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## **Spirituality as Mindfulness: Biblical and Buddhist Approaches<sup>1</sup>**

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Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2010, pp. 38-51 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/scs.0.0082](https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.0.0082)



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# Spirituality as Mindfulness: Biblical and Buddhist Approaches<sup>1</sup>

ALOYSIUS PIERIS, SJ

The practice of mindfulness is widely known as specific to Buddhist spirituality. However, there is also a Christian version of it running through the First and the Second Testaments. The main purpose of this essay is to persuade Christians that it is both appropriate and necessary to employ the category of mindfulness not only in explaining and expounding but also in practicing and promoting their experience of God in Christ. In the process of teaching and practicing the Buddhist version of mindfulness I have discovered its foundational meaning and purpose to be soteriologically valid and have become convinced that its Christian variant needs to be formally recognized and restored in the Church. For despite the non-negotiable differences between Buddhism and Christianity—differences derived mainly from each religion's stance vis-à-vis the existence of, and faith in, an Absolute Personal Creator-Redeemer God—the exercise of mindfulness as recommended in the two religions is the common ground on which they display their affinity as well as their irreconcilably distinctive identities.

Mindfulness as I am using the term in this essay is primarily an art of becoming wholesome and fully human rather than a mere technique for acquisition of psychic powers or a philosophical tool for analyzing the mind. It can, therefore, be transmitted only in a manner that is commensurate with its *experiential* character. That may be why in the history of both Buddhism and Christianity those who have been practicing mindfulness have distanced themselves from the scholastics. Spiritual masters such as Bodhidharma repudiated philosophical speculations of the Buddhist scholiasts. Ignatius of Loyola lamented that the study of scholastic theology had dried up his heart; he recommended the affective or positive theology of the Fathers as conducive to spirituality and relegated scholastic theology to the realm of apologetics. When passing on a spiritual tradition, therefore, we must be wary of the scholastic approach, sometimes misnamed 'scientific' or *wissenschaftliches*, which, when employed in matters pertaining to the Spirit, is no more than one's self-diffidence boosted by the authority of secondary sources. What matters is not my knowledge of what they *say* about mindfulness, but the fruit, which my own humble struggle to practice it, produces in me for my benefit and for the benefit of others.

That is one of the reasons why I have written relatively little about this matter and have preferred to employ the oral mode of transmission in many places on this globe when handing on the spirituality of mindfulness that I myself have received in that same manner. As a Jesuit I have absorbed the Ignatian practice of “God-awareness” (Christian Mindfulness) from the Novitiate onwards through oral communication reinforced by practice; it is not different from the manner in which I learnt and passed on the practice of Buddhist *sati-paṭṭhāna* and *vipassanā* to others. I admit that I have read and studied both primary and secondary sources dealing with this theme, but these texts made sense only in the light of the living tradition that is conveyed from master to pupil. Hence I handle this subject not only in the way I received it but also in the way I made it my own. My main motive is not to lecture on mindfulness but to promote a paradigm shift in the perception, practice and passing on of the spiritual praxis proper to biblical Christianity.

It may be relevant here to recall gratefully a fraternal correction I was kindly offered by the Archimandrite Ambrosius of the Greek Orthodox Church. After listening to a lecture I delivered at Oxford University some years ago, he gently chided me (in private, not in public) for not perceiving the difference between the brand of Hellenism affecting Western theology that had absorbed the philosophical thought of ancient Greece, and the Hellenism of Eastern Orthodox theology which had assimilated the spiritual praxis of their non-Christian ancestors. Mulling over this critical observation of his, I came to understand why our scholastic tradition has not given importance to what Greek Orthodox spirituality has named *nepsis* (vigilance), which is its own technical term for mindfulness and why Thomism is deafeningly silent about the ancient praxis of discernment, with its emphasis more on the virtue of prudence. A “discerning person” (*anthrōpos diakritikos*), according to the Orthodox Greeks, is someone perpetually mindful or watchful of God working in all things and at all times. Ever conscious of God’s Love, which is God’s Will, a vigilant Christian is never taken unawares by circumstances. In the eschatological discourses of the Gospels, Jesus advises us to read the cosmic signs that announce God’s recurrent visitations and thus remain watchful and awake every hour of the day and night, that is to say, remain perpetually mindful. Hence there is no better description of biblical spirituality than ceaseless vigilance or perpetual mindfulness. Understandably, therefore, it is the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that I resort to in the discourse that follows, not the scholastic tradition.

