

"I do not think it fair to bring up Fozdar's and Momen's books on Buddhism in this context."

Whereas one can be hostilely exclusive, I think it is quite possible to be equally hostilely inclusive, presumptive, and I think this is so of Fozdar, though not of Momen. Fozdar "argues" in his prophecy chapter in BUDDHA MAITRYA [sic], and elsewhere in that book, that Buddhists have lost the true meaning and understanding of Buddhism, and he does this in terms that can only be called insulting to Buddhists, and this is so particularly in the context of Fozdar's scholastic incompetency. This is a man who in at least 27 instances quoted as Buddhist texts material that he had know wasn't. Of the prophecy text, the Anagatavamsa, Fozdar states that this is the "oldest passage" relating the decline of the Dhamma and the advent of Maitreya "which can be attributed with any certainty to Siddharta [sic] Himself." (BMA 250, 282) The source for this claim? It can only be Fozdar's own inventiveness, and certainly not any extant scholarship which attributes this work to a man named Kassapa around the end of the 12th Century CE. Fozdar's whole approach to Buddhist texts has nothing to do with traditional exegesis, it has often nothing to do with the traditional meanings of technical terminology, and in one very central issue, Fozdar's approach has nothing to do with the grammar of the passage in question.

On page 177 of BMA he quotes from the Anagatavamsa with the addition of "of the Perfect Buddha": "At the time when the Dispensation of the Perfect Buddha is falling into oblivion, ... a 'miracle' like the Twin-miracle will teach the Dharma." (The deletion and ellipsis are Fozdar's.) Fozdar comments on this, "The sense is clear: the Dharma will be taught not by a single 'miracle' (Avatar), nor by two _separate_ 'miracles' ... but by the 'Twin-miracle...." Fozdar states that "the contemporaneous appearance of Two Avatars," the Twin-miracle, will prevent false claim to Buddhahood, and by being so unusual, it will demand our full attention. Fozdar spends the whole of chapters 10, 11, 12, and 13 to establish that, as announced by the title of chap 14, the Twin-miracle is manifest in the persons of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh.

The full sentence from the Anagatavamsa which Fozdar does actually quote reads:

"At the time when the Dispensation is falling into (oblivion), all the relics, coming from every place: from the abode of serpents and the deva world and the Brahma-world, having gathered together in the space around the great Bo- tree, having made a Buddha image, and having performed a 'miracle' like the Twin-miracle, will teach Dhamma."

Parse this sentence: what is the subject, the verb, and the direct object? And never mind that "relics" and "twin-miracle" have very specific meanings within the Pali literature which Fozdar completely ignores for his own inventive interpretations, and if we follow Fozdar who needs to consider the grammatical structure of the sentence in order find the true meaning of it? The Twin-miracle will teach the Dharma. And this from a man who criticizes

Buddhists and Buddhist scholars for having deformed the true teaching of the Buddha.

I do think the comparison of Fozdar to Miller, they being mirror images of the other, is not inappropriate.

'Fozdar was writing in a Middle Eastern genre called the "istidlaliyyih" or "seeking of proof," the purpose of which is to create common ground with another tradition for the purposes of gaining converts from it.'

This is certainly true of Momen's work, which strikes me as being sympathetic to Buddhism, and is willing to make some attempt at presenting Buddhism in a favorable light, at finding a common ground. Was Fozdar trying to establish common ground by telling Buddhists that have it all wrong, that have lost the true meaning of the Buddha's teaching, and on and on and on? If so Fozdar is a very sorry example of this genre. In both his books his attitude is hostile and subsumptive.

"As for Moojan's book, I should have thought it fairly obvious that it was intended to be used in proselytizing for the Bahá'í faith among Southeast Asian Buddhists, or at least in gaining friends for the Faith in those cultures."

Of course it is, and it is what Moojan told me his intent was, but that does not excuse him from any criticism of how he presents Buddhism. As a matter of fact it should open him up, his work anyway, to a careful examination his presentation of Buddhism, do his parallels really work, is he in fact accurately presenting the Buddhist position, or is he just presenting enough of Buddhism with a particular twist that will allow him to draw the parallels he wants to draw? I would say the latter.

"The Bahá'í Faith is a missionary religion."

Of course, and the missionized, you certainly can expect, will respond to the attempts at presenting their religion in ways that they find problematic.

"Polemics are forbidden to Bahá'ís, but apologia are not."

Where is the line crossed from apologetics to polemics?

"But the approaches so far tried have not been polemical or mean-spirited in the way Miller's book is with regard to the Bahá'í Faith."

I guess it is a matter of taste, but I found Fozdar particularly mean spirited and hostile, though not so of Momen's book.

"Some Bahá'ís may want to convince Buddhists that their religion is ultimately fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith. The latter will be objectionable to some Buddhists, but the distinctions at least should be recognized."

Certainly it is a reasonable thing to think that a Bahá'í would want to convince Buddhists that Bahá'í is the fulfillment of Buddhism, but the question for Bahá'ís, then, is how do you meaningfully talk to Buddhist in a

way that they will listen. Fozdar's books are certainly an obvious negative example. Momen's book is better in attitude, but not less problematic in execution.

Bruce

Letter 2

Date: Tue, 19 Sep 1995 08:14:05 -0500

From: Bruce Burrill

To: Jonah Winters

Subject: Buddhism

Dear Jonah Winters,

Again, thanks for the msg and the review.

"I've been following with fascination the discussion on Buddhism, because it seems to me to be the religion the most unfairly treated by the Bahá'í apologia."

Yes, and would say that the reason is that it really poorly fits the popular Bahá'í paradigm.

I realize that Momen was not presenting a definitive survey of the Pali texts in order to demonstrate his points, but actually that is what would be required. At least it would need to be in the background informing what he saying, and it is not there. I would argue that he was selective of texts that would support his position giving them a spin that further supported his position.

"These three examples show that the Bahá'í interpretation of Buddhism is in many ways completely at odds with the normative interpretations of Buddhism, but that, at the same time, it could very well prevail."

The problem is that virtually any one of the passages he uses to support a metaphysical correspondence is essentially misused by him. Let here repeat part of a brief msg I sent to Momen:

I got your book. In looking in the bibliography, you have referred to none of the excellent studies available on issue of the Pali Canon. I'd be happy to suggest at least ten excellent books or so that deal with Pali sources.

As for your book, I am sorry to say that I am very disappointed in it. It certainly a vast improvement over what Fozdar has done to Buddhism. At least on the surface, if we look at just what you present as being Buddhism, it is generally okay, but not without problems and it is superficial. But when we look at what you present of Buddhism in order for you to draw parallels to Bahá'í, the problem is that your presentation of Buddhism is superficial and incomplete or just wrong.

I am not saying this to be mean or because I feel threatened or some such thing by your parallels. I am saying this because it is true. Please excuse me for being blunt, but the level of scholarship leaves something to be desired. The translation, for example, you use of the famous passage from the Udana 80, which is the same translation Fozdar uses, but it not the translation used in the Minor Anthologies of the Pali Text Society, which you make reference to, this translation you use is a bit problematic. You have the last sentence reading: "there is neither this shore (this world) nor the other shore (Nibbana), nor anything between them"; however, idha is not shore. It is here, as in this existence, huram is not other shore; it is there, as in the next existence, and is definitely not a word for nibbana. The line as it is in the PTS Minor Anthologies reads: "there is no 'here' or 'yonder' nor anything between the two." Or a little more simply: "there is nothing here or there or between them." Or a bit more interpretatively: there is no more this life nor a next life nor something in between." Again, the reading of nibbana for the second word in this line inappropriate; however, the whole of the line does in fact refer to nibbana.

Further, the introduction to the whole of the Udana 80 passage clearly states that it is a discourse about nibbana, not some "Absolute." Are you aware that "unborn (ajatam), unoriginated (abhutam), uncreated (akatham), unformed (asankhatam)" are used elsewhere in either these forms or in variations as defining words for nibbana? You quote this passage but you give no discussion of it or its elements, as if this mysterious sounding collections of words will somehow support your contention that it refers to an Absolute, a god. All we need do is look at one word to see that what is going on here.

The word asankhata, "unformed/unconditioned," is of central importance, and its significance in the Buddhist texts is very easily seen. Sankhata means conditioned, compounded or formed--that is, it is that which is 'put-together,' and in a technical sense it is that which is put together by greed, aversion and delusion. In the Samyutta Nikaya III 87 we find: "Why does one say 'conditions' [sanhkara: the volitional conditions of greed, hatred and delusion]? Because they condition the conditioned [sankhata]." The a in Pali as in a_sankhata is a privative and functions something like a minus sign (-), and its translation is dependent upon its context.

So to further illustrate, in the S.N. IV 251 and IV 321 we find: "That which is the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion is nibbana." In S.N. IV 359 and S.N. 362 we find: "That which is the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion is asankhata." That is to say, it is the freedom from the conditioning of those three unwholesome factors, and clearly nibbana and asankhata are equivalent terms.

To further illustrate I shall quote a sutta from the Itivuttaka, 37-8, which contains the central section of Udana 80.

