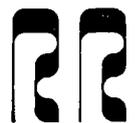


## The Cardinal Meaning



# Religion and Reason 6

*Method and Theory  
in the Study and Interpretation of Religion*

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# The Cardinal Meaning

*Essays in Comparative Hermeneutics:  
Buddhism and Christianity*

*edited by*

MICHAEL PYE and ROBERT MORGAN

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## Preface

This book is concerned with theoretical questions about interpretation which arise in two religious traditions, namely Buddhism and Christianity. The first paper considers the feasibility of a comparative approach to such 'hermeneutical' questions, and the following papers analyse problems about criticism and authenticity arising out of the historical development of these two religions. Professor Smart has kindly contributed some concluding reflections on some of the issues raised.

The main papers were originally read at the fourth annual colloquium on Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster (England) in January 1972. The general intention of the colloquium was that after a discussion of the comparative approach to matters of this kind some broadly parallel questions should be asked about the two religions in question. The contributors were left free however to develop their arguments in the manner which seemed to them to be appropriate and this accounts for a certain variety of approach and emphasis.

Nevertheless all the papers are in some way concerned with one set of questions, namely those which arise out of the historical expansion and diversification of complex religious traditions. Despite the great differences between Buddhism and Christianity, it does seem that in this area similar sorts of problems arise for those concerned with the interpretation of either. If this much is confirmed by what follows there seems to be a case for exploring the comparative approach further by broadening the range of questions and considering other religious traditions.

It will be noticed that it was an essay by Ernst Troeltsch, 'The theologian of the history of religions school', which provided the initial talking point out of which the plan for the colloquium arose. This is particularly appropriate in that the Department of Religious Studies at Lancaster itself provides a historical and phenomenological framework in the study of religion in which questions of meaning and interpretation can also be examined.

## 6 Preface

A complementary starting point in East Asian Buddhism is reflected in the title phrase 'The Cardinal Meaning', in Chinese 大意 (*ta i*), and the usage referred to below (pp. 44–8) is mainly that of *The Platform Sutra* which is one of the most influential texts of Zen Buddhism. In its own way this term picks up controversial points about tradition and criticism, meaning and authenticity, which are broadly analogous to those which have arisen in the development of Christianity.

As a result of the discussion of each paper by those present at the colloquium in Lancaster some additions and adjustments have been made, and the stimulus for these is gratefully acknowledged. The editors also appreciate the efficient cooperation of the other contributors themselves, and of Dr. Jacques Waardenburg, general editor of the series 'Religion and Reason' in which this volume appears.

Michael Pye and Robert Morgan

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## Comparative Hermeneutics in Religion

### 1. A STARTING POINT FOR COMPARATIVE HERMENEUTICS

The word 'hermeneutics' is intended here to mean only 'theory of interpretation', and the argument is limited to the field of religion. Thus while the interpretations of Christianity may be many and varied, the study of *what is going on* or what *might go on* when such interpretations are produced may be conceived of as a unified theoretical investigation called 'hermeneutics'. Again, while the various interpretations in themselves may be intended as normative contributions to theology, hermeneutics may be sufficiently abstracted from the specific content of normative theology to function as both servant and critic to expositors, preachers and systematic theologians. The relationship may be clearly illustrated by some words of Ernst Troeltsch in his article 'Was heisst "Wesen des Christentums"?' (*i.e.* 'What does "Essence of Christianity" mean?'), an article which is taken as a general starting point for what follows.<sup>1</sup> He writes, 'I do not intend to enter the debate about the substantial correctness or mistakenness of Harnack's conception of the essence. . . I wish rather, in view of the various appraisals which have been made, to raise the *methodological* question: What does the expression "essence of Christianity" mean in the first place? What presuppositions are involved in the search for the essence of Christianity? What kind of tools are taken for granted as being useful for the solution of this problem? Is the meaning and goal of this enterprise really so simple and straightforward? What does the task involve, if indeed it is necessary and feasible at all? How far is it purely a historical problem? . . . .'<sup>2</sup> By taking

1. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (Tübingen 1913), pp. 386–451; first published in *Die Christliche Welt*, 1903. My attention was first drawn to this article by my friend and colleague Mr. Robert Morgan. His advice and encouragement have been of great value in the development of the argument set out below, though of course he is not at all to be blamed for its shortcomings.

2. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, p. 390. The edition from which this and all subsequent quotations from Troeltsch's article have been translated is that of the Scientia Verlag Aalen 1962.

one step back in this way Troeltsch was able to consider the varied positions of Harnack and others, especially Loisy, and to analyse the problem in a way which did not depend upon his taking up a position with regard to the point of substance, but which nevertheless may be deemed to have been helpful. Such a stance is akin to an important aspect of the study of religion as this is increasingly widely understood these days; namely it is akin to the phenomenological approach which attempts to discern significant structures without prejudging issues of truth or falsity, value or otherwise, the latter being supposed to belong to a different area of the total enquiry.<sup>3</sup>

I wish to propose that the same principle could be applied not merely in the case of a variety of interpretative positions within one religious tradition, but also in the case of a series of problems about interpretation which seem to occur analogously in various religious traditions. In other words I wish to propose that there is not only hermeneutics, but that there could also be, and ought to be, *comparative hermeneutics*. In order to indicate the feasibility of this both briefly and concretely it is necessary to select one problem which seems to arise analogously in different religious traditions. The problem known in the Christian tradition as the problem about the 'essence' of Christianity seems to be an appropriate one. Just as one problem only is selected, so one other important religious tradition is selected, namely Buddhism, on the grounds that this religion is roughly comparable to Christianity in terms of its general complexity, length of history in various countries, varying role as missionary religion, minority religion, state religion, variety of doctrinal forms and dogmatic standpoints, and so on, while at the same time its central conceptions and practices are sufficiently distinct from those of Christianity for the comparison to be significant. Like Troeltsch I do not intend here to enter the debate about the substantial correctness or mistakenness of any particular attempt to define the 'essence' either in the case of Christianity or in the case of Buddhism. Nor moreover does it seem necessary yet to attempt a definitive theory of what the concept 'essence of religions such as Christianity and

3. On what is meant by 'phenomenological method' here, see further at the end of this argument, below. The position adopted, especially with regard to the 'phenomenological' and 'comparative' aspects of the study of religion (which are not simply to be equated), is explained in greater detail in the theoretical Introduction to my *Comparative Religion: An Introduction Through Source Materials* (Newton Abbot, 1972).

Buddhism' would mean. That is to say that while Troeltsch claimed to have 'solved the question about the meaning and point of the concept "essence", and to have unravelled the various points of concern which coincide in it',<sup>4</sup> it seems unnecessary in the present argument either to be committed to the details of Troeltsch's analysis of the problem in the case of Christianity, useful though it is, or to attempt to defend an alternative analysis. What needs to be established is that a hermeneutical problem of some interest has a significantly analogous character as between two otherwise significantly divergent religious traditions. If this can be shown, then regardless of secondary imperfections in the argument, and regardless of the variety of views which may be held with regard to this or that specific problem, it may perhaps be agreed that *comparative hermeneutics* is a subject. In the meantime, a consideration of possible further implications of this is best postponed until the attempt to establish its feasibility has been stated.

The reason for taking Troeltsch's article as a starting point is that it draws together the main lines of debate on the 'essence of Christianity' up to the time at which he wrote (1903), in a manner sufficiently abstract for his analysis to be used as a model in the search for analogies elsewhere. Of course both Christian theology and hermeneutics in the Christian tradition have moved on since that time, and perhaps they have made progress. There have been the major debates about dialectical theology, about demythologising and existential meaning, about secularisation and the social or political meaning of Christianity, the continued debate about the possibility or otherwise of a natural knowledge of God, the renewed interest in the historical person of Jesus, and in what can be said about the course of history seen in a theologically transfigured manner.

In all of these the theological and hermeneutical questions are very closely interlocked. For example, the normative interpretation of 'mythological' language in the New Testament has often been closely intertwined with debate about the feasibility or desirability of demythologising in principle. For this reason the term 'hermeneutics' has frequently been used in a wider sense than required here, namely to refer not only to procedural questions but also to the very act of understanding and interpreting itself. Such a widely inclusive usage would seem to make the term almost synonymous with 'theology',

4. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, p. 448.

and indeed one sympathises with those who would prefer, then, simply to keep to terms such as 'theology' and 'interpretation'. There do exist, however, identifiable theoretical problems about the *procedures* of interpretation in religion, and though these are of course tightly linked to the substantial questions of interpretation, it is possible to conceive of them to some extent in abstraction. Thus it seems worthwhile to use the word 'hermeneutics' to refer to the 'theoretical problems about the procedures of interpretation', even though a discussion of these problems may raise many questions about the substantial issues themselves. While 'hermeneutics', for some, may mean more than this (because when carried on in the context of one religion only it is almost inevitably extended to refer to problems about the content of interpretation as well as its procedures), a greater degree of abstraction is necessary for the development of the argument set out below, precisely because it is an argument which compares the procedures of religions of which the major substantial concerns might be thought significantly to diverge.

As arguments about the matters referred to above are still being carried on with great fervour, the general situation of Christian theology and hermeneutics at this time seems to be too complex and debatable a starting point for the present purpose. Harnack and Loisy, on the other hand, the two main protagonists adduced by Troeltsch in his preamble, represent the two great traditions of western Christendom, admittedly and of course importantly in a late nineteenth century rationalised and historicised form, but nevertheless reflecting still in their own ways the great dogmatic traditions of the past. Thus Troeltsch himself was in a position to perform the service of abstraction with regard to the notion of the 'essence of Christianity' in a manner which attempted to integrate major Protestant and Catholic themes with the modern historical consciousness. It may perhaps further be maintained that while subsequent theological debates have rarely been focussed on the actual term 'essence of Christianity',<sup>5</sup> nevertheless most of them have had to do in one way or another with the sub-

5. Cf. however William Hamilton's *The New Essence of Christianity* (London, 1966), and S. W. Sykes' 'The Essence of Christianity', *Religious Studies* 7, pp. 291-305. The latter article, which is an interesting new approach to the whole problem, explicitly refers to Troeltsch's analysis in a manner which indicates its relevance to contemporary Christian theology.

stantial problem which it represented, namely, in brief: What is Christianity, as a whole, really all about? Troeltsch's analysis of what is going on when this question is tackled is, by now, sufficiently distant from the latest positions and tendencies to serve as a fairly clear-cut model, recognisable as relevant by almost all Christian theologians, whether they agree with the details of his argument or not. His article may fairly be claimed as a classical example of a hermeneutical discussion about a problem which has proved itself to be a rather persistent one in Christian theology.

Since Troeltsch's article has at last been translated<sup>6</sup> a brief account of his argument and one or two additional references to Loisy will be adequate here. The starting point was the controversy aroused by Harnack's popular book *What is Christianity?* (originally *Das Wesen des Christentums*, or 'The Essence of Christianity'),<sup>7</sup> and especially the criticism by Alfred Loisy. Troeltsch characterised Harnack's conception of the essence of Christianity briefly as 'not some dogma or other, nor church institutions, but the preaching of Jesus'.<sup>8</sup> This preaching, of which a purely historical account may be given, was the criterion by which all later forms of Christianity were to be judged, and in terms of which the whole development of Catholicism was to be ruled out of court. Not that Harnack preferred Protestant orthodoxy as such. 'In place of dogmatics', as Troeltsch puts it, 'there appears, infinitely more simple, effective and convincing, the historical account of the Gospel and its impact as the essence of Christianity'.<sup>9</sup> Loisy for his part, in *L'Évangile et l'Église*,<sup>10</sup> pointed out the novelty of Harnack's conception within Protestantism. 'What would Luther have thought', he wrote, 'if one had presented him with his doctrine of salvation by faith, with the amendment: "independently of belief", or the amendment: "faith in the merciful Father, because faith in the Son is unknown in the Gospel of Jesus"?'<sup>11</sup> Loisy was not of course concerned to defend Protestant orthodoxy, which

6. A translation was completed recently by the present writer and it is hoped that it will be published shortly by Duckworth and Co.

7. First published in 1900, English translation 1901.

8. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, p. 386.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 387.

10. Troeltsch referred to the first edition (Paris, 1902).

11. Alfred Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église* (3rd ed. Paris, 1904), p. xii.

had its own exponents.<sup>12</sup> More significantly however he was also not concerned 'to write an apology for Catholicism and for traditional dogma'.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Loisy makes his own approach to the problem solely on the basis of historical facts, not because he admits that Harnack's work was *really* purely historical, but because it claimed to be. Loisy's intention was to show, on historical grounds, that the Gospel and Catholic Christianity are not separated by a great gulf, as Harnack supposed, but that there is an important relationship between them, and that any account of the essence of Christianity has to take the further development into account and not just restrict itself to narrowly selected items from the earliest beginnings. To follow the latter course is in fact to introduce a crypto-Protestant principle into the historical account. It could perhaps be argued that Loisy in turn introduced a crypto-Catholic principle, by emphasising development, but if so it is not because he emphasised continuity on dogmatic grounds. He claimed that it was historically necessary, and indeed it is presumably impossible to disagree today with his claim that 'Whatever one may think, theologically, of tradition, whether one puts one's confidence in it or distrusts it, one can only know Christ by, through and in the early Christian tradition.'<sup>14</sup> The real crypto-Catholicism of Loisy lies in the fact that he failed to accord any positive recognition to Harnack's use of the 'essence of Christianity' as a critical criterion. Thus he was himself one-sided. As Troeltsch puts it: 'For this very reason Loisy's views about the necessity of Catholicism are interesting and largely correct as an exercise in historical induction; but they have nothing to do with the essence. The definition of the essence does not only involve an imaginative abstraction, but also with it and as part of it a criticism grounded in personal, ethical judgement, which measures the manifestations against the essence.'<sup>15</sup>

While both Harnack and Loisy went to work historically and not dogmatically, the edge to the controversy between them was nevertheless based on the clash between their traditional orientations towards what they took to be the authoritative locus of the essence of Christianity. For Harnack it

12. Referred to by Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, p. 387.

13. Loisy, *Op. cit.*, p. vii.

14. *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

15. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, p. 411.

lay in the 'original' Gospel, while for Loisy it lay in the whole development of the Church. Troeltsch of course agreed with the historical presuppositions of both, and insisted on working them out consistently, sharply rejecting any form of supernaturalist approach. He attempted to combine the main insights of Harnack and Loisy, not indeed with regard to the question about *what* the essence of Christianity might be, but with regard to their method of approach. (As a matter of fact Loisy's own introduction is not without theoretical value, and there is even a short example of comparative hermeneutics which will be referred to again below.) The main points of Troeltsch's own analysis of what the concept 'essence of Christianity' involves are, then, as follows.

Firstly, he argues, 'the essence' is a *critical principle*. He states the matter in summary form thus:

*'It is not merely an abstraction from the manifestations, but at the same time a criticism of the manifestations, and this criticism is not merely an evaluation of that which is not yet complete in terms of the driving ideal, but a discrimination between that which corresponds to the essence and that which is contrary to it.'*<sup>16</sup>

Secondly it is also a *developmental principle*. Again, it will be best to give a few of his own words:

'If we are to speak of the essence at all it cannot be an unchangeable idea given once for all in the teaching of Jesus. Rationalism has indeed conceived of it in this way as a result of its being dogmatically accustomed to unchangeable truths of reason and to the Protestant scriptural principle. In reality however the essence has to be an entity with an inner, living flexibility, and a productive power for new creation and assimilation. It cannot be characterised at all by one word or one doctrine, but only by a concept which includes from the start both flexibility and richness; *it must be a developing spiritual principle*, a 'germinative principle' as Caird calls it, a historical idea in Ranke's sense, that is to say, not a metaphysical or dogmatic idea, but a driving spiritual force which contains within itself purposes and values and which elaborates these both consistently and accommodatingly.'<sup>17</sup>

16. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 418.

Thereafter his attention is given over to the question about how far it is a purely historical problem (one of his original questions) and in what sense the definition of the essence of Christianity is a creative activity. Here too he refuses to relapse into some easy dogmatic *parti pris*, a move which all of a sudden would have achieved precisely nothing. Rather he attempts to answer it by claiming that 'the essence' is not only a critical and developmental principle but also an *ideal principle*, in the sense that it fastens one's attention not only on the past but also on present trends and future possibilities, the evaluation of which in turn has an effect on one's account of what the essence is. The way in which the matter falls out substantially will of course depend upon the individual's stance towards the Christian past, but if he believes that the Christian idea maintains any driving force of value for the future, then, to quote Troeltsch's precise words, '*the essence changes quite automatically from being an abstracted concept to being an ideal concept*'.<sup>18</sup> Or again:

'The essence is an ideal thought which at the same time provides the possibility of new combinations with the concrete life of the present; it is itself a living, individual historical formation which joins the series of those which lie in the past. It is nothing other than a formulation of the Christian idea in a manner corresponding to the present, associated with earlier formations in the laying bare of the force for growth, but immediately allowing this latter to shoot up into new leaves and blossoms.

'To define the essence is to shape it afresh.'<sup>19</sup>

It may be noted at this point that if the critical and developmental aspects reflect the respective approaches of the Protestant Harnack and the Catholic Loisy, these approaches are inextricably combined when the idea of the 'essence' is brought to bear as an *ideal* concept involving at one and the same time both critical selection and historical fulfilment for the present and future. Troeltsch calls this a 'creative act'.<sup>20</sup> It is a combination of history and theology, in which not some dogmatic standpoint but the history itself is the ultimate touchstone and in which at the same time the

18. *Ibid.*, p. 426.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 431. This last sentence is almost a slogan, and reads in the original, 'Wesensbestimmung ist Wesensgestaltung'.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 428

history is not merely of antiquarian interest but is a living force for the present and the future. This is a matter with which Troeltsch concerns himself in detail in his final section entitled 'Subjectivity and objectivity in the definition of the essence'. The inevitable subjective element in this activity cannot be dispensed with and its presence, indeed its importance, is therefore better admitted. It is after all always open to the control of others who know the same objective historical field. But while the subjective is thus not merely arbitrary, the objective in turn cannot do without being subjectively appropriated and transmitted. "The objective is not available to be simply picked up each time, *but every time it is newly created, and it is binding because of the meshing together of what is possessed historically and the personal, conscientious, shaping and transforming activity.*"<sup>21</sup>

There are many other incidental points of interest for comparative hermeneutics in this same article of Troeltsch: his conclusion, for example, that a criterion for the maintenance of continuity *in advance* does not exist, even though consistency with previous formulations of the essence is of course by definition desirable;<sup>22</sup> or his stress on the importance of doing full justice to all aspects of the tradition whether 'orthodox' or 'heretical',<sup>23</sup> and also to the social context of the successive phases under consideration,<sup>24</sup> all of which raises the very important question as to what shape the tradition is supposed to be if it is not to be defined in some *a priori* dogmatic terms. Such matters, important though they are, cannot be pursued here. Nor is it necessary to examine whether Troeltsch's main argument is correct in detail. He includes within his account of the matter the main points which would have to figure in any competing account which claimed to be an improvement. Meanwhile western studies of Buddhism have had, to put it baldly, their Harnacks and their Loisy's, if not yet their Troeltsch, and to these some attention will now be paid before taking account of the work of Asian Buddhists themselves. It will be seen that the hermeneutical issues analysed by Troeltsch recur with remarkable parallelism in the interpretation of a religious tradition of which the main contents are, by any serious account, significantly different from those of Christianity.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 435.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 440.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 405f.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 449.

## 2. THE 'ESSENCE' OF BUDDHISM AS A EUROPEAN QUESTION

Constantin Regamey, in a bibliography of Buddhism<sup>25</sup> and in a short book entitled *Der Buddhismus Indiens*<sup>26</sup> gave a thumbnail sketch of the progress of western Buddhist studies to date, which was taken up again by Edward Conze<sup>27</sup> and which is quite relevant to the present argument.<sup>28</sup> He speaks of three schools in the European study of Buddhism, each of which in turn took a different approach towards the question of what Buddhism is. He termed these the Anglo-German, the Russian and the Franco-Belgian schools respectively and as representatives of these it will suffice here to refer to T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg for the first group, Theodor Stcherbatsky for the second and Etienne Lamotte for the third.

Rhys Davids and Oldenberg both took the Pali Canon in general and certain parts of it in particular to indicate what original, basic Buddhism was. Moreover they both took this Buddhism to be an intellectually and morally elevated religion which had no time for the myth and superstition and ritualism of previous or later times, and which was eminently worthy of the attention of rational, ethical, modern man.<sup>29</sup>

Rhys Davids' basic attitude towards religion is readably stated in his account of the conditions of life in India at the time of the Buddha (taken from *Buddhism*, 1877):

'The old childlike joy in life, so manifest in the Vedas, had died away. The worship of nature had developed or degenerated into the worship of new and less pure divinities. . . . The simple feeling of awe and wonder at the glorious battles of the storm, and the recurring victories of the sun,

25. *Buddhistische Philosophie* (Bern, 1950), pp. 14–17.

26. *Der Buddhismus Indiens* (Vienna, 1951 and Aschaffenburg, 1964), pp. 17–20.

27. 'Recent Progress in Buddhist Studies' in *The Middle Way* (1959–60) and reprinted in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Oxford, 1967). Cf. in the latter pp. 1–3.

28. G. R. Welbon's *The Buddhist Nirvana and its Western Interpreters* (Chicago 1968), a full-scale survey of western Buddhist Studies, is less relevant because of his specific concern with the concept of Nirvana.

29. Hermann Oldenberg, *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (1881, 4th edition Stuttgart and Berlin, 1903), pp. 2–3, implies that Buddhism has a value comparable with the Greek and Jewish heritages. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism, Its History and Literature* (London, 1896 and 1904) pp. 219–221, is more directly exhortatory.

had given way before a debasing ritualism; before the growing belief in the efficacy of carefully conducted rites and ceremonies, and charms, and incantations; before the growing fear of the actual power of the stars over the lives and destinies of men; before the growing dependence on dreams, and omens, and divinations. A belief in the existence of a soul was probably universal. And the curious doctrine of transmigration satisfied the unfortunate that their present woes were the result of their own actions in some former birth, and would be avoided in future ones by present liberality to the priests. . . . The priests were mostly well-meaning, well-conducted, superstitious, and inflated with a sincere belief in their own divinity.<sup>30</sup>

Illustrative of his method of interpretation is the account of the temptation of Gautama by Māra, for which he quoted a late Pali source<sup>31</sup> and made comments such as:

‘There now ensued a second struggle in Gautama’s mind, described in both the Pali and the Sanskrit accounts with all the wealth of poetic imagery of which the Indian mind is master. . . . Unable to express the struggles of his soul in any other way, they represent him as sitting sublime, calm and serene during violent attacks made upon him by a visible tempter and his wicked angels, armed by all kinds of weapons; the greatness of the temptation being shadowed forth by the horrors of the convulsion of the powers of Nature. . . . It may be questioned how far the later Buddhists have been able to recognise the spiritual truth hidden under these material images; most of them have doubtless believed in a real material combat, and a real material earthquake. But it is not in India alone that the attempt to compress ideas about the immaterial into words drawn from tangible things has failed, and has produced expressions which have hardened into false and inconsistent creeds. To us, now, these legends may appear childish or absurd, but they are not without a beauty of their own; and they have still a depth of meaning to those who strive to read between the lines of these, the first half-inarticulate efforts the Indian mind had made to describe the feelings

30. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism: Being a Sketch of the Life and Teachings of Gautama, the Buddha* (1877 and London, 1925), pp. 23–4.

31. *Madhurattha Vilāsinī* (drawing on Turnour in *Journal of the Bengal Asiatic Society*, vii, 812–3).

of a strong man torn by contending passions. Comparing the different accounts of the events of that decisive day in the light of the past and future history of Gautama, the meaning sought to be conveyed by the exuberant imagery of the Buddhist writers seems, in its principle features, unmistakable. . . . For years he had looked at all earthly good as vanity, worthless and transitory. . . . But now to his wavering faith the sweet delights of home and love, the charms of wealth and power, began to show themselves in a different light, and to glow again with attractive colours. They were within his reach, he knew he would be welcomed back, and yet, – would there even then be satisfaction? Were all his labours to be lost? Was there *no* sure ground to stand on? Thus he agonised in his doubt from the early morning until sunset. But as the day ended the religious side of his nature had won the victory; his doubts had cleared away; he had become Buddha, that is enlightened; he had grasped, as it seemed to him, the solution of the great mystery of sorrow, and had learnt at once its causes and its cure. He seemed to have gained the haven of peace, and *in the power over the human heart of inward culture, and of love to others*, to rest at last on a certitude that could never be shaken.<sup>32</sup>

There are unmistakable parallels here to procedures observable in Christian theology: The application of a historical grasp of the essence of early Buddhism ('in the light of the past and future history of Gautama'), in order to extract a meaning from the difficult mythological material, a meaning which moreover, though it is claimed to be representative of the original meaning, can also clearly be seen to be to some extent a *new* meaning. For Rhys Davids it was the inward, purifying mental and moral culture which lay at the heart of Gautama's achievement and from which his love for others and teaching activity flowed. The *summum bonum* of Buddhism, he said, for which Nirvāna was one name, 'is a blissful mental state, a moral condition, a modification of personal character'.<sup>33</sup> As compared with this inward *meaning* and *value* (both words being used advisedly) many of the later developments of Buddhism make a sorry show:

'The development of the Buddhist doctrine which has taken place in the Panjab, Nepal and Tibet is exceedingly interesting, and very valuable

32. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism, Being a Sketch*. . . pp. 36–40.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 112–3.

from the similarity it bears to the development which has taken place in Christianity in Roman Catholic countries. It has resulted at last in the complete establishment of Lāmāism, a religion not only in many points different from, but actually antagonistic to, the primitive system of Buddhism and this not only in its doctrine, but also in its church organisation.<sup>34</sup>

With regard to the celestial bodhisattvas and buddhas of Mahayana Buddhism Rhys Davids is even more forthright:

‘They will probably be found to be the inventions of Buddhists, whose minds were steeped in brahmin philosophy and mythology; and who were so imperfectly converted to Gautama’s system of salvation by self-control and moral culture, that their hearts craved after Buddhist gods to fill the place of the dead gods of the Vedic Pantheon, or to make them live again in their descendants. . .

‘And corrupt Buddhism did not stop here. There is one step still further removed from Gautama’s doctrines – the step from polytheism to monotheism, and this step it also afterwards took. . .

‘It is needless to add, that under the overpowering influence of these sickly imaginations the moral teachings of Gautama have been almost hid from view. The theories grew and flourished; each new step, each new hypothesis demanded another; until the whole sky was filled with forgeries of the brain, and the nobler and simpler lessons of the founder of the religion were smothered beneath the glittering mass of metaphysical subtleties.

‘As the stronger side of Gautama’s teaching was neglected, the debasing belief in rites and ceremonies, and charms, and incantations, which had been the especial object of his scorn, began to live again, and to grow vigorously, and spread like the Birana weed warmed by a tropical sun in marsh and muddy soil’.<sup>35</sup>

In this application of a certain concept of the essence of Buddhism as a critical criterion one is reminded of the protestant sting in H. M. Gwatkin’s eminently readable account of the Arian controversy. Gwatkin concluded not only that Arian doctrine was ‘a mass of presumptuous theorising’; but also that ‘as a concession to heathenism’ (by making Christ ‘no better than

34. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 203–4, 207.

a heathen demigod') 'it was outbid by the growing worship of saints and relics'.<sup>36</sup>

Oldenberg's influential book *Buddha, sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* (1881) is less colourful than the works of Rhys Davids, but is fuller and more systematic. He admitted that the Pali Canon has its share of legendary accretion, but emphasised its simple sobriety as compared with elaborated Buddha-legends such as the *Mahāvastu* or the *Lalitavistara*.<sup>37</sup> The situation was similar, he said, to research into the life of Jesus, which makes use not of mediaeval legends but of the New Testament.<sup>38</sup> As to the content of the Buddha's teaching, Oldenberg considered it justifiable to attribute 'the more essential ideas' (*die wesentlicheren unter den Gedanken*) found in the canonical texts to the Buddha himself.<sup>39</sup> Why should not the founder of Buddhism have formulated himself those special terms and phrases which regularly recur throughout the ancient texts, he argued.<sup>40</sup> On these grounds he made use of the 'four holy truths' as a systematic framework for his whole account of the teachings of Buddhism.

'The starting point for an account of Buddhist doctrine is clearly presented to us by the tradition as well as by the nature of the matter itself. At the basis of the whole of Buddhist thought the ever-present presupposition is the vision of the *suffering* of all existence. The four holy truths of the Buddhists treat of suffering, the arising of suffering, the abolition of suffering, and the path to the abolition of suffering; it is always the word *suffering* which sets the basic tone of Buddhist thought.

'In those four truths we are able to perceive the oldest and most authentic expression of this thought. While most of the categories and theses which we find to be touched on in Buddhist doctrine are not treated as the special possession of *this* faith but as the generally accepted common possession of all those who think religiously, the four holy truths always appear as something which the Buddhists have over and above the non-Buddhists, as the kernel and hinge of the Dhamma (teaching).'<sup>41</sup>

36. H. M. Gwatkin, *The Arian Controversy* (fifth impression, London, 1903), p. 166-7.

37. Oldenberg, *Op. cit.* pp. 84ff.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.

It may be noted here that Oldenberg is applying precisely a principle of interpretation for which Loisy castigated Harnack, namely the principle that the specifically characteristic is the essential. Harnack had claimed that the essential characteristic of the teaching of Jesus, which in turn was the primary locus for the identification of the essence of Christianity, was a trust in God as Father such as was not to be found in the Old Testament. Loisy's rejection of this was made not only by casting doubt on whether such a trust was in fact characteristic only of the teaching of Jesus, but also on quite theoretical grounds. He wrote:

'There would also be little logic in taking for the total essence of a religion that which differentiates it from another. Monotheistic belief is common to Judaism, to Christianity and to Islam. One will not conclude from this that the essence of these three religions is to be sought outside the idea of monotheism. Neither the Jew, the Christian nor the Moslem will admit that belief in one God is not the first and principal article of their creed. Each will criticise the particular form which the idea receives in the faith of his neighbour; but none will take it into his head to deny that monotheism is an element of his own religion on the grounds that monotheism also belongs to the religion of the others. It is by their differences that one establishes the essential distinction between these religions, but their constitution does not consist merely of these differences.

'It is therefore quite arbitrary to decree that Christianity must essentially be that which the Gospel has not borrowed from Judaism, as if that which the Gospel has retained from the Jewish tradition were necessarily of secondary value.'<sup>42</sup>

Loisy's argument seems plausible enough at first sight, but quite apart from the fact that, since Loisy wrote, quite serious attempts have indeed been made to maintain a Christian 'theology' which dispenses with theism as such, there is another aspect to his argument which may be a weakness and which is certainly relevant to the present discussion. This is that the theoretical aspect of the argument is based on three very closely related examples only. How would it turn out if the empirical base for his theoretical observation were widened? Oldenberg's account of Buddhism, at least, would seem to be a counter-case. How many more counter-cases might

42. Loisy, *Op. cit.*, xvi-xvii.

there be? If the alleged arbitrariness of Harnack's decision to select the specific as the essential is to be checked by Loisy's appeal to two further cases, may not Loisy's attempt to set up a theoretical principle on the basis of three cases empirically considered need to be refined by the examination of still more comparable cases? This is not the place to attempt to *solve* this particular hermeneutical problem. There is doubtless much to be said on both sides, and indeed much to be added with respect to the social context of the problem, considered by both Oldenberg and Loisy in purely doctrinal terms. Enough has been said however to suggest that a systematic comparative approach to the problem might lead to a further diminution of arbitrariness.

If both Rhys Davids and Oldenberg took a stance which might in retrospect be fairly described as Harnackian, it is not surprising that in spite of their outstanding historical contributions they were also otherwise criticised in much the same way as Harnack was. Three interconnected points of criticism may be adduced briefly which were made against the 'Harnacks' by Loisy and Regamey respectively. Firstly they were said to be arbitrary and overconfident in their selection of supposedly old elements from within the sources.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, in explaining these elements they failed to take later tradition into account.<sup>44</sup> Thirdly, they interpreted 'original' Buddhism or Christianity in accordance with views about the value of intellectual and moral self-culture or behaviour which were generally current at the time of the interpretation. In this last respect Conze upstaged Regamey's talk of 'arbitrariness' by commending 'the perhaps not entirely unfounded belief that the mentality of Asiatic Buddhists is probably nearer to that of the Buddha than that of the Protestant Christians of a Europe bursting with imperialistic conceit.'<sup>45</sup> This vicious sarcasm may perhaps be more than anything an indication of some personal antipathy towards Protestantism. Regamey is more polite, and in his case we may simply take the *imprimatur* which his book bears as symbolically

43. Loisy, *Op. cit.*, p. xix; cf. Regamey, *Der Buddhismus Indiens*, p. 18.

44. Loisy, *passim*, and Regamey, *Op. cit.* p. 18.

45. Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, p. 2. The implication is that they interpreted Buddhism in terms of their own mentality. Cf. Loisy, *Op. cit.* p. xii: 'Au fond, M. Sabatier et M. Harnack ont voulu concilier la foi chrétienne avec les exigences de la science et de l'esprit scientifique en notre temps.'

consistent with the general tenor of his views about the way in which people ought to deal with religious traditions. There are indeed possible opposing positions on these matters, and at an elementary level these may be related to Protestant and Catholic principles. Less arbitrariness cannot however be brought about by more arbitrariness, but, as was demonstrated by Troeltsch, only by a considered interpenetration of the real values of the various positions, which in turn depends upon greater theoretical refinement. For the time being, polemics apart, it may be agreed that there was considerable value in the correctives instinctively provided by the Russian and the Franco-Belgian schools which Regamey and Conze tend to prefer.

The Russian or Leningrad school of interpretation may be referred to more briefly than the last. Its strength lay in the study of the scholastic tradition as seen in retrospect from the standpoint of the Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Japanese Buddhisms existing down to modern times. While much work was done on problems of terminology and translation,<sup>46</sup> Theodor Stcherbatsky waged bitter warfare with Berriedale Keith about the essential nature of Buddhist teaching.<sup>47</sup> Stcherbatsky argued that the proper way to reconstruct 'the doctrine of the Buddha' is to 'compare the records of the Pali Canon with what we know about the condition of Indian philosophy in the time preceding the age of Buddha, with what followed it, and with what was contemporaneous with it.'<sup>48</sup> He took the Sāṃkhya system with its doctrine of twenty-four elements subject to change and one indestructible soul per individual to be representative of the trend of philosophical opinion at the time of the Buddha. The later Buddhist Mādhyamika and Yogācāra systems, for their part, were clearly developments built upon the earlier system of Buddhist analysis, namely the Abhidhamma of the Hinayāna. All three phases of the Buddhist philosophy, though differing in important respects (*i.e.* moving from 'pluralism' to 'monism' and then to 'idealism') nevertheless had something in common and that is 'the denial of a permanent substantial Ego and the splitting of it into separate elements'. 'That',

46. *I.e.* especially that of Rosenberg and Obermiller, *cf.* details in Regamey's bibliographical *Buddhistische Philosophie*.

47. Th. Stcherbatsky, 'The Doctrine of the Buddha' in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6 (1933), pp. 867-896.

48. Stcherbatsky, 'The Doctrine of the Buddha', p. 870.

he said, 'is the central conception out of which all the subsequent diversity of doctrine developed'.<sup>49</sup> A little later he insisted: 'Buddhism is called the theory of No-Soul. Whosoever wishes to understand Buddhism must fully realize the decision and the vigour with which this doctrine is professed and defended. In this respect Buddhism stands alone among the great philosophies and religions of mankind.'<sup>50</sup> And with regard to the positive statement of the theory he wrote: 'Such is in its essence this theory of elements, which constitutes the theoretical part in the first period of historical Buddhism. Its central conception is one of a plurality of separate elements connected by the laws of functional interdependence. The whole system is deduced with irrefutable logic out of this conception.'<sup>51</sup> This fundamental doctrine which is the basis and strength of all the later Buddhist systems, was formulated, he argued, in competition with the teaching of the Sāṃkhya, and we may presume it to have been the teaching of the Buddha himself.

Against Stcherbatsky it may of course be argued that if Keith was wrong to play down the philosophical aspects and implications of early Buddhism and its continuity with the later Buddhist systems, Stcherbatsky was equally wrong to play down the religious and soteriological aspects. He wrote: 'There is only one point where the solid ground of logic is forsaken and Buddhism appeals to mysticism; that is, its theory of final deliverance, which is attained partly through mystical powers.'<sup>52</sup> One has the impression that this is a rather unimportant aspect of the matter for Stcherbatsky. He certainly does not see the theory of final deliverance as the driving idea of Buddhism as a whole. It is notable that *duhka* (suffering), which for Oldenberg was the *Grundton* of Buddhist thought (though he admitted in a footnote that the philosophical analysis was also important<sup>53</sup>), does not really figure much in Stcherbatsky's analysis, except where he is rather separately discussing the 'aim' of the Buddhist system as opposed to its ontology and psychology.<sup>54</sup> In any case he seems to have thought that this whole aspect of the matter is relatively inessential to Buddhism since it is

49. *Ibid.*, p. 871.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 873.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 886.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 886.

53. Oldenberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 237, note 1.

54. Stcherbatsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 884.

not dissimilar from other systems in seeking release. 'Here again Buddhism does not stand alone with its idea of salvation. Like the Sāṅkhya and Jainism, it is a path to salvation through knowledge and trance and after an existence of bliss in meditative heavens. Its originality lies in the analysing spirit which conceives these higher existences also as a cooperation of separate elements linked together into individual lives through causal laws.'<sup>55</sup> In other words it is not the fact that Buddhism is a path to salvation through knowledge etc. which constitutes the essence of Buddhism, but the specific and unique content of that knowledge. The question of the substantial rightness or wrongness of Stcherbatsky's account may be left on one side. It is of interest here that his *method* included the assumptions: (1) that what is specific is the essential (like Oldenberg), but also (2) (unlike Oldenberg) that any account of the essentials of original Buddhism must include the abstraction of key ideas which can be demonstrated to have been coherently present among the main philosophical schools of later Buddhism.

The third school of western Buddhist studies, the Franco-Belgian or 'modern' school acclaimed by Regamey and Conze, is really a continuation of the Russian school in that it takes the whole Buddhist tradition into account. It differs however from Stcherbatsky at least in that its exponents are not really very interested at all in what 'original' Buddhism may have been. As a matter of fact the continuity may be greater than at first sight appears, because Stcherbatsky only became really interested in the historical question of originality when his works attempting to define the 'central conception' of Buddhism came under attack, and even then his response tended to be theoretical rather than circumstantially historical. However that may be, Regamey characterises the Franco-Belgian school as follows:

"They have abandoned the fruitless attempt to reconstruct a pure Buddhism, are convinced that Buddhism is as much the work of the Buddhists as of the Buddha himself, and find the entire wealth and true face of this religion in the manifoldness of its aspects, and the multiplicity of its sects or schools."<sup>56</sup>

55. *Ibid.*, p. 886.

56. Regamey, *Der Buddhismus Indiens*, p. 20.

While Regamey also claims that this method has shown itself to be more effective even for the problem about the nature of original Buddhism<sup>57</sup>, Conze roundly declares that 'the principles of this school have now been universally adopted by all scholars working in this field'.<sup>58</sup> If these principles simply mean to 'use objectively all the sources presently available, supplementing philological and philosophical analysis with ethnology, sociology and other supporting sciences',<sup>59</sup> it would of course be unimpeachable. Unfortunately however there seems to be rather more to this shift of method, and concerning this extra both Regamey and Conze seem to be rather vague if not naive.

The trend away from looking at what are taken to be the pure, original characteristics of Buddhism and towards looking at the varied schools, cults and sects as containing in their variety the 'wealth' and 'true face' of Buddhism is really quite analogous to Loisy's view of the developments of the Church, of Christian dogma and the Catholic cult as justifiable extensions of Christianity within the process of history, as expounded in Chapters Four, Five and Six of *L'Évangile et l'Église*. Loisy himself concludes with a sentiment which may fairly be compared with the quotation from Regamey given a little above:

'If I have succeeded in showing that Christianity has lived in the Church and by the Church, and that it is quite useless to try to salvage it by the pursuit of some quintessence, this little volume will have achieved its purpose.'<sup>60</sup>

If Troeltsch had to insist on the need to see the concept of the essence of Christianity as being not only one which takes account of various historical phases but also one which displays a critical edge with regard to the identification of these, is the same not true for Buddhism? It is simply not good enough to decry the work of Oldenberg and Rhys Davids, and then to give up all attempts to discriminate within the tradition. The work of Rhys Davids and Oldenberg, and others, may need correction; it may need considerable correction, but the application of an abstracted concept of

57. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

58. Conze, *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

59. Regamey, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

60. Loisy, *Op. cit.*, pp. 278-9.

the essence of Buddhism, however complex it may need to be, seems to be an inevitable part of the historical method required for this very purpose. Indeed it is possible to observe the application of such an abstracted concept in the writings of Regamey and Conze themselves.

Discussing the missionary labours of Padmasambhava in Tibet, Regamey writes: 'The Buddhism which he brought was admittedly little different from the Bon religion: the monks were not bound by a strict discipline, they did not observe celibacy, and they occupied themselves with magic and spells.'<sup>61</sup> At first sight this statement seems to be quite in accord with the principle that the 'wealth' and 'true face' of Buddhism is to be found 'in the manifoldness of its aspects and the multiplicity of its sects or schools'. Yet the two negative clauses as a matter of fact imply some generalised conception of what Buddhism involves, as distinct from the Bon religion, and this conception is used as a criterion in terms of which Padmasambhava's form of Buddhism is assessed and found to be atypical. Regamey says that Padmasambhava was a very successful spreader of Buddhism, which is different from the Bon religion, but that Padmasambhava's own form of Buddhism sailed very near the wind of Bon. Thus we are thrown willy nilly into a sea of problems about what is essential and what is peripheral in the two religions.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, in Conze's *A Short History of Buddhism* a paragraph devoted to Nichiren is concluded with the statement that 'on this occasion Buddhism had evolved its very antithesis out of itself'.<sup>63</sup> He declares that the sect which Nichiren founded 'differs from all other Buddhist schools by its nationalistic, pugnacious and intolerant attitude, and it is somewhat doubtful whether it belongs to the history of Buddhism at all.'<sup>64</sup> Such criticisms of Nichiren may be justifiable, though they are often exaggerated, but the point to observe is that when they are made, some abstracted conception of what Buddhism is really supposed to be like is being brought into play.

61. Regamey, *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

62. If Rhys Davids' attitude, illustrated above, was admittedly somewhat crude, the fact that there is a problem about the identification and nature of Tibetan Buddhism is much more sensitively approached by D. L. Snellgrove in the introduction to his *Hevajra Tantra* (Oxford, 1959), cf. especially pp. 5-10.

63. E. Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (Bombay, 1960), p. 99.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Incidentally, Nichiren certainly had the mentality of an Asian Buddhist, steeped as he was in the very broadly based Tendai tradition and conversant with a wide variety of Buddhist scriptures in Chinese, as translated by Kumārajīva and other eminent men.<sup>65</sup> Conversely, he did not make use of Hegelian phraseology about historical movements evolving their very antitheses out of themselves. What is even less generally realised is that Nichiren himself was doing something very similar to Conze in thirteenth century Japan, because for him the Nembutsu Buddhism of Honen and others, the tantric Buddhism of the Shingon, and the onesided emphasis on *zazen* (*seated* meditation as opposed to the other three types provided for in Tendai Buddhism) were all extremely selective distortions of the originally authoritative and all-embracing Tendai system, which itself was simply an organised and articulated account of the Buddhist tradition as a whole. These misleading and dangerous heresies were bringing Buddhism in Japan into a sorry state, and this was bad for the country, Nichiren claimed (Buddhists had always claimed that Buddhism is good for the country). Moreover Nichiren's criticisms were justified by detailed reference to numerous writings representative of the tradition as a whole.<sup>66</sup> One might wish to reply then that it is doubtful whether any of these sects really belong to the history of Buddhism, but if most of Japanese Buddhism is to be written off in this way, so too must Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism, and where then is the 'method' of the Franco-Belgian school, and of 'all scholars working in this field'? The colourful writings of Rhys Davids and Conze are instinctively right in bringing a critical criterion to bear on Tibetan and Nichirenite Buddhism respectively, even though neither was expert in the field in question. The fact that there is a problem about the authentic continuity of the tradition is clear from the many polemical struggles within the history of Buddhism itself, and western presentations of the

65. Cf. the *Kaimokushō* and various other writings translated by G. Renondeau in his volume *La Doctrine de Nichiren* (Paris, 1953). Renondeau lists fifty-five sutras (including such massive collections as the *Āgamasūtra*, counted as one!) and forty-three authoritative commentarial writings, as having been cited by Nichiren in the writings translated in the volume referred to, which of course only represent a part of his total works.

