

TEMPTATION AND THE HUMANNESS OF SHAKYAMUNI AND JESUS

By Roy C Amore, Canada

The present controversy among Christians regarding the film “The Last Temptation of Christ” has raised some questions regarding the humanity of the Buddha. How do Buddhists find a compromise between the idealized, divine concept of the Enlightened One and his human nature? The Mahayana branch of Buddhism accepts the three “kayas” which acknowledge that a human being called Gautama was born, lived and died like any other member of the homo sapiens. However, in his other two kayas, namely as the embodiment of Bodhi and as the manifestation of the enjoyment of enlightenment he assumes a supramundane significance as the SammaSamBuddha. Roy C Amore, a Christian minister and author of the popular book Two Masters, One Message which examines the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity discusses how the Theravada Buddhists view the problem.

Ed.

Controversy among Christians

“The Last Temptation of Christ”, a new movie based on the novel of the same name by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), has created a heated controversy among Christians in North America. Although the book itself caused only a mild controversy when an English translation first appeared in the early 1960’s, the power of the cinema is such that many conservative Christians have taken to the streets in large numbers to demonstrate against the film. The protesters have tried to organize an economic boycott against all movie theatres that show the film and even against other films made by the same studio or distributed by the company that released this film.

A curious by-product of the controversy is that the more conservative Roman Catholics and the more conservative Protestants, who normally consider each other as adversaries, find themselves united in opposition to the film. It is not unusual to see Catholic nuns and Protestant preachers sharing the speakers’ platform at rallies. The protests at the opening of the film in California were so strong that in some other cities the distributor has opened the film over a month ahead of schedule in order to catch the protesters off guard, before they could get organized.

At the other extreme are the civil libertarians who argue that nobody, including church organizations, has a right to tell other citizens what films they cannot see. Ordinary movie fans are caught in the middle. They want to see the film, which many viewers report to be religiously moving, but their church leaders are calling upon them to boycott it.

The net effect of all the protests, however, is a great deal of free publicity for the film, for it has played to full houses everywhere it has opened.

The Full Humanness of Jesus Christ

Why all the fuss? What is alleged to be so evil about this particular film? The conservative Christians are up in arms because, they say, the film depicts Jesus as a human being. What bothers them most is that the film shows “dream sequences” in which Jesus imagines what it would be like to have a normal life, complete with sex and a family. Christians are quite used to pious movies in which actors mouth the words of the Bible while playing the part of Moses or Jesus. But in such movies Jesus is played as a god-on-earth who is not really tempted at all by Satan in the famous wilderness scene. Jesus easily confronts Satan and resists the temptations held before him by Satan.

The three wilderness temptation of Jesus by Satan are listed only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and according to Luke’s version they are as follows: the temptation to turn rocks into bread so as to end his period of fasting, the temptation to worship the devil in order to gain lordship over the whole earth, and the temptation to jump off the temple parapet so that the angels would save him.

The Biblical temptations focus on Jesus as a divine human, for in two of the three Satan tempts him to use his divine powers to make life easier for himself. But Kazantzakis was fascinated with the idea that Jesus must have gone through many other, more existential, temptations. Kazantzakis wrote of Jesus as having the same kind of tempting thoughts that the rest of us have. Jesus, as penned by Kazantzakis and as acted in the movie, undergoes a long, complex temptation just before dying on the cross. Jesus imagines himself as a family man, living a normal, carnal life with Mary Magdalene. The reader or viewer is free to interpret this long dream sequence in several ways. My view is that Jesus is having one last fantasy about what might have been if he had not followed his spiritual career.

The “last temptation” comes from the imagination of Kazantzakis, not from the New Testament, but its author did not mean to be debunking Jesus. On the

contrary, bringing out the full humanness of Christ was intended to put some power back into the story of Christ. As Kazantzakis wrote to a friend, “I wanted to renew and supplement the sacred Myth that underlies the great Christian civilization of the West. It isn’t a simple ‘Life of Christ’. It’s a laborious, sacred, creative endeavour to reincarnate the essence of Christ, setting aside the dross – falsehoods and pettinesses which all the churches and all the cassocked representatives of Christianity have heaped upon His figure, thereby distorting it.” (Helen Kazantzakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography Based on his Letters*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1968, p. 505)

