

Patterns of Transcendence in the Early Buddhist Tradition: The Place of Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the Western Study of the Buddhist Tradition

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Abstract

This paper¹ examines the ideas of Wilfred Cantwell Smith about the early Buddhist tradition, and his place in the Western studies of Buddhism. It is discussed how the initial efforts of Western scholars paved the way for Buddhist studies to become an academic discipline in European universities. Since the study is about the early Buddhism, the Anglo-German school is focused for their contribution to the study of earlier school known as Theravada. The Theravada tradition strictly rejected the notion of God or divine. Therefore, concepts- such as- Self, Nirvana, and Dharma are of utmost importance in Western interpretive study of early Buddhism. The paper discusses the differences among the Western scholars regarding the meaning of these concepts in order to show Wilfred Cantwell Smith's contributions in this regard. Smith's emphasis on the faith of a Buddhist is interconnected with his critique of the notion of

‘religion.’ He is of the view that ‘religion’ as a concept has belittled the importance of faith in transcendence under the impact of modern Western secularism. He significantly emphasizes the notion of Dharma to describe faith in the early Buddhism. Smith considers Dharma as transcendence with which a faithful Buddhist is involved. This, however, does not preclude Nirvana as an ultimate transcendence. Hence, if Nirvana is conceptually an unapproachable transcendence that is beyond the mundane, Dharma is an achievable transcendence in the mundane realm, according to Smith. Dharma as a transcendent moral ideal, thus, becomes the object of faith in the early Buddhist tradition. In this way, Smith, in addition to his unique analysis, agrees with those Western Buddhologists who are not willing to deny divine in the Theravada tradition despite the tradition’s unequivocal rejection of such ideas.

Keywords: Theravada, Dharma, Nirvana, Transcendence, Self, Faith, Symbols, Buddhology

Introduction

Theravada is considered the oldest surviving school of Buddhism whose teachings are exclusively based on the Pali canon. Not Theravada alone but also a number of prominent Western scholars of Buddhist studies claim that the Pali canon comprises the Buddha’s teachings in their purest and most original form. Some concepts occupy a central place in the doctrinal paradigm of Theravada- such as- *Anatta* (no-self), Nirvana and Dharma. The doctrine of *Anatta*, for example, explains the existence of a human being in terms of five *Khandha* (aggregates) where none of them can be called ‘self’ or ‘soul’. Therefore, according to Theravada, the Buddha denies the existence of Upanishadic Self and proclaims Dukkha (suffering) and *Anicca* (mutability) as the fundamental traits of all sentient beings. This proclamation leads to very crucial questions regarding the moral responsibility of a person, his

rebirth, and, most importantly, his status once he attains Nirvana which is ultimate Buddhist's goal.

The Western academic study of Buddhism began in the middle of the 19th century. Initially, the scholars from England and Germany took the task of research based on the Pali tradition of Buddhism and formed the famous Anglo-German school. The scholars of the school reached contrasting findings as to the notions mentioned above. Some were in line with Theravada stance and others started interpreting the early *Sutta* (Buddha's discourse) of Pali canon according to their own understanding which resulted in their severe disagreement with Theravada.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (1916–2000) contribution to the history of religion is primarily for his methodological inputs and advocacy of universal ecumenism. His academic work is tremendous both quantitatively and, in the way the scholarly community perceived it. He introduced new avenues in the field of comparative religion and the history of religion. His critique of the notion of 'religion' must be taken into account before understanding his position of taking Dharma and Nirvana as transcendental realities in the early Buddhism. Smith criticizes 'religion' as a concept and as a word. For him, 'religion' as a concept has lost its transcendent dimension in the history of the modern West under what he calls negative secularism. Therefore, he puts much emphasis on 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition' as alternative categories for 'religion' to study a religious tradition. Thus the task before him is to trace faith in the early Buddhist tradition. For him, faith is always coupled with transcendence. A person of faith in transcendence becomes a community member, which together form a cumulative tradition. Rituals, beliefs, institutions etc., serve as symbols alluding to transcendence. The transcendent moral law Dharma is the object of faith in the early Buddhist tradition, according to Smith. This, however, does not mean that Nirvana occupies less central place in early Buddhist thought, unlike what Eva Dargyay suggests

