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Expanding Catholicity – the Dialogue with Buddhism

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At a holiday resort two men go to church during a drought to pray. One is a farmer who prays for rain. The other is a tourist who prays for more sunshine. Whose prayers are heard? The answer is simple; the one who is more righteous, because righteousness pleases God. But what if on the way to church the farmer sees the happiness of holidaymakers and prays for more sunshine instead? And what if the tourist notices the parched fields and prays for rain? Whose prayers are heard then? How to measure righteousness when it is combined with such generosity towards the other? In order to save himself from such headaches God invented Buddhism.

You might think such a story both disrespectful and flippant. But it comes from the introduction to a short book called *Buddhism for Buddhists who Want to Believe in God*[1]. The author's point is fairly straightforward. One of the most attractive features of Buddhism, he says, is that it is devoid of dogma. Unfortunately certain Buddhists then invent a doctrine to the effect that to be a Buddhist one must not believe in God. This dogma, he says, effectively 'closes the doors' to potential converts. 'And this despite the fact that millions of Asian Buddhists actually believe in God.'

The author has a point. He reminds us of a principle which must inform all inter-religious dialogue: what we are dealing with are not stereotypes but *living* traditions, the practices of persons of faith rather than hard-edged systems of belief. And religions change as they seek to respond to culture and context. In the series of lectures gathered here we are looking at various engagements with people of other faiths opened up by Vatican II. The Church, we have been told, 'rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people'.[2] But if we are ever to discern what is genuinely 'true and holy' we have to be prepared to listen to what is being said. So what are we to make of a Buddhist who argues

[1] As yet unpublished by David Flint.

[2] *Nostra Aetate*, *The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* 2; from Norman Tanner (ed), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, London: Sheed and Ward; 1990.

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for belief in God? Is our author a heretic – or just trying to expand the bounds of orthodoxy? Maybe Buddhism is rather more fluid and adaptable than we think.

In this lecture I am going to do three things. The first is to say something about Buddhism, setting it in historical context as a living tradition of faith. The second is to note a few examples of the dialogue which have developed since Vatican II. The third will be to attempt a little reflection on the theological significance of Buddhism.

Is there anything about Buddhism which enables Catholics to expand or enhance their sense of catholicity, their own religious sensibility?

Let's begin with the point argued by my Buddhist writer. The Buddha was born into the heavily ritualised world of the 6th century BCE, a world dominated by a pantheon of variously named *devas* – 'gods' or literally 'shining ones'. He did not reject them. Indeed they remain as guardians, intercessors, the lords of specific heavens and other worlds, beings who continue to play a part in everyday religious life. When, for instance, the Buddha achieves his enlightenment he is faced with the question: what to do next? It is through the intervention of the god Brahma that he is persuaded to preach the *Dharma* out of compassion for all suffering sentient human beings. However, the question is not whether such 'god-figures' exist - they do; the realm of human existence has to be set alongside that of other beings in a complex cosmology - but whether they have any sort of *ultimate* significance.

There's a popular story which illustrates the point. A seeker after truth manages to progress in meditation through the different worlds or levels of existence. At each level he asks the gods for an answer to his question. And at each level he is referred further up, until eventually he reaches the court of the great god Brahma. Brahma listens attentively and takes him aside, saying that this is a private matter and they must be alone. The god then admits, to his embarrassment, that he does not know the answer either - but he knows a man who does. He points back to the earth, to the Buddha. 'Go and ask him.'

It is, of course, a nice bit of Buddhist propaganda. The *devas* are relativised in favour of the one who is *atideva* – 'beyond the gods'. The serious point, however, is that Buddhism grapples with a metaphysical issue which the contemporary sacrificial religion of the Veda only managed to obscure. This is not to say that the Buddha was alone in seeking to address questions of ultimate significance – the nature of human selfhood as much as the existence of God. Indeed there were any number of ascetical movements and philosophical schools which asked similar questions. What they have in common is more the personally appropriated experience of *moksa*, liberation from the perpetual round of rebirth. One way to understand what represents a profoundly significant – and quite complex - shift in

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religious understanding is to see it in terms of the revaluing of ritual. The Vedic sacrifice, an external liturgy of movement towards a high point of intense religiosity, is *interiorised.* Meditation is an inner pilgrimage, a structured journey towards the centre of the self. In the Upanisads – the 'end of the Veda' or the philosophical texts which contain the 'essence' of Vedic religion – that self is homologised or correlated with the single transcendent reality of *Brahman* (the impersonal version of Brahma, from a root which has connotations of 'growth' or 'expansion'). *Brahman* is the source and object of final harmony and personal integration – that into which all things, including the *Atman,* the essence of selfhood, ultimately flow.

