I Am a Buddho-Christian:
Arguments For and Against East-West Syncretism

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INTRODUCTION: YOU CAN BE A BUDDHO-CHRISTIAN

William James posited that there are as many religions as there are believers, and indeed a Google search of “types of religion” will net you 119 million results. Somewhere in that 119 million, I’m sure, is a growing new spiritual path which I today will label Buddho-Christianity.

For generations, from at least the mid-19th century, and probably long before that, Christians have been at the very least influenced by Eastern spiritual ideas, and some have created an “enlightened Christianity” that keeps the mother faith intact and enhances it with these strange and wonderful new practices.

I sense a new spiritual age is coming, where these two great faiths can become one. It’s not for everyone, but I believe it is the spirituality of the future, and it is here now. It goes beyond trendy commercial appropriation of Zen to sell gym shoes, to meaningful use of the joys of mindfulness to calm Western life.

Christianity and Buddhism are unique spiritual systems and practices, but there is no reason why many of their elements cannot be combined into a third way that is greater than the sum of its parts. I, and many others like me, are living proof that it can be done, without spiritual or intellectual confusion.

Yes, the theology of Christianity and the philosophy of Buddhism collide in many ways, especially if that’s what you want to look for. You can also find common ground between them, if that’s what you choose to look for.

Some of that common ground is a bit of a stretch, especially when Buddhism is compared to the more traditional Christian theologies. Because of that, I believe, traditional Christianity and Buddhism are incompatible. I stress here that I am talking about traditional Christianity.

Enlightened Christianity is a different animal, and does fit the bill. Only enlightened Christianity is compatible with Buddhism, and can be a stepping stone towards Buddho-Christianity.

Paul Alan Laughlin tells us that the best you can hope for is this enlightened Christianity. Similarly, Thich Nhat Hanh tells us that you can enrichen your own tradition with the other, but the key is making your own roots stronger. Both views are admirable and encourage positive dialogue between the paths. But dialogue is not enough for many of us, who seek to experience a new type of spiritual path.

Enlightened Christianity is only a step towards that spiritual path I seek. I want more. I seek a true union of enlightened Christianity and Buddhism. I am a Buddho-Christian.

THE CLASH OF THE TITANS: INCOMPATIBILITIES

As with all great religions and spiritual paths, there are wide spectrums along theological and philosophical lines in both Christianity and Buddhism. I don’t want to dismiss the differences within Buddhism, but for the most part, there is wide agreement on the basic tenets, and much less discussion than in Christianity about a Supreme Being per se.

For my initial comparison, I will be discussing what I choose to label “traditional Christianity.”

This Christianity, which to me encompasses the vast majority of world Christianity, and especially American Christianity, believes in an outer God, even when not simplistically as the Sunday School “old man in the sky.” God is seen as “other”, a Supreme Being, creator of all that exists and will ever exist. He, yes He, guided and guides history and evolution, intelligently designing, yet allowing free will.

Again, traditional Christianity and Buddhism are incompatible in theology. For starters, Buddhism does not really have a theology, which by definition studies belief in God. The
Buddha’s view on God was that it was a question not worth considering. Since we can’t know, he said, there were more important things to ponder, such as how to reach enlightenment. For this reason Buddhism has often been called an agnostic or even an atheistic philosophy more than a religion.

Buddhism does concern itself with what Laughlin characterizes as an Ultimate Reality, and common ground can be reached between the more enlightened Western ideas of God and this Eastern idea of higher consciousness. But for the traditional Christian there can be no such fine points.

Laughlin, in *Getting Oriented*, explains how in Eastern thinking,

(Immanent Ultimate Reality permeates, saturates, or infuses the cosmos and everything in it *as their very essence* [emphasis original]...This is a very different conceptual approach from that of the West, which begins by thinking of the supernatural God and the cosmos as two different things, and is therefore inherently and profoundly dualistic. (Laughlin 2005, 44)

That dualism, the God as “other” as opposed to Ultimate Reality as a unity, a oneness, is what most differentiates Christianity and Buddhism and makes reconciling their philosophies difficult, if not impossible.

This duality permeates other Christian concepts that are incompatible with Buddhist life views, such as the nature of good and evil, or original sin. Life is ultimately neutral in Buddhism. Good and evil and sin are not natural concepts to that path, because all that is, just is. Such terms are connotations, judgments resulting from our filters. At its most traditional, Christianity views all bad as the result of some evil outside force, personified in Satan, and all good coming from God’s direction.

Everything is directed by a Higher Power in this Christianity. Donald W. Mitchell, writing in the periodical “Buddhist-Christian Studies” uses the Holy Spirit as an example.

