Guardini’s Christ and Buddha:
Buddhism in the eyes of a Catholic theologian now and then

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Introduction

In many ways, the life and work of Romano Guardini (1885-1968) prepared the way for the renewal of Catholic thought and theology in the twentieth century. In contrast with the specialized research of today, he explored various fields according to his interests and the supposed interest of his interlocutors to give lectures in various branches of theology, philosophy and religious phenomenology. Although originally educated as a systematic theologian of a non-Thomistic stamp, he soon began to show interest in liturgical movement, in interpreting religious figures and literary works and issues connected with modernity, technology, ethics. Needless to say, among the figures who occupied his attention the most emergent is the figure of Christ. Above all, he contemplates this in his major Christological-exegetical work *The Lord* (1937), which is to be situated among biographies of Jesus popular since the modern times (Papini, Renan, Mauriac...), but Guardini’s aim was not only descriptive. His interest reached further to ask about Christ’s psychology, Christ’s rôle in Christian existence, Christ’s uniqueness and other topics. It seems natural to the Catholic priest turned university professor that this passion penetrated all periods of his teaching.

The second aspect worthy of attention is Guardini’s search for Christological
analogies in other historical, religious or literary figures. In this context, he looks for references of Christian faith, for example in the works of Dostoyevsky, seeing in his heroes (such as Prince Myshkin) symbols of Christ. Aside from fictional characters, two historical figures earned Guardini’s high esteem, insofar as they became Christ-figures in his thought. These were Socrates and Buddha. The connection between them and Christ is more explicit, since they were religious thinkers rather than personages of literary fiction. He thought they shared a lot in common with Christ and in fact it seems Guardini was planning to write a monograph on each of them, as he did in the case of Christ. Ultimately, he did manage a short work on Socrates that showed Guardini’s fascination with his death in which he saw Christological similarities. However, he did not produce any particular work on Buddha. It is commonly thought that similarly to the book *Death of Socrates* (1943) Guardini hoped to write a book on the deaths of both Christ and on that of Buddha, a project that unfortunately remained unaccomplished. In full disclosure, another important figure that might have merited more attention as a type of anti-prophet to Christ is Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Guardini mentions on countless occasions. Despite his continuous references to Nietzsche, however, he produced no comprehensive work in this regard.

Buddha, for Guardini, was a religious personality, a sage of humanity *par excellence*. Guardini’s esteem for Buddha and Buddhism cannot be negated. On the contrary, he considers Buddha more noble in many aspects than other “saviors” who often are pre-historical or mythological figures. This does not mean Guardini asserted a comprehensive equality between Buddha and Christ. There is little interest on Guardini’s part in other religions, even Protestantism. Mohammed, for example, receives far less attention than Buddha. Rather, his intention was to understand the relationship between Buddha and his disciples and followers, especially what his death meant for them, and what relation
Buddha might have to Christ. It is to be noted that Buddhism for Guardini represents the worldview of the Orient and as such is “polarly opposed” to the occidental thought; similarly, North and South have a complementary relationship. That means that one is not a negation of the opposite one, but in some sense its complement. Therefore, not everything that is different from the Christian has to be its negation. With that mindset, he intended to understand the relationship between Buddha and his disciples in order to find its complementary relationship with Christianity.

In this paper, we will trace Guardini’s understanding and interpretation of Buddhism and the significance of the person of Buddha in his work. Firstly, we will explore the reasons why there was such an interest in Buddhism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and what could have been the common understanding of Buddhism in Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. Secondly, we will assess the evaluation of Buddha, his place in the history of salvation, and his similarity and differences with Christ according to Guardini. The method we will use analyzes only some of the most representative texts. Our focus is on the humanity of Christ and that of Buddha, the meaning of their deaths for their followers, the topics of ascesis, mystical presence of Christ/Buddha in the believer, and the meaning of redemption. Above all, the issue we want to consider and elucidate is Guardini’s understanding of Christ’s originality and uniqueness in respect to other religious figures. This does not necessarily mean a simple superiority, but we will implicitly ask whether Christians can be enriched by Buddha’s life and teaching and, vice versa, what Christianity can offer to Buddhists. In a more thorough examination it would be necessary to consider the Buddhist understanding of Christ and the rôle of Buddha in Buddhism itself, which is outside the scope of this paper.

Another difficulty impacting this study is the fact that speaking of Buddhism as a whole is almost impossible, because there is more than one branch of it; in
fact, many schools of Buddhism understand the position of Siddhartha Gautama quite differently. Due to the scarcity of Guardini’s systematical treatise on Buddha or Buddhism we proceed most effectively in a Guardinian manner: not only strictly analyzing the informational aspects of his claims, but also interpreting and actualizing it immediately, as he would have wished. To that end, the purpose of this paper is to introduce several significative texts of Guardini, keeping in mind the 50th anniversary of his death this year, and to comment on them. Since most of the texts are not translated into English, we will have to work with German originals, quoting from the official translation whenever available or providing our own when necessary.

**Romano Guardini and perspectives on Buddha**

In the twentieth century the number of people was growing who were interested in the analogy between occidental and oriental religiosity. Guardini would have found himself in good company on the question of Eastern religions. But it is likely there was not much direct contact between European and Eastern religious leaders in this period on the level of exchange of ideas. Originally missionaries were the first to communicate information from their travels to the East, but it was not common that they would have studied or researched on the “pagan” cults or ideologies they witnessed. It should be noted, many missionaries a priori did not hold them in high esteem. Nevertheless, apart from Guardini, other religious thinkers of that age were showing interest in Buddhism too, sometimes as an alternative to Christianity. Suffice it to mention A. Schopenhauer, M. Heidegger as philosophers, and the psychoanalyst E. Fromm, or the spiritual leader T. Merton. However, the most outstanding figure with direct connection to Guardini is the Catholic theologian Henri de
Lubac (1896–1991). In his work there are in fact explicit references to Guardini or quotations from his works.

