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TILLICH ON DEATH AND SUFFERING: A KEY TO BUDDHO-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

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PRECIS

In *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich laid out three basic existential anxieties, modes of nonbeing that threaten the being of humankind: Fate and Death, Guilt and Condemnation, Futility and Meaninglessness. They are answered by faith in Jesus the Christ. Tillich even suggested a general historical correlation for, respectively, the Hellenistic, the Late Medieval, and the contemporary periods. Without trying to absolutize any one-to-one religious correlation, the essay shows that what Tillich said of fate and death can well be applied to the central Buddhist concern with *karma* and rebirth. Fate and death threaten one's physical being. Guilt and condemnation may be said to target one's moral being. If in Christianity there is a tendency to consider physical suffering as due punishment for sin, then we may see how Buddhism, the religion that best confronts the reality of suffering, may consider issues of moral decision—even hope for justice—as issues derivative of the cause of suffering: craving, grasping, and discrimination. The clash of worldviews in our time is a clash in meaning that requires us to understand the basic orientations better.

Introduction

In his book *Buddhism and Christianity: A Preface to Dialogue*, German scholar Georg Siegmund reiterated the Christian criticism of Buddhism for lacking an ethical perspective on the world.[1] A religion built on the perception of suffering lacks a primary ethical concern.[2] Indeed, compared with a God

[1]Georg Siegmund, *Buddhism and Christianity: A Preface to Dialogue*, tr. Sr. Mary Francis McCarthy (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980; orig.—*Buddhismus und Christentum* [Frankfurt/M.: Verlag Josef Knecht, 1968]).

[2]Siegmund compared the Buddha's despair over life's finitude and the existentialist angst

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egging on moral humankind to change an immoral society, the story of an Indian prince obsessed with his own sickness, old age, and mortality appears almost self-indulgent.[3] Indeed, Sakyamuni was no Moses. When he toured the city, he saw only pain and suffering, not human's inhumanity to humankind. Moses led a people mistreated by the Pharaoh's soldiers to a promised land. Buddha merely entered *nirvāṇa*. However, to conclude that Buddhism is otherworldly/mystical hardly does the full tradition justice. One must go along with its unfolding to see how there is an ethics derived from commiseration and a community based on charity. Before we can remove misunderstandings, we need to see how misunderstandings arise. They arise very naturally, given the basic modes of ultimate concern in these two religions.

I. Tillich: A Historical Typology of Anxieties

Religion, says Paul Tillich, is ultimate concern. Existential anxieties can bring to surface the depth of that concern, but anxieties may vary in time. Conceivably, religion would also vary in time. In his Terry Lectures at Yale, later published as *The Courage to Be*,[4] Tillich attempted in his theology of culture to review the history of anxiety and faith in the West. He laid out his onto-theological correlation, showing how the three basic existential anxieties of the human being can best find resolution in the Christian faith. The second half of the book was dedicated to that. However, in the second chapter, "Being, Nonbeing, and Anxiety,"[5] Tillich showed how each of the three basic anxieties[6] surfaced prominently in three fairly distinct epochs in European history.[7] The following is a brief summary of that thesis.

A human being's existence, quite unlike God's, is by definition finite. One's being is therefore always open to the threats of nonbeing.[8] The resultant phenomenon is anxiety, which is always total. It seizes one's whole person because nonbeing negates one's very being. In this, it is more than fear that has definable causes and knowable objects. Fear is amendable to rational solution, but anxiety is faceless and so overwhelming as to defy any objectification

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toward death. He even drew a parallel between the comfortable, upper-middle-class life of a Jean-Paul Sartre and the lap of luxury in which Prince Gautama once lived. Others have made Buddhism existentialist, but Siegmund has made Sakyamuni's renunciation look like some privileged youth's negative reaction to the good life.

[3]The intention of the fabled life of luxury the Buddha once enjoyed was meant to be contrasted well with the life of ascetic self-denial. St. Francis' life of poverty would not be as charmed had he been born a beggar instead of a prince, but the two extremes in the Buddha's life are meant to show up the Middle Path.

[4]Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952).

[5]Ibid, pp. 32-63.

[6]Ibid., pp. 42-54.

[7]Ibid., pp. 57-63. It is not necessary to repeat here the warning that the typologies and the periodizations are never that discrete or that absolute.

[8]Ibid., pp. 32-40.

or manipulation. What it reveals is always the ontological split in the human, whose dubious status of being is somehow torn between being and becoming or, as Hamlet put it, one's "crawling between Heaven and Earth." That estrangement can only be reconciled through faith in God. Only in faith would the threats of nothingness be overcome as one centers oneself in the Ground of our Being. In particular, the exigencies of our being-in-history can only be resolved through Jesus the Christ, the God-in-history. He is the New Being through whom Christians, grasped by the ultimacy of their concern, may find a new lease on life. As Jesus, God took upon Godself those very anxieties that came with being human; hence, Christ could so overcome human finitude on humanity's behalf.