The power that is made tangible in the Christian ritual…is the power of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God active in Christ…While the Christian ritual may open the participants to…personal…transformation, it is understood that the… agent of that transforming action is God. (Mitchell 2000, 87-88)

For Buddhists, there is no outside God, much less a cohort like the Holy Spirit, to activate transformation. There is only the innate, all-encompassing Buddha nature that lies within all sentient beings.

There really is no “outer” or “inner” in Buddhism, because ultimately there is no belief in self. There is only *Anatman*, the no-self, and this too conflicts with the Christian concept of the very personal soul, awash in original sin.

This soul can only reach eternal unity with God in an afterlife, a very different goal than the Buddhist’s *nirvana*, a unity with the Ultimate that is possible in the present moment.

And then, of course, we come to Jesus and the Buddha. While there are devotional variations within Buddhism, the original teachings see him as a historical figure who reached enlightenment, not as a God.

Traditional Christianity worships not just God, but also God born human as Jesus Christ, a personal savior who died for our sins on the cross, a blood sacrifice by God for humanity, and as a literal Son of God, not a metaphorical or metaphysical one.

Yes, this paints with a broad brush, but I hold it is within the realm of what most traditional Christians believe. My point is not to vilify this form of Christianity. I honor and respect their beliefs. The point is that this form of Christianity is completely incompatible with Buddhism. For all the above reasons, I personally reject traditional Christianity as part of my spiritual path.
FINDING COMMON GROUND

Happily for people like me, enlightened Christianity does work well with Buddhism, and is in fact a foundation for my new spiritual identity as a Buddho-Christian.

I include Unity and New Thought under this umbrella, but it includes individuals from all branches of Christianity, from Catholics to Methodists, who are open to a more mystical connection with the Divine.

But even in enlightened Christianity, aren’t we still talking about God, and doesn’t that still conflict with Buddhist concepts of Ultimate Reality? Can a Buddhist or Buddho-Christian believe in God, so to speak? I say “so to speak” because the answer is “Yes, but.”

It depends on what your meaning of “God” is. That is a word with a lot of baggage, Western baggage, and there are ways to parse it that can connect it to Eastern concepts. You don’t have to be an atheist, or even an agnostic, to be a Buddhist, and thus you can be a Buddho-Christian who believes in God. So to speak.

But to believe in God in a Buddho-Christian way, you have to let go of attachment to the Western idea of God, and even release all connotations around the supercharged word “God” itself, though I will stick with the word here for simplicity’s sake. There can be no God in the sky, no God who is the “other,” of what Laughlin calls the “transcendent” God.

The God of Buddho-Christianity is what Laughlin labels the immanent God, a God within. It is a mystical connection to the divine, a feeling, an appreciation, an eternal moment more than it is a being of any sort. It cannot be a Supreme Being because it is Being itself.

Some of my favorite descriptions of what I see as the Buddho-Christian God share this more existential ideal of God.

Janet Taylor, Director of the Temple Buddhist Center in Kansas City, Missouri, as well as Chief Operating Officer of Unity Temple on the Plaza, says, “I love the Fillmorean perception of God as divine idea…of God as pure potential. It underlies all things. This makes God real to me, when I can see the innate God substance in me.” (Taylor 2011)

Springs Steele, writing in Buddhist-Christian Studies, mentions a quote attributed to the Buddha himself, “There is an unborn, an unoriginated, an unmade, an uncompounded; were there not, there would be no escape from the world of the born, the originated, the made, the compounded.” (Steele 2000, 22). Interesting, that the Buddha could be characterized as an atheist and still hold out such a Godlike vision.

Brian J. Pierce, in We Walk the Path Together, notes that “We live immersed in the eternity of God…revealing to us that which is already in us and around us. We too often misunderstand eternity as an afterlife, a life that begins only after death.” (Pierce 2005, 17)

Dr. Jay McDaniel, a Professor of Religion at Hendrix College, a Methodist-related school, notes that “Process or Whiteheadian theology is much more compatible with Buddhism than, say, classical theism, because it points to a loving One who is becoming…in bodhisattvic adaptivity to the world, moment by moment, faithful to the world.” (McDaniel, Interview)

And then there is Charles Fillmore, the co-creator of Unity, who says, “The realization of divine unity is the highest that we can attain. This is true glory, the blending and merging of the whole being into Divine Mind. “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (Jn. 17:23) (Fillmore 2011, 41)

He goes on to connect this God idea to the Eastern idea of nirvana.

