



The Crucified and Risen Buddha? A Question of Finality

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The crucified and risen Buddha—is this combination of words appropriate? Why or why not? Perhaps in answering this question light can be thrown upon the meaning of “finality” as applied to Jesus and so also on the continued viability of preaching in this name in a religiously plural world.

I. A TRIPLE REFERENCE

There is a threefold reference in the words, “the crucified and risen Buddha.” We will have to examine the appropriateness of this combination by the possible ways in which it connects these three references. With “crucified” there is an irrevocable historical reference to time and place—“suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died and was buried.” With “risen” there is an equally irrevocable linkage to divine action that breaks beyond time and space—“on the third day he rose again from the dead.”

These two references are the standard stuff of christology. But the repetition of “crucified and risen” is not yet a christology. It is the necessary presupposition for christology, necessary but not sufficient. Further terms are needed to link these first two terms with a meaning for human life. And that was the business of the New Testament: “This Jesus...you crucified...God raised up, and...has made him both Lord and Christ.”¹ And so the giving of titles commences and with that the claiming of a redemptive meaning for the crucified and risen Jesus—Lord, Christ, Savior, Son, logos, and on and on.

¹Acts 2:23, 32, 36.

But now we propose “buddha.” Does the linkage work? Does this title refer to a meaning relevant to the human life of the crucified and risen Jesus? The third reference is to a radically different tradition, one that has no historical connection with Jesus, no connection with the Hebrew Scriptures, none with the Greco-Roman world. It seems odd to say the least.

To even propose the linkage forces these questions at a minimum: (a) What legitimacy do other religions have as religions—the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Native American among others? (b) Whatever answer we give to the first question, is there any legitimate meaning giving connection between the title “buddha” and the reality Jesus lived and he himself was? (c) If Christians were to appropriate this title, would Buddhists applaud or deplore the appropriation?

In this essay we shall ponder this set of questions and then consider in what way these reflections assist us in speaking of the finality of Jesus.

II. WHAT ABOUT THOSE OTHER RELIGIONS?

There is little point in speaking of the finality of Jesus in our day and then, like the proverbial ostrich, burying our heads in the sands of tradition, ignoring the fact of other religions and the claims they press. We must face the questions in a clear-headed and straightforward manner.

There are, to boil matters down, three broad options. There are those who hold as a matter of principle that other religions than Christianity, or my brand of Christianity, are God-forsaken, devoid of truth, and simply and plainly illegitimate—if not demonic. Those who assert this are dogmatic exclusivists. There are others who hold as a matter of principle that all religions (save for a few exceptions, such as the Jim Jones variety, that can be excluded on moral grounds) are equally valid as ways of salvation and that Jesus is but one of potentially innumerable saviors. These we can call dogmatic pluralists. The former group has a wide following among fundamentalist and certain conservative-evangelical groups. The latter constitute a not small and increasingly vocal and crusading elite within mainline Protestant and Catholic groups.²

Both extremes appear simplistic and unbiblical. There are others who wish to take both the exclusive claims of the gospel and the pluralist fact of our time seriously, without falling into either the exclusivist or pluralist ditch. The gospel's claim, while it surely needs interpretation, cannot be discarded; and the fact of pluralism, while it too needs interpretation lest we be misguided, cannot be ignored. There is no single way in which claim and fact are usefully held together. We will suggest one way to do so.

Carl Braaten has correctly observed that, "The New Testament nowhere makes the claim that Christ is the one and only revelation of God in history and to humanity."³ He goes on to cite Barth who, contrary to the caricature many hold of his theology, did in fact speak strongly of revelation outside Bible, church, and gospel. "We recognize," Barth says, "that the fact Jesus

²A recent publication typical of this crusade is John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987).

³Carl E. Braaten, "Salvation through Christ Alone," *Lutheran Forum* 22/4 (1988) 11.

Christ is the one Word of God does not mean that...there are not other...revelations which are quite real." This is so, for "if the whole world of creation and history is the realm of the lordship of the God at whose right hand Jesus Christ is seated," then there ought to be no surprise if God "exercises authority in his outer as well as the inner sphere and is free to attest Himself or to cause Himself to be attested in it." Barth thus speaks of "parables of the kingdom" in the religions which, as Braaten says, are "saying materially the same thing" as Bible and church.⁴

We shall take these intimations seriously. In biblical language, "God did not leave himself without witness."⁵ We cannot dismiss the religions from the sphere of God's revealing activity. Having said this, however, the question quickly comes: "Are the religions also the sphere of God's saving activity?" And here the issue is joined between the pluralist and the one who wishes to keep both claim (that Jesus is the one and only Savior) and fact (of religious pluralism) in mind. Are the religions, at least hypothetically, equally ways of salvation? Would denial of this not be to make God a narrow-minded deity, a stingy giver of that which humanity needs more than anything else? Paul Knitter, for one, has argued a strong case against Jesus Christ as the only savior and for the equal validity of other ways of salvation.⁶

What case then do we make for the legitimacy of other religions and their relation to the gospel we preach? I will comment on three points: (a) the distinction between revelation and salvation; (b) the relation of the religions to revelation; and (c) the relation of the religions to salvation.

