

Should Western Buddhists be Christians?

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This is a paper written in 2008, but may still be of some interest to some people, particularly Buddhists or Christians of course. My attitudes and language have obviously changed in some ways since this paper was written: particularly when I talk about 'Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology', I would now talk about the Middle Way. However, there's also a fair amount of continuity between this and the Middle Way Philosophy I have developed since. (RME 2016)

Introduction

The question above is one to which every Western Buddhist will probably need an answer at some point. It may come from bemused Christians who wonder why such a nice person has got into a weird Eastern cult; it may come from serious encounters with friends or colleagues who respect Buddhism but nevertheless are not sure what its advantages over Christianity may be; or, most seriously, it may arise sometimes as an internal question asked of oneself, a re-opening of an issue that had seemed closed.

It is for the last reason that I want to take up this question here. My thoughts about it have particularly been stimulated recently by two books: Unexpected Way by Paul Williams, an account and justification of the conversion to Catholicism of a well-known Buddhist scholar of twenty years' standing, and Buddhists talk about Jesus, Christians talk about the Buddha, an anthology of writings by various scholars, both Christian and Buddhist. The former of these includes perhaps the most convincing set of unapologetically Christian arguments against Buddhism I have come across, even if some of its assumptions are ultimately questionable, The latter book, featuring many scholars who had been positively influenced by both religions, also led me to question whether the difference between them was as great as I had previously believed it to be.

One day, after reading Williams, and reflecting on his arguments whilst sitting amongst the glories of Worcester cathedral, a possible test of any Western Buddhists' sole commitment to the Buddhist tradition occurred to me. Whilst sitting here in this cathedral, surrounded by soaring Gothic arches, stained glass windows, and the tombs of great historical figures, I wondered, could I genuinely wish for the replacement of this Christian heritage with a Buddhist one? Even if it could be done without suffering or disturbance, would I really want this cathedral to be demolished and replaced with an equally large and beautiful but nevertheless alien Buddhist temple? The answer for me was clearly 'No'. In what sense, then, was I genuinely a Buddhist rather than a Christian? Does my obvious cultural allegiance to Christianity make being a Buddhist unjustifiable? Should I not take the route of some radical Christians, like Don Cupitt, who

respond to philosophical or practical dissatisfaction with Christianity by re-interpreting rather than rejecting it?

What follows is an attempt to think through this question philosophically. In arguing through it I have tried to avoid merely accepting the premises of the Buddhist or Christian tradition, and just arguing in a predictable or defensive fashion “from a Buddhist point of view” or “from a Christian point of view”. Obviously, however, the argument has a personal context, and is an outcome of my own experience of trying to be a Western Buddhist in an environment where I have frequent contact with Christians, and of the influence of Western philosophy.

What is Buddhism?

One of the first problems that becomes apparent in considering this question is one of the definition of terms. What is Buddhism and what does it mean to be “Buddhist”? Likewise what is Christianity and what is a “Christian”? Of the two the definition of Buddhism seems the most problematic, and this is where I shall begin.

In academic Religious Studies circles in Western universities, in recent decades there has been a backlash against “essentialism” in the study of religion. In common parlance and in Religious Education in schools, it tends to be assumed that each religion has certain core beliefs, as well as figures, scriptures, and rituals, which distinguish it from other religions and define each religion as a whole. This is certainly a grossly over-simplified picture when compared to the sociological reality¹. Religions, far from being clearly focussed and differentiated, are more like waves of the sea, arising, falling and merging into one another. This image seems to apply especially well to Buddhism. It seems questionable, when we consider *all* the features of a particular example of “Buddhism” that might be called “religious”, whether they have more in common with other forms of “Buddhism” than they do, say, with adjacent forms of religion which are not considered “Buddhist”. Does a Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist in Japan have more in common with a Theravadin in Sri Lanka than he/she does with a neighbouring Shintoist (especially given that much Japanese religion combines aspects of Buddhism and Shinto and followers may not identify with one rather than the other at all)?

So, from this point of view “Buddhism” is a questionable label. However, pointing this out does not provide any guidance in making judgements about Buddhism, but rather leaves us with an intractable relativism. Lurking in the background of this view there seems to be a highly questionable cultural determinism, in which our experience of needing to make choices *between* different cultural or religious norms is denied. If we cannot define Buddhism at all, there is no particular reason for either being Buddhist or not being Buddhist. To provide a definition of Buddhism which is going to be practically helpful in this way, then, that definition

must not attempt to be purely descriptive, but be at least partially prescriptive, saying what Buddhism *ought* to be rather than necessarily what it is in all cases.

