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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 asceticism, 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 significant 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)¹. 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."² 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 Guardini³. The major influence in his own scholarship can be traced to the famous Berlin orientalist H. Oldenberg (1854-1920), whose book Guardini possessed⁴, as well as to the research of R. Otto (1869–1937), who was similarly interested in analogies between western and eastern religiosity⁵. Last but not least the influence of F. Heiler (1892-1967) is to be taken into consideration⁶.

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.

² H.-B. GERL-FALKOVITZ, *Romano Guardini. Konturen des Lebens und Spuren des Denkens*, Verlagsgemeinschaft topos plus: Kevelaer 2010, 201; H. ZENZ, "Romano Guardini im Internet – Primärliteratur." <http://www.helmut-zenz.de/hzguard2.htm> [accessed 1.9. 2017].

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.

⁴ H. OLDENBERG, *Buddha. Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde*, Stuttgart – Berlin 1921.

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 Park⁷. Another bibliography is the contribution of J.A. Cuttat⁸. 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, criticizes⁹. 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.

⁷ C.H. PARK, "Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen." *Romano Guardinis Verständnis der Person und seine Auseinandersetzung mit dem Buddhismus*, Karl Alber Verlag: Freiburg 2013. This author however does not compare Buddha with Christ *per se*, but rather contrasts Buddha's and Guardini's way of reasoning, finding between them four common points (cf. pp. 306-331). "[Man darf] annehmen, dass Guardini eine gewisse denkerische Affinität zum Buddha fühlte, oder zumindest bei der Lehre des Buddha einen einleuchtende Impuls fand (p. 330). Guardinis Interesse am Buddha war nicht theoretisch-dogmatischer, sondern *praktisch-ethischer* Natur (338)."

⁸ J.A. CUTTAT, "Buddhistische und christliche Innerlichkeit in Guardinis Schau," in: H. KUHN – H. KAHLEFELD – K. FORSTER, ed., *Interpretation der Welt. Festschrift für Romano Guardini zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, Echter: Würzburg 1965, 445–471. He affirms that Guardini's attempts were original and pioneering, valid as an example. ("Daß er es als Erster gewagt hat, das innere Antlitz des 'Geheimnisvollen' [=des Buddha] unvoreingenommen, ja 'mit tiefer Ehrfurcht' in den Blick zu nehmen, um ihm dann unbeirrt, unpolemisch, 'gewaltlos' das innere *Antlitz* Christi gegenüberzustellen, und zwar derart, daß im Maße des 'Vergleichens' die Unvergleichlichkeit Jesu aufblitzt und so Seine Göttlichkeit dem Vergleichenden neu einleuchtet, das ist das eigentliche Neue seiner christlichen Wertantwort auf Sakhyam[m]uni, und darin bleibt er vorbildlich," p. 451).

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 Opferbarung und die Endlichkeit," in: *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 world¹⁰.

¹⁰ R. GUARDINI, *The Lord*, Henry Regnery: Chicago 1954, 305 ("Einen Einzigen gibt es, der den Gedanken eingeben könnte, ihn in die Nähe Jesu zu rücken: Buddha. Dieser Mann bildet ein großes Geheimnis. Er steht in einer erschreckenden, fast übermenschlichen Freiheit; zugleich hat er dabei eine Güte, mächtig wie eine Weltkraft. Vielleicht wird Buddha der Letzte sein, mit dem das Christentum sich auseinanderzusetzen hat. Was er christlich bedeutet, hat noch keiner gesagt. Vielleicht hat Christus nicht nur einen Vorläufer aus dem Alten Testament gehabt, Johannes, den letzten Propheten, sondern auch einen aus dem Herzen der antiken Kultur, Sokrates, und einen dritten, der das letzte Wort östlich-religiöser Erkenntnis und Überwindung gesprochen hat, Buddha. Er ist frei; seine Freiheit aber nicht die Christi. Vielleicht bedeutet sie nur eine letzte, furchtbar-ablösende Erkenntnis der Nichtigkeit der gefallenen Welt;" *Der Herr*, 367). Other important Guardinian texts on Buddha and Buddhism are the following: *Der Herr*, 200-201; 434-436, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 17-19, 104-105; *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, I, 167-169; *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, III, 180-181; *Welt und Person*, 86; *Religion und Offenbarung*, 121-122; *Johanneische Botschaft*, 10-11.

