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Author(s): John B. Cobb, Jr.

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Buddhist Emptiness and the Christian God

John B. Cobb, Jr.

ABSTRACT

It is often assumed that since the ultimate is understood by Buddhists to be Emptiness and by Christians to be God, Emptiness and God must be competing interpretations or designations of the same reality. There may, instead, be diverse ultimates. The quest for the ultimate in India first led to Brahman; in the West, to Being. Buddhism dissolved Brahman into Emptiness. In this century Being has been dissolved into the being of beings or what Whitehead calls creativity. There are other traditions, especially Judaism and Confucianism which have sought the ultimate as the ground or principle of rightness. Unlike Judaism and Confucianism, Christianity stresses that true rightness can be attained only as a gift, but Christianity does not thereby turn away from the principle of rightness. On the contrary, this principle is the giver. In both the Judeo-Christian and Confucian traditions, there have been efforts to assimilate the metaphysical ultimate to the ultimate of rightness, but the resultant syntheses have proved unstable. Nevertheless, in Christianity the idea of God was long associated with such a synthesis. With the dissolution of the metaphysical Being into the being of beings and with the collapse of the synthesis between Being or being and the principle of rightness, the idea of God has become problematic. It is best to reaffirm its identification with the principle of rightness; for worship is directed to this. The metaphysical ultimate is realized rather than properly worshipped. God can then be recognized as categorically distinct from being or creativity or Emptiness. The question now is how faith in God is related to the realization of Emptiness. God can be conceived as the supreme and everlasting Empty One in distinction from Emptiness as such, thus as the one cosmic Buddha. The realization of Emptiness is the realization of oneself as an instance of dependent co-origination or the concrescence of all things. This is often held to be beyond the distinction of good and evil, right and wrong. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the concern for rightness, the realization of Emptiness appears as a fulfilment of this principle. This can be explained if we assume that God as the principle of rightness participates in every instance of

John B. Cobb, Jr., is Inghram Professor of Theology in the School of Theology at Claremont and Avery Professor of Religion in the Claremont Graduate School. He is director of the Center for Process Studies. Prof. Cobb wrote this paper while a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

dependent co-origination, that to be empty is to be open to each element in the concrescence playing its own proper role, and that God's proper role is to guide the concrescence. In this case, the realization of Emptiness is at the same time conformation to the principle of rightness. It may be that faith in God as conformation to the principle of rightness can also lead to the realization of Emptiness.

MY topic is quite ambitious: it is the ultimate. In Buddhism the ultimate is often designated as Emptiness. In Christendom, at least traditionally, the ultimate has been declared to be God. One view of this situation is that Emptiness and God are but two names of the same reality, such that understanding between East and West is a matter of clarifying terminology. Another view is that these two names express opposing views of what the one ultimate reality is. In that case we can either engage in disputation or seek some sort of dialectical reconciliation. My own view is that Emptiness and God name two quite different ultimates to which we are related in two quite different ways. Indeed, there may be still other ultimates, such as the Whole or Cosmos, in relation to which segments of humanity have taken their bearings. If so, the question is whether human beings can develop their relations to this multiplicity of ultimates in ways that are not mutually exclusive. In this paper this question will be pressed only in terms of the Buddhist and Christian ultimate.

I propose to develop my position as follows. First, I will consider briefly the quest for the ultimate as it has led to Being in the West and to Brahman in the East. I will note how in Buddhism and in twentieth century philosophy Brahman or Being has been dissolved into Emptiness. Second, I will discuss the sense of rightness as pointing to another ultimate that has come most clearly to expression in Confucianism and Judaism. I will evaluate the efforts that have been made by the heirs of these traditions to assimilate the metaphysical ultimate to this ultimate principle of rightness. Third, I will consider the status of the idea of God in light of the dissolution of the ultimate into two ultimates, urging its renewal as a designation of the principle of rightness. Fourth, I will consider whether the realization of Emptiness and faith in God are mutually exclusive states, or whether they can be achieved in unity.

I. Being and Emptiness

Our efforts to understand reality in the West have led us again and again to dualism. This has grown out of our preoccupation with the subjective experience of the external object. The visual experience of a table, for example, has been a typical starting point of philosophical inquiry. This experience readily lends itself to analysis in terms of the one who sees and the entity that is seen. The one who sees is the subject; what is seen is the object. The subject is mental, the object, physical or material. The world, therefore, seems to be made up of mind and matter.

