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6. Ultimate Reality in Buddhism and Christianity: A Christian Perspective

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The Concept of Ultimate Reality and Its Relation to Religion

Before I discuss the understanding of Ultimate Reality in Christianity and Buddhism I would like to clarify to some extent the meaning of the term 'Ultimate Reality'. One might define Ultimate Reality as that which is more important than everything else in the life of individuals and communities. An understanding of Ultimate Reality is always linked to an understanding of human life and its essential purposes. One cannot conceive of Ultimate Reality without thinking of the human being for whom it is of ultimate relevance.

Moreover, it is part of the notion of Ultimate Reality that its ultimate importance is not the result of a subjective, arbitrary choice. Rather, Ultimate Reality is believed to be ultimate in light of the true nature of reality. And the meaning of Ultimate Reality is always related to some notion of its counterpart – namely, the non-ultimate realities – and the links between the two. In a similar way Ultimate Reality as *summum bonum*, highest good, is interrelated with other goods and is to be understood in relation to them.

Last but not least Ultimate Reality is connected with spirituality. The spirituality of a person or group can be defined as a

project to integrate one's life by living according to the Ultimate Reality one perceives.¹ Generally implicit in a given understanding of Ultimate Reality are ways of referring to it and guidelines for integrating it into daily life (moral standards, ways of living, rituals, prayer, meditation, etc.). Spirituality also encompasses knowledge about the obstacles to a life in harmony with the Ultimate and how these obstacles can be removed.

The outline just given dovetails with Paul Tillich's formal conception of ultimate concern and faith: 'Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. The content matters infinitely for the life of the believer; it does not however matter for the formal definition.'² Tillich's ultimate concern has both an anthropological and an ontological dimension. It includes a human attitude or a way of acting that takes one thing to be more important than all other things. On the other hand, it refers to the Ultimate as content that matters infinitely for the particular human life concerned with it. The formality of the term allows it to function as a category of comparison with respect to very different world-views and religions. Thus can Buddhism and Christianity, for example, be compared with respect to their understandings of Ultimate Reality.³

I would argue that an engagement with an ultimate concern belongs essentially to the human condition. To relate one's life to an Ultimate Reality, in the sense of viewing one thing as more important than all other things, does not necessarily entail membership in a religion or even seeing oneself as

¹ Cf. S.M. Schneiders, 1998, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', in *Studies in Spirituality* 8, pp. 38-57 (39f.).

² P. Tillich, 1988, *Main Works*, vol. 5, ed. C.H. Ratschow, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, p. 233.

³ When comparing Christianity with Islam or perhaps Vishnuism there is no necessity to introduce the category of Ultimate Reality. It is sufficient to ask how their concepts of God are interrelated. However, as Buddhism and also Taoism and secular world-views don't refer to God as Ultimate Reality, the more comprehensive category has to be used as *tertium comparationis*.

religious.⁴ One may well perceive personal or social well-being, or justice for all, or the classless society or a heroic attitude in the face of universal meaninglessness, etc. as something worth living and dying for. But I would not yet call this a religious concern. It would be more precise to speak of a 'most important reality' than to call these broadly conceived horizons of meaningful life 'Ultimate Reality'. The 'most important' concern is religious (at least in the sense of the great world religions) only if it relates to a reality that is more than just a part of the world in which we are living (even though it be the most important part); it must come before us as a numinous presence that transcends everything in the world and the finite world itself.

Religions are cultural systems for dealing with that kind of world-transcending Ultimate Reality. Those who have come to know an original founding figure, such as the Buddha or Jesus Christ in Buddhism and Christianity, are sustained by the spirituality of these founders and develop further the inherent richness of their experience of the Ultimate. The efforts to transmit the message of the founders to followers in the succeeding generations has given rise to traditions lived out by communities in some organized form with codified doctrines, lineages of transmission, social hierarchies, etc. This institutionalization does not mean that the religious traditions become uniform. Religions are not monotonous highways but, as Hans Küng once said, they resemble complex and ever-changing systems of streams and rivers.

Turning now to the understanding of Ultimate Reality in Christianity and in Buddhism, it therefore should be clear that something like *the* Christian or *the* Buddhist view does not exist. Every religious tradition is internally diverse. In the case

⁴ In this respect I don't agree with W.A. Christian, 1964, *Meaning and Truth in Religion*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 60, who seems to identify the relation to something more important than anything else with being religious. As Tillich speaks of 'faith' and 'believers' and being 'infinitely' concerned, it is quite clear that he refers to religious concepts of Ultimate Reality and also does not differentiate them from non-religious ones.

at hand both religions have a complex history spanning 2,000 or 2,400 years respectively. During this great expanse of time each of these religions, in the effort to understand itself and its experiences of Ultimate Reality, has developed in many and varied ways. The diversity of historical paradigms within the two religions manifests itself in a plurality of schools, orders and churches, which often disagree among themselves as to doctrines and spiritual practices. Therefore to speak of one single concept of Ultimate Reality in Buddhism or Christianity is already a simplification, though of course the different streams of understanding are interconnected and do have a common source. Needless to say, I can present here only some introductory remarks aimed at giving a first impression of a very complex field.