about Smith's position on it.² By showing Dharma as transcendent reality along with Nirvana, Smith reiterates his thesis about 'faith' and 'cumulative tradition' to be replaced with the notion of 'religion' as alternative categories in order to understand the true religiosity of the Buddhist tradition. His emphasis on symbols as window to transcendence is exemplified in his account of Buddhism. Hence, it is maintained that Smith belongs to that Western scholarly tradition which does not deny transcendence or divine, whatever form it may take, in the early Buddhist tradition.

The Western Study of Buddhism: An Overview

The history of 'Buddhist Studies' in the West dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century. Until the beginning of the 19th century, Buddhism was conceived as a part of Hinduism. It was Eugene Burnouf (1801-1852), a German philologist, whose work *Introduction to the History of Buddhism* set a clear distinction between the two religions.³ He is considered the father of Buddhology in the West, and it was he who made a clear distinction between southern (Theravada) and northern (Mahayana) traditions. He considered Theravada as more original and pure Buddhism which later became the reason for Europe's turn towards Theravada for academic purposes until the middle of the 20th century.⁴ In Germany, Arthur Schopenhauer's work on Buddhism had a visible influence on academics and intellectual circles. He found striking similarities in his philosophy of 'pessimism' and that of Buddhist. He made a number of references to Buddhism in his book *The World as Will and Representation*. Buddhism in Europe was not a result of any missionary work done by the Buddhists;⁵ rather, to a large extent philological interest in Pali led them to the scholarly study of Buddhism. Germany and England were the key places where the task of studying Buddhism was undertaken. While in America, Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and the flamboyant Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, with an

increased interest in the esoteric teachings of Eastern religions. It opened its branches in India, Sri Lanka and England.⁶ In England, Edwan Arnold's (1832-1904) non-academic work *The Light of Asia* (1879) produced great interest in Buddhism among the common people and the sale of more than one million copies in England and America was recorded.⁷ Arnold portrayed Buddha as a savior like Jesus, which stirred a strong interest among English and Americans in Buddhism.⁸ In Germany, Hermann Hesse's (1877-1962) novel *Siddhartha Eine Indische Dichtung* [Siddhartha: An Indian Novel] appeared in 1922. Its plot focuses on the spiritual journey of the lead character *Sidhartha*, which takes place during the Buddha's lifetime but independent of the latter's direct guidance. In 1882, Thomas W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922) made the Pali Text Society for the scholarly study of Buddhist texts in the Pali language and their translations. He began the systematic study of Pali and Theravada Buddhism⁹. His book *Buddhism'* (1878) along with German Hermann Oldenburg Pali based work *Buddha: His Life, His Doctrine, and His Order* (1881) proved to be the most famous works in the Buddhist studies.¹⁰ From thereon, Western scholars suggested the 'authenticity' and 'originality' of the Pali canon. In contrast, the Mahayana texts along with their supernatural doctrines were considered as of later origin as well as addition to the original Buddhist teachings. Rhys Davids, for example, considered 'early Buddhism' (Pali tradition) as pure, Tibetan as 'corrupted' and tantric as repulsive.¹¹

The development of Western Buddhist studies can properly be seen in the context of interaction between Europe and Southeast Asia in terms of colonialism. This is of importance that colonial interpretations of Buddhism by the Western philosophers and missionaries led the orthodox Theravada Buddhists to produce apologetic literature as well as to prove their religion as "pragmatic, universal, and socially active".¹² Daharmapala movement did a lot

in this regard that was formed by Maha Bodhi Society and can be called the first global Buddhist missionary movement.¹³

Up to 1950, in whole Europe, only Germans and Britons were most actively contributing towards Buddhist studies, where the studies of Pali canon and Theravada Buddhism were dominant. This model had dominated “the European model of Buddhism.”¹⁴ Buddhism was conceived in Europe as a religion of rationality where a person purified himself from the defilements, namely, craving, and ignorance. From 1950 onwards, after World War 2, other traditions of Buddhism found their way in the academic circles of the West. If geographically divided, three schools of ‘Buddhology’ emerged in Europe for the purpose of academic study of Buddhism.