Despite this difficulty, one could try to base a descriptive definition on the idea that there are certain core doctrines or practices to be found across the Buddhist world. Such teachings as the ideal of enlightenment represented by the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, the analysis of pratityasamutpada, or belief in karma and rebirth may be put forward as beliefs that are shared by all Buddhists, or, if Buddhism is to be defined instead by its practices, the practices of cultivating morality, meditation and wisdom. However, if these beliefs or practices are taken as definitive of Buddhism, the fact that all Buddhists adhere to them becomes analytically true. The argument becomes circular because attention is not attracted to dubious cases. More importantly, this account of Buddhism is based only on description without providing the necessary prescriptive element. Any description of Buddhism will always beg the question of its own definition unless we first establish what Buddhism *ought* to be.

If, on the other hand, we try to provide a prescriptive definition of Buddhism, this carries the opposite danger that the prescribed features will not in fact be typical of what we usually describe as “Buddhism”. In fact, a prescription of what Buddhism ought to be does not necessarily bear any relationship to the reality of what it is as a phenomenon at all. This danger must be noted and faced, but does not prevent me from suggesting a prescriptive definition. Such a definition may indeed have no relationship to the phenomena of Buddhism, but at the same time offers the possibility of a justification which no descriptive definition could possibly offer. No matter how many millions of Buddhists, or indeed how many allegedly enlightened masters, have believed or done a certain thing, this will not necessarily make it the right thing for others to believe or do. Other criteria are needed for its acceptance.

The prescriptive definition of Buddhism I shall suggest is one of Buddhism as a *spiritual epistemology*. It consists in the guidance offered by the Buddha on how to go about making judgements of spiritual truth, and of how to weigh up the claims of contesting religious claims. Its clearest statement appears to be in the Kalama Sutta, though it may also be claimed to be implicit elsewhere in the Pali Canon and in the Mahayana Perfection of Wisdom teachings. What is distinctive about these teachings is that *they do not require any justification from authority*, whether that authority comes from the Buddha’s alleged words or from the Buddhist tradition. Rather it offers a method for judging whether religious doctrines are to be accepted or not. The content of this method, in brief, is that we should judge competing teachings according to our own experience, though attempting to make due allowance for the fact that that experience may be deluded. If we supplement this teaching by the example offered in the Buddha’s own life, we can add to this stress on individual judgement the Middle Way as a guide to discovering the truth. We should neither accept premature absolute formulations of the nature of the world and how we ought to act (eternalism), nor

conclude that there are no such general truths (nihilism), but navigate between these extremes.

This spiritual epistemology is a prescriptive definition of Buddhism only because it consists in the terms which Buddhism itself offers for judging its own truth. I say “offers”, because it is obvious that it would only beg the question further (as well as probably being untrue) to suggest that all or even most Buddhists maintain this philosophical view about what Buddhism ought to be, but nevertheless it is an available resource *offered* in Buddhist scripture and tradition. It is not *justified* through scripture and tradition, but nevertheless can be found there, at least on some possible interpretations. The reason for accepting it is not due to where it is found or with what authority or by whom it is said (although these things may provide reasons for paying attention to it in the beginning), but because it offers a method of investigation which can be applied in experience and adapted to any conceivable set of circumstances. Its philosophical freedom from metaphysical baggage (whether positive or negative) offers an initial reason for accepting it, but its applicability to experience and its falsifiability in relation to subsequent experience² provide further tests of its claim to provide a path to reality.

For me, then, this approach provides a *justifiable* definition of Buddhism, although its failure to be descriptively applicable to the phenomena of Buddhism must be acknowledged. Moving on to the relationship with Christianity, then, we are left with a choice between an unjustifiable descriptive definition of Buddhism, and a justifiable prescriptive definition without any necessary descriptive application. I will attempt to see how either of these relates to the question of whether Western Buddhists should be Christians.

What is Christianity?

It may seem at first that exactly the same types of problems are likely to arise in trying to define Christianity as in defining Buddhism. Certainly there are a great variety of types of Christian spread over many cultures, and there is at least some dispute over who is a Christian and who is not. Are Quakers and Unitarians Christians; are Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses? These doubtful cases certainly make the task of reaching a descriptive definition of Christianity more difficult. However, the vast majority of Christians do seem to be agreed on what constitutes Christianity: Christians believe in a Creator God, and that that God sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins and to rise again on the third day. This is a prescriptive definition, and there are certainly some people who call themselves Christians to whom it does not apply. However, Christianity is different from Buddhism here in the sense that the vast majority of Christians do believe in this prescriptive definition. “Christianity” is not a category created by colonial Buddhist scholars in the same way that “Buddhism” was created by Christian scholars: it is a category invented by Christians to label themselves. Despite the fact that interpretations of these core beliefs vary hugely, Christianity is at least defined by an adherence to beliefs which are formulated in this way.