## **A BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY OF MINDFULNESS**

The retrieval or a fuller appreciation of the place of mindfulness in Christian spirituality will require us to rethink the classic Christian understanding of



*Portraits of War* © Agron Dragaj

contemplation and the related distinction between contemplation and action. St. Basil was among the first Christians to discard this binomial as a fruit of a non-biblical tradition that, according to him, had been influenced by a rather dubious preoccupation with Greek philosophy. It is also worth noting that *theoria*, the Greek word for contemplation, is conspicuously absent not only in the New Testament but even in the early Greek Christian literature. This paradigm, furthermore, is not only unbiblical but also unbuddhistic. In fact the Indic tradition prefers to discuss spirituality in terms of a *triple emphasis*:

namely the affective (*bhakti*), the active (*karma*), and the cognitive (*jñāna*). Mindfulness pervades all these three dimensions. Hence I would suggest that even a comparative study of Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian Spirituality could be a fruitful exercise only if conducted along the common theme of mindfulness rather than on the binary track of “contemplation (*theoria*) and action (*praxis*).”<sup>2</sup>

The teaching of Evagrius Pontificus, one of the earliest exponents of Christian asceticism, provides a good example of how Greek ideas of contemplation entered into the discourse of Christian spirituality. On the assumption that “knowledge assimilates the knower to the known,” he concluded quite logically that knowledge of the Trinity (that is, the contemplative vision of God) was already an assimilation of the human person to the Triune God. But, as Thomas Cardinal Spidlik, S.J., observes, “most ascetics were afraid of this *delusion*, and with good reason,” and cites the opinion of an early sixth-century author, Philoxenus of Mabbug, who argued [in Spidlik’s words] that: “Holiness differs from contemplation, and for two reasons: 1) because contemplation can exist without holiness; 2) because holiness can exist without contemplation . . . for charity alone gives value to everything, whether contemplation or works.”<sup>3</sup>

There are at least three distinct notions of contemplation in the current literature on Christian spirituality and the inability to distinguish between and among them has contributed, I believe, to the unwillingness of many Christians to move toward an authentic practice of Christian mindfulness. In the classical sense of “infused mystical prayer,” contemplation does not necessarily guarantee “union with God” as Theresa of Avila, a great mystic herself, insists in *The Interior Castle*, pointing to works of charity as that which bring about that union. Ignatius of Loyola would have us welcome and accept it with humility as a gratuitous gift of God, but nowhere in his writings, as far as I know, has he identified it as a constitutively essential dimension of salvation and spirituality. Hence Ignatius uses the word contemplation (and this is the second meaning), only to designate what we might call a “formal” prayer (an essential means rather than the essence of spirituality) in which all the senses join the intellect on *re-presenting* Gospel scenes or other scenes to one’s memory so as to relive them with all one’s being and participate in them. It is a sort of an *anamnesis* by which past events become our here and now. This method of prayer which he calls contemplation, was inherited from Ludolf of Saxony and Erasmus. It is also an exercise of mindfulness but in a formal way, in the sense that it interrupts all apostolic activity rather than accompany it.

Rather, in tune with the scriptural tradition, he explained spirituality as “seeing/finding God in all things and all things in God.” This “God-awareness” is not a formal prayer like mystical contemplation mentioned above or the Ignatian contemplation of the *Exercises*; rather it is a permanent prayerful

attitude or an incessantly loving mindfulness of God that accompanies action. Hence Ignatius has never employed the term contemplation to designate this kind of unceasing God-awareness, which he promoted as the ideal spirituality for his followers. It was Jerome Nadal, one of the early exponents of Jesuit spirituality, who invented the phrase “contemplative in action,” using the word contemplative to express this Ignatian spirituality of continuous God awareness accompanying apostolic activity, or a continuous listening mode ensuring discernment and execution of God’s word which is God’s will. This is the third connotation of the word contemplation, a misnomer for the biblical spirituality we define as mindfulness here. It may also be helpful to recall that even in the Rule of St. Benedict, it is *lectio divina*, which the scriptural prayer associated with listening to the Lord’s word, that is advocated. Benedict is also a safe guide in this matter.