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 work¹¹. 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, refusing to cling to concrete values¹². Buddhism is

¹¹ 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.

¹² "Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur," in: *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, I, 203 ("'Christliche Kultur' im Sinne wie 'buddhistische Kultur' gibt es nicht.

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.¹³]

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.

Christliche Theologie ist etwas qualitativ anderes, als die wissenschaftliche Behandlung der buddhistischen Lehre durch einen Buddhagläubigen..."). For Guardini, the Christian worldview was not only one among the other worldviews but meant something special. Guardini meant for the Christian *Weltanschauung* to be a participation in the view of Christ himself. Nevertheless, Guardini considered Buddhism "one of the most profound worldviews that humanity ever developed" (*Die Existenz des Christen*, 204).

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 itself¹⁴. 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 acting¹⁵, 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*¹⁶. Therefore,

¹⁴ Cf. *Welt und Person*, 148.

¹⁵ Cf. *Die Offenbarung – Ihr Wesen und ihre Formen*, 104-105 (“Oder der Verkünder religiöser Botschaft. Hier wäre zuerst über den Religionsstifter zu sprechen; vor allem über die reinste und größte Gestalt unter ihnen, Buddha. Es soll aber gleich gefragt werden, wie sich der Bringer echter Offenbarung zum Hörenden stellt. Nachdem der Prophet die Wahrheit empfangen hat, sagt er: ‘Das habe ich gesehen... das habe ich gehört... also spricht der Herr’. Er selbst ist nur der Bote, der die Offenbarung vermittelt. [...] Jesus würde nie so sprechen. Er steht im Glaubensverhältnis ganz anders. Nicht nur so, daß er größere religiöse Autorität als Isaias oder stärkere Macht des Wortes und des erweisenden Geistes als Paulus hätte. Jesu Sendungsbewußtsein und Machtgefühl waren allerdings ungeheuer...”).

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 avoidable¹⁷. On the other hand, Buddha's death was a natural

sollen... [...] Nicht die Person des Buddha, sondern die von ihm erkannte Lehre ist entscheidend" (C.H. PARK, *"Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen,"* cit., 336-337).

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 accomplished¹⁸. 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.

¹⁸ Cf. *Die Existenz des Christen*, 295-297 ("Zweihundert Jahre vor ihm [=Sokrates] lebt im nördlichen Indien Buddha. Er ist König und genießt zuerst mit allen Kräften einer reichen Natur die Möglichkeiten des Lebens, erkennt aber in erschütternden Begegnungen dessen Vergänglichkeit und geht in die Heimlosigkeit des Asketendaseins. In härtester Zucht durchschaut er die Irrtümer auch der bis dahin üblichen asketischen Bemühungen ebenso wie die der üppig wuchernden Metaphysiken seiner Zeit und dringt in einer letzten Erleuchtung zur Freiheit durch. Er lehrt den gefundenen Weg, um schließlich in dem von ihm bestimmten Augenblick, umgeben von der Schar seiner Jünger, durch einen Akt souveränen Willens das Leben aus sich zu entlassen. So könnte man noch manche Figuren groß gelebten Daseins nennen. Mit keiner von ihnen hat das Leben Jesu etwas gemein"); cf. *Der Herr*, 200 ("Wie steht es denn etwa mit Buddha? Er kämpft sich durch, wird erkannt, als Meister angenommen, und wie er stirbt, steht ein Kreis von Jüngern und Freunden, zum Teil Männer von höchstem menschlichem und religiösem Range verehrend um ihn. Er selbst aber empfindet seinen Tod als die Vollendung seines langen Wirkens ... Oder Sokrates: er hat sein Philosophenleben zu Ende gebracht. Mit ganzer Seele ergebene Schüler – zu ihnen gehört Platon! – haben seinen Geist in sich aufgenommen. Sokrates stirbt im hohen Alter, und im Grunde nicht, weil seine Feinde es wollen, denn es würde ihn nicht einmal ein Nachgeben kosten, um freizukommen. Er stirbt, weil er sein philosophisches Leben mit dem Tod des Philosophen vollenden will ... Wie anders Jesus!").

