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The One Vehicle of Emancipation: Buddhism and Other Religions

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Abstract

Buddhism appears exceptional in lacking any conventional notion of God, which is something that distinguishes practically every other religious tradition. However, while any strict form of theism is absent from its standpoint, it clearly espouses—in a number of its schools—the notion of an ultimate reality that is wholly transcendent, yet fully immanent in the world. Furthermore, its unique understanding of the Absolute provides a glimpse into how Buddhists might regard the significance and purpose of humanity's other spiritual dispensations, without feeling compelled to reject them altogether. By examining some of its key doctrinal foundations, it will be argued that Buddhism—the Mahāyāna in particular—can shed light on the plurality of religions by focusing on what is most essential and universal in our longing for liberation.

Key words: Buddhism, Perennial Philosophy, Comparative Religion, Metaphysics

The reality-body of the Buddha is inconceivable: colorless, formless, beyond any image, yet able to manifest myriad forms for sentient beings, causing them to see according to their inclinations.

– *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*¹

The Perfectly Enlightened One is filled with compassion toward living beings, protects living beings, and looks equally upon all living beings as if he were looking upon his own son Rāhula. He creates rooms and houses of refuge for them.

– *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*²

Verily We sent messengers before thee, among them those of whom We have told thee, and some of whom We have not told thee.

– Qur’ān 40:78

In my Father’s house there are many mansions.

– John 14:2

Introduction

It might seem puzzling that one would undertake a study of Buddhism’s attitude to other religions, when this tradition appears exceptional in being devoid of any conventional notion of God (something that distinguishes practically every other faith).³ However, while any strict form of theism is absent from its purview, it clearly espouses—in a number of its schools—the notion of an ultimate reality that is wholly transcendent, yet fully immanent in the

¹ Cleary (1993), 195.

² Blum (2013), 3.

³ Nevertheless, the Buddha and his disciples had “no hard, cold, mechanistic and materialist view of the universe. They assumed, as a matter of course, that there was a great spiritual power driving through all things as through themselves. Buddhism cannot therefore be regarded as mere atheism.” Woodward (1925), xv.

world.⁴ Furthermore, its unique understanding of the Absolute is such that it affords insights into how Buddhists might regard the significance and purpose of humanity's other spiritual dispensations, without feeling compelled to reject them altogether.

By examining some of its key doctrinal foundations, it will be argued that Buddhism can shed light on the plurality of religious perspectives⁵ by focusing on what is most essential and universal in the human longing for liberation. While this might seem an overly ambitious or unconventional approach, it may well yield some fruitful observations.

In the world of academia, there are few who might be considered 'sages'; in other words, thinkers who have also been privy to a direct, living experience of the emancipating truths of the Dharma. Competent textual scholars, who are indispensable in providing reliable translations of classical texts, are often loath to embark on discussions related to the religious or metaphysical dimensions of the Buddhist faith in a positive and engaging manner. They would no doubt see that as the task of spiritual directors or pastoral guides.

Understandably, their default position tends to be very much sober, cautious, lukewarm, and often sceptical. We see, then, a certain measure of hesitation (even resistance) when it comes to venturing deeper insights that go beyond the strict boundaries of 'objective' scholarship, as commonly understood. Thus, they are inclined to frown upon any displays of spiritual commitment and authority, even

⁴ "What we really are is identical with the Absolute. It is assumed, first of all, that there is an ultimate reality and, secondly, that there is a point in ourselves at which we touch that reality ... also called Nirvāna ... defined as that which stands completely outside the sensory world of illusion and ignorance; a world inextricably interwoven with craving and greed." Conze (1959), 110.

⁵ "Truth is situated beyond forms, whereas revelation, or the tradition which derives from it, belongs to the formal order, and that indeed by definition; but to speak of form is to speak of diversity, and so of plurality." Schuon (1990), 25.

though the subjects of their research—the great saints and masters of the inner life—were, themselves, prone to this same partiality.

While this essay relies mostly on a discussion of primary sources, the views of modern authorities who are sympathetic to what is known as the ‘perennial philosophy’⁶ are cited throughout. One finds that, among the most adequate readings of the Dharma, are those from certain authors of this school. The demonstrable conformity of their commentaries with the traditional sources serves to disarm, in itself, many of the criticisms made by contemporary non-perennialist scholars, including those intent on ‘defending’ Buddhist orthodoxy.

We believe that the contributions of these proponents are apt to be more illuminating than voices that are simply critical or detached, whose antipathy may well be more than merely intellectual and, perhaps, largely bereft of a sapiential attitude. In any case, many of the objections directed at perennialists are regrettably facile and ill-informed caricatures that fail to acknowledge the spiritual nuance of their thought. Even so, a few reflections are offered in response to typical objections that have been raised, with particular reference to the insights of Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998).

The pertinent categories that will be explored in this essay are as follows: (i) the Dharma-Body (*Dharmakāya*),⁷ the highest reality considered in its formless aspect; (ii) *upāya* as compassionate ‘saving means’; (iii) the relativity of religious forms; and (iv) *anātman* as self-naughting. These salient features of Buddhist thought may serve to clarify how the world’s spiritual traditions share certain insights

⁶ “The *Philosophia Perennis* . . . embodies those universal truths to which no one people or age can make exclusive claim.” Coomaraswamy (1943), 4.

⁷ “The *Dharmakāya* is the immanent as well as transcendent truth or reality of all beings and appearances: the indestructible, timeless Absolute, the one essence in and behind all that was, is and will be. It is the bearer and object of enlightenment.” Schumann (1973), 102.

that form a bond between them, in contrast to ubiquitous forces in the world today that seek to undermine and subvert the sacred altogether.

Four Approaches Towards Convergence

i. The Dharma-Body

While no doubt a controversial thesis, it will be argued that every religion, whose goal is the spiritual welfare and deliverance of all beings, has its origin in a boundless reality known, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, as the Dharma-Body. This is the highest of the ‘three bodies’ (*trikāya*) of the Buddha, with the other two representing its manifestations, both transcendental (e.g., cosmic buddhas such as Amitābha or Vairocana) and corporeal (the historical buddha, Śākyamuni).⁸

According to the Pure Land Buddhist master, Tao-ch’o (562–645):

The Dharma-Body is formless and shapeless ... unseen and indescribable, having no abode, non-arising and non-perishing.⁹

This means that it is ultimately inconceivable and beyond rational demonstration, yet capable of being intuited and experienced directly via the faculty of *prajñā*, the highest form of wisdom¹⁰ or spiritual

⁸ “The Buddha is thus, on the one hand, an historical individual and, on the other, ... a completely unobstructed channel for the spiritual force of the dharma ... In this way, the individual called Gautama or Śākyamuni, somehow co-exists with the spiritual principle of Buddhahood which is variously called the *Tathāgata*, the *Dharma-body*, or *Buddha-nature*, although Buddhists have regarded the exact relation between the individual and the spiritual side of his being as incapable of definition.” Conze (1967), 68–69.

⁹ Inagaki (2004), 144–145.

¹⁰ “The perfection of wisdom is the ability to understand the essential properties of all processes and phenomena, their mutual relations, the conditions which bring about their rise and fall, and the ultimate unreality of their separate

intelligence.¹¹ While Buddhists discourage inordinate discussion of this ineffable reality—for fear of turning it into a concrete and graspable object—something must be said of it (albeit apophatically) to ensure that the danger of ‘reification’ is strictly avoided. But even with that caveat in mind, some authorities have gone further and made a significant claim about its nature. Seng-chao (378–414), a Chinese exponent of the ‘Three Treatise’ school in the tradition of Nāgārjuna (c.150–250), remarked:

The Dharma-Body has no form of its own and yet manifests various forms, corresponding to [the conditions and capacities of sentient beings]. The sound of the ultimate truth has no words and yet extensively unfolds scriptures of profound teachings.¹²

The importance of this insight cannot be overestimated. What is being claimed is that every conditioned form is grounded in the ‘Unconditioned’ (*asaṃskṛta*),¹³ and that every relative appearance¹⁴ in existence is rooted in the Absolute; also understood as the ‘Void’ (*śūnyatā*)¹⁵ in its supra-formal dimension. In other words, there is a

existence. At its highest point, it leads right into the Emptiness which is the one and only Reality.” Conze (1967), 65.

¹¹ “Metaphysical evidence takes precedence over ‘physical’ or ‘phenomenal’ certainty.” Schuon (1990), 15.

¹² Cited in Inagaki (1998), 262.

¹³ “Form is a revelation of essence.” Meister Eckhart (1924), 380 (Vol. 2).

¹⁴ “A Buddhist way needs to reveal the world’s insubstantial texture by highlighting the universal relativity of everything, but this must not be mistaken for nothingness, lest it lead to the exclusion of a mode of consciousness from which this very relativity might be contemplated. The doctrine of co-dependent origination accounts for such a possibility by asserting both the conditioned and the unconditioned that is inherent to recognizing the former.” Laude (2017), 76 [adapted].

¹⁵ “It might seem as if, by the use of the term *Void*, we must imply quiescence or a static condition but, on the contrary, this ‘void’ is something which is really the veritable ground of the universe; it is dynamic like a bow at full stretch, ready to shoot an arrow, ever in a state of tense potential activity, evolving from within its bosom all the differentiations of the diversified phenomena of the world.” Coates & Ishizuka (1930), xii-xiii.

unitary source—unthinkable in itself¹⁶—for all tangible manifestations in the phenomenal world, not a plurality of origins.