In the case of Christianity, then, there does not exist the same gap between descriptive and prescriptive definitions as in the case of Buddhism. This is partly because, unlike Buddhism, Christianity does not appear to offer an epistemology which could be justified in any way apart from faith in the Christian teaching itself. Perhaps the nearest approach to such an external justification is to be found in the Natural Law teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, which offers the idea that even pagans have access to the basic insights of Christianity through observation of the nature of the universe. However, even pagans who did this had to begin with the assumption (found in Classical Stoicism) that the world is good, and even the natural law thus derived was judged by Aquinas to offer a second-best ethic, inferior to Christian revelation. There is no hint that Christian revelation should be judged in the terms of natural law, rather the reverse view that the limited merits of natural law alone can be seen fully only in the light of revelation and faith.

For practical purposes, then, I shall take it that the definition of Christianity is a prescriptive one internal to that tradition: consisting in belief in a Creator God, Jesus as divine incarnation, atonement and resurrection. The problems lie not so much in the definition of Christianity as in the interpretation of that definition.

Compatibility: God

Let me then turn to the main question of whether Western Buddhists should be Christians. I will take it that, if there is no particular advantage in being Buddhist over being Christian, the default position in a Western country where Christianity is dominant is to be Christian. Why create communication problems with one's neighbours and relatives unnecessarily? To be justified in being Buddhist rather than Christian, there must be some advantages in being so. If one's reasons for being Buddhist can be equally well satisfied within Christianity, there are no advantages to being Buddhist and thus no justifications for being Buddhist. We must look, then, at whether Buddhism, as I have defined it, is compatible with Christianity, again as I have defined it.

The first and most basic area to consider is that of belief in God. Traditional Buddhism maintains a belief in gods but denies that there is a creator God. Buddhism as spiritual epistemology, however, seems to offer no prima facie reason either to accept or deny the existence of gods or of God.

Although God may or may not exist, however, Buddhism as spiritual epistemology may appear to offer reasons not to believe in him. Believing in God is often connected to belief in his revelation, and thus in the existence of an absolute value to which we should conform. Under the unbearable gaze of that absolute value, the human origins either of truth or of spiritual progress are not recognised, and we become sinners whose salvation can only be gained by obedience to God's revealed commands. Our ability to investigate reality, it

seems, could be sadly skewed by the idea that we could have communications from a being with access to absolute truth. Our beliefs would then become an all-or-nothing affair, either certified by God or not, interfering with our ability to detect the complex gradations of things. This is further complicated by the difficulty in knowing whether or not God exists, so that this access to absolute truth is also based on dogmatic belief rather than a gradation of evidence. These seem to offer powerful reasons, not to reject the possibility of God's existence, but to avoid believing in him because this would be incompatible with the Middle Way as an approach to reality.

However, we must set this argument against some of the possible responses. One possibility would be to believe in a God who never revealed himself. However, such a belief would seem to make no difference to anyone, and would in any case fall far short of Christian belief. Another would be a likely Christian response to this argument: that far from offering only a perspective of absolute truth, God has taken the trouble to communicate himself at a human level through his incarnation as Jesus. God the father, it may be claimed, is indeed unbearably absolute, too remote for human beings to approach, but the son is human. Thus the issue of whether belief in God is justified for a Buddhist becomes inseparable from that of belief in the incarnation. I shall turn to this in the next section.

There is a further possible problem with the claim that belief in God interferes with Buddhist spiritual epistemology, and that is whether it accords with the comparative historical record of the investigation of phenomena in civilisations dominated by Christianity and by Buddhism. Whilst the development of meditational techniques in the Buddhist tradition is unsurpassed, meditation only represents one part of the path and all three parts of it also demand understanding of the world around us. Such understanding has developed much more fully in the West through the rise of science. Whilst the success of science at coming to grips with reality is far from absolute, it has been continually advancing since the Sixteenth Century. Although many early scientists, particularly up till the Eighteenth century, maintained a dogmatic belief in God, this did not prevent them from open-minded exploration of the physical universe which they believed him to have created. The Church's reluctance to accept early scientific discoveries need not be an objection to this, since belief in God was certainly no monopoly of the Church.