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.

¹⁹ *The Lord*, cit., 358 ("Wie steht es mit Buddha? Lassen wir auf sich beruhen, wo er zu Gott führt, und wo von Ihm fort. Nehmen wir ihn nur in der Form und im Anspruch seines Meistertums, so werden wir sein Wesen wohl am besten mit dem Namen ausdrücken, den er selbst in Anspruch genommen hat: 'der Erwachte'. Er ist überzeugt, das Gesetz des Truges erkannt zu haben, das überall waltet, das aber nur der ganz Seltene erkennen konnte. Dieses Gesetz liegt nun Allen offen. Daß es dazu kam, ist Buddhas Werk. Er hat es bis zum Ende durchgeführt und ebendarin sich selbst vollendet. Wie er stirbt, stehen um ihn, zum Teil bereits mit tiefster Einsicht ihm nahe, seine Jünger. Noch einmal durchläuft er in letzter Anstrengung alle Stufen der Meditation; wird der ganzen Macht inne, die er über das Dasein hat, und in dem Augenblicke, den er für recht erkannt, läßt er die Bindungen los, die ihn an das Dasein knüpfen: 'Nichts mehr ist'. Die Jünger aber haben das Bewußtsein, daß sich ein ungeheures Mysterium vollendet hat;" *Der Herr*, 434).

Guardini further considers their legacies. Buddha did indeed open a new way for those who follow him²⁰, 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

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).

succeeded in comprehending and evaluating Buddha's conception of Nirvana, that ultimate awakening, cessation of illusion and being. [...] One thing is certain: Jesus' attitude towards the world is basically different from that of Buddha: Christ is the Establisher of absolute beginning²¹.

For Guardini, redemption does not mean escaping from sin, evil and corruption only, nor a negation of them in a return to happy origins, but the reparation of a defect in a sense of new creation, the final realization of the not-yet-achieved original plan of God. Analogically, the evil seen through Christ's eyes is not necessary and therefore not to be escaped or suppressed, but rather overcome and filled with meaning. Christ's death was neither necessary, nor wanted as such – because he already did or told everything he wanted – but offered as a voluntary defeat and as a sacrifice, which rather scandalized than encouraged people at first.

²¹ *The Lord*, cit., 305-306 ("Was kann der Mensch im Anderen wirken? Sein böses Wollen kann zerstören. Seine Angst kann vergiften. Sein Begehren kann vergewaltigen und unterjochen. Sein Herz kann lösen, helfen, Leben wecken. Sein Geist kann aufbauen, Gemeinschaft und Werk hervorbringen. Seine höchsten Gaben können Dinge schaffen, in denen Gültig-Herrliches aufleuchtet. Das alles ist wahr, und es wäre töricht, irgend etwas daran zu unterschätzen. Dennoch – was der Mensch wirken kann, sind nur Wirkungen innerhalb der Welt. Er kann gegebene Möglichkeiten entwickeln; Zustände des Seienden ändern und gestalten – an die Welt als Ganzes rührt er nicht, denn er steht in ihr. Über das Sein als solches und dessen Charakter hat er keine Macht. Ein Gleichnis dafür ist, wie er sich auf der Erde befindet: er kann Unzähliges auf ihr tun; sie selbst bleibt ihm entzogen. Ein Einziger hat ernsthaft versucht, Hand ans Sein selbst zu legen: Buddha. Er hat mehr gewollt, als nur besser zu werden, oder, von der Welt ausgehend, den Frieden zu finden. Er hat das Unfaßliche unternommen, im Dasein stehend das Dasein als solches aus den Angeln zu heben. Was er mit dem Nirvana gemeint hat, mit dem letzten Erwachen, mit dem Aufhören des Wahns und des Seins, hat christlich wohl noch keiner verstanden und beurteilt. [Der das wollte, müßte in der Liebe Christi vollkommen frei geworden, aber zugleich jenem Geheimnisvollen im sechsten Jahrhundert vor der Geburt des Herrn mit tiefer Ehrfurcht verbunden sein.] Eines aber ist sicher: Christus steht der Welt ganz anders gegenüber als Buddha: Er setzt einen schlechthinnigen Anfang;" *Der Herr*, 368-369).