This is not to postulate some kind of eternal being over and above the flux of *samsāra* (our evanescent world of birth-and-death). A hallmark of early Buddhist thought was the notion that every compounded phenomenon arises co-dependently with others (*pratītya-samutpāda*). However, while this realm of contingency was clearly distinguished from the immutable, the Pāli texts do not speak of any relationship between them; this question had to await later developments in the East Asian traditions of the Mahāyāna.¹⁷ For example, Dōgen (1200–1253), founder of Sōtō Zen, eschews any kind of irreducible dualism when he asserts:

The entire range of phenomena are of the One Mind alone and nothing is excluded. All manifold phases of existence are equally of the One Mind and none differ from it.¹⁸

The potential of the Dharma-Body to manifest appearances,¹⁹ despite its unchanging essence, is seen throughout the Mahāyāna. According to Gishin (781–833), the first head of the Tendai school on Mount Hiei in Japan, “the Tathāgata is eternally quiescent yet its transformations permeate the universe”,²⁰ and Asaṅga (300–370) observed that “the Dharma-Body ... is not engendered by acts and passion, but is powerful in manifesting itself in conditioned

¹⁶ According to the *Diamond Sūtra* (Ch. 7), “truth is uncontainable and inexpressible.”

¹⁷ “The unfolding of Buddhist intellectuality, particularly in its Mahāyāna modalities and, most evidently, at a later stage—in Chinese readings of the Buddha- nature—was to be characterized by tendencies to bring the Absolute back to the center stage in a way that superseded the overall anti- absolutist orientation of its earlier teachings.” Laude (2017), 51 [adapted].

¹⁸ Cited in Hakeda (1967), p.112.

¹⁹ “To be detached from what appears is practically tantamount to a realization of what never disappears, of that which eternally transcends the realm of appearances.” Shah-Kazemi (2010), 57.

²⁰ Swanson (1995), p.101.

images”.²¹ The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* tells us that it is “pure, ever calm, manifesting all forms, yet without any signs, abiding this way everywhere in the world”²² and that, from it, “physical forms appear like reflections”.²³

While we may easily find parallels to this way of thinking in other Eastern traditions (e.g., “That which imparts form to forms is itself formless; therefore Tao cannot have a name”),²⁴ we also find corroboration in unexpected quarters. The Catholic priest and theologian Lorenzo Scupoli (1530–1610)—author of the influential work *Spiritual Combat*—had this to say:

Know that God is beyond all senses and sensory things, beyond all shape, colour, measure and place; is wholly without form and image and, while present in all things, is above them all; therefore, He is beyond all imagining.²⁵

And from the Persian Sufi poet Jāmī (1414–1492) we read:
The Loved One is quite colourless, O heart;
Be not engrossed with colours, then, O heart;
All colours come from what is colourless.²⁶

While many more comparable passages could be cited from across all religious traditions, considerations of space permit only a few representative examples. Bearing in mind this metaphysical framework, in which we see a non-dual emergence of particulars from a fundamental oneness that forever eludes the clutches of concepts and categories, further conclusions might be drawn.

It is not a far stretch to suggest that this notion can be extended—not just to material reality and psychological states—but also to salvific

²¹ Keenan (2003), p.104.

²² Cleary (1993), p.127.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁴ Giles (1889), 289

²⁵ Scupoli (1987), 148

²⁶ Jāmī (1906), 28.

forms themselves. To the extent that we may regard the great religions of the world as conveyors of illumination, transformation and a sacred wisdom,²⁷ then each of them can also be viewed as a unique coagulation arising from the indeterminate ‘fullness’ of the Void,²⁸ which assumes various manifestations in accordance with the temperaments, dispositions and limitations of human collectives.²⁹ In itself, the Absolute is clearly not ‘sectarian’ but rather the source of all possible means of liberating humanity as a whole.³⁰ In this sense, it can be regarded as “the true Light which, coming into this world, illumines everyone.” (John 1:9)

Given the exceptional heterogeneity of spiritual types, it is not surprising that—at the level of outward forms—there will be a superabundance of richly varied doctrines, practices and cultures corresponding to them. These cannot be reconciled at the stage in which diversification is most pronounced, considering the complex

²⁷ “And this wisdom is not made; but it is at this present, as it hath ever been, and so shall it ever be.” Saint Augustine (1912), 49.

²⁸ “The Void, therefore, is ‘empty’ only from the point of view of the false plenitude of the world, and of the reifying tendencies of human thought and language. In itself, it is infinite plenitude; in reality, it is the world, together with all its reified ramifications in thought, that is empty.” Shah-Kazemi (2010), 44–45.

²⁹ “The plurality of religions is no more contradictory than the plurality of individuals ... If humanity were not diverse, a single Divine individualization would suffice; but man is diverse, not only from the point of view of ethnic temperaments, but also from that of spiritual possibilities; the diverse combinations of these two things make possible and necessary the diversity of revelations.” Schuon (1982), 133.

³⁰ “Far from being jealous, like the God of the Jews, the Hermetic God is totally devoid of envy (*aphtonos* CH IV, 3; V, 2; XVI, 4), which means he is generous towards all beings and does not regard the various gods of humankind as rivals, but as his own emanations. Indeed, he is simultaneously ‘the only One and everything’ (CH XII, 8; XIII, 17, 18; XVI, 3) and ‘nothing exists which is not also him’, so that ‘he has all names because everything has gone forth from this only father’ (CH V, 10).” Jean- Pierre Mahé, ‘Hermetism and Gnosticism’ in Trompf (2019), 203–204.

and multifarious needs of each sphere of humanity.³¹ This reality is reflected, ‘exoterically’ speaking,³² in the following verse from the Qur’ān (5:48):

For each, We have appointed a law and a way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community ... Unto God ye will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differed.

Even so, when we consider ends rather than means, certain universal dimensions of the liberated state—common to many religious traditions—come into view, especially at a more inward or ‘esoteric’³³ level that transcends the particularities of confessional perspectives.³⁴ These will be considered later but, for now, the following declarations intimate how a rapprochement between competing faith claims might be possible when the spiritual path is envisaged as a vehicle for receiving emancipating truths.

There may be many paths, but they are all ways of illustrating the One Mind.

– Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645)³⁵

³¹ “The unity of the different religions is not only unrealizable on the external level, that of the forms themselves, but ought not to be realized at that level, even were this possible, for in that case the revealed forms would be deprived of their sufficient reason.” Schuon (1993), xxxiv.

³² “Exoterism never goes beyond the ‘letter’; it puts its accent on the Law—not on a realization of one kind or another—hence also on action and merit. It is essentially a ‘belief’ in ... dogma considered in its formal exclusiveness.” Schuon (2007), 78.

³³ “What characterizes esoterism ... is that on contact with a dogmatic system, it universalizes the symbol or religious concept on the one hand, and interiorizes it on the other; the particular or the limited is recognized as the manifestation of the principal and the transcendent, and this in turn reveals itself as immanent.” Schuon (2019), 26.

³⁴ “If you want to get at the kernel you must break the shell.” Meister Eckhart (2009), 409.

³⁵ Cited in Suzuki (1959), 104.

Every truth, by whomsoever spoken, is from the Holy Spirit.

– Saint Ambrose (339–397)³⁶

Like the bee, gathering honey from different flowers, the wise man accepts the essence of different scriptures, and sees only the good in all religions.

– *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 11.52³⁷

The esoteric teachings of Buddhism and the tenets of the outsiders are, after all, one and the same in essence. At a cursory glance, the latter may seem strange and incompatible with the former; yet, tactfully utilized, there is no conflicting difference at all between them.

– Isonokami no Yakatsugu (723–781)³⁸

ii. *Upāya*

The message of the Buddha directs itself to the fundamental problem of our human condition:

I teach only one thing – suffering and the release from suffering.

– *Majjhima Nikāya* I:130

To that end, he sought—like a good physician—to apply the appropriate remedy to the various emotional maladies that afflicted people, all of which he perceived to be spiritual in nature. In that sense, he did not seek to provide psychological ‘therapy’ in the worldly manner with which we are familiar today. The Buddha (or a bodhisattva) aims to uproot our torment at its source, by helping us to see the disorder in our hearts and minds; in doing so, a host of means are devised and adapted to each person’s individual circumstances.

³⁶ Cited by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1922), 30.

³⁷ Prabhavananda (1968), 216.

³⁸ Katō (1935), 67.

Thus arose the notion of *upāya* (‘expedient means’) where the emphasis is on the provisional³⁹—yet fully efficacious—nature of the truths being imparted, even though they fall short of disclosing reality in its unfathomable essence (*tathātā*); yet, sometimes, particular prominence is given to *upāya-kauśalya*, where the skillful nature of the adaptations required is being stressed.

