

Common or Garden Dharma

Essays in Contemporary Buddhism, Vol. II

by

Michel Clasquin-Johnson

Smashwords Edition

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Introduction to Volume I

The emergence of e-books has created new opportunities for academic authors. Like many academics, there are a number of shorter works that I have published over the years for which I never signed away the electronic publishing rights - mostly because they didn't exist at the time!

Some of these started out as academic articles and have needed to be rewritten extensively to appeal to a broader audience. Others were always written in a more popular style, but were tucked away in newsletters that were not archived effectively, or appeared in now-defunct websites. A few were published in books that went out of print years ago.

I am making a few of these available as a free e-book on Smashwords. It does not include articles that can easily be found online, even if they are stuck behind a paywall. If you would like to see a volume 2 in this series, drop me a note: my email addresses are listed at the back of the book.

These essays have served their purpose: they appeared where they needed to appear, they were read by the people whom I needed to read them. They brought me to where I am today. So why dredge them up and rework them for a new audience?

Academics are funny creatures: most of us are used to working for below-average salaries, and we can labor on for years with no realistic hope of tenure. The one thing academics can't stand is being ignored, having no-one read their work. So, is this a vanity project? Why, yes, of course it is. I am a Buddhist. I never said I was a good one. This is an attempt to get my thoughts onto the perpetual backlist of e-books, my pathetic little shot at immortality. Thank you for participating!

The essays that follow are not arranged from oldest to newest. They don't pretend to form any sort of coherent whole. Each essay stands (or falls, more likely) on its own. Each one expressed my opinion at the time: I may have changed my mind since then, but you will have to wait for my new publications to find out. And here and there I have sneaked in something that doesn't deal with Buddhism at all, but which I still think is worth sharing.

Introduction to Volume II

Volume I in this series ended up more unified than I had planned. There are a few shorter pieces in it that are apropos of nothing at all, but for most of it, now that I read it again, I see how it reflects my own astonishment at finding myself teaching Buddhism in a faculty of Christian theology, at a university in an overwhelmingly Christian country. My efforts to see how Buddhism reacts to history, other religions, mythical patterns and society at large was also an effort to make sense of my own situation. I ended up getting caught in my own little Grand Narrative. Damn.

No such deficiency will be found in this volume. This, I promise, is a truly random, chaotic, farraginous gallimaufry of pieces that bear no relationship to one another whatsoever. I am really scraping the bottom of the barrel here. If you are a graduate student far in the future thinking of writing a dissertation on "A Unifying Theme in Volume 2 of Clasquin-Johnson's Common or Garden Dharma", I have one question for you. Do you believe in ghosts?

I also promise never, ever to use the words "farraginous" and "gallimaufry" again. Mind you, they are real words.

As before, some are academic pieces rewritten for as non-academic audience. Others were always meant for a wider audience, but did not always reach them.

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Religion - What is it, anyway?

This article was originally published in the now defunct alternative lifestyle magazine Namaste in 2003. But long before that, it was written as the introductory chapter of a book to be published jointly by junior academics in the Departments of Religious Studies and Biblical Studies. The book project fell through and the article languished for a decade before Namaste picked it up.

What is religion? If we are going to talk about religion, it might be a good idea to start out with a clear idea of what we are looking at. It is only too obvious today that there are different religions, churches, denominations and sects. And it is equally obvious that they don't agree with each other very much. So let us ask ourselves, what is "religion", what does it mean when we say that a person is "religious" and don't all the religions worship the same God in their own way, in any case?

One could argue that it is obvious what religion is. After all, I am religious, I believe this and that and I do such and such, therefore that is what makes something a religion and therefore what constitutes RELIGION itself. It may be so. But let us try an analogy: Suppose you are a capitalist, and someone asks you what "economics" means. You might then define "economics" as "the interchange of goods and services in a free market." That would be an answer of sorts, but an answer that simply ignores Marx's analysis of class exploitation, Keynes's advocacy of state involvement in the economy, the experience of millions of people in rigidly-controlled command economies ... the list is endless. You are free to argue that economics as you understand it is the best kind, but you cannot claim

that it is the only kind. And the same is true for religion. There are many religions, and what they teach differs.

Even so, might it not be possible to take one's own experience, strip it down to its most basic essentials, see whether those same essentials also apply to other religions and create a workable understanding of religion from that? Many have tried this approach, and have come up with answers such as "religion is the worship of a divine being or beings" or, more broadly, "religion is the human response to that which is considered sacred".

However, if we dig a little deeper in the various religions of the world, we come up with a number of problems. Let us first tackle some basic beliefs. Christians, Jews, Muslims and many others all claim to believe in the existence of a single god who created the world and everything in it (this is called monotheism). But they disagree strongly with each other (and among themselves) about the details, not to mention what He or She might require of humans.

Hindus respond that, in their view, a monotheistic setup is fair enough, but there is also something to be said for incorporating some aspects of polytheism, at least on a subordinate level. In the final analysis some of them might also agree with the Buddhists that the ultimate nature of reality is devoid of personality and that its beginning and end, if such things were to exist, are lost in the mists of time. And that marvelously humanist Chinese sage Confucius once replied to this whole debate by saying, "You do not yet know how to serve people, why then worry about serving the gods?" One cannot regard basic beliefs as the common denominator of all things religious - to say that all religions worship the same God is just too simplistic, too easy. If we take religious people seriously, we have to learn to listen to what they are saying about their beliefs and recognize their uniqueness.

But if basic beliefs about the world and its origin do not help us along in our search for the meaning of "religion", perhaps we can find something else that all religions have in common. I am not referring to acts like praying, lighting candles or prostrating - there the differences are all too clear and we will be discussing some of these in future articles - but perhaps there is something uniquely religious about ethics. After all, don't all religions teach people not to go around killing, raping and robbing each other?

Well, in a sense they all do, but only in highly selective ways. Christians are told to "turn the other cheek", but Islam values a somewhat tougher attitude. Buddhists will extend, in theory at least, their non-harming attitude to all living beings, then indulge in endless debates among themselves whether this implies compulsory vegetarianism. Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians disagree among themselves on the sinfulness of suicide and abortion.

Hardly ever has any religion succeeded in preventing the miseries of war; on the contrary, almost all of them have had a hand, at one time or another, in starting wars against people who happened to be heretics, pagans, heathens, infidels or apostates, in other words, "not like us".

However devoted we are to our respective traditions, we must face up to the truth: "Religionism", like racism and sexism, has caused suffering for millions of people. We might like to think that we have moved beyond all that, but the destruction of the World Trade Center, and before that, the poison gas attack on the Tokyo subway, was a rude awakening - religion as a destructive force continues to exist.

So, if there is indeed a common factor that not only unites all the religions but also helps us to understand what, essentially, it is, it is not plainly visible. We will have to dig a little deeper. What about the structure of the word itself? The word "religion" is derived from a Latin source that means "to tie back" or more figuratively "to re-connect". But this does not help us much, either; the question immediately arises "reconnect to what?" and we are back in the interminable debates about the existence of God, the nature of reality and what human beings really are.

Besides, that only works in some languages. In Afrikaans, for example, the most common term is "godsdienst", literally "service to God". Clearly the same problem arises, for the existence of God is presupposed in the very term itself. This means that a term like "die Boeddhistiese godsdienst" is self-contradictory!. For this reason, Afrikaans-speaking scholars of religion have increasingly turned instead to the neutral, if somewhat artificial, neologism "religie".

We have a problem here. When we started out, we thought we knew what religion was, but now we are not so sure. The fact that religions are different from each other means that as we learn of more and more of them, the concept keeps getting fuzzier.

There are at least three possible reactions to this dilemma. First, there is the fundamentalist option. I can say that while all other traditions are man-made and false, my own is divinely inspired and true. In other words, my beliefs are the TRUTH, while all others are mere "religions". Their followers have been deceived by dark forces. I may tolerate their existence, but I do not accept that they have anything important to teach.

While this approach has the virtues of frankness and simplicity, it is also true that it leads to a fanaticism and a disregard for the rights of others that would no doubt have horrified the founder of the religion in question. This strategy seems most common among monotheists, that is, Jews, Christians and Muslims. But is by no means restricted to them: Even in Buddhism, usually the most tolerant of religions, you will find schools of thought that deny that any other schools teach the true words of the Buddha.. Also, many monotheists reject this approach - they cannot see how a loving God would allow deception on such a massive scale to happen, considering the results for all concerned.

A more subtle variation of this strategy is to declare that all religions have a certain amount of truth in them, but mine happens to be the completely fulfilled truth, which has emerged after a long evolution - the older schools have been corrupted by human misunderstanding of the initially flawless revelation. Alternatively, if this is not yet the case, my religion is at least the closest approach to this complete truth that will be revealed in the fullness of time.

This strategy has long been a favorite among Hindus and Buddhists, but it seems also to have taken root in certain sectors of twentieth-century Christianity: one thinks here of Raimundo Pannikar's phrase "The unknown Christ of Hinduism". One can also see elements of it in the Islamic concept of the "people of the Book". But while this approach may be more refined and humane than the fundamentalist one, it is imperialistic in nature. It refuses to take other people and their beliefs seriously, preferring instead to remake them in its own image.

The Baha'i Faith refines the concept even further: they declare that each major religion was taught by its founder in a way appropriate to its time and place. Therefore, the most recent revelation is the one most appropriate to us, and those of us who prefer to cling to an older faith are not exactly wrong, but maybe a little old-fashioned in a "stick-in-the-mud" kind of way. As a result, Bahai's tend not to evangelize their beliefs aggressively: as far as they are concerned the better fit of their own teachings to our times will eventually become so blindingly obvious that people will naturally turn towards it. Until then, those who stick to other religions will be saved by them, if with more difficulties than is really necessary. We have come a long way from a simplistic fundamentalism here, but there is nevertheless an evolutionary line from the one to the other extreme.

The second major way to react to the problem of the differences between religions is to declare that the only true religion is mysticism. Mysticism may be defined as a process whereby the mystic plumbs the depths of the self and reality in a radical process of meditative self-discovery to discover the true nature of reality. And the sayings of mystics of all kinds of different traditions show that they have known very similar experiences. Therefore, the true unity of religion can be found in mystical experience. In mysticism, we can find the "perennial philosophy", the common ground of all religious experience. All the

rest of religion, the ceremonies, the scriptures, the deeply-held beliefs, are reduced to a kind of life-support system for mysticism.

There is a lot of evidence to support this train of thought. But mysticism is, was and probably always will be a minority interest among religious people. Where does this leave the rest of us? Moreover, the mysticism approach and the fundamentalist attitude share one shortcoming: there is no way that they can be proven to a disinterested outsider. Instead, they require a leap of faith or a mystical experience that is itself religious. Thus, basing a definition of religion on them leads to arguing in circles.

The third reaction to the problem is to ignore it. This approach, which grows naturally out of the exclusivism of the first strategy, was perhaps possible in the past, when some religions dominated large geographical areas. But today, it would imply shutting oneself up in a self-imposed ghetto, avoiding all contact with everyone who might possibly not share one's beliefs and never venturing outside. Surely an unacceptable "solution" to most of us. After all, most religions do believe that their message is valid for all people; how is this truth to be transmitted to other people if we ignore them?

So perhaps there is a fourth way, a way of approaching the differences between religions that will not deny the religious feelings and beliefs, and therefore the very humanity, of people of other faiths and that will not restrict us in the practice of our own religion.

If we cannot identify one common characteristic of all religions, perhaps we can devise a system of classifying them. Then, perhaps the way we classified the religions will itself show us what they have in common.

There are many ways to classify religions. One popular way is to distinguish between local, national and universal religions. The local religion is limited in terms of both geography and missionary intent. Usually, one is born into a local religion; it is the faith of one's family, tribe or clan and one has little interest in extending it to others. On the contrary, since the religion is the source of the group's power, and therefore its means of survival, one should be careful not to divulge too much of it to outsiders. While this type of religion is most common among "primal" communities (hunter-gatherers, herders and premodern agriculturalists), remnants of it remain even in modern societies - witness the secrecy that surrounds groups such as the Freemasons.

National religions usually have to do with the common bonds of a shared language, culture, ethnic background or a shared history. Orthodox Judaism is a good example of this, traditional Hinduism another. While it is not impossible for an outsider to join a national religion, to do so requires that one adopts, not only the religious precepts, but an entire lifestyle. As a result, national religions tend, after an initial flowering that is associated with the growth and political dominance of the associated community, to stop growing and only perpetuate themselves, or even to decline.

The universal religions, on the other hand, have divorced themselves from a specific society to such an extent that they have become "portable". They can adapt themselves to almost any society in which they find themselves. Universal religions are clearly oriented towards converting people of other faiths. Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are the most often quoted examples of universal religions. Keep in mind, though, that there are always "mixed" types. For instance, Hinduism contains aspects of all three these types, depending on whether one investigates it on the village, caste or philosophical level.

But there is a problem with this classification system, useful as it is, if we are looking for the essence of religion. It simply classifies traditions according to their missionary zeal, or lack of it. In terms of this system, classical Marxism-Leninism, with its drive to "world communism" would have to be classified as a "universal religion". While there are some scholars who maintain that it was precisely that, it is problematic to call this philosophy, which denied the truth-claims of all religious systems, a religion. In other words, we cannot use this classification to define religion as something that tries to convert other people.

More fundamentally, conversion is mainly a concern of the universal religions; the other groups care much less about it. In essence, it says that there is a group of missionary religions and two kinds of non-missionary religions. But how can one use a defining characteristic of one group to set up a system that then goes on to define all the groups? In other words, isn't this like the old South Africa, where you were either "white" or some kind of "non-white"?

This shows us that we can never look at religious phenomena with a blank mind, ready to receive "what is out there". Our previous experience always colors our perceptions. Not that this is fatal to good thinking, as long as the reality of the influence of this previous experience is recognized and used positively. Thus, classification systems, although useful, cannot give us the essence of religion, either. All they do is reflect our existing ideas about religion.

What can we learn from all this? Simply that religion is **not a single thing**. To understand religion, we must accept that it is a composite, something made up out of many things, any one (or even more!) of which may be present or absent without affecting the "religious" nature of the whole. We cannot isolate a single aspect such as belief or worship or prayer and set that apart as the "essence" of religion.

Consider the work of the philosopher Wittgenstein. As a young philosopher, he engaged in highly abstract work on logic, but as he grew older he became interested in concepts and ideas that seemed to defy definition.

Wittgenstein developed his philosophy using "game" as his first example. What, he asked, is a game? Many games are played with balls and sticks, but chess is a game, yet it involves neither. Games are played for fun, unless you happen to be a professional sportsman who does it for the money even when you are injured. Games can involve competition, but some others stress cooperation. And so on.

In the end, he decided that "game" could not be reduced to one single defining attribute. Instead, it was the sum total of all its attributes. If one looked at a human activity and saw that the majority of its properties could be found in the list that together made up the definition of "game", then one would be justified in saying that that particular activity was a game. But it was not necessary for all of them to be there.

Can you see how the same is true of religion? It is a big composite of ideas, customs and practices, all sharing a certain "family resemblance", but no single one being so dominant that it alone makes the whole thing "religious". It is all those little things taken together that religion its identity, and if one of those little things falls out of place, this does not make the whole complex invalid. For centuries, religious thinkers have been telling us that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It turns out that this is equally true for religion itself.

In fact, this understanding of what religion is closely reflects the evolution of the concept. When the early European explorers set out on their voyages in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they already had some idea of what religion was. This notion was derived mostly from Christianity, but they were also aware of Judaism and Islam, even if they regarded these as false religions.

When they reached India, they encountered Hinduism. This ancient civilization had systematized beliefs and practices that bore a sufficient resemblance to what they were used to at home for them to refer to Hinduism as the "religion" of the Indian people. The same was true when, later, they reached China and the Americas. In each of these cases, there were separate social structures that were not necessarily identical to European religion, but which bore a certain "family resemblance" to it. With each discovery of a new "religion", the very term itself was widened and it became easier and easier to describe a newly-discovered social phenomenon as "religious".

Sometimes this process would break down, of course - some of the early Christian missionaries to Southern Africa would write in their letters home that the indigenous

people of Africa had no religion! Actually, what happened was that those activities that would be considered "religious" in western society were, in African communities, so tightly integrated with the rest of social life as to present a seamless whole to the observer. To some extent, this is also true of Judaism and Hinduism, as we have seen. Even in modern western society, it is not always easy to say where religion stops and, say, politics begins.

If we stop looking for one small defining property that makes religion what it is, the problem of differences between religions immediately starts to fade away. It is no longer a problem, but rather in itself a glorious expression of the human capacity for making sense of the world. Religion may or may not be divine in origin, but it certainly is human in execution. That people living in different times and places should have responded to their experience of life and death in ways different from mine, but still broadly recognizable as religious, is not a scandal of philosophy, but a celebration of human ingenuity and adaptability. I do not have to adopt another religious system in its totality, but I can still appreciate the beauty and grandeur of that system.

And the same must then be true in our personal religious practice. My bona fide religious experience is completely valid within the framework of my religious tradition, and so is your religious experience within the framework of yours. The fact that my religious experience is not the same as yours, or that our religious systems contradict each other on many specific points, does not change the fact that on the experiential level we have both experienced a life-altering event of the deepest possible meaning. All of us, the Catholic and the Copt, the Buddhist and the Baptist, stand before the Great Mystery, begging bowl in hand, dumbfounded by the greatness of what we can see only dimly.

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Religion and art

I wrote this one for Namaste magazine too, but I don't recall that they ever published it. It was just around the time that the magazine folded, so that was probably what happened.

God is really only another artist. He invented the giraffe, the elephant, and the cat. He has no real style. He just keeps on trying other things. - Pablo Picasso

Art among a religious race produces relics; among a military one, trophies; among a commercial one, articles of trade.- Henry Fuseli

In the year 730, the Byzantine emperor Leo III issued an order forbidding the use of religious images (icons) in Christian worship. Icons were to be destroyed all over the empire; this came to be known as iconoclasm (literally, the breaking of the images). Leo's successors maintained this policy, but the empress Irene reversed it. She was an iconophile (literally, a lover of images) and during her reign the use of icons was restored. Iconoclasm was reinstated by her successors, but under the empress Theodora the iconophiles finally won the day, more than a century after the controversy first broke out.

The use of icons in worship has endured ever since in Eastern Christianity. To this day it is the norm in Orthodox Churches, and Theodora was declared a saint. In the meantime, though, various people had suffered banishment and imprisonment for being on the wrong side of the controversy whenever a new emperor or empress made yet another switch in religious policy.

Almost a thousand years later, a new wave of iconoclasm arose, this time in Western Europe. Of the Reformists, both Zwingli and Calvin were dead set against the use of art in religious practice. Luther took a more moderate stance. Once again, priceless paintings and statues were destroyed. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church continued to use artistic representations of saints and angels to inspire religious fervor in its adherents - many of the world's greatest artistic treasures, like the Sistine chapel and Michelangelo's statue of Moses, were commissioned by the church. To this day, even a member of another religion can tell the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant church just by looking at its interior. Anglican churches can go either way.

Clearly, there is an uneasiness about art deep within the world's largest religion. But where does it come from? Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with the Ten Commandments.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them
(Exodus 20:4-5)

You will recall that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he found to his disgust that the Israelites had already broken this commandment, with his own brother Aaron among the culprits! In one sense, one could say that the commandment had not yet been formally promulgated when they cast the Golden Calf, so perhaps one might forgive them this little error. But clearly, this was the result of a much longer process - unlike all the other nations among which they lived, the Israelites worshipped a god who did not limit himself to a specific shape or place. It was really just a matter of time before it was formally forbidden to even try to make a representation of him. And this has ever since been the question that has plagued artists and theologians ever since. For the artist, the question is "How can one depict something, no, someone, who is both a personal deity and the vastly superior creator of the universe?" Theologians, for their part, ask "Can we mere humans even dare to do such a thing"?

The dilemma has not been confined to Christianity - all religions that get their inspiration from the Old Testament in one way or another have had to face it. Judaism is naturally closest to the source, and it has taken it very much at face value. This is not to say that Jewish religious art does not exist, but it tends to be abstract and non-figurative - decoration rather than figuration.

Islam has taken a similar line, although in Persia it seems that it was reinterpreted a little: as long as the subject was clearly non-religious and no-one worshipped it, some figurative art was allowed. Persian miniatures thereby became an artistic treasure.

More traditional Muslims maintained that any artistic representation of any living creature was forbidden by the Koran, just in case someone might feel inclined to worship it. Abstract decoration was allowed, though, as was elaborate calligraphy. In fact, scholars have speculated that it was this insistence on non-figurative art in Islam that inspired Leo III to proclaim the policy of iconoclasm. After all, the Muslims were at the time beating the Byzantine army back on all fronts, and they were more strict on this issue than the Christians. To the medieval mind, cause and effect could easily be deduced in such a case. The Muslims have recently made their peace with non-religious representation, or Al-Jazeera would not be able to broadcast. But they remain touchy about artistic representations of revered people, whether it is in paint, film or in any other medium. Just ask Salman Rushdie!

But of course, there are religions that do not base their philosophy on the Old Testament. Hinduism seems to have the fewest problems with religious art. There are a

few modern reformist movements that do not use paintings and sculptures of deities, but they are in the minority.

Most Hindu temples and homes are filled with representations of the Hindu gods. Which is a little strange, really, because Hindu philosophy sees the ultimate nature of god (Brahman) as beyond form, indeed, beyond human imagining. But below this, there are many other levels of divinity, and it is these more personal divinities that are commonly depicted. And so we get Hanuman, with his monkey-like face, the blue-skinned Krishna, the elephant-headed Ganesha, and many others.

But if the Hindus did not see a problem in using art in their religion, their cousins the Buddhists certainly did. After the Buddha's death, Buddhism gradually became strong and wealthy enough that the monks could afford to decorate their monasteries. But while they had no problems depicting significant events in the lives of the Buddha and his chief disciples, they stopped short when it came to depicting the Buddha himself.

According to Buddhist doctrine, the Buddha had escaped from the circle of life and death and gone into the beyond of parinirvana. It wasn't just that he didn't exist anymore. He neither existed nor non-existed. He had gone beyond both existence and non-existence. It was felt that to make a representation of him would imply otherwise. And so for several centuries, Buddhists painted and carved elaborate scenes in which adoring crowds of disciples stood around - nothing much. Where the Buddha would have sat there was perhaps a lotus flower, or an eight-spoked wheel, or just a footprint, all of these symbolizing the presence that was absent, the Buddha who was also referred to as the thus-gone (Tathagatha). In a way, these ancient artists faced the same problem as their counterparts in Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures: how does a mere physical creature give form to that which is essentially beyond form?

This changed when Buddhism reached Gandhara in the northwestern outreaches of India. Gandhara had long ago been settled by Greeks, and while their descendants were enthusiastic converts to this new religion, they were not much impressed by the theology of non-presentation. If they were going to be Buddhists, they were going to make sculptures of the Buddha, and there was an end to it! One small problem arose: There was no longer anyone around who remembered what the Buddha had looked like, and the Buddhist texts were quite ambiguous. So they based their first statues on those of Apollo, and this started an artistic tradition that spread across Asia, changing shape whenever Buddhism entered a new cultural area, but always recognizably descended from those first Greek-Indian statues.

In all of those cases, one can see a common thread. Art had a certain utility value, but not necessarily an inherent one. It could be used by a ruler to glorify his reign, or by a priest to glorify his god. But its primary value was that it adorned and glorified something else. "Art for art's sake" would have been a perfectly meaningless phrase to the pre-modern mind. The artist was basically an artisan: "Herr Bach, we are having the Duke of Saxony over next week and we need you to compose two minuets and a violin concerto. That will be all."

This changed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photography was invented, and portrait painters found themselves out of work. Edison discovered a way to reproduce sound and thousands of journeyman musicians were surplus to requirements. This turned out to be a double-edged sword. It was true that art lost much of the patronage on which it had been living for so long, but those artists who decided to stick it out were now suddenly free to experiment with form, sound and emotions. Before, the important thing had been the client's wishes. Now, the artist needed only to listen to his (and increasingly, her) inner feelings. Perhaps Oscar Wilde expressed this new conception of art most clearly:

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or dishonest tradesman. He has no further claim to be considered as an artist.

Forms of artistic expressions, which had once evolved so slowly that it still makes sense to speak of, say "18th century English painting", now started to arise and die out with dizzying speed. Impressionism begat Fauvism, which begat Cubism, which begat Futurism, which begat Abstract Expressionism . . . The public at large stopped even trying to keep up and turned away from the world of art even more that they had been doing already.

Oh, there have been artistic movements, especially in music, that have tried to bring their vision to the masses. But they have been quickly subverted by commercial interests. The blues originated as a cry of anguish against slavery and discrimination. It gave birth to jazz, which was then tamed to become the comfortable middle-class music of the big-band era. Later on, Bob Dylan and John Lennon reached back to the original spirit of blues and folk music, again to express their deepest feelings about what they saw going on around them. But what is their legacy today? Pre-manufactured boy bands, whose music expresses absolutely nothing. In the same way, commercial interests have felt free to plunder the visual arts. Where would advertising be without Surrealism? Popular art is at the mercy of the editor, the market researcher and the record executive.

Eventually, a new kind of patronage was found. Not the mass patronage of the past, where every well-to-do burgher needed a portrait of himself to hang on the wall, but a small section of the seriously wealthy, who might not be able to create art themselves, but who aspired to share the artist's vision.

Of course, there were never many such patrons, and it is from this period that we first observe the rise of a popular stereotype: the struggling artist, starving in a garret, spending money on nothing but art materials and the occasional dose of narcotics, creating works of art understood by no-one but himself, a few other artists and, hopefully, future generations. Vincent Van Gogh was one of the first to live this kind of existence, and is by now the most famous. But there were others whose work has been entirely forgotten.

But let us think about that. Does this kind of lifestyle not remind us of something? To give up a comfortable bourgeois way of life in service to a higher calling: To insist that there is more to life than making money, or even making babies: To work with the finite in a stylized way in search for infinity: To insist that one knows a truth that others do not, a truth accessible only to the initiated. It sounds a lot like religion.

And indeed, today art has become a secular religion. It has its temples (art galleries) its high priests (curators) and heretics (art critics), its theologians (art historians) and its sacred icons. It does not offer an afterlife yet, but note how easily the word "immortality" slips into the conversation when talking about major artists. The original sin of this new religion is vulgarity, and it offers the sacrament of the exhibition opening, bringing us the salvation of good taste.

Anyone may try to join this cult, but to be accepted in the inner circle takes effort, dedication and talent. Or money - artists may tolerate starvation in the garret for now, but still they long to be "discovered", to make that million-dollar sale to a gallery, to get that publishing or recording contract. This faith is closely connected to our other secular religion, commerce, after all. The day of the gentleman amateur is far behind us, and while artists no longer wish to be seen as mere artisans, few seem able to resist the lure of celebrity status. In time, the successful artist becomes a parody of his former self, creating searing indictments of capitalist society while lounging in the back of his Rolls-Royce.

Meanwhile, the old religions soldier on. Now that they can no longer count on the services of the really good artists, they are reduced to repeating the decorative patterns of the past, stamped out in ever-increasing numbers and ever-decreasing quality. Same old, same old. Kitsch.

Today, when an artist consciously uses images and ideas from the established religions, it is front-page news. And the result is as likely to be uproar as appreciation. When Muslims burn a Rushdie book in public, when Christians protest against the showing of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or against the showing of Mapplethorpe artworks, this is not merely in outrage over a secular person misusing the symbols they hold dear. It is a fully-fledged conflict between two very different ways of seeing the world. In a small way, it truly is a religious war.

We started off this essay with quotes from Picasso and Fuseli. Let us end it with another, this time by Marcel Duchamp:

Art is a habit-forming drug. That's all it is for the artist, for the collector, for anybody connected with it. Art has absolutely no existence as veracity, as truth. People speak of it with great, religious reverence, but I don't see why it is to be so much revered. I'm afraid I'm an agnostic when it comes to art. I don't believe in it with all the mystical trimmings. As a drug it's probably very useful for many people, very sedative, but as a religion it's not even as good as God.

* * * * *

The Martians are coming! Or going, actually

This article was also originally meant for Namaste magazine, but after that was closed down it ended up being published in Odyssey magazine instead in 2004.

We will go to Mars. It may not happen soon, and it may not come about as a result of President Bush's recent directive to NASA. But sooner or later we will go. The whole of the emerging global culture points to it.

There was a time, long ago, when there were many different human cultures on Earth. From the American Northwest, where one's status depended on how many of your possessions you were able to give away, to the African Savannah, where the deciding factor was the possession of cattle and the killing of lions, there was an amazing diversity to human life. Thousands of distinct languages were spoken, thousands of religions were practiced. Societies were small, typically between twenty and two hundred people

This started to change between two and three thousand years ago, in the period that turned out to be so pivotal to history that the philosopher Karl Jaspers called it the Axial Age, that is, the axis around which history turns. At that stage, there were already major civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and elsewhere, but they were mainly conglomerations of smaller units. What we call Sumeria was really a collection of independent city-states (village-states, really, by our present standards). Local languages largely survived, and local beliefs were not only tolerated, but incorporated rather unsystematically into state cults.

All this changed during the Axial Age. Egypt was probably the earliest to show the way to the future: a single system of writing cemented the supremacy of the language that became known as Egyptian, and the worship of Amon-Ra slowly pushed other cults,

survivors from an earlier age of village religions, into the background. Things moved slowly back then, but from our present vantage point we can see how over the next thousand years, the same pattern repeated itself again and again in India, in China and in Europe. One local dialect gained supremacy and became a national language. One religion became a widespread ideology. Slightly later, the same pattern of events even took place in the Americas, in the civilizations of the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas.

The logic of the Axial Age continues unabated to the present day. In fact, it has accelerated. Linguists warn that local languages are dying out almost as fast as species of animals in the rain forests. In South Africa, for example, the Nama language will probably not see the twenty-second century and Griqua, while enjoying a brief spell as a "local is lekker" curiosity, is on the endangered list.

Religions have followed the pattern faster than languages. A half dozen religions dominate the thinking of the vast majority of our seven billion fellow humans, and almost all of them (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity) can be dated to the Axial Age. The only one that came a little later was Islam, and even that religion acknowledges its roots in the Axial Age development of Judaic and Christian thought.

It is by now almost impossible for us not to think in terms of Axial Age logic. It crops up in the most unlikely places. In the computer world, the buzzword is "interoperability". It seems right and proper, without any further reflection, that all computers in the world should be able to talk to each other. It seems perfectly natural that any telephone user should be able to call any other telephone in the entire world. Any restriction on this (like DVDs that divide the world into a number of incompatible zones) is experienced as an inconvenience. We don't need to think about this, we don't need to argue the point. It just seems obvious. One language, one religion, one operating system. That is the logic of the Axial Age.

But in fact, this logic has been around for little more than three thousand years, and only in the last three hundred has it really gone global. For well over ninety percent of its existence, homo sapiens lived in small isolated bands, and the notion of a universal language, or a universal religion, would have been utterly incomprehensible. As it remains incomprehensible in those pockets where local languages and religions survive (for now). The ideology of one-ness is a very recent heresy in human development, and just because we all share it does not mean that it is necessarily right.

What do I mean, "we all share it"? Surely not? Oh yes. Even while I am questioning this philosophy, I am doing it in English because I think that that will allow the largest number of people to read it. I constantly try to keep the "average reader" in mind to make sure it will be understood. And I will send it to the editor of Smashwords in Microsoft Word format because I know that their computer is likely to interpret that properly.

Even criticism of the Axial Age and its consequences is deeply embedded within the structures of Axial Age thinking itself. It has become a prison of the mind. A very modern, progressive prison, sure. But still a prison. A few hardy "postmodernists" claim to have escaped from this prison. But from time to time they have to break back in for supplies.

The twentieth century saw the ultimate logical consequence (so far) of the Axial Age: a single global culture. I am not talking about Disneyland in Paris or Coca-Cola advertisements in Addis Ababa. Those are mere symptoms, not the main thing. It is a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world. In this global culture, whether you are a Christian in Alabama, a Buddhist in Japan or a Hindu in Madhya Pradesh actually makes very little difference. Not merely do we watch the same TV shows, or different shows with essentially the same plot, but we expect to see the same kind of thing when we switch the TV on. Free-market democracy, consumer society, modernism, call it what you like. The overall pattern is a steady growth towards one-ness, same-ness.

Talking about TV, watch the news tonight. It doesn't matter which channel. Does it tell you the day's movements on the New York Stock Exchange? It is probably safe to say

that 99% of South Africans don't own any American stocks, so why do we need to know this? Because New York is the financial center of the global culture, just as Paris is the fashion center and Washington the political center. Whatever happens in these centers reverberates around the world. If, in the future, that financial center moves to China, we will be getting the results of the Shanghai Stock Exchange on South African TV. But that would be a mere detail. The system endures.

During the twentieth century, communism promised an alternative vision. But that was a sham. Marx's thinking was solidly based on the philosophy of Hegel, which built on that of Kant, and so on all the way back to Plato. Communism was merely a minor variation of the emerging global society and its philosophy. It too was solidly grounded in the logic of the Axial Age, indeed, it was even more overtly so than capitalism. After all, Marx predicted that just one class would remain standing after the revolution. Lenin introduced absolute rule by one party. Again, we see the move to one-ness.

Few "revolutions" and "paradigm shifts" are really radical, and those in recent memory have been less radical than most. Feminism? It insists that there are not two unequal kinds of human being, male and female, but just one. They are right, of course. But this argument is a logical extension of the earlier battle over the assertion that there were not two unequal kinds of people, serfs and aristocrats, but just one.

Environmentalism? Now that one once looked promising: after all, what is environmentalism if not a philosophy that promotes diversity? But much of contemporary environmentalism has become locked into a static view of nature, of preserving nature in an idealized form that excludes humanity. It has become yet another form of one-ness philosophy. "Become one with nature". Well, what else can you be?

The global society is not simplistically "western". One can call it that for reasons of (fairly recent) history, but the Axial Age logic that underlies it is as much Chinese and Indian as it is European. Once contact was made, the Axial Age cultures rapidly started to merge. India, Japan and China may have been "westernized", but Europe and America have equally much been "orientalized". Minimalist architecture and design echo the austerity of Zen temples. Japanese swords and swordsmanship feature in films and cartoons rather than European sabers and rapiers. Even modern-day cowboys (like the character played by Chuck Norris in the long-running TV series "Walker, Texas Ranger") are expected to know their karate moves. Western culture is a local outcrop of global culture and it is already hard to tell where it ends and other outcrops start.

And so, the global society with its Axial Age logic has become the overarching ideology, the uber-religion, under which we all live. As religions go, it is tolerant of what came before. By and large, it allows remnants of the earlier religions to go on, as long as they remain private and subjective matters, not to be discussed in polite society. One by one, the older religions have succumbed and accepted this reduced place in the greater scheme of things. Islam (at least some forms of it) is the last hold-out, and its resistance to assimilation is being played out in the Middle East as we speak.