66. The argument against Hōnen is developed in this way in the *Risshō Ankoku Ron*, translated by Renondeau under the title 'Le "Traité sur l'État" de Nichiren, suivi de huit lettres de 1268' in *T'oung Pao* 40 (1950).

history of Buddhism can only avoid being contaminated by this problem if they restrict themselves to the most minutely circumscribed area of research, and perhaps not even then. Any moderately general account of Buddhism is bound to raise such questions because, as Troeltsch made clear, they are the inevitable concomitant of the historical method itself. They can only be avoided by a relapse into an arbitrary dogmatism which for a westerner would be nothing more than a naive posturing.

One final and leading example of this much acclaimed modern method may be found in the work of Étienne Lamotte. Lamotte has of course produced major works of translation, like Conze, and is in every way a master scholar of Buddhism. Nevertheless the method which he adopted in his quite massive *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*<sup>67</sup> needs some scrutiny. There are three interconnected problems: about the place accorded to miraculous legend, about what can be known about the Buddha, and about the content of the early teaching of Buddhism. In his introduction Lamotte writes as follows:

‘The Buddhist tradition is bathed in the miraculous. Reduced by certain schools and exaggerated by others, the miraculous turns up everywhere. To some extent its presence has been admitted below without attempting to eliminate it in the name of our western rationalism. To abstract from it would be to offer the reader a caricature and still fail to achieve historical truth. Simply to remove legend is not enough in itself to establish factual reality. To keep the same place for the miraculous which it has always had in the sources gives a more faithful reflection of the mentality of the disciples of the Buddha. It is this mentality which is the proper object of our enquiry and not a fleeting and unattainable historical certitude.’<sup>68</sup>

The problem towards which Lamotte here takes up his position is closely connected with the slow but steady growth of the legend about the Buddha himself until finally complete biographies were compiled including a whole variety of fantastic elements. With regard to the historical problem about the Buddha himself Lamotte writes:

‘To write the life of Śākyamuni is a desperate undertaking. . . . It nevertheless remains the case that Buddhism would be inexplicable if one did

67. Louvain, 1958.

68. Étienne Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (Louvain, 1958), p. x.

not posit at its beginning a personality sufficiently powerful to have given it its impetus and to have stamped it with the essential characteristics which have persisted throughout all its history.’<sup>69</sup>

The problem is made worse, he says, by the various interpretations given to the Buddha-legend by western ‘schools’ of religion. Since these are not specifically identified we can only surmise that they are supposed to suffer especially from a surfeit of ‘our western rationalism’. However, Lamotte’s attempt to escape from this, while at the same time not using the later fully fledged lives of the Buddha such as the *Buddha-carita* or the *Lalitavistara*, leads to an unhappy ambivalence. For example, he begins with the parentage and birth of Śākyamuni, which is treated non-miraculously, but later he includes the story of Devadatta’s enmity with the details about the rock flung down from the mountain failing to harm the Buddha seriously and the enraged elephant sent in pursuit of him kneeling down before his feet.<sup>70</sup> Also, among fairly straightforward accounts of the movements of Śākyamuni from place to place, there is a paragraph which coolly summarises the *content* of his enlightenment, as if this itself were a directly available datum. One is tempted to prefer the vigorous clarity of Rhys Davids writing in 1877.<sup>71</sup> The final stages of the Buddha’s life are recounted on the basis of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, ‘of which we possess several relatively consistent recensions’, but again while many details of this are passed on by

69. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

71. Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids maintained her husband’s ruggedly honest approach, writing on the same general problem in *A Manual of Buddhism* (London 1932, 1935), p. 296: ‘More usually we are simply told: “The Buddha says . . .” Even scholarly writers will be ever telling you the same thing in French, in German, in English. It is true that they are quoting what is stated in records, are aware that these are little more than venerable *on dit’s*, and that they cannot always be reminding the reader that this is so. But that they spare him (and themselves) the constant *caveat* has the effect of *checking the critical attitude* in the average educated reader. Either he swallows all that is virtually only alleged, or he holds all to be mere legendary tale, unworthy of credence. If such writers would only substitute, for “the Buddha said”, “Buddhism says”, then would all be relatively well said. But on to the shoulders of that idealized image “Buddha” is piled a responsibility for any and everything that “Buddhism” has here, and there, and now and then, been adding to and taking away from the original mandate.’ The detail of this complaint may not be precisely applicable to Lamotte’s work (that is, he does not keep on saying: ‘The Buddha says . . .’), but the substance remains relevant.

Lamotte the necessary contraction leads to procedures not in principle unlike the reinterpretations of Rhys Davids. For example, the Buddha's miraculous crossing of the Ganges by vanishing and reappearing while ordinary folk were still looking about for boats and rafts is reduced to the statement that 'he crossed the river with great solemnity'.<sup>72</sup>

The learned author might attempt to justify his procedure by reference to the introductory sentence: 'Reduced to its principle events the life of Śākyamuni *presents itself* in the following manner' (my italics for *se présente*).<sup>73</sup> The question remains however as to what this precisely means. It seems not to be intended as a historical sketch, based on evidence of reasonable probability, but excluding obviously miraculous legend and accounts of the inner life which can only be given from within a religious position (or 'phenomenologically' as representing such). It seems also not intended to be a full-blown epic based on the later Buddhist elaborations. Yet if it is supposed to reflect the mentality of the disciples of the Buddha (in which century incidentally?), on what grounds can the details of the earlier part of the Buddha's life, the account of his enlightenment and the account of his last days be strung together as a continuous narrative, which is something that the earliest Buddhist tradition conspicuously failed to do? Perhaps it should be accepted that what we are offered is a kind of abstracted 'essential' life of the Buddha, such as is roughly consistent with what must be posited to account for the existence of Buddhism at all, consistent with the fragmentary interest in his life displayed by the early compilers, and consistent yet again with the pattern developed in the later lives of the Buddha. To do this however is not merely to make use of historical materials as data for the mentality of the Buddha's disciples, but also to *create* a network which includes historical facts (e.g. dated events), miraculous legend and religious doctrine, and to *evaluate*, for example, the relative value of legendary reminiscence as opposed to 'our western rationalism'. It is to begin to work out an 'essence', in Troeltsch's sense, of this aspect of Buddhism, which in turn, for the writer and his readers, will guide the perception and assessment of later developments.

72. Lamotte, *Op. cit.*, p. 23. Cf. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part II (1910, London 1966), pp. 94-5.

73. Lamotte, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

Lamotte's account of the 'ancient Buddhist doctrine'<sup>74</sup> is perhaps less problematic in itself, because his intention to give an account of what 'Buddhists understand by Law or *dharma*'<sup>75</sup> is more clear. In practice, although he uses the word 'understand' in the present tense and does not say which Buddhists are meant, his account summarises the doctrine of the Pali Canon. A few Mahāyāna texts are referred to on incidental matters, but little attempt is made to include characteristically Mahāyāna teaching at this point. He says, 'The essentials (*l'essentiel*) of Buddhist teaching are contained in the sermon of Benares... where the Buddha revealed the four holy truths (*āryasatya*) to those who were to be his first disciples.'<sup>76</sup> These 'four holy truths' provide for Lamotte, just as they did for Oldenberg (whose work indeed, he says, has maintained its value<sup>77</sup>), the basic framework in the setting of which other formulae and aspects of the teaching, such as *pratītyasamutpāda* and the doctrine of non-self, are presented. These leading teachings, he says, completely outweigh certain other parts of the canonical writings which might seem to offer alternative doctrine, and they are found again and again, modified and interpreted, throughout later Buddhist scholasticism. The persistence of this kernel (*noyau*) of doctrine is all the more remarkable, he goes on, in view of the fact that the Dharma was supposed not merely to consist of the teaching of the Buddha, but also to include that of his disciples, and sometimes even that of sages, gods and apparitions.<sup>78</sup> Thus, again, in spite of the fact that he is alleged to be a member of the Franco-Belgian or modern school which 'has abandoned the fruitless attempt to reconstruct a pure Buddhism', Lamotte is in practice working with a concept of the essence of Buddhism which is not simply to be equated with the historical origins, nor yet to be naively equated with the total mass of Buddhist tradition, but which nevertheless is supposed to reflect the meaning of its various phases. That these 'essentials' could be somewhat differently conceived may be illustrated by the case of T. R. V. Murti's book *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*<sup>79</sup> where it is

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–58.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 25 note 1.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

79. London, 1960.

not so much the sermon at Benares as recorded in the Pali Canon which is taken as the key to the whole, but the doctrine of *śūnyatā* as expounded most clearly by the Mādhyamikas. It is of course unnecessary here to debate the issue itself as to what the content of these 'essentials' should be taken to be.

If Oldenberg and Rhys Davids emphasised the critical aspect of this abstracting process at the expense of the developmental, Lamotte on the whole did the opposite. Indeed, although his writing is only incidentally polemical, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to cast him as a Loisy of western Buddhism.

Such parallelisms should not be pressed too closely. Their value must lie in their suggestiveness rather than in their precision. In particular the two main trends in western Christianity, the Protestant and the Catholic, cannot be neatly paralleled as such. This is because while Rhys Davids and other modern exponents of Pali Buddhism use an essence of Buddhism abstracted in one way or another from the Pali Canon as a critical criterion with which to judge Mahāyāna developments, which have seemed to them to be more 'Catholic' looking, the Mahāyāna itself offered the first serious critique of existing Buddhist tradition in the name of a more profoundly conceived essential meaning sincerely thought to have the authority of the Buddha himself. Protestants should not find it difficult to understand the iconoclasm of the Mahāyāna. Nevertheless in spite of such caveats, and in spite of differences of opinion which are sure to exist about the value of this or that historical account of Buddhism, or about the precise content of its driving ideas, it seems to be the case that the *methodological* problems are in principle similar to those which have so exercised the minds of Christian thinkers. Moreover it seems that the analysis of a given hermeneutical problem in one tradition, the example being Troeltsch's analysis of the problem about the essence of Christianity, may in principle shed some light on what is going on in another. As the matter has been examined above, Troeltsch's insistence on the inevitability of historical abstraction, on the fact that the abstracted 'essence' should have a critical, an overall developmental, and an ideal aspect, and on the subtle interrelationship between the subjective character of evaluation and the objective control of historical fact, help to make clearer sense of the rather instinctive development of western Buddhist studies. This is not to say that Troeltsch's analysis is necessarily to be accepted as such. One might wish to raise questions, for example, about the

relationship between a sympathetically 'phenomenological' account of the essence of a religious tradition and a straightforwardly theological account, questions which might give a new twist to the problems about objectivity and neutrality, evaluation, commitment and creativity. But these questions, which were less topical in Troeltsch's time, cannot be gone into here any more than can the various questions of Christian theology which have emerged since then. By holding back from such matters it has perhaps proved possible to indicate fairly simply some basic analogies between the two sets of hermeneutical problems, and to give some initial weight to the view that a comparative study of them is worth pursuing. Further indications of what a more systematic approach to comparative hermeneutics might involve, and what sort of dividends might be expected to accrue, will be given below. Before that, however, attention must be paid to two objections which might be raised against what is being argued here, and this will allow a little more reference to be made to Asian Buddhists.

### 3. THE 'ESSENCE' OF BUDDHISM AS AN ASIAN QUESTION

It might be thought that the above argument is all right as far as it goes, but that it is really just a little game without any base in Asian Buddhism as such. Or it might be thought that even if a few Asians could be persuaded to play it as well, it would still remain something altogether modern and not really related to the great mass of Buddhism as a historical phenomenon. 'Western' and 'modern' are not always synonymous, and therefore these two matters will be taken in turn, even though some overlap cannot be avoided.

It will unfortunately be impossible to deal with Asian sources as systematically or as fully as they deserve. However the associated papers by David Bastow and Karel Werner also include detailed discussions, which while making independent theoretical contributions indirectly confirm the general relevance of this approach. Nevertheless some brief and specific reference must now be made to Asian sources to show that Troeltsch's analysis is directly relevant to them. Examples selected from various points within the Buddhist tradition will suffice to make at least an elementary working case.

Firstly I may perhaps refer to a personal conversation with three highly qualified Sinhalese Buddhists<sup>80</sup> which began with a very straightforward question about what we were to make of the great variety of materials to be found within the Pali Canon as a whole. The answer, slightly formalised out of the conversational setting, may be stated as follows. Firstly, the commentarial literature gives some guidance, and secondly, the *Khuddaka-Nikāya* and the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka* contain relatively late and miscellaneous material which is therefore less important than the *Vinaya-piṭaka* and the first four *Nikāyas* of the *Sutta-piṭaka*. It may be noted in passing that these two observations indicate that the Canon is only to be regarded as closed in a limited sense, and that further recognised writings are regarded as relevant to its interpretation, rather as the Fathers might be considered authoritatively relevant to the interpretation of the New Testament. It may be noted that the special pre-eminence given to certain writings *within* the Canon as such also has many Christian parallels, notably in the attitudes of Marcion, Luther, and later Protestants (*cf.* Robert Morgan's paper below).<sup>81</sup> Thirdly, it was stated, problems arising in the interpretation of the materials within the writings of greatest authority are solved not only by taking the wider literature into account, but more especially in terms of what we know to be the 'gist' of the teaching of the Buddha, by which is meant our summarised understanding based on a wide knowledge of the whole. Relevant historical knowledge about the status of various texts, etc., acquired by critical study, is to be taken into account here. On request, the Pali word *sāra* (literally 'pith') and the Sinhalese word *sāraya* were supplied for the English 'gist'. With regard to the Pali term, it may be observed that the 'Simile of the Pith', as given both in the *Mahāsāropama-sutta* and the *Culasāropama-sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikāya*, is clearly directed towards the grasping of the *point* of the Buddhist way of life, which is related to but not simply identified with the conceptual traditions as there rehearsed. Thus there is a modern process of abstraction and control, which is not significantly different from the functions of the 'essence' as understood by Troeltsch, and which also has roots in the ancient self-

80. The Ven. K. Gnanatilaka, Mr. W. Chandima, and Mr. P. Wajragnana, Ph. D. students at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster.

81. *Cf.* also E. Käsemann, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Göttingen, 1970).

understanding of the tradition. Indeed, fourthly, with regard to the question about whether this procedure was not in any sense alien to the traditional approach towards problems of interpretation, the immediate response was a reference to the well-known passage on the four ‘great authorities’ (*mahāpadesa*) which is to be found in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*. Reference to this was to be included in the discussion in any case, and the propriety of such reference was thereby confirmed.

The passage may be taken as a second source, this time an ancient, written one, from within Asian Buddhism itself. It runs, in abbreviated form, as follows:

‘In the first place, brethren, a brother may say thus: – “From the mouth of the Exalted One himself have I heard, from his own mouth have I received it. This is the truth, this is the law, this the teaching of the Master.” The word spoken, brethren, by that brother, should neither be received with praise nor treated with scorn. Without praise and without scorn every word and syllable should be carefully understood and then put beside the Suttas [the stock paragraphs learnt by heart in the community] and compared with the Vinaya [the rules of the Order]. If when so compared they do not harmonise with the Suttas and do not fit in with the rules of the Order, then you may come to the conclusion: – “Verily, this is not the word of the Exalted One, and has been wrongly grasped by that brother.” Therefore brethren, you should reject it. But if they harmonise with the Suttas and fit in with the rules of the Order, then you may come to the conclusion: – “Verily, this is the word of the Exalted One, and has been well grasped by that brother.” This, brethren, you should receive as the first Great Authority.

‘Again, brethren, a brother may say thus: – “In such and such a dwelling-place there is a company of the brethren with their elders and leaders. From the mouth of that company have I heard, face to face have I received it. This is the truth. . . (etc.) This, brethren, you should receive as the second Great Authority.

‘Again, brethren, a brother may say thus: – “In such and such a dwelling-place there are dwelling many elders of the Order, deeply read, holding the faith as handed down by tradition, versed in the truths, versed in the regulations of the Order, versed in the summaries of the doctrines and the

law. From the mouth of those elders have I heard . . . (etc.)” This, brethren, you should receive as the third Great Authority.

‘Again, brethren, a brother may say: – “In such and such a dwelling-place there is living a brother, deeply read, . . . (etc.)” This, brethren, you should receive as the fourth Great Authority.<sup>82</sup>

Two points may be made about this passage. It is evident that the authority only lies in the words of the brothers of elders in so far as these are first ascertained to be consistent with the *suttas* and the *vinaya*. If they are consistent then these words too count as being the teaching of the Buddha, along with the already existing tradition. In other words, there are not really four authorities, but one only – or as many as there are brothers and elders submitting successfully to the test. Secondly, the tone of the commendation suggests not that the brother (etc.) in question is supposed to have accidentally heard and successfully parroted some otherwise lost *ipsissima verba* of the Buddha, but rather that he has properly understood and successfully and positively stated some aspect of the Buddha’s teaching. It is not just a trick of memory, but it involves a *grasp* of both discipline and discourse (*vinaya* and *sutta*) and it is in some sense a *re-statement* of it in so far as what he says goes beyond the existing tradition with which it is to be compared. That is, he is not just quoting words which have already been accepted as part of the tradition. His formulation is added to the series of those which already exist and it has to be taken into account by further formulations: hence the steady growth of *relatively* authoritative Buddhist literature. This procedure has persisted down to the present day (with vicissitudes) and it seems to be quite consistent with what was said above about using the ‘gist’ of the whol to determine the value of the particular. Moreover it seems to be found to be in principle consistent with historical research of a modern kind; although obviously the actual results of historical research are bound to have whatever effects they have on the understanding of the relationships between various parts of the evolving canon and on the content of any new statements about the essentials of Buddhist teaching.

It should not be thought however that the position in the Theravada tradition is altogether un-complex and un-controversial. There was always the possibility of a drift into a pedestrian ‘Biblicism’, and also the possibility that particularly effective statements of the teaching of Buddhism

could attain an almost pre-emptive authority of their own. T. O. Ling, for example, who is well aware of the whole problem about determining 'essential Buddhist doctrine' was able to find eighteenth century Siamese support for his decision to take 'the substance of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka' as a criterion for defining it.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, 'A work representative of the Abhidhamma, which for this purpose could be used instead, is Buddhaghosa's Way of Purification (Visuddhimagga), which in a sense presents the conclusion of the Abhidhamma in the Theravādaschool.' Again, 'Buddhaghosa's Way of Purification has, however, tended to be replaced by a compendium of the Abhidhamma literature entitled the *Abhidhammattha-sangaha*, largely on account of the latter's conciseness.' Ling quotes Nyanatiloka as confirming that this contains 'the whole substance of the Abhidhamma'.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps the time will come when Nyanatiloka's own *Guide Through the Abhidhamma-piṭaka*<sup>85</sup> will be recognised as being a guiding account of the essence of Buddhism. This line of thought would seem to suggest that some theory of control is called for which operates both forwards and backwards. The problem about taking summaries of the Abhidhamma as a criterion is that although they may become more succinct and clearcut with time, they also become more and more removed from the historical origins, which also undoubtedly play some role in any account of the essence of Buddhism, as is clear from the first Theravada line of thought adduced earlier. This is not to say that there are fundamental inconsistencies within Theravada Buddhism, which would no doubt arouse the ire of Theravāda apologists. Rather it is to say that, just as in the case of the 'essence' of Christianity, it is necessary somehow to relate the view towards the origins, as being the location of values and meanings which have some role to play as a criterion with which to judge later developments, and the new value of those later formations in their openness to the future.

Ling's book itself, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil*, though admittedly not Asian in the strict sense, deserves further reference at this point. While his selection of the Abhidhamma as a basic criterion seems at first sight a

82. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Op. cit.*, pp. 133-6.

83. T. O. Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil* (London, 1962), pp. 30ff.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

85. Colombo, 1957.

rather arbitrary throwback to Stcherbatsky's approach, and one based on extremely late cited authority at that, the result is in fact remarkably effective. *Via* the Abhidhamma he finds the heart of Buddhism to lie in a conjunction of doctrine and practice, insight and meditation (if one may thus rudely simplify his account). Thus he is able to say that the demonic figure of Māra is strictly speaking not a part of *essential* Buddhism, even though he figures frequently in the Pali Canon. To state his further argument in Troeltschian terms, the Māra who is inessential (*unwesentlich*) plays an important linking role between that which is essential (*wesentlich*) and that which is contrary to the essence (*wesenswidrig*), the latter being beliefs and fears which are not entertained by an enlightened person. Moreover his fifth chapter, which compares Māra and Satan as religious symbols, may be claimed as a brief exercise in comparative hermeutics, though it also deals with substantial matters of interpretation as well. Indeed Ling himself writes in his 'Introduction': 'Moreover, in view of the way in which Buddhism has succeeded in dealing with the relationship between its own essential doctrines and popular indigenous forms of belief and practice, especially in Burma, it is possible that there are here some lessons to be learnt which may prove valuable in other religious situations of a similar nature.'

With regard to Mahāyāna Buddhism it will be convenient to mention first some aspects of early Mahāyāna, then some terminology found in the *Platform Sutra* of Hui-neng (eighth century China) and then the work of some modern Japanese exponents. In Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism, Abhidhamma (or Sanskrit Abhidharma) maintained its importance, because it was in terms of the systematic analysis of experience into its constituent relationships that much of the early debate with the 'Hīnayāna' was couched. To put it briefly, a modified account of these was given entailing a criticism which others found subversive of such cherished concepts as 'Nirvana', 'noble truths', etc.; and which claimed at the same time to be a more correct account of 'the middle way'. There was no question of a separate transmission of any other secret 'esoteric' doctrine from the Buddha. It was a straightforward debate about what the Buddha really meant. After all, to say that a statement is consistent with the discipline and the teaching was inevitably to push the problem back one stage. How do we know whether it is consistent if it is something more than a mere matter of words taken

in literalistic, rote fashion? Popular sutras such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, which indeed led the way in these developments, therefore had no qualms in ascribing the new account of the matter to the authority of the Buddha. It was the Buddha himself, in the *Lotus Sutra*, who declared that his 'historical' enlightenment and nirvana were really nothing but a skilful show for the benefit of those who needed it, the Buddha having really attained enlightenment countless aeons before.<sup>86</sup> Or it was the Buddha himself, in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, who advised on the ambivalent role of the various aspects of the teaching for an adept bodhisattva, thus:

'As many beings as there are in the universe of beings... all these I must lead to Nirvana, into that realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana.'<sup>87</sup>

The inner meaning is thus drawn back from the words which convey it, and this meaning is used to criticise the terminology to which one might otherwise become attached. Nevertheless it is conveyed by *Buddhist* terminology consistent with the tradition, and not just by any terminology. Apart from the tradition and apart from a *grasp* of the tradition the meaning could not be stated. Nor could it be stated without being applied in some specific connection. Similarly the Mādhyamikas claimed not to hold a position, but all their not holding of positions could only be presented in connection with those which others held.<sup>88</sup> The inner meaning (which does not imply unrelated 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' elements) offered by these thinkers is itself known from the tradition, it criticises the tradition, it claims to represent the tradition, and it reshapes, extends and transmits the tradition.

86. Cf. especially Chapter Fifteen (H. Kern, *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka or The Lotus of the True Law*, Sacred Books of the East XXI) (equals Chapter Sixteen in Kumārajīva's Chinese version).

87. E. Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books, Containing The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra* (London 1958), p. 25 (being a quotation from the *Diamond Sutra*).

88. A discussion about whether or not a position was being maintained is to be found in Candrakīrti's commentary on Nāgārjuna's verses, Th. Stcherbatky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* (1927, The Hague 1965), sections XXIV and XXV, and the details will be found to bear out the argument being advanced here.

It is fully consistent with all of this that a statement of the meaning may be infinitely expanded, as in the great, endlessly extended sutras and the more massive śāstras, or contracted into a few basic verses. The *Heart Sutra*, which is a brief restatement of traditional Buddhist formulae such as the four truths, reinterpreting them in terms of *śūnyatā* ('emptiness'), that is, giving 'There is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path',<sup>89</sup> closes with the colophon: 'This completes the heart (*hridaya*) of perfect wisdom'.<sup>90</sup> The *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* closes its eighth chapter, which at one stage may have been the last, with the similar colophon: 'Here ends the Eighth Chapter, "On Meat-eating", from the Laṅkāvatāra, the Essence of the Teaching of All the Buddhas.'<sup>91</sup> The original term used here is *sarvabuddhapravacana-hridaya*, *hridaya* (heart) being translated here by Suzuki as 'essence'.<sup>92</sup> The complete expression also occurs in the second chapter, the original main chapter of the sutra. Mahāmāti says:

'Teach me, Blessed one, concerning that most subtle doctrine which explains the Citta, Manas, Manovijñāna, the five Dharmas, the Svabhāvas, and the Lakshanas; which is put in practice by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; which is separated from the state of mind which recognises a world as something outside the Mind itself; and which, breaking down all the so-called truths established by words and reasonings, constitutes the essence of the teachings of all the Buddhas. Pray teach this assembly headed by the Bodhisattvas gathering on Mount Malaya in the city of Lānkā; teach them regarding the Dharmakāya which is praised by the Tathagatas and which is the realm of the Ālayavijñāna which resembles the ocean with its waves.'<sup>93</sup>

The passage cannot be commented on in detail. It contains terms reflecting both the traditional analysis and special emphasis on the psychology (or 'idealism') of the sutra as a whole. In referring to a 'most subtle doctrine' which constitutes the 'essence' or 'heart' (*hridaya*) of the teaching, it is clearly not referring to nothing at all, nor yet to a dogmatically literalist

89. Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, p. 89.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

91. D. T. Suzuki, *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* (London, 1932), p. 222.

92. Suzuki's translation of this phrase is slightly different each time. In the footnote to page 222 he omits 'All' (presumably by a slip) and does not use capitals, while in the quotation given next below he gives 'teachings' in the plural.

93. Suzuki, *Op. cit.*, pp. 39f.

statement of the doctrine. It is referring rather to what Troeltsch described as an 'entity with an inner, living flexibility, and a productive power for new creation and assimilation', one which 'cannot be characterised at all by one word or one doctrine' (such as perhaps 'non-soul' or 'four holy truths' or 'suffering'), 'but only by a concept which includes from the start both flexibility and richness'. It is with just such a mobile, consistent *hridaya* that Mahāyānists have traditionally operated.

It may be that Mahāyāna Buddhism contains in its view of the nature and function of doctrinal formulae something which is of interest to the Christian theologian. While in Troeltschian terms we may be invited to distinguish between what is essential, what is inessential and what is contrary to the essence (*wesenswidrig*), the Mahāyāna seems to say that all items of doctrine are both essential and dispensable, and that any item of doctrine may be contrary to the essence, depending on the attitude of the person concerned. To put it more provocatively, the provisional (which indicates the real) may be variously essential, dispensable and harmful, while the provisional and the real are also identical. To work this out properly at a comparative level it would be necessary first to go into the whole notion of skilful means, and the doctrine of 'two truths'. This would lead too far afield here.<sup>94</sup> It would also be necessary to distinguish carefully between the role of these ideas in conveying a metaphysics which Christian theologians might find incompatible with Christianity (but all that would be a matter of the *content* of the two traditions), and their role as hermeneutical controls for Buddhology, which might prove to be relevant, through a process of comparison, to hermeneutical questions in Christianity. If Troeltsch's analysis is agreed to be relevant to Buddhist procedures of interpretation, is it not worth considering whether a Mahāyāna analysis of these matters sheds some light on Christian theological procedures?

An idea more obviously parallel to that of the 'essence', though in meaning continuous with the main line of thought to be found in the earlier Mahāyāna

94. Of the two, the notion of 'means' or 'device' (*upāya*) seems to have the most widespread currency among Māhāyana writings; and it is clearly a 'hermeneutical' term in the sense that it is used to indicate the manner in which something (various things) is being or is supposed to be interpreted. This is not to say that all Buddhist writers who have used it have done so with the same degree of reflection, since it is used in stereotyped phrases as well as in more animated contexts.

is that of the 'great meaning' (大意 *ta-i*, Japanese: *tai-i*), found in various passages in the *Platform Sutra* of Hui-Neng. This classical work of Zen Buddhism has recently been authoritatively translated by P. Yampolsky, who renders the term 'cardinal meaning' ('great meaning' is a literal version).<sup>95</sup> It seems to be quite similar to the idea of 'the heart of the teaching of all the Buddhas' referred to above. H. Ui, in his dictionary of Buddhist terms based on Chinese Buddhist literature generally, explains it as: 'The general meaning; a statement which draws out and binds together the meaning of the whole, from the beginning to the end.'<sup>96</sup> In sections 4–8 of the *Platform Sutra*, which are too long to quote but where the term occurs several times, it is closely linked to the relative spiritual attainments of Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng. Shen-hsui, still concerned with his gradual progress towards enlightenment, is said still not to have discerned the cardinal meaning, whereas Hui-neng, who in one way or another (the account is confused) has attained enlightenment, is thereupon said to have awakened to the cardinal meaning. He is also declared worthy to transmit the Dharma. The polemical aspect of the notion of the 'cardinal Meaning' arises because Hui-neng, unlike Shen-hsui, does not depend on the gradual polishing of his mind. Indeed he is illiterate and his enlightenment does not depend on outer formalities such as studying at all. 'If you do not know the original mind, studying the Dharma is to no avail. If you know the mind and see its true nature, you then awake to the cardinal meaning.'<sup>97</sup> There is a radical discontinuity with the monastic practices of study and discipline which are supposed to achieve something. Nevertheless, the compelling religious force of the account should not lead us to overlook that there is a conceptual aspect to the cardinal meaning and one which is inextricably linked to the Buddhist tradition. In this respect it is similar to the 'positionless' transmission effected by the Mādhyamikas. Though the legend varies about the circumstances, hearing the *Diamond Sutra* is said to have played a part in his 'awakening' (section 9), and when Hui-neng was 'awakened' he was entrusted with the transmission of a Dharma which must have been pre-

95. Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York and London, 1967).

96. Hakuju Ui, *Bukkyō Jiten* (Tokyo, 1965), ad loc.

97. Yampolsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 132. There is a problem about the exact location of these sentences in the text.

sumed to be consistently transmittable. Admittedly the Dharma is to be transmitted 'from mind to mind', and admittedly it is said that 'From ancient times the transmission of the Dharma has been as tenuous as a dangling thread.'<sup>98</sup> At the same time the robe presented by the fifth patriarch to the sixth is said to be the proof of authentic transmission, and a later section of the writing gives a long genealogy of authentic transmission (invented in retrospect).<sup>99</sup> Another passage indicates that passing on the sudden teaching (another term for the discontinuous awakening to the original mind and to the cardinal meaning) involves 'proficiency in preaching and proficiency in the mind'.<sup>100</sup> Only 'If you smash completely the erroneous and the correct, then the nature of enlightenment (*bodhi*) will be revealed as it is.'<sup>101</sup> Thus the awakening to the cardinal meaning and the transmission of the Dharma from mind to mind are not only discontinuous in a profound sense, but they also involve conceptual grasp and conceptual communication; rather as in recent Protestant theology the recognition that the words are subordinate to the Word does not mean scorn for the words and for the practical aspects of communicating the Word, however discontinuous, abrupt or 'sudden' the effects of the Word, in a revelatory event, may be upon the believer. This parallel seems to hold good however different the *contents* of the respective events may be. The comparison may be made without regard to any position which may be held about the truth or value of 'Revelation' or 'awakening' respectively. It is important to note that it is consistent with an affirmation of either of these.

A different section of the same writing offers a systematic demythologisation of the three-body doctrine of the Buddha and identifies this too with understanding the cardinal meaning.

'It will make you see the threefold body of the Buddha in your own selves... This has nothing to do with taking refuge. If, however, you awaken to the threefold body, then you have understood the cardinal meaning.'<sup>102</sup>

98. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

100. *Ibid.*, 159.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 161, omitting brackets indicating a textual problem which does not affect the present argument.

102. *Ibid.*, pp. 141–3.

The details of this elaborate reinterpretation, which is by no means an isolated one,<sup>103</sup> are too long to be quoted. It may be noted however that a demythologised essence can only be offered in terms of a conceptually recognisable tradition. Moreover the item of doctrine in question is drawn out from the tradition, criticised ('This has nothing to do with taking refuge', *i.e.* in the threefold body of the Buddha), reinterpreted, and made to convey the cardinal meaning, that is, we may elaborate, the whole, real meaning which is supposed to be transmitted.

Just as every new formulation of the essence in a coherent religious tradition is supposed to be added to the series, so this same writing provided one more scroll for the Chinese Buddhist Canon.

'The Master said: "You ten disciples, when later you transmit the Dharma, hand down the teaching of the one roll of the *Platform Sutra*; then you will not lose the basic teaching. Those who do not receive the *Platform Sutra* do not have the essentials of my teaching. As of now you have received them; hand them down and spread them among later generations. If others are able to encounter the *Platform Sutra*, it will be as if they received the teaching personally from me."

'These ten monks received the teaching, made copies of the *Platform Sutra*, handed them down, and spread them among later generations. Those who received them have without fail seen into their own true nature.'<sup>104</sup>

To see into one's own nature is to be awakened to the cardinal meaning, according to this very text, and therefore there is an intimate relationship between the 'cardinal meaning' and the two other terms used here: 'the basic teaching' (本宗 *pen-tsung*, Japanese: *honshū*) and 'the essentials of the teaching' (宗旨 *tsung-chih*, Japanese: *shūshi*). The latter of these also appears many times in the work, but enough has been said by now to show that this complex of terms operates in many ways analogously to the 'essence' of Troeltsch and others.

For modern Mahāyāna the widely known writings of D. T. Suzuki may be referred to as being a field in which is it easy to find further parallel material. His approach to Buddhist tradition is perhaps less critical at the evaluative

103. *Ibid.*, pp. 156–159 gives a detailed reinterpretation of the Western Land of Amī-tābha Buddha.

104. *Ibid.*, pp. 173f.

level than that of earlier Zen and Mahāyāna figures generally. Nevertheless he has done systematic historical work on the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, drawn out the meaning of this and other Mahāyāna sūtras taking the later tradition into account, and offered a whole variety of statements of Buddhism which sum up the tradition and relate to western ways of thinking, to western mysticism, to various aspects of secular Japanese culture and society, and to that other major stream of Japanese Buddhism centred on the Nembutsu.<sup>105</sup> It may be noted that the term 'Buddhism' can be used quite appropriately, because the Japanese term *bukkyō*, though not made up with the usual modern formulation for an 'ism' (*shugi*), is conceptually just as much of an 'ism' as Christianity. Such terms do not represent a purely western way of thinking as is sometimes supposed.<sup>106</sup> Suzuki's work as a whole may be taken as a massive illustration of Troeltsch's dictum: *Wesensbestimmung ist Wesensgestaltung* ('To define the essence is to shape it [afresh]'). When he was asked to give two lectures to the Emperor at the Imperial Palace in April 1947, these were a miniature of the same approach, and the English translation was aptly entitled *The Essence of Buddhism*.<sup>107</sup> The original Japanese title was *Bukkyō no Tai-i*, literally meaning 'the cardinal meaning of Buddhism', 'cardinal meaning' here being the same term as the Chinese term found in the *Platform Sūtra* as referred to above.<sup>108</sup>

Nor should Suzuki be considered as some kind of freak among modern Japanese Buddhists. There has been an interesting and persistent tendency among Pure Land Buddhists to give the meaning of their special tradition in the wider context of the whole history of Buddhism. Historical criticism plays an important role here, but it is not confined to purely academic circles. There are books designed for a wide readership on topics such as the status of Mahāyāna sūtras as the teaching of the Buddha, which attempt to relate historical and religiously interpretative views of the mat-

105. A recent bibliography of Suzuki's writings may be found in Horst Rzepkowski, *Das Menschenbild bei Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki* (St. Augustine, 1971).

106. Nor need 'Buddhism' and similar terms be dropped on methodological grounds in the history of religions such as those adduced by W. Cantwell Smith and Robert D. Baird, for which see the latter's *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 134-142. The details of this argument cannot be pursued here.

107. Kyoto 1948, 1968.

108. *Ibid.*, flyleaf.

ter.<sup>109</sup> A book entitled *The Principles of Buddhism and the Faith of Shinran*, takes early sources for Buddhist teaching seriously into account. Thus it refers to the three signs as impermanence, non-self and suffering, rather than in the more common Mahāyāna way which is to refer to impermanence, non-self and 'nirvana is quiescence' (omitting suffering), or to all four together.<sup>110</sup> The 'principles of Buddhism' as given in this little book include these three signs, the four (noble) truths (including the eightfold path) and the six perfections and four vows of a bodhisattva. Thus while important early formulae take precedence, the development into Mahāyāna is also included in an elementary fashion, and the whole then serves as a preamble to the function of Amitābha and the teaching of Shinran. The word 'principles' (*genri*) is commonly used in Japanese to mean basic theory as in 'principles of physics' and the like, but it also includes the notion of 'origin' or 'source' and this clearly plays some role here in the religious tradition.

A more well-known 'Pure Land' writer is F. Masutani, who wrote a book simply entitled *Budda* [Buddha]<sup>111</sup> giving an account of his life and teaching fundamentally similar to, though more up-to-date than, the works of Rhys Davids and Oldenberg referred to above. He discusses the historical value of the Nikāyas and gives an account of the Buddha himself (*kono hito wo miyo: ecce homo*) and of the gist of his teaching. The headings are partly historical and partly religious or philosophical in tone; as an example of the latter we may cite the question: 'What may man hope?' which is sub-headed *Nehanjakujō*, 'Nirvana is quiescence'.<sup>112</sup> There is also a reference to Renan's approach to the work of writing his *Life of Jesus*, which may be claimed as a brief example of comparative hermeneutics in action.<sup>113</sup> The trend in Pure Land Buddhism as a whole seems to be that while Amitābha,

109. E.g. Masabumi Fukaura's *Daijōbussetsu Hibussetsu no Mondai* (i. e. 'The problem about whether or not the Mahayana sermons of the Buddha are sermons of the Buddha') (Kyoto 1964).

110. H. Takachi, *Bukkyo no Genri to Shinran no Shinkō* (Kyoto 1960, 1964), p. 17.

111. Fumio Masutani, *Budda* (Tokyo 1956, 1963).

112. Cf. the four questions Masutani asked of Buddhism and Christianity respectively in his *A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity* (Tokyo 1957, 1965), p. 11.

113. A quotation from Renan's *Life of Jesus* about the relationship between the character of Jesus himself and the writings of his followers is used to give weight to similar comments about the Buddha and the Buddhist scriptures, (*Budda*, p. 13).

and of course the Nembutsu itself, remain important focal points in the tradition, there is something of a shift taking place in the definition of the *shape* of the tradition.

Finally the Lotus Sutra tradition (Tendai and Nichirenite) is also not without a similar historical and critical reappraisal and restatement of the tradition, leading in some cases to a more viable view of its *shape* than the classical Tendai system can now offer. There are also numerous attempts to draw out the contemporary intellectual, human, social and political significance of the essence of Buddhism in the modern world.

Perhaps enough has been said by now however to show that Troeltsch's abstract analysis of the functions of the concept 'essence of Christianity' is also highly relevant to an understanding of the procedures of 'Buddhology' as a creative, interpretative activity which can be observed at many points in the history of Buddhism.

It might be argued however that the above account in a sense refers to too much. In trying to show that Troeltsch's analysis is relevant to Asian Buddhism itself and not merely to its European interpreters, reference has been made not only to modern Asians who to some extent are responding to western ideas as well as to traditional Asian ones, but also to Buddhists of far distant times who were not really historians like Harnack and Loisy, Oldenberg and the rest. Thus, it might be thought, they are not really valid parallels for the 'essence' problems as conceived by Troeltsch. It might be argued further that the westernised modern Buddhists are to that extent not standing in continuity with 'the mentality of Asiatic Buddhists'; and that therefore the comparison is not being made with respect to two thoroughly different areas and thus does not lead anywhere in particular. This further objection might also imply that Troeltsch's analysis is not really relevant to historic Christianity either, because the latter is in fact based on 'dogmatic miracle' and cannot be rebased on free historical presuppositions. There are various counter-arguments to these objections.

Firstly, even if the most obvious Asian examples of parallelism to the modern western writing are to be found in modern times, as indeed might be expected, it has been seen that there are after all rather precise terminological premonitions of the idea of the 'essence' in Buddhist tradition. Curiously enough these terminological premonitions are perhaps more clear than any to be found in the history of Christianity.

Secondly, Troeltsch's own definition of what a 'historical' approach to the essence is, is made partly on the basis of the sheer strength of the discipline of history in nineteenth century Europe, but also partly in terms of what it is not. It is to be contrasted with an approach to tradition defined in terms of *Wunder* or miracle, that is, an approach defined *a priori* by biblical or ecclesiastical norms.<sup>114</sup> It may be that his distinction here was a little too sharp, even for Christianity, although at the time when he wrote clarity on the matter was no doubt required (as in many quarters it still is). Christianity has not always shown itself so subservient to the miraculous revelatory norms in question. There has been considerable criticism and reshaping of norms conceived of as being *relatively* important. (Cf. the whole argument of Robert Morgan's paper, and the reference to *relatively* authoritative Buddhist literature above.) Moreover, in the Buddhist case, even though 'miraculous' authority (in Troeltsch's sense) has played a significant role, it has always been subordinated to other matters at least among the creative leaders of Buddhist thought, that is, among its interpreters, with whom after all we are most directly concerned. It would be tedious to demonstrate this in detail. Thus, if that which in Troeltsch's view conflicted with a historically based conception of the 'essence' of the tradition was not in fact present to the same degree or in the same way, the application of Troeltsch's analysis to that extent becomes less odd.

Thirdly, the Buddhist tradition itself shows a growing historical consciousness, at least from the time when the Chinese took it over. In view of the complete lack of reliable Indian information about the provenance of sutras, it is not surprising that a certain amount of pseudo-history was invented. Nevertheless the beginnings of serious historical criticism in Japan, made possible by general factors in the intellectual life of the time, influenced as it was by China, go back at least as far as Nakamoto Tominaga who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century. Some Japanese knew that Mahāyāna sutras were not literally delivered by the Buddha himself, before Europe was aware of their existence at all.<sup>115</sup> In fact there seems to be real

114. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.* pp. 394–6.

115. Tominaga argued thus and similar views were thereafter expounded by Tsunehira Tonomura (1779–1830) and Atsutane Hirata (1776–1843). Cf. 'Hokkekyo Hihanron no Keifu' by S. Suguro in K. Mochizuki's *Kindai Nihon no Hokkebukkyō* (Kyoto, 1968). Tominaga's approach has been described as 'historical relativism', in the introductory

doubt as to whether the attitudes towards religion more generally characteristic of the European *Enlightenment* (*Aufklärung*), to which Troeltsch alludes as being the basis of the truly modern problems<sup>116</sup>, were really as unique as is often thought. To mention but one example, there is a very close parallel to the ideas of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* (1779) in Tomimaga's *Testament of an Old Man* (not later than 1746).<sup>117</sup> A situation of religious pluralism and religious polemics, a historically and ethically critical stance towards the various lines of tradition stretching towards us from out of the past, the attempt to discern a moral and rational core to the competing creeds: none of these were the invention of Europe alone. It seems reasonable then to expect also to find parallels within the Asian tradition itself to the problem about the 'essence' of a given specific religious tradition, even though the way the problem is dressed up will of course be somewhat different.

Fourthly, Troeltsch himself indicated now and then that various aspects of his analysis were relevant to the procedures of Christian theologians of various centuries preceding the European Enlightenment. He wrote:

'The Reformers too acted with an instinctive appreciation of what was historically essential and what was demanded of the present. For this reason they appealed fundamentally to the "Spirit" which spoke out of the Scriptures. Today this instinctive approach is less feasible. . . . The situation itself was the same then as it is today, demanding a rejuvenation out of the historical past and an organic combination with the present. There is within the definition of the essence a living new creation, related afresh to new circumstances, and since it is a question of the new creation of the highest religious revelation it is a new vouchsafing of revelation in the present. This implies nothing other than the "Spirit" of the Reformers. . . .'<sup>118</sup>

The traditional and permanently important role of *criticism* in Christian

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comments to extracts from his works in R. Tsunoda's *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York and London), pp. 479ff, and Tsunoda points out that the approach matured in the context of Japanese Neo-Confucian studies (p. 481).

116. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.* pp. 394–5. Cf. also *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (Siebenstern Taschenbuch edition, 1969) pp. 29–34 (being the opening pages of the essay itself) where the *Aufklärung* is seen as *the* major watershed.

117. Extracts in Tsunoda, *Op. cit.* pp. 483–488.

118. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, pp. 431–2.

interpretation is stated very clearly in Robert Morgan's paper. The fact that so much of Troeltsch's analysis can be shown to be relevant to various stages of the Buddhist tradition and not merely to a few westernisers, can be taken as further grounds (if these were needed) drawn from comparative hermeneutics, for suggesting that his analysis, or something very like it, is relevant to pre-*Aufklärung* Christianity.

Fifthly, it may be admitted finally that the objection does have *some* force. That is, historical criticism in the modern sense is not an important aspect of the *earlier* cases adduced, even though major aspects of Troeltsch's analysis *are* relevant. Nevertheless it is consistent with the thesis about the validity and usefulness of comparative hermeneutics to argue that just as a greater awareness of historical criticism and historical development was required in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, so it was required in nineteenth and twentieth century Asia. Many Asian Buddhist leaders have recognised the need for this awareness, not indeed as the result of being westernised to the point of being only superficially representative of the tradition of Asian Buddhism, but in such a way as to combine the historical stimulus received from the west with both the historical perspectives and the interpretative procedures already available to them as Asians.

Thus, whatever variations are to be observed in the intellectual history of East and West, and however great or small the difference may be thought to be between the *content* of the essence of Buddhism and Christianity respectively, it would seem that the nature and procedures of interpretation and the sort of problems arising from historical development and creative restatement are in principle comparable as between the two traditions. In each tradition different persons are more or less self-conscious about these procedures and problems. Some persons in each tradition reflect theoretically upon them, and produce theoretical terms which do not refer directly to the content of their religious understanding but rather to the manner and means of its statement and communication. If the argument developed above by way of the example of one set of problems is, broadly speaking, justified, it may be reaffirmed that comparative hermeneutics is, or should be, a subject.

## 4. PERSPECTIVES FOR COMPARATIVE HERMENEUTICS

In principle comparative hermeneutics is not new. Not being named by name however it has been fragmentary and confused. No doubt many miscellaneous cases could be adduced in which writers have made use, in principle, of comparative hermeneutics. The references to Loisy, Ling and Masutani, above are examples. More recently, the writing of J. H. Kamstra has revolved around these matters and it is partly due to his influence that the present writer specifically called for an approach to the subject in an earlier publication.<sup>119</sup> For Troeltsch himself the problem about the 'essence' was in principle one which applied to all great historical and religious movements, as for example when he referred to the fundamentally different conceptions which are possible of the essence of Classical Antiquity, of the Middle Ages, of Islam, of Buddhism, and so on.<sup>120</sup> Thus to have related his analysis to one of these other areas in detail, if only by way of example, is fully consistent with his own approach. The degree to which this kind of exercise might prove fruitful if more systematically developed *cannot yet be assessed*. All that is asserted here is that it is a valid and coherent exercise.

Progress in comparative hermeneutics would have to be made in two directions. Firstly the number of religious traditions considered should be increased as far as possible. In this way analysis of a given problem may be refined and stabilised. This is so difficult that individuals can only hope to make small contributions. Secondly, other hermeneutical problems as well as that about the 'essence' (if indeed that problem itself is to be stated in these terms) should be treated comparatively.

Examples of the problems with which comparative hermeneutics might be expected to deal might include such matters as the role of selective emphasis and criticism within a tradition, questions about continuity, about the relationships between what is central and what is peripheral, what is preserved and what is forgotten. These are all related to the problem about the 'essence'. Then there are also the obvious problems about demythologising, about

119. J. H. Kamstra, *Synkretisme op de Grens tussen Theologie en Godsdiensfenomenologie* (Leiden 1970), and the present writer's 'Syncretism and Ambiguity', in *Numen* XVIII, 2, (1971), pp. 83–93.

120. Troeltsch, *Op. cit.*, p. 426. Cf. also page 394, where he actually used the phrase 'essence of Buddhism'.

the various ways in which religious language may be used, and even about the role of falsehoods in religion, etc. There is a major problem about the ways in which religious meaning is continuous and discontinuous with other meanings; that is, the discontinuity of a 'wholly other' revelation might profitably be compared with the discontinuity of a *satori* which leaves the world profoundly as it was. There are problems about the *shape* of a given tradition. These are especially urgent at a time when miraculous definitions of this shape no longer satisfy and when people have more choice and flexibility with regard to the way in which they choose the past for themselves. A steady theoretical perspective might help to avoid hasty arbitrariness in this respect (cf. the example of Marcion considered in Robert Morgan's essay). This raises the question of the role of negative tradition as well as the role of concomitant tradition, the extent to which a clearcut definition of tradition is desirable at all, and whether and how traditions are appropriately expanded or contracted. The questions about tradition also involve reference to religious action, both specific (liturgy, dance, meditation, etc.) but also in the wider sense of far-reaching social or political implications. Such are a few of the problems, merely stated by way of illustration, rather than in any systematic manner. They need to be more adequately defined, and satisfactorily systematised, in order for comparative hermeneutics to make more progress.

In order to avoid misunderstandings a few comments remain to be made about the relationship between comparative hermeneutics in religion and various other subjects. The best way to characterise the position which comparative hermeneutics is supposed to occupy among theology, sociology and other jostling modes of thought, is to say that it belongs to the general study of religion insofar as this proceeds, in a certain precise sense, 'phenomenologically'. The precise sense intended by this word here is a continuation of its usage to date in the context of the study of religion, but is also a restriction of that usage. To study religion 'phenomenologically' means at one and the same time: (1) temporarily to suspend presuppositions and conclusions about the truth, falsity, value or otherwise of a given set of religious data, and (2) to attempt to elucidate as fully as possible the meaning of those data for those who are primarily involved in them, that is, the 'believers' or 'practitioners'.<sup>121</sup> If the word 'phenomenological' is allowed

121. Cf. note 3 above.

to mean this, then it cannot be taken as synonymous with 'comparative', because a wider range of studies (e.g. sociology of religion) can also be comparative. Such other studies cannot however themselves be described as phenomenological in the above sense because they intend to be explanatory in a manner which is extremely likely to contradict the self-understanding of the religious believer. Nor would 'phenomenologically' alone be a satisfactory qualification of the method to be applied in comparative hermeneutics, because a single case could be studied phenomenologically in the sense given above. This could be importantly different from studying the same case sociologically or theologically, but it would not necessarily involve comparison. Thus it is necessary to speak of *comparative* hermeneutics, and to say that it is a study which should proceed phenomenologically in the sense given above.

A comparative approach, because of the abstraction from particular cases, is likely to throw up somewhat different analyses than would the study of one case only. That indeed is the purpose of it. Such generalised analyses are however theoretical constructs which have no status or purpose beyond their reference to the particular cases understood 'phenomenologically' in the sense given. Thus they continue to be controlled in principle by the self-understanding of the religious interpreters themselves, even though they may stand in provisional tension with some of them.

If in this manner comparative hermeneutics takes seriously the meanings of various theologies, etc., it also stands neutral with regard to them. It should not be confused with theology or buddhology (etc.) themselves, and it is not in itself intended to be a prolegomenon to any such. Of course any theologian is at liberty to claim anything, including the phenomenological study of religion, as a prolegomenon for his theology, but this does not affect the neutral status of comparative hermeneutics as this is here proposed. Comparative hermeneutics is there because the data are there. That is, comparative hermeneutics arises because it is the case that there are various religious traditions, some of whose representatives are interested at a more or less theoretical level in the procedures and problems of interpretation. Any study of anything is likely to be further advanced if more than one case is taken into account, that is, if the study includes the comparison of a series of cases; the above preliminary examination was intended to indicate that this is probably true for hermeneutics in religion just as it is for

anything else. This judgment however neither precludes nor demands any position whatever with regard to questions of ultimate truth, value or meaning in religion. The present writer indeed holds some such 'position'; but it would be irrelevant to indicate here what it is.

'Hermeneutics' is a word current in contexts other than that of religion, and it is of course not denied that there are fundamental questions which arise in connection with any act of knowing, of understanding, or communication. There are undoubtedly matters of interest and importance which arise in a much more general approach to the subject, taking account of, say, philosophy, literature and law. An example of an essay written in this perspective is Emilio Betti's *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*<sup>122</sup> ['Hermeneutics as a general methodology in the humanities']. Betti is in fact a lawyer, but in terms of his general theory of interpretation he is able to refer interestingly, for example, to the work of Rudolf Bultmann and of Hans-Georg Gadamer. However, the phrase 'comparative hermeneutics' as used in the present argument has been intended to refer to 'comparative hermeneutics in religion'. A wider discussion would not have been able to concentrate on the specific problems which arise in the comparison of religions. Of course, the concept 'religion' is not a watertight one, and there are many borderline cases which one might wish to take into account. Nevertheless, for all the differences which obtain between various religions, there do seem to be some specific problems about interpretation which arise with particular consistency and force in the context of religion. Such problems are the subject matter of comparative hermeneutics in religion. They are partly determined by the various other characteristics which go to make up religions, as distinct from, say, poems or legal codes, and their study has to take these characteristics into account.

Finally the pursuit of comparative hermeneutics, which is essentially a theoretical one, should be distinguished from a direct engagement in dual or multiform interpretation. As examples of dual interpretation thus directly undertaken we may cite Streeter's *The Buddha and the Christ*<sup>123</sup> and Masu-

122. Tübingen, 1962.

123. Subtitled: *An exploration of the meaning of the universe and of the purpose of human life.*

tani's *A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity*,<sup>124</sup> while examples of multiform interpretation are Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*<sup>125</sup> and John Bowker's *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*.<sup>126</sup> Such works play an interesting role in the modern interpretation of religions, but while partly descriptive this role is also partly evaluative and formative, indeed in a sense theological. Comparative hermeneutics in religion, by contrast, (though no doubt relevant to such enterprises), is the comparative study of *procedures* and *problems* of interpretation, as these are understood whether faintly or clearly by the representatives of recognisable religious traditions.

124. Cf. note 112 above.

125. Frankfurt am Main, 1959.

126. Cambridge, 1970.

## Expansion and Criticism in the Christian Tradition

### 1.

Christians and non-Christians alike have learned to look at the Christian tradition historically. The lesson has not been an easy one for Christian theologians. It has lasted some 200 years and has involved a complete restructuring of theological method; it has given rise to problems which are still hotly debated. The significance of Troeltsch's essay which sparked off the discussion contained in this book<sup>1</sup> is to be found in the weight of his contribution to the analysis of these problems. In raising the *methodological* question: What does the expression 'essence of Christianity' mean?<sup>2</sup> Troeltsch was not guided by a purely analytic interest. His questions concerning 'what presuppositions are involved in a search for the essence of Christianity? What kinds of tools are taken for granted as being useful for the solution of this problem? Is the meaning and goal of this enterprise so simple and straightforward? What does the task involve, if indeed it is necessary and feasible at all? How far is it really a purely historical problem?'<sup>3</sup> – are the questions of a committed Christian theologian, concerned to do theology from within the Christian tradition, but in such a way as to do justice to what he conceives to be the modern historical method. Like another great idealist theologian, Schleiermacher, whose *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*<sup>4</sup> contains striking resemblances to this important essay on theological method, Troeltsch believed that theological judgments could emerge on the basis of historical study.

Neither Schleiermacher nor Troeltsch believed that historical study alone

1. E. Troeltsch, 'Was heisst "Wesen des Christentums"?' *G. S.* II, pp. 386–451. See Michael Pye's essay pp. 9–17.

2. The Pye translation of Troeltsch's essay is followed throughout. Page references are to *G. S.*, II.

3. *G. S.*, II, p. 390.

4. 1811 & 1830. English translation by T. Tice. John Knox Press, Virginia, 1966.

can cause a man to associate himself with a religious tradition. Both think of Christian theology being done by Christians. But it is done on the basis of a study of the past. Despite the vehemence with which the dialectical theology of the 1920s rejected liberal protestantism, its own procedures were not so very different as is sometimes thought. Its listening to the witness of the theological tradition and responding in faith to the kerygma which may be communicated through it, also involved paying attention to the past. In fact Christian theology has always involved this interplay between the tradition and the theologian's contemporary experience leading to the formation of judgments about what is appropriate as Christian belief or practice in the present. The account of criticism in the Christian tradition which follows will select some striking examples of this. They are striking because they are examples where the critical element present in all interpretation of a religious tradition is particularly strong, and the theologian goes so far as to oppose the prevailing interpretation.

The main thesis which is intended to emerge from this selective account of the Christian tradition is that *believers interpret the tradition in the light of their own current apprehension of what Christianity is*. Their apprehension is in the first place shaped by particular strands of the tradition through responding to which they became believers, and it is constantly open to correction in the light of further attention to the tradition. But at any given point their judgments about the tradition are controlled by their current grasp of Christianity. 'Criticism *in* the Christian tradition' – that is to say, criticism of the tradition by members of that tradition, is in fact this matter of *making theological judgments*. It is a matter of interpreting the tradition in the light of one's own experience, shaped as this itself has in part been by a part of the tradition which has to be constantly interpreted afresh. One's interpretation may be more or less 'radical'; that is, it may collide with other people's interpretation and reject a part of the tradition, or it may continue to move along the lines followed by one's immediate predecessors. The more the external context in which Christian existence is thought through afresh alters, the more likely it is that conservative interpretations of the tradition will prove inadequate but also that radical interpretations will prove unreliable. In a period of transition both sides need each other until the fog arises, and the community as a whole can decide about its new shape. Opinions about what Christianity essentially

*is* vary considerably. The central point being made is that when he interprets the tradition, a believer brings into play his own view, and interprets the tradition in the light of this. Why this is so should emerge in the next section. That it is so will result in our description of what actually happens amounting to an account of some believers' theological method.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows attention is restricted to the Christian doctrinal tradition, for reasons of space. The same principles apply to making Christian ethical decisions, and to making judgments about Christian spirituality and ecclesiastical organization. In each case the theologian is guided by an interplay between the tradition and his own contemporary experience. The element of subjectivity is, as Troeltsch recognised,<sup>6</sup> both considerable and inevitable; it leaves plenty of scope for error. This can only be corrected and partly eliminated by the on-going process of theological argument within the Christian community, in which different positions seek to show that they do better justice both to the tradition and to contemporary experience than do alternative theological positions.

Since the following account of what actually happens in the Christian tradition will prove to be a description of a historically conscious theological method, it is worth considering how such a theologian would justify his method. That can only be done by raising the theological question of what Christianity is.

This cross-reference to how (some) Christian theologians see their tradition is relevant to the purely descriptive or phenomenological<sup>7</sup> platform adopted here. What distinguishes the student of religion, or 'religionist'<sup>8</sup> from the other historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists etc. whose methods he uses, and thus what constitutes Religious Studies as an independent (though polymethodic) discipline, is that the religionist respects the fact of human religions. He may not consider any of them valuable or true, but he is committed to giving a descriptive account

5. An implication of this correspondence is that the study of a religion in a Department of Religious Studies will be particularly interested in the theological methods of those who practise it.

6. *G. S.*, II, pp. 427–451

7. See Michael Pye's remarks on pp. 36, 55–7.

8. Professor Ninian Smart's coinage is adopted here for lack of a better word.

of them which practitioners or participators could accept as not being reductionist.

Our attempt to describe how the Christian tradition operates will therefore begin with an account of how (some) Christians think of their tradition. If this were ignored the account of the tradition's expansion would probably be inaccurate, since the growth of Christianity, its progress through history, has been propelled by factors internal to itself. The changing historical environment has influenced the course of Christian history and partly conditioned the new forms it has taken, but the decisive factor has always been the historical activity of Christian believers themselves. The tradition has been expanding for about 2000 years because of what successive generations of Christians have said and done, and this will be the pattern of its continuing expansion for as long as the tradition remains a living one. This suggests that there is something about how Christians see the tradition which it is important to recognize in any descriptive account of its expansion; that can only be ascertained by attending to how they see it.

At this point the interest of the descriptive historian who wishes to understand how the Christian tradition expands coincides with that of the believing theologian who brings about an expansion. It is not that the expansion will only interest the historian if it is a legitimate one. The historian's dragnet will include data which theologians who consider themselves orthodox will brand as heretical. The title 'Christian tradition' is meant to suggest something both wider and less clearly defined than the single word 'Christianity' and is intended to bracket off the theological question of what is authentically Christian and what is not. Nevertheless the historian will look with interest on the defence historically conscious theologians offer of their method, because his account of how the tradition expands owes a good deal to these theologians. The historian places brackets around what he is told and says, 'this is what Christians believe', but since it is they who are responsible for the expansion, he will judge that their account of it is important, whether or not what they say happens also to be true. If the theologians' justification of their method makes sense the historian may conclude that the truth of his account of the expansion which he derived from them receives some measure of confirmation.

The defence of the theological method to be seen operating in sections 4 and 5 as 'criticism in the Christian tradition' takes two forms. The first

(section 2) is an account of how Christians see the tradition; and the second (section 3) appeals to the actual behaviour of the person to whom the tradition refers and its adherents appeal.

2.

Christians and non-Christians alike have learned to look at the Christian tradition historically. They will sometimes disagree about the truth of what is said. Such disagreement is only possible where the non-Christian claims some different knowledge of God, or has some prior conviction which prevents him from allowing any talk about God. Something more fundamental than disagreement about the truth of what the tradition says arises where the Christian and non-Christian have different views about what the subject-matter of the tradition is. It is a difference of *perspective* rather than just a difference of opinion which leads the Christian theologian to refer what is said to God, and the non-Christian historian (even the methodologically uncommitted historian who is in fact a Christian) to refer it to human religious history.

Reasons have been given for adopting the perspective of the believer in order to investigate the tradition, while bracketing off the question whether what the believer says about the God reference of the tradition is true. This decision does not have to be invoked immediately. In the first place, when they look at the Christian tradition historically, believing theologian and methodologically uncommitted historian will agree that what they see is very largely a *history of interpretation of past tradition*. This is clear from the way that theologians constantly say things which have never been said before, and always claim to be saying the same thing as other theologians have said in the past. Doing Christian theology is thus very largely a matter of interpreting the Christian tradition, and any student of the history of the Christian tradition can recognise this.

Possible differences of opinion arise when the important question is asked: what sort of interpretation is being done here? Is it analogous to literary criticism, or more like history or jurisprudence? All these also have to do with texts. In order to answer the question it is necessary to ask those involved what they are up to and take seriously their account of what

may be called theological interpretation, or interpretation which lets God be God.

The Christian theologian whose account of the expansion through interpretation of the Christian tradition we are trying to understand says that the tradition is interpreted above all in the *context of proclamation and for the sake of revelation*. The religionist therefore, has to resist the temptation to give a purely psychological or sociological account of the development of the tradition. He must see what the objects of his study mean by these two theological terms.

In fact these terms are very important for many modern Christian theologians. The main way in which these historically conscious modern men have managed to adopt modern atheistic historical method into their work and still maintain that there is more to Christianity than the non-Christian observer admits, has been through a revision of the concept of revelation. Whether or not the word was used, Christian God-talk has always involved some notion of special revelation or divine manifestation.<sup>9</sup> But whereas in the past they have answered the question of where this is mediated by pointing to a *part* of the tradition, whether the Bible and/or the Church's pronouncements, modern theologians have been at pains to distinguish between the event of revelation itself, and all the traditions through which at various times it has found expression. This distinction has allowed them to investigate the whole tradition historically and even recognise formal contradictions within it, without having to abandon their conviction of the truth of Christianity.<sup>10</sup> In different historical situa-

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9. 'Revelation as a category has had stellar prominence in theology only since the Enlightenment; perhaps one should say, since the dissolution of Protestant Orthodoxy (Protestant Scholasticism). John McIntyre (*The Christian Doctrine of History*, pp. 2-4) rightly notes that revelation is a category the church got along without for centuries, indeed for the whole pre-modern period. Neither the Christian nor the Hebraic community ever got along, however, without its hermeneutical cognates: without cognate categories through which revelation as fundament came to expression.' Ray L. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (Herder, New York), p. 370-1. On this, cf. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus God and Man* (ET SCM, London, 1968), p. 127.

10. For a trenchant expression of the view that even the N. T. itself contains contrasting theological viewpoints, see E. Käsemann, 'The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church', in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SCM, London 1964), pp. 95-107, and 'Is the Gospel Objective?', *Ibid.*, pp. 48-62.

tions it is argued the revelation will have to find different modes of expression.

Instead of the old identification of revelation with a part of the tradition, what is proposed here is a dialectical relationship between the two.<sup>11</sup> By revelation is meant God's self-revelation, and since it is a metaphysical presupposition of those responsible for this modern use of the concept that God is wholly other from man and the world,<sup>12</sup> this means that revelation can no longer be identified with a bit of world such as the biblical text or even the historical Jesus. It may be identified with 'Jesus Christ', by which is meant the Christ of faith. Jesus Christ is none other than the man from Nazareth, but he can only be apprehended as the revelation of God in the moment of faith. Thus while it is a past historical event which is actualised in successive acts of Christian proclamation, the event of revelation is here shifted from a clearly defined place in the past to a succession of moments in successive presents.<sup>13</sup>

11. It is, however, claimed that this view of revelation which differs from that of Protestant Orthodoxy is true to the N. T. See R. Bultmann 'The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament' (1929). ET. in *Existence and Faith* (Collins Fontana, London, 1964), pp. 67-106.

12. In the Preface to the second edition of his commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921) Barth refers to his 'recognition of what Kierkegaard called "the infinite qualitative distinction" between time and eternity.' (ET E. C. Hoskyns, Oxford, 1933) p. 10. The strong reaction against nineteenth century idealism is clear. Bultmann was caricaturing the dialectical theology when he wrote, in 'Liberal Theology and the Latest Theological Movement' (1924) (ET *Faith and Understanding*, SCM, London 1969, pp. 28-52): 'The subject of theology is God, and the chief charge to be brought against liberal theology is that it has dealt not with God but with man. God represents the radical negation and sublimation (*Aufhebung*-abrogation, annihilation) of man...' (p. 29). This crudeness is often taken *au pied de la lettre*. In fact Bultmann's own position is given at the end of the essay: 'The subject of theology is God. Theology speaks of God because it speaks of man as he stands before God. That is, theology speaks out of faith' (p. 52).

13. Emphasis in this section on the present event of revelation will be balanced in the next section by discussion of the past historical event which is actualized in proclamation. The newness of what happened in Jesus will be so emphasised that it would be possible also to say with Schleiermacher (*The Christian Faith*, § 10), 'that the idea of revelation signifies the *originality* of the fact which lies at the foundation of a religious communion, in the sense that this fact, as conditioning the individual content of the religious emotions which are found in the communion, cannot itself in turn be explained by the historical chain which precedes it' (p. 50). But this past historical reference in Christian theological

The advantage of this move was that it avoided identifying revelation with something which could be shown to be false, and so rescued the concept from the annihilating criticism inflicted by the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment on Protestant Orthodoxy's identification of the Word of God with the biblical word. This is not the place to discuss whether this rescue was achieved at the cost of making the concept vacuous or contentless. The problem about a move which distinguishes God or the revelation from a bit of the world or a part of the tradition is that it makes the task of criticising the tradition in the light of revelation more difficult. The revelation has to function as the criterion of all tradition if the expansion of this is to be checked or controlled and prevented from becoming a rank growth. When this task was seen as simply measuring new bits of tradition against older authoritative bits such as the Bible or past papal pronouncements, theological judgments appear to have been simpler and more mechanical. In fact the use of the Bible by fathers and heretics alike shows that they did not actually operate like this. This was at most one element in their procedure.<sup>14</sup> They too made theological judgments on the basis of their current convictions, shaped as these were by the interplay between tradition, especially the scriptural part of it, and their contemporary experience. Thus the requirement arising from distinguishing between revelation and all tradition, namely that a believer brings his own apprehension of the revelation into play when making theological judgments, is not new. It does mean that in the last resort only someone who claims to have some

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talk about revelation must be linked with a present existential and a future eschatological reference. The question of the *content* of Christian revelation can be discussed only when all three time references are included. The way kerygmatic theologians talk about the 'word' sometimes suggests a contentless revelation. But though one only receives the content of a 'word event' given in the present, such as a promise, in the future, this does not prevent a promise from effecting a change in someone's present existential situation. Or, to give another analogy, a declaration of love, even when mediated by a third person, may conceivably be real even if no-one distinctly remembers having known the alleged lover, perhaps because he went abroad years before, leaving only a hazy childhood memory in people's minds. This sort of analogy clearly requires to be backed up by arguments (not proofs) for the existence or reality of God based as broadly as possible on human experience. A revelational theology does not have to be linked with a hostility towards natural theology. Only the demands of a particular polemical situation could justify this.

14. See M. F. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, 1967).

apprehension of the Christian revelation can make Christian theological judgments. Non-believing philosophers may indicate inconsistencies or incoherency in the argument, and methodologically uncommitted historians may disallow the historical evidence to which appeal is in part made. But finally the right to say what is or is not Christian and so to determine the future shape of Christianity rests with the Christian community itself. Theological judgments, such as are involved in criticism of the Christian tradition from within, are not public property in the way that historical judgments are.

To continue with the terminology which has enabled some Christian theologians to take a historical approach to their tradition without thereby abandoning God-talk: It is in connexion with this understanding of revelation as a divine event rather than as a part of the tradition, that 'proclamation' becomes a central category. Proclamation or Christian witness is the human activity that generates the situation in which revelation can take place 'where and when God wills'. Christian proclamation points to Jesus, and gives expression to the believer's evaluation of him and calls upon the hearer to share this evaluation that acknowledges him as Lord.

Whether what happens in Christian proclamation is simply the promulgation of an ideology, or whether beyond this it really is a divine event is a point on which opinions differ. Christians claim it is the latter and call this revelation event 'Gospel', or God-given good news, or 'the power of God on men's behalf'.<sup>15</sup> That is bound to appear pure assertion to anyone who does not accept it, and the 'offence' is exaggerated by the disdain shown by some of those who do accept it as what it claims to be, towards offering rational arguments in its support.<sup>16</sup>

But we are not concerned here with the truth of Christian claims so much as with the mechanics of this proclamation and alleged revelation event. In proclamation believers speak of Jesus as Lord and God and so give expression to their own commitment and to their view of reality as a whole. In speaking of Jesus they inevitably theologize, or borrow the products

15. Cf. Rom. 1:16.

16. That such disdain is neither necessary nor productive is clear from such recent works as R. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination* (Herder, New York, 1968) and L. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Bobbs Merrill, 1969).

of other people's theologizing. In other words they inevitably take up the language of the theological tradition and use it in proclamation. They do not simply repeat the tradition. But that tradition provides the linguistic raw material without which proclamation is impossible, and *through* which the believer puts himself at stake, like he does when he makes a promise or a declaration of love or friendship.

In reapplying traditional language and perhaps extending it the proclaimer is involved in *interpreting* the tradition, in order to help people to see the Christian revelation point about Jesus, and respond to him in a Christian way. The language of the theological tradition is prior to proclamation and revelation, which is why any discussion of Christian origins has to consider the Jewish theological tradition. Since the first Christians were Jews the earliest theological language expressive of Christian faith in Jesus came from that tradition. New situations demanded new theological language, as Christians of different cultures tried to clarify their conviction of his absolute significance for themselves, and (in their view) for the world. Because they have seen the Jesus event as a God-event they have spoken of it in the God-language of their time and place, whether that be Jewish apocalypticism, Hellenistic religions, Greek metaphysics, German idealism, existentialism, secular utopianism or whatever.

Whenever new formulations are used to speak about Jesus in a Christian way<sup>17</sup> the Christian tradition is expanded. Those responsible for such an expansion in the context of proclamation and for the sake of revelation happening intend their witness to be Christian. Sometimes the expansion is allowed and sometimes it is disallowed by other Christians. There must therefore be a criterion by which these other Christians judge such expan-

17. This concentration upon Christology in the broad sense which includes soteriology is justified by the special place it occupies, well expressed in Schleiermacher's summary definition of Christianity as 'essentially distinguished from other monotheistic faiths belonging to the teleological type of religion by the fact that in it everything is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth' (*The Christian Faith*, § 11, Harper, New York, 1963, p. 52). Also by Professor D. M. MacKinnon: 'Christology... sets in motion and keeps in restless activity, the whole work of the characteristically Christian theologian... the question concerning the Christ insinuates itself into every theological discussion and debate...', *Borderlands of Theology* (Lutterworth 1968, pp. 56f).

sions. What is required is a continuity<sup>18</sup> with what has gone before such that the same witness is being maintained and the same faith evoked in a new situation.<sup>19</sup> Where this happens a new interpretation of the tradition is a valid one. Whether this is so can only be judged intuitively by a believer, but having so judged he must then produce arguments, and the arguments will take the form of trying to show that what he is saying is true to the tradition. Thus a certain measuring of new formulations against the tradition does take place, but it is a measuring in which reference is constantly made to the revelation which both the tradition and the new interpretation are seeking to express. Since that revelation can never be had apart from its expression in old or new language it is misleading to say, in Leonard Hodgson's often quoted phrase<sup>20</sup> that we must ask *what the truth must be* and have been if it appeared like that to men who thought and wrote as they did. Rather the question is *what are we to say* in order to say the same thing in our language and world of thought as people who in such a world of thought spoke thus. Contemporary hermeneutical discussion arises from the awareness that we too swim in the stream of historical relativity, and can have no apprehension of the truth which is not historically conditioned.

The purpose of this section has been to try to justify in advance the theological method we shall see operating as criticism in the Christian tradition. This has been done by drawing attention to what those mainly

18. Thus D. F. Strauss was right finally to answer the question 'Are we still Christians?' in the negative (*Der alte und der neue Glaube*, Bonn, 1872) and only youthful enthusiasm can have prevented him from drawing a similar conclusion in 1835 from his concluding dissertation of his *Life of Jesus*, 'The dogmatic import of the life of Jesus', where 'as subject of the predicate which the Church assigns to Christ, we place, instead of an individual, an idea... the idea of the race.' (ET by George Eliot, rp. 1970, Scholarly Press, Michigan, p. 895). Similarly, E. Renan must make astonishing qualifications to the notion 'Christianity' before he can say: 'In this sense we are Christians, even when we separate ourselves on almost all points from the Christian tradition which has preceded us.' (*The Life of Jesus*, Everyman ed. p. 237). Troeltsch's essay already cited emphasises the concern for 'maintaining the continuity' with past tradition at the same time as 'shaping the continuum anew' (*G. S.*, II, p. 432). Also especially p. 439f. See also Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline* (§ 180) on 'the effort to demonstrate the agreement of any given statement with the utterances of primitive Christianity'.

19. On this, see E. Schillebeeckx, 'Toward a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics' in *Religion and the Future of Man* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1969).

20. *E. g.* by D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Pelican, 1963 p. 52). Italics mine.

responsible for the expansion of the Christian tradition consider its character to be. It is expanded by believers interpreting the tradition which already exists in order to communicate the Christian gospel in a new situation. Any new interpretation must be able to justify itself as an interpretation of the tradition by reference to that tradition. It will have to be critical interpretation, selecting from the great mass of traditional material and deciding what is central and what peripheral, what illuminating, what irrelevant and what misguided and mistaken. But when such judgments are made the believer brings his own grasp of the revelation into play. This is necessary because interpretation can only be judged right or wrong by reference to its aim. And the aim of theological interpretation is to let the revelation be heard, or let God be God. In the view of believers the aim of the tradition, and so the criterion of all interpretation is the unobjectifiable revelation. Since it is never given 'neat' as a part of the world it can only be applied by the believers appealing to their grasp of it and engaging in theological argument on a basis of this. The historian can detect this happening, but is not in a position to decide finally between conflicting interpretations. Since we are not concerned here with the truth of what Christians say, but only with the way they operate, our inability as religionists to reach a final decision about their theological judgments need not trouble us. As historians and religionists we have to say what Christianity has been and *is*, not what (in a believer's view) it 'really' is, or ought to be and must become. That is the concern of those who stand within the theological circle.

### 3.

The preceding section was concerned with the God language contained in the Christian tradition, and the way this has to be expanded, and expansions evaluated or criticized. It was the non-worldly character of God in some Christians' view which demanded a treatment involving the subjectivity of the theological critic. But the God language of Christianity relates to a particular man. It is the historical person Jesus of Nazareth who is pointed to in Christian proclamations as 'Gospel' or God-given good news, and so about whom the tradition speaks. This suggests a second criterion

of Christian tradition and proclamation. Wherever the reference of the Christian tradition to Jesus has been abandoned, as it was for example by D. F. Strauss,<sup>21</sup> Christians have rejected the innovation.

If reference to Jesus has been a *de facto* criterion of the tradition, the new avenue to truth opened up in the modern period through modern historical methods suggests a further application of this. Presumably what Jesus was actually like should also in principle function as a criterion of what the theological tradition says about him.

There are in fact practical difficulties about answering this historical question about Jesus and so extending our second criterion in this way. Our historical sources, the gospels, and their sources also, appear to have been little interested in preserving biographical detail about Jesus. The main concern of this material is to present him as act of God on men's behalf – in other words, as 'Gospel'.

However, this fact itself suggests a way of applying our 'historical Jesus' criterion. We may not know enough about Jesus to 'read off' theological claims on a basis of this knowledge in the way that earlier apologetics thought it could derive proofs of his divinity from the 'fact' that he performed miracles and fulfilled O. T. prophecy. This type of argument would be inadvisable even if it appeared to work (which it does not, as soon as the texts are studied historically) because it entails a view of God's presence in Jesus which does not respect the difference between God and man postulated above. Neither can theological claims about Jesus be read off from what he said about himself in the manner of the vulgar apologetic which says that either he was mad, or bad, or what he said about himself is true. Even if the explicitly Christological sayings were genuine sayings of Jesus, which is more than doubtful, there would be a gulf between theological claims being made by Jesus and our acceptance of their truth. This could only be crossed with the help of a blind act of faith which has nothing in common with genuinely Christian response to Jesus, based on inward conviction. A different use of the historical Jesus criterion is required, and one is suggested by the very limitations of the gospels as historical sources.

Christian conviction about Jesus is summarised by saying that he is 'Gospel'. The crucial question to ask about the historical Jesus would

21. See note 18 and also note 83.

therefore seem to be whether he was experienced as Gospel by those who accepted him in his lifetime. If Christian response to Jesus has nothing in common with the response made by those who accepted him in his lifetime, then it is not truly *Jesus* who is introduced in Christian proclamation.<sup>22</sup>

The necessary link between the historical Jesus and subsequent faith is forged not on the basis of his explicit claims for himself, but from how he was experienced. This will of course have been largely dependent upon his activity, but the argument does not depend upon our being able to reconstruct this activity in any detail. It depends upon our being able to establish that some people did respond to him as Gospel. The overwhelming evidence for this is of course the existence of the early Christian church, and the Gospel tradition itself. It is difficult for us as historians to make sense of the emergence of Christian preaching apart from this faith of the disciples during the ministry. Their conviction of the resurrection will have clarified it and confirmed that they had been right to go along with Jesus; it cannot have created it *de novo*. The resurrection was the resurrection of Jesus, and could only make sense to them as referring back to his historical activity, as well as forward to the end. Thus quite apart from the evidence that Jesus unlike John the Baptist was good news for those who welcomed him one could almost establish some continuity between Jesus and Christian faith *a priori*.

This correspondence between Jesus and early Christianity suggests a criterion of all subsequent Christian tradition which claims to refer to him: namely, that it present him as Gospel. If it does not do this it must be criticized. Before we consider examples of this criticism in the Christian tradition it is worth strengthening the claim that it is theologically justified – justified, that is, by the nature of Christianity itself which centres on Jesus – because of what Jesus was like and how he was experienced.

The argument appeals to the response Jesus evoked in his ministry because it is this rather than Jesus' self-consciousness which the emergence

22. This is to accept Schlatter's designation of Jesus as 'the Evangelist', and to side with Käsemann against Bultmann as regards the historical Jesus. See his essay, 'Blind alleys in the "Jesus of history" controversy' (1964) in *New Testament Questions of Today* (ET SCM, London, 1969, pp. 23–65, especially p. 50). How much the whole argument of this essay owes to Ernst Käsemann will be sufficiently clear.

of the church and the survival of the Gospel tradition supply direct evidence for.

The gospels themselves are the product of both historical memory of, and Christian faith in, Jesus. The latter element is admittedly post-resurrection faith, but so long as it was faith in the present *Jesus* and not simply faith in an isolated miracle of resurrection, it must have gained its content from the disciples' earlier experience of Jesus.

To establish a material continuity between the disciples' response to Jesus during his ministry and their post-resurrection faith, not much information is needed. It is important to be able to contrast those who chose to follow him with those who were so offended at him as to wish to see him removed. The vast majority of Jesus' contemporaries, of course, belonged to neither of these small groups. Further, it is important that what Jesus stood for concerned the expected intervention of the God of Israel on its behalf. This gives to the whole affair a soteriological context. One might add a reference to the contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus was not simply a preacher of repentance promising salvation and threatening judgment.<sup>23</sup> In some sense he incorporated the promised salvation. His presence was more than a word promising this; in some sense it realized it. In Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom salvation is declared to be present in some sense which relates to his activity.<sup>24</sup> He appears to have seen the healing and wholeness he brought to some who were sick as a sign of its activity in the present.<sup>25</sup> But on this question of whether Jesus was 'Gospel' for those who received him the decisive evidence is the contrast he draws between the old dispensation and the new which is somehow associated with his present activity.<sup>26</sup> In this connexion it is naturally his attitude to the Jewish law itself which is most important. His sayings on divorce,<sup>27</sup>

23. Against Bultmann, *e.g. Faith and Understanding* (SCM, London, 1969, p. 234). Those who minimise the newness of Jesus generally tend to assimilate him to John the Baptist.

24. Indications of this (though not directly kingdom sayings) are found at Mt. 12 : 6, 41f. 11 : 11f, 20-24, 13 : 16f; also some of the seed parables of the kingdom suggest this, again indirectly.

25. Mt. 12 : 28 = Lk. 11 : 20.

26. Mk. 2 : 18-28.

27. Mk. 10 : 1-12, Mt. 5 : 31f, 19 : 1-12, Lk. 16 : 18.

on the Old Testament food laws,<sup>28</sup> and the sabbath,<sup>29</sup> almost certainly go beyond what is acceptable interpretation within the Jewish tradition and so constitute the germ of Christianity as something new over against Judaism. It is not surprising that Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish ecclesiastical authorities. This prophetic criticism of the tradition went beyond a prophet's 'thus saith the Lord'; Jesus' 'But I say unto you'<sup>30</sup> sets him in explicit antithesis to Moses. It is little wonder that he was accused of blasphemy, whether or not he also attacked the Temple – as he probably did.<sup>31</sup>

This stance of Jesus has to be understood in the light of his intention to confront people with God's utter demand and to show that God's time was here. It is because of this that he can brush aside the mosaic compromise on divorce and can set aside the sabbath. New wine demands new bottles.

The theological relevance of the old conundrum: Was Jesus a Christian or a Jew?<sup>32</sup> – is that it points to the importance both of the tradition out of which Jesus came, and of his independence, newness and sovereign freedom over against this tradition. It is important that Jesus could only be who he was and do what he did and be understood as he was understood, *because* there was the language of a religious tradition available to be interpreted. There was already available a 'language of ultimacy', a framework of God-ideas to interpret the human situation in terms which go beyond what naturalism will allow. Being human involves recognising certain claims and moral obligations and taking responsibility for one's

28. Mk. 7 : 1–23. See note 38.

29. Mk. 2 : 23–28. See note 38.

30. Some at least of the 'antitheses' reproduced at Mt. 5 : 21ff. are authentic. Cf. Lk. 6 : 27.

31. Cf. Mk. 13 : 2, 14 : 58, 15 : 29; Jn. 2:19; Ac. 6 : 14 for indications.

32. Reimarus formulated the problem most sharply. Liberal protestantism thought it had solved it and rescued Jesus for Christianity. In reaction against liberalism's interest in the historical Jesus, Bultmann could echo Wellhausen's view that 'Jesus was not a Christian but a Jew', *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Reimer, Berlin, 1905, p. 113). Käsemann rightly points out that 'The question is not whether he was a Jew or a Christian, but whether this Jew is, as the common consciousness of Christendom asserts, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, the archetype of obedience, the New Adam...' *Essays on New Testament Themes* (ET SCM, London 1969, p. 42).

decisions, and being aware of one's finitude and of the certainty of death. All this finds expression in the language of a religious tradition. But in accepting Jesus the disciples did not simply accept an analysis of their human situation. Rather, their existence was transformed by their acceptance of him and all he stood for. He confronted them with a claim which can only be called unconditional, and gave them a sense of their purpose in the world and an awareness of their status as children of God which made all human status-seeking irrelevant. It is enough to be a disciple. That opens the way for the pearl of great price for which it is worth sacrificing all lesser ends. This reality which Jesus created for those who met him, accepted him and followed him, which came to be called "Gospel" and which could be simply identified with Jesus himself,<sup>33</sup> is not something which was only suspended in the future during Jesus' ministry. The Easter kerygma reflects the disciples' recovery of what the cross, had it been the end of the affair, would have invalidated by showing that Jesus had been mistaken after all: God was not with him. Jesus' unspoken answer to the decisive question 'By what authority doest thou these things?' – would have been proved wrong.<sup>34</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus was the event which for the disciples confirmed Jesus' implicit claim to divine authority and so vindicated their positive response to him. This idea also helped provide a theological conceptuality through which, by Christian proclamation, others could hear enough about Jesus to be faced with the same challenge as they were and to be able similarly to respond to him as Gospel. The content of the Gospel is the person who is proclaimed, not a series of 'salvation facts' which includes the resurrection.<sup>35</sup> In order that Jesus be proclaimed as Gospel new language is needed in new situations. The tradition is interpreted afresh.

33. Marcion equated Jesus and the Gospel. Origen called him *autobasileia* (Comm. in Mt. 14 : 7) Cf. also Mk. 1 : 1.

34. W. Pannenberg rightly emphasises as a part of the importance of the resurrection, its function in verifying for the disciples Jesus' claim to authority. *Jesus God and Man* (ET SCM, London, 1968, pp. 65f).

35. However necessary it may be to preserve the language of 'salvation facts' and however inadequate was the liberals' view of the person of Jesus, they were surely right to place personal response to the latter before intellectual acceptance of the former in their versions of Christianity.

The criterion of valid interpretation worked out in this section has been first that it continues to witness to Jesus, but then that it continues to witness to Jesus *as Gospel*.

This links our Jesus criterion with that discussed in the previous section, since the notion of Gospel or God-given good news, like that of revelation or God, does not refer to a bit of tradition, but to the event in which Jesus Christ is communicated in Christian witness evoking the response of Christian faith. The attempt has been made in this section to justify this 'Gospel' criterion by reference to the character of Christian tradition as Christians see it, through claiming that the historical Jesus was himself Gospel for those who accepted him. The justification provided is one appropriate to the modern historically conscious age, but the practice being justified – judging interpretations of Christianity inadequate if they fail to present Jesus as Gospel – is at least as old as Paul, if not Stephen.

The fact of Jesus himself being Gospel for those who accepted him suggests a question which might throw light upon Christian attempts to present Jesus as Gospel. That is, how did he do it? The answer is clearly, that Jesus' proclamation of Gospel<sup>36</sup> itself took place through tradition being interpreted. Further, this interpretation was critical interpretation – we must say, radically critical interpretation, since it involved violent rejection of a part of the preceding religious tradition. This fact, that Gospel proclamation was launched as 'criticism in a religious tradition' provides a model and possibly a justification for criticism in the Christian tradition under certain circumstances. The conditions for this would be that some analogy be shown to exist between Jesus' criticism of his own Jewish tradition and Christian theological criticism of the Christian tradition. The analogy between Jesus and authentic Christian proclamation has been established: they both proclaim Gospel. The question is whether an analogy also exists between the Jewish tradition which Jesus criticised and Christian tradition.