- i) Anglo-Germans
- ii) Franco-Belgian
- iii) The Leningrad¹⁵

T. W. Ryhs Davids and Herman Oldenburg led the Anglo-German school. Other prominent figures were Mrs. Ryhs Davids, Edward Conze, George Grimm, Paul Dehlke, and I. b. Horner. The Anglo-German school remained committed to study of only the Pali tradition thus with Theravada and “the best known school of interpretation whose works are still playing a leading role in Western Buddhism”.¹⁶ Franco-Belgian “utilized the Sanskrit materials, along with their corresponding translation and commentaries in Chinese and Tibetan.”¹⁷ The Franco-Belgian school, headed by E. Lamotte (1903-83), carried its studies of northern Buddhism after the World War 2 and was concerned with religious aspects of Mahayana Buddhism. Edward Conze (1904-79) did a lot to spread knowledge of Mahayana Buddhism through the Perfection of Wisdom literature.¹⁸ Since the present work is all about the Theravada tradition, this research will focus on the Anglo-German school that was devoted to Pali and the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, at least until 1950.

Survey of the Interpretative Trends of the Major Concepts of Early Buddhism

As mentioned before, three core concepts of *Anatta*, Nirvana, and, in Smith's case Dharma, will be discussed in the rest of the paper for their direct relevance with transcendence or divine, either in its affirmation or negation. The doctrine of *Anatta* (no-Self) has been a much-debated topic in the history of modern scholarship of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism explicitly denies any existence that can be labeled as 'self' or *Atama* (Self). Hence, it has the doctrine of *Anatta*, that is, 'No-Self'. The problem of rebirth and the moral responsibility of a person without considering a 'Self' led modern scholarship to face many difficulties in understanding the concept of *Anatta* in Theravada Buddhism. Some were inclined towards finding an abiding 'Self' in Buddhism, hence, considered it a theistic religion. Consequently, there have been many attempts to read a 'Self' behind the personality factors of a person, that are, *Khandha*—the five aggregates a person is made up of, according to Theravada—with the assertion that Buddha was actually denying the empirical 'self' not the real 'Self'. On the other hand, some tended towards the idea of the annihilation of a person along with his *Dukkha* (suffering) once he achieved Nirvana and died.

However, there have been those who viewed *Anatta* as a means to attain the pure ethical goal Nirvana, where one gets rid of those defilements that are reasons for one's repeated rebirth known as *Samsara*.¹⁹ In addition, the use of *Atta* (Self) and its link with Nirvana in Buddhist discourse has led the Western Buddhist academia of Pali tradition to utter various speculative ideas about its very nature. The following views are suggested by Becker as to the various approaches adopted by the Western scholars about to the notion of 'Self'.

- i) Annihiltionist View
- ii) Eternalistic View

iii) Ethical View²⁰

Annihilationist View

Among the first modern scholars of Buddhist studies in the West, Eugene Burnouf and his student Bartherlemy Saint-Hilaire (1805-1895) were of the view of annihilation of a person once he attains Nirvana and dies afterward. Their reasoning is based on the principle that since Nirvana is extinction of clinging and desires, it can fully be attained through the complete extinction of a person. This is so because nothing is left in Nirvana of that which constitutes existence.²¹ They base their argument on the famous simile of fire that is in *Digha Nikaya*.²²