Among the Greek Fathers, St. Basil’s work provides a good model to follow. It is well known that Basil resisted Hellenistic philosophy encroaching into Christianity and stubbornly adhered to the biblical sources in formulating his monastic spirituality, virtually banishing the word contemplation (*theoria*) from his vocabulary, and resorting to the continual remembrance of God as the hallmark of his spirituality.<sup>4</sup> He believed that *theoria*, or contemplative seeing, “which conveys the impatient desire of the Greeks to acquire a direct experience of what is seen,” runs counter to the Scriptures which teach that we cannot have a direct vision of God. As Spidlik notes, “Israel *remembered* Yahweh by mentioning, *recalling*, preserving, and invoking God’s mighty deeds.”<sup>5</sup> Biblical spirituality is essentially one of remembrance or being mindful.

Let me supplement Spidlik’s observation by recalling another dimension of the Scriptural spirituality of mindfulness: it is not merely a case of our remembering the great deeds of God, but it is actually God’s constant mindfulness of us that accounts for God’s interventions in our life, interventions which we consequently commemorate and celebrate. From God’s own perspective, remembrance is creation, forgetting is annihilation. We exist because we are remembered by God. On the other hand, “remember not our sins” is a biblical plea for forgiveness, meaning “blot out our sins forever.” In return we promise that we too shall not remember the sins of others. To be forgotten by God is to stop existing altogether. We who were eternally conceived in the Divine Mind were not simply “called” into existence when we were created, but literally “recalled” into existence, which is to say, it was when God remembered us that we came to be who and what we are. Hence we remember God in our turn. Our spirituality, therefore, is a covenantal relationship of reciprocal mindfulness.

## RECOLLECTION AND RECOGNITION IN THE BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

Long experience of teaching and practicing mindfulness has convinced me of the importance of two shades of meaning in the notion of mindfulness, namely, recollection and recognition. They are very different mental events, albeit mutually inclusive. Understanding their difference is crucial to the proper practice of Christian mindfulness as well as for knowing how it differs from its Buddhist counterpart.

Recollection is a trip to the past. We are summoned to remember YHWH's marvelous activity in Creation as well as God's mighty deeds of the past as they have affected our personal and collective life. We are invited to *recall* how He has been *mindful* of us. The Scriptures constantly exhort us to indulge in this exercise, which brings about two interior dispositions in our heart: gratitude and trust. Recalling the past we say "God we thank you"; and on that basis, we look to the future and say "God we trust you." This is a basic axiom in Christian spirituality.

When we ceaselessly recall how our motherly Father has been mindful of us in all the vicissitudes of our life, fighting our battles with us, suffering our humiliations and overcoming them within us and through us, filling us with consolation, we cannot but fall down on our knees and burst into psalms of praise and thanksgiving; and at the same time, on the basis of that past experience, we become profoundly convinced that God is so reliable (*'emet*) that we can unreservedly rely on Her in the future too. *'Emuna*, the biblical word for "faith" literally means "total reliance" on the one and only Person who is "totally reliable" (*'emet*). Faith, which is reliance on God (and on no other god of our making) can be experienced only in the process of incessantly recalling how She has demonstrated Her reliability in the past.

This biblical idea of faith differs radically from the Greek philosopher's notion of faith (*pistis*), which was understood in terms of our mental posture before a mere opinion (*doxa*) and contrasted with the knowledge (*gnōsis*) whose object is truth (*alētheia*). If we put aside this manner of distinguishing faith and knowledge, we would realize that the faith, which the Bible speaks of, is *not* an intellectual assent to an incomprehensible truth revealed to us by a knowledgeable person (divine or ecclesiastical), but an act of trust in a Person whose covenantal love (*hesed*) makes that Person totally trustworthy (*'emet*), i.e., "true to Her word."

The opposite of faith, therefore, is not doubt or reason as in scholastic theology but *anxiety* that results in *hoarding*, to use two significant terms employed by Jesus and recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6:25–34) and in the Instructions on the Plain (Lk. 12:22–39). Anxiety results from a



lack of absolute trust in the Creator; hoarding from absolute trust in creatures, which is stark idolatry. Our practice of faith consists of an anxiety-free life of confidence in our maternal Father, “a God who loves us from the depth of Her womb” (*’El raḥūm*) and therefore incapable of abandoning us. Such faith or trust is manifested in living lightheartedly like the birds in the air and the lilies in the fields.

