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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how can teachers promote an interreligious dialogue at a "grassroots" level. The document suggests teaching about another religion, such as Buddhism, as a belief system while deepening the students' understanding of their own religious traditions. After expressing concerns that the issues may be too complex and only serve to reinforce stereotypes about both religions or that the concepts addressed may be too elusive for the audience, Milton J. Bennett's developmental model for intercultural sensitivity is presented. In a lesson envisioned for a 200-level Humanities course, the Buddhist concept of self is contrasted with the Christian concept of self. The ways in which religions choose to image the human self carry enormous cultural implications yet should create opportunities for greater insights on the human condition as students grapple with these difficult questions. (EH)

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TO SEE THE OTHER AS OTHER:

THOUGHTS ON THE TEACHING OF RELIGION

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Statement of the Problem

Reflecting on the current Buddhist-Christian exchange, David Tracy writes that "it is an exceptionally fruitful dialogue insofar as the reality of the other as other is acknowledged as at the heart of all true dialogue" (Tracy, 68). Some very penetrating exchanges have occurred over the past twenty years between theologians and scholars both east and west. Yet this dialogue, however important, constitutes a "top-down" approach to interreligious understanding which may not always touch the laity.

My concerns are somewhat different: as a teacher in an isolated community college, I approach this dialogue with a particular interest in cross-cultural education. My problem then and the focus for this paper is this: how to promote an interreligious dialogue at a "grassroots" level? How can I introduce my students to Buddhism as a belief system so as to cultivate a recognition of "the reality of the other as other" and at the same deepen their understanding of their own religious traditions? To do this, I propose an exploration of a single theme, the self, as conceived in each tradition.

Perhaps it would be useful to describe the kind of population I serve. Valdez, Alaska, is one hundred miles from the next small

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town, three hundred miles from the nearest city. The population is fairly homogenous, so there is little to challenge the prevailing ethnocentrism. My students are adult learners, generally 20 - 35 years old, some older. Most consider themselves Christian; yet few have any objective knowledge of Christianity either as an historical phenomenon or as a belief system. All too often, I have found their thinking about other cultures, when they consider them at all, to be simplistic and stereotypical. I do not mean to suggest that they are incapable of interreligious understanding, but simply that many are ignorant.

I have several concerns in this paper. One is that my presentation of some complex and subtle distinctions may be too simplistic to be accessible to my intended audience and that I will unintentionally reinforce stereotypes about both religions. Another fear is that the topic may simply prove too elusive for that audience.

A Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity

To consider how best to approach an interreligious dialogue in an educational setting, I have relied on the developmental model of Milton J. Bennett. It is Bennett's contention that intercultural sensitivity must be carefully cultivated. It is not enough to simply inform a learner of differing perspectives and then to expect an appreciation for those differences. Where differences

are particularly striking, the learner may feel discomfited and threatened and so reject the unfamiliar without ever experiencing what Tracy calls "the reality of the other as other." Bennett describes a continuum of intercultural awareness moving from ethnocentrism to what he terms "ethno-relationism." There are six stages in this sequence, summarized below.

I. DENIAL

The denial of difference occurs "when physical or social isolation precludes any contact at all with significant cultural differences . . . this position represents the ultimate ethnocentrism, where one's own world view is unchallenged as central to all reality" (Bennett, 182). This stage is usually characterized by parochialism, or in extreme cases, utter disregard for the humanity of the other. The best educational strategy at this level is simply to present some differences as a kind of "cultural awareness," without raising any serious discussion of these differences. It is important not to force a consideration of the meaning of difference too early, or students will just continue to reject the reality of the other.

II. DEFENSE

The recognition of difference threatens the centrality of the learner's worldview. The learner often responds by denigrating the difference with expressions of overt hostility such as, racial, cultural, or national superiority. Cultural pride at this stage asserts one's own culture as the standard for all others. Bennett does not advise directly challenging the learner's stereotypes at

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this level.

