

Buddhist and Judeo-Christian Understandings of God

The following background essay, with material drawn from *Buddhism Made Plain*, by Antony Fernando, describes some of the affinities between the Buddhist “neglect” of God and the Judeo-Christian understanding of God.



Buddhism is often described as an atheistic religion. In studying Buddhism it becomes clear that “God is not part of Gautama’s picture of human liberation” (p. 104). The Buddha believed that worshipping God, or even having a concept of God, is not necessary to achieve liberation. This idea made Buddhism radically different from the other religions of Gautama’s day. However, as Fernando points out, “although the concept of God was excluded from his path to liberation, Gautama never argued against it” (p. 104).

Assuming then that Gautama was not antitheistic, Fernando wonders why Gautama would have gone so against the grain of the religious understanding of his time: In Hinduism God and gods play a large role. The answer lies in the religious practices of Gautama’s contemporaries: “The worship of God had by that time so greatly deteriorated that it distorted what Gautama considered to be the basic element in any religion—namely, liberation” (pp. 104–105). Traditional Hinduism was demanding total acceptance of the infallibility of the Vedas. Ritual and ceremony had more and more importance, and correct practice of rituals was overemphasized. The result was a great deal of fighting among various teachers and schools of thought within the tradition. Gautama considered Hinduism empty and hollow. “According to Gautama, exponents of diverse forms of the worship of God tragically failed to focus attention on the liberation most urgently needed by humankind” (p. 105).

Gautama’s stand in regard to God is very clear in a discussion that took place between Gautama and a monk named Malunkyaputta. The monk asks Gautama why he did not care to give a specific reply to questions such as: Is the world eternal, or is it not? Is it finite, or is it not? Is life in the body, or in the soul? Do beings continue after death, or do they not?

Gautama explained that if he did not speak of them, it was because they did not come within the ambit of his primary preoccupation. His concern was limited to a more urgent need for humanity. To explain his position he told a very forceful story. Imagine that a man is going through a jungle. Halfway through he is shot by a poisoned arrow. If the poisoned arrow remains in his body, he will die. The injured person says: “I will not pull out this arrow until I know who shot it, whether he is tall or short, fat or lean, young or old, of a high caste or a low caste.” I tell you, Malunkyaputta, says Gautama, that man will die before he knows the right answers. (P. 105)



According to Fernando, Gautama's perspective on the existence of God does not justify referring to him as an atheist or an agnostic. Gautama was not indifferent to God, nor did he reject God outright. His concern was "not about whether God exists or not, but whether belief in God has any relevance to the immediate problems of humanity" (p. 105).

There is thus a conspicuous difference between Gautama's objections to belief in God and those of the traditional atheist and agnostic. His argument against God is not leveled against religion. On the contrary, it is in the very name of religion, and as an attempt to save religion, that he omits the concept of God. Differently expressed, Gautama tells the believer in God: let us avoid the confusing and controversial concept of God, of divinity, and let us immediately work toward the divinization of humanity. (P. 106)

In his discussion, Fernando reveals some important points of contact between the presence of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition and the lack of God in the Buddhist tradition. For the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, belief in God "was not a matter of rite and ritual or of external formal worship, but a way of righteous living" (p. 107). When speaking about God, Jesus and the prophets did not focus on trying to describe God's nature; rather, "they spoke of the qualities of the true believer" (p. 107). Passages such as Isaiah 1:11–17 and Amos 6:21–24, as well as stories like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, provide helpful examples of the emphasis Jesus and the prophets placed on those qualities.

To take this a step further, we need to recognize that Jesus and the prophets were not "concerned about promoting a conceptual knowledge of God, or of creating in the minds of people a clear mental picture of God's appearance. What they promoted exclusively was a behavioral acknowledgment of God" (p. 108). True worship of God is evidenced not in worshippers' adherence to the rules of formal ritual and ceremonies but in "the characteristics of their day-to-day behavior. The most central of course is loving care—concern—for those in need" (p. 108).

Fernando concludes his analysis by briefly comparing the outlook of Judeo-Christianity to that of Buddhism. He finds a "common bond" between Gautama and Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, a bond that is seen "in the stand each of them took against the theism of their day" (p. 109):

Unanimously, they condemned the false theism that prevailed in the societies to which they belonged. The prophets, Yeshua [Jesus], and his fellow Jews, of course, did not go so far as Gautama in completely rejecting the idea of God, but all were at one in their conviction that there is an utterly meaningless form of theism that is destructive to the personality. They were at one in affirming that the best and the most needed form of the worship of God is that expressed by sublimity of character or a life of goodness. (P. 109)

(The excerpts and quotations on this handout are from Antony Fernando and Leonard Swidler, *Buddhism Made Plain: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985], pages 104–109. Copyright © 1985 by Antony Fernando. Used with permission of the authors.)