It is important to note, nevertheless, that these two fruits of recollection, that is gratitude and faith, have to be supplemented by a third ingredient of *remembrance* before one can attain Christian maturity, and that is recognition which brings the past and the future into a mindfulness of the present. Here mindfulness as attention plays a major role. This proposition calls for a lengthier comment.

Recognition is that dimension of mindfulness which complements grateful remembrance of the past and the trustful hope for the future with a discerning mindfulness of the present moment, when the same God confronts us and invites us here and now with Her Word. Now God’s Word, as connoted by the Hebrew word *dabar*, is a divine request, a loving command. Here again it differs from the Greek concept of the Word as *logos*, which designates either an idea to be contemplated in spirituality, or reason for explaining the created reality in theology. By contrast the response to *dabar*, God’s Word-request, is compliance with the request expressed by that Word, that is to say, action which is the apex of biblical spirituality, although traditional theology under the influence of Greek thought had undervalued it as something inferior to contemplation. My growing familiarity with God, which I acquire mainly by my constant remembrance of God’s deeds in the past, makes it easy for me to recognize Her voice and Her activity in my life at the present moment and respond to it promptly and with joy. I become a “discerning person” (*anthrōpos diakritikos*), someone ever attentive to God’s loving speech-commands.

The action-response to the request-word recognized by me in the present moment is known in the Bible as “hearing,” which is the technical term both in biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek for obedience. It is another biblical synonym for spirituality. Doing what God wills for me here and now is “Christian perfection.” Often the divine Will or God’s “word-request” is a very loving non-coercive invitation to commit oneself to a mission of love and justice and it invariably implies readiness to renounce one’s own self-destructive egocentricity, which is what stands in the way of spiritual progress.<sup>6</sup> This recognition of God’s loving Will for me here and now, culminating in my action in accordance with it, is possible only in a climate of “thanksgiving and trust” generated by recollection. Thus our mindfulness should pervade the past, present and future, in such a way that the present action-response to God recognized as addressing us here and now transforms our grateful recollection of the past as





*Fisherman Sri Lanka* © Tim Gravestock

well as our trustful hope in God's fidelity in the future into a life of obedience. This manner of practicing mindfulness contrasts with that of the Buddhists, as we are about to see, except in one significant area: both spiritualities identify selfishness as the obstacle to a life of freedom.

### **RECOLLECTION AND RECOGNITION IN THE BUDDHIST PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness fostered in Buddhism is fundamentally an appeal to vigilance or watchfulness. The title Buddha literally means the "One who is awake." Whoever is not awakened is doped, intoxicated, somnolent or asleep. Thus the Sanskrit root *mad* (etymologically related to the English word "mad") conveys the idea of mental slowness or drowsiness in the recurrent Pali Canonical term, *pamāda*. Hence mindfulness is often referred to as *appamāda*, "absence of mental lethargy"; it is a negative term signifying the positive sense of alertness. The *Dhammapada*, an anthology of spiritual *fioretti* attributed to the Buddha, contains this oft quoted dictum: *appamādo amata-padaṇi, pamādo maccuno padam*, which means "watchfulness is the basis of [or the way to] deathlessness, [whereas] slackness is the basis of [or the way to] death." To be spiritually alive is to be incessantly mindful.

True to its non-theistic character, Buddhism does not identify the object of mindfulness as God or God's will. On the contrary, one is called to be mindful of all things including oneself as impermanent (*anicca*), therefore utterly frus-

trating (*dukkha*) and consequently, “without substance” (*anatta*). The insight by which this threefold nature of reality is realized coincides with liberation from all addiction (*upādāna*). The result is pure contentment, that is “satisfaction with the minimum necessary for life” (*appicchatā*) accompanied by joy or beatitude (*santutṭhi*) and overlapping with the elimination of Greed (*taṇhā-nirodha*), a synonym for final release (*nibbāna / nirvāṇa*). Thus mindfulness is an essential step in the path of Buddhist spirituality. The ultimate aim in making that exercise is none other than “a life free of *dukkha*,” the Buddhist counterpart of the anxiety-free life of the beatitudes, which Jesus has formulated in a theistic idiom.