A friend of Burnouf, and the founder of comparative religion, Max Müller (1823-1900) also had a nihilistic view of Nirvana in the beginning that he, however, changed later on.²³ In his earlier position, he considered Nirvana as a “bottomless gulf of total annihilation”.²⁴ He was of the view that the fundamental difference between the metaphysical conception of ‘Self’ in Brahmanism and that of Buddhism is different altogether. Brahmanism treats ‘Self’, known as Atman, as a higher being whose goal is to be absorbed into an absolute ‘Self’, that is, Brahma.²⁵ Theravada treats the ‘self’ as a transient phenomenon which leads him to conclude that Nirvana is the mere ceasing of this transient phenomenon into “the absolute nothingness”.²⁶ Later, when Müller analyzed Nirvana more ‘critically’ and found the existence of the Buddha after his death a compelling evidence, he changed his opinion about it by considering it as mere extinction of a person alone and not the ‘Self’.²⁷ Another German Buddhologist and a companion of Rhys David, Hermann Oldenberg also viewed Nirvana as annihilation. His position on the silence of the Buddha at the question of the existence of a ‘self’ is that the Buddha did not want to shock the hearer by uttering the complete extinction of a person in Nirvana.²⁸ A pioneer of Buddhist studies in Germany, Paul Dahlke was another interpreter of Nirvana as annihilation. He makes distinction

between a 'being' and 'becoming.' In his view, Buddhism suggests the transient 'becoming' of a person, where the ultimate goal is Nirvana or 'No-more-becoming.'²⁹ Similarly, R. C. Childers, having made a difference between Nirvana in life and Nirvana after death, concludes that *Arhatship* ends with annihilating existence.³⁰ In his book *The Way to Nirvana*, Poussin suggests the same view of annihilation of being in Nirvana after death. He concludes that the notion of *Anatta* leaves no room for survival of an *Arhat* "therefore it safely maintained that Nirvana is annihilation."³¹ The Theravada stance, however, does not endorse the interpretation of Nirvana as mere annihilation, for, this view presupposes a 'self' that is annihilated in the state of Nirvana.³² For Theravada, the defilements, greed, hatred and delusion, which keep a person in *Samsara*, are annihilated in *Nibbana*. Moreover, the status of an *Arhat* after his death is considered ineffable.

Eternalistic View

A considerable number of Western scholars take an eternalistic view of 'Self' while interpreting *Anatta*. The phenomenon of looking for an eternalistic interpretation of 'Self' is not confined to these Western scholars alone. It can also be traced to some of the early schools of Buddhism. The third century BC Pudgalavada school is a good example of this tradition. Similarly, many modern Western Buddhologists turned to those passages of the Pali Nikaya where the Buddha seemed to be more positive, instead, eternalistic in his view of human existence.³³ Among those scholars who initially took the nihilistic view of Nirvana but later changed it to eternalistic, are Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids (1857-1942), the co-founder of Pali Text Society. She makes a difference between the 'self' denied in *Anatta* and the real 'Self.'³⁴ The Theosophical interpretation of Buddhism did the most to present an eternalistic interpretation of Nirvana explicitly. It had a significant influence in shaping the esoteric understanding of Buddhism in the West.³⁵ The head of then Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky, interpreted Nirvana in an

Upanishadic way. In *Isis Unveiled*, she writes, "To reach Nirvana means absorption into the great universal soul, the latter representing a state, not an individual being or an anthropomorphic god. . . . That a spirit reaching such a state becomes a part of the integral whole, but never loses its individuality for all that."³⁶

Peter Harvey's work, *Self-less Mind: Personality, Consciousness, and Nirvana in Early Buddhism*, gives a more detailed and sophisticated treatment of 'Self' interpreters. He considers three types of Western scholars of the Pali tradition who read *Atta* (Self) beyond its conventional use in the *Nikayas*, that is, eternalistic.

- i) Those who think there is a real 'Self', which is not Nirvana, and an empirical self has the potential to become a real 'Self'.
- ii) Those who think there is a 'Self' that is not conditioned, that is, Nirvana. Moreover, it is inapprehensible.
- iii) Those who think that there is a real 'Self,' but it is beyond the categories of existence and non-existence.³⁷