Yet the conservatives who protest the movie – almost all of whom have neither read the book nor seen the film – are completely convinced that focusing on Jesus’ sexual fantasies and inner struggles denies his divinity. When the novel appeared in Greek in the early 1950’s the Greek Orthodox Church also denounced it and the Vatican put it on its famous *Index* of books not to be read. After receiving a telegram telling him that the book was on the *Index*, Kazantzakis expressed his frustration in a letter to a friend, “Here is a book that I wrote in a state of deep religious exaltation, with fervent love for Christ; and now the representative of Christ, the Pope, has no understanding of it at all, he cannot sense the Christian love with which it was written, and he condemns it!” (*Nikos Kazantzakis*, p. 523)

The argument of the conservatives is open to the criticism that they are not being true to Christian tradition, although they of course think that they are. The early church leaders had to grapple with the same issues, and their solution was officially adopted by the early Church councils and is in the confessional creeds repeated by Christians to this day. The official Christian teaching is that Jesus was both fully human and full God. This is a puzzling statement, to be sure, but the Christians decided it was better to state paradoxically that Jesus was both completely human and completely divine than to fall into the trap of compromising either his divinity or his humanity. If one taught that Jesus was almost as high as God, or almost like God, it would compromise the divinity of Jesus. On the other hand if one taught that Jesus was only the body of a human but mentally was actually god-like, that would compromise his humanity. It was important to the early Christians to say that Jesus was fully human, like us, because that made his resistance to temptations, his experience of suffering and his death on the cross more meaningful.

The trouble for Christians is that in the nearly two thousand years of Christian devotion to Christ the full humanness of Jesus has been largely lost. Generations of Christians have been taught that Jesus was God on earth, with little attention to the other side of the coin, that Jesus was human like us. For this reason Christians give very little attention to the story of Jesus in the garden

shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. At that time he is said to have prayed to God, asking that “this cup” be taken from him, meaning that he would not have to undergo the torture and death upon the cross. By focussing upon this “final temptation” and by emphasizing Jesus’ lifelong struggle with his mission, Kazantzakis makes this final temptation come alive.

In the first few Christian centuries those overly pious Christians who argued that Jesus was so divine that he only “seemed” like a human were officially denounced as heretics by Christian Councils. The name for this heresy is *Docetism*, which comes from the Greek word for “seem”.

What are Buddhists to make of all of this Christian flap over a film? Can Buddhists just smugly smile at this as being only a Christian problem? I do not think so. Instead, Buddhists might well take this Christian controversy as an occasion to think through what it means when Buddhists teach that Shakyamuni Buddha was a human and not a god. This Christian controversy “gives to think” as the Germans say. It gives Buddhists a point of Dharma to think about seriously. So, the following remarks are intended to get us thinking more deeply about the humanness of Shakyamuni Buddha by comparing the Buddhist and Christian traditions on this topic.

The Full Humanness of Shakyamuni Buddha

In the early centuries of each religious tradition, both Buddhists and Christians had to resist the tendency of overly pious followers to play down the humanness of their spiritual master. For Christians the tendency to ignore Jesus’ humanness was an understandable by-product of the Christian doctrine that Jesus was God on earth. Another Christian doctrine which played a role was the teaching that Jesus’ death on the cross was a perfect and final sacrifice to God, a sacrifice of a pure, unblemished lamb – in keeping with the Jewish practice of sacrificing a young, unblemished lamb at Passover time for the forgiveness of all sins. If Jesus was perfect and unblemished, the pious reasoned, then he could have not committed any sin whatsoever. And since Jesus himself had taught that it was a sin to even think evil thoughts, the pious concluded that Jesus was free from even thinking a sinful thought.

Thus, from the doctrine of Jesus’ divinity and of his sinlessness, it was easy for many Christians to imagine Jesus as a person so pure in his thoughts, words and deeds that he hardly resembled us ordinary humans. On the other hand, the early Christian Councils had affirmed that Jesus was fully human, as well as fully God, so orthodox Christians were left with a doctrine of a “fully human” Christ who in fact never faced the kinds of temptations that other humans faced because he was totally sinless. For the early church the point of view was that

Jesus faced human temptations but did not give in. But a later, pious point of view could not imagine Jesus even being tempted to be tempted, so to speak.

Early Buddhist history saw similar disagreements over the humanity of Shakyamuni Buddha. The fifth book of the Abhidhamma, *The Points of Controversy or Katha-vatthu* in Pali, contains the record of many disputed issues and gives the Theravada position on each. The Katha-vatthu was written in the era of King Ashoka, when there were eighteen schools of Buddhism in India. The Theravada school is the only one of these eighteen to have survived. The others either died out on their own, or were absorbed into the Mahayana movement a few centuries after Ashoka's era.