‘Skill in means’ is the ability to bring out the spiritual potentialities of different people, by statements or actions which are adjusted to their needs and adapted to their capacity for comprehension ... Everything apart from the One, also called ‘Emptiness’⁴⁰ or ‘Suchness’,⁴¹ is devoid of real existence, and whatever may be said about it is ultimately untrue, false and nugatory. But nevertheless it is not only permissible, but even useful to say it, because the salvation of beings demands it.⁴²

In any case, the Mahāyāna teaches that ordinary people lack the wisdom to develop such means for the benefit of others; only awakened beings know what is required to bring the nescient to enlightenment.⁴³ According to the Pure Land master Shinran (1173–1263):

³⁹ One is reminded here of the Buddhist parable of the raft, which is abandoned after having crossed a river, in the same way that doctrine is set aside once the ‘Other Shore’ has been reached. (*Majjhima Nikāya* I. 134).

⁴⁰ “Emptiness does not mean ‘non-existence’ literally. It is usually understood in the sense of empty or devoid of a distinct, absolute, independent, permanent, individual entity or being, as an irreducible component in a pluralistic world.” Hakeda (1967), 36

⁴¹ *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* states: “From the beginning, Suchness in its nature is fully provided with all excellent qualities; namely, it is endowed with the light of great wisdom, the qualities of illuminating the entire universe, of true cognition and a mind pure in its self-nature ... of refreshing coolness, immutability and freedom.” Hakeda (1967), 65.

⁴² Conze (1993), 36–37.

⁴³ “What then is this Enlightenment ... which is the ultimate goal of a bodhisattva’s endeavours? It is a thorough and complete understanding of the nature and meaning of life, the forces that shape it, the method to end it, and the

The wish to save all beings⁴⁴ is the wish to carry them across the great ocean of birth-and-death ... it is the aspiration to bring all beings to the attainment of supreme *Nirvāṇa*; it is the heart of great love and great compassion ... which arises from the wisdom of immeasurable light.⁴⁵

This salvific activity is thus seen as the exemplary manifestation of supreme concern for suffering individuals.⁴⁶ The Buddha accepts us, without condemnation—in whatever condition we find ourselves—and applies the necessary guidance to provide relief from the ‘three poisons’ of greed, folly and anger. In this way, he “gladdens all sentient beings with the power of words and skillful means” (Lotus Sūtra).⁴⁷ By reaching out to us in a manner we can comprehend, this compassion seeks to communicate itself with a view to having us restored to a perfected state—in contrast to our current life of samsāric exile, where we find ourselves far from the true happiness to which we are rightful heirs.

It ought to be evident by now that, in the Mahāyāna or ‘Greater Vehicle’, this motivation to liberate all beings is supremely personal in nature, having a basis in the sacred itself. This is not some vague, cosmic force to which we need to align ourselves, after much struggle, but which never descends to our level. As Nāgārjuna

reality which lies beyond it ... a cognitive insight into that which transcends this fleeting world, and all the beings in it.” Conze (1967), 59.

⁴⁴ “Anyone who is surprised at the idea that the Buddha’s vow can save ‘all beings’ may well be equally surprised at the dogma according to which the Christ died ‘for all men’. The universal grace actualized by a supreme sacrifice cannot however become operative in either case except where it is welcomed.” Burckhardt (2009), 62.

⁴⁵ Shinran (1997), 463 (Volume I).

⁴⁶ “Compassion, even on the human plane, is not just a sentiment, it is an existential quality. This quality presupposes a concrete sense of participation in the suffering of others, as is expressed by the etymology of the word: *compassion* means to ‘suffer with’ another.” Shah-Kazemi (2010), 92.

⁴⁷ Kubo and Yuyama (2007), 33.

observed about the ‘enlightenment-beings’ that are dedicated to our spiritual welfare:

The essential nature of all bodhisattvas is a great loving heart and all sentient beings constitute the object of its love ... In order to emancipate them, bodhisattvas are inspired with great spiritual energy and mingle themselves in the filth of birth-and-death.⁴⁸

Taking into account the prodigious array of doctrines found in Buddhism, one might be forgiven for wondering what the crux might be of such evidently divergent teachings and practices. A response to this quandary is to consider that the very nature of *upāya* itself determines the fundamental orientation of the Buddha’s saving stratagems, whatever form they may take.⁴⁹

This leads to the remarkable conclusion that what is being offered is not just a set of doctrinal beliefs, but rather a *method* by which awakening can take place in each person, this being the subjective dimension of the emancipated state to which Buddhism gives particular emphasis. This recalls our earlier discussion, where the source of all truth, wisdom and compassion is grounded in an inconceivable and unconditioned reality.⁵⁰ Its essence cannot be pinned down or circumscribed,⁵¹ which means that there is no restriction in the range of forms it is able to assume for our benefit.

⁴⁸ Cited in Suzuki (1907), 292 & 293.

⁴⁹ “The sacred scriptures inform us that the Buddha makes use of every means to save creatures and that he speaks to each being in a language it can understand, if only it will listen.” Schuon (2018), 9.

⁵⁰ “Under whatever name and form one may worship the Absolute Reality, it is only a means for realizing It without name and form ... wherein one knows oneself in relation to that Reality and attains peace.” Ramana Maharshi (1997), 72–73.

⁵¹ “If Shākyamuni avoided all mental objectivation of the transcendent Essence, it was because he was thereby enabled to express it all the more fully in the spiritual beauty of his mere existence. Like his revelation of the Way, the economy of his means is also a grace.” Burckhardt (2009), 71.

While the notion of *upāya* was originally envisaged in the context of the Buddhist tradition, religions today find themselves cheek-by-jowl around the world and can no longer ignore each other. Therefore, this doctrine can legitimately be broadened to encompass all faiths in view of their shared core elements—which include ethical principles—given that ‘saving means’ are aimed at every sentient being (not just Buddhists).

This is not about forcing a square peg into a round hole, but of seeing real correspondences where they are apparent, while also admitting incompatibility where it clearly exists (which is inevitable at the level of mutually exclusive spiritual forms). For instance, one might struggle to find *prima facie* common ground between, say, the Diamond Sūtra and the Book of Leviticus!

While the nature of our final release into *Nirvāṇa*⁵² (a posthumous prospect for most of us) is unutterable, the means provided for our deliverance are most assuredly not so, even though they remain but pale reflections of the ultimate reality itself. As *in-formed* beings, we require liberating forms to set us free from our self-created bondage. A formless teaching (if such can even be envisaged) is of no use to anyone who is unenlightened.

A further conclusion that suggests itself is that all ‘salvation’ (i.e., from suffering and ignorance) is the work of the Absolute⁵³ which has appeared, both historically and ‘transcendentally’, in a multiplicity of guises:

Perceiving an incarnation of the *Dharmakāya* in every spiritual leader

⁵² “*Nirvāṇa* has four characteristics: (i) permanence (of the Absolute); (ii) bliss (in the awareness of one’s identity with it); (iii) freedom (from bondage to sorrowful things); and (iv) purity (of emotions and craving).” Schumann (1973), 139.

⁵³ “The Dharma-Body is named ‘cessation of suffering’ and it is beginningless . . . unborn, undying, free from death; permanent, steadfast, calm, eternal; intrinsically pure and free from all defilements.” *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* in Wayman (1974), 98.

regardless of nationality and professed creed, Mahāyānists recognize a Buddha in Socrates, Mohammad, Jesus, Francis of Assisi, Confucius, Laotze, and many others.⁵⁴

Such a claim undoubtedly makes serious demands on us, as it requires that we look *through* religious forms to a higher reality that sustains and connects them. For many, this will be a bridge too far, if not altogether intolerable.⁵⁵

If one is serious about getting to the bottom of the perplexing phenomenon of diverse spiritual *upāyas* (assuming we do not embrace the reductionist belief that simply sees them as ‘cultural constructs’), then a way has to be found that honours their differences while acknowledging that one single tradition cannot possibly exhaust the divine plenitude and its limitless possibilities for soteriological disclosure.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, foundational (yet conflicting) doctrines of the utmost importance to each faith—for example, the law of karma versus divine providence, universal salvation versus eternal damnation, and co-dependent origination versus a willed creation—will forever remain intractable and irreconcilable on this side of the grave.

While Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches—perhaps more explicitly than elsewhere—that the Dharma-Body takes the initiative in providing saving means to humanity as a whole, other traditions are by no means bereft of this notion:

I have meditated on the various religions, forcing myself to understand them, and I have found that they arise from a unique

⁵⁴ Suzuki (1907), 63.

⁵⁵ Yet, even at a relatively exoteric level, we find Pope Francis proclaiming that “The pluralism and diversity of religions...are willed by God in His wisdom.” – *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019).

⁵⁶ “Truth has many aspects. Infinite Truth has infinite expressions. Though the sages speak in diverse ways, they express one and the same Truth.” *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* 11:15 in Prabhavananda (1968), 285.

principle having numerous ramifications. So do not ask of a man that he should adopt this or that religion, for that would take him away from the fundamental principle; it is this principle itself which must come to seek him; in this principle are elucidated all heights and all meanings.

– Manṣūr Al-Ḥallāj (858–922) ⁵⁷

In summary, the doctrine of *upāya* furnishes a valuable key that helps to reconcile two paramount realities: (i) a plurality of valid and effective revelations; and (ii) a single divine origin to them all. Yet, for this to be possible, each dispensation cannot assert that its claims are exclusively true (or, at the very least, reject other doctrines as having no salvific efficacy whatsoever).