My description of Ultimate Reality in Christianity follows a major strand of Christian theology, one that has been influenced by Neo-Platonic negative theology. At the same time it emphasizes the non-duality between Ultimate Reality and non-ultimate reality, and also the motive of kenotic self-giving. A similar tradition strand can be found in other religions. Especially for many theologians involved in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, including myself, it functions as a hermeneutical key to the understanding of Buddhism. Buddhism on the other hand helps us to improve our understanding of this kind of Christian thinking. So not only my understanding of Buddhism but also my view of the Christian Ultimate Reality is already to some extent a product of inter-religious dialogue. By means of transformative encounter Buddhism and Christianity cease to be independent bodies of thought. Of course I do not want to deny the existence of other legitimate traditions of Christian thought in which both negative theology and the idea of *kenosis* play a minor role, and the relation between Ultimate and non-Ultimate Reality is conceived in a more dualistic manner.

The Non-Other Beyond Being and Non-Being: A Christian Deconstruction of Ultimate Reality

There is a very simple answer to the question about Ultimate Reality in Christianity: The Ultimate Reality is God. But who is the Christian God? If we look closer we will find that the answer to this question as well as to the first one is not as simple as it might seem. I would like to begin my reflections on the Christian God by quoting a dialogue written by Nicholas Cusanus in 1444. The name of the dialogue is *De Deo abscondito*, 'On the Hidden God'.⁵ As we all have certain images and prejudices in our heads concerning the Christian God it may be useful to start with a text that tries to deconstruct some of them.

Cusanus starts his dialogue by letting a pagan observe a worshipping Christian who prostrates and sheds tears of love.⁶ The pagan, who does not represent one specific non-Christian

⁵ The term *deus absconditus* refers to Isa. 45.15 which in the Vulgate, the most common Latin version of the Bible, is translated as: '*Vere tu es Deus absconditus, Deus Israel salvator*', 'Truly you are a God who conceals himself, God of Israel, Saviour!'

⁶ I quote according to the translation of J. Hopkins, 1994, *A Miscellany of Cusa*, Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, pp. 300–05. The model for teaching the hidden God to a pagan is Paul's speech on the Areopagus, Acts 17.18ff., in which Paul proclaims the 'unknown God' to the Athenians. Paul's proclamation is connected with a critique of idols based on the Old Testament's prohibition of images of God, probably the most important biblical source of negative theology. In the beginning of *De quaerendo Deo* (1445) Cusanus explicitly refers to Acts 17.18ff. He confesses to admiring the way in which Paul explained the unknown God to the Greek philosophers by revealing to them that this God as the only true God is beyond every human imagination and insight. The philosophical and theological tradition regarding the 'unknown God' before and after Cusanus is treated by D. Carabine, 1995, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition. Plato to Eriugena*, Leuven: Peeters; I.N. Bulhof and L.K. Kate (eds), 2001, *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, New York: Fordham University Press; R. Stolina, 2000, *Niemand hat Gott je gesehen: Traktat über negative Theologie*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter; O. Davies and D. Turner (eds), 2002, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

view but rather any kind of superficial religiosity that wants to make a knowable thing out of Ultimate Reality, asks the Christian:

'Who is the God whom you worship?'

The Christian answers, 'I don't know.'

'How is it, that you worship so seriously that of which you have no knowledge?'

'Because I have no knowledge, I worship.'

'I marvel that a man is devoted to that of which he has no knowledge.'

Again the Christian: 'It is more amazing that a man is devoted to that of which he thinks he has knowledge.'⁷

Later in this dialogue the Christian admits a kind of Socratic knowledge about the Ultimate Reality he worships. 'I know that whatever-I-know is not God and that what-ever-I-conceive is not like God . . .'

'So is God nothing?'

Cusanus – through the Christian – answers: 'It is not the case that He is nothing, for this nothing has the name "nothing".'

The pagan: 'If He is not nothing, then He is something.'

'He is not something, either. For something is not everything. And it is not the case that God is something rather than everything.'

The pagan replies: 'You make strange claims: that God whom you worship is neither nothing nor something. No reasoning grasps this point. . . . Can He be named?'

' . . . That, whose greatness cannot be conceived remains ineffable.'

'But is He ineffable?'

⁷ This, at first glance astonishing, statement is a conclusion of the common Christian thought that God, who *per se* is beyond human comprehension, is the only one worthy of being worshipped. A similar approach can be found in Meister Eckhart, e.g. Sermon 42. The source of Eckhart and Cusanus is Augustinus, *Sermo CXVII* c.3 n.5, PL 38, 663: '*Si comprehendis, non est deus*', 'If you know it, it is not God.'

'He is not ineffable, though He is beyond all things effable; for He is the cause of all nameable things. . . .'

The pagan: 'So He is both ineffable and effable?'

'Not *that* either. For God is not the foundation of contradiction, but is Simplicity . . .'

'What then do you want to say about Him?'