Indian ascetic traditions – of which Buddhism is one – all share something of this personal quest of ultimate reality. But where the Upanisadic speculative texts have what might be called a positive or realist view of ultimate reality, Buddhism is much more reticent. It is as if to dare to speak of what is strictly beyond speech is to risk reducing the ultimate to something less than ultimate, a projection, perhaps, of human needs and desires. Hence all those wonderful stories about the inadequacy of all human efforts to comprehend reality. 'How long will it take me to be enlightened?' asks the pupil. The teacher is reluctant to be drawn but, pressed insistently, shrugs his shoulders and says 'maybe ten years'. 'But if I try really hard?' insists the pupil. 'If you try really hard', comes the reply, 'then maybe twenty years'.

Something of this quest remains wherever Buddhism has taken root and to some extent explains how a local cult became a world religion. There is no 'essence' of Buddhism which can be extracted, systematised and set over against another 'religion' called Christianity. Rather Buddhism is culture-specific; it only exists *in relationship with a culture*, as an inner dynamic or power which enters a culture and adapts, changes and transforms it. The Buddha taught always in the vernacular and with what he called the 'open fist' of the teacher who keeps nothing secret. There are any number of different forms of Buddhism – and the stereotype reflected in my opening story, rationalist, anti-metaphysical, iconoclastic, is only one of them. Early Indian Theravada Buddhism, the Mahayana of Tibet, the austere Zen of Japan, theistic Pure Land traditions, the more post-modern therapeutic Buddhism so popular in the West, are all recognisably Buddhist – but not because they are 'non-dogmatic'. That gives the impression that Buddhism is 'merely' pragmatic or agnostic. Rather, Buddhism adopts a particular style or form of religious thinking wherever it takes root.

So what precisely is it that holds them all together? Buddhism is not so much an alternative to the various renouncer traditions of his day, another version of the search for *moksa,* but a question-mark raised over the whole tendency to over-objectify the source of

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religious meaning. That said, the continuities and discontinuities between Buddhist teaching and the brahmanical forms which preceded it are complex. There is a distinct pragmatism to the Buddha's Middle Way and it is never easy to avoid the impression that Buddhism begins with a negative by 'denying' the existence of the brahmanical gods and the existence of the *atman* or self. On the more positive side, maybe the most important point to bear in mind is that the Buddha introduced a strongly ethical element into a quest for meaning which was in danger of becoming fixated on the isolation of 'ultimate essences'. The Buddha was highly critical of an account of the human person as determined by place and role in society, in short by the givenness of caste. And - to go back to my opening story – he was also critical of an idea of 'God' which was bound up with a hierarchy of 'spiritual beings'.

This is where Buddhism begins – with an account of what persons can become when they enter into responsible relationship with the whole of reality, with the world around them and, more specifically, with other suffering 'sentient beings'. When the Buddha commended a 'Middle Way' he was seeking to avoid extremes, metaphysical extremes about the meaning of life, as well as practical extremes about the way to *moksa* or liberation. In the terms of the early texts, one has to avoid 'eternalism' (what really exists is self-existent) and 'annihilationism' (the denial that anything substantial exists).[3] In more practical terms, if the brahmanical culture, with its emphasis on the intellectualist vision of the *atman*, an inner 'spiritual core' of the person, tends towards the 'eternalist' end of the spectrum, the excessive focus on ascetical practice can entail a certain negative 'annihilationism'. Instead, what the Buddha teaches is a practical attention to the causes of human suffering through the cultivation of virtue and the purification of consciousness. Whatever takes away from *the capacity to see things as they really are* is rejected.

