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Unique Buddha, Unique Christ

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Unique Buddha, Unique Christ

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Abstract- This short essay has three sections: One, motherly no-do in Ecclesiastes supports us. Two, Christ self-empties to accept us all to give us his all. Three, Buddha also self-empties in Nirvana in Mercy. Buddha and Christ are unique, not equal not combinable, but each to be committed to with openness.

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本文提供三段. 第一, 母愛及傳道書的「無為」維持人生. 第二, 基督完全接受我們的一切賜予祂的一切. 第三, 佛祖涅槃之獨特, 並不相斥相當或合同, 而各自歸依互動互學.

關鍵詞: 基督十字架, 佛祖涅槃, 無為, 舊約傳道書.

This short essay has three sections: One, motherly no-do in Ecclesiastes supports us living on. Two, Christ self-empties to accept us all to give us his all. Three, Buddha also self-empties in Nirvana in Mercy. Buddha and Christ are unique, not equal not combinable, but each to be committed to with openness.

I. ONE: NO-DO IN MOM, IN ECCLESIASTES

Let us begin with an elusive yet quite common practice of love in family affairs, called in China, “wu wei 無為, no do.” Tommy yells, loudly and repeatedly, “No nap, Mom!” Now Mom sees how ready he is for nap, but she does no “do 為”—pushing him into bed into WWII, nor does Mom “not do 不為”—letting him go out into serious accidents. Instead, Mom softly tells him, “OK, Tommy. Don’t nap. Just sit here next to your pillow so soft so warm; I’ll tell your favorite story. But do no nap, OK?” Tommy nods, no more yelling. Slowly Mom comes in, “once, upon, a t . . .,” and Tommy hits his pillow, all so happily ever after. Mom smiles, and softly tucks him in.

Now, isn’t this a fabulous loving “wu wei, no do,” but not “non-purposive” (Mom loves) not “action” (Mom acts nothing),¹ just lovingly trailing Tommy along? And Tommy is now happy napping, as Mom is happy tucking him in. Such a magic “no do 無為” is elusive and concrete this ordinary way, wholly beyond logic to systematically parse, for how can anything be neither “do” nor “not do”?

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“This is interesting, pal. But does all this no-do in trifle family squabble have any cash value in our serious adult-living?” O, yes! Mom’s loving “wu-wei, no-do,” not “do,” not “not-do,” is pivotal and indispensable in our daily living—I fully assure you, pal. Let us look at the serious Ecclesiastes in the Bible that urges us on this no-do policy. This book is the most un-Jewish and unchristian of all the Bible books. It says that life-gusts keep blowing, now to A, now to not-A, and then to B, to not-B, etc., all without rhyme or reason (chapter 2). We all desperately try to capture A (“do”), which goes elsewhere at once. What we catch is our own sighs, our own breath (*hebel*, vanity).

Description so vivid here is a beautiful poetry of life of dynamic emptiness; the poetry is composed of vigorous capturing of actuality, a definite “do,” plus empty winds nowhere specific. Should we then give up and do nothing, in a “not do” act, drifting with dead leaves in winds indifferently blowing? This “not do” is silently set aside in Ecclesiastes, not recommended at all.

Instead, Ecclesiastes urges me to grab whatever happens to come my way, as what happens to come to me is what is meant to come for me. Make the most of what comes, and that is my portion (*heleq*) given me by the Beyond above (5:18-20, 7:13). Such activity is not capturing (“do”), not giving up (“not do”), but to enjoy indwelling at the crest of uncertain waves of winds, a “no-do.”

Thus Ecclesiastes urges us all to practice a no-do policy of daily living. We must always be trailing along the blowing of capricious winds ephemeral unsuspected, and take and enjoy what *happens* to “come my way.” We will be living happily ever after, as Tommy hitting his pillow sleeping his needed nap he did not want, happily ever after. Failing to no-do so, my portion for me will be enjoyed by someone *else* (chapter 6).²

The notion of “portion” here is extremely important. Let us dwell on it for a while. We must let

² All this is my coherent elucidation of “hebel” (pp. 101-102, 225, 295, 401) and “heleq” (151, 176, 306, 371, and 402) in Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, 1997. Ecclesiastes 1:2 (12:8) is rendered “Breath of a breath! The slightest breath! All is a breath!,” by R. B. Y. Scott, in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible, 1965, p. 209.