Apropos its historical beginning, Tillich recognized that Christianity was one of many religions current in the late Roman empire, but he noted:

> In the religious movements which centered around this idea ["of the descent of a divine being for the salvation of the world"], the anxiety of fate and death was conquered by man's participation in the divine being who had taken fate and death upon himself. Christianity, although adhering to a similar faith, was superior to syncretism [the various mystery cults] in the individual character of the Savior Jesus Christ and in its concrete-historical basis in the Old Testament.[9]

Henceforth, by accepting acceptance (grace) one can also with true courage utter an absolute No to the nihilism of fate and death that hounds all mortals. Fate and death are, however, only the most elemental of the anxieties Tillich outlines in the book. Associating the birth of Christianity to a resolution of the anxiety of fate and death, Tillich does not mean to say that faith in Christ does not address the other anxieties. Still, over the larger historical landscape, Tillich has aligned each pair of anxieties to three major periods in Western history, noting, "We find that at the end of ancient civilization ontic anxiety is predominant, at the end of the Middle Ages moral anxiety, and at the end of the modern period spiritual anxiety."[10] The table below is for ease of reference:[11]

classical	ontic	fate and death
medieval	moral	guilt and condemnation
modern	spiritual	futility and meaninglessness

Of the three pairs of anxiety, the first is the most elemental. "The anxiety of fate and death is most basic, most universal, and inescapable."[12] It pertains

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[9]Ibid., p. 10.

[10]Ibid., p. 57.

[11]I have substituted the word "futility" for the word "emptiness" in the third set in order to avoid any possible confusion with the ultimate of Buddhist concern, sunyata or Emptiness, which, for the Mahayanist, is nothing nihilistic.

[12]Tillich, *Courage to Be*, p. 42.

to the very physical limitations placed upon our life. In that it has to do with necessity and mortality, that is, ontic exigency, it can be typed as pre-social and pre-moral. Religions or philosophies premised upon this pair need, however, not be asocial or amoral—far from it. Prior to the popularity of Christianity, the Stoics—persons of high moral standards and true cosmopolitans—were the philosophers who best addressed this pair. These pantheists looked fate and death in the eye and took them upon themselves with such resolution that they duly prided their conquest of them—pride in the fact that, whereas gods are "*beyond* suffering, the true Stoic is *above* it."[13] This position is taken by the Buddhists, too. In Buddhism, gods are also beyond suffering. They neither labor nor toil. They are not immortal, for their joyous stay in heaven is karmically numbered; still, they suffer the ease and joy due gods. Only Buddhas are beyond suffering, the joys included.

In the end, Tillich judged the Stoic path as falling short of the Christian ideal:

> The courage to be for [the Stoic] is the courage to affirm oneself in spite of fate and death, but it is not the courage to affirm oneself in spite of sin and guilt. It could not have been different: for the courage to face one's own guilt leads to the question of salvation instead of renunciation.[14]

Though it might be tempting to extend this criticism to Buddhism, we will see later how Buddhism is more than Stoicism, oriental style.[15]

It is clear though that for Tillich the next pair, that of guilt and condemnation, so much more characteristic of the Judeo-Christian ultimate concern, is the more central one. This anxiety centers on sin as the very culpability of humankind, for whose violation of a divine interdict punishment is due. This is the ethos and pathos of the biblical faith. Pangs of conscience the Stoics had, but they never lost faith in human reason or nature's Logos. They knew the fear of moral failure, but fear could still be rationally managed. They did not know the anxiety of mortal sin; however, that classical confidence in rational self-control was well eroded by late Hellenistic times. There was widespread doubt over the human ability to act right. Further, as "the idea precedes the deed," there was growing doubt even over the human ability to think right. The mysteries were not just concerned with gaining control over fate and death:

> The anxiety of guilt and condemnation was effective in the groups who gathered in the mystery cults with their rites of expiation and purification. . . . [but therein], [g]uilt is the pollution of the soul by the material realm or

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[13]Ibid., p. 15-16.

[14]Ibid., p. 17.

[15]How the state of *nirvāṇa*, which reads like some Stoic *apatheia*, is nonetheless more than the Stoic *physis* and how the Buddhist community is in practice more broadly based than the Stoic *cosmopolis* we will see later.