'That it is neither the case that He is named nor is not named, nor the case that He both is named and is not named . . . Rather, whatever can be said . . . does not befit Him . . ., so that He is the one Beginning, which is prior to every thought formable of it.'

One could call this a deconstruction of the Christian Ultimate Reality – a deconstruction that intends at the same time to be an integral part of Christian theology. The dialogue neither affirms a concept of Ultimate Reality, nor tries to improve it, nor simply negates it. Cusanus demonstrates a kind of religious thinking that transcends the process of conceptualization by using advanced conceptual thinking. It starts from a certain pre-understanding of what it means to have a God whom you worship and shows that many of the meanings usually connected with this idea do not fit. But it is not the final aim of this procedure to redefine the concept of Ultimate Reality nor does Cusanus want to prove that the concept as it is is totally without sense. Rather, he is trying to make it transparent for a reality that exceeds all possible conceptualization by refuting all logical possibilities concerning antithetic attributes such as being/non-being, effable/ineffable, in relation to God.

The attempt to speak about Ultimate Reality in the religious sense of the word soon leads to the question of how it is possible to speak about it at all, and this, not only in Christian theology but also in other traditions, results in different ways of deconstruction. According to Cusanus, when we start to speak about God we are already 'wrong'. But not to speak about him also misses the point because he is not simply ineffable and unknowable. The tension between the necessity to speak of God because he reveals himself in manifold ways as Ultimate Reality and thus

concerns us in an ultimate way, and not being able to speak of him because he infinitely exceeds the possibilities of human language and knowledge, is not something to be overcome but to be lived.⁸ It is similar to a Zen koan, which one should not solve in a merely theoretical way but by existentially manifesting the ultimate truth; in other words, not by merely speaking or being silent *about* it, but speaking or being silent *out of* it.⁹

The revealed hiddenness or mysterious revelation that characterizes the Christian God is important for inter-religious dialogue. There is a huge difference between what is said about Ultimate Reality in Christianity and the Ultimate Reality in itself, and this difference has its place within Christianity itself. This means that there is a principle within Christianity that transcends Christianity and at the same time enables an opening towards the messages of other religions.¹⁰

We can also learn from Cusanus that God is not an additional thing among other things. Of course he is not the famous old man with the beard, but neither is he the invisible infinite supreme entity of theological and philosophical imagination. He is not a part of reality as an infinite among finite beings. There is no such thing as a 'God'. If we speak about Ultimate Reality we always tend to reify it and misunderstand it as one

8 Cf. J.M. Byrne, 2001, *God: Thoughts in an Age of Uncertainty*, London and New York: Continuum, p. 60. Traditionally this problem is discussed as the question of how 'negative' and 'positive' theology are related to one another. Cataphatic theology, *via positiva*, the 'positive path', means conceiving God by using affirmative statements like 'God is love', 'God is almighty', etc. Apophatic or negative theology, *via negativa*, the 'negative path', is the way to experience and understand God through negation of everything we know and think of him and thus finally entering silence in the presence of the Ultimate.

9 The differentiation and possible unity between speaking about and speaking out of God is elaborated by W. Schmithals, 1967, *Die Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns*, 2nd edn, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 23–50, especially p. 43.

10 Cusanus already took this step in his first sermon (1430), which can be found among the earliest of his surviving texts. There he first emphasizes the ineffability and hiddenness of God's name and then turns to the various names of God in the different languages of humankind finding truth in each of them.

reality among a totality of beings (albeit the last and greatest of them). Cusanus deconstructs this view by saying that God is beyond being something and being nothing. He functions as the absolute source of all nameable things and the one beginning of everything which is prior to every thought. The origin is not of the same kind as the originated things.¹¹ It is rather a borderless vastness that permeates and embraces everything. Of course the process of deconstruction can pick up again where the quoted dialogue ends, and can deconstruct the expressions 'origin', 'beginning', 'oneness', etc. In *De principio* Cusanus says the ineffable beginning is not called beginning, nor the One, nor by any other name. In a late dialogue he calls God *non Aliud*, the non-Other.¹² He calls him so because God is absolutely different from everything else through his non-difference.¹³ As non-different, God is not somewhere else but here-hereafter. He approaches us as the transcendent depth of things, the infinite in the finite, which is transcendent as well as immanent – or, to be more precise, he approaches us as an event beyond the dualism of immanence and transcendence.¹⁴ This general understanding

11 To talk about Ultimate Reality as something that is more important than anything else is also misleading, because it suggests that Ultimate reality forms the upper end of a scale that starts with things of no importance. According to Cusanus you cannot find the Ultimate on a scale, because it rather is the origin of every scale, within which the absolute minimum and the absolute maximum meet and are transcended.

12 Nicholas Cusanus, *De non aliud* (1462). The Latin text and English translation in J. Hopkins, 1987, *Nicholas of Cusa, On God as Not-Other: A Translation and an Appraisal of De li non aliud*, Minneapolis: Banning Press.