For the Buddhist all of reality is interdependent, all things arising and flowing together within the single ever-transient nexus of becoming and passing away. There is no 'moment' of creation in Buddhism and no creator who is somehow outside or independent of the process of becoming. Indeed to speak of 'independence' in any way would go clean contrary to the whole Buddhist ethos which is so securely rooted, not in any story of origins, but in mindfulness of the here and now. Thus Buddhism seeks to avoid any account of reality which sets up a dualism of the 'invisible' Real somehow lurking behind the visible phenomena. The alternative, however, is not nihilism. A positive alternative is given by the wondrously gnomic and much

[3] For a straightforward account of *sassatavada* and *ucchedavada* in the Theravada tradition see Walpola Rahula's celebrated study, *What the Buddha Taught*, Bedford: Gordon Fraser; 1967; and for a fascinating commentary from a Christian theologian see Lynn D'Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*, London: Macmillan; 1979

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misunderstood Buddhist concept of *śunyata* – 'emptiness'. The great Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa says that 'emptiness is the track on which the centred person moves'.[4] What he means is that the concept of emptiness is a short-hand for the infinite depth and elusiveness of things. But to speak of the emptiness of things is not to speak of nothing. The question is - what are things 'empty *of*'? And the Buddhist answer is 'empty of own-being' – empty of self-existent reality. Nothing exists independent of anything else. There is, therefore, *'no thing'*, no inherently existent reality which can be separated from every other 'thing'. Everything is part of one interdependent continuum of being.

If at this point you feel baffled I can sympathise. You are in good company. Western philosophers and theologians have always been fascinated by a 'religion' which appears to endorse atheism. How could a teacher of the most admirable ideals of moral probity have also believed in a final state of total annihilation? What is the theologian to make of a tradition which appears radically to call into question the Christian conviction of being a unique individual called by God? Where is the 'common ground' on which a dialogue can be based? Strangely, it is the very lack of clear commonalities which makes the dialogue so interesting. If I am right that Buddhism is characterised by questioning and critique, then the dialogue is not about comparing and contrasting different terms and images. It is about responding to the suspicion with which Buddhism greets *any* form of religious language. At its best, the dialogue should make Christians more sensitive to the way in which we use our religious language – above all, about how we dare to speak about God.

Now I shall come back to some of these points towards the end of this lecture. Before that, however, in line with the other lectures in this series I want to say something about how the dialogue with Buddhism has featured on the inter-faith agenda of the Church. *Nostra Aetate*, of course, was dominated by the relationship of the Church with the Jews. Not until relatively late on in the process was any reference made to the religions which originate in the sub-continent of India. The reasons for this, and the immediate responsibility for their inclusion, remain obscure.[5] It appears that missionary bishops, flexing their theological muscles, as it were, objected to the limiting of the document to relations with Jews and Muslims. What *Nostra Aetate* did was to bring other religions gradually within the purview of

[4] From *rTsa she tik chen rigs pa'i rgya mysho*, Sarnath: 1973; p 431. Quoted by Stephen Batchelor in 'The Other Enlightenment Project', from Ursula King (ed), *Faith and Praxis in a Post-Modern Age,* London:Cassells; 1998.

[5] The most detailed account of the formation of the document is by John Oesterreicher in Herbert Vorgrimler (ed), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume III, pp 1-154. For a more recent account see Giuseppe Alberigo (ed), *History of Vatican II*, Maryknoll: Orbis; 1995-.

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Christian theological sensitivity. At first, the 'other' had a Jewish face, then Muslim. But eventually it became clear that reference had to be made to other great world religions as well. It is perhaps significant that the text refers to Muslims and the 'people of the covenant' but to 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' – the latter being included in a lengthy introduction about the common human quest for religious meaning. That may give some indication of the relative lack of familiarity which the Church has with these traditions; Hindus and Buddhists remain part of an impersonal 'ism'.

