

Mission Narratives That Prevent Buddhists from Finding Christ within Their Oikos

by Jens Bernhard

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Why Tackle Mission Narratives?

The purpose of this brief paper is to illuminate the counterproductive impact of some mission narratives among Buddhists. I want to address how they function, how they prevent the good news from being understood, and to make some suggestions about how they might be changed. Specifically, I want to show how these narratives are diametrically opposed to the early church's concept of *oikos* (household, family). *Oikos* starts with the extended family in mind, yet so often today the gospel is presented as a decision an individual has to make between Christianity and their extended family and community. To be regarded as a follower of Christ, a Buddhist has to join the religion of Christianity. She does so against her family, her community, her *oikos*, and quite contrary to numerous examples in the New Testament.¹ So, I want to take a very complicated topic and reduce it to a simple set of axioms so that we can see just how our narratives are opposed to the Buddhist *oikos*.

My assumption is that new missionaries and people interested in mission base most of their actions on a few underlying narratives. It is these narratives that determine their strategy, the people they work with, and how they filter missiological papers. Very often the underlying power of those narratives does not get much attention, while their correctness and usefulness is widely assumed, and almost never questioned. Some of these narratives are, without a doubt, wonderful ("show God's love wherever you can"); others *seem* to be useful and doctrinally correct, but a deeper analysis would show that they are very dysfunctional. In fact, they prevent outright a Buddhist from considering Christ as an option.

This is not to say that those in mission work don't try to tackle these embedded narratives. After the first few years on the mission field, many in mission work will critically reflect on their work and try hard to improve. They go to conferences and learn what they can—some even making time to read

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missiological papers and books. Yet often there is this nagging sense that a lot of missiological research is not very applicable to a specific situation; and, even if it is, it does not spell out specific action steps that might be considered useful. While missiological research can be tremendously helpful, most often the real action is influenced by underlying mission narratives. It's usually because these narratives are straightforward, logical, perceived as doctrinally correct, and perpetuated by the vast majority of mission-interested evangelicals.

Some Important Narratives and How They Form a Cohesive Unit

It is not possible to tackle all of the narratives that may have built the foundational worldview of an evangelical missionary, so I have selected a few that have had a negative impact on bringing Buddhists to Christ, and that have disregarded the fundamental place of oikos in the Buddhist world.

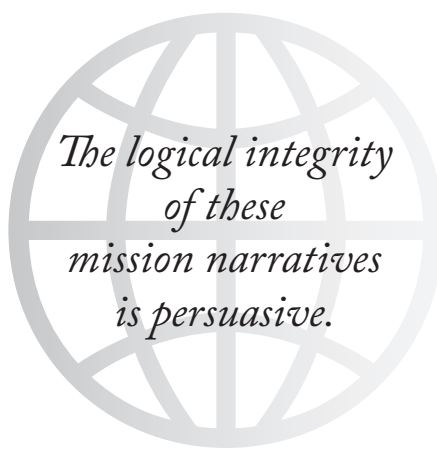
1. "Buddhism is a false religion (because it is incoherent, God-opposing and life-denying²) and therefore..."
2. "Buddhists must become 'Christians' and join a Christian church if they truly want to follow Christ."
3. "It is always better to work together with local Christians; they know the culture and the language better than any outsider can hope to learn in a reasonable amount of time" and therefore...
4. "Because local believers don't bother to learn Buddhist beliefs, and because some individual Buddhists do come to Christ anyway, it is a waste of time to study Buddhism or what Buddhists really believe."

While studying Buddhism may remain quite an anathema, missionaries increasingly want to avoid presenting an overly Western gospel, so new and more sensitive narratives are starting to gain some traction:

5. "Just communicate the gospel in love. God's word will make sense in and of itself" and therefore...
6. "Just give them the Bible in their language, or at least the New Testament. The church will explain it and the Holy Spirit will bring it to life."
7. "Let's contextualize to their local culture, as Jesus is not against their culture per se. If we do not reject their culture, we can demonstrate that it is possible to be Thai (or Burmese or...) and also Christian."

