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Truth and Strangification: Religious Dialogue Between Buddhism and Christianity


ABSTRACT: I take the act of strangification (waitui), understood on linguistic, pragmatic and ontological levels, as the access to truth, not only in the scientific micro-worlds, but also in different cultural worlds and even different religious worlds. The act of strangification is more basic, feasible and fruitful than Habermas’ concept of truth as consensus through “communicative action”. The Habermasian argumentation tends to fail if in the process of Begrudung and in the act of searching for consensus there is no effort for strangification, without which there will be no real mutual understanding and self-reflection during the process of argumentation. Strangification is taken here to be the prerequisite for any successful communication and coordination, including inter-religious dialogue, and strangifiability taken here to be a criterion of truth.

Christianity and Buddhism are two world religions with their long traditions of belief systems, philosophies and spirituality. Both of them have well succeeded in extending and spreading themselves to the whole world becoming by way of strangification in the process of their long histories. What I am doing in this paper is to put them into dialogue within the framework of my ideas of “contrast” and “strangification”.

Under the idea of contrast, Christianity and Buddhism will be seen as different but complementary, distantiating yet co-belonging. I will deal with the following religious doctrines, all in focusing on comparing Buddhist enlightenment and Christian salvation, both essential for leading humankind in going through the darkness of this nihilist modern/post-modern world. (1) Christian and Buddhist common concern for human sufferings, physical as well as moral, and their root in human nature. (2) Christian salvation in contrast to the enlightenment of Buddha nature: the principle of transcendence versus the principle of immanence. (3) Christian fulfillment of Being and
Buddhist emptying of emptiness. (4). Virtue ethics as common to both Christianity and Buddhism and as the practical Way to overcome nihilism and domination.

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I. Truth, Strangification and Contrast

The idea of Truth, if true at all, should be very comprehensive and enjoys a common ground, not only in science, but in all domains of human experience with affectivity, knowledge and belief system, especially in the domains of science, culture and religion. Today we are facing a time of radical change of science, in which no single discipline can supply us with a complete image of any object and adequate solution to any problem. Interdisciplinarity has become a necessary method for the mosaic of human knowledge as well as solution to practical problems. As to culture, with the on-going process of globalization, we’re facing today a situation of multiculturalism both on national and international levels, in which frequent encounter, confrontation and even conflict with other cultures become not only a specific feature of this period of history, but also part of our everyday life. On the level of religion, we see more or less the same situation, in which even it is still necessary for each religion to claim an absolute truth of its own, but, in the meanwhile, this truth is always relativized by confrontation against or dialogue with other religions.

In responding to today’s urgent situation full of conflicts created by self-enclosure of different parts, such as different scientific disciplines, cultural communities, political and religious groups etc., we humans should be more concerned with the other and the possibility of mutual enrichment. In order to overcome antagonism by appealing to effective dialogue, “strangification” and “language appropriation” should be taken as viable strategies. The term “strangification”, a neologism that might appear strange in English, yet much more understandable in Chinese—waitui, means etymologically an act of going outside of oneself to the other, or going outside of one’s familiarity to strangeness, to strangers. This act presupposes “appropriation of language” by which we learn to express our ideas or values in language of others or understandable to others. “Strangification” and “language appropriation” in their turn presuppose an original generosity towards the other, without limiting oneself to the claim of reciprocity, quite often presupposed in social relationship and ethical golden rules.

The concept of strangification was first proposed by Constructive Realism as an epistemological strategy for interdisciplinary research and then was extended by myself as a strategy of cultural interaction and religious dialogue¹, applicable not only to different scientific micro-worlds, but also to different cultural and religious worlds.

In the world of science, different scientific disciplines, because of their difference in methods and languages, construct accordingly different micro-worlds, to be bridged possibly only by the strategy of strangification. There are three types of strangification:

The first is linguistic strangification, by which we translate one discourse about the findings or supposed truth in the context of one particular discipline or research program into the language of or understandable to other disciplines, to see whether it works there or, on the contrary, becomes absurd thereby. If in the latter case, reflection must be made concerning the methodology and principle by which the first discourse was established. If one discourse is translatable into and thereby understandable to other disciplines, it should be said as having more truth because of its universalizability and communicability with other micro-worlds.

The second is pragmatic strangification. Since science is also culturally and socially bound, if we can draw the truth of one particular discipline from its social and organizational context and put it into other social and organizational contexts, we can make clear thereby its pragmatic implication and enlarge its applicability in different social context. If it still work there and develop in the new context, this means it has more universalizable truth. Otherwise, if it does not work any more in the new social context, this means it is limited to a particular socio-practical context and not to be seen as universalizable.