This merging of God and man does not mean the total obliteration of man’s consciousness but its glorification into that of the divine. This is taught in Hindu philosophy as the absorption of the soul into Nirvana, which has been erroneously
interpreted as the total loss of individual consciousness instead of its majestic expansion. (Fillmore 2011, 41)

That is my favorite term for God of all of these, “majestic expansion.” It speaks of the limitlessness, the unity of all existence, one spiritual fabric that is seamless and not dualistic, a permeation of divine force throughout and within all.

These are the enlightened Christian ideas of God: pure potential, the unoriginated, the eternity of God in and around us, bodhisattvic adaptivity, divine Mind, divine unity, merging of God and man, majestic expansion.

But is this a stretch? Are these attempts, doomed to failure, to reconcile hopelessly opposing visions of the Ultimate?

Laughlin says any attempts to reconcile the two ideas will have “unconvincing results.”

The problem is that the Western religions…present us with a God who is Other and intervenes from an Above-and-Beyond Realm; while the Eastern posits a One….that is Within Nature and Human Nature. Panentheism (God contains the All in a way that the All also contains but also exceeds God) is a bold attempt to reconcile these two sorts of Ultimates, but with mixed results. The product may be aesthetically pleasing but is finally merely an intellectual exercise that lets us have our cake and eat it, too. (Laughlin 2011, 19)

In other words, panentheism is an attempt to describe a God who is both immanent (includes all) and transcendent (above all), and that seems to me still dualistic. It seems to be sort of like those Russian nesting dolls, one inside the other but still one unit. You can’t have it both ways. God is either immanent or transcendent, or else you get into this fuzzy territory where God is blithely labeled one of those mysteries beyond our understanding. Which is of course true, but it’s also too easy an answer.

Panentheism, and sometimes enlightened Christianity, tries to choose both ideas of God, or somehow bridge them. As a Buddho-Christian, I choose the immanent God.

Theology itself can be said to be incompatible with the immanent God of Buddho-Christianty. Theology becomes at times an obsession with semantics and thinking, when unity with the immanent God requires mystic experience, not words.

And mystic experience is where East most easily meets West. I believe the Eastern approach to be superior in this regard, in its emphasis on connecting to the world around and within us moment by moment, through spiritual practices such as meditation and mindfulness. Yet many in the West have come to this same place independently, including many Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart.

The biggest commonality to all religions has always been that all spiritual seekers want union with whatever they consider divinity or the Ultimate to be. Thich Nhat Hanh often argues for simple mindfulness, deeply appreciating each moment, as the way to live mystically and make this connection.

He gives a brilliant example of how to use Christian rituals more mindfully to connect with the Ultimate, in Living Buddha, Living Christ.

It is ironic that when mass is said today, many congregants are not called to mindfulness at all. They have heard the words so many times that they just feel a little distracted. This is exactly what Jesus was trying to overcome when he said, This is My body. This is My blood. When we are truly there, dwelling deeply in the present moment, we can see that the bread and the wine are really the Body and Blood of Christ…The body of Christ is the body of God, the body of ultimate reality [emphasis added], the ground of all existence. We do not have to look anywhere else for it. It resides deep in our own being. (Hanh 1995, 30)
This is the approach many Christian mystics, figures such as St. Augustine, Eckhart, St. Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, and so on, have taken. With practices such as Christian meditation and contemplation, prayer, monasterial life and retreats they connected to the divine. They took the liturgy and the sacraments seriously, felt them deeply and mindfully, and made that a mystical connection to the Ultimate.

In such practices, even if the theology is still dualistic, the feeling of the moment is immanent. And, of course, outside of rituals or meditation, we can all connect daily to the divine. We connect with the Ultimate when we appreciate nature, when we hold life in deep reverence, when just stop and sit or look out a window or just breathe, when we’re deeply listening in relationship to others, when we are generous in and in gratitude, when we feel compassion.

One of the most powerful practices I’ve learned at Buddhist retreats is that of mindful eating. At one silent retreat, I ate mindfully and had the most amazing moment of connection because of a cherry tomato. It seemed one of those moments of time stretched eternal. There was not just the wonderful taste and feel of the tomato, but it was as if, when I chewed it, I experienced all its aspects at once, the farmer, the nature it came from, the rain, the sunshine, and so on, I was One with All.

This may seem a silly example of a mystical moment, but right then, it was all I needed. Such mystical moments are open to all spiritual seekers, regardless of belief, always. In enlightened Christianity, however, by its openness to such practices, we have the seeds of a full incorporation of mystical experience.

Some of the Western incorporation is trendy and secular, but welcome nevertheless. Yoga is a regular part of most gyms now. Meditation is exploding in popularity and being recognized as a health benefit. Doctors and some insurance companies now encourage Mindfulness-Based Meditation Training. In Unity, meditation is part of our worship practice. Meditation and mindfulness retreats are abundant, along with Buddhist speakers from both East and West.