The Buddhist texts which refer to the practice of *sati-paṭṭhāna* (establishment of mindfulness) and other related literature make a distinction similar to that I have made with reference to biblical spirituality, namely between *recollection* and *recognition*. The Ābhidhammika writers or Buddhist Scholastics clearly associate the concept of “recognition” (*saññā*) or “knowing again” (*puna-saññāna*) with the concept of “mindfulness” (*sati*), though in the thinking of these exegetes the two concepts often fade away into each other.<sup>7</sup> Commonsense confirms the truth of this distinction; when I recall something I go back to the non-existent past, but when I recognize something, the non-existent past can and often does affect my present perception of a contemporary event. Let us see how these two mental functions operate in Buddhist practice of mindfulness.

The Buddha is often described as recalling (*anussaraṇa*) his past lives in order to instruct the disciples about one or the other facet of the Dhamma. The recollection of one’s past existences (*pubbenivāsānussati*) is invariably present in a liberated person, that is someone who has experienced salvific insight (*vipassanā*) into reality as it is. The exercise of recalling the Buddha and his qualities (*Buddhānussati*), or recalling a death scene (*marañānussati*) as a means of acquiring mindfulness with regard to the three characteristics of reality, is recommended as a wholesome spiritual exercise.

But when it comes to recognition, there seems to be an epistemic as well as an ethical pitfall to be avoided. It is true that in the normal growth of human persons, recognition is an essential element, just as thinking is. Thinking consists of a chain of thoughts (*citta-santāna*), which are actually labels we attach to phenomena. In fact, a child who cannot mentally label things (concept formation) and recognize things (exercise of memory) is not capable of learning anything in life. Such a child would be mentally retarded. Concept-formation and recognition are two human potentialities that guarantee advancement not only in secular knowledge but also in religious knowledge. But when it comes to salvific knowledge (saving wisdom), one has to transcend both recognition

and thinking in order to arrive at a “thought-free insight into the phenomena in their process of becoming” (*yathābhūtaññāna*).

Hence we have here a *caveat* in Buddhism with regard to the exercise of memory as recognition. In my trilogy on the notion of *saññā*, I draw attention to the way an “ideology” (*diṭṭhi*) enters the perception of the present reality through interference of the past-experiences, and prevents one from realizing the salvific truth about phenomena. In the Buddha’s example of the blind men and the elephant, cited in the Scriptural text *Udāna*, each blind man allows his past experience to mislead him with regard to the present object he is trying to understand, and the result is a fist-fight among them. The example of the deer and the scarecrow, which the famous exegete Buddhaghosa adduces to illustrate this same phenomenon, also confirms the teaching of the Buddha on this point; for when the image of a human person as a source of danger, which the deer have acquired from their past experiences of deer-hunters, is *recognized* in the scarecrow, taking it to be a real human being, the memory of the past interferes and distorts the present perception. The deer do not see “the reality as it is.” If they did, they would not be scared by a human effigy made of straw.

That is why the Buddhists distinguish between right mindfulness (*sammāsati*) and wrong mindfulness (*micchāsati*). Right mindfulness is the awareness of the present as the present without interference from past memories or future anxieties. In fact meditation masters such as Thich Nhat Hahn never tire of repeating the legend about how the Buddha replied to the question “What is your method for the realization of the truth?” “We walk, we eat, we bathe, we sit . . .” was the Buddha’s answer. “What is special in that? We all do the same,” responded the questioner. “Friend,” replied the Buddha, “when we sit, we are *conscious* of our sitting; when we bathe, we *know* we are bathing; when we walk, we are *aware* that we walk . . . and so with everything we do.”

Most of us move without being aware of moving. We have deadened what is most human in us. The capacity for mindfulness is a distinguishing mark of a human being. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness reminds us that it is in developing that capacity that one reaches spiritual maturity.

