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從客觀的立場理解宗教

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提要：

本文探討西洋宗教學術研究的核心問題之一。作者依個人二十多年研究與教會的經驗，分析出宗教學術研究不僅是幫助別人理解宗教的有力工具，也會很自然地對研究者產生影響。

第一，從西洋學術的角度研究宗教的人，因為開始與傳統的立場有了距離，就會失去原來的純真。

從客觀角度理解宗教所引起的第二種影響，乃是透過學術理解宗教觀念，使得研究者承當起宗教相互溝通的使命。當一個人對解釋自己的信仰或宗教，以及別人的宗教負責時，宗教與宗教之間的溝通即會形成。開朗而誠懇的溝通，不僅會幫助我們理解別人的信仰，也將加深我們對本身信仰的認識。

當一個人把一個他本身不信仰的宗教觀念，從客觀的角度解釋給一個有這種觀念但不清楚的人，使得他進一步理解時，他會發現：他不僅對別人的宗教用客觀的眼光來看待，而且因為這種方法已經變成他思惟的習慣，對自己的宗教也是一樣。

身為學者的作者認為「信仰」是生活在這個世界上的態度，而不是有意執持的一串教條。學者的生活也是一種「信仰」的生活，而宗教學者的使命是崇高的。

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Late Ming Vijñānamātra Schoolars and their Thought by The Venerable Sheng-yen

After the K' ai-yüan Period of the T'ang emperor Hsüan-tsung's reign (713-741 A. D.), the study of Vijñānamātra was no longer pursued in China. Besides Ch'ing-Hang Ch'eng-kuan's Commentary and Subcommentary on the Hua-yen Sūtra and Yung-ming Yenshou's Tsung-ching lu, no other works were written from which one could perceive a general idea of the Vijñānamātra teachings during the following 800 years up to the late Ming Dynasty. Yet in the last 100 odd years of the Ming Dynasty, there were seventeen scholars who produced 35 Vijñānamātra-related treatises in 107 fascicles. Unable to consult the authoritative expositions of their T'ang predecessors in their exploration of the Vijñānamātra system, they depended on Ch'ing-Hang Ch'eng-kuan's and Yung-

ming Yen-shou's books. Only two of them, who represented the Consciousness-only branch of the Vijñānāmātra School, devoted themselves exclusively to the study of these teachings. The rest originally belonged to other schools and advocated Mind-only Vijñānamātra ideas. Among the remaining fifteen were scholars with such diverse backgrounds as the T'ien-t'ai system of teaching and insight meditation, the essence of the Śurangama Sūtra, the principles of the Awakening of Faith, and the Ch'an School type of meditative practice. The outstanding characteristic of late Ming Vijñānamātra thought was the stress placed on the fusion of nature and appearance.

A Reexamination of the Lineage of Ch'an Buddhism Given by Tsung-mi by Jan Yün-Hua

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During the later years of his life, Professor Hu Shih (1891-1962) continued his interest in the study of Ch'an Buddhist histories. One of his unfinished essays was an examination of the lineage of Ch'an Budd

hism which was posthumously published in 1962. Hu suspects that Tsung-mi (780-841)

has intentionally falsified his lineage by claiming Shen-hui (684-758) as his spiritual ancestor. Hu contends that the Shen-hui actually was the Shen-hui (720-794)

of Ching-chung temple, which belonged to the Northern school of Ch'an. Hu further contends that Tsung-mi has misidentified these two persons in order to falsify and glorify the Ch'an lineage for his own personal advantage. During the last twenty-five years, Hu's view gradually gain ground among recent research of Ch'an. This paper reexamines Hu's contention as well as his sources. The paper points out Hu's difficulty and disproves his contention. Based on Hu's own contradiction and new material the study proves that there is no concrete evidence to prove the accounts given by Tsung-mi are unreliable as Hu has suspected.

The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and Asian Buddhism by Pachow

Throughout East Asia Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva has been one of the most popular divinities in the Mahayana pantheon. He is known as Kuan yin in Chinese, and Kwannon-Sama in Japanese. We shall concentrate our discussion in the following chapters.

¹ The origin of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva

Regarding the origin of Kuanyin, the Sutra on the Prophecy concerning Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva indicates a combination of mythical and mysterious elements. It is stated that he was a

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spiritual contemporary of Sakyamuni Buddha and there was communication between the bodhisattvas of the Pure Land and the presiding Buddha of India. Further it is indicated that he would eventually succeed Amitabha Buddha.

² Avalokitesvara in Buddhist philosophy

The Mayopama-samadhi-Sutra, Lotus Sutra, and the Heart Sutra provide additional insight into the philosophical significance related to Kuanyin. These texts enunciate the Mahayanic virtues of perfect wisdom and compassion. Symbolically then, Kuan yin becomes the embodiment of these ideals. In his infinite wisdom and compassio

netakesonauniversalstatustranscendingtemporalandculturalboundaries.

³ Thehistoricalsourcesandsacredsanctuaries

BasedonthetranslationsofSanskritworkssuchastheLotusSutraandtheSukhavat
i-vvuha-Sutra,itisevidentthatfromthesecondtothefifthcenturiestheworshipofKu
anyinbegantogainpopularity.LaterwhenFa-hsienandHsuan-tsangvisitedIndiaiti
srecordedintheirwritingsthatmanyshrinesandsanctuarieswerededicatedtoKua
nyin.Inaddition,duringthesixthcenturythefamousMountP'u-t'oshan(Potala)inCh
inabecameafamousspotofpilgrimageassociatedwithKuanyin.Similarly,theoffici
alresidenceoftheDalaiLamainLhasaisalsoknownasPotalainhishonor.

