

Buddhism and the question of God

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The Buddha, when asked about god (Brahma or Brahman), used to remain silent. There is thus not much we can “reason” about god in Buddhism. But this does not mean that there is no god in Buddhism and that Buddhism is an *atheistic* religion. He is only beyond our thinking.

PROMOTING THE GOD WITHOUT FORM

God with and without form

Brahma was one of the supreme deities of Hinduism from 5th century BC to 5th century AD. It means that when Buddha was alive, Brahma played a great role in the spiritual life of Hindus, and thus also in his life. Around the middle of the 1st century Brahma was taken up as part of the Hindu trinity, called *Trimurti*. By the 7th century, *Brahma* (creator god) had lost a lot of its importance, very different as *Shiva* (destroyer god) or *Vishnu* (maintainer god), the two other gods of the Hindu trinity.

In Hindu theology, Brahma is considered to be the *personal* aspect of Brahman. He is a *male* deity. Brahman is an abstract noun referring to the *ultimate reality*. The difference is thus that *Brahma* is “with form”, whereas *Brahman* is “formless”. As Brahman is without form (attributes,

qualities), it is also logical that one cannot speak about Brahman, as Buddha did, but only about his form as Brahma, namely the “creator”.

Buddhism as a religion

The Buddha is presented in the West as a universal reality, without qualification, and Buddhism as a philosophy. However, in the East you see a Buddhism that believes in a Buddha who has “body, speech and mind”, to which one prays for help, does devotions to, and perform rites for. There are initiation rites, priests, and faithful of the temple. It is therefore not correct to present Buddhism as “a godless religion”, an *atheist religion*.

We find a similar problem in the West where Hinduism was presented by Hindu scholars as a philosophy more than a religion, in order to find a more easy entrance to a Christian environment. People in the West are also looking for Eastern monistic thinking as different from the Western dualistic thinking.² However, more than 95 percent of the Hindus and Buddhists are devotees and not scholars. Westerners who travel to the East are shocked in the beginning to see this religious aspect of Buddhism, especially those going to do meditation in local Zen temples.

Buddha with form

The “god with form” (or ‘god with attributes’) is found back in Buddhism under the form of faith in *devas*, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and local deities. This kind of faith is already latent present in the life and teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha, and becomes active five centuries later in Mahayana Buddhism, to find its climax again five centuries later in Vajrayana Buddhism. We can speak here of the *Buddha*

¹ This article was originally written at the request of SPIRITUS Revue.

² Poorthuis, Marcel; Salemink, Theo, *Lotus in de Lage Landen: De geschiedenis van het boeddhisme in Nederland - Beeldvorming van 1840 tot heden*, Uitgever Parthenon, Almere, 2009, pp. 26-28.

with form. This path uses a personal god (*Ishvara*) such as the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas to arrive at the experience of Buddha's awakening, that is, to become a Buddha oneself with a compassionate mind and a mindful heart. But this path is considered to be only a *means* to the end, and not the *end* itself. The general opinion in Buddhism is that one has to let go the form of the Buddha to experience the *Buddha without form* to the full.³

We cannot expect another religion born in another culture to use the same terms as Christianity when it comes to the experience and understanding of the *god with form*. The story will be different, but that doesn't mean that Buddhists don't have a lasting experience of god. They too try to understand it/him in their own way.

However, the strength of Buddhism lies in the understanding and promoting of the *god without form*.

God without form

When it comes to Buddhism, people mainly see the negative aspect of Buddhism, especially with concepts as *anatta* (a separate ego is not existing), *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), *Nirvana* (one ends up to exist), *sunyata* (everything is empty), *avidya* (ignorance), and *maya* (this world is not true). There are many people who conclude from this that Buddhism teaches negativity, a meaningless life and a world, in short a *nihilism*. However, those who have experienced the "Emptiness" (*sunyata*) taught by Buddhism know that this emptiness is not meaningless. Indeed, it is just the source of a life full of hope, joy, energy, wisdom and beauty. Seen from the first experience of *sunyata*, everything seems to be meaningless: the ego (*anatta*) and the world (*maya*). But only from a deeper experience of *sunyata*, a true person with true actions will be born in a true world, Nirvana.