A notion which in Christian circles since Paul has been generally used to describe the Jewish tradition has been 'law'. It is true that great emphasis

36. In the light of the discussion of Jesus it is possible for us to use the liberal protestant (not to mention Marcan) phrase 'the Gospel of Jesus'. However, it should be used to speak of the total impact of Jesus, not simply his teaching.

is placed by Judaism upon the Torah. This in turn can lead to legalism, and legalism is one thing which Jesus clearly attacked through prophetic criticism of his religious tradition. But it was not simply pharisaic legalism that Jesus appears to have attacked. His criticism of the tradition went beyond prophetic correction of abuses and created something new which we have called Gospel. The argument of the last two sections has pointed in the direction of saying that Gospel cannot be identified with religious tradition, but that it can only be proclaimed on a basis of religious tradition, through this being interpreted. One may say that all religious tradition has the character of 'law', even though it is never exclusively this. Presumably this is what gives religion so important a function in society. But Christians claim that Christianity is not essentially law, however necessary this element may be. The distinction they sometimes make between Christianity itself and the religious tradition available to the historian<sup>37</sup> is an attempt to leave room for speaking of God or Gospel. The dialectical relationship they wish to maintain between Gospel and law, or revelation and religious tradition, provides the framework within which internal criticism of the tradition by Christians operates – and rightly operates once the God or Gospel presupposition of Christians is admitted. The appeal of Christian theological critics of the Christian tradition to what Christianity essentially *is*, or to their grasp of the Christian Gospel, is not arbitrary. It can be justified by reference to the person they appeal to as himself Gospel. He could only *be* Gospel for his hearers by taking up their religious tradition and interpreting it. But his critical interpretation so pruned the reign of law that he is more appropriately called 'the Evangelist' than a teacher of the law. It is not without reason that later Christian evangelists have appealed to him when the law character of all religious traditions, operative in the Christian tradition also, has stifled the essentially Gospel character of Christianity.

It is not our business as religionists to decide whether it was in fact, as Jesus and Christians have thought, the power and reality of God which

37. This has sometimes been expressed foolishly by saying that Christianity is not a religion. Nevertheless, 'the revelation of God as the abolition of religion' (K. Barth, *C. D.*, 1, 2, § 17) is a phrase which rightly draws attention to the dialectical relationship which critical Christian theologians recognise to exist between the Gospel and the Christian tradition.

found expression in Jesus' behaviour and teaching. We have simply to note that he operated in dependence upon but also in critical reaction against the religious tradition of his own time and place. This must have sprung from an awareness by Jesus that God or revelation cannot be simply identified with all or a part of the tradition. The tradition has to be interpreted, and maybe critically interpreted, in order that God's revelation or Gospel find expression in a given situation. Jesus' perception of what he believed to be God's will was formed, like everybody else's, by an interplay between the tradition in which he grew up and his own experience. Whether the awareness of God's utter demand and saving presence that he brought to expression through the new thing created by his critical interpretation of the tradition was genuine or not is not our concern. But in the light of Christians' assumption that it was genuine we can understand the note of criticism which recurs on appeal to him in subsequent interpretation of tradition within Christianity. Jesus created something new; subsequent Christian proclamations appealed to him as they sought and seek to actualise that something new in their own day.

We turn now to some examples, one very early, one second century, one late medieval and one modern, where Christian proclamation of Jesus as Gospel has had to be critical of contemporary Christian tradition which was making of Jesus a new law or merely a religious and ethical tradition. In each case this was allegedly preventing the event of revelation in which Jesus is known as liberating Gospel, from taking place. It is the mechanics of this criticism which we are to observe.

#### 4.

The origins of Christianity are somewhat obscure. But it seems clear that in primitive Christianity different groups appealed to Jesus in support of their differing positions as regards their relationship to Jewish law or religious tradition. Thus Mark's Jesus is more radical than Matthew's, for example.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the best evidence in favour of the substantial correct-

38. The differences between Mk. 7: 1-23 and Mt. 15: 1-20 or between Mk. 2: 23-28 and Mt. 12: 1-8 are clearly brought out by C. Barth, in Bornkamm, Barth and Held,

ness of Mark's interpretation is the part the Jewish ecclesiastical authorities apparently played in Jesus' removal. Ecclesiastical authorities do not remove conservatives. It seems that the liberal or radical wing in early Christianity had to leave Jerusalem on account of its attitude to the Jewish temple and law. The evidence is too slim for us to state categorically on historical grounds that they were truer interpreters of Jesus than the Twelve, but it is striking that the temple and the law were also key factors in Jesus' collision with his contemporaries.

Rather than speculate where the evidence is so thin, we turn to the most influential Christian of all, and the only first-century Christian whom we know at first hand. Paul was converted to the hellenist law-free wing of Christianity which he had been persecuting; he became its chief representative and theorist in the bitter disputes within the Christian community concerning the Jewish law, or the relationship of the new movement to the preceding religious tradition.

Paul's claim to be a truer interpreter of Jesus than Peter, James and the rest of Jewish Christianity depends on how adequate an interpretation of Jesus' criticism of the Jewish law and tradition is contained in Paul's theology. The disagreement between Peter and Paul recorded in Gal. 2 : 12-13 about the implications of a non-Jewish Christianity is a dramatic expression of that. Paul's criticism of Peter here, and of Judaizing Christianity generally, was that it slipped back into Judaism and so denied the Jesus event.<sup>39</sup> For him the Christian Gospel is clarified by its antithesis to Judaism. That is spelled out in his view that salvation is solely on the basis of Christian response to Jesus, as opposed to morality and religious practice. At this point Paul's Christian proclamation seems to be true to the historical reality of Jesus, as outlined in the previous section.

It is arguable that Paul's Gospel proclaimed through critical interpretation of the religious tradition has had a more direct influence in legitimating theological criticism in Christian history than has Jesus' incarnation of this Gospel. Since Jesus left no literary legacy it was easy for his radical edge to be blunted by his less radical followers in the course of their handing down and interpreting the tradition of his sayings.

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*Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (ET SCM, London, 1963.)

39. Gal. 2 : 21, 4 : 9, 5 : 4.

Paul, too, as we shall see, had to have his critical edge blunted, but some of his writings survived and were venerated. With a N. T. canon containing a dangerous radical like Paul interpreting theologically a dangerous radical like Jesus, the Gospel proclaimed by interpretation of, and in part reaction against, the religious tradition was bound to break out again in a manner that was disturbing and disrupting for the religious tradition, even though this was now a Christianised religious tradition.

This happened as soon as the main lines of the N. T. canon were formed in the second century. Marcion<sup>40</sup> is the clearest example of theological criticism to be found, because his errors (which led to his excommunication) are as obvious as his virtues. Here can be seen the limits of theological critical interpretation of the tradition, as well as its justification.

Like many other Christians before and since, Marcion heard the Gospel most clearly through the bit of tradition which derived from the pen of Paul. One reason why he understood so clearly the apostle's contrast between Christian faith and the morality imposed by religious tradition was the similarity of his polemical situation to Paul's. Just as Paul was confronted with Jewish and Judaising Christianity, so Marcion saw in the Christianity of his day little more than a denationalised version of Diaspora Judaism.<sup>41</sup>

Marcion was historically right to see the distinctive mark of pauline theology in its critical character, and theologically justified in letting this perception drive him to criticising the Church of his day. But he was wrong in his surmise about how Christianity had got into this terribly unpauline state. He thought that Paul's letters had been extensively interpolated with Jewish-Christian material, and that Jesus also had been transformed, by the original written gospel being similarly interpolated and by three others being composed. This historical hypothesis is incorrect. It is, however, interesting in that it illuminates Marcion's theological method, which

40. A. von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium des fremden Gottes* (1921, rp. Darmstadt, 1960) is indispensable, but should be taken with a pinch of salt.

41. H. Conzelmann, *An Outline Theology of the New Testament* (ET SCM, London 1968, p. 294) refers to Bousset's 'somewhat exaggerated' account of the Christianity of I. Clement as 'a diaspora Judaism which has become universal and has been freed from its limitations, but although it has been freed from its limitations it is still diaspora Judaism', *Kyrios Christos* (ET Abingdon, NY 1970), pp. 367 ff.

is in principle similar to that of orthodox theologians. It shows that Marcion's interpretation of the N. T. text is *guided by his antecedent grasp of what Christianity is*. This is what Christian theological interpretation means: a Christian's interpreting the text or tradition critically in the light of his grasp of the gospel or revelation. In this case Marcion was led by his understanding of the revelation to deal violently with the tradition. Even that is in principle legitimate. As was clear with Jesus and Paul the tradition may have to be subjected to radical criticism in order that the Gospel of freedom be clearly proclaimed through interpretation of this tradition.

Every theological interpretation does what Marcion did: namely, distinguishes between central and peripheral elements in the tradition. Where Marcion went beyond the proper limits of theological interpretation was in cutting out all that conflicted with his interpretation. The trouble with this procedure is that it destroys a part of the theologian's evidence, and so reduces the chances of mistaken interpretations being subsequently corrected and partial views being supplemented. Needless to say, the orthodox were guilty of a similar type of offence when they destroyed the writings of heretics, and so mutilated the Christian tradition that way. Once theological formulations are recognised as interpretations of the tradition for the sake of the Gospel being proclaimed it becomes appropriate to judge them more or less adequate rather than simply right or wrong. In this situation misleading theses are worth preserving in theologians' libraries even when they have been banned from pulpits.

The result of Marcion's daring but mistaken historical hypothesis was that for all his intuitive insight into pauline theology he got the historical Paul wrong. And by prematurely ruling out a part of the theological tradition instead of trying to interpret it, he produced an ultra-pauline version of Christianity which in fact could no longer be called Christian because it conflicted with the Jesus criterion by being no longer related to the historical Jew from Nazareth. Marcion's Jesus was docetic. Other avant-garde theologians have made this break with the Christian tradition before and since Marcion, but it has always been repudiated by the rest of the Christian community. The revelation is related by Christians to a historical person. The struggle for the retention of the O. T. in the second century was a struggle for the tradition into which Jesus was born, within which he understood himself, against which he reacted, and in terms of which

he was first understood. It was thus a struggle for an essential characteristic without which according to common Christian conviction no interpretation of the tradition can be called Christian: namely, that it relates to the historical Jew from Nazareth.

But Marcion's virtues are more important than his vices. His error lay in his Christology, not in his preference for a miniature canon. The Christian Gospel can be heard from Paul alone, and even from a part of Paul, provided that part is interpreted correctly; though of course the more the Pauline corpus is reduced the less likely one is to understand Paul correctly. The point at which Marcion got Jesus wrong was in tearing him from his historical context, the religious tradition in which he stood and out of which he has to be understood. Jesus without the Jewish tradition is no longer Jesus of Nazareth. Both Jesus and Paul accepted the O.T. – and criticised it, in order to proclaim the Gospel. Marcion abandoned this dialectic. He had, however, good reasons. The O.T. posed real problems for a Christianity which had inherited a fundamentally unchristian (*i.e.* uncritical) notion of Holy Scripture.<sup>42</sup> But instead of maintaining the dialectical stance of Jesus and Paul to that tradition also, accepting it and interpreting it critically in order to proclaim the Gospel, Marcion opted for the gnostic short cut and rejected it. In so doing he unintentionally invented a new religion, whereas he had hoped to restore Paul's proclamation of Jesus as Gospel in the Christian church.

Marcion was not the only person with the best will in the world to misinterpret Paul. His use of the critical knife was particularly dramatic. Less dramatic but no less effective were the orthodox efforts to gag Paul's critical voice. To remove parts of Paul is one way of doing your theological criticism, and an illegitimate one. Another way, also involving an erroneous historical postulate, is to supplement Paul's writings with further writings bearing his name, such as the deutero-paulines, especially the

42. C. F. Evans, *Is Holy Scripture Christian?* (SCM, London, 1970) is right to criticize certain views of scripture. But the question remains open why and in what sense this part of the tradition is specially authoritative for Christian theology. The old Protestant distinction between scripture as *norma normans* and tradition as *norma normata* retains some validity even when in a historically critical age scripture is seen to be a part of the tradition. For an illuminating discussion of these issues, see G. Ebeling, *Word of God and Tradition* (ET Collins, London, 1968), especially pp. 11–31, 102–180.

Pastoral Epistles. Or one may write a history of the pauline mission which places Paul firmly under the thumb of the Jerusalem church. The baneful influence of Acts on the understanding of Paul lasts to this very day.

It was above all Irenaeus who saved Paul for orthodoxy and wrenched him from the avant-garde theologians of the second century, the gnostics.<sup>43</sup> But he did so by placing him in a Lucan salvation-history context in which his critical voice was drowned in the larger chorus of the apostolic tradition. The ecclesiastical Paul of the Pastorals, Lk-Acts and catholic tradition is not the man who withstood Peter face to face in Antioch when Peter was in the wrong. The Peter of legend finally emerged victorious in Rome, just as the Peter of history was probably victorious in Antioch. In historical terms the rebels and outsiders of a religious tradition are not usually victorious. They have to wait for vindication.

Comparing Marcion's one-sided Paul with the too many-sided Paul of Irenaeus, one has to say that Paul and Irenaeus were both orthodox Christians, whereas Marcion's loss of the historical Jesus puts him outside the mainstream. But outsiders often see some things more clearly than the orthodox, and Marcion understood the newness of the Gospel better than his contemporaries. If the distinctive characteristic of Paul is his understanding the Gospel by way of criticism of the necessary tradition, then one might judge that the gagged Paul of Luke and Irenaeus is Christian but not particularly pauline. Marcion's Paul, on the other hand, is recognisably pauline, but no longer Christian. If one had to choose there can be little doubt that Paul himself would have sided with Irenaeus – and fought for Marcion's cause.

Marcion's theological position, then, is to be rejected. But his critical method, evident in his intention to proclaim Jesus as Gospel by interpreting the tradition, and his willingness where necessary to adopt a critical stance towards this tradition, is true both to Jesus' life and to Paul's theology. Marcion was right to let his interpretation of the tradition be guided by his grasp of what Christianity essentially *is*, and he was right to allow this to lead him to criticise the interpretations of the tradition offered by some of his fellow Christians, past and present.

43. For an illuminating account of the pauline interpretation of Marcion and Irenaeus, which however approves of Paul being given a Salvation history frame, cf. H. von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Mohr, Tübingen, 1968; ET Oxford, 1972).

On both points, letting his interpretation of the tradition be guided by his own theological position, and in criticising the tradition, Marcion was doing in his own way what most of his contemporaries were doing by means of allegorical interpretation. In a historically conscious age, where we are bound to respect the intentions of the human authors of the texts being interpreted this method of theological interpretation and criticism is unacceptable. Marcion's method is really more modern. If only he had tried to bend the unpalatable bits of the tradition, and had remained open to being corrected by these, he would have been doing something very close to what is nowadays called *Sachkritik*, or material criticism of the content. If he had been right in his historical hypothesis, on the other hand, he would be hailed as a forerunner of historical criticism. But he was not. So the evil that he did lived after him, and the good was interred with his bones. Whether one approves of Harnack's attempt at disinterring it will depend in part on one's view of the Luther and liberal protestant coloured light in which Marcion is here presented.<sup>44</sup>

## 5.

The example of Marcion shows the potentially explosive critical power that the Church unwittingly received into its bosom when it canonised the Pauline epistles. The argument of this essay is that this critical edge which Christian theology has sometimes brought to the religious tradition it has to interpret in order that Jesus be proclaimed as Gospel is characteristic. The proclamation of the Gospel requires the religious tradition, but it always and necessarily involves critical interpretation of that tradition. Normally where the tradition is functioning smoothly as a vehicle of the Christian revelation this critical interpretation will be a matter of selection and emphasis. But where the tradition is choking or strangling the expression of this liberating Gospel, then proclamation must involve attacking the tradition. In these cases critical interpretation of the tradition is radicalized.

This radical theological criticism of the tradition is always a risky business

44. See p. 89.

since it involves the theologian or prophet in cutting at his guide-lines or air-pipes. Christian faith depends on the tradition which is here being in part attacked. It is in fact seldom that the necessary pruning has been achieved without the plant being damaged. In every reformation good things have been thrown out with bad. The richness of the tradition is a strength as well as a weakness and the necessary attempts to achieve a better concentration upon the one thing necessary often result in some impoverishment.

Nevertheless, if as Christians believe, the Gospel is 'the power of God on men's behalf' then it cannot be identified with religious tradition or the institution. Wherever the Church identifies itself or its tradition with the revelation it has to actualize, or the Gospel is has to proclaim, (*e.g.* by misusing a phrase like 'the body of Christ'), then theological polemics or criticism become necessary.<sup>45</sup> The identification of the revelation with the religious tradition <sup>46</sup> is the perennial temptation of those whose task it is to cultivate that tradition. Since Paul is the one canonical writer a large part of whose effort was directed towards repudiating a form of this error, it is not surprising that later exponents of theological criticism have appealed to him.

An important question for this whole discussion concerns the grounds on which appeal is made to Paul. The question has already been answered implicitly in the discussion of Jesus, Paul and Marcion. Paul is appealed to because in his writings an echo of what the theologian believes Christianity essentially to be is heard. The significance for modern theological method of the way *they* handled the tradition available to *them* can be further clarified by the introduction of a fourth witness, this time a medieval monk<sup>47</sup>

45. A good account of the necessity for such 'polemics', related to one's apprehension of the 'essence' of Christianity is contained in Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline on the Study of Theology*, § 45–62.

46. This is the regular charge brought by radical Protestantism against Catholicism, whether or not it is just.

47. By calling Luther a Catholic before going on to emphasise the essentially critical character of his work, the intention is to combine full acceptance of the liberals' radical Protestant Luther whose apprehension of the Gospel did not spring from his acknowledgment of inspired Bible or traditional dogma, with a repudiation of the liberals' view that this constituted a new, more advanced stage of Christianity. Rather, this prophetic voice is and always has been one necessary pole within Catholic Christianity. Similarly one must repudiate as a related error the liberals' distinction between Luther's religion

and a professor,<sup>48</sup> since monasteries and universities have often been hotbeds of theological criticism: Martin Luther.

Whatever the differences between Luther's Paul and the Paul of history,<sup>49</sup> Luther has to be credited with the achievement of bringing into play again the pauline critical principle; – *i.e.* Paul's proclamation of the Gospel in and through radical criticism of the religious tradition.

However one judges late medieval theology and devotion, for the young man Luther the Christian tradition was failing to be a vehicle for the liberating Gospel. It is not difficult to see analogies between his position over against the dominant religious tradition of his day, and that of Marcion, Paul and Jesus. The existence of some of Paul's writings in the collection of documents which all Christians agreed to be authoritative, gave Luther a lever with which to criticize the subsequent tradition – even a tradition sanctioned by an authoritative hierarchy. He did not exactly set the authority of Scripture against that of the Church. That would be a contradiction in terms because the notion of Scripture has no meaning except within the religious community. The disagreement was rather about who within the community could say what it means, and so could say what Christianity *is* or should be.<sup>50</sup> Against the hierarchy's control of tradition by its authoritative interpretation, Luther insisted on the right of the individual Christian theologian to see for himself the Christian meaning of Scripture which is clear enough.<sup>51</sup> It was still within the Church that the Spirit showed the Christian meaning of Scripture, when this tradition was interpreted in order that the Gospel be proclaimed. But room was made for criticism of

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and his theology. What Wrede showed for Paul is true also for Luther: 'The religion of the apostle is theological through and through: his theology is his religion.' – *Paul* (ET London 1907).

48. A reminder that Luther was by profession a theologian is contained in the frontispieces of Luther Bibles which still refer to *Dr. Martin Luther*

49. For a formidable statement of these, *cf.* A. Schlatter, *Luthers Deutung des Römerbriefs* (Gütersloh, 1917), criticized in part by E. Ellwein in *ZZ*, (5, 1927, pp. 530–543). Also P. Althaus, *Paulus und Luther über den Menschen* (Gütersloh, 1938, 1963, pp. 21–23), who concedes a good deal to Schlatter, whilst offering some pertinent criticisms.

50. On the *sola scriptura* as a hermeneutical proposal, see G. Ebeling, *Word of God and Tradition* (pp. 122–144).

51. See especially *De Servo Arbitrio* (ET SCM, London 1969), pp. 158ff.

the ecclesiastical tradition by an individual Christian *in the light of his apprehension of the Gospel*.

This was in principle no more than what Jesus did, whether rightly or wrongly and what Paul did in his interpretation of Jesus, and what Marcion was trying to do despite his doctrinal mistake. The historical situation in the sixteenth century meant that Luther could only do it by setting up Scripture as the court of appeal. However, his criticism of the canon shows that in fact it was his *grasp of the Gospel* which was for him the criterion of the tradition, not the formal authority of Scripture. The Biblicism of subsequent Protestantism could appeal to much that Luther said, but did in fact misunderstand his theological method when it identified the Bible with the Word of God or Revelation. Luther could 'urge Christ against Scripture', something which would be quite impossible for a biblicist.<sup>52</sup>

Paul is not appealed to simply because his letters are scripture. The Epistle of James is also canonical. He is appealed to by Luther and Marcion in the same way as he himself appealed to bits of the Old Testament: *i.e.* because and insofar as these bits of authoritative tradition are heard as witness to the Gospel which centres on Jesus. This implies that the appellant has some antecedent grasp of the Christian revelation which is illuminated and expressed by this bit of tradition. This interplay between the believer's experience and the tradition is a continuing element in the life of a Christian, and the present state of play in a believer's mind is invoked whenever he makes theological judgments.<sup>53</sup>

Thus to extrapolate from all these examples what they tell us about criticism *in* the Christian tradition or critical theological method, the state of play at any particular moment, in anyone's thinking *i.e.* a person's theological position, has been formed in the first place by the strand of the Christian tradition through the use of which in proclamation he became

52. Cf. G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (SCM, London, 1963), p. 82. W. Herrmann's discussion of 'the elements of Luther's theology which belong to the past' (*The Communion of the Christian with God*, rp. SCM, 1972, § 12) is instructive. Since a person's theology at any given time should be a coherent unity, it is possible to lay claim to Luther (as Herrmann rightly wishes to do) by arguing that his theology is *essentially critical*, or that the critical moment stands at its centre, as its dominant characteristic. Cf. N. 78, and N. 80.

53. See Käsemann, 'The Spirit and the Letter' in *Perspectives on Paul* (ET SCM, London 1971), pp. 138-166.

a believer. Secondly it is developed by as much of the tradition as he has subsequently confronted and been nourished by. His position continues to be secured, broadened, modified or corrected in his continuing critical debate with the tradition, which we described as an interplay between the believer's experience and the Christian tradition. At every point in his listening to what the tradition is trying to say he is open to having his mind changed or his vision enlarged. But at the same time, in the light of his present and always provisional position, he will be ready to disagree with and criticize parts of the tradition – even such venerable parts of it as the thoughts of St. Paul, Luke, Jerome, Augustine, Calvin, Troeltsch, Pius XII, T.F. Torrance, or R.N. Smart.

Since the revelation cannot be identified with a part of the tradition the argument cannot take the form of simply measuring the offending thoughts of these gentlemen against someone else's more inspired utterances. Judgment is made by the theologian in the light of his own apprehension of the Gospel, and that means that his judgment is always provisional. The form that the argument will take must be an attempt to show that at a particular point one's own grasp of the Christian revelation is less inadequate than that of these greater mortals. Neither side has the thing it is arguing about, the Christian revelation, in its hand, though both hope to have it in their hearts. The argument must be based on what they do have in their hands – *viz.* the Christian tradition. Both sides of the theological argument interpret this data as a whole and try to show their continuity with it, in order to claim that their judgment is authentically Christian.<sup>54</sup>

This means that theological disagreement resulting from criticism of the tradition is an inevitable feature of the life of the Christian community. New expressions of the Gospel prove themselves by their fruits and old ones wither by being left on the shelf, a matter of interest to the historian and theologian, but no longer current coin in the living proclamation of the Church.

The richness of the tradition, and the fact that different Christians, including theologians, are influenced more or less strongly by different parts of it, means that some measure of theological variety is inevitable within the Christian community. Everybody's position is historically

54. See note 18.

conditioned, both by his own situation and by where he stands in relation to the past, or which bits of the Christian tradition have 'spoken' to him. The accuracy of the account of criticism in the Christian tradition contained in this essay is a historical question. But the theological argument for the *necessity* of this criticism contained within the historical account is the expression of a particular theological stance. No-one but a radical Protestant would be likely to find such exemplary significance in Marcion. The comment made earlier about Harnack interpreting him in the light of Luther and liberal protestantism was intended to hint at the theological echo being heard in the history. More importantly, the particular features of the historical Jesus selected for emphasis in section 3 also reflect the desire to make out a theological case. If they are a distortion, other historians must offer corrections. But the history of Jesus is ambiguous enough for different theological emphases to be able to appeal to Jesus. The reason why supposedly neutral, objective, dispassionate debate about historical questions relating to the N.T. is often so passionate and polemical is that theological positions are being defended with the weapons of historical argument.<sup>55</sup>

The theological position implicit in this argument is open to debate. A theologian from a very different tradition from the one echoed here, say an Eastern Orthodox, would also have a standpoint, and on the basis of the material we share, *i.e.* the whole history of the Christian tradition, we could have a meaningful argument and clarify each other's ideas about what Christianity *is* or ought to be. I should want to know what justice he could do to the historical reality of Jesus, since the quest of the historical Jesus which is so important to modern Western theology was in part a protest against the unreality of the Byzantine Christ.<sup>56</sup> The argument would

55. This was recognized by A. Schlatter in an important essay *Die Theologie des Neuen Testaments und die Dogmatik* (rp. Kaiser, Munich, 1969), my English translation of which is published by SCM, London. See also below, p. 96.

56. Even Martin Kähler, who considered that 'the Jesus of the "Life-of-Jesus movement" is merely a modern example of human creativity, and not one iota better than the notorious dogmatic Christ of Byzantine Christology', could say that this 'movement is completely in the right insofar as it sets the Bible against an abstract dogmatism' (*The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, ET C. E. Braaten, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1964, pp. 43 and 46).

in fact get stuck at the point where we discovered that we had different views of reality, since he would probably turn out to be less infected (or purified) by modern European rationalism than I have been. But at least we would have seen where and why our ways divided.

The successive expansions of the tradition which have led to our respective positions have been occasioned in part by changing views of reality as a whole. It is because Christians claim that the subject-matter of their tradition has to do with reality as a whole, that they have had to reinterpret this tradition in every age. They cannot allow it to stand in unreconciled opposition to what is accepted as true on other grounds. But to recognise avenues to truth which might compete with the knowledge claimed to be possessed in the religious tradition is to move into the modern period and the next section of this essay. Here the autonomy of human reason is conceded by theologians distinguishing between revelation and their own tradition so as no longer to see in the latter a 'revealed truth' which is the criterion of all secular knowledge. Thus theology leaves the throne of absolute claims and enters the arena of competing claims to interpret human experience. Whether under these circumstances it will show itself still to be queen is an unresolved question.

## 6.

The argument so far has been that the theologian's criticism of the necessary religious tradition, in the light of his apprehension of the Christian Gospel, and for the sake of this liberating Gospel being communicated, has been a regular feature of the ever-expanding tradition. It is justified by Christians' view of the character of their tradition and its relation to the Gospel or revelation (section 2), and also by the character of the historical figure to whom the theological tradition refers and appeals (section 3). It remains to consider how theological criticism has fared in the modern period, a period itself characterized above all by criticism. Modern criticism, active in all areas, has paid special attention to religion.<sup>57</sup> But unlike

57. Cf. Marx: 'The critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique' in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Ed. I. O'Malley, Cambridge. 1970. p. 131).

theological criticism, this criticism of the Christian tradition has not been for the sake of the Gospel. It has often been hostile to Christianity as such, and not simply to perversions of it.

The type of modern rationalist criticism which concerns us here is historical criticism, the discipline which at the beginning of this essay it was claimed that Christian theology has, over the past 200 years, learned to live with and benefit from. The intention of this section is to indicate briefly how Christian theology has used historical criticism as an instrument of legitimate theological criticism.

There is no shortage of examples. The history of modern theology could almost be written under the heading of historical criticism functioning as theological criticism. Schleiermacher's rehabilitation of Sabellianism<sup>58</sup> is a fine example of sensitive historical probing united with, and serving as a vehicle for, a theological examination of the doctrine of the Trinity and a proposed correction of the Nicene position. Since those early days the 'classical' heretics have often been rehabilitated by advocates more eloquent<sup>59</sup> than the orthodox have found. These are not simply corrective swings of the pendulum demanded by historical justice.<sup>60</sup> The authors are generally reasserting an emphasis in the tradition the neglect of which following condemnation of a one-sided assertion has been an impoverishment to orthodoxy.<sup>61</sup> Or sometimes they are wishing to disagree with orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup>

The theological criticism involved in these interpretations of the tradition with the help of modern historical techniques takes place within limits

58. 'On the discrepancy between the Sabellian and the Athanasian method of representing the doctrine of the Trinity' (ET M. Stuart in *The Biblical Repository and Quarterly Observer*, XVIII, April 1835, pp. 265-353 and July 1835, pp. 1-116).

59. Harnack on Marcion is the best example. The friendly treatment accorded to Apollinaris by G. L. Prestige (*Fathers and Heretics*, SPCK, 1940) is especially interesting in view of the points of contact existing between the Anglo-Catholicism of a generation ago, and Apollinarianism.

60. Such as arguments that Nestorius was not a Nestorian, or the article 'In defence of Arius' by M. F. Wiles (*JTS*, 1962, pp. 339-347), where Arius is defended against the heavy handed treatment accorded him by H. M. Gwatkin and T. E. Pollard.

61. Marcion is again the clearest example. In less extreme cases, such as Pelagius, Nestorius, and Eutyches, orthodoxy soon recouped the ground lost in condemning these one-sided emphases.

62. The liberals' soft spot for Paul of Samosata is a case in point.

that are recognisably Christian. The same might be said of the Ritschlians' more wholesale criticism of the patristic and medieval developments of the doctrinal tradition. Harnack could sit light upon the "hellenization of Christianity" because he located the essence of Christianity elsewhere in the Christian tradition.<sup>63</sup> It is possible to accept the legitimacy of Harnack's attempt to define Christianity, even if one is convinced that it fails rather miserably. Troeltsch's appreciation of Harnack's work, in the essay on the 'essence' already mentioned, contains an admirable account of how nevertheless theological criticism can and should be done *through* historical criticism. This is what the 'essence' concept as used by Harnack is all about. One of the sections of Troeltsch's essay is entitled 'the essence as criticism', just as criticism is the dominant note in Schleiermacher's discussion of the essence in the *Brief Outline*. But for both Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, criticism is only one aspect of the life of a tradition. It goes hand in hand with expansion. 'To define the essence is to shape it anew'<sup>64</sup>, wrote Troeltsch, and Schleiermacher's whole concern was to educate Christian leaders capable of 'cultivating' and 'furthering' Christianity.<sup>65</sup>

One might take various examples, and they would not all come from within Protestantism.<sup>66</sup> The past decade provides indications that theological criticism of the doctrinal tradition is likely to remain a feature of a revived Roman Catholic theology.<sup>67</sup> But in this context, in view of the previous examples it is worth remaining within the ambit of clear and self-conscious theological criticism of the scriptural tradition. Our final example is the most distinguished historical and theological critic of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann.

In view of the terminology employed so far it will be appropriate to call

63. See *What is Christianity?* (rp. Harper, New York 1957, ET of *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Leipzig, 1900).

64. Troeltsch, *G.S.*, II, pp. 428 ff, especially p. 431f.

65. § 3–31. Cf. § 70: 'Insofar as it forms a theological discipline, the historical knowledge of Christianity is, first and foremost, the indispensable condition of all intelligent effort toward the further cultivation of Christianity' Tice (p. 41).

66. The Roman Catholic modernist George Tyrrell would be an instructive example.

67. The works of E. Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng are perhaps the clearest indications of this.

Bultmann's demythologizing<sup>68</sup> the N.T. 'interpreting this part of the religious tradition existentially'. The identity of this Christian theologian's aim with that of our other examples is clear. He can only proclaim the Gospel through interpreting the tradition. However, religious tradition has in itself the character of 'law'; this is the reason for its stabilizing influence in society, and why religion has generally been supported by the state. But the Christian Gospel of revelation is quite different from this, even if it presupposes such a tradition. The task of the Christian theologian is so to interpret the tradition that the liberating power of the Gospel can take effect upon those who hear, understand and accept the proclamation.

The way in which Paul, Marcion and Luther saw the law character of the tradition stifling the Gospel's liberating power on men's behalf was by its making Christianity a matter of morality. They therefore built upon the antithesis of law and grace and fought for the grace character of Christianity. They avoided the danger of it being misunderstood as 'cheap grace'<sup>69</sup> because for them grace was understood as event,<sup>70</sup> known in joyful response to the Christian proclamation, not acquired as a person's own possession. For Bultmann, a faithful son of liberal protestantism no less than fellow-traveller of the dialectical theology, the way in which the law character of the religious tradition was preventing the Christian proclamation from being heard as Gospel lay in the intellectual sphere.<sup>71</sup> Faced with this false stumbling-block to Christian faith, Bultmann's aim is to interpret the tradition in such a way as to overcome this stumbling-block, and let the true "offence" of the Gospel be seen for what it is.<sup>72</sup> This in fact involved severe treatment

68. It is a pity that vulgar usage has adopted the word in a different sense from Bultmann's, and no longer speaks of demythologizing (*i.e.* interpreting in a particular way) the *text* but rather of demythologizing *Christianity*. What is then referred to is the liberals' elimination of a part of the tradition, something from which Bultmann distinguishes his own procedure. Cf. *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (SCM, London, 1960, p. 18).

69. D. Bonhoeffer's phrase. See *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM, London, 1959, pp. 35 ff.).

70. See also R. Bultmann's account of pauline theology. *Theology of the New Testament* (ET SCM, London, 1952, Vol. 1, pp. 288 ff. § 32 'Grace as Event').

71. This emphasis is particularly clear in Bultmann's systematics teacher, R. Herrmann. See especially the Preface and Introduction to *The Communion of the Christian with God* (ET rp. SCM, London, 1972).

72. See, for example, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (p. 36).

of the tradition resulting in the elimination of a good deal in the process of interpretation.<sup>73</sup> Where the tradition's pre-scientific cosmology was imposing itself upon people in the name of Christianity as an intellectual code, this was ripe for criticism. Whether Bultmann's view of the intention of the tradition is adequate, or whether it is not one-sidedly anthropologically biased is not our concern here. Opinions will vary according to how people view Bultmann's understanding of God-talk.<sup>74</sup> We are not concerned with the substantial truth of his theological position, which may like Marcion's (though far less seriously) be adjudged christologically defective, but rather with his theological *method*. There seems to be good reason for accepting his claim<sup>75</sup> that demythologizing is only an extension of the Reformers' material principle of justification on a basis of faith alone, into the realm of epistemology.

The Christian religious tradition may only be understood as a moral or intellectual law where at the same time it is recognized that the essential character of Christianity as Gospel is something very different. The religious tradition then provides the raw material through which Jesus may be proclaimed anew as Gospel in ever new situations. If anyone does not like the particular interpretation of the tradition proposed by Bultmann, and the concomitant expansion by incorporation of Heideggerian terminology, he can ignore it, unless of course he considers it actually misleading, in which case he must criticize Bultmann in the light of his own grasp of what Christianity *is*, its essence, gist or *sāraya*.<sup>76</sup>

The critical edge in Bultmann's interpretation of the tradition is very clear in all his work on N.T. theology. He is more radical than Luther, and shocked even Barth,<sup>77</sup> in that like Marcion he is prepared to distinguish

73. Although Bultmann insists that his operation is 'interpretation', in contrast to the liberals' 'elimination' of myth, it should not be overlooked that the myth disappears equally in both, even if Bultmann has retained more of its meaning.

74. Bultmann's essay, 'What does it mean to speak of God?' (1925), *Faith and Understanding* (pp. 53–65) is of fundamental importance for understanding his theology. See also G. Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube II* (Mohr, Tübingen, 1969, pp. 343–371).

75. See *Kerygma and Myth I* (ed. H. W. Bartsch, pp. 210 f.) 'it carries this doctrine to its logical conclusion in the field of epistemology'.

76. See Michael Pye's essay, p. 37.

77. The disagreement between Barth and Bultmann concerning *Sachkritik* was indication of a fundamental difference in their theological altitudes. See Barth's successive pre-

within a single writer. He does not share Marcion's error of eliminating the offending bits of Paul. But he interprets them away to the periphery of Paul's theology. They are still there but their survival is no credit to Paul.<sup>78</sup> Bultmann comes closer still to Marcion when the unacceptable bits of John are cut off by being ascribed to an ecclesiastical redactor.<sup>79</sup> As with Marcion a historical hypothesis is invoked – though in this case we do not yet know whether the historical hypothesis is right or wrong.

Presumably we never shall know, for example, the historical truth about the composition of the Fourth Gospel, and this leaves elbow room for alternative hypotheses in N.T. exegesis. It is by exploiting this elbow-room that modern historical criticism of the N.T. can be and often is a field for theological argument.<sup>80</sup> Under the surface of historical debate, theological

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faces to *The Epistle to the Romans* (ET OUP, 1933) especially p. 8 which suggests content criticism, p. 10 which points in the opposite direction and pp. 16 ff. which disagree with Bultmann. Also Bultmann's review (1922) of the second edition of Barth's commentary, *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, Vol. 1 (ET ed. J. M. Robinson, especially pp. 118 ff.). Further insistence upon content criticism, again in opposition to Barth, may be found in Bultmann's essay on Karl Barth, 'The Resurrection of the Dead' in *Faith and Understanding* (pp. 72, 81, 86, 92). The same concern is clear in the statement that 'Paul must always be read critically' (p. 280) and in the insistence that 'to be legitimate, theology must always be critical and polemical' (p. 214, cf. pp. 218, 279). The seeds both of Bultmann's later demythologizing provocation, and of his critical N.T. theology, are already fully developed here. See my *Nature of New Testament Theology*, pp. 36–56.

78. Thus the O.T., salvation history, world, futurist eschatology, and the sacraments are underemphasized, and Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 15: 3–8 is considered a lapse (TNT I, p. 305). The whole of § 33 is instructive. Clearly Bultmann is working with a view of the essence or 'centre' of pauline theology which is itself based on exegesis, but which then arranges the exegetical data into a coherent pattern. Thus this type of N.T. theology involves the same sorts of critical procedures as does the systematic theological method under discussion throughout this essay.

79. E.g., John 6: 39b, 40c, 44b, 51b–58. *The Gospel of John* (ET Blackwell, Oxford, 1971, p. 219).

80. This elbow-room is increased by invoking often well-founded hypotheses of a source critical and history of traditions nature, as well as by the question of the authorship of particular books. Thus particular verses such as Rom. 3: 24 f. may be a piece of pre-Pauline tradition taken up by Paul and therefore perhaps not particularly characteristic for his own theology. Or one's total view of Paul will vary according to how many of the epistles which bear his name one considers authentic. Again, philological uncertainties and obscurities can be exploited. Further, the context has to be investigated when considering

battles are being fought.<sup>81</sup> This is one reason why N.T. studies are potentially so interesting to the phenomenologist of religion. Where the evidence is inconclusive N.T. scholars tend to go for the option which agrees best with what they think Christianity is, and this is as true for exegetes who are unsympathetic to Christianity,<sup>82</sup> as for those who have a particular Christian position to defend. And it is as true for those who do not realize what they are doing as for those who do.

In other words, the legitimate and indeed necessary role within Christian theology, of historical criticism as this has developed in the West during the past 200 years, is as one way of doing theological criticism of the tradition, or criticism *in* the Christian tradition. Today it takes the place of ways of doing it which are clearly impossible in a historically conscious age, such as the allegorical method of critical interpretation of the tradition.

## 7.

As well as being a classical example of radical theological criticism, Bultmann is also a good example of the obvious dangers inherent in theological criticism of the tradition. Since criticism tends to purify the tradition by cutting out errors and superstitions and stripping down to essentials, there is

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what weight should be attached to particular statements. Textual critical uncertainties and conjectures, interpolation hypotheses and the like all add to the lee-way within which the interpreter of the N.T. operates, and out of which he draws exegetical conclusions which carry theological weight. It would be an exaggeration to say with Luther that the N.T. has a nose of wax, but the vast variety of exegetical conclusions suggests that N.T. scholars above all should be scrutinized for grindable axes.

81. Adolf Schlatter observed that historical research is by nature disinterested. The heat and passions often generated by N.T. questions was for him a sign that theological interests were at stake when particular positions were defended. *Zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments und zur Dogmatik* (Kaiser, Munich, 1969, p. 210). ET SCM 1973, p. 124.

82. Reimarus (*Fragments*, ed. C. H. Talbert, SCM, London, 1972) is an obvious primitive example. He has had far more primitive successors in the minefield of synoptic criticism, where differing judgments about the authenticity of particular sayings leaves great scope for divergent historical interpretations of Jesus. In this connexion Troeltsch's observation that anti-Christian reconstructions often sound especially plausible because they create an impression of historical distance and greater objectivity, (*G.S.*, II, p. 427) should be borne in mind.

always the danger that some essentials also will get swept away, such as the historical reality of Jesus as happened with Marcion and nearly happened with Bultmann.<sup>83</sup>

The inherent difficulty about theological criticism which emerges here is that every Christian is dependent upon the tradition for his grasp of what Christianity really is. But in the light of this grasp which is the product of the interplay between the tradition and the believer's experience, and within which occurs what was in the first section called 'revelation', he may criticize the tradition. That means that in the pruning operation called theological criticism any individual theologian is in danger of reducing what is reckoned as valid in the tradition to what makes sense or 'speaks' to him, with his more or less partial and one-sided grasp of the Gospel. In order to solve this problem it is necessary to bring in the Christian community as a whole, and let the 'faith of the Church' supply the counter-balance to the vagaries of individual theologians.

What is envisaged here is the Church itself exercising a critical function over against certain expansions of the tradition. This complements individual theologians' criticism of the tradition of the Church, which has been the subject of the discussion so far. Marcion's results, and some of those reached by the allegorical interpretation method of theological criticism of the scriptural tradition, both showed that even brilliant theologians sometimes make mistakes. Ecclesiastical controls were soon found to be a necessary accompaniment of the developing tradition. They can even be seen beginning to operate within the N.T. itself.<sup>84</sup>

The community has somehow always to check the expanding tradition. It has continually to test in its own experience the spirits which claim to be Christian. The question, which is very much alive today, is how this should be done.

83. Bultmann insists upon the necessity for Christian faith and theology of the 'mere that' of Jesus' historical existence. What he was like is not important, so the quest of the historical Jesus, as well as being 'historically impossible' is also 'theologically irrelevant'. For D. F. Strauss, on the other hand, the historical Jesus as such is theologically irrelevant. In both cases it is important to note that these theological judgments are independent of their authors' historical skepticism.

84. Above all at II Pet. 1: 20, but also wherever heresy is combatted, as at I John 4: 3, II Tim. 2: 18.

Theologically, this is the question of who within the community has the spirit, and whether or how far the spirit is limited to or controlled by the ecclesiastical office or hierarchy. An implication of the whole argument of this essay is that every Christian believer apprehends the Gospel and so is a bearer of the spirit. If the argument has concentrated on the part of the community called theologians, this is because they are the Christians with sufficient leisure and talent to immerse themselves in the tradition they have to interpret.

The first way, then, in which the Church corrects the vagaries of an individual theologian or 'tradition expander' is through her other theologians. They in turn judge an interpretation in the light of their apprehension of the Gospel and interpretation of the tradition. There is a subjective element in this, as in all theological decision-making, but this is limited by the establishing of theological guidelines or criteria. All that has been said in this essay about the historical Jesus and about the contrast between law and Gospel, is to be understood as an attempt to provide such criteria. Thus, whatever else Christianity is, it is Gospel rather than law; and whatever else is involved the reference to Jesus is mandatory. It was for the sake of harmony between these two guidelines that it seemed important to assert<sup>85</sup> that Jesus was experienced as Gospel, and that he made himself understood through critical reaction against the 'law' of his own religious tradition.

But theologians are only a part of the community, albeit a particularly qualified and highly articulate part. Further, their work necessarily has an individual and personal character.<sup>86</sup> It was inevitable that responsibility for the Church's teaching should pass into the hands of its leaders. Theology is only the handmaid of proclamation. The system whereby the teaching office of the Church devolved upon the bishops was a practical solution to a pressing need.<sup>87</sup> Since some bishops were also theologically competent,

85. On pp. 71 ff.

86. Despite the modern fashion for theology by committee. Where doctrinal commissions have produced anything worthwhile, this has been thanks to their being led by great theologians such as William Temple and O. C. Quick. The products of compromise emanating from committees constituted to satisfy the requirements of ecclesiastical politics, are a familiar spectacle, especially in liturgical reform.