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"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 others²³.

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.

²³ Cf. C.H. PARK, "Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen," cit., 334 fn. 149.

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 actuality²⁴.

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,

²⁴ *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 17-19 ("Vielleicht gibt es keine religiöse Gestalt, die mit einem so ungeheuren und zugleich so ruhig sich durchsetzenden Anspruch aufgetreten ist wie Buddha. Er wird als 'der Erhabene, der Vollendete, der vollkommen Erleuchtete, reich an Wissen, wegeskundig, der Pfadvollender, Welterkenner, der unvergleichliche Menschenerzieher, der Lehrer von Göttern und Menschen' gerühmt. [...] Seine Autorität gilt unbedingt. Alle Wesen, Menschen nicht nur, sondern auch Geister und Götter erwarten ihr Heil durch ihn. [...] Wie steht nun Buddha selbst in dieser Heilsordnung? Seine Leistung ist ungeheuer. Er erkennt, was allen Wesen, sogar dem Brahma, verborgen ist. [...] Buddha ist 'erleuchtet', 'erwacht'. Er hat die Befangenheit des Wahnes überwunden. Er hat das Gesetz des Daseins, vom 'Leiden, von der Entstehung des Leidens, von der Auflösung des Leidens und von dem zur Leidensauflösung führenden achtteiligen Pfad' erkannt. Er hat ausgesprochen, was wohl durch Schein und Blindheit verhüllt, aber doch objektiv da und gültig war. Ohne ihn würde im laufenden Weltalter kein anderer zur Erkenntnis des Seinsgesetzes und des Erlösungsweges kommen; aber nur deshalb, weil keiner der Menschen, wie sie während dieser Zeit sind, die Kraft dazu hätte, hat doch Buddha selbst in vorausgehenden Wiedergeburten diese Kraft auch nicht gehabt. Die Menschen bedürfen also seiner als des Führers; aber nur tatsächlich, weil sie nun einmal gerade sind, wie sie sind, nicht grundsätzlich. Grundsätzlich vermöchte jeder den gleichen Weg zu gehen, wenn er sich zur vollkommenen Reinheit durchränge. Das Ziel, dem Buddha zustrebt, bildet das Erlöschen, das 'Nichts mehr ist'. Nachher ist er wirklich nicht mehr. Nur noch die Erinnerung an ihn bleibt, und im übrigen besteht 'die Lehre und die Gemeinde'. Von der Lehre aber wird immer wieder gesagt, daß sie aus eigener Kraft befolgt wird. [...] Die religiöse Bedeutung Buddhas hat also äußerstes Maß; im letzten sagt er aber doch nur, was grundsätzlich jeder sagen könnte. Er weist den Weg, der auch ohne ihn, mit der Geltung eines Weltgesetzes, besteht. Die Person des Buddha selbst steht im Religiös-Eigentlichen nicht"); translation by the author.

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 "asceticism," 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 "avatāra" 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 incarnation²⁶. 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

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”); *Johanneische 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...²⁷

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 unfäßlichen 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 könnten 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 souveränem 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 menschengewordene 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 Menschendaseins;" *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

²⁸ Cf. C.B. JONES, "Emptiness, Kenosis, History, and Dialogue: The Christian Response to Masao Abe's Notion of 'Dynamic Sunyata'; in the Early Years of the Abe-Cobb Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," in: *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24 (1/2004), 117–133, online [accessed 15.1.2017]; J. HEISIG, "Sunyata and kenosis," https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/en/files/2012/12/JWH-Sunyata_and_Kenosis.pdf [accessed 28.1.2018].

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 condescendence 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 everything²⁹.