13 With this thought Cusanus refers to Eckhart's commentary to the Book of Wisdom, where Eckhart says that God is the undistinguished which is distinguished from everything else by its undistinguishedness. (*Deus indistinctum quoddam est quod sua indistinctione distinguitur*), *Expositio libri Sapientiae* n. 154, LW II, 490, pp. 7f. Cf. W. Beierwaltes, 1980, *Identität und Differenz*, Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, pp. 97–104, pp. 105–43.

14 See R. Faber, 2001, "Gottesmeer" – Versuch über die Ununterschiedenheit Gottes, in Th. Dienberg and M. Plattig (eds), *'Leben in Fülle': Skizzen zur christlichen Spiritualität. FS für Prof. Weismayer zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*, Münster: Lit Verlag, pp. 64–95.

of God provides, I think, the basis for everything else that can be said about the Christian God.

Self-Communication of the Non-Other as Key to the Concept of Trinity

The Christian understanding of Ultimate Reality is further specified by the doctrine that the one origin of everything has revealed itself as triune God. To explain the trinitarian understanding of God, I introduce the concept of God's self-communication and interpret the so-called persons of the Trinity as modes of his self-communication. The notion of self-communication is not only a key concept in the theology of Karl Rahner, one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century who indeed introduced this idea into modern theology. It is also a key concept for the understanding of Christian faith as a whole, allowing us to see how the different parts of Christian doctrine, such as the teachings regarding creation, Trinity, Christology, soteriology and so forth, are interconnected.

The term is taken from the field of interpersonal relationships. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition personal language is considered to be the least misleading way of referring to God and to God's relation to creation and especially to human beings. The loving relationships between persons (parents and children, friends, lovers, etc.) are the deepest, most intimate and demanding relations that we are able to experience in this world, so if anything they should be appropriate as a model for the relation between the Ultimate and us. If two persons communicate with each other they do more than merely exchange information about other things. They always also communicate themselves. In talking to each other and living with each other, they reveal their own being and become present for each other. To communicate oneself means to let someone participate in one's own life, sharing one's own world with the other. Personal self-communication is an act of self-giving. You empty your mind of selfish interests and allow others to participate in your being by giving them the time and space they need to unfold their own

true being. This giving and receiving of life in human relationships is always based on a form of love that creates and sustains the openness and unity between those who are involved in self-communication.

As I said, interpersonal self-communication is the predominant paradigm for understanding the relation between the world and its divine source in Christianity. It qualifies the way in which God the Non-Other is relating to the world of otherness. In creation God does not just fabricate something outside of himself, but aims at communicating himself. By continuously letting the world emerge out of nothing, He opens up the possibility not only for all created things to be, but also for communion with himself. He reveals himself at the core of every originated being and lets the originated world participate in his divine life. This is an act of selfless love, because there is no necessity for God to share his *plērōma*, his abundance with anything or anyone. The different levels of creation are characterized by the increasing self-communication of God which comes to its fulfilment in the relation between God and the human being.

To see creation as a process of self-communication of the divine has its roots in the Jewish tradition, and Jesus Christ inspired a creative transformation of these roots. The encounter with him led the early Christians to the conviction that in the life and death of Jesus and also in his mysterious presence after death, God was revealing himself in an extraordinarily intense way: Jesus lived in such a radical openness towards Him whom he called his Father that he came to be viewed not simply as similar to God but 'of the same kind' – 'God from God'. Seen in the light of this new experience, self-communication means that God is not only present in various ways in his creation by letting everything be, but he even becomes a part of it. A new form of non-duality between God and his creation has been revealed. If Jesus in a way was God, were there now two Gods? This did not make sense to the early Christians, because they experienced not a second God, but the one and only God whom they as Jews had already worshipped, but now in a new way as human being. So instead of the assumption of two Gods a radical reconsideration

of the nature of God took place. The self-communication of God in Jesus threw new light on the understanding of Ultimate Reality in and as a process of communication. 'A purely unitarian conception of God proved inadequate to contain this dynamic understanding of God.'¹⁵ Inspired by thoughts of Neo-Platonic philosophers, who had already conceived the one origin of everything as internally differentiated, early Christian theology interpreted God as manifold unity, a unity which manifests its inner plurality in the process of self-communication, and especially in Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the triune God says that the one God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God the Father is Ultimate Reality as primordial source, the transcendent creative ground of all being, *principium sine principio*, origin without origin. The talk of the triune God does not reflect a language of observation but of participation in an event of relationships in God.

To refer to God as 'Father' thus does not mean to represent or objectify God as a father-figure, but to address God as Father, and so enter into the movement of a child-father relationship . . . At the same time, we find ourselves involved in a movement of self-giving like that of a Father sending forth a Son.¹⁶

God the Son (also *logos*, Word, cosmic Christ) means God as the one who reveals himself. 'In one word God spoke himself and everything.'¹⁷ The term 'Word' again implies communication and communion. As a person reveals her or his character and intention through the words she or he is saying, God as the Word is the God who speaks to us in everything and thereby manifests himself. The Word is the self-opening of the Father within his creation. For Christians the aim of God's creation –

¹⁵ A.E. McGrath, 2003, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd edn, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 321.