The logical integrity of these narratives is persuasive. That logic is embedded in a thought-style that goes like this:

If there were any truth in Buddhism, Buddhists would be at least interested



in Christ as the truth³ that would guide them in the right direction. But Buddhist doctrines seem to oppose biblical truth at every turn, and because it is fruitless to point that out to Buddhists, the best thing is to erase any talk about Buddhist traditions and concentrate on the love and power of Christ. If even local Christians do not deem it necessary to engage with Buddhists about their beliefs, outsiders should not appear overly smart by trying to know more about Buddhism than the Buddhists themselves. If knowing Buddhism had been helpful, evangelical scholars would have found that out over the last 150 years as they ventured into the Buddhist scriptures, the Tipitaka, in the classical Buddhist language of Pali.⁴ It might be that it is possible for

Muslims to follow Christ and maintain a Muslim identity (because they at least are still in the Abrahamic tradition); or it might even be possible for Hindus to choose Yeshu as their only God; but it is not possible for Buddhists, because Buddha rejected the notion of one supreme Godhead. Hence, Buddhists cannot remain within their Buddhist world if they want to follow Christ.

The task of outsiders is, therefore, perceived as helping the local Christians in their efforts. The narrative continues:

If the scriptures were to be available in local languages and if pastors were to be able to explain them properly so that Buddhists could understand what Christianity is all about, they would believe in Jesus and join the church. As long as the church is not Western, but rather Thai or Burmese, etc., all will be fine. Contextualization can be really helpful.

What's Wrong with These Narratives?

These narratives are internally cohesive, widely accepted, and unfortunately, do not result in much fruit. And where there is any fruit, it is more often an assault on the oikos (household), with individual converts extracted and grafted into a foreign religious world. Yet, this reality simply reinforces the correctness of this narrative in the minds of Christians. Buddhists must be so blinded that they cannot really see the truth nor the goodness of God being made visible in the form of the church. This myth simply perpetuates itself.

The problem, as I see it, is that these narratives do not have their roots in the Bible (but in tradition) and prevent Buddhists from considering Christ within their oikos. This raises a couple of questions.

First, is God not able to reveal truth to non-Christians? It's apparent that he was able to communicate certain truths to the Stoics.⁵ Their turning to Christ is remarkable, especially in comparison to the Jews, the majority

of whom did not recognize Christ as the Messiah even though they had had more specific revelation from God than any other people group on earth. And it's interesting to note in the biblical account just how often the apostle Paul communicated the good news of Christ on the basis of some Stoic beliefs.⁶ He basically uses certain Stoic beliefs because those beliefs are true and he builds on that truth. All truth comes from God and God reveals his truth to whomever, and however, he wants to. So, if Paul was able to find and communicate truths within Stoic philosophy, why would we not look within Buddhist traditions? If truth comes ultimately from God, why are we open to God speaking in a familiar way to Stoics but not to Buddhists?⁷ By rejecting Buddhism categorically as a false religion, are we either accidentally or willfully rejecting those parts of Buddhist traditions or worldview that might just be God's work of preparation for the good news of Christ? Is it the role of missionaries to unilaterally disregard this work of God?

Secondly, must Buddhists become Christians? Do they have to join the existing Christian community or do they simply have to follow Christ? If the goal is to make them Christian, then the Christian tradition has become more important than Christ himself. Is Christ not bigger than human traditions? Is it the task of missionaries to propagate the Christian religion over Christ? If Christ is not the obstacle for a Buddhist, then whatever the obstacle actually is, shouldn't that obstacle be removed? Otherwise, Christians and missionaries are not being faithful to Christ. Might not the real obstacle be that we are presenting Christ in such a way that if a Buddhist wants to follow Christ he can only imagine doing so if he were to convert to a foreign religion—Christianity?

What we see nowadays is that local believers in a Buddhist context do not

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want to engage with Buddhists about their Buddhist beliefs, partly because they don't know much about Buddhist beliefs; but, it's also partly because of the example missionaries have presented them. Buddhist converts were extracted from their own oikos and enculturated into Christianity and now they simply follow the example given them by missionaries. And where missionaries, like Daniel Gogerly in Sri Lanka, did engage with Buddhists and their tradition, they did so in a more polemic, colonialist style, and only with the intention of showing them how wrong they were to believe what Buddha had taught them.⁸

We can see this in Daniel John Gogerly's work from 1885:

We are therefore compelled to assert that Buddhism is not the true religion: for he who was mistaken in three instances may have been mistaken in three hundred... and it necessarily follows that Buddhism is not the true religion and ought to be rejected.⁹

