

On Mahayana Buddhism and The Lotus and the Cross*

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1 Introduction

First, I would like to thank the author of *The Lotus and the Cross* [11], Ravi Zacharias, for being willing to tackle the sensitive issues behind religious differences. I also strongly admire the creative means by which he did so, in the form of a modern conversation between Jesus and Buddha based around the personal story of Priya. He used humor effectively throughout the book to lighten the atmosphere of the story while retaining the deep significance and importance of the issues discussed.

In its portrayal of Buddhism, Mr. Zacharias' text adheres most closely to the Theravada school, which is evident both from the Buddhist teachings he conveys in the story as well as the countries from which he obtained his information, namely Malaysia, Thailand, India, and Singapore. As Mr. Zacharias had a limited space, less than ninety pages in my edition, in which to relate his ideas, he cannot be expected to have given a complete synopsis of both world religions. Thousands of pages would not suffice for such a treatment. However, Mr. Zacharias, a noted scholar, should have elucidated the limits of his treatment of both religions, Christianity to the Evangelical sect and Buddhism to the Theravada.

This paper will not discuss the accuracy of Mr. Zacharias' treatment of Theravada Buddhism, except minimally in passing. Therefore, this paper will not meet Mr. Zacharias' treatment "head on," but rather will portray Buddhism in the light of my tradition, a Korean Zen sect of Mahayana Buddhism. I hope that this paper will give Christians, as well as all other readers, for whom this may be their only exposure to Buddhist teachings, a more complete understanding of Buddhism than that conveyed in *The Lotus and the Cross*.

2 Textual Distortions

This paper will discuss Mr. Zacharias' text from two angles, the general and the specific. In reading *The Lotus and the Cross*, I noted that there were several general points that I found to be

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misleading. These points were evident throughout the book and will be treated first. Subsequently, the paper will identify and comment upon eight specific points in which Mr. Zacharias' portrayal contained a distinct misunderstanding of Buddhist thought from a Mahayana perspective. Finally, there were several specific inaccuracies that were not easily categorized into the eight points above, and these will be discussed at the end.

2.1 On General Aspects of the Text

2.1.1 References to Another Author

"One scholar even called [Buddha and Jesus] brothers. ... did this scholar...completely miss the fundamental differences?" (Mr. Zacharias, pg. 13)¹ This terminology was used by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Theravada Buddhist monk who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967 by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in two of his books entitled *Living Buddha, Living Christ* [5] and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* [6]. Not having spoken to Mr. Zacharias regarding this reference, I can only surmise that this is the author to whom he refers; however, I readily admit that this may not be the case. In the first chapter of *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "People kill and are killed because they cling too tightly to their own beliefs and ideologies. When we believe that ours is the only faith that contains the truth, violence and suffering will surely be the result." As an activist for peace his entire life, Thich Nhat Hanh carries strong authority in this field. Dr. King, in his nomination, even said of Thich Nhat Hanh, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of [this prize] than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity." Therefore, I applaud Thich Nhat Hanh for his devotion to peace and tolerance, and his striving to highlight all that is good in the two great religions of Buddhism and Christianity. It is not that he missed the fundamental differences, as Mr. Zacharias implied. Rather, his purpose and theme for these books was to emphasize the similarities in order to promote peace, understanding, tolerance, and, most importantly, respect between the people of both faiths.

2.1.2 Biased Word Choice to Undermine Authority

As *The Lotus and the Cross* is a Christian apologetic work, one cannot expect a completely unbiased approach to the topic he discusses in his book. However, Mr. Zacharias notes in his Introduction that, "I trust I have presented the ideas fairly..." Therefore, he should be held to as unbiased a portrayal as possible, and this section highlights some examples in which he deviates from this worthy goal.

"Some of my disciples that I discussed these issues with were pretty pathetic in their understanding of such things." (Buddha, pg. 59)² The Buddha was a learned, spiritual individual. As such, respectful and compassionate speech was his hallmark. Mr. Zacharias portrays Jesus as a very eloquent man, in all of his speech. However, as the above quote shows, the Buddha is not given the

¹This statement was reiterated by Mr. Zacharias on, but not limited to, page 38.

²Other examples of similar word choices are located throughout the text, including, but not limited to, the following pages: 19, 26, 41, 44, and 54.

same level of eloquence, in the manner in which he refers to some of his disciples as “pathetic.” If Mr. Zacharias was attempting to be as fair as possible, the Buddha should have been portrayed as a speaker with as much eloquence and compassion as he displayed in the Scriptures. As a modern analogy, consider Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Both men were very spiritual, learned leaders, and each spoke with such compassion and power as to inspire and lead great spiritual and social movements. Would the Buddha, the Enlightened One, the original teacher of Buddhism, be any less eloquent, compassionate, and inspiring in his speech than these two men? To portray him in such a fashion is to use a poor rhetorical device to convey that the Buddha is inferior to the always-eloquent Jesus.

“I certainly hope I will get the chance. . . . But I’ll have my chance too, right?” (Buddha, pg. 54) In this exchange, the Buddha is conveyed as a whining child: “I certainly hope I will get the chance. . . . I’ll have my chance too, right?” Imagine the scene that occurs every day in toy stores: “Can I have that, mommy? Mommy, I can have that right? Mommy, I want that! Can I have it?” If Jesus’ message were actually superior to the Buddha’s, then Mr. Zacharias could have simply allowed the content of his teaching to speak for itself and still achieved his apologetic goal. Instead, he reduced the reader’s perception of the Buddha’s authority as a spiritual leader by utilizing the rhetorical tactic of having the Buddha speak in an immature, inelegant manner.

2.1.3 Unequal Characterization

“Woman, you don’t realize it, but everything you’ve lived through is the fruit of all that you yourself have sown.” (Buddha, pg. 21)³ One of the Buddha’s greatest strengths was his use of “skillful means” by which to teach others. What are “skillful means”? Recall a time when you first started a job at a new company. Early in your career there, your superiors taught you about the processes, the systems, and the work you needed to do. In order for you to understand, their first lessons were very simple, leaving out details that, while important, would have only confused you at that point in time. As you matured in your work, your understanding of the intricacies of the systems increased. Maybe you took training classes to further your own understanding, or maybe it was simply the result of personal experience by which you filled in the blanks left by the earlier training. Was the earlier training wrong? No. At the time, it was the only means by which to get you started in your new job without overwhelming you with details. But as you progressed, it was expected that your knowledge would increase, that you would gain skills and wisdom that would extend and, at times, supersede your early training.