1. Revelation and Salvation.

First, it is important to make and to maintain a distinction between revelation and salvation; I will offer three reasons why this is so. The first reason has to do with the primacy of the subjective factor in revelation and the primacy of the objective factor in salvation. Revelation is always connected with the subjective state of the recipient, whether it be a matter of knowledge or experience or both. Revelation fails to achieve its objective without a subjective appropriation. It is, furthermore, infinitely repeatable. Salvation, on the other hand, is first of all an event that is independent of any subjective situation and as such is once-for-all and unrepeatable—the people of Israel once rescued from Egypt are rescued, and this is so regardless of how they feel about it or whether they even know it or not. It cannot be repeated without anew experience of slavery intervening, but then it is anew and different liberation which has its own unrepeatable identity. To be sure, having created a new situation—deliverance from Egypt, for instance—a new set of dynamics is introduced, and so salvation is also a process (including the subjective awareness that comes through revelation about

⁴Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV /3.i.97 (cited in Braaten, “Salvation through Christ Alone,” 9). Braaten makes a clear distinction in this essay between the exclusively Christocentric approach of Barth’s positive accounting for the religions and the Lutheran approach which works with both creation and christology (see esp. p. 11).

⁵Acts 14:17.

⁶Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

this salvation), but it is a process only in so far as a once-for-all new situation has already taken place.

A second reason that the distinction is important is that revelation is not its own end, whereas salvation is. Revelation always has an intention toward salvation (a changed circumstance), otherwise it would have no meaning or purpose. This intention can be either retroactive in nature (tell our children about the rescue from Egypt) or anticipatory (there is a messiah coming). Or, it can be existential (“You only have I chosen!”), inviting the recipient to enter fully into the enjoyment of that salvation. As such, revelation is always in the service of salvation, not the other way around. Thus, for instance, the preaching of the gospel is always in the service of the witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which is our salvation. This life, death, and resurrection are not in the service of the gospel (as a kind of illustration or object lesson).

A third reason for the distinction is that salvation, unlike revelation, is not simply an event for us, but an event for God. That is to say, salvation has an ontological depth that is the logically prior ground for God’s revealing activity. Salvation engages the fullness of the divine depths. It is an event that creates anew situation not only for us, but also for God. John 3:16 (as only one statement) already makes clear this ontological depth, and the new situation that it

creates for God—the Son suffers rejection and death while the Father suffers loss. Change occurs from God, for God, and within God.

To confuse revelation with salvation, or vice-versa, amounts to an equation of the two and is in effect to have only revelation and no salvation. Why is this so? Revelation is fundamentally an epistemological category whereas salvation is a category of event, with a deeper ontological reach. If an equation is made, the more complex will always be reduced to the more simple category, and with this goes the loss of depth. Simply put, salvation becomes revelation; it becomes a subjective category of knowledge and experience and no more. The history of doctrine illustrates clearly this reduction of the more complex to the more simple. Anus, for instance, sought to avoid the ontological (and therefore complex) depth implicitly claimed in Christian liturgy in which Jesus Christ is worshiped as only God should be worshiped. Anus opted for the simple notion of divine impassibility and so spoke of a created logos that was not God. The church rejected this simplification and affirmed the complex depth of tri-unity.

Paul Knitter, as one pluralist, risks confusing the two (revelation and salvation) in this simplifying way. He suggests “that Jesus saves not by ‘doing’ or ‘repairing’ anything” (thus rejecting an “event” definition of salvation), “but by showing, revealing what is already there but so often unfortunately missed” (thereby completing the process of reducing salvation to an epistemological category).⁷ Knitter finally makes salvation and revelation doctrines about us, not about God. Theology becomes anthropology.

⁷Ibid., 118. Though he couches this in a “perhaps,” the final argument of the book makes clear this is in fact his proposal.

2. Religions and Revelation

Now, let us apply this distinction between revelation and salvation to our understanding of the religions. We will deal with revelation and the religions first, the easier of the two.