⁴ Theinteractionofpsychologyandreligion

Generallyhumansarefacedwithnumerousstrugglesanduncertaintiessuchasnat
ural,social,andbiologicaldangers.Duringsuchcrises,faithinthesavingpowerofKu
anyincangiveonethenecessarystrengthandhope,thusmakingasuitable
solution
possibleItisinthisinteractionoffaithandpositivethinkingthatthe

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interplayofpsychologicalandreligiousconcernsisachieved.

⁵ KuanyininAsianArt

In India the bodhisattva was depicted in masculine form while feminine images are a distinctly Chinese creation. With the development of Tantric Buddhism around the fifth century the artistic presentation about him became more sophisticated. Eventually there evolved a system of seven Kuanyins: 1. Arya Kuanyin, 2. Eleven-headed Kuanyin, 3. Kuanyin with a thousand arms, 4. Kuanyin with a lasso, 5. Kuanyin with a wishing gem and wheel, 6. Chundi Kuanyin, and 7. Horse-headed Kuanyin. The traditional human form, however, is usually preferred by the masses.

6. Kuanyin Folk Religion

The formation of a folk religion centering on Kuanyin was dependent on the establishment of Buddhist beliefs and practices. Therefore, Kuanyin in feminine form cannot be dated earlier than the fifth or sixth century. A number of instances of the folk aspect of Kuanyin are discussed. These include Kuanyin with a fish basket, Tara in Tibet, and Kuanyin's revelation to Chujo Hime.

Conclusion

Our examination of the mythical, historical, religious, philosophical, psychological and artistic aspects of Kuanyin has indicated that he was

a symbol of compassion and wisdom. Throughout the centuries he has captivated the minds of the masses, a trend which we believe will continue in the future.

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The Background and Sources of Seng-chao's Thought by Liu Kuei-chieh

Seng-chao (384-414 A. D.), whose layman surname was Chang, was a native of Ching-chao, present-day Hsi-an, Shanhsi province. Being a disciple of Kumārajīva, he became an important Buddhist theoretician in the late Eastern Chin Dynasty. He devoted himself in his youth to the "Dark Learning" of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, but turned afterwards to Buddhism and won high acclaim for his mastery of prajñāpāramitā thought. In his works, such as the Chao-lun and the Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa Sūtra, he developed the essence of this teaching—the emptiness of nature.

Seng-chao's elegant style penetratingly captured the essential Qualities of both Confucian and Taoist thought, and provided an appropriate tool for the conveying of the Buddha-dharma's subtle meaning. On this he built the structure of his own theories, thereby gaining fame and exerting a great influence upon the development of the San-lun, Hua-yen, and Ch'an Schools. The present paper's purpose is twofold. Firstly, in order to understand the background of Seng-chao's thought, it treats the main streams of thought in the Wei-Chin Period, i. e. the development of the "Dark Learning" and the spread of Buddhism, and, secondly, it attempts to trace the sources of his thought as far as the limited material allows.

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The Characteristic of Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism

by NG Yu-Kwan

This is a study of the characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in India. After examining the studies of modern scholars and what can be found concerning this issue in the sutras and śāstras, the author concludes

udes that this characteristic is nothing but a positive attitude towards the world, viz ; not to forsake the world. This attitude can be seen throughout many Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras, particularly the former, where important concepts, such as Emptiness, buddha-kāya, etc., are preached.

The Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch and Ch'an Painting by Wu Yung-meng

The true picture of human life is one of innocence, sprightliness, freedom, and naturalness. However, the more man's views increase in number, the meaner his heart becomes, and consequently his original state of being is lost. Therefore, the Sixth Patriarch said:

"The Buddha dharma is in the world; awakening cannot be separated from the world." He urged us to awaken, to gain clarity regarding our minds, to behold our nature, and to realize directly the original state of human existence.

The ten-chapter Platform Scripture which records how the Great Master Hui-neng spread the Dharma, was compiled by the

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Patriarch's disciples. It is not only a pivotal text for the Ch'an School, but also one of the most refined products of Chinese culture. It promotes a type of Buddhism which is active in the world by expounding how truth lies in the commonplace and how one attains Buddhahood by beholding one's nature.

After the T'ang Dynasty, Ch'an practitioners and literati spread the thought of the Platform Scripture, and in many cases chose its most popular stories as themes for their paintings. This genre is generally called "Sixth Patriarch Ch'an Painting". Its aim is to provide spontaneous guidance according to the demands of each unique situation.

The Secularization Policy of the Buddhist

Monastic Order in China

A Historical Survey

By Tso Sze-bong

In accordance with the Vinaya, the Buddhist Monastic Order in India adopted a policy of exclusion that barred lay people from living inside or

loitering around the monasteries and nunneries and making use of their facilities, except for those who provided services to the clerics in these establishments. Female visitors were not welcome at the monasteries, and vice versa.

Besides, Buddhist institutes were to be decorated in simplicity.

