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The Buddhist Refusal of Theism

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In a celebrated discourse, a seeker of spiritual truth, Mālunkyaputta, demands that the Buddha resolve his doubts concerning contested metaphysical matters before accepting the Buddha's teaching, which is intended to secure deliverance from suffering. He wants to know, for instance, whether the universe exists perpetually or not, whether the body and the living soul are identical or not, and whether the enlightened sage survives after death or not. In response, the Buddha presents a parable in which he asks Mālunkyaputta to consider the condition of a man who has been wounded by an arrow and now requires the services of a surgeon in order to save his life. In these circumstances, does the man wish to do all that is possible so that the surgeon may succeed at his task, or does he first wish to resolve his doubts regarding the reasons for his wound? Who shot the arrow? and why? Was the act deliberate or accidental? Was the archer old or young? So many questions to ask! Should the man wait until he has all the answers he wants, or should he just let the surgeon get on with his work?

The Buddha, of course, is the surgeon of the story, offering a practical solution to the trouble and pain that afflict our worldly existence. The injured man's questions are analogous to the metaphysical and theological problems raised by the Buddha's interlocutor, which the Buddha dismisses as quite beside the real task at hand:

> These questions, Mālunkyaputta, have no connection to what is most meaningful and do not lead to purity of conduct, to unworldliness, to detachment, to tranquility, or to insight . . . Therefore I have not resolved them. What is it that I have resolved, Mālunkyaputta? It is this: the nature of suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. These I have resolved. (*Majjhimanikāya* 63)

It is in this light that later Buddhist thinkers generally came to regard the supreme question for philosophers of religion – what can we know of the existence and nature of God? – considering it to be no more than an irrelevant distraction from the practical problem posed by the experience of suffering in our world.

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In the first instance, then, the Buddhist attitude to theism is a refusal to be troubled by theistic claims. This has led many to characterize Buddhism not as a brand of atheism, but as a 'non-theistic' religion. Like other major religions, Buddhism offers a system of soteriology: it is concerned to secure our release from the predicament in which we find ourselves in a world marked by the evils of suffering and death. But, in contrast with many other religions, Buddhism remains uninterested in the matter of whether or not God is a part of our existential problem, while at the same time it sees no requirement for theistic belief in its formulation of the solution. In this respect, Buddhism may be thought to urge an ethical ataraxy with respect to theological affirmations.

During the last centuries BCE, when Buddhism developed in India, theism had not as yet become a predominant trend in Indian religious reflection. Certainly, the sacrificial cult of the Vedas proposed a world governed by a prolific pantheon, but the Vedic divinities were themselves by and large regarded as worldly agents, subservient to the priestly power exercised in the rites of the sacrifice. The aspects of early Brahmanical thought that involved a search for ultimate grounds, such as we find represented in the Upaniṣads, tended to reach beyond these divinities and to seek an abstract metaphysical principle at the root of existence, but not a personal god as conceived in monotheistic religions. The early Indian cosmos, therefore, resembled in some respects that of the Hellenistic world. Within such a framework, the ethically motivated refusal to engage in theological speculation was unexceptional, for here even the gods were held to be subject to the same impersonal order that governs the lives of ordinary mortals. On the contrary, it is the intrusion of properly theistic thought, finding its ultimate ground in a supreme and personal deity, that marks a rupture. Though it is not possible to date the emergence of such theism in India with much exactitude, it seems certain that, by the beginning of the common era, several schools of thought were advocating allegiance to such a divinity, regarded at once as a creator and a bestower of grace upon his or her creatures. In response to this emerging theism, Buddhist philosophy reacted by a remarkable shift in its standpoint, turning from what I have characterized as ethical ataraxy to the forceful rebuttal of theistic views.