There is resistance to all this from some quarters of traditional Christianity, which is why the leadership of enlightened Christianity is key to its acceptance. When he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the current Pope Benedict XVI warned about mystical experience in a “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.”

> With the present diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world... we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-Christian. Some use eastern methods solely as a psychophysical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation; others go further and, using different techniques, try to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Christian mystics. Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory, on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality. These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thorough-going examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into sycretism. (Ratzinger, in Steele 2000, 20)

He is right, it can fall into syncretism. I don’t see that as a danger, however, but instead a positive development.

And what of the two touchstone figures, Jesus and the Buddha, can they be part of the same faith path? By definition, Buddho-Christianity must include both. But which Jesus to follow? We know the traditional view of Jesus Christ, the literal Son of God.
But Jesus, even within traditional Christianity, has been viewed throughout the ages through a variety of lens. Everyone, it seems, shapes their image of him to their own liking, and can even use his teachings to affirm opposing ideologies. How else can you explain that Jesus was the touchstone for both the slaveowners and the slaves in the Old South? For one side, he affirmed the keeping of order and the subservience to masters, for the other he was the personal liberator of the soul if not the body, and the friend of the oppressed.

Even more radically, within enlightened Christianity, Jesus is not exclusively divine, but instead an exemplar of all of us being divine. We call him Jesus the Christ, separating out the historical man Jesus from the Christ nature within us all. He is teacher and wayshower. He is a son of God—not the Son of God—in the sense that we are all sons and daughters of God.

C.S. Lewis disagreed with “those who argue that Jesus may have been a great moral teacher without being divine.” (Hitchens 2007, 119)

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic…or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman and something worse…(Let) us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Lewis, in Hitchens 2007, 119)

Thich Nhat Hanh sees it differently.

Jesus is the Son of God and the Son of Man. We are all, at the same time, the sons and daughters of God and the children of our parents. This means we are the same reality as Jesus. This may sound heretical [emphasis added] to many Christians, but I believe theologians who say we are not have to reconsider this. (Hanh 1995, 44)

Note the word “heretical,” I’ll come back to that later. Traditional arguments are based on the supposed accuracy of the “Son of God” quotes in the New Testament. But many scholars will tell you there is no way of knowing what was actually said.

Some will argue that enlightened Christians, especially with metaphysical interpretations of the Bible, including those used in Unity, are picking and choosing what they want from the Bible. Jesus, they say, is falsely remade into a Buddha-like figure who is simply enlightened. Is this overreaching? Should we just let Jesus be Jesus and Buddha be Buddha? What makes metaphysical interpretation any more correct than literalism, just because Charles Fillmore said so?

Personally, I agree with that criticism, to an extent. I am not a big believer in metaphysical interpretation of the Bible, because it seems to me an intellectual exercise in assuming metaphors, symbolism or non-literal meanings in the minds of writers who lived 2000 years ago in a totally different culture, whose literal meanings are hard enough to understand. It seems an amazing amount of hubris to be garnering subtle meanings from something written so long ago.

If we put metaphysical interpretation aside, it is entirely possible that the Bible means literally what the writers wrote, that St. Paul and others did truly mean and believe that Jesus was the one and only begotten Son of God.

But still no one knows what Jesus himself really said. Some of St. Paul’s supposed writings have some historicity behind them, but the Gospel accounts do not. Like any great literature, sacred or otherwise, language, symbolism and metaphors are decided, ultimately, by the reader. The metaphysical interpretations, though they may at times seem like a bit of a stretch, are just as valid as literal interpretations, because neither can be proven.

I say, let traditional Christians have the New Testament the way they want it. And we’ll read it the way we want to. Let the reader decide for himself. Why fight over this ancient tome?
Can both Buddha and Jesus be worshipped as Gods? No, of course not, or at least not monotheistically. The Buddho-Christian answer is to worship neither, for neither is a God, but to follow both. Far better, instead, to worship, so to speak, our Christ nature/ Buddha nature.

This nature is really just connecting to the divinity within. We call them “Christ nature” or “Buddha nature” not because it is magically gifted to us from on high by the God Jesus or the God Buddha, but because we honor Jesus the Christ and Buddha as historical figures who were our saviors only in the sense that they seeded divine ideas to the benefit of all humanity. We are just as accurate calling it our “divine nature”, the “God within,” or anything else that evokes the Godness we all have inside us.

Even if not worshipping them as gods, is it confusing to have both Jesus and Buddha as our wayshowers?

Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*” seems to indicate we must choose.