As part of the Buddha’s enlightenment, he was endowed with the ability to know the level at which his current audience stood, to what degree their spiritual understanding was developed.⁴ With said wisdom, he conveyed the teachings that were especially relevant to his particular audience at a level, and in a manner, in which they could understand and profit from said teachings. There are two indications that Mr. Zacharias did not endow his Buddha character with this vital characteristic of the Buddha. First, Priya’s statement on page 23, “This is perplexing . . . [it is] my greatest puzzle,” stated in response to the Buddha’s exposition on karma that began with the quote opening this

³Similar examples can be seen on pages 19, 26, 41, and 43.

⁴This is seen as the reason for multiple Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma—the Theravada teachings were meant as early teachings, to be later extended by the Mahayana teachings once one’s spiritual development allowed one to understand and implement such teachings.

section, obviously shows that the Buddha's means of relating this teaching were not an effective use of skillful means. Second, reading Buddhist scriptures, one notes that when addressing a particular person who was suffering, the Buddha never used language as noted above because, when a person is in the throes of suffering, such talk does not soothe them. It is difficult to penetrate to true understanding when one is suffused with emotion—imagine the last time you were really angry with someone. Were you thinking clearly? Therefore, Mr. Zacharias did not accurately portray the compassionate manner in which the Buddha would have actually spoken with Priya.

One could argue that Mr. Zacharias made it a point to avoid giving Jesus the inherent advantage he would apparently have had as the Son of God in the Christian religion, as compared with the Buddha who was an enlightened man; therefore, to give Buddha access to the superknowledges⁵ that he naturally attained through his meditation practice and enlightenment would be unfair. However, Mr. Zacharias did give Jesus the ability to know everyone's name and display "supersensory" knowledge at various points throughout the story. Therefore, in an unbiased treatment, it is important to give the Buddha comparable access to the abilities and means of teaching that he exhibited in life.

Further examples include the following:

"... those are crutches for the spiritually weak." (Buddha, pg. 19) This is a phrase that the Buddha never would have used, as it relates an underlying contempt for the person about whom the Buddha is speaking. As the Buddha had developed compassion to the ultimate level, contempt would not have surfaced—its seed had been eliminated. The next sentence Mr. Zacharias wrote, "They're not realities but illusions," is a more accurate indication of the type of factual, non-judgmental statement the Buddha would have chosen to use.

"I can see I'll have to be very careful with my words here." (Buddha, pg. 26) Again, as the Buddha's use of skillful means was paramount, by default he would always have been very careful with his words. Mr. Zacharias' use of this sentence here only goes to discredit the Buddha by making him sound inferior to Jesus in rhetorical skill.

"I pity her very much, but her life-destroying error..." (Buddha, pg. 41) This same sentence was referred to in the footnote in section 2.1.2. Perfect compassion eradicated pity from the Buddha's life. Pity is limited to feelings of sorrow for someone suffering, while compassion is the imperative to relieve others' suffering; bodhisattvas⁶, and thus the Buddha himself, have developed compassion to such a degree that they work directly to relieve others' suffering without hesitation, without a whisper of ego. Additionally, consider the following scenario. A friend comes to you feeling very sad because she was just fired from her job. She cries and relates the story to you. After listening to her difficult situation, you turn to her and say, "I pity you." What effect might that have? The Buddha's perfect development of the use of skillful means would have precluded him from hurting someone in pain.⁷

⁵The five superknowledges are as follows: Divine eye or vision, divine hearing, telepathy, knowledge of former and future lives, and knowledge of the termination of the defilements.

⁶Bodhisattva is a Sanskrit word that is defined by Seung Sahn [8] as follows: "A being whose actions promote unity or harmony; one who vows to postpone one's own enlightenment in order to help all sentient beings realize liberation; one who seeks enlightenment not only for oneself but for others. The bodhisattva ideal is at the heart of Mahayana and Zen Buddhism."

⁷As a short aside, Mr. Zacharias' use of the phrase "life-destroying error" indicates his limited understanding of

2.2 On Specific Teachings of Mahayana Buddhism

2.2.1 Attachment

“Every passion, every craving, every desire was gone. I was unmoved by either joy or sorrow.” (Buddha, pg. 33) Jesus’ response: *“How can it be possible that all desires are wrong?”* (Jesus, pg. 33) Mr. Zacharias belied his misunderstanding of the Buddhist concept of attachment by having Jesus respond by incredulously asking how all desires could be wrong. All desires are wrong, if, and only if, one is attached to those desires. However, in Buddhist terminology, the word “desire” is often chosen as the English translation of the Sanskrit word that means “a ‘want’ to which one is attached.” Therefore, we need to be careful whenever we read the word “desire” occurring in a Buddhist context, as that implies **attachment to a want**, not just a want. In order to more clearly convey the proper understanding of desire and why the Buddha removed every desire (remember, I mean being attached to a want, not just having a want), I will present four examples, as follows.

Example 1: Happiness As I write this, today’s date is March 8, 2006. I awoke this morning to the recollection of a pleasant dream. After a hot shower, I left for work. As I walked to the train, the sun was rising over Lake Michigan to a clear blue sky. Birds sang as I passed under their trees, and the temperature felt more like the middle of Spring than early March. I had this inner sense of peace and happiness as I strolled toward the train. Did the Buddha teach that I shouldn’t enjoy being happy (*“unmoved by . . . joy”*), or that I should somehow temper my happiness? No! So is the desire (as used in the non-Buddhist sense) to be happy wrong? No.