²⁹ "Endlich noch eine rein religiöse Gestalt, die größte von allen und die einzige, die neben Christus in irgendeinem Sinne ernsthaft genannt werden kann: Buddha. Er ist eigentümlich unpersönlich. Sein Wesen hat weniger den Charakter schöpferischen, sich aus sich selbst entfaltenden Reichtums, als den unerbittlicher Folgerichtigkeit. Fast möchte man sagen, den des Gesetzes, aufgenommen in einen unbeugsamen, dem Sinn der Welt dienenden Willen. Sein Dasein macht den Eindruck, als ob in ihm die Welt zur Klarheit gelange. Aber nicht im bejahenden Sinne, so, daß ihre schöne Fülle sich mikrokosmisch in einem Menschenleben offenbarte, sondern in der Form einer Enthüllung, ja Entlarvung. In ihm wird deutlich, daß die Welt Schein, Schuld und Leid ist. Ihr innerstes Gesetz wird entdeckt, um sie zu bezwingen, ja aufzuheben. [...] Endlich geht ihm die Erkenntnis auf, daß alles Dasein nur Schein ist, der aus dem Lebenswillen entspringt, und findet den Weg, durch dessen Überwindung das Dasein selbst aufzuheben. Diese Erkenntnis kommt nicht aus einer Begegnung, auch nicht als Gnade von oben, sondern als letzte Konsequenz daraus, daß er ist, wie er ist und vollbracht hat, was er vollbracht hat, wobei sein jetziges Leben selbst das Ergebnis unzähliger vorausgehender Inkarnationen darstellt. Buddha vollzieht das Erkannte; sammelt Jünger um sich und unterrichtet sie so, daß sie fähig werden, ihrerseits die Lehre weiterzugeben; ordnet das Leben der Gemeinschaft; und nachdem er Zeit gehabt hat, alles Erforderliche zu regeln, stirbt er schließlich hochbetagt im Kreise der Seinen, so daß sein Tod die reine Vollendung seines Lebens und, in gewissem Sinn, das Ende von allem überhaupt bildet" ("Die Daseinsgestalt Jesu," in: *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, III, 180-181; translation by the author). Almost the same text appears – as usual in Guardini – in *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 104-105.

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 gain³⁰. 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 pity³¹. 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 *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 asceticism 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. Asceticism from the Christian point of view does not despise the Self, but wants to

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).

³¹ Let us limit ourselves here to quoting one passage from De Lubac'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 it³². 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 asceticism 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 *Ethics* he assesses the Buddhist notion of asceticism:

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 indissoluble relation between the

³² Cf. *Ethik*, 400, 1016-1017, 1131-1132; "Askese als Element der menschlichen Existenz," in: *Wurzeln eines großen Lebenswerks*, IV, 268-269. Guardini distinguishes and criticized other sorts of asceticism too, as for example the dualistic-gnostic one, which condemns everything material as radically evil.

calling one and the called one³³.

Ascesis does not need to negate all materiality and creaturehood, but what Guardini admired in Buddhist spiritual practices was its serenity and quest for concentration³⁴. 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

³³ *Ethik*, 1017, 1032 ("Sein [=Buddhas] Grundprinzip scheint in der Überzeugung zu bestehen, der Mensch könne das Dasein, sein eigenes Dasein aufheben, indem er den Lebenswillen zum Erlöschen bringt. Diesem Ziel dient zuerst eine radikale Entsagung; dann aber die Erkenntnis, daß das Leben nur gedeiht, wenn es nicht zugleich gewußt wird. Im Gewußtwerden stirbt das Leben. So wird eine Technik der Bewußtmachung entwickelt, die immer tiefer greift, bis schließlich die Erfahrung einsetzt, von welcher alle Buddhareden sprechen: 'Nicht[s] mehr ist'. [...] Das bedeutet eine radikale Absage an alles, was Geschichte heißt. Davon hebt sich schon als unmittelbares Phänomen scharf das ab, was in der biblischen Offenbarung geschieht. Scharf und machtvoll tritt die Souveränität Gottes hervor, welcher der Welt nicht bedarf. Er hat sie geschaffen, weil Er so wollte und ist ihr Herr. Er hat auch den Menschen geschaffen, und ihn als Freien in die Welt gestellt. Der Gott-Herr ruft den Menschen an und begründet dadurch eine Beziehung des Menschen zu Ihm selbst. Der Anruf ist Auftrag, und aus diesem entsteht eine Geschichte, deren Wesenskern in dem unauslöschlichen Bezug zwischen Anrufendem und Angerufenem besteht;" translation by the author).

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 person³⁵. Therefore, the goal of asceticism is not so much to get rid of something as to direct oneself towards God in whom the Self will solely find perfection.