There is one aspect of this uber-religion that concerns us greatly here. It carries the unquestioned assumption of the value of expansion. In the film "Wall Street", the Gordon Gekko character famously declares that "greed is good". He was too modest in his assessment. The greater truth, in Axial Age logic, is that "growth is good".

Religions must compete for adherents - whether they are up-front or subtle about it, the unquestioned assumption is that that things would be better if everybody else adopted my religion. Kingdoms must expand their territory. Languages must increase their number of native speakers. And this logic remains with us today.

Again, watch the TV news and read the newspapers. The need for economic growth is an unquestioned good. If only we can grow the economy, we will all have a little more. On a smaller scale, companies compete for market-share. political parties for voters, universities for students. There are bragging rights and practical benefits involved in being

able to say that "my department is the biggest on campus", or "we are the most-watched TV station in South Africa". Growth is good. Expansion is a necessity.

But this is not the only way to run a society. Even a little study of anthropology reveals that there have been societies that have valued stability over growth. There have been societies, notably the potlatch economies of the American Northwest, that valued distribution rather than growth. One could argue that these have been spectacularly unsuccessful societies. They did not grow, they shrank and disappeared. But to make that argument is to argue from within the very Axial Age philosophy to which these societies pose an alternative! Our minds remain imprisoned.

And all of this brings us to why we will go to Mars. If expansion is a central goal of society, that implies that there is a frontier, beyond which there is a wasteland into which we can expand. The Axial Age's relentless drive towards one-ness requires a two-ness, an Other that we can gradually turn into our One.

But what happens when there is no more unoccupied land, no more heathens to convert, no more savages to turn into placid consumers? What happens when there is a single culture everywhere, when there is one company with 100 percent market share, one university, one universal religion? What happens when there is no more frontier, and no more wasteland? Where does our global society grow to then?

We're not quite there yet. But things certainly seem to be moving in that direction. New religions spring up all the time, but frankly, they are just local variations on some very old themes. New countries declare themselves independent just as the concept of the nation state is made irrelevant by the greater reality of a shared global culture. Giant corporations merge into mega-companies that could buy small countries with little more than the advertising budget. Even when entities remain formally separated, they are linked into virtual organizations by layer upon layer of networks. Eventually the only way out will be to go up.

And that is why we will go to Mars. Not because of scientific research, not because of immediate economic benefits, not even because it is a piece of high adventure. Those are pretexts. We will go because three thousand years of cultural pressure to grow, to expand, will become an irresistible force. I doubt I'll live to see it. But it will happen.

* * * * *

Demythologization in Ancient India

A version of this article, which was originally based on my MA dissertation, first appeared in Religion and Civil Society. Papers from the founding congress of the South African Academy of Religion (De Gruchy & Martin 1995. Pretoria: Unisa Press), and a related article appeared in Myth & Symbol in 1995. This version cuts down on the academic wordiness and most of the referenced material and presents the basic argument.

The term "demythologization" (G. *Entmythologisierung*) is usually associated with the name of Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann - indeed, it did not enter the English language until 1950. It refers to an effort to see beyond the specific, culturally defined mythical embellishments of religious teachings. It differs, however, from ordinary positivist debunking in that the intention of demythologization is not just to prove the myths factually wrong, but to discern a deeper, timeless meaning that is assumed to lie buried beneath

layer upon layer of mythical material. Bultmann was deeply influenced by the existentialists, particularly Heidegger, and he felt that an existential encounter with the text was the correct approach to scriptural material, one that would yield not only intellectual clarification, but also personal faith. In order to do this, it would however be necessary to strip away mythical expressions that were specific to another time and another place.

But while demythologization is certainly not the same thing as debunking, it can be seen as a reaction to it, as a rearguard action by the faithful against the ascendancy of the secular debunkers. Consider, for example, that Bultmann lived and worked out his theory of demythologization in the heyday of positivism, that is, the early and middle twentieth century, and conversely, that the last two decades have seen both a resurgence of interest in myth and a lessening of the attention paid to Bultmann. The process of demythologization can therefore be seen as a symptom, rather than a cause, of a clash between an older, traditional paradigm and a newer, more skeptical culture.

The demythologizing position is open to a number of criticisms, most of which concern the assumed duality between the intrinsic, essential message and the medium in which it is expressed and embellished. In this essay, however, my intention is to show that very similar processes were happening in India twenty-five centuries ago.

It is of course each academic generation's inalienable right to think that it is the first to "escape" from the "straightjacket" of mythical thinking and the first to have discovered the true meaning of life and death, beyond any mythical linguistic confusions. And few academic generations have not made use of this particular right. Nevertheless, this is an incorrect assumption. We should not think that demythologization is a modern invention, even less that it was invented by Bultmann. In previous periods of social, intellectual and religious upheavals there have also been movements that attempted to strip the tales of old of their mythological accretions while attempting to retain some measure of the symbolic truth allegedly hidden within.

In Athens, for example, Socrates was accused of impiety, that is, of denying the divine nature of the celestial bodies, and the general demythologizing and debunking positions were known well enough that he could ridicule his accusers by asking:

My dear Meletus! Do you think that it is Anaxagoras you are accusing? Do you so despise these judges here and think them so unlettered that they do not know that it is the books of Anaxagoras ... which teem with such statements? Are young men to learn these things specifically from me when they can buy them ... for a drachma, if the price is high, and laugh at Socrates if he pretends they are his own? (Allen 1980: 47)

At the same time, similar revolts against the intellectual *ancien regime* were brewing in India. Monotheists, pantheists, atheists and others were engaged in lively, and sometimes bitter, debate. One such revolt has come down to us as Buddhism, and in this paper I intend to look at one small instance of such demythologization, namely that contained in the Pali text known as the *Singalovada Sutta*.

Like any other text, the *Singalovada Sutta* exists within a specific historical context. It is part of a larger literary corpus known as the Pali Canon or Tipitaka, the sacred scriptures of Theravada Buddhism, which was compiled in Sri Lanka around the first century CE after a long period of transmission by means of memorization. But besides this, there is also an internal literary context, that is, the *Sutta*'s own explanation of what it is about. In this case, we do not have to guess at or use much extraneous material to determine this context, for the first two verses of the *Sutta* describe the main characters, the place where the *Sutta* originated and the reason why it was preached in the first place.

1. Thus have I heard. At one time the Blessed one was dwelling near Rajagaha, in the bamboo-grove where the squirrels are fed. In due course, Sigala the householder's son, having risen early and left the city, his clothes and hair streaming wet, raised his hands in salute and veneration to the various directions: to the east, south, west, north, below and above.

2. Just that morning, the Blessed one, having dressed and taken his bowl and robe, went towards Rajagaha on his alms-round. The Blessed one saw Sigala who, having risen early and left the city, his clothes and hair streaming wet, was raising his hands in salute and veneration to the various directions: to the east, south, west, north, below and above. Having seen Sigala the householder's son, the Blessed one said: "Why, o householder's son, do you, having risen early and left the city, your clothes and hair streaming wet, raise your hands in salute and veneration to the various directions: to the east, south, west, north, below and above?"

"My father, when he was dying, told me; 'dear one', I wish you would venerate the directions'. Indeed then, sir, I, holding my father's words in honor, respect, reverence and worship, having risen early and left the city, my clothes and hair streaming wet, raise my hands in salute and veneration to the various directions: to the east, south, west, north, below and above".

"But, o householder's son, thus are the six directions not worshipped in the discipline of a noble one."

"How then, sir, are the six directions to be venerated in the discipline of a noble one? It would be to my benefit, sir, if the Blessed one would explain the teaching of how the six directions are to be venerated in the discipline of a noble one."

"Certainly, o householder's son, listen thoroughly and pay attention; I shall speak."

"Just so, sir" assented Sigala the householder's son to the Blessed one. The Blessed one spoke as follows:

These first two stanzas of the Singalovada Sutta introduce us to the two persons involved and the site where the events described in the text occurred. Of the principal characters, one is Siddhatta Gotama, the historical Buddha, about whom enough has been written to make further comment unnecessary.

The other person involved is a young man named Sigala (or Singala). The word literally means "jackal", and he is the only person of this name mentioned in Malalasekera's *Dictionary of Pali proper names* (1974).

Rhys Davids and Rhys Davids (1977: 169) state that "(Sigala) was probably no brahmin, or we might have found him tending Agni's perpetual fire or bathing his conscience clean in some stream of symbolic efficiency". But, while he might well technically have been a brahmin, this was not his primary social position; he is consistently referred to as a "son of a householder" (*gahapati-putta*).

The gahapatis were members of a distinct socio-economic class that was emerging as the dominant economic force in the region. The general pattern was for a king to donate a piece of land to a person, often but not necessarily a brahmin, who would then work it with the help of slaves and servants. Thus, a system of economic stratification arose which was parallel but not identical to the religion-based fourfold social stratification that would later develop into the caste system. The gahapatis were quite aware of their economic power and the political clout which this gave them - a case is on record of one such householder, a rich merchant, who turned down a king's request for his daughter on the grounds that she was too young. Thus, regardless of whether or not he was a brahmin, Sigala was a member of the bourgeois class of his time - which at least partially explains

the many economic concerns raised in the text. Moreover, as I shall explain below, there are good reasons for believing that Sigala's ritual did involve immersion in or at least self-libation from a stream or pond.

The setting of the Sutta is just outside the city of Rajagaha, the capital of the state of Magadha, in northern India. The city went into decline shortly after the Buddha's death and today the site is known as Rajagir or Rajagriba, in the province of Bihar, India.

The Buddha had been residing in one of his favorite places of residence, a park or grove of bamboos outside the city. This was the first monastic residence accepted by the Buddha, shortly after his enlightenment. Within the bamboo-grove, there was a wooded spot where food was placed for the squirrels who lived in the trees, since local legend told of certain squirrels which had woken a sleeping king to warn him of an approaching snake. This feeding-ground was the Buddha's usual place of residence within the bamboo-grove.

Sigala's hair and clothing are described as being "streaming wet". This implies that the rite which he was performing involved immersion in or self-libation with water or another liquid. Water, of course, is a symbol of central importance in many religious traditions and was an important symbol of purification in the Vedic religion.

Considering all the above information, we can reconstruct more or less what transpired that morning: Sigala left the city early that morning, dressed in his best clothes, and walked to a stream or pond in or near the park. He then bathed in this stream, either by full immersion or symbolically by pouring the river-water over himself. While his hair and garments were still wet, he turned towards the east, raised his hands and probably uttered an incantation to the beings resident in the east, perhaps repeating them four times. He then turned to the north, repeated the ritual, and so forth.

But who or what was Sigala worshipping by performing this ritual? If he were a Buddhist, we might have guessed that he was performing a variation of the loving-kindness meditation, in which the meditator attempts to extend his affection to literally *all* beings in a given direction. But Sigala was not yet a Buddhist lay follower at this stage - this would only come to pass at the very end of the Singalovada Sutta. So we would be better advised to seek a pre-Buddhist context for Sigala's ritual. While there are scattered references to worship of the directions in other sources, the most likely text to provide such a context is the *Atharva Veda*, Book III, Hymns 26 and 27 where the inhabitants of the six directions are clearly described:

O learned persons, who dwell within this eastern region. Ye are the pacifiers of the turbulent. your knowledge of annihilating the sinners constitutes your fiery arrows. Be kind and gracious unto us, and instruct us. To you be reverence, to you be welcome!...

A commander, expert in the science of fiery instruments is regent of the East, its warder is a man of independent nature, free from shackles, men of glory, knowledge, eloquence, self-respect are its arrows. Worship to these the regents, these the warders, and to the arrows. Yea, to all these be worship. Within your jaws of justice we lay the man who hateth us and whom we dislike. (Chand 1982: 92-94)

The references to fire in these passages makes it clear that the "commander" of the eastern direction is Agni, the Vedic fire-god. Similarly, each of the other directions is associated with a particular Vedic deity, as in table 1, below.

East - Agni
South - Indra
West - Varuna

North - Soma
Below - Vishnu
Above - Brihaspati

In this respect, it is interesting to note that Sigala's ritual occurred in the early morning, close to or at dawn. Usas, the Indian goddess of dawn, was said to be the wife of either Surya, the sun god, or Agni, the god of fire. She was at the very least closely connected to Agni, "appearing before or with or after him as the fire lit for the morning sacrifice" (Keith 1971: 120). This may be the significance of starting the ritual by facing the east.

If we accept the above analysis, we may need to modify our description of Sigala's ritual: he may have called the Vedic divinities by name while he was worshipping the "directions". There is one problem, though. The Atharva Veda is the most recent part of what we now call the fourfold Veda. It probably did not yet exist as a single collection in the Buddha's lifetime - where references to non-Buddhist scriptures consistently refer to the *Tevijja*, that is, to the three Vedas, for instance, in the *Tevijja Sutta*. But even so, as Keith (1971: 18-19) argues, it must be based on much older material:

The Atharva Veda reflects the practices of the lower side of religious life, and is closer to the common people than the highly hieratic atmosphere of much of the Rig veda ... (it) is certainly the youngest of all in its redaction, though it is doubtless in part old in material.

Thus, we have reason to believe that the theories and sentiments described in it, as described above, were in existence already at the time that the Buddha delivered this discourse to Sigala. Furthermore, Sigala, as we have already mentioned and shall expand upon below, was very much part of the "lower side of religious life", in that he was both socially (as a gahapati) and personally alienated from the mainstream religion of his day. If there was indeed an "underground" religious movement among the common people that would eventually attain Brahmanic respectability as the Atharva Veda, this would be the only form of religious expression with which he would likely be familiar.

Why, then, did Sigala perform this ceremony? The various manuscripts and commentaries are unanimous on this score: he had been asked to do so by his dying father. The father, of course, occupied a position of great power in the traditional hierarchy of Indian society, and a deathbed request from one's father would not be taken lightly.

The Buddha, seeing Sigala performing his ritual, asked him why he was doing this. Having heard the story, he declared that this was not the proper way to worship the six directions. Sigala then asked him to explain the proper way of doing so, to which request the Buddha assented; he then proceeded to preach the sermon which has come down to us as the *Singalovada Sutta*. First, however, he prepared the ground (in verses 3-26) by talking about ethical behavior in general and the importance of having good friends.

Only then does the text return to the question with which it started; how is one to worship the six directions as directed by Sigala's father? He declares the worship of the six directions to be a metaphor for proper human relationships, built on a system of mutually reciprocal duties and responses. These injunctions are not to be taken literally, as Sigala had been doing, at all. Instead, the six directions must be understood as signifying specific classes of people with whom Sigala had relationships. I stress "Sigala" here, for it is clear that the six classes were not intended to be abstract, universal social groups, but were rather a highly contextualized division of humanity which focused on the relationships of young men in Indian society and Sigala in particular. Consider, for instance, how the western direction is pronounced to represent the *wife*, not some neutral term like "the spouse". Nor is this due to the *Singalovada Sutta* being the product of an era before

inclusive language, for the different duties assigned to husband and wife clearly show that the Buddha had Sigala in mind when he discussed this relationship.

This contextualized nature of the Singalovada Sutta naturally limits the extent to which we can generalize its contents to our own situation, a hermeneutical question to which we shall return in the conclusion to this paper. Nevertheless, the range of relationships discussed is wide, and all of them are still relevant today.

27. "And what, o householder's son, is the noble disciple's protection of the six directions? O householder's son, the six directions should be known as [signifying] these six.

- (1) The eastern direction is to be seen as the mother and father.
- (2) The southern direction is to be seen as [one's] teachers.
- (3) The western direction is to be seen as the wife.
- (4) The northern direction is to be seen as [one's] friends and companions.
- (5) The lower direction is to be seen as the slaves and servants.
- (6) The upper direction is to be seen as the recluses and priests.

In these verses, the ritual is entirely transformed, ethicized and placed in an ethical framework - there is no evidence that any physical ritual was still prescribed for Sigala to perform. Moreover, the people who are set up as being symbolized by the six directions are "revered" neither by means of ritual nor in some abstract sense, but by the performance of specific acts which are described explicitly in this part of the Singalovada Sutta.

The new meanings of the six "directions" appear to display a clearly structured arrangement; they can be divided into a pair of triplets. The first of these is the parents/teachers/wife triad - it represents the most important relationships a person went through while passing from birth through the first few of the stages of life in what would later in Hinduism be formalized as the *Ashramadharma*, a developmental theory and practice in which a young boy would pass from his parents' household into that of a teacher, and would afterwards take a wife and set up a household of his own. Thus, this group of relationships is diachronic in nature; they trace a person's passage through time. It is also significant that the final two stages are not represented here; these stages involve a progressive withdrawal from worldly affairs, which is expressed in Buddhism by joining the monastic order, and the Buddhist equivalent of the ethical expression of these stages would be in the *Vinaya* literature.

The second triad of relationships concerns one's friends and companions, slaves and servants, and the recluses and priests. This group is synchronic in nature, but shows a certain progression nonetheless. In this case, we observe an increase in formality. We could expect Sigala to be quite intimate with his personal friends, less so with his servants, and to interact very formally with priests and religious wanderers, whom, as we know from the canonical literature, he would probably have addressed as *bhante* (revered sir), just as Sigala addressed the Buddha in verse 2. Thus, this group traces a person's relationships from the least formal to the most, or to put it differently, from the most intimate to the least.

As I have briefly indicated above, the list of relationships enumerated is far from exhaustive. While the ruler/subject relationship (or, in more contemporary terms, the relationship between the individual and the state), for instance, could be subsumed under the heading of master/servant, there is no mention at all of the proper relationship between human and nonhuman (e.g. animal) forms of life. It could, however, be argued that the contemporary debate about "animal rights" is addressed by Buddhism in its general condemnation of taking life. But if the list is not exhaustive, it is comprehensive; it does contain most of the kinds of people with whom Sigala (and ourselves) would expect to come into contact on a day-to-day basis.

A more telling criticism is that ethics is reduced by the Sutta to interpersonal relationships. There is no explicit discussion here of, say, parenthood as an abstract and universal concept, but rather of the concrete relationship between parent and child. While this may perhaps be explained as a characteristic feature of all pre-modern ethical thinking, this does not alter the fact that such a lack of structural awareness makes the application of this ethical teaching to our contemporary situation somewhat problematical.

Moreover, while some of the classes of people discussed here still exist relatively unchanged (for instance, parents and children), other types, like the slaves, no longer exist. Nevertheless, one can look at the classes and see certain patterns. For instance, in the master/slave relationship there is a pattern where one person is socially and legally entitled to order another person to perform certain economic tasks. The modern analogy would be the relationship between employer and employee, and this will be the context in which the master/slave relationship in the Singalovada Sutta will be examined here.

After the introductory information in verse 27, verses 28 to 33 then provide us with a more detailed exposition of the proper relationship between Sigala and these other classes of society. Each of these verses follows the same pattern: first Sigala's five duties towards the person or persons who are symbolized by the direction in question. Then their five (six in the case of recluses and Brahmins) responses to being so treated is described. It is important to note the difference between these actions. In the first case, the term used is *paccupahatabba*, which is the future passive participle of *paccupahahati*, meaning "to stand up before" and in this context, more figuratively "to tend". As the future passive participle denotes something which should be done, it is here translated as "(they) are to be tended". But the term used to express the other party's response to Sigala's action is *anukampati*, which is simply the present indicative active of a verb meaning "to have pity on, to commiserate, to pity, to sympathize with". Again, this should be understood in the context of this text; an action in response is implied here, and thus it is here translated as "responding in sympathy".

The significance of this is that it shows the relationships between people described in the Singalovada Sutta to be somewhat more complicated than the merely "reciprocal" duties or responsibilities which most commentators tend to see in the text. The first set of actions in each verse, which describe Sigala's actions, are moral duties - they are "to be done", as the use of the future passive participle indicates, while the second set of actions merely describe acts which happen quite naturally, if the previously-described moral duties have been performed, as indicated by the use of the present indicative active. To paraphrase, then, the general pattern is as follows: "You *should* treat such-and-such people in the following five ways, and in return they *will* treat you in the following five ways".

Clearly, there is an element of causality involved here. The message is that if I were to treat certain people in a certain way, they would naturally and automatically respond in a certain other way. And causality, of course, is one of the principal concerns of Buddhist philosophy. This shows how closely the Singalovada Sutta is interwoven with central Buddhist philosophical themes.

But it would nevertheless be wrong to think of the Sutta as a cold-blooded exercise in social engineering. Although the second list in each verse describe events which will automatically occur if the duties in the first list are carried out, it should be recognized that the Buddha is here describing an ideal situation, and the results are in each case equally plausible as duties of the other person.

Furthermore, the text is strongly contextualized. For instance, we do not know if Sigala had any children, but even if he did, the description of him as the son of a householder (*gahapati-putta*) throughout the text shows that his primary social position at the time was that of a young man, and therefore a "child" rather than a "parent". One might

speculate that had he been older, the Buddha might have started by saying "The eastern direction is to be seen as the child", rather than "... as the mother and father".

32. O householder's son, slaves and servants, as the lower direction, are to be tended by the gentleman in five ways:

- (1) By scheduling the work according to each one's ability;
- (2) By not making them work for food alone;
- (3) By nursing them when they fall ill;
- (4) By giving them tasty foodstuffs;
- (5) And by relinquishing them at the right time.

And in these five ways, o householder's son, do slaves and servants, as the lower direction, having been tended by the gentleman in five ways, respond in sympathy:

- (1) They rise earlier;
- (2) They lie down later;
- (3) They give alms;
- (4) They perform good deeds;
- (5) And they earn a good reputation.

These indeed, o householder's son, are the five ways in which slaves and servants, having been tended as the lower direction by the gentleman in five ways, respond in sympathy. Thus is the lower direction dealt with, rendering it tranquil and free from fear.

Sigala was told to treat the servants as follows: Firstly, he should set down a reasonable working schedule that would take each servant's capabilities into consideration. This appears to be primarily a warning against overworking the servants. This could be construed as a breach of the precept against "taking that which is not given". He should also "not make them work for food alone". One wonders if this was such a common practice that it was necessary for the Buddha to disavow it: presumably it would refer especially to those servants who were enslaved.

The "gentleman", as Sigala is referred to here, should also tend the servants when they fall ill. This recalls an episode in the Vinaya literature in which the Buddha tended a seriously ill monk with his own hands, afterwards admonishing the monks that, if they wished to tend the Buddha, they should tend the sick. The gentleman should also supply the servants with "tasty foodstuffs". Most significantly, he should "relinquish them at the right time". This can be interpreted as another injunction against overworking the servants, as in the first duty on this list, but it can also be seen as an attempt to encourage manumission. If we accept the latter interpretation, then the Buddha's statement here is in line with, or possibly the precursor of, the other Indian sacred texts mentioned above that prescribed the humane treatment and manumission of slaves.

Clearly, these duties were promulgated with the household servant in mind, but as we have seen above, one could apply these injunctions to the contemporary situation by substituting "employer" for "gentleman" or "master" and "employee" for "servant". The Pali injunction that one's servants should not be made to work for food alone can then be seen as a plea for a fair wage structure, as could the employer's duty to "feed" the employee. The precept regarding medical care can then be seen as indicating the need for a medical aid scheme, while the stated need to give employees the occasional day off speaks for itself. Naturally, these things are relative: what is considered a fair wage now may not be considered that a century hence.

Even so, one can see that the principle of fair, compassionate and even-handed treatment of employees is supported in the Singalovada Sutta, a reflection perhaps of such fundamental Buddhist emotive attitudes as friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy

and equanimity. What is missing, at least from our perspective, is the need for employer and employee to enter into a process of negotiation or collective bargaining. This is another example of the lack of awareness in ancient Buddhist texts of structural impediments to good human relationships.

How could one summarize such a vast amount of ethical advice? Perhaps we can merely state that the Sutta in this section exhorts us to adopt a lifestyle of friendliness and service to those with whom we come into daily contact. In each case, the precise way in which we should interact with another person will depend on that person's relationship to us. This is symbolically presented in the Sutta by dividing Sigala's relationships into six classes. While this division is not exhaustive, it does cover a wide field, and the principle of treating persons according to their social position in relation to ourselves can be extended to other types of relationships. We should always keep in mind that Buddhist ethics were never intended to be a moral straightjacket.

On the contrary, the Buddhist ethic is solidly based on the pan-Buddhist principle of interdependent causality. It might be summarized as follows: "You are free to do whatever you want to do: there *will* be consequences". And these consequences are described in very positive terms, which is unusual for a Buddhist text. If we treat people in the ways prescribed, they will respond naturally and almost inevitably in very specific ways that will, incidentally, be to our benefit. And since this text is strongly contextualized, since it is not an *ex cathedra* pronouncement by the Buddha, but a specific sermon to young Sigala, the duties and responses could as easily have been phrased the other way round.

As is usual with these texts, this one ends on an upbeat note: Sigala is overjoyed at having heard this Sutta pronounced. He praises the Buddha effusively and becomes a lay Buddhist.

One can see that what happens in this text is a fair approximation of Bultmannian demythologization. It would be asking for too much to expect a complete correspondence between the two: the Buddha's reinterpretation of Sigala's ritual is not existential but rather ethical. But if we stretch the meaning of demythologization but a little, we can see that it fits well enough. Like Bultmann, the Buddha lived in a time when traditional beliefs were questioned, examined and re-examined, and in the end often rejected. And also like Bultmann, the Buddha chooses not to debunk the pre-existing religious structure, but to strip it of its reference to mythical beings and reinterpret it in a new, in this case ethical, context that allows for some religio-philosophical continuity but only when the old teaching is stripped of what is judged to be unnecessary mythical trappings.

This discussion was then later written down in a sacred set of canonical texts. And this is the final irony: In Theravada Buddhist countries, the Singalovada Sutta has become such a popular source of religious inspiration drawn from antiquity, it has served as such an eminent source of pro-social codes of conduct, that it has become a myth itself. Moreover, it has become a myth that is itself sorely in need of demythologization. I hope that this essay and my related writings on the subject will have served as a beginning in this respect.

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Buddhism and Human Rights

One of the very first academic conferences I ever attended dealt with the various religions' views on human rights. Seeing that nobody was doing Buddhism, I went straight home and wrote the article on which this essay is based. But by the time it was published in the Journal for the Study of Religion (Sept 1993), the conference was old news, really.

The question of what the fundamental rights of human beings are is quite pertinent in the current South African situation, as well as in the wider global context. In the last few decades, it has become accepted practice to use the term 'human rights abuses' to describe the most varied forms of man's inhumanity to man, ranging from such appalling practices as murder and torture to lesser acts such as the banning of literature.

However, before we can ask just what specific human rights are, or should be, the logic of academic discourse demands that we clarify just what we mean by this concept 'human rights'. Furthermore, is the concept compatible with the major systems of thought that have shaped human experience throughout history? One manifestation of these world views is the phenomenon of religion, and the compatibility of the human rights concept with the various religious traditions has only recently been considered in any depth, as in the case of the 1988 annual conference of the Association for the Study of Religion (Southern Africa). Here I should especially like to refer to the work of Martin Prozesky, who at that conference pointed out that a fundamental discontinuity can be observed between the theistic worldview and the western liberal one which is presupposed by human rights theorists. He has since repeated his position in print at least twice (Prozesky 1989, 1990 - cf the criticism by Manley 1992: 59-60). I do not intend to repeat Prozesky's theory here in any great detail, but at the risk of oversimplifying his position, his argument can be summarized as a contradiction between religious dogma and the way human beings experience the world, that is, as a variation of the dilemma underlying the age-old theological problem of evil and its attempted answer by means of theodicy.

In this short article, I shall attempt to complement Prozesky's work by extending the discussion into a different realm, namely that of the non-theistic religion known as Buddhism, a realm which he has not yet added to his analysis of the logical and religious implications of human rights theory. Like him, I address a logical and conceptual, rather than an empirical, issue: that Buddhists have actively supported human rights campaigns is empirically undeniable. Later on in this paper, I shall examine a possible way in which they could do so in consonance with the fundamental tenets of their faith.

The human rights question, naturally, centers on the definitions of the two terms which are combined to create the concept; "human" and "rights". The combination of these two words carries two implications. First, they are human rights. The rights which we refer to with this term are in the first place restricted to humans (as opposed to the newer development of "animal rights"). Secondly they are human rights (often further qualified as "universal") and are therefore extended to all humans irrespective of their legal status or any other conventional measure of worth. To establish a Buddhist response to this issue

we should therefore take a close look at how this tradition approaches and understands these terms.

Let us start with "human". Buddhism regards the human being as a conglomeration of five *skandhas* or factors, these being body, perception, cognition, volition and consciousness. This classification may initially remind one of the body-mind-soul schema familiar to us from early Western thinking, but in fact it denotes an entirely different pattern of thought. As is continually stressed in the anatta doctrine, none of the skandhas have any ultimate superiority over the others - all need to be present for a human being to exist and none of them is considered to be an enduring, permanent entity. The system is also somewhat arbitrary insofar as the factors themselves are infinitely sub-divisible), and may well have served primarily as objects of meditation rather than as objectively existing constituents of the human being. In the Mahayana this interdependency of the various aspects of personhood was expressed more succinctly by the term "emptiness". The tendency in Buddhism was always to stress the way in which a person is causally related to internal processes as well as the rest of the world.

"Rights" are not something the Buddhist scriptures discuss at any great length; as Abe (1986a:191) has pointed out, "Buddhism emphasizes wisdom and compassion rather than justice and charity". This should not entirely surprise us, since the human rights concept as we know it simply was not around at the time. Perhaps we should take Trevor Ling's (1973:21) admonitions to heart when we discuss such matters as human rights and religious traditions:

To attempt to relate the teaching of the Buddha to that of (a modern thinker) purely in terms of propositions is likely to be an unprofitable exercise; it is like trying to get a telephone conversation going between two men who speak different languages, and one of whom cannot hear the other.

Kenneth Inada, one of the few contemporary writers on Buddhism who have addressed this topic, attempts to present the self-denying renunciation of nirvana by the Bodhisattva (savior-saint) as an instance of human rights. He describes this as follows:

The Bodhisattva personifies the ideality of existence, not only on a personal basis, but also in the larger social or world context. . . . The Bodhisattva ideal speaks to us of equality, liberty and security from the total perspective. (Inada 1982:75)

Apparently he sees a need for human rights to be guaranteed by a higher power, which makes his position vulnerable to Prozesky's argument. Apart from this, there is an absolutist element in the "rights" concept which contradicts this vision of the Bodhisattva as guardian of human rights. I believe this to be a legacy of the legal origin of the concept. For instance, when we say that a person has a right to a fair trial, what we are trying to express is our conviction that no matter how repulsive the misdeeds we believe him to have committed, he must have the opportunity to explain his actions or to prove that he is not in fact the one who performed them. No explicit religious basis is required for such an understanding of "rights" - all it takes is an awareness of the fallibility of our own judgment and a "social contract" type of social theory.

The Buddhist would have few quarrels with this, except perhaps to point out that the treatment to which we may or may not be entitled is largely conditioned by karma, or actions committed either by us or by our previous incarnations, which would imply that we are merely fortunate to have inherited such good karma from our previous incarnations that we have been reborn in a society which holds such a high opinion of individuals and their rights.

The next step in the development of the concept is that the right is no longer thought of as merely an agreed upon principle of law, but is now regarded as part of the very structure of existence. In other words, the concept has become reified. The important feature here is that the right inheres in the accused purely as a result of being human - it is not something that can be earned in the way a worker can earn a bonus for hard work or a student earn a degree as a result of passing an examination. Human rights, it is asserted, apply to us all, regardless of what we have or have not done. Considering that we treat every other part of our world with due consideration for the circumstances which created them, there must be something irreducibly worthy inherent in the human condition to warrant such special treatment. That is to say, the hidden premiss of this argument is that people must exist as autonomous entities. Prozesky uses the term "sovereignty" to express this thought.

As we have seen, Buddhism has little to say about the human rights concept in its original legal and political context, although it would be forced by its own logic to point out the arbitrariness of these systems of social engineering. In the Buddhist perspective, law and politics are fully human creations, and therefore have no intrinsic reality of their own, no ontological "being" that is independent of prior conditions. However, within the logic of the legal/political paradigm, this entitlement view of human rights can be seen to function efficiently. Thus, human rights can serve us perfectly well, provided that the concept remains within its original concept.

But when the human rights concept was then extended to a "right" such as the right to own property, and especially when this right was then declared to be universal and inalienable, the Buddhist would by reason of his faith be forced to ask such questions as "who is it that owns property?".

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi describes his personal struggle with the concept of property. The conclusion at which he finally arrived was that one should treat property like a trustee: taking the best possible care of it, but not regarding any of it as one's own. True, despite Gandhi's ecumenical spirit he always remained a Hindu, not a Buddhist, but this idea of his admirably reflects the ideal Buddhist stance as well.

Considering the anatta theory briefly sketched above, it becomes clear that in the final analysis there is no "owner". The person to whom these rights are intrinsically allotted by human rights theory has been dissolved by Buddhist philosophy into an ever changing flow of factors, none of them enduring or unchangeable or capable of possessing or being possessed. True, each particular human collection of skandhas is unique, but the same is true of those collections of skandhas which we normally refer to as non-human. The idea of the person as an independent, fully autonomous entity unaffected by circumstances is anathema to the Buddhist tradition. As we are all dependent on previous and extraneous conditions, there can be no question of us being "sovereign".

According to Buddhism, there is indeed something special about the human condition: it is only from this state that one can become enlightened. But we have no right to become enlightened, any more than a diamond in a deep rock bed has a right to become part of the British crown jewels. Like the diamond, our fortune is partly determined by the causes and conditions surrounding us. Unlike it, we have at least some power over our own destiny: as conscious beings, we can decide to swim against the stream towards nirvana.

Thus, to return to Inada's attempt to ground a Buddhist view of human rights in the self-abnegation of the Bodhisattva, the Bodhisattvas' compassionate actions have nothing to do with "human rights". It was by choice that they decided to refrain from entering nirvana while suffering still existed. They could have decided otherwise and become a Pratyekabuddhas (silent Buddhas) or arhats (saints) instead. That we live in an age in which the Bodhisattvas' compassion and wisdom are available is our good fortune, or

more technically, the result of our good karma: we are in no way entitled to it, in the sense that there is no higher tribunal to which we might appeal if it were not the case.

This does not imply that Buddhism is blind to the distress caused by such actions as murder and violence. How could it be? After all, the first Noble Truth of Buddhism is the omnipresence of suffering, and the system as a whole is intimately concerned with the eradication of suffering. Ultimately, this can only be done by attaining nirvana, the Buddhist Summum Bonum, but on a more immediate level, the Buddhist is encouraged to do everything in his power to decrease the amount of suffering in his immediate environment. Still, this is a matter of compassion and personal choice: it has nothing to do with "human rights".