We have no good reason to doubt that religions other than Christianity are or can be bearers of God’s revelation to humanity. As such, they have a positive and constructive function to play in the economy of God’s saving work. The Barth/Braaten comments have already clued us in to this. This assertion most immediately raises the question of the status of Scripture. Scripture, of course, belongs to the category of revelation. The Scriptures, whether Old or New, the Bhagavadgita or the Qur’an, are certainly not our salvation. One way to put the question is, “Are there many revelations out there on a par with the Hebrew Scriptures? Are there many ‘old testaments’?”

We will pose a brief answer without a long elaboration. The relation of the religions to God’s saving work is either more direct or more indirect. At least four degrees of directness need to be stated. The witness of the apostles has the most direct relation to God’s saving work in Jesus. In this sense there is an epistemological advantage in the apostolic witness. The covenant with Israel witnessed to in the Hebrew Scriptures and still embraced by Judaism is, in a different way, also directly related to God’s saving work in Jesus. It is the immediate and necessary presupposition for the revelation given in and through the Jesus-event and is required for appropriating its meaning for us. Here too there is an epistemological advantage.

In a less direct way, the religions and climate of experience and thought in the Greco-Roman world that provided the categories that helped interpret the Jesus-event in a Hellenistic

Jewish or Gentile context also entered into that revelatory event as part and parcel of it. Thus, to mention just two examples, Jesus is related to “logos” and is addressed as “Lord.” In yet a different and indirect way, the religions of the world today bring their promise and gifts to the world community, making possible an even wider circle of interpretation and appropriation of God’s saving and revealing work in Jesus Christ. As Braaten puts it: “The community must listen to these alien witnesses to the truth, search for material agreement, and let them illumine, accentuate, and explain (without replacing or rivalling) the biblical and Christian witnesses.”⁸

There is, however, a danger in this way of putting it. This danger is that we look into the mirror of other religions and only see ourselves reflected back. The significance of other religions is not exhausted in supposed similarities. We must interpret the words “illumine, accentuate, and explain” in a strong sense. We might in fact find that the witness of another religion challenges our accepted, and perhaps flawed and narrow, ways of interpreting Jesus, challenging us to the bone. For this reason, it is far more important that we listen to the witness of other religions in the ways that they are different from our accepted ways than in the ways that they seem the most similar. These differences must be tested against us—yes, *against* us—

⁸Braaten, “Salvation through Christ Alone,” 10.

and in the light of the gospel. Without this we might miss the witness that God has precisely for us today in and through that religion. Simple difference, like simple similarity, has no virtue in and of itself. Its significance for the gospel can only be known through a testing—a testing that dialogue will force upon us. This is a venture, a risk, but done in faith in the gospel. We need to be ready whatever convincing witness another religion brings to us, however hard it may be to give that heed. Only in this openness of faith can we avoid a selective seeing of ourselves in other religions.⁹

3. *Religions and Salvation*

Thirdly, the relation of other religions to salvation needs to be addressed. What shall we say here? What can we say?

We have already argued that revelation and salvation are to be distinguished. Knitter forces the next question when he asks: “What kind of a God is this who offers a revelation that can never lead to salvation...? Is it not a rather capricious, teasing God...?”¹⁰ Yes indeed! Althaus, whom Braaten affirms, seems to suggest just this: “Outside of Christ there is indeed a self-manifestation of God, and therefore knowledge of God, but it does not lead to salvation, or union between God and man.”¹¹ What does Althaus here claim to know? How does he know?

Revelation and salvation, though distinct, are surely related. We have already rejected Knitter’s *equation* of the two. We also find Althaus’ language inadequate. He *separates* the two. He is too tied to a rigid law-gospel dichotomy. What right have we to say that some of God’s revelation is only law, that it lacks an interior relation to Christ? We have already argued that revelation always intends salvation—salvation (gospel) is its *raison-d’etre*. Surely we need a more dynamic way of relating the two (including law and gospel) than simply flipping the law-gospel coin. We always seem to know ahead of time which way it will fall!

For the purposes of this essay I will make a straightforward seven-fold proposal and leave it at that.

First, from what God has done in Jesus we have a sure knowledge of what sort of God is active wherever there is revelation. Second, we know that revelation always intends salvation. Third, we know that in God's decisive act of raising Jesus from the dead salvation has been accomplished (though it still awaits consummation). Fourth, we know that revelation in the history of Israel was a revelation that, though "outside Christ" in a technical sense, yet mediated salvation in view of Christ. Even though, externally speaking, God's revealing activity may be more or less directly related to the Jesus-event, as a work of God it is surely always—however indirectly—internally related to that event. When questioning the possibility of

⁹John Cobb speaks of a "mutual transformation." This is certainly part of what we intend here. See his *Beyond Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

¹⁰Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 116.