> by demonic powers [such that] the anxiety of guilt [due personal culpability] remains a secondary element . . . [16]

So it was left to the Christian gospel to demand total accountability of all people in a popular movement whose strength the elite philosophy of the Stoics could little match.However, it also follows that, as Europe was converted to the Christian faith, its cardinal categories to describe the plight of humankind, namely, guilt and condemnation, would win currency and become constitutive of its moral identity. This, after all, is *the* Christian anxiety that even Judaism and Islam never know as strongly. It changed classical culture and set Europe on a different cultural path "so radically that toward the end of the Middle Ages the anxiety of guilt and condemnation was decisive."[17] It became so decisive that, from the standpoint of this moral anxiety, any religion that still makes ontic fate and death its primary concern is naturally suspect as primitive and pre-moral. This appears primitive and pre-moral because the religion of guilt and condemnation has by then totally subsumed the problem of fate and death under itself. Hence, death is the "price of sin" and "sin is the sting of death," says St. Paul. Even as fate and death appeared to haunt humankind again in late-medieval Europe—we see its signs in the fascination with the Transi (decomposing corpse) in Gothic painting, in the adoration of the goddess Fortuna in Renaissance art,[18] and in Machiavelli's *The Prince*—they were colored, at least in the Reformation circles, by the primary anxiety over judgment at death and recast into a doctrine of predestination of the saved and the damned.

II. The Greek and the Biblical Views of Fate and Death

Here lies the genesis of Christian misunderstanding of Buddhism. Christianity has learned to subsume fate and death under the "higher" moral anxiety of guilt and condemnation and cannot understand how anyone could choose not to. However, let us consider the possibility that there might not only be periods of relative stress on one of the three modal anxieties but that there might also be different religions excelling in resolving one of these basic anxieties differently. That is, in their ultimate concern, Buddhism might just be the religion that targets fate and death as Christianity does guilt and condemnation. Such variation should come as no surprise because, even in the West, the anxiety over fate is more Greek than Hebrew, and the Greeks worried more over fate than over death. Both, however, were not *a priori* moral categories but the facts of life. Fate is blind, and human being is mortal. Fortune could smile on the good or the evil, but both would die, no matter

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[16]Tillich, *Courage to Be*, p. 58.
[17]Ibid.
[18]Ibid., p. 59.

what. Fate and death were impersonal, as was the cosmic order to which they belonged and whose balance they helped to ensure.[19] Even Zeus could not change fate; he could merely delay for a while the death that awaited one of his human offspring. This matter-of-fact-ness of death is best illustrated here with a Hindu myth. There was no death at first; humans just lived on and on, but that led to the world's being overpopulated. So, Varuna, the Zeus of India, permitted death to reap its yearly quota so that order might be. Morality is not involved in this decision, just necessity.

The ethicalization of fate – the transformation of ontic anxiety into moral anxiety – came slowly but never completely in classical Greece. In the tragedy, Oedipus was fated to kill his father. The oracle could not be changed by Laius' attempt to have his son killed any more than could Oedipus avoid this unholy act. Oedipus did not know that the stubborn old man whom he met on the road and killed was his father, but ignorance little changed the fact or affected the punishment due this unnatural crime. Oedipus had to pay.[20] The idea that Oedipus sinned because of his pride or *hubris* came later. Forewarned by the blind seer not to seek what he knew not, Oedipus was presumptuous enough to ignore the words and vowed to seek out the culprit – who turned out to be himself.[21] The lesson he learned is the tragic acknowledgement of the unknown bounds humans must not overstep, but, since the boundaries were unknown, Oedipus was guilty only after the fact. Ultimately, his story might be of crime and punishment, not guilt and condemnation. Oedipus blinded himself in remorse – the gods have nothing to do with it. In the march of human civilization that was Athens, this was intended to be a reminder that all human progress is a violation of nature, which would extract a price.[22]

That was Greece. In Palestine, fate was not a religious category. It had no independent existence in a world overseen by YHWH. Genesis did not consider Adam's fall to be fated. When Adam sinned, Adam knew, as Oedipus did not, that he had sinned, and he sinned knowingly.[23] That overt act of disobedience was later interpreted by Hellenistic Christianity as involving a prior intent: *hubris* itself. Humans overstep themselves, not against the order of the cosmos, not just against a rule (that was the older legalistic understanding),

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[19]In the myths, the impersonality is told through the threesomeness of the sisters of fate. The three are to ensure that if one proves errant – and classical gods were never infallible – the majority would restore "what had to be restored." That is a tautology, but the nature of fate is just that: what will be will be. The three sisters were old hags like the Furies, leftovers from a chthonic past, their sense of justice being based more on blood feuds and taboos than on any universal, moral law. Pre-ethical, they neither did nor could judge or hear supplications.

[20]At first, his people paid for his crime. In those days, kings represented the people, and the land was his land; hence, the sin of a king was paid dearly by his subjects and the crops.

[21]But, then, he was only doing his duty as king to seek out the culprit, his righteousness not unfounded upon his being king.

[22]Knowledge, contrary to what the philosophers would say later, is not always virtue; ignorance (of what transpired) might have its bliss.