> Trying to explain to someone in denigrative Defense that his or her negative stereotypes are inaccurate does not work, and may simply provide the [learner] with more denigrative fodder. Techniques to increase cultural self-esteem could include discussions of what is 'good' about one's own culture, accompanied by discussion of 'good' things about other cultures." (189)

III. MINIMIZATION

At this stage, cultural difference is acknowledged but held to be superficial. The learner adopts what Bennett calls a "transcendent universalism" (184). This position generalizes that "we are all the same underneath," "people are people everywhere," or - among certain religious groups - "we are all God's children." This universalizing from one's own experiences denies the reality of significant cultural differences. Movement beyond this stage requires "a major conceptual shift from reliance on absolute principles of some sort to an acknowledgement of nonabsolute reality" (190). It is at this point -- and not earlier -- that Bennett recommends an emphasis on substantial cultural differences. He suggests such activities as simulations, personal narratives, demonstrations, and guest presenters to confront the learner with those differences.

IV. ACCEPTANCE

This is the first stage of ethno-relationism. "At this stage, cultural difference is both acknowledged and respected. Difference is perceived as fundamental, necessary and preferable in human affairs" (184). The emphasis here is on the details of cultural difference within a cultural context. Discussion includes styles

of discourse, nonverbal behavior, and cultural values. The learner is urged not to judge differences in value, but simply to understand them.

V. ADAPTATION

This stage is characterized by a heightened sensitivity to another culture, an ability to enter empathetically into the reality of the other. Learners at the level of Adaptation are "eager to apply their knowledge of cultural difference to actual face-to-face communication" (193).

VI. INTEGRATION

At the highest level of inter-cultural sensitivity, the learner integrates difference by applying what has been learned back to his or her own cultural identity This process requires both an empathetic understanding of another culture and a healthy awareness of one's own. People at this level often struggle to construct an ethical system which accommodates a diversity of perspectives.

All this may seem rather self-evident for those currently engaged in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue (and operating at the level of Integration). But it is a helpful model for those of us seeking to modify behaviors and attitudes in an educational setting. I find particularly useful the suggestion that Defense and Minimization can be viewed positively, as developmental stages in the recognition of the cultural difference.

Most of my students operate at the first three, ethnocentric

levels. Denial of difference is common among those who quite literally may have had **no** exposure to another religious tradition. A dramatic example of this is the woman who announced in "Western Civilization" that she saw no need to learn history before the birth of Christ. Others -- at the stage of Defense -- seem to know just enough about the world "outside" to reject it. These would include the woman who refused to allow her daughter to attend a yoga class after she deduced from the dictionary that it was a form of pagan religion. In another Alaskan community, parents protested an elementary school's efforts to celebrate the Chinese New Year in the Year of the Dragon, because they believed the dragon to be a satanic symbol.

The following lesson is envisioned for a 200-level Humanities course. Let us assume that the students have already been exposed to a number of different religions before this lesson on Buddhism and Christianity. They have read about the cosmologies of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the mythologies of Greece and Rome, the emergence of monotheism in Israel, and the evolution of the early Christian Church. They can no longer deny the existence of the other, although many have defensively rejected the validity of the other's views. Reading the flood myth in "The Epic of Gilgamesh," for example, students are discomfited to learn of a flood tradition predating the Noah story. Some simply refuse to believe it.

In the lesson outlined below, I plan to present the Buddhist concept of the self in contrast to the Christian concept. My goal is to encourage students to grow from the defensive rejection of

difference through the minimization of difference to an acceptance of difference. The lesson begins by sketching out the details of the concept of the self within each tradition. I am particularly indebted to Winston L. King's article "No-Self, No-Mind, and Emptiness Revisited" for the examples provided and much of the subsequent discussion.

The Christian Concept of Self

To examine the Christian concept of the self, we shall begin with the creation story in the Book of Genesis (King James).

