

## 6. Christianity Beyond Beliefs

### a response to Stephen Batchelor

I have come to treasure a book by Stephen Batchelor entitled *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. Batchelor's understanding of the teachings of Buddhism is congenial with my own understanding of the essence of Christianity. I am going to dialogue with Batchelor's book as a way of clarifying the essential quality of the Christian breakthrough.

But before I begin this dialogue I want to answer two questions: (1) Why does Christianity need clarifying? and (2) Why do I think a Buddhist writer can offer Christians help in the clarification of Christianity?

First of all, both Buddhism and Christianity are very old religions, each formulated in a very different time than our own. Both of these religions, and all other long-standing religions, face the need for thoroughgoing reinterpretation in order to speak relevantly to the cultural ferment of our present times. Many Buddhists and Christians have been working intently at this task for over a century. A kinship among these various renewal forces has arisen because all of us have faced many of the very same issues. Renewal forces within the various traditions find themselves facing these same distortions: moralism, sentimentality, and the literalistic interpretation of doctrines or beliefs. All of our inherited religious traditions have, in very similar ways, lost touch with the actual contemporary experience of living our lives.

And why is dialogue with Buddhism particularly helpful for Christians? Buddhism has a similarity with Christianity. Both religions have adapted themselves to many different cultures. Both have spread throughout the world speaking powerfully to people in cultures that are very different from the culture in which the original breakthrough of each tradition took place. At their best, both religions have the ability to be relevant to a human culture without being identical with that culture.

Over the past several decades, Buddhism has become a strong presence in Europe and on the North American continent. Coming to the West from the East, Buddhism has been less burdened than Christianity with obsolete ways of engaging this culture. The Buddhist resurgence has been able to engage modern Western culture in a manner that is fresh and relevant. This success is suggestive and challenging to Christian renewal forces who would like to be similarly effective in leading a Christian resurgence.

Batchelor's story and his writings illustrate this freshness and relevance now present in western Buddhism. After years of practicing Buddhism and studying the classical texts (especially Tibetan Buddhism), Batchelor came to an awareness which he states in his preface to an earlier book, *Alone with Others*:

Nevertheless, my increasing difficulty in being able to accept many traditional Buddhist views in the way they are currently presented in the established schools led me to search for a mode of interpretation that would be able to open up the meaning of Buddhism without falling into the extremes of either diluting the original concepts or insisting on a rigid literalism. In order for the Buddhist teachings to resound with the fullness of their meaning, I feel it necessary that they speak to us in a language that we can authentically hear.<sup>1</sup>

Christian renewal forces can certainly identify with those concerns. Even more amazing to

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Alone with Others* (Grove Press, New York: 1983) Page 21-22

me is the following quotation, also from *Alone with Others*, in which Batchelor notes his dialogue with Christian resurgence:

The search for a coherent means to articulate my understanding of Buddhism led me to the field of modern existentialist philosophy and, in particular, its application to Christian theology. Among the writings of existentialist philosophy, I have found Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* to be invaluable. Much of the terminology and methodology employed there has been used throughout this book. The influence of existentialist theology has come primarily from Paul Tillich and John MacQuarrie. It has been through their writings that I have become aware of the many possibilities for using existentialist thought as a means of translating and revitalizing traditional religious ideas. In fact, through reading their words I discovered that they, as Christians, were trying to deal with precisely the same problems that I was facing as a Buddhist. Their writings not only gave me many ideas for a means to help resolve these conflicts, but also opened my eyes for the first time to the richness of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In my reflections that follow, I will be sharing how Batchelor's thoughts about the everyday practice of a contemporary, existential interpretation of Buddhism has moved me toward a clearer vision of the everyday practice of a contemporary, existential interpretation of Christianity.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Alone with Others*, page 22 Thanks to Grove/Atlantic Inc. for permission to use these quotations

## a. Awakening and Salvation

In chapter one of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor summarizes the four ennobling truths of the Buddha in this manner: (1) Anguish is to be understood, (2) its origins are to be let go of, (3) its cessation is to be realized, and (4) the path is to be cultivated.<sup>3</sup>

These truths are not four propositions to be believed; they are four practices to be done. Batchelor likens them to Alice in Wonderland's bottle which comes with the instruction "Drink me!" Each ennobling truth comes with an instruction: (1) Understand me! (2) Let go! (3) Realize me! and (4) Cultivate me! These four instructions are not separate from each other but commend a flow of actions each leading to the next.

These truths/actions are ennobling because they grant integrity, dignity, and authority to one's life. This ennoblement is not just an idea but a program to be carried out. There is nothing otherworldly or magical about these four truths or about this ennoblement. It is practical, secular, here-and-now living.

**(1) Understand anguish!** Anguish and its cessation are the focus of the Buddha's teaching. There is no cessation of anguish without looking our anguish in the face. Avoidance of anguish, flight from anguish, denial of anguish--these are the opposite of understanding anguish. When our life is anguish, we might be inclined to ask, "What is there to understand?" First of all, understanding means experiencing that our life is coming to us as anguish and, second, to see how that anguish is arising. We have only to observe carefully to see that every part of our life is in transition, is arising and passing away. As we observe even more carefully we can see that these ups and downs of our external life are not the source of our anguish. Understanding this is not like believing a doctrine; rather it is having an experience--the experience of being aware of and carefully observing our own anguish. Our awakenment commences when we see that we ourselves, not the events we are facing, are the source of our anguish.

**(2) Let go of the origin of anguish!** Craving a life different from the one we have: this is the origin of anguish. Being averse to the life we have: this is the origin of anguish. We cannot stamp out craving and aversion any more than we can stamp out anguish. But we can understand craving in a way that leads to letting go of it. Craving leads to anguish: understanding craving leads to letting go. Letting go of craving is a choice made in the moment, not a state of permanent achievement nor a state of consciousness that lasts for all eternity. Letting go of craving is a possibility in the now, a discovery of freedom, an action to be followed in this moment.

