Chi since 1998. He has virtually become a part of my family and I feel adopted by him as well. Every Friday evening, he and our common friends study the Bible together, pray together, and serve each other through wellness activities—that is, Qi Gong massage, Tai Chi breathing, and exchange of information on holistic health.

¹² Arai Emiko San, a retired JAL flight attendant, is like an older sister to me. Her deep knowledge and faithful practice of Japanese Buddhism inspired me to learn more about Zen. After our morning Tai Chi, we sometimes drive to UBC campus together where she reads sutras at the Asian Center while I read Hebrew Bible at Vancouver School of Theology. Last summer, she joined me and my wife in a hiking trip at The Chief in Squamish, British Columbia.
They eventually became one of my closest friends. Both of them shared with me that our dialogue has to be *experiential immersion* and not just *intellectual discussion*. They voluntarily joined me in my Bible study and prayers. I voluntarily joined them in the practice of Tai Chi and Zen meditation. We called this venture *experiential dialogue*.

This was the context when I started to think theologically, in a formal setting, about these experiences. I decided to focus my formal studies—this paper—on Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

In an increasingly pluralistic global village, I’m becoming more and more aware of conflicting truth-claims among religions. Wolfhart Pannenberg’s comment on this subject helped me a lot:

If we look to the history of religions in the past, there was always competition and struggle for superiority on the basis of different truth claims. Although claims of this broad kind cannot be easily judged once for all, they nevertheless admit provisional judgment in terms of whether a religious tradition continues to illumine the life of its adherents in the context of their world. In the case of encounter or confrontation between different religious cultures (or sometimes between different religious strands within one and the same culture) this means, whether a particular tradition proves superior in illuminating the people’s experiences of their life and world. The great changes in the history of religions can largely be accounted for this way. It is the encounter of conflicting truth claims that challenges each religious tradition to reaffirm itself in facing those challenges.\(^\text{13}\)

How would I approach the issue of conflicting truth-claims between Buddhism and Christianity? How can I enter into a loving interreligious dialogue while remaining truthful and respectful to both my Christian doctrines and my friend’s Buddhist doctrines?

Paul Griffiths helped me think clearly on the nature of religious doctrine. He delineated what he meant by the term *doctrine*:

The term *doctrine* in English, as also *doctrina* in Latin, means both “the act of teaching” and “the content of what is taught,” and hence overlaps significantly with the terms *catechesis* and *catechism*. *Doctrina* was used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek words *didaskalia* and *didache*, entirely typical is the use of *didaskalia* and cognate terms in 1 Timothy 4.\(^\text{14}\)


Griffiths offered five important dimensions of religious doctrine using some Buddhist and Christian perspectives:

1. *Religious Doctrines as Community Rules.* “Religious doctrines function as rules governing the life of the communities that profess them.” Griffiths pointed out that in both Buddhism and Christianity, there are doctrine-expressing sentences that regulate what is possible for the community to say about *salvation.* In very clear terms, both religions reject the application of the category “salvation” to those outside their respective communities; in so doing they both tell their respective communities that the category “salvation” can be applied only to those inside.

2. *Religious Doctrines As Definitions of Community Boundaries.* Many of the religious doctrines “exclude what is unacceptable to the community, reject heresy and so define, conceptually and practically, the bounds of the community.” Griffiths observed that for most religious communities, including Christianity and Buddhism, “doctrine-expressing sentences have taken form precisely as the result of the desire of those communities to exclude what they came to feel to be untrue, inadequate, or misleading.”

3. *Doctrines and the Spiritual Experience of Communities.* “Religious doctrines are both shaped by and formative of the spiritual experience of the communities that process them.” Griffiths’ examples from each religion showed that there is a complex symbiosis between their doctrines and their spirituality.

4. *Religious Doctrines—Catechesis and Evangelism.* “Religious doctrines function as instruments for the making of members of religious communities.” Griffiths observed that both Buddhism and Christianity desire to convert outsiders into their respective communities.
This missionary desire is an essential part of their self-definition. When conversion occurs, it is assumed that the former outsider has come to realize that “certain heretofore unknown or rejected items of doctrine are in fact both true and desirable. When evangelism has had its effect, catechesis can begin. And doctrine is integral to both processes.”

5. Religious Doctrines and Salvation. “Almost all religious communities take most of their doctrines—at least those that make prima facie claims about the nature of human persons and the world in which they live, as well as those that make recommendations about what kinds of action are desirable—to have cognitive content and to be expressive of salvifically significant truths.”

Griffiths argued that the five dimensions of religious doctrines are crucial in interreligious understanding. He also emphasized that, in our interreligious encounters, these criteria would help us do justice to the integrity of the religions. He cited an example from the Buddhist doctrinal system:

For Buddhists, to let go of the idea that the buddhadharma is the supreme expression of truth, that the Buddha is superior to men and gods, and that all other religious communities (when they are not simply abominations) are partial reflections of and preparations for the real truth (which is Buddhism), means much more than simply tinkering with the system. It means an abandonment of almost everything that has been of key importance for Buddhist spirituality, intellectual life, ritual and ethical practice, and the rest.

Griffiths insists that we take the uniqueness of doctrines seriously if we want to show respect to the world’s religion. To minimize the importance of doctrines and replace them with a “well-intentioned pragmatism” is as imperialistic as the Christendom.

Taking religious doctrines seriously doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to view them as binary/exclusive in character. At this point, it is important to review the debate on how to approach religious doctrines: exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic.

21 Ibid., p. 166.
22 Ibid., p. 167.
23 Ibid., p. 168.
Exclusivist Approach. The Roman Catholic doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is a classic summary of the exclusivist approach to truth. Protestants expressed it in a different way:

Outside Christianity there is no salvation. For example, a definition of missiology reads:

That branch of theology which in opposition to the non-Christian religions, shows the Christian religion to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life; which seeks to disposses the non-Christian religions and to plant in their stead in the soil of heathen national life the evangelic faith and the Christian life.  

This view of truth among Christians worked hand in hand with Western colonialism. The British East India Company and its evangelical business leaders, for example, helped in the “evangelization” of India in the early 19th century. A historian reports:

The Indian territories were allotted by providence to Great Britain, wrote Charles Grant, the evangelical chairman of the British East India Company’s Court of Directors, “not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, once sunk in darkness, vice, and misery, the light and benign influence of the truth, the blessings of a well-regulated society, the improvements and comforts of active industry.”

Until now, for many Christians who describe themselves as conservative evangelicals, the Gospel is often reduced to the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20). Christianity is then perceived as an exclusivist faith against all other pagan religions. Schwöbel comments:

The question that arises when God is presented as being exclusively at work in Christianity is whether this does not reduce the universality of God to such an extent that God is made to appear as the tribal deity of a rather imperialistic form of Western Christianity.

An exclusivist approach to truth can be summarized in the following forms: (1) Christianity alone possesses the full knowledge of God because it alone is based on and is the containing vehicle of God’s direct self-revelation; (2) Christianity arose from and alone proclaims God’s saving act in the atoning death of Christ; (3) Christianity, despite all its historical defects, is the only religious movement to have been founded on earth by God in person.

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26 Schwöbel, p. 31.
I see the exclusivist view to be too presumptuous, almost claiming to have a monopoly of the Divine intervention on earth. Christianity does not own God. Christians must be aware of their own particularity even as they worship a universal God.

**Inclusivist Approach.** During the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) the Roman Catholic Church virtually repealed the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), declared that “man—every man without exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ... because with man—every man without exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.”

John Hick observed that the Protestant thinking has moved in the same direction:

The new consensus, or near consensus, that has emerged out of this trend away from the old exclusivism is today generally called inclusivism. The Christian mind has now for the most part made the move from an intolerant exclusivism to a benevolent inclusivism... Non-Christians can be saved because, unknown to them, Christ is secretly “in a way united” with them.