The third is ontological strangification. When an act of strangification is conducted with a direct experience with Reality Itself as a detour to understand other micro-worlds, then there is an ontological strangification. This means our direct experience with Reality Itself can nourish our language and our dialogue with others.

When extended to the cultural and religious worlds, if a value/cultural expression/religious belief is translatable into value/cultural expression/religious belief understandable to other cultural or religious communities, then it has a larger or universalizable validity. Otherwise its validity is limited to its own world and reflection must be made on that limit. If one value/expressions/belief is universalizable to or applicable in other social and pragmatic contexts, it has thereby a larger validity than in its own original context. Finally, a value/expressions/belief, when universalizable by a detour of experiencing Reality Itself, for example a direct experience with other people, Nature or Ultimate Reality, by the same token will be capable of promoting mutual understanding with other cultural and religious worlds. When we come to religious dialogue, which presupposes by its own nature ontological strangification, one’s experience with Ultimate Reality is very helpful for understanding others’ religious discourses and practices.

On this point I am different from F. Wallner who understand ontological strangification by the fact that we can travel from one microworld to another microworld, which for me is merely ontic and can become ontological only when in the access to other micro/cultural/religious worlds there is a detour through Reality Itself. I have modified Wallner’s two realms of reality, “Reality Itself” and “Constructed Reality”, into three, by adding the “Life-World” which mediates the Reality Itself and Constructed Reality. Also I have modified somehow his pragmatist vision of science. (Shen 1994)
Strangification presupposes language appropriation. As we can see, a person, from his/her birth to grown-up, has to learn various kinds and different levels of language. In the beginning of our life, we learn language through the generosity of our significant others who are generous in talking to us. Because of language appropriation, we begin to open up a world of meaningfulness. When grown up, we learn all kinds of discipline, knowledge, technique and cultural expression; all these belong to some sort of language appropriation. Language appropriation enriches our life with knowledge and meaningfulness. By appropriating a language understandable to others we’ll be able to strangify ourselves via that language. This is also applicable to collective process of learning. For example, when China began to open itself to Buddhism in Han dynasty, or much later, to Christianity in Ming dynasty, they should go thorough a process of language appropriation in order to recontextualize in China.

I would propose “strangifiability” as a new criteria of truth, especially valuable in the interdisciplinary, intercultural and inter-religious contexts. Since there is no single scientific discipline capable of offering us a complete image of any reality or solving any particular problem, those old criteria of truth attaching to the idea of science limited to discipline become obsolete. For example, Karl Popper’s idea of falsification could be done within any discipline or research program without the need to go outside of itself and be open to the other, is therefore improper to the idea of interdisciplinarity. In contrast, strangifiability is more suitable for the context of interdisciplinary research. I tend to think Habermas’ idea of truth as consensus is more applicable for the pluralistic society and to different parts in communication, such as different political parties, interest groups and ideological settings. Still, the idea of strangification is more feasible and fruitful than Habermas’ concept of “communicative action”, limited to the process of argumentation in which the proposition-for and proposition-against, by way of Begründung, search for a consensus in a higher proposition acceptable for both parties. Although Habermas has proposed some ideal claims for communication such as understandability, truth, sincerity and legitimacy, unfortunately in the actual world of communication, there happens very often either total conflict or compromise, without any real consensus. The Habermasian argumentation tends to fail if in the process of Begründung and in the act of searching for consensus, there is pre-linguistic and therefore pre-argumentative mutual understanding and no effort of strangification, without which there will be no “understandability” and no self-reflection. Therefore, strangification as could be seen as prerequisite for any successful communication and coordination.

For me the most fascinating phenomenon about Buddhism and Christianity is their strangifiability or universalizability, now already into the whole world. Christianity and Buddhism are two World religions with their long traditions of belief systems, philosophies and spirituality, one essential to Western culture, the other essential to Asian cultures. What I am going to do here is to put them into dialogue one with another, dialogue as conceived under my philosophy of contrast and the strategy of strangification.
In this dark valley of nihilism that today’s world is suffering, both Buddhism and Christianity can, in basing upon their spiritual resources, contribute together ideas, values and practices capable of rendering human life meaningful. Under the impact of modernization and the challenge of post-modern deconstruction, human existence, despite differences in cultural expressions, is under the menace and the torturing of domination, alienation and meaningless life. “Nihilism” is now deprived of its profound meaning of “re-evaluations of all values”. It denotes now the superficiality, frivolity and meaninglessness, in which people have no more long term ideal to devote their life for, instead they indulge themselves in the pursuing of immediate pleasure and interest.