This said by the Blessed One, the Worthy One, was heard by me in this way: "Monks, there is freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from

making, freedom from conditioning. For, monks if there were not this freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from making, freedom from conditioning, then escape from that which is birth, becoming, making, conditioning, would not be known here. But, monks, because there is freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from making, freedom from conditioning, therefore the escape from that which is birth, becoming, making, conditioning is known." This meaning the Blessed One spoke, it is spoken here in this way: That which is born, become, arisen, made, conditioned, and thus unstable, put together of decay and death, the seat of disease, brittle, caused and craving food, that is not fit to find pleasure in. Being freed of this, calmed beyond conjecture, stable, freed from birth, freed from arising, freed from sorrow, freed from passions, the elements of suffering stopped, the conditioning [of greed, hatred and delusion] appeased, this is ease [bliss]. This meaning spoken just so by the Blessed One was heard by me in this way.

Let me recommend Rune Johansson's THE PSYCHOLOGY OF NIRVANA, and the brilliant CONCEPT AND REALITY by Nanananda, Buddhist Publication Society.

Your discussion of the uniqueness of the Buddha is also singularly problematic. Essentially, you picked a few verses that seem to support your position, ignoring many others. Your interpretation of the passage you quote from the Tevijja Sutta (page 35 of your book) ignores the whole of the Buddha's teachings about Brahma and the Brahma worlds and his relationship to Brahma and the brahma worlds.

Further, on page 35 you quote the Buddha as stating that he is denying the epistemological stance of devising a "system beaten out by reasoning and based upon investigation," but you fail understand that does not thusly mean revelation by default. The Sangarava Sutta of the Majjhima states that there are three types of claims to religious knowledge. The above is the second, which the Buddha rejects. The first is revelation, which he rejects. The third is that of personal understanding derived from one's own extra-sensory powers of perception, which the Buddha said I am one of these. Elsewhere the Buddha states to his monks:

"Come, this is the Way, this is the course I have followed until, having realized by my own super-knowledge the matchless plunge into Brahma-faring, I have made it known. Come you too, follow likewise, so that you also, having realized by your own super- knowledge the matchless plunge into the Brahma-faring, may abide in it." AN I 168-69.

And:

"Two things, o monks, I came to know well: not to be content with good states of mind, so far achieved and to be unremitting in the struggle for the goal. Unremittingly, indeed, did I struggle and I resolved: "Let skin, sinews and bones remain; let flesh and blood in the body dry up: yet there shall be no ceasing of energy, manly energy, manly effort!" "Through heedfulness have I won Enlightenment, through effort have I won the unsurpassable security from samsaric toil. 'If you, O monks, will struggle unremittingly and resolve: "Let

skin ... [as above] manly effort" -- then you, too, O monks, will soon realize here and now, through your own direct knowledge, that unequalled goal of the holy life." AN II ii 5.

And how about the Itivuttaka 57:

"Whoever frees himself from the passions of lust, hatred, and ignorance, they call him, one who is self developed, made divine (brahmabhuta), well-gone (tathagata), awake (buddha), one who has left fear and hatred, and one who has let go of all."?

The question of the nature of the Buddha and that nature in relation to the nature of the enlightened followers is not quite as you have presented it.

Also, on page 37 you state: "Indeed, the Buddha specifically states that his station is one to 'which no worldling can attain.'" Is that really what the Dhammapada 272 is saying? That's what Fozdar wants it to say, but is the text really saying that?

On page 52 you quote: "There is no disappearing to the true _Dhamma_...they make the true _Dhamma_ disappear."

But you fail to quote what immediately follows: "But five things conduce to its maintenance, clarity and non-disappearance -- that monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen live with reverence and deference for the Teacher, for Dhamma, for the Order, for the training and for concentration."

Are you going to argue that the _all_ followers of the Buddha have not done these five things from some time forward which has allowed the true Dhamma to disappear?

You quote from the Anagatavamsa. Do you know what this text is? Can you really argue that the "five disappearances" have happened as this text describes?

"While a four line stanza still continues to exist among men, there will not be a disappearance of learning." Are you going to argue that has happened?

"He has presented selections from the writings of the two religions that show the correspondences between them to be incontestable. He has done so without misrepresenting either religion."

My above to Momen is too brief and unsystematic, but I will say again the selection of Buddhist texts Momen uses is too select to really warrant his conclusions, and that is why I disagree with your above statement very strongly. As presented by Momen the correspondences are clearly contestable. I think he has misrepresent the basic teachings of the Pali texts. I would not say this a deliberate misrepresentation; rather, he simply needs to study these texts more carefully. He needs to look at some of excellent studies that have already been done.

"If the Bahá'í interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha is to be upheld, Buddhism will have to be radically reevaluated. Most Buddhists and

Buddhologists would find such an attempt at reinterpretation to be futile and, possibly, offensive. Momen's book takes a convincing step towards opening the possibility of such a reevaluation."

Again, to repeat myself, Momen is not convincing. To look at the question of what is the nature of the Buddha and how does he differ from the enlightened followers requires that _all_ of the texts pertaining to the issue are carefully examined. The few texts Momen presses into service do not contradict the traditional Buddhist notion that the _bodhi_ of the Buddha is no different from that of the enlightened disciple. Momen in ignoring those texts that clearly indicate that, as I quoted to him, and using the texts he does with the spin he gives them, then he can make his claim. To me this very unconvincing.

To repeat what I earlier said on the list Momen: "It is one thing to Thank you for your posting on the similarities between the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and the Bahá'í writings. This raises several questions. Do you feel that when we look at the fuller Buddhist context of the FNT and fuller Bahá'í context of the Bahá'í passages you quote that the similarities hold? Given that the FNT is a specific application of a general formula of the Buddhist notion of causality, _paticcasamuppada_, conditioned co-production, the claim that the Bahá'í quotes are up to the same sort of process as found in the FNT seems less than cogent."

"Momen's book is one portent of a possible wholesale reinterpretation of the religion, one that is founded on the same scriptures on which the heretofore standard interpretations of Buddhism have been founded, and one that could eventually become scholastically acceptable."

Do you think such a wholesale reinterpretation could happen? As yet I have seen nothing that would suggest this is possible, but....

"Any attempt at explaining one tradition through recourse to the philosophy of another is regarded with historically-justifiable suspicion."

It may not be something that is academically acceptable, but it is certainly something that is, as you well know, done all the time in the religious sphere. The challenge will be to a religious comparison that is academically sound. An interesting and very good book is K. N. Upadhyaya's EARLY BUDDHISM AND THE BHAGAVADGITA, Motilal Banarsidass, which an excellent scholarly comparison, but then there is a geographical and historical connexion between the two bodies of work, and there is no doctrinally driven agenda in this book. It is a history of ideas. Another interesting book is Dharmasiri's A BUDDHIST CRITIQUE OF THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF GOD, in which he is able to show quite nicely that a contemporary god-notion can be accurately portrayed, and that it can be soundly critiqued and rejected from the basis of Pali texts. So, certainly it is possible that a Bahá'í, well versed in the basic of Buddhology could do such a reinterpretation, but....

Anyway, thanks again for your msg.

Bruce

Letter 3

Date: Wed, 20 Sep 95 23:56:51

From: Wendi and Moojan Momen

To: talisman

Subject: Miller, Bahai & Buddhism

Dear Bruce

I am sorry that you think that my treatment of Buddhism is in some way comparable to Miller's treatment of the Bahá'í Faith. I think others have commented sufficiently on that. I had assumed that your statement was merely a rhetorical device for getting the discussion on Talisman onto subjects that interest you.

The two main areas that you contested are:

1. My arriving at a conclusion that there is reference to an Absolute in Buddhism (your assertion that I have stated that there is a reference to a "god" in Buddhism is incorrect - I do not make any such assertion - or at any rate I do not intend to).

the introduction to the whole of the Udana 80 passage clearly states that it is a discourse about nibbana, not some "Absolute." . Again, the reading of nibbana for the second word in this line inappropriate; however, the whole of the line does in fact refer to nibbana . You quote this passage but you give no discussion of it or its elements, as if this mysterious sounding collections of words will somehow support your contention that it refers to an Absolute, a god.

I would cite as evidence for my interpretation, Nagarjuna's commentary on the Udana passage. Murti gives this as: "Nagarjuna is emphatic in stating that without the acceptance of the paramartha (the ultimate reality) there can be no deliverance (Nirvana) from Samsara" (Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 235 and note 1). If Murti has translated correctly, then clearly Nagarjuna does not regard the ultimate reality spoken of in the Udana passage as being Nirvana -- if that were the case it would reduce the above-quoted sentence to a nonsense: "Without the acceptance of Nirvana there can be no Nirvana"

However, having said that, I really do not mind whether one chooses to interpret this Udana passage as referring to Nibbana or to some other Absolute. For even if it does refer to Nibbana as you assert, this makes no difference to my argument. Nibbana is itself an Absolute, the description of it in this Udana passage makes it Absolute Reality, and that is all I am asserting: that there is a concept of an Absolute Reality -- whatever name you wish to hang on it. There cannot of course be more than one Absolute Reality otherwise neither could be said to be absolute.

If we then consider the way that Nagarjuna and others develop this in the formulation that Samsara is Nibbana and Nibbana is Samsara, we arrive at a

position that I see as being resonant with the Advaita Vedantist position that "Thou art That" or the position in the Wahdat al-Wujud school of Sufism in Islam -- i.e. the assertion that the Absolute Reality is the only Reality if we could see things as they really are, and thus this world (samsara) and our reality are not different to that Reality.