Even nowadays, the same line of thinking is common among evangelicals. In *The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus talks with Buddha*, Ravi Zacharias states in his introduction in 2010:

Jesus and Buddha cannot both be right. The lotus is the symbol of Buddhism; the cross, the symbol of the Christian faith. Behind the two symbols stand two diametrically opposed beliefs.¹⁰

It's possible that this approach created so much hurt and pushback that generations of missionaries "threw out the baby with the bathwater." They no longer engage with Buddhists at all. By this lack of engagement, they affirm the dogma, "Buddhism is not the true religion." How was creating religious antagonism beneficial? Again, the apostle Paul, in Athens on Mars Hill speaking of an unknown God, in a

society far more idolatrous than Buddhist societies, sought out what God had prepared in their own literature, poetry, and religious belief system.¹¹ Yet, today's missionaries too often think that practicing the opposite is advantageous for mission among Buddhists.

Terms of Translation

With respect to local Christians, do they really know better how to engage with Buddhists or are they struggling at least as much as the ignorant outsider? If Gogerly learned Pali in order to refute Buddhists, why don't local or outside believers learn Pali in order to search more positively for God's points of revelation within the Tipitaka?¹²

This lack of engagement is reflected in Bible translation. The underlying evangelical narrative of translation is based, first of all, on dispensing with all Buddhist words and concepts.¹³ The narrative encourages the invention and use of new terms and concepts that are so patently wrong that they are immediately unbiblical. A shallow, misguided understanding of Buddhism, embedded in the narrative, leads to distorted meanings.

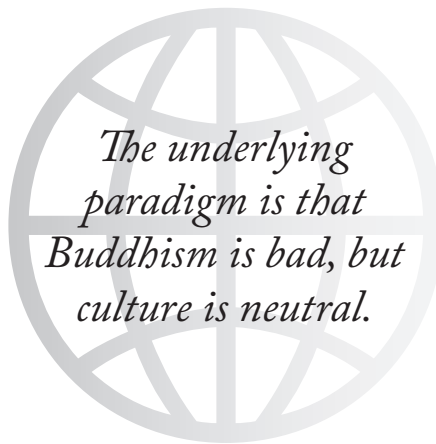
One example would be the correspondence of the concept of a "karmic heaven" with that of the kingdom of God, the implication being that God is conditioned by karma. Suffice it to say, if God were karmic, he would be (at the very least) under the condition of "dissatisfactoriness" (*dukkha*) and subject to death in the Buddhist mind. Because such an idea does not portray the God of the Bible, it would be recommended to stay as far away as possible from terms that suggest that God could be karmic—even if it is only to give Buddhists a more accurate picture of the biblical idea of God.

If Buddhists, who do not know Christ already, reject this faulty translation of a karmic god, how more likely would they embrace the truth of Christ if it finally were to be communicated properly? Right now, the Buddhist understanding of God is closer to Satan than it is biblical.¹⁴ Cleaning up some fundamental misunderstanding should not be an impossible task, but with the underlying narrative being “Buddhism is a false religion,” hardly anyone seems to be bothered to do so. The distorted understanding Buddhists get when reading something like John 3:16 (Thai translation), which casts God in the most unfavorable (and unbiblical!) light possible, should expose the dysfunction of this overarching narrative.¹⁵ Practically speaking, how then can the Bible speak for itself? This may sound extreme, but I am not aware of even a single New Testament translation into a heart language that leaves the Buddhists who read it on their own with a correct understanding of this pivotal evangelical proposition. Why then would self-theologizing even work? And if Buddhist-context self-theologizing has been rendered impossible by incorrect Bible translations, it consequently becomes impossible to avoid Western involvement and to cast off the shadows of a dominant colonial past.

All this leaves new missionaries in the quicksand of misunderstanding. Since they are unfamiliar with the depth of Buddhist philosophy, they reduce the good news to “God is love” and “Jesus loves you.” Therefore, their narrative becomes “I simply have to love my Buddhist neighbor and he will find Christ and experience the love of the Christian community.” Their expectation is that new believers will start to follow Christ and become Christians. Yet, even this love-approach is still based on the idea that, in the end, the Christian religion is superior and Christ can only be found within Christianity. Buddhists want to find Christ, but not the Christ that can

only be embraced when the Christian religion is embraced first, but the Christ whom they experience, starting with a Buddhist perspective. This Christ is biblical, but not Christian; he is biblical and Buddhist.¹⁶

Again, Christianity and the love of Christ-followers is perceived as polarized against the natural oikos (household) of the Buddhist communities. How can Christians avoid Buddhists getting the idea that while Christians talk about love and act lovingly, it is all to deceive¹⁷ Buddhists and drive a wedge between them and their families and communities? Why not instead foster a narrative that values and strengthens their oikos? Can we not show some fundamental respect



for the way their religious civilization has helped to maintain the identity of the oikos?