Let us take the example of caring for the sick. The story goes that the Buddha once discovered that one of his monks was seriously ill and was not being cared for by his fellow monks. He then went to his sick disciple and bathed this man's sores with his own hands. Afterwards, he admonished his monks with the words "He who would tend me, let him tend the sick" (Vin. Mv. Kh. 8).

Can we deduce from this tale that the sick have a right to be treated? Indeed not: this would be an irresponsible hermeneutic excess. Note how the Buddha's injunction to the monks is presented as an "if - then" statement. If we desire to attend to the Buddha, then we should tend the sick. The choice is left open: the sick have no intrinsic right to be treated, nor do we have the correspondingly universal duty to treat them. But if we desire to take the Buddha's teaching seriously, we should develop the compassion that allows us to see the sick person's suffering as if it were our own, and take the necessary steps to eliminate it or at least soften its impact. In this context, one could mention the recent development at several American Zen centers of having a clinic for terminally ill AIDS patients attached to the meditation center, in which the patients are cared for by the staff and visiting meditators.

This explains why Buddhism would not argue dogmatically for or against free medical care on grounds of principles contained in the text quoted above. The Buddhist approach to this issue would be simply to consider the pragmatic effects of different systems of health care and then advocate the one which would best serve the interests of those who are suffering. Different social structures will produce different answers, as will different degrees of compassion. Thus, a higher principle can be served than the immediate one offered in the text.

The voluntaristic nature of Buddhist ethics is shown even more clearly when one considers the difference between the Judeo-Christian ten commandments and the Buddhist five precepts (cf. Abe 1986b:205). On the one hand "Thou shalt not kill": on the other "I undertake the rule of training to refrain from doing injury to living beings". The contrast could hardly be clearer: a command which brooks no excuses as opposed to a personal commitment to a goal.

Furthermore, Buddhists might argue that the human rights concept is subtly demeaning to those who uphold it. If I treat a person with dignity and respect simply because he has a right to be so treated, I am merely doing my duty. But if I so treat him because I compassionately understand the suffering in his own life and consciously decide not to retaliate blindly for any imagined slight which I feel has been inflicted upon me, this ennobles not only me, but, indirectly, my society. It elevates me slightly above what I was and brings me just that little bit closer to nirvana. Or, to put it in more Buddhist terminology, it is wholesome karma. A whole range of Kantian arguments could of course be leveled against this: my intention here being to discuss the Buddhist understanding of human rights, I shall not enter into these.

The outcome of all this is that the Buddhist cannot logically use the term "human rights" without involving himself in a contradiction in terms of his own religio-philosophical system. Not that this has stopped them from doing so. Just as Prozesky has pointed out

that Christians tend to be unaware of the logical contradiction between their beliefs and the human rights theory, so has Robert Traer (1988) been able to find Buddhists, some of them as highly placed as U Thant, the former secretary general of the United Nations, using the term.

It is true that some of the topics addressed by the Buddha coincide with issues that are still relevant to the contemporary human rights debate. His opposition to slavery, abuses of the caste system, and the oppression of women is often cited in the context of human rights. That he did speak out against these things is undeniable. But this was not unusual among the world renouncers of ancient India, since social distinctions were meaningless within the ranks of the "homeless ones" in any case. In any case, the project was eventually to fail. Social stratification survives to this day in Buddhist countries, and has in some cases even spread to the monastic order.

In Thailand, for instance, there are now two distinct monastic orders, both in the Theravada tradition. While most of the Thai monks belong to the Mahanikaya order, the Dhammayuttinikaya order was founded in 1833 by King Mongkut (Rama IV) before his ascension to the throne, with the express purpose of constituting an "elite order of monks" (Lester 1973: 95). Moreover, these are empirical contingencies, and as was said at the outset of this article, my interest here is in the logical relationship between Buddhist philosophy and human rights theory.

Does all of this imply that Buddhists have excluded themselves from taking part in the human rights debate? Perhaps not: they can always rely on the concept of "skillful means" to solve this problem. This concept holds that any teaching is valuable and therefore 'true', if it brings beings a little closer to enlightenment and the eradication of suffering. Thus, even if my partners in the debate use concepts widely different from my own, as a Buddhist I can still join them if their goals are broadly speaking the same as mine. To let semantic differences interfere in the joint creation of a more humane, compassionate society would be a grievous error for a Buddhist, especially since the Buddhist understanding of the meaning of terms tends towards the nominalist in any case. Such pragmatic actions may be seen, for instance, in the cases of Buddhist/Christian cooperation in Sri Lanka. But the logical problems remain; and look set to continue doing so until an authentically Buddhist human rights theory, or an equivalent which manages to avoid such value-loaded terms, has been worked out.

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Hinduism in Tshwane (Pretoria)

This essay is based on an article I published in Journal for the Study of Religion (March 1997). Despite the risk of appearing to be anachronistic, I shall use the current names of South African cities and provinces wherever possible. Older place-names within direct quotations and in the names of organizations, however, have been left untouched.

Hinduism is yet another of the faiths that entered the city of Tshwane in the late nineteenth century. Of all the major South African religions, it is probably the most accommodating in its basic theological structure, being easily able to admit that there may be truth, even great truth, in other traditions. Paradoxically, however, Hinduism has historically enjoyed such a close association with a particular culture that it has only recently been able to make any significant advances beyond those cultural confines. In South Africa today, this makes Hinduism particularly vulnerable to the pressures of conversion to other religions, secularization and westernization.

It is difficult to characterize Hinduism in a concise definition - after all, it is a tradition that spans some three-quarters of a billion people, two major language families with dozens of constituent languages, and the subcontinent of India, which itself stretches from the tropical jungles of the south to the icy peaks of the Himalayas. Hinduism once also existed in Indonesia, where a form of the religion persists on the island of Bali, and in parts of South-east Asia. Under the influence of British colonialism, Hinduism also spread to other parts of the world, notably Trinidad, Fiji and South Africa.

The first known Hindus in South Africa arrived on the SS Truro in 1860 as indentured laborers. The main cause for their arrival was the shortage of farm labour for the sugar plantations of kwaZulu-Natal. The indentured laborer contracted to work for a fixed period, typically ten years, and would then be offered a choice between return passage to India or a piece of land in kwaZulu-Natal. Indian immigration by means of indentured labour was stopped after a while, resumed in 1872 and finally halted in 1911. Interestingly, it was stopped not primarily by South Africa, but by the colonial government of India, which was receiving disturbing reports of the treatment of these laborers. Hindu indentured laborers were soon followed by "passenger" Indians. These were traders and artisans who emigrated to South Africa to service the growing Indian community. There seems to have been a geographical or even racial distinction involved in this: a common perception among Tshwane Hindus, we found, is that the indentured laborers were mostly Tamil- and Telugu-speakers from south India, while the "passengers" were generally Hindi- and Gujarati-speakers from the north. The historical data do not quite bear this out. Although most of the Indian travelers on the SS Truro, for instance, did come from the South, there was also a fair sprinkling of people from the northern provinces. Also, the first batch of "passengers", at least, consisted mostly of Muslims. Even at this early stage, there were also a few Indians who belonged to neither of the two main religious groups of Islam and Hinduism, such as Mr C A Cama, who arrived in the Gauteng area in 1895: "An anomaly in the law of the republic which classified Parsis separately from other Asians enabled him to become ... a landed proprietor in the Transvaal" (Swan 1985:6). He did not, however, establish a viable Parsee community in Tshwane.

Even today, most South African Hindus think of themselves as belonging to a specific linguistic groups. There are four such groups represented in South Africa, based on the languages Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Telugu. Of these, only the first three are represented in Tshwane in any numbers: the Telugu-speakers (or Andhras) of Tshwane seem to have

been absorbed in the Tamil community. However, these languages have not been able to maintain their status as truly spoken languages: in the 1991 census, for instance, the Indian languages reported in Greater Tshwane were as follows:

Hindi 36
Gujarati 611
Tamil 38
Telugu 0

The census figures contain no separate enumeration of Hindus, Muslims, Indian Christians and Chinese, instead lumping all of these together as "Asians". Nevertheless, when we see that of the 20 516 Asians, 18 406 reported English as their mother tongue, and when we further consider that at least some of those who reported an South Asian language may have been Muslim or Christian, the degree to which the Indian languages have lost ground becomes clear. Even if we use the rather unlikely assumption that all those who reported speaking an Indian language belonged to the reported 5 076 Hindus, this would represent only 13% of the total. Those who did report an Indian language may speak English as well. Only the very old now converse *only* in an Indian language, though many of the younger generation still have at least a smattering of their ancestral tongue as a second or even third language. As we shall see below, some of the main Hindu organizations have instituted language courses for their members' children. Whether these will be successful in stemming the tide remains to be seen.

For now, the *lingua franca* of the Tshwane Hindu community remains English, which is ironic considering the history of British colonization of India. In this, the Tshwane Hindus are typical: South African Hindus, and indeed of South African Indians, in general. In 1951, only 6,33 percent of South African Indians reported English as their home language. By 1970 this percentage had grown to 31,79 percent and by 1980 it stood at a staggering 73,31 percent, with an additional 11,3 percent reporting a combination of English and one of the Indian languages (Brijlal 1989:35). This is surely a linguistic shift of unparalleled proportions. In Tshwane, the Hindi- and Gujarati-speaking groups have even incorporated English into their temple services; the Tamil groups have so far resisted this. The fact that English has been the main medium of education in the community has probably been a main factor in this change. It is in fact true that even India itself cannot afford to dispense with the English language, although the Indian languages are naturally in a much stronger position there.

An even more interesting aspect is the weak position of Afrikaans among the Indian population: although most Tshwane Indians understand some Afrikaans, virtually none have adopted the major language of this predominantly Afrikaans city as their mother tongue; perhaps this can be seen as a political reaction to Afrikaner hegemony. The degree of fluency in African languages in the community could not be ascertained.

Gandhi and Tshwane

The story in which Mohandas K Gandhi, later known as the Mahatma or "great soul", was thrown off a train by the racist conductor because he dared to sit in the first class carriage is too well known to need repeating. But what is less well known is that he was then on his way from Durban to Tshwane. He was qualified in law, and in 1893 he had been engaged to do legal work in South Africa regarding a court case between two Indian merchants.

Gandhi's first political act in South Africa was to contact the British agent in Tshwane and wring concessions from the railway company to the effect that "properly dressed" Indians would be allowed to travel by first and second class. In his autobiography, Gandhi reports that he lodged with " a poor woman ... the wife of a baker". All that we are told about her is that "The landlady was a good woman. She had cooked a vegetarian meal for

me. It was not long before I had made myself quite at home with the family". We have not been able to find out where in Tshwane the house was in which he stayed for that initial year, nor if the building is still standing.

He encountered as much racism in Tshwane as he did on that famous journey: as an Indian he was refused admittance at hotels and one Tshwane barber refused to cut his hair for fear of losing white customers. But he also came into contact with Christians whom he greatly admired. One such Christian was Mr Baker, a Tshwane lawyer to whom Gandhi was acting as co-counsel. His personal relations with the Christians extended even to the point of attending a convention in Wellington chaired by the famous reverend Andrew Murray.

Something of Gandhi's later beliefs and strategies could already be seen in his legal work in Tshwane: when he discovered that both parties in the court case were impoverishing themselves over it, he persuaded them to accept arbitration.

After the year in Tshwane called for in his contract, Gandhi was set to return home to India, but was persuaded to stay to fight a bill then before the Natal Assembly that would effectively disenfranchise the Indian community. At this stage he and others founded the Natal Indian Congress, a body that would endure for a century, even taking part in the 1993-1994 negotiations at Kempton Park, when it had formally been absorbed into the ANC. The rest of Gandhi's stay in South Africa, however, was in and around Durban and Johannesburg, though he may have visited Tshwane from time to time. He finally left for India in 1914 (Gandhi 1957, Swan 1985).

Early Hinduism in Tshwane

It is not known when the first Hindus reached Tshwane, but the community was well established by the end of the nineteenth century. By and large, they resided in the Marabastad area, where the Mariamman temple still stands as testament to their presence. After 1948, rumors of the forced resettlement of the Indian population became ever more prevalent, and by the early 1970s the entire Indian population of Tshwane had been relocated to Laudium. Later population growth was accommodated in the new township of Lotus Gardens and since the repeal of the Group Areas Act, individual Hindus have started to settle further afield, in formerly white suburbs like Erasmia. In the old Transvaal province at least, however, legalized discrimination against Indians was a little less extreme than that against Blacks, and many Hindus and other Indians continued to operate businesses and otherwise ply their trades in the officially "white" part of town, something completely forbidden to Blacks. In many cases, however, this had to be done with a "dummy" corporation ostensibly owned by whites acting as an official front. A respondent told us that "in some cases they actually benefited from apartheid - they simply had white fronts running their businesses there and because they had been officially thrown out of that area, they were given shops in the township so now they had two shops."

It has become customary to divide modern Hinduism into two groups: the first is Sanathanist Hinduism. This is the traditional, orthodox form of Hinduism that focuses on the communal and home-based worship of the traditional Hindu deities. As we shall see below, this form of Hinduism is also clearly stratified according to the original linguistic and regional backgrounds of the Hindu community.

The other major grouping within modern Hinduism is usually called "neo-Hinduism". This consists of reform movements which mostly arose in nineteenth century India. These movements tend to reject the caste system at least in its present form, attract followers across regional and linguistic lines, and generally are more open to the proselytization of non-Hindus. These factors mutually reinforce one another: the de-emphasizing of the caste system makes it easier to accept outsiders, be they other Indians or non-Indians,

and the presence of these former outsiders from a variety of social backgrounds tends to lead to a further lack of interest in maintaining a system of rigid social stratification. In Tshwane, as in the rest of South Africa, though, they form only a minority of the total Hindu populations. The division and associated terminology strictly speaking applies only to groups, not to individuals. In particular, one should not refer to a specific person as a "neo-Hindu". He or she is simply a Hindu who belongs to a neo-Hindu movement.

Sanathanist Hinduism in Tshwane

The range of philosophical diversity in Hinduism is astounding: monotheism, polytheism, monism, even forms of agnosticism all have a place in the Hindu scheme of things. Nor is there a call for all people to worship one manifestation, even within a single family. One of our respondents:

My personal god is Ganesh, my first prayer is to him. But my daughter loves Krishna, whenever we have a video on Lord Krishna she'll be in raptures. While my other daughter loves Ganesh like I do; she's the elder daughter and a bit more conservative. All beliefs, all religions end up at the same point, it is only the approaches that are different. So there can be unity in that diversity.

There are four main Sanathanist Associations in Tshwane - two for the Tamil-speakers and one each for those of Hindi and Gujarati extraction. As far as we could ascertain, the Tamil-speakers have been around Tshwane the longest, at least as an organized group. There are two main Tamil organizations; The second oldest Tamil organization in Gauteng, the *Pretoria Tamil League*, founded in 1902, and the more recent *Laudium Tamil Association*. Members of both these groups live in Laudium, but the PTL concentrates its activities on the old Mariammen temple in Marabastad, though it also has activities in Laudium, while the LTA is more specifically concerned with worship within Laudium itself. One informant also intimated that the split in the Tamil population dates back to the forced removal to Laudium;

Now in the Laudium Tamil Association you had members from the Tamil community who had come from (the area called) Lady Selborne. They were of the opinion that the Pretoria Tamil League, being closer to the city and having a few rich benefactors, was a rich man's organization.

The two organizations persist as separate entities, but do cooperate, for instance, in organizing eisteddfods under the umbrella of the Transvaal Tamil Federation and that of the South African Tamil Federation, to which both Tshwane organizations belong. An even more recent development is that of the *Lotus Garden Tamil Association*, which was founded to serve the needs of the Tamils in the newly-built Indian suburb of Lotus Garden. In what follows we shall concentrate on the PTL, since we were able to gather more data on it than on the others. It claims around 600 members, which we estimate to be just under half of the Tamil population of Tshwane.

The *Pretoria Hindu Seva Samaj* was established in 1932 by ten local businessmen to serve as the main organization for Gujarati-speaking Hindus. It maintains a large temple in Laudium which rose to national prominence in January 1993 when a bomb was detonated there by persons unknown. It claims the allegiance of 500 families or about 2 000 members. Organizationally, it contains a dozen or so affiliated groups that deal with more specialized areas of Hindu life, such as the women's group.

The Hindi-speaking Hindu community is served by the *Pretoria Sanathan Vedh Dharam Sabha*. We could not discover exactly when it was founded, but its temple in

Laudium was built in the early 1980s, thus making it probably the most recent of the language-based Hindu organizations. With about 400 members it is also the smallest. It is slightly more cosmopolitan than the others in that our respondent reported that not all its members were Hindi-speaking; indeed, a few were Tamils. This was also the reason why more and more of its proceedings were being performed in English rather than Hindi. This may indicate that the Pretoria Sanathan Vedh Dharam Sabha is a movement in transition, from a traditional Sanathanist group to something that more closely approximates a neo-Hindu movement. For the moment, however, it remains predominantly in the former camp.

The first thing that struck us about Sanathanist Hinduism in Tshwane is its lack of theological sophistication. Some of the spokespersons we talked to, leading persons in their respective groups, literally did not recognize the names of great Hindu thinkers such as Shankara and Ramanuja. The analogy to this would be a leading Christian not knowing who such seminal thinkers as Augustine, Luther or Calvin were. If this is true of the leaders, how much more true must it be of the followers? Sanathanist Hinduism has become largely a matter of simple home-based piety and temple attendance, of the repetition of little-understood rituals simply because they are traditional, and above all of identification with one's ethnic roots in a particular part of India. Sanathanist Hinduism is inextricably interwoven with what it means to be of Indian descent, and more particularly of Tamil, Gujarati or Hindi ancestry. With the decline of the "vernacular" languages, religion is one of the few links to the old country that are left, and this can be important to people who were not until very recently accepted as full citizens of South Africa. Dance and other art forms are also important in this regard: when we visited a Divali festival in Laudium at the end of 1994, the program was dominated by dance exhibitions, the specifically religious content of which was not always obvious to outsiders. At the same festival, the program was concluded by singing, neither "Die Stem" nor "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", but the national anthem of India. A spokesperson was apologetic about this when contacted: "Yes, I think in time we'll start singing the South African anthem, but we're not quite there yet."

This indicates that after 130 years of being denied a true South African identity by the white establishment, the Hindu population still regards itself as Indian first and South African second. It is only natural that there should then be a desire to identify with one's specific ethnic roots, and with little access to other aspects of one's original culture, religion would seem to be the natural route for this desire to follow. We found far less of this attitude among Indian Christians and Muslims. In their case, the fact of their belonging to a transnational brother- and sisterhood seems to have eased the transition from an Indian to a South African identity.

Perhaps the best description of Sanathanist Hinduism came from one of our respondents. Note the order of importance in which he placed the various aspects of Hinduism:

Hinduism is not a theoretical religion, it is a practical religion. The beautiful thing about Hinduism is that it encompasses everything. It has firstly a mythology which makes religion so much more interesting. I mean, we hear stories about Lord Krishna and the children can identify with that, because they contain a little bit of mischief. Then we have the rituals, which are performed at the temple and maybe at home. Then we have the esoteric side to all these rituals and mythology and lastly we have philosophy, which, if you look at it, is very very practical, provided it is practiced.

Our comments above should not be seen as denigrating the faith and commitment of the people involved. Undoubtedly their faith is genuine, perhaps all the more genuine for not being excessively cerebral. Nor should it be seen as a universal condition; there certainly are some members of Sanathanist Hindu groups whose intellectual

understanding of the tradition exceeds the average. In general, we found the Tamil community somewhat better off in this respect than the others. This may be the result either of their being the largest Hindu community, of the fact that at least one Tamil group has brought over a full-time Brahmin priest from Sri Lanka, or of the common perception that they are somewhat poorer than the other groups, and therefore less immersed in western-style education.

What the situation described above does imply is, firstly, that in South Africa, Sanathanist Hinduism has become equally a religion and a means of expressing one's ethnic identity. Secondly, the low level of doctrinal knowledge leaves the Hindus virtually defenseless against the arguments of seminary-trained Christian, especially Pentecostal, missionaries. All indications are that the Indian Christian population is overwhelmingly ex-Hindu, albeit in the third or even fourth generation in some cases. There is some resentment among Tshwane Hindus of Christian (and Muslim) proselytization efforts, and suspicion of the converts' motives. We quote three of our respondents:

I mean, we have Tamils who are Christians and we have Tamils who are Muslims, but this was done because of the economic situation in Pretoria, I should say in the whole Republic, where conversion was done to alleviate those economic conditions.

You find that Christianity and Islam to a large extent target the poor sections of the community. People are being bribed, if I can use the word, to convert. They are given a material incentive to change their faith.

And in the early years in Natal, we know of cases where people were unemployed and they came in and promised them jobs if they would become Christians.

These charges may well be perception as much as fact, since they come from a tradition that has developed neither its social welfare structures nor its missionary strategy to the same extent as Christianity or Islam. But if so, it is a very strong and widespread perception, and one that is encountered across the entire spectrum of Hinduism in Tshwane.

There is no formal gender separation practiced in the Tshwane temples, although this has been known to occur in India. Nor is there any objection to outsiders visiting the temple services; "there is no segregation; we all sit on the floor - if you come to the temple you will see exactly what happens". We did observe a certain amount of informal segregation at one ceremony we attended, but no more than one would see at almost any South African religious gathering. In one of our informants' opinion, there was a clear link between the oppression of women and the caste system:

We have no problem with anyone praying at our temple, except in the case of women at a certain time of the month, when they should not normally be there. But this sort of thing was probably brought forth by some Brahmin or other. Obviously, in South Africa we don't have that Brahmin-and-lower-castes thing. In our temple you will find that our elder ladies will still move to one side of the temple but the younger generation will be with their husbands or with their brothers and cousins.

Indeed, it is clear that caste has largely been abandoned by the South African Hindu. This is to be expected: the immigrants were mostly lower-caste and would have had little

interest in perpetuating the system. One respondent informed us how the marriage between his Tamil mother and his Telugu father could never have happened in India:

... but being here in South Africa, we thought there was no reason to not have this marriage. What we have here in South Africa is a wealthy middle class and a lower middle class, that is the only differentiation. I suppose it could be a problem in India. I have heard from people who have been there that the very strict Brahmins would not allow South Africans to enter their homes.

This statement was flatly denied by an expert on Hinduism that we consulted after the interviews. Yet it remains as a perception, if not as fact.

Despite this, the speaker took some pride in the fact that the priest his congregation had been able to bring in from the east was a real Brahmin, a member of the priestly caste. This shows how the system may be on the decline, but how traces of it persist.

Sanathanist Hinduism is by its very nature not a proselytizing faith and we found no evidence of a concerted effort to attract new members. While it is not impossible for an outsider to join one of the Sanathanist movements and join in the temple's activities, this is an unusual occurrence. Our respondents could think of only one case of a non-Hindu, an ethnic white in fact, joining all the activities of a particular temple. Eventually he left to settle in India. Generally, one is born into such a movement and one does not normally leave. Ceremonies for joining or leaving are brief if they exist at all, and are generally restricted to naming ceremonies for newborn children. This is virtually all that is left of the rich tapestry of ceremonies that signified the passage from one phase of life to another in traditional Hinduism in India. Secularization has taken a heavy toll on traditional Sanathanist Hinduism in Tshwane; the vast array of public rituals and ceremonies which Greyling could describe as recently as 1963 has become much attenuated. In this, Hinduism in Tshwane may be a sign of things to come; Hinduism in kwaZulu-Natal, for instance, is more traditional in the way it celebrates ceremonies such as the *Kavadi Festival*.

Leaving the movement, though rare, is even easier: "the day you want to leave, you just leave; there are no rules and regulations." Nor can one really be expelled: "the priest or the elders may bar people from attending the administrative meetings, yes, but not from the temple, for we believe that the temple is there for anybody who is willing to pray." On the other hand, while religious tolerance is extended to all in true Hindu fashion, this does not mean that the faithful are not entitled to their private opinions about apostates: "Individuals are entitled to join whatever organization he or she desires, but are looked down upon from a religious viewpoint if they convert (to another religion)". In accordance with the group-identity base of Sanathanist Hinduism, it is not so much having theologically unorthodox opinions that severs the individual from the religious community, but rather abandoning one's primary self-definition as, for instance "a Tamil-speaking Hindu whose ancestors came from Tamil Nadu". The Sanathanist organization typically does not object to its members also attending meetings of neo-Hindu groups or even of those of other religions. What its structure cannot accommodate, however, is the total renunciation of all former religious and cultural affiliations that is required of the new convert to Christianity or Islam.

Generally, festivities are scheduled for Sundays whenever possible. This is not because this day has any special significance in Hinduism. It is simply a matter of people being available for the festival on that day. Some ceremonies are also conducted during the week. Generally men dress in western clothes, while women are more likely to wear traditional Indian dress. Although these groups do have informal social welfare programs, "we do not publicise this ... there are a lot of charlatans out there". The effect of this is that welfare actions tend to take place mostly within the group.

Full-time Hindu religious officials are rare in Tshwane. The current priest of the Pretoria Tamil league is an educated Brahmin from Sri Lanka, but his predecessor was a self-taught South African who "was not a priest in the true sense of the word, because he did not study in India." Certain adaptations needed to be made, however, for in South Africa there was a need for the priest to conduct funerals, a duty which he would not normally perform in India or Sri Lanka. The other organizations are led by devoted laypersons rather than priests raised and trained in the orthodox way. Organizationally, the Sanathanist movements are managed by the usual system of committees and subcommittees. They all belong to language-specific provincial and national organizations, and all liaise with the *Pretoria Hindu Organization* (see below).

Although Indian languages have been an official part of the school curriculum of Indian children since 1984, both the Tamil and the Gujarati communities regard this as insufficient. Both communities have started language courses after official school hours for their members' children. The Hindi community of Tshwane is too small to think of doing the same thing at the moment, and most of its children "are attending the Gujarati classes; it is similar to our Hindi". The religious import of these schools is that much of the learning seems to be done through the teaching of prayers and religious songs. Instructions also include "the history of the religion and the events that led up to it" and even remedial mathematics. There is also instruction in dance and other cultural aspects of Hindu life. Thus we can see again how closely interwoven the various forms of Sanathanist Hinduism are with the regional and cultural origins of their followers. It also gives one hope that the next generation of Hindus will be better versed in their language, culture and religion than is the present. "With modern technology, you find that Tamil is becoming easier to learn. My children speak it better than I do."

Neo-Hinduism in Tshwane

There are two main neo-Hindu groups present in Tshwane: the *Ramakrishna Centre* and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) informally known as the Hare Krishna movement. There are profound differences between the two, yet both can be seen as new developments in Hinduism, not as reactions against Sanathanism, for they accept the scriptural basis of orthodox Hinduism, but as a recasting of the ancient faith into shapes that are seen as more appropriate for the modern age. In general, these movements, as against the Sanathanist groups, were typified by more erudite spokespersons, people who could confidently hold their own in interreligious debate. There are other neo-Hindu movements in South Africa, such as the *Divine Life Society* and the *Swami Narayan movement*, but their foothold in Tshwane is limited.

The Ramakrishna Centre of South Africa was established in 1942 by His Holiness Swami Nischalananda. It is based on the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, a Bengali mystic who lived from 1836 to 1886 CE. Its teaching are strongly universalistic - they stress the essential unity of all religious traditions. It represents a "liberalization" of Hinduism, in the sense of a definite effort to free it from its symbiotic relationship with Indian social structures and make it a more universal, more accessible tradition, but without cutting it off from its roots in Indian metaphysics. It is doctrinally orthodox Hinduism, but its emphasis on outreach toward non-Hindus, its high degree of organization and the way it publicizes itself, especially through public lectures and through the written word, represent something new.

The Ramakrishna Centre was established in Tshwane within a few years after the founding of the South African branch, but enthusiasm waned and the Tshwane group disappeared from the scene. It was revived in 1985 and it currently claims around 150 active members. There is, however, a much larger group of people who support the Centre even if they are not officially members. Many of these also belong to one of the

Sanathanist movements. There is even some (unofficial and very low-key) support from members of the Muslim community and from white supporters who may remain nominally Christian.

The Hare Krishna movement, on the other hand, is not so much a "liberalization" of Hinduism as it is a "fundamentalism" or perhaps rather a "neo-traditionalism". Although formally founded in New York 1966 by AC Bhaktivedanta Sri Prabhupada (1896-1977), it harks back to the 16th century mystic Chaitanya and beyond that to the golden age when the divine Avatar Krishna walked the earth. Classical Hinduism proposed that one should live one's life in very precisely defined stages; the scholar, the householder, the recluse and the renunciant. Although one was normally supposed to follow all these stages in chronological order, it was also permitted to bypass the second and third stages and move straight from the scholar to the renunciant stage. In modern Hinduism, however, especially outside India, the last two stages have to a large extent fallen away. The Hare Krishna movement must be seen in this light - it is an effort to revitalize Hinduism by reintroducing the renunciant element. Devotees practice an extremely strict, by western standards, ethical code of conduct. Vegetarianism is compulsory and sexual activity for any purpose other than procreation is forbidden. Only the most enthusiastic devotees actually shave their heads and don the yellow robes that makes this group a familiar sight in the west, but even those who do not go all the way live a life of self-restraint and devotion to Krishna. Philosophically, the movement belongs to the *Achintya bheda-bheda* tradition, literally "incomprehensible dualistic monism", which combines elements of dualism and monism in a single religio-philosophical system. The movement's most characteristic form of worship is the constant recitation of the mantra extolling the virtues of Krishna and Rama:

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna
Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
Hare Rama, Hare Rama
Rama Rama, Hare Hare

The Hare Krishna movement was formally introduced into South Africa by Sri Prabhupada himself in 1975, although a movement had existed here for five years prior to that (Sooklal 1987, 1990). Since then, the movement has expanded to the extent that they have been able to build a magnificent temple in Durban. Soon after the movement had been founded in South Africa, Sri Prabhupada visited Tshwane and a local group of followers was established here, which was initially to be administered from the Johannesburg branch. It was, however, not until 1994 that the movement bought a house in Laudium for the purpose of establishing a preaching center. We were invited to the opening of this center, but unfortunately circumstances prevented us from doing so. Although the movement is quite small in Tshwane, counting perhaps forty members or so, the enthusiasm of the devotees is beyond doubt and the fact that it fills a definite niche in Hindu life that is consonant with ancient Indian tradition ensures that it will have a future in the community. Since we interviewed them, the movement has also bought a house in the central Tshwane area of Sunnyside.

We see, then, that the neo-Hindu movement itself divides into two groups, the "liberal" and the "neoconservative". Yet both are attempts to revitalize Hinduism. In the effort to do this, they have come to share certain other characteristics.

One such characteristic is the neo-Hindu approach to regional and class exclusivity. We have seen that the caste system was already fading into oblivion in South Africa, but the neo-Hindu movements emphatically insist on the applicability of Hindu teachings to all people, including non-Indians, and actively try to spread the Hindu message. The means they employ to do this may differ from the ecstatic displays of chanting and dancing by Hare Krishna devotees to the more intellectual approach of the Ramakrishna Centre, but

the attempt itself distinguishes them from Sanathanist Hinduism. The implication has also been that these movements have actually drawn a small but significant number of non-Indian, mostly white, supporters. The Hare Krishna movement in South Africa differs from that in countries such as Britain or America in that most of its adherents are drawn, not from a nonreligious or nominally Christian background, but from the Hindu community itself. Nevertheless, as Hindu movements in South Africa go, it has probably the largest proportion of non-Indian members. The motivations behind this differ: to the liberal groups, the rigid interpretation of the caste system is not something that can be justified from the Vedas. To the neoconservatives, caste distinctions fall away in the renunciant stage of life in any case, as it always had done in India.

Another factor that unites these groups is the fact that all of them have decided on English as the main medium of communication, at least in Tshwane. The Hare Krishna informant told us that they did also use Zulu in Kwazulu-Natal. They also have a greater reverence for classical Sanskrit and study it to a somewhat greater extent. This use of English as the main language of instruction and can also be traced to the neo-Hindu belief that they have a message for all humanity, not one for a specific ethnic group. The Indian languages are not completely ignored:

We sing hymns and songs, and you will find that the Tamil children are singing the Gujarati songs and we make a point of getting our Gujarati children to learn some Tamil. This serves to de-emphasize the linguistic differences, to go beyond that.

Nevertheless, the linguistic emphasis in neo-Hinduism is to use the most commonly spoken language in a given society as the medium of communicating the Hindu message. In Tshwane, this turned out to be English. The prestige of speaking the world's major international language has been a factor in this development.

The instructions are all in English, even in the temples, you will find, except for the prayers. And I am very happy about that, because you can go throughout the world today and get along with the English language. If you go out of South Africa, what are you going to do with Afrikaans, or Zulu for that matter? I do not regard English as the Englishman's language; it's grown beyond that. You can read the Bible in any language and you can read the Gita in any language, but what really matters is that you can bring it to the people in modern terms. You do not need to know Sanskrit to be a good Hindu. There are still prayers in Sanskrit or in Tamil. And they will probably stick to that.

The third major difference between the neo-Hindu movements and the Sanathanist traditionalists is that the former have developed a far greater amount of social welfare work that goes beyond the actual membership of the group. Both the Ramakrishna Mission and the Hare Krishna movement are involved in work among the underprivileged.

We are involved in a feeding scheme in Atteridgeville. This is the ninth year running. Every Saturday we provide meals which are cooked by volunteers from the community. We do this not to enforce our religious beliefs on anybody, all we say is "Let us pray to God, however you understand him, for whatever happens, is by his blessing and his will. The youth group have an annual sponsored 48 hour fast, and the money raised is used to make Christmas hampers for this community of people. And during winter we have a drive to collect blankets and old clothing and so on.

From a western perspective, one would expect that the neo-Hindu emphasis on spreading their message would imply a denigration of other religions or even other segments of Hinduism itself. In fact, this is not the case. These movements maintain the traditional Hindu view that all religions contain an element of truth. They stated it as follows:

I think people tend to look the differences all the time, rather than looking at similarities. We believe in discussing these things, that this will show that the moral and ethical standpoint is in fact one.

Swami Prabhupada said that we don't want to convert anyone: we simply want to make Christians better Christians and so on. There are many paths to God. The Muslims worship Allah and we worship Krishna. Krishna is the same person as Allah - the same god under a different name.

You see, we believe that there is only one Brahman, or God. Brahman is the only reality, or the underlying reality of life. So the God we believe in as Muslims or Hindus or Christians or atheists are all the same underlying reality. So what would it matter if all the Hindus became Christians or Muslims or whatever? If my entire family became Christians, does it matter? Must I go to war to change it? That's what is happening isn't it?