**(3) Realize emptiness, the cessation of anguish!** This ennobling "awakenment" is a real happening in the present moment of actual living. Awakenment can be called "emptiness" because our clinging to various contents has been released. Awakenment is timeless because one has let go of having to have this or that result in time. From the high peak of having let go, one can observe the coming and going of all things. One can do so without craving and without anguish. One can do so with integrity, dignity, and authority in one's life. One has entered freedom, an infinitely creative dimension of actual human life. One has not left the real world of passing things; rather one has found a center, the center of freedom within the world of passing things and therefore the power to enter into the world of passing things as a victor rather than a victim of one's own cravings, aversions, and anguish. This high moment is real, but it is not a possession to which we can cling. As Batchelor says, "... no sooner is it glimpsed than it is gone. Cessation of craving is like a momentary gap in the clouds. The sun shines brilliantly for a few

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs* (Riverhead Books, New York: 1997)

moments only to be covered over again. We find ourselves back in the humbling fog of anguish, craving, habit, restlessness, distraction. But with this difference: now we know where this track goes.” (pages 9-10) The moment of enlightenment enables us to see that there is an option to the tracks of craving and anguish. Before enlightenment we have not been on a path of our own choosing but rather on a track of bondage that is choosing for us. The realization of the cessation of anguish carries us forward into the relevance of the fourth ennobling truth.

**Cultivate the path!** The path is freedom. The path is not the way to freedom. The path is freedom freely choosing to remain and widen freedom. As Bachelor puts it, “Awakening is no longer seen as something to attain in the distant future, for it is not a thing but a process--and this process is the path itself. But neither does this render us in any way perfect or infallible. We are quite capable of subverting this process to the interests of far-from-extinct desires, ambitions, hatreds, jealousies, and fears.” (page 10) Awakening is not an aloof and lofty pedestal but a process of living in the “turmoil and ambiguity of everyday life.” And this path is not otherworldly but “encompasses everything we do. It is an authentic way of being in the world. ... [it] underpins the values that inform our ideas, the choices we make, the words we utter, the deeds we perform, the work we do. It provides the ethical ground for mindful and focused awareness, which in turn further deepens our understanding of the kind of reality we inhabit and the kind of beings we are that inhabit such a reality.” (pages 10-11)

These four ennobling instructions are not separate, distinct things but one process: understanding anguish leads to letting go of anguish which leads to the cessation of anguish which enables one to be in a life of freely cultivating the path of living and expanding this enlightenment.

## **Christian Salvation**

Bachelor’s approach to and understanding of the teachings of the Buddha is remarkably parallel with my own approach to and understanding of the Christian breakthrough. The New Testament witnesses also speak of a life set loose from egoistic cravings. And this transformation does not come about through swallowing religious ideas but through a pointed address to our specific personal lives. The teachings of Jesus and the proclamations of the early church cut through the patterns of egoistic living and open the possibility of living a new life of freedom, love, compassion, peace, tranquility, and joy. Like Buddhist enlightenment, Christian salvation means entering a life beyond egoistic cravings, a life beyond security in wealth, a life beyond status among others, a life beyond self as “self” is normally understood. As the teachings of Jesus indicate, if one is to find one’s SELF one must lose one’s self.

If the New Testament message were only a set of beliefs, no fundamental transformation would have occurred. The Christian message requires reception and obedience. Like the four ennobling instructions of the Buddha, the Christian message comes with a tag of instruction: “Drink me! Eat me! Trust me!”

In the Gospel of John, the Christian message is called “the logos” or “Word” of God. The Greek term “logos” pointed to the meaning of everything. It is not the words of the Bible. It is not the words of Jesus. This Word is the invisible meaning of everything. This Word is the Ultimate Message being spoken by the Infinite Silence of Final Reality. This Message, according to John, predates the dawn of time, predates “the Big Bang,” to use a modern term. What a paradox such talk entails: the Infinite Silence preceding time itself speaks the Ultimate Message to human flesh in the present moment. John goes on to witness that those who accept this Ultimate Message are healed, illuminated, walk in the light. Those who do not receive this Ultimate Message remain in darkness. These are the images that begin the Gospel of John and

that have formed a vital part of the entire history of Christianity.

“Speech from the Infinite Silence”--this paradox is an expression of what I mean by a “Christianity Beyond Beliefs.” This Speech, this Word, this Ultimate Message, as reflected in the Christian story, tells humanity that the invisible, mysterious, Infinite Silence that never speaks human words is, nevertheless, speaking to us in each and every event of our lives. And what is being said to us? What is this Ultimate Message? That we are loved--that we are affirmed by the Infinite Silence--that we are being cared for in and through every event that is happening to us. Through an actual experience in history (through the events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth when understood to be the Christ) we have learned that we are loved, that everything that is happening to us is love, that the “Reality” coming at us is trustworthy rather than a problem that needs to be corrected.

So, if what is happening to us is not the problem of our lives, what is the problem of our lives? Craving a different life. This craving is often pictured in the Christian heritage as rebellion against that Infinite Reality (that Infinite Silence) which is constituting whatever it is that is being constituted. This rebellion may take the form of delusion, unconsciousness, and/or the unwillingness to be conscious of what is taking place. This rebellion may take the form of a highly conscious insistence that our lives be different than they are. This rebellion may take the form of sheer hatred of everything and everybody, including ourselves.

When the Ultimate Message dawns upon us, it dawns as an audit or judgment of our rebellion, of our craving for a different life. Whatever form our rebellion takes, the Ultimate Message sent by the Infinite Silence teaches us to confess our rebellion and see that our rebellion is futile--that rebellion leads to despair or anguish. This is so because in being our rebellion we are attempting to defeat an undefeatable foe; we are attempting to flee an inescapable pursuer; we are hoping to escape from the Ground of our Being--a Reality from which no escape is possible. We are thus in anguish. We are thus in despair. We may not want to call it despair, for we still hope to win our rebellion. And we may not want to call our life “despair” because we do not want to face the hopelessness that our rebellion is. Yet when we do see clearly this “judgment” being meted out to us by the Ultimate Message, we see that our entire life has been and may continue to be a hopeless anguish of bondage to our own craving for a life different than the one being provided by the Infinite Silence.