87. The significance of the struggle against heresy for the emergence of the monarchical episcopate is generally recognised.

it was a happy arrangement at least until the days of ecclesiastical bureaucrats and managers. So long as bishops were truly representative of the community and also genuinely prepared to lead, this was a sensible mechanism by which new interpretations of the tradition could be commented on, accepted or rejected, and the community determine its future shape and appearance.

But the weakness of a system which allows the leaders of the institution to test the spirits is that they are almost bound to err on the side of conservatism, and so instead of being tested the spirits will be quenched. New interpretations of the tradition will be suppressed before they have the chance to prove themselves. On the other hand certain things will *not* be suppressed which *should* be! No religious institution is entirely free from its shadow side – superstition.<sup>88</sup> So long as the Gospel claims to be about reality it must be the mortal enemy of superstition. But the combatting of superstition often plays havoc with the institution. Those who have responsibility for the institution are therefore not well placed to initiate struggle; it is too likely to rock the boat.

However, the critical element in Christianity derives from the critical quality of the Jesus event, and so does not depend on the theological acumen of the hierarchy. It might break out (as charisma) anywhere. Even where its one-sidednesses have been rightly condemned, and a few rebels burned, its irruption has often succeeded in making its point. Even if the Christian institution is as rotten as other human institutions there are good grounds for optimism in the fact that its whole *raison d'être* is for the sake of something which might at any time break out in such a way as to subject the institution and tradition to devastating criticism.

The claim was made in the previous section that in the modern period a

88. This dangerous and loaded word is used intentionally in this context to mean 'un-truth posing as religious truth'. Its usage presupposes that the user has a standpoint which is opposed to that so designated. It should therefore be avoided in value free phenomenological statements, but will always be found on the lips of critical theologians. Its occurrence here is justified within a discussion of criticism in the Christian tradition, where theological positions are being marked out by way of examples. However, this term and the whole discussion are to be placed in brackets, as suggested in Section 1, since we are here concerned not with the truth of certain theological statements in the tradition, but simply with how the tradition expands and is criticized from within.

new tool for theological criticism of the Christian tradition has been forged. Historical criticism is interested in truth and reality. In the service of this it exposes superstition and myth. One would expect it therefore to be the ally of a Gospel which claims to be about reality and to be the implacable enemy of all religious untruth or superstition. The rationalism which gave birth to historical criticism has been and is hostile to Christian faith, but it has been and is a very useful enemy. If its wholesale criticism of religion as superstition has to be resisted, it has not to be resisted wholesale. Rather, its criticism may be welcomed and used against what really are elements of superstition in the Christian tradition today.

Theological discussion of Jesus in the light of the new historical disciplines during the last century were in part a serious attempt to apprehend his reality *as Gospel* in a new cultural situation. Similarly today, the debate about demythologizing is, at the deepest level and unnoticed by some who have participated in the debate, a matter concerning the reality of Jesus as Gospel, life-giving good news for those who accept him, and so the implacable enemy of superstition. Myths are probably a necessary vehicle for religious teaching, but they must be recognized as such. Bultmann is sometimes chastised for being against them. What he is against in fact is myth posing as quasi-scientific reality. That is superstition, and its presence in the Christian tradition means that this tradition has to be subject to theological criticism. Only thus will the Gospel be proclaimed, and heard as Gospel.

The cost of this criticism to the rebels within the Christian tradition who practise it is the danger of error and the near certainty of persecution by their co-religionists. The rebel Jew was crucified – and the rest only wanted to be his followers. Jesus, Paul, Marcion, Luther and Bultmann opened the door to error.<sup>89</sup> One at least went through it and the others

89. A critical stance towards law opens the door to antinomianism and anarchy. Thorough-going criticism of the tradition within which one stands involves the risk of cutting oneself loose from it. Not everyone is successful in combining fearless criticism with the proper loyalty required by the saying 'Belief needs daring and much loyalty'. Troeltsch saw that this saying is particularly true of the definition of the essence of Christianity. Much loyalty in meditation on and devotion to history, but also the daring to bring a living idea forward out of history for the present time, and, with the courage of a conscience grounded in God, to set it within the intellectual world of the present: this is what is involved in work on the essence of Christianity. In one person there is perhaps more loyalty

are to say the least, theologically ambiguous characters. Such is the risk inherent in all bold new interpretation which dares even to say No to a part of the tradition, and thus criticize the expanding tradition. That luxuriant growth, the expanding tradition contains bad theologies, ideologies, mythologies and superstition – all claiming the label of Christian, and all very dear to the hearts of the Christians who subscribe to them. The pruning-knife is essential equipment for theologians and prophets; they wield it for the sake of those who are being systematically misled about what Christianity *is*, and who are having the Gospel concealed from them by its being falsely identified with the oppressive burden of a religious tradition.

On the other hand the radicals have to remember that the Christian community contains many who are not Paulinists. Their critical voice has to be heard, but it *can* only be heard in reaction against the religious tradition which only survives at all through the continuing faith of the rest. If they remember with Kierkegaard that they are only the salt in the stew they will overcome the perennial temptation to opt out of the community, away from the place where they can be most effective. Religious institutions need the spirit of critical radicalism if they are not to stagnate; but the outsiders also need the community as the sphere within which to operate. Had Paul failed in his life work to maintain the unity of the Church in his own day, its history and his would have been very different. A central question for Christianity today is whether its radicals and conservatives finally part company.<sup>90</sup> The patristic church never made up for its loss of Marcion, and Western Catholicism is only now making good its loss of Luther. If the Jewish tradition had not lost the man from Nazareth, Christian theology would be able to afford to be less dialectical.

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and in the other there is more daring, but the closest linking of both is the ideal (*G.S.*, II, pp. 447 f.). Or, in the terms of this essay: the interpretation of the religious tradition for the sake of the Gospel being proclaimed requires faithfulness to the tradition combined with boldness to interpret it afresh as Gospel for the present, recognising the possibility of error inherent in all interpretation. Schleiermacher's unusual use of the terms 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' (*Brief Outline*, § 203) also refers to this difference between conservative (loyal) and radical (daring) temperaments, both of which have their place in the Christian community.

90. This, rather than the latest ecclesiastical merger, is the really serious question of Christian unity today.



## Continuity and Diversity in Early Buddhism

### 1.

Part of the task of philosophers of religion is to investigate the internal consistency of religions. The concept of religious tradition includes some notion of continuity, and therefore perhaps of consistency; but there can also be diversity within the tradition; and, further, members of the same religion can have different attitudes to the same tradition. This being so, it is not easy to apply the test of consistency to the historical development of a religion. It is too simple to rule that consistency is a matter of agreeing with the tradition; either this enforces a conservatism which would rule out any advance in religious sensitivity, or it lets in anything which can be described by the vague term 'reinterpretation'. In the history of a religion, we have a mass of data of which we have to make sense. In some respects the religion stays the same; in others it changes. Often there is more than one form of the religion operating at the same time; again with many similarities, many dissimilarities. Are there any reasonable criteria which can be applied, from inside or from outside the religion, to distinguish between versions of the religion which ought properly to be counted as part of the religion, and those which ought not to be so counted? If there are such reasonable criteria, they will provide a way of understanding religious change, of mastering the variety of data.

The attempt, then, is to provide a rational framework, with the aid of which it can be considered whether any particular version of a religion is consistent with the religious tradition. There is of course no difficulty in finding other frameworks of understanding to explain relations to tradition – the frameworks may be economic, political, psychological; but it is worth considering whether it is also appropriate to assess the history of religion in the light of what is reasonable.

The aim of this paper is to present such a framework through the consideration of particular examples; this seems to me the proper way of

doing the philosophy of religion, to look for rational patterns in particular cases; without the particular case the pattern itself may seem bare and unpromising. Certainly the framework to be presented was discovered or invented not by philosophical analysis but by the consideration of the particular cases.

I give a brief outline of the framework now; but its plausibility rests on its operation in detailed application to particular examples.

a) A religion contains at any one time a mass of traditional material of indeterminate extent, perhaps including texts, doctrines, rituals etc.

b) Since this material is rich enough to support an indefinite number of different interpretations, every member of the religion, or every sect or age, must choose and develop such an interpretation. He or it does this by trying to 'make the most of' the material; treating it in a way which produces what is most true, or moral, or beautiful, or spiritually significant, or moving. Of course if he can find nothing profoundly moral, true, etc., in it, he will not be or remain a member of the religion.

c) His relation to the traditional material will then be determined by the nature of the interpretation of it which he has found. The important consideration is the kind of truth accorded to the traditional material by the interpretation. This is important because the nature of one's commitment to source material depends on the kind of truth one accords to it. To take obvious examples, a philosophical text, a scientific treatise and a work of literature may all be thought of as true, but, because the kind of truth is different, the amount of deviation from the source text which is possible, while still preserving the essential truth, varies greatly. Paraphrasing a work of philosophy may make it clearer and so improve it; but paraphrasing will destroy a poem. A scientific theory may be accepted as a brilliant hypothesis, but it is to be expected that it will be modified and reformulated as it is subjected to empirical test. In this case the original text expressing the theory is of little interest when a more sophisticated version has been achieved. So to say that such various examples are all true is to say that they are all successful in the various ways appropriate to them. To return to the religious case, it can be seen that only under certain interpretations will the member commit himself to the textual details of the traditional material. If he sees it as important to him for the lofty moral insights or

the profound philosophical truths it contains, he may quite consistently appropriate the insights and develop them on his own account, independently of the traditional material; for that is how such insights should be treated. Judgments about whether an interpretation is really consistent with the tradition, and therefore whether a person who adopts such an interpretation is really a member of the religion, are therefore primarily evaluative judgments; does the interpretation get at the deep truth contained in the traditional material, or is it concerned solely with the superficial and unimportant aspects of this material.

It may be said, as against this last point, that there are religious and non-religious interpretations (philosophical, moral, etc., would be non-religious), and only the former can be really in the tradition. This means little until some substance is given to the term 'religious interpretation'. But suppose in a particular case it did seem useful to characterise some interpretation or interpretations as religious (perhaps those involving unconditional commitment or the concept of revelation); then those people who thought such an interpretation to be of most value might claim that they represented the real tradition, for other interpretations omitted the really important matters in the traditional material, and so failed to make the most of it. This would, though, itself be an evaluative judgment, and therefore of course open to debate; and it would be up to the defenders of such a view to argue for the supremacy of their way of treating the material.

It does often happen that statements about what is the real interpretation or the real tradition are made by people who themselves have no opinions about the value of the material. These judgments can only be of historical interest – as pointing out for example that most people who have claimed allegiance to the religion have favoured one type of interpretation.

## 2.

The particular cases through which I hope to expound this framework are two contemporaneous sects of Early Buddhism, the Theravādins and the Mahāsāṅghikas as they were four or five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. The contrast between the two is of interest because in some ways it foreshadows the distinction between Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna

Buddhism; the dates chosen are those of our earliest direct and substantial knowledge of Buddhist history.

The sects were descendants of the two sides of a major schism, the *mahābheda*, which took place within the Buddhist community of monks probably between 100 and 200 years after the death of the Buddha. We know that the occasion of the split was disagreement about the truth of five propositions, which dealt mainly with the state of Arhatship; and it is also more or less certain that the sects which resulted from the split were called the Sthaviras or Elders, and the Mahāsāṅghikas, or those of the Great Community. But our knowledge of the actual doctrines of these two sects at the time of the *mahābheda* is limited and on the whole indirect. It is for this reason that I have taken as my examples not the original parties to the schism, but their descendants, about whom much more is known. I wish to take into account, though, the relation between the Theravādins and the Mahāsāṅghikas and the *mahābheda*; for it is relevant to my exposition that to some extent the two sects relied on common traditional material; *i.e.*, material from before the split. It is the early material, much of which is common to both traditions, which contains the seeds of both the tendencies to be described; or, rather, is open to the two strikingly different interpretations.

The Theravādins were one of the several sects which derived from the Sthaviras. If we take Bureau's dates<sup>1</sup> they arose about 100 years after the split, as a regional variant in Ceylon of the Vibhajyavādins, who were themselves at one remove from the original Sthaviras. We have the Theravādin, Pāli, version of the Suttas, which claim to give the actual words of the Buddha's sermons. These Suttas are certainly to a large extent the Theravādins' inheritance from their predecessors; they contain a great deal of doctrine, but taken as a whole cannot be said to present a consistent Buddhism. The Pāli canon also contains some basic rules of the Order of monks (*Pātimokkha*, *Mahāvagga*, *Cullavagga*) and some psalms and other verses not all put into sermon form (*Suttanipāta*, *Therīgāthā*, *Theragāthā*), all of which very probably date from the very earliest days of the Order, *i.e.* before the *mahābheda*. There are also works concerned with exegesis, from a sectarian standpoint, of these early scriptures; notably the *Kathāvata-*

1. André Bureau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule* (Saigon, 1955).

*thu*, which argues against doctrinal positions adopted by rival sects. This work, being second order, is relatively late; the dissenting opinions against which it argues cover 500 years or so of sectarian history;<sup>2</sup> and include the five propositions already referred to.

The Pāli canon as a whole then seems to contain both a great deal of early non-sectarian material, and works containing the Theravādin interpretation of this material. Support for this assessment can be found in Lamotte.<sup>3</sup> He has general comments on the relation between the Pāli, *i.e.* Theravādin, canon, and the Sanskrit canons of others sects. About the sutras (in the Pāli canon the Sutta-piṭaka) he says that they are in general not sectarian documents but the common heritage of all the sects. If this is so, the Sūtra-piṭaka of the Mahāsāṅghikas cannot in its central doctrines have been very different from the Theravādin Suttapiṭaka. In particular the versified psalms, and parts of the Suttanipāta, have recognisable Sanskrit counterparts, and therefore must have been common to all the sects. About the Vinayapiṭaka Lamotte says that though the various versions draw on a common basis (which must in the Pāli canon be the *Pātimokkha* etc. referred to above), they treat this basis with some liberality, and so as a whole are really sectarian documents. The Abhidharma-piṭakas, of which the *Kathāvatthu* is a Theravādin representative, are however wholly sectarian, and were composed by the various schools to present their own particular doctrines.

If it is possible, within the Pāli canon, to distinguish between traditional material and the Theravādin interpretation of this material, we can probably include the basic Vinaya texts, much of the Khuddhaka-nikāya, and the general lines of the rest of the Suttapiṭaka in the former; and the Abhidhamma and probably the more systematic doctrinal parts of the Suttapiṭaka in the latter. The detailed chronology of the composition of the various parts of the Pāli canon is fortunately not essential for the exposition of the framework, for at each stage there is a tradition and a choice regarding that tradition. Though certainly, the more obvious the distinction between traditional and interpretative material, the easier is the exposition.

It is then to the Pāli Abhidhamma-piṭaka, and in particular to the *Kathā-*

2. Etienne Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (Louvain, 1956), p. 202.

3. Lamotte, *Op. cit.*, Chap. II; II, 2.

*vatthu*, that we must first look, in trying to establish the views characteristic of the Theravādins. Unfortunately this work is not written as a systematic exposition of Theravādin doctrine, but as piecemeal replies to various alternative views advanced by rival sects. Nevertheless, one can see from the general tenor of the book, and from the relative attention paid to the various topics, that the Theravādins' main interest was in the ideal of Arhatship, the kind of life necessary to reach this ideal, and a philosophical-psychological analysis of the nature of human existence, which contributes to an understanding of the various stages of achievement of one seeking the ideal.

I wish in fact to take this as not the only but the most important characteristic emphasis of the Theravādin interpretation of their traditional material. They saw it (or most of them did, or they did most of the time) as telling of a way of life, a Path, leading to the ideal state of Arhatship. This state was described mainly in negative psychological terms, as being a state of freedom or liberation from the constraints of various kinds of lust, selfishness and ignorance. Because of this emancipation, the Arhat is also free from rebirth. He is free from lusts, from hankering after a future life, from spiritual ignorance:

'In him, thus set free, there arises the knowledge of his emancipation, and he knows: "Rebirth has been destroyed. The higher life has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been accomplished. After this present life there will be no beyond!"'<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that this account is true, the prime importance of the tradition and of the canon for the Theravādins is as providing a description of the Way – a set of instructions by following which the goal of emancipation can be attained; with some metaphysical and psychological background to enable one to understand the instructions. The importance of the Buddha is that he provided this information. But these statements cannot be properly appreciated until we see what kind of truths these instructions were thought to be, and how the Buddha came to be in possession of the information.

But before working out in detail the Theravādin view of the epistemological

4. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 93.

status of the Buddha, and therefore of their traditional texts, I must discuss the concept of interpretative choice, as exemplified by the Theravādin concern with the path of emancipation. My thesis is that this is an evaluative choice, and cannot be reduced to, though it may contain, a non-evaluative judgment such as a judgment about what were the intentions of the original composers of the traditional material. The tradition which the Theravādins inherited included the early part of their canon; it would also probably include customs of pilgrimage to places associated with events in the life of Gotama Buddha;<sup>5</sup> and a traditional institution of monks, behaving according to the rules of the Vinaya, and telling each other the stories and sermons of the Buddha contained in the other texts mentioned. The Theravādins made something of this material, understood it, interpreted it, by deciding that its real significance lay in the description of a Way of life, as above. That is to say, the aspect of the traditional material which was of fundamental importance to them was that it answered questions about how to live and what to aim at in this life.

This judgment of theirs has two parts; first that such questions are of central importance; and second that the answers to them are to be found in the traditional material. Taken together, these imply that the material contains nothing of greater importance, so it is in this way that the Theravādins 'make the most of' their tradition.

Had they not found anything of fundamental importance in the tradition, it would not have been worth their while to commit themselves to any interpretation; presumably they would have looked elsewhere for satisfaction.

The second aspect of the interpretative judgment is not itself evaluative, but it is of little interest if isolated from that aspect which is evaluative. For if, as is typically the case, the material can bear several interpretations – one might, for instance, take the tradition as telling how one can be reborn in one of the heavens – some principle of selection must be used; and this, if the members are looking to the material for some kind of 'saving truth', can only be evaluative. In any case, the question of whether a particular interpretation is one of those which the tradition can bear, depends on the nature of the truths claimed to be of fundamental importance by that interpretation. Suppose the tradition contains a story which it is obvious from

5. See A. Foucher, *La Vie du Bouddha* (Paris, 1949).

the context is not meant to be taken as literally true. Then to discover whether the tradition will support a particular interpretation, one must ascertain whether that interpretation demands historic or merely symbolic truth from such stories. My discussion of the nature of the truths in the Theravādin interpretation comes later.

What can be said about the evaluative aspect of the interpretation? Evaluative judgments are nearly always controversial, and one's disagreement with a particular interpretation will most probably be a disagreement with the evaluations which it represents. Can we understand why the Theravādins made the judgments they did, without committing ourselves to any judgment about what is of deep importance in their tradition? We must, I think, have some imaginative sympathy for the Theravādins' high estimation of the Way and the goal. One can read their restrained accounts of the Way, and of the ideal man, the emancipated one, the Arhat, and catch for oneself something of its unique attraction. If one can muster no such imaginative sympathy, presumably one has failed to understand why they chose as they did, and failed therefore to master one's subject. But even when understanding is present it is only partial; there is always some degree of failure.

Another question is whether the Theravādins realised they were making an evaluative choice. It is of course almost impossible to know, but the question does not seem to me to be of much importance. The Theravādins had opinions for which they can be held responsible, whether they were reached by conscious deliberation or were unthinkingly taken over from their predecessors.

I can now go on to discuss the nature of the truths about the Way briefly mentioned above. A conclusion on this matter will in turn determine the nature of the relationship between the Theravādins and their traditional material, the kind of authority which they accorded to that material.

A discussion of the nature of the truths about the Way must basically be an investigation of how the statements about the Way are justified. One can only see whether a statement is intended as scientific, philosophical, revealed, symbolic, when one knows what reasons are given for believing it. The discussion which follows is unfortunately both detailed and long drawn-out; I shall try to make the issues clear in a brief preliminary outline.

The extreme possibilities are

1) that the truths about the Way are justified by reference to methods of investigation open to any man, by using his powers of observation or his reason or both. In this case the relation between the doctrines and the Buddha is inessential; and the appropriate attitude to the traditional texts is that suitable for scientific or philosophical classics, worthy perhaps of admiration and reverence, but of no kind of unconditional commitment.

2) that the truths are known and can only be known in some extraordinary way, by reference to some transcendent otherworldly reality; so the proper attitude to the Buddha's teachings is of faith, in the sense of absolute commitment to what one cannot verify for oneself.

As I see it, the Theravādin view is on the whole a compromise between (1) and (2), based on the idea that the Buddha's knowledge is a result of the excellence of his spiritual achievements. Thus his epistemological position is unique, but not in a way which prevents his disciples from attempting to follow his Path. A monk can reasonably, if courageously, aim at becoming an Arhat, as Gotama himself did.<sup>6</sup> The consequence of the compromise view for the Theravādin attitude to their traditional material would be that in principle the material is dispensable, for the knowledge in it could be rediscovered and confirmed by men other than Gotama Buddha, but in practice it is indispensable, for in fact no-one has arisen who can approach the Buddha in his spiritual achievements.<sup>7</sup>

The aim, as stated above, of finding out the nature of the truths about the Way by seeing how the propositions are justified, takes us into the territory covered by K. N. Jayatilleke's thorough and competent book, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*.<sup>8</sup> Jayatilleke suggests (p. 464) that the Buddha's knowledge of the Way was reached by scientific method; that his pronounce-

6. It must be said though that in several places the Theravādins stray nearer to position (2), and treat the Buddha as worthy rather of worship than of reverential admiration.

7. Dr. Karel Werner has suggested to me that on the Theravādin view some of the Buddha's followers did equal his spiritual achievements; his distinctive feature was his intellectual grasp of the issues, and his power of exposition. If this is so, the general form of my conclusion can remain, though some details would have to be altered; for it would still be possible in principle for a follower to equal the Buddha's intellectual grasp, although in practice no such person has arisen.

8. London, 1963.

ments therefore make scientific claims. If this is to be taken seriously, it places the Buddha (or rather the Bodhisat) in an epistemological position no different from that of any enquirer after the truth, as in position (1) above. An essential feature of scientific method is that it is public, its results are open to anyone, the only qualifications being scientific ability and sometimes technical expertise.

Jayatilleke mentions two types of supposedly scientific evidence with which the Buddha supported his recommendations. The first is that as a result of his advanced achievements of concentration and contemplation, the Buddha was able 'with purified deva-vision' to see his own past lives, and the present thoughts and past lives of other men. He could thus observe the operation of *karma*, and thereby infer the appropriate method for avoiding its influence; he could see what type of life had a favourable outcome.<sup>9</sup> The other supposedly scientific investigation was that of the Buddha's trying various forms of religious life, following various religious teachers, when he first went forth into the homeless state.<sup>10</sup> He found the ways of life recommended by these teachers unsatisfactory, and so was able to provide his disciples with his own personal testimony that the Way described and followed by himself succeeded where other ways failed. Is this evidence scientific? The importance of the Buddha's *achievements* in the first of these justificatory experiences suggests that it is not straightforwardly so; though there are similarities to scientific method, at least in that the justifications are by reference to experience. To see how far the similarities go, I shall now examine two closely connected issues; the humanity of the Buddha, and the question of whether any of his teachings were regarded as open to question, revisable in the light of the experiences of his followers.

On the first issue, obviously the more there is in common between the Buddha and his followers, the closer we are to possibility (1), and the more plausible is Jayatilleke's thesis. In fact the Suttas, and the *Kathāvatthu*, present a wide range of different views on the humanity of the Buddha. There are passages in which it is the essential similarity between the Buddha

9. See, for example, the Tevijja-Vacchagottasutta, translated in Vol. II of *Middle Length Sayings*.

10. See, for example, the Ariyapariyesanasutta, translated in Vol. I. of *Middle Length Sayings*.

and his follower who achieves Arhatship which is emphasised; in *Kindred Sayings* (Vol. III, p. 58) it is explicitly stated that the achievements of Buddha and the 'brother who is freed by insight' are the same, *except* that the Tathāgata it is who 'doth cause a way to arise which had not arisen before . . . and . . . his disciples are wayfarers who follow after him'. The naturalistic descriptions of the Buddha's day-to-day activities in many of the *nidānas*, and of the events which preceded his death in the Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. II), also suggest that his Way, his type of life, was one in which his disciples could truly *follow* him.

There are several passages in which the state of Buddhahood is said to give rise to extra-ordinary happenings – as in the Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta where as the Buddha is about to enter into Nibbāna, 'heavenly music sounds in the sky, . . . and heavenly songs come wafted from the skies, out of reverence for the successor of the Buddhas of old'. But the Buddha himself is said to have thought little of such melodramatic happenings, and indeed such touches of folk religion<sup>11</sup> are doctrinally unimportant. They can be seen as no more than a re-expression in terms comprehensible to the undisciplined mind of the spiritual excellence of the Buddha. But one can see more significance in the doctrine of the 32 marks of the Superman, treated at length in the Lakkhaṇa Suttanta (*Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. III) and referred to in the Mahāpadāna Suttanta (*Ibid.*, Vol. II); and in the fabulous tales of the Buddha's nativity, also given in the Mahāpadāna Suttanta. These teachings are repeated in the *Kathāvatthu*, IV: 7. They seem to imply that the Buddha's unique and supreme status was a settled thing right from his birth, and before; this is hardly compatible with the representation of the Bodhisat's periods as disciple of various teachers, his practising of austerities, as genuine though vain seekings after the truth; and with the ideal that the Buddha actually achieved something by his efforts under the Bodhi-tree. Neither are these teachings of the Mahāpadāna Suttanta compatible with the idea that the Buddha's disciples can, by an effort of will, follow his Way, struggle as he struggled with the *āsavas*.

One can only conclude that the Theravādin texts contain two distinct views of the Buddha's epistemological status. My earlier claim that on the whole the Theravādins regarded their tradition as important because it

11. See also the Āṭānāṭṭiya Suttanta, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. III.

told of a Way to be followed, does describe the predominant view, but is inadequate as an account of the attitudes expressed in the Mahāpadāna Suttanta. Can we then take Jayatilleke's thesis as describing the predominant Theravādin position, that in which the Buddha's humanity is emphasised? There is still a difficulty, regarding the second of the two issues mentioned above. As Jayatilleke makes clear, in the Suttas the Buddha speaks of his *dhamma* as a 'come-and-see thing': the bhikkhu need take on trust only the stages of the Way he has not yet achieved. As for what he has achieved, he can see for himself that the Buddha's teachings are correct; and so has no further need of the Buddha as authority.<sup>12</sup> But it is always assumed that when the bhikkhu does come and see, what he will find will be exactly as the Buddha has described it. There is no scope for modification or revision of the instructions about the Way, in the light of experiences of the Buddha's followers.<sup>13</sup> This is not the relationship suitable to the proponent of a scientific hypothesis and his fellow-scientists; no scientific investigator is infallible, no experimental results sacrosanct.

The word 'sacrosanct' suggests that the relationship was in fact what to Christian eyes would appear typically religious, *i.e.* one of unconditional commitment. But as we have seen there is too much in common between the Buddha and his followers, between the strivings of the Bodhisat and of the bhikkhu, for that account to be plausible; and it is for this reason that I suggest a compromise account. According to this, the Theravādins reconciled their picture of the Buddha as fully human, with their refusal to think of any of his pronouncements as being debatable, by thinking of him as a moral and spiritual expert, a man of outstanding achievements; and of themselves as learners. To compare great things to small, one may think of the position of a person learning to play a musical instrument, and being taught by a master instrumentalist. The teacher has achieved what the learner is aiming at, and it is because of this that he is in a position to teach; it would for this reason be impertinent for the learner to question his teacher's instructions and advice. The learner can have some appreciation

12. See passages quoted in *Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (ed. by Radhakrishnan and Moore, Princeton, 1957), pp. 345–346.

13. See *Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. III, p. 69, where the description of someone who attempts to go beyond the Teacher's instructions is 'some foolish man here, not knowing, ignorant, with his mind in the grip of craving'.

of his master's achievements before he starts his course of learning, merely in virtue of being a musical listener. But as he learns, the extent and nature of these achievements will become clearer to him.

If the analogy is appropriate, the Theravādins believed that the Buddha was in a position to 'cause a way to arise which had not arisen before' because he was a man of great spiritual excellence. The truths which he proclaimed, truths which the Theravādins saw as contained in their tradition, were of a kind which only a person of such excellence could discover; and which only people approaching this excellence could appreciate.

It cannot be said though that the situation is now clear; for the notion of truths which can only be appreciated by people of moral and spiritual excellence is not one which is easily accommodated by modern Western epistemology. I am not of course concerned with justifying Theravādin epistemology, merely with understanding it; to achieve this understanding we must look in more detail at the central pronouncements of the Buddha and their justification.

According to the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, the peculiarly Buddhist knowledge which immediately precedes knowledge that one is liberated, is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths as applied to pain and the *āsavas*.<sup>14</sup> This knowledge is such that acquiring it is itself the final spiritual achievement. It obviously cannot be communicated, as knowledge, to the beginner on the Path; he can only believe it by faith. The Arhat knows though by seeing face to face:

'Just . . . as if in a mountain fastness there were a pool of water, clear, translucent and serene; and a man, standing on the bank, and with eyes to see, should perceive the oysters and the shells, the gravel and the pebbles and the shoals of fish, as they move about or lie within it: He would know: "This pool is clear. . . ."'

Why is it that this knowledge, this seeing face-to-face, which provides the rationale for the whole Buddhist Path, is regarded as the supreme spiritual achievement, or at least as the final sufficient and necessary condition for this achievement? Can one not see for oneself, without any spiritual excellence, that pain is the result of certain sorts of desire, so to get rid of pain one must, by an effort of will, get rid of these desires?

14. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, pp. 92–93.

One answer to this is that while the Four Noble Truths can be seen by anyone to be a reasonable hypothesis, only the man who has actually achieved liberation by means of the Truths really knows that they are true. Until that stage is reached, following the Buddhist Way cannot be anything but a risk, a gamble. On this account the truth of the Truths is contingent, can be discovered only by experience. This account fits in well enough with the analogy of the musical instrumentalist, and raises no new problems.

There is though another account sometimes proposed, according to which the Truths would be, and would derive from, necessary truths: the 'seeing face to face' is, somehow, experiencing or otherwise coming to know metaphysical truths. If the basic truths of Theravāda Buddhism are metaphysical, then they can be established, if at all, either by the use of reason – which would, for our purposes, place them in the same category as scientific statements, as being open to public proof or disproof, and so would return us to position (1); or by some mysterious metaphysical experience.<sup>15</sup> Although there are hints of both these accounts in the texts, it seems fortunately to be the case that reference to necessary truths can be avoided, while remaining faithful to the main tenor of the Theravādin position. There are two main candidates for metaphysical principles lying behind knowledge of the Four Noble Truths; the first is the thesis that the human being is merely an aggregate of psycho-physical elements, and has no abiding soul. The Theravādin attitude to the no-soul thesis is notoriously complex, and the Suttas include straightforwardly philosophical arguments, *e.g.*, that nothing with which the soul could possibly be identified is permanent enough to be a genuine soul.<sup>16</sup> But the main interest in the theory is in its moral implications; the *āsava* of becoming is not the vice of believing that there is a soul, but that of hankering after rebirth and the preservation of one's personal identity. And in the Brahmajāla Sutta<sup>17</sup> the Buddha's argument against those who do believe in the soul is that such views have a disastrous effect on the future condition of those who hold them. If then the no-soul theory is a judgment of the worthlessness of

15. Mystical experiences have sometimes been said to give insight into metaphysical truths.

16. Mahānidāna Suttanta, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. II, pp. 63–66.

17. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I.

taking pride in one's personal identity, it is not, and does not necessarily imply, a metaphysical statement about the necessary structure of the world.

This is more clearly the case with the other candidate, the supposed general principle of causation. The Suttas contain no philosophical argument for such a position; and despite the pronouncements of Mrs. Rhys Davids<sup>18</sup> and of Jayatilleke<sup>19</sup>, it seems to me that the most the Buddha wants to claim, according to the Theravādins, is that there is a simple causal law relating people's actions and desires to their allotment of pain and contentment in the present life and possibly in future lives. This, like any causal law, is a contingent, not a metaphysical matter, in quite a different category from the general principle of causation (which Mrs. Rhys Davids describes as 'breaking in on a great mind with a flash of intuition').

The one question which remains regarding the Theravādins is about the sense in which the truths which they judged to be of prime importance were to be found in the traditional material. Basically these truths were about the Way to a goal; and to the extent that they were able to confirm them for themselves, by following the Way, the Theravādins could have replaced the traditional material by accounts of their own spiritual experiences. But if in fact their spiritual excellence did not reach such heights, they had to rely on the knowledge of one who had achieved what they only aimed at achieving. So they required of their traditional material not merely that it contained truths about the Way, but also that it reported the life and teachings of an actual historical human being. So their interpretative judgment included a judgment of fact, that there was such a man. And indeed this judgment of fact constitutes one of the natural interpretations of the traditional stories. But, as we shall see in considering the Mahāsāṅghikas, the stories need not be interpreted in this way, if the evaluative interest is different. The Theravādins thought that the existence of Gotama was only really important if he was a human being who practised and taught a Way for others to follow. It was because the Theravādins made this judgment of significance that they interpreted the traditional stories as telling

18. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. II, p. 47.

19. *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 454–457.

of a real human being. The evaluative judgment of significance – only if he was a real human being is he important to us – *precedes* the judgment of Buddhology – he was a real human being.

## 3.

The Mahāsāṅghikas originated in the sect which split from the Sthaviras in the *mahābheda* mentioned earlier. As with the Sthaviras, our only knowledge about them at that early stage is concerned with their attitude to the five propositions. Their acceptance of them tells us little: it would not be profitable to discuss here the details and the many possible interpretations of these propositions; if anything at all can be concluded from them, it is probably as A. K. Warder says: ‘the trend is evidently to make the state of being an Arhat more easily attainable than [the opponents of the propositions] believed’.<sup>20</sup> The name ‘Mahāsāṅghika’ suggests, and there is some evidence to support this, that the sect drew its support from a wider range of Buddhists than the strictly monkish Theravādins. It was more sympathetic to the needs and interests of lay-disciples, and of those monks, called *prthagjana*, who could not claim the highest levels of spiritual achievement. It is not clear whether and how this is related to their attitude to the five propositions.

We have more detailed knowledge about the Mahāsāṅghikas as they existed at about the beginning of the Christian era – that is contemporaneous with the Theravādins already discussed. Bareau<sup>21</sup> tells us of a large number of doctrinal theses attributed to them, in addition to the five propositions. His sources are, in the main, Vasumitra, who wrote accounts of the sects about 400 years after the Buddha’s death, *i.e.* around 50 B.C.;<sup>22</sup> a Chinese commentator on Vasumitra, K’ouei Ki, who wrote in 622 A.D.; and the *Kathāvatthu*. We can also say from Lamotte’s observations quoted above, that their basic tradition of rules of the Order, stories about the Buddha, and statements of doctrine, would be of a non-sectarian origin, and probably quite similar to that of the Theravādins.

20. *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi, 1970), p. 216.

21. Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Vehicule*, pp. 57 ff.

22. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, p. 301.

From Bareau, we learn that the doctrines peculiar to the Mahāsāṅghikas, which distinguish them radically from those who held the dominant Theravādin view, are as follows:

Gotama Buddha is only the most recent of several Buddhas; their lives and characteristics were in essence identical; and they were, or rather are, completely supramundane. Their earthly bodies are destructible, but the Buddhas themselves are distinct from their earthly manifestations, and are supreme and indestructible. In every word they speak, in every sound they utter, are contained all the elements of *dharma*. Even the earthly body of the Buddha is unlimited, in that the Buddha can appear to different people in different bodies, of different sizes, as is appropriate to their welfare. The Buddha neither sleeps nor dreams; neither does he speak, being eternally in a state of contemplation. But men think that he speaks, and 'jump for joy'<sup>23</sup> According to the *Kathāvatthu* (XXI : 4) the Mahāsāṅghikas believed that Buddhas can, because of the powers they have achieved, suspend any natural law. Theravādins credited a Buddha only with certain limited natural powers, such as were thought to be within the scope of any spiritually advanced monk.

The only Mahāsāṅghika sectarian text which has been translated into English is the *Mahāvastu*, a Buddhist Sanskrit work, said to be part of the canon of the Lokottaravādins ('Supramundanists'), a subset of the Mahāsāṅghika, and compiled probably at around the same date as Vasumitra's work. It is a heterogeneous collection, from many different sources, of tales of several kinds about the Buddhas. There are more or less straightforward biographical stories, having for the most part parallels in the Pāli suttas; folk tales related as stories of the previous lives of the Buddhas, many of which have parallels in the Pāli Jātakas; and fantastic stories, with indiscriminate use of hyperbole, about the Buddhas' extraordinary powers and characteristics, about their previous lives and their nativity and youth. The idea of separating out the biographical parts of the tradition, and presenting for its own sake something like a life of the Buddhas, is in itself foreign to the aim of the Theravādin interpretation of the tradition; which on the whole, as we have seen, concentrates on the teachings of the Buddha, and is concerned with his life only as it supports the teach-

23. Bareau, *Op. cit.*, p. 0.

ings. An exception, also mentioned earlier, is the *Mahāpadāna Suttanta*, which tells of the nativity and youth of not Gotama but Vipassi, the first of the Buddhas, in terms similar to though not as far-fetched as those of the *Mahāvastu*. It implies that the major events of the Buddha's life are themselves of great significance, manifesting and perhaps symbolising some cosmic and necessary truth. This is precisely the burden of the *Mahāvastu* as a whole; the fact of its compilation shows that the Buddha's life was thought to be important in itself, and the elaboration and extravagance of much of the biography shows that the truths to which it was thought to testify were by no means ordinary truths about life on earth. Knowledge about the Buddhas was in a category distinct from knowledge about the world we live in. This Buddhology, like the opposed Theravādin view, is important for its effect on the religious lives of its sympathisers. If the Buddha's excellencies are such as to make a radical distinction between himself and the rest of mankind, then he is not to be thought of as a real man, so it is hopeless for ordinary men to try to imitate him. Their hope lies rather in seeking his help; he alone has the power to enable men to achieve their religious ideal, whether it be of Nirvāṇa or rebirth in heaven. So the Buddha is thought of as saviour rather than teacher. This view is far from being the consistent doctrine of the *Mahāvastu* – the work has no consistent doctrine – but it is the doctrine implicit in much of the peculiarly Mahāsāṅghika parts of that work.

Thus in *Mahāvastu* (Vol. I) there is a passage describing how a Buddha can appear to men in such various forms as will conduce to their spiritual welfare:

‘A merchant, Dhruva, asks the Buddha for his help: “O Sage, who art gifted with all virtuous qualities, the great compassionate one, I with my folk come to thee for refuge, O thou of great glory. . .”. Then out of his compassion for men the Leader appeared, arriving in an instant and attended by his saints. Seeing him hovering in the air, self-controlled and calm and honoured, graciously appearing to him and his folk, the merchant went up to the Refuge. . .’. The Buddha proclaimed the Four Noble Truths, and ‘the merchant, with all his people, hearing that lion’s roar, immediately won the salutary and true fruition’.<sup>24</sup>

24. ‘Apparitions’, pp. 140–151 of J. J. Jones’s translation.

Here the 'lion's roar' has an almost magical effect; there is no thought of the teaching operating by convincing the man's reason, or of the man overcoming his passions by an arduous process of self-discipline. The only effort of will required of the merchant is his willingness to come to the Buddha for refuge.

In *Mahāvastu* (Vol. II) is a long passage promising the most extravagant rewards to people who worship the Buddha and act in appropriate ways towards his topes (Skt: *stūpa*) or memorial shrines:

'Whoso has anointed a tope with perfume becomes a noble universal ruler, a merchant, a king's minister, a virtuous householder, and even a Buddha, light-bringer, lord of *dharma*. . . . He who, exultant, joyful and eager, has placed a necklace of gems on the shrines of the Conqueror, becomes a king, . . . wins a magnificent royal city.'<sup>25</sup>

In his sensitive and perceptive book *The Buddha and Five After-Centuries*,<sup>26</sup> Sukumar Dutt describes how the carvings on the stūpas reflected the fixing of a stereotyped biography of the Buddhas. Certain crucial events were picked out and related or depicted in every detail. The explanation of this is a Buddhology which contrasts with that of the Theravādins:

'The truths of the *dhamma* are not taught; they exist in the nature of things, and the Buddha in each manifestation only reveals and confirms them . . . The *dhamma* is accordingly identified . . . with the eternal Order, *Dhammatā*. In the life of the Lord, as the holy legends sketch it, this *Dhammatā* is expressed and embodied. . . . It is in this sense that the stūpa artists take the legends, transmuting the eternity of their truth to the eternal life of art.'

So the attitude of worship of the Buddha as a saviour, manifested in stūpa adoration, is associated with a view of his life as described in the legends, rather than his teachings, as presenting religious truth to the believer.

For the Mahāsāṅghikas, then, their traditional material was of significance not as telling of a Way to be followed, but as giving a vision of the transcendent; telling of the existence and presence in the world of something,

25. *Mahāvastu*, Vol. II, pp. 348–349.

26. London, 1957, pp. 193–194.

a being or an order of reality, quite beyond the limitations of the worldly and the contingent. Though there was a Gotama Buddha, he was only an appearance; he was not really of this world; he was a being who could only be described by such verbal and pictorial superlatives as human imagination could devise. The help he was and is able to give to earthly beings relates to their worldly as well as to their spiritual ambitions; it depends on their will in a totally different way from the religious Path of the Theravādins.

Lamotte suggests that the Mahāsāṅghika tendencies resulted from the communication of *dharmā* to the masses:

‘These were ill-prepared to receive it, and were not able to apply it to themselves without changing it radically. The layman demands a god, where the monk demands a master. Having to live in the world, the layman wishes to please and make gifts, while the monk in his solitude wishes to perfect himself. The layman wishes by his cultic acts to conciliate the superior powers which can ameliorate his poverty and misfortune; the monk puts his hope and trust in the Rule, and in spiritual exercises. The layman is “plus dévot qu’éclairé”.’<sup>27</sup>

This gives one answer to the question of why the Mahāsāṅghikas saw the fundamental significance of the traditional stories and practices as they did; one may add, more sympathetically, that the picture of the Transcendent as being willing to help mankind in all ways – of the Buddha as compassionate – constituted a moral judgment about the importance of compassion as opposed to self-perfection; and the loss of interest in the ideal of the Arhat can be seen as the result of a realistic assessment of man’s weakness, of his moral and spiritual fallibility. Here again, our concern is to try to understand why the Mahāsāṅghikas chose as they did; but understanding is best achieved by supposing in the absence of contrary evidence, that reasons which seem to us persuasive would also seem so to Buddhists.

We must now give an account of the kind of authority the Mahāsāṅghikas accorded to their traditional material – which was, as we have seen, in the main similar to that of the Theravādins. What kind of truth is exemplified by the doctrinal statements described above? There is a great deal to suggest that the Mahāsāṅghikas regarded the traditional stories much as people

27. *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, p. 712.

who believe in myths regard them; *i.e.* the truth they found in them was mythical truth.<sup>28</sup>

This categorisation has several implications. Mythical truth is symbolic, not historical; although the symbols are concrete and particular, what is symbolised is general – propositions regarded as constitutive of the world order, cosmic truths such as in other contexts might be called metaphysical. To say that the Mahāsāṅghikas did not impute historical truth to the stories about the Buddha told in their traditional material is not, of course, to say that they thought of them as historically false. They believed that Gotama Buddha had existed, albeit merely as a phenomenon; but by their docetism they emptied the historical facts of any importance. The importance was in what lay behind the historical phenomena; the real Buddha was elsewhere. So the stories are told not for their historical accuracy, but because they express the Mahāsāṅghika vision of the world. It is for this reason that the doctrines can include elaborations of what is said about the Buddha in the traditional stories. It is because the significant truth lies not in the stories as historical records, but in the cosmic vision they symbolise, that the compilers of the *Mahāvastu* could accept with equanimity many versions, more or less highly coloured, of the same formalised incident in the Buddha's life.<sup>29</sup> As is well said by J. J. Jones, in the Foreword to Vol. II of his translation of the *Mahāvastu*, 'If some of the language [of the *Mahāvastu*] savours of the extravagant, that is always more or less the case when the attempt is made to express the infinite in terms of the finite.' And finally the doctrine of many Buddhas can be taken to express the fact that the symbolised truths are not confined to any particular historical time.