> And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.
> So God created man in his . :n image; in the image of God he created him; male and · male created he them.
> And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it. (Gen. 1.26-28)
> And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Gen. 2.7)

Here is a vision of humanity conceived in the image of the divine. Man is both a physical entity, fashioned from the dust of the earth, and a spiritual being, imbued with "the breath of life" by the Creator. Humanity is both body and spirit, and this duality becomes one of the central themes of Christianity. Shortly after the creation, the first man and woman disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. They make this choice

freely and, as a consequence, are expelled from Paradise. At the outset, then, the Judeo-Christian tradition posits the human self as a free-standing individual, capable of moral reasoning and accountable for wrong-doing. In the Old Testament, although the Covenant is between God and the Hebrew people, men and women speak to their God and hear his voice as individuals. God admonishes righteous behavior and delivers swift justice to the transgressor.

In the New Testament, this concept of individual personhood is expanded to include the idea of an immortal soul. The self or soul is conferred on humanity with the breath of life. Christianity offers each individual a personal relationship with the divine. It is as individual souls that men and women respond to the word of God and the message of Christ. The body may be mortal, but the soul is indestructible. In the Book of Revelations, St. John the Divine writes:

> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men"...And God will dwell with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more. (Rev. 21.2-4)

In contrast to this vision of eternal bliss for the chosen is the image of eternal suffering for the damned.

> And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20.31-14)

Various Christian denominations differ on the details of free will, determinism and salvation, but on the fundamental structure

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of the self there is widespread agreement. It is as individuals that we are held accountable in the final judgement; heaven and hell are peopled by individual souls.

The Buddhist Concept of No-Self

The Buddhist concept of self can perhaps be best illustrated by the following story, which comes from the Theravada Buddhist tradition. The Milindapanha tells of a Greek king, Milinda, who comes before the Buddhist monk Nagasena seeking answers about the Buddhist teaching on the self. The monk affirms that his name is Bhante Nagasena, but denies that this is really who or what he is. The name is merely a "'convenient designation... for there is no Ego to be found here'" (Warren, 129).

The king scoffs, "'... if there is no Ego to be found, who is it then furnishes you priests with the priestly requisites -- robes, food, bedding, and medicine?'" Indeed, he continues, "'who is it who applies himself to meditation? ... who is it commits immorality? ... who is it commits the five crimes that constitute "proximate karma"?'"(130) For the king, the self is identified with human activity: the meeting of obligations, acts of devotion, the accumulation of karma good and bad.

Nagasena then considers where an ego might reside. He dismisses a catalog of body parts, including "saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine, brain" (130). None of these parts of a

human being can be said to house the ego or self. Nor, he maintains, can any combination of "form, sensation, perception, the predispositions, and consciousness" (131) be mistaken for the human self. An individual, Nagasena, can be named for convenience, but the reality of that person is an illusion. To clarify this to the baffled king, he offers the analogy of the chariot.

He questions the king about the chariot in which he arrived. Taking each piece of the chariot in turn -- the pole, the axle, the wheels, and so on -- he establishes that none of these is a chariot. The identity of a chariot does not consist in any or all of the parts: "'the word "chariot" is but a way of counting... a convenient designation and name" for the various parts which constitute a functional chariot. But, in an absolute sense, there is no substantial chariot, just as there is no substantial self: "in the absolute sense, there is only name and form" (132).

Continuing their dialogue, the king asks about the continuity of personal identity: are the infant, the child and the adult the same person? The monk replies, paradoxically, that they are the same and yet different. To illustrate this, he uses the image of a candle burning: is it the same flame all night long? Likewise is the milk which changes to sour cream, butter and ghee still the same substance?

> "In exactly the same way, your majesty, do the elements of being join one another in serial succession: one element perishes, another arises, succeeding each other as it were instantaneously. Therefore neither as the same nor as a different person do you arrive at your latest aggregation of consciousnesses. . . (148 - 149).

In the same way that one can only step into a river once before it

becomes essentially a different river, the stream of an individual life is always different, yet always connected.

Thus, according to Buddhist teaching, there is no absolute self, no substance or entity on which we can fix our personhood. The self does not reside in the body nor in subjective consciousness; it is not found in the human capacities for reason, for feeling, or for sacrifice. All of these qualities may be named for convenience like the parts of a chariot; but since they are without permanence, they cannot be said to constitute an ultimate reality of self-hood. The ego/self is illusory, transitory. As the monk points out, without the comfort of his chariot, the king himself might have presented a very different self: "your feet become sore, your body tired, the mind is oppressed, and the body-consciousness suffers" (131).