One speaks of "the positive way" (*via positiva*) and "the negative way" (*via negativa*) in theology. The positive way accepts the attributes of God and seeks to understand God through deepening these attributes. The negative way is the more *mystical* way, compared to the positive way which is a more *prophetic* way; it wants to understand God through denying everything that is not Him. They search for a god without attributes, the formless, the universal, the ultimate reality.

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

A pastoral approach

If joy (*sukha*) is the goal, why does Buddhism stresses then the negativity of human life and world? To understand this we must know that Buddhism uses the *via negativa* as the means to come to a deeper understanding, to come out of ignorance. Christian *negative theology* uses the same way to get to know God, to that what is true, eternal, something real, that makes sense by itself and gives meaning to everything and everyone. Buddhist theology is therefore in essence a *negative theology*, but also a *pastoral theology*, a way of educating people. To get to the ultimate reality, Buddhism teaches that one must begin by emptying one's thoughts, desires, dreams. Leave everything out that is not real, to get to what cannot be denied. The same for the self. You have to start thinking that you are not a father, a teacher, a postman, a mother, etc. Because you are more than your job, your social role, your idea of yourself. To get to an existential experience, you must first deny the things you have learned about parents, teachers, society, culture and religion.

For this reason, in Buddhism one cannot teach that there is an ego or a god. It is just "not done". If one teaches the truth, people no longer will seek. This we can compare to Christianity where it is taught that we are all sinners, in order to arrive at a person's conversion with the desire to become an ethical, holy, wise and compassionate person. Therefore, the doctrine of the absence of an

³ Exception to the rule are for instance the Pure Land traditions, *Amidism*, where enlightenment means entering the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.

eternal and immutable ego (*anatta*), together with the doctrine of suffering (*dukkha*) and the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*), show Buddha's *pastoral approach*. These concepts are not pessimistic, but fundamentally *positive* teachings.

***Upaya*, skillful means**

The Buddha was a real “pastor”. He was good at preaching as he uses, just as Jesus, many examples to adapt his message to the audience in order to make it easy to understand. There is a saying in English: “When you want to teach French to John, you have to know French and you have to know John”. When you preach, you have to preach at the level of the listener, not showing off with your knowledge. Also as a teacher one has to take care of this last wrong attitude. Of course you know more as a teacher. Where does the need come from to show it also? You have to lower yourself in order that the other can grow in knowledge. To make your message comes thru you have to use some pedagogical methods, aids, to make it easy for the listener/viewer to understand it. This is called *upaya*, “the skillful use of means”, a method the Buddha advised to all preachers.

The story of the burning house

The Buddha explained this “skill in means” by the famous *story of the burning house*. The father, on returning home, sees his children playing in a burning house. He calls on them to come out of the house, but they do not react on his shouting. He therefore goes to buy the nicest toys, shows them from outside, and but then do they listen to him. It is a story that wants to tell that our body is suffering of the heat of our desires, and it is the Buddha that gives us the right medicine to cure our desires (the *Medicine Buddha*). As a father who looks for other ways to convince the children of the need to start moving, in the same way the preacher has to use his/her creativity in order that the message is brought home to the person.

The term *pastoral approach* is the Christian way of saying using “*skillful means*”. As a

pastor one has to adapt the official teachings of the Church to the level of the people. When the people are not ready for it, one has to try to find ways to make them accept it. The teaching of the Buddha concerning *anatta* (non-self) can be understood as a *pastoral approach*. The same goes for the idea of *dukkha* (suffering) and *anicca* (impermanence). This does not mean that these teachings are not true, but that they have to be understood in the right context. Also the silence of the Buddha about god is an example of a pastoral approach. However, it was also more. We will come to that later on.

There is always the risk that the means are taken too seriously. For instance, a Buddha statue *is* not the Buddha, but can help to understand what the Buddha *is like*. We need sometimes a person as Zenmaster Tan-Hsia T'iengen (739-824) who chopped and burned a wooden Buddha statue because he had it too cold. One could consider the whole of later Buddhism with its statues, rituals, mantras, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, nothing more than skillful means for the salvation of people.⁴ Are they therefore meaningless? No. If we want to eat, we also need tools. In the very end, all religions are in a way “skillful means”, ways to the Divine, the Ultimate Reality, the “great beyond”, the “Total Other”, the Buddha, the Dharma, the Emptiness, the Suchness, the “other side”. But at the same time, they are also expressions of that what they believe in, and should not be taken too lightly neither.