2. My assertion that the Buddha claims some supra-mundane station for himself that puts him above his disciples

Your discussion of the uniqueness of the Buddha is also singularly problematic. Essentially, you picked a few verses that seem to support your position, ignoring many others.

You then quote several passages that state that others can, through their own efforts, do what the Buddha has done.

I was not unaware of these passages. To keep the book at a simple level, however, I decided not to deal with them.

First, I would not consider the passages that you quote are necessarily relevant to the point that I am making. The fact that others can do what the Buddha has done does not mean that others have the same station that he does.

Second, if we were to allow that the passages that you quote do assert that the Buddha was a mere human just like the rest of us, where does that leave us? I assume -- that you are not claiming that the series of passages that I quote which clearly claim a supra- mundane station for the Buddha and a salvific role for his teaching, are forged. So we have a contradiction between these two sets of passages. I suppose we could just conclude that the Buddha was incoherent and leave it at that. That after all is what Miller would do in a similar situation since his only aim is destructive. But Bahá'ís prefer, wherever there is an apparent contradiction to look for a truth that unites the contradictions at a higher level of truth.

Thus if we look at these two statements, the one claiming a high station for the Buddha and the other seeming to say that he is just an ordinary human being we again find resonances between this situation and the situation in other religions. In Islam, the Qur'an states that Muhammad was a man just like any other; but at the same time other passages in the Qur'an, the Sunni Traditions and especially the Shi`i Traditions give an elevated station to Muhammad; similarly Jesus, at one time is making statements that ask the question of whether he can even be called good when there is only one good, the Father in Heaven, and at another making statements that have caused Christians to consider him to be one with the Godhead itself. And Bahá'u'lláh at one time writes: "Know verily that whenever this Youth turneth His eyes towards His own self, he findeth it the most insignificant of all creation"; and yet he also writes passages that caused his Muslim enemies to assert that he had claimed to be God.

Bahá'u'lláh explains this apparent contradiction in the words of these religious leaders by explaining that they they each have a dual station. They

have one elevated station in which they are far above humanity. In this station, high claims can be made about them (also in this station they are all in reality one, but we will return to this anon). They also have a human station which they share with the rest of humanity and in this station, they are "but a man like others". If you want to read more on this theme then you should turn to Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude (Kitab-i-Iqán, pp. about 150 to 185)

I hope you can appreciate why I did not want to bring complex issues like this into a book that I was trying to keep simple.

You seem to be keen to see me as asserting that in Buddhism there are such concepts as "god" and "revelation":

your contention that it refers to an Absolute, a god.

And:

but you fail understand that does not thusly mean revelation by default.

I do not think that a close reading of my text would support the assertion that I was claiming that the Buddha taught of God or of a revelation.

I think you are reading your own prejudices against Western theism into my text. My position is not that theism is the right answer and that the Buddhists have got it wrong. Nor am I playing a game of seeking to destroy Buddhism by playing with its texts in the way that Miller does. My position is that Bahá'u'lláh supports neither the theism of the Western religions nor the monism of the Eastern religions (Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism), but rather a relativist approach that asserts that the Truth is transcendent to all concepts and schema. Therefore any metaphysical statement that is made can only ever be made from a particular viewpoint and thus be correct from that viewpoint--but that is precisely the point: it IS true from that viewpoint. All truth is, however, a limited, relative truth. (I have set this out at much greater length in a paper published in vol. 5 of the Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Faiths series, published by Kalimat Press in Los Angeles)

Thus the Buddhist concepts are not wrong, they are correct; and so are the truths of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. I would say the job of the Bahá'ís is to see the Bahá'í Faith in terms of the religious truths that each of these religions have uncovered from their scriptures and their Way in centuries of civilization. Of course for historical reasons, Bahá'ís have progressed much further down this path with Christianity and Islam. But inevitably, Bahá'ís must make a start in the task of seeing the Bahá'í Faith in terms of the religious truths which Buddhists have uncovered in 2500 years of civilization. My book is only intended to be a small start in this direction and, given my lack of the necessary language skills, it was inevitably a flawed start; but I would beg of you not to mistake the direction that is being taken, however much you may dislike the first step.

Finally you seem to be much concerned with a quotation from the writings of

Bahá'u'lláh which you have found: "If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith." (Gleanings, p. 52). This passage is referring precisely to that unity of these founder-prophets of the world religions at the higher level which I referred to earlier.

Bahá'u'lláh gives the analogy of sun. Although there is only one sun, human beings, in order to mark the passing of time give each day a different name. And so if the sun were to say: "I am the sun of yesterday", it would be quite correct, for each day is the expression of the same reality, the appearance of the sun; and if it were to be said that, with regard to their names the days differ, that would also be true. The oneness and differences of the prophets of God should be thought of in the same way. They are each the appearance on earth of the same reality, and thus are all one; and yet they each came at a different time and thus have a different name. Therefore to prefer one of these prophet-founders of the world religions over another is wrong.

Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute . They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret. To prefer one in honor to another, to exalt certain ones above the rest, is in no wise to be permitted. Every true Prophet hath regarded His Message as fundamentally the same as the Revelation of every other Prophet gone before Him. If any man, therefore, should fail to comprehend this truth, and should consequently indulge in vain and unseemly language, no one whose sight is keen and whose understanding is enlightened would ever allow such idle talk to cause him to waver in his belief. (Gleanings, pages 78-79)

Although in their inner spiritual reality these prophet-founders of the world religions are one and the same, they differ in their external aspects, their name, their bodily form, the age in which they came and the specific message that they brought.

The same passage that speaks of "uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith" goes on, however, to speak of the differences between the prophet-founders at the lower level the human level. "The other station is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof." In this respect, each of these founder-prophets "hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, " etc. (Gleanings, p. 52).

It is this area of difference that has confused humanity and made it appear that there are some inherent contradictions among the religions of the world.

It is because of this difference in their station and mission that the words and utterances flowing from these Well-springs of divine knowledge appear to diverge and differ. Otherwise, in the eyes of them that are initiated into the mysteries of divine wisdom, all their utterances are in reality but the

expressions of one Truth. As most of the people have failed to appreciate those stations to which We have referred, they therefore feel perplexed and dismayed at the varying utterances pronounced by Manifestations that are essentially one and the same. (Kitab-i-Iqan, page 177)

The differences among the teachings of the prophet-founders of the world religions arise because they have come to different parts of the world in which there are differing cultures, therefore they have to address their message differently in accordance with that culture. An even more important reason for difference is the fact that the needs of humanity has changed over the ages and the message of these prophet-founders of the world religions is in accordance with the needs of the age in which they appear.

The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed...Cleave unto that which draweth you together and uniteth you. (Gleanings, page 217)

Bahá'u'lláh writes that these founders of the world religions should be regarded as doctors whose task is to diagnose the ills of humanity and prescribe the remedy (an analogy also used by the Buddha of course).

The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity. To none is given the right to question their words or disparage their conduct, for they are the only ones who can claim to have understood the patient and to have correctly diagnosed its ailments. No man, however acute his perception, can ever hope to reach the heights which the wisdom and understanding of the Divine Physician have attained. Little wonder, then, if the treatment prescribed by the physician in this day should not be found to be identical with that which he prescribed before. How could it be otherwise when the ills affecting the sufferer necessitate at every stage of his sickness a special remedy? In like manner, every time the Prophets of God have illumined the world with the resplendent radiance of the Day Star of Divine knowledge, they have invariably summoned its peoples to embrace the light of God through such means as best befitted the exigencies of the age in which they appeared. They were thus able to scatter the darkness of ignorance, and to shed upon the world the glory of their own knowledge. It is towards the inmost essence of these Prophets, therefore, that the eye of every man of discernment must be directed, inasmuch as their one and only purpose hath always been to guide the erring, and give peace to the afflicted. (Gleanings, pages 80- 81)

As I said to you in a previous posting, I do not particularly want to get involved in lengthy metaphysical hair-splitting and disputation for various reasons; the first being that I believe that it is exactly what both the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh tried to dissuade their followers from doing. Surely that is the whole point of the Buddha likening humanity to a man with a poison arrow in his foot -- it is not just a waste of time for us to be debating these

niceties, it is actually dangerous because it distracts attention from what is the real task at hand. The Bahá'í scriptures also condemn religious disputation "If ye fail to discover truth in a person's words, make them not the object of contention, inasmuch as ye have been forbidden in the Bayan to enter into idle disputation and controversy (Selections from the Bab, page 134).

I apologize that it has taken a while to get this posting out. That is not just because of its length. I am also rather late on several writing projects that I have promised to various people. I finally managed to complete an introduction to a book which I had promised to Tony Lee last week and now I am trying to finish a manuscript of a book which I had thought I would complete at the beginning of this month, as well as organize a conference that is due to take place in December.

Moojan

Letter 4

Date: Sun, 24 Sep 1995 15:07:55 -0500

From: Bruce Burrill

To: talisman

Subject: Momen's Book

Moojan,

MM: 'As I said to you in a previous posting, I do not particularly want to get involved in lengthy metaphysical hair-splitting and disputation for various reasons; the first being that I believe that it is exactly what both the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh tried to dissuade their followers from doing. Surely that is the whole point of the Buddha likening humanity to a man with a poison arrow in his foot -- it is not just a waste of time for us to be debating these niceties, it is actually dangerous because it distracts attention from what is the real task at hand.'