Perhaps Gavin D’Costa is the most articulate of all the inclusivist theologians I have read. However, he moved beyond the traditional inclusivist view—that non-Christians are actually anonymous Christians. He calls himself an inclusivist but he sees it operating in a different way: “This approach allows for a genuine recognition of religious plurality and facilitates appropriate theological criteria to make sense of such diversity.” He suggests that “at the heart of a Trinitarian doctrine of God, the multiplicity of religions takes on a special theological significance that cannot be ignored by Christians who worship a Trinitarian God.”

**Pluralist Approach.** Pluralists seek to move beyond the traditional exclusivist-inclusivist approaches. For them, inclusivism is a great move forward in terms of inter-religious dialogue. But according to John Hick, one of the leading proponents of a programmatic Pluralistic Theology

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28 Hick, p. 22.


30 Ibid.
of Religions, all this “does not mean...that the old sense of Christian superiority has died out or that the traditional claim to the unique finality of the Christian Gospel has been rescinded.”

Hick continues:

To abandon this claim to an ultimate religious superiority is therefore to pass a critical point, entering new territory from which the whole terrain of Christian truth is bound to look different. For on the other side of this divide Christianity is seen in a pluralistic context as one of the great world faiths, one of the streams of religious life through which human beings can be savingly related to that ultimate Reality Christians know as the heavenly Father.

For Hicks, the Christian tradition is now seen as “one of a plurality of contexts of salvation—contexts, that is to say, within which the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to God—or Reality-centeredness is occurring.” Furthermore, the Christian claim—that Christ’s continuing agency on earth is superior to all other religions—must be shown by historical evidence; Christian inclusivism has to be posed as an empirical issue to be settled by examination of facts.

Pluralism sounds very attractive to me because of its claim to objectivity and universality. But I think pluralists do not clearly see their own subjectivity and particularity. Their Enlightenment grid—their modernistic weltanschauung—is another Western form of imperialism presented in a very gentle way.

Personal Approach I’ve Chosen. At this point in my theological journey the approaches of Gavin D’Costa and M.M. Thomas meet the concerns I have with regards to religious doctrine and integrity as it relates to my desire to experience other world religions, such as Buddhism.

Here’s how D’Costa’s theses helped me:

1. A trinitarian Christology guards against exclusivism and pluralism by dialectically relating the universal and the particular. My faith in Jesus Christ is re-strengthened in this process
because I realized that he is “totus Deus, never totum Dei”—that is, wholly God but never the whole of God.”  As a finite person, I cannot all-at-once embrace the infinite universality of God. It was only through my particular encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth that I was able to embrace the universal God who became a particular person in space-time history.

Through Christ, I am able to embrace God, not exhaustively but relationally. This existential, relational knowledge brought me to a new awareness of the universality of God through the Holy Spirit. I am developing a new appreciation for a Christocentric Trinitarian theology. D’Costa puts it well: “In this way the Trinity anchors God’s self-revelation in the particularities of history, principally focused in Jesus Christ—without limiting God to this particularity through the universality of the Holy Spirit.”

2. Pneumatology allows the particularity of Christ to be related to the universal activity of God in the history of humankind. My spiritual meditation and biblical reflection helped me gain a fresh understanding of the universality of God in the Holy Spirit. “There are no good theological reasons to suggest that God’s activity has stopped, but rather, given the universal salvific will of the Father revealed in Christ, we can have every expectation that God’s activity in

35 D’Costa, p. 18.

36 I have been reminded that the Holy Spirit is the biblical Breath of Life as indicated in the Hebrew Bible. Animals have the Breath of Life or nefesh ‘hayya (Genesis 1:30). Nefesh means “soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion, and passion.” ‘Hayya is an adjective meaning “alive or living.” Human beings were created by God from the dust of the ground (in a sense we’re one with the Earth) and were breathed the Breath of Life or nishmat ‘hayyim (Genesis 2:7). N’sh’m’ means “breath of God as hot wind kindling a flame; as destroying wind; as cold wind producing ice; as creative, giving breath to human beings.” It also means “God’s breath in human beings; it is a characteristic of our humanity.” ‘Hayyim is the plural of ‘Hayya. God described all creatures under heaven as having the Breath of Life or ruach ‘hayyim (Genesis 6:17). The word ruach means “breath, wind, spirit.” This term is also used in Genesis 1:2 in reference to the Ruach or Spirit of God who was “hovering over the waters.” The Greek New Testament is consistent with the Hebrew Bible in its understanding of the Breath of Life. The first Adam, according to the Apostle Paul, became a Living Being or eis psuchein zousan. Included among the many meanings of psuchei are the concepts of “breath of life, soul life, and life-principle.” Zaou means “living,” the root word for the terms “zoo” or “zoology.” The second Adam, Christ, became a life-giving spirit or pneuma zouopoiooun. Pneuma means “breath, life, spirit, soul.” Zouopoioeou means “to make alive, to give life to” (1 Corinthians 15:45). The term Breath of Life or pneuma zoueis was also used in the story of God’s Two Witnesses. These two men prophesied for God in the midst of opposition from the majority of the world’s population. When they were finished testifying for God, they were attacked, overpowered, and was killed. "But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet...” (Revelation 11:11) Zouei means “of life.” Therefore, when the Bible uses the term Breath of Life, I understand it to mean: (1) God’s Spirit or Wind that hovers over the whole creation; (2) God’s breath as hot wind kindling a flame, energizing all living creatures; (3) God’s life that has been breathed into all living things; (4) God’s life-spirit that was breathed into the nostrils of the dust-formed humanity, and as a consequence, we became living, self-conscious, physical-spiritual beings; (5) God’s life-giving-Spirit in Christ to bring new life to human beings; (6) God’s life-spirit that resurrects the dead.
history is ongoing and certainly not historically limited to Christianity."\(^{37}\) Because God the Holy Spirit is active in history inside and outside Christianity, I must have a narrative space within my Christian theology and practice so that their histories and stories can be heard without distortion.\(^{38}\)

3. **A Christocentric trinitarianism discloses loving relationship as the proper mode of being.** Hence love of neighbor (which includes Hindus, Buddhists, and others) is an imperative for all Christians. Because I love and worship the Triune God whose relationship with each other is characterized by loving communion, loving communion should characterize my mode of being. My love of neighbor is co-essential with my love for God. D’Costa explains: “In our multifaith local and global societies, neighbors will include people from all faiths. Being called to love our neighbor is not exclusively expressed in a personal modality but also in a structural manner. Hence, inter-religious dialogue, at a personal and structural level, is an imperative for all Christians.”\(^{39}\)

4. **The normativity of Christ involves the normativity of crucified self-giving love.** Praxis and dialogue. The story of the Good Samaritan is a challenge for me to prioritize “self-giving and suffering action on behalf of our neighbor as that which constitutes neighborly love.”\(^{40}\) The life and death of Jesus Christ encoded this in the life of the Christian community. This self-giving and suffering action is my response to the prophetic calling for the followers of Christ to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to proclaim recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the Lord’s Jubilee (Lk. 4:18-19). D’Costa further emphasizes that, “Christ’s normativity correctly suggests that *working together* with men and women from other religions for liberation from oppression and suffering in all its many

\(^{37}\) D’Costa, p. 19.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 20.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
forms and, through this mutuality, discovering the many forms in which this oppression and suffering take place, is one proper mode of interreligious dialogue for Christians.\textsuperscript{41}