Commentators are usually piecemeal without synthetic vision, and in addition loaded with usual impressions *out* of line with the original. “Hebel” as breath is cumbered with “ephemeral, empty, meaningless, unexpected,” all needless extras to turn the down-to-earth urging of Ecclesiastes into empty pessimism. My synthetic vision, in line with the thrust of Ecclesiastes, coherently elucidates with caring no-do, to bypass all such baseless accretions.

¹ Donald J. Munro calls “wu wei” a “non-purposive action” in his *The Concept of Man in Early China*, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969, pp. 142, 144. The phrase is meaningless, showing Munro’s desperation.

God be God, high above, unknown to us. All this while, we must allow ourselves to be human “under the sun,” as the Ecclesiastes keeps saying, as we receive what is allotted to us from on high unknown, and enjoy our portion as much as humanly possible. My portion is mine alone to enjoy and to share.

Such is what Ecclesiastes said. Now let us extrapolate. Sharing is joy ultimate; we can and must share our portions together to enjoy life together. Such sharing applies also in the realm of religion, since Ecclesiastes is part of the Old Testament. In order to share, I must first have my portion all my own. My portion is uniquely mine alone, one and only.

If I am a Christian, my unique portion that no other religion can have is “Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). This is my unique bliss, one and only, that I cherish absolutely, and so I cannot help but share my exclusive joy with you. It is completely up to you to accept or reject my offer. But my joy-responsibility remains. It is to offer you to share with you my exclusive portion, one and only.

We call this, my joy-responsibility to share, “Christian mission.” By the same token, *you* have received your unique portion from the ultimate on high that is unknown. You have your joy-responsibility, then, to also show and offer me your unique portion, one and only. And it behooves me to accept your joy-portion into my joy-portion. We can then enjoy our life together.

II. TWO: CHRIST ALL-ACCEPTING, SELF-GIVING

And that is what has happened in Christianity, and is still happening now. We see even the most abominable practices in other religions were accepted into, of all places, the very center of Christianity. Three examples suffice. One, offering of precious first-borns to ferocious Moloch³ is accepted and digested into God in love offering his Only Son on the cross, to woo us back into his fold.

Two, gruesome cannibalism⁴ to eat the victim for his life-vigor is accepted, and digested into Christ's offer of his flesh and blood to us to partake of his life-vigor (John 6). Three, sexual union with Baal the divine husband⁵ is accepted and digested into Yahweh as husband wooing his unfaithful wife the Israelites back into his divine-human love, and Christ giving himself to win back his wife the church.

Mind you, however. “Digestion” here amounts to putting upside down the meanings of the original offers from these other religions. Our offering of our

first-borns to appease Moloch is now changed to God's offering of his Only Son to woo us back. Our pursuit of sexual union with Baal our husband is now reversed to God our husband pursuing us his unfaithful wife. Our pursuit of victims for their life-vigor is turned into Christ the Victim pursuing us to “eat and drink *him*” (John 6).

All these revolutionary reversals show the special uniqueness of Christianity; it is thus that the Christian's very acceptance and digestion of other religions show how special Christianity is. It is the Christian theology of the sacraments. Now we must notice what this “sacrament” amounts to. “Sacrament” twists and turns meaning, and such twist is beyond logical analysis to parse. The Christian sacraments are entirely bodily, offering of the first-born, sexual union, cannibalism, in the revolution of orientation from other religions to Christian.

Finally, to culminate all above, Christ goes to the lowest the most painful. Ugly pain of death on the most abject cross *is* Christian theophany, religious hierophany⁶ (Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Corinthians 1:-2:). This oxymoron, the lowest as the highest, is the absolute special in Christianity. The Bible is the humanly ugliest made the divinely most beautiful, by Christ on the cross. Christ in love of us picks up our ugliest to show us how much he loves us. When we meet our ugliest our lowest, we meet him the highest, right at our lowest ugliest, and the most painful. And then he lifts us up to joy the highest.