By the time the train neared my stop for work, my happiness had faded somewhat. This is the vital point at which attachment can rear its ugly head. How did I respond to this faded happiness? Wouldn’t it be reasonable to feel slightly sad that my happy feelings were leaving, or maybe exasperated or frustrated that the happiness which had felt so strong and permanent was disappearing? If I had felt any of these things, I would have been exhibiting attachment to my happiness. If I had felt any of these things, I would have been suffering, even if only slightly. What other possible response is there, though? The other possible response is the one the Buddha taught, to enjoy your happiness, but not to be attached to your happiness. When my happiness began declining, I acknowledged that my happiness was declining. Then I was mindful of what was taking its place; in my case this morning, it was a simple neutral feeling. I then acknowledged and enjoyed having that neutral feeling.

What would have happened had the feeling that was replacing my happiness been anxiety about work? Maybe, for example, I had a big report due today, and the anxiety was overwhelming my happiness. I could feel mad that I was letting my anxiety get in the way of my happiness, and then try to force my happiness back or repress my anxiety. All that would have done was build stress and unhappiness as I craved for the feeling of happiness that I had once had, and cause me to lament that I no longer had it. But if, in this scenario, I had just acknowledged that anxiety was rising in me, I could embrace that anxiety and reduce it, without craving for the happiness that was in me several minutes prior.

Theravada Buddhism. Ignorance, to which he is referring as the “error,” is ultimately in Theravada Buddhism the life-sustaining error, as it is the primary cause that ensnares one in the cycle of birth and death. Mahayana Buddhism does not view life-sustenance as an error, although ignorance is still viewed as the primary unwholesome root.

Example 2: One's Spouse A good friend of mine, with whom I often discuss Buddhist ideas, once told me that he should desire, and be attached to, his spouse. I agree 100%, if he was using those terms in the non-Buddhist sense. However, the Buddha would have said in the Scriptures that attachment to your spouse, or your children, or your pets, is unwholesome, causes suffering, and is to be abandoned. What was the Buddha talking about?

True love is without attachment (in the Buddhist sense). If a man sees his wife speaking with some of their male neighbors and feels even a twinge of jealousy, his love is tainted with attachment. A man can fully love his wife, fully trust her, and not feel jealousy arise when presented with the above situation. This second man experiences true love without the taint of attachment. What about if one's wife travels on a business trip? Is the feeling of "missing her" to be regarded as wrong, as attachment? No! But if his missing her causes worrisome thoughts to needlessly enter his mind that she might get in an accident and never come back, or if it causes him to function at a reduced capacity while she is away, then his love is tainted by attachment. Hopefully these examples clearly show that it is not a hindrance to fully love, cherish, and care for your spouse in a healthy fashion; it is, however, an unhealthy hindrance for your love to be tainted by attachment.

Example 3: Grief Let's examine many people's worst fear—the death of a parent. Does the Buddha teach that sadness at the death of your parent means that you are spiritually undeveloped? No! Sadness and grief are natural feelings when a loved one dies. The proper response is to be fully with your grief; accept that you are sorrowful and embrace that sorrow. Nurture yourself. Do not try to push your sadness away or repress it. You must allow your grief to run its course to heal you emotionally. However, if your grief leaves you incapacitated, unable to function, after a reasonable period of time of properly nurturing yourself and being with your grief, then that can signify attachment. If your grief causes you to think or act in an unhealthful manner, then your love for your parent was tainted with attachment, and is causing you undue suffering. This is what the Buddha was referring to when he said he was unmoved by sorrow in Mr. Zacharias' quote above. He never taught that feeling sadness and grieving at the death of one's parent is a desire to be eliminated. It is only the unhealthy results of excessive grief that he would condemn as an attachment to be abandoned.

Example 4: Goals If I love teaching, is it wrong for me to want to become a teacher? Is it wrong for me to have that goal? Does "... *every desire was gone*" mean that I should not want anything, that I should just drift through life accepting what comes without striving for anything? Is that what the Buddha meant? No! There is nothing wrong with me wanting to become a teacher, from the Buddhist perspective. If, in the process of working to become a teacher, I hit an obstacle that has the potential to prevent the attainment of my goal, I have two responses, the pure response and the attachment-tainted response. The pure response consists of not getting down on myself, not blaming fate, not blaming others, and not blaming myself for the obstacle. Rather, I simply analyze the obstacle and do what I need to overcome or bypass it. The tainted response is to get down on myself, or blame God or fate, or blame others, or my own inadequacies, or my bad luck, for the obstacle. The latter response is a result of attachment, either to the goal or to my ego. Having the desire (in the non-Buddhist sense) to become a teacher is healthy and good! Having the desire (in the Buddhist sense) to become a teacher results in the latter response, and thus is unhealthy and

unwholesome.

What if the goal is ultimately unattainable? For instance, what if my goal were to become a world-renowned pianist, and I simply did not have the physical and mental talent to achieve that goal? If I am attached to that goal, I might continue striving for the goal when I know, truly, that I cannot attain it, causing me undue mental suffering. I might also see my inability to achieve it as a failure, as some reflection of my lack of worth to society, my family, and my friends. If I am not attached to this goal, I can acknowledge when I know, in my heart, that the goal is unattainable—there is nothing to worry about, or consider as a failure, because I am simply incapable of achieving this goal with the physical form and mental capacities with which I was born.

Final Thought What is common among my examples above in the descriptions of Buddhist desire? Suffering. In every case, desire (attachment to a want) results in suffering: 1. My happiness leads to feeling bad that the happiness is departing; 2. Jealousy and incapacity can result from attachment to one's spouse; 3. Incapacity and depression result from attachment to one's passed parent; 4. Depression and feelings of failure result from attachment to a goal or one's ego. Now, in the example of grief, one might argue that suffering is not avoided in the pure, untainted response, because sadness and grief are still present, and one still grieves for the loss of the parent. However, this is not a contradiction, as the Buddha illustrated in the Sallatha Sutra (SN XXXVI.6):

When touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows; in the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the uninstructed person sorrows, grieves, & laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught. So he feels two pains, physical & mental. . . . Sensing a feeling of pain, he senses it as though joined with it. . . . Now, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones, when touched with a feeling of pain, does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. So he feels one pain: physical, but not mental. Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, did not shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pain of only one arrow. In the same way, when touched with a feeling of pain, the well-instructed disciple of the noble ones does not sorrow, grieve, or lament, does not beat his breast or become distraught. He feels one pain: physical, but not mental. . . . Sensing a feeling of pain, he senses it disjoined from it. [9]

Pain and suffering exist. We cannot avoid pain caused by something outside of our control, such as the death of a parent; we can control our response to this pain. It is within our power to stop the second arrow from hitting us, every time. That is the essence of the Buddha's teaching on the elimination of desire.