As for Guardini’s relationship with Buddhism and the East, there are several pieces of the mosaic we can put together. For instance, in the winter semester of 1937/38 he offered a seminar at the University of Berlin on the topic of “Buddha’s death,” with the precise title “Der Tod des Buddha. Die buddhistische Sinndeutung des Daseins und ihre Bedeutung für das Verständnis des Christentums.” However, since it was not published in any form, we cannot know how often it was referenced, and unfortunately even its manuscript has not survived. Further, from his work we know about books he might have been reading. For example, there are works of Georg Grimm (1868-1945) quoted by Guardini. The major influence in his own scholarship can be traced to the famous Berlin orientalist H. Oldenberg (1854-1920), whose book Guardini possessed, as well as to the research of R. Otto (1869–1937), who was similarly interested in analogies between western and eastern religiosity. Last but not least the influence of F. Heiler (1892-1967) is to be taken into consideration.

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1 H. DE LUBAC, Aspects du Bouddhisme, Seuil: Paris 1951. However, de Lubac’s interest is in comparison between Christian and Buddhist tradition and their eventual connections and not between Christ and Buddha as persons. His studies on Buddhism had another two parts: Aspects du Bouddhisme II (1955) and La rencontre du bouddhisme et de l’Occident (1952). In the foreword of the first volume he is directly quoting Guardini.
3 G. GRIMM, Die Wissenschaft des Buddhismus, Leipzig 1923. The source for Guardini’s quotations of Buddha’s teaching was Karl Eugen Neumann’s translation, Reden Gotamo Buddhas, Mittlere Sammlung, München 1922, vol. 1.
5 R. OTTO, West-östliche Mystik. Vergleich und Unterscheidung zur Wesensdeutung, Gotha 1926.
6 F. HEILER, Die buddhistische Versenkung, München 1922.
Nevertheless, few studies are dedicated to the relationship between Guardini’s thought and Buddhism. The one recent work that examines Guardini’s and Buddhist understanding of the Self is written by Chan Ho Park\textsuperscript{7}. Another bibliography is the contribution of J.A. Cuttat\textsuperscript{8}. Although Guardini shows interest in Buddha, as one of several figures for interpretation, he does not automatically accept his approach as an alternative to Christianity; he appreciates, evaluates, criticizes\textsuperscript{9}. When Guardini speaks about Buddhism, he usually considers early “southern” Buddhism, which in his words “went very soon corrupt.” Because of this statement, we can suppose that for Guardini Buddhism stands more or less for the Theravada school.


\textsuperscript{9} At the first sight we meet everywhere in Guardini a profound respect for Buddhism: “Der Buddhismus ist doch auch eine große Religion, voll der tiefsten und kühnsten Gedanken” (“Die Offenerbarung und die Endlichkeit,” in: \textit{Unterscheidung des Christlichen}, II, 141).
Some texts to be taken into consideration

Guardini’s most emblematic passage, which respectfully compares Christ with Buddha, while assigning to him only and exactly the rôle of a “precursor,” is the following paragraph from Guardini’s famous Jesus-book, *The Lord* (1937).

There is only one whom we might be inclined to compare with Jesus: Buddha. This man is a great mystery. He lived in an awful, almost superhuman freedom, yet his kindness was powerful as a cosmic force. Perhaps Buddha will be the last religious genius to be explained by Christianity. As yet no one has really uncovered his Christian significance. Perhaps Christ had not only one precursor, John, last of the prophets, but three: John the Baptist for the Chosen People, Socrates from the heart of antiquity, and Buddha, who spoke the ultimate word in Eastern religious cognition. Buddha is free; but his freedom is not that of Christ. Possibly Buddha’s freedom is only the ultimate and supremely liberating knowledge of the vanity of this fallen world.

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According to Guardini, Buddha joins John the Baptist and Socrates as one of the few people comparable with Christ. Even among the precursors Buddha seems to have a privileged place in Guardini’s understanding. However, Guardini’s word “precursor” is specifically used in John the Baptist’s sense: to prepare the way for the Messiah, directly or indirectly, intentionally or not, and after his coming the precursor must withdraw. Failure to do so would create animosity to the One who is to come and be an obstacle to him. Moreover, as much as Guardini may perceive and appreciate the enormous freedom of Buddha, he distinguishes it immediately from the free being of Christ, so that one could ask if Buddha’s freedom was not more a kind of indifference or freedom “from” something, while Christ’s freedom was radically a freedom “for” something. Buddha had correctly perceived and understood the essence of the being with its limitations and constraints, but it was above all the fallen world he was facing and not the being as such.

In any case, Guardini is aware that Christianity, destined to all people of good will, has to confront Buddhism at some level, and cannot simply ignore the figure of the Enlightened One. In his thought, something needed to be still said about Buddha from the Christian point of view. Both Christ and Buddha gave birth to religions that are particularly universalistic and essentially missionary. Guardini set about a scholarly comparison between the two, asking: Who is this Buddha? Without any doubt, Guardini considers him a sage who expounded upon the superficiality and caducity of the earthly existence and the nothingness of the Self. In other words, Buddha was somebody who became free thanks to this knowledge, although his own freedom was still not perfect, because it was principally an escape from the fallen being and not its overcoming. What is at issue here is Buddha’s teaching on the right order of being that he obtained and that he did not want to keep for himself only. As a human being, Buddha
achieved much more than many teachers of morality; he became able to win
over himself. Without any special revelation (or maybe with a sort of an implicit
revelation) he discovered what life was like and how to face it. The question is
whether Siddhartha Gautama became the Enlightened One by necessity, by
proper merits, or if it could have been anybody else in his stead. Guardini seems
to admit that despite his particular personal contribution it took many lives for
Śākyamuni to prepare for his enlightenment, but it did not necessarily need to
be him for accomplishing this work\(^1\). However, that is not to say the person of
Buddha is of no importance for subsequent generations of followers, as if
Buddhism would go on even without a historical Buddha. Such a claim must be
said in an even stronger sense about Christ: without him there not only would
not be any Christianity at all, but there is effectively none apart from him.
According to Guardini, the fact that something is Christian does not mean that
it is only related to Christ, but that he himself is its essence. However, Christ’s
presence is not limited to what is explicitly Christian.