[23]The partial blame shifted to Eve and Satan does not affect the legal definition of a conscious violation of an interdict.

but against God. To Paul and Augustine, this pride of human will against God's will is so fundamental that it indicts the whole person, the whole of humanity itself. Pride became the human intention not just to replace God with lesser gods but to supersede God with humanity. It is better to call this Christian than Jewish, for this concept of sin as *hubris* was born more out of and in reaction to late classical humanism than out of Pharisaic pietism. The Hebraic worry was over humans' worshipping other gods. The idols then were the gods of nature. The new worry was over humankind, for as Calvin well put it later, the human mind is a permanent factory of idols.

Because evil is now being seen as rooted in human will, even reason may be corrupted by it. That notion of radical evil ruled out Pelagianism and any Stoic confidence in self-perfection. The condemnation of pride changed the definition of faith from the old Hebraic sense of trust to the Christian *pistis*, faith. This new faith involves a totalistic acceptance of a saving mediator by sin-ridden humankind. Salvation superseded renunciation, and grace the compliance with the law. It used to be that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom; now, knowledge came with acknowledgment of a mystery, one having to do with death and resurrection.

It should be remembered here that death probably never aroused as much anxiety as fate in classical cultures. It was feared, but it was certain as fate was not.[24] In heroic society, death was a fact of life to be accepted even by the life-affirming culture. Death was the great leveler, and Hades was indiscriminately egalitarian. With the collapse of civic order, however, came greater individuation for a broader society. It was then that an unclassical hysteria—that is, an immoderate anxiety—over death and mortality became the preoccupation of the mystery cults. (The Stoics actually tried to keep up the older, losing ideal.) A similar change can also be detected in Palestine. The old Hebraic attitude toward death was just as matter-of-fact; only rarely did God tamper with the laws of nature or suspend death. In the post-exilic and intertestamental period, fascination with miracles grew, and belief in resurrection spread. The fall of Adam, once considered irreversible, now attracted new interpretations. Some began to see that, if death came as the price of sin, it would follow that an abrogation of sin would recall the eternal life that was Eden. With Christianity's ethicalization of ontic anxiety, the facticity of fate and the sting of death lost their hold on human beings. Henceforth, it became a fundamental fact in this theistic faith that guilt and condemnation should be the primary definition of humans and their situation.

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[24]That is why the tragedy could make more of one than the other.

III. The Buddhist Conquest of Fate and Death as Karma *and* Saṁsāra

Buddhism historically took a different route to its axial self-understanding. Vedic India knew the anxiety of fate and death, too. To cheat life of its despair, Brahmanical lore developed a priestly cult that sought magical control over fate and death. That ritualization of religion in the period of the *Brāhmaṇa*s (ca. 1000 B.C.E.) went so far that even the gods, once worshipped as self-sufficient deities, fell under the spell of the sacrifices in the once propitiatory rites. The glorification of the power of the ritual acts (*karma*) was such that it now ruled even the gods. Generalized later to mean all actions, not just magical rites, *karma* became the power of the universe itself. During the thisworldly optimistic phase, *saṁsāra* (the endless cycles of rebirth) as a category was unknown, but at the end of India's ancient period (ca. 500 B.C.E.), anxiety over death and judgment surfaced. In the axial age of the Upaniṣads and amidst social chaos, death became serial (redeaths). With that, the positive potency once granted ritual *karma* backfired. The tool of priests, *karma* now became the master instead—actions producing reactions in an endless series of retribution spanning many lives.

Fate was amoral in Greece, and death was a given to the Stoics. In India, however, they were ethicalized into *karma* and *saṁsāra*, in design as comprehensive as their biblical subsumption under sin and punishment, but with no reference to any god or eternal life. *Karma* removes contingency from fate because all that happens happens as a result of past moral and immoral actions. Fate is not blind; it is only our ignorance of the causes and the conditions that is blind. Stoic resignation before necessity is, therefore, not the proper response; freedom through knowledge of the causality is. However, this philosophy also removes the need of gods.[25] The gods had fallen victim to *karma*, their state now a path of finite reward for finite good.

This reduction of all life to being due moral or immoral action dismisses magic as well as grace and makes this the most, not the least, ethicorational religion there is.[26] It accomplishes this by collapsing ontic and moral realities in a way that would offend those who believe in the distinction of the human species. A human being can be reborn as a pig because of misdeeds. Humanity can thus be continuous with beasts (in some Hindu myths, even with plants). The cultivation of *tapas* (yogic heat) at the ontic-physical level and in total privacy can somehow generate such moral *karma* as to affect one's social well-being or even the fate of the (ontic) universe itself. Few moderns can accept this, though similar ideas were found in medieval Christianity.[27]

The Buddha presupposed the reality of *karma* and *saṁsāra*, but his

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[25]These gods being denied are gods of nature, slaves to *saṁsāra*, gods the YHWHists could as well do without. The atheism here is just anti-idolatry.