In China, on the other hand, the Monastic Order adopted a policy of secularization. This policy is reflected in the following phenomena as recorded in both the Buddhist and secular histories:

(1) The Chinese Buddhist, clerics or laymen, decorated their religious establishments ostentatiously.

(2) The Monastic Order opened their monasteries and nunneries to the society as a place of amusement, provides musical, dancing and acrobatic performances in order to entertain the laity, and allowed them

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to hold drinking parties in the monastic gardens,

(3) the authorities of the monasteries accepted poor intellectuals as tenants and sometimes even provided them with free meals, no matter whether these intellectuals were Buddhist converts or not,

- (4) The authorities of monasteries allowed lay females to come in and saunter about, or vice versa,
- (5) the authorities of Buddhist establishments allowed lay people to take bath with hot water supplied in the clerics' bathing hall,
- (6) The authorities of the establishments allowed the laity to hold funeral in their institutes and even to bury the dead in the monastic ground.

All of the above-mentioned phenomena are in fact breaches of the Buddhist Vinaya, therefore, Disciplinarian Tao-hsüan (道宣), the ninth patriarch of the Disciplinary School, condemned these practices very strongly.

Why did the Chinese Monastic Order stray from the Vinaya to ingratiate themselves with the secular society? As my research reveals, the Order adopted such a policy for the following reasons: Firstly, the Mêng-tzŭ (孟子) or 'I Work of Mencius', one of the Confucian canons read by everybody, highly extols King Wên (文王) of the Chou (周) Dynasty, who, recognizing that his royal park was built with the cash and labour of his subjects, decided to share it with them. Influenced by t

In his story, the Chinese laymen would argue that without their donations no Buddhist establishment would have been established. They would also think that they should have the same right to the monasteries and nunneries as the Chou people had to the royal park. As King Wên allowed his people to hunt and fish in his park, the Chinese laymen would think that there was nothing wrong in their using of the monastic facilities (such as the bathing hall)

occasionally. Secondly, as the poor intellectuals might one day become high-ranking officials once they passed the public examination, the monks extended to them their hospitality

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in anticipation of receiving their patronage in future. Besides, keeping an intellectual in a Buddhist environment would be a good way of courting a man to lean to Buddhism. Thirdly, according to historical records, lay females trusted monks more than the nuns, and preferred to come to the monasteries in order to pour out their miseries to the male clerics and to hear comforting words from them. As the financial resources of Buddhist establishment mainly depended on donations from the secular world and females were the main donors, monks found it difficult

t to re ject their lady visitors. Fourthly, as the Chinese tradi tionally too k funerals very seriously, the Buddhist laymen would desire to perfor m therituals in the monasteries or even to bury the dead in the monast ic ground in hopes ofseeking more blessing from the Buddha. Financi al considerations also restrain the clericsfrom rejecting such demands from their lay donors. Under the presure of the secular society,the Chi nese Monastic Order adopted a secularization policy reluctantly.

Except for allowing lay people to come to bathe, the order phenomena still survive in themonastic circles to the present days.

The Explanation of “The Twenty-fold Mahāyāna San gha”

in Tsong-kha-pa's mNgon-par rtogs-pa'i rgyan

legs-bshad gser-gyi phreng-ba

by Ch'en Yü-chiao

My translation of the "General Exposit ion of the Triple Jewel", which the 'Grel-ba don-gsal and the gSer-gyi phreng-ba give, was published i n the last volume of the Hwa Kang Buddhist Journal (No.8. 1985.) . The present paper presents the translation of the followingse

ction, namely the detailed exposition of "The Twenty-fold Mahāyāna Saṅgha". Both the explanation found

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in the 'Grel-ba don-gsal and a selection of important relevant passages from Tsong-kha-pa's subcommentary gSer-gy~hreng-ba are herein rendered into Chinese. The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra quoted in it is compared with Kumārajīva's translation Ta-p'in pan-juoching. Hsüan-tsang's rendering Ta pan-juo ching

(Second Congregation) , the Tibetan translation of the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā, and both the Tibetan and English versions of the recast Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā which was incorporated into the Abhisamayālaṃkāra, which are bsTan-gyur No.

5188 and Edward Conze's The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom.

It was discovered that, firstly, the sequence of "The Twentyfold Mahāyāna Saṅgha" in the Abhisamayālaṃkāra differs from that in the Chinese versions and the Tibetan Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā which moreover lack seven paragraphs of relevant text. Secondly, the Tibetan and English versions of the recast Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpā

ramitā correspond perfectly with the Abhisamayālaṅkāra. Thirdly, the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, which the gSer-gyi phreng-ba quotes, is the revised version of the Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā, not the original one. A discussion of problems like the reason for the above-mentioned discrepancies between the different prajñāpāramitā Sūtra versions or the relationship between the decline of prajñāpāramitā studies in China and the late (Republican era) translation of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra, concludes the paper.

A Study on Substance and Function in the Ch'an School

by Tu Sung-po

The existence and identity of both substance and function are

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agreed upon by religious thinkers and philosophers alike. Among the Chinese Ch'an masters are unrivalled in terms of giving rise to function from substance and talking about substance and function only after sudden awakening, i.e. the illumination of one's own mind and view of one's nature. In modern times, however, some people criticized the Ch'an Sch

ool as lacking the concepts of substance and function, while others draw the conclusion that it does not differentiate between these concepts.