This is not a matter of metaphysical hair splitting; it is, rather, a matter of trying to understand what it is that is being said in the Pali texts, what the Buddha taught. You can make statements about what you think the Buddha taught, but if I disagree with you I am hair-splitting? I don't think so. There certainly can be careful -- and should be room for careful -- discussion and examination of what you are saying. As I said to Juan:

Juan: "As for Moojan's book, I should have thought it fairly obvious that it was intended to be used in proselytizing for the Bahá'í faith among Southeast Asian Buddhists, or at least in gaining friends for the Faith in those cultures."

Me: "Of course it is, and it is what Moojan told me his intent was, but that does not excuse him from any criticism of how he presents Buddhism. As a matter of fact it should open him up, his work anyway, to a careful examination of his

presentation of Buddhism: do his parallels really work, is he in fact accurately presenting the Buddhist position, or is he just presenting enough of Buddhism with a particular twist that will allow him to draw the parallels he wants to draw? I would say the latter." I think this is a fair response. Let's discuss your presentation of Buddhism. There is something to be learned here. You have the opportunity to discuss Buddhism with someone who is well educated in Buddhism, its history, its ideas, and its practices, and the learning goes both ways. If it starts going in circles or gets bogged down in excruciating minutia, then we stop.

MM: "I am sorry that you think that my treatment of Buddhism is in some way comparable to Miller's treatment of the Bahá'í Faith. I think others have commented sufficiently on that. I had assumed that your statement was merely a rhetorical device for getting the discussion on Talisman onto subjects that interest you."

I think I sufficiently distanced you from Miller, in that your presentation is sympathetic to Buddhism in that it certainly lacks the hostility and incompetency of Fozdar's works, but as I bluntly said, your book is problematic in how it presents Buddhism, particularly in how you present Buddhism in order to draw the parallels you want to draw. And in the context of Miller and Fozdar, I raised the question, which is why I was invited here, about the nature of how Bahá'í treats and understands other religions, which why I question your book.

You are correct, I like talking about Buddhism, and I also have a personal interest in Bahá'í. Years ago during a very important period in my life, Bahá'í gave me quite a bit in the Bahá'í friends with whom I walked through that time. I may strongly disagree with Bahá'í on any number of issues, but I carry for it an appreciation, and in my own sort odd way I try to give back to it, which is sometimes in challenging Bahá'ís to look carefully and deeply at what they are saying about other religions. There is always something to learn, and it goes in both directions.

'(your assertion that I have stated that there is a reference to a "god" in Buddhism is incorrect - I do not make any such assertion - or at any rate I do not intend to).'

What I said: "You quote this passage but you give no discussion of it or its elements, as if this mysterious sounding collections of words will somehow support your contention that it refers to an Absolute, a god." And why I said that:

"Although the Buddha speaks of the 'Unborn, Unoriginated' and Bahá'u'lláh speaks of 'God', it is clear from the above quotations that they are referring to the same entity, an entity which is beyond human knowledge and understanding." Page 24 of B&BF.

"And so, although the Buddha speaks of the Absolute Reality and of himself as the discloser of the Path, the _Dhamma_, and Bahá'u'lláh speaks of God and of

himself as the Manifestation of God, they are in effect saying the same thing and referring to the same spiritual truth: that there is a Higher Truth, an Absolute Reality, to which human beings have no direct access." Page 34 of B&BF.

I think my assertion is correct -- "same entity," which Bahá'u'lláh and Bahá'ís refer to as "God." You've drawn not just a parallel, but a synonymy.

I would cite as evidence for my interpretation, Nagarjuna's commentary on the Udana passage. Murti gives this as: "Nagarjuna is emphatic in stating that without the acceptance of the paramartha (the ultimate reality) there can be no deliverance (Nirvana) from Samsara" (Central Philosophy of Buddhism, p. 235 and note 1). If Murti has translated correctly, then clearly Nagarjuna does not regard the ultimate reality spoken of in the Udana passage as being Nirvana -- if that were the case it would reduce the above-quoted sentence to a nonsense: "Without the acceptance of Nirvana there can be no Nirvana"

I am rather puzzled why you seem to think that Nagarjuna is saying that there is an Absolute behind nirvana on the basis of this. The Sanskrit passage that Murti cites but does not translate reads:

"Without understanding the ultimate fruit/highest truth/what is ultimately real [parama-artha], freedom [nirvana] is not attained."

And certainly that can be seen to have some correspondence to the passage from Udana 80,

. "Monks, there is freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from making, freedom from conditioning. For, monks if there were not this freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from making, freedom from conditioning, then escape from that which is birth, becoming, making, conditioning, would not be known here. But, monks, because there is freedom from birth, freedom from becoming, freedom from making, freedom from conditioning, therefore the escape from that which is birth, becoming, making, conditioning is known."

I think you've misread Murti, who does, in fact, regard this passage from the Udana (and the Iti) as referring to nirvana. See Murti pgs 47-8 & 271. If Murti thought that the Udana 80 is referring to an Absolute behind nirvana, he certainly has not said so here. The question I have is: can you support your claim for an extra-nirvana absolute from the Pali sources themselves? The Udana is the favorite of those who want to find some sort of god notion within Buddhism, but I have not seen those who do that show that they can talk about this text with any exegetical skill. Inevitably what I do see is eisegesis.

As an aside concerning Murti, let me refer you to C. W. Huntington's *THE EMPTINESS OF EMPTINESS: An Introduction to Early Indian Madhyamika*, Hawaii, 1989. Of Murti Huntington states: "A more recent example of the type [of study that sees Madhyamika as positing a very sophisticated doctrine of monism explicating "transcendental or absolute existence"] appears in T.R.V. Murti's widely acclaimed study, *THE CENTRAL PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM*. If Stcherbatsky

represents the classical statement of the absolutist interpretation, then Murti is certainly its baroque -- his Vedantic/Kantian spectacles distorts the Madhyamika's message in a much more subtle and persuasive fashion than any nihilistic interpretation ever could, and for that reason have done a great deal to prevent us from deepening our understanding of these texts." Page 27.

MM: "However, having said that, I really do not mind whether one chooses to interpret this Udana passage as referring to Nibbana or to some other Absolute. For even if it does refer to Nibbana as you assert, this makes no difference to my argument."

It is not a matter of my assertion. The Udana 80 starts by saying very specifically that it is talking about nirvana. The technical terminology is used elsewhere in the Pali Canon either in these forms or in variations as defining words for nirvana, and the phraseology of this passage refers to nirvana, finding parallels elsewhere in the Pali texts.

If we take nirvana as "the Absolute," you don't think that doesn't make a difference to your argument? You state: "that there is a Higher Truth, an Absolute Reality, to which human beings have no direct access." Page 34 of B&BF. But if the "Absolute" is nirvana, from the Buddhist perspective we do have the possibility of direct access, direct understanding to which we can achieve by treading the path the Buddha trod, understanding what he understood, being liberated the way he was liberated. This puts the Buddhist conception of the "Absolute" at odds, in a very fundamental way, with the Bahá'í notion of an Absolute, to which we supposedly have no direct access.

Having no direct access is foreign to the Buddha's teaching.

"If we then consider the way that Nagarjuna and others develop this in the formulation that Samsara is Nibbana and Nibbana is Samsara"

Let me ask you, what is Nagarjuna's basis for making this equation?

"You then quote several passages that state that others can, through their own efforts, do what the Buddha has done. ... The fact that others can do what the Buddha has done does not mean that others have the same station that he does. ... if we were to allow that the passages that you quote do assert that the Buddha was a mere human just like the rest of us, where does that leave us? ... So we have a contradiction between these two sets of passages."

Contradiction? What contradiction that arises is strictly a result of applying a Bahá'í paradigm to the situation. When we look at it from a Buddhist perspective there is no contradiction. Was the Buddha a mere human? I never said so, nor implied so. When the Buddha was asked after his enlightenment what he was he denied that he was a mere human being or that he was a god or a demon. The Buddha stated he was one who was awake (buddha). He was the one, through his own efforts, who broke through to enlightenment, making what he learned available to his followers:

"Come, this is the Way, this is the course I have followed until, having

realized by my own super-knowledge the matchless plunge into Brahma-faring, I have made it known. Come you too, follow likewise, so that you also, having realized by your own super-knowledge the matchless plunge into the Brahma-faring, may abide in it." AN I 168-69.

And this is in the context of the Buddha starting out as a "mere" human being, vowing to the Buddha Dipankara, some eons ago, that he would in some future life break through to enlightenment and make it known for the welfare of all beings. Life after life was devoted to that end. There is no contradiction here. What the Buddha offers is, in fact, what he realized, stating that we can realize it as well:

"Two things, o monks, I came to know well: not to be content with good states of mind, so far achieved and to be unremitting in the struggle for the goal. Unremittingly, indeed, did I struggle and I resolved: "Let skin, sinews and bones remain; let flesh and blood in the body dry up: yet there shall be no ceasing of energy, manly energy, manly effort!" "Through heedfulness have I won Enlightenment, through effort have I won the unsurpassable security from samsaric toil. 'If you, O monks, will struggle unremittingly and resolve: "Let skin ... [as above] manly effort" -- then you, too, O monks, will soon realize here and now, through your own direct knowledge, that unequalled goal of the holy life." AN II ii 5.

