



John Bowker, 'I live by faith: the religions described'

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[B] Buddhism

Buddhism began historically in the sixth centuryBC, as (in part) a protest against a prevailing tendency in Indian religion at that time to rely on sacrifices and rituals to ensure one's successful progress through life. The term 'Buddha' means 'Enlightened One'.

So the main point of departure for Buddhism is the Enlightenment of Gautama – his deep realisation of what are known as The Four Noble Truths: the truth that nothing (absolutely nothing) can escape the condition of transience, suffering and decay (no matter how long anything lasts, it will one day disappear); the truth of how this suffering (which in Pali is called *dukkha*) originates; the truth of how *dukkha* nevertheless can cease; and the truth of the path that leads to the ceasing of *dukkha* – the eight-runged ladder of Buddhist belief and action, which leads beyond the bondage of *dukkha*.

The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path combine with the Five Precepts (five mainly ethical principles) to make the most basic summary of what Buddhism involves, as Dr Fernando explained to me. Dr Fernando is a dentist in North London who lived originally in Sri Lanka. Like the Hindus, he stressed that Buddhism is a practical path, and that the Buddha's purpose was simply to show us the *dharma* (in Pali, the *dhamma*), the path to follow which will lead the way out of our bondage to suffering and death:

The Buddha was only a teacher. He showed us the Way. We call Buddhists, the observers of the *dhamma*. The *dhamma* is the doctrine. It's a practical philosophy – a philosophy that has to be practised. The Five Precepts are meant for the layman [as opposed to the *bhikkus*, the Buddhist monks]; but to understand this, we must first understand the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha enunciated four of them. The first is, that there is sorrow in the world, from the time of birth to the time of death; there *are* moments of happiness, but they are just gilded sorrow. Then the cause of this sorrow (it's really stress: you can use the word 'sorrow' for want of a better term, but I would use the word 'stress'), this stress is there from the time you are born. So the second truth is the cause of sorrow. Now, like a physician, the Buddha is diagnosing this so-called affliction. He knows *what* it is, but now he wants to know what the cause is. What causes sorrow? There must be a cause; and you can't attack the problem unless you know the cause. And the cause, according to him, is *tanha* – that is in Pali: for want of a better term you may call it 'craving', which includes all these emotions like hatred, anger, lust, envy, jealousy, quickness of temper. They are all included under *tanha*. In Buddhism the main thing is moderation, not to carry anything to excess.

So up to this stage, people have described it as a very pessimistic view. But it's *not* a pessimistic view. Even if it is pessimistic at this stage, when you discuss the other two Truths,

it becomes the most optimistic philosophy one could ever find; because now he discusses the *destruction* of the sorrow: for any energy to flow, there must be a motivating force; it is *tanha* which is this motivating force (in driving our lives), according to the Buddha. If you remove that force – that causative factor – then the energy must lose its momentum and come to a standstill. That is what we could understand as *nirvana*.

Of course, it's a question what exactly *nirvana*, the ultimate goal for Buddhists, is – and Dr Fernando had something to say about that. But before pursuing that question, I asked him to tell me what the Fourth Noble Truth is:

The fourth is – and it's the most optimistic – how to destroy this so-called sorrow; and that is by establishing oneself on the Eightfold Path; and that is, right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The first one that I mentioned, right understanding, is the most important, because without the right understanding you will never observe the other seven. Now the right understanding leads us to the Five Precepts: because of this understanding, they are not *laws*. Through a right understanding, one says to oneself, I resolve – I make a resolution – not to take life, because the life is precious to the person who has it – maybe it's a little insect: to us he's an insect, like the Lilliputians who were almost insects to Gulliver, but Gulliver was himself an insect in another land. They're all relative terms, but life is still important: life was important to Gulliver when he was among the Lilliputians, and life was still important to him when he was in the land of the giants; but still it was the same Gulliver. So however mean, however small, the animal may seem, life to that animal is as important and precious as it is to us.