"Or must we tell [Priya's parents] that if they weren't attached to her, they wouldn't grieve?" (Jesus, pg. 60)

"The [Buddhist] community consists of those who . . . move toward not desiring anything, including the friendship of others." (Jesus, pg. 83)

I believe it is now obvious how poorly Mr. Zacharias understands Buddhist desire. The answer to the first question is a resounding “No.” The second quote is utterly false.

2.2.2 Rules

“But something else quickly stands out: rules, scores of rules, like a noose ... ready ... to be tightened around the neck. ... The list goes on—227 rules for the male monk and 311 for the female.” (Jesus, pgs. 34-5) In this section, Mr. Zacharias’ Jesus is commenting on the Theravada code of rules for the priesthood. Mr. Zacharias is correct that these rules exist for Theravada monks. However, the rules differ in my Mahayana tradition. In the Buddhist Society for Compassionate Wisdom⁸, priests and Dharma teachers vow to adhere to Samantabhadra’s ten great vows (in addition to the Five Precepts, which I discuss below). These ten great vows are summarized below:

1. Pay homage and respect to all Buddhas, past, present, and future.
2. Praise the Tathagatas⁹.
3. Cultivate the giving of offerings.
4. Repent all karmic obstructions (misdeeds and wrongful actions).
5. Rejoice in the virtues and meritorious deeds of others.
6. Request the turning of the wheel of Dharma.
7. Request that the Buddhas dwell in the world in order to give benefit and joy to all living beings.
8. Follow the teachings of the Buddha at all times.
9. Act only for the benefit, joy, and liberation of all living beings.
10. Dedicate all benefits from acting and thinking according to the other nine vows to all living beings.

⁸<http://www.zenbuddhisttemple.org>

⁹Tathagata means “The one thus-come” or “The one thus-gone.” This is the name by which the historical Buddha Sakyamuni referred to himself in the Pali Canon (Theravada scriptures). However, there is a slight difference between the terms Buddha and Tathagata. A Buddha turns the wheel of Dharma at a time when it has not been turned. In this context, there has been only one Buddha in this age, as any other Bodhisattvas who have realized awakening have done so through his transmission of realization. These Bodhisattvas are Tathagatas, but they are not yet able to demonstrate as Buddhas (because the wheel of Dharma is already turned), and will have to wait until a suitable time and place occurs before they can manifest as Buddhas. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tathagata>) This is often an issue of semantics, as many schools use the terms nearly interchangeably.

More importantly, however, Mr. Zacharias neglects to expound upon the equality of Christianity and Buddhism when it comes to the fulfillment of ethical constraints. Let me convey this idea through the Five Precepts, guidelines for ethical behavior in Buddhism. The precepts are as follows:

1. Do not harm, but cherish all life.
2. Do not take what is not given, but respect the things of others.
3. Do not engage in sexual promiscuity, but practice purity of mind and self-restraint.
4. Do not lie, but speak the truth.
5. Do not partake in the production and trading of firearms and chemical poisons that are injurious to public health and safety, nor of drugs and liquors that confuse or weaken the mind.

Early in one's Buddhist training, these may be used as guidelines to ethical conduct. When a situation arises in which one is unsure how to act, consulting these guidelines will often help one determine the proper course of action. However, Buddhism is a wisdom tradition, which means that wisdom reigns supreme over rules. A classic example is as follows. A monk walking through a forest is startled by a deer that darts out of the underbrush and, turning right, darts back under cover. Seconds later, a hunter barrels out of the same patch of underbrush. He asks the monk if he saw a deer. "Yes," replies the monk. "Which direction did it run?" "Left." "Thank you," says the hunter as he runs left into the forest. The monk just violated the precept not to lie. However, in this case, wisdom tells the monk that the hunter, had he found the deer, would have killed it, which would have been a much greater offense to the deer than lying was to the hunter. Much greater suffering would have resulted from the death of the deer than from the hunter's inability to locate his prey.

As one matures in one's practice, as wisdom develops, the precepts become irrelevant. One naturally, without a list of rules, knows the ethical action to take in a given situation. Christianity is the same in that, if one truly follows Christ's teachings, there is no need for the 10 Commandments or the golden rule—one follows them naturally without needing a list to which to refer.

The Buddha accepted many people into his Sangha, most of whom were neophytes on the path. Therefore, until they could develop their own wisdom, they needed guidance from those who were more wise in how to live, those who had experienced and analyzed the ultimate observed effects of certain actions. That was the primary purpose of the strict monastic code imposed upon monks.

Many other rules were based on practicalities:

"But it's past twelve o'clock, sir! These monks don't eat after the noon hour." (Priya, pg. 68) It was known through experience that a full stomach dulls one's attention and focus. Therefore, these monks, for whom meditation was their vocation, only ate before noon in order to improve their meditation in the afternoon and evening hours.

"Besides, I am a woman. I cannot place food directly into his hands. . . . He said it would pollute him." (Priya and Boat Driver, pg. 68) Theravada orders often have a rule whereby monks are forbidden the touch of people of the opposite sex. The purpose behind this rule is to minimize the chance of lust arising in the celibate monk.

2.2.3 Prayer

“But prayer is a dimension that doesn’t fit in with my teaching.” (Buddha, pg. 47) In Autumn of 2005, my temple hosted small group discussions with the Venerable Samu Sunim, our head priest, in which the topic under discussion was “Prayer in Buddhism.” Sunim explained that prayer is an important practice within Buddhism. But how can there be prayer when there is nobody to whom to pray? Mr. Zacharias explained it well, *“In persistent, fervent prayer, God perparees the soil of one’s heart to make room for the seed of His answer.”* (Jesus, pg. 47) In Buddhism, the act of prayer itself prepares the soil of one’s heart and mind for that for which one prays. There is no need to pray to anyone for this effect to occur. In modern psychological terms, prayer conveys to one’s subconscious mind what is desired (in the non-Buddhist sense), tilling the soil of the mind and allowing it to manifest one’s prayer. In Buddhist terminology, a seed is planted in one’s mind which, when nourished by the proper conditions, will germinate and manifest. Therefore, Mr. Zacharias was incorrect in having the Buddha utter the words that opened this paragraph, at least from the Mahayana perspective.