If we are to maintain the view that belief in God is incompatible with the Middle Way, then, we must also find some explanation for the fact that Christian civilisation appears to have surpassed Buddhist in its application in some important respects. Such an explanation might include an attempt to play down the positive relationship between Christianity and science and attribute the rise of science to other historical factors, but this would probably not do justice to the complexity of the matter. However many other factors may have been involved, it can scarcely be denied that Christianity is much more closely and positively

related to the development of science than traditional Buddhism has ever been. Another explanation might draw on the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive accounts of Buddhism to claim that traditional Buddhists have not on the whole followed the spiritual epistemology of the Middle Way. This seems a much more convincing explanation. The history of Buddhism is one of renunciation, meditative and doctrinal refinements, and of various cultural adaptations and encounters, but we do not see Buddhist monks developing scientific medicine to relieve suffering, experimental psychology to refine the explanations of the Abhidhamma, or telephones and computers to improve communication and thus support the unity of the sangha. This is not because the motivations for doing these things were not present, but because there was not an open-minded approach to the exploration of physical reality.

This might mean, then, that belief in God is at least in some ways supportive to Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology. However, the fact that most modern scientists manage to dispense with belief in God (and that they are also prone to other forms of dogmatism) should prevent us from pushing this point too far. A provisional stab at a conclusion on this complex topic might be that although belief in God may be antipathetic to the practice of the Middle Way, this depends very much how belief in God is interpreted. If God is seen as a Creator, but "Creation" understood symbolically rather than literally, in a way compatible with scientific evidence of the development of the universe (as in most liberal interpretations of Christianity), and his revelation is understood to be entirely ambiguous (whether found in nature or in meditative or other religious experience) then belief in such a God may be at least harmless.

Would there be any positive advantages to belief in such a God? Paul Williams, arguing in support of his conversion from Buddhism to Christianity, argues that although believing in God is not more *rational* than not doing so, to take the leap of faith required to believe in God provides him with a sense of positive meaning in existence which the Buddhist approach does not offer. Whether a sense of positive meaning *needs* to be found in such large beliefs, rather than in more immediate goals, seems to be a matter of temperament. For me such beliefs seem to have a comparable function to the belief in the possibility of enlightenment as a perfect state in traditional Buddhism, which seems equally remote and equally plausible. For those who need such remote metaphysical beliefs as a route out of an experience of existential dukkha, one can hardly begrudge them such, or the positive energy they apparently provide. It is the dogmatic *application* of such beliefs rather than the beliefs themselves which seem to threaten interference in spiritual progress by petrifying our understanding of the truth. Christian beliefs could function in this way, but then so could beliefs about truths apparently delivered by the Buddha from the state of enlightenment, and in both cases awareness is needed to avoid any such application.

Compatibility: Jesus

So now I must examine the further belief which is specific to Christianity out of the theistic religions: belief that Jesus is the incarnation of God, God made fully human and thus coming down to the relative level. Once again, whether Jesus actually *was* incarnated seems beside the point: the evidence is ambiguous and could never be proven either way. If God exists and is capable of creating the universe, he is obviously also capable of fixing an incarnation, but on the other hand the difference between an “ordinary” human being and an incarnation of God is not obvious and depends entirely on faith. Traditional Buddhism clearly does not share that faith: even if Jesus was a bodhisattva, as some have claimed, he was not an incarnation of God. Again, though, from the perspective of Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology it is the functionality of the belief that is more important. Two arguments seem possible: on the one hand we could view the Christian doctrine of the incarnation as a great con trick, a false synthesis of the irreconcilably different, on the other as the genuine resolution of a tension between absolute and relative. I shall start with the first of these.

Belief in Jesus may be an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. If God is absolute, it is obvious that no incarnation of God could fully take on that quality, for both his powers and his perfection are limited. If we think about the moral function of the belief in incarnation in relation to atonement, again, it can seem more like an appeal to magic than a spiritually helpful belief. Christians (beginning with St. Paul) feeling a desperate sense of their imperfection and sinfulness, seem to have latched onto the belief that Jesus overcomes that sin and saves them through the act of sacrificing himself. Christianity, then, often seems to entrench a state of inadequacy rather than resolving it, as the Christian believer comes to think that an absolute solution has been found to sin if she only throws herself on God’s mercy and obeys God in all. The imperfection of our understanding of divine revelation then becomes forgotten in an emotional response to a longed-for release from a sense of sinfulness. Armed with the magic talisman of the atonement, it seems that intolerance and holy wars can too easily be justified, for to admit the limitations of the human judgements that are still being made in these situations would be to undermine the magic and bring the sense of human sinfulness crashing back.