The philosophical problems generated by dualism are notorious. Hence Western philosophy is full of efforts to escape dualism. The easiest ways are by

declaring the primacy either of the mental or of the material. Either mind can be viewed as the one source and locus of the data that are interpreted as matter, or mind can be viewed as an epiphenomenal by-product of changes in position of material particles. In these ways we can achieve idealist and materialist monisms, but since the ideal and the material are defined against each other, the taint of dualism is in fact not overcome.

There has been in the West a deeper response to the threat of dualism, a response which probes behind the differences between mind and matter to what they have in common. If both mental and material entities *are*, then what they have in common is existence or being. The tendency in the West is often to suppose that this only means that existence or being names what is ultimate in the hierarchy of abstractions. That is, whereas only some entities are characterized by such particular qualities as squareness or redness, and whereas on the dualistic view thinking and extension are mutually exclusive characterizations of entities, existence or being characterizes all. But to view existence or being as simply the most abstract of characteristics, so abstract that it can be predicated of all things, is to misunderstand. Existence or being is not one more characteristic or essence that can be posited of things. It is that by virtue of which anything whatever can be posited. Hence it is related to things in a way totally different from the way in which abstractions or essences or forms are related to them. These differentiate types of things, but no combination of forms constitutes an existent thing: it constitutes only a more complex form. The existence of the existing thing is an entirely different matter. Hence existence as such, or being itself, is the ultimate reality by and through which every particular entity is or exists as qualified in its distinctive way.

The recognition of being itself as beyond and above all dualism and indeed all distinctions has played an important role in human thought. It is perceived as radically superior to all contingent things that have their being only through it. All things that exist only by participation or derivation from being itself, whereas being itself is unaffected by them. As that by virtue of which all things are, as the ground of the being of all beings, it appears as infinitely more excellent than even the greatest being could be. It is absolute, immutable, omnipotent, and ineffable.

In the East the admiration for pure being went even further. As Brahman, its contrast with all contingent things led to viewing these things not merely as phenomenal but even as unreal or illusory. The goal for human life could be construed as release from involvement in this unreal and illusory world so as to be one with the real and changeless Brahman. This release could be affected by the realization of the identity of the being of the self and the being of all things.

Western mysticism at times came close to this position. Meister Eckhart identified being with the Godhead, and he was able to realize his own identity with this Godhead. But he did not draw conclusions about the unreality or illusoriness of the world comparable in their negations to those that can be found in the school of Sankara.

The point of these brief comments is to argue that the ultimate of metaphysical thought and of mysticism is one. In the Hindu tradition this is clear; for the greatest metaphysicians and the greatest mystics are often one. In the West it is less clear, but Rudolf Otto has pointed out how closely Meister Eckhart follows the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. This unity suggests that critics of metaphysics are wrong when they suppose that it deals only with abstractions remote from human experience. On the contrary, insofar as metaphysics penetrates to the ground of the being of beings it moves in tandem with the mystical penetration into ultimate reality. Metaphysics and mysticism inform one another. Mystical experience seems to confirm the metaphysical vision of Being Itself, the Ground of Being, or Brahman underlying and transcending the world of flux and expressing itself in that world.

The mystical literature both of the West and of Hinduism is full of negations as well as affirmations. Being or Brahman is utterly other than all things of which we can think, for all concepts are of forms rather than of being itself. Our habit of conceptual thinking can be broken only by repeated negations of all our efforts to conceive. The appeal can only be to intuition or experiential realization. Nevertheless, the mysticism of Being and of Brahman employs negations in support of affirmation. Being is not real as contingent things are real, but this is because it has an eminently superior reality of a wholly different order. Being is no-thing, because to be a thing is to be finite, and Being is without limitations of any kind. Being is empty in that it lacks all definition by forms; for such definition too is a mark of limitation and finitude.

Nevertheless, in Western and Hindu mysticism the negation served the cause of the affirmation of ultimate reality as Being or Brahman, the infinite source or ground of all things. Buddhism, on the other hand, from its origins insisted that the quest for the source or ground of things is idle, and this quickly came to be understood to imply that there is no such ground. Ultimate reality is not Being but Nothingness, Nirvana.

Even this was not radical enough to undergird the Buddhist requirement of total detachment. Nirvana could still be viewed as a blessed state or condition to be discovered or attained in contrast with the misery of Samsara, the phenomenal world. As long as this duality was allowed, one could be repelled by Samsara and crave Nirvana. Hence in the Madhyamika school, the distinction of Nirvana and Samsara was also negated, and in the Mahayana vision the identity of these opposites became fundamental. Nirvana is Samsara and Samsara is Nirvana; for both Nirvana and Samsara are "sunya" or empty. All that is, is Emptiness.