## **THE PLACE OF THE POOR IN THE CHRISTIAN PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS**

The first council recorded in the history of Christianity (*Acts 15: 1–29*) demanded “only one thing” from the church’s ministers: that they “remember the poor,” which, Paul says, was just what he always “eagerly hastened” to do (*Gal. 2:10*). The irony is that the only thing that all the subsequent Councils seem to have forgotten to do was to remember the poor in their deliberations. After a careful perusal of the documents of all the Ecumenical Councils, I have

come to the tentative conclusion (subject to correction) that of all the councils held after the Apostolic Assembly mentioned in the *Acts*, only Vatican II has cared to remember the poor in its teachings!

The reason for this could be that Vatican II was convoked by a peasant Pope of happy memory, who declared prophetically that the whole Christian community should be “the church of the poor, the church of all,” thus giving a signal to the Council Fathers that they should remember God’s poor in their deliberations; secondly, Vatican II happened to be the first ever World Council in Church history, that is to say, a Council in which the churches from the poor South and the poor East were represented for the first time, and in such great numbers as to have exerted a significant influence on its deliberations. Hence it is relevant to note here that Liberation theology, much maligned as a mere Marxist reading of the Bible, was actually the first fruit of the Second Vatican Council’s “remembering the poor” and its re-enthronement of the Word of God in the church’s life and liturgy. This theology, in other words, is a happy recovery of Biblical Christianity within the churches of the poor by the poor in those churches.

The scandalous plight of the poor and their staggering numbers in the world have led many to deny God’s existence after blaming poverty and injustice on that very God who, consequently, has no right to exist. These atheists have grasped a very profound biblical truth: a God who is insensitive to the poor is a delusion; gods of exploiters who were worshipped in Egypt and Babylonia, the two Super Powers that flanked the Promised Land, were man-made idols. The Israelites realized that idolatry and injustice go together. That is precisely why in biblical theism, it is the poor who *remind* us of our faith in the God of Moses and Jesus, the unique God who pitches Her tent among the powerless, not only speaking through them, but also blaming poverty and injustice on *our* failure to *remember* Her in Her covenant partners. Being counted among the poor and *then* speaking and working for them is YHWH’s way of fighting against poverty and injustice. Jesus proved he was the Son of that same God by adopting that same strategy, and he expects nothing less from us.

The biblical poor comprise the humble ones of the Matthean beatitudes as well as the *humbled* ones of the Lukan beatitudes; the poor by choice and the poor by circumstances. They are the two categories of the Poor that God partners in Her project of liberation. In fact YHWH’s own self-definition offered in Ex. 20:2–3 is formulated in terms of the leading role He played in the freedom-struggle of the enslaved Israelites. Hence on Sinai YHWH signed an irrevocable covenant with the runaway slaves of Egypt, and slaves of all times. And He always *remembers* His covenant with them (Ex. 6:5). Hence, this covenant was never abrogated but renewed on the Cross on which YHWH the “God of

Slaves” gave Her life for us in Jesus, “the Slave of God,” (*ebed YHWH*), in a death-penalty reserved only for slaves. In Jesus crucified and risen, therefore, we meet both God and the slaves of all times as one covenanted reality, as one redemptive force. The implication is clear: for all those who claim to be Christ-followers, the call to be mindful of God coincides with the call to be mindful of the poor. It is both or neither.

In the psalms, the poor remind God of Her covenantal promise to *remember* them against their oppressors (Ps. 10:11–12; 13:1; 25:6–7; 42:9; 44:9; 44:24; 74:2,19; etc.) and express their confidence that God would not fail to *remember* them (Ps. 6:5; 9:12; 77:6–11; 79:8; 89:50 etc.). From his place of torture, Jesus, “God become Poor” expressed his pain in the words of the Psalm sung by the desperate victims of violence; and true to the Promise, God his maternal Father remembered him; for She delivered Jesus from death by raising him again into Life. It is this “world-shaking” event (Mt. 27:52b), that we *remember* as the paschal mystery in the Holy Eucharist, the Passover Meal of the New Covenant.