5. \textit{The church stands under the judgment of the Holy Spirit, and if the Holy Spirit is active in the world religions, then the world religions are vital to Christian faithfulness.} D’Costa based this thesis from John’s Farewell Discourses when Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit’s relation to himself and the Father in John 16:12-15. His commentary on this passage is noteworthy:

The full richness and depths of God are yet to be discovered even though in Christianity it is claimed that God has revealed herself definitively in Christ. “I have yet many things to say to you” is indicative of this recognition, which also poses this question: How is this deepening process of disclosure to take place? The answer given here is through the work of the Spirit, who will “guide” and “declare.” What is interesting in this passage is the ongoing hermeneutical circle underpinning John’s Trinitarian theology. The process of guidance and declaration, or what we might call the ongoing disclosure of the fullness of revelation, is authorized and measured insomuch as it is in conformity to Christ (“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you”). This conformity to Christ is itself only authorized because of his relationship to the Father (“All that the Father has is mine”). The riches of the mystery of God are disclosed by the Spirit and are measured and discerned by their conformity to and in their illumination of Christ. Insomuch as these riches are disclosed, Christ, the universal Logos, is more fully translated and universalized. In this sense, Jesus is the normative criteria for God, while not foreclosing the ongoing self-disclosure of God in history through the Spirit.\textsuperscript{42}

The Christ I have encountered is the norm for understanding God and yet not a static norm. This norm by which I came to understand God is being constantly “transformed and enriched through the guiding/declaring/judging function of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{43}

This is very significant in my experiential dialogue with Buddhism. First, I’m becoming more aware that the Spirit and the Word are present and active in the world—inside and outside Christianity. This means that the Spirit and the Word are also active and present in the religions of the world. Second, I am becoming more aware that “it is intrinsic to the vocation of the church to be attentive to the world religions.”\textsuperscript{44} The church must not “willfully close itself to the

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 21.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., pp. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
Spirit of truth, which it requires to remain faithful to the truth and be guided more deeply into it.”

Third, I’m becoming more aware about the purifying process of interreligious dialogue about our knowledge of God’s truth. D’Costa explains:

The doctrine of the Spirit thereby provides the narrative space in which the testimonies of people from the world religions, in their words and lives, can unmask the false ideologies and distorted narrative practices within Christian communities. At the same time, it allows Christians to be aware of God’s self-disclosure within the world’s religions, and through this process of learning, enrich its own self-understanding. Without listening to this testimony, Christians cease to be faithful to their own calling as Christians, in being attentive to God.

Now, M. M. Thomas presented various aspects of Christ-centeredness, which they learned in their experience of interfaith dialogue on human renewal in the context of India’s religious and ideological pluralism:

1. The insight that faith in Christ needs to be distinguished from all its historical expressions in religion and culture and be seen as transcending them.

   Christ is beyond my christological propositions that were formulated within my religious history and culture. Through this experiential dialogue with Buddhists, I’m opening myself for a continued re-formation of my faith in Christ beyond my absolutization of my christology. If this is so, then it is possible, even inevitable, for me to hold on my faith in Christ within the framework of other religions such as Buddhism.

2. Christ-centeredness in the Christian stance toward interfaith relations provides a principle of spiritual discrimination.

   Like any other religious human being living in the context of postmodernity, I cannot jump out of my Christian religion and culture. I cannot accept the pluralist’s notion of a philosophical Ultimate Reality or a liberal pragmatic criteria that do not take my Christian doctrines and Buddhist doctrines seriously; they are another form of Western

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 55.
49 Ibid., p. 57.
imperialism. Jesus Christ provides a universal and transcendent source of criticism of all religions and culture, including the criticism of Christianity itself.

3. Christ, as the criterion of spiritual evaluation of all religions, including Christianity, enables a discernment of spirits in them. There are many aspects in the spirituality of world religions and cultures that are not of God; they are "described in the Bible as forces of darkness, of idolatry, or of anti-Christ." In my experiential dialogue with Buddhism, I must use a mixture of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in my discernment process. I see exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism operate under a Christocentric lens. With this Christocentric lens, it is possible for me to exclude forms of evil and include what are good and what a life-affirming values even if they don’t have a Christian brand or trademark. The recognition of, and working within, a pluralistic society is also possible. M. M. Thomas is positive about this when faced with the challenges of religious plurality in India:

...True equality in a pluralistic society lay neither in the religious idea of equality of religions not in the idea of equal respect for all religions, but in the equality of persons, that is, the equal recognition and reverence for persons in the integrity of their religious or secular ideological faith-commitments. Indeed, this is the basis on which interfaith dialogue and common struggle for remaking society can best be promoted in pluralistic India.

Guided with these insights on religion, religious doctrine, and religious integrity, I will now continue to explore further the possibility of whether or not I can be a Buddhist Christian.

CRUCIAL POINTS OF TENSION BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY & BUDDHISM

When comparing truth-claims between two religions, one must go beyond positive comparisons that are more accepted as politically correct in a pluralistic world. When we seek truth in all honesty, we cannot avoid negative criticism even if it is not always welcomed. In a multicultural society, criticism, very often, breed ill-feelings. Because of this, most people would

50 Ibid., p. 58.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p. 59.
avoid critical dialogues about each other’s truth-claims. But this attitude negates authentic understanding. Dr. Dharmasiri, a Buddhist philosopher and teacher, says that this attitude is wrong for some very important reasons.\(^5^3\)

To make comparisons between religions is easy. To quote parallel passages from texts of different religions is equally easy. But intellectually this is very immoral exercise, since when we quote such apparently similar passages we quote them out of their proper context that gives religious statements their meaning.

Therefore, religions should be compared and contrasted in terms of their whole doctrinal and cultural contexts. It is only then that comparisons or contrasts between religions can be made…

Superficial comparisons can lead to superficially happy confrontations. But that only worsens the situation by leaving the real problems lie dormant underneath. One cannot exorcise real differences simply by emphasizing superficial similarities. Therefore the first indispensable step to take is to show and clarify areas of disagreement. Then only can we understand where we stand. We may thereafter attempt to map out the possible ways of making or finding comparisons.

This paper is an attempt to make comparisons and contrasts based on Dr. Dharmasiri’s insight. I will limit my comparisons or contrasts between Christianity and Buddhism on the subjects of God and Transformation.

**God.** Dr. Dharmasiri delineated the conflicting truth-claims about the concept of God between Christianity and Buddhism. Whereas Christianity’s basic presupposition is the existence of a Creator God as the eternal, personal, spiritual Being who created—separate from, but active in—the cosmos, the Buddha “did not accept the existence of God.”\(^5^4\)

Buddhists translated this conflicting truth-claim into a practical objection when the name of God was invoked during the Council of the Parliament of the World’s Religion in Chicago, IL from August 28 to September 4, 1993. In that Council, 6,500 people from every possible religion


\(^5^4\) Ibid., pp. xi-xii. Throughout his book, Dr. Dharmasiri presented a detailed and systematic critique of the concept of God in Christian theology from the point of view of early Buddhism.
took part in finalizing a Declaration Toward a Global Ethic. Hans Küng, the theologian who drafted the Declaration, remarked:  

It was clear to me from the start that the representatives of Buddhism would not have accepted the name of God in such a declaration. And moreover there was immediately a controversy over this even during the Parliament. So I want to explain this point in more detail.

Buddhism—a religion without God? Of course experts in Buddhism can point out that Buddhism as practiced in reality does know ‘God’, indeed a number of gods taken over from popular religion (Indian religion or some others): those personified natural forces or divinized kings and saints who are called on for protection and help (there are phenomena corresponding to such practical polytheism in popular Catholicism with its veneration of saints and angels). The Buddha Gautama himself regarded the gods (devas) as real but provisional, since they too were subject to birth and rebirth.