The Mahāsāṅghikas' interpretative choice, then, involves the evaluative judgment that the deepest truths to be found in the traditional material relate to the eternal structure and constitution of the cosmos; and this involves the non-evaluative judgment that the traditional stories can be interpreted as symbolically true. We cannot say that the Mahāsāṅghikas themselves would have described their position in such abstract terms,

28. I do not wish to suggest that the stories, under the Mahāsāṅghikan interpretation, have all the features of a typical myth in a primitive religion.

29. See T. O. Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil* (London, 1962), p. 94 for the metaphysical significance of the Māra legends.

though their descendents did come to the stage of being explicitly aware that the stories were significant for what they symbolised; but this account, if I am right, enables us to understand their distinctive treatment of their traditional material.

#### 4.

In conclusion I must make some comments on the general significance of the framework I have tried to expound. I have described the relations between two Buddhist sects and their traditions in terms of it; but does its usefulness go further? Does it claim to be true, necessarily true, true of all religions, and of all stages of all religions?

There are, to begin with, two conditions necessary for its applicability; that the traditional material of a religion should be rich enough to bear several interpretations; and that people should look to this material for some kind of fundamental truth or significance.

With respect to the first of these, no doubt the richer a religion is in this way, the more likely is it to become a universal religion; for different people will, according to their different needs and abilities, be able to draw different truths, patterns of life etc. from the same traditional material; and will therefore for different reasons give the religion their profound allegiance. One may feel that such various interpretations should, if the religion is to be coherent, really all be different ways of expressing the same interpretation; there should be just one fundamental truth lying behind them all – but this is a matter I cannot go into now. It can also be said that richness, in the sense described, brings risks with it; for if men are able to make great things out of the material, they may also be able, if their judgment is unsound or perverted, to use the same material as basis and vindication for narrow or warped views of the world.

As regards the second condition of applicability, this may or may not be a defining characteristic of 'religion'. It is at any rate plain that the concept of 'fundamental truth' needs a much more thorough analysis than I have been able to give it here.

Suppose in some particular case these two conditions are satisfied; does it follow that any particular version of the religion will be based on an

interpretative choice with respect to the traditional material and that this interpretative choice will be primarily evaluative? I think it does so follow; we cannot evade evaluative choices by, say, adopting the interpretations worked out by our predecessors, for to take such a position is itself to choose. It is no doubt preferable that we should be aware of the kind of choice we are making.

I have suggested, in answer to the questions put in section I, that the decision about whether a particular version of a religion is consistent with the religious tradition may be seen as complex, involving an evaluative element, and also an investigation of the kind of truth exemplified by the interpretation. These criteria of consistency can be used only by people who are willing to commit themselves to evaluative judgments about the tradition; it may be that there are other types of interpretative judgments about religious material, which can be made disinterestedly, but I cannot see that such judgments would be as important as the ones I have tried to describe.



## Authenticity in the Interpretation of Christianity

'There was a time when the essence of Christianity was believed to consist in a number of fixed dogmatic opinions and ecclesiastical customs. . . . Today we have left this point behind, for we know that dogmas and rites appertain merely to the phenomena of a religion, but do not constitute its real and original essence. On the contrary, this consists in the specific way and manner in which man experiences his relation to God and the world. . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Thus wrote Pfeiderer in 1892. In 1967, with less emphasis on 'emotion' and 'feeling', Cantwell Smith described 'true religion' as 'a quality of personal living, . . . a kind of life, . . . a relation – a living relation – between man and God; an actual relation . . . between particular, real men, in concrete, changing situations, and God'.<sup>2</sup>

I begin with these quotations because in what follows I shall be dealing with Christianity in terms of its doctrines and their interpretations. Theological statements are not the primary material of Christianity. They are secondary, parasitic attempts to put into rationally acceptable propositions the faith by which Christians live. In all discussions about religion it is the believers' actual relation to God and their consequent manner of life which is the heart of the matter, not their attempts to codify it theologically. It is especially important to remember this when we find that there are not only gaps but even contradictions between what believers offer as theological expressions of their faith and the faith which in fact determines their lives. If, then, we wanted to discuss the tests for authentic interpretations of Christianity in terms of its primary reality, we would be committed to an analysis of changes in the actual self-understandings, life-styles, moral practices, ritual acts and social structures of Christian believers. These,

1. O. Pfeiderer, *Evolution and Theology and Other Essays* (ed. by O. Cone, Edinburgh, 1900), p. 80.

2. W. Cantwell Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York, 1967), p. 115.

however, seem to me to be highly elusive matters and, having called your attention to the nature of actual faith, I intend to confine myself, out of convenience and cowardice, to the theological expressions of faith.

This, though, is not an indefensible retreat from the realities of living faith to the abstractions and intellectualisations of theology. All talk about faith is theology. Talk about the actual self-understandings, life-styles, moral practices, ritual acts and social structures of Christian believers is thus to some degree theological and, furthermore, presupposes presumably theological judgments about what is to be regarded as 'Christian'. My main reason, however, for confining myself to the theological expressions of Christianity is that I hold that the Christian faith – as any other religious faith – is founded upon certain factual claims of an appropriate logical type even though in practice these 'facts' may not be explicitly asserted by believers nor even accepted by them when asserted by others. The self-understanding, life-style, moral practices, ritual acts and social structure of the Christian faith are ways in which believers appropriate and respond to these claims about what is the case.<sup>3</sup> Theology attempts to make these claims explicit. Thus to discuss authentic interpretations of Christianity in terms of theology is to discuss them in terms of the claims which are presupposed by and give the fundamental 'reasons' for any living Christian faith. It is not to seek the living among the dead!

The problem before us is 'How do we know when a new interpretation of Christianity is a valid one?' This is a meta-Christian, though perhaps not a meta-theological, question since it concerns the norms by which a presentation of Christianity can be identified, wholly or in part, as authentically Christian. We are not asked, that is, to decide what is authentic Christianity for this or any other age but to decide how we could and should reach such a decision. As posed the question suggests that there is a certain 'thing' – a religious faith – called 'Christianity' of which different interpretations are offered, some of which may be judged 'invalid' because they misrepresent that 'thing' and present some different 'thing'. To understand the ques-

3. In practice changes in these expressions of Christianity may lead to as well as reflect changes in the underlying theological convictions. Practice may thus change principles as well as *vice versa* but this does not seriously affect my intention to discuss new interpretations of Christianity and their validity in terms of theological doctrines.

tion in this way, however, might seriously mislead us. 'Christianity' is not an object like a play, a poem or a painting which can be distinguished from the various interpretations of it. Even though we can never apprehend any object without interpreting it to some extent, it does make sense, at least regulatively, to distinguish between certain objects and the interpretations of them and to consider that in these cases there is a possibility of judging the plausibility of an interpretation by referring to the object. This is not so with Christianity: every statement or presentation of the Christian faith is an interpretation of Christianity. We can compare and perhaps judge between these interpretations but we cannot do it by reference to some 'object' that is Christianity-in-itself. No such object is there to be referred to. The actual living faith of a Christian reflects that particular Christian's (or his community's) understanding – and so interpretation – of Christianity. Furthermore, it is not just a case, in Kantian terms, of us being able to know only the phenomenon and not the noumenon: it is a case where we cannot be sure that the phenomena that are called 'Christianity' refer to a single noumenon. The different interpretations may express a number of significantly different things – significantly different religious faiths – which share the same name, probably because they have some shared past or family resemblances. This difficulty is heightened when it is recognised that the different faiths which may confusingly share the label 'Christianity' may each have a number of different, more or less valid, interpretations. When, therefore, we begin to examine different interpretations of what is called 'Christianity', we must not presuppose that we are dealing with interpretations either of one faith or of many – and, if many, of how many.<sup>4</sup> Finally we ought not to prejudge the question whether the different interpretations of a single faith are to be understood as different expressions of an unchanging truth rather than as expressions of the changing character of that truth. What was faith's 'truth' for the Apostles in their day may not be 'true' in a different age.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is far too simplistic to assume that

4. Comp. the opposite claim in J. H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1890), p. 5 where it is held that unity is to be assumed until the opposite is proved. I think that this principle may methodologically beg a fundamental question.

5. Here – and elsewhere in this paper – I am using 'truth' in a metaphysical way and not as referring to a quality of propositions.

the question of the 'apostolic' nature of a current presentation of the Christian faith can be answered by considering whether the apostles, if they appeared among us today, would recognise that presentation as an expression of the faith they had proclaimed in the first century A.D. If these Rip-van-Winkle apostles came to life today with only the understanding and language of first century man, they would not be able to understand the current presentation of faith. If they came to life with only a contemporary understanding and language, they would be no better off than we are to determine if this was what they had believed in the first century. If they came to life aware of both first century and twentieth century understanding and language, it is questionable whether they could relate the two. They would be people who belonged to two cultures and it is not only the philosophical theorising of Wittgensteinians but also the actual experience of people who have belonged to some extent to two cultures<sup>6</sup> that indicates the difficulties of identifying what is considered to be 'true' in one culture with what is considered to be 'true' in another. Since our grasp of 'truth' is partly conditioned by our culture and since all our judgments must be on the basis of some culture or other, we have no neutral standpoint by which we can determine if what was 'true' in one culture is the same as or different from what is 'true' in another culture. We may find comfort in believing it – and in affirming that our faith is the 'apostolic' one – but in principle it seems doubtful if we can determine this.

The methodological difficulties which are revealed by an analysis of the question before us must not be allowed to obscure the importance of this question for Christian thought today. Before any decision can be made about the Christian faith, it is first necessary to establish what that faith is. The great variety of interpretations of that faith which have been offered in the past and today, some of which seem fundamentally incompatible with each other, makes us even more aware of the difficulty of that task. If the diversity of what purports to be 'Christianity' shows that the description 'Christian' has no fixed content, then to talk about any faith or

6. Cf. P. Winch's remarks on Evans-Pritchard's work, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937) in his essay 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (repr. in *Religion and Understanding*, ed. by D. Z. Phillips, Oxford, 1967) and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's remarks on the same problem in his various works.

understanding as 'Christian' is to apply to it a meaningless label. It is to use the kind of bogus description that is appreciated by advertising copywriters – descriptions which appear to claim much but in fact claim nothing that can be falsified. In that case the label 'Christian' ought to be dropped in serious discussions. If, on the other hand, it is held that the label is usable because it has a determinate content, then the identifying characteristics of that content need to be elucidated so that we can distinguish between true and false, valid and invalid, presentations of the Christian faith today. Only so will we have a way of deciding whether we are offered genuine Christian faith or some distortion of it in the works of Harvey Cox, Van Buren, Ogden, Wiles, Pannenberg, Torrance and the rest. And only so will we, more importantly, be able to judge between the conflicting claims that are made about the current activity of God, the 'risen Christ' or the Holy Spirit in the religious, social and political worlds. Is the activity of Christ today to be seen primarily in the underground Church or in the Vatican, in communes or in suburban development, in *Hair* or in Mary Whitehouse, in Powellite order or Maoist revolution? It is easy to say 'Christ is here', 'Christ is not there', 'this expresses the Christian faith', 'this is contrary to Christian understanding'. With sufficient ingenuity a theologian can probably show that the Christian faith supports and the activity of Christ promotes whatever his prejudices prefer. The crucial issue is how the theologian can significantly justify such claims. Can he show that these claims do correspond to the Christian faith and do reflect where, if anywhere, Christ (or God or the Holy Spirit) is at work and not simply where his prejudices lead him? The question before us, 'How do we know when a new interpretation of Christianity is a valid one?', is thus a question which must be answered before any decisions can be made about the Christian faith today. Only by answering it can we decide whether there is something properly describable as 'Christianity' and evaluate the claims that are made for it.

The question before us assumes that different interpretations of Christianity exist, actually or potentially. I presume that it is not necessary to justify this assumption. Although it is always dangerous to claim that anything is obvious in history, it seems to me most unlikely that anyone who is acquainted with the history of Christian thought and with its present state could deny that in form and presentation, if not also in essential content, there are real differences in the theological understandings of the Christian

faith that have been and are advanced. Anyway, I do not intend to defend this claim beyond reminding you that it was accepted as practically self-evident by such diverse theologians as Newman and Troeltsch. Newman, who felt that no Protestant could 'be deep in history',<sup>7</sup> saw it as an inescapable fact of Christianity's history that 'there are to be found, during the 1800 years through which it has lasted, certain apparent inconsistencies and alterations in its doctrine and its worship'.<sup>8</sup> His theory of the development of doctrine was 'an hypothesis to account for [this] difficulty'.<sup>9</sup> Not only 'the history of all sects and parties in religion' but also the intrinsic nature of religion and 'the analogy and example of Scripture' led him to conclude that 'Christian doctrine admits of formal, legitimate, and true developments'.<sup>10</sup> Troeltsch is more radical. He describes Christianity as 'a theoretical abstraction' since it 'presents no historical uniformity, but displays a different character in every age'. Thus, while he allows Christianity to be 'a particular, independent, historical principle', he also holds that it contains as such 'very diverse possibilities and tendencies'.<sup>11</sup> Protestantism, for him, is not a single entity. There are 'fundamental differences' between modern Protestantism and that of the sixteenth century even where they affirm the same 'orthodox dogmatic traditions'.<sup>12</sup>

The most common way in which Christian theologians have discussed these changes in Christian thought has been in terms of the notion of 'development'. This notion, however, must be used with caution since it may suggest a greater continuity, purposiveness and coherence about the changes than is justified by what happened. 'Development' is frequently associated with ideas of improvement, progress, movement towards perfection, fulfilment or completion. Changes in Christian thought, however, may not express improved, deeper understandings of the Christian faith but either simply different, qualitatively equal ones or poorer ones. The

7. *I.e.*, take history seriously : Newman, *Development of Doctrine*, p. 8; *cf.* p. 7 ff.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

11. E. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought, Its History and Application* (ed. by F. von Hügel, New York, 1957), p. 43 f.

12. E. Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress* (transl. by W. Montgomery, London, 1912), p. 44 f.

interpretations of Christianity in seventeenth and eighteenth century Lutheranism and Calvinism differ in important respects from those of Luther and Calvin but while the later may be called 'developments' of the earlier interpretations in that they are descended from them, it is questionable whether they are improvements on them. It seems better, then, to talk, as the question before us does, of 'new interpretations' of Christianity rather than of 'developments' of its thought. Not all new interpretations are improvements.

It is also important to recognise that new interpretations of Christianity are not creations *ex nihilo*. Although we may suspect sometimes that what are presented as different interpretations of Christianity are expressions of fundamentally distinct faiths, each interpretation is a response to and modification of earlier interpretations of that faith. The Christian theologian, because he is an interpreter of what he holds to be the Christian faith, does not intend to proclaim a new faith but to communicate, clarify, correct and develop what he regards as obscure, confused, erroneous and inadequate expressions of that faith. Where differences of interpretation that amount to the presentation of distinct faiths appear, they appear gradually as patterns of interpretation of a common stock increasingly diverge. This has two consequences. First, it means that since the Christian faith is only known in terms of its interpretations what is known as Christianity is the result of one or more cumulative traditions of interpretation and practical expression. The 'Christian faith' today is largely the product of and response to a series of interpretations that stretch back to the time of Christ and beyond to the religious understandings of the ancient Near East. Talk about 'the Christian faith', therefore, must always be related to the state of that faith at particular times and places if it is to avoid the danger of describing a product of the author's mind. Secondly, since new interpretations generally appear gradually, too much weight ought not to be placed on the description 'new' as applied to any particular interpretation. Decisive breaks in understanding with what went before very rarely, if ever, occur. What, however, do sometimes occur are dramatic recognitions of the extent of the changes that have gradually appeared. An example of this is the recognition of the supposed fundamental atheism of contemporary Western culture that created such a stir in America in the mid-1960s. Nietzsche had seen this a century before (and Richter a century before that) but when his

madman proclaimed it, he realised that he had come too soon. People as a whole were then not ready to recognise the implications of their culture and understanding. A century later, for various reasons, the message that we live in a godless age and that the churches are the monuments to this was widely entertainable. It was not the interpretation of faith and culture, though, that was new but the readiness to accept it. It was this readiness to accept that created the drama of the 'death of God' movement. We must be careful, consequently, not to confuse newness of interpretation with sudden recognitions of what has been happening in theology.

Granted that new interpretations of Christianity appear, why do they appear? Are they always the result of theologians trying to justify their existence by producing something new or is there sometimes a more significant justification for their appearance? It will help us to tackle the question 'How do we know when a new interpretation of Christianity is a valid one?' if first we can determine the reasons for the new interpretations. Leaving aside the naughty suggestion that theologians seek new interpretations to get fame for themselves, there are good reasons why they cannot rest content with repeating in its original formulations the faith once delivered to and declared by the apostles. This is not because there is some inner principle of automatic change in the original affirmation of the faith.<sup>13</sup> Analogies taken from organic development are misleading here. No inner necessity and direction for change in the structure of faith itself seems to be discernable although believers may hold that some changes are due to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> When Donald Schon speaks of metaphors, including the metaphor of Christianity, as having 'lives of their own', propelling themselves 'through the culture, seeking elaboration and expansion',<sup>15</sup> this life is not intrinsic to the metaphor but the result of its interaction with a changing environment. In principle new interpretations of Christianity appear because every understanding of the Christian faith is partial and provisional and because the world and culture in which Christians find themselves is changing. As the self-understanding of a living religious faith, Christian theology

13. Comp. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, p. 61 for an apparently contrary view.

14. Cf. John 14: 26; 16: 12 ff.

15. Donald A. Schon, *Invention and the Evolution of Ideas* (London, 1969), p. 67; cf. p. 90.

changes in order to attain deeper and truer understandings of that faith and in order to maintain its relevance to the present age.<sup>16</sup>

Pfleiderer, for example, makes this point in his study of *The Early Christian Conception of Christ* when he states as an apparently self-evident truth that 'an ideal is above the limitations of time and coincides with no one of its historical manifestations' and concludes that

'we ought to let history point the way above history to the eternal and omnipresent God, who is a God of the living and not of the dead; . . . to free ourselves from the fatal ban of historicism, which seeks God's revelation only in the records of a dead past, and thus loses its power of finding it in the living present. Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen!'<sup>17</sup>

Writing in 1898, he asserted that 'new forms of thought' were needed if Christianity was to speak to a people that had long since 'reached its majority'.<sup>18</sup> Troeltsch linked the 'development of Christianity', whose course he regarded as somewhat 'unpredictable', not only 'with the whole spiritual and cultural development of European civilisation' but also with the impulse of faith towards 'a continual self-purification and self-deepening'.<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg, similarly, asserts that new understandings of Christianity are continually required if the Christian faith is to remain a living faith, both because 'men's experience of existence – their picture of nature and their historical world – succumbs to progressive transformation' in the openness of their temporality and because the infinity of God makes 'the reference of man

16. I thus reject the suggestion made in Rupert E. Davies' introduction to the papers in *The Living God* (ed. by D. Kirkpatrick, Nashville, U.S.A., 1971), p. 13, that in discussion I once stated that I 'did not believe that religious statements were relative to the culture in which they were made'. I cannot imagine myself ever making such a claim. If my memory of the discussion is correct the report has misrepresented a remark about truth not changing in different cultures. I would not want to make even this claim as boldly now though I still think that if something expresses the truth for a certain time and place, it always expresses the truth for that time and place. At the same time, I would now want to hold that the grasp of the truth at any time and place is relative to that time and place. Absolute, unchanging truth about ultimate reality is a regulative ideal for us in practice.

17. O. Pfleiderer, *The Early Christian Conception of Christ* (London, 1905), p. 164, 169 f.

18. Pfleiderer, *Evolution and Theology*, p. 24.

19. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, p. 59 f.

toward God . . . an infinite task' and his grasp of God always provisional.<sup>20</sup>

These, though, are fairly general statements about the reasons for new interpretations of Christianity. I think we can list the reasons in more detail. There are, so far as I can tell, seven different factors which, singly or in combination, lead to new interpretations.

First there is the desire for *coherence* – that is, to make faith speak about and to the world which is experienced by contemporary men as their actual world. New interpretations of Christianity thus may arise because there are serious differences between the world implied by faith and the world which men now consider to exist. It was, for example, the desire for such coherence that provoked changes in the understanding of the creation stories of Genesis. Those who accepted the conclusions of geological science as reports of what really happened and yet did not want simply to reject the Genesis records as wrong reinterpreted those records to make them cohere (or at least not to clash) with the geologists' reports, first interpreting the 'days' as 'epochs' and then, when this was judged to be an inadequate response, understanding the stories in a new way – for example, as 'myths'. Similarly, the understanding of what is meant by the 'one faith' of all Christians has been modified as a result of investigations into the history of Christian doctrine. Barth asserts that it was 'the stone wall' of the Bible's affirmation of 'God's deity' that led him to renounce the liberal theology of such as Troeltsch and, because 'the ship was threatening to run aground, . . . to turn the rudder an angle of exactly 180 degrees'<sup>21</sup> – an illustration which shows that Barth would have been a disastrous helmsman! So far as Barth himself is concerned, we may accept his own estimation of the reason for his actions but we should also recognise that it was the crisis for Western civilisation proclaimed by the guns on the Western Front in the 1914–18 war that made Barth's interpretation of the 'Word' so appealing. It presented a theology that spoke to the world many men knew as their own. Furthermore, for all Barth says about his later recognition of the 'humanity of God' being the result of Christological understanding,<sup>22</sup>

20. W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol. 2 (London, 1971), p. 105 ff; cf. p. 109 ff.

21. K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London, 1967), p. 37 f.

22. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

it is perhaps not without significance that it occurred in a culture that increasingly respected man's achievements.<sup>23</sup> The desire for the coherence of faith and contemporary culture can also be seen as a major motive behind the radical theology of the past decade. Whatever else the 'death-of-God' theologians wanted to do, they certainly wanted to adjust their understanding of the Christian faith so as to make it cohere with what they regarded as the real world.

Secondly, there is the desire for *consistency* – that is, the desire to produce a statement of the Christian faith which cannot be criticised for containing misleading half-truths and internal contradictions. New interpretations of Christianity thus arise, on the one hand, because earlier expressions of that faith are held to have presented only part of the story. Barth's own understanding of the reason for his recognition of the 'humanity' of God in his later theology illustrates this point. Barth comments that while his earlier exposition of the deity of God was true so far as it went, 'we did not know how to carry through with sufficient care and thoroughness the new knowledge of the *deity* of God which was so exciting both to us and to others'.<sup>24</sup> The recognition of the humanity of God – as Barth treats the notion – was a necessary revision to correct the imbalance in the earlier understanding of God. The later view, that is, did not deny the earlier but complemented it.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, new interpretations of Christianity arise because earlier ones are judged to contain inconsistencies that are now unacceptable even if previously they have been swallowed whole after being baptised as 'paradoxes'. An example of such revision is Hartshorne's dipolar concept of God. By carefully distinguishing between the notions of essence, existence and actuality, Hartshorne argues that it is possible to affirm consistently that there are both necessary and contingent, absolute and relative, unchanging and changing elements in God and so to affirm that 'God is love' in a way that takes both terms seriously. By revising the

23. Cf. Barth's own comment in *Ibid.*, p. 41 f.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

25. We may also mention in this respect Newman's view of the place of 'logical sequence' in the development of doctrine. New interpretations, that is, may draw out the implications of previous statements. This, however, is not likely to produce anything significantly 'new': cf. Newman, *Development of Doctrine*, p. 189 ff, 383 ff.

structure of the concept of God, he thus attempts to overcome fundamental problems in classical theology – problems such as how it is possible to talk consistently of an unchanging God as loving or an absolute God as creating or a necessary God as responding or an eternal God as knowing where the object of his love, creativity, response and knowledge is not himself but, as believers affirm, the changing, created, contingent and temporal world.

A third reason for new interpretations of Christianity is the desire to *communicate* its faith to men whose language and thought-forms make them unable to understand earlier expressions of that faith. Bultmann's demythologising programme is a good example of this kind of new interpretation as it seeks to present the New Testament Gospel in existential terms so that modern man may appreciate its proper challenge. The intention behind such new interpretations is usually to re-express the old ideas, not to alter them. Old and new words as well as old and new thought-forms do not, unfortunately, have a one-to-one correlation. Language is troublesomely elusive – as Eliot reminds us

'... words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place'.<sup>26</sup>

It is always debatable whether such new interpretations simply communicate the old in contemporary language and thought-forms or whether the translation has significantly altered the message. Consequently new interpretations whose motive is to communicate the Christian faith may in practice do more than they intend.

New interpretations arise, fourthly, out of a desire to show the *comprehensiveness* of the Christian faith. Since that faith claims, among other things, to express truth about 'God' and since God is the ground of all reality, existing interpretations of Christianity are revised or replaced when it is considered that they have failed to embrace all reality. Attempts are made to show that the insights of the Christian faith do not belong to a ghetto vision but have universal validity. Teilhard de Chardin's mystical theology

26. T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*.

was an attempt to relate the Christian faith to what his science and his experience told him about the universe, fulfilling what in 1918 he had prayed might be his vocation, namely,

‘to be the apostle – and, if I dare say so, the evangelist – of your *Christ in the Universe*. For you gave me the gift of sensing, beneath the incoherence of the surface, the deep, living unity which your grace has mercifully thrown over our heart-breaking plurality.’<sup>27</sup>

His expositions of the Christian faith seek to express its cosmic dimension. A different view of the way in which the need for comprehensiveness will lead to new understandings of the Christian faith is to be found in Pannenberg’s remarks about religious syncretism. He regards religions as expressions of ‘total views’ of ‘the nature of reality’ and suggests that a religious tradition is partly shown to be alive by ‘its assimilative and integrative power’ as the dominant factor in reactions with other religious traditions. ‘Purity’, in contrast, ‘can mean sterility’. The ‘inexhaustible assimilative and regenerative power’ of Christianity which makes it unusually syncretistic is, according to Pannenberg, not a sign of its weakness but of its ‘unique strength’.<sup>28</sup> New interpretations of Christianity may thus result from the conviction that its faith embraces all truth.

A fifth cause of new interpretations is what we may call *convenience*. Here I am thinking of those changes in the understanding of the Christian faith which have apparently been brought about by an attempt to show that it supports some policy or practice which the interpreter already and independently accepts. In many instances this reason for change cannot be religiously approved since it is directed by a desire to use (some theologians might say abuse) the Christian faith for ulterior purposes but it would be foolish to deny its effectiveness. The way in which some clerical theologians claim special status in the Church for those who have been ordained makes me wonder if their thinking is motivated by the desire to enhance their own position rather than by a clear insight into the theological foun-

27. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (London, 1965), p. 151.

28. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, Vol. 2, p. 86 ff. We might also mention in this respect Newman’s view that genuine developments show a ‘power of assimilation’. Newman, though, severely limits this by holding that they also show ‘preservation of type’ and ‘continuity of principles’. Cf. *Development of Doctrine*, passim.

dations of the Christian community. *A fortiori* I am even more suspicious when meetings of bishops conclude that bishops are to guide and rule the rest! Theological support for the divine right of kings in the seventeenth-century and for Che Guevara revolutionaries in the twentieth, for imperial expansion in the crusades and for independence in the twentieth century suggest how new interpretations of the Christian faith can be found to provide apparent theological justification for what people intend to do anyway. The South African regime and the black power movement do not lack theological apologists. We should not be too cynical at this. Each theological justification for a social or political movement has probably also evoked a theological condemnation as well! Nor should we think that theologians only disagree to keep themselves in business! Nevertheless, convenience – the revision of Christian self-understanding to bring it into conformity with some desired end – has been and doubtless still is a source of new interpretations of that faith. It may also sometimes be a legitimate source of change for there can be situations when a desired policy or practice reflects or leads to truer Christian insight than the existing understanding of that faith. This may be seen in Luther's rejection of the authority of the Pope and Councils in his disputation with Eck. What originally was probably a 'convenient' way out of a corner led to a new and – for some theologians – truer insight into the nature of authority in the Christian faith.

Finally, admitting all the dangers of psychological explanations in such matters, we should probably recognise that new interpretations of the Christian faith may, sixthly, be the result, in part, of the *character* of the theologians presenting them. Troeltsch, for example, suggests that the difference between early Lutheranism and Calvinism

'is by no means solely due to the different local conditions of civilization in which the two arose, but lies, in spite of the essential agreement in their dogmatic basis, in certain subtle differences of religious and ethical thought, corresponding to differences in the character and disposition of the leaders, which were intensified to an extraordinary degree by the difference of general conditions in the two cases.'<sup>29</sup>

29. Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, p. 53.

Now we have outlined why new interpretations of Christianity have appeared, we can turn to the question of their validity. Is it possible to judge that any proffered interpretation is a true exposition of the Christian faith? If it is possible, what are the norms that are to be employed and what do they indicate about the nature of that faith? First we will consider why five respected answers to this question are unsatisfactory.

The first answer is that of Vincent of Lerins. He held that it is possible to judge between authentic and inauthentic statements of the Christian faith on the grounds that the true revealed and apostolic faith is what has been held by Christians 'semper, ubique et ab omnibus' (always, everywhere and by all). As it stands, however, this criterion is useless for our purposes since it condemns all new interpretations of the Christian faith – for, as *new* interpretations, they cannot have been held as such 'always, everywhere and by all' Christians. Indeed, a strict application of the Vincentian canon could probably show that Christian doctrine as a whole has hardly ever existed since it was only in the very early Church that all Christians were of a common mind.<sup>30</sup> By the time of Paul's arguments with Peter and his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians, they had ceased to be wholly agreed! Attempts to salvage the Vincentian canon by modifying the understanding of its terms (for example, by regarding the 'all' as referring to all 'true' Christians or by holding that its criteria are met by articles of faith that can be judged to have been held implicitly by some Christians), seem unable to avoid begging the question at issue. Because of the way words change their meanings as well as because of those manifest changes in statements of the Christian faith which have provoked the problem before us, it is questionable whether we can find anything, in a material as opposed to a purely formal sense, that can be shown to have been believed by Christians 'semper, ubique et ab omnibus'. To say, for example, that all Christians have always and everywhere agreed in believing in Christ is possibly to make only a formal claim. While they may all have said that they believe in 'Christ', it is very much open to question whether there is a significant area of agreement in what they have understood by 'belief in' and by 'Christ'. Any application of the Vincentian canon also seems to require a prior identification of the 'true Christians' whose hold on the true faith, either

30. Cf. Acts 2: 42 ff; 4: 32.

implicitly or explicitly, is to act as a standard for judging the rest. What we are looking for, however, are the criteria by which such identifications can be made. So far as the validity of new interpretations of Christianity is concerned, the Vincentian canon begs the crucial question.

A second answer is that offered by Newman in his *Development of Doctrine*. In brief he suggests that genuine developments of Christian doctrine are characterised by seven ‘notes’: preservation of its type, continuity of its principles, power of assimilation, logical sequence, anticipation of its future, conservative action upon its past and chronic vigour. By applying them to Christian doctrine Newman was able to convince himself that ‘modern Catholicism is nothing else but simply the legitimate growth and complement, that is, the natural and necessary development, of the doctrine of the early church.’<sup>31</sup> But while Newman’s position may be commended as an important improvement on the theory that doctrine develops by working out its logical implications, his tests summarise the formal characteristics common to orthodox Roman Catholic doctrine at different times. Their apologetic for contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine thus presupposes that Roman Catholic doctrine is in the true line of succession of Christian doctrine and that alien developments are not. It is this presupposition, though, that needs to be justified. Our question is the question of the criteria for such justification. Newman’s view of the authentic changes in Christian doctrine, furthermore, is in terms of developments of ideas which clearly enjoy a fundamental unity. This may be challenged on the grounds that it imposes too narrow restrictions on the possible extent of valid interpretations of Christianity.

A third answer is that suggested by Barth’s view that the true interpretation of the Christian faith today is what confronts us now as self-evidently the Word of God. In his *Romans*, Barth condemns ‘Christian Apologetics’ (which presumably covers tests for valid interpretations of Christianity, including Barth’s own interpretation) as reflecting meaningless anxiety for the Gospel:

‘no divinity which NEEDS ANYTHING, any human propaganda (Acts 17: 24, 25), – can be God... The appointment of Jesus to be the

31. Newman, *Development of Doctrine*, p. 169.

Christ takes place in the Spirit and must be apprehended in the Spirit. It is self-sufficient, unlimited, and in itself true.<sup>32</sup>

The Word of God is known to be such not by human reasoning but by the miracle of faith.<sup>33</sup> Barth, therefore, wrestles with the witness of Scripture and of the Church<sup>34</sup> but in the end 'the possibility of knowing the Word of God is God's miracle on and in us'.<sup>35</sup> This solution to the question of the validity of interpretations of Christianity may seem attractive because it places the responsibility for establishing and declaring this validity onto God! All that the theologian has to do is to report what God, who cannot err, declares. In practice this test is no test at all. It sanctions every view of Christianity that comes home to somebody and every new interpretation of Christianity presumably appears to its advocates to present the Word of God for today. Since the interpretations of Christianity do not always agree, we need to refer to something other than the convictions of their advocates if we are to be able to choose sensibly between them. Otherwise the theological scene will be anarchic and its debates will be as edifying as those between rival gangs of football club supporters! Barthian theology was not so far from this when the old Barth attacked some of his former pupils who affirmed the 'death of God' as, perplexingly, the 'Word of God' for the 1960s. Incompatible convictions about what God revealed were in conflict and, for true Barthians, there was nothing else to appeal to but such convictions.

A fourth answer to our question appeals to the consensus of the Church. It is held that 'the Church' is the proper judge of whether a new interpretation of Christianity is valid or not. The initial difficulty with this answer is that there is great disagreement about what constitutes 'the Church' in this respect. The history of Christianity is scarred by occasions on which bodies of Christians have excommunicated each other for accepting or

32. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (transl. by E. C. Hoskyns, London, 1933), p. 36.

33. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 366 and K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, part 1 (transl. by G. T. Thomson, Edinburgh, 1936), pp. 255, 260, 283; cf. also *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 14: 'Truth comes, in the faith in which we begin and in the faith in which we cease (and begin all over again) to know', and pp. 19 ff, 22 f, 25.

34. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Part 2 (transl. by G. W. Bromiley, Edinburgh, 1958), p. xi.

35. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 282.

rejecting some new interpretation of their supposedly common faith. Which side was the Church whose consensus was normative? Must truth always lie with the big battalions? The truth may be mighty but how do we know that it has always prevailed? Each surviving denomination and doubtless each destroyed one claimed that its consensus was the proper one. Were any of them right? How do we tell? Furthermore, as I recognise as someone who has actually had to sit on a tribunal judging a heresy charge (a bizarre situation for me but perhaps it is safer to be on the bench than in the dock), appeal to the ‘consensus’ of ‘the Church’ leaves wide open the question of what criteria ‘the Church’ is to judge by. In the end the Church, at least as a body that makes decisions, is composed of people and the consensus of the Church is what is decided by the people who belong to it.<sup>36</sup> The question before us is the question that they ask when they are asked to decide if something is truly Christian or not: ‘How are we to tell?’

A fifth answer claims that there is some identifiable ‘essence’ of Christianity which provides the touchstone for distinguishing between valid and invalid interpretations of its faith. This is a widely advanced solution to our question and we must examine it with some care. Different, roughly contemporaneous, versions of it are found in Pfleiderer, Harnack and Rashdall. It is also put forward in one form or another by those who affirm that the heart of the Christian faith is contained in certain unalterable truths which have been definitively revealed to men.

Pfleiderer, recognising the cultural relativity and incompleteness<sup>37</sup> of any expression of ‘the essence of Christianity’, holds that it is ‘whatever – after deduction of temporary and transitory coverings – stands forth as the real permanent nucleus of the religion and morality of the New Testament and the Reformation’.<sup>38</sup> He finds ‘its centre of unity’ to be ‘the fundamental sentiment of the pious soul’.<sup>39</sup> What, then, Pfleiderer describes as the ‘ethico-religious nucleus’ of Christianity is his criterion for identifying authen-

36. We may further ask, ‘Who decides who they shall be? Does “the Church” decide who belongs to it and those who belong to it decide what is the true Church?’ This is not a happy circle of judgments.

37. Cf. Pfleiderer, *Evolution and Theology*, p. 26.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 84; cf. pp. 81 f, 84 ff.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

tic stages in its evolution.<sup>40</sup> Harnack poses our problem in this way:

‘There are only two possibilities here: either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity.’

He then states, ‘The latter is the true view’.<sup>41</sup> In *What is Christianity?* he expounds his understanding of the kernel of Christianity hidden within the husk of its historical forms, an understanding which is not only based upon the teaching of Jesus but also upon ‘all the later products of its spirit’.<sup>42</sup> His conclusion is that ‘the Gospel is the knowledge and recognition of God as the Father, the certainty of redemption, humility and joy in God, energy and brotherly love’ in a faith where both the founder and his message are not to be forgotten.<sup>43</sup> It is this Gospel which identifies authentic Christian faith. According to Hastings Rashdall, while ‘the Christian thought of the future must be different in many ways from the thought of the past, it need not be less Christian’. Indeed, he considers that it should be ‘more Christian’ because men now understand ‘better than past generations the essential and eternal value’ of the life and teaching of Christ. Thus, although future Christian thought may find ‘ever fresh meanings in the teaching of its Founder,’ Rashdall affirms that it ‘will never really go beyond what in germ and in essence is to be found in the religious consciousness of Christ’.<sup>44</sup>

What Sykes has recently called ‘the theory of direct transference’ is one variety of this solution. He describes it as having ‘in popular apologetic an irresistible fascination’ and as holding that ‘the essence of Christianity. . . is transferred, from person to person, culture to culture, age to age *without alteration*’.<sup>45</sup> The examples we have given, however, indicate that the ‘essence’ of Christianity is not always understood in as fixed a manner as the ‘theory of direct transference’ apparently demands. Sykes’ own theory, for example,

40. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 2 f, 8, 24 ff.

41. A. Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (transl. by T. B. Saunders, New York, 1957), p. 14.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 10 f.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

44. Hastings Rashdall, *Doctrine and Development* (London, 1898), p. xi f.

45. S. W. Sykes, ‘The Essence of Christianity’, *Religious Studies*, 7 (4), December 1971, p. 293.

which uses the more flexible notion of ‘the “character of Christ” as the essence of Christianity’<sup>46</sup> can be regarded as another example of this solution. Nevertheless, in spite of its supporters, this solution has to be rejected as unworkable since there is no satisfactory way of identifying that ‘essence’ of Christianity which this criterion requires. Since this may seem to some to be a surprising claim, I will outline some of the arguments which show that no such essence can be produced as a standard for valid interpretations of Christianity.

To start with, no such essence is defined in a document accepted by all Christians (and if it were, we would be faced with the prior question of how we judged who are Christians and that none of those who rejected it are Christians). Two possible objections that may be raised to this claim are the Creed and the Bible. On the face of it, the creeds appear to provide an authoritative summary of the Christian faith. Why, then, cannot they be the criteria for testing new interpretations of Christianity? If the new interpretations agree with the creeds they pass, if they contradict them they fail. It seems so easy! In practice it is the opposite. Leaving aside the question of which creeds are to be regarded as ultimately authoritative – do the Athanasian creed, the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Westminster Confession rank with the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds and how do we decide? – the practical ineffectiveness of the creeds arises from the fact that while Christians may agree that those creeds are a standard expression of the Christian faith, they disagree over the meaning of the terms used in them. Their agreement over the creeds, that is, is much more formal than material. Take, for example, the phrase ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’. The Pope and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, the Bishop of Willesden and the Principal of Tyndale Hall, all affirm this phrase but it is very unlikely that they all understand the same thing by the words they use. If it is claimed that such differences do not occur in the central affirmations of the creed about ‘God’ and ‘Christ’, we may well wonder if this is so. New interpretations of Christianity are sometimes presented as attempts to clarify what the creeds ‘really’ mean in their central as well as in their peripheral affirmations and the problem before us, in such cases, is the problem how we can tell whether these new interpretations do expound

46. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

the multivalent expressions of the creeds in accordance with authentic Christian faith. Since, then, uncertainty about what the creeds mean is one of the causes of the problem before us, we can hardly use the creeds as a touchstone of authenticity.

Similar but more acute problems arise when attempts are made to use the Bible as the criterion for authentic expressions of Christianity. Centuries of Biblical exegesis show how various are even the plausible interpretations of its materials. No interpretation of Christianity, orthodox or heretical, has found difficulty in offering Biblical 'support' for itself. New interpretations of Christianity have often arisen from the attempt to express for the present age what the Bible 'really' has to say.<sup>47</sup> As some have discovered, though, it can be theologically dangerous to keep close to what the Bible actually says. Isaac Barrow offered on Trinity Sunday 1663 'A Defence of the Blessed Trinity' in which he argued that what 'the Holy Scripture teacheth us plainly' is 'abundantly enough to satisfy our Minds, to stop our Mouths, to smother all Doubt and Dispute about this High and Holy Mystery' of 'the Orthodox Doctrine concerning the Blessed Trinity'.<sup>48</sup> Half a century later Samuel Clarke was unwise enough to attempt to work out such an argument in detail in his *Scripture-Doctrine of the Trinity wherein every text in the New Testament relating to that Doctrine is distinctly considered . . .* He listed some 880 different texts of the New Testament under different heads and then drew out the doctrinal implications of what is thus 'plainly revealed in Scripture'.<sup>49</sup> He condemned 'Tritheism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Socinianism, and the like' as having 'puzzled the plain and practical Doctrine of Scripture, with endless speculative disputes'<sup>50</sup> and professed himself prepared to alter his opinions only if some 'Learned Person' produced a more cogent 'Interpretation of All the Texts' which he had produced and of their 'Consequences'.<sup>51</sup> The result of Clarke's meticulous examination of the New Testament was that on June 2, 1714, the Lower House of Convo-

47. Barth's commentary on *Romans* is a good example of this.

48. *The Works of the Learned Isaac Barrow*, Vol. 3, (publ. by J. Tillotson, London, 1716), p. 386.

49. S. Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1719), p. xxx (The first edition appeared in 1712.)

50. *Ibid.*, pp. xxx f.

51. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

cation complained to the Bishops that his work contained ‘Assertions contrary to the Catholick Faith, as received and declared by this Reformed Church of England’.<sup>52</sup> The Bishops thought that ‘the Lower-House had just Reason for their Complaint’<sup>53</sup> but, after further enquiries, told the Lower House that they judged it ‘fit to proceed no farther’ in the matter.<sup>54</sup> The Lower House protested that Clarke had not made a ‘Recantation of the Heretical Assertions’<sup>55</sup> but it could do no more. It was probably just as well. To condemn a man for presenting what the Bible stated would have been disturbing. Clarke was effectively punished by the Establishment, though, as they never gave him a Bishopric and his fate is a cautionary tale about the dangers of using the Bible to determine the true Christian faith!

A different view of the ‘essence’ of Christianity is that it is contained in the believer’s faith in Christ. It is ‘Christ’, then, not some document, which provides the norm for valid interpretations of the Christian faith. The difficulty here is that different interpretations of Christianity present different interpretations of Christ and there seems to be no clear point of reference by which we can choose between them. It is easy to over-emphasise the way in which the quest of the historical Jesus has provided portraits of the questers and of their ideals but it does not seem practically possible to produce an understanding of Christ which will be accepted as an agreed standard for interpretations of Christianity. Each interpreter, usually quite plausibly, finds in the Bible a Christ that supports his interpretation. The situation becomes even more chaotic when suggestions are made, as by Sykes, that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the admittedly flexible notion of ‘the character of Christ’ where that ‘character’ refers not only to the Jesus of history but also to the ever-living Christ of the resurrection.<sup>56</sup> At this point ‘Christ’ seems to have become a cipher into

52. *An Apology for Dr. Clarke, containing an Account of the late Proceedings in Convocation upon his Writings concerning the Trinity*, published by the Author of the above-mentioned Letter to Dr. Clarke (London, 1714), p. 10.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Reply dated June 4th.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 63. Resolution of July 5th.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 64. Resolution of July 7th.

56. *Cf.* Sykes, ‘Essence of Christianity’, p. 299 f.

which we can read a wide range of meanings. It is not a norm for judging the validity of new interpretations of Christianity but a label which all the conflicting interpretations claim for themselves. Sykes' model of 'the character of Christ' would be attractive if we could know how to distinguish between valid and invalid understandings of that character. As he presents it, though, I do not find it altogether clear whether Sykes' 'gospel of Jesus Christ' is the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Gospel preached by Jesus Christ or the Gospel held by Jesus Christ as his own faith. The cash value of his references to Christ is less clear.<sup>57</sup> The norm that we are seeking, therefore, can hardly be held to be 'Christ' when we need some such norm in order to establish what is a true or valid understanding of Christ.

