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De Lubac, Christ and the Buddha[1]

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Abstract

Cardinal Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) considered Buddhism to be, after Christianity, the greatest spiritual fact of history. His groundbreaking studies of it have nevertheless received little previous scholarly attention. De Lubac focuses on Amidism, also known as Pure Land Buddhism, because he regards this as the form of Buddhism possessing greatest affinity with Christian faith, particularly in its conceptions of charity and divine personality. Religion cannot be considered in isolation from culture, however. De Lubac argues that Christian-Buddhist encounter is, wherever it occurs, necessarily also an encounter between Western culture and Buddhism, in the course of which boundaries between religions and cultures are continually defined, dissolved and redefined, especially in the understanding of human personhood. He nevertheless defends the universality of faith in Christ, the Word made flesh, in whom the desire of nature for God characteristic of the whole of humanity is fully expressed and realized.

Keywords

Henri de Lubac, Buddhism, Amidism, Christ, culture

In the spring of 1930, Henri de Lubac was asked by the Dean of the Catholic Theological Faculty in Lyons, where he had recently been appointed Professor of Fundamental Theology, to add a course on the history of religions to his teaching portfolio for the forthcoming academic year.[2] Thus were laid the foundations of his interest in

[1] I am grateful to Gavin D'Costa, Wendy Dossett, Owen Gartside, Tom Plant and Andrew Unsworth for comments on this article. It was first presented at the Society for the Study of Theology 2006 Annual Conference at the University of Leeds, UK, the subject of which was "Theology and the Religions." A revised version was presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego, in the Roman Catholic Studies Group.

[2] Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned his Writings* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), p. 31; trans. by Anne Elizabeth Englund of *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* (Namur: Culture et vérité, 2nd edn, 1992).

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religion in general and Buddhism in particular, which he considered to be, after Christianity, the greatest spiritual fact of history. De Lubac's interests in Buddhism developed more fully twenty years later, during the early 1950s. Following the encyclical *Humani generis*, his books *Surnaturel*, *Corpus mysticum* and *De la connaissance de Dieu* were withdrawn from catholic libraries and shops, and he was prohibited from publishing any Christian theology.[3] Buddhist studies enabled him to continue his religious writing and publishing whilst remaining obedient to these restrictions.[4]

It will become clear as the discussion proceeds that De Lubac increasingly focuses his attention on Amidism, or "Pure Land" (*Jōdo Shū*) Buddhism, rather than the Zen or Tibetan varieties, which are better known in popular Western consciousness. Zen is characterised by extreme immanentism: the object of meditative concentration is the self's "true" nature and its goal the nurturing of the eye of wisdom. In Amidism, however, the Buddha himself becomes the object of contemplation by which the self seeks to inhabit his compassionate heart. As in Catholic devotion to Christ, an actual figure is the focus. Also in Amidism, repetition of the Name of Amida in the phrase "*Namu Amida butsu*"—a practice known as *nembutsu*—and of his vows, takes the place of the silent, wordless meditation of Zen (*AB* II 14; ch7). This invocation of a personal name is closer to Christian prayer, especially the Jesus Prayer tradition, than to Tibetan yoga or tantra. From a Christian perspective, Amidism can thus be seen as the fullest flowering of the *Mahāyāna* (Great Vehicle) tradition, in which meditation and doctrine are represented in a person and a place: the Buddha Amida, and the Pure Land into which the self will be reborn.

The Cross and the Bodhi Tree

The Buddha Shakyamuni instructed his disciple Sariputra that after his death his image should be cut in the shape of a fig tree (*asvattha*), in recollection of his enlightenment gained whilst meditating under such a tree (*AB* I 57). The image of the tree as the place from which

[3] De Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, p. 74.