The Buddhist Concept of Co-Dependent Origination

Another aspect of the Buddhist concept of the self, that of the inter-dependence of all life, can be illustrated through the parable of the Hall of Mirrors which comes from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. In 699 AD, the Chinese empress Wu Tse-T'ien summoned the Buddhist master Fa Tsang before her and asked for clarification of his teachings. In response, the master prepared a room lined with mirrors, on the floor and ceiling, all four walls and in every corner, all facing one another. In the center of the

room he placed an image of the Buddha beside a burning candle. The result was a kaleidoscope of infinite reflections.

> In each and every reflection of any mirror you will find the reflections of all the other mirrors together with the Buddha's image in each, without omission or misplacement. The principle of interpenetration and containment is clearly shown by this demonstration. Right here we see an example of one in all and all in one - the mystery of realm embracing realm **ad infinitum** is thus revealed (Chang, 24).

The Buddha image represents the totality of the physical universe, including those individuals who inhabit that universe. All are shown to be interrelated, constantly casting reflections back upon one another. There is no separate, self-contained entity or self in the universe. The Buddha image is the sum of all the reflective images, but has no independent reality. Writes Winston L. King in his analysis of this image:

> It is, so to speak, but a crossroads, a convergence point wherein all the universe comes together. It is a nexus of connections; no separate individual or self is to be found there (King, 158).

In this view, all entities are interconnected and interpenetrating. There is no self which does not stand in relation to everything else in the universe. What we experience as a self is simply a reflection of our impact upon others and theirs upon us. It has no static or enduring qualities. Again, as in the Theravada view, the self is impermanent and illusory.

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Discussion

On the surface, then, these two concepts of self and no-self seem to be opposite poles. Let us examine each more fully.

Central to Buddhist thinking are the Four Noble Truths of Gautama Buddha which hold that: 1) all life is suffering; 2) the root of suffering is the endless, insatiable craving of the ego-self, 3) to abolish suffering one must abolish craving; 4) this is done by following the precepts of the Noble Eightfold Path. Human suffering is clearly identified with human desire. Since desires are never satisfied, one always wants more. The ego-self thus perpetuates its own suffering by continuously grasping at life. According to the Buddhist concept of **kharma**, the unenlightened are reborn into the suffering of this life. So long as one believes in the reality of the self, one is doomed to repeat the cycle of birth and rebirth, life, suffering and death. The self that Buddhism would deny, then, is the self that hungers after life: the sensual self, the greedy self, the self that experiences love and hate, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain. There is no peace to be found in these transitory desires, only disappointment and more suffering.

Walking the Noble Eightfold Path, the seeker must accept the truth of the Buddha and pursue an ethical life through right speech, right conduct and right livelihood. Further, the Buddhist seeks spiritual enlightenment through meditation and withdrawal

from the temporal demands of life. The goal of this path, and the Buddhist understanding of salvation, is liberation from egoistic craving. Enlightenment, the experience of **nirvana**, is understood as the extinguishment of individuality and all desires. This experience of no-self is but a moment, rather like the revelation of divine grace which a Christian might describe. In the words of D. T. Suzuki:

> ... this is the moment when the infinite mind realizes that it is rooted in the infinite. In terms of Christianity, this is the time when the soul hears directly or inwardly the voice of the living God (quoted in King, 169).

One then returns to the limited reality of this world with the demands of the body, community and so on, but now with an understanding of **Sunyata**, the emptiness of ultimate reality.

By contrast, the concept of individual autonomy is one of the most cherished ideals of Christianity and of western civilization. As articulated during the Enlightenment, the individual is held to be a moral agent, endowed with reason and free will. The self is identified with the soul and as such is considered a divine gift. Yet this strong sense of self can also be a source of pain and alienation. Our individualism isolates us from one another and from the natural world. Liberal democracies promise much to those who "make something of their lives" and are unforgiving to those who are less skilled at this enterprise. The sense of human mission associated with the Biblical creation -- "replenish the earth and subdue it" -- has fostered a destructive exploitation of the environment.