Among those who consider that an empirical 'self' has the potentiality to change into a real 'Self' is I.B. Horner (1896-1991), a pupil of Mrs. Rhys Davids. Horner was born in England and was a president of Pali Text Society and the leading scholar of Pali literature. According to her, the early Buddhism has nothing to do with the teaching of *Anatta*; it only explains that none of the five *Khandha* are the real 'Self.' She considers that there is a logical opposite of *Anatta*, that is, 'Self' which can be attained by following the Buddha's path.³⁸ Second, among those who consider Nirvana as a true 'Self' is Edward Conze (1904-79). He was a German scholar of Buddhism. In one of his works, *Buddhist Thought in India*, he asserts that the Buddha does not deny 'Self', he only says that one cannot understand it.³⁹ Among the scholars, who are of the view that there is a real 'Self,' its status, however, is beyond the categories of existence or non-existence, are George Grimm

(1868-1945) and Joaquín Pérez-Remón (1922 - 1985). Grimm was very influential in early German Buddhist studies. He asserts the existence of an 'absolute' behind all the phenomena. This 'absolute,' however, is considered beyond all the categories of 'being' and 'non-being' and this was reason of the Buddha's silence when asked about 'self.'⁴⁰ Remón has taken a position akin to Grimm's in his analysis of the doctrine of *Anatta* in a much bolder way. His *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism* provides an interpretative study of the doctrine of 'no-self'. He focuses on the use of *Atta* (self) in Pali Nikaya. He is of the view that in *Nikaya* text, the word *Atta* is used in two ways. He calls them the existential 'self' and the metaphysical 'Self.'⁴¹ For him, the existential 'self' works as a moral agent that is in action. On the other hand, the metaphysical 'self' is the underlying 'self' which is beyond description. Moreover, the doctrine of *Anatta* should be taken in relative sense, that is, the phenomenal factors are not 'self,' and not in absolute sense.⁴²

Ethical View

When asked about the status of an *Arhat* after his death, the Buddha remained silent. Some Western scholars believe that the Buddha's silence was due to the fact that he considered it futile to discuss such issues.⁴³ Such a vision led several Western interprets to take Nirvana not as an ontological state but rather as an ethical goal. Among the first of these scholars, Henry Thomas Colebrook found similarities between Hinduism and Buddhism in the pursuit of curing ethical problems, instead of looking at Buddhism in its Indian context of eternal or transcendental bliss.⁴⁴ In his *Miscellaneous Essays* he writes, "a happy state of imperturbable apathy is the ultimate bliss (ananda) to which the Indian aspires."⁴⁵ In this sense, Nirvana refers to the extinction of desires and ethical defilements and not the extinction of a person, 'self' or existence. Rhys Davids—the founder of Pali Text Society—and Kalupahana took the same stance. Kalupahana considers Nirvana nothing other than a mental state that can be attained in this life. In his *Causality: The*

Central Philosophy of Buddhism, he writes, “it is a state of perfect mental health (aroga) of perfect happiness . . . attained in this life.”⁴⁶ Another contemporary scholar, Steven Collins, gives a detailed analysis of the use of *Atta* (self) in his *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism*. In this work, Collins shows how the doctrine of *Anatta* works as a “linguistic taboo in technical discourse.”⁴⁷ According to him, this linguistic taboo provides the opportunity for meditative self-analysis, on the one hand. On the other hand, it proves to be a particular identity of Buddhism as a system different from Brahmanism.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith on The Early Buddhism

Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s contributions in the field of the history of religion are primarily for his methodological inputs and advocacy of universal ecumenism. He was born in 1916 in Toronto Canada. His academic work is tremendous both quantitatively and the way it was perceived by the scholarly community. Smith began his enquiry about religious traditions with his unique assessment of ‘religion’ both for the purpose of acquiring valid knowledge about it and making such generic categories that could be applied to any religious phenomenon for the purpose of generalization. In this regard, he considered the term ‘religion’ inappropriate, rather distractive. Therefore, he proposed ‘faith’ and ‘cumulative tradition’ as alternative conceptual categories in order to study a religious phenomenon more aptly. A person of faith, therefore, becomes more important than the factual data, for it is that person who is in contact with transcendence. He suggests that a cumulative tradition is made up of persons of faith; hence, it must not be disregarded in the inquiry about any religious tradition, he suggests. In his critique of the term ‘religion,’ he attempts to show how historically transcendence has been discredited in the history of the modern West through secular means. The discredit of transcendence by modern Western secularism, which he considered to have begun in the Eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is