But we must ask, again, whether this is necessarily the case in Christianity. Could it not be possible for a Christian to maintain awareness both of human inadequacy when compared to a divine standard, and of the possibility of progress? The whole tradition of the *via negativa* in Christianity perceives belief in God as a reason for epistemological humility: we cannot know either God or his will completely. The incarnation of God-become-human could then become a symbol of the way in which we must navigate the tension between absolute and relative: of the Middle Way in Buddhist terms. If Jesus was in some ways divine and in others human, then this could offer a rich fund of creative ambiguity as well as an example of how to lead a life which takes both ideals and humanity seriously. The atonement then becomes symbolic of a release from a previous

state of mere humanity, of the freeing of human potential in communication with the divine.

Here it becomes evident not that we *must* interpret Jesus in this way, or even that most, or indeed any, Christians do, but that it is *possible* to interpret the central Christian symbols in a way which is compatible with Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology. It may be asked why we should make the effort to do so, possibly going against the grain of much of the Christian theological tradition. One answer to this is that there is no way of avoiding this effort of interpretation if one desires any religious expression of Buddhism as spiritual epistemology. The traditional Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth are likewise commonly interpreted in a fashion that requires dogmatic belief and interferes with our investigation of experience, for example by creating a prior assumption of "justice" in the universe. Belief in the absolute status of nirvana and the reliability of the pronouncements of enlightened beings can have a similar effect. In both these cases it is probably possible to interpret the traditional doctrines in a way which is compatible with Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology, but we are not spared the effort of continual alertness in making sure that we do not slip into dogmatism or go along with unexamined tradition for its own sake when utilising these doctrines. If Western Buddhists have to do these things in the interpretation of Buddhism, why shouldn't they do so in the interpretation of Christianity?

Following this line of interpretation, what are we to make of the crucifixion and the resurrection? The crucifixion is often interpreted in terms of an unbalanced, perhaps even masochistic, ethic of self-sacrifice, which is obviously not compatible with the Middle Way, where awareness of one's own needs and psychological states must play their part alongside awareness of others. Personally, as a central symbol of Christianity I find the crucifixion extremely off-putting. But there are similar (if not so central) stories of self-sacrifice in the Buddhist tradition, such as the story in the Jatakas of the bodhisattva who fed himself to a hungry tigress. The effort of interpretation is not different in each case. Furthermore, in the case of the crucifixion Christians argue that it is balanced by the resurrection: self-sacrifice gives rise to unexpected hope.

One way of interpreting this might be in terms of a movement from a lower to a higher level of awareness. In order to make such progress we have repeatedly both to maintain the desire for movement to a higher level and recognise and address the real conditions at the lower level. For example in meditation, a breakthrough into dhyana requires that we do not desire dhyana too much, and when effort is matched with sufficient contentedness we may suddenly be rewarded by the unexpected experience. Crucifixion may thus be understood as an exaggerated symbol of renunciation (comparable to the going-forth in the life of the Buddha), resurrection an exaggerated symbol of a recognition of the human condition (comparable to the Buddha's realisation of the ineffectiveness of asceticism and recognition of the Middle Way). Jesus may be thought of as

“going forth” from all identification with his continued life, but then returning in recognition of human weakness, in this case not his own weakness but those of others who needed his return to support their own positive activity. To think of renouncing life itself, and of regaining life itself, is to provide a very strong version of the Middle Way, perhaps too strong to be readily related to our everyday experience very easily. But again, in interpreting the Buddha’s life in symbolic terms we also face difficulties in scaling down a grand symbol to one we can understand in relation to everyday choices. Likewise, in interpreting the Buddha's life we may find episodes which appear ethically questionable (like the Buddha leaving his wife and child) just as we may find the self-sacrifice of the crucifixion or the apparent showmanship involved in resurrection ethically questionable. However, the function of these stories in either religion is not primarily ethical but symbolic. If the symbolism is understood as that of the Middle Way, the traditional forms of either religion begin to appear compatible with Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology.