Seen from this perspective, both Christianity and Buddhism can cooperate and nourish each other in reconstructing a meaningful human existence, both in distilling the best from their spiritual traditions and in facing together the destiny of human kind probing for an outlet through the of nihilistic darkness.

I am saying this in reference to my philosophy of contrast, which is a fundamental way of thinking and practice by which mutual complementarity is to be discovered out of multiplicity or dualistic oppositions all in respecting their differences. By “contrast” I understand the interplay between difference and complementarity, continuity and discontinuity, distantiation and co-belongingness, which constitute the fundamental structure and dynamism of objects under investigation. Structural contrasts and dynamic contrasts constitute the dialectics of experience, history and Being. I propose the philosophy of contrast as an alternative to all dualistic ways of thinking which underline too much oppositions but neglect complementarity. It serves also as remedy to Hegelian dialectics which emphasizes too much on negativity and thereby forgetting the creative positivity of Being. The wisdom of contrast has its origin in traditional Chinese philosophy. The Book of Changes said, “The rhythmic interaction between yin and yang constitutes what we call the Way(Dao).” Also Laozi in the Daodejing said something similar: “All things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through their blending interactions they achieve harmony.” Put it in a simpler way, the philosophy of contrast demands us to see always the other side of the coin, both in its structural aspect and its historical aspect.

With this contrast way of thinking in mind, I tend to see Christianity and Buddhism as different but complementary, dictantiating yet co-belonging. In this paper, I will deal with the following doctrinal positions of each: their common concern with human suffering and virtue ethics, their contrasts in fulfillment of being versus emptying of emptiness, principle of transcendence versus principle of immanence, all in focusing on the dialogue between Buddhist enlightenment and Christian salvation, seen both as essential for helping humankind to get through the darkness of this nihilist modern/post-modern world.

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3 About the concept of nihilism and contemporary cultural situation, see Johan Goudsblom, Nihilism and Culture, (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), pp. 3-18
II. Human Suffering and Human Nature

My point of departure is Christian and Buddhist common concern for human suffering. They are two world religions with highest concern with suffering and evil faced by all human beings. It is for saving humankind from suffering and evil that it is pertinent for Christianity to talk about salvation. Also Buddhist enlightenment is a way of self-awareness liberating humankind from all suffering and evil. Both Christian and Buddhist teachings explain the origin of suffering and evil in referring to human nature.

When thinking of Christian concept of human nature, one is reminded of the doctrine of original sin. For some theologians the original sin represents the original darkness in human nature inherited from Adam and Eve after they acted against a prohibitive rule of God. But my reading of the narrative of Adam’s falling in the Genesis tells me that human nature is originally created good, as situated in the ontology of goodness and theology of Imago Dei. The environment of human existence is constituted by all things which, after each created by God, were proclaimed as good by Him. This is the ontological foundation upon which human beings emerge. Human beings are created according to the image of God. “God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.” Since God is supreme Good, his likeness should also be good, not evil. Also, human beings are created with cognitive faculty and free will and are responsible for their own action. This is the transcendental foundation of all moral good and evil.

Evil came when human beings abused their free will and interrupted his/her intersubjective relation with God, relation as represented by a covenant of rule of action. By this interruption of relation, human beings were enclosed in the arrogance of his own subjectivity, cutting himself from his relation with God, after which human beings began to suffer. Evil and suffering were then consequence of the degeneration of human nature and the ungrateful refusal of one’s relation with God.

In Christianity, human nature as created in the likeness of God, is originally good, but in the empirical exercises of this free will, human being could both possibly and actually choose to be self-enclosed to the point of denying good relationship with God, and falls thereby. Christianity agrees more liberty to human free will, and therefore more responsibility to human action, it recognizes much autonomy to human subjectivity, to the extent that it might seclude itself from all other, even to the point of rejecting God. The so called “hell” is the state of existence in which human individual refuses God, cutting himself from all relation with the other, and thereby excluding himself from his own salvation, not to mention his own possibility of perfection. That is where human beings suffer the most. But even if man could exclude himself from God, the love of God

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5 Genesis, 1:27, in The Jerusalem Bible, The Old Testament, p.16
6 This is similar to Chinese philosophy where Confucianism asserts that human nature is transcendentally good, but the Daoist critique by Laozi shows its empirical degeneration process because of the negligence and forgetfulness of Dao and de. “Therefore, when Dao is lost, there comes de(creative power). When de is lost, there comes ren (humaneness). When ren is lost, there comes yi(righteousness). When yi is lost, there comes li(the ritual).” Laozi, Daodejing, Ch. 38.
is infinitely immense so that such a state of existence could not refuse the penetration of God’s love. St. Augustine said that, “Even if I were in Hell You would be there for if I go down into hell, Thou art there also.” The reading of these words suggests to me that God love would penetrate also into hell. Personally, I tend to think that, even if human beings could refuse God arrogantly, since they are finite beings, their refusal of God, no matter how arrogant it is, is still a finite refusal and thus there will always be possibilities of penetration by divine love, which is infinite. It’s reasonable to think that God’s love will never abandon any being whatsoever.

