

“Where do theism and nontheism converge?”
For the World Community for Christian Meditation
Lecture Series on “Unified Consciousness:
The Common Insight of all Spiritual Traditions and of the Greatest Scientists”
Lecture Notes
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The Creation of the World

- Biblical account of God speaking the world into existence out of nothing, which he deemed to be “good,” versus the actions of Adam & Eve resulting in the fall into a world of sin, aging, sickness, and death, characterized as a “vale of tears”
- Buddhist account of realms of saṃsāra, “oceans of misery,” brought into existence by the actions of sentient beings, which comprise a realm of “deceptive reality” that totally obscures “ultimate reality” which is primordially pure and timeless

Biblical Theism versus Nontheistic Buddhism

- The Bible is understood to be the Word of God, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, which is to be accepted out of faith as transmitted by His chosen prophets, apostles, and disciples, so it is a paradigmatically religious text.
- The Pāli canon presents the teachings of the Buddha and his prominent disciples based on the Buddha’s discoveries replicated by many of his followers, about the reality of suffering, its true causes, the possibility of ultimate freedom, and the path to such freedom.
- But pragmatically there is a similarity in identifying the causes of suffering:
 - St. Augustine (*The Confessions*): The two real causes of the miseries of this life are “the profundity of ignorance” and the “love of things vain and noxious.”
 - Buddha: “Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.” Such craving is rooted in ignorance about the fundamental nature of reality. (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*)
- These teachings, called “The First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma” by Mahāyāna Buddhists, are based on the phenomenological exploration of the world of experience within the soteriological framework of ethical discipline, the cultivation of “mental unification” (*samādhi*), and of wisdom based on direct perception and logical inference, so it is more scientific than religious in nature, inviting critical inquiry and not unquestioning faith.
- But Christian theology has long invoked the maxim of “faith seeking understanding”—used by St. Augustine, 4th-5th C. and St. Anselm of Canterbury, 11th C., who added, “I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand.”

Christian and Buddhist Metaphysics

- While the Bible is not a philosophical treatise, Christian theologians have interpreted it in light of various non-Christian philosophies, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, both of whom advocated forms of metaphysical realism.
- The Buddhist teachings of the Mahāyāna “Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma” largely focus on the philosophical investigation of the ontological nature of reality, which presents the whole of conditioned existence arising as dependently related events, each of which is devoid of any independent, inherent identity of its own. It remains to be seen whether biblical theism is intrinsically incompatible with “ontological relativism,” which refutes metaphysical realism.

Christian and Buddhist Mystical Views of the Divine

- Nicholas of Cusa (1401 – 1464)
 - “In order to experientially realize this divine unity, the ‘face of God,’ it is for me to enter into the cloud and to admit the coincidence of opposites, above all capacity of reason, and to seek there the truth where impossibility confronts me. And above reason, above even every highest intellectual ascent when I will have attained to that which is unknown to every intellect and which every intellect judges to be the most removed from truth, there are you, my God, who are absolute necessity.”¹
 - Whoever sees the face of God sees all things openly, with nothing remaining hidden. Such knowledge is achieved with divine, “absolute sight,” without which there can be no human, “contracted sight.” This contemplative “God’s-eye view of reality” is enabled by a kind of sight that embraces in itself all modes of seeing. “In God’s light is all our knowledge, so that it is not we ourselves who know, but rather it is God who knows in us.”² The gate of the “wall of paradise is guarded by the highest spirit of reason, and unless it is overpowered, the way in will not lie open.”³
 - “Finally, there is still a path of seeking God within yourself: the path of the removal of limits...When...you conceive that God is better than can be conceived, you reject everything that is limited and contracted...if you seek further, you find nothing in yourself like God, but rather you affirm that God is above all these as the cause, beginning, and light of life of your intellective

¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* (*De visione Dei* 1453) in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1453/1997), 251.

² Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God* (*De quaerendo Deum* 1445) in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. H. Lawrence Bond (New York: Paulist Press, 1445/1997), 225.

³ Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, 252.

soul... You will rejoice to have found God beyond all your interiority as the source of the good, from which everything that you have flows out to you.”

- “You turn yourself to God by entering each day more deeply within yourself and forsaking everything that lies outside in order that you be found on that path on which God is met so that after this you can apprehend God in truth.”⁴
- In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the historical Buddha is regarded as a “supreme emanation body of the dharmakāya” (within the Buddhist Trinity of dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya), the fourth of a series of 1,000 nirmāṇakāya buddhas during this “fortunate era,” all of whom manifest simultaneously throughout myriad worlds.
- *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*: “The buddha-nature of beings is eternal and unchanging.”
- *Śrimaladeviśiṃhanada Sūtra*: “The cessation of suffering is not the destruction of a phenomenon. Why? Because the dharmakāya of the Buddha is primordially existent; it is not made, not born, not exhausted, and not to be exhausted. It is permanent, reliable, completely pure by nature, completely liberated from all the sheaths of the mental afflictions ... and so it is called the cessation of suffering. This is what is called the *tathāgatagarbha*, dharmakāya freed from the veils of the mental afflictions.”
- Maitreya (*Uttaratantra* 1.27)
 - “Because a perfect buddha’s body is pervasive, because suchness is without differentiation, and because a [buddha] lineage exists, all embodied [beings] are always in possession of a buddha essence.”
 - The dharmakāya is all-pervasive, so the minds of sentient beings are suffused by the Buddha-mind.
 - The suchness (natural purity) of the buddhas’ minds and of sentient beings’ minds are not inherently different, because both are empty of inherent existence.
- Dūdjom Lingpa (1835 – 1904) (*The Vajra Essence*): “Once you have recognized all phenomena included within saṃsāra and nirvāṇa as the play of your own appearances alone, you will actualize the great, all-pervasive realm of pristine space, which is self-originating, spontaneous, primordial consciousness ... due to the unceasing power in the nature of primordial consciousness, there is total knowledge and total awareness of all phenomena, without its ever merging with or entering into objects. Primordial consciousness is self-originating, naturally clear, free of outer and inner obscurations; it is the all-pervasive, radiant, clear infinity of space, free of contamination.”

Christian and Buddhist Mystical Practice

- St. Gregory Palamas (c. 1296 – 1357 or 1359): “Since the intellect of those recently embarked on the spiritual path continually darts away again as soon as it has been concentrated, they must continually bring it back once more; for in their inexperience they are unaware that of all things it is the most difficult to observe and the most mobile. That is why some teachers recommend them to pay attention to the exhalation and inhalation of their breath, and to restrain it a little, so that while they are watching it the intellect, too, may be held in check.”

⁴ Nicholas of Cusa, *On Seeking God*, 231.

- Hesychios the Priest (7th century): “One type of watchfulness consists in closely scrutinizing every mental image or provocation ... A second type of watchfulness consists in freeing the heart from all thoughts, keeping it profoundly silent and still, and in praying.... Continuity of attention (*prosochi*) produces inner stability; inner stability produces a natural intensification of watchfulness (*nipsis*); and this intensification gradually and in due measure gives contemplative insight into spiritual warfare.”
- St. Symeon the New Theologian (949 – 1022):
 - “When the mind is simple, or rather devoid of all concepts and completely clothed in the simple light of God, and hidden within it, the mind can find no other object to which it can direct the movement of its thought except the One in which it is anchored. It therefore remains in the abyss of the divine light which does not allow the mind to see anything outside of it. This is what the words, ‘God is light’ mean; He is the supreme light, the repose of all contemplation for those who have attained it.” —*Theological and Practical Chapters* 2.17.⁵
 - “The mind which is always in motion becomes motionless and entirely empty of thought when it is covered completely by the divine darkness and the light ... It lives a life beyond life, being a light inside a light, but not a light to itself; for it is not itself that it sees but Him who is above it, and the glory coming from Him makes the mind a stranger to its own thought, so that it no longer knows itself as a thinking mind.” —*Theological and Practical Chapters* 2.18.
- Buddha: “Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful, sublime, an ambrosial dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot unwholesome states whenever they arise.” (*Samyutta Nikāya* 54.9)
- Panchen Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen (1570-1662): “Whatever sorts of thoughts arise, without suppressing them, recognize what they emerging from and what they dissolve into; and stay focused while you observe their nature. By doing so, eventually the motion of thoughts ceases and there is stillness ... each time you observe the nature of any thoughts that arise, they will vanish by themselves, following which, a vacuity appears. Likewise, if you also examine the mind when it remains without movement, you will see an unobscured, clear and vivid vacuity, without any difference between the former and latter states. That is well known among meditators and is called ‘the union of stillness and motion.’”
- Padmasambhava (8th c.) (*Natural Liberation*): “Having nothing on which to meditate, and without any modification or adulteration, place your mind simply without wavering, in its own natural state, its natural lucidity, its own character, just as it is. Remain in clarity, and rest the mind so that it is loose and free ... Occasionally inquire, ‘What is that awareness of the one who is focusing the interest?’ Let the awareness itself steadily observe itself. At that time, let your mind come to rest in the center of your heart, and evenly leave it there.”