The declaration is decidedly tentative - describing Buddhism as testifying to 'the essential inadequacy of this changing world' and proposing a way of life 'by which people can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation and reach supreme illumination either through their own efforts or by the aid of divine help'. It is worth noting the conclusion of this paragraph: 'The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.' (*NA 2*)

In the forty years since the Council closed vast amounts of energy have been expended on the 'conversations and collaboration' to which the Council called the Church – not that the results have been uniformly positive. At the highest level of the magisterium, a certain ambiguity towards Buddhism is apparent. Pope John Paul II, for instance, in speeches to various groups and meetings has commended Buddhist values, but his comments in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* about 'Buddhist atheism' caused a great deal of upset.[6] There can be little doubt that the spread of Buddhism in Europe and the USA is in no small way due to the personal religious experience which Buddhism affords. It is this growing influence which worries the Vatican. A consultation on Buddhism in Europe, held in Rome in 1999, sought to redress the balance. It concluded that 'The Church sees in Buddhism a serious path towards radical conversion of the human heart. From the Church's own concern to be awake to the Lord's presence, she cannot but be respectful of a tradition which draws attention to the salvific potential of the "here and now". The practice of mindfulness creates a sense of a wider silence which nourishes the attitude of compassion. This often overflows into commitment and action.'[7]

At a different level, a growing appreciation of the richness and diversity of Buddhism is reflected in the various forms of encounter between Christians and Buddhists developed over the last half

[6] Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, London: Cape; 1994.

[7] Quoted in *Pro Dialogo* (bulletin of Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) 102, 1999, p 343.

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century. I have time to focus on one area only. Zen Buddhism has proved an attractive – and productive – basis for dialogue. Pioneering work had been done in the years after the Second World War by a handful of Jesuits in Japan. For Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, the practice of Zen was a logical extension of his missionary commitment – a form of inculturation into the spiritual world of Japan to which he had committed his life.[8] For his contemporary, Heinrich Dumoulin, the interest was more strictly academic. His highly influential history of Zen *c*hronicles an engagement which reaches back to the days of St Francis Xavier.[9] Their successors, such as William Johnston and Kadichi Kadowaki, follow in the same tradition, claiming to practise not pure Zen under a Buddhist master but a Zen-influenced Christian contemplation.[10] For Kadowaki Zen and Christianity differ as to their ultimate aims, but in terms of practice and structure show many similarities. Johnston is responsible for a whole series of popular but often deeply insightful books on Christian mysticism which have taken their inspiration from the broader dialogue of religions.

Willigis Jäger, a German Benedictine who runs a Zen-Christian centre in Würzburg, is perhaps the most radical practitioner.[11] He argues that the Zen experience of *satori* or awakening is identical with what is taught about mystical experience by Eckhart, John of the Cross and the author of *The Cloud.* The myths, rituals and symbols of religious traditions are transcended in inner personal conviction; all religions, including Christianity and Buddhism, have to be understood as culturally conditioned attempts to speak of what can only be properly recognised in the silence of an intuitive mystical knowing. Less given to such speculative questions is Robert Kennedy, a Jesuit from New York.[12] His wonderfully poetic style of writing speaks of Zen as a way to overcome the human tendency to theorise by total immersion in a stillness where an intuition of God's immanence can be realised. Elaine McInnes, a Catholic sister who learned her Zen practice in Japan and subsequently set up a centre in the Philippines, speaks in similar vein of Zen prayer leading to a sense of being deeply infused with the Divine.[13] For

[8] See especially Hugo Enomiya Lassalle, *Zen Meditation for Christians*, Open Court; 1974.

[9] H.Dumoulin, *A History of Zen Buddhism*, London: Faber; 1963.

[10] J.K. Kadowaki, *Zen and the Bible,* Maryknoll: Orbis; 2002. William Johnston, *The Still Point*, San Francisco: Harper and Row; 1970; *Silent Music*, London: Fontana; 1976; *Christian Zen*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; 1979.

[11] See EG Willigis Jager, *Contemplation: a Christian Path*, Liguori publications, 1994

[12] See especially *Zen Spirit, Christian Spirit: the Place of Zen in Christian Life*, Continuum, 1996; and *Zen Gifts to Christians*, London: Continuum; 2000.

[13] See Elaine McInnes, *Zen Contemplation for Christians:a Bridge of Living Water*, Sheed and Ward, 2003.

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both these practitioners Zen and Christian prayer are different but parallel paths. Christian categories are not to be replaced by Buddhist, as if they are mere variants on a common theme; rather Zen strengthens the Christian commitment to enter into the utter mystery of God after the manner of the self-emptying of Christ.