Underlying Our Contextualization

One of the most recently developed mission narratives deserves some extended attention:

Let’s contextualize the church to their local culture, as Jesus is not against their culture per se. If we do not reject their culture, we can demonstrate that it is possible to be Thai (or Burmese or ...) and Christian.

This narrative seems at first to finally get rid of all colonialism and Western dominance. It does not need to ridicule

Buddhist traditions as it safely ignores anything religiously Buddhist. It tries to completely separate religion from culture. It proclaims that there is good culture and good traditions, especially if some elements are reinterpreted—like the use of incense symbolizing prayers to God. The idea is,

If you become a Christian, you can still act like your Buddhist family and friends (to a certain degree that is¹⁸) because we are not against your Thai or Burmese or ... culture. Jesus loves your culture. So, you can now worship Christ from within your culture. You can be a good Thai citizen and a Christian. Just be Thai in all your Christian expressions.

The intention behind this narrative is to directly refute the notion that being Thai means being Buddhist.¹⁹ The underlying paradigm is that Buddhism is bad, but culture is neutral. To its credit, the narrative does not impose Western culture any more, for Christianity can be adaptable; it can find expressions in any culture of the world (because culture is neutral). Although this perspective does not intend to establish Christianity as a religion at home within any culture and nation, it certainly appears to be the goal. The evangelical narrative contains the hope that everyone finds Christ as his or her savior, but it’s possible only by transplanting the Christian religious tradition. This ignores what Paul meant when he said, “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles, too” (Rom. 3:29). He was able to take the Jewish rabbi known as Jesus out of the Jewish religion and give him to everybody, regardless of his religion. No religion of Christianity appears within the first two hundred years after Christ; and, if Greeks, Romans, Stoics and others did not have to convert to another religion, why are Buddhists required to convert to another religion today?

On top of this, there is another apparent problem with this practice of contextualization: when Christians

take elements of Buddhist traditions and use them in their services, Buddhists regard this as theft. They see the exchange, the superficial correspondence. There is considerable anti-Christian sentiment among Buddhists when Catholics call their churches a *wat* (temple). Therefore, the idea cannot simply be to take Buddhist concepts like *nirvana*, *dukkha*, etc. and reinterpret them as Christian concepts, or take Buddhist ceremonies and label them Christian by using them with just slight adaptation. Yet, if followers of Christ cannot use Buddhist concepts, they are stuck with the problems mentioned above—a God stuck in a karmic heaven and a Jesus being under the power of karma, which presents anything but a savior in Buddhist eyes. But what if a Buddhist can freely use his Buddhist concepts, in the same way as Stoics used their Stoic concepts and started following Christ? That would require a change of narrative.

What Can Be Done Better?

Instead of extracting Buddhists from their oikos, it is time to demonstrate how Jesus can manifest himself within an existing oikos without any religious conversion (displacement). We are seeing today that Hindus and Muslims can follow Christ, each within their religious tradition, but Buddhists cannot? In the spirit of Paul, who insisted that no one had to become a Jew to follow Christ, the same Christ has to be extracted from a traditional Christian religion and be given freely to all people regardless of their religious, ethnic, community or national context.²⁰

Let's apply the "oikos litmus test" to our narratives: Are whole families following Christ? If not, then most likely individuals have been separated from their families and a foreign religious community has taken on the role of a substitute oikos. If Christ is not manifested within an already existing household, then we can legitimately suspect that people have been converted to the Christian religion first

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and foremost and not singularly to Christ. This could unfortunately signal that Christ is being misrepresented. Is Christ proclaimed or is Christianity proclaimed? If Buddhists are not allowed to follow Christ as Buddhists outside the Christian hegemony, Christianity can become the obstacle to the good news.