severely criticized by Smith. Under this trend of trivializing transcendence, the quality of faith has ceased to be identified as an activity of religious inquiry. Therefore, History of Religion, in his self-described function considers the persons of faith engaged with transcendence. He writes, “The traditions evolve. Men’s faith varies. God endures.”⁴⁸ The key themes one needs to consider before delving into what Smith has to offer as his ideas about Buddhism are his particular understanding of the term ‘religion,’ his views about transcendence, and his views about the role of symbols. His attempt to reconstruct the term ‘religion’, as did his desire to seek new ways to study religious phenomenon, was in all respect novel. As a new scheme of conceptualization, he offers two terms, ‘faith’ and ‘cumulative tradition’, in place of ‘religion.’ Smith views the relationship between faith and cumulative tradition as one of interdependence. He asserts that when a person becomes part of a religious movement, he experiences what the movement signifies: transcendence. Thus, understanding any movement empty of that signifier would be considered meaningless.⁴⁹ This transcendental reference is often missed by the outside observer of the movement, making the observation useless for the insider. “Participant is concerned with God; the observer has been concerned with ‘religion,’” he asserts.⁵⁰ Therefore, he considers the term ‘religion’ distracting both for the participant and the observer because it fails to express the transcendence and evolving history of a religious tradition. Thus, for Smith, a personal religiousness with reference to transcendence developed within its cumulative tradition forms person’s faith. His distinction between human knowledge and humane knowledge is critical to understand his view on modern knowledge when it comes studying other religious traditions. He contends that modern knowledge has an utter disregard for faith as an essential human quality. Whereas “Once the human at issue, the question of transcendence is not far behind.”⁵¹ This ‘impersonalization of knowledge,’ as he calls it, becomes the norm of the modern world where

propositional truths are considered final truths.⁵² He considers the study of myth and symbols as a remedy to reemphasize personal quality and religious phenomenon.⁵³

Having established the mundane and the transcendent domain of a religious tradition, Smith suggest dropping the term 'religion,' for it neglects one of these two domains, and proposes to replace it with 'cumulative tradition' and 'faith.' Through these notions religious life of a person can be studied properly without neglecting any of the two domains.⁵⁴ Therefore, for him, a meaningful scientific study must deal with the person of faith along with the other factual inquires of religious tradition.⁵⁵ Built on his notion of faith and cumulative tradition, Smith develops his critique of the methods of comparative religion and offers a new paradigm for the history of religions. In this regard, he is critical of the practice of naming religions by the West, for example, he says, "There was not 'a Buddhist religion', we have noted, in India; but there was a Buddhist community"⁵⁶ Moreover, he says, "The Buddha did not preach a religion; he was quite emphatic about this, and scolded those of his disciples who were concerned with such matters, for giving attention to the wrong issues. He revealed (disclosed to men) not a religion but a transcendent, pre-existent, moral law (Dharma)."⁵⁷ In his view, to consider Dharma as religion is to conceptualize it and thereby to disregard the quality of faith of the Buddhists.⁵⁸ In this regard, Smith corroborates with Hesse, whose novel *Siddhartha: An Indian Novel* interestingly depicts that though the Buddha's teachings are perfect, these are of no help without personal spiritual journey.⁵⁹

Dharma and Nirvana as Transcendence

In one of his detailed accounts of the Buddhist tradition, he starts his inquiry about the early Buddhist school known as Theravada. He sets the task of exploring the faith in that early period of Buddhism before him. He agrees with the Theravada stance that early Buddhism strictly precluded reference to