In one effort to find the truth in all religions, the youth group of the Ramakrishna Centre assigned its members to the major religions on a more or less random basis, and instructed them read up on these traditions and to talk to its representatives. They then returned to the center and conducted a "mini-parliament of religions". The leader of the center in Tshwane has also spoken widely on the Hindu point of view at a variety of venues, including Unisa.

But while they recognize that there is goodness and truth in other religions, they nevertheless also believe that they have a contribution of their own to make, and in their own way they are active in mission work. The Hare Krishna movement is probably the most visible in this, simply because of their distinctive dress, hairstyle, and their public chanting and dancing activities, but we suspect that the quieter, more intellectual method of the Ramakrishna Centre could in fact be more effective in this city, more in tune with the highly cerebral ethos of Tshwane. But in all cases, the neo-Hindu movements of Tshwane take an attitude of simply making its teachings and facilities available. The approach is one of passive accessibility:

The aim of the movement is not in fact like that of some other religions, to convert people. We sort of work, and if the people like this, they come and join. So there is no active programme to get people involved in membership.

Since the neo-Hindu movements attempt to transcend linguistic divisions in the Hindu community, it stands to reason that they have not established schools or courses specifically to teach Indian languages, although they do propagate that their members should learn each other's languages where possible. The situation regarding general-education schools is more varied. The Ramakrishna Centre has no specifically Centre-run school in Tshwane or, as far as we could determine, elsewhere in the country: "We don't have special schools for the Ramakrishna Centre, we believe people should mix". The Hare Krishna movement has attempted to establish schools in other counties, which in some cases, like that of the USA, have fallen foul of local regulations. They do not have a formal school in Tshwane, and previous efforts to establish schools elsewhere in South Africa seems to have petered out. For the education of their children, informal provisions

are made; "The parents will teach them when they come home from school." When this is deemed insufficient, more drastic steps are taken:

A lot of our children go overseas for schooling. There, you might have the same subjects, like geography or English, but we also teach them about Krishna consciousness. We feel that in the government schools the children go to, say, the science class, where they are taught that everything comes from the big bang, that there is no God. Then they go to biology, and they are taught that man comes from the apes. Finally they go to the religious class and they are taught that man is the creation of God. So you see, the child is getting a lot of different types of ideas. We try to protect our children. We teach them about Krishna from a very early age. And then besides these academic subjects we teach them Sanskrit and we might teach them either Hindi or Bengali. These schools are mostly for boys, but we now have a girl's school overseas too. There is no co-ed system of education.

The spokespersons for the neo-Hindu movements showed a keen awareness of the moral dilemmas that surround the issues of war and conscription. In the main, they opposed war. The Ramakrishna Centre's informant accepted that an army was necessary for defense of one's principles, if only as a very last resort, and that some level of preparedness might have to be maintained. But, he asked, what guarantees were there that this army would not be used in an aggressive way? That would be something they would oppose entirely. The Hare Krishna movement, which has a number of white devotees, was more evasive on this point, but it appeared that some devotees had obeyed their conscription orders under protest, while others had undertaken passive resistance against the militarism of apartheid South Africa. Generally, the relationship between the Hare Krishna movement and the South African Defense Force seemed to be a very strained one. The immediate cause of war, they pointed out, was the sinful lifestyle of a country's inhabitants. The killing of cows was one sin which they regarded as particularly abhorrent.

Trends in Tshwane Hinduism

There are other Hindu organizations in Tshwane which we were unable to interview and which we should therefore rather not comment on at any length. Among these are the *Sai Baba movement*, the *Sahaj Marg*, the *Baal-Guru movement* and the *Radhasoami Organization*. From what we have been able to gather, however, these movements are generally small, they fit into one or other of the two main categories of Sanathanist or neo-Hinduism, and they do not alter the general picture given above. There is, however, one umbrella body for all Hindus in Tshwane that needs to be mentioned. This is the *Pretoria Hindu Organization*.

The Pretoria Hindu Organization was founded in 1980 with the specific purpose of unifying Hinduism in Tshwane in the face of continual losses to other faiths: "The Christians were making inroads into Laudium converting people to Christianity, Islam was making an impact and Hinduism was very dormant at the time". Another major factor was the need for a welfare organization:

We felt a need to form an umbrella body to address common issues facing us, and one issue that was of serious concern was the downswing in the economy and the resulting poverty. Lots of people were knocking on doors and we felt that an organization was needed to address the welfare needs of the community more effectively. It started off very well because we had soup

kitchens running, we had a volunteer staff of over 50 doing home visits, assisting people who were in financial problems. We had a system in which we gave people a voucher for a hundred Rand and they would then go to a shop and buy groceries.

Since then, the Pretoria Hindu Organization has remained a strong force on the welfare scene. One important activity is the distribution of food hampers during Divali, or the "Festival of Lights", the most important festival on the Hindu calendar. It has also extended its activities to the neighboring Black suburb of Atteridgeville.

We give blankets to Atteridgeville on a weekly basis, and there is a feeding scheme that goes on in Atteridgeville, but there is no attempt to convert these people to the faith, in fact we don't ask people to which faith they belong.

The other major function of the Pretoria Hindu Organization has been to unify Hinduism by organizing joint activities. The most important of these is the joint Divali celebration, which we were privileged to attend in October 1994. The main reason why the Pretoria Hindu Organization's celebration serves as a unifying factor to an extent that the separate organizations' own festivals do not is that northern and southern India use completely different calendars to calculate the correct date for the Festival. These group-specific festivals continue, but now the Pretoria Hindu organization's joint festival, held on a date that is an acceptable compromise, is also well attended and serves as a visible unifying factor in the life of the Hindu community.

The Pretoria Hindu organization has no doctrine of its own: it is an organization comprised of other organizations and all Hindu organizations of any size belong to it or are at least liaising with it. The four large founder members each have 5 delegates on its executive while smaller member organizations can each send three. Individual membership is also possible. Its success has been instrumental in similar projects elsewhere:

I would say that it is the first of its kind anywhere, because even in India, which I recently visited for the first time, I haven't come across these organizations that are, you know, inter-language. It has been very successful in the sense that it was the first time in the history of Tshwane, even in the history of South Africa, that the different linguistic groups formed such a common organization. And I must tell you that it has had a ripple effect; that communities in Lenasia, and I believe in some places in Natal as well, have also started to form these organizations, because it was seen as something that was sorely needed.

The Pretoria Hindu Organization also belongs to the South African Hindu Maha Sabha, the umbrella body for all Hindus in South Africa. Many of its member societies also indicated that they belonged to the Maha Sabha as individual organizations.

The Hindu view of Tshwane and in particular about Laudium mirrored our experience with the Indian Muslims: although Laudium started out as an enclave where Indians were kept apart from white Tshwane by apartheid laws, it has nevertheless developed a character of its own. A sense of community has taken root there that will ensure that it retains its distinctive nature as a kind of Indian "chinatown" of Tshwane. The pressure of the expanding population on the limited amount of available land is great, but those Hindus who have left have mostly gone to adjoining suburbs. Although at the time of writing the possibility was being raised that property in Marabastad that had been expropriated under apartheid might be restituted, none of our interviewees expected a mass exodus from Laudium. Ironically, many of those we spoke to, despite having

suffered under apartheid, felt that there was a natural tendency for people of a given culture to stick together. The irony of the situation was not lost on them:

I think people are comfortable with their own kind to a large extent. You know, that is the irony of it, for so many years the apartheid government tried to convince the (white) people that "the Indians or the Blacks will come and get you", but now after three or four years, you can count on your fingertips the number of people who have actually left Laudium. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, and the very wealthy will probably move into very wealthy white areas, but the large majority will remain here. If they went over there they would have no temple and no cultural activities.

The Indian population have generally accepted Pretoria. I think they find it about the best place to live in the whole republic, because conservatism is so much more prevalent here. Each cultural group belongs to its suburb. I think we are very happy with this sort of setup. It's a very conservative town, Pretoria.

None of our respondents reported any significant amount of religious persecution: "I don't think we had a problem as such, I mean, as a youngster we would fight with the *kleilat*, but that was just normal boys being rowdy". Even the most unusual group from a western perspective, the Hare Krishna Movement, told of how they would go to the cosmopolitan white suburb of Sunnyside to preach. They did, however, encounter some problems on the University of Pretoria campus. These have not extended to the point of physical violence, though; "It's not that bad - but sometimes someone will drive past and shout 'Hey, Hare Krishna!', but, even then, it's not all bad, for they are saying the name of God ..."

We surveyed the Hindu population in the beginning and middle of 1994, just around the time of the elections and the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president. There was a feeling of optimism in the air, both with regards to Tshwane and to the country as a whole:

Well yes, I don't think it is an Afrikaner city any more. It used to be. And I think that with what is happening in parliament and so on there is a renewed enthusiasm. I suddenly find that I am part of the country. I always felt that I was a foreigner in my own land and I am the third generation to live here. I never felt part of the country before, I never voted before, this is the first time I could actually vote. And I think everybody is very excited about Pretoria now, far more than they could ever have been before. You suddenly feel that there is a new, what is the word, a new way of being part of Pretoria and of South Africa as a whole. But if you had asked me this a year ago, I would have given a very different answer.

Wider Hindu influences

By and large, Hinduism in Tshwane has remained the religion of an ethnic minority, the Indian South Africans. The Ramakrishna Centre and Hare Krishna movement have a few white supporters and members, and the other groups also have tales of the occasional devotee from white Tshwane, but the Hindu influence on other groups has been negligible. This has been especially true in the case of black Tshwane. If there are black Hindus in Tshwane, we were completely unable to find them, but black members of the Hare Krishna movement have been observed in Johannesburg and other centers.

But Hinduism has exercised another kind of influence on non-Hindus in Tshwane. Many new religious movements show clear traces of Hindu, and particularly Vedantic thinking. Almost all of these movements originate from outside Tshwane, and even outside South Africa, and the Hindu influence on them was made before these movements entered the city. But there can be little doubt that movements such as Theosophy, Eckankar, and the School of Economic Science have all absorbed and accommodated some amount of ethical and philosophical influence from the Hindu faith, notably the themes of reincarnation, theistic monism and salvation through self-perfection. This is, of course, by no means the only influence that went into the making of these traditions. Nor does it make their adherents proper Hindus. But there are clear signs that this attenuated form of Hinduism is still the most common form of religious counterculture in white, Christian Tshwane. From this one may deduce that there does exist a religious need for, perhaps not Hinduism itself, but for the kind of monistic philosophy that is best embodied by that tradition.

Significantly, none of these movements have made much headway in Laudium, signifying that the existence of authentic Hinduism lessens the need for any quasi-Hindu religious movement.

Conclusion

Although the academic distinction between Sanathanist and neo-Hinduism is a useful one, it should not be overrated. There is a definite overlap of membership between the two groups, and neither would regard the other as unorthodox or heretical. This makes it difficult for us to agree unequivocally with the statement that "... the challenges of the future will have to be borne by the neo-Hindu groups who have the kind of religious approach that may have greater success with the better educated and those who wish to reconstitute the religion of their parents", at least not in the case of Tshwane.

Although the traditional Sanathanists have in the past suffered heavy losses to other religions, they can be seen to bolster their religious communities in precisely those areas where their strengths lie, namely the creation of a feeling of shared religious, linguistic and cultural heritage. The language courses they present are significant attempts to do just this, and seem to be meeting with some success. Simultaneously, feelings of a heritage and destiny common to all Hindus are fostered both by the neo-Hindu movements and the Pretoria Hindu Organization. We would not necessarily care to extrapolate such optimism to the South African Hindu population outside the city, though: one expert we consulted was adamant that there were great demographic and even personality differences between Hindus in Gauteng and those in kwaZulu-Natal.

What we are prepared to say, though, is that Hinduism in Tshwane does not seem to have a great future outside its present ethnic base. Nor does it seem likely that it will win back many of those it has lost to Christianity and Islam, or just to the general secularization process. But it will endure. As one of our respondents put it:

We have been around for five thousand years. And I think we'll be around for another five thousand years. I am sure of it. I am definitely sure of it. And I don't think we should be afraid that we or any other community would have this mass exodus from one religion to another. For we are all unique in our own way.

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Ixopo: The story of a South African Buddhist center

This essay is based on an article first published in Journal for the Study of Religion in 2004.

The Buddhist Retreat Centre (BRC), about 12 kilometers from the town of Ixopo in Kwazulu-Natal Province, South Africa, opened its doors for business in 1980. For twenty-five years it has been at the center of the small but growing South African Buddhist community - to such an extent, indeed, that the name of the town has become transposed onto the center, and within this community a question such as "Have you been to Ixopo recently?" refers not to the town itself, but to the BRC. This gives us an initial indication of how influential the center has become.

To mark the BRC's impending 25th anniversary, I researched its history, its functioning within its community and how it is likely to forge ahead. This entailed interviews with the founder and with staff members and teachers past and present, as well as a perusal of brochures and other publications the center has produced over the years.

Founding and prehistory

The history of the BRC, especially in its early years, is inextricably intertwined with the personal history of its founder, Louis van Loon, and to understand why the BRC came into being we need to go back far beyond its official opening in 1980.

Van Loon was born to a thoroughly secular family in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1935. In 1956 he came to South Africa as a newly-qualified engineer. However, like many of his generation, his education had been interrupted by World War II and postwar austerities, and professional qualifications apart he was very much self-educated.

At the time, the Dutch government was subsidizing the emigration of young, qualified people to various other parts of the world, South Africa included. When a job opportunity in South Africa came up, Van Loon did not hesitate. He arrived in the country with very little English, fifty pounds of subsidy money in hand and two suitcases, one filled with clothes, the other with art materials.

After six months he had taken charge one of his employer's sidelines, a soil analysis division, and it was during an investigation for this division that he first came to Durban. He persuaded his company to move the soil division to Durban, arguing that the far more diverse conditions in the area made it a more suitable location than the relatively uniform

soil conditions of the Transvaal. Two years later, he started his own professional practice as architect and consulting engineer.

Soon afterwards, Van Loon was sufficiently well established on a professional level to devote time to his philosophical interests. He became involved with Theosophy, "in those days, probably one of the most powerful alternative ways of seeing the world," and then more particularly with the Theosophist offshoot, the Alice Bailey movement. It was in these circles that Van Loon got his first taste of Asian thought: "*chakras*, and *kundalini* and world cycles ... all that stuff." By then, he had also become a vegetarian and had taught himself astrology. He was, in fact, fast gaining a reputation for casting accurate horoscopes. Under the direction of Dr Douglas Baker, an Alice Bailey enthusiast, Van Loon set up a study group in Durban. It was while setting up the group's management structure that he first met his future first wife, Molly.

A few years after their marriage, the Van Loons travelled to the East. Molly had been born and raised in colonial Burma, and this was supposed to have been a simple nostalgic trip for her benefit. Instead, they encountered classical Buddhist art in a Bombay museum. The Van Loons became fascinated by Asian art. They started what would later become known as the Molly van Loon collection of Buddhist Art, now sadly in the process of being dispersed. During this and many subsequent trips to Asia, the Van Loons met with Tibetan lamas, started to learn meditation practice in Sri Lanka, and met some of the prominent people who were traveling in India at the time. Louis started to act as spokesperson for the incipient Buddhist community at conferences in Durban and this led to him giving lectures on Buddhism at the University of Durban-Westville, marking the beginning of Buddhist Studies in South African academia.

In 1969, during one of their journeys in India, Louis van Loon contracted a disease for which Indian doctors had neither diagnosis nor cure. They left for the highlands of Sri Lanka: even if Molly could not nurse him back to health there, at least it would be a more pleasant place to die.

We made it, barely. It was a little hotel and we were the only guests. I dragged myself out of the foyer and promptly collapsed. I was unconscious for three days and two nights, sweating out liters of fluid. And then I woke up, crystal clear, reborn. I was weak, of course. After another day or two I was sufficiently strong to stand on my feet and I went for a walk. [They walked towards a small dam nearby and] standing there, there were all these hills disappearing into the distance, and tea estates and so on. And it was then that I said to myself, 'I must go back to South Africa as soon as possible. And when we are back we must establish Buddhism there. We must get a property somewhat like this, with hills receding into the distance, and build a meditation center'.

By then, a few meditation centers already existed, mostly in America, but neither of the Van Loons had ever visited one, so they had very little information on what to look for. Eventually they found the farm on which the BRC was to be established and bought it virtually sight unseen.

There was only one corrugated iron shack on the property, in which a Zulu family lived. It would be ten hard years before the farm was ready to accept retreatants. First, the Van Loons started to visit existing meditation centers in the Western world. But all of those consisted of existing buildings that had been converted. Still, it was a useful exercise in this planning stage. Only around 1976 did they actually start building on the farm. During the next four years, Louis and Molly van Loon would come to the farm weekend after weekend, working from dusk till dawn. The concept changed as they went along: What is today the center's meditation hall was initially designed for triple duty as kitchen and dining hall as well, but then the entire structure became the meditation hall, which today is filled

to capacity almost every weekend. Now that they had a meditation hall that could hold thirty people, they needed to build accommodations for that number. Mervyn Croft and his brother were already active at this stage: As he relates, "During those times [when Louis and Molly had other commitments] we would go out, pay the wages, maybe fix a broken motor ... two weeks later we'd go back and pay the next lot of wages."

The pedestal for the great Buddha statue was built in this period, but the statue itself would have to wait a little longer. The *stupa* on the adjoining hill, was equally one of the first structures they planned to build. In 1972, long before there was any official activity on the farm, the appropriate spot was indicated to Louis van Loon by Lama Anagarika Govinda. A foundation stone was immediately laid, and some years later, when the center was holding its first-ever gardening retreat, an impromptu decision was made to build the *stupa*, and it was done within three weeks. Only afterwards did they realize that when they started to dig the foundations, it was in fact ten years to the day since the cornerstone had been laid.

By 1980, the center was thought to be sufficiently developed to hold its first retreats. Building would continue intermittently, however. When one now looks at the tiny rondavel that is the teahouse, it is easy to see why the large studio next to it was the first priority, and it was finished in 1987. Other buildings that have gone up since the official opening have been a residence for the Van Loons, and various types of accommodation for resident staff and visiting teachers. At the moment, however, there seem to be no further plans for expansion, certainly not to increase the 30-odd retreatants the center can accommodate at any time.

Further development

In March 1980, then, the BRC opened its doors for its first retreat. Press coverage of the event was quite positive, though it seems to have been largely restricted to the local Kwazulu-Natal Press.

Initially, the Center's staff consisted of five people: Louis and Molly van Loon, Antony Osler, Clifford Harwood and Sally-Joan Heywood. Since the Van Loons continued to reside in Durban, there were effectively three people at the center on a full-time basis. Today, the center operates with a full-time staff complement of seven people, most of whom stay at the BRC for six months to a year. Positions tend to be spoken for well in advance, with applications coming in even from outside South Africa.

For some time before the official opening, the Van Loons had been searching for a full-time teacher among the monastics they met during their travels, but had not managed to find one with the wide knowledge of different schools of Buddhism that they felt this country required. Louis van Loon and Antony Osler met at a retreat in Cape Town shortly before the official opening and Osler accepted Van Loon's offer to become the BRC's first resident teacher.

The BRC's inaugural newsletter makes for interesting reading; seen in retrospect, it shows both how the BRC has continued to remain true to its original vision and how it had to adapt to local circumstances and the vicissitudes of personnel changes. Some parts of it, such as the general description of Buddhism, closely resemble phrases encountered in BRC newsletters to this day. But the programme for 1980 was very Zen-oriented, with retreats like "Zen and the Judaeo-Christian experience," "Zen in the art of listening", "Executive Zen" and no less than 11 nine-day *sesshins* (intensive Japanese-style retreats). Perhaps this was too ambitious - today the Dharma Centre in Robertson, an explicitly Zen-oriented organization, only holds about 3-4 nine-day *sesshins* a year. As we shall see, it took the BRC a few years of experimenting to come up with the right mix of retreat topics.

Clearly, at the outset, Van Loon saw himself primarily as the center's administrator and organizer, while Osler's role would be that of resident teacher and this can be seen as one reason for the emphasis on Zen in the early years. There is one major exception, however. Throughout the Buddhist world, the main religious festival, Wesak, celebrates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha, all three of which are thought to have taken place on the same day of the year. However, there is no agreement between Buddhist schools about when this was supposed to have taken place; indeed there are even sub-schools that celebrate Wesak on different days. Since its inception, the BRC has celebrated Wesak around the date traditionally held to by the Sri Lankan branch of the Theravada tradition, rather than several months later when the Japanese Zen tradition celebrates it.

The very first retreat offered by the BRC was almost fully booked: a martial arts group in Durban had heard of the place and was eager to explore the relation between their practice and Zen. It turned out to be a test for the newly-established rules of conduct (which apply to this day): "We had decided that people should be silent in the lodge at night, but all that happened was that they tiptoed up and down visiting each other in their rooms, the guys visiting the girls and so on." The very next retreat, however, saw only a single retreatant.

The 1980 newsletter also envisages renting out the BRC as a conference venue to like-minded organizations, and we see this offer repeated in newsletters for a few years afterwards. This has not been realized to any significant degree: it seems that while a number of activities are now presented at the BRC that can be described as tangentially Buddhist (e.g. ecology, T'ai Chi, art), it has been found easier to bring in the other organization's personnel as teachers and present the resulting activity as a BRC retreat.

Gavin Harrison took Osler's place as resident teacher in the second half of 1981. Harrison would later become better known as the author of "In the lap of the Buddha," which recounts his spiritual struggle in the face of his HIV-positive status.

The 1981 newsletter shows that the BRC was starting to adapt to the South African spiritual "market." Retreat topics started to branch out: "Judaean-Christian-Buddhist dialogue"; "The world of bonzai"; and the first "Basic Buddhism."

Joseph Goldstein, one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, one of the oldest Western retreat centers, was the first visiting teacher in January 1981. Daily rates for his retreat surged from the normal R10-R24 to R65, to cover his airfare. In 1982 he was followed by Sharon Salzberg, also from IMS. Both were to return in 1983 and have conducted several retreats since. From this point onwards, we see the BRC's focus slowly shifting from its initial concentration on Zen to the westernized form of Theravada developed at IMS. But this did not mean that other forms of Buddhism were completely abandoned: Since those early days, the center has hosted visiting teachers from various Zen and Tibetan lineages. However, the focus has remained on meditation - ritualistic expressions of Buddhism have by and large not been among the BRC's offerings.

At the end of the 1981 newsletter there is a small notice about a local Buddhist group starting in Pretoria. This marks the beginning of a loose network of meditation groups in the major cities (and a few of the larger towns) that now spans the entire country and has, at times, extended into neighboring countries. The degree to which these groups are affiliated either to the BRC or to the Buddhist Institute of South Africa varies. South African Buddhism greatly tends towards atomism and local independence, and even those groups that self-identify themselves as formal "affiliates" of the BRC are largely managed at local level.

1982 saw the first Theravada visiting teachers, Ven Piyadassi and Ayya Khema. Retreat topics continue to diverge. By now only a single 5-day sesshin was scheduled for the second half of 1982, although two 9-day "Intensive retreats" can probably be seen in

the same light. But other topics such as "Ikebana" and "Buddhism and science" start to make their appearance. 1982 also saw the first bird-watching retreat, which has since become one of the BRC's mainstays.

In 1983, the pattern of the previous year continues. The BRC also branched out beyond the strictly-defined boundaries of Buddhism when it offered retreats on Hinduism ("Yoga and Classical Indian dance") and Chinese religion ("Taoism and T'ai Chi").

Antony Osler left the BRC in late 1983 to take up monastic life at the Mount Baldy Zen Center in the USA. Upon his return to South Africa in 1988, he settled in Colesberg where he combined legal practice with the creation of a small Zen-oriented retreat center on his farm in that area. From time to time, he also still leads retreats at the BRC. For the next ten years, then, the BRC would be without an official full-time teacher and Louis van Loon found himself increasingly drawn into a teaching role. This role continues today, even with other teachers now available.

1984 saw the introduction of art retreats; "Sumi-e - the way of the brush," and "Seeing-drawing", two topics that have proved to be yet two more hardy perennials in the BRC's repertoire. More birdwatching retreats were alternated with retreats of a more traditional Buddhist nature, led by visiting teachers such as Namgyal Rimpoche, Ayya Khema and Bhikkhu Anando. Towards the end of this year, Anando urged Louis van Loon to start building the Buddha statue. In fact, he extended his stay at the center to do so. The statue they built together (with some help from retreatants) is regarded as the largest hand-built Buddha statue in the Western world. There are other, larger statues elsewhere, but as far as can be ascertained these have all been imported from Asia in semi-finished form and merely assembled on site.

This year also saw the first appearance of the Sri Lankan lay teacher Godwin Samararatne. Although he initially came in as a last-minute replacement for another teacher, Samararatne developed an immediate rapport with the South African Buddhist community. The experience also launched him onto the international Buddhist teachers' circuit and from South Africa he went on to teach at centers in Europe and the USA. He was to return to South Africa regularly over the next fifteen years, annually at first and then on a roughly biannual basis until his death in 2000. During this period, which saw an increasing fragmentation of South African Buddhism, "Godwin," as he was universally known, was the one teacher universally welcomed by Theravada, Zen and Tibetan groups. On each visit he would teach at these groups as well as at the BRC. With the Tibetan Buddhist establishment, special permission had to be sought from overseas for him to teach at their centers. A new meditation center currently being constructed in the Magaliesberg area intends to commemorate Godwin by naming its main meditation hall after him. It would hardly be an exaggeration to think of him, with Van Loon and a few others, as one of the founders of South African Buddhism.

The December 1984 newsletter also announces a retreat by Louis van Loon in Somerset West. Although this was not something that would often be repeated in the future, the fact that Louis van Loon was by now in demand as a teacher in other groups and centers suggests a growing self-acceptance on his part of his role as one of the main voices of Buddhism in South Africa. It is a role that persists to this day: he has been the mainstay in the presentations of retreats at the BRC, especially in the difficult period from 1984 to 1994, when the center was essentially without a permanent teacher. He has also been consulted during the constitutional talks leading up to the 1994 elections, where he essentially served as the public face and voice of South African Buddhism.

The February-August 1989 newsletter shows an interesting entry: the BRC secretary asks people to confirm bookings made by telephone, "as many of our retreats are fully booked these days [and] we often have to put people on waiting lists for these retreats". The fact that overbooking and waiting lists were now becoming a problem shows that the Center was by then not merely viable, but a vital factor in the life of the South African

Buddhist community it had helped to create. Naturally, not everything would be smooth sailing from here on. There would be financial problems, personality clashes and various other crises to overcome. But the general pattern had been established and would continue: today not "many" but virtually all BRC retreats are fully booked well in advance.

By 1991, Mervyn Croft, who had already been on the Center's full-time staff since 1986 and had informally been assisting Louis van Loon and other teachers in giving retreats, started to lead retreats under his own name. Other local teachers who have been active at the BRC in a teaching capacity include Rob Nairn and Heila Downey. Today they are leading figures in, respectively, the Tibetan Buddhist and Zen establishments in the country. Foreign teachers, apart from those already mentioned, have included Steve Allen, Ven Olande Ananda Thera, Zen master Seung Sahn, Douglas Harding and many others. The BRC's emphasis on interreligious dialogue and practice has also made it possible for non-Buddhist spiritual leaders to conduct retreats there; among these has been the Catholic mystic Father Sepp Anthofer.

Louis and Molly van Loon were divorced in 1987. Louis van Loon married Chrisi McGrath in 1989 and has continued to live in Durban and to play a pivotal role in the running of the BRC. Chrisi van Loon herself has come to play an active role as well. Although Molly van Loon was still elected to the executive committee of the Buddhist Institute of South Africa (see below) for 1989, she moved to Johannesburg soon afterwards and cut all ties with the BRC and the Institute. She died in 2000, her will stipulating that no piece in her collection of Buddhist art should be allowed to fall into the hands of either Louis van Loon or the Buddhist Institute of South Africa.

In 1995 the BRC gained two western-born ex-monastics as permanent teachers. Now married to each other, they have continued to be known by their former monastic names of Kittisaro and Thanissara. We find the first mention of their impending arrival in the May-December 1994 brochure. At first, their intention was to spend half their teaching time in South Africa and half elsewhere, but in fact their increasing popularity has led to them now spending around nine months of the year here and three months overseas, mostly in the United Kingdom. They continue to teach intermittently at the BRC, but have also founded a small Buddhist establishment of their own, called Dharmagiri, near Underberg. Relations between the two centers are cordial and they seem to have worked out different roles for themselves that prevent competition between them. This arrangement fits into the broader role of the BRC within the South African Buddhist community, which will be discussed below.

By 1999, some long-time resident staff members left the center. Perhaps coincidentally, this period also saw a change in the design of the newsletters. Not only was there now a single large folding page instead of the previous saddle-stitched booklet-style publication, but the 2-3 page essays on Buddhism and the day-to-day running of the Center vanished. When more general news and reflections have been published since then, this has generally been done on separate loose-leaf inserts rather than in the main body of the newsletter.

One may speculate that this change was not merely the result of cost constraints: after nearly twenty years, perhaps both Buddhism and the center generally were sufficiently well-established in South Africa that it was no longer felt to be necessary to use the newsletter as an introduction to Buddhist thought. From this point onwards, the newsletter becomes more "business-like"; its authors assume that its readership is well established and is primarily interested in retreat details.

Practice and relations

The BRC's primary, indeed almost exclusive, activity is the organization and presentation of "retreats." So successful has it been at this task that the South African

Buddhist community now uses the term "retreat" for even the shortest gathering and seems incapable of conceptualizing other possible means of pursuing communal Buddhist practice.

Since about 1985, then, the BRC seemed to have found its niche. Retreat topics from that year onward have remained on its programme and are still regularly presented. This is not to say that it has become moribund: new topics for retreats have explored, for example, the relations between Buddhist thought and Existentialist philosophy, and special men's, women's and children's retreats have become a regular addition to the programme. But the blend of topics presented at the center, the kind of retreats it is willing to present, has not changed drastically over the last twenty years.

Indeed, the relative lack of change in retreat contents at the BRC over the last twenty years is theoretically problematic. The spread of Buddhism in the Western World has received much attention from Buddhological theorists recently. Prominent among these have been the work of Michael Pye and Martin Baumann, and also my own work on the subject, which has largely been based on theirs. A common thread in these theories is the assertion that after an initial period in which Buddhism is presented to the "target society" in a way that borrows heavily from that society's conceptual framework, there will be a later stage in which there is a return to the "pure", "unadulterated" Buddhism as it is practiced in the country of origin. Theories and theorists disagree about the exact nature and timing of this *recouplement* process, but mostly they agree that it is a necessary stage in the development of Buddhism in a new social environment. Without it, it is hard to see how there can be any development of an indigenous Buddhist tradition.

But the BRC seems to be stuck in the initial stage, in which Buddhist ideas are presented to the new, non-Buddhist environment in an attractive form that seeks to draw parallels with the receiving culture rather than emphasize the distinctiveness of Asian Buddhism. In the BRC's case, we can see this in the proportion of retreats that seem specifically Buddhist versus those concerned with non-Buddhist, or even non-religious, aspects of life. A quick glance at the June 2003-January 2004 newsletter gives us the following list of formal conducted retreats:

The BRC goes juvenile: A retreat for children and their parents
Nurturing your creativity
The way of effortless effort: Tai Ch'i
Sketch from scratch: Can't draw a straight line?
Trading until the end of business: Releasing the beloved
Breathing life into Ch'i Kung
A guide to joyful living: A course in basic Buddhism and meditation
"Hell is other people: Exploring relationships
Zen Pen: A writing/meditation retreat
Good heavens! Come fly a kite
Mindfulness: The ultimate cure
S O S: Awakening to self, other and spirit:, a retreat for women
Drumming up stillness: A drumming retreat
Healing into awareness: Buddhism and psychotherapy
Making friends with adversity: Otherwise, we'll always be angry ...
That's it! A Zen retreat
A Tai Ch'i workshop: Meditation in movement
Yogis live longer: A Hatha Yoga workshop
Finding relief in clay
Paint your dreams
Embodied spirituality: Wholeness through yoga and meditation
Basho's pond: A silent retreat for frogs

Ageless living, fearless aging
100 Birds of a feather: Bird watching at the BRC
Grounded like a tree open to the sky: An introduction to Ch'i Kung
The way of the mystic: Meditations from the heart
Awakening the enlightened heart: Transformation through meditation
Silent night, dharma night: Christmas at the BRC
An insight and Zen retreat
Personal meditation and study
A dharma study retreat

From a purist perspective one could ask, what happened to the "Buddhist" in the Buddhist Retreat Centre? Hatha yoga comes from the Hindu tradition, Tai Ch'i from Taoism. Bird-watching, painting, kite-flying; are these intrinsically Buddhist activities? Has the BRC abandoned its Buddhist roots and become a New Age center where everything goes? It must be admitted that there are those in the South African Buddhist community who have voiced such opinions from time to time. They acknowledge that the BRC is responding to the needs of the South African public, and they appreciate the special circumstances under which it operates, but they wonder if the pendulum has not swung too far away from a traditional understanding of Buddhism.

But to adopt that perspective is to ignore the special role that the BRC has created for itself. In Buddhist circles, it is often referred to in an affectionate way as "the kindergarten," a term that Van Loon first coined himself. Back in 1980, when it was nearly the only Buddhist establishment in South Africa, and certainly the only one run on a full-time basis, such a criticism might have been valid. But twenty-five years later, there is a Zen center in Robertson, a Tibetan *gompa* in Johannesburg, not to mention local Buddhist groups from various traditions in every major city and a few of the larger towns. There is now ample opportunity in South Africa for those who wish to undertake strict, traditional practice of one form or another. Even within Kwazulu-Natal, the Dharmagiri center near Underberg serves such a function - it presents no weekend retreats, only those lasting two weeks and longer, and membership is restricted, indeed one gets in there almost by invitation only. Indeed, with Kittisaro and Thanissara now spending a larger amount of time at Dharmagiri, it could once again be said that the BRC is without a full-time permanent teacher. To give another pertinent example, the Nan Hua Temple near Bronkhorstspuit presents Buddhism in a strictly traditional Chinese way, but it could be asked whether such an approach would meet with any success if the ground had not been prepared, and continues to be prepared, by institutions such as the BRC.

Thus we see that in terms of South African Buddhism as a whole, there is indeed a "recoupment" process taking place - but it is mainly happening elsewhere. While that is going on, there remains a need for a facility where the initial stage of introducing Buddhist ideas to society can continue, and this is the role that the BRC has taken on. Buddhological theories of Buddhist expansion turn out to be not exactly invalidated by the case of the BRC, but in need of further refinement: Just because one process started earlier than another does not imply that it is superseded and effectively stopped by the second process: It continues in its own right and continues to influence the later processes. Antony Osler expressed the creative tension between these activities as follows:

I think Louis in particular felt that we needed to cater to people who were just ordinary South Africans who wanted access to this sort of thing, but we also understood that we needed some kind of stronger commitment, a base of people who weren't just drifting in and out, but who had made a lifestyle choice . . . [the arrival of Kittisaro and Thanissara was] an outflow of that part of the

BRC. I think that issue has still never quite been settled, there is a sense that somewhere in South Africa there should be a group of dedicated people in an almost monastic setting, and that this should be the source of your teachers . . . This has never quite been settled, but perhaps that has just been accepted as the way it is.