In the S.N. IV 251 and IV 321 we find: "That which is the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion is nibbana," the goal which the Buddha realized and taught, and the Itivuttaka 57 states:

"Whoever frees himself from the passions of greed, hatred, and ignorance, they call him, one who is self developed, made divine (brahmabhuta), thus-gone (tathagata), awake (buddha), one who has left fear and hatred, and one who has let go of all."

It is not uncommon in the Pali texts for the word buddha, one who is awake, to refer to the enlightened follower. What distinguished the Buddha from his enlightened follower? As the text you quoted states, it is the fact that the Buddha found the way and made it known. Again, in the Buddhist context we do not have a problem here when we take into account the broad context of who and what the Buddha was.

When you state: "The Buddha's are the ONLY contact that we in world of Samsara can have with Eternity and the Absolute. As Gautama Buddha says: 'All things indeed pass away, but the Buddhas are forever [page 38, with my emphasis]," MM: "given my lack of the necessary language skills, it was inevitably a flawed start"

Lack of "the necessary language skills" need not be a fatal flaw. Winston King wrote an excellent book, THERAVADA MEDITATION, without knowing Pali or Sanskrit, but this lack can be a serious problem:

"All things indeed pass away, but the Buddhas are forever."

You attribute this to Dhammapada 255. Checking the eight translations I have at hand, and more importantly checking the actual Pali, verse 255 does not say the Buddhas are forever: "There are no conditions that are eternal, there is no instability in the awake (buddha)." (Another passage where the word buddha is used generically for the enlightened ones.) Injitam simply cannot be read as eternal or forever. This last phrase is simply saying that for the awake there is no instability caused by conditions, particularly of hatred, greed, and ignorance.

On page 34-5 you state: "There is a wide spread belief that the Lord Buddha was a man like any other who attained enlightenment through his own efforts. However, if the Buddhist scriptures are examined with a fresh and unbiased eye, it is hard to come to such an understanding. For example, when asked whether he could guide people to that higher reality [the "Higher Truth", as you seem to imply], Gautama Buddha replied: '...Yea, I know it [the path to Brahma] even as one who has entered the Brahma world, and has been born within it.' Thus the Buddhist scripture appear to suggest that the Buddhas are in reality people of a higher plane who are temporarily in this world to guide us."

It is difficult to understand quite what you are getting at here. Is knowing the Brahma world and the path that leads to it the same as the goal of the Buddha's Eightfold path? You certainly seem to be implying that is so, but if so you are then ignoring the fact that as discourse 97 of the Majjhima Nikaya states that this is a hina, lesser, goal compared to that of nirvana. Also, according to the framework of the Buddha's teaching that anyone who has attained to a certain level of meditative concentration can know the Brahma world as the Buddha talks about it.

On page 37 you state: "Indeed, the Buddha specifically states that his station is one to 'which no worldling can attain.'" You footnote this quote as coming from Dhammapada 272, which, including 271, reads in full:

271: Not by precepts and rites, Nor again by much learning, Nor by acquisition of concentration, Nor by secluded lodging,

272: Thinking "I touched the ease of renunciation" Not resorted to by ordinary people [worldlings], O Monks, do not be so content, Not having attained the extinction of intoxicants.

In other words, just because you've attained to certain levels of practice and insight beyond the worldling's level, don't rest in that stuff until you attained full liberation. Dhammapada 271-2 is addressed to monks of some level of experience, and the Buddha is telling them to get on with it. This text has nothing to do with the Buddha's supposed "station."

One further example: "Since Buddhas are embodiments of the Absolute Truth, they are all that human being are capable of understanding of the Truth. The Lord Buddha states: 'Whoever sees Dhamma sees me, whoever sees me sees the Dhamma.'" Page 39.

The question has to be asked: What is the context of this passage? because it

certainly does not support what you are trying make it say. This is a serious problem.

So the concerns and solutions you outlined from a Bahá'í perspective may be appropriate for understanding Bahá'u'lláh the man and Bahá'u'lláh the Manifestation of god, but they are inappropriate to the Pali texts for understanding the Buddha, the man, who through his own efforts became awake, and who then taught that way to others.

MM: "I do not think that a close reading of my text would support the assertion that I was claiming that the Buddha taught of God or of a revelation."

What a close reading will show that you very early on equate the "Absolute" with "God." Though you don't say: "The Buddha taught a god," you have already equated the idea of the absolute with the idea of a god by the time you talk about the Buddha's supposed teaching about the "Absolute," and you do in fact state quite clearly, "Although the Buddha speaks of the 'Unborn, Unoriginated' and Bahá'u'lláh speaks of 'God', it is clear from the above quotations that they are referring to the same entity, an entity which is beyond human knowledge and understanding." Page 24 of B&BF.

And this is further underlined by your conflationary statements such as: "He [Bahá'u'lláh] says that the Tathagatas or Manifestations of God are the intermediaries between the highest reality and the world [pg 36]," which is followed by a Bahá'í quote full of god language. On page 40: "Bahá'u'lláh explains that there are two aspects to the teaching of all the Buddhas." And the seemingly ever-present: "Bahá'u'lláh continued to teach the Path of _Dhamma_."

A close reading of your text will show that though you did directly state that the Buddha taught a god, your very obvious implications cannot be escaped.

MM: "Nor am I playing a game of seeking to destroy Buddhism by playing with its texts in the way that Miller does."

I would say you are doing just the opposite of Miller. Miller being a protestant exclusivist, is likely to dismiss that which is not in agreement with his view. Your position is subsumptive, which not to exclude but to subsume everything else into what is thought to be a greater whole.

"My position is that Bahá'u'lláh supports neither the theism of the Western religions nor the monism of the Eastern religions (Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism), but rather a relativist approach that asserts that the Truth is transcendent to all concepts and schema."

Buddhism is not monistic. Truth is transcendent to all concepts and schemata? Even the concept and schema that truth is transcendent to all concepts and schemata?

"Therefore any metaphysical statement that is made can only ever be made from a particular viewpoint and thus be correct from that viewpoint--but that is precisely the point: it IS true from that viewpoint."

But that does not mean that it is true in any sort of object manner, but then you seem to be denying that there is any sort of objective truth available to us.

"Thus the Buddhist concepts are not wrong, they are correct"

Of course you really are saying that they are wrong -- that is wrong as the Buddhist themselves understand them, as being descriptions of how the universe works. You are assuming onto yourself the position to make this judgement, but upon what objective basis is such a judgement made?

Bruce

Letter 5

Date: Mon, 25 Sep 1995 19:25:34 -0400 (EDT)

From: Juan R Cole

To: talisman

Subject: God and Buddhist transcendence

Bruce: Your reduction of Moojan's phrase "Bahá'u'lláh in his writings uses the term `God' whereas the Buddha uses such expressions as the `Unborn, Unoriginated' (p. 19) to a statement that "Buddha believed in God" is a mistake deriving from your unstated use of classical logic. You have carried out this syllogism:

Bahá'u'lláh used the term `God' `God' is equivalent to the `Unborn, the Unoriginated' The Buddha used the terms `Unborn, Unoriginated' Therefore the Buddha used the term `God.'

This is, however, a logical error and does not take account of advances during the past century in semantics and symbolic logic. Frege was the first to point out that while "Venus" and the "morning star" had the same referent, they had different *connotations* that classical logic could not account for.

Thus, in a Bahá'í semiotics, "God" and the Buddha's "Unborn, Unoriginated" are signs that have the same ultimate referent. They have, however, very different connotations and are embedded in entirely different language games. Flattening out the signs into mere equivalents by ignoring connotation and looking only at denotation results in nonsense. It is like saying that "hat" and "sombbrero" are equivalent and that therefore many New Yorkers wear sombreros (this is the precise form of the fallacy you have committed with regard to Moojan's passage).

I think, in short, that you have misunderstood Moojan's intentions, and that what he is proposing is a third common term rather than a subsumption of `the Unborn, the Unoriginated' to the Western conception of "God." I do not deny that many Bahá'ís perform such a subsumption, only that Moojan does; for corroborating proof you have only to study his chapter on religious relativism in *Studies in Babi and Bahá'í Religions* vol. 5.

Now, you may, of course, deny that "God" and "the Unborn, the Unoriginated" *do* have a common, transcendent and ineffable referent despite their different connotations and their different linguistic and cultural contexts in diverse language games. But such a denial simply ends the dialogue, since 1) most Bahá'ís take such a premise as a matter of faith, 2) it cannot be disproven, and 3) many Bahá'ís would argue that this transcendent unity of religions can be "seen" in the same way that Buddhists maintain that Nirvana can be "seen" (before you object, Sri Walpole Rahula himself told me he thought the best verb in English for capturing the Buddha's teaching was to "see" Nirvana). Now, most physicists will deny that there is any Nirvana or that it can be seen; and that's the end of their dialogue with Buddhism, since it is certainly not something amenable to testing with scientific equipment (pace TM). In the same way, to begin by rejecting the transcendent unity of the religions ends any dialogue on the subject with Bahá'ís. If, on the other hand, you are interested in seeing that unity, I maintain that it can be experienced through meditating on Bahá'u'lláh's writings in conjunction with the scriptures of the world-religions, just in the same way that Nirvana can be attained by following the path of the Buddha.