Conclusions

Should it be concluded from this, then, that Western Buddhists should be Christians? This would be too sweeping. What can be concluded, though, is that they *can* be in certain limited circumstances. These circumstances include the “Buddhism” to which Western Buddhists are committed being understood as spiritual epistemology only, and the central Christian beliefs being interpretable in the ways I have suggested as expressions of the Middle Way. Other requirements would be a supportive social context, both in the Buddhist community and the Christian, and temperamental or emotional access to these ways of interpreting Christian symbols so that they assume a spiritual significance. Even if all these conditions are met, Western Buddhists may still find that they make better spiritual progress within the Buddhist tradition.

It might be argued that for most Westerners (even the ones for whom the above conditions are true) the task of interpreting Christianity in this way is relatively much more difficult than a similar interpretation of Buddhism. This can hardly be denied, but tasks are not always less worthwhile because they are difficult. Another important point is that these interpretations of Christian symbols can probably only be made *in the light of* prior experience of Buddhism. It is the comparison of the two religions which seems to make available a rich fund of alternative interpretations. If Western Buddhists had never become Buddhists in the first place, but stayed within Christianity, such interpretations would probably not be accessible to them. Being on the cusp of the relationship between two great religions in many ways seems a fortunate position offering rich potentiality, even if it is also sometimes an uncomfortable position. Remaining on this cusp may better fulfil the needs of Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology than immersing ourselves completely in one religious tradition. Even if Western Buddhists do not go so far as to become Christians, their experience may be

richer for remaining open to positive re-interpretations of the Christian beliefs and symbols which surround us.

In conclusion, then, there may still be some good reasons for Western Buddhists not to be Christians, but I think I have also identified some unconvincing reasons. I will finish by summarising each of these. The good reasons are all positive ones to do with the Buddhist tradition, the unconvincing ones mainly to do with dubious assumptions about Christianity.

Good reasons

1. *The spiritual resources offered by Buddhism:* The Buddhist tradition offers a great many techniques for spiritual development which may not be offered, or be offered in a less systematic and effective form, by Christianity. Being a Buddhist may be a requirement to access these resources.
2. *The influence of the spiritual epistemology of the Middle Way:* However incompletely or imperfectly the Buddhist tradition may express the Middle Way, the Middle Way is nevertheless an important theme which has at least contributed to the moulding of the Buddhist tradition in a way in which it has not contributed to the Christian.
3. *Positive responses to the Buddhist tradition:* Despite the cultural differences, some Westerners may nevertheless find Buddhism easier to relate to than Christianity. This provides a pragmatic justification for staying with the Buddhist tradition.

Unconvincing reasons

1. *The intrinsic unskilfulness of Christianity:* As I have tried to show, the unskilfulness of Christian beliefs, values, or symbols depends entirely on their interpretation. In some conceivable cases they may be a better expression of Buddhism as a spiritual epistemology than traditional Buddhist ones.
2. *The non-existence of God:* As nothing can ever be shown either way on this one, the arguments here are irrelevant. To conclude that God does not exist because of a lack of evidence is to commit a fallacy of ignorance.
3. *Historical doubts about the claimed facts of Jesus' life, or other Biblical events:* This only creates a problem for those who base their beliefs on a literal or historical view of the Bible, but not all Christians do this. Those who take a literal or historical view of the life of the Buddha face similar problems. A symbolic interpretation in either case implies that it would not matter if the claimed events were proved to be entirely fictional.
4. *The relative wisdom of Buddhists and Christians:* As I have argued, it is not obvious that Buddhists have done more to confront reality than Christians have.
5. *Avoidance of conflict in Buddhism:* It is not obviously the case that fewer wars have been fought in the name of Buddhism than Christianity, or that Christianity has been historically more intolerant³. The claim that this is the case often depends on a dubious distinction between "religious" and "merely

political” conflicts, but it is very difficult to separate these when considering the whole impact of a religion on the surrounding culture. Any other claims about the superior moral track-record of Buddhism are equally questionable. We can admit this without accepting the common Christian response to this claim that the moral record of a religion is not relevant to its truth: this is to merely dissociate religion from evidence and experience in an unhelpful way.

¹ An up-to-date picture of the complexity of that reality can be found in the detailed statistics available at www.adherents.com.

² In exactly what ways the Middle Way may be falsifiable (which is related to the ways in which it avoids unfalsifiable metaphysical baggage) is a complex question which I do not have space to discuss here. It is developed at length in my unpublished Ph.D. thesis A Buddhist Theory of Moral Objectivity (University of Lancaster, 2001)

³ For evidence of conflicts associated with, or supported by, Buddhism, see Brian Victoria’s Zen at War or Trevor Ling’s Buddhism, Imperialism and War.