



Christian / Buddhist DIALOGUE



Introduction

This month's topic explores the concepts of "process theology" and "personal theology". Personal theology is perhaps more familiar to most Westerners, and refers to religious life based on an acknowledgment of some personal relationship between human and divine. It might affirm some personhood to the divine and it supports a teaching of salvation by that other. Process theology is a modern theology based on Hartshorne, Whitehead and Cobb, in the West, and countless writers in the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, including Shankara, Nagarjuna and more. It affirms a 'ground of being' which is impersonal, outside of but active through time and constitutes the true nature of human (and other) life. Salvation is replaced by an 'awakening' to the truth of one's fundamental nature.

Buddhist Comment

It's not easy to pin down a theology in a tradition that spans 2500 years and hundreds of historical eras and cultures. And, it would not be that difficult to find elements of both personalising and process-emphasizing teaching in Buddhism. What I'll do here is describe the major Buddhist concept which addresses this, the concept of Tri-kaya, The Three Bodies, and later comment from my own perspective.

Within our major school, known as the Mahayana or All-saving Vehicle, we find this teaching of the three *kayas* or bodies of Buddha. They are identified as the *dharmakaya* (truth-body); *sambhoga-kaya* (enjoyment body) and *nirmanakaya* (emanation-body). From here I'll stick with the English words.

This doctrine is the way to account for the process/personal question at hand.

I acknowledge that the whole understanding of what is a Buddha may be unfamiliar to our dialogue, and I won't expand on that here, since we will come to that later in this series. For our purposes, we'll simply say that Buddha is that truth

to which the historical sage Shakyamuni "woke up" and became transformed by, after his wanderings in North India about 500 BCE. Let's begin there.

The physical body of Shakyamuni, which 'woke up' to the Dharma is the emanation-body. This was a convenient and teaching activity by which Truth presented itself in the world. It is identical to that truth, but not in any way a limitation to it. Truth does not die with the death of an emanation-body. Such bodies, and they are numberless, are examples of the skilful means of the Buddhas who act out of compassion for suffering beings. These are different from the enjoyment bodies, which are the fantastic celestial bodies we know from texts like the Lotus Sutra and others. Such embodiments are outside of time and space and dwell in equally fantastic realms, surrounded by countless bodhisattvas (Buddhas-to-be). This enjoyment embodiment gives us some information which points to the difference between the lives of suffering beings and the promises of full and complete Buddhahood. Thirdly, and most sublimely, is the truth-body, which is the full

and complete expression or revelation of the Dharma itself. It is utterly outside of time and space and utterly inexplicable to humans. It is, without doubt, able to be experienced by humans, but it cannot be described or referenced in human discourse. The experience of the dharma-body is the very goal of our Buddhist practice efforts. These three bodies, as equal representations of buddha-nature, can and do arise simultaneously, in the different revelatory contexts.

In my own personal religious history, I have moved from one pole, that of a strict non-theist, non-personalist, process theology to my present understanding which is marked by an acknowledgement, possibly what in Shin Buddhist terms might be called a 'surrender', to the active presence of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life. I would not call this view of the Buddhas as suggesting a 'person' or an 'entity' for me. The welcome breakthrough was an appreciation that the relationship between me as the humble and ignorant human and Amitabha Buddha was a personal one. It was the recognition that Amitabha, as the Voice That Calls, is calling directly to me. Not me alone, of course, but as I experience it, a call heard in my ears and heart. This has not meant abandoning my 'working model' of my world as one characterised by interconnectedness, responsibility and shared suffering. Nor does it suggest to me any acceptance that I have an eternal self, nor does it diminish the practice means taught by Buddhas and Dharma ancestors. The personalism I experience still occurs within the over-riding metaphor of the impermanence of this person. Perhaps this reflects an intellectual indecisiveness. I would prefer to see it as typical Buddhist non-dualism. There are no This-Versus-That propositions in Buddhist teaching. Ours is not a pursuit of doctrinal purity but the pursuit, by whatever circuitous and at times contradictory routes arise, and by which we approach that point we call Awakening.