This Ultimate Message also makes plain to us that the life which is being provided by the Infinite Silence is good for us, is love for us, is freedom instead of our self-constructed bondage of rebellion and futility. Furthermore, the Ultimate Message makes clear to us that all our rebellion, however horrific and however misguided, is forgiven by the Infinite Silence. “Forgiven by the Infinite Silence” is a metaphor, a poem that means simply this: we are welcome home to our actual lives, however drastically we have been away from our actual lives. The past is indeed unrecoverable; it cannot be undone. We do not possess the past. We can draw no blame from our past, and we can draw no honor from our past. **Our past is not ours**; it belongs to the Infinite Silence who, speaking metaphorically, is forgiving it and is using it to issue in whatever consequences this Infinite Source is constituting now. So we can let go; we can surrender our past to that Infinite tomb into which each moment goes and to that Infinite womb out of which each new consequence and possibility comes. Having made that surrender, we can place our attention on this present moment and on our choices in this moment. Having let go of the past, it is given back to us in this present moment as a treasure house of memory on how and how not to live the present.

So the challenge of the Ultimate Message is for us to accept the forgiveness resident in this Ultimate Message and proceed forward into the future, choosing to be the freedom, compassion,



tranquility, and joy that are our deepest reality. This moment of enlightenment, this occasion of healing, this event of being saved from our rebellion, is not a possession but a possibility. We are still tempted in every way that every human being is tempted to fall again into the perdition of following our cravings for a different life rather than responding freely to the situations that are being provided. Though such temptation is always present, the Infinite Silence is also sending help. "Holy Spirit" is the name for this help, this power to sustain us. In our actual lives, we are being given the freedom, the compassion, the tranquility, and the joy to live our actual lives in freedom, compassion, tranquility, and joy. We do not have to invent the Holy Spirit. We do not have to achieve the Holy Spirit some day. **Holy Spirit is our actual lives from which we have been fleeing and rebelling.** Having accepted our real lives as the lives in which our true fulfillment actually resides, we then have all the freedom, compassion, tranquility, and joy we need to be wholly competent and confident in this next moment of living. But this competence and this confidence are not a possession; such living is an option standing before our freedom. **The primal choice of freedom is to be the freedom that our freedom already is.** This freely chosen freedom manifests as freedom, compassion, tranquility, and joy. Yet our freedom also faces the option of returning again to the shackles of slavery that our cravings and their consequent anguish build for us.

Viewed as a finite product of the human imagination, the Christian story of salvation is quite different from the four ennobling instructions of the Buddha, but the overlap in real experience is astonishing to me. This astonishing overlap gives me additional encouragement that such awakening (such salvation) is indeed the way that life actually works.

And this "working" is not about consenting to a set of religious beliefs. Our religious beliefs, when fully renewed in their meaning, merely express, in a fragmentary way, the workings of a Reality that is beyond beliefs.

## b. Agnosticism and the Trinity

Agnosticism is the title of the second chapter of Stephen Batchelor's book *Buddhism Without Beliefs*. In this chapter Batchelor spells out the context indicated by the title of his book. Here is Batchelor's point: "When asked what he was doing, the Buddha replied that he taught 'anguish and the ending of anguish.' When asked about metaphysics (the origin and end of the universe, the identity or difference of body and mind, his existence or nonexistence after death) he remained silent. He said the dharma was permeated by a single taste: freedom. He made no claims to uniqueness or divinity and did not have recourse to a term we would translate as 'God.'" (page 15)

Buddhism did indeed become a religious movement in which answers were given on every metaphysical topic. Also, the Buddha came to be revered by many as a divine or quasi-divine being. Nevertheless, there remains this most interesting memory that the Buddha, before his work was institutionalized into a religion, was a thoroughgoing agnostic.

Agnosticism is not the same thing as atheism. "Atheism" can be defined as the belief that the belief of theism is highly improbable. "Agnosticism," however, can be defined as the simple admission that one does not know what one does not know. Agnosticism is the avoidance of any intellectual statement that is not reflective of actual experience. Agnosticism, so conceived, is nothing more ominous than commitment to an open quest for the truth rather than assuming possession of a truth one does not have. A "true believer" may be consoled by beliefs that have not been grounded in experience, but such beliefs are a false security. Agnosticism is a rejection of false security. Agnosticism means a commitment to meaningful questions and a refusal to be taken in by meaningless answers.

The Buddha, like all human beings, had beliefs. It can be shown that the Buddha was indeed a creature of his times, holding certain beliefs characteristic of those times, but the Buddha did not place emphasis upon those inherited beliefs as essential to his teaching (the dharma). He taught from his own experience, and he taught his followers to trust their own experience. This element of Buddhist tradition has great appeal to the agnostic spirit in our contemporary culture. Many, perhaps most of us if we could be wholly honest, are fed up with being asked to swallow beliefs that are not reflective of our own actual experience.

Batchelor points out that we human beings often seek answers or wish to hold beliefs that provide us with some sort of consolation. We seek "revealed information" in order to have certainty where experience does not provide certainty. We especially seek certainty about such things as life after death or the abiding presence of some supernatural help.

But Batchelor states, "An agnostic Buddhist looks to the dharma for metaphors of existential *confrontation* rather than metaphors of existential *consolation*. The dharma is not a belief by which you will be miraculously saved. It is a method to be investigated and tried out. It starts by facing up to the primacy of anguish, and proceeds to apply a set of practices to understand the human dilemma and work toward a resolution." (page 18)

Batchelor's proposed agnosticism is not a passive or cynical surrender to the times. Rather, it is an aggressive program of action: the realization of "an internally consistent set of values and practices that creatively animates all aspects of human life. . . . a culture of awakening that both supports individual dharma practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world." (page 20)

## The Agnostic Core of Christianity

The Christian heritage is also capable of honoring the honest questions being asked by our agnostic and pluralistic world. Christianity does not need to be presented as a set system of beliefs thrown down from on high. Strange as this may seem to most Christians and non-Christians alike, Christianity, like Buddhism, has an agnostic core. This core is difficult to see, because the agnostic core of Christianity has been obscured by a huge complexity of Christian beliefs, dogmas, controversies, theological positions, and centuries of vigorous argument. So Christian-identified persons tend either to seek consolation in some particular subset of favorite "Christian beliefs" or else they tend to abandon all hope that the Christian heritage can ever again have a relevant meaning for an honest truth-seeking person.

At first glance, it seems necessary that we adopt some sort of "belief in God" in order to make sense of the Christian Bible. But rather than swallowing what some taken-for-granted Christian authority says "God" means, let us assume that we do not know what "God" means as an experience in our own lives. Secondly, let us assume that we do not know what the biblical writers were using the word "God" to point to in their own personal experience. Now, instead of having imported beliefs, we have meaningful questions. What did the word "God" mean for the biblical writers? And what does the word "God" mean in our own personal experience? Such honest questioning might be called "Christian agnosticism."