[4] His principal works in this field are: 1) *AB* I: *Aspects of Buddhism*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1953), opening ch. "Buddhist Charity and Christian Charity" repr. in *Communio* 15 (1988), pp. 497–510; trans. by George Lamb of *Aspects du bouddhisme*, vol. 1: *Amida* (Paris: Seuil, 1951); 2) *AB* II: *Aspects du bouddhisme*, vol. 2: *Amida* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), trans. by Amita Bakha as *History of Pure Land Buddhism*, in *Buddha Dhyana Dana Review* 12, 5–6 (2002); 13, 1 (2003), at www.bdcu.org.au/BDDR; 3) *RBO*: *La Rencontre du bouddhisme et de l'Occident* (Paris: Cerf, 2000 [1952]), no trans.; 4) *TF*: Essays in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989); trans. by Rebecca Howell Balinski of *Théologies d'occasion* (Paris: Desclée, 1984).

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truth and life emerge appears in several places in the *Lotus Sūtra*.[5] The tree, with its roots in the navel of the Supreme Being, is the "image and manifestation of this Being, the emanation of its Energy, the respiration of its Breath; it is the symbol of hidden deity; the greatest of the gods reveal themselves as the spirit moving its branches formed of all the elements—air, fire, water, earth." (*AB* I 65)

In Christian tradition, the Cross is also described using tree of life imagery, as beautifully depicted in the hymn of Venantius Fortunatus often sung on Good Friday:

> Faithful cross above all other
> One and only noble tree
> None in foliage, none in blossom,
> None in fruit thy peer may be.
> Sweetest wood and sweetest iron,
> Sweetest weight is hung on thee. (*AB* I 60)

The suggestion that the cross is a tree which actually bears foliage, blossom and fruit is reflected in the *khach'k'ar* or "living crosses" common amongst Armenian Christians, which have foliage and flowers entwined around them or even growing out of them. The tree motif establishes, moreover, links with other events in salvation history. According to the *Legenda Aurea*, the Cross was hewn from wood from the tree of life in the Garden of Eden.[6] On Adam's death, Seth obtained one of its branches from the cherubim guarding the garden and planted it at Golgotha, named after the skull of Adam who is buried there.

The tree of life therefore represents salvation, in different forms, to both Buddhist and Christian. The salvation offered to the Buddhist is founded on moral self-discipline, concentration and wisdom, and thus possesses pronounced Gnostic overtones. The Buddha experiences suffering simply by his participation in the human condition. He does not, like Christ, take on the suffering of others in order to buy back humanity from sin into fellowship with a divine being distinct from him. There are several similarities between the Buddhist and Christian views of salvation, however, notwithstanding this large difference in the redemptive process. In mainstream Christian soteriology, knowledge also has a key role, being prominent for instance in the wisdom tradition. There is, moreover, a recurring supposition that the Cross was manufactured not from the tree of life but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*AB* I 58). Furthermore, the motif of spiritual ascent through successive stages of enlightenment is suggested in Christian discourse by the image of the ladder, common in Syriac

[5] *Lotus Sūtra* 7; 27.

[6] Jacobus de Voragine, "The Exaltation of the Holy Cross," in *The Golden Legend,* I (2 vols.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 168–173.

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tradition and inspired by Jacob's ladder of Genesis 28 (*AB* I 61–62). James of Serugh affirms: "Christ on the Cross stood on the earth, as on a ladder of many rungs."[7] Christian salvation and enlightenment are nevertheless founded on an event that is necessarily social, and situated within a wider objective history of creation, redemption and future consummation. Buddhist awakening is, in contrast, focused on the self, and when it extends beyond the self empties that self, and the history it inhabits, of concrete reality.

Loving the Person

Crucial to De Lubac's encounter with Buddhism is his understanding of the figure of the Buddha. This has both doctrinal and anthropological implications. Just as Christology informs the understanding of the human person, created, redeemed and transformed in the image of Christ, so buddhology cannot be separated from the conception of humanity in Buddhist religion. The central difficulty De Lubac identifies is Buddhism's lack of any developed principle of incarnation (*AB* I 37). Christ the Word becomes flesh in order to redeem the world, but the Buddha, on attaining enlightenment, transcends the world in a state of *lokottara*. The elevated state which the Buddha comes to enjoy is represented in images from his earlier earthly life. His feet never touch the earth, being raised above it from birth by carpets of lotus flowers, and he is even shielded from the flesh of his mother's womb by a covering of precious stones (*AB* I 116). This is rather like a revised Gospel narrative in which Christ always walked on water, removed from the toil and suffering of the world and presenting himself to humankind as a vision, rather than being a concrete person entering fully into earthly human life.