Given that an exoteric mentality has always been preponderant in (and necessary to) religious belief, it can hardly be expected that the above thesis is likely to be embraced with any great enthusiasm by most faith adherents. Even so, one could argue that Christ was speaking as the Universal Logos itself (rather than as Jesus of Nazareth) when he declared, “Other sheep have I that are not of this fold” (John 10:16). For those who consider the resolution of this matter to be imperative in maintaining the integrity of spiritual traditions as a whole, the limitations ingrained in the very forms of religious expression must be confronted head on, despite the acute discomfort that this may elicit for many believers.

iii. The Relativity of Forms

The Buddhist approach has sometimes been criticized for being too flexible when it comes to its doctrinal pronouncements, a fact that has spawned a plethora of different schools and teachings, which often appear to contradict each other. While this bewildering abundance of perspectives might seem confusing, it may also be

⁵⁷ Cited in Schuon (1988), 173.

considered as one of its hidden strengths, and the reason why Buddhism has largely avoided conflicts on the scale seen in some other traditions.

Traditionally, the Buddha is said to have given ‘84,000’ different teachings in response to the almost limitless variety of human needs and capacities⁵⁸—yet always with the same objective in mind:

The Buddha aspires to benefit sentient beings by giving them . . .
a great realm of ultimate purity, peace and sustenance.
– Zonkaku (1290–1373)⁵⁹

This diversity does not suggest that its teachings are without any firm bedrock but, rather, that there is a set of key insights which subtly tie together the variegated threads of the Dharma. Adherence to them is not necessarily insisted upon as an article of faith; instead, they should be seen as a natural outcome of reflecting on the complex truths of human existence.

This latitude in belief acts as a foil to fundamentalism in that it reveals the incompleteness of any single doctrinal standpoint, while stressing that each one is perfectly adequate as a means of emancipation. To this extent, the wide range of teachings available in Buddhism can be seen as complementary⁶⁰ rather than adversarial; a position that may serve to remove the sclerotic tendency to form fixed and definitive views on spiritual matters—a major source of religious disputes.

We ought to acknowledge, then, that any credal formulation can

⁵⁸ “All spiritual possibilities must be represented within each tradition . . . To argue about whether the Buddhism of Sri Lanka is more genuinely Buddhist than that of Tibet, or Zen, or Jōdo – these are futile arguments. They are not worth having.” Oldmeadow (2021), 45-46.

⁵⁹ Bloom (2013), 119.

⁶⁰ This has even broader applicability in that every religion “is necessarily a partial representation of the truth intended by tradition universally considered . . . What then is clear and full in one tradition can be used to develop the meaning of what may be hardly more than alluded to in another.” Coomaraswamy (1987), 40.

barely do justice to the transcendent reality to which it refers, for this must needs remain an incommunicable experience of the spirit. Conceding as much, however, does not belittle the teachings as being only ‘half-true’, so to speak, such as to vitiate their potency. On the contrary, the latter is assured by their having emerged from the realm of truth and light revealed to the Buddha in his enlightenment experience.

The Buddha regards universal existence with detached Wisdom and impartial Compassion. The aim of his teaching and method is liberation from all partial and illusory viewpoints, coloured by desire and aversion, into a state of peace and well-being.⁶¹

– Harold Stewart (1916–1995)

When awakened to *Nirvāṇa*, the Buddha discerned the reality of our human condition, coupled with a liberating awareness granted by this truth. Any articulation of his sublime vision is inevitably a descent from a consummate apprehension of a non-verbal wholeness, to an everyday language that is ruptured and imprecise;⁶² but one which still points to the source of its meaning and—if rightly ascertained—to the same unitive experience that is the fount of all doctrine.⁶³

A possible Buddhist solution to the problem of fundamentalism, from which other traditions may gain a useful perspective, is to see teachings as supple and diaphanous vehicles that captures the profoundest insights of a spiritual tradition, without embedding them into an inflexible posture. This enables us to appreciate the symbolic and allegorical nature of sacred texts, in a manner that lies beyond the reach of a suffocating literalism—“for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

⁶¹ Stewart (1981), 152.

⁶² “To say form is to say limit and opposition. The husk can bear witness; it can also corrupt.” Schuon (2006), 252.

⁶³ “We have in mind less traditional information, as such, than the exposition of intrinsic doctrine; in other words, our aim is to enunciate truths for which traditional dialectical expressions serve as vestments.” Schuon (2002), vii.

The ‘non-theistic’ (not atheistic) character of Buddhist wisdom, and its insistence on the ‘non-selfhood’ of all things, belong together; a fact that moreover explains Buddhism’s marked preference for apophatic enunciations. Dogmatic affirmations, by lending to ideas a kind of fixed self, are, from a Buddhist point of view, always suspect, if not in practice avoidable altogether.⁶⁴
– Marco Pallis (1895–1989)

Needless to say, the ‘relativity’ of forms does not imply relativism as such.⁶⁵ What is being claimed, rather, is that no form—even while fully salvific—can deplete the spiritual and doctrinal possibilities issuing from the Absolute because it, alone, lies beyond all forms.⁶⁶

Such an approach admittedly contains risks for those to whom such a resolution is either too slippery, or an outright threat to rigid doctrinarism. This can provoke either an arrogance that is overly self-assured—the bane of sectarian thinking—or a nebulous sentimentality divested of both insight and rigour. Dogmatic ossification, as well as a vapid liberality, can often lead to the loss of religious belief altogether, by closing off access to the living sources of authentic awakening and transformation.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Pallis (2003), 55.

⁶⁵ “Revelation is absolute in itself, but relative in its form.” Schuon (1990), 26.

⁶⁶ “All thought about the Absolute is vitiated by a false perspective. For these reasons, the Buddha says that he teaches nothing about the origin of the world or of the soul, and is only concerned with suffering and the way of deliverance from suffering ... This attitude is justified by the fact that the mental objectivation of Divine Reality may often constitute an obstacle to its realization ... because thought limits consciousness and, in a sense, congeals it.” Burckhardt (2009), 50.

⁶⁷ “The exoteric viewpoint is, in fact, doomed to end by negating itself once it is no longer vivified by the presence within it of the esoterism of which it is both the outward radiation and the veil. So it is that religion, according to the measure in which it denies metaphysical realities and becomes crystallized in literalistic dogmatism, inevitably engenders unbelief; the atrophy that overtakes dogmas, when they are deprived of their internal dimension, recoils upon them from outside, in the form of heretical and atheistic negations.” Schuon (1993), 9.

iv. *Anātman*

One of the most challenging beliefs found in the Buddhist tradition is that of *anātman* (Pāli, *anattā*) or ‘not-self’, which seeks to combat our innate tendency to form attachments to impermanent realities that only serve to cause discontent. Some scholars go further and argue (perhaps too confidently) that the Buddha rejected any notion of an immutable essence pervading conditioned phenomena⁶⁸ (including in individual beings who cannot be said to possess their ‘own being’ or *svabhāva*),⁶⁹ while others assert that he made—at least in the early Theravādin tradition—no definitive pronouncements on the matter (other than pointing out what was not the *ātman*).

When more developed notions of the Dharma-Body emerged in the Mahāyāna schools of China, Korea and Japan, we begin to find deeper reflections on the nature of our true identity⁷⁰—in contrast to the earlier Buddhist tradition which, by and large, maintained an unwavering reticence on the question of any ‘higher self’ beyond the unstable mental and material aggregates (*skandhas*) of our mind-sense-body complex.⁷¹ Indeed, the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* goes so far as to suggest that we do indeed possess an *ātman*; however, this is not a ‘person’ *per se* but, rather, ultimate reality itself:

⁶⁸ “The Buddha flatly denies that he ever taught the cessation or annihilation of an essence; all that he teaches is the putting of a stop to sorrow. (M.1.137-140, cf. D.2.68 and *passim*) ... ‘That is not my Self’ has so often been misinterpreted to mean ‘There is no Self.’” Coomaraswamy (1943), 72.

⁶⁹ “If the Buddha’s enlightenment taught him that the empirical self is an illusion, the source of that enlightenment cannot possibly be the empirical self, for this self is rendered illusory in light of that very enlightenment. The relative self cannot reveal the relativity of the self. The ‘revelation’ of this relativity must, on the contrary, be derived from something absolute, being that which alone can reveal the self to be illusory.” Shah-Kazemi (2010), 22.

⁷⁰ “We are urged to consider that nothing in our empirical self is worthy of being regarded as the real self.” Conze (1975), 19.

⁷¹ “Vacchagotta the wanderer asked the Master: ‘Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?’. When this was said, the Master was silent. ‘Then is there no self?’ Again, the Master was silent.” (*Samyutta Nikāya* 44:10)

When good sons and daughters abandon the body ... having parted from old age, sickness and death, they realize the indestructible, eternal, unchanging and inconceivable ... Dharma-Body.⁷²

This outlook was not confined to just East Asian traditions of the Greater Vehicle:

In its true state, mind is naked, immaculate; not made of anything ... clear, vacuous, without duality, transparent; timeless, uncompounded, unimpeded, colourless; not realizable as a separate thing, but as the unity of all things, yet not composed of them; of one taste and transcendent over differentiation.⁷³

– Padmasambhāva (*fl.* 8th century)

In other traditional perspectives, one encounters the notion of ‘dying before one dies’—a forgetfulness of both self and the world. Again, this points to a compelling awareness in which our authentic identity can be recovered.⁷⁴ The following examples might seem quite severe, especially to modern ears where a cult of individualism is often fostered. Even so, they confirm the Buddhist view regarding the insubstantial nature of who we take ourselves to be which, in turn, instils an ethical outlook (well-nigh universal across religions) that is grounded in compassion, selflessness and benevolence; in other words, a “belief in the Absolute, accountability to that Absolute, and virtuous conduct in consequence of those beliefs”.⁷⁵ This requires that we keep our everyday selves in abeyance, so that we may encounter an abiding self in a dimension of being that is altogether

⁷² Wayman (1974), 21.