What is incredible is here. All religions soar up to the highest. In contrast, Christ turns to the lowest and accepts the lowest to turn it into the highest; after all, Christ is the Creator. Everything begins here (Genesis 2). “Down” is steady, earthed, and cannot go any lower. Christ is with Chinese tyrants and German Hitler. Thus Christianity supports from beneath all religions. In fact, Christ has been doing so as described above. That is the special uniqueness of Christianity, seen nowhere else.

Christian mission is here, urging other religions to inter-support as Christianity does them. They must concur on this inter-support, their passionate ideal, with their own different reasons. Meanwhile, Moloch, Baal, and Hitler vanish. Christ's cross now has no Christ, and the cross itself vanishes into history. Babies powerless are dawning parent care, and the new Heaven and the new Earth dawns on us. Such Christian sacramental theology is body thinking fully at work in this ultimate realm of religion.

“So, what is so big about all that? What is so unique about *Christ* himself? The apostles' daring, self-

³ This horrible “passing through fire” was extremely popular in ancient Israelites with surrounding races.

⁴ Gruesome cannibalism is satirically depicted in a pamphlet titled, “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift, 1729.

⁵ This is temple prostitution, “hierodule” in ancient Greece, on a massive scale; it was euphemized as sexuality made sacred.

⁶ On hierophany, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.

...serving declaration in the strongest possible wording,⁷ simply floors me; they say that we are not given under heaven any other savior than Christ (Acts 4:12)! Can you explain *that?*" All right, pal. Let us begin here. We are impressed by how the apostles risked their lives declaring it. But what is "it"? Paul said, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2) Let us then unpack Christ's cross, to wit, Christ on the cross.

In Christ's cross, his deathly pain meets our deadly pain; we in pain meet him in pain. Christ is ultimately concerned with us to enable us to be ultimately concerned with him.⁸ In his cross, Christ gives his all, the totality of his self, all divine all human. This total gift "saves" us all. His cleansing our sin, by his cross, prepares our total acceptance of him totally accepting us. Total acceptance implicates ultimate concern, of course. In Christ, we are now "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our very breaths puff out brand new Christ. Thus it is that *his* total offering "saves" us totally.

All other religious leaders and advocates stand aside to counsel us. In contrast, Christ on the cross plunges right *into* our heartfelt inside. He in all his totality comes into "me"; he in pain comes into me in pain. Inside me, he in pain powerfully grips me; he would never let me go until he gives all his very best. "In my Father's house, there are many mansions," and he is preparing a reserved place just for me (John 14:2). It is in this way that he gives his "all" to grip my "all," so as to give me the very ultimate best in all heaven and all earth, and far beyond heaven and earth, he the Son of God, and God himself. Nothing greater than this gift can be imagined.

His total giving here amounts to this exchange no one has ever heard of. Christ all-wealthy turns all-empty on the cross, so that we all-poor can turn all-rich in him, in his total grip of love, the Love that is beyond all loves everywhere. He first loves us, so we can love him and love our neighbors in him. This is how "there is no other name given us under heaven to save us" (Acts 4:12) but Jesus Christ on the cross.

In all, we simply can never get over this drama totally unheard of anywhere in world history. In offering on the cross all of himself to us, Christ wants us to all-accept his all-acceptance of us. All-acceptance is pain, expressed on the cross, and all-acceptance is joy, expressed in the Eucharist⁹ of joyful thanksgiving for his gracious offers that are no less than he himself in all his totality. By Christ's all-being, we are invited to all-accept,

with ultimate concern, the joy of pain of Christ's heavenly offers of his all-acceptance, in his ultimate concerns of his ultimate Love.

The paschal Lamb, Agnus Dei, is now offered (1 Corinthians 5:7), total and intact, not a single bone broken. Accepting this Lamb is called "eating and drinking" at the Last Supper and the First Supper into new Heaven and new Earth (John 6). This is how we are "saved" by the Savior, one and only, given us under heaven (Acts 4:12). "Any one is challenged to cite any religion even remotely paralleling such extraordinary explosive drama of salvation, so empty so full, intimately human, vastly cosmic," so would the Christian apostles shout.

We admire their sheer goodwill risking their lives declaring it. Still, our reactions differ; we may or may not agree with them totally. The Christians would throw all of themselves into their blusters, while the Buddhists may generously applaud these apostles—with the Buddhist own goodwill to concur with Christian goodwill, with their own Buddhist reasons.