¹⁶ P.S. Fiddes, 2002, 'The Quest for a Place Which Is "Not-a-Place": The Hiddenness of God and the Presence of God', in O. Davies and D. Turner (eds), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 53.

¹⁷ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion* 33.

the perfect non-duality between creation and creator – manifests itself in Jesus Christ. He is therefore called the Word of God made Flesh.¹⁸

God the Spirit is the life of God in which the created world participates. Already the Hebrew Bible uses the phrase 'spirit (*rûach*, 'breath') of God' as a name for the life-giving presence of Ultimate Reality. The Spirit is the unitive power that is renewing the world by uniting it with the Father. Most of all the renewing presence of God is a personal experience. Through God's self-communication he becomes present in our hearts and thereby unites us with himself.¹⁹ And, as Basil of Caesarea says, human beings are able to share this divine presence with each other: 'Souls in which the Spirit dwells, illuminated by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual and send forth their grace to others.'²⁰

The unity between God the Father and Jesus Christ as incarnated Son is interpreted as a unity without fusion, but also without separation. The one is in the other, as the Gospel of John lets Jesus say: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me.'²¹ This can also be said for the Spirit in respect to the Father and the Son and vice versa. The relation of the three is that of a *perichorēsis*, mutual indwelling. Each is room for the others.

Christians believe that the triune God is known throughout creation and through the history of salvation, especially in the redeeming encounter with Jesus Christ. Father, Son and Spirit are the modes of self-communication of God, but they not only determine his relation to the created world but also differentiate his interior structure. The God who appears as a Trinity in the history of human encounter with him is also a Trinity within himself.²²

¹⁸ John 1.14.

¹⁹ See Ps. 51.11; Ps. 139.7.

²⁰ Quoted in McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 311.

²¹ John 14.11.

²² For this axiom of identity between the so-called immanent and economic Trinity and the doctrine of Trinity in general see K. Rahner, 1970, *The Trinity*, London: Burnes & Oates.

Christian Ultimate Reality as Process of Interactive Self-Emptying

With this point I only sum up what I have been saying already. Again I refer to the idea of the self-communication of Ultimate Reality, now in a slightly different perspective.

A static, substantialist view places Ultimate Reality on one side and non-Ultimate reality on the other. Somewhere in between, mediators like Jesus Christ function as a bridge between the two realities. It is one of the major aims of this paper to show that this image does not correspond to a more developed Christian (or Buddhist) understanding of Ultimate Reality. In the Christian view God's Ultimate Reality does not stay within itself, as perhaps Aristotle's unmoving mover does. One could say perhaps that Ultimate Reality is distributing itself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*: 'the good naturally diffuses itself', said the Platonists) among several actors, who give it, receive it and pass it on to one other in a kenotic ('self-emptying') process.²³ Thus the original meaning of self-communication in a Christian context could be qualified as a circle of selfless self-communication. Self-emptying happens already within the triune God through the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Spirit. Furthermore God is emptying, and in a way 'de-ultimating', himself, by giving room to creation as the place of his self-communication, finally becoming a human being (Jesus Christ as Ultimate Reality). Jesus, however, did not, as the Philippian hymn says, 'count equality with God something to be grasped', but emptied himself and shared his divine life with outcasts and sinners.²⁴ He finally demonstrated his humility and love when he did not flee from or resist his enemies and died on

²³ For an outline of kenotic theology see J. Moltmann, 2001, 'God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World', in J. Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, Michigan and Cambridge: Eerdmans, pp. 137-51; R.R. Brouwer, 2002, 'Kenosis in Philippians 2:5-11 and in the History of Christian Doctrine', in Onno Zijlstra (ed.), *Letting Go: Rethinking Kenosis*, Bern and Berlin: Peter Lang, pp. 69-108.

²⁴ Phil. 2.6-8.

the cross. The disastrous consequences of basic distrust (sin), and their overcoming through defenceless love, were thereby forever inscribed into the flesh of the Ultimate (the Cross as Ultimate Reality). Jesus as the incarnation of God's kenotic, self-emptying love is no isolated or singular peak in the history of the encounter between God and humankind; rather, he passes on his union with the Father to all who are willing to receive it. 'God became a human being that humans may become God' was the formula of the church fathers for this, and in the Gospel of John it is said that to those who did accept Jesus as the divine Word 'he gave power to become children of God'.²⁵ So Ultimate Reality extends further to all who open themselves through the Son to the Father (the 'birth of God' as Ultimate Reality within everyone). Being blessed with the divine union they thankfully reaffirm the Father as Ultimate Reality mediated by the Son and testify to God's love by establishing loving relationships with their fellow beings. Thereby they anticipate and initially realize the 'Kingdom of God', the final consummation of the world and humankind, where God will be all in all (Ultimate Reality as the ultimate future of self-communication). Thus Ultimate Reality is on the move. It circulates between the Father, Son and Spirit, creation, sinners and believers. I suggest that this self-emptying flow of life within a cosmic play is what should be called the Christian Ultimate Reality and not 'just' God alone.