⁵ As quoted in *In the Light of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), Life–Spirituality–Doctrine*, by Archbishop Basil Krivocheine (New York, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press), 1986, pp. 224–225.

- Dudjom Rinpoche (1904 – 1987) (*The Illumination of Primordial Wisdom*): “Recognize for yourself that the dharmakāya is none other than this great, empty, luminous, self-emergent pristine awareness, which transcends cognition. Do not construct or alter anything in the momentary consciousness of the present, in which past thoughts have ceased and later ones have not arisen. By so doing, settle your ordinary consciousness in its natural, unmodified state, uncontaminated by thoughts concerning the three times, resting in the fourth time that transcends the three times. Come to the firm conviction that this technique of meditation entails nothing whatsoever apart from this.

Come to the innermost liberation of realizing that everything that appears is a display of the dharmakāya, and the realization of empty awareness that is naked and free of cognition. Upon this basis, settle your consciousness in a state of effortless relaxation, like space, free of extremes.

At that time, while the objects of the six senses do appear, let your awareness be self-illuminating, utterly naked, and free of grasping. Inwardly, let your mind be devoid of conceptual, discursive excursions and withdrawals, and be nakedly self-awakened. In between, even when awareness remains in its own state, it is not bound by antidotes; but without mediation it is open, and it is not influenced by good or bad objects. Do not contaminate it with grasping. Without letting cognition intrude with its remedies for countering obstacles, directly recognize the vivid, clear aspect of cognizance. Sustaining awareness in this way, unobstructed and naked, is a distinction of the Great Perfection.”

- Sera Khandro (1892 – 1940) (*Garland for the Delight of the Fortunate*):
 - “This mind vajra, pristine awareness, never changes within the three times of past, present, and future, so it is said to be the *eternal vajra*. Its meaning is space, inconceivable absolute space itself. In this regard there are three aspects: external space, internal space, and secret, inconceivable space. As for external space, all phenomena included in the vast outer physical worlds; the multitudes of inner, animate sentient inhabitants; the well-displayed intervening appearances of the five senses; your own body, aggregates, elements, and sense bases; and all the appearances and mindsets of ordinary sentient beings are external space. Once this has been determined by way of the authentic teachings of the jinas, the authentic pith instructions of the sublime guru, and your own authentic pristine awareness, the true realization of the manner in which they do not exist and are not established as real is internal space. The realization of the indivisibility of external space and internal space—in which luminosity and emptiness are indivisible as the one taste of your own pristine awareness, the great dharmakāya—is the secret, inconceivable space.”
 - “Although there is no outer or inner with respect to the ground of being and the mind, self-grasping superimposes boundaries between outer and inner. Just as water in its naturally fluid state freezes solid due to currents of cold wind, likewise the naturally fluid ground of being is thoroughly established as saṃsāra by cords of self-grasping.”