By way of comparison, Christianity is not a mere occidental analogy to
Buddhism, an actualized version of humanity’s wisdom. It would ignore the
complexity of these religions to call them parallel or equal. In another text on
Christianity and Culture, Guardini claims for example that there is not a
Christian culture in the *same* sense as there is a Buddhist one, because Buddha
negated any precedent cultural framework and called to withdrawal from the
world and to interiority, refuting to cling to concrete values\(^2\). Buddhism is

\(^1\) Cf. footnote 19 below. J.A. CUTTAT, “Buddhistische und christliche Innerlichkeit in
Guardinis Schau,” cit., p. 452 claims that to think that Buddhism can exist even without
the person of Buddha is a misunderstanding, but his view that Guardini understood and
proved this point sounds a little vague. Similar speculations have been made about
Christianity without Christ (for non-Christians?) but there is nevertheless a radical
difference between a non-Buddhist Buddhism and non-Christian Christianity.

\(^2\) “Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur,” in: *Unterscheidung des
indeed more a-historical in respect to Christianity in the sense that it seeks to escape from history rather than bring the existent world to perfection. However, contrary to that, differing from many other religious and non-religious saviors, Buddha is quite particular because he was indeed historical. In this aspect he can be compared with Christ. In Guardini’s words,

All saviors stand in the original time. Perhaps they are said to have come, to have lived, to have died. This “then” in which everything happens, however, does not belong to the history... [Buddha is probably the only one about whom that is not true – the Buddha issue itself is a particular one, and it has for the Christian confrontation a completely different degree than the others.]

It could be said that in the Orient, Buddhism was an early alternative to the passage from *mythos* to *logos*, since the Buddha’s many-faceted skepsis towards preexistent Hinduism is somewhat analogous to the reform brought about later by Christ in the Jewish environment. But it does not necessarily follow that only because they stand close to each other, they stand also on the same side.

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13 “Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik,” in: *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, II, 171 and footnote (“Alle Heilbringer stehen in der Urzeit. Von ihnen heißt es wohl, sie seien gekommen, sie hätten gelebt, sie seien gestorben. Das ‘Damals’ aber, in dem das alles geschieht, gehört nicht zur Geschichte... [Wahrscheinlich ist Buddha der einzige, auf den das nicht zutrifft – wie das Buddhaproblem überhaupt ein singuläres ist, und für die christliche Auseinandersetzung einen ganz anderen Rang hat als die übrigen]”).
It is apparent that there are radical differences between Christianity and Buddhism. These differences are not only in the fact that they recall different origins and points of departure. Christ is distinguishable even from the various founders of religious movements within Christianity itself\(^\text{14}\). In merely human terms, there have been many other religious figures more capable and with greater visible results than Jesus Christ; Buddha himself appears in many aspects a super-human in respect to Christ. Yet while religious leaders or founders of congregations inspire their followers, Christ himself is a criterion and norm of Christian being and acting\(^\text{15}\), the one with whom and by whose force a Christian mystically works. Christ is more than a mediator or an accompanist – he requires obedience. Christ is the soul of Christianity, which could not stand firm without him or apart from him.

Buddha, however, is supposed not to have originally collected any disciples since his way to enlightenment was meant for him alone, although anyone could learn from it and imitate it. His achievement was important for himself first, and only secondarily to the whole of humanity. It seems that he did not want his words to be written down and left for later generations. Contrastingly, Christ called people not to walk with him towards God but to follow him\(^\text{16}\). Therefore,


\(^{16}\) “Die buddhistische Nachfolge bedeutet aber etwas ganz anderes. Der Buddha betrachtete sich selbst nicht einmal als Vorbild, nach dem sich die Menschen richten
to be Christian in the sense of belonging to Christ proposed by Acts 11:26 has a deeper and more intensive meaning than being inspired by Buddha, related to him and therefore Buddhist.

This evaluation of course varies according to each Buddhist school, but in general it can be said that Buddha was (and intended to be) an example of what humans can achieve spiritually. Even if in some interpretations Buddha is still supposed to accompany and help the believer in the present life or at least at the moment of entering the Nirvana, what he began should have been continued by his disciples, each on his own, which cannot be straight forwardly said about Christ’s work. His accomplishment was not only a model for others, something to be brought further and perfected, but in certain aspects unique, without any possibility of sharing in it or adding something to it. What Buddha shares is his experience and his insights, while Christ gives access to his very existentiality that becomes important especially after his passing over from this world and his resurrection.

For Guardini, the decisive point of encounter between Christ and Buddha, as well as with Socrates, is their deaths. This includes, not only their way of dying or the reason for it, but also the significance it has for their followers. Is it only an example of detachment that should be imitated by a follower, or has the death itself any power determining or changing the very roots of existence? The death of Socrates was freely chosen as a witness to what he had taught and was essentially avoidable. On the other hand, Buddha’s death was a natural


17 Although we will not be focusing on Socrates, we plan to note those places in which Guardini included him in the conversation about spiritual leadership and death. Similarly to Buddha, Socrates pursues and teaches the truth but does not enter in the personal relation between a disciple and the truth itself. Every disciple has to go this way on his own. Socrates’ death was fundamentally a witness and perfection of his life and as such was imitable and to be imitated by his followers, while Christ’s death can
consequence of his own living, that was inevitable, and that he peacefully accepted because he was aware that his mission was accomplished. The Buddha’s radical life of self-denial and abandonment were heroic deeds, but in contrast to Christ they were accidental to his being; in Christ there is an identity of being, words and works. In Buddha’s teaching and in the teaching of many enlightened spirits there are many useful answers to the issues of human life. Above all, both masters understood that this present existence is not everything at all, and that human beings profoundly need to be reborn. Such conclusions are the response to the teaching of a master with new or radical morality and spiritual practices. For Christianity, what matters beyond practice is not only Christ’s doctrine but also and above all his existence, the mode of being he exemplified and the special, immediate relationship with him directly. Guardini considers the life of Christ in comparison with Buddha as follows:

only be united with. Cf. Der Herr, 200, 433 ff.; Johanneische Botschaft, 11-12; Die Existenz des Christen, 295; Die Offenbarung, 104.

And Buddha? Omitting here the question where he leads to God and where away from him, and considering him only in the form to which he himself laid claims, that of a master, we do well to summarize his essence with the name he applied to himself, “the Enlightened One.” He is convinced that he has discovered the law of illusion that reigns everywhere, but which only the extremely rare individual is privileged to perceive. Now it is manifest to all — through his life’s work, which he has carried out to the end, thus perfecting himself. About his deathbed stand his disciples, some of them already profoundly entrenched in his world of thought. One last time he summons his strength and mounts all the steps of meditation. Fully conscious of the control he exercises over existence, at the moment he recognizes as his, he “lets go” the last frail bond that links him to life. “Nothing more exists.” The disciples know that they have witnessed the fulfillment of a tremendous mystery¹⁹.