Similarly, Buddhism emerged as a religion that offered enlightenment to human beings to liberate them from all sufferings. This is the original meaning of the four noble truths. The first two noble truths explain the suffering of man and the formation of the world. Human conditions consist in suffering of all kind, including giving birth, getting old, getting sick, dying. There are other sufferings such as separation from what is pleasant, not obtaining that which one desires, being sad and especially those sufferings caused by impermanence and by the gathering and separation of conditions. Although the noble truth of gathering was proposed by Buddha as the origin of human suffering, it could be interpreted also as having some cosmological implications. The formation of the world could be seen as determined by the gathering or separation of elements according to the arising of their interdependent conditions or relationship, as an interpretation extended from the doctrine of dependent causation, originally limited to human experience. Starting from the initial ignorance, the twelve links, either by simultaneous coordination or by temporal causation, determine the formation of life and world. In short, suffering was resulted from the dependent causation initiated by ignorance, only enlightenment, a self-awareness of the causation process, could liberate human beings from it.

Liberation could be effected by the other two nobles truths, cessation and paths. “Cessation” means liberation from the original darkness and all suffering in the state of nirvana; whereas “Paths” means the practice of eightfold right paths, leading thereby to the achievement of a virtuous man. The possibility of enlightenment and liberation presupposes that human nature must be pure and good in itself, so as to make enlightenment possible. Therefore, a pure and good human nature, or the concept of Buddha nature developed later by Mahayana Buddhism, is the transcendent condition of possibility of enlightenment and liberation.

We could discern thereby from the above a certain contrast in Buddhism, as in the case of Christianity, on the one hand, there is a radical darkness in human nature causing all suffering; on the other hand, there is the affirmation of an originally pure and good Buddha nature. The tension created by this contrast gives a more balancing and dynamic

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8 Here I disqualify myself, as a philosopher, from any theological interpretation of the Christian dogma concerning hell.
9 In this sense, dependent causation could have some cosmological status. But it does not offer any explanation of the origin of the world, as the doctrine of creation of the world by God in Christianity. Buddha seemed to see those metaphysical questions and doctrines as playing with words, but this ways of saying does not resolve the cosmological question of the origin of the world. For me, philosophically speaking, cosmology and ontology seem to be a weak point in Buddhism.
vision of Buddhism to take care of human suffering all in encouraging the unfolding of his good nature.

In short, enlightenment in Buddhism is the self-awareness and unfolding of one's Buddha nature. Whereas salvation in Christianity is the process of divine grace corroborating the self-transformation and enhancement of human spirit towards divine perfection from all human beings’ state of self-exclusion rooted in its finitude and selfishness.

III. Salvation through God and Enlightenment of Buddha Nature

For the Christians, there is no salvation without God. As St. Augustine puts it, “our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” He means that human heart could not be calmed down until it finds itself in the presence and grace of God. This sets up a principle of transcendence to the fulfillment of human potentiality. There human soul is still related to God inside the most profound being of itself and thereby the principle of immanence is still recognized by Christianity to a certain degree. On the one hand, the dynamism of human nature is important for salvation, because this demands his free will and virtuous efforts. On the other hand, this dynamism is not to be kept enclosed within itself, without openness to the other, and ultimately to an absolute Other, otherwise human beings finds no fulfillment and therefore no salvation. In this sense, Christianity embodies also this wisdom of contrast that has profoundly grasped this dynamic tension within human nature and the relation between God and man. Jesus Christ has clearly articulated this truth when he said,

The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know; for salvation comes from the Jews. But the hour will come—in fact it is here already—when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth: that is the kind of worshipper the Father wants. God is spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.

Here Jesus refers to two modes of salvation history, one is general salvation history, and the other is special salvation history. Special salvation history is that of the chosen, the elite. But general salvation history is to worship God in spirit and truth. Those who worship God in this way could have their salvation, not limited to external factors such as place or racial or cultural groups. In this sense, “worship” means to bring out what is most sincere in one’s own spirit, and to experience truth as revealed to the human beings. This recognizes the immanence principle by which human being worships God with the participation of his utmost sincere spiritual dynamism.