Next, let us notice what happens when we attempt to answer the question "What in their own experience did the biblical writers point to with the word God?" When we look carefully at the Bible, we find that the biblical writers were using the word "God" more as a question than as an answer. Here are some of their "God" questions put in my own words: What "existed" before everything that we see and hear and touch and taste and feel? What is the origin of everything? What sustains everything in being? What takes everything out of being? What is going on in the actual sequence of natural and historical events? When the biblical writers use the word "God" in connection with such questions, no answer is actually being given. The word "God" serves as a marker for the Unknown, for the boundless Mystery. This is directly stated in such ways as these: "God's ways are not our ways." "God's ways are beyond finding out." "No one has ever seen God." Even when the prophet Isaiah claims to have seen God (Isaiah 6:1), Isaiah makes clear that what he "saw" were winged fantasy figures covering God with their wings and crying out "AWE, AWE, AWE." Isaiah says he felt the foundations of the temple shake and the house of worship fill with smoke. This is metaphorical poetry for saying that all of Isaiah's religious beliefs had come unglued. Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me. I am a liar, and I dwell among a lying people." This is what it meant for Isaiah to "see" God.

The God of the Bible is never literally seen nor heard. It is even appropriate to speak of the biblical God as that Infinite Silence that never speaks. "The Word of God," as used in the Bible, is actually a human interpretation of the actions in history of this Infinite Silence.

With the word "God" we tend to associate literalistic pictures--such as a large humanoid form living in a supernatural upper story. When this literal image controls our minds, we cannot easily see that the biblical writers were poets of their own experience. They were not the recipients of privileged information from some "divine space" or "universe next door." They were poets of their own experience within the real encounters in history.

The word "God" also meant something very practical to the biblical writers; it meant a relationship of devotion, loyalty, and meaning. In terms of this usage, it would be fair to say that my automobile is my "God" if clinging to that piece of reality is the central devotion, loyalty, and meaning of my life. Such devotion is called "idolatry" in the biblical tradition because the proper devotion for humanity, according to the biblical recommendation, is



devotion to the Boundless Mystery, the Unknown Unknown, the Source and Tomb of all finite processes--including automobiles, human bodies, human egos, families, nations, and planets. The biblical God is both NO-thing and EVERY-thing. The actual experience of God is the experience of finite “things” arriving in our awareness as part of “EVERY-thing” and then passing away into “NO-thing.” The “EVERY” and the “NO” are not directly experienced, only the “thing” part of these terms is directly experienced. “NO-thing” and “EVERY-thing” are poetry expressing the awareness that we are indeed confronting a Mysterious Unknown in and through the coming and going of all things. If we are clinging to any of these things as the meaning of our lives, we are in an inappropriate devotion or worship. The authentic devotion recommended by the Bible is a devotion to NO-thing/EVERY-thing, which means that we are not clinging for meaning or consolation to any finite thing. Rather, we are standing nude, exposed, open to the full terror and glory of MYSTERIOUS REALTY. Such standing, according to the Bible, is what it means to fully be a human being.

If we view the biblical heritage in the above manner, we can say that the biblical handling of the term “God” is a form of agnosticism. In biblical worship (devotion, loyalty, practice) we are celebrating a relationship with the Unknown Unknown. Therefore, it is not quite appropriate to say that we “believe in God” or to “have beliefs about God.” All such beliefs crumble into mental foolishness when confronted with this NO-thing, EVERY-thing, MYSTERIOUS UNKNOWN. Neither the letters of the alphabet nor the thoughts of the human mind can contain the experience that the biblical witness was pointing to with the term “God.”

Furthermore, we can also claim that the term “monotheism” as used in the Jewish, Christian, and Moslem traditions is being properly understood only when we see the agnosticism in that term. To paraphrase Mohammed, “There are no gods-----PERIOD-----except THE INFINITE.” This simple phrase captures the experiential beginning point of the entire biblical heritage. No finite thing is appropriate for the meaning of your life.

The originators of Christianity claimed to be experiencing two more “faces” of God; they called them “Jesus Christ” and “Holy Spirit.” Jesus Christ, as a face of God, meant something more than the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth. As I have already noted, the Gospel of John introduces Jesus Christ as the Word of God--the Speech of the Infinite Silence. In Jesus, this Ultimate Message walked among us. And what did this “walking among us” get said to us? What is this Ultimate Message? Though the author of the Gospel of John spends his entire book answering this question, here is a cryptic summary of the answer given in this gospel: **The Ultimate Message is the proclamation that the Infinite Silence loves humanity.** In other words, in the events of our lives we do not confront an alien destiny in which we do not belong. Everything that is happening to us is love for us. There is, therefore, no need to cling onto passing things or to be averse to existing things. All things in all their comings and goings are love for us.

We are indeed challenged by the author of the Gospel of John to believe in the actuality of this love, but what does “belief” mean in this instance? It means giving up all our beliefs and actively trusting that Mysterious Unknown which we do not understand and never hope to understand. Such trust is not a merely rational belief at all; it is an action. Trust is an adventure in freedom; it is a wager of our entire lives that all the events of our lives are good for us. Such trust is also the searing vision that we are foolish to crave some other life. As strange as this may sound to dogma-enthralled Christians, the phrase “believe in Jesus Christ” means to abandon all beliefs and trust the Ultimate Message that the Infinite Silence is affirming each of us here and now in each and every event of our living experience.

Also, belief in the Holy Spirit is not “belief” in the normal sense of that word. The Holy Spirit is simply the actuality which bubbles forth when we trust the Ultimate Message of the Infinite

Silence. Holy Spirit is freedom, compassion, equanimity, tranquility, hope beyond all finite hopes, peace with the Infinite, joy unspeakable, the bliss for which we humans were constituted. In so far as we have even for a moment tasted any or all of these aspects of Holy Spirit, we know who we essentially are. We may still become enmeshed in our craving and clinging enthrallment with the passing things of the finite world or of our own finite personalities, but such enmeshments are no longer viewed as our essential being. Our trust in the Holy Spirit means an active commitment to freely choose to be the freedom we essentially are and to be that freedom/compassion/peace/bliss in ever fuller measure.