The second precept is, I resolve not to take anything that does not belong to me. If you take two people: one may not steal because he fears the consequences of being caught in the act or of a prison sentence; the other will not steal even if the opportunity presents itself and he knows that he will never be caught – but he still will not steal, because he knows it doesn't rightly belong to him. Both people are not committing the act of stealing, but one is with a different motive: and here we come to the *motive*, which is very, very important – the *motive*.

The third is, I resolve not to indulge in excessive sensual pleasure – not adultery: in excessive sensual pleasures – that is, the five senses – anything in excess. Even where sexual behaviour is concerned, indulging in excessive sexual pleasure with one's own wife is not conducive to mental culture.

In the fourth one, I resolve not to tell lies, to deceive, to slander, to cause ill-will between two people by spreading rumours.

The fifth is, I resolve not to indulge in intoxicants. Now if I've been asked to take a bit of whisky or brandy – a capful every night – I'm not taking a delight in it, but to me it is a medicine, and I do so. It is not an absolute prohibition: it's something I must be in control of.

So the key-point here is discipline and control; and it's leading, as Dr Fernando said, to the final goal of *nirvana*. But he couldn't say what *nirvana* is, because the Buddha couldn't talk about it either:

He never discussed what *nirvana* was. He never told us what *nirvana* was, because he couldn't describe it. It is something that one can only experience, never describe. By what words can you describe the indescribable? He said, 'I can only show you the way. It is something that you must experience for yourself'; and by reasoning, you experience it. So he didn't say that *nirvana* is a state which does exist, neither did he say it does not exist.

Twewang Topgyal comes from a very different kind of Buddhism. He is a refugee from Tibet; and Tibetan Buddhism, as we shall see, is very different from Sri Lankan Buddhism. But he too said exactly the same, when I asked him if he could tell me what this final goal of *nirvana* is:

I won't be able to tell you exactly what it is like, because I've not been there. I can just give you my picture, or what I would like to see it as. *Nirvana* is the ultimate goal which every Buddhist aspires to reach. It is a state of being, I would like to think. It is the end of all sorrow, it is the total end of ignorance, and it is the sort of stage where you become all-knowing. Apart from that – how one would feel or anything like that – I can't really elaborate. That's just how I would like to see *nirvana* as being.

There are two main kinds of Buddhism. Theravada (also known as Hinayana) is found mainly in Sri Lanka and South-East Asia, sticking closely to the so-called Pali Canon, the collected teachings of the Buddha; and Mahayana, which is a term covering a multitude of different developments of Buddhism, with more elaborate rituals, a greater number of sacred texts (many of which are also believed to have come from the Buddha), more gods and demons, and also more ways of approaching Enlightenment, embracing the extremes of Tantric and Zen Buddhism. From his Tibetan background, Twewang Topgyal tried to explain the different emphases in Buddhism – and he also went on to warn about the dangers of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, which is a kind of commando raid on truth:

Basically there are two parts in Buddhism. One is a much more sure sort of way, but it is a much more gradual process. The other one is a bit dangerous, if all the circumstances and if all the combinations do not work correctly, and that is the Tantric Buddhism. It was originally started by the Indian guru called Padmasambhava in Tibet. And the other part was mainly started by someone called Tsongkhapa who was a Tibetan religious teacher. This came much later than the Tantric practice, and of course in terms of actual practice, there are a lot of differences: for instance, Tantric practitioners are quite often married, quite often they drink alcoholic drinks, and so on, which is totally prohibited in the other way of practising. It is said that someone who is practising in the Tantric way of Buddhism is like someone climbing through the inside of a bamboo pole: it's a sort of oneway tunnel, and once you fall down, you will go right down. I think what it basically means is that the practitioner needs to reach a certain sort of level in order to put it into right practice. Now what does tend to happen is that because the Tantric rules of practice are quite liberal, to a layman, therefore there are quite a number of fakes, if you like, or malpractices, which do originate from all that.