Such doceticism, as De Lubac terms it, can be identified in both Christian and Buddhist traditions, although functions in very different ways. In Christian belief it is traditionally considered heretical, or expressed less negatively, as defining a theological option which lacks coherence. De Lubac's ultimate objection to the notion that Jesus only *appeared* to be human is that humankind would also only appear to be human. But this is exactly the Buddhist position, where doceticism is "radical" and "universal." Amida Buddha inhabits an "emanation" or "transformation" body (*nirmanakaya*) that is in reality neither material nor spiritual (*AB* I 119). De Lubac perceives the wide implications of this understating of divine disembodiment for the material order. The corollary of God not acting on matter and assuming material form is either the Buddhist dissolution of the material

[7] "Homily on the Vision of Jacob at Bethel," 95.

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order, or the scholastic exaltation of materiality as an independently constituted realm of "pure nature."

De Lubac's response to the possibility of the dissolution of the created order is his well-known concept of the supernatural: divine action, he argues, penetrates, sustains and transforms the whole of creation, which remains entirely dependent on it.[8] He perhaps finds echoes of this relation in the emphasis placed on dependence on Amida in the True Pure Land (*Jōdo Shinshū*) tradition associated with Shinran's disciples, who "insist even more than Honen's on the feeling of absolute confidence in Amida" (*TF* 351; *AB* II ch 9). Without this complete dependence, there can be no hope of salvation nor even of continued existence. The outcome of the alternative docetic account of the nature-grace relation is, De Lubac suggests, an extreme scepticism of a Sea of Faith variety which could conceivably be reached by either a Christian route or a Buddhist one: God never entered into the world, his incarnate body was mere appearance, his mouth uttered no true teaching, and written accounts about such teaching are no more than stories (*AB* I 120). De Lubac in fact suggests that Christian reluctance to accept that God could assume material nature developed under Buddhist impetus. Archaeological evidence he cites supports the view that the Nestorian conception of Christ as consisting of two different persons, associated with the East Syrian Church, was fostered by religious and cultural exchanges across the central Asian plains during the seventh and eighth centuries (*TF* 289–307; *AB* II ch10).

De Lubac notes that Karl Barth also identifies Amidism as the religious form possessing the greatest affinity with Christianity. He critically observes that Barth finds "scarcely any other difference between the two doctrines of grace than the real efficacy of the name of Jesus Christ ... without substituting a comparison which would permit a pronouncement on the content of the faiths" (*AB* II 7). It can be said in Barth's defence that he begins his discussion of Amidism by drawing several anthropological comparisons of the type that De Lubac claims are lacking. These culminate in the observation that satisfaction of a human desire for "redemption by dissolution" (into the nirvana beyond the Pure Land) is its goal, with Amida, faith in him, and the Pure Land being only means to attain this goal.[9] Yet Barth characteristically retreats from this cultural-anthropological perspective on Amidist teaching to affirm uncompromisingly that the "truth of the Christian religion is in fact enclosed in the one name of Jesus

[8] Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); trans. by Rosemary Sheed of *Le Mystère du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965).

[9] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (10 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–77), pp. 340–343. See Charles Waldrop, "Karl Barth and Pure Land Buddhism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24 (1987), pp. 574–597.

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Christ and nothing else." De Lubac ultimately shares Barth's fundamental conviction that theology must be centred on Christ. He also believes, like Barth, that the whole of the created order is dependent on divine action (the "supernatural") for its preservation, but thinks that, in consequence, theological encounter and critique need to proceed in part from consideration of the consequences of particular sets of teachings for theological anthropology.