The dissolution of Being into Emptiness is also a dissolution of metaphysics into the language of things and of mysticism into the sheer immediacy of the world. We may, as a result, speak of the Buddhist denial or rejection of Being, of metaphysics, and of mysticism. But this would be misunderstood in the West where such denial usually arises by refusing the questions and the experiential probing that lead to Being, to metaphysics, and

to mysticism. Buddhism overcomes Being by its analysis, metaphysics by metaphysical subtlety, and mysticism by mystical discipline. Hence it will be less confusing to continue to speak of Being, metaphysics, and mysticism, recognizing that in the Buddhist penetration they are dissolved and transformed.

The dissolution of Being into Emptiness is not designed to restore primacy to the finite things and events. Just as for Western and Hindu metaphysics and mysticism the finite things and events are nothing but expressions of Being; so for Buddhism they are nothing but expressions of Emptiness. Disengagement from attachment to things is as strong in Buddhism as in Hinduism. But this disengagement is not for the sake of a new engagement with ultimate reality. The ultimate that comes to expression in things, events, or experiences is Emptiness.

These Buddhist assertions are, and are intended to be, mind-boggling. As Buddhists insist, there is no simple way to explain them to those of us who have not experientially realized their truth. Still, much can be said, and I will try to indicate what I have understood or believe myself to have understood. What does it mean to say that an event, such as a moment of human experience, is empty?

First, it is empty of substance. There is no underlying self or "I" that unites separate moments of experience. Even in the single moment there is no subject to which the experience occurs. The happening of the experience brings into being the only subject that in any sense exists, and this subject is nothing other than the happening.

Second, the experience lacks all possession. That which makes up the experience does not belong to the experience. Its constituent elements are given to it. The experience is nothing but the coming together of that which is other than the experience.

Third, the experience is empty of form. It does not possess a form which it imposes on what constitutes it. The form is nothing but the result of the constitution, which is carried out by the constituting elements.

Fourth, it is empty of being. There is not, in addition to the coming together of the constituting elements something else which is the being of the new experience. Those constituting elements become the new experience, or rather, this becoming is the experience. Further, these elements, in their turn do not have being; for they in their turn are empty in the same way. There is no being—only Emptiness.

This explanation indicates that the Emptiness of an experience is the obverse side of the mode of its constitution. This mode is called *pratitya-samutpada* or dependent co-origination. That is, all the elements jointly constitute the new event which is then an element in the constitution of others. Both as event and as an element in other events it is empty.

The doctrine of Emptiness is not developed for the purpose of destroying all possible happiness and engendering bleak pessimism. On the contrary, it is developed to encourage the attainment of bliss through experiential realization of Emptiness. Indeed, there is no doubt that Buddhism succeeds in

leading its adepts into a state of remarkable serenity and inner peace. Furthermore, just because all events are empty, they are also spontaneous and free.

The serenity and spontaneity attained by realization of Emptiness do not lead away from the awareness of what is occurring in one's world or reduce effectiveness of action. On the contrary, Buddhist meditation has been cultivated successfully for the sake of greater effectiveness in normal life. The Buddhist adept is able to be aware of every feature of her or his environment, responding to it freshly with enjoyment and appreciation without imposing upon it any meaning or emotional tone not immediately derived from it. Recent tests have vindicated this claim. In most meditative states persons are shown to respond differentially to stimuli. If a simple stimulus is frequently repeated, they respond with strong emotion initially, but eventually they become accustomed to it and do not respond at all. In a state of Zen meditation, however, persons respond to each repetition of the stimulus identically.

I mention this recent verification of Buddhist claims, not because Buddhist metaphysics is thereby proven, but to make it clear that we are not simply playing word-games. The experiential realization of being as Emptiness has definite effects, experienced as salvific by those who know them inwardly, and profoundly impressive to observers.

My knowledge of comparative religious practice and the results is not sufficient to allow me to judge between Western-Hindu mysticism and Buddhist meditation. But whereas until recently Western thought tended to support the view of being as Being Itself and the Ground of Being, in the twentieth century it has engaged in a dissolution of Being comparable to that of Buddhism. Hence there is special importance today in the encounter with Buddhism.

This reference to twentieth century development is especially focused on Martin Heidegger and Alfred North Whitehead. It is Heidegger who has done the major work in recovering for Western thought the question of being. It is he who has insisted upon the ontological difference between being and beings and worked through the history of Western philosophy in terms of his cognitive-experiential grasp of this difference. The results follow Buddhism in the insistence that there is no Being other than the being of the beings, and he goes far toward ridding this being of substantial character. Like Buddhism, he has dissolved metaphysics as onto-theo-logic.