[26]So Max Weber assessed karmic theodicy the most rational of all theodicies.

[27]Aristotle allowed animal and vegetable souls in his hierarchy of souls, and contemplation in the cloisters was (and is still) thought to affect the welfare of the world outside the monasteries.

therapy for suffering does not require that as its premise. Buddhism has survived without it, because the first concern in Buddhism is with *dukkha* (pain, suffering) and freedom therefrom. Pain is not an ethical category but a psychophysical datum. In the abhidharmic (Hinayana scholastic) system, pain is so analyzed in terms of the physical *rūpa* or the psychic *citta*. Other religions might ask why there is suffering—as though it should not be there—but the Buddhist simply acknowledges the fact that there is suffering. This is not to say that suffering is causeless; everything has a cause. It is, rather, that Buddhist therapy ultimately does not go in for speculating about some remote cause.[28] The therapy begins in the present; the persistence of psychic suffering is due to our continual cravings and attachments. In the parable of the poisoned arrow, the Buddha shows himself to be unconcerned with the what and wherefor of the malaise. He was concerned only with the pain at hand and its removal.

One may seek out the cause of suffering in *karma* and *saṁsāra*, deeds done in some past life, but ultimately *karma* and *saṁsara* do not explain suffering; they *are* suffering. So the second Noble Truth avoids such infinite regress. It simply says that, as there is craving, there is suffering. Immediacy is implied in their conditioned co-arising.[29] Specifics of past causes do not matter that much; the common fact that we all suffer is alone what matters. Just as the idea that all humans are sinners making irrelevant claims of relative merits, so the idea of universal suffering makes irrelevant questions of who suffered more and why.[30] How sin and suffering get here—by some mythic fall or some primal ignorance—is secondary in importance to how to get out of here. So the third and the fourth Noble Truths state that suffering ceases with cravings; it ceases through the Eight Noble Paths, the rules of a community, and the practice of *śīla, samādhi, prajñā* (precepts, meditation, wisdom).

Since suffering is ultimately mental (even physical pain is in the head), the solution to suffering is understandably also psychological. In the Buddha's first sermon at Benaras, the focus was on *dukkha* (suffering); even *anatman* (no self) and impermanence came only as adjuncts. We suffer because we want things we do not have, cannot have, or cannot possess forever. The idea was hardly new. Life is one long frustration.[31] The distinction of the Buddha's teaching is that it regards those moments of gratification to be no less painful. No Hindu philosophical system subsumes all of life under such universal *dukkha*, but, then, the Buddha also plumbed the depth of suffering as no other did.

As in Christianity, the attention was turned to the motive behind the act,

[28]That was left to subsequent Buddhist literature, the *abhidharma* and the *avadāna* (folklore of past lives).

[29]Later serialization of the Buddha's cure for pain produced the theory of the Twelve Chains of Causation spanning Three Times.

[30]Such universalism in fact then helped create a new, indiscriminate human fellowship.

[31]The Upaniṣad thinkers also traced the root of *saṁsāra* to *kāma* (desires). The idea of a life-force forcing life along is ancient and derivable from any fertility cult.

the thought before the deed, the *citta-karma*. He found it in *tṛṣṇa*, a "thirst" more primitive than *kāma*. Normal desire has objects, but thirst is a pervasive craving after objects yet to be. It is a blind drive or *saṃskāra*; this "will to be" has a root that evokes scenes of atomic elements' striving forward, seeking to be an entity. Like *hubris*, it typically "oversteps itself" (its impermanent state), but, unlike *hubris*, it transgresses neither nature's nor God's law. What it desires might not even fall, in Western eyes, under the jurisdiction of morality. It can simply be the eye craving for something to see. However, it does have a natural tendency toward self-idolatry, for it would create the false sense of identity (*bhāva*, becoming) we call our "self."

It is unfortunate that the Buddhist denial of a self has deadlocked so much of the Buddho-Christian dialogue when it really should not. The egoistic self, which the Buddhist repudiates like the gods he demotes, the Christian should be able to do without. What does divide the two traditions is that Buddhists suffer because they crave; Christians, because they sin. Christian suffering is tied to Christian morality, which is tied in turn to the event of a sinless Christ who died on the Cross on humanity's behalf. So, martyrs faced death the same way, for Christ, truth, or others, through faith, hope, and love. That is the ground of the Christian "courage to be." The Buddhists, however, face their share of death, torture, and persecution with a "courage to be" minus that theistic assumption. Christians pray for strength from God; Buddhists pray to arouse their power of forbearance (*kṣānti*).[32] As moral persons, Buddhists and Christians do not act all that differently under similar situations.[33] Buddhist monks are not as totally indifferent to the world as they are often alleged to be.[34]

However, a Buddhist would refuse to regard death as a moral problem. Death is an ontic reality, the dispersal of the Five Elements, and should only be reckoned as such—dust to dust. It may occur in conjunction with a moral dilemma: Should a monk risk his life to stop a massacre of the innocent? Yes. However, to consider death a punishment due for sin and the redeemed as eligible to resurrection is to confuse an *is* with a fictive *ought*. To seek grace is to thirst after the comfort of illusions. Buddhists are often accused of being otherworldly, but to them Christians are escapists into the false refuge of an immortal soul, an eternal paradise, a life hereafter, an almighty God.[35]

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[32]We will put aside the Buddhist idea of faith-reliance for the moment.