In Christianity, the so-called immanence principle is based upon the fact that all men are created Imago Dei, whereas in the case of Buddhism, it is the affirmation that all human and even sentient beings have Buddha nature. We can say that, for Christians, there is

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certain divine nature in human beings, by which we should be as perfect as our Father in Heaven. This divinity of human being is affirmed by Jesus when He says, “Is it not written in your Law: “I said, you are gods?” So the Law uses the word “gods” of those to whom the word of God was addressed, and scripture cannot be rejected.” In Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings are created Imago Dei; they are also children of God. In this sense human beings could be seen as gods. This divinity of human beings is therefore related ontologically to God, to be seen as the inner light, the locus of enlightenment, of human existence; just as in the case of Buddhism, the Buddha nature of each human and sentient being is the source of his own enlightenment.

Nevertheless, in Christianity, this immanence principle claims also a transcendence principle by which human being will not be limited and thereby enclosed in his own subjectivity. There will be always God, and the truth and spirit are openness to God. Human spiritual illumination is never limited to itself and by itself, because in the human enlightenment there is relation with and participation of divine illumination. It is in this sense that I understood what St. Augustine said, “God hath created man’s mind rational and intellectual, whereby he may take in His light...and He so enlighteneth it of Himself, that not only those things which are displayed by the truth, but even truth itself may be perceived by the mind’s eye.” By this openness to God and enlightenment from God, human beings will never be enclosed in “Man, all too human” type of humanism. In this sense, “worships” means to enhance one’s self to the spirit of God and to the truth as enlightened by God himself to us. This is to say that in Christianity the immanence principle is always related to and enhanced by the transcendence principle and never to be separated from it.

When we come to Buddhism, the principle of immanence is overwhelming: human beings are in search of enlightenment, and through enlightenment, liberation from all suffering and human finitude. But, in Mahayana Buddhism, these could be done only through the self-awakening of one’s own Buddha nature within oneself. Although this self-awakening should transcend any empirical experience and the egoist self for the altruistic and universal reason, the resources of this self transcendence is within one’s own self and its fulfillment is of his own Buddha nature. There seems to be no need to recognize any transcendent God and the intervention of His grace in human enlightenment. In this sense, there seems no need to set up any principle of transcendence.

But, under the overwhelming weight of immanence principle, there are still tendencies in Buddhism to worship Buddha, or a certain figure of Buddha, as divine and the necessity to appeal to His Grace. We could find this contrasting tension in the history of Buddhism. For example, Pure Land Buddhism, in which there is Amida Buddha, a figure somewhat similar to a personal God to whom one may sing and pray, even in such a simple way to appeal to his name in incessant repetition. In everyday life and in time of

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urgency, this prayer and appeal to Amida Buddha might be accorded His grace and help. The end of this prayer for the grace of Amida is to attain the Pure Land or the Paradise. Besides, it is also an everyday practice that both Buddhist monks and laymen pray for the blessing and protection of Bodhisattva.

But even in this case, the prayer to a quasi personal God and the repetitive evocation of his name could be interpreted as a technique of spirituality, the effect of which is to reduce one’s distracting thoughts into the pious petition of one holy name or the name of the perfect One. And the evocation of Amida Buddha’s name might also be seen as the simplest way to awaken one’s own Buddha nature inside one’s own self. Therefore, “Pure Land” could be interpreted as “Pure Heart”, in which it is extremely easy to attain Enlightenment, rather than to be compared with the Heaven of Christianity. Even the focus of its prayer is enlightenment rather than grace. In the seemingly theistic tendency of Pure Land Buddhism, there is always possibility to understand it with the principle of immanence.

In fact, the deification of Buddha existed right from the first stage of development of Buddhism and continues to exist until these days. Recently there is critique of the phenomenon of deification of Buddha within today’s Buddhist movement. Buddhist scholars such as Rev. Yin Shun, Prof. Yang Huinan have criticized this tendency in Buddhism to worship Buddha God as a strategy to extend Buddhism in the secular world. They have traced back this tendency of deification of Buddha back to the origin of the Second Council, in which was divided later the Mahasamghikas(Section of the Great Mass) and Sthaviras(Section of the Elders). As Rev. Yin Shun has pointed out, the first reason of this great schism is their difference in interpreting the status of Buddhahood. For the Sthaviras, which is more humanistic and realistic according to Rev. Yin Shun, taking himself also a humanistic position, the human body of Buddha, just like everybody, needs clothing, eating, sleeping and medical care when ill, whereas Buddha’s Dharmakaya (Spiritual Body) is perfect. But the Mahasamghikas asserted the position that Buddha is Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient and living endlessly and eternally. And that Buddha himself is in the Tusita Heaven, and never teaches in the world. He who teaches is merely an Nirmannakaya, a form of Buddha's appearance body.14