Buddha certainly had some power over the being that he succeeded in obtaining without changing it. He saw the truth clearer than many other humans. But Christ is effectively at work in every Christian.

Guardini further considers their legacies. Buddha did indeed open a new way for those who follow him\textsuperscript{20}, but as the Church fathers liked to say Christ has become the Way. While for Buddha death was a natural event, more or less freely accepted or sought, Christ’s death meant an extreme identification with humanity, a penetration of the depths of being and changing the roots of existence. Buddha was seeking the liberation for himself at the first place. The redemption realized by Christ means much more than purification of the corrupt creation or even bringing it to perfection by transcending its precedent limits; it should be considered a real “new creation.” Buddha’s death was a natural result of his precedent life, its to-be-expected conclusion, but Christ’s dying on the cross was in many aspects sudden, tragic, and contrary to God’s original plan of redemption. Therefore, for Guardini, the event of Christ is to be considered a new and absolute beginning. On this topic, Guardini’s words are very clear and quite original:

There is a limit to man’s possibilities: he can effect only things within the world. He can develop given possibilities; change and shape given conditions; he cannot change the world as a whole, for he is a part of it… He has no influence over being as such or its characteristics. He can change all manner of things on the surface of earth; earth itself escapes his power. Only one person ever seriously attempted to go farther: to lay hands on being – Buddha. He desired more than mere moral progress or peace outside the world. He attempted the inconceivable: himself part of existence, he tried to lift all existence by its “bootstraps”. So far no Christian has

\textsuperscript{20} The Lord, cit., 360 (“In Buddha’s seat we have the solemn consummation of his evolution towards perfection; it opens a door through which all others may pass — who have the courage to do so… In Jesus there is something else: a will capable of bearing all that is to come through to the end; a heart that has embraced the illimitableness of human sin and human suffering…,” Der Herr, 436).
The rank of Buddha and of Christ as humans

For Guardini, the question at stake is not above all whether Christ is God, human and divine at the same time, while Buddha is a mere human being. That is more or less presupposed. Rather, the issue for him is in what sense Christ was human in respect to the humanity of Buddha and what their humanity meant respectively to the people around them or coming after them. That both of them were fully human during their lives is beyond any doubt; in some sense Buddha was maybe more perfectly human than Christ, who is God’s servant “without beauty nor shape to look at” (Is 53:2). Buddha and next to him other religious thinkers were ideal humans, which comparing to Christ might even seem “artificial”\(^\text{22}\). Many sublime characteristics that can be found in Buddha are absent in Christ for one reason: he is throughout different and cannot be measured simply by comparing with others\(^\text{23}\).

Buddha as human sought the truth – a rare and noble task in itself – and it can rightly be said that he found and preached it. He commenced a work, gave an example. What happened to Buddha after entering the Nirvana is unknown or irrelevant for Guardini, and anyway disputed diversely in different Buddhist schools. As it may be, Buddha seems somehow different from other “saviors;” his humanity is deeper and higher. He found the grace to go beyond the limitations of an ordinary human nature – by his own endeavor. Guardini would agree that Buddha’s humanity is particular throughout, as well as Christ’s humanity was particular throughout compared to other men and women, albeit essentially the same. The former was considered something to have to be freed from; the latter was embraced for the sake of humanity. How Guardini understood and appreciated Buddha’s mission, while at the same time seeing its

\(^{22}\) Cf. Der Herr, 201.

limits too, can be seen from the text:

Perhaps there is no religious figure other than Buddha who would arise with such a claim that is tremendous and at the same time imposes itself quietly. He is praised as “the noble one, the perfect one, perfectly illumined, rich in knowledge, knowing the way, the realizer of the path, knower of the world, incomparable educator of men, teacher of gods and humans.” […] His authority is unconditionally valid. All beings, not only human but also spirits and gods expect salvation through him. […] Now, how is Buddha himself related to this order of salvation? His achievement is tremendous. He comes to know what is hidden to all beings, even to Brahma. […] Buddha is “enlightened”, “awakened”. He has overcome the prejudice of illusion. […] He recognized the law of existence, about the “suffering, about the origin of suffering, about the dissolution of suffering and about the eightfold path leading to dissolution of suffering.” He uttered what was veiled perhaps through appearance and blindness, but nevertheless it was objectively there and valid. Without him nobody else would come to the knowledge of the law of being during the present course of time; but only because nobody from the people as they are during this time would have strength to do that, since even Buddha himself has not had this strength during the previous rebirths. People need him as a guide; but as a matter of fact only because they are now exactly how they are, and not in their essence. In principle everybody could go the same way, if he broke through to perfect pureness. The goal for which Buddha strives is the extinguishing, the “nothing more exists.” Afterwards he really is not any more. Only a memory of him remains and otherwise what consists is “the teaching and the community.” About the teaching it has always again been said that it is followed by one’s own strength. […] The religious meaning of Buddha has
an extreme measure; finally he says however only that what anybody in principle could say. He shows the way that remains even without him with the validity of a world law. The person of Buddha itself is not situated in the religious actuality.24

Buddha did not establish any laws of existence; he only discovered them and put them into practice himself. Christ came from outside bringing something humans did not have, while Buddha perfected humanity from within, up to its limits. Certainly, Christ has to be distinguished from various other religious and mythological figures that sometimes came to merge with Buddhism too,

according to which a deity can enter into the world under the appearance of a human being (cf. *avatar*)\(^{25}\). For Christ did not come to live among men and women just for a certain period of time, in order to leave thereafter. He indeed identified himself with humanity, or better, with every human being, since the humanity he adopted was not a general or typical humanity, but rather the humanity of every human of all ages. He was able to enrich – not only restore – human existence because he brought something that was essential to it, not only lost but more original than the origins. Buddha, on the other hand, penetrated the depths of human existence with all its misery, comprehended the ephemerality of being that is not more than a shadow of a fuller existence, or non-existence in Buddhist terms. He also offered a way to becoming really human by escaping self-centered humanity. But he himself definitely was not nor did he consider himself to be the Way. What Buddha proposed were techniques of overcoming oneself, one’s self-centered illusory existence and attachment to things, ideas or persons. But the meaning of Christian “ascesis,” a concept also dear to Guardini that will be mentioned below in more detail, differs insofar as it does not mean achieving something by own practices but opening oneself to the work of grace. The paradoxical difference between the two personages is that on the one hand Buddha is too similar with other humans to be able to change their destiny, but on the other hand he is and remains an absolutely separate individual who cannot abide in another person; moreover,