Whitehead's work is remarkably compatible with that of Heidegger. He noted that every philosophy requires an ultimate that is actual only in its instantiations. In *Science and the Modern World* he called this ultimate "substantial activity," and he related it specifically to Spinoza's substance. But by the time he wrote *Process and Reality* the note of substantiality was gone. The ultimate is creativity, and creativity is nothing other than the many becoming one and being increased by one. Creativity is neither a being nor Being. It is remarkably like the ancient Buddhist dependent co-origination.

II. The Principle of Rightness

The dissolution of Being itself into Emptiness highlights the presence in the history of religions of another ultimate. Alongside the drive to go beyond the conditioned multiplicity of things to their common ground, which turns out to be groundlessness, there is another drive rightly to order action and experience. One finds this concern reflected in all the religious literatures of humankind, although in the religions of India it seems to be finally subordinated to the other concern for release through experiential realization of ultimate reality. In Judaism and in Confucianism it is paramount.

The rightness in question expresses itself in diverse ways. There is a rightness of style or form, propriety, appropriateness, good judgment, wisdom. Only in special circumstances is it expressed in clear-cut moral dualities of "ought" and "ought not." More often it functions as a discrimination of excellence from mediocrity. Still it is always bound up with norms of conduct that are broadly ethical.

It is particularly instructive to the Westerner to observe the struggle of the two ultimates in China. The first is represented by Taoism and is supported and strengthened subsequently by Buddhism. In Taoism efforts to improve society or to mold moral character are either ridiculed or viewed as clearly secondary to the fundamental goal of human beings, the realization of Tao. The embodiment of the second ultimate in Confucianism led to occasional attacks upon the escapism and amorality of Taoism. For the Confucian the goal must be rightly to order individual life and through it the corporate life. Moral considerations should never be subordinated to a mystical fulfillment of the private individual. They are as ultimate for the Confucian as is the unnamable Tao for the Taoist. But they are a radically different kind of ultimate.

Confucian thought was directed primarily to social theory and ethics. Hence it did not depend on agreed clarification of the metaphysical status of the ground or principle of rightness. Nevertheless, even a cursory reading of the texts allows one to say that in an important sense this principle is both immanent and transcendent for most Confucian thinkers. It is immanent in that it can be found by the sage through self-knowledge. The sense of rightness is a part of lived experience. We can grow in our ability to discern it well and to conform ourselves to it. But it is not imposed on us by alien authority. It is our own deepest nature.

At the same time, rightness is transcendent. It is not transcendent in the sense of having to be revealed or existing apart from human experience. But it is transcendent in that it is not created or chosen by human beings. It is given for us. It belongs to the nature of reality. It is prior to our acknowledgment of it or conformity to it. We individually derive it from beyond ourselves, and societies derive it from beyond themselves. The source or ground of its presence in our experience and nature is its prior characterization of heaven or of Tao. In its ultimacy it commands respect and even devotion, and that devotion is directed toward the cosmic ground of what is within.

All of this is familiar to the Westerner. Only in the last century have we come to see how even the most immanent interpretations of Western morality have in fact grounded themselves upon the transcendent. For only in the last century have we had radical critics of this transcendence who have argued that all appraisal of rightness is in fact a creation of norms rather than a recognition of a rightness already there. Kant's "moral law within" is as transcendent of human choice as is the prophet's "Thus says the Lord." The question is how to understand this transcendence. And to this question there has been far greater attention in the West than in China.

In Christianity there has been a transcending of morality. But this transcendence of morality should not be confused with the mystical transcending. In Paul morality is transcended because the effort to be righteous fails, not because being righteous is unimportant. What comes in the place of human fulfillment of the requirements of rightness is true righteousness as a gift. This involves conceiving of the principle of rightness as giving what it demands so that the believer can live out of this gift. It does not involve turning from the ultimate source of rightness to another ultimate that is beyond, or indifferent to, the distinctions of better and worse.

Just as it has proved possible to ignore and even to deny the metaphysical and mystical ultimate, so also it has proved possible to ignore and deny the ultimate of rightness. Cognitive confusion about both ultimates has contributed its share to the "positivistic" spirit. Nevertheless, these denials, however brilliant and important they have been, are best seen as phases in the process of cleansing our thought of these ultimates from conceptual accretions. Both remain present and functioning in human life when unrecognized, and in new forms they are recognized again and again. Our present experience as much as that of any previous epoch witnesses to the presence of a rightness in things more or less conformed to, just as the deepest intellectual and experiential penetration leads to the realization of a being that is Emptiness.