Following Rev. Yin Shun, Prof. Yang Huinan has also traced back the actual phenomenon of deification of Buddha to Indian Buddhism, in which the Mahasamghikas proclaimed that Buddha is All Mighty and Omnipresent (in all places and instants of time) in order to adapt Buddhism to a greater number of believers. Prof. Yang worries about this tendency and characterizes it as a “return to Brahmanism”, in Buddhism and takes it as the reason of the latter’s decline.15

This tendency in Buddhism to conceive Buddha as All mighty, Omnipresent and Omniscient, forms a contrast situation within Buddhism. On the one hand, Immanence

principle; on the other hand, a transcendent Buddha. Nevertheless, in its essence, Buddhism in general understands enlightenment and liberation more by the immanence principle. It was for this reason that Chinese Mahayana Buddhism has quickly transformed the divinity of Buddha into the Buddha nature of each individual human and sentient being. This overemphasis on the immanence principle, once introduced into Chinese philosophy, has transformed progressively Chinese philosophy into different kinds of Philosophy of immanence. This is the case with all different sects of Chinese Buddhism. This is also the case with Neo-Confucianism.

IV. Fulfillment of Being versus Emptying of Emptiness

For Christians, God is the most perfect Spiritual Being. He is the creator of the whole universe, including human beings, other sentient beings and all other things, a God unexplainable and unfathomable by all human discourses such as science, philosophy and theology. To say that God is the creator and fulfillment of all beings is not to identify Him with Being, as some scholastic philosophers would say. But I will follow St. Thomas when he distinguished Being, which is the act of existence of all beings but not to be seen as self-subsistent, and God, who is Ipsum esse subsistens. Besides, we should add that in God there are unfathomable possibilities, which could be but is not yet. Here God could be conceived only in a negative way, as taught by negative theology. Without better term, we could term these unfathomable possibilities as “nothingness”, without it there will be no possibility for further fulfillment of Being. God’s unfathomability forbids us to identify Him with Being. God is Being and God transcends Being. He transcends therefore the distinction between Being and nothingness, and out of nothingness, He created all beings.

We could say that God is personal, in the sense that He is conscious and spiritual, that He knows and loves. But we can also say that He is not personal, in the sense that He is not “consciousness” and “spiritual” in the way that we are. He knows, but not in the sense that we know. He loves, but not in the sense that we love. God is personal and God transcends personality.

In the tradition of Buddhism, even if there is a tendency to deify Buddha as Omnipotent and Omniscient, more profoundly it declares itself as free from any idea of God. This freedom from the need to worship one personal God constitutes an essential part of the experience of Buddhist enlightenment and liberation. Even if in the Pure Land Buddhism there is petition to Amida Buddha for his grace and for the happening of the Pure Land as spiritual paradise, still Amida is not understood as a creator of the world as in the case of Christianity. Although Amida actualizes the Pure Land, He does not intervene in the course of world history. Also the idea of Pure Land does not entail any idea similar to the Christian New Heaven and Earth. Rather the petition of Amida’s name represents an action of reducing all thoughts to one. It signifies the attainment of perfect sincerity in faith analogous to the attainment of perfect emptiness through meditation. Therefore emptiness is most profound experience in Buddhism, so much so as to go beyond even the experience of worshipping a personal God. Different from the Christian emphasis on

16St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 29, 2; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I,25
the God as *Summum Bonum* and the fulfillment of their being in God as the destiny of all beings, Buddhism emphasizes more upon the experience of emptying that is the essence of all enlightenment and liberation.\(^{17}\)

For Buddhism, emptiness is neither to be identified with being nor with nothingness. In order to keep the liberation process radical so as to bring out the freedom implied in the experience of enlightenment, emptiness is experienced always as emptying of emptiness. It is something similar to Heidegger’s *Ab-grund*\(^{18}\), the always departing from all foundation. In Heidegger’s eyes, the Christian conceptual framework is more like what he called “onto-theo-logy”\(^{19}\), which, on the one hand affirms Being as the ontological foundation of all things; on the other, it affirms God as the theological foundation of Being. By contrast, Buddhism is more like an anti-foundationalism. Emptying of emptiness is without any foundation and continues to depart from all foundation, in order to keep human spirit as free as possible.

But, even if the Buddhist experience of emptiness is most profound in its spiritual freedom, still this does not mean there is no God as Fulfillment of Being. Even if our freedom is so radical that not a single human discourse, no philosophical, scientific or theological doctrine could serve as foundation to our existence, still this does not mean that we are foundationless. There must be a certain foundation of Being, although the foundation itself is unfathomable and all our founding discourse should be deconstructed in order to keep human spirit and its foundation free.