This concludes my brief summary of how we might identify the agnostic core of Christianity. So understood, these three “faces” of “God” are indeed a “Christianity beyond beliefs.” Someone might claim that I have simply stated another set of Christian beliefs, perhaps leading to one more denomination of Christianity. But what I am trying to express here is far more alternative than another set of beliefs. I am attempting to move beyond the entire array of denominational beliefs. I have seen books written on “What do Methodists believe?” or “What do Catholics believe?” I do not intend these paragraphs to be part of another sectarian game of authoritative religion. I am not writing about what Christian agnostics believe. The Christian agnosticism I am attempting to illuminate is beyond beliefs. I consider all dogmatic statements, intellectual articulations, or rational formulations inadequate to express the essence of Christianity. I am committed to rescuing Christianity from any and all sets of beliefs. I am committed to my and your actual experience as the only valid grounding for the truth of Christianity or the truth of Buddhism or the truth of Judaism or the truth of Islam or the truth of the Bible or the truth of the Koran or any other truth. Beliefs found in any of these layers of religious tradition are worthy of the characterization “truth” only if you and I and the next person can indeed experience in our own lives that to which these bits of tradition are pointing.

Such agnosticism does not mean the reduction of truth to scientific objectivity. There is such a thing as inward truth as well as outward, objective, scientific approximations of demonstrable actualities. Part of this inward realm of truth can be called “religious” if we mean by “religious” an actuality of human experience that religions tend to express. And what is a religion? Religion is nothing more glorious than what Batchelor is pointing to with these words: “an internally consistent set of values and practices that creatively animates all aspects of human life. ... a culture of awakening that both supports individual dharma practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world.” (page 20)

If I change only a few words in that quotation, I can make the same point for the practice of an agnostic Christianity: “an internally consistent set of values and practices that creatively animates all aspects of human life. ... a culture of healing that both supports solitary and communal Christian practice and addresses the dilemmas of an agnostic and pluralist world.” Such a Christianity is beyond beliefs. Such a Christianity is indeed a freshly created “culture of awakening” or “culture of healing.” To an outside observer, this fresh expression of the Christian breakthrough might look like one more set of beliefs, but it is not. We who choose to build this agnostic Christian culture and live within it know that this culture is a finite thing of our own creation. It contains no beliefs derived from a heavenly wisdom or brought to Earth by divine messenger. The intellectual and artistic contents of this humanly created agnostic Christian culture are but feeble pointers to the beliefless, contentless Trinity of personally experienced truths: namely, the Infinite Silence, the Ultimate Message, and the Wind of Human Authenticity. Our attempts to express these three Infinite, religiously-contentless verities in finite religious/rational beliefs is always imperfect, always incomplete. It is an unending adventure into an expanding unknown. This process of Christian culture-building is important, yet only those who are experiencing the Infinite verities expressed by this culture can understand what this culture-building process is all about.

## c. Anguish and Despair

In the third chapter of *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Batchelor hones in on a central topic in the Buddha's teaching, the basic problem that the Buddha's breakthrough was out to resolve. He begins with the story of the Prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, leaving his luxurious life and going in search of an understanding of anguish and the means of its cessation. In the following quotations, Batchelor helps us see the universal relevance of this quest.

Like Prince Siddhartha, "We too sense that there is more to life than indulging desires and warding off fears. We too feel anguish most acutely when we break out of our habitual routines and witness ourselves hovering between birth and death--our birth and death. We discover that we have been thrown apparently without choice into a world not of our making. However painful the exit from our mother's uterus, it is mercifully forgotten. But in achieving consciousness, we realize that the only certainty in life is that it will end. We don't like the idea: we try to forget that too." (page 22)

Batchelor shows how meditation practice prepares us to see clearly for ourselves our own anguish, an anguish which we may not wish to notice, and which may indeed escape notice through our many distractions. He then states for us the sort of personal revelations which this meditative practice can bring to our awareness. "All of life is in ceaseless mutation; emerging, modifying, disappearing. The relative constancy of still, centered attention is simply a steady adjustment to the flux of what is observed. Nothing can be relied upon for security. As soon as you grasp something, it's gone. Anguish emerges from craving for life to be other than it is. It is the symptom of flight from birth and death, from the pulse of the present. It is the gnawing mood of unease that haunts the clinging to 'me' and 'mine.'" (page 25)

This passage, as clearly as any I have seen, defines what the Buddha's focus on "anguish" means. "**Anguish emerges from craving for life to be other than it is.**" This means that the anguish for which the Buddha seeks cessation is not the ordinary pain of our existence, but that second level of pain which appears because we resist living our ordinary pains and our ordinary pleasures with all their fragile temporality. Our anguish is not the bare fact that we get sick, grow old, and die. Our anguish is found in the craving for a life other than this--for a life with an everlasting security of pleasure, love, knowledge, accomplishment, honor, and self-esteem. A life that includes pain, rejection, ignorance, failure, shame, and guilt is not to our liking. We resist such a life. We crave something different. But since there is no other life, our resistance and our craving create the pain Batchelor is calling "anguish."

Batchelor ends his chapter with some reflection on the cessation of anguish. "When we stop fleeing birth and death, the grip of anguish is loosened and existence reveals itself as a question. . . . Such a question is a mystery, not a problem. It cannot be 'solved' by meditation techniques, through the authority of a text, upon submission to the will of a guru. Such strategies merely replace the question with beliefs in an answer." (pages 26-27)

Batchelor is clear that there is no answer, no beliefs that can give an answer to the question of existence. We can only move ever deeper into the question which our existence is. And this deeper understanding of our lives never becomes a set of beliefs, but "probes ever deeper into what is still unknown."

Implied in Batchelor's remarks is the insight that the overcoming of anguish is not some form of intellectual security; it is rather a surrender to being perpetually insecure and thus open to the never-ending flow of additional clarity about that insecurity and about the possibility of living abundantly in spite of it.

## Christianity and Despair

The central problem of humanity as depicted in the Christian breakthrough is called “sin.” Søren Kierkegaard in his classic book *The Sickness unto Death* defines the essence of sin as despair. Despair may lead to various forms of what humans call “immorality” but sin is not immorality. And overcoming sin is not synonymous with becoming moral by anyone’s moral standards.