A Christian is a continuation of Jesus Christ: He *is* [emphasis original] Jesus Christ, and she *is* [emphasis original] Jesus Christ…A Buddhist is a child of the Buddha, he *is*, and she *is*, a continuation of the Buddha. She *is* [emphasis original] the Buddha, he *is* [emphasis original] the Buddha…You are the child of your mother…You are the child of your father…You are your father, whether you like it or not. (Hanh 1999, 196)

He says so more explicitly in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, where he suggests that it is not practical or advisable to live a spiritual life where you are the child of two fathers.

When we respect our blood ancestors and our spiritual ancestors, we feel rooted. If we can find ways to cherish and develop our spiritual heritage, we will avoid the kind of alienation that is destroying society, and we will become whole again. We must encourage others, especially our young people, to go back to their traditions and rediscover the jewels that are there. (living…90)

This is the approach also advocated by Laughlin, and by many enlightened Christians, to reinvigorate our Christian roots with the spiritual waters of Buddhism and other Eastern ideas, but keep sitting under a Christian tree.

Paul Knitter, in *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian*, honors the role of Buddhist in watering his Christian tree.

**(T)hinking about God as Interbeing and relating to God as the connecting Spirit is a major antidote to the dualism that has infected Christian theology and spirituality. It served me as a kind of new pair of glasses through which I saw creation…Passing back to one’s own tradition after having passed over to another can lead to repossessing, but also realigning, one’s previous beliefs.**

(Knitter 2009, 21)

Dr. McDaniel also praises the gifts of Buddhism to his Christian faith.

Zen is among the most down to earth and concrete religions I know. It is very bodily and practical. For this reason I think Zen can enrich the incarnational emphasis of Christianity, which likewise finds the infinite in the finite, the sacred in the ordinary, the word in the enfleshedness of daily life. Living Zen can help Christians enter more deeply into that form of living to which we aspire: life in Christ…**(T)he two…did indeed feel compatible and mutually enriching, so I wasn't forced to choose. Each had a healing quality that could add to the other.**

(McDaniel, Website)
Enlightened Christianity may indeed be best for many who would feel alienated or disconnected by breaking away completely to a new faith.

Unity, which is certainly enlightened Christianity, posits an ideal of God which more closely matches Buddhist philosophy than it does traditional Christianity, which begs the question, is Unity even Christian? It’s definitely not traditional Christianity, even if at times it seems to try really, really hard to be accepted by it. It mirrors much of early Christianity, especially the gnostic Gospels, but that branch of the faith is today seen as heretical to the mother churches.

Unity’s ties to the Gnostic faith follow the broken line from the first centuries until the 19th century, when those early teachings were rediscovered and revived by the transcendentalists. From there flowed the beginnings of New Thought, through the Fillmores and Ernest Holmes and others, to New Thought and Unity today.

I come back to Thich Nhat Hanh’s use of the word “heretical” to describe how some Christians might view the New Thought Jesus.

Though there has been much positive dialogue between New Thought and traditional Christianity, and even converts of sorts such as the retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, there has also been strong criticism and violent language directed at Unity’s beliefs. It is seen as a Christian heresy by many elements of traditional Christianity to believe in a God who is immanent instead of transcendent, or a Jesus who is not the literal Son of God.

Neil Vahle, in his excellent history *The Unity Movement*, lists some of the traditional charges against Unity.

> Unity has been attacked for rejecting the belief that God is a person, and for viewing God as impersonal “principle.”…Rev. Louis T. Talbot chided Unity for its failure to accord “personality” to God…In an article entitled, “The Unity Cult,” Walter Martin pointed out…“The Father objectively loved the world, hence He is a Person who is capable of love, not love itself, as unity would have us believe.”…Talbot asserted: “Unity members believe the lie of Satan that they may be gods by recognizing their own inner divinity, thus making themselves equal with God.” (Vahle 2002, 407-408)

To use a famous phrase from the dating world, they’re just not that into us. So why bother? I know there are many Christians you might consider traditional that are friendly to New Thought, and that only the most evangelical and fundamentalist branches throw such accusations at us. But, still, all in all, even those friendly branches are not really in agreement with New Thought, they are merely less combative and more accepting of differences.

Because of this hostility, and because of the baggage many Unity followers carry from negative experiences with traditional Christianity, many are unsure of how Christian the movement should be. Christian terms such as “church,” “Christian” and even “Christ nature” are not universally accepted by all in Unity.