The BRC serves as a gateway, a place where people who are just vaguely interested in Buddhism can be introduced to it in a gentle way through birdwatching, kite-flying and so on. Some will eventually move on to more specific forms of Buddhist practice, others will continue to regard the BRC as the spiritual home that is right for them. Indeed, many members and leading figures of more traditionalist groups recognize the BRC as the place where their spiritual journey began. For example, soon after Zen teacher Stephen Allen visited the BRC in 1986, a Zen group was founded in Johannesburg. Later, a visit by Zen master Seung Sahn proved immensely influential in determining the future development of Zen in South Africa. In yet another instance, the genesis of the Gelugpa lineage in South Africa can be traced directly to Geshe Damcho's visits to the BRC back in the 1980's. Occasionally, the leading figures of these distant offshoots have returned to lead occasional retreats at the BRC. Sometimes this has worked well, at other times, " . . . people have come back, given retreats, but the community didn't respond well to them."

Nor is the BRC much perturbed by the incorporation of practices from other religious traditions - it can be seen as a continuation of the interreligious dialogue that was part of its mission from the outset. Perhaps these days there is less urgency about dialoguing with Christians and more interest in trying out techniques from Hinduism and Taoism; but that might change again in the future, and in fact some Catholic nuns from a nearby convent are among the regular retreatants. The BRC, under Van Loon's direction, does not wish to turn Buddhism into yet another hard, unmalleable "ism."

Moreover, a superficial reading of the BRC brochure can be misleading. On first glance, for example, it seems that in 1983, the BRC saw itself as an institution of higher learning. Besides the series of retreats on "Buddhism and science," 1983 also saw a "Wesak Buddhist Studies course" in which Louis van Loon was assisted by Patrick Maxwell, of the Religious Studies department at the University of Natal. The later 1980s would also see the presentation of *Abhidhamma* retreats. These more studious-sounding retreat titles are now rare at the BRC. When I put the question to van Loon, his reply was twofold: Firstly,

We did in the beginning use rather classical descriptions for our retreats. We had *vipassana* retreats, for instance, and *abhidhamma* retreats. And quite clearly, you can only do that sort of thing in an environment where people know what you are talking about. In those days, nobody in South Africa knew what '*vipassana*' meant, and so it would fall flat. Nobody would turn up. So I had to throttle back and go back to a much earlier stage of one's development of interest in Buddhism. So let's rather call it 'Basic Buddhism'.

Secondly, it should be noted that even during birdwatching or kite-flying retreats there are regular meditation sessions every day, with instructions if required. Rather than taking a pedantic "let's talk about Buddhism" approach, these retreats gently bring the non-Buddhist world into a Buddhist context. Newcomers are allowed to ease into the Buddhist lifestyle rather than being asked to make a clean break with their familiar worldview.

Environmental and social activities

Ecological concern has long been a prime concern of the BRC staff, and when bird-watching retreats started to take off, this aspect really started to come to the fore. The dam area was the first to be planted with indigenous trees, and weekend retreats were organized to hack away bugweeds and wattle seedlings. Mervyn Croft was particularly involved in these efforts, and the foundation he laid during his years at the center has continued to prosper. The BRC has been awarded National Heritage Site status, especially for its work in the conservation of the highly endangered blue swallow - the center having since 1986 been a regular nesting site for two out of only thirty or so known breeding pairs. Other species have thrived as well: when the number of species of birds on the property was first recorded, only 48 were found. Today, 165 species are routinely sighted. Small mammal species can also be found on the center grounds.

In 1996, a long-negotiated land swop with paper company SAPPI went into effect and the BRC attained a long-cherished goal of consolidating its holdings up to the nearest road. These areas remain covered with wattle plantations. In fact, even though at its peak, the center was one of the elite plantations that could produce twenty tons of wattle bark per hectare and the plantation created a positive cash flow during the early years, the wattle operations has turned out not to be the major source of income that had initially been hoped for. It is kept going mainly because it provides employment to about twenty Zulu people in the area, some full-time, others on a seasonal basis.

Social upliftment has also featured largely among the BRC's activities. At first this was largely restricted to the immediate area and performed largely on the individual initiative of staff members. In the early 80's for example, the center helped the local Zulu community to build a school. More recently, the Woza Moya project has been a joint effort between the BRC and the Dharmagiri center to help disadvantaged communities throughout Kwazulu-Natal Province. A BRC staff member is now working full-time on this project. The next step is to raise funds to build an office for the project on the BRC's doorstep.

The ideal is for the disadvantaged community to take over the project eventually, with the BRC taking more of a supervisory role. As van Loon put it, "We want the project to be *theirs*, not our little white do-gooder sort of thing." To appreciate the significance of this statement, we need to look at the BRC's clientele and its relations to the people who live nearby.

It must be admitted that the BRC, like most South African Buddhist organizations, has yet to draw significant support from outside its traditional white, middle-class following. "When I go out there, all the cars are like mine, only a lot newer; everybody comes from a similar background, and I do think that is a pity; it isn't necessarily wrong, but it is a limitation." It is a problem that is not unique to the BRC nor even to South African Buddhism, and I have written about it elsewhere. However, the rural setting of the BRC throws the dilemma into sharp relief: the divide is not only white vs black, and middle vs working class, but also urban vs rural.

That is definitely not to say that the BRC is in any sense a racist organization. In fact, it threw its doors open to all races from the very beginning, a time in South Africa's history when it could be dangerous to do so - and was visited by government agents for its pains. The problem is rather that few non-white, non-middle class, non-urban people have felt the need to go through those doors. As a black middle class develops, the BRC is only now starting to see the first beginnings of black interest in Buddhism and black attendance at retreats. But it is early days yet. For some time to come the BRC will be living with the typically South African situation where "The blacks are still the servants, while the whites are called staff." Again, it must be stressed that no staff position at the center has ever been restricted to whites; it is rather the case that no black has ever applied. In a sense,

this is understandable: to take a "gap year" at a retreat center is an action that presupposes a comfortable middle-class existence into which one can easily fall back. Even among South African white Buddhists there is less of a tendency to take out major periods for self-development than among their overseas counterparts: "There is no safety net, so one can't easily say, 'I'll just take a year off.'" One can only speculate how much more this would apply to black South Africans. It is just not something that is easily done by people whose memory of poverty and repression is only one or two generations old.

The result of this is that the BRC's social upliftment activity, like so much charitable work in South Africa, always runs the risk of appearing as *noblesse oblige*. However good the relations between individual staff members and the nearby Zulu village are (and there have been many such relations over the years) the center and the village remain separate entities that remain unintegrated. The BRC's *sangha* lives in the suburbs of Durban and other major cities, not on the hill across the valley.

It is not necessarily a problem, but it certainly is something that people need to be aware of; it mirrors South African society very clearly. It seems unsettled to me, but then again the whole country is unsettled that way. The more specialized Buddhist centers avoid the problem by having the retreatants do all the work, but that only "solves" the problem in that particular situation.

Seen in this light, one can understand the sense of urgency one encounters when one discusses social involvement with BRC members and associates. It is only by handing off the social development structures and resources as soon as feasible, by withdrawing into the background as soon as one can and letting the recipients continue it as a project of their own, that the center's efforts at social upliftment will cease to have this problem. In a way, it can be seen as yet another lesson in the Buddhist virtue of non-attachment.

Management, administration, and governance

The BRC is run under the auspices of the Buddhist Institute of South Africa (BISA). The Institute's inaugural meeting took place at the home of Louis and Molly van Loon in Durban on 7 May 1980. 21 people were present and another 13 represented by proxy. Some early meetings of the BISA were conducted at the Durban venue of the Theosophical Society. Since then, they have been held at Louis van Loon's home. The Institute's executive committee also meets every two months to exercise oversight over the running of the center.

Despite what the name might suggest, BISA was never meant to be an umbrella body for all South African Buddhists. Initially, there were plans to establish a Buddhist museum and library, a study program by distance education, a bursary fund and so on. The reality of how time-consuming the running of the BRC turned out to be soon caught up with these plans. Nevertheless, BISA's all-encompassing view of Buddhism, its refusal to adhere to a single tradition, has made it the first organization to be called upon when a conference needs a Buddhist speaker, for example. Louis van Loon himself has been called upon to represent the Buddhist community in talks between the government and the religious communities of the country. It is in this sense, if not in the sense of being directly elected, that BISA can be seen as the most representative Buddhist body in South Africa.

Generally, we are friendly with every single Buddhist group in the country, even when they can't stand each other. We are just so easygoing, and they are all welcome to come and teach. But there's no real chance of uniting all the Buddhists in South Africa.

At the time of writing, Louis van Loon retains ownership of the land on which the BRC is situated. Upon his death, ownership will pass to the Buddhist Trust of South Africa. The trustees of this body do not overlap with either the executive committee of the Buddhist Institute of South Africa, nor with the BRC staff who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the center. At that stage, the Trust's primary responsibility will be to ensure that Van Loon's legacy is maintained and that the BRC is never transformed into an exclusivist organization that promotes one kind of Buddhism over others. In such an event, the Trust could, in fact, order the Institute and the center off its property and start the entire process anew.

It is a complicated structure, and not one that has been precisely duplicated by other centers in the country. But it has allowed the BISA to exist without membership lists, fees or any other bureaucratic machinery. In fact, there is a standing open invitation to all interested parties to attend every BISA annual general meeting and from the outset, this invitation has been printed in the BRC newsletter with the announcement of each BISA AGM. Since the BRC cleans up its mailing lists infrequently, in effect this means that anyone who has ever given the slightest indication of being interested in Buddhism is entitled, indeed invited, to attend the BISA AGM, to table motions and to stand for office.

Under normal circumstances, this might open the possibility of a takeover of BISA by special interest groups or even hostile forces. But the existence of the Trust allows BISA to have this fragile nature. If the Trust did not exist, one would expect the Institute to need far more of the usual trappings of non-profit and religious institutions - a highly detailed constitution, a vision and mission statement, formal membership rolls and so on.

In a way, the administration and governance of the BRC mirrors aspects of Buddhism itself. In one sense, Buddhism is hyper-democratic: All beings can attain enlightenment, none are favored above others, at least not in the long run. But on another level, Buddhism can be seen as severely autocratic: the guru's word is law. It is by finding a constantly shifting level (dare we call it a Middle Way?) between these extremes that Buddhism persists and develops. In an analogous way, the "autocratic" nature of, currently, Van Loon's ownership of the property, and later, that of the Trust, allows the Institute to conduct its business in a "hyper-democratic" way.

Evaluation and prospects

In many ways, the BRC has become not only the source from which most other Buddhist establishments have sprung, but also the yardstick against which they measure themselves. Even when other centers decide to do things differently, it is common to hear the BRC used as a reference point to explain the decision. A Buddhist center may, for example, choose not to emulate the BRC's policy of having meals prepared by a dedicated kitchen staff, but to have retreatants do this themselves. But then the reasoning given for that decision will often contain a line like "We can't afford that right now; we are not well established like Ixopo."

It is common enough for a religious institution to experience a crisis on the death of its charismatic founder. While Louis van Loon remains in good health (and would probably object to the label "charismatic"), the fact remains that one day the BRC will have to continue on its way without his inputs, which remain considerable both managerially and in terms of conducting retreats. When the time comes, will there be enough momentum and a steady stream of volunteers to keep the center going? Will its role change as the South African Buddhist community matures? For how long will the country need a Buddhist "kindergarten"? We can only speculate. One can only hope that towards the year 2029, there will still be a Buddhist Retreat Centre near the town of Ixopo and that someone will feel called upon to investigate its 50-year history.

But if the future looks uncertain, one may nevertheless celebrate the past and present. To conclude, then, I offer these remarks by three interviewees, all of whom have had long and fruitful associations with the BRC:

(Thanissara) It is a doorway for people to come to the practice of meditation, even beyond learning that it is a Buddhist thing, but just to get a sense of one's inner life. And it is presented in a way that doesn't make it intimidating or exclusive. It serves that function phenomenally well. Beyond that, it introduces people to diverse expressions of Buddhism. ... I think by now it is a step up from a kindergarten, but perhaps it is a nursery...

(Antony Osler) There was very little Buddhism in this country before the BRC, so in terms of popularizing I would say that the number of people who have been through the "kindergarten" must be quite high. Certainly, some people wanted to practice more intensely and eventually they all left the center. For those people, the BRC was never the answer. The monastic core we hoped for was never set up, but it may be that the two goals are not really compatible. ... It is there for a taste, I think, and a break for people whose lives are particularly full and who want to refresh their lives. And for that, it is great.

(Mervyn Croft) It was the pioneering center and it still is the biggest, most established and most respected center in South Africa. Also the fact that it brings in teachers from many traditions, and all the spinoffs that have come from that. And I hope that as other centers take root, that we retain that spirit of openness, that we don't get locked up in little enclaves of Zen or Tibetan Buddhism or whatever. The BRC could play a role in that.

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A missed opportunity? The WCRP Declaration of 1992

Based on an article originally published in the journal Missionalia (April 1994).

For millennia, religion has stood as the basis and guarantor of ethics in society. While this function of religion has declined in the last century or so, and while it is true that the logical relation between religion and human rights is a questionable one and that the entire concept of human rights is philosophically questionable, it is still true that the hold that religion has on the minds of millions of people remains a potent weapon for good or evil.

Just consider how many of the wars going on in the world are explicitly or implicitly religious in nature. In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, for instance, there is much use of terms such as "ethnic cleansing". But the Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims are genetically of the same Slavic stock; they even speak the same language, Serbo-Croatian. No, that conflict is essentially a clash of cultures, and more specifically of cultures whose self-identification is based largely, though not exclusively, on religion. In short, it is no exaggeration to describe the conflict there as a war between Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Muslims. Elsewhere, we can see religious conflicts between people who belong to the same large religious complexes, such as that between Protestant and Catholic Christians in Northern Ireland and between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims in Iraq.

In South Africa, while there is little violent conflict explicitly based on religious grounds, the actions of some religious groupings in providing theological justification for racial discrimination during the apartheid years have left a bitter legacy. Without religious reconstruction, argues Villa-Vicencio (1991, 1993), sociopolitical reconstruction of South African society is impossible. On the other side of the coin, we can see that many twentieth-century figures who have become almost synonymous with ethical behavior and moral persuasion were and are deeply religious people, though not necessarily in a conventional way. Here one could mention Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King junior, Alexander Solzhenitshyn and Mother Theresa. South Africa, too, has known a number of religious leaders and followers who have consistently spoken out against apartheid. The names of Bishop Tutu and Reverend Boesak most readily come to mind here.

If, then, religion is potentially a force for either good or evil, it is the duty of all religious individuals and communities to direct this potential into ethically preferable channels. In other words, we must talk to and negotiate with those of other religious persuasions rather than fight them. There are two broad streams of such dialogue; firstly, one can speak to people within one's own religion, but of a different denomination - this is called ecumenism. Secondly, one can talk to people who belong to a completely different faith-tradition - this is called interreligious dialogue. Although this distinction is at least partly an artificial one, based on a classification of "faith-tradition" as the conventional, but highly questionable religious blocs of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on, it nevertheless remains a useful contrast.

One organization that has concerned itself with interreligious dialogue since 1970 is the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP). Although WCRP was formally founded in 1970, it grew out of a meeting in 1962 convened by Dr Dana McLean Greeley during the Cuban missile crisis and from subsequent conferences in 1964 and 1966. Since its founding, WCRP has held international conferences every five years. WCRP chapters now exist in many different countries, including South Africa.

It is a cardinal objective of WCRP-SA to make South Africans aware of the extent to which our country is religiously pluralistic. Every world religion is represented here. Islam has been present almost as long as Christianity, and we have one of the largest concentration of Hindus outside the Indian subcontinent. Although Christianity is the single largest faith present here, it must be acknowledged that South Africa is not dominated by a single Christian denomination. On the contrary, the sheer variety of denominations is staggering and the interaction between them is not always marked by tolerance and dialogue.

Declaration past

During WCRP-SA's 1990 "National Inter-Faith Conference on Religion-State Relations", it was decided that "WCRP-SA should initiate a process of developing a charter of religious rights and responsibilities within the context of a new constitutional framework" (WCRP-SA 1991: 81). Although the initial impulse for the document was based on the thought of Albie Sachs, once the task was attempted the organizers felt it to be imperative that this be a religious initiative rather than a political one, and while political groupings were consulted throughout, their wishes and suggestions were not allowed to override those of religious organizations. For example, the very word "charter" was dropped at a very early stage since some participants felt that it would indicate an excessively close association with the "Charterist" movement in South African politics. Human nature being what it is, the compilers of the document still often refer to it nostalgically as "the charter", but this does not necessarily demonstrate any hidden ideological bias.

The task of organizing this document was assigned jointly to the Pretoria and Johannesburg Branches of WCRP-SA, and when the National Charter Committee had been established, Dr J.N.J. (Klippiess) Kritzinger was chosen as chairperson. Much input was also received from Dr Gerrie Lubbe, national chairperson of WCRP-SA. Dr Lubbe was later to receive the Indicator Human Rights Award for his efforts to bring about interreligious dialogue, both in terms of the Declaration process and elsewhere. I was not present at the 1990 conference, but joined the WCRP-SA effort soon thereafter and have been active in the organization's "National Charter Committee" throughout its existence. My primary source for this article, therefore, is personal memory.

The declaration was created by the following process: first the intention to formulate such a document was announced and a request for inputs was made to as many religious, political and social organizations as could be reached. To achieve this end, inter-faith and multi-faith workshops were organized on a regional basis. Individual religious organizations also held their own meetings to discuss possible inclusions in and objections to such a document. While it is hardly possible to generalize on the way different religious organizations conducted such sessions, some idea of the process may be gained by looking at the way the issue was handled by one group with which I am personally involved, namely the Pretoria Buddhist Group (PBG).

Like a number of other religious organizations, the PBG called a special meeting of active members to discuss whether such a document was necessary and what the members felt should be included in it. Since the PBG is the only Buddhist group in Pretoria, no single-faith Buddhist meeting was held in the region, as was the case with some other religious traditions. The PBG came up with 10 points that it felt warranted attention. In abbreviated form, they were:

- (1) People have the unqualified right to make their own religious choices.
- (2) Religion should cease to see itself as the co-governor of the country.
- (3) ... while religious belief should be free and unregulated, religious acts cannot be considered above the law.
- (4) It is proposed that a joint religious committee be established to discuss these matters with the government on an ongoing basis.
- (5) The breaking up of religious gatherings and desecration of religious objects such as shrines by persons of other religious persuasions should be outlawed.
- (6) The religious institution of matrimony should be separated from the legal institution of marriage, as it is in certain western European countries. ... The PBG deplores the present situation, in which only Christian and Jewish religious officials are recognized as marriage officers.
- (7) The teaching of religion in schools should be depoliticized by removing it from the hands of teachers and returning it to religious professionals.
- (8) We suggest that the current unfair and discriminatory Christian monopoly over religious broadcasting be done away with.
- (9) Adults should be allowed to refuse medical attention on religious grounds, but the state may legitimately insist on such attention being dispensed to children or to people not in full possession of their faculties.
- (10) The PBG commits itself to reconciliation between the people of South Africa and pledges to work towards democracy, tolerance and peace, both within its own ranks and in its dealings with the outside world.

These ten points were received by the WCRP-SA Charter Committee, along with others from a variety of religious institutions and individuals. From these inputs and suggestions, a Draft Declaration was created at a WCRP-SA workshop in Johannesburg in June 1992. This Draft Declaration was then returned to the organizations previously

contacted, including those who had not responded to the earlier call for suggestions, and their comments were invited. Press releases were also made at this time.

Like other religious organizations, the PBG received a copy of the Draft Declaration and convened another special meeting to discuss it. It was noted that none of its suggestions had been incorporated verbatim, but that the general tenor of the Draft Declaration was highly compatible with its suggestions. It was therefore decided to accept the Draft Declaration in principle, but to suggest certain amendments.

Many such suggestions were received from a variety of sources, some of them critical of specific passages, others looking suspiciously like a concerted letter-writing campaign by religiously conservative groupings advising us, in the words of one correspondent to "... forget all about it!". From the more constructive among these comments a second Draft Declaration was compiled at a workshop near Hartebeespoort Dam in October 1992. It ended up about half the size of the original. This second draft was then disseminated again and was further amended by a national conference organized jointly by WCRP-SA and the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA) in November 1992. The conference was attended by representatives from most of the major denominations and religious organizations in the country. They were divided as follows:

60 Christians

20 Muslims

20 Hindus

20 Jews

30 Others (academics, WCRP-SA Charter Committee members, Buddhists and members of the Baha'i faith)

These persons then jointly created the Declaration as we have it today (WCRP-SA 1992a). It was then forwarded to religious organizations and individuals for possible ratification or suggestions for further amendment. The PBG once again distributed the Declaration and decided at one of its regular meetings to endorse the document. The reply slip enclosed with the Declaration was accordingly completed and signed and was forwarded to WCRP-SA headquarters.

Naturally, the capsule description above does little justice to the long hours put in by the members of the Charter Committee. Nor does it describe the fascinating patterns of interaction that occurred in the two workshops and the conference.

Members of religious traditions that had long lived together amicably suddenly found each other on opposing sides over one particular issue, then joining forces with a completely different faith over another. In other cases, representatives of religions that have long histories of mutual enmity found themselves in unexpected agreement over specific issues. At times, the participants at the workshops displayed a sensitivity and goodwill towards the religious sentiments of others that was quite touching; once, for example, a Christian participant vetoed an excessively one-sided theistic definition of religion on the grounds that it would exclude the Buddhists, before the Buddhist participant himself had a chance to object!

Needless to say, at the final conference many of the delegates were present in a more "official" capacity, and tended to fight more specifically for the interests of their particular organization.

Declaration present

Let us now look at the main sections of the Declaration and explain each one's intentions and evolution, giving special attention to two of the more problematic areas, namely the issue of religious freedom in general and that of religious education in schools:

WE WHO SUBSCRIBE TO THIS DECLARATION

- a. understand, for the purpose of this declaration, a religious community to mean a group of people who follow a particular system of belief, morality and worship, either in recognition of a divine being, in the pursuit of spiritual development, or in the expression of a sense of belonging through social custom and ritual;
- b. recognize that the people of our continent, Africa, belong to diverse religious communities;
- c. regret that in South Africa religion has sometimes been used to justify injustice, sow conflict and contribute to the oppression, exploitation and suffering of people;
- d. acknowledge the courageous role played by many members of religious communities in upholding human dignity, justice and peace in the face of repression and division;
- e. are convinced that our religious communities can play a role in redressing past injustices and the construction of a just society;

THEREFORE

- f. affirm the rightful and lawful existence of diverse religious communities and call upon the state to recognize them and guarantee their autonomy;
- g. call upon religious communities to promote spiritual and moral values, reconciliation and reconstruction, in accordance with their own teachings;

AND AFFIRM THAT...

The preamble to the Declaration defines religion and religious communities, acknowledges the situation that has led to the creation of the document and makes certain demands on both the state and on religious communities themselves.

The definition is in the form of a series of conjunctions and disjunctions: this shows the difficulty of defining something that will encompass all the phenomena that common sense tells us are "religious", a difficulty all too familiar to scholars active in Religious Studies. First it is stated that religious communities practice "a particular system of belief, morality and worship" and then that this is done for one of three reasons, namely "either in recognition of a divine being, in the pursuit of spiritual development, or in the expression of a sense of belonging through social custom and ritual". It is clear that the first of these three is intended to cover theistic religion, the second non-theistic religions such as Buddhism and the third is specifically aimed at the inclusion of African Traditional Religion.

This definition, although somewhat cumbersome and inelegant, was approved unanimously by the conference. At the time, delegates were so relieved at having created this definition and at its being acceptable to all participants that there was much joking about obtaining a patent or copyright on it.

The definition is followed by a historical description of the religious plurality of South Africa, the fact that religion has been used both to oppress and to fight oppression, and the hope that religion may yet contribute to the rebuilding of the country.

1. PEOPLE SHALL ENJOY FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

1.1. All persons shall be free to have and give expression to a system of values or religious beliefs and practices of their choice, and no-one shall be coerced into accepting or changing his/her religious affiliation.

1.2. Everyone should respect and practice tolerance towards other people whatever their religious beliefs, provided that the expression of religion shall not violate the legal rights of others.

Naturally, a document such as a Declaration of Religious Rights and Responsibilities, particularly in the current South African situation, can do no other than to start out by stating what its creators regard to be the ideal situation regarding the role of religion and religious freedom in society. Religious freedom is a complicated issue, as can be seen in the variety of comments made by participants at a 1993 conference on this very topic held at Unisa under the auspices of the Institute for Theological Research (Kilian 1993).

According to Sachs (1991: 39), there are basically five "constitutional options for governing the relations between religious organizations and the state." They are:

* Theocracy, that is, the acknowledgement of religious organizations as the holders of public power and of religious laws as the laws of the state.

* A partly, secular, partly religious state, with legal power-sharing between the state and religious institutions - each exercising constitutionally recognized power in its own sphere, usually with religious bodies controlling family law and, possibly, criminal law, and the state controlling all other aspects.

* A secular state with active interaction between the state and religious organizations, which not only have a constitutionally recognized sphere of autonomy, but collaborate with the state in tasks of mutual concern

* A secular state in which religious organizations have a tolerated, private sphere of action, but there is no overlapping or joint activity with the state.

* A secular state in which religious organizations are repressed.

Sachs (1991: 39) goes on to state that "in the light of South Africa's history and culture, something along the lines of the third option mentioned above would achieve the greatest support, namely, a secular state with active interaction between the state and religious organizations." However, the situation remains problematical. Prozesky (1991: 7), for instance, sees a fundamental contradiction between religious belief and the secular democratic state, which he states as follows:

... if God is the only sovereign, or Christ the only Savior, or the Qur'an the last and greatest testament, then how can true believers accept a political system which effectively restricts God, Christ or the Qur'an to only part of society, by confining them to private life, or to voluntary associations, or by removing the influence of religion from the organs of the state, as many democrats are hoping will happen in the new South Africa. Can believers really accept that cornerstone of modern democratic political structures, the distinction between secular and sacred? Can people who believe in their hearts that there is one true faith really accept that all faiths are on a par, and that the state should treat them equally?

While Prozesky's comment is particularly apt in the case of the fourth of Sachs's constitutional options, it cannot be entirely discounted in the case of any but the first. Religions have a tendency to make absolutist claims to truth, and in the absence of

restraining conditions, some traditions in particular seem to feel an overwhelming urge to establish a theocratic state. This is the problem that the first clause of the Declaration attempts to forestall.

The first clause of the Declaration sets the scene for all that is to follow: the rest of the document can be said to emanate from this first statement of intent. It will be noted that besides asserting a conventional freedom of religious preference, the first clause also explicitly protects people's right to profess "a system of values" which is not necessarily part of a recognized religious system. This was a particularly thorny issue at the workshops and conference: the consensus that emerged was that we could not merely insist on the right to be religious, but that in all fairness the right not to be religious had to be equally guaranteed. However, the feeling was that while a person might denounce conventional religion, no-one could survive as a human being without some value system, however vague and undefined. Accordingly, this is how clause 1.1 was phrased.

While sub-clause 1.1 states the religions' demand on state structures, sub-clause 1.2 is more concerned with the actions of religious people and organizations themselves. This is a cardinal feature of the Declaration, for the compilers were concerned from the outset that it should not be a mere set of demands, but that it should also show the contributions that religious people, jointly, were willing and able to make to the reconstruction of South African society. Hence the title: Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities.

This does not imply that the Declaration or its compilers had in mind the creation of a syncretistic, all-encompassing super-religion that would negate each tradition's claims to exclusivity, as is claimed by Stegen (1993:127).

The point of acknowledging South African religious pluralism in a document such as this, as it was seen by the participants at the various workshops and conferences, is precisely to create a framework in which each tradition has a legal right to make robust claims to uniqueness and indispensability, but without taking actions that would encroach on another tradition's matching and equally valid right to do the same.

In terms of the Liberal/Ecumenical/Differential trends in freedom of faith identified by Van Niekerk (1993: 30-33), it is clear that the Declaration falls squarely into the liberal camp:

For the purposes of the liberal position, organizations of faith are regarded as private personae. Freedom of faith means that people of different religious value systems may enact this private matter in different ways, so long as their actions do not harm others.

Incidentally, the Declaration in its first draft stage was initially titled the "(Draft) Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Religious People" (WCRP-SA 1992b), showing a typically "liberal" concern for the individual rather than the group. At the heart of the Declaration's stance on religious freedom it is therefore vulnerable to Van Niekerk's comment that:

When it comes to the question of freedom of faith, the bane of humanity is the distinction between sacred and profane, theocratic and secular, church and world, private and civil. What we should have is not just a separation between church and state ... (but) genuine differentiation between all societal structures ... plus interstructural integration in the sense of mutual responsibility and accountability (Van Niekerk 1993: 34).

Although the Declaration does here and there make attempts to address societal structures other than the state, the basic formula stated in its first clause show it to be

based on a classic dualistic religion/nonreligion or state/nonstate paradigm. The way in which it attempts to solve this dichotomy is firmly based in what Van Niekerk (1993: 30) calls the "liberal trend" in religious freedom. While one imagines that this would be regretted by Van Niekerk, who seems to champion the differential trend, it can be said in favor of the compilers' liberal approach that it is consonant with the approaches taken by many successful democratic countries and that, in the absence of a single highly dominant faith that is itself unfractured, it does seem to work.

2. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES SHALL BE EQUAL BEFORE THE LAW

2.1. The state shall uphold the equality of all religious communities before the law, not identifying with or favoring any, but shall consult and cooperate with religious communities in matters of mutual concern.

2.2. Religious communities, singly, jointly or collectively, shall have the right to address the state and enter into dialogue on matters important to them.

2.3. The state shall uphold the professional confidentiality of people who exercise a leadership function in religious communities concerning any information acquired in the course of their religious duties.

2.4. There shall be no discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation in employment practices, except where religious affiliation is an essential job qualification.

Clause 2 goes into state-religion relationships in greater detail. Here it can be seen that the compilers of the Declaration ended up supporting the third of Sachs's five constitutional options; that is, no attempt is made to absolutize the state/religion relationship; instead, an attempt is made to create a situation where religious institutions are guaranteed a sphere of relative autonomy, but one in which an important aspect of that autonomy is the freedom to address the state on issues on which some or all of them feel that it is necessary to take a stand.

Clause 2.1 is concerned with the equal treatment of religious communities, in other words with the avoidance of an established or state church, whether explicitly, as Islam is established in Iran, or implicitly, as the Dutch Reformed "Sister Churches" have been in South Africa for the last half-century. Clearly the compilers of the Declaration did not desire a "secular" state in the sense of a state that actively oppresses religion, nor even in the sense of such a strict division between church and state that school prayers become a politicized issue. What they did strive for was a situation in which the state and religious communities recognize each other's legitimate existence and consult each other whenever necessary. Some of the corollaries of such a relationship are spelt out in 2.2 and 2.3.

The somewhat ambiguous qualification at the end of 2.4 refers directly to the fears of some of the participants that a straightforward ban on religious discrimination in employment practices could lead to, say, a Jewish or Islamic school being unable to insist on hiring only teachers of their own faith. Thus, the "essential job qualification" should be demonstrable and clearly defined in each case.

In one sense, the position of this sub-clause is anomalous, since it does not deal directly with the relation between the state and religious communities as do the other sub-clauses of clause 2. Instead, it is concerned with the relation between employers and employees. The reason for this lies in the evolution of this sub-clause: in an earlier version it was restricted to employees of the state, and the change to the present phrasing was only made at a very late stage of the process. On reflection, it might have been better to set it apart as a clause in its own right.

3. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES HAVE MORAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO SOCIETY

Religious communities should, within their respective teachings,

- 3.1. educate their communities in spiritual and moral values and promote these in society;
- 3.2. direct energies, talents and resources towards the service of their fellow human beings;
- 3.3 direct their land resources to the benefit of the landless;
- 3.4. remain self-critical at all times and strive to eliminate discrimination based on gender, race, language or social status in their own structures and among their members;
- 3.5. critically evaluate all social, economic and political structures and their activities;
- 3.6 ensure that people who exercise a leadership function in religious communities follow the dictates of their consciences to avoid conspiring or colluding to violate the public good or the legal rights of others.

Clause 3 is the main expression within the Declaration of the religious communities' responsibility towards society. Some of the sub-clauses remain problematic: 3.4, for instance, calls for the elimination of gender discrimination within religious communities; does this imply that women could make a legal demand to be ordained as priests or ministers in those religious institutions which now restrict such ordination to males?

Certainly, some representatives stated that their organizations felt so strongly about this issue that they would rather disband or go underground than submit to such a regulation. In the end, the consensus was that common sense would have to prevail: nowhere in the world has gender equality been pressed this far in any legal system. Hence the proviso "within their respective teachings": this qualification applies not only to the issue of gender equality but also to other concerns: some religions are deliberately "other-worldly" and it would be unfair to force a "critical evaluation of all social, economic and political structures" upon them. Sub-clause 3.6 is a direct counterweight to 2.3 - if religious leaders have the right to professional confidentiality, then they also have the corresponding duty to use this confidentiality only for the common good.

4. PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- 4.1. Parents, guardians and religious communities have the primary responsibility for the faith development of their children, and parental consent is required in all matters pertaining to their religious instruction and worship in schools.
- 4.2. The decision about whether or not to offer religious education in state schools shall be made by each local school community.
- 4.3 Schools that offer religious education may choose single-faith instruction in each of the religions represented in the school, or the study of world religions, or both.
- 4.4. In the case of a single-faith curriculum, school communities should invite suitably qualified persons from religious communities to give religious instruction to their own adherents.
- 4.5. Religious communities shall be entitled to establish and maintain their own educational institutions at all levels.
- 4.6. Such institutions shall have the right to financial support by the state, provided that they comply with the academic norms laid down by the educational authorities.
- 4.7. Public tertiary educational institutions should provide facilities for worship to all religious communities with significant representation at the institution.