There are twenty-three books or chapters in the Katha-vatthu, and each chapter contains from five to twelve points about which there was controversy in Ashoka's era. Of the more than two hundred points of controversy, fourteen deal with the proper understanding of the Buddha. From among these fourteen, I will summarize the points that deal specifically with the humanness of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Point ten of Katha-vatthu book II deals with the humanity of the Buddha. It refutes the position of the Andhaka school "that his daily usages (of language) were supramundane usages". The Theravada refutation of this position was first of all that it implied that the Buddha only communicated successfully with advanced disciples, for ordinary persons would not be able to understand supramundane language. But since the Buddha was remembered to have effectively taught people at all levels of spiritual development, he must have used mundane language often. Further arguments are that the Buddha used mundane terms frequently, that ordinary people were able to hear his voice, that ordinary people were emotionally moved by Buddha's dharma talks, that some people were offended by his speech or were baffled by his words, and these rejected his teachings. Furthermore, not everyone who heard his speech entered onto the paths.

The Andhakas objected that the Buddha, using supramundane speech, could point to both ordinary and supramundane matters, just as a person with a golden wand might point to a pile of gold or a pile of rice. The Theravada countered with the opposite position, that just as an ordinary stick could point to both rice and gold, so could (and did) the Buddha use ordinary speech to point to both mundane and supramundane truths.

Point one of Katha-vatthu book XVIII refutes the claims that the Buddha did not live "in the world of mankind". According to The Debates Commentary, *Kathavatthupparakara Atthakatha* in Pali, the Vetulyakas and others held this

position. The commentator explains that the argument of the opponents is that the Buddha in essence remained in the Tusita heaven while a bodily shape appeared on earth. This is very close to the position taken by the Christian Docetists mentioned above, as the Japanese Buddhist scholar Prof. M. Anesaki pointed out long ago. (“Docetism”, *Ency. Of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings)

The Theravada response is not a philosophical one but rather merely appeals to a straightforward understanding of the tradition that the Buddha lived and taught on earth, at specific times and places. The opponents’ docetic understanding is based upon their understanding of a scriptural passage which holds that the Tathagata grew up in the world and dwelled in it, having overcome the world, and remained undefiled by the world. This citation is from “The Flower”, which is the second of the discourses on flowers in the third book of the *Samyutta Nikaya*. In that context the Buddha is using the very common Indian simile of the lotus. His point is that a Tathagata is undefiled by living in the world like a lotus is unsoiled by dirty water in its pond. The Vetulyaka position takes the term “undefiled” too far when it concludes that the Tathagata was so untouched by the world that he did not really exist in it. As with Christian Docetism, their zeal to praise the spiritual master led some Buddhists to deny or at least minimize his humanness.

The point of controversy which occurs next, point two of book XVIII, deals with Buddhist Docetism as well. Again it is said to be the Vetulyakas who wrongly hold that the Tathagata did not himself teach Dharma. The belief here is that Dharma was taught by the “apparent Buddha” on earth while the Buddha really remained in Tusita heaven. The Theravada rejected this position by simply stating that the Tathagata taught Dharma and by citing some of the many passages in the scripture in which the Buddha says precisely that he taught Dharma.

Point five of book XXI gives the Theravada position that the various Buddhas that live on earth do not differ in their teaching, but they do differ in body, age and radiance. I take this to imply that each Buddha is fully a human, and therefore has a different body than other Buddhas.

The humanness of the Tathagata is also asserted by the Theravada insistence, over against the Vetulyakas, that the Tathagata felt pity. Again the motivation of the opponents was the pious one of imagining a Buddha so lofty and free of passion that he was incapable of pity. The commentary points out that the opponents wrongly think that being free from passion implies being free from compassion.

The most bizarre of all the points of controversy is point four of book XVIII concerning whether or not the excreta of the Tathagata was fragrant or malodorous. The commentary notes that the erroneous claim that the faeces of the Tathagata were sweet smelling was motivated by over zealous affection for the Tathagata. The Theravada argument is that since the Buddha did not eat fine perfumes but ordinary food, the claim is false.

The Theravada insistence upon the full humanness of the Tathagata does not mean that there is no difference between a Tathagata and an ordinary person, however. For example, point two of book III distinguishes those powers of discernment that are held by a Tathagata but not by others, even those who have entered upon the Ariyan paths.

My claim is that in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions level headed persons have had to stand up against those who, motivated by extremes of devotionism, have denied the full humanness of their spiritual master. This battle was fought and won by the orthodox, main-stream leadership of early Christianity and Buddhism, but with each new generation of disciples there is a resurfacing of the old false understanding.