For Christians, salvation is generally experienced as a direct and personal communion with God, an awareness of the presence of God immanent in all life and at the same time, transcendent or beyond life. At such moments, the individual often transcends the limits of self and feels connected with other souls through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This revelation carries the promise of a complete union with God after death. Salvation, like enlightenment, can be sought after but not forced (Buddhists regard the active striving for nirvana as just another form of grasping or karma-making). One is saved by the gift of divine grace and not through any deeds or purchase. However, one becomes more receptive to grace through prayer and self-denial. Indeed, the attitude of prayerful "attention" of which Simone Weil writes is much like Buddhist meditation: in both instances one transcends self-consciousness by focusing beyond the self.

Minimization of Difference

At this point, students have read the examples described above and considered the concept of self in both traditions. Recognizing that both Christianity and Buddhism **have** a concept of self is, of course, a significant intellectual achievement. From this point, students might be guided to an understanding that in either case it is a concept and not a reality that is being discussed.

Returning to Bennett's model, we recognize that this is the

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place to offer some similarities in order to move students away from a defensive posture. We have already suggested several: between prayer and meditation, for example, and between the experience of enlightenment and that of salvation. It seems that in each religion, the self is regarded as a source of pain, whether it be the willful self that sins in Christianity or the grasping self that clings to earthly desire in Buddhism. Enlightenment comes in a moment of transcendence of self with a recognition of the infinite, conceived either as God or as Emptiness.

Students at this stage, then, might be tempted to minimize the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. We can anticipate the "common ground" they would describe: that we are all basically the same and have the same spiritual need for comfort, that we feel ourselves to be infinitely small in a vast and unknowable universe, and that we seek to identify with a reality that is larger than ourselves. Statements along these lines would certainly be an improvement over the rejection or denial of the humanity of the Buddhist, but this is not yet the "recognition of the other as other" we are seeking in our inter-religious dialogue.

Acceptance and Adaptation of Difference

According to Bennett, the appropriate strategy for students at the minimizing state is to emphasize the significant differences between the two traditions. Students who are predisposed to regard

the other as "basically just like me" can be safely confronted with the radical "other" without becoming hostile or defensive. Bennett suggests bringing in representatives of the other culture as resources now, because it is difficult "to face someone from another culture and deny cultural differences claimed by that person" (191). This might be accomplished (even in a small town in Alaska) by inviting a western follower of Buddhism to speak to the class. Someone who had chosen to leave Christianity for Buddhism would be well situated to discuss the differences between the two.

Speaking to fellow theologians engaged in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, King warns against making facile comparisons. The differences between self and no-self, between Christian personalism and Buddhist impersonalism are real and should not be minimized. King summarizes the distance between two positions as follows:

> To the Buddhist, the Christian seems ineradicably trapped in Christianity itself by an all pervasive, totally defeating illusion of a narrowly conceived and largely static self or soul. And to compound his hopeless situation he projects personhood onto his ultimate reality, God, and views his salvation as the eternal perpetuation of his selfhood in heaven! Conversely, the Christian sees Buddhism... as teaching the dissolution of all individuality, the destruction of selfhood and all of its personal and moral values which the Christian so greatly cherishes. . . Buddhists find Christian salvation to be the eternalization of human bondage, disguised as heaven but in reality one of the higher hells, so to speak; and Christians find in nirvana nothing but annihilation (King, 160).

Often points of comparison evoked in the interreligious dialogue, such as the mysticism of Meister Eckhart or St Dionysius, are so marginal to the mainstream of Christian thought as to create a

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false juxtaposition. According to King, belief in the "perpetually functioning thinking-feeling-acting individual" is so fundamental to Christian thinking that "it is from this center of personal awareness that one must speak to Buddhists, not from the mystical-impersonal fringes of the Christian tradition" (163).