...So in the sphere of Buddhism we do not find a strict atheism but a polytheism—often crudely magical. However, the gods are not ‘Ultimate Reality’, absolute ‘Ground’ and ‘Primal Goal’.

Hans Küng reported that the reaction of Buddhists during the Parliament confirmed this. There was, however, a statement that was read by the leaders of Buddhism at the same Parliament:

We would like to make it known to all that Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was not God or a god. He was a human being who attained full Enlightenment through meditation and showed us the path of spiritual awakening and freedom. Therefore, Buddhism is not a religion of God. Buddhism is a religion of wisdom, enlightenment and compassion. Like the worshippers of God who believe that salvation is available to all through confession of sin and a life of prayer, we Buddhists believe that salvation and enlightenment is available to all through removal of defilements and delusion and a life of meditation. However, unlike those who believe in God who is separate from us, Buddhists believe that Buddha, which means “one who is awake and enlightened,” is inherent in us all as Buddhanature or Buddhamind.

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56 Ibid., p. 63.

57 Ibid., p. 64. The leaders who signed the statement were the following: the Ven. Samu Sunim of the Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago; Ven. Maha Ghosananda, the supreme patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism; Zen Master Seung Sahn; Ven. Abbot Walpola Piyananda of Sri Lanka Buddhism; the Rev. Chung Ok Lee of Korean Buddhism; and the Thai professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh.

58 Ibid.
The Buddhist-Christian dialogue moved beyond promoting mutual understanding between the two religions. Through the leadership of Masao Abe Buddhists and Christians entered a new stage in which the mutual transformation of Buddhism and Christianity is seriously explored.\(^{59}\) Abe examines the Christian God—clearly understood as the Triune God of Christian experience rather than the “One” of the philosophers so roundly and correctly criticized by Pascal—and the Emptiness (Sunyata) of Mahayana Buddhism’s understanding of Reality. In one of his essays\(^{60}\) he suggested that, in Christianity, the notion of the *kenotic* God is essential as the root-source of the *kenotic* Christ, if God is truly God of love. Through his exegesis of Philippians 2:5-8, he suggested a reformulation of the doctrine of Christ’s kenosis as follows:

> The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying): precisely because he is not the Son of God he is truly the Son of God (for he originally and always works as Christ, the Messiah, in his salvational function of self-emptying).\(^{61}\)

This leads to the concept of a self-emptying God since the kenotic God is the ground of the kenotic Christ:

> God is not God (for God is love and completely self-emptying); precisely because God is not a self-affirmative God, God is truly a God of love (for through complete self-abnegation God is totally identical with everything including sinful humans).\(^{62}\)

Abe further explains that,

> The notion of kenotic God opens up for Christianity a common ground with Buddhism by overcoming Christianity’s monotheistic character, the absolute oneness of God, and by sharing with Buddhism the realization of absolute nothingness as the essential basis for the ultimate. This can be accomplished through the notion of the kenotic God—not through losing Christianity’s self-identity, but rather through deepening its spirituality.\(^{63}\)

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\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 11.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., p. 17.
Masao Abe also suggested that Sunyata—the ultimate reality for Buddhism—must be grasped dynamically, not statically, since Sunyata indicates not only wisdom but also compassion:

Sunyata is fundamentally non-Sunyata—that is... Sunyata. That is the true and ultimate Sunyata. This means that true Sunyata empties not only everything else, but also empties itself. Through its self-emptying it makes everything exist as it is and work as it does. In other words, through its self-emptying the realization of Sunyata reestablishes a dualistic view and value judgment clearly, without being limited by them. Sunyata should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form, for it is a dynamic creative function of emptying everything and making alive everything.\(^64\)

He then concludes that “when we clearly realize the notion of the *kenotic* God in Christianity and the notion of the dynamic Sunyata in Buddhism—without eliminating the distinctiveness of either religion but rather by deepening their respective uniqueness—we find a significant common basis at a more profound level.”\(^65\)

**Transformation.** In 1985, Schubert M. Ogden and Masao Abe had a conversation on the subject of transformation.\(^66\) Ogden defined transformation as “the transition from inauthentic to authentic existence,”\(^67\) while Abe pointed out that “transformation in Buddhism centers around the realization of death”—that is, the realization of the beginningless and endless non-dualistic process of living-dying.\(^68\)

*Christian View of Transformation.* The Christian understanding of ultimate transformation, according to Ogden, starts with our understanding of *ultimate reality* through Jesus Christ:

The proper starting point for such a statement is the constitutive claim of the Christian witness that Jesus is the Christ, in the sense that through Jesus the meaning of ultimate reality for us is decisively re-presented...

In this sense, the Christian witness is and must be “christocentric.” But there is a difference between thus claiming that the only meaning of ultimate reality for us is

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\(^{64}\) Ibid., p. 33.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., p. 61.

\(^{66}\) Schubert M. Ogden, “For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free’: The Christian Understanding of Ultimate Transformation”; Masao Abe, “Transformation in Buddhism”. These were papers delivered at the Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter at Vancouver School of Theology, March 22-25, 1985.

\(^{67}\) Ogden, p. 3.

that which is decisively re-presented through Jesus and claiming that it is only in Jesus that the meaning of ultimate reality for us is constituted.\textsuperscript{69}

Ogden proceeded that the ultimate reality that Jesus Christ re-presented is \textit{the reality of God}. It is through God’s reality that our self-understanding can be authentic. He explains:

Its assertion about the meaning of ultimate reality for us is determined by the claim that the only strictly ultimate reality, which not only we but anything that is so much possible is somehow obliged to take account of, is the reality of God, which itself is understood to be the utterly boundless love both of itself and of everything else. Thus, according to this answer, the sole primal source both of ourselves and of any even merely possible world to other persons or things is the same unbounded love that is also the sole final end of all things. This means that our self-understanding can be authentic only insofar as it is appropriate to this love, and so authorized by it, whence the assertion that we are to understand ourselves through faith in God’s love.\textsuperscript{70}

He pointed out that our self-understanding must be grounded on the reality of God and that God’s love alone must be the object of our trust and loyalty. Any other self-understanding that is also taken to be strictly ultimate is an inauthentic understanding of our existence. Traditional theology calls this inauthentic self-understanding as \textit{sin}.\textsuperscript{71} The rejection of God as Ultimate Reality, according to Ogden, may be described as \textit{unfaith or idolatry}—that is, “trusting in and being loyal to something besides God’s love as the only reality that is strictly ultimate.”\textsuperscript{72}

He concluded that, in the Christian understanding, “ultimate transformation as either the process or an instance of change from an inauthentic to an authentic self-understanding is the change from sin to faith, from unfaith to idolatry to trust in God’s love and loyalty to it alone as strictly ultimate.” This understanding of ultimate transformation is also known as \textit{salvation, redemption, or regeneration}.

For Ogden, this ultimate transformation or salvation brings us freedom: “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). He closed his paper with a call to pursue the logical and moral implications of the freedom we have in Christ:

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
So in the Christian understanding for which I have argued, the existence for freedom for which we are freed by God’s love involves our action not only for the freedom of faith of all our fellow human beings but also for their freedom from unjust social and cultural structures that oppress them and keep them in bondage. In this way, our ultimate transformation involves penultimate transformations in the social and cultural orders for which we are responsible as well as in our individual beliefs and actions. Even so, having also argued that our ultimate transformation is one thing, all other changes, something else, I must insist on this final point: as surely as ultimate transformation may indeed involve radical social and cultural change, even the most radical such change can never be more than penultimate in relation to the freedom of faith for which Christ has set us free.\footnote{Ibid., p. 11.}

Implicit in Ogden’s view of transformation is its linear view of history in which the process of transformation moves from the past, to the present, then to the future. Transformation starts from creation to the \textit{eschaton}.