Looking back, we realize that the "arrogant" Acts 4:12 shows the following. The apostles felt in their bones the fiery Breath of the Beyond gusting "from heaven," and they saw the Gust Pentecostal in Jesus as the Christ, and they had to declare it. Sounding "self serving," it was divine-serving on which they risked lives. Their "daring" audacity "floored" some folks, and caught Pentecostal fire in others. Christianity was born there.

Later, Kant the pious Christian sighed awed at the starry heaven and intimate conscience. Still later, Hegel a theology-student saw the Geist the mind-spirit gush through history, and Western philosophy followed as their footnotes, naively assuming human logic as cosmic reason.¹⁰ The apostles' vision of Christ all-accepting all-giving was consigned to "theology." Such is how religion *uniquely* fared in Judea and the West.

III. THREE: BUDDHA, UNIQUE, THREE CAUTIONS

"Are you not arrogant in saying all this, though?" Well, I am not arrogant if what I assert is a self-*emptying* Christ all-*dead* on the cross, right? No one can be accused of arrogance in asserting emptiness, can he?

¹⁰ Thus even the "sober" empiricist, the likes of G. E. Moore, confidently examine theories, to betray their own Hegelian naivete that the rational (their own) is the real. But the West has another strain of thinking in Plato who, disillusioned at wayward actuality, takes flight to the lucid Sun of Ideas, as told in the Myth of the Cave in Plato's *Republic* (514a-521b). So, A. N. Whitehead claims, "Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato" (in his *Process and Reality*, NY: Free Press, 1978, p. 39).

The West thus wanders back and forth between Plato and Hegel, and Kant's *First Critique* shows how lost the West is. This is, I think, because the West takes "reasoning" as separate from actuality, ever without body thinking, and so neither Plato nor Hegel can understand Christianity, much less Buddhism. But pursuing this line of thinking, my line, would take us too far away from our concern here.

⁷ On grammatical niceties on how strong the wording is, see *A Grammatical Analysis of the New Testament*, Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1996, p. 360.

⁸ Neither Schleiermacher nor Tillich has gone far enough to the Christ himself.

⁹ "Eucharist" is literally, grace, gratitude, and joy, all three in one. See *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, p. 430.

“Now, how do you compare Christian emptiness with Buddhist emptiness?” I can smile and offer Christ’s emptiness to Buddha in *Buddha’s* total emptiness, and both can shake hands. Mind you. Shaking hands requires standing *opposite* one to the other. Buddha and Christ can have a long delightful dialogue on “emptiness,” can they not?

Such dialogue would bring out the uniqueness of Buddha with the uniqueness of Christ. “Isn’t ‘uniqueness’ one-only? You cannot have more than one ‘one only,’ now can you?” A good protest you raised, pal. My response is simple, just following each case as it arises. Buddha’s uniqueness is Buddha’s only; Christ’s uniqueness is Christ’s only. There is no other uniqueness of Buddha except for Buddha’s. There is no other uniqueness of Christ except for Christ’s. Uniqueness is “one only” in each one-only case! Isn’t all this fair enough for “uniqueness”?

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.” Let me be concrete, then. The major point of this short essay is to specify the special uniqueness of Christianity, in the form of its strongest possible declaration, “There is no other savior under heaven given us!” (Acts 4:12) This essay has tried to show how reasonable such unreasonable declaration is, *in the midst* of august world religions.

After all, “religion” means how we all-human in Mother Nature aspire toward the Beyond-human. Therefore, our thinking mode appropriate to religion should be motherly no-do, to *allow* us all Tommy’s to gain what we all need, often even against our explicit wishes, as all mothers always do to all their dear Tommy’s. Religion is a no-do affair of our gentle Mother Nature.

Now, this motherly allowing includes self-emptying other-acceptance, solely for the sake of others, and here is how “uniqueness” can be unique to each case, each in its unique way. Motherly allowing is radically practiced by the Christ on the cross, as passionately described above. But we must notice. In his own unique way, Buddha did so as well as Great Mercy *Mahakaruna* in the all-emptying Nirvana all blown-off, all-death beyond death beyond life, all-calm.