The issue of religious education and instruction in schools is one of the thorniest issues facing South Africa today. As I write this (November 1993) it is widely accepted that

our country will soon have a single educational system, even if this is divided into regional structures for administrative purposes. Religion is an important aspect of South African society and it would appear vital that it be included in the curriculum somehow. But is it justifiable to offer instruction in just one religion, or one interpretation of that religion, as was done in the past? Even some Christian theologians are now referring to the teaching of religion in the South African educational system as a failed experiment: "In 1987 many Afrikaner students look on Christian Higher Education and Christian National Education as antiquated ideals to be left to the eccentrically religious or the far right wing groups" (Lederle 1988: 44). And Kerr (1991 :1) states that "We meet at a time (1991) when the school subject which, for the sake of convenience we will call Religious Education, continues to be quietly allowed to slip from the timetables of state schools." Moreover, with the demise of the Group Areas Act formerly white schools have already seen an influx, if a modest one, of nonChristian families into their feeder areas. How is this situation to be accommodated?

Mitchell (1993) summarizes the educational options regarding religious education in schools. In abbreviated form, they are as follows:

- * The freedom to evangelize - a situation in which one or a small number of officially approved religious traditions are entitled to evangelize pupils at state schools; the status quo in South Africa at the time of writing.
- * The freedom to withdraw - while excepting the above option in broad outlines, individual teachers and children are allowed to withdraw from religious education by taking recourse to a "conscience clause".
- * The freedom to be separate - in this option, representatives of the various faiths take over the teaching of religion to the children of their respective adherents. Religious education is thus taken out of the hands of professional educators.
- * The freedom for a local option - In this option, the parent community decides which religion is to be taught in a given school.
- * The freedom from coercion - This system would either follow the American pattern by removing religious education from the school syllabus entirely or replace the present confessional form of religious education with one that is based on firmly educational grounds and that would probably include the teaching of the basic tenets of the major religious traditions. While he accepts that each of these options has its own problems, Mitchell comes out in support for the implementation of this option in South African schools.

Kerr states that the most relevant models for the South African situations are those of the ex-colonial African countries and that of England, "on which our system was originally modeled", and puts forward a similar, though not identical, list of possibilities:

- * No religious education in schools
- * Full cooperation between church and state
- * Self-determination by provincial authorities
- * Ex-colonial countries which have retained religious education after independence
- * Ex-colonial countries which have excluded religious education
- * Countries where the religious and cultural diversity of the population is acknowledged and catered for in the religious education curriculum in state schools (Kerr 1991: 12-14)

This, then, is the basic problematical situation regarding the teaching of religion to school-going children. The answer at which the Declaration's compilers eventually arrived is to promote the idea of a "local option" as much as possible, although the mention of "parental consent" in 4.2 also shows evidence of Mitchell's "right to withdraw". In the first

place, the Declaration maintains that the religious instruction of children is primarily the responsibility of the family and the local religious community; the school can only play a supplementary role. Every parent-teacher-student association at every state school will then have the opportunity to choose between the following options:

- 1) No religious instruction at all.
- 2) The academic study of world religions.
- 3) Religious instruction in each of the faiths represented in the school.
- 4) Both (2) and (3).

In other words, if a school community decides on option (3) and it has children from three different religious communities in its ranks, then those communities would be approached and asked to organize religious instruction for their own adherents' children. However, it should be noted that clause 4.4 does not expressly prevent teachers from being active in religious education alongside the religious functionaries. This arrangement differs from Mitchell's "local option" in that a simple majoritarian decision by the parent body would not be able to impose a single religion on an entire school - the role of the parent-teacher-student association is simply to decide whether or not to teach religion at all; if the answer is in the affirmative, the only choice left is to decide whether to teach all the religions represented in the school in a confessional manner or to teach the academic, non-confessional study of religions. Besides giving full and accurate expression to the entire range of religious belief present in the school, this would also reduce the workload of teachers, who would no longer necessarily have to offer religious instruction. This variation on Mitchell's "local option" would not be subject to his criticism that "such a system would only work if geographical and religious apartheid remained intact" (Mitchell 1993: 118). As families of a hitherto-unrepresented religious faith moved into a new neighborhood and enrolled their children into a local school that had opted to give religious instruction in all the faiths represented in the student body, the teachers would contact the family's religious leaders and arrange for the children's religious instruction accordingly. No doubt, there would be some administrative difficulties involved in this, but the end result would be that no-one could claim that he or she was being discriminated against or dominated because of his or her religious affiliation, or at least not in the educational system.

The alternative option, "the academic study of world religions", would be a new option in South African education, but one that has been offered successfully in other parts of the world, notably the United Kingdom. It could be presented instead of or in conjunction with single-faith instruction.

In addition to the above, religious groups would also be entitled to start their own private sectarian schools, much as is the case today. In such schools, people would have the "freedom to evangelize", as Mitchell puts it.

It can be seen, therefore, that the Declaration's statements on religious education tries to accommodate as many people as possible by combining aspects of some of the options as delineated by Mitchell. The most important aspect of the Declaration's educational policy, however, remains the local option. In this, the document recognizes that a school in Sea Point, Hillbrow or Sunnyside is likely to have a different school-going population with a different religious profile than one in Malmesbury or Bronkhorstspuit. To impose a single religious policy for all of these would amount to exactly the kind of religious imperialism that the document tries to get away from.

5. PEOPLE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS SHALL ENJOY RELIGIOUS RIGHTS

5.1. Members of the security forces, prisoners, as well as patients and residents in public institutions, shall have the right to observe the requirements of their religions.

5.2. Such persons shall have access to spiritual care from their own religious communities.

Clause 5 of the Declaration deals with the religious rights of people who for some reason or another are not able to enjoy regular communication with their religious communities. It is stated that not only should such persons be entitled to observe the requirements of their faith, but that they should also be allowed to receive visits from religious ministers of their particular organization. This was a relatively uncontroversial clause; only the precise phrasing was debated at the final conference.

6. RELIGIONS HAVE THE RIGHT TO PROPAGATE THEIR TEACHINGS

6.1. The propagation of religious teachings should be done with respect for people of other religious communities, without denigrating them or violating their legal rights.

6.2. Such propagation should not take unfair advantage of anyone on the basis of age, physical and mental weakness, economic need or any other vulnerability.

Religious propagation, another thorny issue, is tackled by clause 6 of the Declaration. If I believe that my religion is true and others are false, and that it is my spiritual duty to convert other people to my religion, does this imply that I am allowed to make denigrating and inflammatory statements about others? Can I call another person's most deeply-held beliefs a false religion? Can I go into hospitals and attempt to convert people who are bedridden and unable to shut the door in my face? Can I make a conscious effort to proselytize impressionable school children against the wishes of their parents? If not, how does this affect the freedoms of expression and association which we all hope will be entrenched in a future legal system? Here the Declaration can make only general remarks: many of the practical issues remain to be worked out. The Draft Declaration was much more specific in issuing guidelines, but conceptual and practical difficulties kept cropping up that reduced the final statement to this somewhat vague statement of intent.

7. RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES SHALL HAVE ACCESS TO THE PUBLIC MEDIA

7.1. Every religious community shall have reasonable access to the publicly-owned communications media and the right to establish its own.

7.2. To ensure such reasonable access and to avoid misunderstandings and intolerance, the broad religious spectrum of society should be represented on all boards responsible for religious media.

As in the case of religious education in schools, the Declaration's standpoint on religion and the media is an attempt to move away from the status quo, in which one religion virtually has a monopoly on religious broadcasting, to a more balanced position in which any religious community would have a fair chance of gaining air time on the publicly-owned radio and television networks. An alternative proposal, first put forward by representatives of the Hindu community, was that all religions should have "equal" access. But this has problems of its own: does a religion with a hundred thousand followers get the same amount of air time as one with five million? And what are the groups that should be equalized in this respect: Christian-Jewish-Muslim-Hindu perhaps, in which case one offends members of minority religions by their omission and the majority religion by its unjust allocation of only one quarter of the available air time when it lays claim to three quarters of the population. Or should the Christians be divided into Protestant and Catholics (and Orthodox?), the Muslims into their schools of jurisprudence and so on? Or perhaps each Christian denomination and every analogue of the denomination in other

religions, even if it has no more than a dozen followers, should be seen as a separate religion with a valid claim to "equal" media exposure? Similar problems plague the idea, as stated in the Draft Declaration, that all religious communities should have "proportional" access. In the end, it was decided to leave the specifics to be negotiated, but to lay down the principle of "reasonable access". The advantage of this phrasing, as was pointed out by a participant who belonged to the legal profession, is that the term "reasonable" is a justiciable one, that is, it is a term that has a definite and specific meaning in legal terminology and that can therefore be enforced by a court of law.

8. THE STATE SHALL RECOGNIZE SYSTEMS OF FAMILY AND CUSTOMARY LAW

8.1. The state shall grant legal status to systems of family and customary law of religious communities with regard to marriage and its dissolution, the support of dependents and succession.

8.2. The state shall recognize persons from all religious communities as marriage officers.

8.3. Marriages and dissolutions contracted under family or customary law should be registered with the appropriate civil authorities.

8.4. People whose family or customary law has been granted legal status may also have legal recourse to the civil authorities on issues of family law.

8.5. In the case of the dissolution of a marriage, recourse may be sought in civil law after the avenues of family or customary law have been applied.

If any one issue ever threatened to shipwreck the entire Declaration process, the question of family and customary law surely was it. In practical terms, there are three religious complexes in contemporary South Africa that maintain extensive systems of family and customary law besides the civil legal system: Judaism, Islam and African Traditional Religion, with a number of variations within each of these. Other religious traditions also have certain codes of conduct and procedures for censuring or even expelling their members, of course; the vital distinction is that the above-mentioned three traditions have certain religio-legal requirements that coincide and sometimes conflict with areas of life in which the modern state claims predominance. These areas include issues such as marriage and divorce. In many respects, female participants argued, retention of these customary systems of law would disadvantage women. Some traditional (generally male) participants, on the contrary, were quite open about their intention to abandon the Declaration process if the issue was not addressed in a way that would include retention of customary law.

The requirements of these traditions in respect of marriage, divorce and the support of dependents were often in direct opposition to one another. Other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, had no specific, extensive religio-legal systems of their own but were affronted by the practice, until very recently, of the state appointing only Christian ministers and Jewish rabbis as marriage officers; this was also true of Islamic marriages.

In compiling the compromise that is clause 8, one principle was kept in mind: the simple realpolitik of the situation is that the South African civil legal system is not about to relinquish its position as the law of the land, nor would it be advisable to attempt to establish a country with parallel and equal legal systems. Thus, if systems of family and customary law are to be given some kind of recognition, they will have to be in such a position that, while they may enjoy considerable autonomy in practice, they will ultimately remain subordinate to civil law. Hence the requirement that all marriages and dissolutions of marriages also be registered with the civil authorities, and the stipulation that final recourse may be had to the civil courts. "The intention of this clause was to give women

who are trapped in religious marriages the right of civil recourse where their religious leaders did not see fit to allow them a divorce" (Sooka 1993: 90).

One should not underestimate the depth of feeling that is engendered by this clause: one Muslim spokesperson was heard to say that the Muslim community would go along with the Declaration, despite some remaining misgivings, just to ensure the recognition of their system of family law.

9. THE HOLY DAYS OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES SHALL BE RESPECTED

9.1. Authorities and employers shall make reasonable allowances for people from all religious communities to observe their religious holidays and days or times of worship.

The majority of workshop and conference attendants recognized the de facto situation of South Africa having a Christian majority and made no radical proposals to de-establish Sundays and other Christian holidays. However, the Draft Declaration's recognition of Sunday as the generally accepted day of rest was also felt to be too partisan. Thus, clause 9 of the Declaration contains a quite moderate proposal that "reasonable allowances" should be negotiated between the state and religious communities and between employers and employees.

10. RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS MAY OWN PROPERTY AND BE EXEMPT FROM TAXES

10.1. Local authorities shall set aside adequate land for religious purposes, such as worship, burial and cremation, and shall respect the religious integrity of these sites.

10.2 Such land shall be allocated to religious communities in terms of the needs of the local population.

10.3. Assets, religious objects and symbols imported and funds received by religious communities for worship, education and works of mercy shall be exempt from taxation, and donations or bequests for the above purposes shall be tax-deductible.

The final clause of the Declaration was debated hotly at the workshops and the conference: some delegates felt that such a straightforward demand for the right to "own property and be exempt from taxes" was self-serving and might damage the credibility of the entire document. It was also pointed out that to a large extent this position was already reflected in the status quo. The counter-arguments were that inequities do in fact exist and that the status quo was a mere happenstance which might be repealed by a future government. Eventually, it was decided that the principle needed to be established, and the right of a religious community to own assets and be tax-exempt was incorporated in the Declaration.

AFFIRMATION

We, the signatories to this declaration,
convinced that there is an urgent need for all religious communities and the state to accept and implement the principles in this declaration;
trusting that this will contribute to better relations between the state and religious communities and between religious communities themselves;
recognizing that these principles will function within the framework of a Bill of Rights;
appeal to all religious communities to promote these principles everywhere.

The Declaration ends with an affirmation that states the importance the signatories believe it to have, their recognition that it will function within a Bill of Rights and an appeal to religious organizations to promote the principles it contains.

The conference also approved a condensed version of the Declaration to be forwarded to the Constitution-making body as a candidate for inclusion in a future Bill of Rights:

1. All persons are entitled to freedom of conscience, to profess, practice, and propagate any religion or no religion and to change their religious allegiance;
2. Every religious community and/or member thereof shall enjoy the right -
 - 2.1 to establish, maintain and manage religious institutions and to have its particular system of family law recognized by the state;
 - 2.2 to criticize and challenge all social and political structures and policies in terms of the teachings of that religion.

It may be instructive to compare this proposed clause to some other proposals by major political forces on the same topic. The following were the most recent that could be obtained at the time of writing, and were kindly provided by Mr. P. A. Van Wyk of the South African Law Commission. In alphabetical order, they are:

African National Congress:

There shall be freedom of worship and tolerance of all religions, and no State or official religion shall be established.

The institutions of religion shall be separate from the State, but nothing in this Constitution shall prevent them from co-operating with the State with a view to furthering the objectives of this Constitution, nor from bearing witness and commenting on the actions of the State.

Places associated with religious observance shall be respected, and no-one shall be barred from entering them on grounds of race.

(African National Congress 1993: 7)

Democratic Party:

Every person shall have the right to ... freedom of conscience and religion and, consequently, the State shall not favor one religion over another.

(Democratic Party 1993: 3)

KwaZulu Legislative Assembly:

Religious freedoms are recognized and shall be guaranteed. Everyone shall have the right to profess and promote his or her religion or belief, and to establish institutions and organize activities for this purpose. The State of KwaZulu/Natal shall not take any action supporting or endorsing any particular religious belief or confession or conditioning the exercise of religious freedom to any requirement, and shall promote conditions for the equal and free exercise of all religions and beliefs in the State.

(KwaZulu Legislative Assembly 1992: 10)

South African Government:

Every person shall have the right to profess and practice the religion of his choosing. (This) shall not preclude ministrations to the forces, the public service and other state institutions, religious instruction or exercise in schools, and religious broadcasts instituted by or under any law.

(South African Government 1993: 8)

It is ironic that, of these proposals, only the WCRP-SA Declaration in its condensed form, the one created by religious people, specifically guarantees the right of persons to have and propagate "no religion" and to "change their religious allegiance"! A minor point is the drafting committee's decision, contrary to most of the other proposals, not to capitalize the term "state". As one delegate stated, "Why capitalize `state'? It is not sacred!" By and large, however, the proposed clauses of political parties and government structures contain much that is similar to the Declaration in both its full and condensed forms. However, the ANC's proposal contains a specific reference to racial discrimination which does not appear in quite such a prominent form in the Declaration, and the SA Government's proposal contains references to religious education and broadcasting that seem to support the status quo and to be incompatible with the concepts contained in the Declaration.

The Declaration as it stands now still has shortcomings: despite WCRP's best efforts, we are still encountering religious organizations that have never heard of the Declaration or the process that brought it into being, this despite the attention paid to it in the press and on television. This lack of "grassroots" involvement is now being rectified by WCRP-SA with a series of meetings and lectures, of which this article is a modest part. Another shortcoming is that most of the members of the Charter committee and the attendants at the two workshops could be said to belong to the "left wing" of their various religions - they were committed to the interfaith process and to the creation of a document that would be representative of the interests of all religious South Africans, or at least as many as possible. Naturally, those that chose not to participate had no opportunity to have their views included. Also, at no stage did the process involve a bona fide representative of African Traditional Religion, though this was contrary to our wishes and was due largely to the non-hierarchical, non-organizational nature of this religious tradition.

The original Draft Declaration also contained a clause pertaining to conscientious objection to military service. This was dropped because some of the workshop attendants felt that this issue was sufficiently important to be dealt with separately in the Bill of Rights, and that the issue of conscientious objection should in any case not be restricted to purely religious objections. When this was put to the 1992 conference, though, the motion to forward such a proposal to the constitution-makers was defeated, as delegates from religious communities which had not in the past been much affected by military call-ups felt that their constituencies had not had sufficient opportunity to consider the issue. It can be expected though, that the issue will arise once more in the future.

Declaration future

Quo vadis, Declaration? The document was disseminated to religious communities throughout the country for endorsement. These have flooded in from individuals, but official endorsements from religious communities have been more slow in appearing. This is to be expected: a given church might conduct a general synod only once every four years, and even then such a matter might be referred to a committee with instructions to report back at the next general synod. Smaller religious communities (such as the PBG) and those with more hierarchical decision-making structures have been quicker to respond.

By no means is this Declaration to be thought of as having been carved in metaphysical granite: if it turns out to be totally unacceptable to most of the major religious organizations in the country, then we may have to start from scratch. If, however, only some sections turn out to be unacceptable or serious omissions are pointed out, then a series of separately worded amendments and/or addenda may be the best way to make the document more widely acceptable.

At first, the intention was that the Declaration, once it was finished, would somehow be "appended" to the Bill of Rights in a future Constitution, along with other, similar documents. While this hope has not entirely faded, the emphasis has since shifted to the creation of a conscientizing document, a text that would describe what it is that religious people and organizations expect from their government and what they would be willing to do in return, a set of conditions for which they would jointly strive, be it in the field of constitutional law or anywhere else. In short, it should describe what we, as religious South Africans, want: how to get it will be a matter of long-term tactics and religion-state negotiation.

A Declaration by itself is little more than a piece of paper which will not decrease the level of violence in the country or lead to a negotiated constitutional settlement or to interreligious tolerance by its mere existence. Only if religious and nonreligious institutions alike acknowledge the spirit of cooperation and tolerance in which it was conceived and act to implement its suggestions can it make a difference to the ethical and religious climate of the country.

Thus, this is what the assembled religious communities of South Africa want and are able to contribute to the ethical and constitutional debate: whether it is sufficient will have to be left to posterity to judge.

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Buddhism, science and other world views

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It was with some reticence that I agreed to take part in these proceedings. From a Buddhist point of view, it seems that the whole question of the relationship, for which we should read the clash of ideologies, between religion and science is a peculiarly Judæo-Christian problem. As I shall try to make clear, to the Buddhist it is as senseless to say that religion and science are in conflict as to say that mathematics conflicts with English grammar. Both are symbolic languages that attempt to describe reality from a specific perspective. But those initial perspectives are so different that one cannot really talk of a relation between the two unless one posits a higher-order meta-language of which both are subsets.

I must assume that my audience, composed as it is mainly of scientists and those whose religious convictions lie firmly in the Judæo-Christian tradition, is unfamiliar with the Buddhist religio-philosophical tradition. I shall therefore have to diverge from a strict discussion of the relation between Buddhism and science into aspects of central Buddhist teachings and how these relate to Hinduism, its closest living relative, and Christianity, the dominant religious tradition in the context of this conference.

Why Buddhism?

We may ask why we should include Buddhism in the points of view that we are exploring in this meeting. There are not many Buddhists in South Africa. On a wider scale, however, we can see that the Buddhist worldview is slowly diffusing into the western world, not only in the form of western "converts" to Buddhism, but, even more pertinently, in the fact that Buddhist philosophical concepts and logical structures are slowly starting to permeate the "western world", or as I prefer to think of it, the formerly western part of the emerging global cultural mosaic. I have argued this at length elsewhere. Here I shall just summarize the main points of my argument.

While it is true that there are but a few committed Buddhists in South Africa, western society, of which South Africa is at least partly a member, is slowly being permeated with oriental influences. Youngsters who thirty years ago would have taken up boxing now do karate. Even small towns have ikebana displays in the annual show of the local flower arranging club, not to mention the popularity of bonsai trees. Certain trends in art, fashion and architecture show an affinity with Japanese ideals of simplicity and spontaneity or, conversely, with a riotous display of colors and patterns that may be seen as a manifestation of Sino-Tibetan influences. The inspiration behind all these new Oriental influences, the argument continues, is Buddhist philosophy and the Buddhist view of reality and the ideal life. Thus, if we wish to understand what is happening to our society and possibly take steps to either prevent or facilitate this paradigm shift, we should understand Buddhism. This slow "orientalizing" of western society is nowhere shown more clearly than in Standen's (1987) book "The changing face of the hero". Simultaneously, of course, the eastern world is being occidentalized, and then we have not yet considered the influences of the third world on these two cultural power blocs and vice versa.

It is true that traditional oriental society did not draw the rigid distinctions between the "sacred" and the "secular" spheres of existence that westerners are accustomed to. Stated in Buddhist jargon, martial arts can serve as a way of losing the concept of selfhood and attuning to the totality of existence, and ikebana can be an expression of one's understanding of the emptiness of conditioned reality.

They need not be this, of course. Most occidental practitioners of karate see their pursuit of this art purely as a form of physical exercise and self-defense. But, the argument goes, something of the original inspiration behind these activities remains. If we prefer not to understand this on a too esoteric level, then perhaps we can express it as follows: the possibility exists that the practitioner of karate or ikebana might decide to read books about their respective arts, and there encounter descriptions of the origins of their pursuits and how these are related to Buddhist philosophy. This might then lead, if not to an outright adoption of Buddhist principles, to an appreciation of and behavior commensurate with Buddhist practices. If this were to occur on a sufficiently large scale, the result would be a drift towards the gradual Buddhification of society. Naturally, whether one approves of such a process or not depends on one's own prior commitments and one's opinion of Buddhism. But then at least let this be an informed opinion; and for this we need to study Buddhism.

On a more strictly academic level, one could mention that Buddhist philosophy has addressed many of the same questions as other religious and philosophical traditions, but starting from often radically different starting-points. This provides us with a unique vantage point from which to examine our own beliefs and arguments, and discover the often well-hidden presuppositions, prejudices and apparently self-evident "facts" on which our arguments are so often based. Let us take one fundamental issue by way of example: Buddhists do not posit the existence and relevance of a personal, all-powerful deity, the very life-blood of western, theistic religion. There are even instances where the possibility that such a being might exist is flatly denied. Yet Buddhists, by general consensus, have managed to be religious people. Does this then imply that the category "religion" transcends theism, or is there something fundamentally wrong with our understanding of what religion is, when we can lump such philosophically incompatible phenomena as traditional Christian monotheism and near-nihilistic Buddhist causal interdependency within this category? In other words, when we start to define religion, do we not already have a mental impression of what religion is, to which we then adapt our definition? The Indian non-theistic religions have been gadflies to those who sought an easy definition of religion ever since the founding of Religious studies as an academic discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century. By raising such questions, the study of Buddhism can clarify matters in sometimes surprisingly remote corners of academia. And that might well include

theology: Krüger (1989: 98) makes the point that "... a Christian theology conceived of in terms of the philosophy of Gotama rather than that of Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus is not unthinkable".

In 1920, H G Wells co-authored a series of essays on the "six greatest men of all time". They were, in no particular order, Jesus, Aristotle, Ashoka, Roger Bacon, Abraham Lincoln and the Buddha. If we see Aristotle and Lincoln as standing at the very beginning of the western philosophical and scientific tradition (of which Marxism too is an offshoot), the Buddha and Ashoka as representing Buddhism and Christ and Bacon (Roger, not Francis) as the Christian, and thus theistic, representatives, then this leaves us with three great paradigms or systems of thought; Buddhism, theism and science. And this is yet another reason to study Buddhism: being a religious tradition that takes all truth-claims with a generous pinch of salt, it may yet serve as a mediating factor between the conflicting claims of the other two traditions. If Buddhism, and the study of Buddhism, can serve as an honest broker, if it can allay the fruitless war between faith and reason that has so severely split western society for well over a century, then perhaps the study of Buddhism is the best possible investment we can make in our own future.

In this essay I intend to look at the interaction between Buddhism and science from both perspectives; How does Buddhism view the scientific endeavor, and how does the scientific adventure affect Buddhist thinking? Let us look first at how Buddhism would approach science.

Buddhism looks at science

Naturally, "science" is a vague generic term: with the increasing specialization in scientific circles, we are rapidly approaching a situation in which even scientists find it difficult to find a common language even among themselves. Gone are the days of the old eighteenth and early nineteenth century paradigm of the "naturalist" who could dabble in all the branches of physical science and who probably had some opinions on the human sciences as well. Today, the research scientist who investigates inorganic chemistry and the applied scientist who works in the R&D department of a paint factory often have surprisingly little to say to one another. So, if we are to talk about "science", we had better restrict ourselves to a sample of strains of thought from particular scientific disciplines.

The first scientific discipline which we shall examine is physics. There has in recent decades been quite a bit of literature relating the relation between recent developments in physics on the one hand, and Buddhism and other forms of Asian philosophy on the other. This literary genre dates mainly from the first publication in 1975 of Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of physics* (Capra 1983) and from later works in the same vein by Capra and related thinkers such as Gary Zukav, though some earlier efforts in this direction may be found. But efforts from the scientific side to see Buddhism as a kind of proto-physics are, in my opinion, somewhat forced. From the Buddhist point of view, the enterprise of physics may well be interesting in a theoretical way, but the origin and composition of the universe has nothing whatever to do with the goal of religious practice. The existence of the universe is, of course, a prerequisite for our existence and hence for the possibility of religious practice, but Buddhism takes this existence as a given and proceeds with no further consideration of the matter to its real concern, the state of the human mind.

Let me explain. Like all religious traditions that have come down to us from antiquity, Buddhism has inherited a myth of origin. I do not say one of "creation", for Buddhism believes neither in a Creator nor in a *creatio ex nihilo*. But there is a myth of the repeated dissolutions and reconstitutions of reality. In fact, there are a number of such myths to choose from.

However, these myths never lived at the core of Buddhist thinking in quite the same way that Genesis 1 was present at the core of Christian thinking, for example. The

Genesis creation story is set at the beginning of the Bible not merely because it is the beginning of the biblical story; it also establishes the existence of God, his act of creating reality, and his resultant status as the Lord of creation, including the human inhabitants of creation. The entire drama of the Jewish and Christian religious history and thinking is predicated on this chapter. It is required to be there for the Judæo-Christian religious message to make any sense, to be internally consistent, at all. Its position at the beginning of the Bible is symbolic of its foundational role in the Judæo-Christian mythos. By way of contrast, the Buddhist myths of origin are buried deep in the Buddhist scriptures. The Pāli canon starts, not with myths of origin, but with the rules to be followed by Buddhist monks and nuns in their quest for enlightenment. There is more to this than just a matter of arrangements of texts in terms of their relative importance: it also reflects on the difference between a “linear” and a “cyclical” understanding of time. But let us continue.

The central message of Buddhism is contained in the Four Noble Truths. To paraphrase: life is inherently unstable and unsatisfactory, and our deep-rooted desire for stability and satisfactoriness causes our lives to be an unending striving after that which can, by its very nature never be attained. If we can learn to stop this desire, we will no longer attempt the impossible and will know inner peace. The way to do this has been explained by the Buddha in terms of eight ethical and meditative lifestyle recommendations.

Note that there is no explanation in this teaching of *why*, for instance, we have this desire that causes life to be “inherently unstable and unsatisfactory”. This is a question that may be asked, of course, but in the Buddhist view, knowing the ultimate cause of instability and unsatisfactoriness on an intellectual level does not help us to remove our response to this situation in our personal lives. This is expressed in many places in the Buddhist scriptures, most famously in the Cula-Malunkya-sutta, often called the “Parable of the Arrow” in the western world (Majjhima Nikaya, sutta 63). In this story, a young follower of the Buddha named Malunkya announces that he will leave the Buddhist fold unless the Buddha supplies the answer to ten metaphysical questions. Among these are questions that may still interest physicists today, for instance, “Is the world (i.e. the universe) eternal or not?” The Buddha supplies an analogy to show that, interesting though these matters may be on an intellectual level, they do not touch on the existential crisis of human existence. Again, I paraphrase: “Assume you have been wounded by an arrow. I am a doctor. Will you refuse to let me take out the arrow unless you are first informed who made the arrow, which bird supplied the fletching, if the arrowhead is made from iron or bronze, and who shot the arrow? Or would you want me to take it out right away?” Naturally, Malunkya prefers to live in comparative ignorance rather than to die with this rather irrelevant knowledge. The message of this sutta is that Enlightenment is a practical achievement, not a philosophical game.

The questions put by Malunkya were well known in the India of the Buddha’s time. Philosophers attempted to answer these questions with reference to a number of different paradigms. In Buddhism, however, these matters were eventually named the *avyakata*, or undeclared problems. There were also other speculative views, known as *ditthi*, to which the Buddha refused to supply answers.

The Buddha had a knack of punching holes in all types of grand statements that made definitive speculative statements about things. In particular, he had a keen philosophical nose for problems that were in fact pseudo-problems, arising from the misuse of language. Some problems simply cannot be answered, because they are phrased in conventional language. In this respect the Buddha’s thinking reminds us strongly of the analytical philosophy of the modern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who put great effort into the cleansing of language. (Krüger 1991:138)

There is nothing stranger in the history of religion than the sight of Buddha founding a worldwide religion, and yet refusing to be drawn into any discussion about eternity, immortality, or God. The infinite is a myth, he says, a fiction of philosophers who have not the modesty to confess that an atom can never understand the cosmos. He smiles at the debate over the finity or infinity of the universe quite as if he foresaw the futile astromythology of physicists and mathematicians who debate the same question today. He refuses to express any opinion as to whether the world had a beginning or will have an end; whether the soul is the same as the body, or distinct from it; whether, even for the greatest saint, there is to be any reward in any heaven. He calls such questions “the jungle, the desert, the puppet-show, the writhing, the entanglement, of speculation,” and will have nothing to do with them; they lead only to feverish disputation, personal resentments, and sorrow; they never lead to wisdom and peace. Saintliness and content lie not in knowledge of the universe and God, but simply in selfless and beneficent living. And then, with scandalous humor, he suggests that the gods themselves, if they existed, could not answer these questions. (Durand 1994. screen 815:2179)

For another example of how Buddhism not only disdained cosmological theorizing, but actively transformed it into existential insight, the following quotation from the Buddhist philosopher Nishitani Keiji is apposite:

The eschatological myth of older ages that the cosmos must someday necessarily be burned up in a cosmic fire also entered into Buddhism. Buddhists, however, in their interpretation of this myth have always accepted it on the dimension of religious existence and transformed the idea of the end of the world into an existential problem. Viewed from this standpoint, this world as it is, with the sun, the moon and the numerous stars, with mountains, rivers, trees and flowers, is, as such, the world ablaze in the all-consuming cosmic conflagration. The end of the world is an actuality here and now, is a fact and a fate directly underneath our feet. (Nishitani 1965:88)

When we apply these principles to the relation between Buddhism and modern physics, we see that the same relationship still holds. To the Buddhist, the theories of modern cosmology and quantum physics are interesting, as they are to other people. No doubt there are Buddhists who are professional physicists. But there is no direct connection at this stage between physics and religion as Buddhism understands the latter term. Buddhism is interested in our existential response to the situation in which we find ourselves, not in how that situation came to be.

It would be fair to say that new theories in physics, to the extent that they have been expressed in terms simple enough for non-physicists to comprehend, have been acknowledged by Buddhists with a somewhat greater ease than by many non-Buddhists. This is due to the superficial similarity in terminology, in some cases, between ancient Buddhist teachings and modern physics. When told that an electron has only a probability of existing, the Buddhist can nod sagely and say “Ah yes, the Buddha taught that all is insubstantial”. When informed that radioactive material decays and slowly changes into something else, losing mass in the process, he can smile and say “And did the Buddha not pronounce on his death-bed that all compounded things are impermanent?” Moreover, Buddhists are enjoined not to believe anything simply because it has been explained by another, but to verify the claims for themselves. But such superficial similarities in the use of language should not fool us into thinking that Buddhism was conceived as a kind of

proto-science. The verification referred to above is intensely personal. The existential knowledge thus obtained cannot be transferred to another by means of ordinary language, nor even by a specialized jargon. It is verification to further personal spiritual growth, not verification to advance the growth of an external base of objective knowledge. It remains true, however, that this coincidental similarity of symbolic languages has enabled Buddhists to live in our technocratic society with a minimum of cognitive dissonance. As Balasubramaniam suggests, “the parallels discovered (between Buddhism and quantum physics) are not parallels of identity but parallels of analogy” (1992:205).

Much the same situation exists in the relation between Buddhism and biology. The same myths of origin to which I referred above also contain stories of living creatures changing in shape over successive generations. However, a closer look shows that this change in shape and abilities is closely connected to the advance and decline of those beings’ moral qualities. In other words, this is “evolution” in a quasi-Lamarckian rather than in the strict Darwinian sense of the term.

But once again, these myths, beautiful as they are, and no doubt containing valuable ethical and spiritual truths, have never been regarded as a core teaching of Buddhism. In contemporary Buddhist circles, evolution is a non-issue. I suspect that the majority of Buddhists who are aware of evolutionary theory accept it as the most plausible explanation of why we look the way we do. Certainly I do accept it on that basis. But there is, to my knowledge, no research data to confirm or refute my suspicion, for the simple reason that the entire matter is so tangential to the central concerns of Buddhism that the subject simply never comes up for discussion.

Things get more interesting, however, in that grey area where biochemistry shades into psychology. For it is with the science of psychology (and the other human sciences) that Buddhism has the greatest amount of common ground. This is especially true of Jungian psychology and its more recent offshoot, Transpersonal psychology. There is a certain amount of circularity present here, though, for it is known that Carl Jung took great interest in Buddhist thought. Yet even here we should be careful to distinguish between the psychologist as a research scientist and the psychologist as therapist. The central concern that Buddhism has with the human psyche is not that of a “disinterested” observer, a pure seeker after an abstract truth, but with the process of healing the psyche on both the individual and transpersonal levels. It is with the psychologist as healer of the psyche that Buddhism finds its greatest affinity, not so much with the psychologist as researcher.

However, Buddhism does not have such an affinity with all the human or social sciences. For instance, Buddhism has very little regard for the study of history. Unlike the Judæo-Christian faiths, Buddhism is not a “historical” religion. In Christian history, for instance, every claim that something described in the Bible didn’t happen in quite that way in quite that place or time seems to have triggered a crisis in its ranks. Christianity has survived, of course. Indeed, it has become quite adept at reinterpreting its scriptures as and when required. But Christianity remains rooted in history. If Jesus did not die on the cross and rise from the dead afterwards, how can it still present its scheme of salvation? By way of contrast, if someone were to prove conclusively that there never was such a person as the historical Buddha, the Buddhist world would by and large shrug its collective shoulders and continue as before. The truth of Buddhist teachings lie in their inner consistency and in the way they are manifested in the life of the Buddhist community - they are not tied up with the personality of the particular person who first pronounced them.