\textit{Buddhist View of Transformation.} Transformation, according to Masao Abe, centers around the realization of death. “Apart from the realization of death the Buddhist notion of transformation cannot be legitimately grasped.”\footnote{Abe, “Transformation in Buddhism,” p. 1.}

Abe starts by clarifying the nature of life and death:

In our usual way of thinking, life and death are distinguished from one another and their relationship is taken as a \textit{process} that moves from life to death… When we look upon the relation of life and death as a \textit{process} moving from the former to the latter, our \textit{existential} posture is \textit{outside} of both. It is just like standing on an embankment and looking down the river of life flowing from its source to its lower reaches. Are we, however, not actually swimming right in the middle of this river? By taking our position outside of both life and death we objectify our life as something \textit{present} and our death as something which will happen in the \textit{future}.\footnote{Ibid., p. 2.}

Life and death are not two separate things but dynamically one. According to him, we are not moving from life to death. Instead, at “each and every moment, we are fully living and fully dying.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 3.} Hence, we should not speak of \textit{life and death}, but instead, we must speak of \textit{living-dying} as antithetical and yet inseparable aspects of one and the same reality.\footnote{Ibid., p. 4.} If \textit{living-dying} is
viewed existentially from the inside, then a newborn baby can be seen as beginning to die; thus, the baby is living-dying. The same is true with an old person in his or her deathbed; such person is living-dying.

In Buddhism, this beginningless and endless living-dying is called samsara. This is regarded as death in the true sense of the word. Samsara is what is problematic in Buddhism, according to Abe. Transformation in Buddhism “precisely indicates transformation from an existence bound by samsara to an existence liberated from samsara—that is, existence in nirvana.”

Living-dying must be realized as karma—that is, act, deed, or retribution:

In Buddhism, our life and death struggle is grasped as karma because it is ultimately rooted in our blind craving to exist and our fundamental ignorance of the principle of dependent origination and non-substantiality of everything in the universe.

Abe identified a three-pronged karma-realization to achieve transformation—that is, transformation from an existence involved in samsara to an existence living in nirvana: (1) the non-duality of life and death; (2) the beginninglessness and endlessness of our living-dying; (3) the total living-dying at this moment of the absolute present—that is, here, in this point, we can overcome samsara and realize nirvana right in the midst of samsara.

Furthermore, Abe pointed out that “Buddhist transformation takes place not in nirvana apart from samsara, but at the intersection of samsara and nirvana.” This is important because even though one must overcome attachment to samsara and arrive at nirvana, one must not stay in nirvana. He explains:

But if one stays in nirvana, apart from samsara one is still selfish because abiding in nirvana one may enjoy one’s own salvation while forgetting suffering of one’s

78 Ibid. Also, for a comparative analysis of Buddhist nirvana and Christian salvation, see Fumio Masutani, A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1967), pp. 50-68.

79 For a thorough definition of karma, see Antony Fernando, Buddhism and Christianity: Their Inner Affinity (Sri Lanka: Empire Press, 1981), pp. 30-33.

80 Ibid., p. 10.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., p. 14.
fellow beings who are still involved in samsara. To be completely unselfish one should not stay in nirvana but return to the realm of samsara to save suffering fellow beings. This is the reason Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes “Do not abide in samsara for the sake of wisdom; do not abide in nirvana for the sake of compassion.” Not abiding either in samsara or nirvana and freely moving from samsara to nirvana, from nirvana to samsara without attaching to either, this dynamic movement is true nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism.\(^83\)

For Abe, when transformation takes place at the intersection of samsara and nirvana, then one’s transformation has reached "the dynamism of true nirvana."\(^84\)

This dynamism of true nirvana has both personal and social dimensions. Self-awakening in nirvana, however important it may be, is not sufficient. "Only when awakening others from samsara is achieved is self-awakening also achieved."\(^85\) This is expressed in the Four Great Vows of Mahayana Buddhism:

However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them;  
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;  
However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them;  
However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it.

These vows show that benefiting others comes before benefiting the self. Abe commented that this "signifies the spirit of Bodhisattva, the model of the Mahayana Buddhist who strives to save others before saving oneself."\(^86\) This, according to him, is the basis for the social transformation in Buddhism. He further explains:

The vow of Bodhisattva to save all beings and to attain Buddhahood is a single process involving both self and others, and provides the basis for the transformation of society in Buddhism... Traditional Buddhism lacks a concrete program of social transformation. This is partly because Buddhism is more concerned with the ground or religious basis for social transformation rather than a practical program, and partly because in Buddhism the ground or religious basis for social transformation is not limited to human beings but includes all beings, human and natural. It is an urgent task for Buddhism to actualize the Bodhisattva idea in a concrete plan for social transformation in the contemporary human predicament.\(^87\)

\(^83\) Ibid.  
\(^84\) Ibid., p. 15.  
\(^85\) Ibid.  
\(^86\) Ibid.  
\(^87\) Ibid., p. 16.
Abe concludes by explaining the uniqueness of the Buddhist concept of time. He said that time is understood entirely without beginning and without end. Time is neither linear nor circular and therefore is completely reversible; and yet it moves from moment to moment, each moment embracing the whole process of time. Because of this notion of time, he said that “Buddhism is weak in its view of history.” However, he is optimistic that Buddhism can strengthen its own view of history:

Accordingly, one who has attained nirvana should not abide in nirvana but must return to the realm of samsara to help these people equally awaken to their original nature by themselves. This is the compassionate aspect of nirvana which can be actualized only by overcoming the attachment to one’s own nirvana. This process of actualizing the compassionate aspect of nirvana is endless because people who do not awaken to their original nature are countless and appear to be endless. Here the progress of history toward the future is necessary and comes to have a positive significance.

...Unidirectional history toward the future becomes essential. Here, we do have a Buddhist view of history.

Abe warns not to misinterpret this view of history. This is not an eschatological nor a teleological view of history. In the light of wisdom everything and everyone without exception is realized in its original nature. In the light of compassion the process of awakening others in history is endless. Buddhist transformation in history takes place at the intersection of the wisdom aspect and the compassionate aspect of nirvana which is essentially dynamic.

I’m excited to learn about the positive developments in the theological dialogue between Buddhists and Christians especially in the concepts of God and Transformation.

On the subject of God, I appreciate Masao Abe’s Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata. Is he proposing to free the oneness in Trinity to great zero? Is my Christian faith, that starts with a Christocentric Trinitarianism, being changed from three-in-one to three-in-absolute-emptiness? I don’t know yet. I need to study more about what Sunyata means. Perhaps I still have to work in my mind how the Christian ground (being) is the same as the Buddhist ground (nothingness).

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., p. 18.
90 Ibid.
Would the appropriation of this insight take place with integrity and respect as far as the doctrine of the Trinity is concerned? By the way Abe did his exegesis, I think religious integrity and respect are present in this dialogue.

There are three aspects of Masao Abe’s *Kenotic God* that is good in the light of what M. M. Thomas calls the *new humanity in Christ*? I think Abe’s proposal and the response of Christians, such as John Cobb, is a good example of “a larger koinonia of dialogue among people of different faiths inwardly being renewed by their acknowledgment of the ultimacy of the pattern of suffering servanthood as exemplified by the crucified Jesus.”

Perhaps Abe’s view of the *kenosis* of God in Christ exemplifies how the Holy Spirit works in world religions such as Buddhism. Could this be one of those “testimonies of people from the world religions” that D’Costa is talking about? Is the Spirit now providing the narrative space in which Buddhism might unmask the false ideologies and distorted narrative practices within our Christian communities? Shall we discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church about our worship of *crusading and conquest* as examples of our idolatry and our distorted narrative practices? Is Masao Abe’s kenotic God a reminder from the Holy Spirit that, in Christ, our God emptied and humbled himself?