What is “despair” in Kierkegaard’s analysis? It is precisely the same dynamic that Batchelor calls “anguish.” **Despair emerges from craving for life to be other than it is.** One must despair because the quest to make life other than it is is hopeless. We do not mean by this that finite conditions cannot be changed; these finite possibilities are part of life as it is. But if we define “hope” as the craving for life to be fundamentally other than it is, then there is no hope. Life is hopeless; life is despair; life is a burning fire than can never be quenched.

According to Kierkegaard, the opposite of despair is trust--trust that life as it is presented to us is trustworthy; life with all its ups and downs is good for us. Trust overcomes despair because it strikes at the heart of why we are in despair. We are in despair because we do not trust. We are in despair because we are suspicious that life as it is coming to us is untrustworthy. “Faith” or “trust,” according to the Christian theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, is the suspicion that the almost universal suspicion that life is untrustworthy is itself suspicious.

So the Christian journey toward Spirit maturity begins with the suspicion that the ever present suspicion called despair is suspicious. Faith or trust can then move forward into its full glory: the realization of freedom, compassion, tranquility, and joy in living the very life that is being given to us by whatever Mystery it is that is giving us our specific lives.

Such faith or trust is a renunciation of our craving that life be other than it is. Such faith is the cessation of the same anguish which concerned the Buddha. Despair or anguish can be overcome because it is not essential to our natural beings like pain, rejection, ignorance, failure, shame, and guilt. These downs to the ups of pleasure, love, knowledge, accomplishment, honor, and self-esteem are unavoidable. But despair is avoidable. Anguish is avoidable. This is the good news both of Jesus and the Buddha, of both Søren Kierkegaard and Stephen Batchelor.

How is anguish avoidable? The Buddha teaches us to understand our anguish and its source and thus let go of our cravings and aversions to life as it is.

How is despair avoidable? Jesus and the Christ proclamation teach us to repent--to turn from our rebellion against life as it is and to trust in the mysterious but real abundance that is being offered to us.

## d. Death and Eternal Life

In the fourth chapter of *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Batchelor reflects upon this sentence: *Since death alone is certain and the time of death is uncertain, what should I do?* (page 29)

*Death is certain.* Batchelor's aim in this chapter is to "awaken a felt sense of what it means to live a life that will stop." (page 29) The point is not simply to know with the mind but to *feel* the certainty of death. Batchelor reminds us that early Buddhists sometimes sat and watched a human body decay until a felt sense of death broke through.

*And the time of death is uncertain.* Death does not happen only to other persons. Our death is coming, and we know not when. "Life is accident prone." (page 30)

*What should I do?* Meditate on this reality. Death meditation, says Batchelor, is not a morbid practice. "By meditating on death, we paradoxically become conscious of life." (page 32) "Over time such meditation penetrates our primary sense of being in the world at all. It helps us value more deeply our relationships with others, whom we come to regard as transient as ourselves. It evokes the poignancy implicit in the transitoriness of all things." (page 33)

## Christianity and Death

Modern Christians have been justly accused of minimizing death--even of denying death altogether. And a Christian practice of contemplating death is rarely done. Such meditation would be considered morbid by many. But this avoidance of death is a departure from deep elements in the Christian heritage. Beginning with the Psalms the practice of contemplating death has been vividly present.

These verses from Psalm 49 are an example:

So remember this: wise persons must die;  
stupid persons, brutish persons, all perish.  
The grave is their eternal home,  
their dwelling for all time to come.  
They may leave their own names to estates,  
but they must leave their riches to others.  
For human beings are like oxen whose lives cannot last,  
they are like cattle whose time is short. (10-12)

Here is another example from Psalm 90, lines which I have reworded slightly:

The Infinite Silence turns human beings back into dust.  
"Turn back," says the Infinite Silence "you offspring of humanity."  
For in the perspective of the Infinite Silence a thousand years are as yesterday,  
but a night watch passes and the Infinite has cut off human life.  
Humans are like a dream at daybreak;  
they fade like grass which springs up with the morning  
but when evening comes is parched and withered.

Oh Infinite Silence, we are brought to an end by your negation  
and silenced by your fury.  
Our illusions are laid bare;



our lusts exposed.  
Our days pass by under the shadow of your fury;  
our years die away like a murmur.  
Seventy years is the span of our life,  
eighty if our strength holds.  
The hurrying years are labor and sorrow;  
so quickly they pass and are forgotten.

Who, O Infinite Silence, feels the power of your negation?  
Who feels your fury like those who revere you?  
Teach us to count our days carefully  
that we may enter the gate of wisdom. (3-12)

Indeed, such wisdom is foundational in the Christian heritage. One of the proverbs states that the beginning of wisdom is dread of the Infinite Source and Tomb of our lives. The beginning of wisdom is an awareness of our finitude.

## Life After Death

In the fifth chapter of *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Batchelor deals with the topic of reincarnation. Batchelor admits that “the evidence does not suggest that [the Buddha] held an agnostic view on this matter.” “In accepting the idea of rebirth, the Buddha reflected the worldview of his time. In common with Indian tradition, he maintained that the aim of life is to attain freedom from the anguished cycle of compulsive rebirth. (It is a curious twist that Westerners find the idea of rebirth consoling).” (page 35)

Batchelor chooses to be agnostic about life after death. We clearly do not know, he says, so let us be honest about what we do not know. We do not have to believe what the Buddha believed or did not believe. Whatever beliefs the Buddha may have held, the Buddha focused on what we can know in the here and now of conscious experience. He focused on currently experienced anguish and on the cessation of anguish. Batchelor chooses to follow the Buddha in focusing on what we can know--namely, anguish and the cessation of anguish in this present moment. Batchelor is especially opposed to finding consolation in beliefs that provide escape from these simple, liberating truths: (1) Your death is certain, and (2) the time and manner of your death is uncertain.