\(^{25}\) On the comparison with the Hindu concept of “avatar” cf. A. MONG, “Jesus, the *Avatar*”, in: *Verbum SVD* 58 (1/2017), 124-135, however the author’s approach appears to us excessive. Although the author quotes sources that speak against the juxtaposition of incarnation and avatar, he concludes that “the Nicene Creed […] unfortunately leaves no room for inculturation. Such a dogmatic formulation of Christology is meaningful only to theologians” (p. 134). The reason why he has to say that is that his fundamental conviction is that “the New Testament and later writings attempt to express the complexity and profundity of Jesus’s nature and personality, borrowing concepts and images from their own cultural and social milieu” (p. 135), which seems too simplistic.
personality and individuality as such are being refused. Christ, however, is identical with humans but in an aspect very different, being at the same time not only radically other but also capable of inhabiting the believers’ person.

The analysis of the human condition Buddha created was in many aspects precise and correct with crossing points with Christ’s worldview. Both of them recognized the limits of the created being – whether they were essential and connatural to it or only a result of corruption – and offered certain way out of it. However, their evaluation of the limited, material world is radically different. Either anything material and therefore individual is negated as such, or the ego is criticized only as far as it is an “aversio a Deo” and “incurvatio in seipsum” – something that has to be abandoned but only in order to regain it again purified. For Christ, the aim of religion is not fleeing from this world nor refusing matter. On the contrary, as Guardini once aptly said, there is no other religion that takes materiality and corporality so earnestly as Christianity due to Christ’s incarnation. How much Christ’s incarnation makes him different from other, apparently greater humans, among whom Buddha certainly merits recognition and admiration, is expressed by Guardini in this way:

Even more difficult is comparison with Buddha, that inconceivably great spirit who possessed all that existed of terrestrial splendor and forsook it to realize a religious existence of even greater cosmic dimensions than the philosophical spheres of Socrates and Plato – here again, how different Jesus! Indeed, asking in all reverence and only to adore the better, is there in Jesus himself that which in Buddha we call “religious greatness”? Might

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26 Cf. Landschaft der Ewigkeit, 86 (“Ja trotz aller scheinbaren, aus asketischen Spannungen oder aus geschichtlichen Gegensätzen stammenden Dualismen weiß der christliche Glaube um eine echte, ja besondere Bedeutung von Materie und Leiblichkeit”); Johannesische Botschaft, 69 (“Der Vorwurf, der Christ hasse und verachte die Welt, ist so falsch, wie er alt ist. In Wahrheit nimmt niemand sie so ernst und groß, wie der wirkliche Christ...”).
one not conclude that from the point of view of the path he climbed, of the
profundity of his cognition, of his creative religious wisdom and
sovereignty of style Buddha was superior? This would not only be a great
error and profound temptation, but infinite nonsense, for all these things
have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. He is the Son of the living God, the
incarnate Logos. Seen again this one tremendous fact, all else is purely
incidental. That so much in Christ seems to fail to measure up to earthly
standards of genius is due only to the sacred Kenosis, entry of the
omnipotent Word into the voluntary impotence of a genuinely shared
human existence...

The goal of any Christian spiritual endeavor is therefore not to destroy but to
elevate and spiritualize the material creation by bringing it back to God and
offering it to Him. Of course, matter can become a temptation, a burden, a
limitation. However, the ambiguous relationship to created things has to be
reoriented, not suppressed nor eliminated. Buddhists, on the other hand, are

27 *The Lord*, cit., 359 (“Noch schwerer wird alles, wenn wir Ihn mit Buddha Vergleichen,
jenem unfaßlichen Geiste, der alles besaß, was zeitliche Herrlichkeit heißt, aber es
ablegte und eine religiöse Existenz verwirklichte, die als solche von der gleichen, nein,
wohl noch höherer Weltgröße war, als die des Sokrates und Platon im Philosophischen
– wie anders ist Jesus auch hierin! Man kommt gar nicht auf den Gedanken, seine Jünger
könten im Sinne unmittelbarer religiöser Gestalt ‘groß’ genannt werden, stammt doch
die Bedeutung des Apostels ganz anderswoher. Ja – wir reden in Ehrfurcht, nur um
tiefer anbeten zu lernen – ist denn in Jesus selbst das, was man angesichts einer Gestalt
wie Buddha ‘religiöse Größe’ nennen würde? Könnte man nicht das Gefühl bekommen,
Buddha sei Ihm an durchmessenen Wegen, an Einsicht in die Zusammenhänge des
Daseins, an schöpferischer religiöser Weisheit, an souveränen Stil überlegen gewesen?
Aber das wäre ein großer Irrtum und eine tiefe Versuchung. Nein, Unsinn wäre es; denn
das alles hat mit Jesus nichts zu tun. Er ist der Sohn des Lebendigen Gottes, der
menschgewordene Logos. Im Augenblick, da das gesehen wird, werden alle anderen
Maßstäbe wesenlos. Daß aber vor ihnen so vieles zu versagen scheint, offenbart die
Kenosis; das Eingegangensein des ewigen Wortes in die Ohnmacht unseres Menschen-
daseins;” *Der Herr*, 435).
usually said to aim at overcoming the created being as imperfect (and unperfectable), evil in itself, or at least a profound illusion. The present existence is not real and therefore one must not attach himself or herself to it; it has to be unveiled as such and abandoned. Both Christ and Buddha agree upon one thing: that what has to be suspended is one’s egoistic will or greed which makes a human being a prisoner of himself or herself bound to things that are not everlasting. The difference is that Christians are to substitute selfishness with God’s will and the abnegation of oneself is to be joined with carrying Christ’s cross daily. Suffering in the Buddhist view is inherent to material existence (which in fact means only hanging onto being and longing desperately for being) and therefore is to be discarded by transcending it. According to Christ, however, evil and pain were not meant to be part of creation. They are not necessary, and therefore can and have to be in some sense accepted and overcome as he himself did. Both rightly discover and reveal that the present existence is inevitably interwoven with suffering during the life in the worldly lacrimarum vallis, but the approach to it differs at the end. Either humans are called to avoid suffering by refusing the will to exist in a mode of attachment and in that way they must admit that suffering is a necessary price for existing, or they unite themselves to God, who in the crucified Christ embraced suffering once for all in order to end it – now virtually, but one day definitely. Life is not worthy of living only because it does or does not contain suffering, but because Christ decided to live it to the extent of making it his own forever.