In any case, I think it will be more fruitful to return to the 8-fold Noble Path than to discuss Transcendent Reality.

cheers Juan Cole, History, University of Michigan

Letter 6

Date: Tue, 26 Sep 1995 00:03:44 -0500

From: Bruce Burrill

To: talisman

Subject: Re: God and Buddhist transcendence

Juan,

Thanks for your msg.

'Bruce: Your reduction of Moojan's phrase "Bahá'u'lláh in his writings uses the term `God' whereas the Buddha uses such expressions as the `Unborn, Unoriginated' (p. 19) to a statement that "Buddha believed in God" is a mistake deriving from your unstated use of classical logic. You have carried out this syllogism

'Bahá'u'lláh used the term `God' `God' is equivalent to the `Unborn, the Unoriginated' The Buddha used the terms `Unborn, Unoriginated' Therefore the Buddha used the term `God.'" 'This is, however, a logical error and does not take account of advances during the past century in semantics and symbolic logic. Frege was the first to point out that while "Venus" and the "morning star" had the same referent, they had different *connotations* that classical logic could not account for.'

I never said that Momen said the Buddha used the term god. As a matter of fact,

I clearly point out that he did not say that.

Let me repeat my self and let me a make correction:

'What a close reading will show that you [Momen] very early on equate the "Absolute" with "God." Though you don't say: "The Buddha taught a god," you have already equated the idea of the absolute with the idea of a god by the time you talk about the Buddha's supposed teaching about the "Absolute," and you do in fact state quite clearly, "Although the Buddha speaks of the 'Unborn, Unoriginated' and Bahá'u'lláh speaks of 'God', it is clear from the above quotations that they are referring to the same entity, an entity which is beyond human knowledge and understanding." Page 24 of B&BF.'

And the correction:

"A close reading of your text will show that though you did NOT directly state that the Buddha taught a god, your very obvious implications cannot be escaped."

The "not" was missed when I originally posted this msg. A proof reader would be of great help.

My point is that by the time Momen does talk about the supposed "Absolute" in Buddhism, "Absolute" is a term that he has already equated with the idea of god. With reference to Frege, it was Momen who said "same entity," using the words "Absolute" and "God" interchangeably in his text in the same way he interchangeably equates and uses "Buddhas" with "Manifestations of God." Momen collapses the connotations, and he never demonstrates that the supposed Buddhist "Absolute" is the "same entity" as the Bahá'í "God," or that Manifestations of God are Buddhas, though he collapses that distinction, or, since you are so concerned with connotations and denotation, that Bahá'u'lláh taught Dhamma.

'Thus, in a Bahá'í semiotics, "God" and the Buddha's "Unborn, Unoriginated" are signs that have the same ultimate referent.'

But to say that they have the "same ultimate referent" is not a little problematic; it is majorly problematic, and to have meaning beyond mere assertion that these terms "have the same ultimate referent" some proof is required. The rest of your argument, until the question of "same ultimate referent" is settled, is irrelevant.

"Flattening out the signs into mere equivalents by ignoring connotation and looking only at denotation results in nonsense."

This precisely what Momen has done, thus my complaint.

I think, in short, that you have misunderstood Moojan's intentions, and that what he is proposing is a third common term rather than a subsumption of 'the Unborn, the Unoriginated' to the Western conception of "God."

Western conception of god? I am well aware how Bahá'ís disassociate their notion of god from what has gone before, but quite frankly that is beside the

point. What Momen is offering is a defining of Buddhism in terms of Bahá'í, which is essentially what your "third term" boils down to, or so it seems.

"for corroborating proof you have only to study his chapter on religious relativism in Studies in Babi and Bahá'í Religions vol. 5."

I do not have access to it, but what from I have seen of it from Momen, you, and others here, it looks a lot like Hick's approach, which is less than convincing.

"But such a denial simply ends the dialogue, since 1) most Bahá'ís take such a premise as a matter of faith, 2) it cannot be disproven, and 3) many Bahá'ís would argue that this transcendent unity of religions can be "seen" in the same way that Buddhists maintain that Nirvana can be "seen" (before you object, Sri Walpole Rahula himself told me he thought the best verb in English for capturing the Buddha's teaching was to "see" Nirvana)."

What is the function of Bahá'í dialogue if it ended so easily? If a Bahá'í want to see how the Buddha's teaching fits into the Bahá'í framework, I would hope that first rather than making all sorts of unwarranted assumptions about "Absolutes" in the Buddha's teaching, the Bahá'í explorer would try to find out what it that the Buddha taught from the perspective Buddhism. I get absolutely no sense of this in Momen's book, as sympathetic as he is to Buddhism.

So the unity of religion for most Bahá'ís is not something that can be carefully explored; rather, it must just be grokked somehow? Nirvana can be seen, but let us not also forget that nirvana also exists in verb form, so one becomes nirvanized. But is the seeing of unity that you believe is there the same as seeing nirvana? What is the point of this comparison? (And as an aside it is not Walpole, it Walpola.)

"In the same way, to begin by rejecting the transcendent unity of the religions ends any dialogue on the subject with Bahá'ís."

To me that is a really sad statement. But understand something, I am not rejecting some sort of transcendent unity. My point is that if there is such a unity is not easily seen or demonstrated, and certainly not by easy equations of quoting a couple of passages. If Momen wants the Udana 80 to be the same entity, as he claims it is, as Bahá'u'lláh's god, then he needs to be able to do a very careful exegesis. It shows no respect to Buddhism and the Buddha quoting this passage without making a serious attempt at understanding it fully in all its elements. He does not have to have it in his book, but that understanding needs to be there; otherwise, what do we then have?

"If, on the other hand, you are interested in seeing that unity, I maintain that it can be experienced through meditating on Bahá'u'lláh's writings in conjunction with the scriptures of the world-religions"

Maybe, but do we then take the time and effort -- the very hard work -- to carefully understand what these other scriptures are saying, or can we make

them say what we want to meet this goal of unity?

"In any case, I think it will be more fruitful to return to the 8-fold Noble Path than to discuss Transcendent Reality."

How can we discuss the Eight-fold Path without discussing the goal of the path?

Bruce

Letter 7

Date: Tue, 27 Feb 1996 11:51:03 -0500 (EST)

From: Juan R Cole

To: Bruce Burrill, talisman

Subject: Re: King Kong & God [Buddhism & Bahá'í]

I just wanted to say that while I admire Bruce for his sincerity in this dialogue and also for his forbearance, I don't think it is fair for him to lump the Fozdar Bahá'í approach to Buddhism together with the Momen Bahá'í approach.

Momen's approach can really only be understood with reference to his seminal chapter on religious relativism in vol. 5 of *Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions* (Kalimat). Momen to my knowledge never argues that Buddhism employed a theistic discourse, unlike Fozdar.

John Hick has distinguished three approaches to other religions among believers. One is pluralism, the belief that all religions are equally true. The second is inclusivism, the belief that other religions have part of the truth, but one's own religion has the entire truth. The third is exclusivism, the belief that one's own religion is the truth, and other religions are false.

I don't want to put words in your mouth, Bruce, but I read your earlier postings as indicating that you are an exclusivist. You think Buddhism is the true path to knowing the truth, and that other religions are simply mistaken, in their theism as well as in many other dimensions. This would align you with, e.g., the Southern Baptists in Christianity, also exclusivists, who would tend to see Buddhism as the work of the devil or at least as not a path to salvation, since that can only be had through Jesus Christ. Have I misread you?

I read Jack Coleman as arguing for a form of Baha' inclusivism, wherein Bahá'u'lláh has brought the entire truth, and Buddhism only has a partial remnant of it, which it has misunderstood. This is similar to the stance of the Roman Catholic church since Vatican II, which is that the light of Jesus flickers dimly in other traditions, but is fully manifest only in Catholicism.

I myself believe that what Bahá'u'lláh mandates is a Bahá'í pluralism. In this view, all religions are equally good paths to the spiritual truth. Each is characterized by a different theological "discourse" (Bahá'u'lláh calls it a "guftigu" in Persian). Thus, in Judaism and Islam, the prophets were not thought to use theopathic language ("I am God,"), whereas in Hinduism,

Christianity and Babism, they were. Bahá'u'lláh Himself to my knowledge never discusses Buddhism, though He obliquely responds to questions about Hinduism and the Bhagavad-Gita by saying that their ideas about cyclical advent of avatars are essentially the same as the schema He laid out in the Book of Certitude.

While all religions (including, by `Abdu'l-Bahá's and Shoghi Effendi's admission, Buddhism) are equally good paths to spiritual truth, Bahá'ís believe that the Bahá'í Faith's *social principles* are more appropriate to the emergent global civilization than are those of past religions. The idea of progressive revelation does not require the ex post facto homogenization of past religion's core ideas. Why not acknowledge the diversity of religious and cultural expression in human history? What progressive revelation does imply is that religions dictate legal norms of behavior, and that these norms seldom have a shelf-life of more than a millennium or so.

I don't myself think it matters an iota whether we approach the Transcendent Truth as an impersonal Dharma or as a personal God; this sort of thing is dependent on the seeker's own maqam/station. Even within theistic traditions, there are those who prefer a non-theistic apophatic theology, while millions of Buddhists have centered their devotions on personal gods. I don't think there is anything surprising in the conclusion that the Buddha developed an original nontheistic language about ultimate truth or that he taught an original path to its attainment. I say, Yaaay, Lord Buddha!