Difficulties Concerning a Christian Interpretation of Buddhist Ultimate Reality

As Lambert Schmithausen and others have shown, Buddhist theory should primarily be understood as an interpretation of Buddhist spiritual practice and the experiences which are made along this path.²⁶ For Buddha the priority was to understand

²⁵ John 1.12.

²⁶ Cf. L. Schmithausen, 1973, 'Spirituelle Praxis und philosophische Theorie im Buddhismus', in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 57, pp. 161-86.

what makes people suffer and to find the skilful means (*upāya*) of liberation from that suffering. Of course this enterprise has also led Buddhist thinkers to cosmological and metaphysical reflection, not least because they had to explain their religion to other schools of thought in India and elsewhere. But Buddhist theory always focused mainly on interpreting Buddhist forms of life and meditative experience, trying to defend them as practices that correspond to the nature of reality.

Buddha and his followers described the Buddhist path to salvation without speaking of God. Of course Buddha knew of the gods that were worshipped in the Indian civilization at the time, and he explicitly confirmed their existence. But they carry no ultimate meaning for the liberation of human beings. Moreover the gods are finite beings too, who long for liberation and have to be reborn as humans to gain freedom from suffering.

One can find theistic tendencies or variations within Buddhism that might, to a Christian theologian, seem closer to the Christian understanding of Ultimate Reality than do others; for example, the Lotus Sūtra's theology of an eternal Buddha, which became important in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism, or the faith in the boundless compassion of Amida Buddha, or the concept of an Ādi Buddha ('Original Buddha') that is developed in some Tantras (for instance, the *Kālacakra Tantra*, which is probably influenced by theistic religions). However, I will not be going into that for now.

In any event, Buddhism in general has no concept of God comparable to the Christian God as an almighty creator who redeems and consummates his creation through his love. The absence of a concept of God has caused any number of problems for Christian interpreters of Buddhism, from the sixteenth-century Jesuits in China, then especially from the nineteenth century onwards until the present day. For those who followed the method of a direct comparison between Buddhism and Christianity the lack of the concept of God was considered to be as important in Buddhism as the existence of such a concept is in Christianity. If you see things that way then Buddhism looks

like an atheistic world-view. But, as Perry Schmidt-Leukel has pointed out, this is a misunderstanding of the type that arises when one takes the comparative category from one's own tradition, presuming that what is determinative in one's own faith must be of equal importance in the other.²⁷ To illustrate the hermeneutical problem concerning the absence of God-talk in Buddhism, let us imagine that your car is the only vehicle you know. If you then see an aeroplane for the first time, you might think that it must necessarily be a vehicle of inferior quality compared with your car, because it has only very small and comparative weak wheels.

Indeed influential philosophers and theologians misunderstood Buddhism as a form of nihilistic atheism. If there is an Ultimate Reality in Buddhism then according to this interpretation it is the ultimate negation of life as painful. Buddhist spirituality was considered to be pessimistic and weary of life. And Buddhist meditation was thought of as a kind of slow suicide.²⁸

Nowadays no serious scholar would uphold these views. Many studies have made it clear that Buddhism is a real religion that recognizes an Ultimate Reality in the religious sense of the word explained above.²⁹ To present my understanding of Ultimate Reality in Buddhism I will first consider two terms used to designate it in early Buddhism. Afterwards I will turn to a Mahāyāna view of Ultimate Reality, especially as presented in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

²⁷ See P. Schmidt-Leukel, 1993, 'Christliche Buddhismus-Interpretation und die Gottesfrage', in *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 44, pp. 349–58.

²⁸ For the history of Christian reception of Buddhism see P. Schmidt-Leukel, 1992, *'Den Löwen brüllen hören': Zur Hermeneutik eines christlichen Verständnisses der buddhistischen Heilsbotschaft*, Paderborn: Schöningh; W. Lai and M. von Brück, 2001, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multi-Cultural History of Their Dialogue*, Maryknoll: Orbis.

²⁹ See E. Steinkellner, 2000, 'Buddhismus: Religion oder Philosophie? Und: Vom Wesen des Buddha', in A. Bsteh (ed.), *Der Buddhismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*, Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, pp. 251–62.

Ultimate Reality in Early Buddhism: *amṛta* and *nirvāṇa*

Let us look at the first section of Buddha's famous first sermon at Benares, a very early text, entitled 'Putting In Motion The Wheel Of Teaching'. Buddha arrives in the deer park close to Benares and encounters five ascetics who had formerly been his disciples. Buddha had left them because he had no longer found any sense in self-mortification, and consequently abandoned the ascetic vows. The ascetics rise and greet him: 'Be welcome, friend Gotama!' Buddha replies that they should not call him by his name nor address him as a friend anymore because he has gained complete awakening. Then he starts his sermon: 'Listen! The deathless is found (*amatam adhigatam*); I proclaim, I teach the Dharma!' After this solemn introduction he describes the Dharma ('liberating doctrine') as the 'middle path' of spiritual practice that avoids the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification and leads to peace of mind, wisdom and full awakening.