On the subject of *transformation*, the Holy Spirit also allows Buddhists and Christians to be aware of God’s self-disclosure within their respective religions, and through this process of learning-in-dialogue, enrich their own self-understanding. On one hand, Buddhists can enrich their own self-understanding of *history* as it relates to individual and social *transformation*. On the other hand, Christians can enrich our self-understanding of *living-dying* as it relates to individual and social transformation which is consistent with Jesus’ statement: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn. 12:24).

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91 M. M. Thomas, p. 61.
92 Ibid.
Listening to the testimony of the Holy Spirit will help us Christians to be faithful to our own calling in being attentive to God.

Considering these information and insights, is it possible to be a Buddhist Christian? Theologically, I choose to remain faithful to Christocentric Trinitarianism. Hence, I am first a Christian as a matter of religious integrity. This is my point of reference.

However, like a compass with a needle-leg (to use as a point-of-reference) and a pencil-leg (to use to enlarge one’s circle), a firm stand on Christocentric Trinitarianism (my needle-leg) would actually expand my spiritual experience (my pencil-leg) of God’s presence and work in other religions through the Holy Spirit. Is it possible for a faithful believer in Christological Trinitarianism to experience and love Christ in the religious framework of Buddhism? To be specific, can I be a Christian of doctrinal integrity even when I practice Zen Buddhist meditation?

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE THROUGH CONTEMPLATION

I have been practicing Buddhist meditation for two years now. Guided by D.T. Suzuki’s manual\(^{93}\), I tried to practice Zen. I realized later that I need a roshi, or a Zen Master, but they are difficult to find. So I tried joining a meditation class at the International Buddhist Society\(^{94}\) near my home and used the work of William Johnston\(^{95}\) to guide my Zen experience as a Christian. Through his books, Johnston became my roshi.

William Johnston is an Irish Jesuit who lived in Japan for more than forty years and learned Zen Buddhism and zazen (Zen sitting) from the roshi. He emphasizes that we know God only in contemplation because God is beyond philosophical and rational propositions.\(^{96}\) In the mystical


\(^{94}\) The International Buddhist Society is located at 9160 Steveston Highway, Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Tel: 604. 274.2822. Website: [http://www.buddhisttemple.org/index1.htm](http://www.buddhisttemple.org/index1.htm).


life, where there will be no words and no theological noise but silent communion, both Christian and Buddhist meet at the core of their being.\textsuperscript{97}

Johnston also emphasizes that a contemplative approach to Christian-Buddhist dialogue is not syncretism.\textsuperscript{98} He claims that he is still remaining committed to Christ and the Gospel, and he also stresses that Christian essentials are maintained in all purity.\textsuperscript{99}

**The Body and Meditation.** Before experiencing Zen meditation, my Christian spirituality used to be “cognitively noisy”. I used to pray as if I had to explain to God the rationale behind my prayers. I listened to God—through the meditation of the Word—with a theologically “correct” grid. I was not even aware I had a grid!

One of the astonishing assertions of Zen is its emphasis on achieving body-awareness by correct posture. I heard from my friend that Zen master Dogen even said that correct sitting or *zazen* was already enlightenment. And the perfect posture is the lotus. Lotus posture means sitting cross-legged with the left leg putting above the right. The left hand is held over the right and the thumbs are lightly touching. Zen believes that the lotus posture can impede discursive reasoning and thinking, and detach one from the very process of thinking. I do not know what *being detached from the very process of thinking* means yet. Right now, I’m beginning not to think about my body; instead I’m beginning to feel it and to experience it. I’m beginning to learn how to sit down with lotus and grasp the present in its totality. There are instances when I feel that I transcend time and all anxieties and fears about the future or the past are gone! Is this what Zen call *satori*? I do not know yet.

Zen masters always tell the students to control their breathing. Correct breathing should be slow, rhythmical, and abdominal. One should swell the muscles of the lower abdomen and become aware of the *tanden*, which is also the source of body energy. At first, I was consciously controlling my breathing, counting each inhalation and exhalation regularly. Now, I

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., p. 219.


\textsuperscript{99}Johnston, *Mystical Theology*, p. 31.
am learning to stop counting altogether and simply follow the breathing rhythm. Advanced contemplatives at times feel that they are united with universe and that the cosmic energy, or the \textit{ki} is liberated from the body. In my experience, this is like the Holy Wind or the Holy Breath coming from both above me and below me, meeting like a ball of fire in my \textit{tanden}. The ball of fire then fills my whole body until I literally feel the warmth of God’s Spirit, energizing and renewing my whole being. Finally, the ball of fire go back upward and downward, leaving my body and at the same time, retaining the living fire within my body. At that moment, I feel I’m one with God and the whole of creation!

\textbf{Koan Interpretation.} \textit{Koan}, usually in the form of question or narrative, is an outrageous paradox. For example: “How would you describe the sound of one hand clapping?” Through the absurdity of \textit{koan}, people get enlightened not by logical nor intellectual thinking, but by psychological and intuitive knowledge.

\textit{Koan} triggers the mystical faculties into action and opens up a new level of wisdom—like the \textit{great unsearchable things you do not know} that the Prophet Jeremiah talked about (Jer. 33:3), or the \textit{peace of God that surpasses all understanding} that the Apostle Paul was talking about (Phil. 4:6-7). Was Jesus a \textit{koan}-maker? He said: “He that loves his life will lose it.” Was Paul a \textit{koan}-maker? He testified: “When I am weak then I am strong.” These sayings are beyond reason and just like \textit{koan}. I’m learning to interpret them by faith, which is the breakthrough into the deep realm of the soul that accepts paradox and mystery with humility. The \textit{koan} is a good training to bow my mind before the Mind of Christ.

My Zen experience taught me that, on the contemplative level, it is possible to be a Buddhist Christian. Zen Buddhism enriches me as a Christian on the \textit{way} of meditation. And as a Christian, I enrich my Buddhist friend on the \textit{goal} of meditation. For me, this is a great blessing in experiential Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

I do not agree with traditional inclusivism that I have to prove theologically that deep down, all Buddhists are anonymous Christians. Dialogue is dialogue, not proselytizing. However, using D’Costa’s five theses that were mentioned earlier, I believe that God reveals the Divine Nature
to other religions through the power of the Holy Spirit. God has been doing constructive works in other religions. Non-Christian mysticism, including Zen Buddhism, is also under the presence of God’s work through the Spirit.

I, as a Christian, can learn to deepen my spiritual expression of love to God from the way of Buddhist meditation. My way of spiritual discipline is Buddhist. My goal in my spiritual journey is to grow deeper in my love-relationship with the Triune God. In this sense, I am a Buddhist Christian. And I believe I am a Christian of integrity!

BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE THROUGH ETHICO-PRACTICAL COOPERATION

This experiential dialogue is not just about my way of spiritual discipline and my goal in spiritual journey. Because this is a personal journey, it has to start with my individual experience. But this dialogue must not stop as an individualistic endeavor. It must continue on to the ethico-practical sphere. It is my desire that this dialogue is also at once be concerned with, and be immersed in, the realities that most humans are experiencing—suffering, injustice, war, environmental destruction, etc.

I’m excited that Buddhists and Christians have actually entered into a new level of ethico-practical dialogue. However, one must ask: Do Christians and Buddhists differ in their approach to political and social practices as much as their doctrinal differences? Are the issues of religious doctrine and integrity relevant to the ethico-practical cooperation?

It will be helpful at this point to review what is actually happening in the ethico-practical dialogue and cooperation between Buddhists and Christians.