Janet Taylor, though her first inclination is to avoid labels, says,

> If I had to choose, I’d call myself a Unity Buddhist. I don’t see any disconnect in calling myself that. One issue I’ve had in using the word Christian in any form or fashion is that in our culture there is such a wide variation of perceptions of what a Christian can be about. (Taylor 2011)

She mentions a negative reaction, as young as 11, to the Methodist upbringing, which led her to become a seeker, finding Buddhism, then Unity, then evolving into her unique path. “I grew up as a Methodist,” she recounts. “My parents were very devout Methodists. As a child I tried to toe the line, I wanted to believe. What my mother tried to instill in me, that fearing of God, didn’t appeal to me.” (Taylor 2011)
Even as a “Unity Buddhist”, however, she sees the value of the Christian connection, though she favors not using that word to describe herself.

I think Fillmore saw the Buddhist connection to Christianity. In Unity I have a better appreciation for Christianity as an embedded theology. It helps to ground it in Christian terms, Christian terms can serve as a bridge. (Taylor 2011)

This is a manifestation of Thich Nhat Hanh’s advice to reinvigorate your spiritual roots, but goes a step beyond, which is why I believe Fillmorean ideas are a key dynamic in moving from enlightened Christianity to Buddho-Christianity.

Moving beyond Enlightened Christianity: Buddho-Christianity in practice

Why do I, and others like me, not just follow Thich Nhat Hanh’s advice and return to our roots, into “enlightened Christianity?”

For me, it would be a denial of a big part of my spiritual voyage. There is by now too much of the Buddhist in me, so it would be a personal lie to leave out the Buddhist part. Also, I retain too many negative feelings about my solely Christian past to wholeheartedly embrace that faith without significant modification.

I’d like to share just a bit about my own spiritual journey, then finish by talking about what Buddho-Christianity means to me in personal practice.

My parents are immigrants from Mexico, and as I like to joke, Mexicans are baptized Roman Catholic the minute they come out of the womb. I was a good Catholic boy, a dedicated altar boy, and I even remember getting prizes for being the first to memorize the Act of Contrition.

Even though I was loyal to my faith, there was a strong undercurrent of fear to my Catholicism. In our house there were thick, dark crucifixes with Jesus in pain and awash in the blood of our sins. I also watched a lot of horror movies on TV, and the two even melded together, so that I started having this weird, terrifying recurring nightmare where Frankenstein was crucified on the cross. Interesting metaphor, actually, if you think about it.

When I went away to college, it was the first time in my life where I did not have to go church, because my strict Catholic father wasn’t there to make sure I did. It was there, like many of us, that I was introduced to new ideas. But I did not really explore myself spiritually as much as walk away from my rote faith.

For years after that, in my 20s, I did not really feel a need for any kind of religion, and vacillated between atheism and agnosticism. I don’t remember exactly how Buddhism crept into my head, though my first clear memory is reading about the Chicago Bulls’ coach at the time, Phil Jackson, talking about his own Buddhist beliefs and recommending a book about it. I went out and purchased that book, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, by the Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki, and it blew my mind, and I have not turned back since. I was hooked.

I read everything I could get my hands on about Buddhism, and went to a class offered by a Buddhist monk about basic meditation. I was struck by his bearing, his humor and his compassion, and decided I wanted to be that way. I signed up for my first of many Buddhist retreats, a one day gathering at his temple in downtown Chicago.

The next step was to set up my own little Buddhist altar, which I did in my living room, and I have meditated, even if just for a few seconds, most every day of my life since the mid-90s. Like many professed American Buddhists, I never joined a *sangha* or temple, making my practice a very personal one of meditation and reading about Buddhism.

The next step in my spiritual journey was to find my current *sangha*, Unity. I lucked into that by meeting my beautiful wife Elizabeth, who invited me to a Unity service. Again, I was hooked immediately. Though there was a huge painting of Jesus in the sanctuary, that same painting also included the Buddha, and *chakras*, and so much more from all faiths.
I came to love the Unity teaching that all paths lead to God, the view of Jesus as a wayshower who could exist in my heart with the Buddha, and the spiritual practicality of Unity’s principles, which asks us to walk the walk in our daily lives. I did not really “come back” to my Christian roots, as Thich Nhat Hanh would have me do, because this did not seem traditionally Christian to me, and still doesn’t.

In fact, it work in reverse, as Unity deepened my Buddhist practice. It was at a Unity weekend retreat that I first met Rev. Robert Brumet, and was introduced to mindfulness practice. Looking back, I can see that I was only a beginner Buddhist before that, and had not really incorporated Buddhist spiritual practices into my daily life.

Mindfulness practice has put spiritual principles into my daily life. I’ve gone to many Brumet retreats since then, and two years ago we went to a retreat near Denver offered by Thich Nhat Hanh’s Plum Village group of monks and nuns, though he himself did not attend due to illness. There we took what is called the Five Mindfulness Trainings Vows. This coming August, we have plans to go to the same retreat, this time hoping the master himself will be well and there.