[33]As persons of peace, Buddhist monks in times of such conflict would avoid violence and scenes of war; however, when it is obvious that if through involvement they could end violence, alleviate suffering, or heal wounds, they would even lay down their lives.

[34]Buddhists do have the duty so to protect the Three Jewels, and human lives came under the Saṅgha Jewel. Ideally, the defense of faith should be Gandhian, but, under very special circumstances, as allowed by the *Mahā-Parinirvāṇa Sūtra*, armed defense is permitted to laypersons in alliance with the good monks against infidels and heretics. In the last War, Japanese Buddhism knew villains as well as martyrs, just as did German Christianity.

[35]There is a lot of misunderstanding between Buddhists and Christians over this. Since the removal of death is premised upon the removal of all *karma*—good, bad, and indifferent—the quest of *nirvāṇa* is deemed by its critics as otherworldly and mystical. This is unfortunate because

The Buddhist who so lived without illusions and the Christian who so affirmed the real God would find it hard to see eye-to-eye. This is because Buddhists have chosen to confront the fundamental anxiety, fate and death, and build their worldview on that, while Christians have chosen to tackle the next level of anxiety, guilt and condemnation, and make that their measure. Buddhists are not amoral; they have just built their morality upon the notion of sentience. Christians do not avoid facing death by moralizing it away; if they sublated ontic anxiety into moral anxiety, they only went from one "No Exit" situation into another. Radical sin poses as great a threat on the Christian (moral) being as fundamental suffering would on the Buddhist (ontic) being.

IV. A Buddhist Reading of Genesis

To see how the Buddhist and the Christian can look at the same phenomenon differently, we can take as an example the story of Genesis, which happens to contain elements of both ontic death and moral sin. In the biblical original, Adam fell because he disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of knowledge. It is a drama of personalities in conflict, of laws and the breaking of laws, and of seduction by internal pride and external evil. By an act of overt disobedience, humankind became alienated from God the Creator, sinning because of pride. That the male was misled by the female (created out of him and thus a part of him) or seduced by the Devil (who charged God with jealousy)[36] is not the main point of the priestly editor of this ancient story.

An atheistic Buddhist would read the story differently, ultimately with no God or Adam, and more as a drama of the mind. The fall, says the Buddhist, comes about in the act of craving (for the fruit).[37] It was ultimately not Adam who craved but the craving that created Adam. This means that the thirst for the fruit precipitated the unwarranted distinction of the desiring subject (Adam) and the desired object (fruit). This false sense of selfhood led to the forgetfulness of the basic reality of universal impermanence. The knowledge of good and evil may then represent discrimination; the good is desired, the evil abhorred. With such a false promise of eternal life for the illusory being called Adam, there is the fall. The reversal of the fall is therefore by the cessation of the craving, the rededication of self and object to the selfsameness of all. Here, *hubris* is the thirst for being, the will toward ontic form, the idolatry

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very few remarks made by the Buddha resemble the poetry of mystics, and much of it is just about moral living and hard-nosed facing of reality (*yathā-bhūtum*) as it is. To mystify is to speculate; to crave nonexistence is another craving.

[36]I.e., that Adam might become like God with the knowledge of good and evil (in Babylon, that meant access to magical power) and immortal if he further ate of the fruit of eternal life.

[37]That craving has been dramatized by the sexual motifs of the prior seduction of the woman (by the snake) and later the woman's appeal to the man, but that is best reserved for monastic prudence or Tantric mystery to make more of.

of the ego who makes oneself god in its own realm and the measure of all things.

This Buddhist reading is not unknown to the West. The gnostics or some Jewish *aggadahs* have also traced the fall to desire and subsequent alienation of self from self, of Adam and Eve ("They saw they were naked and were ashamed."), of God and humankind, of human beings and nature. However, it is important not to overdo such parallels and relegate Buddhist wisdom under the gnostic heresy. This is because a basic difference between Buddhism and the Gnostics is the Buddhist commitment to strict, rational, thisworldly, and altruistic ethics.[38] Contrary to Christian polemics, this selfless tradition respects persons as persons because of a basic belief in the kinship of all interconnected beings. On the actual principles and how they were worked out in the building of the Sangha, only a future article could elucidate more fully.[39]

V. Mutual Solicitation as an Answer to Modern Anxiety

Christians ethicalized death, while Buddhists psychologized morality, but are their primary orientations toward the self-definition of humankind so mutually exclusive? Can they afford to retain that exclusivism even if it were possible in our time?