Christian Contribution and Deficiencies. Knut Walf\(^{100}\) wrote a historical assessment of the Christian contribution towards a global ethic and advancement of human rights. He traced the Western concept of human rights and social ethics from the pre- and extra-Christian philosophies of Graeco-Roman provenance, through the early Christian community, through the

Protestant Reformation theology, and to modern Euro-American formulations. He also appraised the Roman Catholic Church’s laws on this issue. Walf argued that “church order and church law cannot and should not stand in opposition to the basic and human rights that prevail in human society.” He said this after documenting certain historical facts that proved his case. Then he asked what according to him is the most important question for Christians: “Is there any call today for the establishing of human rights from the side of Christian theologians, given that it is difficult to legitimize human rights from scripture, and that the history of Christianity bears witness to countless failures to observe human rights?” Walf answered his own question:

The establishing of human rights must take place as a necessary contribution of Christian theology towards an ethic of communication which must be discussed between Christians and non-Christians. When, therefore, Christian theologians engage in dialogue with representatives of other religions on this very question, they are making pioneering contributions towards a totally new way of understanding religions.

Christian theologians and social ethicists like Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann have been doing their homework since Walf’s question. Among other Christian thinkers, I find Max Stackhouse as one of the most articulate social ethicists in the context of a global political economy. He argued that Christians must reach more deeply into the resources of our heritage if we want to be effective in dealing with the challenges of a global era. These resources include the practice of paradoxical values inherent to the Christian community: contextualism and absolutism, individualism and community, incentive and opportunity.

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101 Ibid., pp. 35-37.
102 Ibid., pp. 38-41.
103 Ibid., p. 42.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid., p. 43.
107 Ibid., pp. 64-68.
Buddhist Contribution and Deficiencies. Sulak Sivaraksa\textsuperscript{108} made an evaluation of Buddhist contribution to human rights and global problem-solving. He began by an honest and direct-to-the-point statement: “There is no serious contemporary Buddhist perspective for global problem-solving.”\textsuperscript{109} Earlier in his article, Sivaraksa explained the doctrinal and historical backgrounds why the World Fellowship of Buddhists traditionally avoided political, military and economic issues; why it has not even dealt with environmental or human rights crises, nor has it promoted human cooperation.\textsuperscript{110} Near the end of his paper, Sivaraksa pointed out the new developments in Buddhism, especially the Asian Buddhist Conference for Peace held in 1989 in Mongolia. From then on, a new awareness began to emerge among Buddhists:

1. The individual and society in Buddhism  
2. Universalism and particularism  
3. Existing social practices which may lead to a more ideal society  
4. Sangha, state, and people  
5. Buddhism and the evolution of society  
6. Buddhist eschatology, millennialism and the Buddha land  
7. Buddhist education  
8. Buddhist approaches to war and violence  
9. Science, technology and Buddhism  
10. Women, family in Buddhism

Sivaraksa pointed out that these new developments were a result of “a new interpretation of the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness and the application of the Five Precepts to the common situation” that has been emerging.\textsuperscript{111} This further developed into an international network of engaged Buddhists which he calls “a hopeful beginnings for global problem-solving.”\textsuperscript{112}

Behind these frameworks that might facilitate a working relationship between Buddhists and Christians are theological appropriations that result to mutual transformation between the two

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 78.  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., pp. 79-88.  
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., pp. 88-90.  
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
religions. As presented by Walf, Christianity has been in the process of theological transformation as they respond to contemporary challenges throughout their history. In Sivaraksa’s assessment, Buddhists are being challenged to reinterpret some of their doctrines and narratives to meet today’s challenges.

Both religions, in search for a common ethical ground, have to struggle with what the constants (that which are unchangeable) are and what the variables (that which are changeable) are in their respective religious traditions. Both of them stood firm to what they see as constants. Both of them changed accordingly in response to what they see as variables.

**A Global Ethic.** Hans Küng reported that along with other religions of the world, Buddhists and Christians actively participated during the Council of the Parliament of World’s Religions. The representatives of very different religions, including Buddhists and Christians, signed a Declaration Toward a Global Ethic, after vigorous discussions. The principles of this new global ethic are worth noting:

I. No new global order without a new global ethic
II. A fundamental demand: Every human being must be treated humanely
III. Four irrevocable directives:
   1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence
   2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order
   3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness
   4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women
IV. A transformation of consciousness.

The progress in the ethico-practical encounter between Buddhism and Christianity are good, positive developments. My response to these developments is both affirmative and evaluative. I affirm the attitude and actions of religious leaders who stepped out of their comfort zones to enter into a new relationship towards a global ethic. Indeed, there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions!  

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114 Ibid., pp. 17-36.

115 Hans Küng, et al., p. 43.
At the same token, I feel there is a need to evaluate whether each religious community and their respective doctrines were respected and taken seriously during the process of such historic cooperation.

For example, at the beginning of the above-mentioned Council of the Parliament of World Religions, Hans Küng mentioned that many representatives objected to the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic as “too Western.” Was the issue of the doctrinal differences between religions taken seriously? Or simply glossed over? Or perhaps denied? Can we use ethico-practical cooperation as foundation for a pluralistic theology of religion?

There is an on-going debate about this issue. Paul F. Knitter sees the issue of justice and liberation—i.e., ethico-practical cooperation—as the basis for a pluralistic, non-relativistic dialogue. He proposed that,

A Christian liberation theology of religions...will propose as the “common” (though still “shaky”) ground or starting point for religious encounter not Theos, the ineffable mystery of the divine, but rather, Soteria, the “ineffable mystery of salvation.” Such a soteriocentric approach, it seems, is less prone to (though never fully immune from) ideological abuse, for it does not impose its own views of God or the Ultimate on other traditions...

Knitter’s argument sounds very convincing. First, he insists that praxis must be both the origin and the confirmation of theory or doctrine, instead of a preestablished absolutist position like the traditional understanding of Jesus Christ. Second, he shows that the realization of the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, which are the ingredients of a genuine theology of liberation, assures Christians that they do not need to hang on to their absolutist Christology in order to commit themselves to the liberating message of Jesus. Thirdly, when, according to him, orthopraxis is taken as a working criterion for “grading the religions,” then we can objectively assess the values of “ways of salvation” and the credibility of liberators and

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116 Ibid., p. 70.
118 Ibid., p. 187.
“saviors.” Finally, he closes his argument that this pragmatically presupposed program—a liberation theology of religions—would deal with the “obstacle facing those who are exploring possibilities of a non-absolutist or nondefinitive understanding of Christ”; this, then, would lead to an even playing field among the religions of the world as they work together.¹¹⁹

John Milbank, in contrast, argues that ethico-practical cooperation cannot be a foundation for genuine interreligious dialogue in the context of plurality. According to him, the Western construction of religion as a realm within culture is an “ethnocentric illusion.”¹²⁰ He speaks instead of religion as "the basic organizing categories for an entire culture: the images, word-forms, and practices which specify 'what there is' for a particular society."¹²¹ Practice is a realm within religion. Practice, then, is not a foundation; religion is!¹²² His response to Knitter is direct to the point:

Paul Knitter, for example, suggests that religions have never been as far apart in their soteriologies as in their theologies (this of course ignores the fact that these categories are actually alien to most religions). Such a claim can only imply that a common secular realm of human aspiration, relatively free from mythical and metaphysical elaborations, has always been latent within the religious traditions, and that the modern distinguishing of the modern category has always been somehow present, albeit often obscured. Yet if this is the case, the political and social agreement only arises insofar as the political gets separated from religion, or at least its more particular aspects. Even were one to grant this, a perplexity would remain: How can a consensus about social justice, which is relatively independent of religion, possibly help to mediate the differences between religions? The religions may agree upon a common action, but this will neither help nor hinder a process of dialogue.¹²³

Orthopraxis cannot take the place of orthodoxy as a new orthodoxy. The programmatic approach of a liberation theology of religions forgets the fact that such approach is a universalization of their own particularity. "So to celebrate universalism, rationalism, and humanism on the hand, and to disapprove of imperialism on the other... is contradictory."¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 191-197.
¹²⁰ Milbank, pp. 176-177.
¹²¹ Ibid.
¹²² Ibid., p. 181.
¹²³ Ibid., p. 182.
¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 181-182.
I tend to agree with John Milbank at this point. Elsewhere in his paper, he emphasized that practice turns out to be no neutral meeting ground, but rather the place where the other religions and even Christianity itself to some degree, have been most engulfed by the dominance of secular norms.\footnote{Ibid., p. 184.} It seems to me that secular Western liberalism—including those who advance a pluralist theology of religions—are not clearly aware that they are universalizing their own particularity. In their determination to eliminate the vestiges of Christian imperialism, they are bringing in another imperialist undertaking.