For the Christian, love is transferred from God to the world via the Son in concrete, directed particularity, and the neighbour in Christ is loved for himself, rather than purely as a means to further ends. Christian conceptions of charity tend towards universality, in which God's love for the world in the particular gift of his Son becomes the model for the concrete relations of charity which exist both between followers of Christ, as well as in their mission to persons in the wider world. In Buddhism, however, the self is ultimately an illusion. Charity becomes compassion (*maitri*) directed to alleviate the other's moral or physical sufferings by setting him on the path to spiritual peace and meditation. Compassion is "declared to be all the more perfect, the more it becomes abstract and generalised," being "more concerned with suffering in general than with each suffering being in particular" (*AB* I 38). Buddhist compassion therefore attains its goal not in universality and particularity, but in generality. In Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, the highest form of other-regard is pure, objectless compassion, which dissolves finally into the void of *nirvāna*.

De Lubac traces the origins of this void to the absence in Buddhist teaching of any doctrine of incarnation. The Buddhist, when contemplating his neighbour, does not perceive in him the image of God:

> Since in the depths of his being there is no ontological solidity deriving from a Creator; since he is nothing but a mass of component parts, with no inner unity, therefore there is nothing in the human being that can call for, or make possible, any ultimate love. Altruism of any kind, whatever its tinge, and however ardent it may be, can only be a procedure for getting rid of desire. (*AB* I 41)

The final end of love for the Buddhist lies in the transcendence of individual selfhood and liberation from individuality and personality. The bodhisattvas themselves provide the model for this state, possessing no real being distinct from the impersonal and unsubstantial Buddhahood which absorbs them all in a single *dharma-kaya*, "like remote, floating, unreal prefigurings of the Christ" (*AB* I 49). Buddha does not desire even to remain the leader or director of the community founded by him. His role does not compare with that of Christ, who says of himself "I am the Way," and "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (*AB* II 5; John 14:6; 15:5). Christ is "in his humanity the Image of the invisible God. He is his own witness to himself. He

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presents himself … as the object of the faith which he preaches." (*AB* II ch11)

In view of these stark differences in the concept of the self, it is surprising that De Lubac describes both Buddhist compassion (*maitri*) and Christian love as "charity" (AB I 52). Elsewhere in his theology, De Lubac seems to employ the term charity in preference to "love" to describe the Christian vocation because charity suggests a concrete engagement by means of specific loving acts in the world rather than an abstracted state of mind detached from the world. Recognition of the distinction between charity and compassion might therefore serve his project better, particularly his later efforts to promote not only social action but mystical awareness as well. Following the Second Vatican Council, De Lubac becomes increasingly concerned to address the decline of the sense of the sacred in the Church. The personal spiritual discipline fundamental to Buddhist compassion aims to cultivate a similar sense, and provides part of the devotional basis for the concrete social action that is intrinsic to the Christian notion of charity.

What are the implications of this critique of the Buddhist dissolution of the essence of personhood for the Christian, especially in relation to the concept of love? De Lubac anticipates challenges made to the argument of Anders Nygren in his study *Agapē and Eros* that the truly Christian form of love is *agapē*, a kind of indiscriminately diffused benevolence.[10] Particularly relevant is the distinction already developed between "physical" and "ecstatic" conceptions of love by a French Jesuit confrère, Pierre Rousselot, in *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages*.[11] This contrast is grounded in the effect of love on its subject and not in any attempt to classify the desire itself. According to the physical conception of love, the end of love is the preservation and completion of the subject in her love of God, whereas ecstasy brings the subject to stand outside herself in a state of personal disintegration. In modern "applied" theology, personhood is frequently undermined by pseudo-psychological ideologies of weakness and vulnerability which are the modern equivalent of the ecstatic conception of love, rather than being exalted according to the ancient Christian humanist theological anthropology of the Church fathers. De Lubac presents a sustained argument, in his studies of Buddhism and also of patristic writers, that the true vocation of Christian love is to affirm, exalt and complete the human person.

[10] Anders Nygren, *Agapē and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1982); originally published in Swedish 1930–36; first French trans. by Pierre Jundt, *Erôs et agapé : la notion chrétienne de l'amour et ses transformations* (3 vols.; Paris: Aubier, 1944–52).