So there are many different interpretations of Buddhism. But where they all agree (and here they are simply following the Buddha) is in *rejecting* the Hindu belief (which we've just heard described) that there is a soul, or *atman* within us, which endures through death, and which is reborn until it attains *moksha*, release. For Buddhists, there is *nothing* which is permanent, not even a soul. On the other hand, there *is* a continuing flow or process of change, in which the present stage immediately gives rise to the next stage, and so on, with the direction of that change being controlled by strict laws. So what the organisation of energy (which is at present 'you' or 'me') does, at any moment, influences what that flow of energy will become at some later date – even beyond death. In *that* sense there is rebirth in Buddhism, but there is no self – no soul – riding along through the process of change: there is only the process itself.

So the idea of no-self, which is called in Pali *anatta*, is one great difference between Hindus and Buddhists. But where, in contrast, they *agree* (and so also does our third religion, Sikhism) is in maintaining that the whole process of rebirth, or of reappearance, is controlled by a strict rule or law of reward and punishment. This is called *karma* (or by Buddhists in Pali, *kamma*). *Karma* means that any good you do in this life will be rewarded in whatever future form you reappear, and any evil you do will be punished, maybe by going to a place of torment and pain, or by coming back to this earth as an animal.

Kunvergi Dabasia is a Hindu, living in Coventry, and he described, very briefly, how the kind of life you now live depends on what you have done in previous lives:

It depends what kind of *karma* you have done in a previous life: if you have done good *karma* then you won't be suffering. But if you have done very bad *karma*, then you'll be suffering. And if you are doing good *karma* in this life, then you'll be having a good life in the coming life – say, if your *karma* is good, you might come back as a human being. But if your *karma* is very bad, then you might be going to be an animal.

[C] Sikhism

So *karma* and rebirth (or in the case of Buddhists, reappearance) lie at the very root of Hindu and Buddhist lives – and the same is true of Sikhs. Sikhism also began in India, as a kind of reforming movement. It is based on the teaching of ten gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak, who died in 1539. Gurbachan Singh Sidhu, a Sikh living in Coventry, explained to me that a guru is a teacher: ‘Prayer establishes a relation with God and a relation with our guru. Guru is the teacher, and by this word we mean, the person who brings us from darkness to light.’

Sikhs place much emphasis on the way they combine different religions: ‘We are a combination of all the religions,’ said Gurcharan Singh Kundi, echoing the verse of Guru Nanak: ‘There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God’s path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim, and the path which I follow is God’s.’ ‘Mind you,’ he then went on to say, ‘but we are also different from other religions, because of our preaching, and because that’s what our gurus said.’

Two things stand out as making the Sikh different. The first is the reverence they have for their Holy Book which they regard as a *living guru*. The second is the set of five items which the fully committed Sikh must wear, the five Ks, so called because each of them begins with the letter K. (The most distinctive sign of a Sikh, to the outsider, is the turban, though in fact the obligation is to wear the hair uncut: the turban comes in as a part of that, because it is necessary to keep the hair tidy.)

Let’s look at these in turn. First, the living guru: before the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, died, he said that after him there would be no further guru except the living guru, which is the collection of holy writings known as the Guru Granth Sahib. This holy book is deeply revered, and it is attended to and treated (both in the home and in the *gurdwara*, or temple) as a living reality, as Gurcharan Singh Kundi explained to me, when I talked to him in Leeds:

We take our Holy Book as a living guru. It’s not a Holy *Book*. Christians take the Holy Book as a Holy Book; Hindus take the Holy Book as a Holy Book; and Muslims take their Quran as a Holy Book. But we take our Holy Book as a living guru. We respect him as a living guru. Now when you go to a Sikh temple our Holy Book will be above the congregation. It won’t be on the same level. It’s always at a special place in our congregation. In the morning – as in the Army there is a reveille in the morning – so we, at night, take our Holy Book: we close it, we call it *santokh*, and then we take it to the bed, a special place. In the morning, again we bring our Holy Book and put it on the throne; because that itself is a throne. Where our Holy Book is, where we place our Holy Book, that is a throne of a king. So anything which is said from, or read from, our Holy Book, it’s taken that these are the actual words of our guru. Because our tenth guru (when they departed from us), his answer was, ‘After me, there won’t be any guru, and the Holy Book will be your living guru.’ So we have faith that the Holy Book is our guru.