From the classical exclusivist/inclusivist approach, the question concerning exclusion/inclusion does not become easier when the discussion moves to the ethico-practical level. However, as M. M. Thomas would approach it, I would use a mixture of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in my discernment process.\footnote{Thomas, p. 55.} I see exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism operate under a Christocentric lens. With this Christocentric lens, it is possible for me to exclude forms of evil and include what is good and what is life-affirming values even if they don’t have a Christian brand or trademark. I think an ethico-practical cooperation in the context of a pluralistic society is not just possible but inevitable.

With a Christocentric point of reference and lens, one can work with Buddhists toward a global ethic of justice and peace and still maintain religious integrity.

CONCLUSION

Yes, it’s possible to be a Buddhist Christian.

I regard religion as my Weltanschauung—the basic organizing category for the entire culture I grew up in, including the images, word-forms, and practices which specify final reality. My religion starts with a Christocentric Trinitarian view of God and Authentic Life. From this Weltanschauung, I have committed my self to a set of religious doctrines, which I understand
as community rules, definitions of community boundaries, expressions of community’s spiritual experiences, evangelistic-discipleship processes, and view of salvation. These religious doctrines include the notion that God is active inside and outside my religious community; hence, God’s Spirit and God’s Word are present in the religions of the world. While being aware that God’s Spirit and God’s Word are present in the religions of the world, the particularity of my experience and knowledge of God in Jesus Christ provide me a lens for spiritual discrimination and spiritual discernment as I try to see the universality of God outside my religious community.

Spiritual discrimination and discernment are necessary for me to have a sense of religious integrity. Spiritual discrimination and discernment are also necessary because there are many aspects in the spirituality of world religions, including that of Western Christianity, that are not of God—forces of darkness, idolatry, anti-Christ. The process of discrimination and discernment may involve: exclusion of all forms of evil and demonic—like crusading conquest among Western Christians; inclusion of good and life-affirming values—like justice, peace and harmony among people groups; and, affirmation of religious plurality—like truthful and loving dialogue and cooperation among religions of the world.

What I mean by religion, religious doctrine, and religious integrity contains the meaning of the category Christian which I am applying to myself. In this sense, I am a Christian.

Buddhism is a weltanschauung by itself. In the subjects of both God and Transformation, Christians can appropriate insights from Buddhist tradition without necessarily jeopardizing their religious integrity and vice versa. In my case, a Christocentric Trinitarian weltanschauung serves as my point-of-reference. With this reference point, I can reach out to the wisdom and insights from Buddhism that are of God—what are truthful and what are good. Using the image of a compass, my needle-leg (reference point) is Christian; my pencil-leg (appropriation of wisdom outside the reference point) is Buddhist. My friend is also doing the same process, but her needle-leg is Buddhism while her pencil-leg is Christianity.

In the sense of being the pencil-leg, both the terms Buddhist and Christian can be used as a qualifying adjective while maintaining mutual integrity and respect for their respective needle-
legs. Therefore, from a **theological point of view**, it is possible for me to be a Buddhist Christian.

In the sphere of contemplation and mysticism, my way of spiritual expression is Buddhist meditation while my goal in spiritual journey is to grow in my love for God and for my neighbors as a Christian. My neighbors include Buddhists and other people from various religious communities. Therefore from the **experiential perspective of contemplation**, it is possible to be a Buddhist Christian. I am a Buddhist Christian.

In the area of ethico-practical cooperation, I see orthodoxy as my foundation while orthopraxis as my shared ministry field of justice and global ethic. Both the Buddhists and the Christians can work together while being faithful to what they see as constants and variables. What is constant to me is my Christian point-of-reference. My methodologies for practico-ethical cooperation with Buddhists—in the context of a pluralistic global reality—are a variable. As a Christian, would I participate in a Buddhist-sponsored work of justice and mercy in an area of need where Christian ministries may not be present? Yes, I will. I can be a Christian community development worker under the supervision of a Buddhist temple leadership. In terms of **ethico-practical cooperation**, it is possible for me to be a Buddhist Christian.

Is this another form of syncretism?

**Syncretism** is generally understood in the World Council of Churches as “the conscious or unconscious human attempts to create a new religion composed of elements taken from different religions.” Syncretism is also widely used as a warning signal against two dangers: (1) the danger of attempting to *translate* the Christian message for a cultural setting or in approach to faiths and ideologies with which Christians are in dialogue partnership, they may go too far and compromise the authenticity of Christian faith and life. They have the Bible to guide them but there is always risk in seeking to express the Gospel in a new setting: for instance, the compromising of the Gospel in the so called *civil religions* of the West; (2) the danger of

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interpreting a living faith not in its own terms but in terms of another faith or ideology—in this way, Christianity may be syncretized by seeing it only as a variant of some other approaches to God, or another faith may be wrongly syncretized by seeing it only as partial understanding of what Christians believe that they know in full.

In this paper, I have emphasized my respect for religion (Buddhism, Christianity, and others) as weltanschauung and how religious doctrine and integrity of both Buddhism and Christianity are taken seriously and carefully. The Christocentric Trinitarian worldview that I hold as my reference point for interreligious dialogue does not fit with the definition of syncretism cited above. The theological, contemplative, and ethico-practical processes shared in this paper demonstrate that this experiential dialogue does not fit with either the danger of compromise and the danger of co-variance, which are characteristic of syncretism. No, this experiential dialogue is not syncretism.

END OF PAPER
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Lay Buddhists don't wear special clothes or live by a lot of rules. You don't need to be vegetarian, or reject material possessions, relationships, or a social life. But becoming Buddhist doesn't magically change the world around us to fit our needs. So what is it that changes? To be a Buddhist, we don't need to wear any special clothing, change our eating habits, or give up material possessions or a social life. It's as simple as changing our perception — not taking the obstacles that come our way so seriously, and seeing everything around us as interesting and full of potential. Simple to say but not always easy to do. By understanding the teachings and using tools like meditation, as Buddhists we gradually alter our view of whatever is happening in life. It is not possible to be both a Buddhist and a Christian because Buddhism teaches all things without exception are 'anatta' ('not-self') & 'the elements' ('dhatu') as its core & fundamental principle; whereas Christianity includes 'self' in the form of Christ & The Father as a core principle. In other words, Buddhism is strictly 'impersonal' where as Christianity is 'personal', where salvation is based on a personal relationship between the 'small-self' & a personal god (Christ & The Father). This is why Christianity has had many Inquisitions. In conclusion, Buddhism states it is "impossible" for a person of right view to take refuge in another teacher, thus it is not possible to be both a Buddhist and a Christian.