⁷³ Evans-Wentz (1958), 211.

⁷⁴ “It is altogether contrary to Buddhist, as it is to Vedantic, doctrine to think of ‘ourselves’ as wanderers in the fatally determined storm of the world’s flow (*samsāra*). Our ‘immortal Self’ is anything but a ‘surviving personality’. It is not this man so-and-so that goes home and is lost to view, but the prodigal Self that recollects itself; and that having been many, is now again one.” Coomaraswamy (1943), 74.

⁷⁵ Shah-Kazemi (2010), 19.

inexpressible, yet which unites us all in the very ground of true reality itself.

The kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead.
– Meister Eckhart (1260–1328)⁷⁶

Your glory lies where you cease to exist.
– Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950)⁷⁷

He has died to self and become living through the Lord.
– Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207–1273)⁷⁸

No soul is rested till it is made nought as to all things that are made.
– Julian of Norwich (1343–1416)⁷⁹

Be in the world like a traveller, or like a passer on, and reckon
yourself as
of the dead.
– Muḥammad (570–632)⁸⁰

Words of Torah endure only in a person who makes himself like
one who is as nothing⁸¹ ... Wisdom, where is it found? Wisdom
comes into being from *ayin*⁸² ('no-thing').
– Rabbi Yoḥanan (180–279)⁸³

⁷⁶ Meister Eckhart (1924), 419 (Vol. 1).

⁷⁷ Ramana Maharshi (1978), 100.

⁷⁸ Rūmī (1930), 189.

⁷⁹ Julian of Norwich (1907), 11.

⁸⁰ Muhammad (1941), 118.

⁸¹ "Judaism's 'no-thing-ness' (*Ayin*) relates to the Buddhist state of extinction (*Nirvāna*) or the Void (*Śūnyā*) – the cessation of relative and painful existence through an 'awakening' (*Bodhi*) to the supreme and absolute reality." Schaya (2014), 14.

⁸² According to David ben Avraham ha-Lavan, a 14th-century Kabbalist, "*Ayin* is more existent than all the being of the world ... every simple thing is complex compared with its simplicity." (*Masoret ha-Berit*, ed. Gershom Scholem, *Qovets al-Yad*, n.s. 1, 1936: 31).

⁸³ *Babylonian Talmud* (Sotah 21b).

By the unceasing and absolute renunciation of thyself and all things, thou shalt ... be released from all, and so shalt be led upwards to the ray of that Divine Darkness which exceedeth all existence.

– Dionysius the Areopagite (5th–6th century) ⁸⁴

Such examples serve to demonstrate that the Buddhist notion of *anātman* clearly has analogous parallels elsewhere. This is significant when we contemplate the matter from a different vantage point—one that confirms the provisional nature of conditioned reality as finite and impermanent; including the cluster of mutable attributes that comprise our everyday personalities.⁸⁵ In this way, we come full circle from the formless abundance at the heart of all things, to the very same unthinkable (*acintya*) dimension of existence that is inherent to the realm of transient and insubstantial forms.

Some objections considered

Critiques of the ‘perennialist’ position from a Buddhist perspective appear to be scant. One notable exception is an article by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (b. 1949) published in 2010.⁸⁶

While acknowledging that “the principles of the perennial philosophy ... have provided an underpinning for how Buddhism is taught in the West”, Ṭhānissaro questions the reliability of this approach, claiming that it has “distorted the Dhamma in the process”. Furthermore, he asserts that “perennial philosophers base their

⁸⁴ Dionysius the Areopagite (1920), 191–192.

⁸⁵ “For the exoteric, God’s personal mode is his only one; for the esoteric, this mode resides in one that is higher and ultimately modeless. . . . For the exoteric, the world is real in every sense; for the esoteric, it has only a qualified reality.” Huston Smith – ‘Introduction’, Schuon (1993), xxvii.

⁸⁶ Ṭhānissaro (2010), 9–14.

thinking on two claims. The first is a fact-claim: all the great religious traditions of the world share a common core of beliefs. The second is a value-claim: the commonality of these beliefs is proof that they are true.” (p.10).

The first remark to be made here is that perennialists would never lay claim to a misconceived unity envisaged at the wrong level. In other words, they are the first to concede that, while there is clearly antagonism on the plane of doctrine, a certain confluence can be discerned across traditions when considered from a higher, more inclusive perspective that privileges sapiential metaphysics and spiritual transformation.⁸⁷ Such criteria, while undoubtedly out of vogue in academic circles today, remain indispensable to a more satisfying resolution of this enigma.⁸⁸

Having pointed out what he sees as the fallacious ‘fact-claim’ regarding certain beliefs that are said to be held in common across many traditions, Thānissaro then goes on to assert that perennialists fall prey to the corresponding error of thinking that this somehow confers veracity on the consensus.

While this is a valid observation in principle, it would be remarkable indeed if the striking unanimity that one does find among the great sages and mystics throughout history, failed to make a deep impression on an unprejudiced observer. This is an extraordinary occurrence that cannot simply be dismissed casually as an aberration, for the mere reason that one’s own tradition cannot accommodate the

⁸⁷ “Our starting point is the acknowledgment of the fact that there are diverse religions which exclude each other. This could mean that one religion is right and that all the others are false; it could mean also that all are false. In reality, it means that all are right, not in their dogmatic exclusivism, but in their unanimous inner signification.” Schuon (1996), 75.

⁸⁸ “Tradition speaks to each man the language he can understand, provided he be willing to listen; this reservation is essential, for tradition, we repeat, cannot become bankrupt; it is rather of man’s bankruptcy that one should speak, for it is he who has lost the intuition of the supernatural and the sense of the sacred.” Schuon (1992), 77.

views of a majority. Again, we readily concede that this, in itself, does not support the ‘fact-claim’ in question, but it does demand that we give the matter more careful attention, because we are faced here with an astounding phenomenon that cries out for explanation.

The main problem with the perennialist position, according to Ṭhānissaro, is the flawed methodology it employs to argue for a shared spiritual nucleus among humanity’s great traditions.

The central question tackled by the perennial philosophy, we are told, is that of our true identity—“What is my true self?”—and the answer to that question is that our true self is identical with Being as a whole. We are all One, and our common identity extends to the ground and source of all things.⁸⁹

It is undoubtedly the case that questions pertaining to the nature of our ‘true self’⁹⁰ (including its relationship to ultimate reality however conceived) feature prominently in perennialist works, but that is only because this important concern can be found throughout all religious traditions, so we ought not to be surprised that it has merited much attention (even by some schools of the Theravāda).

Ṭhānissaro then makes the following claim:

To arrive at this answer, though, the perennial philosophers have had to discount many of the teachings—found in most of the

⁸⁹ Ṭhānissaro (2010), 10.

⁹⁰ “To know the difference between the real Self and the ego is to have grasped the Buddha’s idea of *anattā* ... Our true Self is unimaginable, inconceivable, indescribable and unfathomable ... If this Self lies beyond the phenomenal world, then it also lies beyond the transitory ... Hence the Self also lies beyond that which brings sorrow.” Saher (1970), 23, 66–67.

world's major religions—that posit a separate identity for each person, and a creator of the universe separate from its creation.⁹¹

To say that one person has a distinct identity from another is to state the obvious. So is the notion that a manifested universe that is ephemeral—and thus in a constant state of flux—cannot be identical with its source in every respect. However, this does not preclude a deeper continuity between all beings and the Absolute, which then ensures that we are never completely separate from others:

The Kingdom of God is within you.
– Luke 17:21

I am the Self ... seated in the heart of all beings.
– Bhagavad Gītā 10:20

We are nearer to him than the jugular vein.
– Qur'ān 50:16

Just as there can be no ice without water, so Nirvāna is immediately present.
– Hakuin⁹²

Since God is the universal cause of all Being, in whatever region Being can be found, there must be the Divine Presence.
– Saint Thomas Aquinas⁹³

The wonderful Tao exists not far away from your own body.
– Chang Po-tuan⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Hakuin (1963), 183.

⁹³ *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.68.

⁹⁴ Davis, Tenney L. & Chao, Yün-ts'ung (1940). "Chang Po-tuan of T'ien-t'ai, his *Wu Chen P'ien*, 'Essay on the Understanding of the

Within the heart of everything, there is ultimate reality... Nirvāna is the unborn, unextinct dharma; it is the supreme end ... it is not itself anything born. In truth, all things are, in their ultimate nature, Nirvāna itself.