Beyond the concept of “no self”

The Buddha and his followers never intended to discuss the topic of Atman (the Self) with other schools of their time.⁵ The Buddhist teaching that *nothing has a self* (*anatta*) is basically a *pastoral theological way* of encouraging people to look for the real self, the great ego, an ego that is not contaminated with our little desires, dreams, nostalgia, thirst, etc. We must overcome our

⁴ Edward Conze, *Aspecten van het Boeddhisme*, Het Spectrum, 1991, p. 57.

⁵ Hajime Nakamura, *Jiga to Muga, Indo shiso to Bukkyo no konpon mondai*, Heirakuji shoten, Kyoto, 1970, p. 51.

human weakness, the cause of our human suffering (*karma*), and find our divinity, our spiritual identity, in short our “Buddhahood”. We are all called to become a Buddha, according to early Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism. In later Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, the idea came up that we are already in essence enlightened (Jp. *hongaku*), we *are* a Buddha, only we have to realize this *Buddhahood* and to live it out. The way to get to this pure dream of becoming a Buddha is different in Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, but this “true self” exists for everyone in an inexplainable way. For this reason, Sakyamuni Buddha always remained silent when he was asked about the existence of Atman.⁶ He never taught that the self “is not”, but only that “it cannot be apprehended”.⁷ However, different as Upanishadic philosophies, Buddhism never thought of a metaphysical existence of the self, the Atman, but only searched for the “true self”.⁸ One can discern six kinds of views on the idea of a self in Buddhism, beginning with the attachment to a self, up to a true self.⁹

Beyond the concept of “no god”

The concept of god for the Buddha can be understood from the same pastoral approach to the existence of an ego. However, there is also a deeper reason for this silence, as there is regarding the existence of the self. Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh gives the reason:

*The Buddha was not against God. He was only against the notions of God that are mere mental constructions that do not correspond to reality, notions that prevent us from developing ourselves and touching ultimate reality.*¹⁰

⁶ Despite this silence, in his sermons there are passages in which he uses the concept of *Atman*.

⁷ Edward Conze, *Buddhist thought in India*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, Michigan US, 1967, pp. 39-49.

⁸ Hajime Nakamura, *id.*, p. 60.

⁹ Hajime Nakamura, *id.*, p. 142.

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Riverhead Books, NY, 1995, p. 151.

The mystery of god cannot be revealed by logic, but only by practice and experience. Buddha used to say that Brahma is “not susceptible to thought” (Pali: *atakkavacara*, not thought out), meaning he is unthinkable, “non-conceptual”. The same goes for concepts as Atman, Dharma, Nirvana, and others. He refuses to discuss in total 14 concepts.¹¹

Brahmins of his time thought they knew god or the ego without having the mystical experience. The Buddha however always remained silent, contrary to many other schools of his time that discussed intensively the theme of Atman and Brahman. Also his disciples did not enter into these discussions. They remained loyal to the Buddha’s silence. Buddha’s reaction forms part of the negative path in spiritual life, the *via negativa*.

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Decay of the *via negativa*

The pastoral teaching of emptiness, *via negativa*, narrowed down in Buddhist history. Theravada Buddhism was still strong in denying everything. The life of a Theravada Buddhist monk is a fine example of this faith in the negative path. But five hundred years later, the *via positiva* begins to come up in Mahayana Buddhism with new forms of skillful means to get enlightened. Mahayana teaches that we are all a Buddha in essence and we can continue as a lay person to live in the world to make it visible. We only have to have “faith in our inner goodness” (*Buddha nature*), and bring the best in us out for the good of all living beings. Finally, in Vajrayana Buddhism, the mystical way comes up in which unity with the Buddha will be “the way of faith”. The disciple does not have to follow all the monastic rules, the *vinayas*, to find it, but will be offered plenty of skillful means such as mudras, mantras, and mandalas, as his aid.