¹¹Paul Althaus, "Die Inflation des Begriffs der Offenbarung in der gegenwärtigen Theologie," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 18 (1941) 143. See Braaten, "Salvation through Christ Alone," 11. Braaten comments that "Paul Althaus puts it just right for Lutherans." I am not so sure.

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gentiles sharing in salvation as gentiles, Peter had his vision of the sheet filled with unclean creatures. His first words to Cornelius speak volumes: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."¹² These words became not an excuse from preaching but the very reason for preaching. There was a dynamic, interior relation between the previous gentile experience of revelation and the gospel of Jesus.

Sixth, we know that no rite, no holy act, no belief, whether Christian or pre-Christian, in and of itself guarantees our share in God's salvation. Not even baptism does that in itself. Baptism is a visible sign of God's invisible promise made concrete in Jesus. In that promise and its concrete enactment in Jesus occurs the salvation of any and all who are related in an internal and dynamic way to salvation through God's revealing activity. These things we know.¹³

But, seventh and finally, one thing we do not know—where and how this occurs outside the hearing of faith (*fides ex auditu*). Thus, the modern penchant to specify the religions as ways of salvation in their own right is to overstep the bounds of knowledge given to us. Here we will maintain the silence of respect. Yet, even as the inner *telos* of the revelation vouchsafed to Israel was Christ, so it is in all cases. But not without surprise and transformation. The crucified and risen Jesus never fits the categories—not even that of messiah. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ makes possible the occurrence of the surprise of faith within history. So it was for Cornelius.

This is a partial answer. Much more needs to be said, but we cannot say it here.

III. FACING UP TO THE BUDDHA

We have in this issue something far bigger than this short essay can deal with. But in the light of what has been set forth above we can begin to make some tentative suggestions that may bring us a way forward.

What perhaps strikes one initially is the incongruity of this linkage: the crucified and risen Buddha. The Buddha, as the "enlightened one,"¹⁴ had broken through all experience of human attachment to a state beyond attachment. The agony of a cross bespeaks at least a lingering

attachment to life and a distaste for death of the one who suffers so. It would be different had Jesus been essentially indifferent to his particular fate. But the prayer in Gethsemane shatters any such wishful thinking. The agony of the crucified does not fit the equanimity of the enlightened one. Crucifixion speaks

¹²Acts 10:34f.

¹³Time does not permit a development of theological arguments here. At least three immediately present themselves: a cosmic christology in line with Colossians and Ephesians (cf. Knitter's comments on Devanandan and Thomas in *No Other Name?*, 110-113); a lordship christology (see Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV /3 for an example of this); an eschatological christology (see Braaten's speculations in "The Meaning of Evangelism in the Context of God's Universal Grace," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 3 [1987-1988] 9-19, especially the latter portion). All three have solid biblical basis.

¹⁴This is the title given to Shakyamuni of the 6th century B.C.E. much as Christ or messiah ("the anointed one") was a title given to the first-century Jesus.

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of an irreversible rootedness in human and earthly existence—with its attachments!

So also with resurrection. But this speaks of an equally irreversible unearthly connectedness. Here God, and a faith in God, comes into the picture. It can certainly be said that for a believer in God, this (God) is the last and most difficult attachment to overcome. The Buddha had no attachment to God, for he believed in no God with whom to be attached. There was a radical acceptance of reality as it occurred to one, without a questing for a refuge from that reality. The Buddha had penetrated by insight into the core of reality and discovered that this core was characterized ultimately by impermanence and non-substantiality. At the core there was no core, for even the supposed core proved to be empty of its own being, its own independent, autonomous reality; it could not be grasped. So also, God for the Buddha was a symbol which proved to be an illusion with no graspable reality corresponding to the name. To speak of resurrection, as Christians do, is still to speak of God and a world, and to lend a non-fictional semblance to that which is essentially fiction. So the Buddhist will speak. Thus "risen" and "Buddha" hardly seem to fit well together.

Despite this seeming incongruity, there is a persisting tug between what Jesus was and what the Buddha exemplifies. The Buddha had discovered and made concrete a truth that was valid for all times and places. This is the Buddhist claim. All beings are embraced by this same truth. At the heart of this truth is the radical denial of a self-standing, independent, autonomous self or ego. Each individual, whether Buddha or Jesus, bears the quality of infinitely conditioned existence. Wisdom, enlightenment, was an insight into the infinitely conditioned, dependent character of every individual moment—the moment that I am, the moment that you are. To have this insight, and so to die to a clinging to the self, was to gain the world, all phenomena, the whole of reality—truly a symbolic death and a symbolic resurrection. To be a Buddha is to have been enlightened to this truth and to live and die by it.