The present paper intends to correct these extreme views and misunderstandings.

Firstly, the characteristics of the Ch'an School in comparison with the teaching schools are demonstrated by virtue of the school's formation and cultivation methods.

Secondly, a comprehensive synthesis of the pertinent remarks made by enlightened Ch'an masters reveals the essential substance and function concept of the Ch'an School : (1) "Mind," "nature,"

"one thing," and other expressions skilfully used by Ch'an Masters are all different terms denoting the same" substance".

(2) There is no right and wrong, good and evil, sorrow and joy in this substance which is pure by itself.

(3) It transcends all measurements and verbal formation, leaves no traces, can neither be known through knowledge nor pursued by reason.

(4) Substance is formless and immaterial. Neither does it arise nor perish, neither come nor go. It is to be found everywhere in the universe a

and, based on it, function arises continuously.

(5) Substance is neither empty nor existing, yet both empty as well as existing. Manifesting itself in accordance with objects, it can be great or small. It is the master of everything. Thus the relationship between substance and function is one of identity.

(6) The function of substance is incessant. It encompasses

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all activities yet cannot be limited within their scope, Not in its entirety active and not resting in inactivity, it can do 'everything.

(7) Irrespective of relation to man, it is not diminished in a bewildered worldling and not increased in a holy man, Neither interrupted nor uninterrupted, neither in the turbulent nor calm, it can nowhere be applied intentionally.

The subtlety and transcendence of this substance and function concept excels all other philosophies, This is proven in the following section in which its characteristics are discussed, When philosophers discourse of substance and function, they develop their ideas based on feeling or reasoning wherefore their theories differ completely, The neo-Confucianists of the Sung Dynasty are a good illustration of this fact. The

y tried to find out by logical deduction what cannot be found in this way . On the other hand, Chan masters realize substance and function through sudden enlightenment which perceives directly, The expressions they used may differ but their actual meaning is identical. Moreover, their sudden enlightenment has to be certified by a master which excludes the possibility of mistaken "awakening", Thus no other philosophy can compete with the subtle and transcending Ch'an School concept of substance which is founded on sudden enlightenment.

The Thought of the Indian "Six Teachers" :

An Attempt at Analysis

by Li Chih-fu

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The "Six Teachers" of ancient India whom Buddhist texts refer to as "śīrthikas" did not themselves hand down any scriptures, What we know of their teachings comes from distorted fragments in the works of their opponents in which their theories are subjected to criticism, As to the relevant Buddhist text materials, they differ in content and are affected

contradictory, Later scholars would confine themselves to the statements of a single sutra and criticize the theories of the "Six Teachers", Yet this amounted only to corrupting even further already twisted information, It is therefore necessary to compare and analyze the pertinent materials in order to reconstruct the original thought of the "Six Teachers", We might say that the "Six Teachers" are closely related to the non-Vedic Indian culture of the Bhagavadgīta and Sāṃkhya, and are distant relations or forerunners of the anti-Vedic Carvakas, Jainas, and Buddhists, Their influence on Buddhism in the positive as well as the negative sense is highly evident.

The Characteristics of Ch'an Master Ta-hui Tsung-kao's Meditation Method by Teng K'e-ming

Ta-hui Tsung-kao was the first Chinese Ch'an master who emphatically advocated the use of "ts'an hua-t'ou", Criticizing the Ch'an methods of the late Northern and early Southern Sung Dynasties, he said:

"Both members of the Sangha and lay people who nowadays devote themselves to religious practice, are committing two great errors: firstl

y, they tend to study those sayings of others which they regard as something extraordinary; secondly, unable to forget the finger and simply look at the moon, they cannot attain awakening through the sayings of others, "

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There was a kind of "perverse silent illumination Ch'an " where people were only told to sit calmly without striving for a subtle awakening. Ta-hui claimed that its proponents were,

"according to the scriptures, slanderers of great prajñā. These people cut down the living wisdom of the Buddhas. They still could not atone for their misdeeds, even if a thousand Enlightened Ones would appear in the world."

Ta-hui did not agree with those who studied the many sayings of others or practiced silent illumination Ch'an, and criticized them on every occasion. Ts'an hua-t'ou was, in his opinion, the best way to practice Ch'an.

"A thousand, nay, a ten thousand doubts are only one doubt. If this on

the doubt is broken by the hua-t'ou, all doubts are broken at the same time. If the hua-t'ou cannot break it, you have to go on with it to the very end. In the event that one discards the hua-t'ou and instead allows doubts to arise based on other's sayings, scriptures, the kungfu masters of old or everyday vexations, one becomes a member of Mara's retinue.

"Ta-hui instructed his students to practice with the "wu"

(does not have)

hua-t'ou of "the dog from Chao-chou does not have the Buddha-nature ."

"Only this one word is the knife with which one's path through saṃsāra can be severed. When confused thoughts arise, just pay attention to the word:

'wu' . Focus on it in every situation, and all of a sudden one will find that all distorted input has ceased. This is the moment to return home and sit unperturbed." Designed to prevent people from getting lost in the stagnation of silent illumination or the vast bulk of Ch'an School Scriptures, the practice of the "wu" hua-t'ou has opened up a new vista and has provided people with an effective method which leads to awakening. If one is unable to use this hua-t'ou, one can easily proceed into t

he wrong direction although one invests enormous energy. Ta-hui was convinced that it was

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the aspect of saving energy which made his practice so powerful, and it was the moment of gaining momentum in which one's efforts were not wasted.