Batchelor also explores some of the problems that contemporary Buddhists encounter with regard to rebirth. Perhaps the most significant of these is this question: what reality in our living experience do we suppose is going to be reborn? “Religions that posit an eternal self distinct from the body-mind complex escape this dilemma--the body and mind may die but the self continues. A central Buddhist idea, however, is that no such intrinsic self can be found through analysis or realized in meditation. Such a deep-seated sense of personal identity is a fiction, a tragic habit that lies at the root of craving and anguish. How do we square this with rebirth, which necessarily entails the existence of something that not only survives the death of the body and brain but somehow traverses the space between a corpse and a fertilized ovum?” (page 36)

Batchelor wishes to relieve Buddhists from any need to believe something that they cannot honestly believe. By implication he recommends that all of us base our living on what we actually know or can know on the basis of our own experience.

## Christianity and Life After Death

Contemporary Christians face virtually the same issues with regard to immortality that Batchelor points out with regard to reincarnation. We have no scientific or contemplative evidence for a ghostly soul-substance that can fly away to some ghostly realm. Many Christian-identified people are, in truth, agnostic about this belief. Yet Christian heritage seems deeply invested in this belief. Most Christians (and most non-Christians as well) assume that there cannot be a continuation of Christian practice that does not include some sort of belief in life after death. We must take this challenge seriously, for Christian theology has, for most of the last 2000 years, embraced the assumption of an immortal soul.

Most Christians today do not understand very well the origins of this belief or why Christians in earlier centuries embraced it. The belief in immortality was derived in part from Greek philosophy and in part from a first century Hebraic belief about the divine judgment of all humanity at the end of time. Understanding these historical origins is important, for it makes clear both the temporality of the belief in immortality and also why this temporal belief played a valid role in traditional Christianity. So bear with me as I briefly survey this rather complex journey of Christian beliefs about life after death.

In the earliest period of Hebrew tradition, there was no belief in life after death. These layers of tradition contain no belief about immortality, reincarnation, or the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. In these early times, death was seen as a shadowy place, a cosmic tomb into which all things returned, a place where humans could no longer offer praise to God. Several Psalms bargain with God on this basis, "Keep me alive and I will continue to praise you. What praise can I offer you after I am dead?" Attempts to find a belief in immortality in these early writings are mistaken.

In the period of New Testament formation, part but not all of the Jewish community held a belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. A group of religious authorities called the Sadducees rejected this belief, but the Pharisees were among those who held this belief. This belief functioned as part of the moral seriousness of the Pharisee tradition. It amplified their conviction that no unrighteousness would go unpunished and no righteousness would go unrewarded. In this present life, justice does not always work out, but the Pharisees believed that in the resurrection of our bodies at the end of time all unrighteousness would be consumed in a fire that is never quenched and all righteousness would be rewarded with everlasting bliss.

Jesus and his disciples were clearly part of that religious sector of Judaism that believed in a resurrection at the end of time. Modern Christians do not customarily hold this belief. A resurrection at the end of time seems an extremely odd notion to our modern minds. The very idea of laying around in the tomb for thousands of years and then being bodily reassembled so that our lives lived in the body could be eternally audited seems preposterous to us as well as downright crass. So let us take this hint from Batchelor: if Buddhists do not have to believe everything that the Buddha believed, Christians do not have to believe everything that Jesus believed.

Medieval Christians came to accept a combination of the Greek conception of immortality with the heaven-and-hell portion of the Hebrew end-of-time resurrection scenario. For centuries, Christians have believed that the body simply disintegrates and that our "immortal soul" goes immediately to its reward or punishment.

The ancient Greek notion of immortality was not related to reward and punishment, but was an attempt to affirm the transcendent nature of human rationality. For Socrates and Plato, truth

was something more lasting than our passing human opinions: truth was grounded in the everlasting structure of the cosmos. Our capacity for truth was seen to be a witness to the fact that human life is something more than a life lived in the shadows of arbitrary and passing opinions. Human living, they taught, could be illuminated by truth that lasts.

We can now see that some of Plato's universal truths are nothing more glorious than the universals of a passing Greek culture. But we can also view Socrates and Plato as mystics who saw that human life is at root a relationship with the Infinite. Such mysticism, both ancient and modern, need not include, however, the notions of heaven and hell or reward and punishment. This original Greek belief in the immortality of the soul was sanguine compared to the twist that was given to this belief when it was combined with the Hebraic heritage on heaven and hell.

It is also instructive to realize that the Greek dualism of an immortal soul within a passing body was not present in the ancient Hebrew heritage. The resurrection belief of the New Testament period held body and soul together. This offended some of Paul's Greek-thinking audience to the degree that they quizzed Paul about what sort of body resurrected people were going to have. Paul speculated that it would be a spiritual body rather than a passing body. Paul was convinced that God could certainly provide whatever embodiment is needed for this resurrected life at the end of time. It is noteworthy that Paul resisted the notion of immortality as well as the notion of a dualism of soul and body. Paul could not imagine a soul without a body. Furthermore, to Paul, Jesus is not alive because Jesus has an immortal soul or because Jesus is a ghostly spirit that can enter our souls. Jesus is alive because he is bodily resurrected and is bodily present in the life of the community who worship in his name. Paul's view of life after death was not the medieval or modern view of immortality. Paul saw himself living between the times--between the time when "eternal life" came into our current lives and the time when "eternal life" will come in its fullness at the end of time. Clearly, by "resurrected life" Paul meant an experience that he was having in his present life. We should not be too hasty in assuming that we know what he was talking about.

The Gospel of John, which is one of the most Greek-leaning writings in the New Testament, also resists the Greek notions of immortality and the separation of soul and body. The author of the Fourth Gospel retains a strong belief in the resurrection of the body on the last day. His concepts of "eternal life" relate to that belief. But the author of the Fourth Gospel is also extremely explicit that "eternal life" is experienced NOW--here and now in this passing body. This is eternal life, he explains, that you or I right now trust the Ultimate Message of Jesus that the Infinite Silence loves us, loves us in spite of all our unrighteousness, forgives us now, restores us now, fills us now with the life that was in Jesus. According to this writer, the final judgment at the end of time is already happening right now. This is the final judgment: some trust and some don't trust the Ultimate Message of Love brought into our consciousness by Jesus who was acting in obedience to the Infinite Silence.