I wondered how a Sikh actually goes about consulting this living guru, and he went on to tell me:

The way we go is this: when we go to a temple, we bow – the same mark of respect – and then we go behind and ask somebody (if there is somebody on the seat already), we ask them to give a *wak*; ‘wak’ means, to read the first paragraph of the Holy Book. And that paragraph would definitely coincide with what you had in your mind, because that is the answer.

I asked him if it is the first paragraph that his eye falls on. He said:

Yes, the first paragraph from the left hand side. Some people take it from the right hand side – you know, the bottom right. Some take it from the left. So if the paragraph has started, he turns his page back. And these words – again, it’s a question of faith – are exactly what you want.

Then our conversation went on:

‘But supposing they’re not what you want: can you argue with the living guru? Can you disagree with the advice that is given?’

‘No, we don’t have to disagree, because guru is a guru.’

‘So he has authority over your choice?’

‘Definitely. Because nothing could happen otherwise: if the guru wants he can make things happen. That’s our belief. I mean, even the wind won’t blow unless the Almighty wants it to blow. The rain won’t go unless the Almighty wants the rain. So everything is in his hands.’

By immersing themselves in the teaching of the living guru, Sikhs believe that they approach the highest in what Surinder Singh Hyare called ‘the easiest way’:

Sikhism is the way for perfection, just like all other religions are. But Sikhism is something which has been brought to bear much more on *all* sides of human being, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. This Holy Book is made in the words of the saints – saints who were the fruits of humanity, I can say – the best. Their words are written in poetry; and those we sing in temples and at home. So in a way, the physical side is the best way, because we start from that. But mentally and spiritually also, we get the company of the best. So we approach to the highest in an easy way, not in a forceful way, but easily, just starting from the family.

The second distinctive mark of the Sikhs are the five Ks. They, with prayer, are the mark of what Amritpal Singh Hunjan called ‘the practical Sikh’:

A real practical Sikh is supposed to get up in the morning, say about five or six, to say his prayers. In the evenings, he says his prayers again before going to bed. In the same way, a practical Sikh is supposed to have the five Ks – that is the shorts (that’s one of them); and he’s supposed to have the steel bangle. He is not supposed to cut his hair, and the fourth one is the *kangh*; and the *kirpan*, that’s the fifth – the sword, the small dagger. All these are important. The *kesh*, that is, the hair, identifies a person’s spiritual heritage. The *kara*, that’s the steel bangle, is supposed to prevent someone from doing bad deeds: it reminds a person that he ought not to do bad deeds with his right hand. The shorts [*kachha*] come from the time when Sikhs were soldiers and the shorts were worn by the Sikhs as a soldier’s uniform, really. And the *kirpan* is because in those days, olden ages, when Sikhism was still in the process of being formed, the Sikhs were under threat from the Muslims. So they had to wear this *kirpan* for protection; and the comb (that’s the *kangh*) is to remind a person that he’s supposed to comb his hair and keep it healthy.

From this one can see what a deep emotional issue it is for a Sikh to be asked to give up one of these marks and messages of his faith – his dagger, for example, because it is an offensive weapon (or could be, in the meaning of the Act); or even more to the point, if he is asked to shave off his beard, cut his hair and abandon his turban, if he is to get a job. Here are two Sikhs, describing what it felt like when they were required to do exactly that. The first is Amrik Singh Dhesi, who had great trouble in finding work, though now he works for British Telecom:

When I came here in 1961, there were not many people living here. And the jobs’ problem was difficult at that time. Whenever we go to the factories for any employment, they looked at our turban and they used to refuse to give us the jobs. And the people who were already living here, they were telling the same stories to the new chaps coming here. So only my uncle was living here at that time, so he suggested, ‘You will have to cut your hair.’ I waited for a month, I was very, very hesitant to get it cut. Before I got my hair cut, I asked my uncle, ‘I must get my photograph taken’; and here’s the photograph, taken at that time. I saved my

hair. When I cut it, it's still there – I'm still keeping it. I was crying all day on that day I got my hair cut. I did not like it, but that's the thing that happened.