In this text the term for the Buddhist Ultimate Reality is *amata* (Pāli) / *amṛta* (Sanskrit), usually translated as: 'immortality, the immortal, that without death or that without dying'.³⁰ In the context of the sermon the mention of the deathless has a performative, soteriological sense.³¹ Buddha wants to motivate his listeners to adopt a certain form of practice that will liberate them from the painful clinging to transient things. Ultimate Reality is no mere theoretical question but becomes relevant for Buddhism primarily in the context of overcoming the ruinous interconnection of 'thirst' (desire), attachment, mortality and

³⁰ Vedic myths know *amṛta* as nectar of the gods. The usage of the term in the old Buddhist sources is influenced by early upaniṣadic thought. For example, one of the prayers in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Br. Up. I.3.28) asks for the progress from untruth (*asat*) to truth (*sat*) or Ultimate Reality, from the darkness of ignorance (*avidyā*) to light of wisdom (*jyoti*) and from death (*mṛtyu*) to immortality (*amṛta*). Cf. S.G. Deodikar, 1992, *Upaniṣads and Early Buddhism*, Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, p. 122, p. 131.

³¹ 'Soteriological' is a term from Christian theology, which nowadays is also used in scholarly works on other religions. It means 'salvation-related'. 'Soteriology' is the part of theology or Buddhist theory dealing with the doctrine of salvation/liberation.

suffering. Here we have a similarity with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, for the idea of God was not developed as a theoretical hypothesis concerning the origins of the world either. Rather, the talk of a Divine Creator emerged from experiences of liberating encounters with an Ultimate Reality and thus from a soteriological context. The faith in creation developed out of the experience of a present salutary relationship between God and man in which God emerged as a reliable source of freedom, peace and justice.

As Tilmann Vetter has shown, the term *amata* means more than simply the cessation of future dying in the sense of not being reborn again.³² In the sermon of Benares Buddha says that on his 'middle path' one is able to reach *amata* already in this life. It is something that can be directly perceived and experienced here and now. Very likely it was a mystical experience of eternity that gave Buddha ultimate release from all that makes a transient being suffer. In proper meditation a reality enters the field of awareness that is beyond death and therefore the fear of death vanishes. In a very typical way Buddha does not further describe this kind of Ultimate Reality beyond the world of finitude. The rest of the sermon deals with the kind of ethical and contemplative practice that leads to the experience of *amata*.

Like *amata* the much more popular *nibbāna* (Pāli)/*nirvāṇa* (Sanskrit) is a word for Ultimate Reality in early Buddhist thought as well as in later times.³³ In older passages of the Pāli Canon it is sometimes a metaphor for *dukkhanirodha* ('cessation of suffering'), the 'third noble truth'. 'When it was first used, it seems to have been more a figure of speech than a concept;

³² T. Vetter, 1988, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism*, Leiden: Brill, p. xxix n. 10, p. xxxi, pp. 8f. See also T. Vetter, 1995, 'Bei Lebzeiten das Todlose erreichen: Zum Begriff AMATA im alten Buddhismus', in G. Oberhammer (ed.), *Im Tod gewinnt der Mensch sein Selbst*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 211-23.

³³ The history of Western interpretations of *nirvāṇa* is investigated by G.R. Welbon, 1968, *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and its Western Interpreters*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

a definition of the term is scarcely to be found. As a figure of speech it conveys the meaning that as craving or a wrong attitude ceases, it is like a fire which has been extinguished.³⁴ Indeed, a literal translation of *nir-vāṇa* is 'blown out', as in the extinguishing of a fire. The fire that is blown out when *nirvāṇa* happens is the fire of desire, and also of hate and confusion – the basic vices that bind sentient beings in *samsāra*, the succession of death and rebirth, until liberation is attained. The counterpart of *nirvāṇa* as an experience of Ultimate reality is *samsāra*. As the sphere of non-Ultimate Reality it is understood in terms of transitoriness, mortality and suffering, whereas Ultimate Reality is primarily understood as deathless. The common existential horizon within which both *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are understood is that of mortality. In early Buddhism *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* seem to be more or less opposed to each other. Where one begins, the other ends. Final attainment of the Ultimate Reality entails abandonment of the conditioned world.

In Buddha's first sermon *nirvāṇa* is mentioned in one line with a list of synonyms such as the withdrawal from earthly things, the ending of the finite, peace, insight, awakening. The experience of *nirvāṇa* is one of ultimate release. The term is used to describe the peaceful state of the human mind, but there are also passages in early Buddhist texts that relate this inner peace to a transcendent reality, such as the following, famous one: 'There is, monks, something unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncreated. If, monks, this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncreated would not be there, then there would be no escape for what is born, has become, is made, and formed.'³⁵

It is very clear from this text that early Buddhism is not interested in the simple extinction of an always painful and dissatisfying life but searches for eternity, immortality. A Christian could use the same words to speak about God as source of ultimate freedom and bliss, salvation and eternal life. They also are very similar to expressions employed in the Upaniṣads for *Brahman* as Ultimate Reality.

34 Vetter, *Ideas and Meditative Practices*, p. 15.

35 *Udāna* 8.3.