It can be rightly said that in Buddha’s case what is important is his radically new insight into laws of existence, but that could have been brought about also by somebody else. He himself was not the salvific law; he simply pointed to it and was subject to it. He needed to be redeemed (or to redeem himself) first. What brings salvation to people that look upon him are his words, his wisdom and his example, but not any exact deed – past or present – at least in the early
forms of Buddhism. Buddha’s death did not mean any big change in his own life, since he already had attained enlightenment. In contrast, Christ is unique because his words and deeds coincide. He was not calling people to follow his teaching but himself. He did not only discover and unmask the laws resident at the depth of existence, but he modified them. Above all, Christ’s death was a free decision, an unnecessary happening, not indifference towards evil but its acceptance in the fullest sense. To summarize, both Buddha and Christ came to lead people out of a state of “being mere humans”: Buddha in that he invited people to abandon the yearning for existence, and Christ in that he united humans to himself so that they transcend the state of being material creatures destined to perdition. Nobody can exist if he is not really himself, nor can anybody exist if he is only himself. The nature of things could be changed indeed from within, but only through bringing something from outside that was not contained in it. For everything that can be criticized on the present corrupt state of the universe is not an unfortunate necessity but a result of the primordial fall.

**Kenōsis or śūnyatā**

Much research has been done on the similarity between the Buddhist concept of emptiness (śūnyatā) and the Christological key-term “kenosis”\(^{28}\). However, even if they show some similarities, they are not directly comparable, since – as De Lubac would say – not every analogy means a real direct connection. On the one hand, Buddhist emptiness is an ideal, an original principle of all material being (that lacks any substance in itself), and therefore something that has to be

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discovered and aimed at in order to obtain redemption. On the other hand, the self-emptying of Christ is a point of departure, a non-necessary decision, a sign of divine condescension that has a place in history of salvation but is not its last point. Christ did not lose himself or negate his own value, but temporarily abandoned his own dignity as Son of God (albeit not completely) and made himself equal to humans for their sake. His making himself lowly and poor is not an end in itself but has as its purpose the enrichment of human beings (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). However, the notion of self-emptying in Buddhism is a means to escape the necessity of existence with all the sufferings of being and to achieve enlightenment, while Christianity takes materiality and the bodily reality very seriously, as has been said. Even suffering can be a value. The present being is not a mere illusion as Buddhism tends to view it, but is a corrupt state of creation that is in itself good. It remains however true that there is another reality, which is more real than the actual one.

Guardini rightly perceives that Buddha’s real nature is or at least its aim was to be/become impersonal, free from any individuality and thus united with other beings. Guardini reflects on this idea, saying:

Finally, there is another religious figure, the highest from all and the only one that can be named in some sense seriously next to Christ: Buddha. He is specifically impersonal. His existence has not so much the character of a creative richness that unfolds itself from within, but rather a character of an implacable consequentiality. One could even say, a character of a law assumed into a will that is relentless and serves the meaning of the world. His existence gives the impression, as if in him the world arrived at brightness. However not in an affirmative sense, so that its beautiful fullness reveals itself microcosmically in human life, but in the form of unveiling, or better denudation. In him it becomes obvious that the world
is illusion, guilt and suffering. Its most inner law is discovered in order to overcome it, or better to dissolve it. [...] In the end he obtains a knowledge that all being is only an illusion that originates in the will towards life, and he finds the way to dissolve the existence itself by overcoming this will. This knowledge does not come from an encounter, nor from above as a grace, but as the last consequence from the fact that he is how he is, and that he achieved what he achieved, while his present life itself represents a result of innumerable antecedent incarnations. Buddha realizes what he came to know; he collects followers around himself and teaches them so that they in their turn become able to pass down the teaching; he organizes the life of the community; and after he had time to arrange everything necessary, he dies aged in the circle of his own disciples, so that his death is tantamount to pure realization of his life and, in some sense, the total end of everything 29.

Self and the existence in Buddhism are something ambiguous and rather undesirable that has to be deconstructed. It seems that it cannot but be understood as egoistic and closed in itself; it can and should be set apart because it is neither a value nor reality, and therefore its loss is a gain\textsuperscript{30}. In Christianity, on the other hand, the personality enjoys appreciation as the highest value. That does not mean at all that Buddhism despises human life. On the contrary, both religions show much respect for the life in all its forms, however the important Buddhist value of compassion is quite different from Christian charity, which should be much more than pity\textsuperscript{31}. However, the ego in a Christian view is not a necessarily evil but incidentally wretched. Humans have to put away some layers of it in order to come through to the very Self that is more than only a common nature or identity with a godhead. The real possibility of perversion does not make of the Self an evil thing or a danger \textit{per se}. The Self has to be purified from any unauthenticity and illusoriness; not because it is essentially corrupt because of its disordered bonds with creatures and with itself.

As we can see from this issue, there is a common interest in ascesis on both sides – Buddhism and Christianity – but according to Guardini there is also a significant difference between what each of them understand by this term. Ascesis from the Christian point of view does not despise the Self, but wants to

\textsuperscript{30} For Buddhism, the being of the Self is despised as something closed in itself, as being imprisoned in the finitude and hanging on the things of this world that are illusory; moreover, what is preferred is the detachment and the suppression of an egoistic individuality (cf. Religion und Offenbarung, 122; Das Wesen des Christentums, 104).