“Yes, there are cardinal differences between one who prays and one who meditates. ... And it’s true that with my followers prayer does ‘slip in,’ as you say.” (Buddha, pg. 49) Mr. Zacharias was correct in asserting that prayer does not equal meditation. They are very different processes. However, as I noted above, prayer is an important practice within Buddhism and, thus, does not “slip in” accidentally, but is consciously performed. I should note that the two sentences I quoted to begin this paragraph, despite the appearance granted by the ellipsis, are not linearly connected. Prayer does not “slip in” during meditation; the processes are distinctly different, and one cannot be mistaken for the other, nor can one transmute into the other. I do not believe Mr. Zacharias intended to link these two sentences; it is only the visual form in which I present them above that might lead one to link them.¹⁰

2.2.4 Omniscience

*“You say that you had reached a place of perfect knowledge and understanding; yet you were **corrected** by your disciples, not merely on the timing, but on the very mission you ultimately set upon. ... The unenlightened were able to correct the enlightened.”* (Jesus, pg. 44)

“There are mysteries to life that are still beyond you, yet you claim to have arrived.” (Jesus, pgs. 50-51)

It is common in the West for people to incorrectly attribute “perfect knowledge” or “omniscience” in a spiritual context to mean omniscience such as we grant to the God of Christianity. The Sanskrit word often translated “omniscience” is *sarvajnata*, which actually carries a much different meaning than we attribute to omniscience in English:

Omniscience refers to the gnosis of the Buddha, with which there is nothing he does not know. However, not to confuse “omniscience” with the theistic conception of an

¹⁰A further example of Mr. Zacharias’ misconception of prayer, at least from a Mahayana perspective, is noted on page 66.

omniscient God, the “everything” here is specifically everything about the source of the predicament of worldly life and the way of transcendence of that world through liberation. [10]

Therefore, it is clear that having “perfect knowledge and understanding” would not preclude the Buddha from being corrected on the subject of whether he should teach. Furthermore, the Buddha was human; of course there were mysteries of life that were beyond him, just as there are mysteries beyond our understanding. Mr. Zacharias again exhibits a misunderstanding of Buddhist terminology, this time by making the mistake of applying Western concepts to an Eastern religion.

“First you told us that there is no God. Then you said that you know more than God.” (Jesus, pg. 55) The Buddha never said he knows more than God because there is no God—with a capital ‘G’—in the Buddhist world view. The Buddha’s “perfect knowledge and understanding” exceeded that of the gods, who were reborn in that state due to their virtuous nature.¹¹ The Buddha’s “perfect knowledge” can never exceed that of the Christian God who, by definition, is omniscient (in the Western theistic sense). However, the Christian God does not exist in Buddhist cosmology, nor does any Uncaused Cause. Therefore, Mr. Zacharias’ comparison is nonsensical.

2.2.5 Emptiness

“Now we’re told that there is no such person as Priya. No real self on the one hand—but her self is all she needs, on the other hand, to find the truth?” (Jesus, pg. 55) Mr. Zacharias is putting words in the Buddha’s mouth by indicating that he would ever say there is no such person as Priya. Priya exists, she has form, she has thoughts, she has feelings, she is conscious. Priya is an existing person, but yet she has no real self. How is this possible? The key, again, is in the specific definition of “self” as used in Buddhism. A “self” is defined by Mr. Thurman [10] as the intrinsic identity of a person—permanent, unchanging, and unrelative. To expand upon this, a “self” is an animating kernel or soul within you that will always exist, in its exact same form, unchanging forever. It is completely separate from all things, like how it appears that your couch is completely unrelated to, completely separate from, and not at all affected by, the engine in your car. It is this specific self, prevalent in the Buddha’s day as embodied in the atman of Hinduism, that the Buddha refuted. It is this self that the Buddha taught does not exist.

What does exist, then, since I noted above that the person that is Priya exists? Her form exists; we can experience it with our senses. Her thoughts and feelings exist; we can easily infer this because Priya can interact with us, converse with us. She has consciousness because she is alive, animated. However, none of these comprise a self—permanent, unchanging, unrelative—that animates Priya. Furthermore, Buddhism teaches that, under concentrated analysis, nothing else can be found within or beyond the physical and mental aggregates that constitute Priya that is permanent, unchanging, and unrelative.

¹¹Beings may be reborn into heavenly realms, according to Buddhist cosmology (see section 2.2.8 on karma). However, this state is impermanent and still within the cycle of birth and death. While beings reborn as gods enjoy a peaceful, pleasurable existence, they will ultimately die and will be reborn again, as described in the section on karma. Hence, gods do not have “perfect knowledge and understanding,” as described here.

“According to your teaching, you personally no longer exist, nor will she. Nonexistence is the first gem.” (Jesus, pg. 83) As explained in the two paragraphs above, neither the Buddha nor Priya exists from the point of view of either of them having a permanent, unchanging, unrelative self that animates their physical and mental aggregates. To comment on this point, I will paraphrase the Dalai Lama:

The sense of self or the thought ‘I am’ that arises in us has two different aspects. First, our sense of self focuses on the conventional ‘I’ (our form, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and consciousness) that is the subject of all our action and experience. Then, focused on that self, we apprehend it as intrinsically real (permanent, unchanging, unrelative). The former sense of self is natural and unharmed, and is called “relative truth” in Buddhism. The latter leads us into all sorts of confusion and afflictions. [3]

Further thoughts on this topic will be discussed in section 2.2.8, when we discuss karma.