[11] Pierre Rousselot, *The Problem of Love in the Middle Ages: A Historical Contribution* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2001); trans. by Alan Vincelette of *Pour l'histoire du problème de l'amour au moyen âge* (Munster: Aschendorff, 1908).

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Faith, Religion and Culture

De Lubac, writing in 1935, argues that scholars of religion need to free themselves from four almost perennial "illusions": that origins common to different religions may be discovered; that the most ancient religious forms can be identified; that primitive religion is the truest; and the belief in comparative religion that "one is practicing pure science when one is really only applying a system" (*TF* 317). Religion needs, De Lubac asserts, to "disengage from metaphysics." He considers Buddhist-Christian interaction in terms of encounter rather than dialogue in exactly this sense that there is no history or methodology available to unify the relation. Comments in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* have led some scholars to speculate on the existence of a Buddhist colony in Alexandria, but De Lubac points to the distinct lack of evidence for any contacts prior to the twelfth century (*RBO* 19, 32). He regards with similar scepticism the attempt to establish a Buddhist confluence into early Christian teaching via Plotinus's possible sojourn in India (*RBO* 24, 202).

Different parties to religious encounter nevertheless employ common symbols, such as the tree of life. Also highly significant in religious history has been the legend of Barlaam and his protégé Josaphat, son of the Indian King Avennir, who according to the Christian account was baptised, renounced earthly riches and converted many people to Christ through his miracles and preaching. This legend originates, however, in the life of Siddhartha Buddha by Asvaghosa, in which the Buddha forsakes the royal court in favour of the path of poverty, despite having been sequestered in unmitigated luxury. Although identified with the Buddha, Josaphat was also canonized by the sixteenth-century Catholic Church (*RBO* 28–31)![12]

De Lubac offers a more concrete example demonstrating the usefulness to Christians of narrative and symbolic appropriation. During the long period in Japan when Christians were subjected to state persecution—which persisted right through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the first half of the nineteenth—the Christians of Nagasaki and the surrounding prefecture sought the prayers of Mary before statues of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, known in Japan as Kannon.[13] Sometimes represented as a woman, she is believed to embody compassionate mercy towards the suffering and to combat the evils that cause it. This devotion to a maternal figure resonates with De Lubac's own catholic and Jesuit respect for Mary the Mother of

[12] For the Christian version, see De Voragine, "Saints Barlaam and Josaphat," in *Golden Legend*, II, pp. 355–366.

[13] Examples are reproduced in Stephen Turnbull, *The Kakure Kirishitan of Japan:A Study of their Development, Beliefs and Rituals to the Present Day* (Richmond: Japan Library, 1998), plates 2, 3 and 18.

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Jesus.[14] De Lubac remarks: "The Japanese police saw only a bodhisattva there: the faithful, who invoked her, had transformed it into an image of the 'Queen of mercy.'" (*AB* II ch 5; *TF* 359–60) These underground Christians (*senpuku kirishitan*) who prayed to the image handed down their faith from generation to generation, yet their existence became generally known only after 1873 when the new Meiji government finally lifted the ban on Christianity. Even today, some hidden Christians (*kakure kirishitan*) continue to exist in the region practising similar devotions and customs and with their own distinctive scriptures.[15]

In this extreme situation of persecution, images used in Buddhist contemplation fostered the prayer of Christian communities. De Lubac suggests that the support was made possible by cultural affinity, identifying a "certain personalism inherent in the Japanese turn of mind and far removed from the Indian mentality" (*AB* II ch 11). In other words, the fact that the fullest flowering of Amidism occurred in Japan needs to be considered in light of cultural constructions of the human person, which provide the concrete context for religious belief and are transformed by that belief. Culture not only informs the essence of belief, but shapes the encounter between different believers. De Lubac clearly distinguishes the Christian encounter with Amidism in Japanese culture from the encounter of Christians with other varieties of Buddhism in the modern West. He argues that most Christians who have experienced Buddhism have progressed little further than the "neo-Western Buddhism" constructed by Western cultural perceptions of the Orient (*RBO* 208). In fact, he suggests, most Western Buddhists have, like Tolstoy, Swedenborg and Wagner, been in reality disciples of Schopenhauer rather than of the Buddha (*RBO* 280).