The narrative that will move us forward out of all these intertwined problems is one that encourages us to sit down and learn about Buddhist traditions, to dig deeply into Buddhist philosophy, and understand the underlying ideas with an open heart and mind. But the foundational axiom must be that God has revealed truth to Buddha somehow. On that truth, it is possible to build truth revealed by Christ. The temptation of comparing religions must be withstood as it leads to wrong results which are not helpful at all. No one would get away with a Jewish/Christian comparison that constantly juxtaposed the prophet Isaiah with Jesus in order to show that Isaiah is inferior to Jesus and therefore that Jews cannot follow Christ. Yet, that is precisely what is being done to Buddhists. Isaiah had tremendous revelation about Christ even though he did not have the full knowledge of God. Both Isaiah and Buddha²¹ lived hundreds of years before Christ, and, to be fair, no one living before Jesus could have known and understood that Jesus' death and resurrection would render death powerless.²² No narrative should be expected to compare Buddha to Christ. The question is one of preparation, not of comparison to prove superiority.²³

When a Buddhist who legitimately owns his Buddhist concepts applies them to the truth revealed through Christ, he will find many ways in

which the Buddha has prepared the way for Christ. But this will be the Christ of Buddhists, not of Christians.²⁴ The crucial question, of course, is whether Christ followers will see this as a legitimate way to engage with Buddhists. Or will they simply maintain a narrative that uses a Bible translated for Christians and leaves Buddhists to figure everything out for themselves? What are the chances that even the best learned Buddhist scholars can make sense of Christ when our best educated Christian scholars present Jesus as being under karma?

The Buddhist scholar who comes to mind and who has made significant progress in this regard is Buddhadasa Bhikku.²⁵ He had to read between the lines and navigate many Christian misinterpretations in order to retrieve some truth from the New Testament translations. But who worked constructively together with him? Hardly anyone. Even without help, his insights can be regarded as the most progressive understanding of biblical truth from a Buddhist perspective; but, in a few areas of interpretation he still fell short of capturing the essence of Christ. If thirty years ago Christ followers had understood both biblical truth and as much about the Buddhist *dhamma* as Bhikku himself, they could have dialogued with him and a lot of obstacles would have been removed from his path. This is simply to illustrate that Buddhists will not develop a full and accurate understanding of God and Christ if theological scholars shy away from engaging with Buddhist scholars.

Changing the Narrative

My critique of this common evangelical narrative among Buddhists indicates the absolute necessity of scholarly engagement from the outset. The

essence and complexity of topics for constructing a new bridge are far too complicated for non-scholars to grasp. Missionaries are eager to point out that the average Buddhist can't recall the Five Precepts or the Four Noble Truths—that Buddhist doctrines are completely irrelevant for a Christian witness that would save Buddhists. I would say they are correct if the goal behind their narrative is to convert Buddhists to Christianity; but if our narrative has the intention of portraying God and Christ faithfully and accurately to Buddhists, then we must engage with the conceptual world of the Buddhist. This alternate narrative will encourage us to find a way for high-identity Buddhists to remain in their oikos while embracing their new identity in Christ.

I believe that answers exist for the questions I have raised, yet these have not been discussed in academic publications. There is a constructive way forward, but first and foremost it requires we expose these counterproductive mission narratives. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ No one joined the Christian religion because there was no Christian religion at that time.

² Which it isn't. It is not helpful to misunderstand the essence of Buddhism in its various traditions and then attack the straw man in order to show the superiority of Christianity.

³ Christ is the truth = the *dhamma*. This is important, hence the wording. It's not the truth "of" Christ that hides them, which is why I avoided the word "that."

⁴ See R. F. Young and G. P. V. Soma-ratna, *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies in Nineteenth-Century Ceylon*, 83ff (Vienna: Institut für Indologie, 1996).

⁵ The Stoic worldview and philosophy was very influential in ancient Greece.

⁶ All of the following Bible verses are consistent with Stoic beliefs: 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12; Acts 17:24–29; Acts 17:24; Acts 17:25; Acts 17:26–28a; Acts 17:28b; Acts 17:29; Gal. 5:23b; 1 Cor. 9:24a; Rom. 7:22–23; Phil. 3:19; Rom. 8:5; 2 Cor 4:4; Phil. 1:21; 2 Tim. 4:6; 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Cor. 9:16; Acts 14:15; 2 Cor. 7:2;

Rom. 12:4; Eph. 1:22–23; 1 Cor. 12:14–17; 1 Cor. 12:25. See biblethingsinbibleways.wordpress.com, accessed July 14, 2017.