Medieval Christianity combined John's emphasis on the here and now nature of eternal life with the Greek notion of an immortal soul. To understand why this was possible for them to make this combination, we have to understand what experiences they were pointing to with these beliefs. The here and now "eternal life" spoken of by Paul and John witnessed to a breakthrough of profound inwardness in which detachment from the finite passing world resulted in a deep freedom and capacity for compassion toward all that was happening in the passing world. In this view, being a full human being means being at "rest" in this non-passing "place." Greek immortality also pointed to the need for "rest" in a "place" of "truth,"--a settling in to the way life worked that gave one confidence in the midst of the chaotic world of passing opinions. In those times, these two "restings" could be combined if one approached them as experiences rather than as objective rational beliefs.

Ancient Christian sensibilities also included this realization: the profoundest level of human inwardness is never in a neutral state. A human “soul” is either in despair over the specific life assigned it by its Maker or it has found peace with life and with the Maker who made it. The medieval vision of hell is poetry about this despair--this anguish of spirit. The medieval vision of heaven is a poetry about the peace and joy that one can experience in an appropriate relatedness to the Infinite. If you trust the Maker, then now and forever you will have peace and joy. If you do not trust the Maker, then now and forever you will have anguish and despair. No one, according to this Christian vision, can escape this “crisis of decision” about the living of human life. A sanguine, choiceless, automatic immortality was unthinkable to medieval Christianity. The truth of what they were pointing to can be separated from the poetry or beliefs with which they expressed that truth. Strange as this may seem, we can embrace their truth without giving assent to their beliefs.

Most modern Christians live in a corruption of this medieval synthesis of Hebraic and Greek beliefs. Today, most Christian-identified people do not understand the life experiences out of which earlier Christians were inventing their religious expressions. Instead, modern Christians tend to filter through the body of old Christian beliefs for something consoling. Few actually believe in the resurrection of the body at the end of time. Few actually believe that there is a real possibility of an enduring hell for them after death. It is quite common for people to feel that hell either does not actually exist or that it has been avoided by believing specific doctrines. Often these doctrines are being believed only by “force of mind” in the wild hope of avoiding death and hell. Clearly such believing does not reflect an honest experience of living. In other words, many Christians are selecting beliefs that help them feel that there is no death--at least no permanent death for them. Believing in such consoling ideas is not the same thing as the trust (faith) spoken of by Jesus, Paul, John, and the rest of the New Testament writers. Belief without the experience that fills that belief with meaning is sheer superstition. Indeed, such belief is a delusion that will lead to profound anguish in the here and now of living.

So what might a realistic, experience-centered Christianity say about life after death? We can certainly say that we can know from experience the hell of anguish or despair in the living here and now. We may also be able to say that we know from experience in the living here and now the “heaven” of cessation of despair, of the glory of ego-emptiness, of peace, tranquility, equanimity, freedom, compassion, and joy. With regard, however, to a literal “hell” or “heaven” after our biological death, we must honestly say that we simply do not know.

We can be agnostic about life after death and still feel confident that our agnosticism is consistent with the real truth of the Christian breakthrough. We can affirm that we do not need to know about life after death in order to live an abundant expression of the Christian breakthrough. Furthermore, if the Spirit life pointed to by centuries of Christian witness is not valuable to us in the living here and now (and valuable above all else), then it will not be valuable to us even if such a life were to “exist” beyond death.

## e. Building a Culture of Christian Practice

In the remaining chapters of *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Batchelor deals with this list of ordinary yet intriguing topics: Integrity, Friendship, Awareness, Becoming, Emptiness, Compassion, Freedom, Imagination, and Culture. In each case, his insights are almost entirely transferable to the context of Christian resurgence. For example, if I were giving a sermon on freedom, I could take a text on freedom from Paul's letter to the Galatians and use Batchelor's insights on freedom to help illuminate what Paul was talking about. Buddhist compassion and Christian love are likewise corresponding concepts in most if not all ways. Clearly, the overlaps are great enough that each heritage can learn from the other. I recommend that Christian readers of this book read also the Batchelor book in its entirety and explore for yourself how each of his insights can enrich the Christian recovery. I have only scratched the surface of possibilities for fruitful dialogue on these topics.

In conclusion, I will comment on the last of Batchelor's topics--his discussion of a Buddhist culture of awakening. This chapter of his book applies almost without change to Christian resurgence as well. His reflections have challenged me to think more deeply about my responsibilities in creating a viable Christian culture. While Batchelor speaks of a culture of awakening, Christians may need to speak of a culture of **healing**--where "healing" means both rescue [salvation] from our despair-producing estrangements and maturation [sanctification] of our liberated realism.

Batchelor prefers to speak of an "agnostic Buddhist culture of awakenment" as opposed to a "religious Buddhist culture of awakenment." I use the word "religion" in a wider sense. In my current use of the word "religion," an agnostic Buddhist culture would be a type of religion. Yet Batchelor's terminology enables us to consider how the popular use of the word "religion" points to something quite opposite from the culture of awakenment that Batchelor recommends. Such "religion" is also quite opposite from what I mean by a Christian culture of healing.

I prefer to view Batchelor's agnostic culture of awakenment as an example of what we might also call "good religion"--what all religions, at their best, have always been. We might define "religion" in such a way that it has nothing to do with other realms in which gods and goddesses dwell--nothing to do with hierarchical institutions which pass down divinely sanctioned beliefs to their believers. Suppose we defined "religion" as any temporal, communal, cultural practice that enables awakening, that enables healing of our despair. Such a definition would allow us to make fresh sense of the entire history of religion. When we come across sayings of Jesus like "The Sabbath was made for humanity not humanity for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), we can interpret that passage as: "Religious cultures are made for awakening and healing humanity not humanity for religious cultures." When we read in the letters of Paul that "In Christ, it is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision that counts, but the power of new birth" (Galatians 6:15), we can understand that to mean: "It is not a religious culture or a lack of that religious culture that counts, but the power of being awakened--of being healed of our despair."

The need that human beings have for a vital religious culture has always been paradoxical. On the one hand, awakenment or healing does not require any particular set of ideas, beliefs, understandings, symbols, liturgies, moralities, ways of doing community, or modes of making a historical contribution. Nevertheless, in each historical setting we need to create a "religious culture" that includes a particular set of all these cultural forms and practices. We need these forms in order to cultivate our awakening--to cultivate our healing. Batchelor claims that the fourth ennobling truth of Buddhism is cultivating the living of awakenment in a vital culture that focuses on awakenment. Christians can likewise claim the need for a timely Christian culture in which maturing the experience of being healed of our despair is cultivated.