One can indeed be ideologically self-sufficient. There is something in religious systems – the more perfect, the more closed – that promotes that. Christian moralists can still well pass judgment on Buddhists and, if one knows enough about psychology, can even reduce the phenomenon of a "pre-individuated" no-self to being the result of depersonalization brought about by the self-induced pain and suffering that ascetics indulge in. Such words are the luxury of armchair critics. The Christian being martyred on the cross and the Buddhist monk accepting starvation so that food might be spared for others

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[38]It is true that Buddhism holds morality (as *karma*) and moral decision (as discrimination) suspect, but that is talking at the nirvanic level. Like the question on the woman and her meeting with seven husbands in Heaven, such talk is not always relevant in everyday life, for which the tradition has a demagicized system of precepts as respectable as any: "Avoid evil, do good, and cleanse your mind."

[39]Since Siegmund has brought this up, we might also indulge in seeing a further parallel and difference in the life stages mapped by Kierkegaard and the life stages in the legend of the Buddha. Kierkegaard talked about the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious stages and painted a picture of a hedonist (himself as the lover) in the first stage. Like Prince Gautama in his pleasure garden, Kierkegaard's decision to reject his love is reminiscent of Sakyamuni's renunciation of his family. Through self-denial, Kierkegaard moved on to the ethical plane; through self-denial, however, the Buddha remained with the ontic – he became an extreme ascetic. Kierkegaard eventually discovered the religious through a leap of faith, but it was a leap premised no less on the moral anxiety of guilt and condemnation. The Buddha denied self-denial and found the Middle Path, but the enlightenment was still premised on the reality of pleasure and pain. The philosopher who is a lover of life, Nietzsche, calls the Buddha "The Preacher of Death," as he glorified the very thirst for rebirth as the Will for the Eternal Return (Tillich, *Courage to Be*, p. 27, though the Buddha is not named).

in times of famine know better the fragility of the "self" that those who live in clover take so much for granted. Both found an ego-strength, a "courage to be," albeit from two different systems of religious beliefs, to help them to transcend despair. Whether one is based on an ontic and the other on an ethical view of self and world may not matter that much, for, in the end, both lived in and derived their strength from symbolic systems of ultimate meaning. To each of them, the symbols are real – in fact, more real than the pain of death itself.

That brings us to the final anxiety. So far we have not discussed the anxieties of futility and meaninglessness that, says Tillich, characterize our time. Tillich does not put this pair last in his list of anxieties as we did in our table above. Tillich reserves the last place for guilt and condemnation. This is so even though one might consider this modern, spiritual anxiety the highest of anxieties.[40] As Tillich put it:

> We use the term meaninglessness for the absolute threat of nonbeing to spiritual self-affirmation . . .
>
> The anxiety of meaninglessness is anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings. This anxiety is aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence.[41]

However, as a Christian theologian, Tillich could not predicate guilt and condemnation under a higher anxiety called futility and meaninglessness. Christianity knew guilt and condemnation best, but all religions can claim to be concerned with meaning. Not accidentally, Tillich's discussion of the spiritual anxiety over futility and meaninglessness[42] is the most general and least christocentric of his discussions.

Here is the rub. The modern loss of meaning that Tillich analyzed so well is a loss of meaning that affects no less the traditional Christian worldview. Terms such as guilt and condemnation, so constitutive of the Christian soteriology, might still be vivid for some Christians, but to too many they have become dated words. People know the dictionary meaning of guilt, but they do not feel guilty. Rational humanism – what Tillich called Neo-Stoicism under his treatment of Spinoza – has managed to live without the felt need for either salvation or renunciation, the mode of deliverance in the two earlier ages.[43] The loss of meaning is the modern spiritual malaise. This is not new; people in other ages had despaired over the emptiness of their lives. However, if Tillich's theology of culture shows anything, it shows that, just as Europe was converted to Christianity at the end of the classical period into becoming

[40]If the ontic attends the body and the moral the mind, this spiritual anxiety should indeed attend the spirit. However, even though Tillich used the word "spiritual" as the adjective for the anxiety over meaning, that word was vaguely defined.

[41]Tillich, *Courage to Be*, p. 47.

[42]Ibid., pp. 46-51.