Later Hua-t'ou's like "The ten thousand things return to one, where does the one return to?" or "Who is mindful of the Buddha?"

" derived from Ta-hui's Ch'an method which exerted tremendous influence on the post-Sung Ch'an School development in China.

Study on the Representation of the Nirvana Scene by Ch'en Ch'ing-hsiang

In Buddhist art, the depiction of the Master's parinirvāṇa is an important theme. It was popular for a long time and can be found in all Theravāda and Mahāyāna countries of Asia. We could well say that in most places where Buddhists lived pictorial representations of the nirvāṇa scene were created.

The present paper first quotes in general terms the canonical scriptures upon which these works of art are based, primarily the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna versions of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. Then it adduces what other texts record concerning the events before and after the nirvāṇa.

Examples of nirvāṇa depictions are introduced beginning with Section Four. The survey starts from the Indian styles of Gandhāra, Mathūra, and Gupta, and proceeds along the Silk Road to Central Asia, Tun-hua ng, and then China proper. A selection of historical sites with nirvāṇa representations is given including the rock carvings at Mt. K'ung-wang, Lien-yüankang, which were dated to the Eastern Han Dynasty after their discovery four years ago, or the huge stone sculpture of the reclining Buddha discovered two years ago in An-yüeh, Szechuan Province. Since they provide valuable data on the route along which Buddhism

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spread eastward and the styles of nirvāṇa representations, they have attracted attention from scholars all over the world.

Generally speaking, representations of nirvāṇa are comprised of two parts: the reclining Buddha and his mourning disciples. Although the Buddha's posture usually corresponds to the canonical description, some divergencies can still be found that bear witness to certain local and historical conditions. Nevertheless the execution of the disciples is more artistically exuberant. Not only do the different expressions of mourning

(due to the individual development of bodhisattvas, arhats, gods, men, etc.)

reveal the highest of artistic skill, but the various costumes of kings, princes, noblemen, and commoners gathered to mourn the Buddha's passing away also provide us with clues to the customs of different periods and regions. Thus they are a valuable source of information on social history.

Understanding Religion from the Outside

by Charles W. Swain

The present paper discusses one of the central problems of the western academic study of religion. Relating his experiences of research in

and teaching of religious studies for more than two decades, the author analyzes how the academic study of religion is not only a powerful tool for understanding, but possesses a "recoil" mechanism which can affect its user.

The first thing that happens to one who adopts the western academic perspective is loss of innocence because one begins to distance oneself from the naivete of any traditional perspective.

The second aspect of the transforming effect of trying to

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understand religion" from the outside" is based on the academic idea of understanding which accepts the responsibility to communicate to others the meaning of what one understands. By taking the responsibility for both elucidating one's beliefs or tradition to outsiders and interpreting other traditions, interreligious dialogue is possible. Open and honest dialogue can change not only one's understanding of someone else's religion, but also that of one's own faith.

The third stage in the process of transformation, which can be effect o
f studying religion, arises out of the realization that one's interpretation
, from the outside, of a point of view which one does not share, may he
lp someone who shares that viewpoint to understand it better. At this p
oint one discovers that one does not only look at the beliefs and religi
oustraditions of others from the distance of phenomenological "suspe
nse of judgement", but, having internalized this methodology, one eve
n views one's own beliefs and tradition" from the outside."

As a scholar, the author understands "faith" as a mode of being in the
world, and not a set of beliefs consciously held. The scholar's life, in hi
s opinion, is a life of faith, and the vocation of a scholar in the field of re
ligion is a high one.

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UNDERSTANDING RELIGION FROM THE OUTSIDE

by Charles W. Swain

In the more than twenty years since the publication of Wilfred Cantwell
Smith's ground-breaking *The Meaning and End of Religion*, it has become a cliché to say that the western concept of "religion" is recent and
parochial. Smith demonstrates convincingly that our common notion of
religion is formed from three elements:

(1) the idea, compounded in the crucible of post-Reformation Europe,
that something called "religion" can be separated from a given social complex,
and examined as one might examine that society's language or marriage customs;
(2) the idea, borne on the strong currents of anti-rationalism in the 17th and 18th centuries,
that religion is an affair of the heart, a matter of faith or belief, and thus an aspect of individual
personhood; and (3) the 19th century idea of historical development or evolution.
Smith also argues, again convincingly, in my judgment, that the rise of the western
academic study of religion was heavily dependent upon this concept.

Because of the spread of western influence, there are people in virtually all modern,
non-western cultures who understand what is meant by the western concept of "religion".
But so far as I can determine, the western academic study of religion is little known
in the universities of Asia.

a; and, when this approach to religion is transposed into a non-western frame of reference, some of its inherent problems are highlighted. Having recently spent a semester teaching in a Chinese university, I have had occasion to reflect once more on one of the central problems of my own academic discipline.

In the first place, the majority of my students were Buddhist

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nuns who were studying their own tradition

(along with its Indian antecedents.)

