



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.

[F] Islam

Islam is derived from the call of God to Muhammad to be his prophet, to be one who warns people and calls them back to the truth, that they and all people and all created things come from God and depend on God for their life and being. It is his duty also to warn people that their lives are returning to God who will judge them by an exact balance according to their good and evil deeds.

For the Muslim, Muhammad (who lived in Arabia from 586–632CE) is the last of the prophets, the seal of the prophets, through whom the Quran, the uncorrupted revelation, has been transmitted into the world. There have been many previous prophets – Moses and Jesus among them – all with the same message. So Islam is connected to Judaism and Christianity, in the sense that God has sent a prophet to every nation. But Islam is different, in the sense that Muslims believe that they are the only community which has preserved the message of God (the Quran) in a pure and uncorrupted form. Mr Abdul Rahman, a taxi driver in Coventry, talked to me about this:

From Adam to Jesus, every prophet has preached this religion which is called Islam. Of course, there was no name for it at that time. Then the last prophet came, when the prophet of Islam went on pilgrimage to Mecca. And he called everybody (about 140,000, I suppose, but I don't know what was the right figure) all Muslims in front of him; and then Gabriel came, and he read this verse to the prophet: *alyaum* (that means, today) *akmaltu* (has been completed) *lakum* (upon you) this religion. So 'Today this religion has been completed and you have done your duty. And it is my will that I have named this religion for you, and the next future world; and this religion will be called Islam.' It's not that the earlier prophets *have* been rejected. They have been rejected by the people that never listened to them, but they have never been rejected by God. They did their duty. It's like building a house: one person comes and he builds the walls, and he's called, bricklayer. The next comes and he builds the window, and he's called the carpenter. Then the glazier, then the roof-tiler and everything; so everybody is called by a different name. Adam came with a different duty. Noah came with a different duty. They were doing a chapter, you know. We say they have done a chapter. The Bible does not tell all those things in detail which the Quran does. Those books were for their own time, and Quran is for the whole time until the end – the end of the world.

So Islam is the one – and same – religion which God has always intended, and to which he has continually called men and women through his prophets. Indeed, those earlier prophets foresaw Muhammad as the final prophet and talked about him – a point which Hajji Cassim Mohammad made, while also emphasising that there cannot be another prophet:

God sent his messengers at different times to different nations. Islam is not a new way of life, it is the same old way of life, the same religion of Abraham, the same way of life coming down, Judaism, Islam, right down the line. God sent thousands of prophets. In the Holy Quran God says so (and we believe that the Holy Quran is the word of God, and God does not tell lies). In Deuteronomy, God, speaking to Moses, said, 'I will raise the prophet from among thy brethren, and he shall not speak of himself, but what he shall hear, that he shall speak, for I, God, shall put my words into his mouth.' Now this prophet, we believe, is the holy prophet Muhammad. The holy prophet Muhammad was an unlettered prophet. He did not know how to read or write. He was untaught by man, but he was taught by God; the angel Gabriel taught him. In all the religious Scriptures the advent of the holy prophet Muhammad was foretold; and in Deuteronomy, it's very, very clear. Muslims believe that the person referred to there is the holy prophet Muhammad. There is no doubt about it. In the Holy Quran, God says, 'I am its author, I am its protector: no one can change it.' 1400 years have passed, not even one *ayat* [verse], not even one word in the Holy Quran, has changed. How has God managed to protect it? He caused the Muslims to memorise the whole Quran by heart. God has sent his final messenger as a seal of the prophets. And he has sent his

final message, the Holy Quran. So there is no more need for any more messages, or any more prophets. What the holy prophet did say was that, after me, reformers will come, *mujaddids*, who will come at different times simply to correct you when you drift away from that straight path. So there is no need for any further prophets or books, because the message is complete.

It follows that Muslims must live their lives as the Quran instructs and encourages them – with the help of what are known as *hadith*: they are the records describing what Muhammad did and said, which can, so to speak, illustrate the Quran, and give practical guidance to the ways in which Muslims should behave.

The word *Sunni* means that I am following the thing that the prophet has done in his life: the movement of his body (what he has done by his hand, by his foot, by his eyes, mouth, ears, anything), following the movement of his body is called *sunna*. The word he has said from his mouth is called *hadith*. His sayings are called *hadith*, his movements are called *sunna*. So we are following both things.

That attention to detail explains why many Muslims emphasise (like some of the Jews speaking of Judaism) that Islam is not a religion, it's a way of life. As Cassim Mohammad put it, 'We don't refer to Islam as a religion. It's a way of life. The Holy Quran refers to Islam as a *din*, and a *din* is a way of life.'

That way of life is summarised in what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam – the five fundamental affirmations and practices. Mr Mohammed Ali, who works as a guard for British Rail, and who is a member of an interfaith dialogue council, told me what the Five Pillars are:

The first of the Five Pillars is the Kalima: that is, *La Ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah* – it is to say, There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Apostle. The second is the prayer, the five-times-a-day prayer, which I start in the early morning when I get up. It's the most important thing in our life, prayer: prayer keeps us away from lots of things – from all bad things, and bad thoughts. And the third is the fasting [during daylight hours] which we do for a month; I do it anyway, and most of my family does, and most of the brothers and Muslims I know, we all do – regardless of time or anything: this last year we have to keep fast over 18 hours in a day; that's the longest we have. And then the next Pillar is the *Zakat* [almsgiving]: so if we have £1000, £25 is for the poor people. It's 2% of our earnings – and it's not much. It's like a tax. And then the fifth one is the *hajj*, the pilgrimage – that is, whoever goes to the blessed place (Mecca), that's the *hajj*, and they are purified.

Although Islam emphasises the unity of God and the unity of all life and all creation as derived from God, Islam itself is divided into two main communities, the Sunni and the Shia'. The Sunni claim to follow the *sunna*, or path of the prophet, without adding any new practice or teachings. The Shia' are the party of Ali – the word *shia'* means 'party'; and the Shia' are those who believe that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, should have succeeded him, on the grounds, as one Shiite Muslim put it, that it is the close family of a person which knows him best.

The political implications of the Sunni/Shia' divide can still be serious, as we can see in Iran and Iraq. Nevertheless, virtually all Muslims, Sunni and Shia', say that they are Muslim first and foremost – and that being Sunni or Shia' is more a matter of lifestyle and inherited history than it is of being a true or false Muslim.