Can Buddhism therefore assume truly religious forms in Western cultures? The notion that De Lubac regards Buddhism as the eastern variety of Marxist and fascist atheism is common currency in English scholarship and originates in Hans Urs von Balthasar's study of De Lubac.[16] But it seems that Balthasar, in making this assessment, is unusually paying insufficient attention to culture! De Lubac certainly sees Western transmutations of Indian Buddhism as preparing

[14] Especially in Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982); trans. by S. Englund of *Les Églises particulières dans l'Église universelle* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971); The Eternal Feminine: *A Study on the Poem by Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1971); trans. by René Hague of *L'Éternel féminin : étude sur un texte du Père Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968).

[15] See *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth: The Sacred Book of Japan's Hidden Christians* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

[16] Hans Urs von Balthasar *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp. 54–59; trans. by Joseph Fessio and Michael M. Waldstein of *Henri de Lubac : sein organisches Lebenswerk* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1976).

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intellectual ground for the various forms of totalitarianism that came to occlude them. He refers to a fatal substitution bound up with the "retreat from scientific rationalism and liberal democracy, the resurgence of myth, of the arcane, of the sense of the sacred, of all forms of irrational thought" (*RBO* 242). His assessment of Buddhism in Asian cultures is, however, more positive. He states, referring to both Vehicles:

> If religion is defined as a relationship to a personal God, a true God, it is clear that Buddhism is not a religion, since it does not recognize such a God. It is atheistic. But from a historical and descriptive point of view, such a definition of religion is too specific. Buddhism leaves no place outside itself, alongside itself, so to speak, for anything else that would be a religion. All the functions of life that are filled by what is commonly called religion—that is, functions that are not filled by a pure philosophy or a pure moral doctrine—are filled by Buddhism... It takes all of humanity, with all of its powers, in order to bring it the total response, both speculative and practical, to the question of its destiny. Buddhism creates a spiritual link among all of its followers. It demands a true "conversion." Finally, one senses in Buddhism that quivering of the spiritual being in contact with the mysterious and the sacred. (*TF* 333–334)

The Buddhist and the Christian can thus potentially agree on several key points of doctrine: the dynamic of call, response, conversion and even rebirth; the existence of a community of practitioners or believers; some type of sacramental sense; and the possible claims to exclusivity of their respective confessions.

De Lubac nevertheless remains critical of the absence in Buddhism of any objective, enduring deity. The pure mysticism which it espouses leaves, he protests, no place for the living God (RBO 279). Even in the Amidist conception of the Buddha as infinite light (Amitābha), he remains curiously depersonalised, and ultimately dissolves into a void along with all other phenomena. Negativity is a perennial hazard in the Christian tradition as well (RBO 282). To counter it, De Lubac presents a model of religious knowing in which negative moments need to be balanced by positive, cataphatic ones. God hides himself from humanity, but also reveals himself to it.[17] This dialectic of withdrawal and disclosure makes Christian faith possible, the true end of which is not ignorance but knowledge.[18] Mystery, De Lubac states in his *Medieval Exegesis*, "carries a strongly

[17] Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 138–141; trans. by Alexander Dru of *Sur les chemins de dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1956).

[18] Michel Fédou, «Henri de Lubac et la 'Théologie des religions'», in *L'Intelligence de la rencontre du bouddhisme*, *Études lubaciennes* 2 (Paris: Cerf, 2001), pp. 111–126; Jacques Cuttat, «Fait bouddique et fait Chrétien», in *L'Homme devant Dieu : mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac*, ed. J. Guillet et al., III (3 vols.; Paris: Auier, 1963–64), pp. 30–33.