[43]Ibid., pp. 18-24.

sensitive to the reality of guilt and condemnation, Europe at the end of the modern age is being converted out of the same. The post-Christian world has been weaned away precisely from those symbols of the late medieval era. The traditional structures of the Christian faith are becoming so many broken symbols.[44]

The anxiety of futility and meaninglessness in our time is, therefore, not just a spiritual malaise (we do not even know what spirit means nowadays); it is also or even more so a linguistic anxiety, a disease in the language that prevents us from even coming to a clear conception about our situation. That plagued even Tillich, the theologian who tried to offset every existentialist query with a correlated Christian theological reply, but even Tillich's language of being sounds strangely empty.[45]

We are not only in a dreadful need for some expression of ultimate concern; we need a new vocabulary to help in the rediscovery of what we should even be concerned about. Here is where interfaith dialogue might help to create a new language. While the encounters of religions might have contributed to that anarchy of language of ultimate concern, the same might prove in the long run the birth of a new awareness. Therefore, it is important that Christians not dismiss Buddhism as impersonal, nonethical, atheistic, and ahistorical, not when the whole Christian vision of personhood, God, ethics, and history itself is undergoing review. The same applies to the Buddhist philosophers who are so confident that Buddhism has the better grasp of reality. The fact of the matter is that both traditions face semantic confusion.

How do we untangle ourselves from the war of words? We must return to the basics of our ontic limitations and our moral culpabilities—but without the preconceptualizations that define one as *karma* and *saṁsāra* and the other as guilt and condemnation. We must not debunk the world of meaning both religions have built but rebuild their insights for the new world of religions. We have to face with courage both the inherent limitations of any religious system and also the inherent wealth of their traditions. Tillich has shown how the primary modes of existential anxiety have shifted in time in the West. We have shown how such variations might apply to the genesis of two religions, Christianity and Buddhism. That is only the beginning of our enterprise.

A full historical treatment of both traditions (being planned) will show how the East has its three periods of anxieties and how, in world history, these two traditions evolved, even met, and have their forms of piety dovetailing into one another in time. Christianity would adopt renunciation and experience the loss of the self in its own yogic prayers. Buddhism would know the failure

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[44]As when Nietzsche announced the death of God; see Tillich, *Courage to Be*, pp. 24-31, for the positive side of this crude awakening on which even the existential theology of Tillich rests.

[45]Tillich's language of God as Ground and Christ as the Center of our New Being has inspired a whole generation of thinkers, but in our post-Freudian, post-existentialist generation, amidst the present distrust of depth psychology and the collapse of metaphysics and ontotheology, Tillich's vocabulary seems already peculiarly dated.

of the moral will in its moments of eschatological despair and hope and accept the promise of grace.[46] Given the fact that all religions address the same basic anxieties of the same human species, such interreligious exploration should end in a mutual solicitation of insights,[47] of finding in another person's faith seen through a glass darkly some neglected corner of one's own tradition and soul.

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[46]It began with Mahadeva, the first evil man to attain deliverance in an act of ultimate repentance and the eschatological gospel about sin-ridden persons born into evil.

[47]I prefer this term of Joseph O'Leary (Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan) to the term "Mutual Transformation." I also thank O'Leary for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

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can override marked differences in self-understanding. There can be a tension between the deductive and inductive approaches to defining communal identity.

Reflection needs to take place ecumenically to collect and evaluate the perceptions Christians have in interreligious and multireligious experiences. A multireligious forum for Christians to join with representatives of other faith traditions is also needed. Possibilities for the N.C.C.C. Interfaith Working Group or the W.C.R.P. to provide such opportunities were discussed, as were the advantages of the various situations where Christians have come together alone or with members of other faith communities. These include the Faith and Order Commission, the Collegeville consultation, W.C.R.P., the National Workshop on Christian Unity, the National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations, the North American Interfaith Network, and the National Association of Ecumenical Staff. Some of these are limited in focus, some in membership. While W.C.R.P. provides a multireligious forum, the N.C.C.C. Interfaith Working Group may provide the widest regularly scheduled gathering of church representatives with interests in interreligious relations.

Rejecting a suggestion that a new forum be developed similar to the workshops on Christian unity and Christian-Jewish relations, the group reached consensus to continue the process that led to the Collegeville statement, in the hope of completing a fuller and more concise text on their theological agreements, disagreements, and concerns regarding confessing the Christian faith in a pluralistic world. A smaller consultative group was suggested, involving staff from the N.C.C.C. Interfaith Working Group, the N.C.C.B. Secretariat, the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America, the Southern Baptist Interfaith Witness Office, and a Pentecostal coalition through Assemblies of God personnel. This group of five or more would distribute the Collegeville paper for responses and suggestions within their communities and perhaps among representatives of other faith traditions as well, asking certain leading questions.

The consultative group would then plan a further consultation in 1994 to focus on the goals of dialogue and their relation to the identity of Christians, leading to a consensus document noting agreements and disagreements. The participants encouraged the W.C.R.P. to plan, along with the interreligious or public relations staff of various churches and religious bodies, a multireligious forum for wider contact among religious groups.

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