\textsuperscript{31} Let us limit ourselves here to quoting one passage from De Lubac\textquotesingle s first work mentioned in the footnote 1: “We may say, in fact, that at its best Buddhist charity resembles Christian charity as a dream resembles reality. The great Bodhisattvas of charity are like remote, floating, unreal prefigurings of the Christ, not creatures of flesh and blood like the saints of the Church; but the mere fact of having imagined them, even in a dream, is far too profound and noble an achievement not to be worthy of admiration” (p. 49).
purify it, not deconstructing but re-creating it\textsuperscript{32}. Guardini admits that there is much egoism and inauthenticity present in the Self, since it is not a part of original human nature but suffers the consequences of original sin, while selfhood as such is something positive and inalienable, although not absolutely. Christian ascesis is more than mere human striving for perfection, understood in the sense of purgation of all imperfections, while in Buddhism all initiative comes in the first place from the respective person alone. In Guardini’s \textit{Ethics} he assesses the Buddhist notion of ascesis:

Buddha’s underlying principle seems to consist of the conviction that man can dissolve the existence, his own existence, by extinguishing the will to life. To this goal first of all a radical detachment is useful; then the knowledge of the fact that life flourishes only when it is not aware about. In the becoming aware the life dies. Therefore a technique for becoming aware is developed that reaches always more profoundly, until it finally arrives at the experience of which all the speeches of Buddha talk: “there is nothing more.” […] That means a radical renouncement of everything that is history. From that differs strictly – as an immediate phenomenon – everything that happens in the Biblical revelation. The sovereignty of God who does not need the world appears clearly and powerfully. He created it because he wanted it so and is its Lord. He created also man and put him as a free being into the world. God the Lord calls the man and grounds by it the man’s relationship to himself. The calling is a task and from there the history arises, whose essential part consists in the indissolvable relation between the

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. \textit{Ethik}, 400, 1016-1017, 1131-1132; “Askese als Element der menschlichen Existenz,” in: \textit{Wurzeln eines gro\ssen Lebenswerks}, IV, 268-269. Guardini distinguishes and criticized other sorts of ascesis too, as for example the dualistic-gnostic one, which condemns everything material as radically evil.
calling one and the called one.\(^{33}\)

Ascesis does not need to negate all materiality and creaturehood, but what Guardini admired in Buddhist spiritual practices was its serenity and quest for concentration\(^{34}\). According to Guardini, modern humanity lost the ability to act and to be at the same time rooted in objective reality and in the Self, while peacefully taking distance from the object of the one’s acting. In the same way, Christ did not call everybody to renounce earthly goods but to destroy the unsound attachment to them. Therefore, the goal of human spirituality and religiosity should not be to cancel one’s own Self or to extinguish subjective passion, but rather to order them towards the proper end and to control and limit the egoistic aspect of the Self. In the same way, to be or become free does not mean only to get rid of any limitation of any burden (such as bodily or

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\(^{34}\) Guardini especially compares the spiritual practice of rosary with the Buddhist reciting of mantras, considering this form of prayer universally valid because based on a profound human necessity (“Das Gebet ist ein urmenschliches Tun; so enthält es Wesensgesetze, die überall wiederkehren. Wenn sich also bei einer so ernsten Religion, wie es der sechshundert Jahre vor Christus entstandene Buddhismus ist, eine Gebetsform findet, die unter gewissen Gesichtspunkten dem Rosenkranz ähnelt, dann spricht das eher für, als gegen ihn…”, Der Rosenkranz, 15). He even mentions in his diary that he had a rosary made of Buddhist prayer chain (Stationen und Rückblicke, 189).
material existence or *karma* that destines a person to reborn again), but rather to act within a certain framework, realizing one’s own potential and pursuing his or her ultimate end. The reason is that limitations give one space for existence; a border defines a being by separating and connecting at the same time. As a Christian, Guardini is well aware of the fact that the present human Self is not necessarily the true, the original one nor the one to be aimed at, but needs to be overcome and in some sense destroyed; however, there is a clear essence of the authentic Self that must be realized together with God’s view of the person\(^\text{35}\). Therefore, the goal of ascesis is not so much to get rid of something as to direct oneself towards God in whom the Self will solely find perfection.

Ascesis for Guardini is fundamentally a right measure – not too much, not too little – since it might be sometimes easier to simply detach oneself from a thing than to use it properly. A common insight is true: we are often imprisoned in ourselves and need to be freed from ourselves; “the enemy of our salvation is our self.” But the Christian novelty is that Christ as a good shepherd is fighting with us and for us\(^\text{36}\). However much both religions might agree about the comprehensive reality of “losing oneself” and the need of *Selbslostigkeit* for the sake of self-discipline and objectivity, the Buddhist view is more one-sided than the Christian view because it lacks acceptance of one’s own creaturehood, which for Guardini is oppositional to the disinterestedness of oneself. Where the polar tension between these two aspects is missing, there life is going to stagnate. Similarly, Christianity makes us understand that the perishability of the material universe does not need to lead to escape from it, nor must the coming end of the world produce sentiments of resignation.

It is helpful here to consider another point of encounter between the two


\(^{36}\) Cf. *Der Herr*, 188.
systems of belief which is their perception of the “mystical” relationship between an individual and the divine being. Interpretation of the respective tradition or school notwithstanding, in some traditions Buddha – one of many, who had to be born many times before attaining enlightenment – succeeded just at the end in realizing his “Buddhahood,” more or less common to all, a Buddhahood in which potentially all people can share. In contrast, although Christian believers share in Christ’s life or participate in “divine nature,” this means a much higher event than only realizing that one has a common “Christhood,” to which Christ himself would have awakened at a certain moment. Christhood is proper only to Christ in its full sense because he was unique, and it is he who shares himself with whomever he wants.\(^{37}\) Maybe it could be distinguished in this way: the Buddhist realizes in himself or herself the Buddha-like nature, while the follower of Christ co-realizes Christ’s life within himself or herself.\(^{38}\) Letting go one’s own Self does not necessarily lead to letting Christ’s nature transpire inherently in the believer. In Guardini’s terminology, Christian interiority is not only a product of human introspection and of discarding anything superfluous (e.g. through ascetic practices), in the psychological sense. It is God who creates this interiority when he enters and thus widens the being of the person – it is God’s own interiority in the first place.\(^{39}\) While Buddha contributed to the analysis of the profoundness of the

\(^{37}\) Buddha is one of many other enlightened ones: he perfected in himself the Buddha-nature inherent in every human (or even in every creature), so that anybody can – in principle – attain Buddhahood, i.e. becoming Buddha in his or her turn. This may be thanks to the example or merits of the first Buddha, with or without his help. However, it can never be said in the same sense that people possess *per se* a Christhood that has only to be actualized, because the grace of divine filiation is a gift freely given by Christ in virtue of participating in his unique filial identity.