Clarification of each of the two ultimates and of what each means for human existence has taken place in separate traditions. I have suggested that the metaphysical-mystical ultimate is most fully clarified precisely in that tradition in which it is most fully freed of the last remnants of substantiality, namely Buddhism. But much can be learned of it in Hindu Brahmanism and Chinese Taoism as well. The ethical ultimate received its fullest development in the biblical and Confucian traditions.

In China the two ultimates were cultivated for centuries in partly separate traditions. Many Chinese embodied both in their lives, but an attempt at full synthesis in an inclusive philosophy awaited the advent of Neo-Confucianism. Chu Hsi is the greatest figure in this movement, and his synthesis can be treated in terms of the two concepts of T'ai-chi, the Great Ultimate, and Li, the principle of heaven and earth and the thousand things. Chu-Hsi declares that T'ai-chi is Li. This means that the metaphysical ultimate and the ultimate of rightness are one and the same. This identification does not, however, subordinate the directive character of Li to the transcendence of good and evil

of the metaphysical ultimate. On the contrary, in Chu Hsi the metaphysical ultimate is viewed as characterized by the directivity derived from the ultimate principle of rightness.

In the West contact between Jewish and metaphysical thinking quickly drove Jewish thought to the claim that the ultimate principle of rightness to which it was directed must also be the metaphysical ultimate. Philo is the first great figure in this synthesis, and he has been followed by the major traditions of Christian theology. This synthesis could not be postponed or avoided as in China, because already in its dealings with the ultimate principle of rightness Israel had identified this as the creator of heaven and earth, and her praise of this creator heaped upon him every superlative attribute. It would be unthinkable to allow another ultimate beside this one. In later Christian theology, notably that of St. Thomas, the metaphysical ultimate was recognized as *esse*, the act of being, or Being Itself, but in Jewish and Christian thought, as in that of Neo-Confucianism, the metaphysical ultimate is suffused with a directivity derived from the ultimate of rightness.

Hinduism and Buddhism have from the beginning dealt with the principle of rightness as well as with the metaphysical ultimate. In general, however, they have done so by distinguishing levels of human existence and attainment. The level at which considerations of rightness are relevant is finally transcended by the level at which the metaphysical ultimate is experientially realized. This final subordination of the ethical to the metaphysical is unacceptable to Confucianists and to heirs of the biblical tradition.

The question that confronts us now is whether the synthesis of the two ultimates effected in Neo-Confucianism and in most Western theology can be vindicated. Does the directivity in things, the orientation toward rightness, arise out of the relation to the metaphysical ultimate, or is the metaphysical ultimate finally neutral? If it is neutral, then is the ethical ultimate in fact not ultimate at all? Or is there an ultimate that is just as ultimate in its way as the metaphysical ultimate but that differs fundamentally from it?

The history of both Neo-Confucianism and of Western thought reveals a fundamental instability in the efforts to identify the two ultimates as one. To show that would be to retrace the history of these traditions in a way for which I have neither the knowledge nor the time. But the work of Heidegger and Whitehead indicates that the Buddhist analysis of the metaphysical-mystical ultimate as Emptiness carries us more fully into truth than any other. This emptiness cannot be identified with the ultimate of rightness. Hence either the ultimacy of this ultimate must be denied, or we are left with a duality of ultimates.

III. God

In the two preceding sections the word God has been avoided because it carries such heavy freight of meaning that it is difficult to discuss topics dispassionately once it is introduced. However, it is time now to ask to what

this word has referred and what are its equivalents in other traditions and languages.

“God” is best used, first, to refer to whatever is worshipped. In this sense there are, superficially at least, many gods, and a god need have no ultimacy. But there is a drive in the act of worship itself to attribute ultimacy to what is worshipped, and this calls forth an effort to think through the specific object of worship to the ultimate that is worshipped in it. Hence “God,” wherever the thought functions strongly, tends to name what is felt in some important way to be ultimate.

That “God” belongs with worship not only leads to association with ultimacy but also with actuality or concreteness. Within the context of worship there is a strong tendency to personalize the divine. But this tendency comes into tension with the other tendency toward ultimacy. What is actual, concrete, or personal seems always necessarily delimited and therefore limited. What is ultimate is more easily conceived as principle than as personality.