Christian Comment

This month's question is centred on the topic of 'personal theology and process theology.' I was unclear as to what 'process theology' meant, so I looked it up, and find that the major concepts listed presuppose an image of God that doesn't work for me at all. They presuppose a God who is a sentient being, capable of deliberate action. Right away, I'm stumped.

I believe that there is a power of love in this world that can transform lives. I believe in it because I've seen it happen. I name that transforming love, "God." For me, there is no personhood of God that is a sentient being that (who) can interact with our world.

Having said that, I do acknowledge that my understanding of God is not the mainline image. Most Christians would be more likely to have an image of God-as-person (generally male), or at least, of God-as-a-sentient-being. They would believe that one can have a 'personal' relationship with the Divine. We hear questions like "Have you accepted Jesus as your personal saviour?" This is an understanding of the Divine as a being which/who at the very least, has an influence on the workings of the world. For some, this influence extends to the point of guidance and intervention. It's fairly common to hear such people speak of God as their personal intermediary, standing between them and fate, e.g., "I was in a multi-car accident, where people died, but I wasn't hurt. God was really with me that day!" I find this problematic, as its logical corollary would be, "therefore God was not with the people who were injured or who died."

A personal saviour would be that conception of the Divine that/who forgives one's sins, and offers the possibility of eternal redemption, or, conversely, eternal punishment, based on an individual's willingness to confess and seek forgiveness from God. The concept of "being

saved” is a whole other topic, and one that will be addressed in a different conversation.

My image of God-as-love lacks the comfort, I suppose, of having a personal God who knows my name and follows my activities with unwavering attention, as well as the knowing and following every other person in the world. But my understanding of God is lodged in an image that I can live with; one that doesn't compel me to suspend my intellect, or deny the science of the natural world, or believe in miracles that go counter to credulity.

God-as-love puts a different slant on my understanding of how I relate to the Divine. People ask, for example, 'if there is a God, why do children starve to death?' My theology translates these questions to ask, "If there's a power of love that can transform lives, why do children starve to death?' etc... It turns the question back to me, and the rest of humanity. If children are starving to death, it's because we humans have not done enough to end their hunger. If wars kill innocent people, it's because we humans haven't done enough to work for peace.

Where we DO see God-as-love in all these situations, is in the human response around them. When we see people reaching out with generosity of hand and wallet and spirit, we see God. God/love compels us to live in right relationship with each other, and that means enacting God in our world. I have seen a resistance to this image of God. Believing in a God/power-of-love that requires effort on our part, is not as easy as sitting back and waiting for a deity somewhere 'out there' to take care of things.

My theology says that we are all capable of incarnating God-as-love in our own selves, but that most of us-- not all-- put up barriers that

keep us limited. In the person of Jesus Christ, there were no such barriers. He gave of himself in limitless love, and for this reason I have no hesitation in naming him "God." He was indeed love incarnate. If I were to claim a 'personal relationship' with any aspect of the Divine, I would say it is with the person of Jesus. He was a real human being; he lived and breathed and walked the earth just as we do. My personal relationship lies in the memory and the teachings and the example of the ministry of love that he lived.

Buddhist Reply

Deep bows to Sister Meg for her disarmingly honest comment. In our Age of Science, reason and secularity, it is a huge challenge to uncover a personal theology which honours one's tradition without seeming anachronistic. I think Christians have a significantly different challenge in coming to terms with the "guy-in-the-sky" than Buddhists. As mentioned in my statement, we have this concept of the three Bodies, in particular the Enjoyment Body, which allows all manner of poetic and mythologic excess without the unpleasant obligation of making rational sense. I have no difficulty entering into that world and wandering about in it without feeling silly or infantile. Mind you, I still feel irrational, but since this theology allows the suspension or, perhaps more accurately the confinement of logic outside the walls of that concept, I can wander and enjoy what it has to offer, with no necessity of making human-world sense in it.