\(^{38}\) C.H. PARK, “*Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen,*” cit., 329 fn. 122 quotes E. Biser who speaks about “Nachvollzug des Buddhaeins“ through meditation, while Guardini’s preferred term is the “Mitvollzug“ of Christ’s existence by the believer.

human soul, whose discovery gives meaning to life along with the awareness of one’s own mere nothingness, he stopped one step before the uncreated interiority. Nevertheless, although Guardini is not clear enough on this point, it seems that he rightly realized the Buddhist aim is indeed nothingness. This does not however mean a simple non-being; but exceeds any conceptuality, cannot be explained and understood in simply human terms, and is something like a double negation in terms of a non-being of a being that is not\(^\text{40}\). Again, what Buddha as well as what Christ demanded, cannot be explained in purely human concepts. But Buddhist pessimism about contingent things of this non-definite world resembles more the critique of a Qohelet than the New Testament’s quest for the “new earth and new heaven.” What Buddha was not sufficiently aware of is that nothingness is not the only \(\textit{Daseinspol}\), as Guardini would say, but there is an other existential pole, God who calls beings out of nothingness. If such a God is absent, the beings’ endeavor to rise out of nothingness cannot be but a vain effort and a short-term illusion that indeed necessarily leads to

disappointment.

In this sense, there is also a fundamental difference in understanding what redemption means for Buddha and for Christ. While it can be said in some sense for Buddhism that redemption is awakening to knowledge of being or self-awareness in a realization that one is already saved, for Christians redemption connotes a radical change in being, acquisition of a new being, and a consciousness of new life. Buddhist liberation from the chain of rebirths is essentially a self-redemption without any need of gods\textsuperscript{41}. Guardini is very clear that to be saved in no case means return to the original state of nature nor to fully receive something one already possesses, but rather to be reborn as a new creation, impossible by mere human forces. Indeed, perfect human nature was not the one at the beginning, to which we only have to return, but it will be the one at the end which will be not acquired by any human endeavor but received as a grace from God\textsuperscript{42}. Eternity does not consist in getting rid of temporality or materiality, not even by gaining a new, better substance but is fundamentally a participation in the life of Jesus Christ – the only everlasting one – whose existence was not extinguished by passing over to life resurrected.

\textsuperscript{41} For the possibility of other interpretation by Guardini himself, cf. \textit{Welt und Person}, 86 (“Allerdings könnte man auch zweifeln, ob Buddha selbst die Autonomie wollte; ob es ihm nicht vielmehr um eine Bestimmung Gottes und eines Verhältnisses zu Gott ging, die er nur in negativer Form ausdrücken konnte. In diesem Falle würde die von ihm erklärte Scheinhaftigkeit der Welt erst dann zu einer wirklichen Autonomieform, wenn ein ‘ungläubiger’ Mensch des Westens die von Buddha ‘gläubig’ gemeinte Weltstruktur von ihrem eigenen Sinn ablöste und zum Mittel seines Autonomiewillens machte ... Das echte Erlebnis des absoluten Scheins ist aber wohl nur dem Osten eigen. Im Abendland findet es sich bloß in der Skepsis”). However, the affirmation of Cuttat that terms such as nihilism, pantheism, atheism, a-personalism, a-moralism are not present in Guardini to describe Buddhism seems to us exaggerated (cf. J.A. CUTTAT, “Buddhistische und christliche Innerlichkeit in Guardinis Schau,” cit., 456).

Final reflections

How was Buddha seen in the eyes of a Catholic theologian such as Guardini? Of course, he did not consider him an mere alternative to Christ. But the appreciation that he shows towards the Enlightened One is not to be taken for granted. Guardini understands Buddha’s analysis of the present human existence as fundamentally correct and pointing in the right direction, even if he arrived at other solutions. Buddha was indeed striving for truth and he obtained it to a bigger or lesser extent. There are many things that can be compared between Siddhartha Gautama and Christ as human beings and teachers of wisdom. Said in a Guardinian manner, Buddha can be called an actual bringer of salvation as many others, maybe even one of the most perfect ones. In contrast, Christ is not a “bringer” of any message of redemption, because he is God’s kingdom in person. While Buddha strived to transcend his own humanity, Christ can perhaps be said to have been even “all too human”.

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43 “Was die Gestalt Buddhas anging, so war Guardinis Fragestellung zu dieser Zeit einzig” (H.-B. GERL-FALKOVITZ, Romano Guardini, cit., 220); C.H. PARK, “Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen,” cit., 334 ("Guardini wagte wohl als Erster, das innere Antlitz dieser Gestalt unvoreingenommen in den Blick zu nehmen, um ihm unpolitisch das innere Antlitz Christi gegenüberstellen"). Of course, there is a slight difference between the figure of Buddha in Guardini’s major Christological-exetetical work The Lord and the late lectures on ethics, for example.

Both Christ and Buddha lived within a concrete culture and religion that they reformed in certain ways. They did not just transmit a knowledge about God they received, but they discovered in themselves new insights that they handed over to their followers, themselves becoming in this sense a norm for them. Unlike many saviors of humanity, Christ and Buddha were historical figures, just the Buddhist approach to history and culture is different from the Christian one. It not only transcends concrete culture and wants to put roots in every place and time, but it radically tries to free itself from and overcome history. In this sense for Guardini Buddha was certainly different from other religious thinkers and in many aspects correct. It should be not underestimated that Guardini – in treating the topic of Buddhism – was successful in avoiding both extremes of syncretism and of exclusivism, which were and still are quite common. Unfortunately, Guardini was not systematic in considering the person Buddha and we are left reading between the lines of his work.

In the end, it is clear that Guardini’s understanding of Buddhism is far from perfect; that was not even his purpose. He aptly uses the figure of Buddha to emphasize Christ’s uniqueness in a clearer way, without diminishing the historical importance of Siddhartha Gautama. The most important message of Guardini’s work on Buddhism is this: that Buddha shows what the natural human intuition is capable of in the field of existential quests. In this sense, Christ did not need to come in order to correct Buddha’s insights but rather he is able to complete them. Of concern here is not Christ’s superiority towards other religious personages, but rather his unique incomparableness throughout.