The text just quoted is very important because it demonstrates that early Buddhism is a religion of liberation and not just a psychology. I believe it is important to underline this, because nowadays especially in the Western world you can find Buddhists who misinterpret their path as 'a psychological technique with no metaphysical implications', as John Hick once put it.³⁶ Especially meditation, as the core practice of Buddhist spirituality, is often misunderstood as simply producing a state of consciousness in which wishes and anxieties created by the ego disappear and are replaced by a feeling of serenity. *Nirvāṇa* understood in that way is a mere psychological state of mind, and not an experience of Ultimate Reality that transcends the experiencing subject in a certain way. Such a secularized view is sometimes promoted as a modern, humanistic alternative to what is thought of as the concept of the Christian God. But I'm afraid that it only produces a superficial version of Buddhism as a kind of tranquillizer, which does not correspond to the real depth of this religion. The often very tacit way in which many Buddhist scriptures and teachers refer to an Ultimate Reality makes such a misunderstanding possible. On the other side the silence of the Buddha and his followers has the advantage of avoiding the danger of reifying Ultimate Reality.

Nirvāṇa as *śūnya*: Nāgārjuna's Deconstruction of Ultimate Reality

In spite of this discretion the question of how to understand *nirvāṇa* and its relation to the conditioned world of everyday experience nevertheless continued to fascinate Buddhist thinkers and was further elaborated in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Mahāyāna (the 'Great Vehicle'), as a new paradigm of Buddhism, gradually developed from the first century BCE onwards. Compared with early Buddhism Mahāyāna speaks about Ultimate Reality

36 Cf. J. Hick, 1991, 'Religion as "Skilful Means": A Hint from Buddhism', in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 30, pp. 141–58 (148).

in a more explicit way although the incomprehensibility of the Ultimate is still emphasized. New names for it appear: *dharmadhātu* (the 'dharma realm'), *tathatā* ('suchness') or *bhūtakoti* (the 'peak of reality').³⁷ It was a South Indian Mahāyānist philosopher who drew radical consequences from Buddha's silence as to the ontological status of the Ultimate, as well as from his refusal to describe a liberated person or even reality in general in terms of being or not-being. Nāgārjuna, who lived in the second century CE, was the most important thinker of early Mahāyāna Buddhism. From his teaching emerged the Mādhyamika School, which, along with the Yogācāra School, dominated Mahāyāna thought in India. Nāgārjuna's major work is the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* ('Verses on the Basic Teachings of the Middle Path', abbreviated as MMK). For our topic this book is of particular interest; in it, Nāgārjuna develops a deep and still thought-provoking way to understand Ultimate Reality.

Nāgārjuna's new approach was, as already stated, based on older Buddhist teachings. Of central importance for his thought is a passage from the *Kaccāyana Sutta*:

'All exists': Kaccāna, this is one extreme. 'All does not exist': this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the middle . . .³⁸

Nāgārjuna affirms:

Those who perceive self-existence and other-existence, and an existing thing and a non-existing thing, do not perceive the true nature of the Buddha's teaching. In 'The Instruction

³⁷ See E. Frauwallner, 1956, *Die Philosophie des Buddhismus*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, p. 148.

³⁸ *Kaccāyana Sutta*, *Samyutta Nikāya* ii 17. Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), 2000, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom, p. 544.

of Kātyāyana' both 'it is' and 'it is not' are opposed by the Glorious One . . .³⁹

In the *Kaccāyana Sutta* as well as in Nāgārjuna's thought the Middle Way between the opposites of being and not-being is shown by the *pratītyasamutpāda*, the chain of dependent-arising. Buddha developed different forms of this chain to explain the conditions that lead to the arising and perpetuation of suffering. In later Buddhist philosophy the term denotes a theory of the universal nexus and conditional dependency between all sorts of phenomena. The inner structure and meaning of dependent-arising is a major controversial topic in Buddhist philosophy, Nāgārjuna's contribution being one of the most important and radical in this debate.

Because of the mutual interdependent arising of everything he rejects the notion of *svabhāva*, 'self-existence' or 'inherent existence' in the sense of immutability and independence from other things, and replaces it with *śūnyatā* ('emptiness') as the fundamental category. He examines various philosophical key concepts such as causality, the elements, time, actor and action, truth and falsehood – all in the effort to show that contradictions arise if one understands these concepts as referring to self-existing entities.

For our topic it is crucial that in the twenty-fifth chapter of MMK he also treats *nirvāṇa* in the same way. *Nirvāṇa* is empty, he says. It is not a discrete entity with an inherent essence. Therefore categories of being and non-being, becoming and passing are inapplicable. *Nirvāṇa* is not existing, because if it were, it would be characterized by decay and death like everything else that exists. On the other hand it is also not simply non-existing. If *nirvāṇa* would be both existing and non-existing then liberation would exist and not exist at the same time. And finally he also rejects the position that *nirvāṇa* is neither existing nor not existing, for to say that something is neither existing nor not

³⁹ MMK 15.6f. I quote MMK from the translation in F. Streng, 1967, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning*, Nashville: Abingdon.