Another attempt to use the 'essence' of Christianity as the test of valid interpretations locates this 'essence' neither in Jesus Christ himself nor in the actual statements of the Bible but in the original faith of the first Christians. This faith, it is held, is to be found by analysing the first Christians' expression of their faith as they bear witness to Christ in the New Testament. Here again, however, we do not find a generally accepted norm for interpretations of Christianity but are faced with many conflicting interpretations, each of which claims to elucidate for us the original content of that faith. From the start the elucidation is clearly difficult because it does not deal with what may be regarded as relatively concrete matters like the meaning of a Biblical statement or the actual events of Jesus' life but with a much more elusive issue, namely, the faith which the first Christians held and which we find them trying to understand for themselves and to express for others in the New Testament. We cannot be sure in this that the New Testament authors had clearly understood their own faith nor that they had found the most adequate and appropriate way to express it. Furthermore, as recent hermeneutical studies have indicated, it is doubtful whether we should ever claim to be able to determine what an author himself meant when he wrote something, especially when that author belongs to a significantly different culture. Kimmerle, for example, has put it in this way: 'even if I concentrate exclusively on the text in order to do justice to the subject matter discussed there, it is still *I* who does this, who deals with the

57. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 295 where Sykes is apparently confident that the phrase has some cash value.

text and with its subject matter'. Thus while, as one seeking to understand the text, one 'does not remain untouched by the subject matter', one's understanding is affected by 'one's own way of thinking and one's own conceptuality' and so 'one's own "prejudices" and preknowledge enter even here into the process of understanding'.<sup>58</sup> What, then, we find in the Bible depends to a significant extent upon the questions which we put to it and expect its text to answer and upon the conceptualities which form our structure of understanding. It seems to me, therefore, that Robert Morgan is right when he suggests in his paper that Marcion and Luther, for instance, based their interpretation of the Bible upon their existing understanding of the Christian Gospel. This, I suspect, is what has always happened and, for all our sophisticated awareness of it, is what will continue to happen. It does not mean that each of us simply imposes whatever meaning we choose upon the Biblical text: words are not omnivalent. As we wrestle with the text, the text itself not only limits the meaning we find in it but also may change our ways of understanding its subject matter. Nevertheless, there is no way to justify the claim that the understanding produced by our wrestling with a Biblical text is to be identified with what the author intended when he wrote it.<sup>59</sup> All we can claim is that this is the understanding which the text has evoked in us. As the original Christian faith declared in the New Testament is something we cannot determine, we cannot use it as a norm for later interpretations of Christianity.

Reference to the original Christian faith as a norm for later understanding of that faith may also be criticised in principle on the ground that since the faith may be a developing faith, the original form ought no more to be regarded as a standard for later forms than the baby is for the man or Bleriot's plane for the Concorde or the acorn for the oak tree. If, as Jesus stated (if he did!), the Holy Spirit is to lead Christians 'into all the truth',<sup>60</sup>

58. H. Kimmerle, 'Hermeneutical Theory or Ontological Hermeneutics', translated by F. Seifert, in *History and Hermeneutic, Journal for Theology and the Church* Vol. 4, (New York, 1967) p. 117.

59. I suspect Biblical exegesis may find fruitful insight into the nature of its task in what some literary critics have written about their work. Cf. W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (London, 1970).

60. John 16: 13.

it may be an error to determine authentic Christianity by its earliest forms. Pfeiderer expresses this judgment when he states that

‘a historical point of view which sets up in Jesus an absolute at the beginning, and then lets the theology of the Church follow as a lapse from the truth, in order to bring us back again to the Jesus of history as the final and definitive authority, is the opposite of scientific’.<sup>61</sup>

For Pfeiderer theology must be ‘scientific’.<sup>62</sup> Rejecting the view that the corpus of authentic Christian faith was once and for all revealed in or by Christ and recorded in the New Testament, it may thus be maintained that the normative essence of Christianity is to be inferred from its different historical forms as some kind of principle common to them all. Unfortunately here again we seem to have a solution to our problem which is unworkable in practice. Even if, for instance, certain expressions are found to be common to all the interpretations of Christianity, it is still a very open question whether those expressions have roughly the same (or a significantly overlapping) content in all their different contexts. As we have already suggested, there is no material agreement between people who say that they believe in ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’ but do not agree about what is meant by that utterance. It is consequently liable to be misleading to claim even that all Christians have shared a common ‘belief in Christ’. While they may have all affirmed that they ‘believe in Christ’ (as should be expected if they have claimed the label ‘Christian’), it is not certain that they have all meant the same thing by ‘Christ’ except that, in a basically formal sense, the term has designated whoever or whatever they have regarded as the basis of their faith. In material content the ‘Christ’ of the Crusaders and the ‘Christ’ of the Quakers, the ‘Christ’ of liberal Protestantism and the ‘Christ’ of Neo-orthodoxy seem to disagree more than they agree. On the other hand, if an investigation shows that there is a body of material agreement in different historical interpretations of Christianity, the question will then arise whether the interpretations that have been examined cover all the legitimate varieties of Christianity. The attempt to infer the essence of Christianity from its historical manifestations is thus methodologically suspect because the results of any such examination will be

61. Pfeiderer, *Evolution and Theology*, p. 24.

62. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 8.

controlled by a prior decision about what are to be regarded as genuine manifestations of Christianity and so as data for examination. The 'essence' that may be inferred, for example, may well vary according to whether the data includes or excludes Marcionites, Montanists, Patripassians, Monothelites, Hussites, Unitarians, Quakers, Methodists, Snake-handlers, Pentecostals, the Jesus-movement and so on! A normative essence of Christianity, therefore, cannot be found by reference to the history of Christianity without fundamentally begging the question.

Finally, attempts to judge new interpretations of Christianity by reference to some 'essence' of Christianity can be criticised for failing to appreciate that only interpretations of Christianity are available to us. Any statement of the supposed essence of Christianity is itself an interpretation of that essence, given in terms of a particular structure of understanding. As Bultmann's demythologising programme suggests, we can translate expressions of the Christian faith from one setting to another but no amount of 'demythologising' will provide a universal pure essence which is independent of all cultural forms. Consequently, even if the view that new interpretations of Christianity are to be judged by its 'essence' could overcome the problems we have outlined, the resulting situation would be that one interpretation was being used to validate or invalidate another. Since a new interpretation is developed for one or more of the reasons we outlined earlier, its appearance is due to a decision that earlier interpretations are in some way inadequate or misleading. The normative statement of the essence of Christianity is presumably among those earlier interpretations and so the new interpretation must either embrace it as giving only a partial understanding of Christianity and complement it or reject parts of it and replace them. In both cases the supposed normative statement of the essence of Christianity cannot be regarded as a neutral point of judgment. The existence of the new interpretation is a judgment upon it and makes it a partner to the controversy. It is hard to see how justice can be done when the judge is expected to judge what has been produced in protest against his adequacy as a judge!

None of the tests which we have examined, then, seems able to provide a satisfactory way of deciding whether a new interpretation of Christianity is a valid one. Does this mean there is no sound basis for such a judgment? If so, we would be in the theologically bizarre situation that all interpretations of the Christian faith must be accepted as authentic expressions of

that faith even though they clashed radically with each other. This would be to make the description 'Christian' an empty one, except perhaps as a mark of approval. Can the description be shown to have material content? In practice it is used as if it has some such definite content even though what that content is may neither be clear nor agreed. For example, not every interpretation of Christianity that offers us a coherent, consistent, communicating, comprehensive, convenient or characteristic expression of that faith is in practice accepted as authentically Christian although there are always arguments about each particular case. Braithwaite's empiricist interpretation, van Buren's non-transcendent interpretation, Malcolm Muggeridge's world-rejecting interpretation, Harvey Cox's modern-world-affirming interpretation, Michalson's existential interpretation, Barth's non-religious interpretation and Ogden's process interpretation have each been criticised on the ground that they meet current problems with existing interpretations of Christianity at the cost of producing something which is not authentically Christian. Furthermore, in spite of their disagreements, most Christian theologians seem to agree in principle that all new interpretations of Christianity are in danger of being so determined by contemporary culture in their view of true faith that they fail to give adequate recognition to the critical function of that faith. A valid understanding of the Christian faith is regarded as not simply a matter of utterly rejecting or utterly accepting the contemporary world but as involving a judgment on that world in the light of Christian understanding as well as an understanding of Christianity in the light of the real world. In practice, then, it is assumed that not everything which claims to be 'Christian' is therefore properly classified as such. The description 'Christian' is treated as if it had a content and heresy as a real possibility. But if none of the tests which we have examined work, how can a rationally justifiable distinction be made between valid and invalid understandings of Christianity? Is common practice simply wrong when it presupposes that such a distinction can be made? We come, at last, to the heart of the problem.

A first step towards the solution which I want tentatively to offer is to consider again why new interpretations occur. The recognition of new interpretations and the question of their validity are relatively modern. They are one result of the spread of historical awareness. Christians in earlier ages did not have our culture's sense of history with its relativistic

implications. Consequently when they presented what we would judge to be new interpretations of Christianity, they understood themselves to be rediscovering and re-expressing the unchanging truth contained in the Christian faith. Holding, that is, that Christianity is the true faith (i.e., the faith which has the truth) and that what is true is always true, they sought to re-assert pure Christianity in contrast to what they regarded as corrupt and mistaken expressions of it. They did not want to present anything really new but to re-affirm the unchanging truth contained in pure Christianity. While, therefore, their intention, as they usually confessed it, was to present pure Christianity, the ultimate norm for their presentation was the truth – not just the truth as seen by Christianity (as we might talk about presenting the Muslim or the Buddhist understanding of reality) but the ultimate truth about reality – for as Christians they assumed that the ultimate truth about reality and their Christian faith were identical. Consequently their judgments about what was and what was not part of the pure Christianity which they wanted to describe was determined by what they judged to be the truth.

Luther, for example, in his disputation with Eck, claimed the truth as his ultimate standard as a Christian theologian:

‘I believe that I am a Christian theologian, and live in the kingdom of truth; and therefore I will be free and will give myself up to no authority . . . so that I may confidently confess all that I know as truth, whether it is asserted by a Catholic or a heretic . . . ’<sup>63</sup>

Even if he were forced to this confession by the pressure of the debate, it is hardly likely that Luther – or any other Christian theologian – would in times of cool reflection want to deny that his goal and norm as a Christian theologian is the truth. When Christ himself claimed to be ‘the way, the truth and the life’,<sup>64</sup> the theological implication seems to be that whatever is ‘the truth’ in religion is authentically Christian as well as *vice versa*. As Barth puts it, speaking of his understanding of God’s deity and of the concept of God’s ‘humanity’, ‘there must be positive acceptance and not unconsidered rejection of the elements of truth, which one cannot possibly

63. Quoted in O. Pfliegerer, *Philosophy and Development of Religion*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1894), p. 331.

64. John 14: 6.

deny to it even if one sees all its weaknesses.’<sup>65</sup> If, then, a problem arises about the validity of a new interpretation of Christianity, that problem will be solved for Christian believers if it can be determined whether or not that interpretation expresses the truth. As believers they hold that all religious truth is in Christ. If the new interpretation expresses the truth, they must regard it as of Christ; if it does not, they must regard it as none of his. As for non-Christians, I wonder if the question of the validity of a new interpretation of Christianity is a significant question for them so far as it relates to *Christianity*; while if it is taken as a question about the truth of the interpretation, then the same criteria will apply.

This test of truth is, I suggest, thoroughly in accordance with the intentions behind any serious new interpretations of Christianity. We see this if we consider again the causes of new interpretations which we outlined earlier. The search for *coherence* is to meet the criticism that Christianity is false because it is at variance with the ‘facts’ of the ‘real’ world by showing, on the contrary, that the Christian faith deals with that world. The demand for *consistency* is to deny the charge that the Christian faith must be false because it is internally self-contradictory. The desire to *communicate* is to overcome the charge that the Christian faith is a false faith because it offers nothing that is meaningful or significant for life today. The quest for *comprehensiveness* is to challenge the view that Christianity does not have the whole truth because it gives only a partial understanding of reality. The motive of *convenience* reflects the wish to show that Christianity does not oppose ‘correct’ policies and practices. Even the influence of *character* on interpretations of Christianity can be regarded as the theologian’s attempt to overcome the charge that the Christian faith has nothing to offer him. Put positively, the intention behind new interpretations of Christianity is to show that the Christian faith is true – true because it agrees with the ‘facts’, true because it is self-consistent, true because it says something meaningful, true because it applies universally, true because it supports ‘correct’ policies and practices, true because it speaks to the individual case. New interpretations of Christianity are thus stages in the quest for religious truth. They belong to the search for an understanding of the ultimate structure and meaning of reality which can be the basis for life today and in the future.

65. Barth, *Humanity of God*, p. 42.

Valid interpretations of Christianity are, therefore, those interpretations which bring out the religious truth in Christianity.

Tests for authentic interpretations thus come down to being tests for truth appropriate to the logical nature of religious insight. Consequently, we may add a seventh reason for new interpretations of which the other six are particular aspects, namely, the desire for *correspondence*. Changes in religious and theological understanding come about as believers and theologians attempt to make their faith correspond to the ultimate truth about reality so far as it can be grasped for their world in terms significant for, even if not wholly determined by, contemporary culture. One corollary of this is that the interpretations of Christianity appropriate to different cultures will differ in more than their ways of expression. As different cultures reflect different understandings of reality, the interpretations of Christianity that are appropriate to them (even if at the same time also critical of them) will to some degree be liable to vary in content. This, it seems to me, is a more satisfactory conclusion to draw from the situation than that of Troeltsch when he holds that each great religion is confined to a particular civilization.<sup>66</sup> Troeltsch's judgment is hardly compatible with the believer's assumption, at least in the case of most Christians, that his faith concerns all reality and that its truth is universal. But while it is hard to envisage a Christian holding that the Christian faith is true for him in his culture but not for another person in another culture, his recognition of basic differences between cultures should prevent him being disturbed when the Christian faith in different cultural situations is, for example, based on significantly different concepts of Christ. This is inevitable if 'Christ' is to be the 'Christ' for all men.

As I have already remarked, believers who hold that Christ is 'the truth' will hold that every insight into religious truth that is developed and, on testing, shown to be such will be embodied in some way in Christ. This, though, must be regarded as a claim of faith – necessarily presupposed by faith, perhaps, but not confirmable. Our earlier examination of the different tests offered to authenticate interpretations of Christianity implies that there is no satisfactory way of determining whether any contemporary insight into the truth really does elucidate something that is Christ where

66. Cf. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, pp. 56 f, 62.

the concept of Christ has material content and is not just a label for whatever in fact happens to be the truth. When, therefore, a believer is faced with the objection that a new interpretation of the Christian faith which he accepts apparently conflicts with what traditional authorities have declared in their interpretations of it, he may respond in either of two ways. He may reply 'This new interpretation is true and the traditional authorities were mistaken' or he may reply 'This new interpretation is true and so it must be what the traditional authorities "really" meant even though they did not express it clearly'. Which reply he offers probably depends on whether he has any respect for those authorities!

Does this solution to our problem mean that new interpretations of the Christian faith are to be treated like new insights in metaphysical understanding? There are many similarities. The appropriate modes of verification for religious claims are very similar to those for metaphysical claims<sup>67</sup> and this implies that the truth at issue is similar. Such a conclusion seems to be suggested by some of the closing remarks of Troeltsch's lecture on 'Christianity among the World Religions' when he says that all the historical religions are

'tending in the same direction, and... seem impelled by an inner force to strive upward towards some unknown height, where alone the ultimate unity and the final objective validity can lie. And, as all religion has thus a common goal in the Unknown, the Future, perchance in the Beyond, so too it has a common ground in the Divine Spirit ever pressing the finite mind onward towards further light and fuller consciousness, a Spirit Which indwells the finite spirit, and Whose ultimate union with it is the purpose of the whole many-sided process.'<sup>68</sup>

These Hegelian remarks seem to belong to a metaphysician rather than a theologian. Troeltsch in the end, though, shows the difference between

67. I have explored different aspects of the verification of religious claims in 'Some Comments on Hartshorne's Presentation of the Ontological Argument' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 4, pp. 103 ff; 'The Incarnation as a Continuing Reality' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 303 ff; 'The Holy Spirit and Theology' in *The Expository Times*, Vol. 82, pp. 292 ff; 'Theistic Verification' printed in *The Living God*, ed. by D. Kirkpatrick and in a study of 'Anselm's Credo ut Intelligam', to be published in *Analecta Anselmiana*.

68. Troeltsch, *Christian Thought*, p. 61.

the metaphysician and the theologian when, as a Christian theologian, he writes earlier in the lecture:

‘We shall . . . strive continually to bring our Christianity into harmony with the changing conditions of life, and to bring its human and divine potentialities to the fullest possible fruition. It is the loftiest and most spiritual revelation we know at all. It has the highest validity. Let that suffice.’<sup>69</sup>

and then ends by saying:

‘A truth which, in the first instance, is *a truth for us* does not cease, because of this, to be very Truth and Life. . . . In our earthly experience the Divine Life is not One, but Many. But to apprehend the One in the Many constitutes the special character of love.’<sup>70</sup>

The major difference between a metaphysician and a theologian, that is, is not in the truth that they seek but in the way that they approach the search. The tough-minded metaphysician may regard in principle all options as open to him and all past views of truth as materials which he can accept, reject or adapt as he considers best – though he should be careful not to make a fool of himself by assuming that he has a standpoint outside the relativities of history. The theologian, in contrast, as the interpreter of a particular faith, to a significant extent sees himself as restricted to the cumulative tradition of a particular religious faith <sup>71</sup> and his task to that of elucidating the truth from the starting-point of that faith. He may produce results as conservative or as radical as any metaphysician but in principle he will regard his conclusions as proper expressions of that faith.

The limitation imposed upon the Christian theologian by having to start from the Christian tradition is not, however, very great. It may in some ways be compared to the limitations which the interpreter of a poem, a musical script or a character in a play feels imposed upon him by the text before him. Consider, for example, the way in which critics can present different interpretations of a poem. The text may restrict the extent of feasible interpretations while leaving considerable scope to the critic. As Wimsatt puts it,

69. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

71. In practice I suspect that the parallel with metaphysics is fairly close as most metaphysicians belong to and work within a particular metaphysical tradition.

‘The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s. . . . The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.’<sup>72</sup>

The Christian religious tradition, however, is much less defined and so much less restrictive than the text of a poem. Since it is made up of a variety of apparently conflicting interpretations of the Christian faith, starting with the Bible and continuing to the latest fashion in American, Scottish, German or Lancastrian theology, it offers in practice as open a scope for interpretation as any metaphysician could desire! The test of validity, then, is effectively the test of truth. How do we know when a new interpretation of Christianity is a valid one? I suggest that the answer for the Christian believer is ‘When the interpretation starts from material found in the Christian religious tradition (which, however, can only be vaguely defined) and provides a true understanding of ultimate reality.’

Since this paper is already too long, I leave for other occasions the next question: ‘But how do we verify a claim about the nature of ultimate reality?’

72. Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, p. 5.



## Authenticity in the Interpretation of Buddhism

This paper is addressed to the question: 'How do we know when a new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition is a valid one?', and the implications of the question are more complex and more diversified than might be expected at first glance. It is concerned with discovering or formulating criteria for assessing the validity of new interpretations of the Buddhist tradition. Yet, what is Buddhist tradition? Buddhism has behind it a 2,500 years long history of development, evolution, modification and periodic reinterpretation brought about by changing historical circumstances and by its spreading further and further into countries where it was stimulated by its encounter with and penetration of different civilisations and cultural traditions. In the last few decades it has reached and has started establishing itself, with unmistakable signs of further modifications and some new attempts at new interpretations, even in the sphere of our Western civilisation.

From the historical point of view all these stages and trends going under the name of Buddhism belong to the Buddhist tradition. Of course a historian is not concerned with the validity of subsequent interpretations of a particular religious tradition by the professed followers of that tradition. He will only take proper notice of the influence from outside and the changes within the tradition as compared with its previous stages and forms and will analyse and describe them.

The concept of validity which we have to use when trying to answer the posited question implies evaluating and judging the religious tradition in question and its new interpretations on the basis of its own intrinsic nature and within the scope of the message it originally wanted to convey. This might suggest that an answer would best be given by one who would himself be committed to this same tradition. In which case for Christianity the question should be attempted by a Christian, for Buddhism by a Buddhist.

However, one does not have to be a historian to raise immediately the objection that orthodox Christianity, especially the Roman Catholic,

would not acknowledge as valid any interpretation of Christianity substantially different from its own. Other denominations would have a similar difficulty, although to a lesser degree. Buddhism on the other hand has the reputation of being a tolerant religion without any fixed doctrinal authority and unlike Christianity the modern world organisations of Buddhism, such as the World Fellowship of Buddhism, associate all existing Buddhist schools, sects and groups which are interested to join. However, if you succeed, in a private conversation, in obtaining a real opinion on the matter from an informed Theravāda monk, you will learn from him that only his school's teaching, based exclusively on the Pāli Canon and its later commentaries, contains the true message of the Buddha and that every subsequent interpretation is only a distortion of and deviation from the oldest and only valid Buddhist tradition.<sup>1</sup>

The attitude of the Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism is less strict and more open: The Hinayāna tradition (which includes its only surviving school of Theravāda) is not denied validity, but is proclaimed to be incomplete and inferior. So the situation within the Buddhist tradition is not entirely without resemblance to that within the Christian tradition.

The natural conclusion seems to be, therefore, that the one who attempts to answer the title question should not be personally committed to the religion on whose interpretations he has to pass judgment; or that he should be as liberal a follower of it as possible, allowing for the widest acceptable differences within its tradition and not allowing his personal preferences to influence his criteria of validity for differing interpretations.

The best method would be, in my view, the phenomenological approach<sup>2</sup>

1. I have myself obtained such answers not only from Buddhist monks from Asian countries, but also from English Buddhists, even if they belong to the Buddhist Society in London which itself is entirely non-sectarian. This rather orthodox attitude is not publicly stressed because of the need which is felt for closer collaboration and for the sake of having a wider forum for airing one's interpretation of the Buddhist teachings. In Germany the Theravāda followers show a similar tendency which can also be detected in most books on Buddhism written by Buddhists of the Theravāda persuasion.

2. The phenomenological method is best suited here, because what is required for the purpose is not an account of specific outward characteristics and doctrinal features, but a description of essential constituents of what we may call 'Buddhist mentality'. It is therefore necessary to analyse the structure of this mentality without dealing with what does not essentially belong to it.

with more stress laid on the practical aim rather than on doctrinal subtleties of subsequent interpretations of the Buddhist tradition. The position and objectives of what we can call the Buddhist tradition have to be worked out, so to say, from within the evolving Buddhist mind, yet without personal involvement, and then formulated and described in clearly understandable terms and in a way acceptable both to a committed Buddhist as summarizing the tenets and aspirations of his own particular school or sect and to a comparative religionist as presenting the core of the Buddhist tradition which can be traced in all historical interpretations of it and therefore may also be used as criteria of future new interpretations.

The objectives of the Buddhist tradition may be formulated as follows:

1. The main purpose of the Buddhist teachings is best expressed in one word which is: liberation. This is understood to be a transcendental state defying conceptual definition or description which, however, is characterized, from the standpoint of normal life, as liberation from the samsaric state of conditioned existence, *i.e.* from a blind subjugation to the necessity of going through a ceaseless round of rebirths. It is brought about by the extinction of personal desire, hate and ignorance which results in detachment from the five constituents of empirical personal existence. This state is referred to as Nirvāna. Its more positive contents are expressed by the term Enlightenment which implies the gaining of complete vision and insight into the operation of the law of existence (dharma) which makes its transcending possible.

2. The second objective is to secure the way leading to liberation which usually involves creating conditions enabling a way of life supposed to be conducive to liberation, such as forming certain communities, and which further involves finding and using some method of personal approach to the problem of liberation which directs the individual's effort towards the goal.

3. Third it is the wish to preserve the message and to transmit it to others, including subsequent generations.

4. And finally it is the responsibility felt towards the world at large which takes the form of a compassionate care for their well-being in view of the dangers in saṃsāro threatening those who not only do not know of a possibility of release, but are even unaware of the laws governing samsaric existence. This concern usually takes the form of instructing and assisting in

(a) understanding the teaching of liberation and in choosing an appropriate method of achieving it, (b) in adopting a proper way of life which, if short of leading directly to liberation, will secure a favourable rebirth which in turn will make liberation attainable, (c) in opting for a code of conduct or attitude to life which will lead to a freer and happier life in the present.

These propositions must now be tested on historical interpretations of the Buddhist tradition and then used as criteria of validity on one or two contemporary schools where new interpretation may be expected. From the multitude of Buddhist schools I propose to select those which may be considered the main ones, all of which originated in the distant past or at least several centuries ago, but are still living parts of the Buddhist tradition with numerous followers:

1. The oldest one among them is undoubtedly the Theravāda tradition which is the only surviving Hīnayāna school of Buddhism.

2. Next comes the early Mahāyāna school of the 'Transcendental Wisdom' (Prajñāpāramitā) which radically re-interpreted the old tradition. It survives not as a single school but split into numerous sects, and its tenets are incorporated in all subsequent reinterpretations which are not limited to the Pāli sources. Even the Theravāda doctrines have been influenced by it over the centuries.

3. A further development of Mahāyāna is the Tantric school, sometimes called Vajrayāna, which originated in India but became prominent in Tibet where it has remained the only religion of the people up till the present day. Its tenets are not different from those of the early Mahāyāna, but it has developed specific methods of approaching the set goal.

4. The boldest innovation in interpretation of the Buddhist tradition seems to be the Zen school. A closer examination, however, reveals it to be a movement reacting against the elaborate ritualism of the popular Mahāyāna practice, against its formalisation of the doctrine and overemphasis on religious texts. Although a Mahāyāna sect, it resembles the early Theravāda school in its soberness of approach to strict personal practice.

5. A reference should also be made to a popular movement within the Buddhist tradition which to some orthodox Buddhists appears to be the very opposite of the Buddha's message of self-reliance. It is the Pure Land School which actually originated with the appearance of the Bodhisattva doctrine and found ready acceptance among Mahāyāna lay followers.

Its influence really runs through all Mahāyāna Buddhism when it addresses the masses. As a separate sect it survives in Japan.

6. Finally the above set of propositions should be applied to some trends within the Buddhist tradition which we can find in contemporary Japan and in the West in order to see whether they are predominantly extensions of various Buddhist schools of the past or whether there is or is going to be a new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition in either of these spheres.

If the proposed set of criteria proves to be workable in these instances, the title question may be considered to have been answered.

#### THE THERAVĀDA TRADITION

The Pāli Canon is admittedly the oldest and best preserved source of the early Buddhist teaching. It forms the basis for the oldest surviving school of Buddhism called Theravāda which considers it to be the authentic word of the historical Buddha himself. Although this claim is not quite supported by scholarly research, the Pāli Canon undoubtedly contains the core of Buddhist teachings presented in a rational and consistent way which allows us to feel the strong personality of their author, although the Canon itself was put together by the monks after his death and written down as late as the first century B.C. in Ceylon. Other Hinayāna sects in India had their own Canons which, however, have not been preserved. Only fragments of the Sarvāstivāda scriptures have been found, some of which do not differ much from the Pāli Canon as far as the reported words of the Buddha are concerned. Parts of the Hinayāna Canons, especially those dealing with the code of behaviour of monks (Vinaya) were translated into Tibetan, Chinese and, later, into Japanese.

We may say that without the Pāli Canon our understanding of later stages of the Buddhist tradition would be very limited and even Mahāyāna Buddhists have to resort to it, if they want to make a deeper study of their religion. This is also the reason why Pāli studies in modern Japan are flourishing.

It is only natural that the set of objectives of the Buddhist tradition outlined above should be best illustrated by passages from the Pāli Canon.

1. The main purpose of the teaching, viz. that of liberation, is clearly expressed in a discourse of the Pāli Canon in which the Buddha is reported to speak about the eight marvels of his teaching which he compares with the eight marvels of the great ocean:

‘Just as, monks, the great ocean has one flavour, the flavour of salt, even so, monks, this teaching has one essence, the essence of liberation.’<sup>3</sup>

Liberation, deliverance, release or freedom – these are possible renderings of the Pāli expression ‘vimutti’ which is seldom described as a positive value, but mostly defined negatively as release from the conditioned, samsaric existence which is marked by deluded state of mind. Within the samsaric existence there is no lasting satisfaction and no permanent salvation. Even a birth in a blissful heaven is only temporary and will be followed by a descent into one of the lower realms of existence, unless the blind urge to live is abandoned. A beginning to this wandering through saṃsāro cannot be found:

‘Unimaginable, monks, is a beginning to the round of births. For beings obstructed by ignorance and fettered by craving that are wandering through the round of births a starting point is not conceivable.’<sup>4</sup>

Five types of existence are taught by the earliest sources. A being is reborn successively in them according to the nature of his deeds and volitions. When he overcomes the inclination to act and to will within these phenomenal spheres of existence and turns away from them completely, release or Nirvāna follows which is absolute and definite:

‘These, Sāriputta, are the five destinies: hell, animal womb, the sphere of the deceased ones, men, gods. I clearly know hell and the path leading to hell and the way of conduct leading to hell and I also clearly know how, according to the course followed, one is reborn on losing one’s body, after death, in a state of woe, with bad destiny, in a place of suffering, in hell. And I clearly know the animal realm and the sphere of the deceased ones and the path leading to the animal realm and to the sphere of the deceased ones and the way of conduct leading to the animal realm and to the sphere of the deceased ones and I also clearly know how, according to the course

3. ‘Seyyathā pi bhikkhave mahāsamuddo ekaraso loṇaraso, evam eva kho bhikkhave ayam dhammo ekaraso vimuttiraso.’ *Udāna* 5,5.

4. *Sutta Nipāta*, 2, 15, 14.

followed, one is reborn on losing one's body, after death, in an animal womb or in the sphere of the departed ones. And I clearly know men and gods and the path leading to the world of men or to the worlds of gods and I also clearly know how, according to the course followed, one is reborn, on leaving one's body, after death, among men or in a state of bliss, in a heavenly world. And I clearly know Nirvāna and the path leading to Nirvāna and the way of conduct leading to Nirvāna and I also clearly know how, according to the course followed, one dwells, after destruction of cankers, in cankerfree liberation of mind and liberation through wisdom, having fully understood, realized and attained it by oneself in this world.<sup>5</sup>

In order to reach liberation it is necessary to get to know and understand the truth as it was discovered by the Buddha. This can, practically, happen only when one is reborn in a human form, which is not easy owing to ignorance of the laws governing the mechanism of the process of rebirth. From the texts it is clear that man is not regarded as an absolute value. The nature or status of manhood is not guaranteed and is acquired only on the basis of previous deeds and volitions. As the horrors of subhuman existences do not leave much space for reflection and understanding to develop, volitional activities tend to take the form of blind reactions and an ascent to humanhood is very rare. Superhuman existences in heavenly spheres are again so pleasant that the urgency to understand the laws of existence is not felt and in due course a descent into lower forms of life follows. In a human existence either of these situations may occur so that descent as well as ascent are possible, but a descent is more likely, as genuine interest in religious life is not so frequent. An ascent from subhuman forms is extremely difficult and usually occurs only after long periods and a number of births in painful conditions when the suffering softens the brutal urges and a residual aspiration from past higher births brings the being into a higher sphere of life.

The rarity of obtaining a human existence in the process of rebirth is expressed in the following passage:

'Just as if, monks, a man should throw into the mighty ocean a yoke with one hole, and then a one-eyed turtle should pop up to the surface

5. *Majjhima Nikāya* 12. PTS edition Vol. 1, pp. 73–74. I have abridged the text for this translation.

only once at the end of every hundred years. Now what do you think, monks, would that one-eyed turtle push his neck through that yoke with one hole (on each occasion) when he popped up to the surface, only once at the end of every hundred years?' – 'It might be so, Lord, now and again, after the lapse of a long time.' – 'Well, monks, sooner, do I declare, would that one-eyed turtle, if he were to pop up to the surface. . . . thus, sooner would he push his neck through that yoke with one hole than would a fool, who has once gone to the downfall, become a man. What is the reason for that? It is because herein there is no living of the righteous life, no living in tranquillity, no doing of righteous deeds, no doing of meritorious deeds, but feeding on each other's flesh and feeding on the weaker sort prevails.'<sup>6</sup>

When, after arduous process, a follower of the Buddha reaches final release, he has an immediate recognition of his freedom. This is expressed usually by the following words:

'Exhausted is birth, the holy life has been lived, what was to be done has been done, there is no further birth after this – thus he realized.'<sup>7</sup>

His personal career has been completed and he has become an Arahāt (a worthy one), similarly as the Buddha who also bears this title, the difference between them being this that the Buddha reached liberation and discovered the way to it himself while others followed his guidance as disciples. This includes further difference: the Buddha is the incomparable world teacher of the Dharma.

Nirvāna, the final liberation, cannot be conceptually defined or adequately described. It is the final solution to all problems which is achieved by direct experience. It is a state both transcendent and immanent. It is immanent because it can be reached while one is still a living person, in other words it must be within the grasp of one's experience, and it is transcendent, because it is not of this world or cosmos, whether material or spiritual. Even the heavens and the subtlest spheres of formless spiritual

6. *Sutta Nipāta* 5, 455. Quoted from *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, translated by F. L. Woodward (London, 1960), pp. 179–180. I have slightly changed the translation.

7. *Khīnā jāti, vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaniyaṃ, nāparaṃ itthattayāti abhaññāsi.* *Sutta Nipāta* 2, 15, 14. This passage can be found in many discourses in which a disciple of the Buddha is described as having won Arahātship or perfection after he had been instructed by the Buddha in the teaching and in a method of meditation which he then ardently applied. For example in *Dig. Nik.* 8.

existence are, according to Buddhism, parts of this world of saṃsāro. No description involving movement, time or space fits for Nirvāna:

‘Nirvāna is stopping of becoming.’<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it is best paraphrased by Sir Edwin Arnold in his book *The Light of Asia*:

‘If any teach Nirvana is to cease, say unto such they lie.

If any teach Nirvana is to live, say unto such they err.’

An entirely new dimension beyond the grasp of our senses and the comprehension of our mind is here asserted.

2. The second objective of the Buddhist tradition, viz. that of securing the way to liberation by an appropriate way of life was achieved in the oldest times by the Buddha’s creating a community of disciples which gradually developed into the Buddhist order of monks and nuns. First the Buddha transmitted his message to his previous companions from the time when he was but a truth-seeker, who were all wandering ascetics, this way of life being already at that time in India a very ancient one. As he was recognized by them as their teacher and head, this created a separate sect of mendicants within the great and loose community of wandering almsmen. It became of course one of many existing sects which were very fluid and only some of them – like the Jains – formed already a distinct and compact order. But soon the circle of the Buddha’s followers grew and most new arrivals were recruited from the settled population of the country. Distinct rules of conduct were gradually introduced and instructions given so that monks could direct their time and effort systematically to the realisation of the goal.<sup>9</sup> Later on the wandering communities developed into monastic orders and that is how they have survived in all Buddhist countries in Asia. The Theravāda order of monks claims continuity since the days of the Buddha and there is little reason, if any, to doubt it.

3. The wish to preserve the message of liberation and to transmit it to subsequent generations was, according to the Pāli Canon, already the

8. *Sutta Nipāta* 2, 117.

9. The beginning and further development of the Buddhist order in India are described by Sukumar Dutt in his extensive book *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India* (London, 1962).

concern of the Buddha himself. When he reached Enlightenment and had enjoyed the bliss of his achievement for three weeks, the idea of sharing it with others occurred to him. First he was hesitant and inclined to be content with his own freedom, as preaching to others would be a vexation to him. He knew that mankind lived in enjoyment of and attachment to sensual pleasures and that the achieving of Enlightenment required renunciation and dispassion. However, moved by compassion for suffering and striving individuals such as he was prior to Enlightenment, he surveyed the world with 'the eye of an awakened one' which indicates the powers ascribed to a Buddha who was able to see the minds and hearts of others at will. And seeing that there are some beings 'with little dust in their eyes' who could understand his message and grow in insight, he decided to become a teacher with the words:

'The doors of deathlessness are open for those who can hear.'<sup>10</sup>

The missionary character of the Buddhist teaching in the earliest days is further expressed by the story of how the Buddha, when he had sixty disciples, all of whom had reached perfection under his guidance, sent them to preach the Dharma with the words:

'I am freed, monks, from all fetters, both those of gods and those of men. You also, monks, are freed from all fetters, both those of gods and those of men. Wander, monks, on your way for the benefit of many, for the happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the benefit, the happiness of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach, monks, the teaching which is pleasant at the beginning, pleasant halfway through and pleasant when completed. Explain the spirit and the letter of the pure life fulfilled in perfection. There are beings with only little dust in their eyes who, if they do not hear the teaching, will get lost; if they are trained in the teaching, they will grow. And I, monks, will go to Uruvela, the military market town, to preach the teaching.'<sup>11</sup>

When the order of monks and nuns grew in number and the Buddha allowed his senior disciples to accept and ordain newcomers (previously they had had to travel to the place where the Buddha happened to be at the time), the question arose of transmitting correctly the Buddha's teaching. The

10. *Mahāvagga* 1, 5.

11. *Mahāvagga* 1, 11.

method obviously was to give the newly ordained monks the basic rules of conduct, a method of meditation or mental training, if and when they were ripe for it, and instruction in teaching. This was done by repeating to them the Buddha's own words – his sermons he had given and discourses he had led. Sometimes some of the senior and advanced monks – on rare occasions nuns – gave a sermon themselves. However, all such discourses preserved in the Pāli Canon are there reported to have been afterwards repeated to the Buddha by some of the listeners and he then confirmed their correctness saying that, if asked, he himself would have explained the matter in the same way. And, indeed, there is hardly any difference traceable between the discourses handed down under the name of the Buddha and those under the name of his disciples.

Because the Buddha lived and preached for another 45 years after his Enlightenment, he certainly must have given a vast number of sermons and discourses. The Sutta Piṭaka and partly also the Vinaya Piṭaka contain the bulk of what the monks preserved in their memory and arranged in collections after the Buddha's death. Groups of monks specialized, already during the Buddha's lifetime, in memorizing certain groups of the Master's discourses. The memorizing served a double purpose: it helped to absorb the contents of the discourses which were then readily available for contemplation and finally for intuitive penetration of their truth; and it was intended, at the same time, for preserving the teaching from generation to generation. The memorizing was the task particularly of younger monks. Some newly ordained monks who joined the order at an advanced age asked the Buddha for a short instruction and a strict method of meditation which would bring them to realisation more quickly than the slow training involving the memorizing of long texts:

'It will be good, Lord, if the Exalted One can explain to me the teaching in brief, so that, after having listened to the instruction, I may live alone, secluded, earnest and resolute.'<sup>12</sup>

4. Right from the start of his mission the Buddha was concerned, according to the Pāli Canon, with the welfare of others and not only of those who became his disciples as monks. According to the tradition (*Mahāvagga* 1,4)

12. *Samy. Nika*. 11, 7, 15 and elsewhere.

the Buddha's first disciples were actually two merchants who offered food to him and asked him to accept them as lay disciples gone to him for refuge for life.

The lay community of the Buddha's followers then grew steadily during his lifetime as well as afterwards. On numerous occasions the Buddha gave instructions in his teaching to his lay followers or to outsiders, always using such language and such an approach as would make it easy for the listener to understand. Even when he saw that the listener was able to understand his teaching in full, he proceeded in stages in his conversation, from current and obvious problems to subtler points of his teaching.

There were, of course, a few points at the time which went without saying. The chief of them was the doctrine on rebirth and on karma, that is to say that practically all visitors of the Buddha who came to put questions to him believed in some form of transmigration and in the force of their deeds and actions in determining the quality of their future life.

Therefore the Buddha, after the initial conversation was over, and he saw that the listener was accepting his words with confidence, started his instruction on this basis, trying to make him see the deeper aspects and implications of the current beliefs when consistently applied for spiritual development by the individual. He showed him how charity, the attitude of giving and openness to others and their needs, was rewarding, how morality and right conduct were important and how life imbued with such virtues led to rebirth in heavenly spheres which were much preferable to the gross-material form of earthly life. From this he proceeded to explain the futility and dangers of the sensual pleasures and enjoyments which usually form the most prized part of the lives of men, while their spiritual development suffers from them. Contrary to this, renunciation brings peace and prepares one for deeper truth. When afterwards the Buddha saw that the listener could follow him easily and with an open mind as well as with appreciation in his heart of the loftier outlook, he progressed to the exposition of his own teaching formulated in the four noble truths, namely (1) that of suffering which is present in every form of conditioned, phenomenal existence, (2) that of the origin of suffering, which is man's desire and craving to live, experience and find satisfaction within the conditioned and impermanent forms of existence which are tied to his senses and limited intellect and which can never really satisfy him, (3) that of the cessation of suffering which is equal to achieving

Nirvāna and consists in renouncing the desire for this limited personal form of existence and, finally, (4) that of the way leading to this end which has eight parts and includes training in and cultivation of morality, contemplation and wisdom.

In many discourses we find a short, condensed version of this course of instruction given to a layman which goes as follows:

‘The Exalted One gave the householder Upāli a gradual discourse, namely a discourse on giving, a discourse on morality, a discourse on heaven. He made clear to him the disadvantage, lowliness and impurity of sensual desires and the profit in renouncing the world. When the Exalted One understood that the mind of Upāli, the householder, was ready, supple, unhindered, elated and pleased, then he expounded to him that doctrine which is brought forth by the Awakened Ones: on suffering, origin, cessation and way.’<sup>13</sup>

Although basically the Buddha’s attitude clearly indicates that outward renunciation of the world and joining the order of monks is the best guarantee of favourable conditions promoting the chance of reaching Nirvāna, on a number of occasions he confirmed that even a layman or householder might attain the highest and occasionally he even told his monks how a certain householder had reached the goal:

‘Endowed with six qualities, monks, the householder Tapusso lives, having reached the certainty of a Perfect One, seen the deathless and having experienced himself the deathless. What six? Unwavering confidence in the Buddha, unwavering confidence in the teaching, unwavering confidence in the order, noble morality, established knowledge and perfect deliverance.’<sup>14</sup>

Then he enumerated a few other householders and laymen who had attained to the same high goal.

Failing this achievement the Buddha advises the layman to live in such a

13. ‘Atha kho Bhagavā Upālissa gahapatissa ānupubbikathaṃ kathesi, seyyathidaṃ silakathaṃ saggakathaṃ, kāmānaṃ okāraṃ sankilesaṃ, nekkhamme ānisaṃsaṃ pakāsesi. Yada Bhagavā aññāsi Upāliṃ gahapatiṃ kallacittaṃ muducittaṃ vinivaraṇacittaṃ udagacittaṃ pasannacittaṃ atha yā buddhānaṃ sāmukkaṃsikaṃ dhammadesanā taṃ pakāsesi: dukkhaṃ samudayaṃ nirodhaṃ maggaṃ.’ *Maj. Nik.* 2. 56. PTS edition Vol. 1, pp. 379–380. Similar passages can be found also elsewhere.

14. ‘Chahi bhikkhave dhammehi samannāgato Tapusso gahapati Tathāgate nitṭhaṃ gato amataddaso amataṃ sacchikatvā iriyati. Katamehi chahi? Buddhhe aveccappasādena, dhamme aveccappasādena, saṅghe aveccappasādena, ariyena silena, ariyena ñāṇena, ariyāya vimuttiyā.’ *Ang. Nik.* CXIX, 1–2. PTS edition Vol. 3, pp. 450–451.

way which will secure for him good reputation, welfare and happiness on earth and rebirth in heaven after death, while warning them of the evil consequences of a wrong way of life:

‘Then the Exalted One addressed the lay followers of Pataligama: There are these five losses, householders, which attend the wicked and immoral man. What five? Herein, householders, the wicked immoral man, as the result of sloth, comes to great loss of wealth . . . an evil report prevails about him . . . whatever company he may enter, be it a company of nobles, or the Brahmans, or the householders, or a company of recluses, he enters shyly and confused in mind . . . , he is troubled in mind when he dies . . . and upon the break-up of the body, after death, he is reborn in hell, the ill-path, the down-fall, the place of suffering. Now there are these five profits, householders, that attend the righteous man who lives virtuously: Herein, householders, the righteous man who lives virtuously comes by a great mass of wealth, due to his own exertions . . . a good reputation prevails about him . . . into whatsoever company he enters, be it of the nobles, or the brahmans or the householders or the recluses, he enters bold and confident . . . he makes an end with mind untroubled . . . and on the break-up of the body, after death, he is reborn in the blissful, happy world.’<sup>15</sup>

Those who go deeper in their moral and meditational training following the instructions of the Buddha may reach a stage of progress which makes them safe from lower spheres of life and secures them such favourable forms of rebirth from which they are able to finish off their pilgrimage towards Enlightenment:

‘Sāriputta, whatever white-clad homeman you might know who acts controlled with respect to the five ways of training, who has gained four higher mental properties, in which one dwells happy in this world, without difficulty, without pain, without trouble, he can proclaim about himself, if he so wishes: “Freed am I from hell, freed from the womb of an animal, freed from the sphere of the deceased ones, freed from lapse, from bad path, from downfall. A stream-winner am I, not subject to downfall, assured, destined for awakening”.’<sup>16</sup>

15. *Dīgha Nikāya* 2, 82. Quoted from *Some Sayings of the Buddha*, pp. 168–169, abridged and slightly changed.

