

BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY AND QUANTUM MECHANICS

Robert Alan Paul, November 2016

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I recently attended a talk delivered by a physicist who is also a Christian. He is a member of a Canadian association of scientist Christians (distinct from Christian Scientists), which sponsored a series of such talks. The presentation was about physics and Christianity, with a focus on quantum mechanics.

I attended with my usual ulterior motives, with arrogance at the base – thinking that I know things others don't. Hence, I would 'listen' with the idea of 'correcting' the errors that are typical when people talk about physics and religion. They have either too little understanding of physics, or of the history and philosophy of science in general. Most talks I attend, or papers I read in this context concern the association between physics and Buddhism, hence there is also frequently a lapse in their understanding of the latter – at least compared with what I think I know.

I rarely get involved with discussions of science and Christianity, although I have investigated Dawkins and his analysis of the incompatibility of evolutionary science and 'religion.' (It's interesting to have discovered someone even more arrogant than I am, based on significant gaps in knowledge about the nature of religion beyond Bible-thumping Christianity. But that is another story, and another article.) I generally have little patience for conventional theists or people who 'believe' and have 'faith' as their guiding framework rather than meaning, understanding, knowledge and reason based on empirical evidence. This has been the case in relation to my Buddhist Sangha nearly as much as in relation to Christians.

My arrogance and lack of patience have been challenged with new insight into the ways belief and faith permeate my own Buddhist practice. How much do I truly 'know' about my own practice, and how much do I take on faith? This is a puzzlement for someone who prides himself on reason and reliance on evidence.

However, pride goeth before the fall. I was surprised to find myself in the midst of this talk, listening with an open mind, with none of my typical cynical skepticism about all things Christian. Since he was a physicist with a decent knowledge of quantum physics, although lacking in relevant knowledge of history and philosophy, I was able to focus on a question that has become important to me personally: How do I respond to the apparent inconsistency between the evidential requirements of science and the evidential requirements of my own religion and personal journey?

This journey in recent times has required a completely devastating destruction of my pride and arrogance, and I have realized just how important it is to give up my reliance on reason, understanding and thoughts in general, and rather relate to attention and awareness of my physical body moving in space and time.

After introducing my own issues regarding my personal path as a Buddhist, philosopher and physicist, I posed my question to the speaker: 'How do you, as a Christian with beliefs acquired from your personal journey and application of the method of prayer, informed by faith in the Bible and Christ, respond to the apparent discrepancies in evidential requirements between those forms of knowledge and the forms of knowledge gained from empirical sciences?' He acknowledged my question in a response informed by his own relationship to his own faith. I have to respond informed by my own. To date, the question is still out there, unanswered. Maybe that is where it should be.