Among the arguments that were advanced by Buddhist thinkers in articulating their opposition to the emerging Hindu theism, some will be familiar to students of the philosophy of religion in the West. Especially prominent was a version of the argument from evil: theism holds the world to have been crafted by a supremely good divinity, to whom we owe our allegiance in order to secure our salvation. But, counters the opponent of theism, given the evil of our world, the god who is presumed to have created it cannot be supremely good and may in fact be held responsible for the very catastrophe from which we wish to be saved! Such a god is no more worthy of our adherence than would be the assassin of the man shot by the arrow in the parable recounted above. Thus, in consideration of the evil and pain that determines our world, theism must either be altogether false or, if God does exist, it can be only as a perverse or errant demiurge in whom we would be wrong to place our trust. The development of Buddhist argumentation along these lines inspired later Hindu thinkers to elaborate a variety of theodicies in defense of their positions, but the Buddhists, for their part, remained unconvinced.

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A second line of argument stressed formal problems in the conception of a supreme deity. God, the theists affirm, must be eternal, and an eternal entity must be supposed to be altogether free from corruption and change. That same eternal being is held to be the creator, that is, the causal basis, of this world of corruption and change. The changing state, however, of a thing that is caused implies there to be change also in its causal basis, for a changeless cause cannot explain alteration in the result. The hypothesis of a creator god, therefore, either fails to explain our changing world, or else God himself must be subject to change and corruption, and hence cannot be eternal. Creation, in other words, entails the impermanence of the creator. Theism, the Buddhist philosophers concluded, could not as a system of thought be saved from such contradictions.

Just as occurred in the history of scholastic philosophy in the West, these and related arguments were subject to enormous elaboration and became, in time, the subject of entire treatises. The philosophers who contributed to these developments included some of Buddhist India's greatest luminaries: Vasubandhu (c. 5th century), Dharmakīrti (c. 600), Śāntarakṣita (fl. c. 760), and Jñānaśrīmitra (10th century) among them. In reading the works of these thinkers, we may come to conclude that Buddhism's earlier refusal of theism had indeed given way to a well-formed anti-theism. It remains noteworthy, however, that these authors adhere throughout their anti-theistic writings to strict principles of philosophical detachment and never allow their arguments to give way to polemical attacks against either theistic religions or their adherents. Buddhist anti-theism, in other words, was conceived primarily in terms of the logical requirements of Buddhist philosophical systems, for which the concept of a personal god violated the rational demands of an impersonal, moral and causal order.

Some interpreters of Buddhism, indeed, have underscored countervailing tendencies that appear to indicate a Buddhist reconciliation with aspects of theism. Against the view that Buddhism is an anti- or non-theistic religion, it has been noted that most forms of Buddhism have admitted a diverse pantheon of local divinities and spirits, and that the religious lives of Buddhists in traditional communities as widely separated as Nepal, Thailand and Japan have generally granted a central role to the cults of such beings. May not Buddhism, therefore, be considered, in practice at least if not in theory, consistent with a type of polytheism? Though this question cannot be altogether discounted, it should be emphasized that the various local deities admitted by Buddhism are always held to be, like ourselves, worldly beings who are subject to the mundane conditions of birth, suffering and death. Like ourselves, their lives are ordained by the impersonal order of the world and they may be worshipped only to secure mundane ends – protection from illness, plentiful harvests, etc. – but not at all for the ultimate goals of enlightenment and spiritual freedom. The Buddhist concession to the gods, in other words, has no direct bearing upon Buddhist attitudes with respect to the existence of a supreme deity. At the same time, it is true that the gods do play a preeminent role in the lives of believers in many Buddhist societies.

From its beginnings, too, Buddhism developed an attitude of worship and devotion toward the person of the Buddha, an attitude that in its emotional resonances seems fully consonant with the sentiments of faith and devotion as these manifest in

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theistic traditions. In time, Buddhism further gave rise to cults of past and future Buddhas, as well as of the great bodhisattvas thought to have forestalled final enlightenment in order to remain in the world to aid others. Besides the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, the focal points for worship came to include, among many others: Amitābha, whose paradise promises divine bliss to those reborn there; Maitreya, the next Buddha who will appear in our world; Avalokiteśvara (or Guanyin in Chinese), the bodhisattva of compassion; and Tārā, the savior often identified with the wisdom that is the divine mother of all Buddhas. These developments were particularly prominent in the traditions adhering to the Mahāyāna, the 'great vehicle' of Buddhism that spread from India to Central and East Asia.