the divine, which is why many Western scholars considered it as an atheistic movement. He considers it as an ignorance on the part of Western scholars, for they are unable to see transcendence in it.⁶⁰ Since the study of the quality of faith in transcendence across all religious traditions is emphasized in Smith's discourse, he turns to its inquiry in early Buddhism, where he agrees with those Western Buddhologists who considered Nirvana as the ultimate reality hence transcendence. However, he considers Dharma as the proper object of faith as well as transcendent reality within the mundane. By way of example, he considers "analogous to a pre-existent logos"⁶¹ in Christianity. Although Smith agrees that the early Buddhist rejected the gods, a reason why there was an early trend of considering Buddhism as an atheistic religion by some Western scholars,⁶² he views it as the denial of a personal God rather than the denial of transcendence. He, therefore, finds the problem in the Western theistic conception rather than the absence of divine or transcendence in the early Buddhism. While discussing the new Western scholarly trends of considering Nirvana as a concept resembling the divine of the theistic traditions, he puts forward his own analysis. He is of the view that Western scholars have been more interested in Nirvana⁶³ than Dharma. For him, Dharma is significantly more feasible to be considered to have transcendent value for at least the early Buddhists. For Smith, Dharma as a universal and independent moral law is the only permanent thing in the mundane flux of 'suffering.' The early Buddhists had faith in Dharma as the ultimate reality discovered by the Buddha in his enlightenment. Therefore, he maintains that the Dharma, as a pre-existing transcendent moral law, a remedy to Dukkha (suffering), is discovered by the Buddha and not invented by him.⁶⁴ Therefore, the quality of Buddhist's faith is to be observed vis-à-vis their active participation in Dharma which is transcendent. An outsider must consider Dharma as the central notion in the life of the Buddhist, not only to understand their faith, but also to find theistic dimensions in it, he asserts.

Moreover, it is that quality of faith in transcendent Dharma, which may be considered divine, as he says, “Dharma itself, in Buddhist conception (particularly for Theravadins), as the one absolute in an otherwise evanescent universe, corresponds in some ways more closely to 'God' in Christian conception than to 'religion.’”⁶⁵ The faith involvement of a Buddhist is to be seen in his involvement with Dharma. To put it in Smith’s words, “[T]he moral law is absolute; and human life lived in accord with it is thereby delivered from the relativity in which all else consists, to participate in transcendence.”⁶⁶ While explaining different expression of God in various religions, he says that for a Theravada Buddhist, “Dhamma (Dharma) or Nirvana would be more appropriate.”⁶⁷ Smith does not neglect Nirvana as the ultimate transcendence, instead he acknowledges it. He emphasizes Dharma as another absolute more accessible to humans in the mundane realm as an “independent truth, an objective reality.”⁶⁸ He differentiates between Nirvana and Dharma as the two transcendental realms by considering the former as beyond the mundane, and the latter within the mundane. It is through Dharma where both converge. He says, “For each religious community, the transcendent and the concrete converge in some particular point or pattern or person or ideas.”⁶⁹ The concept of Dharma was not novel in the Indian context. In Hinduism, it entailed the pantheon of gods, where Brahman was the ultimate transcendent reality, along with moral and ritualistic laws. With this “metaphysics of morality,”⁷⁰ the Buddha made the Dharma an absolute transcendent reality while making the gods part of the mundane. Even Nirvana is validated through Dharma according to him. In this way, the Buddha contested the rigid ritualistic and individualistic trends based on the caste system and consequently elevated Dharma to transcendent moral law.⁷¹ According to Smith, ideas and symbols of religious traditions should be the primary object of a researcher in his attempt to see what they have been, how the people of faith operate through them and what they symbolize.⁷² Since

symbols play a significant role in Smith's framework, he emphasizes that the historical Buddha and his teaching played the ultimate role as the symbols of transcendence in Theravada Buddhism.⁷³ *Buddhavacanam* or the word of the Buddha carries the symbolic quality of transcendence. Again, while translating the term *Buddhavacanam* as the word of the Buddha, he turns to the example of 'Christ' as 'word' in Christianity. In his words, "Buddhavacanam, then, might almost be translated as "salvific word.""⁷⁴