Their motive was clearly and quite consciously to broaden and deepen their acquaintance with their own tradition. They were somewhat taken

aback to discover that their teacher was not a "believing" and

practicing Buddhist. They were too polite to ask it, but the question

hung in the air: Given the investment of time and energy demanded

(many of these students were learning Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, and Japanese in the course of their work toward the M. A. degree !) , why

would I want to study in depth a religious tradition to which I was not

ersonally committed? As I labored to increase my reading knowledge of Chinese, it was hard to dismiss this question as pointless.

Secondly, when my students became aware that I was not a fellow Buddhist, however deeply I have been influenced by their tradition, they were understandably curious about my personal religious commitments. But the question -- "What is your religion?"

-- coming from this group of students was somehow different and more disturbing. This was the first time in my career that I found myself so explicitly teaching members of a religious community other than my own about their own tradition. Being so inescapably an "outsider" forced upon me the realization that the academic study of religion, as practiced in western (secular) universities, is not only a powerful tool

(one might even say weapon)

for understanding, but that this weapon possesses a curious recoil mechanism which can affect its user. Not all scholars experience these effects; they are a possible, and not a necessary outcome of academic study. Some western scholars approach religion in much the same way that these Buddhists did, spending their time and energy on a single tradition, or even a single, limited aspect of one tradition. Never the

ss, trying to answer honestly my students' questions about my own religion commitments, and why I practice my chosen profession in the way I do, proved for me both a stimulating and sobering exercise.

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I have spent my entire adult life engaged in trying to understand religion as a dimension of human culture. I began from a perspective very similar to that of my Chinese students

(and, I suspect, most of my students in general) . that is, the perspective of a naive believer within a single tradition: in my case, that of orthodox, evangelical, Protestant Christianity. My original intention was to broaden and deepen my understanding of my own tradition. So far as I am able to recover the self-understanding of the person who began this intellectual and spiritual journey, more than twenty-five years ago, it seems to me that had I known from the beginning what would happen, the transforming effects might well have alarmed me, and perhaps even persuaded me not to set out.

I remember vividly a moment, toward the end of my semester in China, when one of my students, a Buddhist nun, grasped something of what I was trying to communicate about the value of studying religion as I do,

"I think I understand what you are saying," she said, struggling with the English language as well as her thoughts,

"and I agree with you. But, if I adopt this approach, what will happen to me?"

"She sat before me, a young, slight Chinese woman, wearing her black robe, her head shaved. She had renounced all ties to family, the symbolic center of her own culture, in her commitment to the Buddhist tradition, within whose community she was now nurtured and sustained. The feeling that swept over me in that moment was close to awe; I think it was the most moving experience of my career as a teacher.

What does happen to someone who tries to understand religion from a western, academic perspective?

It may be that we, who represent this perspective, have not asked this question with sufficient seriousness. The value of what we do seems

undeniable; we do not think much about the costs, or the balance between the value and the costs.

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Simply put, the first thing that happens to one who adopts the western academic perspective on religion is loss of innocence. Religion, as a dimension of human culture, presents the student with a vast body of data, phenomena that range over the whole of human history and every known human society. Acquaintance with the body of knowledge which has been gathered in the more than two hundred years of academic religion study must have a cumulative, relativising effect on the student.

It is possible to compartmentalize, at least initially, your own beliefs and, perhaps, even your own tradition. But eventually the patterns, obvious and startling, which inform the data, lead you to think of your own tradition as one among others. Your acquaintance with the phenomena of religion forces you to say "my faith" rather than "the faith," even if you still think of yourself as a Christian, or Buddhist, believer. You may continue to believe that your own tradition is somehow "better" than others.

er traditions, but you have nevertheless begun to distance yourself from the naivete of any traditional perspective.

From the beginning you will make some attempt to understand and interpret these phenomena; this attempt will almost certainly be from within your own religious frame of reference. You approach Buddhism as a Christian, for example, and quite self-consciously from Christian presuppositions. Because such beginning interpretations take the phenomena being studied seriously, they are not to be despised. But usually they are not satisfying to the interpreter for very long, because they disregard as persons the persons whom one is trying to understand; it is as if you were translating a poem from, say, Chinese to English, and were committed to ignoring the protests of the Chinese poet that you had got it all wrong. I suspect that it is most often, as in my own case, actual contact with living human beings, who embody the tradition which one is trying to understand, that evokes this second aspect of the transforming effect of trying to understand

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religion "from the outside."

Maybe the best way to grasp this is to ask yourself: What does it mean to understand something ?

Obviously understanding means more than "being acquainted with," for we all are acquainted with many things -- things which we might be able even to describe to someone else -- that we don't understand. When you first say to yourself "I understand" you are, I think, summing up an inner conversation in which you have been able to explain what you have experienced to your own satisfaction.

"Explain" here means a re-description which expresses the meaning you have derived from your experience. When you understand something, it has meaning for you; when you don't, it is "just an experience."

It is at this point that academic study departs from our common-sense idea of understanding. What constitutes academe as a community (if it is a community at all, which is open to question)

is that it renounces purely private acts of understanding. In the academy, we take public responsibility for what and how we think. Thus, in the academy, to understand something means to accept the responsibility for communicating to someone else what it means. Further, ideally such communication cannot presuppose a privileged audience, exclude

ing those who do not share your own presuppositions. It is this latter stipulation which can have a profound impact on the student of religion.