One solution to this problem is to hold that all worship is in fact directed to the metaphysical ultimate, but that it is psychologically necessary for all except the mystic to worship this ultimate through particular embodiments. The word God then can continue to attach to the supreme embodiment or embodiments of the ultimate, and some other word, such as “Godhead,” can name the ultimate itself. This usage in Meister Eckhart was noted in Section I. It corresponds to the relation of Isvara and Brahman in Sankara, and to the relation of the Buddhas to the Buddha-nature or Emptiness in much Buddhist thought.

In Confucian thought much less attention is given to the object of worship, but this could be identified as T'ai-yi, the Great One. In the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Chu Hsi, the Great One is explicitly identified with Li, the principle of rightness that functions as the directivity of all things. Li is also identified with the metaphysical ultimate, T'ai-chi, but in such a way that the metaphysical ultimate is assimilated to the ethical rather than the reverse. Hence, the God of Confucianism is the principle of rightness which may or may not also be viewed as metaphysically ultimate. The reality of God for Confucianism is bound up with the reality of a principle of rightness that is transcendent as well as immanent. But because worship is of minor importance to the Confucian, the identification of this principle as God is optional.

In the West God has meant the Ultimate, and the Ultimate has been both ethically and metaphysically ultimate. Hence belief in God faces a crisis when the one Ultimate is divided into two. The crisis has been precipitated especially by Heidegger, whose profound investigation of being led him to the conclusion that being is not God. If theologians are to continue to speak of God, they must identify God in another way. Heidegger lent his blessing to the proposal of Heinrich Ott that God is to faith as being is to thought, but this suggestive opening to a new mode of theology has thus far not been developed among Heideggerians.

On the contrary, the most influential philosophical theologian of our century, Paul Tillich, in spite of Heidegger's warning, identified God with Being. He recognized with Heidegger that this meant that God is not in any sense a being. Hence he was forced to remove from the idea of God much that had clung to the earlier understanding of Being when *esse* had been assimilated to an established understanding of deity. That is, in Tillich the classical identification of God and Being was continued, but whereas in Thomism the understanding of Being has been assimilated to the understanding of God, in Tillich the understanding of God was assimilated to the understanding of Being.

The contrast here should not be exaggerated. The understanding of God in philosophical theology had long been profoundly affected by its assimilation of Being. And in Tillich the understanding of Being as the Ground of Being and Depth of Being and much of his rhetoric and even doctrine shows the influence of an understanding of God shaped by the principle of rightness. Nevertheless, once the ontological difference between being and beings is unequivocally accepted, as it is by Tillich, the reversal is in principle effected.

The English theologian, John Macquarrie, made still more explicit and specific use of Heidegger's renewal of the understanding of being. He freed being largely from the connotations of Ground of Being and Depth of Being that reflected Schelling and the Protestant mystics rather than Heidegger. Certainly much that he says about God as Being betrays the tension between the principle of rightness and the metaphysical ultimate. But he goes one step further in displaying the cost to Christianity of the identification of God with the metaphysical ultimate as this is progressively freed from the connotations of the principles of rightness. Although this kind of theological response to Heidegger continues, it appears to have decreasing power.

Whitehead agreed with Heidegger that the metaphysical ultimate is not God. This ultimate, creativity, was nevertheless appropriated by some of those influenced by him as God. Usually they coordinated his doctrine of creativity with that of Henry Nelson Wieman, thus restoring to it the association with the principle of rightness from which his own analysis freed it. Nevertheless, since Whitehead not only allowed and encouraged a different identification of God but himself developed it, Whitehead's primary theological influence has been the emergence of a school, process theology, that dissociates God from the metaphysical ultimate.

Even within the mainstream of process theology, however, the dissociation has been very incomplete. Charles Hartshorne has engaged more in a new interpretation of the metaphysical ultimate that introduces process into it than in a dissolution of the historic identification of the ultimate of metaphysics with the ultimate principle of rightness. For years I struggled to subordinate creativity to God, rather than to allow their radical difference to stand out clearly. It has required an encounter with Eastern thought to clarify the religious meaning of the work of both Heidegger and Whitehead and to force the issue of God. When that issue is forced, at least within process

theology, but also wherever biblical faith is primary, God must be identified with the principle of rightness rather than with the metaphysical ultimate. The problem for Christian theology is then the right understanding of this principle in its purity and distinctness instead of the effort to unite with it the metaphysical ultimate. To this task Whitehead has himself made a contribution whose full meaning has not yet been grasped or appropriated by his followers.