What affinity does this have to what Jesus was? Truly Jesus died to his own self, his own ego, his own identity. "Take up your cross and follow me," he invited. The one that thought to gain his or her life would lose it. Each had to die to self-clinging, just as a seed must give up its own secure identity and die before it can bear fruit and grow. This image of the seed, an image with which all Buddhists are familiar from their own texts, makes the meaning of the infinitely conditioned quite clear. If a seed is placed in the ground, but clings to its own isolated identity, it

remains inert. If, however, it opens itself and responds to the multiple conditions that surround and embrace it—the soil and its minerals, moisture, warmth, and so on—it will find a new and different life. Only that death, only that opening out to its total environment, only that loss of “security” provides security. The Buddhist would understand this.

In his theological elaboration of this truth about Jesus, Paul speaks of

an “emptying.” Jesus “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.”¹⁵ Jesus entered into the infinitely conditioned state of being a human. “The logos became flesh.”¹⁶ This too the Buddhist would understand, at least in part. And applying this truth to the individual Christian Paul speaks some of his most memorable words: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”¹⁷ Here Paul is infinitely conditioned by the reality of Christ. In this message of the gospel, at whose heart is the word about a dying to oneself, is a tug in the direction of the enlightenment of the Buddha, whose enlightenment was precisely a dying to self.

Does the linkage fit? It does and it does not. As with the messiah, the category is not adequate. As categories are applied to Jesus they take on a new, and often unexpected, meaning. Yet the old meaning is a necessary ingredient of its appropriateness. Jesus is the messiah in a genuinely appropriate sense. Jesus is “the anointed one,” with the authority and prerogatives implied in that designation of honor. Might Jesus also be “the enlightened one,” also in a new and unexpected sense, but yet in a sense that is genuinely appropriate to the prior meaning? Might that prior meaning “illuminate, accentuate, and explain” better for us, for others, who Jesus really is? Does Buddhism implicitly invite the Christian to a further exploration of this possibility?

IV. AND WHAT ABOUT FINALITY?

This essay has assumed that Jesus Christ is God’s final word given to the world. It assumes that this affirmation is not an argument to support the gospel but is itself the gospel. This is the *solus Christus*. But final in what sense?

It is final because Christ sums up the past. Something comes to its end and fulfillment here. We have spoken of the inner *telos* of all revelation and its intention towards salvation. This summing up is a complete openness to the past not only to its good but to its evil. At the same time it is a creative and surprising summing up; it remains eternal in its surprise. The summing up is done in a “hidden” way (humiliation, not triumph), open only to faith, even while it is a public spectacle. The history of christology has only begun. This summing up continues as we encounter ever new surprises in what the crucified and risen one means for God and for us.

It is final because Christ anticipates the future. That is, it is final because it is not final. The infinity of God’s future lies ahead, and this infinity has been finitely anticipated. Were this the end, meaning there is no “more,” much less a “morrow,” it would amount to the finality of death as our cosmic eschaton. But Christ is risen. The continual surprise of God’s future stands before us. The risen one is the guarantee and foretaste of a not yet complete future. Every future is decisively, i.e., redemptively, anticipated here.

¹⁵Philippians 2:6-7.

¹⁶John 1:14.

It is final because Christ encounters our present. In this encounter we are deconstructed and reconstructed. It is final, because the whole truth about us is disclosed now, in this moment, in this encounter. We are being summoned to an absolute accounting; we are being astonished by an absolute giftedness—a word of grace beyond which no truer or more final word can be spoken. Now, in this moment, we live in the present absolute of “through faith for faith.”¹⁸

The crucified and risen Buddha? Does this sum up in a surprising way something of our human past? For instance, our human Buddhist past? Does it anticipate something of God’s future? Will there be a “buddha,” an “enlightened one” in that future? Does it encounter our present—as an infinitely conditioned present in which we find nothing to which finally to cling? But we need no longer cling for we are clung onto.

The one who lives by this finality of Jesus will not be apprehensive, defensive, or belligerent amidst the religious pluralism of our day but can enter into that arena, the contemporary arena from which none of us can now escape, in a spirit of faithfulness, anticipation, discovery, and hope. Let us live so and do so.

¹⁸Romans 1:17.