The usual first response to this wider context of understanding can be called confessionism. Here I accept responsibility for communicating the meaning of my beliefs or my tradition to outsiders, making every effort to find some "point of contact" within their frame of reference. By extension, I may take responsibility for my interpretation of another tradition as my understanding, or "a Christian," understanding of the outsiders' tradition. This is often termed interreligious dialogue.

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Each participant enters the dialogue with full integrity; there is no explicit goal of converting any or all of the participants to a single point of view. The explicit goal is increasing mutual understanding and acceptance of the differing viewpoints represented. So, for example, recent Buddhist

Christian dialogue has most often consisted of Buddhists and Christians each presenting their own view of a particular aspect of human existence, in the search for points of contact between the two traditions, as

well as Buddhists presenting their understanding of the Christian world view, and vice versa.

You can see that such dialogue does not demand any overt movement away from traditional perspectives by the participants. But there is a subtle impulse toward movement, induced by the "corrective" offered to a Christian understanding of the Buddhist tradition by a Buddhist participant in the dialogue, or vice versa. Joachim Wach once remarked that the problem with misunderstanding is that it is a way of understanding something. I have found in my classes that a very effective motive to induce students to take more seriously their responsibility to interpret someone else's religion carefully and fairly is the presence of someone who represents that religious perspective. On occasion, I have written the word "slander" as a marginal comment to some student's insensitive exposition of someone else's religious position; this almost always provokes a response of some kind. To become aware that you have misunderstood something is to accept a responsibility to change your point of view.

The process of dialogue, then, will of ten induce shifts in perspective, subtle, even unnoticed, but cumulative in effect over time. As an honest participant, you will sometimes discover, upon being challenged, that you have in fact changed, and no longer believe something that you believed when the dialogue began. It may be that your understanding of someone else's religion has changed; but you may also discover that your understanding of your own

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faith has changed. Notice that changed, but your understanding point later.

I began to study Latin in the 9th grade; it was, believe it or not, a requirement for entrance into the state university which I attended. I enjoyed studying Latin, and in fact kept at it for five more years. But the most profound effect which the study of Latin had on me, I think, was what I learned about the English language from studying Latin -- far more than I ever learned in any English class. What I understand about the structure of the English language, its grammar and syntax, beyond the intuiti

ons which derive from being a native speaker, I learned almost entirely
, I am convinced, while I was studying Latin.

A language is a means of expression which most of us take for granted. You did not choose your mother tongue. No matter how many languages you learn, you cannot change the fact that your native language is, say, English, even if you should decide that another language is a better vehicle for self-expression. However, once you understand another language well enough to express yourself within its structures and limits, you can never view your native language with the same naivete.

Languages are cumulative traditions very like those we have learned to call "religions." The awareness that studying someone else's religion seriously can affect your understanding of your own faith is the second stage of the transforming process of academic study.

Before we discuss the third stage of this process, some further background may be helpful. Friedrich Schleiermacher, in an essay on hermeneutics which became the basis for his suggested reforms of the theological curriculum, boldly asserted that the task of the interpreter was to understand a text *wie wohl und dann besser als*,

"as well as and even better than," the author. Shades of the new criticism ! But Schleiermacher was thinking in

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the context of a history of interpreting texts, especially biblical texts, and his idea presupposes the self-understanding of a single religious community. His assertion has had a profound influence on western interpreters of religion since his time, stretching from Wilhelm Dilthey and Ernst Troeltsch, through Rudolph Otto to Joachim Wach, and eventually to the phenomenological movement which has had such a great influence on the academic study of religion.

The phenomenological movement, both in philosophy and academic religion study, held out the possibility that the sensitive interpreter might be able to communicate the meaning of a given phenomenon to any and all observers. To do this, the phenomenologists argued, it was necessary to "bracket" one's own ontological intuitions concerning a given phenomenon; by phenomenological reduction, a structural description of the phenomenon could be given in which the meaning would be retained without presuppositions about what lay behind the phenomenon.

on, what it "really was." This methodology has informed the work of some of the most influential recent interpreters of religion, among them van der Leeuw and Eliade. In general, critics of the phenomenological movement have not been convinced of the possibility of "presuppositionless interpretation;" but the tantalizing ideal has persisted, and especially in the field of religion.

At about this same time, first in Europe and then in England another powerful current in philosophy was flowing, first in the various forms of so-called "logical positivism," and then in the work of "ordinary language" philosophers, preeminently Ludwig Wittgenstein. Like the phenomenologists, Wittgenstein insisted that the task of philosophy was not to legislate, or even advocate, an ontology, but to "clarify" the presuppositions which lay behind ordinary discourse, and to rid it of apparent conundrums arising out of misunderstanding of the uses of language.

Wittgenstein coined the phrase "philosophy as therapy," which was picked up by

his disciples as a watchword for their idea of what a philosopher should be about .

These two currents, the phenomenological and the analytical, flowed side-by-side in the academic study of religion during the period when I received my professional training. Both of them, albeit in different ways, held out the possibility of understanding human phenomena in a way which could, in principle, be communicated to any human being, regardless of their presuppositions or point of view. This possibility became my ideal as a scholar, as it did for many of my peers who were trained in that period.

