

ESCHATOLOGY OF THE SOUL AND ESCHATOLOGY WITHOUT A SOUL

R.J. Zwi WERBLOWSKY †

Martin Buber Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion,
The Hebrew University, JERUSALEM

The ultimate destiny of the soul is often conceived in terms of a final journey to some heavenly sphere – whether Amida's Pure Land, diverse other Buddha Lands, the Elysian fields, Walhalla, the Christian Paradise (= the Jewish celestial Garden of Eden = the Muslim *djannat*). Of course there are celestial journeys which are not eschatological but part of a regular pattern of spiritual life (e.g., mystical, shamanistic, visionary, extatic), even as there are *post-mortem* (as well as visionary *ante-mortem*) journeys through various cosmic spheres. Vision of, meditation on, or the quest of union with, the divine are usually described as an "ascent" (*scala mentis ad deum*), and one great spiritual teacher even acquired the title "ladder-man" (St. John Climacus). There is no need of examples here, as every student of religions has his favorite collection, from the gnostic climate described by W. BOUSSET in his classic essay *Die Himmelsreise der Seele*, the Jewish Merkabah travellers and even St. Paul, to Eliade's "pan-shamanism". This is not the place to repeat my urgent appeal to all students of religion to declare, for the benefit of our discipline, a moratorium on the use of the word "shamanism". But before proceeding to my main theme, it may not be amiss to draw attention to the fact that, as the term *ascensus* (or, conversely, the *descensus ad inferos*) suggests, every system of religion of necessity has a cosmology without which terms like *ascensus* or *descensus* would be meaningless. Only spiritual systems based on what K. GOLDAMMER called *Die Entwertung des Räumlichen* can do without cosmology. Perhaps the best illustration is the unfortunately untranslatable German term which F. HEILER used for Buddhist meditation: *Versenkung*. But even in these cases the language of "vertical" metaphors cannot be completely discarded. At the beginning of the Heart-Sūtra of the *Prajñāpāramitā* we find the *Bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara in "deep" meditation "looking down" in his compassion on the suffering beings.

And with *Versenkung* we come to Buddhism and our main theme. The notion of the liberation of the soul from all attachments that tie it to the wheel of *karma* and that would bring it to its "eschatological" goal of *mokṣa* is an Indian commonplace. We cannot discuss here in detail two of the main problems arising out of the Buddha's teaching: the difference between *nirvāṇa* and *mokṣa*, and why (from a Hindu point of view) the Buddha so much complicated his soteriology by insisting on the doctrine of *anatta*. I am speaking here deliberately of a complication, since it is not easy to explain what is gained in terms of the soteriological goal of total liberation from the karmic wheel of existences by admitting our empirical reality as persons i.e., the empirical reality of certain compounds of material and mental factors and elements (*nāma-rūpa*) which constitute our entity as persons, but as persons without an ontological nucleus, *ātman*, or self. Persons without Selves (to borrow the happy phrase of Steven COLLINS' book *Selfless Persons*, 1982). Liberation viz. *mokṣa* thus becomes the enlightened realisation of the emptiness of not only the illusory self but also of the constituent *skandhas* and all *dharmas*. The problem is complicated by the assumption of some kind of sequence of continuity of this selfless existence. It is beside the point to say that the Buddha, being Indian, simply and unquestioningly adopted the

current matter-of-course belief in rebirth (which also means re-lying). Without the belief in rebirth the whole soteriological scheme of Buddhism would collapse. This, of course, renders the question what exactly it is that is reborn when there is no *substantia animae* or comparable entity all the more difficult and elusive. The question becomes even more puzzling if we take into account the possibility of the recollection, at certain stages, of previous “incarnations”. So some kind of continuous identity after all? The problem was with Buddhism since its beginnings. We only have to think of the *Pudgalavadins*. The proposed solutions of this apparent contradiction range from the simplistic to the extremely subtle and need not detain us here. At any rate, the Buddha’s utterance on the subject (as recorded in the *Visuddhi Magga*) could hardly be more explicit:

«Suffering exists, but no sufferer is found.
The deed is, but no doer of the deed is there.
Nirvāṇa is, but not the man who enters it.
The Path is, but no traveller on it».