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objective connotation." He affirms: "Mystery is entirely concrete. It does not exist in idea. It does not consist in any atemporal truth or object of detached speculation. This mystery is a reality in act, the realization of a Grand Design; it is therefore, in the strongest sense, even something historical, in which personal beings are engaged."[19] This mystery is located in the encounter of the believer, constituted as a person in the image of God, with the person of Christ sent by God into the world to transform humanity and the whole of the creation which humankind orders and inhabits.

Final Reflections

The first two drafts of the Second Vatican Council's declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, failed to mention Buddhism. It was introduced only once the text reached its third version in November 1964. Buddhism was then identified solely with the experience of *nirvāna*: abnegation and purification of the self as a path to freedom and permanent peace. The fourth and final version echoes, however, De Lubac's more positive and nuanced appraisal, referring to Amida Buddha in its reference to a "higher source" of illumination beyond that of the self, as distinct from more self-centred paths of enlightenment. In Buddhism, "according to its various forms, the radical inadequacy of this changeable world is acknowledged and a way is taught whereby those with a devout and trustful spirit may be able to reach either a state of perfect freedom or, relying on their own efforts or on help from a higher source [*superiore auxilio*], the highest illumination."[20]

De Lubac offers his final assessment of the status of Buddhist belief in a paper presented at the Paris meeting of the Secretariat for non-Christian religions in 1971, five years before Balthasar's study of his work was published. It is a more positive appraisal than Balthasar's, and is not taken account of in Balthasar's interpretation of his position. Amidism, De Lubac here affirms, is grounded in an "expression of religious feeling whose value could remain unacknowledged only by a theology that is excessively severe and hardly in conformity with Catholic Tradition. It is a religious feeling that Christian education, far from destroying, must deepen and lead to its perfection." (*TF* 359) This expression of religious feeling should elicit in followers of Christ not an attitude of suspicion but a "spirit of dialogue"

[19] Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); trans. by E.M. Macierowski of *L'Exégèse médiévale : les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1959), pp. 20, 93–94.

[20] "Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions," 2, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, II (2 vols.; London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 969. See Mikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 124–128.

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tempered by "critical regard." De Lubac defines the latter as an "effort of true discernment that is as intent on setting aside the distortions coming from negative prejudices as the illusions provoked by generous inclinations" (*TF* 363).

De Lubac identifies in Amidism the presence of a "sentiment of a need for salvation based on a sense of sin increased by the recourse to Amida's grace, without which it is impossible for humanity to be delivered from its sin" (*TF* 365). This form of Buddhism therefore possesses a strong sense of individual salvation, but what it lacks is an eschatological vision of the salvation of the wider world as necessary to this. Even the future Maitreya Buddha, currently awaiting his eventual manifestation, is not the future hope of current humanity so much as the saviour, in a limited sense, of future humanity, being the successor of the current Sakyamuni Buddha. Maitreya therefore has, in de Lubac's view, "no personal interest at all for individuals living today" (*TF* 371–373).

De Lubac here rearticulates the importance of the social and eschatological dimension of salvation. He states: "The Christian hope does not aim at a salvation that would be obtained in this world, this spatio-temporal universe within which all of our individual and collective experiences take place." (*TF* 366) Salvation is nothing other than the salvation of the world itself, as recognised by Teilhard de Chardin in his evolutionary theology.[21] It is the role of the Church continually to remind humankind of the transcendent social end for which it is destined, which is not part of present immanent reality. In this transcendent end, the kingdom of Christ assumes a "mystical identification" with the Godhead. God for the Christian is, De Lubac states, the "hidden Being par excellence, because he is the personal Being par excellence—and, for the one who approaches him, he is the personalizing Being."[22] Amida Buddha, by contrast, is "reabsorbed in an Absolute transcending all knowledge that can be described only in the most minimal terms of void and space... His personality is not sublimated but abolished." (*TF* 368).

De Lubac and the Future of Christian-Buddhist Encounter

Attempts have increasingly been made over the past twenty years to develop a doctrine of "engaged" Buddhism according to which salvation has a wide range of practical implications.[23] This clearly

[21] David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 197–235.

[22] David Grumett, *De Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 95–111.

[23] For origins, see *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax, rev. edn, 1988 [1985]).