Clearly other examples could be given of the fruitfulness of the 'dialogue of religious experience'; wherever people of faith meet at a more than superficial level there is an imperative to explore the sources of spiritual motivation in liturgy, prayer and meditation. Even the act of silent listening to the reading of scriptures can generate an enormous empathy and cross-religious understanding. Buddhist meditation, however, especially in its Zen form, does seem to open up something more: a silent space where one becomes intensely mindful of the present moment. The space allows resonances and echoes to be heard. Zen practices like sitting meditation and even the paradoxical *koan*, probing riddles designed to frustrate the conceptualising capacity of the mind, may produce an imaginative response from within the Christian vision of the world. As Johnston interprets it, Buddhist enlightenment, 'awakening' to the truth about reality, may be understood as in some sense equivalent to what Christians understand as conversion, turning back to God. Something sparks in the darkness, a new angle or insight lighting up a familiar tradition. I find another of Johnston's insights, that the cross of Christ is *the* Christian *koan*, most illuminating.[14] If the object of Zen is to deconstruct all preconceived religious assumptions with an insistent question-mark, Christ challenges the desire to possess the perfect pattern, to be able to 'comprehend', to grasp, the whole mystery of Being.

There's an important insight here. The dialogue of religious experience opens up something of the inter-personal communion which an exchange at a purely theoretical level can ignore. This is not to dismiss the value of theory or theology – or I would be out of a job. But it does suggest that a dialogue which takes place only at the level of the exchange of ideas may fail to touch the forces of life-giving motivation which are triggered by prayer, meditation and ritual. The Buddhist-Christian dialogue has opened up some very interesting philosophical and theological engagements – and, if there were time, it would be good to develop some examples here. If I don't do that, it's because I think that the real value of this particular engagement lie in its capacity to make Christians reflect on the *nature of dialogue itself* – and indeed on the nature of religion.

That's what I mean by my title 'Expanding Catholicity' – not a bit of spiritual colonisation but a growing sensitivity to the myriad ways in which God may be speaking in our world. I think it was Thomas Merton who said that comparing Zen and Christianity is rather like

[14] See EG *Christian Zen*, pp 57ff.

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comparing tennis with mathematics. We're not talking about easy equivalences. Maybe that is true about comparing any two religions. But it's particularly true of the engagement with Buddhism. Its critical, even iconoclastic, side warns us that any search for points of comparison is set within a wider context of radical otherness.

So what I would like to do is step back for a moment and think about one of the 'sub-themes' which has been around for us in this series. As a Catholic Christian I want to ask what the engagement with 'the other', with radical difference, teaches me about what it is to be Christian.

Before opening up that area of discussion, just a few words on what I mean by 'religion'. Religion is trivialised when reduced to a set of 'answers' to philosophical or existential questions, some sort of private and personal 'coping mechanism'. This is where I find the Buddhist critique helpful. All too easily religion is understood in terms of a dualistic vision of *this* visible world of our experience and some sort of 'supernatural' *other* world peopled by invisible realities, spirits, saints, the souls of the dead – and, of course, God. Understood in this way, 'the religions' – Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism etc - are all variations on a single theme, more or less adequate ways of articulating common human experiences or life crises, most obviously the mystery of death, the most threatening 'other' of them all.

Now I do not want to underestimate the significance of such an account. There is plenty of common ground between the religions. Nevertheless, the danger is that religion is 'intellectualised', turned into theory and system, reified into an 'ism', when, more properly, it consists of different complexes of rituals and myths, prayers and stories, the particular practices of faith and patterns of holiness which give a structure to human life. There is more to religion, in other words, than a set of private beliefs about supernatural things. More exactly we are talking about ways in which people, communities of faith, make sense of the *whole* of human experience, *implicit ways of ordering life rather than explicit reflections on the meaning of life.* The danger with the latter is that it tends to flatten experience into one easily assimilable homogeneous pattern, rather than allowing the extraordinary to inform the ordinary, allowing the mysterious and 'other' to live with what is known and understood.

If we think of religions as consisting essentially of different answers to common questions then we should not be surprised if inter-faith dialogue ends up as a debate about competing truth-claims. So said the Archbishop of Canterbury in an important lecture given in Birmingham in June 2003.[15] And I agree with him. Rowan Williams'

[15] Available at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org.