16. Yaṃ kañci Sāriputta jāneyyatha gihiṃ odātavaśanaṃ pañcasu sikkhāpadesu saṃvutakammantaṃ vatunnañ ca ābhi cetasikānaṃ ditṭha dhammasukhavihārānaṃ nikā-

The five ways of training mentioned are further explained as the consistent practice of five moral rules, namely abstention from killing, from taking what is not given, from wrong conduct as to sexual contacts, from lying and from consuming intoxicants. The four higher mental properties are perfect confidence in the Buddha, in his teaching and in the community of his noble followers, and consistent sticking to purity and virtue.

But even those who are not able to look forward to future achievements and are bound to the earthly form of life are given advice by the Buddha with the prospect of living happily in this world during this life, whether it is the advice to look after their parents to repay their care (*Ang. Nik.* 1,132), an instruction to women on their duties in marriage (*Ang. Nik.* 3,37–8) or to a householder with respect to his way of conduct towards his wife, family, servants, in his business, etc.<sup>17</sup>

This may suffice to show that the Theravāda teaching which is based on the Pāli Canon is undoubtedly a valid interpretation of the Buddhist tradition. However, advantageous as it is to have an extensive and comprehensive set of texts comprising the full teaching, this may, with time, be a disadvantage for the living practice. This seems to have happened within a few centuries after the Buddha's death in India. Then the main objective of his teaching, liberation, no longer seemed to be within the reach of an average follower, even among monks, and it became a distant goal attainable, perhaps, under a future Buddha. In its place came the study of the doctrine and its elaboration with the emphasis laid on the explanation of the nature of this world and of the way one experiences it (Abhidharma). As there hardly were individuals who could proclaim Arahatsip, disputes about the qualities of an Arahata arose. The strict criteria of personal practice were replaced by learned disputes. Lay followers had no say and, indeed, hardly any interest in these matters and they became alienated from the monkhood by whom they were largely regarded as merely their material supporters.

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malābhiṃ akicchābhiṃ, so ākaṅkhamāno attanā 'va attānam vyākareyya 'khīnanirayo 'mhi khīnatiracchānāyonīyo khīnapittivīsayo khīṇāpāyaduggativinipāto, sotāpanno'ham asmi avinipātadhammo niyato sambodhiparāyano' ti.' *Ang. Nik.* CLXXIX, 2. PTS edition Vol. 3, p. 211.

17. See also 'Everyman's ethics', *Four Discourses of the Buddha* (The Wheel Publication, No. 14, Kandy).

## EARLY MAHĀYĀNA TRADITION

However, the vitality of the Buddha's message among the lay followers was still strong and in this situation a new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition appeared under the name of Mahāyāna about 500 years after the Buddha's death which sought to make his teaching again into a lived practice. It obviously came from the circles that did not regard the contemporary order of monks as true preservers and bearers of the Buddha's message. In this new movement laymen were again given a full chance to achieve the highest.

1. It was by the name of its first objective that the Mahāyāna movement appealed to the masses: The goal of life is Enlightenment, which is virtually identical with the achievement of the Buddha himself. However, as the historical Buddha no longer lived within the reach of his followers, and the monk followers of the old tradition seemed to have lost the link with his original message, the new interpretation turned for encouragement and inspiration to the timeless source of Enlightenment in transcendence. The Enlightenment of the historical Buddha came to be looked upon as one of many manifestations of the cosmic element of Enlightenment which is timeless or eternal and which every devoted worshipper or ardent follower may and finally will penetrate.

As the principle of Enlightenment is not remoter from the world now than it was during the life of the Buddha Śakyamuni, there must even now be in the world numerous manifestations of it in action. Enlightenment and its freedom are accessible directly or through the help of enlightened beings (Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) to everybody and no one should be content with a lesser aim.

There is no fundamental difference between the Mahāyāna conception of Enlightenment and the Hīnayāna concept of Nirvāna as shown by the following passage from the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra:

'Enlightenment is not discerned by anyone, nor is it fully known, nor seen, nor heard, nor remembered. It is neither produced nor stopped, neither discribed nor expounded. In so far as there is, Sāriputra, any Enlightenment, that Enlightenment is neither existence nor non-existence. For

there is nothing that could be fully known by Enlightenment, nor does Enlightenment fully know Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup>

There are many passages in the Mahāyāna literature where Nirvāna, Enlightenment, Emptiness, or whatever designation is used for the final achievement, is described in contradictory terms and as 'non-achievement', to indicate its transcendent nature defying all attempts to classify it under known concepts. At the same time it is maintained that Nirvāna is not different from Saṃsāra, that is to say reaching Nirvāna does not mean going to another place. The Enlightenment is to be realized here and now as always present, never arisen, never actually lost.

All the samsaric realms of conditioned existence are practically the same in Hīnayāna and in all Mahāyāna schools. The beings are seen in Mahāyāna as hopelessly lost in samsaric entanglement despite the fact that Nirvāna or Enlightenment is within their reach or, in fact, in their very hearts. Therefore we may circumscribe the difference between an enlightened and unenlightened being according to Mahāyāna as a mere illusion, as a difference resting purely in their respective knowledge or awareness of their true nature. Enlightenment is realized as a result of shifting the consciousness from its being lost in fascination by the samsaric spectacle to the clear appreciation of its own nature which is Enlightenment itself.

2. The way in which the Indian Mahāyāna movement tried to secure conditions for its followers which would lead them towards the goal does not seem to have differed substantially from that offered by previous times. First of all there was continuity of the monastic establishment. The communities of monks were not entirely separately organized according to sects, but in one and the same monastery monks of various sects of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna schools were living together, following the same monastic discipline and daily routine based on the same Vinaya rules. However, the new doctrinal interpretations, which often depended on individual teachers with names that remained illustrious for centuries, increased the importance of the individual teacher-pupil relationship, and individual religious practice under the guidance of a personal teacher was becoming more widespread even among lay followers and was finally more favoured than the

18. E. Conze, *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom* (London, 1955), p. 115.

previous impersonal and anonymous monastic ideal. In the circle of pupils of a famous teacher the status of a monk would not be regarded as higher than that of a layman, as the status itself was of no importance at all on the Bodhisattva path. In a way, this was a return to the situation in earlier days during the Buddha's life, before the order of monks was constituted into a strictly separate community and when the Buddha had many accomplished disciples as we mentioned earlier.

3. The wish to preserve and transmit the message of liberation to others and to subsequent generations appears to be much stronger in the Mahāyāna tradition than in the Hīnayāna one. A real deluge of hitherto unknown sūtras emerged suddenly from obscurity at the beginning of our era and were proclaimed to be the true word of the Buddha. The conception of the Buddha's personality in them was substantially changed, for it is the universal principle of Buddhahood – Dharmakāya – that is supposed to act behind the scene and the historical Buddha came to be regarded as merely its projection. Nevertheless the strength of the personality of the historical Buddha was still such at the time that the new teachings were put into his mouth in order to secure authoritativeness for them. The framework of the early discourses as we know it from the Pāli Canon was carefully copied: every sūtra opens with an account of the scene and circumstances of the sermon and with a description of the audience. Quite often this account is exactly taken over from the previous tradition, the audience being enlarged, however, by countless hosts of Bodhisattvas. Other sūtras were supposedly preached by the Buddha in other spheres of life, an assertion for which support can already be found in the Pāli Canon so that the idea was not new. The Mahāyāna sūtras were supposedly codified by an assembly of Bodhisattvas on the mythical mountain of Vimalasvabhāva – which again echoes earlier traditions of a council of Arahats held after the Buddha's death where all the known discourses of the Buddha were recited and arranged into collections and canonized.

The appearance of the new collections of Mahāyāna sūtras was explained as a renewal of the declining doctrine in the world which had lost its appeal after 500 years and needed renewal in the new age.<sup>19</sup>

19. Comp. E. Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (Bombay, 1960), pp. 29–30.

This theory of the renewal of the message of Enlightenment whenever there was a need shows the great concern for the preservation of the doctrine for all future times. It lays stress on getting across the spirit of the message rather than its original form, thus not only justifying its own new interpretation, but allowing also the possibility or even the necessity of future reinterpretations.

4. The responsibility felt towards the world at large, the concern for every living being, is the very reason given by the Mahāyāna tradition for its regarding itself to be superior to Hīnayāna. When the Buddha and his great disciples had gone, the community of monks seemed to have less regard for the ordinary layman who did not feel the urge to renounce the worldly life and work for his immediate salvation as a monk. Pious deeds were regarded as enough for a layman to perform and monks were interested in achieving their individual salvation or, later, in pursuing their learning. A Mahayanist, however, who strives for Enlightenment takes a Bodhisattva vow upon himself which means that he promises to assist countless beings to reach Enlightenment either by becoming a Buddha and teaching them or by postponing the final achievement of full Nirvāna for himself, while helping others, until all other beings reach the goal.

In this way a Bodhisattva renounces the world and personal worldly aims – not necessarily by becoming a monk, i.e. by giving up formally his life in society, but in any event internally or mentally. His aim is to develop spiritual insight and wisdom conducive to Enlightenment, and, motivated by compassion, he uses them then on various levels of the samsaric life in order to help others. He does not seclude himself, but lives a model life wherever he is in order to show to others that spiritual life is possible in any conditions. He himself adopts an attitude of strict unselfishness and trains himself in immaculate conduct, while assisting others even in their lower needs which are often motivated by personal selfishness, and this he calls skill in means, enabling him gradually to lead others to the higher aspirations, meanwhile securing for them some relief from suffering and a better prospect for the future.

## TANTRISM

The Tantric interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, known also as Vajrayāna, belongs virtually within the scope of Mahāyāna teachings. The differences between the two of them are not doctrinal – only here and there we find emphasis put on different aspects of the doctrine – but rather methodical, i.e. in adopted practices.

1. When it is attempted in Tantrism to circumscribe the goal, i.e. the liberation or Enlightenment, there is much less speculation than in Mahāyāna. It is understood in Tantrism that the goal is liberation from the limited ego-centred individuality which ties beings to the samsaric form of existence. In the final experience of liberation Tantrism stresses especially its character of blissfulness which might seem to be an innovation, but at a closer inspection we find that Tantrism only puts an emphasis on what was often mentioned as a characteristic of Nirvāna already in the Pāli Canon.<sup>20</sup>

2. Enlightenment – or reaching the Supreme Buddhahood, as Vajrayanists would prefer to say – being the ultimate objective of Tantric Buddhism, we cannot but concede that it is a valid interpretation of the Buddhist tradition, however objectionable some of the Tantric practices appear to be both to some Western students of Buddhology and to some Buddhists of other schools. And the methods used by Tantrism to achieve Enlightenment are numerous and often, at first glance, quite contrary to what one would expect in view of the methods of old Buddhist traditions and with respect to the nature of the proclaimed goal which, even in Tantrism, is finally achieved only on the basis of aloofness from the phenomenal world and by transcending personal involvement in samsaric existence. From this last point of view even the Tantric goal still has the taste of liberation the Buddha referred to when characterizing his teaching.

Numerous Tantric methods often make use of pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices (which again is nothing foreign to Buddhism, as even the Buddha's eightfold path in its oldest version incorporates practices of pre-Buddhist yoga). But in Tantrism we find magic, occult practices of

20. *E.g.*: *Ang. Nik.* 9, 34; *Maj. Nik.* 59; *Sutta Nipāta* 36, 26.

various sorts, mantras, elaborate ceremonies, ritual dances, bewildering music, sessions at which eating meat and drinking alcoholic drinks as well as sexual union are essential parts of the ritual, and visual projective meditations. There are two distinct schools of Tantric Buddhism, usually called the 'left-hand' one and the 'right-hand' one. The methods of the latter are fairly in line with the Buddhist approach as we can understand it: mantras and ceremonial performances are used to prepare the mind, to capture the imagination and to direct it towards the inner world of symbols which finally are recognized as forces of the mind and are linked to the forces of the universe, only to be, in the last instance, dismissed by the mind which is supposed to transcend them in the final liberation.

But the left-hand practices have also their proper explanation. It is maintained that the present age is the dark, materialistic age (Kali yuga of the Hindu Purānas) in which sensual pleasures rank first and lofty ideals have little attraction. Ordinary religious practice does not lead anywhere and even sincere pursuit of the traditional Buddhist path brings results only after arduous efforts stretching over innumerable successive lives. The Tantrist wants Enlightenment quickly, during this present life. Through plunging into highly refined pleasures – although under strict ceremonial provisions – one satisfies one's deepest urges and there remains nothing mysterious in sensual pleasures still to be desired. At the bottom of the experiences of the blind pursuer of sensual pleasures there is only surfeit and disgust or even despair. But when a Tantrist has experienced all he can, he gains independence and mastery over his mind with all its previously unknown aspects, for he has never lost sight of the final goal.

3. The message of Tantrism, especially of its esoteric and 'lefthand' practices, is preserved through oral transmission and direct initiation of the pupil by his personal teacher, perhaps under the assistance of senior pupils or experienced initiates. The concern for the future is shown in numerous Tantric texts which, however, hide their meaning by using a highly symbolic language which is supposed to be understood only by those who have undergone sufficient preparation and training in traditional methods and gained knowledge and understanding through persistent study and meditation.

4. In the context of the wider Buddhist tradition the Tantrists consider themselves to be Budhisattvas. They teach other people to tread the path

or to go through life according to their own individual capacities. They assist them on all levels of life and therefore themselves are engaged in all possible activities. An example of this has been Tibet, with lamas as ascetic hermits as well as political rulers, learned abbots of huge monasteries as well as village magicians and so on. The two guiding principles in their teaching vocation which provide for the conciliation of two entirely different activities like spiritual endeavours and worldly proficiency are called 'wisdom' and 'skill in means' respectively.<sup>21</sup>

#### ZEN BUDDHISM

The Zen interpretation of the Buddhist tradition dates back to the early centuries of our era, but it seems to be the liveliest one in the present Buddhist world. It has, of course, undergone considerable evolution throughout centuries and has produced an enormous bulk of literature despite its emphasis put on direct transmission of its message from teacher to pupil.

1. The aim of Zen is expressed by the term Enlightenment which is the expression preferred within the whole of the Mahāyāna tradition. But there has been no consistent attempt in Zen to present a doctrinal formulation of what is meant by that term. The emphasis is placed on its aspect of personal experience rather than on fixing a binding criterion of its validity. Consequently we have the impression that the contents of the experience of Enlightenment differ with different individuals – masters and pupils of Zen –

21. Information on Tantric Buddhism is not yet available in its entirety. Many texts undoubtedly have not yet been discovered or made public, many available texts have not yet been studied, analysed and translated, and many studied texts are not yet quite understood. Most books on Buddhism giving comprehensive information on its schools have a chapter on Tantric teachings, e.g.: E. J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London, 1967), Chap. 18. A more suggestive section on Tantrism is in: E. Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development* (Oxford, 1957), Chap. 8, pp. 176–200. The right-hand practice has been comprehensively described in Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (London, 1962). See also: John Blofeld, *The Way of Power* (London, 1971), and Herbert Guenther, *Tibetan Buddhism Without Mystification* (Leiden, 1968). Both practices, the right-hand one and the left-hand one, are described in C. M. Chen, *Buddhist Meditation Systematical and Practical* (Kalampong, 1967).

who nevertheless seem to be able to recognize mutually the genuineness of their respective experience.

The common element in the experience of Zen Enlightenment appears to be the sense of being freed from the tension of the limited, individual angle of looking at reality, and a sudden flash of vision which has the character of breaking through to impersonal reality itself.

Contradictory as it must sound, such a breaking through on the part of an individual may be a comparatively limited event in need of further deepening. The individual thus may go through a series of experiences of Enlightenment and not even a master has necessarily to be an Accomplished One in the traditional Buddhist sense. Perhaps that is why the experiences of Zen Enlightenment are referred to by terms which are not equivalents of the Sanskrit term *Bodhi*, the most common one nowadays being the Japanese expression 'Satori'. However, the awareness of the final achievement of complete Enlightenment is also present in Zen. The admitted goal is to reach Buddhahood. The Buddha nature being in everybody, the experience of Enlightenment is often described as seeing one's own true nature.

2. In securing the way leading to the realization of the aim, that is to say to the experience of Satori and finally to seeing one's own Buddha nature, the Zen Buddhist school uses the traditional monastic institution as it was established in Chinese Buddhism, with a monastic discipline and routine going well back to the oldest Vinaya tradition. The specific training, however, is untraditional and is based on close contacts between the pupil and his master.

Again we may say that this is a return, in fact, to the method of the earliest days of the Buddha's teaching activities when he was himself the personal teacher of every newcomer and transmitted directly to him his own teaching and method. When the number of his followers was too large, the advanced pupils stepped in and taught the novices. But they would not necessarily transmit to them their own experiences or living knowledge, but would teach them the Buddha's doctrine in his own words which soon resulted in a mere process of memorizing the Buddha's discourses – already during his lifetime. But as we know, some newcomers preferred to ask the Buddha himself for a method of meditation leading quickly to the goal and were given it individually according to their maturity and type of character

so that the method of direct transmission never entirely disappeared, at least during the Buddha's lifetime.

The approach of the Zen masters to teaching follows, in fact, in the footsteps of the Buddha himself. Individual audiences given from time to time to every pupil are used by them as a method of transmitting the message of Enlightenment. Book knowledge is not encouraged and Zen followers actually claim that the line of transmission of the message has never been broken but descended directly from the Buddha in a line of patriarchs, and it continued in China as a 'special tradition outside scriptures'. The first Zen patriarch was the Buddha's pupil Kashyapa and the 28th one was Bodhidharma who came to China and started a new line of patriarchs there. Although this cannot be historically verified, there is no reason to believe that the message of Enlightenment as taught by the Buddha could not have been preserved in some way also outside the spoken word and that the Scriptures written down four centuries after his death must necessarily have been the only means of communicating it further.

3. The concern for preserving the message within the Zen tradition is best illustrated by the teaching of the succession of patriarchs which has been mentioned and by the procedures developed by the Zen masters to pass on their teaching vocation to their ablest pupil when they felt death approaching. Contemporary Zen Buddhism in Japan has exact regulations for the installation of Zen masters which involve long years of monastic discipline, preparation, meditation and testing the validity of the candidate's experience of Satori by a recognized master.

4. The Zen attitude towards the laity is very open. The students of Zen have always been recruited both from the ordained monkhood and from the laity. In Japan some masters even took part in public life and many outstanding individuals from various branches of public, commercial and cultural life have been Zen followers. Training in Zen meditation is given to all those who show interest and are willing to accept the guidance and discipline. Without stressing the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism, which includes the teaching of rebirth, and rather presupposing that they have already been absorbed by the newcomer, Zen points out the importance of living in the present ('here and now' as the Pāli texts already put it). But

without insisting on the immediate ultimateness of the present experience, Zen appreciates all that may be fresh and creative in it. In this way it has exercised considerable influence on various aspects of life, making it more worthwhile and adding a dimension of depth where we would not expect to find it. Examples of this are numerous – Zen painting, poetry, flower arrangement or tea ceremony. Even such areas as archery and swordsmanship were shaped by the Zen meditative approach to them. And the national character of contemporary Japanese people still seems to owe to Zen its flexibility and effectiveness.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE PURE LAND SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM

It is not possible to look upon the Pure Land teaching as a separate new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition; it is rather a part of the Mahāyāna tradition and a logical byproduct of its Bodhisattva doctrine. Mahāyāna interpretation at its highest aims at the achievement of Supreme Buddhahood and the path to it leads through ten stages of Bodhisattvahood. A Bodhisattva is one who is not content with liberating himself, but wants to liberate or assist in the liberation of countless beings who are subject to suffering. The Pure Land teaching is the religion of those countless suffering beings. They not only feel unable to follow the Bodhisattva path themselves, but they also feel that even achieving Nirvāna for themselves is altogether beyond their personal capacity and therefore they find consolation in a Bodhisattva's vow which expresses his determination to save all beings who turn to him for help.

The sect is probably only slightly younger than the Mahāyāna tradition itself, having originated in India and been brought to China as early as 150 A.D. It survives in Japan as Amidism. It centres round the figure of the mythological Buddha Amitābha and his paradise (Pure Land) which he created for his followers.

22. Despite the fact that Zen claims to be independent of book knowledge, Zen literature is abundant. Also the literature on Zen has grown enormously. For various reasons the following three books seem to me to be a fairly representative reading for gaining first information: Heinrich Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism* (London, 1963; German ed. 1959); Bernard Philips, *The Essentials of Zen Buddhism. An Anthology of the Writings of D. T. Suzuki* (London, 1963); Chan Chen-Chi, *The Practice of Zen* (London, 1960).

1. Theoretically, Nirvāna remains the goal for this school, too, but for all practical purposes the aim is reduced, during this life, to the securing of the next rebirth in the Western paradise of Amitābha. Only there, in the presence of his compassionate saviour and teacher, the humble and unsophisticated follower may hope to understand the message of true salvation and subsequently achieve the full Nirvāna.

2. The means adopted for securing rebirth in the Western paradise are externally very simple and finally have been reduced to two elements: unshakable faith in the Buddha Amitābha and the repetition of his name. Nevertheless, even in this simplified version of the Buddhist practice, if it is earnestly followed, genuine experiences similar to those achieved by followers of other traditional methods are sometimes reported.

3. The message of the Pure Land teaching is spread and handed down by priests of the sect. The institution of monkhood has been practically abandoned. The priests marry and lead normal lives not very different from those of the lay followers, the reason given being this, that the message of salvation should be brought directly into the ordinary life of ordinary people for whom it has been meant and it should not be clouded for them by doctrinal subtleties and the requirements of arduous practice.

4. As salvation is secured through the help of Amitābha, there is no need to renounce ordinary life. Happy life adapted to existing conditions is stressed, together with the sanctioning of social duties and with valuing marriage as a way of sharing the burden of life.<sup>23</sup>

#### MODERN TENDENCIES IN BUDDHISM

All hitherto discussed interpretations of the Buddhist tradition are still living forces in contemporary Buddhism with little or no change in the doctri-

23. As sources the relevant sections of the following books may be consulted: E. Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development* (Oxford, 1957); J. H. Kamstra, *Encounter or Syncretism. The Initial Growth of Japanese Buddhism* (Leiden, 1967); H. Hackmann, *Laien-Buddhismus in China* (Stuttgart, 1924).

nal formulations or the practical applications. Almost all Buddhist countries keep alive as their present religion some of the described traditions without any attempt at new interpretation. It is only in modern Japan, with her astonishing capacity to produce spontaneously new religions and new sects within existing religions, that the Buddhist tradition is undergoing some new interpretation. And it is only in the countries with Western civilisation that Buddhism, having become during the past few decades a part, albeit small, of the pattern of contemporary religious life, is expected by some to produce in due course a new 'yāna', a new, 'Western', interpretation of its message.

Both these trends are worth a brief examination.

#### JAPAN

Buddhism in contemporary Japan is based on a historical development started more than a thousand years ago, but at the same time it is marked by an impetus which has probably given it its unusual vigour; the postwar collapse of Japan's national dreams and the resulting disorientation were succeeded by a new optimism and determination to build up a new and prosperous society whose success has been observed by the rest of the world over the past two decades. Various factors may have contributed to this success, but among them there are certainly a few qualities of the Japanese character which have been developed by centuries of Buddhist influence, especially of its Zen school, such as the ability to cope with the present without being haunted by the past and without impatience over the speed at which a desired achievement arrives.

On the other hand, the established Buddhist sects had little, if anything, to contribute to the national revival, although many of their members either played a leading role in it or contributed to it as ordinary workers. Consequently they resented the fact that Buddhism began to be looked upon as practically dead, especially by Christian visitors. This judgment has proved to be entirely wrong by the new orientation within the Buddhist movement which is coupled with the term 'modernisation' and aims at including into the Buddhist outlook a concern for social problems and community life.

When we examine the new sects, societies and organisations of this post-war Buddhist revivalist movement, it appears that none of them can be

credited with having put forth a new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition. They all fit within the Mahāyāna tradition, the Lotus Sūtra being their basic text. Some of them even try to stress certain elements of the original Buddhist tradition – Pāli studies flourish in Japan today. The innovations or the modernisation of the Buddhist tradition do not introduce any new or foreign elements into the Buddhist attitude. They fit well into our set of criteria, particularly into point four, with the emphasis laid on achieving happiness during life on earth. Happiness in this world, it is maintained, is directly linked to the highest attainment, for there is no justification for the expectation that the happiness of Buddhahood could be achieved through unhappiness in this world.

The old established sects of Japanese Buddhism – those based on early Mahāyāna, on Zen and on Pure Land teachings – continue to exist, but the new popular movements are practically all based on or inspired by the 13th century reformer Nichiren (1222–1282) who repudiated all schools of Buddhism existing in his time and concentrated his efforts on inciting in his followers a simple faith in the Lotus Sūtra.

As already mentioned, the new movements preserve all the basic points of the Buddhist tradition. But, more than the older schools, they stress responsibility towards the world at large and thus bring into their attitudes and activities the element of humanisation which was more or less lost sight of in some other sects as a result of impersonal methods of meditation. Further we find there the tendency to rationalisation and demythologizing of some ideas concerning the afterlife (at least on the part of intellectual followers) and especially the acceptance of tasks to be carried out on this earth so that social service and the feeling of solidarity are encouraged. To a certain degree this also is more a return to the oldest Buddhist tradition than an innovation. But the consequences of these attitudes are sometimes pushed further than would be expected, as in the case of Sōka Gakkai ('Value Creating Society'), a movement which finally founded even a political party (Komeito – the Party of Purity) as an instrument of their social endeavours. The Soka Gakkai, however, see in their adopted practice the integration of two traditional tendencies of Nichirenism, namely the 'Path of the King' and the 'Path of the Buddha'.

Reluctant as some Buddhists and interpreters of Buddhism may be to recognize such tendencies as still Buddhist, it has to be pointed out that there

is an old Indian tradition of a Dharma rāja, a righteous king, which had been included in the Pāli tradition (see the Cakkavati Sutta of Majjhima Nik. 26). Here the Buddha is reported to have given his views on the perfect way of ruling the state and on the organisation of society by describing a perfect state of which he himself was the ruler in one of his former lives. This tradition materialized to some extent two hundred years after the Buddha in the person of the Buddhist Emperor Aśoka who is still often referred to by Buddhists with some pride.

Political tendencies are not at all foreign to the Buddhist tradition, as shown even by the history of Theravāda countries, such as Ceylon and Thailand. Upon the whole we may say again that the present day developments in Japanese Buddhism are not new interpretations of the Buddhist tradition, but rather they revive, stress and elaborate some of its less known aspects.<sup>24</sup>

#### WESTERN COUNTRIES

When we turn to Buddhist activities in the West, we face a very young development. The knowledge of Buddhist doctrines in the West is not much older than a century and that is a very short time in the history of a religious movement. The first encounters of the Western mind with Buddhism took place in the U.S.A. as a result of Chinese and Japanese immigration and in Europe as a result of learned research into Buddhist literature followed by public interest when books on Buddhism were published. Since the beginning of this century various Buddhist groups, societies and communities have kept appearing and disappearing, but it is possible to say that after the second world war the development has shown that Buddhism has come West to stay as one of the accepted religious movements. Although there are Buddhist activities going on in a number of Western countries, Buddhism has so far firmly established itself only in the U.S.A., in England and in West Germany.

As might be expected, there has been no real attempt at a new interpreta-

24. The latest information on modern trends in Japanese Buddhism are described in a paper by H. Dumoulin, 'Buddhismus in modernem Japan', in: *Buddhismus der Gegenwart* (ed. by H. Dumoulin, Freiburg. 1970).

tion of the Buddhist tradition in the West and the pattern of Buddhist activities here is based on the Asiatic schools of Buddhism. In the U.S.A. the Japanese influence prevails and Zen is by far the most popular school. It is perhaps the only one which can claim a modern innovation, namely an attempt to adapt the Zen attitude to life to the needs of the Hippy subculture — a trend understandably deplored by serious Buddhist followers. Otherwise both the Theravāda and the Tibetan form of Buddhism have made some progress in the U.S.A. in recent years.

In Germany the first Buddhist societies were of Theravāda orientation. After the second world war Mahāyāna also gained in popularity and there are now branches of Japanese Jodo Shin Shu (Pure Land School), of Tibetan Arya Maitreya Mandala (Tantric or Vajrayāna school) and some Zen groups. Most Buddhist groups in Germany are collective members of the German Buddhist Union which is a purely administrative institution without any ambition to influence its members as to the interpretation of the Buddhist tradition. The only attempt at a re-interpretation of the Buddhist teachings has been undertaken by the 'Buddhistisches Seminar für Seinskunde' in Hamburg. Again it is not a new interpretation, but it aims at the reformulation in contemporary language of the teachings contained mainly in the discourses of the Buddha (Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli Canon) to the exclusion of later commentaries and practically also of the Abhidhamma.

In England the situation has been slightly different from elsewhere. Theravāda also prevailed in the first 'Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland', but when in 1924 the present Buddhist Society in London was founded, it was meant to be and has remained an organisation enabling its members to undertake the study and practice of Buddhism as a whole as well as its different schools. Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the general Mahāyāna approach, flourish there side by side and the tolerant attitude of the Society and its members allows expression to be given also to comparisons with and ventilation of ideas of Theosophic, Vedāntist and Christian origin.

There is, however, a clearly detectable tendency within the Buddhist Society to treat Buddhism as a whole, to try to establish Buddhism above or without schools as a non-sectarian Buddhism. Its founder president, Ch. Humphreys, made a contribution to this trend by formulating 12 principles acceptable to all schools and there are occasional hints in the Society's ma-

gazine at the possibility of developing a Western school of Buddhism. All these activities are well within the sphere of established Buddhist principles, and therefore there is a likelihood that if a new Western interpretation of the Buddhist tradition is arrived at – a task for at least another century or two, rather than for one or two decades – it will fit well within the historical and phenomenological criteria of its validity.

Another development within the English Buddhist movement, which seems to be forward-looking, is only four or five years old. It is called the 'Friends of the Western Buddhist Order' and is led by an Englishman who spent 20 years in India as a Buddhist monk under the name Sangharakshita. His interpretation of Buddhism tries to integrate the three Buddhist traditions (Hīna-, Mahā- and Vajrayāna) into a comprehensive one (a tendency which is not new and can be traced in some Tibetan sects, particularly also in the Arya Maitreya Mandala). The stress, however, seems to be on introducing into the West a kind of Buddhist community life. If Buddhism is to find a firm footing in the West – it is the founder's view – it cannot be left to intellectual study and to individual meditational practice with occasional social gatherings and classes – a pattern adopted by the Buddhist Society of London and other groups – but small communities have to be formed which will let Buddhism penetrate their whole daily way of life. There are two such communities so far, one of which has existed for about four years.<sup>25</sup>

If this experiment proves successful, it will provide another source for a possible future new interpretation of the Buddhist tradition.

25. See a chapter on 'Buddhism in the West' by E. Benz in: *Buddhismus der Gegenwart* (Freiburg, 1970). For English Buddhism, information is best obtained from the publications of the Buddhist Society in London, particularly from: *The Middle Way*, *Journal of the Buddhist Society*, and *Buddhism and the Buddhist Movement Today*. See also C. Humphreys, *Basic Buddhism* and *Sixty Years of Buddhism in England*. For the movement of the 'Western Buddhist Order' led by Sangharakshita, see their *Bulletin of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order*, published four times a year. For the approach of their founder to Buddhism, the following two books are of importance: Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (Bangalore, 1966), and *The Three Jewels* (London, 1967).

## ADDITIONAL NOTE

During the discussion at the Colloquium the point was raised that negative examples, if available, might support the workability and credibility of the proposed set of criteria. Replying the author suggested the Pudgalavāda (Pāli: Puggalavāda) teaching as an example of an invalid interpretation of the doctrinal aspect of liberation and the modern Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism as being entirely at variance with the Buddhist doctrine.

Describing the first objective of the Buddhist tradition, namely liberation (see above, p. 3), it was said: 'It is brought about by the extinction of personal desire, hate and ignorance which results in detachment from the five constituents of empirical personal existence.' This sufficiently expresses the basic doctrinal tenet of Buddhism, held by all historically known schools of Buddhism, including the contemporary ones and excluding the Pudgalavādins, that there exists no substratum of a personality apart or different from the five constituents of empirical personal existence (pañca-upādāna-skandha). Life in the empirical sense is a constant process of regrouping of the elements of these five constituents. Liberation is equivalent to the cessation (nirodha) of this process of regrouping and there can be no talk, in the strict sense, of a person or personality reaching liberation or Nirvana.

The Pudgalavāda seems to have been held by more than one school; the original one was called Vātsīputriyas (Pāli: Vajjiputtakas, going back perhaps to the 4th century B.C.) from which the school of Sāmmītiyas arose about a hundred years later and was still in existence when Hsuan Tsang visited India (7th century A.D.). Sāmmītiyas possessed their own Canon written in the Apabhramśa dialect which has been lost. Their teaching is known only from refutations of opponents, especially from *Kathāvatthu* 1,1 (English as *Points of Controversy*, PTS, pp. 8–63) and from the *Abhidharmakośa*, Chap. 9. According to these sources the Pudgalavādins taught the existence of a person as a real and ultimate fact, an entity which is undefinable, but transmigrates and finally reaches Nirvāna. The teaching did not survive in the end, being too widely criticized as incompatible with the Buddhist traditional teaching on liberation and Nirvāna. Especially its similarity to the Sāṃkhya conception of a puruṣa or to the Brahmanic doctrine on the Individual Ātman (although its counterpart, the doctrine of identity of Ātman with Brahman, the Universal Spirit or Essence was never adopted by Pudgalavādins in any form)

made it difficult to uphold it as a Buddhist teaching distinct from the Brahmanic tradition.<sup>26</sup>

The Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism is not one of a new sect or school of Buddhism, trying to establish itself within the Buddhist tradition, but one of a new movement, claiming universality and viewing itself as a true successor or at least interpreter of all the world's higher religious traditions. Buddhist teachings and terminology are used within this new framework to support the Theosophical syncretic aims as is shown by the title of an important Theosophical book by A. P. Sinnet, *Esoteric Buddhism*. The disparity of the Theosophical and Buddhist teachings is best seen in their respective conceptions of Nirvāna. For Buddhism it is the Absolute, the final transcendental reality. In Theosophical theory the 'nirvānic plane' is the fifth one in the scale of seven ascending planes, the two remaining higher ones being 'hidden in the unimaginable light of God'.<sup>27</sup>

26. Cf. H. v. Glasenapp, *Der Buddhismus* (Berlin, 1936), pp. 55–56; V. Lesny, *Buddhismus* (Prague, 1948), pp. 241–242; E. J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London, 1967), pp. 99 ff. For a different view, though not convincingly documented and based more on speculation, see A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon* (Repr. Varanasi, 1963), pp. 81–84.

27. A. Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom* (Adyar, 1969), p. 184.



## Comparative Hermeneutics: An Epilogue about the Future

The symposium on hermeneutics here represented by the foregoing substantial papers is a starting-point for further thought. So this epilogue is also a prologue to other things: things which are vital to the various kinds of theology and to the study of religion.

One of the original features of the colloquium has been the vigorous attempt to come to terms with *comparison*. Too often the study of religion and theology has been insulated from the real world – a real world which is plural. The project of comparing the hermeneutics of Christianity or Buddhism, that is the theory of interpretation as so far worked out in the context of the Christian and Buddhist traditions, is a move in the attempt to look at religion broadly, and at the same time seriously.

Some might criticize the selection. For after all it could turn out that a distortion is introduced by dealing with Christianity and Buddhism in particular; or if not a distortion at least an unfortunate selectivity, which would mislead those who attempted to generalise on the basis of the discussions here represented.

It could be argued as follows. In Christianity the focus of faith is Christ – the incarnate God who was the Jesus of history; and in Buddhism the focus of loyalty (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha) lies beyond the words of scripture, so in both cases one must go beyond the ‘revealed texts’. But by contrast in Islam the norm of doctrine and of practice is basically the Koran, which is looked upon within Islam in such a way that one cannot ‘go beyond the revealed text’. There is a sense in which the Koran corresponds to the Incarnation.

This gives rise to a hermeneutical asymmetry. In the one case the texts can be treated more lightly. Their reference is what is, as it were, to be developed in the changing circumstances of the world which ultimately require the process of interpretation. So one objection to our procedure in this symposium is that there is an easier task when one selects out Christianity and Buddhism as the bases of comparison. But to this I simply reply: So

life is different for those who do comparative hermeneutics as between (say) Buddhism and Islam. This does not invalidate the other attempt. Further it is probable that the present collection of essays is the first serious expression of comparative hermeneutics as an intellectual enterprise in the study of religion. No wonder it is not comprehensive! But it can be an important beginning.

It might also be added, as it were between an objection and a commendation of the enterprise, that the papers do not seriously raise, or go into, the problems of the theory of interpretation in regard to non-religious (or apparently non-religious) traditions – such as political ones. How are the works of Marx to be interpreted? How those of Mao? Clearly there are developments at work, and also theories on how to apply and so extend the insights of the ‘founders’. The problems are parallel to those in religion. Perhaps indeed they are identical in a sense: it all depends on how one defines ‘religion’ and on the other side ‘ideology’. (It is my own conviction that religions and political ideologies should be treated together in the history of religions, etc.)

It is true that the above questions are scarcely directly touched on in the papers in this volume, but they lie implicitly in the enterprise. But perhaps the most important problem arising from the symposium is the question of the levels at which interpretation, and theories of interpretation, may exist. What I have in mind is this. At the lowest level, a person in a given tradition gives his account of a doctrine or of some other element of the tradition. In saying this is the ‘lowest’ level, of course no grading is implied. From a logical point of view, this is the initial base. Then at a higher, and more reflective level, one may consider by what criteria one should interpret the tradition in question. A great deal of contemporary hermeneutics is at this level. Thus the sophisticated Christian theologian (for example) may evolve criteria for developing an account of his own tradition. So far the distinction could provide us with a certain ambiguity as to what is meant by ‘comparative hermeneutics’. So far it could mean (a) the comparison of the development of interpretation at the base level; or (b) the comparison of ideas about the criteria, evolved in different traditions, as to the method of interpreting the respective materials by the traditions; or (c) it could mean both (a) and (b).

However, there is another level to consider. For one might at a higher

level of abstraction wish to rise beyond any given theory of interpretation which is 'tradition-bound'. I am not here necessarily claiming that what passes for theory of interpretation is in fact in this way culture-bound (though one is bound to feel unease in this matter in considering the admittedly sophisticated German theories of interpretation stemming from the work of Gadamer, for example). It is surely, however, possible that this is so and indeed in principle almost inevitable, seeing how culture-bound concepts (presuppositions) are so deeply embedded in ways of thinking about one's own tradition. At the higher level, then, that I am considering, one might arrive at a *general theory of religious interpretation*.

By calling it 'general' I mean to draw attention to its trans-cultural validity. But we must be clear as to what such a general theory is *not*. First of all, it is *not* a general theory of the criteria of truth in religion, though it might be connected with such a theory (at present merely adumbrated<sup>1</sup>). Such a theory is not the same as a generalised hermeneutics, insofar as the latter concerns the ways in which traditions are developed – not so much factually as conceptually and so in a sense 'logically' (at least as viewed from within the tradition in question). A generalised hermeneutics concerns truth less directly, in other words. Second, a general hermeneutical theory is *not* a prescription for the genuine interpretation of any given tradition, or of all. The reason is that interpretation problems arise necessarily and typically from the fact that an original text, event or other element in a tradition is taken as given in a milieu other than that in which it originally had its genesis. One may be able to describe the general problems which occur and recur because the milieu has changed so generally. But there is no real possibility of providing a formula to deal with all cases now and in the future.

Indeed a major point (maybe a virtue) about religious traditions is their openness to the future (an openness conferred in some measure by the openness of the future in general!). This openness gives hermeneutics a problematic status. But also it should be noted that I have adverted to three levels – the basis, the tradition-bound theory of interpretation, and the general theory. It is however unlikely that the three levels can be kept always and

1. *E.g.* in my *Reasons and Faiths* (1955), and in William Christian, *Oppositions of Religious Doctrines* (1972).

effectively apart. Why this is so I leave to the reader: but clearly there are good reasons why the three-decker universe of hermeneutics may collapse into a one-decker world. This is a major question, then, about the enterprise. The collapse would provide a certain kind of relativism, for it would imply a value-bound approach to the understanding of traditions.

What, however, is the place of what has been called in this volume 'comparative hermeneutics' in the study of religion? The area herein dignified, in my view rightly, by a title vacillates between the descriptive and the normative. I think it is idle for the student of religion to attempt ultimately to escape this dialectic between fact and norm. This is in no way to say that one should sacrifice facts and make a heady rush into commitment. As a private individual the religionist may be committed (rightly) to what he will; but his studies must transcend this – or, more precisely, the whole thing is not strictly a matter of individuals but rather of institutions: so the religionist as a student of religion (that is as having a role within the enterprise of studying religion) must without rushing into commitment face the dialectic between fact and norm to which I have referred. So then there is a question about the ultimate generality which one should expect from the enterprise of a comparative hermeneutics.

But there is a place for it in the study of religion. Indeed a very important place. Why is this so?

The reason is that religion must be studied not merely polymethodically but also dynamically. That is, not only methodologically should different disciplines be brought to bear on religion and religions – such as phenomenology, psychology or sociology – but also religions should be seen as changing and being transformed in various ways. This latter dynamic aspect of religion necessarily has as an accompaniment the evolution of doctrine and more generally of the belief element (including the mythic and the ethical) of a given tradition. But the dynamism of religious change is not only institutional and experimental, it is also bound to be affective and intellectual. And so, since there are bound to be, with religious changes and changes in the criticism, intellectual strains, there is bound to arise the problem (indeed problems, for traditions vary as we have noted) of interpretation.

It follows then that the comparative and plural overview of hermeneutical endeavours (at the intermediate level) has an important future. Indeed it is a future which involves issues of method. So in the last resort comparative

hermeneutics is part of the ongoing debate as to the right ways to study religion.

It cannot be pretended, as I have hinted already, that the papers in this volume provide final solutions to any of the problems which in general arise in the area of hermeneutics. But they surely represent an imaginative start to a whole series of enquiries. Not only our newly-formed western self-consciousness – a self-consciousness which involves among many other things a recognition that we have or ought to have criteria for what we accept from our traditions – but also our new global awareness – an awareness hammering home the pluralism of human culture and the challenge of other ways of life – these forces in combination ensure that we must have a new view of our religious and ideological beliefs. Cultural tribalism, even on the European scale, is *passé*. In this sense, comparative hermeneutics is not *passé*; and it arises inevitably from the recognition of reasonable ‘equality’ between traditions.

However, there are undoubtedly problems to be solved. For as I have already stressed, facts and norms are in a dialectical relationship in the development of a religious tradition. The student of religious history is thus faced from time to time with what necessarily has a strong affinity to the question of the *essence* of a tradition. This point is enough brought out in the foregoing symposium. The question of the essence is just another way (when it comes to the crunch) of asking about the limits of prophecy, or, if you like, the limits of interpretation. The spirit bloweth where it listeth, but it needs to be tested. True it is not the job of the student of religion to test the spirits; but at another level he has a similar task, even though less is at risk.

Meanwhile to complicate matters the results of the religionist’s enquiry feed into theology (say Christian theology) and the circle looks complete. But it is really more like a spiral, happily. In any event it is to be hoped that the present volume is the first start in a deeper and wider enterprise stretching into the future. At least we can claim a certain originality, but it is the originality of the seed.



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