For Mahāyāna thought, moreover, the Buddha in his absolute aspect is the 'body of reality' (*dharmakāya*), pervading all that there is and instilling in every living creature a potential to realize the highest enlightenment. Though this body of reality is regarded as an ultimate principle, establishing the basis for such properties of buddhahood as those of omniscience and omnibenevolence, it is not to be thought of as a personal divinity or as a creator. As was admitted by some Buddhist philosophers, it was thought to be similar in certain respects to *brahman,* the impersonal ground of existence posited in the Hindu Upaniṣads. Nevertheless, Buddhists generally insisted that the body of reality corresponded not to being, but to that emptiness which transcends the dichotomy of existence and its opposite.

As these brief examples show, Buddhism, while denying ultimacy to the Vedic gods and to the local divinities of the lands in which it spread, nevertheless elaborated its own distinctive pantheon, offering an array of transcendent figures ever present to intercede in the lives of the faithful, saving them from worldly troubles and aiding them to advance toward the enlightenment that is Buddhism's final goal. Moreover, in the conception of the body of reality and related notions, a domain of religious thought resembling theological speculation unfolded as well. It may appear, therefore, that despite its repeated denials of theism, Buddhism in the end became a type of theistic religion and must be considered on this basis.

Though such a conclusion is in some respects unobjectionable, we must nevertheless recall the important reservations with which Buddhism has forever regarded most forms of theistic belief: on the one hand, Buddhism will not countenance the idea of an omnipotent creator, who is *a fortiori* the creator not only of the good, but also of the evil in the world; and, on the other, although the buddhas and bodhisattvas to whom Buddhism accords the highest honor may aid their devotees in overcoming the evil and pain to which beings in the world are subject, they are in no way held to be the source of the existential predicament in which we find ourselves. In the Buddhist universe, one may say, the problem of Job cannot arise and if, overcome by the suffering around him, the Buddhist demands to know 'why?', he or she will find answers not in the inscrutability of a supreme god, but only in the impersonal order of things and in the deeds of living beings subject to that order.

For these reasons, interreligious dialogue involving Buddhism cannot proceed along precisely the same lines as does conversation among the three monotheistic faiths, which share important presuppositions and cultural roots, together with a complex history of cooperation and conflict. Buddhism, by contrast, is the product of an entirely different historical and cultural experience. Though some Buddhist

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thinkers, for example the philosophers Masao Abe of Japan and the Gunapala Dharmasiri of Sri Lanka, have sought to develop Buddhist responses to western theological concerns, the focal point for Buddhist exchange with other religions has tended to be religious ethics rather than belief per se. For it is in its emphasis upon values such as generosity, compassion, self-discipline and peace that Buddhism most evidently shares in the common human concerns that equally inform the monotheistic traditions. Such a vision is evident in the words of the present Dalai Lama, spoken on the occasion of a meeting with Christian theologians: 'I believe that the purpose of all major religious traditions is not to construct big temples on the outside, but to create temples of goodness and compassion *inside*, in our hearts. Every religious tradition has the potential to create this. The greater our awareness is regarding the value and effectiveness of other religious traditions, then the deeper will be our respect and reverence toward other religions' (*The Good Heart*, pp. 39–40). Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama also affirms a role for dialogue among religious scholars specializing in the study of theology and doctrine within their respective traditions; for, he maintains, mutual respect can flourish only where there is mutual understanding, and this must stem from knowledge not only of the apparent commonalities linking the various traditions, but equally from a keen awareness of their differences.

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