Because of its emphasis on enlightenment and liberation, Buddhism tends not to identify the realization of Buddha nature with Being. It is reluctant to recognize Buddha as a personal God. It seems that for Buddhism, the personalization of God is a sign of inferiority, when compared with the rich experience of impersonal emptiness. Still I think it is more human to posit a personal God who knows and loves and to whom we could pray. Although there is also a profound meaning in God as impersonal, an unflexible maintaining of this thesis might also fall into an insensible cult in which there is no personal interaction and dialogue. It would become a state of mind into which an impersonalist interpretation of God and Buddha has the danger to fall. This state of mind is something similar to what Jesus has described:

*What description can I find for this generation? It is like Children shouting to each other as they sit in the market place: “We played the pipes for you, and you wouldn't dance; we sang dirges, and you wouldn’t be mourners.”*\(^{20}\)

For us humans, to say God is personal is to say that God does know and love and to whom we could pray in our heart. But this does not mean that He knows, loves and listens to our prayers in our *human, too human* way. Especially in the Christian tradition

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\(^{17}\) But we have to notice here the fact of being enlightened cannot cancel by that mere fact the existence of dependent causation. It merely frees itself from the determination of the dependent causation.


\(^{19}\) M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pünlingen: Gunther Neske, 1957), pp.60-63

\(^{20}\) Matthew, 11, 16-17, in *Jerusalem Bible, New Testament*, p.32
of mysticism, God is Mystery of all mysteries. In the mystical experience of God, there is a certain moment in which we enter in the darkness of the soul, as St. John of the Cross would characterize it, where a contemplative prayer enters into a mysterious, passive phase of experience loosing himself in an overwhelming rhythm not to be qualified as an interpersonal experience at all. In the contrast of personal/transpersonal there emerges a tension of experience in which our relation with God becomes more and more profound.

V. Ethics of Virtue to Overcome Nihilism and Domination

Last but not least, in facing together this world marching through the dark valley of nihilism, and especially in the social and political world under power domination and struggle, both Christianity and Buddhism should develop and extend together the influence of their ethics of virtue instead of all kind of utilitarian and deontologist ethics. Facing the world of nihilism, utilitarianism, with its emphasis on the pursuing and the calculation of utility, will serve no help to human spirit. On the contrary, it could only, by its emphasis on calculative rationality, add to the nihilistic crisis in which human beings search merely for more immediate interest and pleasure.

As to the ethics of obligation, it brings no help to this world of power conflict and domination. It is time to rethink of the priority of areteology over any form of deontology. Because our world today is suffering from its over-emphasis on obligation, either as moral or as legal constraint of human behavior. This could be traced back to the arising of modernity, when Kant defined morality as acting autonomously according to categorical imperatives. For Kant, morality consists merely in the autonomous observance of moral obligation, whereas virtue was the denial of one’s desire in following the demand of moral obligation. On the level of morality, Kant sustained the position of deontology. On the level of state, he proposed the concept of Rechtstaat, a state ruled by law. With the advancement of modernization, the situation is getting worse nowadays, to the extent that nobody really loves legal and moral obligations, and even tries on the contrary to evade from their constraints. Instead, people prefer love, creativity and excellence.

I think it is the common spiritual resources of Christianity and Buddhism to emphasize the priority of virtue over utility and obligation. Virtue is seen in these grand traditions as both the development and fulfillment of the goodness originally existing in human nature, both as the excellence of human ability and as realization of good relationship. Obligation is considered necessary only when it helps to form and achieve a virtuous life. Obligations are never taken at their face value, they exist for the formation of virtues. Human excellence and good relationship are always presupposed in the observance of obligations.

For example, in the case of Christianity, the rule set in the Garden by God to Adam and Eve is a rule by covenant, that is, a rule for the maintenance of relationship.

As MacIntyre points out, “To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclinations; it is to act from inclinations formed by the cultivation of the virtues.” A. McIntyre, *After Virtue*, (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 149
between God and Human beings. And the moral obligations concretized in the Ten Commandments are resulted from the Mosaic covenant between God and Israel. Respect for the justice of God constitutes the reason for Israel’s obedience of the obligations expressed in the Ten Commandments. These are not to be considered as heteronomy, as some scholars maintain in criticizing Christianity. The distinction between autonomy and heteronomy still belongs to the ethics of obligation, in which there is priority of norm over virtue. But in Christianity, the truth is quite to the contrary. And this is most evident in what Jesus said, “If you love me then obey my order.” Here the relation of love is in priority over the obedience of order. Obey, in order to love. Love is the essence of Jesus’ commandment. Faith, hope, love, justice, wisdom, temperance...etc., are virtues in Christian ethics. In short, Christian ethics is an ethics of virtue that emphasizes the perfection of human good and the fulfillment of good relationship.