2.2.6 Buddha-Nature

“There’s no way to confer value on a person unless that value is intrinsic. There’s no way value can be intrinsic unless that person is created by one of ultimate worth. . . . The purpose in life, Gautama, is communion, not union. There can be no meaning when the goal is to meditate oneself into oblivion. But meaning is found in a relationship with the living God.” (Jesus, pgs. 71-73) This utterance from Mr. Zacharias’ Jesus is nonsensical, unsubstantiated, and inaccurate. Each segment of this quote will be discussed below.

“There’s no way to confer value on a person unless that value is intrinsic.” Who is conferring value in this sentence? Since both Christianity and Buddhism teach us that we are not to judge others, that we are all equal, one should never be conferring value on another. It was said most succinctly by Bodhidharma [7] over 1,500 years ago, “This mind is the buddha.” He is speaking of THIS mind, your mind, my mind, every being’s mind. Buddhism teaches that the defilements of greed, anger, and ignorance only obscure the perfect, inherently good intrinsic nature of all beings, like the morning fog obscures the sky. All beings are intrinsically perfect; therefore, all beings have intrinsic value. We call this one’s “Buddha-nature.”

“There’s no way value can be intrinsic unless that person is created by one of ultimate worth.” This statement is inaccurate because Buddhism teaches that one’s value is intrinsic (as noted above), without one having been created by God. Additionally, it is also completely illogical because it is based on the fallacy of argument from personal incredulity. Perhaps Mr. Zacharias cannot comprehend how value can be intrinsic without one having been created by one of ultimate worth, but many, many Buddhists over the last 2,500 years certainly can.

“The purpose in life, Gautama, is communion, not union.” This is one opinion. However, I personally see much greater value and purpose in union. Communion is having a relationship with God. However, when one realizes that one is truly inseparable from all-that-is, one experiences the intimate, immediate, obvious, and spontaneous understanding that such relationship, which inherently requires an existence apart from the other, is incomplete.

“There can be no meaning when the goal is to meditate oneself into oblivion.” This is another example of the fallacy of arguing from personal incredulity. Just because Mr. Zacharias cannot fathom a meaning to life without God does not mean that there is no meaning to life without God. Furthermore, Mr. Zacharias also displays a complete misunderstanding of Buddhist practice. One does not meditate oneself into oblivion. That would be a nihilistic view, which is 100% incompatible with Buddhist teaching. As a matter of fact, that is a very good measure of one’s understanding of Buddhist teachings. If one feels Buddhism is nihilistic, then that is a clear indicator that one’s understanding of Buddhism is quite poor.

“But meaning is found in a relationship with the living God.” This is true for Christians. Incredible meaning is also found on the Buddhist path, to which I can personally attest.

Mr. Zacharias explains the reasoning behind the Christian need for relationship with God, as expressed in the quote that opened this section, when he writes regarding the Christian view of humanity, *“The heart is desperately wicked.”* (Jesus, pg. 78) I am personally very sad for anyone who truly believes that we are wicked at heart. In my view, that would be a depressing, meaningless existence. I cannot understand how anyone can look at another and not see the perfection that lies at the core of that other person, just waiting to be awakened. However, to expressly avoid the fallacy of arguing from personal incredulity, I will readily admit that some people hold this view.

2.2.7 Impermanence

“Because everything is impermanent.” (Buddha, pg. 76). In response, *“Even that statement? Is that impermanent too?”* (Jesus, pg. 76) Mr. Zacharias is truly portraying Jesus in a poor manner, having him resort to nonsensical wordplay. The Buddha never would have stumbled in answering this question, as Mr. Zacharias has him do. The answer is not difficult—of course that statement is impermanent. When the Buddha uttered it, sound waves comprising that statement were created, which Jesus heard. Immediately, those sound waves diminished, eventually becoming inaudible. A perfect example of impermanence. Obviously, Mr. Zacharias’ Jesus did not mean it in that fashion; however, that is the only fashion in which it makes sense. The Buddha taught that all conditioned things and events are constantly fluctuating—this is his definition of impermanence, as noted by the Dalai Lama [2]. Thus, the sounds waves, the physical product of speech, are impermanent. Additionally, if I were to think, “Everything is impermanent,” that unit of thought would be impermanent and would eventually leave me. However, the concept embodied by the words is not a conditioned thing or event; it is a concept. Therefore, to say it has the characteristic of permanence or impermanence is like saying that a book has or doesn’t have the characteristic of intelligence. The entire idea is ridiculous because intelligence is a characteristic of living, sentient

beings, and since a book is non-living and non-sentient, intelligence does not even apply to it regardless of the wisdom contained therein.

Mr. Zacharias does not pursue the topic of impermanence beyond this statement. Therefore, even though the concept is extremely important to Buddhist thought, further discussion of it is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.2.8 Karma

Here we get to the topic that I consider the most often misunderstood among non-Buddhists, perhaps with the exception of emptiness, which is nearly always portrayed incorrectly by non-Buddhists. At least with emptiness, people tend to comprehend its depth and so, while they may not actually understand the concept correctly, they usually recognize that there is more to it than they comprehend. However, most people think they understand karma. And perhaps they do—but usually not Buddhist karma.

“We have a common saying in my culture when anything goes wrong—it basically means ‘Never mind’ or ‘It will all work out.’” (Priya, pg. 15) This is a secular saying, not a Buddhist one. Mr. Zacharias does not explicitly state that this is a Buddhist teaching, but the idea is somewhat implied due to his Prologue, which states that the country in which Priya resides is 95% Buddhist. This saying does not correctly convey a single aspect of Buddhist karma.

“You were not free from debt when you were born . . . And your every act, word, and deed has to be paid for.” (Buddha, pgs. 21-22)¹² This statement is wrong. Mr. Zacharias makes the mistake of analyzing the Buddhist concept of karma from a Western viewpoint. In the West, Christianity has polarized the world into good and evil. The East has no such concept.¹³ There is nothing to be paid for because karma is not a morality system that keeps track of rights and wrongs. There is no vengeance in karma, no justice, no mercy. Causes and conditions have effects—that is all.