⁷ Paul builds on the Greeks' understanding of their philosophers while nowadays it is popular to ignore the philosophical writings of Buddha and Buddhists.

⁸ For further references, please see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia*, (EOS, Editions of Sankt Ottilien, 2017). This book gives an excellent overview on what happened in Asia among Buddhists.

⁹ Daniel John Gogerly, *The Kristiyani Prajnapt*, (1885), public domain reprint.

¹⁰ What one Buddhist scholar wrote about the book can be read here: http://unknowingmind.pbworks.com/f/Dissent_Lotus_and_Cross_Final.pdf.

¹¹ Acts 17:16–34.

¹² Accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.tipitaka.org>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tripitaka>.

¹³ Terms like *nibbana*, *metta*, *anatta*, *dukkha*, etc., are examples, and highlighted in the article by Chris Bauer, "The Fingerprints of God in Buddhism: Could a New Approach to the Way We Look at Buddhism be a Key to Breakthrough?" *Mission Frontiers* Nov/Dec (2014), <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-fingerprints-of-god-in-buddhism-article>.

¹⁴ Why that is and how this kind of understanding developed can easily be figured out once a few Pali terms are understood.

¹⁵ Accessed July 18, 2017, <https://projectthailand.net/2011/01/04/john-316-from-a-thai-buddhist-worldview-total-opposite/>.

¹⁶ What this specifically can look like depends on the context, but for a general idea, see Bauer, "The Fingerprints of God."

¹⁷ This is felt like a deception by Buddhists. See *Buddhist-Christian Relations in Asia*, ed. Schmidt-Leukel, Kenneth Flaming in his article "Buddhist-Christian Relations in Thailand An Overview" cited Sobhon Ganabhorn 1984, in *A Plot to Undermine Buddhism. Bangkok: Siva Phorn*, p. 12. The accusation was the Catholic Church is "distorting and subverting Buddhism" and claiming a "plot, in which Buddhist teachings have been distorted and according to the plan to absorb it into Catholicism."

¹⁸ To what degree is obviously determined by the Christians in charge.

¹⁹ This idea is not limited to Thais but is applicable to Sri Lankans, Laotians, Burmese, Shan, Khmer, Vietnamese etc.

²⁰ Rom. 3:29 "Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles, too? Yes, of the Gentiles, too." (NIV)

²¹ In the same way as Isaiah was preparatory for the Jews for Christ, so in the same way is Buddha preparatory for the Buddhists for Christ.

²² The prophets wrote about it, obviously, but neither was it common knowledge nor a common expectation and it was likely not even conceptualized by Jesus' contemporaries.

²³ The question of superiority is a tricky one. First, Buddhists feel that Buddha and Buddhism are as superior as Christians feel Christ and Christianity are superior. Second, what is at stake is a classification which, according to Perry Schmidt-Leukel, goes like this: "The religious claims of teaching a path of salvation are either all false (naturalism) or they are not all false. If they are not all false, then only one of them is true (exclusivism) or more than one is true. If more than one is true, then there is either one singular maximum of that truth (inclusivism) or there is no singular maximum, so that at least some are equally true" in *Religious Pluralism & Interreligious Theology*, p. 4 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017). While this seems completely water-tight, it is not because it assumes a comparability beyond time and (God-given) revelation. Taking this into account, it is possible to arrive at a statement that goes beyond Schmidt-Leukel's classification: Given the revelation God gave to Buddha, Buddha spoke into his context words of (God's) truth that framed the discussion (of the ultimate essence of atman) in a way that can be understood as preparatory for Christ. But this (biblical) truth of Christ is understood by a Buddhist in light of the truth God revealed to Buddha, not in light of the truth God revealed to the Jews.

²⁴ It is the same Christ. It is Christ who is the way to nirvana, he is the *dhamma*, the Noble Eightfold Path. It is for this freedom that Christ has set the Buddhist free. Free from karma, free from delusion, anger and greed. And obviously, this "Buddhist" Christ is also found in the scriptures of the NT. To find him, the NT has to be read with Buddhist eyes.

²⁵ Accessed July 18, 2017, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhadasa>.

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