Today, I feel fully Buddho-Christian, enriched by the best of both spiritual paths. What does this look like, in daily practice?

I go to a Unity Church, but admittedly not every Sunday. I enjoy the services as a celebration of community and divine joy, but I don’t see much traditionally Christian in them. The minister might or might not mention the Bible, but is more likely to talk in a self-help sort of vein about living spiritual principles. The music and interacting in community with others refreshes me for the week, and I appreciate the short meditation, though if I ran a Unity church, I personally would experiment with occasional meditations as long as 15 minutes.

Though I’ve read the entire Bible, both Old and New Testament, for the most part most of my spiritual reading now is Buddhist, in books and through a wonderful magazine called Buddhadharma. I find that Buddhadharma really feeds me spiritually on a daily basis with its advice on living a spiritual life.

I find that my rituals are mostly Buddhist. Though I am at times frustrated that I don’t make time to meditate as long as I’d like to daily, I always find some way to meditate. At work, I have an Outlook reminder on my computer called “God”, and I stop what I’m doing then, take three long breaths, and say a mindfulness chant.

Every morning I recite a long prayer of my own creation, and it includes nothing Christian in it, except maybe the Serenity Prayer. Most of it is Buddhist: I recite a Prayer to the three refuges three times (to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha), I recite the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I reaffirm my vows to plant the seeds of a better karma and to develop the bodhicitta mind. I pay homage to lovingkindness, non-attachment, compassion, mindfulness, all in a Buddhist vein, though these are obviously universal spiritual principles. This prayer/chant energizes me for the day, and then the daily struggle begins to stay centered and practice mindfulness always.

In our house whether by design or accident, I counted the other day that we have the Buddha represented five times either in sculptures or wall hangings. We have only a small “Jesus action figure” and a candle holder of the Virgin Mary to represent Christianity, mostly because we have not been able to find positive representations, of Jesus meditating for example.

Mindfulness informs my life always, I really do try to live it. I find myself frequently stopping my actions or thoughts to just breathe and reset and live a mindful life.

All this speaks to me in a concrete way about Buddhism, but where is the Christian part of my Buddho-Christianity?

I profess to be a follower of Jesus, but he is in the background of my spiritual life. Perhaps his teachings are embedded deep in my subconscious from my childhood training, and his teachings
inform my life and how I relate to the world. I’m sure that’s true to a large extent, yet Jesus is not in the forefront of my consciousness.

The Unity teachings, by contrast, are an important part of my practice. Three times a day I recite three positive affirmations. One important thing Unity has given me is the encouragement to pursue my spiritual curiosity, to be open to new ideas about the nature of God, the nature of humankind, the metaphysical meanings of sacred literature, the truth about Jesus, and so on. Without the spiritual ferment that Unity has brought forth in me, I would have been stuck in a shallow and limited Buddhism.

But is any of that really Christian? Not traditionally so, but it is all part of what enlightened Christianity adds to my belief system.

I was going to write that my morality, my ethics, are mostly Buddhist, from the Noble Eightfold Path. Yet, my morality and my ethics were ingrained in me, they became part of my embedded theology long before I ever read one Buddhist book. The Ten Commandments, like it or not, are as much a part of me as any Buddhist Path.

My embedded theology, in fact, cannot be denied, even as I claim it is not my driving spiritual force anymore. I cannot know what effect it has on my subconscious, and I must honor its existence. Growing up Catholic, living in a traditional Judeo-Christian society, a big part of me by sheer force will always remain Christian, no matter what new ideas I pop into my head. I understand why Laughlin and Thich Nhat Hanh encourage us to return to our spiritual roots, because our embedded theology always remains a strong pull, and I can see how resisting it can cause disorientation.

The strongest part of my embedded theology, pointing towards the role Christianity really plays for me, is to fill my need for a concept of God, any concept of God. As I’ve much discussed, I don’t buy into the traditional Christian idea of God. But I do need God in my life. Buddhism’s concepts around Ultimate Reality plant the seeds of my enlightened Christian God ideas, but by themselves, without the Western structural framework of the God idea itself, I find them dry and abstract. They are not enough. I need a God that is real, that I can feel. Yes, I can touch my God mystically, but even there my mind needs to grasp some more concrete concept of what I am touching.

And I confess, as one Unity minister, Rev. Eileen Stulak, once described in a talk about a personal crisis, sometimes I need a God with “skin on it.” I remember my own medical crisis, in an emergency room three years ago. When the doctor called for the heart paddles, I chanted a mantra, “I love God, God loves me,” over and over, until the crisis passed. I believed, and still do, that this focus on God in that moment saved my life.