IV. The Realization of Emptiness and Faith in God

The analysis thus far has been primarily designed to show that an adequate account of the deepest level of human experience requires us to recognize that there are two ultimates, the metaphysical ultimate and the ultimate principle of rightness. I have also argued that the metaphysical ultimate is best understood precisely in its dissolution into dependent co-origination or Emptiness, and that the principle of rightness is properly designated as God.

The discussion has shown that the affirmation of these two ultimates is not contradictory. Indeed, the double affirmation is allowed and clarified in Heidegger and actually developed in Whitehead. Heidegger's being and Whitehead's creativity correspond remarkably with Buddhist Emptiness. And Whitehead has developed a cosmology in which God as the principle of rightness is clearly distinguished from and related to creativity as the metaphysical ultimate.

It is not so evident, however, that Buddhism can allow this dual ultimate. The question posed by Buddhism to this affirmation of God is whether it fully recognizes that God, too, insofar as God is, must be empty. That would mean recognizing that God does not possess a being different in kind from the being of other entities, which has been displayed as Emptiness. God, too, must be empty, just as the self, and all things are empty—empty of substantiality or own-being, and lacking in any given character of their own. God like all things must be an instance of dependent co-origination.

Whitehead's doctrine of God is open to this interpretation. God, like all things, is an instance of creativity, that is, of the many becoming one, which is his formulation of dependent co-origination. God is as much a creature of creativity as is any other entity, and God is not an exception to the categories. The principle of universal relativity includes God. Furthermore, God as understood by Whitehead supremely embodies the characteristics that follow from enlightenment. Accordingly God may be conceived as the totally enlightened one, the supreme and everlasting Buddha.

Whereas the unenlightened one discriminates, accentuating some stimuli and shutting out others, the enlightened one receives all for just what they are. Whereas the unenlightened one juxtaposes self-interest and the good of others, the enlightened one is equally benevolent toward all. Emptiness is freedom from all distorting perceptions and concerns and perfect openness to all that is, human and nonhuman alike.

Whitehead conceives God in much this way. God is constituted by the progressive unification of all actuality with all possibility. Each actuality and every possibility is allowed to be just what it is in the process of dependent co-origination or concrescence. God is indiscriminately benevolent towards all. There are no distortions in God's perceptions and concerns preventing God's perfect openness toward all that is, human and nonhuman alike. Thus "God" can be freed from the note of substantiality and dualism that makes this concept offensive to the Buddhist. Whether Buddhists can accept the remaining distinction between the one cosmic Buddha, the ultimate principle of rightness, and the many creaturely Buddhas is not yet clear.

Religiously some such acceptance seems to function in some Buddhist schools. The Christian conviction that personal trust in God, present in the world as Christ, is essential to salvation is paralleled in those Buddhist schools that teach salvation by the power of the Other, especially Amida Buddha, rather than by one's own efforts. Nevertheless, there is a profound difference.

For the Buddhists, even in those schools that emphasize total dependence on the power of the Other, the goal is that of enlightenment, or the realization of the ultimate reality of one's situation. This is the realization of the identity of one's true self as the Emptiness that is open to be filled by everything impartially. For Christians the goal is for the self to be progressively conformed to the gracious promptings or call of God, trusting the creative outcome of that surrender of the resistant selfhood to the divine wisdom and purpose.

We can now see that either goal is attainable, or rather that either may be approximated. For the Buddhist, even the Buddhist who stresses faith in the Other, the final goal is to attain freedom from the other power in becoming oneself a Buddha. For the Christian the final goal is to experience freedom as the perfect conformation to God, the principle of rightness.

When compared with ordinary states of self-centeredness, anxiety, isolation, and ambition, the Buddhist and Christian goals seem very much alike. But they overcome our ordinary pettiness and misery in fundamentally distinct ways. The differences can be stated as follows. Buddhists realize that they are at each and every moment, and hence without qualification, instances of dependent co-origination or, in Whitehead's language, concrescent processes. The actual standpoint of experience is never that of a completed entity, whereas all of our conceptuality, even about ourselves, turns us into such entities. This actual, existential realization frees the concrescent process of distortion and illusion, and it opens experience to what is as it is. Christians on the other hand, attend to God's aim for the concrescence, a directivity toward rightness that is the divine immanence in the concrescent process. This aim is both at an immediate achievement in that concrescence and at its appropriate effects beyond itself. These effects are upon other events and especially upon other human experiences.