Buddhism teaches also an ethics of virtue and sustains the priority of virtue over obligation. The eightfold paths proclaimed repeatedly by Buddha as the way to enlightenment and liberation from all suffering and from the determination by dependent causation, consist in the accomplishment of a virtuous life rather than the formalistic observance of obligations. In the eightfold paths, right speech, right action and right livelihood concern mostly with the performance of sila or moral obligations. The so called five precepts (not to kill, not to steal, not to be indecent, not to abuse words, not to be alcoholic) are not merely negative obligations, they are set up for the positive unfolding of wisdom and compassion of all things, which is the perfection of our altruistic capacity. That is to say, the observance of obligation is for the excellence of our capacity and relation with all things.

As to other constituents of the eightfold paths, for example, the right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation are for the practice of the meditative life; and the right vision, right thought are for the attainment of wisdom. Sila, meditation and wisdom constitute the threefold training for a Buddhist virtuous life. The excellence of our altruistic capacity and the fulfillment of relationship with ourselves and all sentient beings are essential to Buddhist ethics, only the relationship with God seems not to have been emphasized in Buddhism.

In Buddhism, the life of enlightenment is a life of virtue. In Christianity, the life leading to spiritual salvation is also a life of virtue. Both agree in seeing virtue as excellence or perfection of our natural abilities and the fulfillment of our relations. Buddhist enlightenment concerns the relation with one’s own Buddha nature and all things, not including God. In Christianity, apart from our relationship with ourselves, with nature and other human beings, we should fulfill a good relationship with God, which serves as the foundation for all other relationships.

VI. Conclusion

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22 The fact of being enlightened, and therefore of becoming a Buddha, does not cancel by that fact the existence of dependent causation, but merely gets rid off its determination.
Buddhist emphasis on enlightenment is important for today’s world to bring out what is best in human nature (characterized by Buddhism as Buddha nature) in a self-conscious way. This is also essential for the Christians, because, without the experience of enlightenment, there will be no active experience of God. It is upon the self-awareness of our own human nature that we have a basis in us to collaborate with God in our experience of luminous truth and goodness. Buddhist notions of enlightenment and Buddha nature lay the anthropological foundation of all religiosity. On the other hand, this experience of enlightenment needs also to be promoted and accomplished by Christian salvation, understood as the enhancement and transformation of our finite being by God, a God who transcends both Being and nothingness, personality and impersonality. Without this mysteriously mysterious God, there will be no ontological foundation for the experience of enlightenment and liberation. If deprived of its ontological foundation, the saying that “Every sentient being could become Buddha” would become only an encouraging motto.

Nevertheless, in facing the common human condition in which impersonal technology is now creating a miserable situation of alienation, both Christianity and Buddhism should come to the rescue of human beings in spreading the influence of their integral and open humanism. Especially in this dark valley of nihilism, both Christianity and Buddhism could revitalize their dynamism of value creativity. This dynamism is rooted in their respective understanding of the goodness of human nature, the one as Imago Dei and the other as Buddha nature. And, facing commonly this world of domination of all kind, both Christianity and Buddhism should not serve as corroborating ideology for the commercial and political control. Instead, they should collaborate for the liberation and enhancement of human beings by the practice of their ethics of virtue, in overcoming the insufficiencies of both utilitarian ethics and obligation ethics. In the starting years of the Third Millennium, Buddhism and Christianity have much to cooperate for the enlightenment and salvation of humankind.

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23 By “ontological foundation” I mean the ultimate ground for all existents, not limited to merely human understanding of Being. We should not anthropologize the meaning of the ontological. It is the ultimate and free ground of all groundless, even more profound than Heideggerian Ab-grund.

24 Even if I use the conditional “if”, there must be such a foundation in Buddhism, even if there is no doctrine of creation in it. Cosmological and ontological explanations could be developed out of the theory of dependent causation. Since understanding, when compared with faith, practice and proof, is of key importance in Buddhism, the lack of ontological foundation still constitutes a part of human ignorance. These explanations are not to be treated as merely playing with words, but in need of development in Buddhism through creative hermeneutics. The characterization of all metaphysical explanations of the origin of cosmos by Buddha himself as “playing with words” could be seen as a sign of his recognition of finitude of human reason, which awaits, in some way or another, other resources of wisdom (such as the divine revelation).