Asceticism 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 us³⁶. However much both religions might agree about the comprehensive reality of “losing oneself” and the need of *Selbstlosigkeit* 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

³⁵ “Die christliche Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen ist der gnadengeschenkte Mitvollzug des Blickes Gottes auf ihn” (*Welt und Person*, 59).

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 reborn 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 wants³⁷. 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 herself³⁸. 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 place³⁹. 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 Buddhaseins*” through meditation, while Guardini’s preferred term is the “*Mitvollzug*” of Christ’s existence by the believer.

³⁹ Cf. *Welt und Person*, 55-56.

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 not⁴⁰. 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 *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

⁴⁰ Cf. "Gedanken über das Verhältnis von Christentum und Kultur," in: *Unterscheidung*, I, 168-169 ("Alles Sein bedeutet, objektiv gesehen, Schein; subjektiv, Wahn. Heil, Erlösung bedeutet Auflösung des Wahns; Erwachen dazu, daß nichts ist. Dieses Erwachen zur Erkenntnis, daß alles nichts ist: auch der Erwachende selbst, auch die Götter, auch das Eine, bedeutet einen realen inneren Vorgang von höchster Kraft. Es fällt uns schwer, ihn zu verstehen. Wir müssen ihn aber ganz ernst nehmen; als etwas, was es gibt. Darin nun, wie er dieses 'Nichts', das Nirwana, gefaßt hat, scheint die ungeheure Tat Buddhas zu liegen. *Es war nicht bloß ein Negativum. Das könnte nicht so wirken. [...] trotzdem kann jenes Erlöschen, das Eingehen ins Nirwana kein bloßes Negativum sein. Es ist ein bezogenes Negativum.* Das Wesen des Nirwana-Begriffes scheint darin zu bestehen, daß er das alte, positive Atman enthält, jedoch in negativer Form. Der Wert aber dieser negativen Form läge in ihrer erzieherischen Bedeutung," italics added); *Religion und Offenbarung*, 122 ("Eine genauere Betrachtung läßt freilich erkennen, daß dieses totale Nichts in Wahrheit keine Null ist, vielmehr Inbegriff des Sinnes, der aber durch Eine nichts ausnehmende Verneinung ausgedrückt wird. Ein Erfahrungs- und Willensinhalt, der dem Abendländer mit seinem intensiven Gefühl für die Wirklichkeit der Welt, die Sinndichte des Geschichtlichen und den entscheidenden Charakter der Person kaum zugänglich sein dürfte").

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 gods⁴¹. 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 God⁴². 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.

⁴¹ For the possibility of other interpretation by Guardini himself, cf. *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 eigentlichen 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).

⁴² Cf. “Der Glaube an die Gnade und das Bewusstsein der Schuld,” in: *Unterscheidung des Christlichen*, II, 116; *Der Herr*, 314, 648; *Die letzten Dinge*, 20.

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 granted⁴³. 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"⁴⁴.

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-exegetical work *The Lord* and the late lectures on ethics, for example.

⁴⁴ "Let us stress once more, however, that in all this there is no trace of the imperturbability of the Stoic or the renunciation of a Buddha. Jesus is fully alive, fully sentient, fully human" (*The humanity of Christ. Contributions to a Psychology of Jesus*, Random House: New York, 1964, quoted according to an online text available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CHRIST/HUMAN.TXT> [accessed 2.2.2018]). Cf. J.A. CUTTAT, "Buddhistische und christliche Innerlichkeit in Guardinis Schau," cit., 458 ("Gemessen an jüdischen, griechischen, asiatischen Maßstäben erschien er [=Jesus] nicht als der Frömmste, Weiseste, Asketischste. Er war menschlich, hat auf dem Höhepunkt seines Wirkens geweint, gezittert, um Hilfe gefleht; ein Mensch wie ein anderer..."), while on the other hand "aus dem Buddhabild spricht weder eine Gottheit noch ein Mensch, sondern ein sakraler Übermensch" (p. 455).

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 common⁴⁵. 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.

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⁴⁵ Cf. J.A. CUTTAT, "Buddhistische und christliche Innerlichkeit in Guardinis Schau," cit., 470.