I think it does matter whether we are working for the unity of humankind, for world peace, for the equality of the sexes, for human rights, and for other principles that Bahá'u'lláh has revealed as the urgent exigencies of this Day. And I should say that while I may not agree with Dr. Coleman's views on Buddhism, I admire the hell out of his services to humankind in a turbulent place like contemporary Croatia!

cheers

Juan Cole, History, University of Michigan

Letter 8

Date: Thu, 29 Feb 1996 01:14:39 -0600

From: Bruce Burrill

To: talisman

Subject: Re: King Kong & God [Buddism & Bahá'í]

Juan,

"Momen's approach can really only be understood with reference to his seminal chapter on religious relativism in vol. 5 of *Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions* (Kalimat). Momen to my knowledge never argues that Buddhism employed a theistic discourse, unlike Fozdar."

What I see Momen doing is conflating Buddhism and Bahá'í. Though Momen does not say directly that the Buddha taught a god notion, Momen does talk about the Buddha teaching an "Absolute," and by the time he get around to discussing the Buddha's supposed "Absolute" Momen has quite clearly equated the notion of the "Absolute" with the idea of god.

Momen: "Although the Buddha speaks of the 'Unborn, Unoriginated' and Bahá'u'lláh speaks of 'God', it is clear from the above quotations that they are referring to the same entity, an entity which is beyond human knowledge and understanding." Page 24 of B&BF.

And this is further underlined by his conflatory statements such as: "He [Bahá'u'lláh] says that the Tathagatas or Manifestations of God are the intermediaries between the highest reality and the world [pg 36]," which is followed by a Bahá'í quote full of god language. On page 40: "Bahá'u'lláh explains that there are two aspects to the teaching of all the Buddhas." And the seemingly ever-present: "Bahá'u'lláh continued to teach the Path of _Dhamma_."

A close reading of his book will show that though he did not directly state that the Buddha taught a god, his very obvious implications cannot be escaped. There are some very serious eisegetical problems with how Momen treats the Buddhist texts to make them say what he wants them to say.

"I don't want to put words in your mouth, Bruce, but I read your earlier postings as indicating that you are an exclusivist. You think Buddhism is the true path to knowing the truth, and that other religions are simply mistaken, in their theism as well as in many other dimensions. This would align you with, e.g., the Southern Baptists in Christianity, also exclusivists, who would tend to see Buddhism as the work of the devil or at least as not a path to salvation, since that can only be had through Jesus Christ. Have I misread you?"

You certainly have. I have never said anything like this. Buddhism has from the time of the Buddha onwards critiqued other religions. It sees that other religions may have some truth, but what truth there is is most clearly seen, most fully realized, within the Buddha's teaching.

"Momen's approach can really only be understood with reference to his seminal chapter on religious relativism"

To look at this a bit more closely, since this seems to be the basis for your claim of Bahá'í pluralism. Momen in a msg to me that was posted on Talisman:

"My position is that Bahá'u'lláh supports neither the theism of the Western religions nor the monism of the Eastern religions (Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism, Taoism), but rather a relativist approach that asserts that the Truth is transcendent to all concepts and schema. Therefore any metaphysical statement that is made can only ever be made from a particular viewpoint and thus be correct from that viewpoint--but that is precisely the point: it IS true from that viewpoint. All truth is, however, a limited, relative truth. (I have set

this out at much greater length in a paper published in vol. 5 of the Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Faiths series, published by Kalimat Press in Los Angeles)

"Thus the Buddhist concepts are not wrong, they are correct; and so are the truths of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. I would say the job of the Bahá'ís is to see the Bahá'í Faith in terms of the religious truths that each of these religions have uncovered from their scriptures and their Way in centuries of civilization."

What Momen is advocating a coherence theory of truth as opposed to a correspondence theory. In the context here to say that Buddhist concepts are not wrong is to say that they are internally coherent within their viewpoint, but they may not necessarily correspond to the transcendent truth, which is beyond concepts or our understanding, or they may not correspond to how things really are, how the universe works. And I suspect that these relative Buddhist truths are good because they pragmatically promote good behaviour and are therefore pragmatically true. They are not good or true by their virtue of corresponding to the way things are, with how the universe works.

The problem with Momen's position when he says the Buddhist concepts are not wrong but are correct, is that he is passing a very serious judgement upon them from an outside position, and he is, in fact, stating that the Buddhist concepts are wrong as the Buddhist themselves understand them, as being true descriptions in correspondence to how the universe works. This relativist position of Momen's assumes onto itself the position to make this judgement, which interestingly enough would in effect be a position of correspondence, describing how the universe works. So, Momen's (the Bahá'í?) position is essentially a position of correspondence that deprives any other position the right to claim correspondence.

When looked at carefully, the pluralism that you seem to be advocating is a great deal less benign and a great deal more problematic than it at first seems.

"I don't myself think it matters an iota whether we approach the Transcendent Truth as an impersonal Dharma or as a personal God; this sort of thing is dependent on the seeker's own maqam/station."

That assumes that there is a "Transcendent Truth," which is not necessarily a safe assumption from a Buddhist perspective.

"Even within theistic traditions, there are those who prefer a non-theistic apophatic theology"

The interesting thing about apophatic theology, it is an implicit admission of the serious conceptual problematics involved in the god idea.

"I think it does matter whether we are working for the unity of humankind, for world peace, for the equality of the sexes, for human rights"

Certainly.

Bruce

Letter 9

Date: Sun, 8 Jun 1997

From: Wendi and Moojan Momen

To: Jonah Winters

Subject: Post-script

Post-script: In re-reading the discussions that we had, it occurs to me that the main cause of misunderstanding was Bruce's assumption that because Bahá'ís say that they believe in the unity of religion ("If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith." Gleanings, p. 52), this necessarily means that they accept the interpretation made by Buddhist scholars of the Buddhist scriptures. In fact, if one looks at the methodology of both Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Baha in dealing with Christian and Islamic questions, you will see that the Bahá'í methodology is to accept the person of the founder and the text of the scripture of other religions but to reserve the right to interpret these in accordance with certain Bahá'í hermeneutical principles. Now Christian and Islamic scholars have not been happy with the interpretations that this methodology produces over questions such as the resurrection of Christ or the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad. It should not therefore be surprising if Buddhist scholars object to the same process being applied to their scriptures.

I am not, of course, claiming here that my interpretations of Buddhism are definitive from a Bahá'í point of view and they certainly do not hold the authority that Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations of Christian and Islamic scriptures have. I believe however that they are a starting point for a Bahá'í approach to Buddhism using the hermeneutical principles of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá. I have written about this question at greater length in a paper (Bahá'í Hermeneutical Principles as applied to Other Religions: The Example of Buddhism) that I am presenting at the Irfan Colloquium in Manchester, July 1997.

Moojan Momen

Letter 10

[Note: This letter was written at a different time and response to a different discussion. I append it because it relates and is a very useful commentary. -J.W.]

From Dann May

Date: Mon, 16 Jun 97 16:27:50 -0500 (CDT)

To: talisman

Subject: Buddhism, Bahá'í, words

According to the Christian theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, "the language of faith is the language of symbols." Since religious language often attempts to discuss matters held to be either incomprehensible, ineffable, unseen, and the like, much of its apparently descriptive discourse is more appropriately understood from a mytho-poetic or allegorical perspective. I would argue that much of the apparent disagreement among the various list members regarding Bahá'í and Buddhist doctrines results from an inability to both acknowledge and explicate the implications of the mytho-poetic perspective.

For most Western Bahá'ís, "God" is understood in a typically Judeo-Christian-Islamic theistic mode, yet the sacred scriptures of this tradition, including the Bahá'í scriptures, acknowledges that God is ineffable, ontologically beyond comprehension -- a great mystery. This being so, what then, can be definitively said about God? To put it in Buddhist terminology, the term "God" is "empty" (Skt. sunyata). For most Buddhists, the term Nirvana is likewise understood to be beyond comprehension, ineffable, and "empty". Thus, as many Buddhists are fond of saying, from this life one cannot think nirvana, and from nirvana one cannot think this life.