Science looks at Buddhism

Thus far the Buddhist view of science. How does science view Buddhism? Here I find myself at a disadvantage, since I stand on one side of a divide similar to that described by C P Snow in his famous "Two cultures", trying to view myself from the other side. But let me point out, however speculatively, a few areas where I believe that scientists and Buddhists might find common ground, and some others we would have to agree to disagree. Here we find the same problem that we started out with: like "science", "Buddhism" is a broad term that encompasses a variety of thoughts and traditions. Buddhist thought has ranged from the verge of nihilism to something nearly indistinguishable from theism. There are scholars who maintain that it is possible to extract from twenty-five centuries of development an "original Buddhism". I am not one of them. Yet there are certain motifs that are common to all forms of Buddhism, and we shall have to range across them, painting with a broad brush.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between scientific thinking and Buddhism is the fact that Buddhism teaches, and accepts the reality of reincarnation. There has been some scientific research on reincarnation. By strict standards of verifiability, the results of this can at best be said to be inconclusive. But reincarnation itself is a complicated mythical and symbolic motif, susceptible to more than just the literal interpretation. Joseph Campbell has suggested that the rebirth theory, apart from its philosophical implications, is itself a powerful mythical motif, suggesting as it does that

... there are dimensions of your being and a potential for realization and consciousness that are not included in your concept of yourself. Your life is much deeper and broader than you can conceive it to be here ... you can live in terms of that depth. (Campbell 1988: 58).

Within Buddhist circles, for example, there has been a long-running debate on whether the description of desire leading, through a twelvefold process, to rebirth and hence to old age and death refers to a physical rebirth or to the coming into existence and subsequent waning of a moment of consciousness. More recently, I have argued that the reincarnation motif may also be reinterpreted as denoting the continuing influence of our existence on a societal level (Clasquin 1993).

The conclusive evidence for reincarnation, to the Buddhist, is the insight into the reality of this process which the individual develops during meditation. I have arrived at some such insights myself, if only in a minor way. Yet such insights are not transmissible by language - they are real on an individual existential level. By way of analogy: we can teach a person blind from birth all about the refraction of light through droplets of water. What we cannot teach him is the experience of seeing a rainbow. We can compare it to other experiences we know this person to have had, say, listening to a symphony. But there can be no question of making him experience the rainbow directly - unless we give him eyes to see it with. This, to continue the metaphor, is the function of meditation - it gives us the equipment to experience aspects of reality which have thus far remained hidden.

There are other potential areas of disagreement. Many of the Buddhist traditions adheres to an idealist ontology. In other words, it maintains that the primary building block of reality is not Matter, but Mind. One may here be reminded of contemporary Quantum Mechanics's insistence that the researcher is not so much an observer as a participant in the experimentation process. But once again, the methods used to arrive at this conclusion differ. Buddhist idealist philosophers arrived at their conclusion both through introspection and through philosophical speculations that can be compared directly to those of western idealist philosophers such as Bishop Berkeley. They did not reach it by

the modern scientific method of analysis, at least not in any strict definition of the latter. Thus the similarity between these claims can at best said to be coincidental. Naturally, for one who accepts an idealist ontology, reincarnation is far less of a philosophical problem than for the materialist.

Moreover, such an idealist ontology is by no means universal within Buddhism. The now-extinct Sarvastivada school, for instance, while not exactly materialist, tended towards that viewpoint with the slogan from which it gained its name: "sarva asti" ("everything exists"). Whether Mind is the raw material from which reality is constructed or whether it is an epiphenomenon of material reality, the Buddha's teachings of impermanence, insubstantiality and unsatisfactoriness remain an existential truth. This, by the way, is one reason why religious wars have been exceedingly rare in Buddhist history. The points of disagreement between the various schools of Buddhism have invariably been over issues that are peripheral to the central Buddhist message. Such conflicts between Buddhist communities as may be found in history have consistently been about concrete issues such as land and royal favor of one school over another. Deplorable as these situations have been, they were not specifically religious wars.

And the three central Buddhist themes of impermanence, insubstantiality and unsatisfactoriness are, if not directly applicable as scientific concepts, at least congenial to them. In a later development, these three were conflated into a single concept: "emptiness". When Buddhists say that "everything is empty", this does not imply that nothing exists. It does mean that while everything in reality is real enough, no part of it could survive without the simultaneous presence of all other parts. It points to the radical interdependence of all that exists. It denies the existence of any form of reality that occupies a unique place, that exists solely by its own power. It applies this understanding of reality strictly to everything. There is no privileged place in this scheme for homo sapiens. There is no "ghost in the machine" - to classify ourselves as part ghost, part machine is to show an inadequate concept of the complicated nature of existence. We too are part of this unbelievably intricate web of causality, within and without, in which a myriad of causes, known or unknown, shapes what we are and what we become. This does not lead, in Buddhism, to a strict determinism, for volition is recognized as one of the empirically discernible factors that go into making a sentient being. But there is no soul or self in Buddhist thinking, no irreducible core of human-ness that transcends the vagaries of empirical existence. In fact, what I have called "insubstantiality" above, when read more literally, is "not-self" (anatta).

In a system that does not allow for the existence of a soul, as the more traditional thinkers of the Buddha's time were quick to recognize, there cannot be an Oversoul, in other words, there cannot be a supreme Deity as it is presented to us in so much of the Judæo-Christian tradition. One should be careful not to stretch words beyond their customary boundaries without good reason. The concept of the supreme god that was developing in India at the time was and remains different in many crucial respects to the image of god that most of us have absorbed from our western environment. Yet the Buddhist arguments against a the existence supreme being are much the same as those used by western atheists and agnostics.

This is the point where Hinduism and Buddhism parted ways, peacefully for the most part. There had been Hindu thinkers, largely in the Sakhya tradition, who had said many of the same things as the Buddha. There were later Hindu teachers, notably the great Shankara, whose teachings at times came so close to Buddhist thinking that there were those who accused him of being a Buddhist in disguise. But Hinduism always retained the concept of an ultimate being, an ultimate reality, a supreme god. In however abstract a form this may be presented, there lies the difference between the two religions. Buddhism sees all reality as radically interdependent, with no exceptions.

And it is also here where the difference between Buddhism and the Judæo-Christian tradition lies today. If there is a God as presented in classical Judæo-Christian thinking, then Buddhism cannot be true, for this would mean that there was at least one self-existent entity (at least partly) within reality, and that there may therefore be others. Conversely, if Buddhism is correct in its assessment of reality as being a radically interdependent “web” of causality, then God, as presented in classical Judæo-Christian thinking, cannot exist. In the Buddhist viewpoint, this does not imply that there are no beings that are longer-lived and more powerful than human beings. Such godlings may exist, and if so they may exist in ways that are all but inconceivable to us, but if so, they too are subject to decay, extinction, and eventual rebirth. It should, however, be pointed out that this argument deliberately ignores more recent Judæo-Christian concepts of God, such as that presented by the process theology based on Whiteheadian philosophy. In this case, the differences between Buddhism and Judæo-Christian thinking are far smaller.

Science and Buddhism seeing each other (through a glass, darkly)

Where does this leave Buddhism and science? As I have tried to point out throughout this essay, there are similarities in outlook. Even the language sounds similar. For “impermanence”, we could substitute “entropy”, for “insubstantiality” perhaps “operant conditioning”, and instead of “emptiness”, we might in some contexts say “indeterminacy”. But this is too easy - it is in fact a piece of philosophical sleight-of-hand that ignores the respective underlying impulses and methodologies of both Buddhism and science. Science is an effort to understand reality - it is (or attempts to be) value-neutral regarding what should be done with that understanding. Buddhism also employs a terminology of understanding or insight, but its underlying motivation is value-laden. It is therapeutic in nature. To paraphrase Karl Marx: “The scientists have only explained the world; the Buddhist point is how to react to our experience of it”.

Both science and Buddhism make use of a specific methodology. In science it is that of a series of conjecture and experiments, on which follows either refutation or confirmation of the conjecture. It is essentially a public process even if the results are suppressed for reasons such as national security, for it is essential that the conjecture, the conditions for the experiment and the result must all be expressible in language. Not necessarily English, but some form of symbolic language that is immediately accessible to anyone trained in the use of that language. To extend this methodology metaphorically into the Buddhist arena, the conjecture and rules of experimentation of Buddhism are expressible and widely available in language. These are the problems of the human condition, as Buddhism understands them, and the instructions for meditation and general lifestyle. They are public. But the result is private. It is not expressible in a common or shared form of discourse (cf. Balasubramaniam 1992:207). Nishitani maintains that this intense self-investigation is the unique preserve, not just of Buddhism, but of religion generally:

There remains one basic question: what on earth is this man himself who is endowed with, among other abilities, the very capacity of inquiring in so scientific a way into the mechanisms of nature, society and human consciousness? To this question the sciences are unable to answer ... there would be no other way for them but to answer by way of again inquiring into the mechanism of nature, the mechanism of society, or the mechanism of consciousness. This means that the very dimension on which that question emerges is closed to those sciences, that they are even denied the access to the possibility of putting such a question. (Nishitani 1965: 106)

We seem to have reached an impasse. It appears as if Buddhism and science are distinct world-views with precious little in common, with the Judæo-Christian tradition as yet a third, largely incompatible with either of the other two. "East is East and West is West, and ne'er the twain shall meet" (Rudyard Kipling, *The ballad of East and West*). Yet this answer is unsatisfactory. Regardless of the prophecies of doom of the more radical among the "postmodern" philosophers, there remains our overpowering intuition that all these philosophical systems, and many others besides, must refer to a common human experience of reality, that somehow they all refer to the same world. Indeed, Nishitani follows his description of the gap between science and mystical introspection quoted above with the observation that "... What is required is the unification of two contradictory moments: the scientific view of the universe and the investigation of man himself." (Nishitani 1965: 106)

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that a relation between Buddhism and science would only be possible if it could be expressed in a higher-order meta-language of which both these modes of discourse were subsets. This may well be true of the relation between science and religion in a more general sense. Unless and until we develop such a language, even if we all speak English we are simply not speaking the same language. If such a "language" could be found, it would certainly be one of the human race's greatest achievements, for until there is a mode of discourse that incorporates not only science and religion(s), but also art, feeling and all other modes of human existence, there cannot truly be the much-to-be-desired "theory of everything". Such a language will therefore have to be developed, by a slow process of coming together that is typified or perhaps even epitomized by meetings such as this. A common language of science and religion would only be a first tentative step in this process. In such a process, we would neither search for a religious justification for the scientific endeavor and its conclusions, nor to reduce mystical experience to "nothing but" a set of biochemical, electrical and behaviorally conditioned states. Instead, it would attempt to develop a vocabulary that would encompass both aspects of human existence, taking both equally seriously.

To return to an earlier suggestion, if we are to develop such a language, it seems that Buddhist involvement is crucial. Buddhism is neither Christianity nor science. Its unique approach to reality combines aspects of both - Christianity's insistence that the world is not empty of values and science's determination not to let values cloud its vision of what is really there - Christianity's understanding of the human being as having purpose and direction and science's observation that much of what we perceive as our purpose has causal precedents in the world outside our bodies and minds. This is not to say that it has "the best of both worlds", for one could argue as easily that it has both Christianity's devotion to something that may not exist at all and science's arrogant appraisal of other belief systems as primitive and superseded developments. However, its positioning in-between these two large philosophical blocs may allow it to mediate the ideas flowing from the one to the other, to soften their impact by translating them into something closer to what the receiver is accustomed to hearing. Buddhism has the tools to do this: whether science and Christianity are willing to let it play this role will have to be left to them to decide.

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On being Buddhist and unemployed

This essay is based on an original version published in in 1992 in Willem Vorster's book, On being unemployed and religious.

When I was asked to write and present a paper detailing the Buddhist attitude towards unemployment, my first reaction was a proper "academic" one: I went to the library and looked for books and articles on the topic. Much to my dismay, it turned out that no existing works on the topic "Buddhism and unemployment" existed. Neither Buddhist theologians and philosophers nor academic Buddhologists, it would appear, have paid much attention to the relationship, if any, between this ancient religious tradition and the contemporary social problem of unemployment.

A number of reasons could be advanced to explain this situation, some external to Buddhist philosophy, others closely associated with it. In the first group, one could cite the fact that Buddhism has been until recently been operative in societies which, for all their undoubted sophistication, were essentially based on an economy of small-scale agriculture. In such societies, one might perhaps be under-employed, but unemployment in the modern sense of not being economically active at all is unknown in subsistence or near-subsistence farming cultures. "Unemployment" is a concept of the modern industrial age - The first use of the term "unemployed" in the currently accepted sense of "not engaged in any work or occupation" was in Milton's Paradise Lost in 1667, and it was not in common use until the 19th century. The more abstract term "unemployment" is of even more recent origin - The first recorded instance is found in 1888, and it came into common use only in 1895. In a pre-industrial society, the concept is almost completely meaningless.

But here we are speaking about either the past or about a present which is rapidly changing beyond recall: not only is Buddhism currently expanding into the western world, including the westernized component of South African society, but the Asian cultures which still form the stronghold of the Buddhist faith are modernizing and westernizing their economies at a feverish pace. Inevitably, I believe, such modernization must involve more than the mere importation of machinery: those who operate such machinery must have at least a rudimentary understanding of the (western) scientific principles by means of which the machines operate; those who design and market the products of the machines must understand the workings of a modern market economy. In short, in modernizing their economies, Buddhist societies will inevitably have to adopt western conceptual frameworks, as has already occurred in Japan and Korea. The same, incidentally, is true of South Africa - this country, too, cannot hope to be a player in a world economy dominated by western technocracy without adopting, or in our case retaining, that civilization's paradigms: therefore, the Buddhist case may prove more instructive to us than might be immediately apparent.

Below, I shall argue that the concept of "unemployment" is largely the result of just such a paradigm. This implies that unemployment may soon become a factor in these

societies just as it has done in ours. If so, traditionally Buddhist societies will sooner or later have to face up to unemployment in their midst and formulate appropriate strategies. Hopefully, this paper will be a start to just such a process.

Other factors which may have contributed to the neglect of this topic by scholars of Buddhism are more internal to the tradition itself. As religions go, Buddhism is not and perhaps never has been a strongly socially-committed tradition. The emphasis in Buddhist philosophy is teleological; the ideal has ever been to escape from the unsatisfactoriness of the mundane world into another realm of experience which transcends the petty limitations of time and space. This, needless to say, is a vast over-generalization of the variety of Buddhist beliefs and practices which half a continent and twenty-five centuries have seen come and go, but it nevertheless holds as a general principle.

One could also cite the importance of the theories of karma and rebirth in Buddhist anthropology and ontology. While Buddhist causation-theory is not strictly determinist to the trained eye of the philosopher, it cannot be denied that the concept of future lives, the conditions of which are to be based on acts performed in this and other, previous lives, could possibly lead to a long-term, laissez-faire system of morality. In short, some of the very tenets of the Buddhist religion have conspired against the sociology of social problems becoming a viable field of study within the context of Buddhist philosophy. Only recently have a few scholars like Kitagawa (1980) and Gombrich (1988) begun to examine the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and social power structures.

But as I have indicated above, this situation will have to change. If there is no existing Buddhist response to unemployment, it should be possible to create one from the fundamental principles of Buddhist philosophy and from personal and institutional Buddhist religious practice ; and this is what I shall attempt to do in the remainder of this paper, which should therefore be seen as a Buddhist, rather than a Buddhological, attempt to address the issue of unemployment. In doing so, I hope to act also as a spokesperson for religious people generally, for despite the great conceptual differences between religious traditions, they all agree in positing the ideal of a more human-centered, compassionate society.

Predating postmodernism and other modern philosophies by twenty-five centuries, Buddhism maintains that the world we live in has no intrinsic reality apart from the mental construction which we impose upon it. In the opening words of the Dhammapada, a seminal Buddhist text, "What we are today is the result of our thoughts, and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind" (Mascaro 1983: 35). It follows that our anthropology, the way we think about people, will affect the way we react towards them. And they will react to our behavior in turn. So what is our anthropology as citizens of a twentieth-century technocratic society?

The answer can be clearly seen in the ritual that seems to inevitably take place whenever two people in western society meet for the first time. First, we need to know each others' names, a requirement which is fulfilled either by ourselves or by a third party. Once we have learnt each others' names, we might follow this up with a somewhat perfunctory "How do you do?", but soon enough the really important question crops up - "What do you do?". And the intention behind the question is clear to all concerned - my interlocutor is not interested in my marital status, my dilettante interest in opera or the fact that I spend much of my spare time watching television or reading, as the case may be. Nor are my personal happiness and spiritual attainment of any great interest. To the contrary, the intention behind the question is solely to find out what I "do for a living", in which field I am "economically active". Clearly, the economic aspect of our lives looms overwhelmingly large in our anthropology: whenever I meet someone, I am expected to inform that person that I am a bricklayer, an academic, a retired person or worst of all, that I am "unemployed".

But the implication of this excessive emphasis on economic activity in our assessment of other human beings is that a person who cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question "what do you do?" is unclassifiable in terms of our paradigm. And what cannot be fitted into our mental framework, by a common enough trick of the human mind, cannot exist. And this is why the concept of unemployment was invented - it is an attempt to create a satisfactory answer. For this is the message which we as a society are sending to the unemployed: "You do not exist as far as the most important considerations recognized by this society are concerned. You are nothing at all". It needs hardly to be pointed out at this stage of the argument that this message is based on a severely curtailed anthropology, that is, a narrow view of what it is to be human. People may not be economically active, but they still have their hopes and fears, their dreams, relationships and daily activities. In many and diverse ways, they too are contributing to the totality of human experience. Who are we to call them "unemployed"?

Thus, when we talk about unemployment, we should look beyond the brute fact that a certain number of people are not active in the economic sphere. We should also consider how our very classificatory systems have created the situation in which such people are viewed as almost sub-human. Absence of economic opportunity may be a brute physical fact, but it is our perception and interpretation of that fact that creates "unemployment". Furthermore, this is not a critique only of contemporary capitalism: Marxism makes the same conceptual error when it restricts its analysis of human beings by seeing them only as economic units. Both capitalism and Marxism are expressions of western technocracy.

But if our present dilemma is caused by our classificatory paradigm, we should be able to reverse this flow of causation: a full recognition of the multidimensional nature of human existence would tend to lessen the excessive emphasis on economic activity and would thus restore full human dignity to the unemployed. From the recognition, on both the conscious and unconscious levels, of the inherent worth of all human beings, whether "employed" or not, would follow the awareness that provision must be made for those in material need, a condition which is not identical with "unemployment".

Such considerations naturally move our argument into the area of political philosophy. In this regard, I should like to cite the influential Thai Buddhist philosopher, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa. Socialism, he declares, is preferable to capitalism in Buddhist eyes, since it lessens the greed which drives the capitalist system. But modern socialism is too materialistic: he calls for a spiritualized, humanized socialism in which each person will deeply care for all others since in essence they are all one "not in a static or absolute sense, but in the process of interdependent becoming" (Swearer 1979: 61).

Religion has always been the one human activity that has insisted on the multidimensionality of human existence. Religious traditions have formed contemplative orders for those of a mystical bent and invented ritual for those who needed it, they have promulgated ethical codes for both clergy and laity and conducted charitable work towards the underprivileged. Religion has guided the lives of pacifist and militant alike; great acts of goodness and unspeakable horrors have both been performed in the name of religion. In short, it is in peoples' religious lives that we can discern the full extent of human existence and it is to religion that we must look for ways in which the required shift in consciousness may be achieved. The remainder of this paper will focus on possible solutions from within the Buddhist tradition, but this will only be an example, and should be seen within the context of a larger tradition of religious affirmation of the holistic nature of human existence.

I have no intention of presenting Oriental societies as earthly paradises in which Buddhist teachings have totally eradicated this one-sided stress on the economic aspect of life; greed, envy and callous disregard for the environment exist there just as they do among us. Even so, the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and Buddhist practices and

institutions may offer us some suggestions how we may alter and perhaps even eradicate the paradigm which sees human beings only as units of production and assesses their worth accordingly.

Buddhism teaches that all existence is a ceaseless flow of processes. What we mistakenly refer to as "things" are in fact processes in the act of becoming. Furthermore, these processes are fully interdependent and cannot attain to even their ephemeral existence without all other processes being present. Thus, every "thing", seen from the perspective of this vast interdependence, is the sum total of the entire universe: of all that has been, is and will be. Simultaneously, and without contradiction, every "thing", seen purely by itself, is "empty"; it flickers into existence for the briefest of moments and is gone, to be replaced by something similar, but never identical.

There is no privileged position for Homo Sapiens in this system. We too exist only as temporary arrangements in this vast web of interdependent mutation and rearrangement. Thus, Buddhism insists that to describe a human being, we must attempt to describe her in her totality, in terms of every event that has made her what she is and what she may yet become. In practice, of course, this may prove impossible, but the attempt must be made, the principle must be acknowledged. To extract one aspect from the total human situation and use this as an exclusive object of study may well be an acceptable academic strategy, but when this one aspect is reified and ontologized, when it is emphasized to the exclusion of all other factors, this is unacceptable to Buddhism. In fact, it is perhaps as close as one can come to a Buddhist form of blasphemy.

Thus, in the absence of a culture-wide occidental conversion to the Buddhist faith, Buddhism would support the establishment in western society of a philosophy of mutual interdependence, with or without religious overtones. Philosophically speaking, this might imply the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead and the theology of people like John Cobb. But on the level of a mass movement, it is in the ecological movement that most progress can be seen, despite its tendency to descend into mere sentimentalism. Ecology, by its very nature, stresses interdependence and totality rather than division and particularity. When this kind of thinking is applied to the human situation, it will inevitably show the futility of our traditional paradigms.

On the social level, perhaps the most uniquely Buddhist contribution to the structure of Buddhist societies is the concept of sangha. This term is used primarily to denote the order of monks founded by the Buddha in the fifth century BCE. Its importance in this sense is shown by the fact that the formal act of becoming a Buddhist comprises a "taking of refuge" in the Buddha as historical founder of the Buddhist tradition, in the Dhamma, which here signifies the Buddha's teachings, and in the Sangha, the community of full-time religious experts. Thus, the monastic order is ranked in importance equally with the historical founder and his teachings. This importance led to the derivation of a more abstract meaning for the term "sangha": it eventually came to signify a sense of community or, to use Victor Turner's phraseology, *communitas*.

Primarily, of course, this was intended as a sense of community with fellow-believers, as opposed to non-Buddhists. But Buddhist philosophy teaches us that the distinctions which serve us so well on the empirical level are entirely mental creations with no independent ontological status. Thus, the term "sangha" must eventually be understood as a compassionate solidarity with all sentient beings, whether fellow Buddhist or not, and whether human or non-human.

But let us return for a moment to the Sangha as a social institution. The sangha was formally instituted by the Buddha himself, but has its precedents in pre-Buddhist India, where religiously-inspired ascetics, mendicants and hermits (*sannyasins*) had long been recognized as an important and even essential part of Indian society. These ascetics were full-time religious specialists who engaged in religious practices such as ritual, self-denial and meditation: they performed nothing that we would recognize as economic activity. In

fact, they stayed alive by engaging in what we would regard as perhaps the most despicable of acts: begging. Despite this, they were revered by Indian society as people to whom the world and its activities had ceased to matter and who were solely bent on attaining religious goals. Such people exist to this day in India, and subsist on the goodwill of the population as they have one for some three thousand years.

What the Buddha did, then, was to regularize this existing social phenomenon by organizing it and putting it on a more permanent footing. Buddhist bhikkhus (monks) generally practice a more communal lifestyle than the Indian sannyasins. A strict code of conduct has replaced the individualistic ways of old - this is called the Vinaya or Patimokkha and comprises 227 rules. But in essence, the bhikkhu is the Buddhist sociological equivalent of the Hindu sannyasin. Both have renounced the world and are wholly engaged, in theory at least, in the serious search for answers to religious questions. What is important for our purposes, though, is the acceptance of the bhikkhu-sangha by the lay population. Without such acceptance and material support, the sangha could not possibly survive. The fact that the lay population does voluntarily support the bhikkhus' simple needs of shelter, clothing and food demonstrates that the perception of the sangha in Buddhist countries is one of an institution that is eminently worthy of respect, even though it makes absolutely no contribution to the material wellbeing of the community.

As Buddhism split into various sects, differences between the practices of different sections of the sangha emerged. In Tibet, for example, the establishment of a Buddhist theocracy led to an estimated one-third of the male population entering the sangha. Clearly, it was unrealistic to expect all of these to practice the celibate and otherwise self-restrained monastic lifestyle, and before long certain categories of monks were allowed to marry. In Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism, the monks cultivate their own fields and are therefore less dependent on the laity for support. In this instance the daily alms-round of classical Buddhism has been reduced to a largely symbolic event. But despite such changes, the central meaning of the bhikkhu-sangha in Buddhist societies has always been the same. It has acted as an archetypal counterweight to excessive materialism and as a symbolic expression of the multidimensionality of human existence.

Thus, when I call for the reevaluation of our fundamental value-systems, and on a moving away from the excessive emphasis on the economic aspect of life within these, I am in fact advocating the establishment of a social structure that would be something like the Buddhist sangha. It need not be precisely that, of course. In fact, it need not even be explicitly religious. But it should be a structure that would stress the value of noneconomic activities for the betterment of human existence as a whole.

From the perspective of state intervention, for instance, an extension of the existing tax exemption of sports sponsorship to support of the arts would emphasize human multidimensionality. Provisions for maternal and paternal leave should be granted, not as grudging concessions to trade union demands, but simply because the joys and sorrows of parenthood are too important an aspect of human existence to be neglected. On the religious level, existing contemplative structures and tendencies in all traditions need strengthening. In such ways could we bring about a recognition that humans are multifaceted beings who cannot be summarized by referring only to the economic aspects of their lives. But we cannot relegate the project of redeveloping an emphasis on human multidimensionality to big business, big government or big religion - every one of us, personally and as a community member, has a role to play in this process. In Britain, which has the oldest and best-established Buddhist community outside Asia, "Right Livelihood" businesses, such as bookshops and vegetarian restaurants have been set up by Buddhists which try to present the western world with just such an alternative view of how life can be lived.

We are creatures of habit; even in a world such as that envisaged in this paper, we would probably continue asking a new acquaintance "what do you do?". But if the answer

was "I write poetry", we would not automatically assume that this was that person's prime way of spending his or her time and immediately ask "But can you make a living out of that?", thus implying that one's main interest in life should be identical with what one does for a living. Our new friend might spend only an hour a day on his poetry and the rest on some job or other, but this one hour would be the focus of his day, his very reason for being. Even if he were to lose his job, we could not call him "unemployed", for his poetry has enriched our culture, it has extended the meaning of what it is to be human, if ever so slightly, and continues to do so. True, if he could earn a decent living from what he loves to do most, this would constitute the ideal situation, but such utopian ideas are hardly germane to us today.

But when I say that unemployment will be eradicated by solving its root cause, which is our society's excessive emphasis on matters economic, am I not avoiding the distress caused by the lack of economic opportunity and engaging in a sterile academic exercise? In short, am I not merely defining unemployment out of existence? In a sense, yes I am, but that sense, I would maintain, is the same sense in which we, as a society, have already defined unemployment into existence. Poverty and unemployment are not the same process at all. That people experience hunger, that they have no food and shelter, that their educational facilities are inadequate - these are discrete problems which should be directly dealt with at their own level. If they can be solved by providing the person concerned with a job, well and good. But what we must get rid of is the idea that only those who are economically active, and who are therefore worthy in our eyes and according to our definitions, need to be assisted with food, shelter and culture. We who are "employed" may have to scale down our own expectations, but would that not be a worthwhile renunciation if it abolished the specter of poverty which hangs over our heads like a Damoclean sword too?

In short, we must cease labeling people as "employed" and "unemployed". To thus label our experiences, teaches the Buddha, is to show our ignorance of the essential interdependence of all processes; it expresses the strength of our false belief in our own independence from the rest of creation; our immense egoism, in fact. The prime purpose of all Buddhist thought and action has ever been to relieve suffering. To participate in this process, let us be prepared to examine even our most deeply-held beliefs and, if necessary, jettison them.

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Symbolic reactionism

Another essay originally written for Namaste magazine

We often hear the word "symbol", as in "oh, it's only symbolic". But have we stopped to think about what it means? Symbols surround us wherever we go. The red STOP sign at the end of the road is a symbol. A baby's face represented on a jar of baby food is also a symbol.

A symbol is something that points to something else. More specifically, a symbol is something simple that represents something complicated. This representation can be immediate and direct: the baby's face is such a one. Even the childless will walk past the baby food section in a supermarket and recognize and inwardly respond to the baby's toothless grin (a fact which the advertising and packaging industries are perfectly aware of). But the STOP sign? There is nothing in an red octagonal surface with white lettering that intrinsically means "bring your vehicle to a halt". This kind of symbol needs to be learnt. It is an abstract, indirect symbol.

Symbols can be multi-layered. In Catholic churches you will often find a crucifix; a fairly realistic representation of the crucified Jesus. It is not the actual Jesus hanging there, but a symbol of him cast in bronze. But in most Protestant churches, this has been further abstracted into just a cross. The cross is a symbol of the crucifix, a symbol of a symbol. This multilayering finds its ultimate expression in language: the word "cross" on this page no longer even looks like a physical cross. All the woodiness of the beams, the hardness of the spikes, all the blood and tears and suffering have been removed from it. But this word is still a symbol, pointing to the same thing as the realistic crucifix and the abstract cross.

Humans are largely defined by their use of language, for we are symbol-using animals like no other species besides us. Apes may be taught sign language, but in their native habitat they have shown little need to develop it for themselves. We humans, on the other hand, constantly invent new ways of speaking, new symbolic universes that end up appearing more real than the things they point to. Words on paper, symbols, are taken as truth itself, whether it is Holy Scripture or the daily newspaper. This happens even when they contradict our daily experience. The symbolic world becomes more real than the grass beneath our feet. And let us be clear on this: it is not only weak-willed soap opera addicts who get caught up in a symbolic world far removed from reality. We all live like this. The symbols become our new reality, and when they in turn become too complex to handle we invent new symbols that point to them.

No wonder, then, that mystics from all religious traditions urge us to return to the simple, direct experience of what lies directly before us. But ultimately, their efforts are self-contradictory. The mystic may experience God directly, but the moment he opens his mouth to inform the rest of the world of his achievement, he has no choice but to re-enter the symbolic universe in which we live. He can try, and many have, to short-circuit the process: instead of talking about his experience he can point to the sky. But even the act of pointing has a long symbolic history. We cannot escape from symbols: at best, we can take a brief holiday from them, and when we do, we go alone.

Religions are among the most prolific symbol users, and throughout history they have been eager borrowers of symbols from their predecessors. Why should this be so? For one thing, the ideas that religion presents to us are often complex ones. Entire doctoral theses have been written just about the Christian theory of the Trinity, for instance, and there seems to be no end to new ideas about this. Hinduism presents us with the counter-intuitive idea that my little self is identical to the Great Self of the All-that-is. Buddhism goes further and denies that any self exists, that at the center of all things we find only a deep, profound silence and emptiness.

These are all deep and complex teachings, and few of us have the time and energy to explore even one of them in depth. Yet all these religions believe that these are vital teachings that need to be brought to the people somehow. Symbols turned out to be the best way to do this. The calm face of the Buddha-statue shows us the peace of Nirvana. The visual representation of the sound OM refers us to the background hum of continuing creative activity that unites the universe.

But in fact it is not easy to think out new symbols that are meaningful enough that they will "stick"- ask any advertising agency. And once an old symbol has taken root, it tends to be tenacious. And so religion's usual way of dealing with symbols has not been "divide and conquer", but rather "embrace and extend". An old symbol could be adopted, if only its meaning could be changed.

Symbols and their meanings can be changed, though not easily. The best example is probably the swastika. This is a very old symbol, and one that was found widely throughout Europe and Asia in both clockwise and counter-clockwise forms. One of many ways to symbolically represent the sun, it can be found inscribed on the chest of Buddha-statues in the Far East, in Celtic grave sites in Britain, and even in its rounded, swirling variations, in Neolithic settlements in Turkey. It was a symbol of light and warmth. Of course Hitler's use of it as the prime symbol of his genocidal Nazi movement changed all that. Today, when we see a swastika, we see darkness and destruction, not light and goodness. Perhaps one day the swastika will come back in its original role, but that would probably take a measure of good as enormous as the amount of evil that has sullied it.

But the history of religions gives us many examples of symbols that have been adopted, reinterpreted and put to positive use. The easter egg is an old pagan symbol of the fertility that emerges from the earth in spring. Apart from the incongruity of celebrating a spring festival in the Southern Hemisphere's autumn, it remains among us, now serving as a reminder of the special nature of the Christian Easter festival period. Buddhism adopted even the gods of early Hinduism, but demoted them. In Buddhism, even the gods are not immortal - they too are subject to change and decay. Then, when Buddhism moved into new areas, it incorporated the existing deities of those regions as heavenly protectors of the Buddha's teachings. Even Islam, the least symbol-using of the major religions, retained the custom of pilgrimage to Mecca and all its symbolic meaning, though it was now Allah who was worshipped at the Kaaba, not the earlier Arabian deities. For the main part, however, Islam preferred to skip directly to the highly abstract level of textual symbolism, with a minimum of intermediate, realistic symbols. So, by and large, did Judaism: "thou shalt not make a graven image".

The question arises: if we all live in these symbolic worlds, out of touch with the reality to which they point, does it matter which one? Or is there one religion, one philosophy, one way of life that is somehow slightly less out of touch?

But this is in fact an unanswerable question. Once we have admitted that we live in a symbolic universe, there is no way of measuring its correspondence to reality. The only way to do that would be to compare it to reality itself. As we have seen above, this is the way of the mystic. But even the mystic, when he compares the reality he has encountered to the various symbol systems, has no choice but to express it in the terms allowed by the symbol systems themselves. It is the symbols, not the reality, that dictate what can and cannot be said. And so the comparison becomes an exercise in comparing the symbol systems among themselves, not one of comparing them to reality. It is like asking which of the following words best describes the essence of the oak tree in the lane:

English: tree

Afrikaans: boom

Spanish: árbol

The only appropriate answer is "none of the above". None of these words contain the woodiness of the tree's trunk, the fresh greenery of its leaves, the spring in the step of the squirrels on its branches. This may seem obvious. What is less obvious, but even more important to realize, is that even when I see the tree, touch the tree, smell the tree, I am still reacting to it as part of the symbolic structure of tree-ness. I am seeing, touching, smelling it as it compares to all the trees I have seen, touched and smelled before. Beyond that there is everything I have heard or read about trees, which boils down to all the trees that other people have seen, touched and smelled before me, and what they thought about that. An entire world of symbolic meanings instantly slides in between me and the tree. This is a prison, in one sense, a web of symbols from which I cannot escape. But within that web, I am relatively free to move around; to make sense of my existence, and the tree's. And I am also free to learn how to move around inside another web.