“But your present moral bankruptcy is because of the way you spent your life—that should bring you responsibility.” (Buddha, pg. 22) Mr. Zacharias again incorrectly presents Priya’s life difficulties as a “moral bankruptcy,” as if it were a debt that needed to be repaid. Let me now give a short presentation of karma that will hopefully better represent karma as understood from a Buddhist perspective. Let us ignore the concept of rebirth for the moment, and instead look only at a fictional man’s life. Let’s call him Bill.

As a young child, Bill was a sponge, absorbing everything around him. Especially from his parents. Like all children, he learned how to behave, how to think, how to react, by observing his parents. If his father often reacted with anger, he would have learned to react with anger. If his mother was

¹²This same basic statement of something needing to be paid for is repeated throughout the book, including on the following pages: 23, 24, 55, 82, and 83.

¹³As Joseph Campbell [1, pg. 16] states, “In the biblically grounded Christian West, the accent is on ethics, on good against evil. We are thus bound by our religion itself to the field of duality. The mystical perspective, however, views good and evil as aspects of one process. One finds this in the Chinese yin-yang sign. We have, then, these two totally different religious perspectives. The idea of good and evil absolutes in the world after the fall is biblical and as a result you do not rest on corrupted nature. Instead, you correct nature and align yourself with the good against evil. Eastern cults, on the other hand, put you in touch with nature, where what Westerners call good and evil interlock. But by what right, this Eastern tradition asks, do we call these things evil when they are of the process of nature?”

aggressive in her communications, he would have learned to be aggressive in similar situations. If his father was compassionate and loving, Bill would have learned to respond in kind.

Fast forward to Bill's days in elementary school. Now, added to the imprinting left on him by his parents from his early childhood is the behavior of the new authority figures in his life, his teachers. Furthermore, he sees how other children react to things around them, how they think, how they behave, and he incorporates these learnings into himself to some degree as well.

Fast forward to Bill's adult life. As shown repeatedly by Sigmund Freud, our reactions as adults are based very strongly upon what we learned as children. Every thought that Bill has, every action he takes, every statement he makes, is based on what he has learned to do throughout his life, from his childhood to the present day—his developed responses are habitual. As sentient beings, we have the ability to override our habitual responses; but realistically, how often do we do that? The phrase, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," is a testament to the power our habitual responses have over us. This is karma in action.

As an extreme example, consider phobias. Bill was frightened by a tiny spider when he was a child, and this made neural connections in his brain that now cause him to respond in kind whenever he sees a harmless daddy long legs spider in a corner. How hard is it for Bill to override this karmic response? Very difficult. Can it be done? Of course! Buddhism is the ultimate optimistic religion—it teaches that one can overcome all learned responses with training.

Consider now a more traditional karmic subject, anger. Let's say that Bill's father was an angry man. From his behavior, Bill learned that anger was a proper response in many situations. So one day, the adult Bill is in a meeting with his supervisor, who is reviewing Bill's work. The supervisor skillfully relates some constructive criticism to Bill. In Bill's mind, he feels anger welling up. Even though his supervisor was kind in how he conveyed the criticism, Bill's learned response is anger. This is a karmic response. Let's consider several responses from Bill:

1. Bill allows his anger to grow and responds defiantly to his supervisor. In this case, Bill suffers tremendously. Most obviously, he gets in trouble at work for reacting in such a fashion. Worse, however, is the effect this has on his future karma. He let his anger overwhelm him, which increases the likelihood that he will respond in a similar fashion in the future. As with all things, it becomes easier and easier to respond in anger each time he allows himself to do so. It's like the person who says, "Oh, I can steal this candy. It only costs a dime, so that won't hurt the merchant." Soon, it becomes easier and easier for this person to say, "This sweater is nice, and only costs \$10, so the store won't really miss it." Just as greed begets greed, anger begets anger.
2. Bill lets his anger stew, but controls his outward response. In this case, Bill is only slightly better off than in case #1. He does not get in physical trouble with his boss because his response was appropriate. However, he allows his anger to remain, which, again, makes it more likely for him to respond with anger in the future.
3. Bill recognizes that his anger is an inappropriate response to his supervisor's well-intentioned attempt to help him. Bill responds kindly to his supervisor and analyzes his anger to help understand why it arose, and why it is a harmful result. In this case, the proper causes existed—Bill was in the habit of responding with anger—and the proper conditions were

present—Bill received criticism; therefore, Bill responded to the criticism with anger. This is Buddhist karma. However, unlike in the previous two cases, Bill has now generated positive karma by his response in case #3. He has recognized his anger response as inappropriate and harmful, and has taken steps to respond differently in the future. Will Bill ever respond inappropriately with anger in the future? Probably. He has built up a strong habit of anger based on his past thoughts and actions. In Buddhist terms, he has created strong negative karma that he must overcome. However, Bill has it within his power to completely eradicate this habit. Each time he recognizes his anger for what it is, and the harm it causes him, he makes it less likely that he will respond angrily in the future. Therefore, by his thoughts and actions today, he is creating the conditions necessary for his natural response in the future to be compassionate and thankful. As a result, his future angry responses will be reduced in intensity and duration, until eventually the response is eliminated.

Hopefully, this better explains karma from a Buddhist perspective. As one can see from this, there is no moral debt to be paid. Priya is not morally bankrupt. Rather, her past thoughts, actions, and speech have played a role in creating her current situation because her response in every moment is based in part on her past learned habitual responses, her karma.

“I teach that another consciousness with the moral deposit reaped from your indebtedness will be born.” (Buddha, pg. 23) *“Buddha talked to you about being reborn in another consciousness and in a different person.”* (Jesus, pg. 81) The first quote speaks of “indebtedness.” There is no need to speak further on the faults inherent in this phrase. Both of these quotes reference the Buddhist concept of rebirth. Mr. Zacharias seems to emphasize, as most Christian apologists do, that it makes no sense for karma to be “transferred” to another consciousness, another person, upon rebirth. This focus is indicative of a common misunderstanding of rebirth.

To properly understand rebirth, a definition of consciousness is needed. From the Buddhist perspective, consciousness is effectively a digital phenomenon. In other words, consciousness is not a continuous flowing stream. Rather, there are discrete units of consciousness that follow each other very closely in time, just like your cellular phone captures discrete samples of your voice approximately 7,000 times per second and transmits only those individual samples to the other caller, who perceives your speech as continuous. The means by which our consciousness operates is explained below.