Focusing on Christianity, this essay tried to show how the Christian “no other” means “special and unique,” in a deathly accepting way in an idiosyncratic Christian manner. The same can be said of Buddhist uniqueness, but in the Buddhist own way and no other in the whole world—can it not? We remember the monk Ta-chih who sacrificed himself on the pyre 大志焚身, to cause Yang Ti of Sui dynasty to withdraw his order for dispersing the monks.¹¹

Christ’s death on the cross is matched by monk Ta-chih’s death on the pyre. Ta-chih moved the dynasty

to take away its ban on the monks; Christ moves people to accept his acceptance. So, both are alike; both self-empty to move people. But their contexts and their meanings are quite different, and the ways they moved people also differ considerably. Importantly, Christ accepts all our ugly practices; Ta-chih does not.

Christ died in much pain; Buddha calmly vanished in Nirvana beyond death beyond life. They both dwell in emptiness, but they differ. For Buddha, “nothing” is the be-all and end-all of all, including Buddha himself, in Nirvana. For Christ, “nothing” begins to yet to begin, as he embraces all, in creation. When I am empty, so lonely or so ashamed or so much in pain, Christ is here gazing at me, whispering, “I am here,” while Buddha is nowhere, beckoning me silently from nowhere. “With Christ, warm in pain” differs from “Buddha-calm, in clean snow.” But, warm in pain or calm and clean, both are empty, all empty, each uniquely. And the list of contrasts and similarities continues.

“Are you sure Buddha’s calm is unique in all religions?” Well, many religions are noisy, such as Islam. People say the “grave-garden” is absolutely calm, and Buddha’s calm is beyond grave-calm, because grave denies life while Buddha alone denies *all* denials.¹² Buddha’s calm is unique because he *alone* denies all denials, denying even itself denying; no other religion does such radical total denial. It is Nirvana no other religion in world history has.

In some such manner as this, the uniqueness holds for Buddhism, differently from how the uniqueness holds in Christianity. Calm pervades all by ending all in Buddhism. Calm pervades all by beginning all in Christianity. Whether what is said here has been successfully described above or not, and how far the present essay has succeeded in doing all this, if it has, must be left to the reader to judge.

Now, lastly, three practical cautions on uniqueness are in order. *One*, you ask, “You put Buddha and Christ side by side. Are Christ and Buddha equal, then?” O, No. Uniqueness implicates difference, not equality. Buddha and Christ are differently precious; we are ultimately the richer for being blessed differently by both differently uniquely. *Two*, you ask, “Can we have them both, then?” O, No. Uniqueness is uncombined. Claiming to be a Buddhist Jew, Boorstein bypassed key features in Judaism (judgment, obedience, etc.).¹³ Still, uniqueness can do dialogue, shaking hands from

¹² So many schools and literature on negativism in Buddhism in China are countless. See, e.g., Junjiro Takakusu, *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*, Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1956, and Wing-tsit Chan’s survey in his *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 1963, pp.336-449. For convenience, I follow the line of Nagarjuna and such. See Chan, pp. 343-369 and Takakusu, pp. 96-107.

¹³ Sylvia Boorstein, *That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997.

¹¹ For details, see 丁福保編纂, *佛學大辭典*, 北京市文物出版社, 2002, p. 197.

opposite ends, as Mr. King tried for Buddhism and Christianity.¹⁴

Three, you ask, “*What* can we do, then?” “Commitment with openness” is required of us. Mutual reach-out (open) needs reaching out *of* different positions (committed); loving others (open) is by “me” each different (committed). “*How* can we be committed?” We cannot specify how. We have no argument on taste—because taste is personal—that is a tip of commitment personal and unique. As we innately choose our mates who choose us, so we converge to what is constitutionally congenial to us. We have no manual of commitment as we have no manual of mate-choosing. *We* have the final say on commitment that finally decides us.

These three cautions on uniqueness—no equality, no combination, but commitment with openness—point to three more areas *beyond* this essay, to explore in three more essays and three more books. Religion is in the ultimate, and ultimacy is the vast horizon unlimited. We take a deep breath to soar breathlessly high on and on, even beyond our short life-span.

¹⁴ Winston L. King, *Buddhism and Christianity*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962. How far he succeeded in it remains to be seen. I have not seen anyone else who seriously tried the project.