– *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* ⁹⁵

Therefore, it is far from accurate to say that perennialists have “discounted” certain teachings that are inconvenient to their case; rather, they have considered the full range of insights offered by each tradition in order to furnish a much more nuanced account of this question. This is why the following criticism is groundless:

To get around this difficulty, perennial philosophers have tried to limit the range of what they mean by a “great religious tradition”. [They] make a distinction, inherited from the Romantics, between conventional religious doctrines and the insights of direct religious or mystical experience. Mystical experience is the direct apprehension of inner truths. Conventional doctrines are the corruption of those truths, formulated by people of a lower level of religious inspiration, influenced by social, cultural, or political factors. Thus perennial philosophers claim that they are justified in ignoring conventional doctrines and drawing their raw data only from reports of mystical experience, for these are closest to the truths of direct experience (p.10).

Thānissaro presents a false dichotomy here. Perennialists are certainly not dismissive of corrupted “conventional doctrines” that are only fit for those with “a lower level of religious inspiration”. The mystical insights of a religion’s most distinguished sages have been prized in that they offer valuable glimpses of ‘Suchness’ based on their own realization. However, they were able to do so precisely

Truth”. *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. 73 (13): 379.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Ramanan (1987), pp. 262–63.

because of their faithful adherence to a spiritual tradition⁹⁶ which nourished and sustained their path, especially through the contemplative study of scriptures (without neglecting praxis and the moral dimension of their faith).

Sacred texts are clearly multivalent and thus capable of eliciting a range of interpretations—from the literal to the anagogic. In other words, it is not that doctrines themselves are necessarily ‘conventional’ but, rather, that the hermeneutical abilities of exegetes will vary according to their apprehension of spiritual realities.

We shall now consider Thānissaro’s critique of perennialism as it concerns the Buddhist tradition.

The problem here is that many accounts of direct religious experiences do not support the tenets of perennial philosophy. The Buddha’s Awakening is a case in point. That Awakening obviously qualifies as a direct religious experience, and yet the descriptions of it found in the earliest records, the Pāli canon, contain nothing to support the perennial philosophy’s answer to the question of personal identity.⁹⁷

It is undeniable that early Buddhism is least amenable to a perennialist understanding of religious pluralism, given its general reluctance to explore questions regarding the highest reality.⁹⁸ This is claimed to be so because the Buddha considered such queries as fruitless in aiding our liberation from the cycle of birth and death. That said, however, even the ‘original’ form of this tradition could not avoid making certain positive declarations regarding the liberated

⁹⁶ “Enter houses through their proper doors.” (Qur’an 2:189)

⁹⁷ Thānissaro (2010), 10.

⁹⁸ “The Buddha’s silence was part of his ‘mystical rhetoric’, one might say: the dialectical stress of his teachings was on escaping from the suffering attendant upon the compounded world, rather than on understanding the cosmological process by which one becomes enslaved by that compounded world.” Shah-Kazemi (2010), 33.

state. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, it is described as

... the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unageing, the stable, the unmanifest, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the shelter, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom ...⁹⁹

In the same way that Ṭhānissaro accuses perennialists of neglecting the Pāli sources when presenting their “reductive account” of “all great religions” he, in turn, appears to reject the validity of the Mahāyāna canon; presumably because it directly contradicts “the earliest records” of the Buddhist tradition, considered as something static, resistant to any challenge, or immune to varied inflections and interpretations. The implication here is that any later doctrinal developments must needs represent an adulterated understanding, compared to the pristine collection of scriptures said to be a true account of the historical Buddha’s teaching (in contrast to ‘spurious’ Mahāyāna texts that were supposedly delivered by him in one of his transcendental manifestations).¹⁰⁰

It is not possible here to explore in depth all the controversies surrounding what the Buddha actually taught, how the Pāli canon was settled, or the emergence of the Greater Vehicle as a reaction to it. Yet it remains the case that not just perennialists, but the Mahāyāna itself, sees the earlier tradition (undoubtedly a valid path in its own right) as limited in scope, to the extent that it has ignored a number of important questions, and rejected more expansive insights into the

⁹⁹ Bodhi (2005), p.365.

¹⁰⁰ “The audience of the *Nirvāna Sutra* learns that: (a) the occasion when the Buddha said something matters, and should be taken into consideration in interpreting it, and: (b) the Buddha taught his doctrines in stages as a means to gradually lift up his students to higher and higher reaches of liberation. Both these points explain why the Mahāyāna teachings were initially held back from his immediate voice-hearing disciples, the śrāvakas, who would be unable to grasp the more profound teachings and might react with scorn.” Blum (2013), xxi.

mysterious nature of the self. Therefore, the teachings that arose in the wake of Buddhism's far-reaching expansion into the East were an entirely legitimate development in response to perceived shortcomings—both metaphysical and soteriological—in the parent tradition.

Ṭhānissaro points out that the Buddha denounced any questions pertaining to our personal identity “as inappropriate entanglements blocking the path to Awakening”. Yet, the great majority of humanity throughout history would beg to differ, given the intense interest that has been shown—since time immemorial—in such matters (including by the pre-Mahāyāna school of the Puḍgalavādins). In any case, it is hard to imagine how anyone might coherently envisage the reality of Awakening without a proper understanding of ‘who’ it is that awakens, and to ‘what’.

The tradition's initial silence on these controversial subjects led, inevitably, to problems of its own whereby much debate ensued as to the nature of transmigration and the status of an enlightened being. Even the doctrines of karma and co-dependent origination (which are ‘fact-claims’ in their own right) raise a host of philosophical problems that have yet to be adequately resolved. These, too, are metaphysical questions, so why are some permitted and not others?

Ṭhānissaro raises the issue of theodicy in the context of the non-dualist approach, which he claims the perennialists see as “superior” and more “inclusive”. The problem of evil and human suffering is, indeed, a serious difficulty but his own tradition raises other impasses of its own. Perhaps we need to adopt a certain measure of humility in the face of these irresolvable quandaries. As the Buddha himself observed, interminable disputation over imponderable matters can only lead to “madness and distress” (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4:77). Notwithstanding that sobering note of caution, we should never terminate valid queries prematurely, especially if there is any hope of approaching a more satisfactory response to such elusive questions.

Limitations of space have precluded a discussion of other questions

raised by Ṭhānissaro in his important critique. Nonetheless, a brief recap of these concerns—as they pertain to this essay—may be in order. In summary, we can see that the Pāli sources are focused on methodic and practical concerns with a view to replicating the Buddha’s enlightenment, while having recourse to a minimum of doctrinal apparatus. This is a perfectly justified approach, but it remains inadequate for certain temperaments that seek a more metaphysical basis to religious thought.

So, rather than trying to play off one school against the other, we need to accept that every one represents *de facto* Buddhism (whether people like it or not), insofar as their manifold doctrines are all canonical. One need only consider, for example, the vast *Taishō Tripitaka* which represents the definitive East Asian Buddhist canon; a comprehensive collection of texts from both the Mahāyāna and Pāli traditions.

Given that further developments within the Greater Vehicle sought to engage with questions regarding our fundamental nature, it is not surprising that this phase of the Dharma lent itself to a greater convergence with perennialist concerns as found in other traditions. This is by no means to denigrate the Theravāda which has provided Buddhism with many of its key foundations but, rather, to acknowledge that its survey of spiritual reality is, most assuredly, not exhaustive.¹⁰¹

In this context, it is also important to note that there is no unanimous agreement among the various Buddhist schools regarding the nature of the self, where we find views spanning from quasi-

¹⁰¹ “There are those in the Theravādin tradition of Buddhism, in particular, who say that the Buddha was an ordinary human being who happened to get his act together. He was just like you and me; he tried this, he tried that, he went into the forest, he practiced asceticism, he studied, and eventually decided ... to sit down under the Bodhi tree and meditate until he attained final insight. This is ... a way of thinking about things that has a certain utility, but which is limited; in the end, it turns out to be quite inadequate. The Mahāyāna tradition takes a much fuller view of the Buddha.” Oldmeadow (2021), 44.

annihilationism¹⁰² to its complete opposite.¹⁰³ The fact that some of the more developed (and less aporetic) perspectives surfaced later historically in no way impugns their validity, or exempts us from the need to give them serious consideration on their merits.¹⁰⁴

If we accept that the Buddha, in his capacity as a ‘great physician’, administered an array of remedies in accordance with humanity’s countless infirmities, we can hardly be surprised that this would naturally lead to a profusion of doctrines suited to the spiritual relief of suffering beings.¹⁰⁵

A Way Forward

Buddhism offers a unique lens through which to appreciate other religions. Its understanding of ultimate reality, along with its notion of skillful means, allows for a comprehensive scope of salvation that

¹⁰² And yet, even in an early Buddhist scripture, we find: “It is not good to misrepresent the Blessed One, for the Blessed One would not say, ‘A monk with no more [mental] effluents, on the break-up of the body, is annihilated, perishes, and does not exist after death’.” (*Samyutta Nikāya* 22:85)

¹⁰³ “The Tathagata’s Body is not causally conditioned. Because it is not causally conditioned, it is said to have a Self; if it has a Self, then it is also permanent, blissful and pure.” – *Nirvāna Sūtra* (tr. Stephen Hodge) in Page (2003), 38.

¹⁰⁴ The *Nirvāna Sūtra*’s “stance toward non-self and self expresses the complaint that many Buddhists have lost their way precisely because they have simply traded one attachment for another: proudly renouncing self, they are now attached to non-self, clinging to the concept as if it can liberate them. Although the discursive, evaluating self is a fiction, there does exist a genuine self and that, according to the sutra, is precisely the buddha-nature.” Blum (2013), xvii.