In this way, the aspect of emptiness is no longer clear on a religious level, although the

¹¹ Raimon Panikkar, *Het zwijgen van de Boeddha, Inleiding tot het religieus atheïsme*, Uitg. Asoka, Rotterdam, 2002, p. 134, footnotes 319-320.

dogmatic position of Buddhism does not change: we are all imperfect, sinners, and we must seek the perfect, the eternal, the joy, the just, the wisdom, the great compassion. Buddhism does not teach *original sin* like Christianity, but in a similar way it teaches that we are born with a certain *karma received from former lives*, from parents, from society. We have to overcome that “inborn ignorance”, and realize that we are a buddha. The first step is to accept the Buddha and his dream of final liberation into one’s own life (*bodhicitta*).

Reappearance in philosophy

In Mahayana Buddhism, however, the negative path reappears as a philosophy thanks to Nagarjuna’s teaching at the beginning of our era. He uses the negative dialectics of *neti-neti* (not this, not that) to come to the Ultimate Truth. In this sense, his philosophy is a *negative theology*. The central term in his philosophy is *sunyata*, “emptiness”. This idea of the emptiness of the world is not always well explained nor understood. It is not a nihilism, nor a negativism. As we explained above, there is a way of getting to the truth, a way of removing attachments, that is, our affection for things, for people, for work, for himself, for the world, for dogma, for god. We must all see it as nonsense, empty.

We cannot start with the most difficult, but with things visible to arrive at emptiness itself, for example the attachment to the Buddha’s vision, or to the concept we have of god and ourselves. There are many levels of emptiness, with the last level also the emptiness of emptiness! The *Prajnaparamita Sutra* teaches for instance 18 types of emptiness. It is clear from that list even the entire teaching of Buddhism must be denied, that is, also the non-existence of the Atman, *anatta*. There is however no teaching in the list regarding the emptiness of Brahma, Brahman, nor any of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, devas or asuras. The list shows a process leading to ultimate emptiness. The term “emptiness” is therefore in the first place not an ontological but a *soteriological*

term in Buddhism. The list is meant to show the way to Nirvana, the highest spiritual state a person can achieve.¹²

Emptiness as the name of god

When a religion speaks of “one god”, “the name of god”, and “a revelation from god”, we can say that it has reached the last level of belief in a *personal god*, the end of the *via positiva*. Buddhism does not seem to have reached this level, although we have seen that Buddhism is based on “revelations” and that the names of “Buddha”, “Bodhisattva”, “Dharma” have a divine connotation.

However, Buddhism is basically a *via negativa* and thus its term for god will be different too. “Emptiness”, “Void”, “Nothingness” are more likely to be names for God in this way, and it will refer more to a *universal and impersonal aspect of god*. Already more than a century ago, Rudolf Otto, the famous religious scholar, observes that the Buddhist terms for the great emptiness such as “Nothing” and “Void”, are names for “das Ganz Andere”, “the Wholly Other”, meaning God:

*But, like “nothing”, the “void” is actually a numinous ideogram of the “completely different one”.*¹³

With these concepts, Buddhism has reached the highest level of belief in an impersonal god. The end of this negative path should though logically be connected with the end of the positive path, even when the terms are different, because both are theological ways in search for god. As Christians, we can reason that God, with his Creation and the gift of his Son, emptied himself out of love. He is *the Emptying God*.¹⁴

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¹² There are other such lists in Buddhism. The *Visuddhimagga* (*Path to Purity*, 5th cent. Sri Lanka), drawing on tradition, shows how emptiness should be comprehended in two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, and forty-two ways, and the *Patisambhidamagga* (*Path of Discrimination*, 2nd cent.) explains it in twenty-four ways. See, Edward Conze, *Buddhist thought in India*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, Michigan US, 1967, p. 60.

¹³ Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, Gotha, Stuttgart, 1924 (12th ed.) pp. 31-32.

¹⁴ See John Cobb / Christopher Ives, *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, Orbis Books, 1990.