- All conditioned things and formations are impermanent (as discussed briefly in 2.2.7).
- Therefore, each instant of consciousness is impermanent. In other words, each instant must pass away.
- However, the conditions present in one’s life when an instant of consciousness passes away cause a new instant to be generated.
- The nature of this new instant of consciousness has two components:
 1. Past input (karma): the nature of the previous unit of consciousness and the past conditions (thoughts, feelings, perceptions) in the mind of the person;

2. Current input: the present conditions in the mind of the person.

- Therefore, this new instant is different from the previous instant. No two instants are identical because the two factors above that comprise the nature of new instants are constantly changing.

From the final point above, the person you are now is not the same person you were a moment ago. The great Greek philosopher Heraclitus proclaimed that one cannot step into the same river twice. The river is constantly flowing and the river you step in now is different from the river you stepped in a second ago. In the same way, you are constantly changing, physically, mentally, emotionally, and, as explained here, consciously. The person experiencing the results of your karma is *always* different from the person who generated the karma, by this understanding.

This process is the same upon death and rebirth as it is throughout life. After the final unit of consciousness of one's bodily life expires, karma causes another instant of consciousness to be generated (because the necessary causes and conditions are present to generate a new instant of consciousness, a new instant must arise, even if the body is no longer habitable). And that new instant arises within an entity whose nature is akin to the nature of that instant. Hence, this describes the reasoning behind rebirths in realms ranging from heavenly to hell-like.

Therefore, the particular criticism levied upon the Buddhist teachings of karma and rebirth by Christian apologists as noted above is unfounded, given a proper understanding of the mechanism of karma.

"Invest in a life of good deeds that will outweigh the bad ones." (Buddha, pg. 24) This is a worthy goal. However, from the perspective of karma, deeds cannot "outweigh" other deeds. Every single deed, be it a thought, action, or emotion, has an effect.

"It's surprising that you haven't yet discerned that morality itself cannot bring freedom or dignity." (Jesus, pg. 58) The nature of ethics is integrity, honesty, and virtue. Therefore, acting, thinking, and speaking ethically brings dignity. Additionally, contrary to what Mr. Zacharias implies, the Buddha agrees with Jesus that morality cannot bring freedom. What it can bring is a more fortunate rebirth and less suffering in this life for you and those with whom you interact.

"Knowledge and righteousness cannot carry you into the kingdom. You can never truly be righteous until you are redeemed. . . . You cannot become righteous by looking deep inside yourself and by meditating." (Jesus, pg. 79) Righteousness is defined as "morally upright" by the American Heritage Dictionary. Mr. Zacharias' Jesus is correct when he says that intellectual knowledge and righteousness cannot carry you into the kingdom. However, wisdom, born of true experience, will.

2.3 Additional Thoughts

I'd like to comment on three further quotes from Mr. Zacharias' book that do not fit neatly into the categories above.

"How can an infinite number have finality?" (Jesus, pg. 71) Let me quote from another well-known book, "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." [4, Genesis 2:3] Since it is obvious from modern cosmology

that the creation of the world took billions of years, I could ask, “How can thirteen billion years equal seven days?” The only answer is symbolism. Just as Genesis is a beautiful symbolic myth, so are many Buddhist stories. In addition, it is a fairly rudimentary mathematical concept that an infinite number can have finality. For instance, one can integrate a function from negative infinity to zero. This function is integrated, or summed, over an infinite number of numbers, even though it has one endpoint.

“A boat! A lotus flower! Your metaphors lose the person.” (Jesus, pg. 62) Just as Jesus used parables to convey his teachings in a more accessible manner, a manner with which his audience would better connect, the Buddha used parables and similes. In his brilliant use of skillful means, the Buddha was able to find natural events with which his audience could easily identify, and he related his teachings in that fashion. It was the unexcelled mindful eye of the Buddha that allowed him to find similes to convey his teachings. While Mr. Zacharias sees this as a deficiency, I see the Buddha’s awakened mind brilliantly conveying a complex realization through a simple, everyday phenomenon that brings his audience closer to that realization.

“Your followers have no final [written] word to rely on.” (Jesus, pg. 76) There is no “final” written word because words cannot bring you closer to realization. Only practice and personal experience of the true nature of reality can. Our practice is what we rely upon. To look outside ourselves is an error. Yes, the precepts, for instance, were given by the Buddha as guidelines for proper behavior. But ultimately, through practice, perfect wisdom arises from within, and no outside words are necessary. The only way for us to attain this wisdom is through our practice. And truly, there is nothing to attain because we already have this wisdom; our Buddha-nature is this wisdom.

“In fact, some of your followers say that even if you had remained silent there would’ve been no loss of insight.” (Jesus, pg. 76) One day at Vulture’s Peak, the Buddha sat down to give a Dharma talk to 1,200 of his disciples. He sat there for quite some time, silent, and his disciples became puzzled. Finally, the Buddha reached down and picked up a lotus flower that had been lying beside him. He held this flower aloft. One lone disciple in the far back of the assembly, Mahakashyapa, smiled, and was awakened. Through this simple gesture, the Buddha brought his disciple to enlightenment. This is a testament to the Buddha’s unparalleled mastery of skillful means. It also teaches us that, sometimes, remaining silent is all the teaching that is required.

2.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to show the primary audience of *The Lotus and the Cross*, for whom that book might be their only exposure to Buddhist thought, that many aspects of Buddhism, especially those of the Mahayana tradition, have not been accurately portrayed. Mr. Zacharias has the duty, as a comparative religion author, to designate the boundaries of his treatment such that his audience might understand the limits of said treatment. I hope this paper has educated the reader to some degree about the value and depth of the Buddhist religion, and has spurred the reader to pursue further detailed study. Such study can only have a positive effect, whether that be to better understand others, to increase one’s tolerance of other religions, or to expand one’s mind about a view of life foreign to one, even while deepening one’s commitment to Christianity. Buddhism is not a proselytizing religion—I have no desire to convert the reader. My wish for you is that you find the practice that brings you peace and happiness.

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