¹⁰⁵ “The doctrines of the Buddhas are only ‘celestial mirages’ intended to catch, as in a golden net, the greatest possible number of creatures plunged in ignorance, suffering and transmigration ... it is therefore the benefit of creatures, and not the suchness of the Universe, that determines the necessarily contingent form of the Message ... Buddhism, within the framework of its own wisdom, goes beyond formal ‘mythology’ or the ‘letter’ and ultimately transcends all possible human formulations, thus realizing an unsurpassable contemplative disinterestedness.” Schuon (2018), 87.

extends to all beings—not just adherents of Śākyamuni’s teaching. While this tradition certainly shares a number of features with other faiths, the uniqueness it exhibits (i.e., its non-theism and rejection of a substantial ‘soul’)¹⁰⁶ has often led to its exclusion from discussions about the perennial philosophy, even though it offers valuable insights regarding the plurality of religious forms. It goes without saying that certain traditions are far from generous in acknowledging the value of spiritual paths other than their own; nevertheless, Buddhism presents the possibility of a higher resolution (even if this is likely to be beyond the pale for many).¹⁰⁷

It is quite apparent therefore, especially in the Mahāyāna, that Buddhism openly acknowledges the existence of a supreme reality distinguished by the attributes of “eternity, bliss, true self and purity” (*nitya-sukha-ātma-śubha*), as declared in a renowned text, *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*.¹⁰⁸ Not only is it known as *Nirvāṇa*—the state of complete liberation (*vimukti*) from ignorance and suffering—but also the Dharma-Body, viewed as the Absolute or *noumenon*¹⁰⁹ (although not in the sense of a remote, omnipotent being that brings about a ‘willed’ creation).

¹⁰⁶ “If one accepts that ‘the kingdom of Heaven is within you’, then one cannot logically reproach Buddhism for conceiving the Divine Principle in this respect alone. The ‘Void’ or ‘Extinction’ is God—the supra-ontological Real seen ‘inwardly’—within ourselves; not in our thought or in our ego, of course, but starting from that ‘geometrical point’ within us whereby we are mysteriously linked to the Infinite. Buddhist ‘atheism’ consists in a refusal to objectivize or exteriorize the ‘God within’ in a dogmatic form.” Schuon (2018), 19.

¹⁰⁷ “The exoteric’s assessment of the esoteric is likely to be less charitable, not because exoterics are less endowed with that virtue, but because a portion of the esoteric position being obscured from him, he cannot honor it without betraying the truth he does see.” Huston Smith – ‘Introduction’, Schuon (1993), xvi.

¹⁰⁸ Hakeda (1967), p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ “The noumenon is the substratum of phenomena, while the latter are attributes of the former ... It is the reason, life, and norm of all particular existences ... the formative principle which gave and still gives shape to the world”. Sōgen (1912), 252, 254 & 302.

Accordingly, Buddhism does not attribute grossly anthropomorphic characteristics to this reality,¹¹⁰ though this should not lead one to suppose that it lacks conspicuous features in common with other religions.¹¹¹ As Lord Chalmers once remarked regarding certain parallels between the Christian and Buddhist traditions: “There is here no question of one creed borrowing from the other; the relationship goes deeper than that.”¹¹²

The widespread assertion that Buddhism should not be considered a religious phenomenon but, rather, a variation of the scientific method applied to our mundane psychology, grossly misrepresents the tradition and should not be used as a pretext to ignore its ‘perennial’ dimensions.¹¹³ Many forms of Buddhism in the modern world are, in fact, but a reductionist—and de-sacralized—aberration in light of its teachings considered *in toto*.¹¹⁴

A plenary revelation provides non-worldly means of deliverance

¹¹⁰ “Buddhism, inasmuch as it is a characteristic perspective and independently of its modes, is necessary: it could not but come to be, given that a non-anthropomorphic, impersonal, and ‘static’ consideration of the Infinite is in itself a possibility; such a perspective had therefore to be manifested at a particular cyclical moment and in a human setting that rendered it opportune, for the existence of a given receptacle calls for that of a given content.” Schuon (2018), 16-17.

¹¹¹ “Many Westerners attracted to Buddhism, often unaware of its close affinities with the Christian tradition which they have repudiated, laud it as ‘rational’, ‘empirical’, ‘scientific’, humanistic’, and the like, and disavow its religious ‘trappings’.” Oldmeadow (2021), viii.

¹¹² Chalmers (1932), xx.

¹¹³ “Buddhism, which is so often reduced to the level of a base philosophical empiricism, has in fact nothing to do with an ideology that is purely human and thus devoid of any enlightening or salvific quality; to deny the celestial character of Śākyamuni and his message is tantamount to saying that there can be effects without a cause.” Schuon (2018), 15.

¹¹⁴ “The claims sometimes made by Orientalists and Western converts that Buddhism is simply a ‘philosophy’ or ‘natural religion’ have more to say about modern prejudices than about Buddhism properly understood.” Oldmeadow (2021), x.

from the anguish of our human condition. Its objective is a transcendent satisfaction of all human desire and a steadfast spiritual equanimity, along with an adequate (albeit limited) metaphysical framework. In this respect, every *upāya* revealed by the Dharma-Body is equally efficacious, even though some may be more indirect than others in their approach. In consequence, they embody insights that are true in the sense of capturing an authentic dimension of ultimate reality.¹¹⁵

So, despite considerable resistance to this claim, Buddhism does indeed share a number of notable features in common with other religions—how could it not?—but it also stands out from them in important ways that are quite distinctive. As mentioned earlier, Mahāyānists have largely been inclined to accept that all religions have their origin in the Dharma-Body, which has dispensed its liberating teachings in a way that conforms to the innumerable needs of humanity.

Once that which is formless takes on specific forms, through which to express itself in response to salvific exigencies, it must also engender imperfections that come with assuming a restrictive finitude, such that differences—often deep-seated—are inevitable.¹¹⁶ Therefore, despite the shortcomings we find in all religious doctrines (given that they are intended for the plane of relativity), it suffices that they are commensurate with the mentalities to which they are addressed.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ “These truths ... are not the exclusive possession of any school or individual: were it otherwise they would not be truths, for these cannot be invented, but must necessarily be known in every integral traditional civilization.” Schuon (1993), xxxiii.

¹¹⁶ “The Druze view about the various religious forms is that their movement of separation over time from the divine source leads to their eventual decline. A religion is an integral whole that is subject to necessary laws of change like any living organism.” Adnan Kasamanie, ‘Druze gnosis and the mystery of time’ in Trompf (2019), 351.

¹¹⁷ “The formal homogeneity of a religion requires not only truth but also errors—though these are only in form ... Religions are ‘mythologies’ which, as

This also applies to the doctrines of Buddhism which, to be sure, has its own lacunae. That is why any kind of unanimity can only emerge at a higher level of apprehension which, properly speaking, is ineffable, thereby eluding the unavoidable confinement of dogmatic forms which can only preclude other possible (though similarly incomplete) articulations of the same truth.¹¹⁸

If the highest reality is truly compassionate, it will leave no sector of humankind without guidance and illumination, despite the strife, conflict and mutual incomprehension to which the varied religious forms often give rise. In this sense, much more separates Buddhism from contemporary atheism than from other faiths, which—at the very least—acknowledge primacy of the spiritual and its attendant truths.¹¹⁹

The exoteric mind will never concede that the privileged religious forms to which it is exclusively attached are deficient in any way.¹²⁰

such, are based on real aspects of the Divine and on sacred facts—hence on realities, but on aspects alone; this limitation is at once inevitable and completely effective.” Schuon (2007), 72.

¹¹⁸ “Intrinsically ‘orthodox’ dogmas, that is, those established in view of salvation, differ from one religion to another; consequently they cannot all be objectively true. However, all dogmas are symbolically true and subjectively efficacious, which is to say that their purpose is to create human attitudes that contribute in their way to the divine miracle of salvation. This, in practice, is the meaning of the Buddhist term *upāya*, ‘skillful means’ or ‘spiritual stratagem’, and it is thanks to this efficient intention—or this virtually liberating ‘truth’—that all dogmas are justified and, in the final analysis, compatible despite their antagonisms.” Schuon (2018), 186.

¹¹⁹ “If an idea is true, it belongs equally to all who are capable of understanding it; if it is false, there is no credit in having invented it. A true idea cannot be ‘new’, for truth is not a product of the human mind; it exists independently of us, and all we have to do is to take cognizance of it; outside this knowledge there can be nothing but error.” Guénon (2004), 56–57.

¹²⁰ “Men have no eschatological interest—or believe they have none—in challenging this exclusivism; quite the contrary. However, this ‘instinct of self-preservation’ has nothing to do with the total truth ... Every religious message is

As a result, other spiritual possibilities are denigrated as false or even pernicious. While many religions preach God's universal love for mankind, few rarely hold back from consigning large swathes of humanity to perdition because of their ignorance of the one and only 'true faith', whichever that might be.¹²¹

How can a man, who observes that his religion of birth or adoption is visibly incapable of saving the whole of humanity, still believe that it is the only saving religion? And how can a man, who moreover observes the existence of other religions, powerfully established and having the same claim, persist in believing that God, sincerely desirous of saving the world, should have found no other means of doing so than by instituting one sole religion, strongly colored by particular ethnic and historical features—as it must necessarily be—and doomed in advance to failure as regards the goal in question?¹²²

Ultimately, all this comes down to a matter of *vision* not argument. The Sufis speak of the importance of *dhawq*—the need to 'taste' for ourselves the liberation that is being offered; unless we do, all disputes will remain impotent. One can cite texts and authorities back and forth endlessly but, in the end, the only question that matters is one of truth. Which truth though? The one that leads to abiding joy in union with the Sacred.

