The Celestial Web

Buddhism and Christianity

A Different Comparison

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Translated
by David West

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Introduction

The Celestial Web: Indra's Net

There is a common image in Mahayana Buddhism, the so-called Great or Eminent Vehicle, that equates reality with a celestial web: the jeweled net of the god Indra. The very influential *Avataṃsaka-Sūtra,*[1] in particular, alludes many times to this,[2] although nowhere does the text directly explain the image itself, assuming that it is already familiar among Buddhists. The Chinese Buddhist master Dushun (Tu-shun and also Fa-shun, sixth to seventh century CE) explains the image as follows, saying that it

> illustrates how the many things interpenetrate like the realm of Indra's net of jewels. . . . This imperial net is made all of jewels: because the jewels are clear, they reflect each other's images, appearing in each other's reflections upon reflections, ad infinitum, all appearing at once in one jewel, and in each one it is so.[3]

Thus, Indra's net is a web spreading throughout the sky, its nodes holding clear jewels, each reflecting the whole net in its own way. Master Dushun is considered to be the first patriarch of the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism. This school draws especially on the teachings of the Indian *Avataṭaṃsaka-Sūtra*,[4] which probably dates in its later form from the fourth century CE and is an extensive compilation of even older texts of Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, the first Chinese translations of individual parts of the *Avataṃsaka-Sūtra* date back to the second century.

However, the idea of the world as a vast net belonging to the god Indra is much older, and indeed goes back to ideas already found in Vedic texts

[1]I have omitted diacritical marks for all names of persons and for all terms used as English words (such as nirvana, samsara, sangha, etc.) but retained them for titles of scriptures or references to the original terms and, of course, when they were used in citations.

[2]Especially in books 4, 5, 12, 21, 25, 33, 34, 39.

[3]As in his tract *Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of the Hua-yen*, quoted here from the English translation by Thomas Cleary (1983, 66).

[4]See Schmidt-Leukel 2006a, 141–43.

(*Atharva Veda* 8.8.8). But Mahayana Buddhism gives the image the special nuance of the clarity of the individual jewels, these symbolizing the "emptiness" or insubstantiality of all things that make up a world, indeed all worlds as a whole. This in turn leads to the idea of their mutual reflection, and finally to the idea that the entire web is reflected and refracted in each of its parts. The celestial web thus corresponds to a "fractal" pattern—that is, a pattern in which the structure's individual components repeat basic features of the whole structure.

According to the *Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, the image of Indra's net is not connected with the idea of an amorphous mass. Even if the ultimate reality hidden in and behind everything transcends every material or conceptual form, and in this sense is "formless" or "amorphous" (Sanskrit: *arupya*), it is nevertheless manifested in countless forms, precisely as a myriad web of diversity and difference. Thus, the twenty-fifth book of the *Sūtra* says: even if all worlds interpenetrate each other infinitely, they can still be distinguished from one another. Those who can recognize the whole in each part do so "without destroying the features of their structures, causing all to be clearly seen."[5]

It is in this respect especially that the ancient metaphor of "Indra's" or "God's" net is suitable for the novel comparison of Buddhism and Christianity presented here, since I regard Buddhism and Christianity not as homogeneous entities, but as complex, multilayered, and sometimes heterogeneous structures. Scrutinizing the internal diversity of both religions reveals fractal structural patterns, which means that obvious differences *between* the two religions can also be seen *within* each of them. Structurally, a quasi-reciprocal interpenetration of both religions becomes visible; their relationship resembles the celestial web.

However, in the spirit of the *Avataṃsaka-Sūtra*, this does not mean blurring the differences, which will still "be clearly seen," but as part of a far more differentiated—indeed, fractal—structure. This, I hope, can help us recognize and understand better the structural patterns of religious diversity as a whole, including and especially in terms of their theological significance. The fact that some of the differences embedded in the fractal patterns turn out to be complementary makes clear how far such complex traditions are related to each other and can therefore enrich but also correct one another.

The first two chapters are devoted to the methodology of this new form of comparative religion. Chapter 1 addresses the significance and the crisis of the comparative method within religious studies and theology, but also the attempts to rehabilitate and reconceptualize comparative religion. Chapter

[5]According to Thomas Cleary's English translation (1993, 656).

2 develops the thesis that religious diversity displays fractal patterns, and discusses the significance of this thesis for the understanding of religion and the comparison of religions from the perspective of religious studies and theology.

After these introductory reflections, I turn in the following chapters to the actual comparison of Buddhism and Christianity. Any comparison is of course selective, since, as Oliver Freiberger has noted, "one can only compare *in view of something*."[6] I take for my points of comparison how both religions relate to the world (chapter 3), how they understand ultimate reality (chapter 4), what their view is of the dark side of human existence (chapter 5), as well as how they see salvation/liberation in terms of the figures mediating it (chapter 6), the paths leading to it (chapter 7), and finally its goals (chapter 8).

The real point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*), however, is a second-order point of comparison. Each of chapters 3 to 8 begins from the different contrasts between both religions, which are often seen as opposites. Then I bring in the fractal perspective. That is, I show by means of prominent highlights that the different positions with regard to the respective thematic field (the *tertium comparationis* of the first order) can also be found in each of the two religions. *Comparing these intrareligious differences* thus forms my true point of comparison.

Each of these chapters also addresses the question of why, despite their different emphases and accents, both religions have developed such parallel intrareligious differences. Mutual historical influences play only a minor role at most,[7] and I therefore pursue a different line of inquiry: namely, whether each of the parallel differences can be understood as complementary—for it would then be conceivable that both, and presumably all major, religions contain something like an inner dynamic to synthesize opposing currents. Given the specific and thus inevitably partial emphases of each religious tradition, such a dynamic aims at a greater wholeness. An entelechy toward greater wholeness could at least partially explain the parallel occurrence of complementary differences. "The study of fractals in the natural world," says William Jackson, "reveals hidden implicit wholeness, orders hitherto undiscerned."[8] The mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot derived the noun "the fractal" and the adjective "fractal" from the Latin *frangere*/*fractus* (to break, broken),[9] the fractal fragment therefore implicitly referring to the larger wholeness of a fractal order. If we add the temporal dimension of

[6]Freiberger 2019, 31.

[7]On the issue of historical dependencies between Buddhism and Christianity, see Schmidt-Leukel 1992, 21–35; Winter 2008.

[8]Jackson, W. 2004, 60.

[9]Mandelbrot 1983, 4.

fractal orders, then we can agree with William Jackson: "Fractals involve holism in dynamic ways."[10] That is, individual complex entities that, like religions, are subject to progressive growth tend toward a kind of wholeness by forming more and more substructures, thereby integrating an ever-increasing diversity. Identifying such dynamic interconnections within both intrareligious and interreligious diversity is very significant theologically, since it can provide a new basis for how theology interprets the relationship between the great religions of humankind, and open up space for interreligious learning. I elaborate on this in the concluding chapter 9.

[10]Jackson W. 2004, 69.