I have tried to show in this presentation that the respective attainments of Buddhism and Christianity are not contradictory, but that they yet differ profoundly. Christians can agree that what is ultimate in the metaphysical

sense is dependent co-origination, the many becoming one, creativity, or concrescence as such. They can understand, therefore, why metaphysicians and mystics have so often pushed through and past God to the metaphysical-mystical ultimate which can be called Being, Brahman, or Godhead. But they need not be intimidated. Buddhism teaches that this ultimate is indeed devoid of form and beyond good and evil, as mystics have often said. It is exemplified without discrimination in a cockroach, a human child, God, and an atomic explosion. It is not evident that this is the one ultimate that should guide all human attention, effort, and reflection. If there is importance in the shape that dependent co-origination or concrescence takes, if it matters whether the universe is full of life or allowed to die, then we should attend to God, God is not that ultimate that is actual only in its instantiations, but God is the ultimate instantiation of the ultimate. It is meaningless to speak of Emptiness as superior to God or of God as superior to Emptiness. They are incommensurable.

In this way the encounter with Buddhist Emptiness can free Christians to distinguish the Emptiness of God from the Emptiness which is the Godhead, without claiming for God the kind of ultimacy that belongs to Emptiness or to Godhead as such. But a still deeper question remains. How are Christians to relate themselves to that other form of human realization and perfection exemplified so purely in Buddhist enlightenment? Having recognized the possibility and reality of this fulfillment as well as its difference from Christian trust in God, are they to envy it in its superiority, condemn it as an inferior rival, recognize it as a legitimate option to be chosen by those so inclined, or attempt to appropriate it?

The argument of this paper counts against the first two of these options. That is, it finds no neutral grounds from which the respective worth of the two ultimates can be appraised. It opposes any claim to superiority between them. This implies that the orientation of human beings may be equally to Emptiness or to God. World history shows that the results of both orientations have been impressive, despite all their ambiguities, and that each exercises a certain attraction on the practitioners of the other. But the argument thus far has left fully open the question whether we are confronted here by existentially exclusive alternatives or whether this duality can in turn be transcended.

There are encouraging indications that the duality can be transcended. The hope that a synthesis of Buddhist and Christian achievements is possible is strengthened by the observation that the Buddhist saint appears to live and act as the Christian would expect one to live and act who is fully responsive to God. Although there is much talk of transcending the duality of good and evil, and although cheap imitations of Buddhism sometimes lead to amorality and immorality, authentic Buddhism does not have this character. The result of transcending the duality of good and evil is a pure and spontaneous goodness. It seems that when all discrimination and objectifying conceptualization are overcome, when one realizes what is as it is, the resultant concrescent process conforms effortlessly, without naming it, to the divine impulse.

Much Buddhist literature, indeed, witnesses to the conviction that Emptiness is not really neutral toward rightness. For example, in the treatment of the *Dharmakaya*, the Buddha-body or Buddha-nature, which is the truth and reality of all things, Buddhist writers employ notions of rightness, and especially of wisdom and compassion. Also, they attribute to the *Dharmakaya* the effecting of good works in those who realize it. Although the personalistic and value-laden language may be interpreted as a concession to popular understanding, it reflects a deep sense that what is realized in the realization of the metaphysical ultimate has its directivity toward wisdom and compassion.

This can be understood in terms of the double ultimate discussed above. Ultimate reality is the process of dependent co-origination in which the many that constitute the given world become a new, but ephemeral and insubstantial, one. Among these many, one is God, functioning in all things as a directivity toward rightness. The Buddhist who is completely empty is by that token completely open. To be completely open is to allow each element in the many to be what it is in the new one, that is, to function appropriately according to its own potentiality. To allow God so to function is to be spontaneously formed by the rightness appropriate in that moment. Thus to be truly open is to be spontaneously good. By being wholly indifferent to right and wrong the Buddhist achieves a perfect conformation to the immanent principle of right. It seems, therefore, that Buddhist enlightenment contains a synthesis of the two ultimates.

There is also a Christian approach to this synthesis. This is through attention to the principle of rightness. The Christian goal is to achieve sensitivity and responsiveness to the inner promptings of God. Spiritual discipline consists in discerning the spirits so as to discriminate the divine urge from the many other urges that affect us. Response to this directivity leads away from concern primarily with oneself to a broader concern and to sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others. In short, it leads toward openness to what occurs as it occurs and to self-constitution that is appropriate thereto. Perhaps when this is combined with the recognition that the reality of the self *is* this dependent co-origination, what is achieved through cultivated responsiveness to the directivity that is God's presence will converge with what is achieved through Buddhist enlightenment.