I find Meg's embracing of "God As Love" very compelling, although I would say that 'love' is a less common virtue or principle for Buddhists than say 'compassion' or 'loving kindness'. Within my Jo-do (way of devotion) affiliation, we similarly acknowledge the Divine as a

reaching out, “The Voice That calls” as we say, an indivisible presence in our own being. I would also empathise with her in affirming the presence of that loving spirit in our own human lives. She fairly points out that we “put up barriers that keep us limited” or as a Buddhist would phrase it, we bring on our own suffering and alienation when we deny this part of ourselves.

I should come back to the ‘process’ theme here and raise the concept of “buddha-nature” or equally common “buddha-mind”. This is a rather complex concept, and contentious even within Buddhism. In the briefest of terms, it is the affirmation that every aspect of the universe, from smallest and simplest to largest and most diverse, is itself the presence of a limitless, timeless and wholly uncontainable “buddha-nature”. I think the philosophical term is the “is-ness” of everything that is. It is that which harmonizes those three Bodies.

Technically, it is called ‘pan-psychism’, and it describes much of Japanese Buddhism, but has also been applied to the work of Spinoza and Whitehead, the modern Western writers we noted above as representatives of “process theology”.

I felt I gained some new insight into this and our conversation through a film I saw last week. The film, called *Shugendo Now* is a documentary on the resurgence of a religious movement in Japan which combines Buddhist and Shinto practice (Shinto being the native and naturalist faith of early Japan). This stunningly beautiful documentary demonstrates a kind of marriage between process and personal theologies. On the one hand it posits a ‘panpsychism’, an affirmation that there is a single ‘mind’ (buddha-mind, we would call it) which infuses all that is. On the other hand, it is that same mind which unites all of us and functions, if we can say that, solely to call us to our own loving hearts. As I said above, dualities of ‘this VS that’ are not at home in Buddhism, and this film helped me to see the possibility of holding both as supports for my faith.

Christian Reply

As I read Rev. Innen's contribution to this month's conversation, I realized that I really should have given more space in my own offering to explain the traditional understanding of the Christian perception of God as Trinity. The trinity is a concept that many Christians find challenging. I am sad to say that differing understandings can even lead to divisiveness among Christians. In essence, God is described (historically) as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each part of the Trinity is completely equal to the other two. There is no hierarchy.

God the Father is understood as the One who created the universe, the Son is God incarnate in human form who offers us salvation, and the Spirit is God's energy flowing through us. Other titles used to describe the Trinity are “creator, redeemer, and sustainer”, or “power, purpose, and presence.” There are many other titles that people use to describe the trinity, but the important thing to remember, is that these are not descriptions of the nature of God, so much as people's understandings of God.

In response to Innen's contribution, I am fascinated to see that Buddhism also has a set of 'threes,' that being the three bodies of the Buddha-- the truth body, the enjoyment body, and the emanation body. I wonder if there is something in our human makeup that prods us to think/understand in threes. I appreciated the concept of the multitude of emanation bodies, who act out the compassion and loving-kindness of the Buddha. I am drawn to the analogy that they are the people that Christians would describe, or name, as “saints.” I also see a parallel between the “fantastic celestial

bodies” of the enjoyment bodies, with the Christian understanding of angels. The truth body, “which is the full and complete expression or revelation of the Dharma itself.... utterly outside of time and space and utterly inexplicable to humans” makes me think of the way I understand God as love: something which cannot be tied to a human image or personal form, but which can be experienced by all humans.

I like very much, the understanding of the Amitabha Buddha as the Voice that Calls. This makes sense to me. The feeling, as Innen put it, of “a call heard in my ears and heart.” This is the sort of personal God that I can understand. If I were to phrase that in Christian terms, I could say with all honesty that God speaks to me in that way. I am pleased to be opened to a new way of understanding that call/voice as being personal, even as I shy from the image of a person-figure deity.

This dialogue is between Reverends Innen Ray Parchelo, of the Red Maple Buddhist Congregation, Renfrew, Ontario and Meggin King, of the United Church of Pugwash, Nova Scotia.