Are we merely having an argument about words while all the time failing to grasp what they so dimly point towards? Are we arguing about the shape and texture of the finger without acknowledging the meaning of "pointing"? Perhaps, as several philosophers of religion (John Hick, Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, and others) have recently been attempting to articulate, is that Reality (call it what you will -- God, ultimate concern, the void, the Dao, dharma, etc.) always exceeds our attempts to categorize, label, and comprehend it. Perhaps Reality can be understood both theistically and non-theistically, as light is understood by physicists to be both a wave and a particle. In saying this, I acknowledge that Reality no doubt exceeds or transcends our feeble attempts to grasp it in either of these two modes. As John Hick points out in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, while the Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Bahá'í) are primarily theistic, each of them has notable individuals and schools of thought that understand God from a non-theistic perspective (e.g. the Christian Mystics, Sufis in Islam, and the Cabalistic Jews, to name a few). And while the Eastern religions (i.e. certain forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese Religions) are primarily non-theistic, there are theistic trends in each (e.g. Amida Buddhism, monotheistic ways of understanding Brahman in Hinduism, and so on). Thus as the Sufi mystic and religious scholar Frithjof Schuon writes: "As far as Buddhism is concerned, we will not ask therefore whether it agrees with the letter of the Veda or if its "non-theism" -- and not "atheism"! -- is reconcilable in its expression with Semitic theism or any other, but only whether Buddhism is true in itself; which means, if the answer is affirmative, that it will agree with the Vedic spirit and that its non-theism will express the Truth, or a sufficient and efficacious aspect of the Truth, whereof theism provides another possible expression,

opportune in the world it governs. Moreover, a particular spiritual perspective is usually discoverable somewhere within the framework of a tradition that excludes it; thus "theism" reappears in a certain sense, notably in the form of Amidism, within the framework of Buddhism despite its characteristic non-theism and this non-theism is to be found in its turn in the conception of the "impersonal Essence" of the Divinity in the monotheistic esoterisms ... (_Treasures of Buddhism_, pp. 18-19)

Perhaps, all religious doctrines about Reality are like those blind men encountering the elephant. Some people, coming from a more theistic background, understand it theistically, others, from a non-theistic background understand it as non-theistic, and so on. If, as Hick and others argue, Reality in itself (an sich) cannot be humanly experienced or adequately described, then no tradition, however profound or subtle (whether Buddhist, Bahá'í, Sufi, Daoist, etc.) amounts to more than a finger pointing in the general direction of the moon. All such attempts to discuss that which is empty and beyond all human description and comprehension is at best metaphorical, a poor analogy, and not meant to have its superficial meaning, its apparently concrete but incompatible descriptions, rigorously dissected and analyzed. As logicians would say, we are having a merely verbal argument -- one that does not see beyond differences in words and the meanings they attempt to convey as well as the meanings we read into them.

Thus, Abdu'l-Bahá argues that the major differences between the religions results primarily from historical-cultural-linguistic differences, from differences in terminology and nomenclature: "The divine religions of the Holy Manifestations of God are in reality one though in name and nomenclature they differ. Man must learn to be a lover of the Light no matter what dayspring it may appear. (_Star of the West_, vol. 17, 285, see also _Promulgation of Universal Peace_ 41). Writing on the same theme Bahá'u'lláh states "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated." (_Epistle to the Son of the Wolf_ 13).

A similar analysis can be done for the apparent soul / no soul (Skt. Anatman, Pali anatta) debate. If, as the Bahá'í writings indicate, the soul is "a mystery" which "within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, 160), then what can be said about the soul? If the doctrine of anatta denies a permanent unchanging self or soul, then what is reborn in a next life. As Schuon argues: "Buddhists deny "the soul," so it is said, and yet they essentially admit the "karmic" continuity or, if one prefers, the moral causality of that living and conscious nucleus that is the ego" (_Treasures of Buddhism_ 37). Perhaps, like the problem with the nature of Reality, what we call "soul" in the West and what is called "no-soul" in Buddhism are but two ways of understanding that which is ultimately "empty" and beyond understanding.

Some quotations of interest:

"The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be that which He is, namely, incapable of being expressed by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, the single name being 'Above Every Name.'" (Gregory of Nyssa, c. 330-c. 394, Christian theologian of the Eastern Church, qtd. in Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* 238)

"We cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him. . . . God transcends even the mind." (St. Thomas Aquinas, Catholic theologian and philosopher)

"This varied family of distinctions suggests the perhaps daring thought that the Real an sich is one but is nevertheless capable of being humanly experienced in a variety of ways." (Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* 40)

Warmest greetings,

Dann May, Philosophy, OK City Univ.

Letter 11

[Note: This letter was written at a different time, but is a continuation of the above discussions. -J.W.]

From: Moojan Momen

To: Bruce Burrill

Date: February 10, 1998

Subject: Re: Buddhism

On Sat, 17 Jan 1998, Bruce Burrill wrote:

...In your book you state:

Gautama Buddha described the degraded state of the world at the time of the coming of Metteyya, these conditions have been fulfilled today:

Thus, brethren, from goods not being bestowed on the destitute, poverty grew great ..stealing... violence... murder...lying...evil speaking...adultery...abusive and idle talk...covetousness and ill-will...false opinions... incest, wanton greed and perverted lust...till finally lack of filial and religious piety and lack of regard for the head of the clan grew great. From these things growing, the life- span of those beings and the comeliness of them wasted...

Among such humans, the ten moral courses on conduct will disappear, the ten immoral courses of action will flourish excessively, there will be no word for moral among such humans - far less any moral agent. Among such humans, brethren, they who lack filial and religious piety, and show no respect for the head clan - it is they whom homage and praise will be given to the

filial-minded, to the pious and to them who respect the heads of their clans...

The world will fall into promiscuity, like goats and sheep, fowls and swine, dogs and jackals. Among such humans, brethren, keen mutual enmity will become the rule, keen ill-will, keen animosity, passionate thoughts even of killing, in a mother towards her child, in a child towards its mother, in a father towards his child and a child towards his father, in brother to brother, in brother to sister, in sister to brother...

But the sutta certainly doesn't support your statement, "degraded state of the world at the time of the coming of Metteyya." You have left out of your quotation from this text the very obvious and central time line of the decreasing life spans. Once the life span reaches 10 years, some individual put a stop to the immorality and the life span increases to 80,000 years, and it is in the period of morality and prosperity that Metteyya comes, not the degraded state of the world. This is very clear in the text. I'd like to know why you have presented the sutta as saying something very different than what it in fact says.

Dear Mr Burrill

Thank you for your explanation of your original message. I think you have a valid point here and are right to question my interpretation.

I would put forward the following three lines of response to your comments:

1. Scriptural. While your interpretation of this tradition may be correct, there are other traditions that undoubtedly state that the Buddha will appear at the time when the world is in a degraded state. The Tradition of the Five Disappearances, from the *Anagatavamsa*, attests to this from the Theravada side. The only tradition I have to hand from the Mahayana side is from the *Book of Zambasta* (trans. R E Emmerick), pp. 305-7.

2. Interpretation. One of the principles of the Bahá'í interpretation of prophecy is that where a prophecy appears to refer to events that are contra-indicated by science, then it is likely that a spiritual rather than a physical interpretation is the true meaning of the text. One example that Bahá'u'lláh gives in his *Book of Certitude* is that of the Christian prophecy that at the time of the return of Christ, the stars will fall to earth. Since it is a physical impossibility for even one star to fall to earth, let alone "stars", Bahá'ís have preferred Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation that this in fact refers to the declining influence of religious leaders (spiritual stars that come out when the sun - the prophet himself - has gone down/left the physical world). In a similar way, the reference in this prophecy and other prophecies to human beings having lived 80,000 years at some time in the past, that we are moving towards to a situation in which they will only live 10 years and then they are going to again move towards 80,000 is contradicted by science and by archeology. Therefore it is necessary to look for a spiritual interpretation. Without a thorough study of all references, I would not like to advance an interpretation, but I am merely suggesting that Bahá'ís would not

necessarily accept a literal interpretation of this text as referring to the passage of time.

3. Historical. One can easily find evidence for the fact that large numbers of Buddhists have both thought that the Maitreya Buddha will appear at a time when the world is in a dark and dismal state and have considered that the nineteenth/early twentieth century was the time for this to occur (i.e. about 2500 years after the time of the Buddha). One can for example point to perhaps as many as a dozen millennialist movements ranging geographically from Burma and Thailand through Vietnam to China and thus encompassing both Theravada and Mahayana traditions which rose around the claim of their founder either to be the Maitreya Buddha himself or to be Maitreya's deputy who was announcing the imminent advent of Maitreya.

There thus appears to be in Buddhism two different traditions regarding the coming of Maitreya. We may, in parallel with two similar Christian lines of interpretation, call these the pre-millennialist and post-millennialist. The former say that the Messianic figure (Christ or in this case the Buddha) will appear first when the earth is in a degraded state and will then usher in the golden age, while the latter say that the golden age will come first and only then will the Messiah appear. This is nothing to do with differences between Theravada and Mahayana since both groups seem to appear in both of these major sects. In Christianity, post-millennialists were very strong in the nineteenth century while pre-millennialism has gained strength throughout this century.

I must thank you for raising this issue as it has led me to thinking that, interestingly, a similar division now seems to have appeared in Shi`i Islam. The tradition in Shi`i Islam is what I have described above as pre-millennialist, but Khomeini has brought forward and has been able to gain acceptance for a post-millennialist interpretation of Shi`i prophecies about the coming of the Imam Mahdi, whereby the previous interpretation that the Imam Mahdi will appear when the earth is filled with injustice and evil is replaced by a view that says that Shi`is can work towards creating an ideal Shi`i community in anticipation of the coming of the Mahdi.

Finally, I would like to comment that I personally have no great interest in the question of prophesy. It seems to me that prophecies can be interpreted to mean just about anything that anyone wants them to mean. The only reason that I put anything at all in on this subject in my book is for reasons of completeness. I think they are particularly inappropriate in the case of Buddhism and Hinduism, where, although the average Buddhist and Hindu knows of the expected advent of Kalki Avatar or Maitreya Buddha, they have almost no knowledge of the actual scriptural texts that relate to this subject and that are for the most part written in languages that they do not know.

Best wishes,

Moojan Momen

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