In this sense, we recall the traditional adage that "all the Buddha's medicines are good"; but these remedies, while not necessarily

a Message of the Absolute; this character of absoluteness penetrates the entire message and confers upon it its quality of uniqueness. God speaks for the Inward and is not preoccupied with the outward as such; He proclaims 'the Religion' in a form adapted to given human possibilities; He does not engage in 'comparative religion'." Schuon (2018), 114.

¹²¹ "We would very much like to know what this love is that condemns millions of sincere souls to a vain faith and a sterile fervor, and this for millennia; a love whose means are so ineffective that, after so many centuries, the overwhelming majority of these souls are still cut off from truth and salvation ... the sheer implausibility of this hypothesis requires no demonstration." Schuon (2018), 22.

¹²² Schuon (2013), 115.

compatible with each other (because they are treating different ailments), have nonetheless emerged from a single, vast storehouse of Dharma—the one vehicle of emancipation for all beings.

Conclusion

So, what, exactly, is this core vision that perennialists claim lies at the heart of every spiritual tradition? How can we justify what's often referred to as “the transcendent unity of religions”¹²³ when clearly there appears to be little agreement between them? The question, when put in this rather crude form, will inevitably invite ridicule, scepticism and understandable opposition. Frithjof Schuon distilled the matter as follows:

The quintessence of all tradition and all spirituality is discernment between the Real and the illusory, and concentration on the Real. Everything is contained in this twofold definition. This is doctrine and method in a more outward sense; now there are many doctrines and many methods, but there is only one discernment between the Real and the illusory, the Absolute and the contingent, the Infinite and the finite; just as there is only one concentration on the Real, only the one Union, only one Deliverance.¹²⁴

This is a helpful way to get our bearings on the question. Every religious perspective clearly asserts this fundamental distinction. Even the doctrinally ‘minimalist’ position of early Pāli Buddhism

¹²³ “The traditional method of studying religions, while asserting categorically their ‘transcendent unity’ and the fact that ‘all paths lead to the same summit’, is deeply respectful of every step on each path, of every signpost which makes the journey possible, and without which the single summit could never be reached. It seeks to penetrate into the meaning of rites, symbols, images, and doctrines which constitute a particular religious universe, but does not try to cast aside these elements or to reduce them to anything other than what they are within that distinct universe of meaning.” Nasr (1989), 288.

¹²⁴ Schuon (2005), 187.

acknowledges a bifurcation between conditioned reality and the Unconditioned which transcends the limitations of *samsāra*.¹²⁵ Hence, all religions share this metaphysical differentiation which is not found in any profane worldview;¹²⁶ a remarkable convergence in itself, despite the very real differences we discern at the level of sectarian beliefs.¹²⁷

The end of all religions is the timeless consummation of our deepest desire for eternal peace, perfection, blessedness and illumination, along with release from pain and dissatisfaction (note that these are experiential states, not metaphysical propositions). So, in terms of their *télos*—not necessarily their means—they share something fundamentally similar that is radically opposed to merely secular responses to the question of meaning and human flourishing.¹²⁸ As *homo religiosus*, therefore, we seek the *summum bonum*—a completion of our humanity as spiritual beings who are made for supreme felicity.

The perennialist resolution to the challenge posed by a plurality of faiths is doubtlessly a contentious one. However, unless we adopt a reductionist approach that simply dismisses all religion as a chimera concocted by human beings to assuage their fear of death, then we

¹²⁵ “There is, monks, an unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unconditioned. If, monks, there were not that which is unborn, unoriginated, uncreated, unconditioned, there would be no escape from what is born, originated, created, and conditioned.” (*Udāna* VIII.3)

¹²⁶ “The Christian saint who fights Muslims is closer to Islamic sanctity than the philosopher who accepts everything and practices nothing.” Schuon (2009), 158.

¹²⁷ Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931) observed that “every genuine religion differentiates between the holy and the profane”. Furthermore, he remarked that an exaggerated focus on “concrete formulations of the divine” has “frequently resulted in excluding from the realm of religion ... Buddhism and other higher systems of liberation and piety because they did not contain a belief in God. However, the only certain mark (of religiosity) is the holy.” Hastings (1913), 731 ff, Vol. 6.

¹²⁸ “Man is made for the Absolute or the Infinite, not for limitless contingency.” Schuon (1984), 114.

need to take this phenomenon seriously. If we do, then we also have to come to terms with what its profusion of forms signifies.

Keeping in mind the above, we may come to see that religious experience reflects an authentic reality, and that each tradition discloses an aspect of a truth that is intrinsically unspeakable. Yet, for reasons entirely understandable, it has proven very difficult for most people of faith to assert “the spiritual equivalence of the great revelations”.¹²⁹ However, it might be argued that such reluctance is attributable more to entrenched cultural or psychological factors, than it is to strictly metaphysical ones.

A more nuanced understanding is thus required to account for both the diverse expressions of tradition forms, and for the unity that reveals them as recognisably divine in origin.¹³⁰ We also need a framework that acknowledges our bond to a sacred reality that is both transcendent and immanent—a numinous force that can permanently deliver us from affliction and death.¹³¹

It is hoped that enough has been said to thwart the charge that perennialists promote the universality of humanity’s spiritual traditions at the cost of blurring their legitimate differences. Its advocates have never claimed to effect a reconciliation solely at the level of forms, even though these are vital to embodied religious traditions.

Accordingly, a more convincing account of unity has to be found elsewhere, but this cannot be on a plane of reality that is already ‘downstream’ from the Void (*śūnyatā*) wherein all divergences are absent. Yet this is not some distant or impassive transcendental

¹²⁹ Schuon (2007), 122.

¹³⁰ According to Ibn ‘Arabī (1165–1240), “If he knew ... that the water takes on the color of the cup, he would let every believer have his own belief, and would recognize God in the form of every object of belief.” Chittick (1989), 344.

¹³¹ “Each religion is an expression of the Absolute ... otherwise it would not be a religion, but a man-made ideology, with no power to save.” Stoddart (2008), 32.

terminus but, rather, the final fulfillment of our spiritual longing.¹³² In this way, each tradition's uniqueness can be preserved and respected, while sharing a foundation with other religions that surpasses their ineluctable variety, represented by the rich modes of human complexity.¹³³

Perhaps the perennialist perspective is best placed to do full justice to all these requirements. It does this without capitulating either to an unmitigated relativism or to a crass uniformity that dishonours the integrity of each faith; every one embodying—in its own way—humanity's joyous experience of the spiritual release conferred by the Absolute in its many compassionate guises.

We do not look for gulfs when we compare religions; rather, we try to find similarities and unity. This is the essential difference between the Chinese and Western viewpoints. We firmly believe in the truism that all faiths are paths leading towards the Ultimate Reality, just as the spokes of the wheel converge to its axis.

When people are too immersed in the dogmas and rituals of their chosen religion, it appears to them to be the only one worth following, and so they defend their own particular faith. However, when they have acquired enough wisdom, charity and discernment, they too are bound to perceive that the road to Heaven is nobody's monopoly, and that the divine laws apply equally to all. It is the dogmas, ritual and mode of worship that divide faiths, not the basic essence of their beliefs.

But I am not in favour of conversion from one faith to another; neither do I believe in the fusion of all religions. The Ultimate Truth is one,

¹³² "The highest reality is not a mere abstraction; it is very much alive with sense and intelligence and, above all, with love purged of human infirmities and defilements." Suzuki (1957), 46.

¹³³ This is the "the Centre where all the radii meet, the summit which all roads reach. Only such a vision of the Centre can provide a meaningful dialogue between religions, showing both their inner unity and formal diversity." Nasr (1973), 150.

but it has an infinite number of aspects. What is more beautiful than that each faith should reflect only one facet of the Divine, all of them together creating a shining gem of beauty? Would the world be more beautiful if all the flowers on earth had been blended into one uniform colour, or all mountains razed to make the globe monotonously flat?

Each religion offers something glorious, peculiarly its own, to point out the road to Ultimate Reality. Who would be able to prescribe a single form of religion that would satisfy all and everybody? That would be an attempt to give a finite concept of the Infinite and, of course, it would fail.¹³⁴

– Abbot Mingzing¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Excerpt from an interview in Goullart (1961), 47.

¹³⁵ Prior to the Second World War, he was abbot of the Pure Land Buddhist Monastery of the Purple Bamboo Grove, near Hangzhou.

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Two copies of the typescript of reviews along with a copy on floppy disk (Microsoft Word) should be submitted. Reviews should not exceed 6 double-spaced A4 pages. The reviewed author's full name, book title and other specifications (place of publication, publisher, date and number of pages) as well as the reviewer's full name and affiliation should be typed at the top of the first page.

Endnotes

Endnotes should be typed double-spaced at the end of the article rather than at the bottom of each page and numbered in a single sequence. Acknowledgements should be the last number in the article and placed in the endnotes accordingly. Endnotes are for the citation of the sources.