To return to the argument of the essay: the third stage in the process of transformation, which can be an effect of studying religion, arises out of the realization that your interpretation, from the outside, of a point of view which you do not share, may indeed help someone who shares that viewpoint to understand it, and themselves, better. Here you face the Faustian bargain: are you willing to "suspend judgment," to submerge, insofar as you can, your own self-understanding in the task of interpretation ?

To put it bluntly and polemically, would you consent to losing your own soul in order to save someone else's ?

I am more than half serious in this way of posing the question. Remember the poignant question of the Buddhist nun - -

"If I accept your point of view, what happens to me?" She saw the abyss opening beneath her feet.

Phenomenological epoche,

"suspense of judgment," is indeed a powerful weapon in the struggle for understanding. Interpreting to someone else the meaning of a perspective you, as interpreter, do not share, is satisfying to a degree very hard to explain to one who has not shared the experience. It is at this point, however, that the interpreter experiences the "recoil" of academic religion study. You discover that you are not only looking at the beliefs and religious traditions of others from the distance of epoche,

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the phenomenological "suspense of judgment;" you have internalized this methodology, and you become aware -- this can be very unsettling -

- that you now view even your own beliefs and tradition" from the outside," as it were.

This is why the question -- What is your religion?

-- comes with new and disturbing overtones, especially when it comes from someone outside your own tradition, who views you as a representative of it. You are committed to approaching religion with absolute seriousness; yet you can no longer give any simple answer to apparently simple and direct questions about your own religious beliefs.

If someone asks me:

"Do you believe in God?" the most authentic and honest response I can make is another question,

"Why do you ask?," or "What do you mean, 'God' ?

" Let me hasten to add that this does NOT mean that I have no religious beliefs, or that I have" lost my faith." Rather, I have learned that religious faith, my own as well as that of others, has depths of which we are not consciously aware, and that its meaning can be communicated within more than one religious frame of reference.

My response to such questions, however: is only partly a function of my desire to understand the frame of reference within which the question is being asked, so that my response will be truly communicative. There is also an element of condescension in such a response, because I am thinking (although I do not say it) :

"I could say either 'yes' or 'no' and mean it, but I doubt very much that any answer I give would have the same meaning for both of us." That is, I am tempted to think that in fact I do understand what you, the questioner, mean" as well as and even better than" you do. I use the term" temptation" advisedly, because, as a scholar, I must not understand the critical distance which separates me from the phenomenon I am trying to understand as placing me in a superior perspective. Instead I must struggle to keep myself "in submission," as it were, to the

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phenomena themselves. The irritation, even anger, which my students feel (and sometimes express)

when I "dodge" their questions, arises, I think, because they dimly sense the scholar's condescension. I repent, but my uneasiness about answering such questions does not go away.

Imagine that you can understand and speak some language other than your mother tongue-- say Chinese. A Chinese person asks you: what color is that flower? Would you answer, in Chinese, "hong"? Can you be confident of what the Chinese color-reference means, or what the questioner would understand if you used it? Is it better to answer with the English word, "red," even if the Chinese questioner can't understand you?

Suppose you would answer the question with the English word "purple," and you don't know the Chinese word for "purple." The analogy is not exact, but it captures something of my feeling when someone asks me "Are you a Christian?" or "Do you believe in God?" or even "Do you think ghosts are real?"

"At the same time, I most emphatically do NOT think that questions from my students about my own beliefs and convictions are irrelevant to the academic study of religion. How shall I respond?"

Even more disturbing: can I answer my own deepest religious questions to my own satisfaction?

The answer is no, I cannot. Indeed, it often seems to me that the quest for any ultimate meaning or reality is a fool's errand: peeling an onion,

layer after layer, only to risk discovering that there is, at the center, literally "nothing." I become more and more convinced that the scholar can have no univocal symbols by which to communicate with the believer, even when the dialogue between "scholar" and "believer" goes on within the soul of a single person.

As a scholar, I understand "faith" as a mode of being in the world, and not a set of beliefs consciously held. This is true of my own faith as well as the faith of those I am trying to understand and interpret. My own religious life has become largely

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a process of "waiting without idols," to borrow Gabriel Vahanian's pregnant phrase. Although I am comfortable participating in the common life of more than one religious community, none of the religious symbols which I have learned to interpret fully expresses the deepest dimensions of my own human being, and the world within which I find myself. In this sense, I have left behind the comfort of believing for the ongoing task of understanding - - my own faith as well as the faith of others.

"I believe' in order to understand," wrote St. Augustine; for me, the aph

orism must read,

"If I do not suspend belief, I will never understand." This is what it means, I think to be a scholar and teacher in my field.

What happens to someone who tries to understand religion from the outside ?

I have tried to give you some reasons for taking this question more seriously than it is sometimes taken in western, secular universities. Let me conclude on a positive note, for I do not intend these reflections to be discouraging. The scholar's life, as I understand it, is a life of faith, and the vocation of a scholar in the field of religion is a high one: to open yourself, in so far as you can, to the meaning of the widest possible range of religious phenomena, even at the risk of your own deepest convictions; to place yourself in the service of others, helping them to become acquainted with, understand, appreciate, and appropriate the power, embodied in religious symbols and traditions, to create and sustain truly and fully human lives; to tend the flame of our common humanity, as it shines across the boundaries of time, place, and culture. When I have been responsible, in whatever small way, to this high calling, I have found nothing in life more satisfying.