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inverts the polarities of the dominant Buddhist tradition that De Lubac presents: salvation is construed no longer as transcendence of material existence, but as the transformation of it. Parallels may here be identified with the categories of "practical" or "applied" theology in recent Christian thought: these subdisciplines gain their validity from the supposition that they provide methods or conclusions unavailable to "pure" theology. Two very different transitions are being effected, however. In the case of Christian theology, the new categories are at best superfluous and at worst misleading, suggesting that the fundamental truths of Christian faith contain, in themselves, no practical implications until subjected to additional critical categories and methods. This is false: the fundamental theological truths about creation, incarnation, redemption and salvation are inalienably for the world and transformative of it. In the case of Buddhism, however, the concept of "engagement" effects a real transformation rather than a merely apparent one. The idea of "engagement" does not emerge from the historic religious discipline itself, but from the desire to separate that discipline from its dominant traditional cosmology.

The thesis that Amida presents Christian theologians with the most accessible face of Buddhism has more recently been advanced by Galen Amstutz, who states that Amidism (which he calls "Shin") "probably provides the strongest potential point of contact."[24] The possibility of close study of Amidism in Japan was, however, closed to Western theologians during its period of major flourishing in the isolationist epoch, which lasted from 1641 until the 1860s. Since then, its distinctive character has typically gone unrecognised and Buddhism has been represented by orientalist narrative as a geographical other: a repository for displaced Western desire and objectification rather than a participant in serious encounter.[25] The critique of this objectifying approach has developed in the wake of Edward Said's well-known analysis *Orientalism* of 1978. Yet as long ago as 1952, De Lubac deconstructs orientalist perspectives on Buddhism and its associated culture (*RBO* 262–268). These he terms "humanist," because they identify particular elements of other religions and cultures as possessing universal value on the grounds that they provide historic manifestations of human spirituality and wisdom, rather than truly encountering religions in their full particularity and strangeness.

[24] Galen Amstutz, Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism(Albany: State University of New York, 1997), p. 121.

[25] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). Jean-Noël Robert, «La perception du bouddhisme dans l'oeuvre de Henri de Lubac», in *L'Intelligence de la rencontre du bouddhisme*, pp. 45–56, discusses some subsequent critiques pursuing Said's own.

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The paucity of serious studies of Amidism in the countries where it has flourished suggests, however, that orientalism is not only a Western phenomenon. Amidism, being a predominantly rural denomination, can easily be evoked as an historical and cultural other in places in Japan where it previously flourished. Amstutz points to the real difficulties inherent in engagement and critique, arguing that modern scholars have typically omitted to recognize the rooting of True Pure Land Amidism in local communities in contrast with the institutional and monastic organisation of Zen and earlier forms of Amidism. He proposes, moreover, a thesis in the tradition of Max Weber's Protestant ethic that Amidism was vital in the rise of Tokugawa business communities and consequent Japanese economic expansion. Social science perspectives such as these help to explain why Amidism has not been so widely translated into Western contexts as Zen, and raise large questions about the extent to which any such translation is likely to occur in the future.

De Lubac's reflections conclude ambivalently. He is frequently critical of the history of the Western encounter of Buddhism and Christianity, whether the syncretism of the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat or the nihilistic pessimism of Schopenhauer. Moreover, he insists, the essence of present encounter cannot be separated from its history and the account of that history. What might the future hold for Buddhist-Christian encounter? Heinrich Dumoulin notes *Nostra Aetate*'s acknowledgement that Christian-Buddhist dialogue "will take on a different direction and development according to the particular standpoint of the Buddhist partner."[26] De Lubac's oeuvre reminds those engaged in interfaith dialogue of this fact, suggesting that dialogue should be fully located in the particularity of the specific denominational and sub-denominational traditions of both Christian and Buddhist belief, which will transform their respective cultural contexts and be transformed by them.

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[26] Heinrich Dumoulin, "Excursus on Buddhism," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, III (5 vols.; London: Burns & Oates, 1967–69), pp. 146–150.

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