Bookreview: “*Extensio Dei*—Mission as Divine Reaching Out”

Jacob Kavunkal

When a scholar—after spending long years in a relentless pursuit of plumbing the depths of a particular field of science—offers his insights in the form of a flowing narrative, it is always an enlightening experience to go through it. The author has presented his views finding expression in this volume in numerous forums of both experts in the field as well as students seeking to deepen their knowledge of the subject. What is said in it, therefore, are not mere personal opinions, but stirring insights that have been put through a process of scholarly dialogue. If it is armed with this awareness that one turns to reading Jacob Kavunkal’s latest offering, *Extensio Dei—Mission as Divine Reaching Out*, I am sure, one’s learning experience will be considerably enhanced.

The book’s contents are skillfully organized as can be expected from an experienced author. A short Preface places before the reader at the outset a succinct portrayal of the key concept of *Extensio Dei*, which indeed is the defining theme of the book, running like a golden thread that holds together the whole narrative. It is followed by a soberly composed Introduction which lays out the *status quaestionis* of Christian mission as it exists and unfolds in the contemporary world. Some of the major issues raised in it are then systematically elaborated in the following part of the book, divided into nine chapters, each of which explores significant themes such as mission as a pursuit of love

and service, humanization of life, mission as advocacy, and so on.

What I found as particularly fascinating is the opening chapter of the book which discusses the story of the sin of the first parents as given in chapter three of the book of Genesis, providing an alternative reading to it. The traditional position sees the Genesis narrative as portraying exclusively

the purported fall of the first parents risking the salvation of the entire human race. It is reinterpreted by looking at the story of the fall from the integral perspective of God’s overwhelming goodness ubiquitously present in the Bible. Seeing the Christ-event simply as a remedial to the dereliction of the first parents is, according to the author, a lop-sided interpretation that ignores the wealth of nuances which the story contains. The consequent depiction of mission as an

enterprise of liberating people from the shackles of original sin and leading them to the path of salvation is too atavistic and amounts to equating a profoundly significant religious text to an entry in a cookbook! When assessed from the vantage point of the kingdom-centred mission of Jesus, the story of the fall discloses primarily the sexual realism of the biblical writer.

The following chapter seems to me to be the heart of the book for in it the author offers us a systematic and logically sound elaboration of its key idea: *extensio Dei*. Through a brief but insightful survey of the major



developments in the biblical story, he shows how God's benevolent reaching out which started to unfold at creation sweeps through the entire gamut of human history. It basically tells us that "In so far as the nature of love is reaching out, we can approach the same mystery of creation as well as the rest of the biblical narrative as a process of divine self-reaching out, as an unfolding of the divine being" (p. 20). What that makes evident to us is that "The whole biblical discourse can be encapsulated in one phrase: *Extensio Dei* (*extendere* = to reach out), divine self-reaching out" (p. 22). This foundational principle has enormous implications for the life and mission of the human family and particularly of the Church. At a time when the world seems to be gladly dispensing with the sense of transcendence there is an urgent need, the author asserts, "to become aware of the mystifying presence of the divine in and around us, inviting us to respond through a sort of prophetic contemplation that is not only awe-inspired, but also committed to the dignity of life in every form, but above all, to human life" (p. 22). When transferred to the sphere of day-to-day life, it makes us aware that the practice of love in service to fellow human beings is the exercise of mission.

The author presents his views in dialogue with a breathtaking range of literature. In fact, the number of books and articles quoted or referred to in the book is truly staggering. They include works from fields as varied as theology, biblical exegesis, missiology and sociological analysis. In addition, the book is replete with references to Church documents and magisterial teachings. There is, however, one lacuna—if it can be called so—that I find in this regard. Although Kavunkal mostly uses the larger Asian and the Indian landscape as the locus of his theologizing effort, references to Asian and Indian authors are rare in the book.

The book's major strength in my assessment is that it offers an integral understanding of Christian mission consonant with the realities of the present-day world. The vision of mission that emerges from the book is based on solid biblical foundation, is inclusive in scope, deeply respectful of the followers of other faith traditions and, therefore, totally non-intimidating. Mission-thinkers looking for break-through insights as well as practitioners of mission in search of viable ways of doing mission will find it a rich source book.

Thomas Malipurathu, SVD



(This interesting book is the summary of a research done in Milan, Italy, regarding the faith of Italian youth. The title sums it up well: "God in my own way")