So even if we cannot say that there is one religious symbol system that comes closest to reality "out there", we can still say that we can find meaning, even deep meaning, inside one of them. The crucial question is not which one of them is right, but which one of them is right for me, which one allows me to move around until I find a place of comfort. For many, perhaps most, of us this will mean the system we learnt as children. Sheer familiarity with a given symbolic system is a powerful factor: it gives us the symbolic tools with which to "move around". For a few, it will mean searching among the systems for one that "fits" better.

And so, the next time you hear someone say that something is "only symbolic", you may be forgiven for smiling a little smile, and for saying "Yes, but what isn't?" Symbols inform our life: indeed, they are our life. Symbols are the indispensable way in which we make our way through reality. They make up our reality, they create us even while we are creating them.

At this point, the idealist philosopher would ask whether there is any reality to which the symbols refer, or whether there are just symbols pointing towards each other in an endless cycle. Religion, relying on the unanimous assertions of the mystics among the various system, insists that there is a reality. How that is described, however, will depend on the symbols used. Some will say "fullness", others "emptiness". Neither is completely correct, for both are using symbols to point to something beyond symbols. But also, neither is completely incorrect. In West Africa, itinerant story-tellers travel from village to village. Their traditional way to start telling their tales goes something like this: "This story is a lie. But not everything in it is false." A wise way of seeing the world, indeed.

* * * * *

Why we should study Buddhism

Based on an article originally published in Theologia Evangelica in 1992.

It is valuable for academics to reflect from time to time on why they do what they do, and the relevance of their study fields for the wider community. Not that relevance is the only criterion by which to determine what should or should not be studied - the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake has ever been a driving force of the human species with its innate monkey curiosity. Furthermore, what is irrelevant today may be of vital importance tomorrow and vice versa. The periodic table, for instance, is the crowning achievement of nineteenth-century physics, but at the time, its relevance was highly dubious: it would

simply not have been possible for Queen Victoria, Abraham Lincoln or Paul Kruger to assemble the foremost scientists of the day and say, "Gentlemen, I should like you to invent the fast breeder reactor". The acquisition of knowledge and understanding for their own sakes is and should remain an important aspect of any university's academic programme.

But even if the contemporary relevance of a given field of study is only one factor in determining whether it is worth studying, it is nevertheless an important one. In this essay, I shall examine my own primary field of interest, the academic study of Buddhism, and attempt to justify its existence. Needless to say, an "objective" approach to such a topic is almost a contradiction in terms - this is primarily an apologetic for Buddhology, and I shall leave it to others to criticize my work and judge whether my attempt has been successful. Hopefully, this will start a debate on the justifiability of other religiously-oriented disciplines as well.

So, why study Buddhism? And more particularly, why study Buddhism at Unisa? The first, most immediately obvious answer is that there are Buddhists in this country, and that by studying the fundamental tenets and the practical implications of their tradition, we can render the same kind of service to them that, say, a theologian can render to the Christian community or an expert in Islam to the Muslim section of the population. While this argument is valid on the face of it, it contains two defects. Firstly, it does not question the societal worth of theological and religious studies; it simply assumes that such studies are worthwhile. As I shall attempt to demonstrate below, the study of religious phenomena, in this case Buddhism, is in fact indispensable for our complete understanding of the human life-world in general and contemporary society in particular, and brings many practical benefits, but this must be established by argument, not merely assumed. Secondly, the argument falls rather flat in a country like South Africa, where Buddhists make up a negligibly small part of the population.

If the number of adherents is to be the deciding factor on the question which subjects are to be studied, then the existence of Buddhist studies at South African universities would imply that we should also have scholars and even whole academic departments specializing in the full-time study of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, the Ahmadiyya movement in Islam, Zoroastrianism, and so on. In fact, while there are certain scholars of religion with an interest in these fields, they generally subsume their studies under other headings, subdivisions of Religious Studies such as Hindu, Islamic or Ancient Near Eastern studies. But Buddhology is recognized as a distinct research field with equal status to these; it is presented by Religious Studies departments worldwide as an integral part of the curriculum and in more affluent societies such as the USA, there are in fact academic institutes entirely devoted to this subject (e.g. the Kuroda Institute for the study of Buddhism and human values at the University of Illinois). Not many of them, it is true, but the subject is clearly recognized as a valid and valuable area of study.

It is however true that an understanding of Buddhism will assist us in our understanding of and dealings with traditionally Buddhist societies. Since many of these are situated on the Pacific Rim, currently the global economic growth point and containing some of South Africa's major trading partners, such as Japan and Korea, this may yet become an increasingly important issue. If Japanese businesspeople attain their competitive edge by reading the deeply Zen Buddhist-inspired "Book of three rings" by the legendary samurai Minamoto Musashi, perhaps they know something we do not.

A more sophisticated variant of the above argument is as follows: while it is true that there are but a few committed Buddhists in South Africa, western society, of which South Africa is at least partly a member, is slowly being permeated with oriental influences. Youngsters who thirty years ago would have taken up boxing now do karate. Even small towns have ikebana displays in the annual show of the local flower arranging club, not to mention the popularity of bonsai trees. Certain trends in art, fashion and architecture show

an affinity with Japanese ideals of simplicity and spontaneity or, conversely, with a riotous display of colors and patterns that may be seen as a manifestation of Sino-Tibetan influences. The inspiration behind all these new Oriental influences, the argument continues, is Buddhist philosophy and the Buddhist view of reality and the ideal life. Thus, if we wish to understand what is happening to our society and possibly take steps to either prevent or facilitate this paradigm shift, we should study Buddhism. A similar argument could naturally be made in respect of the popularity of hatha yoga and the study of Hinduism.

It was on grounds such as the above, that the Northern Transvaal synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1983 expressed its concern over the Buddhist influences discernible in the practice of karate (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1983: 177; see also Gous 1983: 125-208). While I do not share the negative assessment of Buddhist influences that underlies this decision, the logic underlying their decision is valid and, in my opinion, sound within the synod's prevailing paradigm. Other commentators, especially, it appears, those of a Jungian bent, have reacted in the opposite way, welcoming the change with open arms.

Such an argument can easily be taken to quite ridiculous extremes, as can be demonstrated by inverting it; baseball and golf are currently two of the most popular spectator and participant sports, respectively, in Japan. Purely on this basis, would we advise the Japanese to study Christianity? But such flippancies apart, there remains an element of truth in the argument. It is true that traditional oriental society did not draw the rigid distinctions between the "sacred" and the "secular" spheres of existence that westerners are accustomed to. Martial arts can serve as a way of losing the concept of selfhood and attuning to the totality of existence, and ikebana can be an expression of one's understanding of the emptiness of conditioned reality.

They need not be this, of course. Most occidental practitioners of karate see their pursuit of this art purely as a form of physical exercise and self-defense. But, the argument goes, something of the original inspiration behind these activities remains. If we prefer not to understand this on a too esoteric level, then perhaps we can express it as follows: the possibility exists that the practitioner of karate or ikebana might decide to read books about their respective arts, and there encounter descriptions of the origins of their pursuits and how these are related to Buddhist philosophy. This might then lead, if not to an outright adoption of Buddhist principles, to an appreciation of and behavior commensurate with Buddhist practices. If this were to occur on a sufficiently large scale, the result would be a drift towards the gradual Buddhification of society.

Naturally, whether one approves of such a process or not depends on one's own prior commitments and one's opinion of Buddhism. But then at least let this be an informed opinion; and for this we need to study Buddhism. Forewarned is forearmed - we cannot leave an important social development such as this to the historians of future ages. Only a thorough understanding of how Buddhist philosophy has influenced societies in the past will enable us to predict how it may yet influence our own world.

A personal anecdote may be apposite here: when my sister was still at high school, she attended a meeting in which a locally well known evangelist told her that Buddhists worshipped by rubbing the fat stomachs of Buddha statues! This shows the enormous extent of ignorance of other faiths in our society. Not only is the corpulent statue commonly seen in the west an image of a Chinese saint called Pu Tai (Jap. Hotei), and not of the historical Buddha, but anyone even slightly familiar with Buddhist philosophy would be aware that such behavior, if in fact it exists anywhere, would be on the same level of religious behavior as a westerner "touching wood"; in other words, the level of popular ritual and superstition rather than orthodox spirituality. While the evangelist in question is undoubtedly entitled to his views, Buddhology could ensure that at least he would be able to base his attitude on factually correct information.

On a more strictly academic level, one could mention that Buddhist philosophy has addressed many of the same questions as other religious and philosophical traditions, but starting from often radically different starting-points. This provides us with an unique vantage point from which to examine our own beliefs and arguments, and discover the often well-hidden presuppositions, prejudices and apparently self-evident "facts" on which our arguments are so often based.

For instance, in the western theistic religious tradition, one problem is why there is such a thing as evil in a world created by a loving deity. Possible answers to this question are called "theodicies" and it would be beyond the scope of this article to describe the history this philosophical debate. Buddhists have a similar dilemma, but couched in slightly differing terms; "why is there suffering?". Let us briefly look at the ways in which the Buddhist paradigm would approach the question.

"Is there a problem of evil?" asks Marco Pallis, a contemporary Buddhist thinker. He comes to the conclusion that the imperfection of the world is an inseparable aspect of its finitude and therefore a normal part of phenomenal existence. Moreover, he points out that in Buddhism no "beginning" or "end" to phenomenal existence is posited: thus evil is merely "... a particular case of the relative, viewed from its privative angle. Suffering in all its forms is then accepted as a measure of the world's remoteness from the divine principle" (Pallis 1980). In other words, "evil" is merely our word for that aspect of existence which we dislike. And in Buddhist philosophy, the fact that we like and dislike demonstrates how far we are from enlightenment, thus "(the problem) is neither the existence of the world nor our idea of what a world might have been like had we been asked to create one, but solely the question of how best to rejoin our own center, which is also the center of all things ..." (Pallis 1980: 47). In other words, the reason for the existence of evil or suffering should not be sought in the world's constitution so much as in the way we approach and interact with the world: more specifically, it is stated that a grasping, self-centered attitude towards existence will produce suffering.

In Buddhist mythology, too, the abstract nature of "evil", as opposed to the more immediate, existential nature of "suffering", is symbolized by the tale of how it was the very presence of sickness, disease, old age and death that prompted prince Siddharta Gautama to set out on the road to his eventual Buddhahood. Good, therefore, needed the presence of evil to allow its full fruition. This is not seen in the Buddhist tradition as a suggestion that the "evil" was somehow an expression of a "higher good", but as a symbolic expression of a higher "nirvanic" view of reality which is beyond our good/evil system of classification.

In the higher reaches of Madhyamika Buddhist philosophy, the distinction between good and evil is completely eradicated: samsara is itself nirvana, being is emptiness, phenomenon and noumenon are one in all their apparent diversity. While nonBuddhist thinkers may have arrived at similar conclusions, and some have, the value of seeing Buddhists handle such issues lies not so much in the conclusion reached as in the way it demonstrates how a different set of initial assumptions change the entire approach to the question. The same is true, of course, of oriental scholars now becoming aware of the western religio-philosophical tradition.

Let us take a perhaps even more fundamental issue: Buddhists deny the existence and relevance of a personal, all-powerful deity, the very life-blood of western, theistic religion. Yet Buddhists, by general consensus, have managed to be religious people. Does this then imply that the category "religion" transcends theism, or is there something fundamentally wrong with our understanding of what religion is, when we can lump such philosophically incompatible phenomena as traditional Christian monotheism and near-nihilistic Buddhist causal interdependency within this category? In other words, when we start to define religion, do we not already have an mental impression of what religion is, to which we then accommodate our definition? The Indian non-theistic religions have been

a gadfly to those who sought an easy definition of religion ever since the founding of Religious studies as an academic discipline towards the end of the nineteenth century.

By raising such questions, the study of Buddhism can clarify matters in sometimes surprisingly remote corners of academia. And that might well include theology: Kruger (1989: 98) makes the point that "... a Christian theology conceived of in terms of the philosophy of Gotama rather than that of Plato, Aristotle or Plotinus is not unthinkable".

But of course the same type of argument could be raised to support the study of, say, Jainism or the religion of the Inuit. Why Buddhism in particular? The answer would appear to be that most of the other religions mentioned are too interwoven in a particular set of socio-historical circumstances to be broadly applicable to the outside world. Religions like Hinduism have developed a missionary outreach in the last century (e.g. the Ramakrishna Mission and the Hare Krishna movement), and other religions like Judaism, while rarely proselytizing actively, have always been open to converts, but only three religious traditions are universal religions, that is, only three have from the outset regarded their message as important for all humanity: Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

Accordingly, only these three have developed their philosophical and theological theses, arguments and positions in a way that allows a relatively easy transition to other, very different cultures. When I say "easy" I do not imply that we do not require a sophisticated hermeneutical strategy to understand the transition; to the contrary, I merely mean that, by and large, only these three traditions have "designed" their doctrines to be understandable to outsiders who are unfamiliar with a thousand details from everyday life. Other religious traditions, venerable and instructive though they might be, are simply too closely involved with the experience of a particular group of people to be readily assimilated into the universe of general academic discourse.

But the "family resemblance" between Islam and Christianity, at least as seen from the Buddhist perspective, is sufficiently great to enable us to see them as variants of one religio-philosophical tradition for the purpose of macro-cultural information interchange and comparison. And perhaps that by itself is an indication of how attention to the Buddhist paradigm can demonstrate our intellectual blind spots. Those, then, are some of the reasons for studying Buddhism. As intimated above, to these very pragmatic reasons must always be added the value and sheer joy of gathering knowledge purely for its own sake. The final relevance of Buddhist studies will be for history to decide, but I hope that I have demonstrated that from our perspective Buddhology, apart from its intrinsic fascination, is more than a mere intellectual luxury. Even in the absence of a substantial Buddhist community, it helps us understand other societies whose importance in the global economy is increasingly rising, it gives us valuable information about contemporary changes in our own society, and it serves as a critical tool for non-Buddhist thinkers that can enhance academic discourse as a whole. A nonsectarian university such as Unisa is then particularly well suited to take advantage of these benefits of academic Buddhology.

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*It is so rare that I get the opportunity to inflict my "poetry" upon an unsuspecting audience.
This was written around 1993.*

The Second Coming™©

Jesus was born again
in a backyard mechanic's garage in Bethlehem
between the truck and the tractor.
Christiane Amanpour covered it for CNN.

And there was supposed to
have been a heavenly host
belting out hosannahs.
But they got held up in traffic
by suicide bombers going boom.

And three eggheads from the East,
Melchior, Balthazar and Unpronounceable,
pitched up with presents
bought on Melchior's MasterCard:
A yellow knitted jumpsuit,
a big bag of Pampers
and a Playstation too.
The myrrh and frankenstein
(y'know, the smelly stuff)
had been impounded by Customs
and they'd needed the gold to make bail.

And the Vatican pronounced
that they would make a thorough study of the phenomenon
and issue a decision on its authenticity when they were done
in twenty years or so.

And the Israeli cabinet denied
that it was really him.
For this time,
the parents he picked
were Palestinian.

And the world
turned to more important things:
spring fashions in Paris,
the President's love-life
and parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan.

And Christiane left for Lebanon.

* * * * *

Book Reviews

Book reviews are another thing you end up doing if you work in academia. There's a simple reason why we do this: you get to keep the book. But you end up doing a lot of them over the years. You don't always keep track of which journal sent you the book to review, and not all journals will send you a complimentary copy if all you have contributed is a lowly book review. These are some of the more interesting books I have read over the last few years. I am embarrassed to say that I am not entirely sure where the reviews were all published ...

Bryan Rennie 2001. *Changing religious worlds. The meaning and end of Mircea Eliade*. Albany: State university of New York Press.

Many readers of this journal will remember the figure from their undergraduate days: bestriding the academic study of religion like a colossus, Mircea Eliade was presented to us as the last in a long line of "Greats", theorists who had made our subject what it is today. And even if Otto, Van der Leeuw and the rest of their generation were rapidly fading into the footnotes, Eliade remained as the one theorist who could not be ignored.

And then, tragedy. Academics are allowed somewhat of a misspent youth, provided their indiscretions are strictly non-political. Eliade, it turned out, had been in some vague way involved with fascism in his native Romania. Interest in him waned. Somehow, his personal involvement with a discredited political philosophy as a young man had discredited the thinking of his mature years. Aficionados of Heidegger may nod knowingly at this point. This affair has not aroused much interest in South Africa, where there are just too many people into whose past one should not enquire too closely, and where a collective amnesia has been endemic since the early nineties. Elsewhere, however, such things are taken more seriously.

Still, banishment does not last forever, and Bryan Rennie, a long-time writer on all things Eliadean, has compiled a book in which a number of fine academics take another look at Eliade; the man, the thinker and his legacy. And yes, the subtitle was borrowed from Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

The book is divided into distinct sections, each with a particular focus. The first of these, entitled "critique", sees three contemporary academic heavyweights wrestling with Eliade's ghost. The titles of their essays; "Building on Eliade's magnificent failure" (Roger Corless), "Methods, theories and the terrors of history: Closing the Eliadean era with some dignity" (Russel McCutcheon) and "Are there modern myths?" (Robert A Segal) give us an indication of the general tone of the critique that will be presented in this section. And, taking the three together, it is a thorough critique indeed.

The next section, "philosophy" continues the project on a more abstract level. These three essays are most likely the ones that would form the focus of a course built around this book, since they engage more explicitly with Eliade the theorist than with Eliade the

academic phenomenon. Tim Murphy, Allan W Larsen and Carl Olson are the contributors here.

It may come as a surprise to scholars of religion (it certainly did to this reviewer) that Eliade wrote fiction in his native Romanian language - indeed, he believed that he would be remembered for his fiction long after his scholarly work had been forgotten. The jury remains out on that, but this book does well to include, in a separate section entitled "literature" , not only two descriptions and assessments of Eliade's literary work (by Mac Linscott Ricketts and Rachela Permenter), but also one of Eliade's stories, "The man who could read stones", translated by Ricketts. One should not, however, expect to find a completely worked out theory of the relation between the scholarly and the literary facets of Eliade's work here (that would be the scope of an entire book in itself, no doubt).

In the same vein, the next section, "personal reflections", contains not only two essays with reflections on Eliade and his legacy (by N J Girardot and Wendell Charles Beane), but also a biographical piece by Eliade himself, written while he was a student in India at the time of the pre-independence nationalist uprising there. These additions give the book a breadth it would undoubtedly have lacked if it had just consisted of the "critique" and "philosophy" parts. They allow us to see Eliade as a human being, not merely as an academic archetype. Even if it comes across strange, at first, to find creative writing material and personal recollections in an otherwise academic text, one warms to the idea quickly and starts to think of some other books that might be improved by such inclusions ...

The final section, "applications", contains three essays (by Douglas Allen, David Cave and William E Paden) in which we see an attempt to find a continuing relevance for Eliadean theory, not quite in opposition to the first two sections, but certainly at some dissonance to them. Ultimately, I came away unconvinced, but the fact that effort was put into the re-evaluation of a once nearly universally accepted theoretical structure is itself of great value.

This book would be quite useful in a postgraduate course on Eliade, as a supplement to the study of Eliade's own major writings, naturally. But how many such courses still exist? This is the unspoken question that lies at the core of the book. It comes across as a somewhat wistful elegy for a lost age, for the last (and perhaps the greatest) modernist attempt to apply a unified Grand Narrative to the study of religion. Even without the intrusion of academically irrelevant but politically toxic factors, Eliade would have started to join his predecessors in the footnotes by now. New theorists (including some of the contributors to this book), new approaches and new sets of questions have arisen.

Despite the editor's earnest attempts in the introduction and conclusion to draw together the various strands presented in the book, one suspects that there is still more that can be said about Eliade. His ideas have been incorporated into the general toolkit and in that sense he lives on. But his era is over. The king is dead; long live ... what?

Frederick Ferré 1993. Hellfire and Lightning Rods. Orbis: Maryknoll NY

It is rare, while reviewing a book, to be wondering constantly which of one's colleagues one should lend this book to first. This is such a book. The author, who describes himself as a Christian philosopher rather than a theologian, starts from an experience related to him by his father. In rural Minnesota in the early twentieth century, a particular preacher railed against the installation of lightning conductors as being a clear opposition to God's will. Those who thus prevented the wrath of God from destroying their properties by means of lightning strikes were certainly doomed to an eternity in hell. Yet the "shiny spikes of faithlessness" continued to spread "from farmhouse to farmhouse,

from barn to hayloft to silo". Today, few if any Christians regard the installation of such a device as being in any way contrary to their religious convictions. This incident supplies the book with its title and with its central theme: the relation between science, technology and religion in a highly modernized but slowly post-modernizing world.

The preface makes it clear that this book developed out of a series of papers and articles that were later reworked to create a coherent whole. Editorial oversights have left a few gaps and inconsistencies in the structure of the work: for instance, Ferré's central theoretical construct, "multi-mythic organicism" is explained fully in chh. 12-14, but before that, on p. 108, the term is already used - without an adequate definition. Such concerns are a minor quibble, though, and do not detract from the book as a whole.

The book is divided into five main parts. In Part 1: Technology and Religion, Ferré describes the problematical relationship between science, technology and religion, with special reference to Christianity. Of particular interest here is his assertion on p. 47 that

Someday historians may look back on the twentieth century as an age of unusual faith. I am not now referring to the dramatic revivals of fundamentalisms ... in the latter decades of the century. Those revivals I take to be primarily reactions against the dominant faith of the century. That dominant faith itself has been an all-pervading and blissful trust in technology. There are many among us in the West (or global North) who still hardly recognize the degree to which technological faith has characterized our age, but this obliviousness tends to confirm the thesis, since ages tend not to be self-aware of the basic premises on which they stand.

It is this attitude of faith in technology (or *technolatry*) which Ferré is concerned to investigate. Note that he is no reactionary or Luddite - he fully acknowledges that the clock cannot be turned back. It is not technology itself that concerns him, but our worship of it and its parent, quantitative science. In a sense, the entire book is both a call for the rehumanization of and reinsertion of values into science and technology, and a discussion of how this may be done with our known philosophical and spiritual resources.

In Part 2: Science and Ultimate Belief, Ferré discusses both the supposed value-neutral character of science and its actual role in western society as a purveyor of absolute existential truths. He shows that while science may not be a religion in a strict sense of the word, it nevertheless acts as a generator of Religious World Models (RWMs) that are quite analogous to religion. Of course, this kind of analysis has been done elsewhere, and this is perhaps the weakest part of the book, but it nevertheless has a necessary function in the book's structure - it serves as an introduction to Part 3: Myths and Modernity, which shows, particularly in ch. 11, why technolatry is not, in the end, satisfactory as a spiritual path.

In Part 4: Toward Multi-Mythic Organicism, the author sets out by demonstrating how the current resurgence of popular interest in magic among westerners can be seen as yet another example of the societal crisis that pervades a western society poised between the modern and the postmodern - at such a time, the backwards pull of the premodern is felt more strongly than ever. Ferré discusses the traditional Christian worldview

To conclude, this is a truly excellent work of reflective scholarship. It combines an acute and penetrating analysis of the current problematical relation between science, technology and religion with a plea for a more passionate and caring relation among humans and between humans and their world. It manages to be logically consistent, true to the tangible facts and deeply concerned with the future of our planet. I cannot recommend this book strongly enough.

James William Coleman 2001. *The New Buddhism. The Western transformation of an ancient tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book is one of an increasing number of works on Western Buddhism. It differs from many of the others in that it seems to have been written for the express purpose of serving as a text that can be used to teach courses on Western Buddhism to undergraduate students, rather than as a communique to fellow academics. The language is commendably clear and the book is well laid-out.

The book starts out with a quick overview of the Asian heritage of Buddhism, moves on to the introduction of Buddhism to the western world and concludes with chapters discussing the phenomenon of western Buddhism with reference to the various forms of practice to be found in it, the thorny issue of sex and power relations that have rocked Western Buddhism in recent decades, and finally with a reflection on the place Buddhism may take within broader western society. All this is backed up with reference to Coleman's own empirical research, and indeed the questionnaire used in his research is included as an appendix. This could be very useful to the student unsure of how to proceed with research.

If there is to be a point of criticism, it is just this: the title gives one the impression that we will be reading a general overview of Western Buddhism as a whole. But this does not happen, for the book is tightly focused on Buddhism in the USA. British Buddhism gets a passing mention as the point of origin of Alan Watts; French Buddhism is similarly only engaged with as the home base of Thich Nhat Hanh. Australia? Canada? Germany? If there is Western Buddhism in those countries, one would never guess it from reading this book.

This is not in itself such a bad thing. There certainly is room within this field for a good, focused study of Buddhism in the USA. But when the subtitle of a book announces that it will deal with "the *western* transformation" of Buddhism, one is led to expect more. Does Coleman mean to imply that Western Buddhism worldwide is so uniform that it can be described adequately if we discuss just one part of it? Religion-state relations are quite different elsewhere in the Western world, for example, in Germany and the Netherlands. One would also like to see how the sex scandals that erupted in US Buddhist circles in the 80s and 90s were viewed in other western societies. And so the book seems to fly a false flag. This may not be Coleman's fault at all - one suspects the hidden hand of a commissioning editor here. If we think of this book as "The New Buddhism. The *American* transformation of an ancient tradition" we get a much clearer picture of the book's contents.

Other criticisms could be raised, but would be minor. A little more rigorous copy-editing would have been useful at times: for example, the big event in Chicago in 1893 is variously referred to as the "World Congress of Religions" (P7, index) or the "World Parliament of Religions" (pp 57-60). Even where two possible terms do exist, in a book of this nature it is generally better to pick a term and stick with it.

I would recommend that university lecturers who are about to offer a course in Western Buddhism give this book serious consideration. It will need to be supplemented with material on Western Buddhism outside the USA, either in the form of lectures or in that of additional reading material. But the ground that Coleman does cover, he covers thoroughly and in an easy-to-read fashion.

H M Vroom 1996. No Other Gods. Christian belief in dialogue with Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Grand Rapids, MI: W B Eerdmans

It is difficult to classify a book such as this. If it is indeed a dialogue, then it is an internal one, in which Vroom's understanding of what constitutes Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam is strongly contrasted with his personal Christian faith.

There are a number of problems with his approach. First: although he states explicitly that his analysis will include neither the New Age movement nor nonreligious philosophies, he does not adequately explain why Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam will be so treated. Then, in his conclusion, Judaism is suddenly brought into the picture. For now, let us suppose that the three religions he has chosen to deal with qualify because, in his particular socio-religious environment, they represent the clearest religious alternatives to Christianity. Further on, we shall see that there may well be other reasons.

Even within his view of the three religions, there are wide divergences. In the chapter on Buddhism, for example, he leans heavily, almost exclusively, in fact, on the philosophy of the Kyoto School. This school has been influential in shaping twentieth-century perceptions of Zen Buddhism, of course, though perhaps more in academic circles than among rank-and-file Buddhists. But Vroom, perhaps unintentionally, makes it stand for *all* of Buddhism. One longs for a mention of the Theravada scholar Buddhadasa, or of the many Tibetan scholars of the Vajrayana school, to show some of the internal variation within Buddhism. What really interests Vroom here is the concept of Emptiness (*shunyata*), and indeed the writings of the Kyoto school are one of the most accessible ways of approaching this topic, at least partly because of Abe Masao's long-running debate with Christians. He enters this internal debate with a definite view in mind: "... I examine a religious tradition that does not believe in God as the source of all things ... and then suggest a few reasons for believing in God despite (their) ideas" (p 7). I will not here enter into a discussion on the validity of Vroom's objections to the Buddhist idea of Emptiness.

Having so severely restricted the scope of Buddhism, one would then logically expect Vroom to do the same with Hinduism: to discuss the works of contemporary or near-contemporary Hindu scholars and intellectuals such as Aurobindo or Bhave, or failing that, the works of a single classical school of Hindu philosophy. But he does not. Instead, after giving a wide-ranging overview of Hindu teachings he arrives at the topic that is his prime interest: reincarnation. Almost a third of the chapter deals with this one issue and Vroom attempts to repudiate it. At times, this repudiation is little more than an opposition of one belief with another: "First, I do not believe that all things ... have a permanent, immutable 'self' that takes first one and then another 'name and form' ..." (p 80). Other objections are stated in a more sophisticated way, but all can be traced back to his specifically Christian understanding of the problem of evil. It would have been interesting and instructive to see at this point a rejoinder by a Hindu scholar, to turn this into a real dialogue. Another issue arises: reincarnation is an equally important motif in Tibetan Buddhism as in Hinduism, yet the topic is ignored in the chapter on Buddhism, just as the concept is accepted as valid, but then largely ignored in practice, in Zen Buddhism. Here again we see how Vroom is limiting his analysis deliberately, but in a somewhat haphazard way.

When Vroom arrives at the chapter on Islam, he changes tack once again. Here, the emphasis is on whether the Islamic God and the Christian are the same and, related to that, the Christian view of the true prophethood of Mohammed and the scriptural validity of the Koran. Here, the more familiar surroundings of a monotheistic religion give him far more room to maneuver and we see him at his best as he skillfully teases out the conceptual differences between the two traditions.

By now, we see a pattern emerging. Vroom does not have a problem with Buddhism as a whole, but with the concept of emptiness; not with Hinduism as a whole, but with the idea of reincarnation; and not with Islam as a whole, but with the Muslim understanding of deity. In each of the three religions which the chapters are purportedly about, he zeroes in on just those concepts that are most troublesome to his Christian belief and counters them, with greater or lesser success, from a Christian point of view. Not that he attacks the other three religions in an aggressive way: indeed, he sees much that is of value in each of them.

In the final chapter, he tries to tie together his observations. He reiterates that all the religions he has examined have a contribution to make to each other, repudiates a rigidly exclusivist point of view, replacing it with a notion not unlike that of the "anonymous Christian":

According to the Revelation of John, people will praise Christ as the Lamb. Perhaps people who were Buddhist or Muslim while they lived had not ever expected that they would praise Christ, but they will not have to become members of the Christian church to do so. They will learn a few things they do not know at this moment, but I am afraid that that holds for Christians as well. (p 142)

But this does not lead him into a vapid acceptance of all religions as being intrinsically the same. Real differences do exist, and must be acknowledged:

If the Buem and Akkan people in Ghana call the transcendent Nyankopon Kokurako (the Almighty God), Oboadee (Creator) and Nyame (the Radiant) ... then one can conclude that these people intend the same God as Jews and Christians. If a Zen master states that faith in God is only halfway down the road to ultimate wisdom because the idea of a separate being, distinguished from the world in which we live, is naive and betrays attachment to the self, then I see no philosophical ground for concluding that Zen and Christianity refer to the same divine or "empty" transcendence. (p 148)

What comes out of this book in the end is not an attempt at comparing four religions "objectively". Nor is it even a formal theology of the religions. Rather, it is a fascinating account of Vroom's personal struggle, both as an academic and as a believer, to make sense out of the existence and truth-claims of four different religious traditions. Not in an autobiographical sense, but rather in the sense of the struggle that must go on every day in any person who takes the truth-claims of the religions seriously. He makes no claim at having a final answer: it is the process itself that matters.

Ninian Smart 2006. *World Philosophies. Second Revised Edition.* (edited by Oliver Leaman). London: Routledge.

500 pages on the philosophies of the world, East, West and South, ranging across millennia? This is the kind of book I wish I had in my possession twenty-five years ago when I was a student. Today, however, I would be reluctant to spend my own money on it, and it would be unconscionable to require students to spend theirs. This is not the book's fault. It is a reflection on changes in how we access and use information.

In this, one of his last published works, Smart uses a broad conception of “philosophy”. This is about world views, indeed, about cosmologies, not about the meaning of words. The chapters are laid out primarily by geographical origin, starting with “South Asian philosophies” and ranging worldwide before ending with an (all-too-brief) chapter on “African philosophies”. Just about the only part of the world that Smart does not deem to have a philosophical tradition of its own is Australasia. Within each of these chapters, the discussion follows roughly historical lines of development. It is, therefore, not an encyclopedia, to be dipped into in search of specific information. If one needs information on Ramanuja, it certainly helps to know that Ramanuja was a Hindu thinker and that he will be dealt with under South Asian Philosophies.

Nor is it a book to read from page one right through to the end. Its sheer size alone would prohibit that for most readers.

Instead this is a bibliophile’s delight, the magnificent swan song of an renowned academic who always excelled at writing clearly and intelligibly about complicated subjects. Smart never talks down to his readers, but somehow always manages to get the core of his topic across without lapsing into excessive jargon. It is the kind of book in which one can dip at semi-random to find new worlds of thought (“There are South American philosophies? I must read that”), and return from time to time to revisit old favorites.

World Philosophies will get a permanent place on my book rack next to Russell’s *History of Western Philosophy*, to which it is almost a companion volume. But neither book will get the attention they would have received by my younger self.

For as voluminous as it is, *World Philosophies* cannot compete with the new sources of information that are available today. Take, for example, Mani and Manichaeism philosophy. Smart manages to squeeze in one page on both the man and his thought, including the recurrence of Manichaeism ideas in medieval Europe and its influence on Christianity. About 300 words, then (*World Philosophies*, pp 174-175).

Now consider the student’s favorite source of material to plagiarize, Wikipedia. Here we find a 5000 word article on Manichaeism, with separate articles on the biography of its founder, on neo-Manichaeism, and links to related topics like gnosticism and dualism.

One may legitimately question the quality of Wikipedia material. But the sheer quantity of information that is instantly available simply dwarfs any possible book project. And, as we keep reminding our students, Wikipedia is merely the beginning of a search for information, not the end of one. Once we take account of all the quality information on Manichaeism available online, it would rival *World Philosophies* as a whole.

And so, *World Philosophies*, which received much praise when it first appeared in 1999 (ironically, just one year before the first stirrings of the Wikipedia project), now comes across as an antiquarian *objet d’art* rather than the utilitarian source of knowledge it once was. What was the swan song of a great academic may well, in this second edition, signal the swan song of an entire category of books.

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About the author

Michel Clasquin-Johnson is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Africa and was until recently, the entire Buddhological establishment on the continent of Africa (There’s a new guy down at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University: He writes good stuff but let’s wait and see if he sticks with it). He lives in Pretoria, South

Africa with his wife, son and two motorcycles. He likes to think that he practices Buddhism (in his own way) as well as thinking about it. The entire Buddhist world disagrees, but is too polite to say so.

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