The second is the same Gurcharan Singh Kundi who described Sikhism as a combination of all different religions. He too had to get his hair cut in order to get a job – but it wasn't easy:

I went to the barber five times, and every time I came out: five times. There's no lie in it. But the conditions were such that I couldn't do any job. And I thought of the only way to earn more, and that was on the buses. I had to have my hair cut so that I can get my family, and I can achieve my objectives of coming to England.

'But then,' I asked him, 'on the sixth time when you went to the barber, what did you feel? What did you feel when your hair was cut?' He said:

I have no words to express how I felt at that time. But on the other hand, I had no choice, I had to do it.

But at least in Sikhism, you can always find your way back. And this again is a basic point about Sikhism. No matter how often you fail or abandon the five Ks, you can always come back into the full commitment and practice of faith, through a ceremony of initiation – or of new beginnings – which is known as the *amrit* ceremony. Harbans Singh Sagoo used to be an air traffic controller in East Africa, but now he is a garage owner in Leeds. He described the *amrit* ceremony to me, and told me something also of the basic vows that are made:

The *amrit* ceremony is conducted by Five Beloved Ones, as we call them, or Panj Pyare. They are people who have already been baptised, and are usually the elders in the community. The ceremony takes place in the presence of the Holy Granth. Members of the public who are ready for initiation get together inside the prayer hall of the temple, where the ceremony is to take place. The Panj Pyare, or the five Beloved Ones, together with two other attendants, and one person in the presence of the Holy Granth, get together round a steel bowl into which water is poured; then specially prepared sweet things (they are called *patasse*; they are special sweets that are prepared for the occasion) are poured into the water by the Panj Pyare, and they use a dagger to stir the water. Then five morning prayers of the Sikhs are said turn by turn. The first prayer that is said, is the *Japji*, the second one is called *Japji*, which is Guru Gobind Singh's writing; then the third one is *Sawaiyas*, and then the *Chaupai*, and finally the *Anand*. Those are the five prayers that are said, and the *amrit* is then ready to be distributed among the initiates. And the initiates partake by sipping the *amrit* five times, and uttering the words: *wahi Guru, wahi Guruka Khalsa, wahi Guruki fateh*, meaning that the *Khalsa*, the Community of the Pure, belongs to the guru, and the victory is the guru's. And the *amrit* is also sprinkled into the eyes and into the top of the hair. This is to purify and sanctify the body and the soul, so that you see, you think, and you do good. And the five Ks of the Sikhs are essential – the wearing of the five Ks is essential before the ceremony starts – the five Ks are of course, the *kesh* which is the unshorn hair, the *kangh*, which is a little wooden comb, the *kara*, which is a steel bracelet that a Sikh wears on his wrist; and then the *kirpan*, which is a small sword-like thing, and the *kachha*, which is a special type of breeches. And then the *amrit* is distributed to all the initiates, at the end of which the four vows are taken. They are basically the 'don'ts'; one of the 'don'ts' is that they will never cut their hair from any part of their body: they are not to eat anything that is fish, meat or eggs; they don't drink anything that's alcoholic, and they don't make use of tobacco in any form; and the fourth 'don't', of course, is that they never commit adultery. And apart from that, the *Gur Mantra*, which is the word '*wahi guru*', is given to them for devotional purposes, and the *Mur Mantra* is given to them as the basic formula. And they are asked to repeat that on a regular basis. They are also advised that the five prayers that were said during the preparation of the *amrit* are to be said regularly as part of the early morning

devotion. People who are not in a position to read, or people who are not conversant with Punjabi, can devote a similar amount of time, which works out to about maybe two and a half hours a day, by merely repeating the *Mur Mantra*, or the *Gur Mantra*, which is the word '*wahi guru*'.