In the circumstance it is obvious that in spite of its top-heavy philosophical apparatus and terminology, Buddhist discourse is not, strictly speaking, philosophical. It is, depending on the circumstances (and again in Steven Collins’ felicitous phrase), a matter of «soteriological strategy».

Our present concern is neither philosophy nor *Abhidhamma*, but the practical result of this quandary, which is the duality inherent in the very nature of the *Buddhadhamma*. I am not referring here to the duality *sangha* and laymen but to elitist Buddhism on the one hand and (not folk-Buddhism! but) the *de facto* soteriology of the ordinary Buddhist-in-the-street (meaning also in his house and in the temple). Each of us exists as the product of *his karma*, accumulated in *his* previous existences, and in the knowledge that the Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path can help *him* to improve *his karma* and assure *him* a better rebirth. The altruistic habit of sharing acquired merit with *others*, so popular and widely practised in *Theravāda* countries, is a transfer of part of *my* merit to other egos. Buddhist *post-mortem* rites are, in actual fact, nothing but the generation of merits to be applied to the defunct. One suspects that the worst and the most shocking news for an ordinary Buddhist would be the communication that after his demise he would enter *parinirvāṇa*. What he wants is a better rebirth (if possible without the intermediary stay in purgatory), and if possible – in a Mahāyānist context – rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land, the Buddhist counterpart to the western Paradise but, being Buddhist, not eternal. Inconsistencies are inevitable in mythological as in philosophical systems. When the Buddha preached the *Sūtra* of the Lotus-Flower of the Wonderful Law, he was surrounded in addition to tens of thousands of *bodhisattvas*, *bhikkus*, gods, dragon-kings etc. also by twelve thousand *arhats* who, in spite of being *arhats*, evidently had not lost their identity. It is thus obvious that we are dealing with two eschatologies at least: an absolute and a relative one.

There is, in fact, only one *eschaton* for that reality of existence which is not a soul but a modality of continuity of existence, a continuity which, by the way, has to be understood as a sequence of momentary states. Bergson’s *durée* is not a Buddhist obsession. This *eschaton*, *nirvāṇa*, is the one and only unconditioned absolute. The fact that in some Mahāyānist schools immanence and transcendence are identified, and that these same schools practise rites that are as complicated and impressive as they are photogenic in order to assure to the defunct a better rebirth (rather than *nirvāṇa*) is irrelevant to our present purpose. The result of this dual eschatology is a *de facto* Buddhist life which, in spite of theoretical commitment to the doctrine of *anatta*, is hardly distinguishable in its “intentionality” from the religious life of an average *ātman*-believing Hindu aspiring to *mokṣa*.

ESCHATOLOGY WITHOUT SOUL

This short note on the paradox inherent in the most essential of all Buddhist doctrines, that of *anatta*, will only hint at but not discuss in detail two related questions. Is there in Buddhism a collective, socio-political eschatology, of the type known in other cultures as messianism or millenarianism? One would guess, theoretically, that the answer is negative. Buddhism is essentially an a-political and individualist teaching of salvation. But the dynamics of religion as lived by actual people in an actual world does not necessarily obey to excogitations of philosophers and theologians. The future Buddha Maitreya, biding his time in the *Tuṣita*-heaven, has been at the centre of many a “messianic” movement and ideology, and many religious revivals “tainted” with Maitreyanism have not without reason been considered subversive by governments.

Also social life has its problems of continuity, and every society has its rules and regulations for the transfer of rights, status, property, obligations etc. Heredity (especially primogeniture) and elections are two examples of such mechanisms. Heredity is out of the question when the holders of power are celibate. Tibetan Buddhism is unique in harnessing the doctrine of reincarnation to the mechanism of transmitting succession. Authorised wise men identify incarnations of a high order in children born at the moment of the passing away of a *tulku*. The best known examples are the Dalai Lama (reincarnation of Avalokiteśvara) and the Panchen Lama (incarnation of Amitābha). But as these are *Bodhisattvas*, there is no eschatological dimension to the matter. The *Bodhisattva*, after all, has renounced his *eschaton* in order to save suffering beings.

In conclusion, let us return to where we began. Buddhism knows two levels of eschatology: an eschatology *ad interim* which is practically an eschatology of the soul, and an absolute eschatology (since *nirvāṇa* is the only absolute) which is an eschatology of existence and not the eschatology of a non-existent soul.