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point was that, before religion is reduced to competing accounts of human experience, it is more properly a way of structuring and motivating 'ordinary' everyday lives. Of course, our religious faith does enable us to speak of what is true. But anyone who has spent time talking with people of another faith tradition knows that the commonalities are sometimes set very deep – and are by no means entirely obvious. Rituals spring from very different roots; prayers address very different images of God; actions are inspired by very different motivations. Our religious worlds overlap, but sometimes in strange and unexpected ways. It takes time to explore those worlds.

One of my constant convictions is that, whatever is meant by that slippery bit of jargon 'dialogue', it cannot be reduced to some intellectualist exchange of ideas. There are other experiences of inter-religious engagement which are equally 'dialogical' – expressive of a profoundly human exploration of the 'middle' of our lives, most obviously the dialogue of religious experience and spirituality.

In that sense the term expresses something important about a cultural sensibility of our time – the awareness that life is to be lived in irreducible relationship with the *other*. That word, which often appears to be no more than a bit of post-modern obfuscation, is used in two different ways, roughly corresponding to the Latin *alter* or *alius*. The former gives us 'the alternate', the 'second of two'; EG 'my other car is a Merc'; 'Rory Bremner is Tony Blair's *alter ego*'. The latter has connotations of 'alien' – the stranger, the one who is unknown and something of a threat. As far as inter-faith relations are concerned, I always feel that the task is to make the latter the former, so that the stranger becomes someone I know, someone I can relate to. This is a practical as much as a theological issue – and not just in inner cities where communities feel 'othered' or *alienated* from wider society. Wherever people have to cope with whatever is strange and disorientating, whatever does not 'fit' the patterns and stories with which they seek to narrate our lives, they can be said to be in touch with an analogous 'otherness'. My point – if you have followed my drift – is that Buddhism is the most challenging and disorienting example of such otherness. How can Buddhism become not Christianity's *alius,* an alien other, but its *alter* - a partner in a common project?

Let me conclude with a very brief and inadequate thought in response to that question. At the very least Buddhism reminds Christians to be careful of the language we use when speaking of the Ultimate. I sometimes think that the real difference between Christianity and Buddhism is that Christians dare to speak of that mystery of God about which Buddhists insist one must be silent. The story with which I began is correct, *if* by God is meant that reality which mere human words cannot contain or exhaust. The Buddha does not deny 'God' or Ultimate Reality. Rather, he attempts to overcome the

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tendency to idolise some symbol or image of God by awakening people to a sense of their own contingency. More positively, the Buddha engages in a critique of religious language, a critique he considered to be liberative. That, I think, is what the Zen *koan* is intended to do. It uses language as a sort of 'shock therapy' to pierce beyond language.

Is that all that Buddhism can do for us – to warn us of the limits of language? There is something else. Christianity is always charged with speaking of what it knows of the God revealed in Christ. Maybe what the engagement with Buddhism does is not so much to make us suspicious of language but to value language, to express our *wonder that the Word of God is spoken and has been heard*.

The experience of Christian Zen practitioners is that their Zen practice sensitises them to the present moment, that powerful receptive silence into which the Word of God is spoken. According to Raimon Panikkar, the Buddha's silence can only properly be understood within the context of meditation – the formal, almost ritualised, attention to the present moment.[16] He reminds us that the peculiarly Buddhist quality of 'equanimity' can be understood in Christian terms as a contemplative 'waiting' upon the God who speaks in the depths of the heart. But he also points out that silence has a constructive role to play within all ritual, a role which sets it in a dialectical play with the language of faith.

Ritual is, of course, based on a response which is expressed in words - through the liturgical action itself, hymns of praise, formal prayers etc. But it relies for its effectiveness on the silence which it encourages. No religion, as Panikkar reminds us, can afford to ignore the religious significance of silence. Without the act of contemplative attention it may be impossible to hear what is being said. Panikkar's point is that all words issue from silence and must return to silence. As a Christian might say, the Word is spoken out of the silence of the Father; the Father does not speak but the Word makes the Father known. Perhaps what Buddhism can teach Christians is - very simply - to attend more mindfully to that present moment, a moment of vulnerability perhaps, in which the God who is always 'other' paradoxically comes so close.

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[16] See Raimon Panikkar, *The Silence of God: the Answer of the Buddha*, Orbis: 1989; especially pp 148ff.

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