Smith considers Buddhist ceremonies yet another example of symbolic significance in Buddhist tradition. By way of example, he offers his analysis of a Buddhist rite of initiation, known as *Shin Byu*, as a reenactment of the great renunciation of the Buddha.⁷⁵ In this rite, the Buddhists express faith through their involvement with transcendent Dharma, both at the personal and communal level. Thus, the task of comparative religion, for Smith, is not just to collect information about the institutions, beliefs and practices but also to trace what is symbolized through them.⁷⁶ The participation or involvement, of community in the ritual, itself symbolizes that there is something that transcend the mundane, which is moral in its character and "a window on eternity"⁷⁷ It is precisely here, Smith asserts, that the faith of a Buddhist can be seen. Therefore, he does not see the initiation of a boy in the ceremony as an individual going out in search of truth all alone, rather getting connected with the Buddha through the cumulative tradition.⁷⁸

Unlike some of the other Western scholars, Smith does acknowledge the religiosity found in the early Buddhist tradition. The early Buddhist movement was religious, in Smith analysis, "because through it men and women's lives were lived in what the Western world has traditionally called the presence of God".⁷⁹ This religiosity is expressed through the faith of the Buddhist. The Buddha taught faith and he himself "certainly had faith: a religious faith, mighty, contagious."⁸⁰ The faith is interwoven with an absolute transcendent moral law known as Dharma. It is expressed and

nourished through rituals, rites, and sacred literature both at the personal and communal level. Dharma as a moral law leads to the ultimate transcendent Nirvana which is beyond the mundane. Glimpses of the divine are found in these two notions. Through these, the Buddhists “tasted transcendence,”⁸¹ Smith insists, “he (the Buddha) did not call God but I do.”⁸² The mood of conveying the involvement of man with transcendence is a symbol for Smith, like the heart is a symbol of affection for others when one transcends oneself. Hence, the quality of ‘more’ is found in symbols. A student of religious tradition, therefore, must pay attention to its symbols in relation to the persons involved with them. For him, rituals as symbols can connect people with transcendence through participation in which many people have been participating in history.⁸³ Unlike Durkheim, Smith believes, it is the community that finds its existence through religion or other forms of transcendental truths, like, friendship, love, and so on.⁸⁴

In comparison with the other Western Buddhologists discussed above, it can be remarked that Smith’s position is in line with the eternalists on the one hand. On the other hand, his overwhelming emphasis on the Dharma as a “transcendent pattern of right conduct”⁸⁵ in the Theravada tradition, aligns him with those who consider the ethical view of the ultimate reality. As Willard G. Oxtoby (1933-2003) observes in his editorial note, when it comes to the Theravada tradition, Smith’s position on the role and nature of Dharma is analogous to the role and nature of God in the West.⁸⁶ It would not be an exaggeration to say that along with his ideational framework in terms of faith, cumulative tradition, transcendence, etcetera, his reading of earlier Buddhist tradition can be considered a Christian understanding of Buddhist tradition. The analogies he draws between Dharma and pre-existent logos, and the *Buddhavacanam* (the word of the Buddha) with that of the ‘word’ as Christ, are indicative in this regard. Moreover, His insistence on

faith is not empty of serious problems which seems to be from his Christian background, as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi suggests.⁸⁷

Conclusion

By presenting a brief historical sketch of Buddhist studies in the West, it has been shown how Buddhist studies in the West began while focusing exclusively on the Theravada tradition. A brief account is given about those differences that emerged between a considerable number of eminent Anglo-German Buddhologists as to some crucial notions, such as, 'Self', Nirvana and Dharma. It is shown how these Western scholars of early Buddhism interpreted those notion in more or less three different ways; eternalistic, annihilationist and ethical. Smith's understanding of early Buddhism is discussed to locate his position among the Western reflections on core ideas of Buddhist tradition. It is concluded that Smith offers a unique understanding of the early Buddhism with the help of his particular conceptual apparatus, where faith, cumulative tradition and religious symbols along with the critique of the concept 'religion' play a critical role. Nonetheless, some of the conclusions he reached are similar to those of other Buddhologists. His consideration of Nirvana and Dharma as transcendent realities puts him into the camp of those Western scholars who held the eternalistic view of those notions. However, his division between Nirvana as transcendence beyond the mundane and Dharma as transcendence within the mundane is unique and suggestive of his Christian reading of the Buddhist tradition. Moreover, his view of Dharma as the absolute moral law aligns him also with those who hold the ethical view of these notions.

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