[E] Christianity

But one break in that chain of inheritance has been Christianity. Many of the early Christians were originally Jews: and Paul understood what had happened in the life (and death) of Jesus as God's way of extending the family of Abraham – in other words, of bringing all the nations into the promise of blessing, which God had made to Abraham long ago:

'In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.' (Gen/Ber. xxiii.18)

So Christianity really began as an interpretation of Judaism – an interpretation of what God had intended the faith of his people to be. But it was an interpretation which saw in Jesus a decisive action of God, through and within a human life, restoring the connection between God and human beings. In other words, it was a renewal or an extension of the covenant – a new testament.

But the interpretation of Jesus was made in Jewish terms in ways which few Jews could accept. Jesus was claimed to be the promised Messiah, or (in Greek) *Christos*, Christ; and he was seen to be, in a unique way, the Son of God, the effective action of God in dealing with sin, and in reconciling the world to himself.

So Christianity divided from Judaism and became a religion of redemption from sin and of atonement with God, passing from death and through death into life. A Christian doctor in Basingstoke explained to me why Jesus was – and is – necessary in dealing with the fact of sin:

If I do something wrong, I want to say 'Sorry' to God. Because I'm such a miserable sinner, because I do so many things wrong, I'm far apart from God, so I'm sort of not on speaking terms with God, really: God is just too good for me. So I can't even begin to say that I'm sorry. I need somebody to go through, and that's what Jesus is. He's somebody who's identified with your sins, through death. What did he say? This is my body which is broken for you. He didn't need to do it. In the garden of Gethsemane before it, he was really struggling, because he realised that's what God was asking him to do; but he realised how hard it was going to be for himself, because it was going to mean pain and suffering of the biggest kind for him. But he did it so that we could reach God through him.

So if I sin, the point is that he's already paid the price of all the sins that are going to be committed in the world. He's not confined to time: so the fact that I sin today can still be transferred to that atonement. So for us, that's what Jesus is, a way of getting your 'sorry' message across.

For another Christian, this basic point (about the seriousness of sin and of the way in which Jesus brings people back to God) is summarised in a reflection on prayer which she keeps by her bed:

O the comfort, the inexpressible comfort, the feeling safe with a person, having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pour them out, just as they are, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.

For Christians, therefore, Christ makes manifest, not only the character of God as love, but also the reality of God in human form, and in the Spirit of love which continues from him. As a result there is an urgency among Christians to share the message of that love and that redemption with others, as this young Pentecostal Christian makes clear:

In this period of time, God is now showing love towards mankind. The Bible tells us, 'For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son.' Now God sent his Son because

of his love for mankind. When man fell into sin, God did not have to send his Son, he did not have to do anything, OK? It's because of his love, his compassion. He could not let man die, so he sent his Son. It's because of his love. Now he said, 'I have provided the sacrifice, I have provided the way for you to live a life in the spirit.' And in every day, like even by just talking to you now and sharing the Gospel with you, God is saying, 'Listen to me, I'm calling you, I love you.' And from the very time he sent his Son, he's saying, 'I love you: listen to me.' Christianity is the love of God: that's what it is. The love of God: that's what Christianity means.

There are, of course, many different interpretations of the meaning and practice of Christianity – Protestants, Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, Pentecostals and so on; but the same basic point comes through them all, that Christianity is (or should be) the translation of the love of God – of God who is love – into this life and this world. And Christians have the sense that God, having participated in human life in the person of Christ, is able to share in their own lives, helping and encouraging them into this life of love, which will keep them safe beyond death. This is how another Pentecostal Christian (who came to this country from the West Indies twenty years ago and who has suffered much during her life) saw it:

I am a Christian because I'm living in this life, and there's a lot of suffering, a lot of insults, a lot of grief, a lot of pain. And since I know that there's a life after this, I would love to know that after this life, I will live a comfortable life – no suffering, no pain, no torment, and the tear will be wiped away. To me, Christianity is knowing that the Lord is always with me: he knows the sorrow, the fears, the burden, the joy; because, you see, Christianity is not just pure joy. Sometimes there is sadness. But when you are experiencing sadness and little hardships, the joy of knowing that God is with you covers all the sorrow. I really wouldn't exchange this life for anything else. Sometimes I don't feel well, but I don't worry about it – I don't think about it; because Jesus has suffered more than this – and it says, If you suffer with him, you shall reign with him.