I know the connotations of the word “God,” but to me this felt like an affirmation of the God I know, the spiritual unity that is all existence, and I believe I was calling out to that unity in my time of need, and it responded, “I love you too, and it is not your time.”

I resist the semantics of theology and the self-imposed demand to strictly define my God ideas, or any of my spiritual ideas. I find my ideas are fluid, perhaps even contradictory. Sometimes I ask myself, why not have both Gods in my pantheon, skin and no skin, each to fit my need of the moment. Or does that lead to dissonance, the undecided mind, uncertainty?

Or are these just pretty questions we can’t possibly answer, and the Buddha had it right not to worry about God, and just worry about how we live?

I see the Buddha’s point, and yet I still feel a void that only a God idea can fill. Mindfulness, living a good life, and perfecting myself are not enough. I want to connect to God, but I still need to grasp what I am connecting to.

Dr. McDaniel gives a beautiful description of his own God idea that fits my pantheon. “I sensed,” he writes, “that there is a mysterious and encircling presence—a sky-like mind—in
which we live and breathe and have our being, and that this mind is amazingly graceful. We can live from this grace and even add to it.” (McDaniel, Website)

I am going to borrow his God idea and make it my own skin/no skin God, “sky-like mind.”

**CONCLUSION: I AM A BUDDHO-CHRISTIAN**

Theology is a conscious process. You can choose a new theology, though you run the risk of it clashing with your embedded theology. But unless you believe, like a sort of determinism, that it cannot be overcome at all, you still have free choice in the matter.

Theology, like philosophy in general, pretends to logical proof, but there are competing claims to Ultimate Truth about everything spiritual, and no one logical set has ever been universally accepted as the “winner.” What logic really tells us, then, is that if your logic, your theology, is good enough for you and doesn’t cause you any cognitive dissonance or anxiety because it is so over the top ridiculous, then it passes the test.

Jeffrey Carlson, writing in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, identifies what he calls the “syncretic self.”

> While for most social scientists syncretism is a relatively neutral term, for most theologians this “religious mixing” is seen as a threat to the “purity” of orthodoxy. I would argue that all religion is, ultimately, syncretism. To have a religious identity is, inevitably, to be a “syncretic self,” the product of a process of selective appropriation, internalizing elements drawn from various pools of possibility. We are this almagam, this ever-changing assemblage of diverse elements, brought together out of freedom and amid a certain destiny, an array of…influencing factors we cannot completely control. (Carlson 2000, 119)

This was William James’ main point in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. If I may be so bold as to paraphrase that whole book in two sentences, since I did write a Lyceum paper on it two years ago, his message is that every single person’s religion is in some way different. Therefore, if you believe it, it is your religion.

What then, is Buddho-Christianity? To summarize its theology, it’s a belief in an immanent God, a desire for unity with that God in the moment and throughout our lives, a use of both Jesus the Christ and the Buddha as spiritual wayshowers, and a daily personal practice that is inclusive to both Buddhist and Christian methods of achieving that unity: meditation, mindfulness, prayer, affirmation, and so on. The theology I have outlined is not perfect, and I’m sure it has its inconsistencies and gaps. Can you name any theology that is any better in those regards?

I honor the beauty in both Buddhism and Christianity, and my personal spiritual experience has been too deeply touched by both paths to allow me to choose between them, so I choose both. The choice is mine, I *am* a Buddho-Christian!
Bibliography


McDaniel, Dr. Jay. Interview with Arturo Mora. E-mail interview. Overland Park, KS, April 6, 2011.


I am thinking of buying a little buddha statue for decorative purposes. Not to worship it or anything. Would that be sinful to do? Would it violate...Â For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, Like x 1. Agree x 1. Winner x 1. List. Jul 13, 2012. (You must log in or sign up to reply here.) I Am Buddha. 185K likes. Nobody is born Uncreative. #IAmBuddha is a movement which aims at exploring and bringing out the creative wealth and help make...Â I Am Buddha. 45 mins Â– Why â€œbeing politically correctâ€™™ and â€œbeing correctâ€™™ are two different things? #IAmBuddha https://iambuddha.net/â€œ/why-being-politically-correct-and-â€œ/ Share1.7KSharesThere was a gentleman who used to outrage a lot against corruption. One day I wrote a tweet â€œâ€œiambuddha.net. Why â€œbeing politically correctâ€™™ and â€œbeing correctâ€™™ are two different things? - #IAmBuddha. Share1.7KSharesThere was a gentleman who used to outrage a lot against corruption. One day I wrote a tweet â€œâ€œ Share1.7KSharesThere was a gentleman who used to outrage a lot against corruption.