My goal as an instructor has been to bring my students to a level of awareness and acceptance of the difference of Buddhist thinking. In this scenario, the students have come not only to recognize and accept the reality of the other, they have also gained some insight into the structure of their own belief system. Acceptance, in terms of intercultural sensitivity, is characterized by "respect for value difference' (Bennett, 191). Within an interreligious dialogue, acceptance means an acknowledgement that the other has different, but equally valid answers to the great spiritual questions. For certain students, coming from a conservative Christian tradition, this last step will be very difficult, suggesting as it does a cultural relativism. It should be emphasized that respect for difference does not prevent one from holding an opinion about those differences, so long as this does not become an ethnocentric judgement of the other.

It is unlikely that, in this setting, student sensitivity would advance to the next stage, that of Adaptation. If this were an entire course on Buddhism, if we had several Buddhist exchange students or had sent students to Asia, perhaps we could achieve some level of empathy. In the classroom, this would involve the study of Asian history and a much wider reading of Buddhist

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literature to enable students to enter into the reality of the Buddhist tradition. However, given the limitations of time and distance, I believe that Acceptance is a reasonable and appropriate goal in the context I have described.

Integration

Integration, the final stage in Bennett's model, refers to the process of re-evaluating one's own identity in relation to the other culture.

> In the language of this model, a person who has integrated difference is one who can construe differences as processes, who can adapt to those differences, and who can additionally construe him or herself in various cultural ways (Bennett, 187).

The person who has integrated difference is personally transformed through an intercultural contact in which one's own cultural identity becomes less fixed. When the intercultural exchange is also an interreligious one, the challenge to one's identity occurs at the deepest level, that of spiritual belief, and the difficulty of real integration increases. In an educational setting, this kind of transformation is not likely, nor -- I would submit -- is it even appropriate. I am not interested in changing my students' religious beliefs; I wish only to make them more reflective and tolerant in those beliefs.

I do not mean to suggest, however, that the interreligious enterprise is misguided. On the contrary, in the present

historical context of widespread spiritual malaise, global violence and environmental deterioration, there is much to be gained from such discussions. Those engaged in this dialogue recognize the potential for mutual enrichment when representatives of the world's major religions meet and discuss their differences. According Jurgen Moltmann, "reciprocal understanding is not only furthered, but Christianity and Buddhism in their immiscible difference are led into a common reality" (Moltmann, 116). However, we must recognize the danger, already mentioned, that attempting to find a common conceptual vocabulary, theologians will minimize the very real differences between Christianity and Buddhism.

Winston King suggests how that dialogue might proceed within a discussion of self. Without minimizing the differences between the autonomous Christian self and the Buddhist no-self, King suggests some implicit conceptual similarities between the two presentations of the self. First, there are in the western experience of selfhood many instances of the transcendence of self. He points to the ability to transcend the limits of time and space, the limits of the physical and the social, through a higher self-consciousness. Far greater prospects for self-transcendence are offered through identification with Christ, who:

> ...enables the Western self to escape from its prison of static, closely confined individualism into the immensities of the unlimited and unlimiting love of God and persons; to lose its narrowness and tightness by being crucified with Christ and raised into a new larger selfhood (165).

By the same token, in Buddhism, King discerns a "latent but basic and functional selfhood" (165). He regards the negative

statements of the self in Buddhism -- no-self, no-mind, emptiness -- as a kind of apophatic treatment of the self. Buddhism declares that the self cannot be known; the self is an illusion; the self has no reality. And yet Buddhism would not deny that a "self" **is** experienced. Masao Abe, a leading voice in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, speaks of two axes of human experience: the horizontal dimension of time and space and the vertical dimension of transcendent religious experience. Through meditation, one is freed from the horizontal dimension with its limiting physical, temporal realities (Abe, 174). Yet one must also exist in the here and now. Before and after enlightenment, one must chop wood and carry water. Enlightenment liberates the self from any narrow self-formulation into an enlarged selfhood.

The ways in which we choose to image the human self carry enormous cultural implications. What sense of community does each concept suggest? What is the understanding of free will or individual moral agency? What responsibilities toward the poor, the elderly, the planet itself are to be found in each tradition? Through an intercultural, interreligious dialogue, we may achieve greater insight as we grapple with these difficult questions. It is at this level, then, that the task of the theologian and that of the educator are one and the same.

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