Here we must distinguish the Buddhist concept of mindfulness (Sanskrit root *smṛ*) from the biblical notion of remembrance (Hebrew root *zkr*) which plays an important role in the Eucharistic celebration of the Paschal event. During the triple feast of the Buddha on the Vesak Full Moon Day every year, the Buddhists *recall* his birth, his enlightenment and his final release from the cycle of becoming only as *past events*. This is not a deficiency in Buddhism but only a difference we must respect; it is part and parcel of its non-theistic posture. By contrast, the *anamnesis* (“remembrance”) we resort to as Christians, is a qualitatively different species of mindfulness. Since God remembers things into existence in his timeless moment (*kairos*), we also transport ourselves into that Eternal Now whenever we remember God’s salvific deeds in Christ, for it is where our mindfulness overlaps with God’s mindfulness of us in Him who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). In the Eucharist we are given an opportunity to enter into that hour which Jesus always spoke of as “my hour.” *Anamnesis* is a unique genre of presence in the Now of God.

## A MINDFUL EUCHARIST

This act of remembrance or *anamnesis* on our part has been made easy thanks to a special intervention of Jesus, which is also unique to Christianity. He is so gentle as not to overload our *memory* with innumerable data. Christian Mindfulness does not demand memorizing anything. Jesus has spared us this trouble by sharing his own Spirit, as our ever available personal secretary, who if listened to would help us in this task by reminding us of our Savior’s words and deeds (Jn. 14:26) which we celebrate as our salvation both in our life

of solidarity with the poor and in our sacramental worship. The Spirit is the divine aid to our mindfulness.

There is, in other words, an intimate nexus between this kind of *anamnesis*, namely, remembering God-in-Christ in the Eucharist, and the remembering of God-in-the Poor. They both point to a real presence of Christ, that is, to his body. In biblical anthropology I *am* my body, and my body *is* my person, my “me.” Jesus refers not only to the sacramental bread but also the dispossessed of the earth as his ‘Me,’ his person, his *body*. He has identified his “Me” with the “little ones” (Mt. 10:42), and with those deprived of food and drink, health and home, and those detained in prisons (Mt. 25:31–46) In short, with “the least of my brothers and sisters,” as he affectionately refers to the insignificant and forgotten ones in our society (v.40). The Body of Christ in the poor and in the Eucharist are each a presence that reminds us of the End-Time moment of salvation which was anticipated on the cross by the Victim-Judge, in whom the victims of “all the nations” (Mt. 25:32) have already passed their final judgment on those very nations which, like that Rich Man of the parable, fail to remember the destitute Lazarus begging on their door-step (Lk. 16:20–25).

Hence the *anamnesis* of the End-Time Now in the Eucharist cannot be separated from the *anamnesis* of the End-Time Now when the victims of nations, acting as the Vicars of Christ, pass their irreversible judgment on all the nations. This nexus is not sufficiently emphasized in the Eucharistic theology today. Our amnesia with regard to God’s poor and our failure to be counted among them in solidarity with them amounts to our obliterating God from our memory and, consequently, us from Her memory. For the worship of God is empty noise, a senseless ritual and an affront to Her divine majesty whenever we forget the needy and the neglected (Is. 1:11–17; Amos 5:21–24); and this prophetic judgment can be passed also on the way we celebrate the Eucharist, the memorial of the Body of Christ.

For many years, I have been training my Christian students coming from Buddhist countries in the art of celebrating the Eucharist mindfully. In this particular “rite” (referred to by them as the Buddhist Eucharist or the Contemplative Liturgy or the Silent Mass, and celebrated here and there in Asia), I have recommended the Buddhist exercises of mindfulness as an aid to enter fully into the *kairos* (God’s Eternal Now; the Hour of Christ; the Day of the Lord; the Time of Salvation), in which the remembrance of the past, present and future, makes us partake truly in the Passover of the Jews and that of Christ as well as our own end-time Passover, all constituting one indivisible event that we experience here and now. This is what we mean by *anamnesis* in Greek (*zkr* in Hebrew); it is the characteristically Judeo-Christian way of remembering our ever mindful God.

The Passover supper was a *victory meal*, in which the progeny of the hungry sons of Jacob (who went Westward to the rich country of Egypt in search of economic aid and became its political slaves) celebrated *the memory* of a God who, *remembered* them in their plight and participated in their struggle for freedom from their enslavement to that wealthy nation. In a poor country such as ours, this ritual, which asks us to *remember*, among other things, Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from their subjugation to a rich nation, has acquired unexpected depths of meaning. It has become one of most significant public expressions of our collective mindfulness of who we are and who we hope to become in God.

## NOTES

1. An earlier and substantially different version of this essay originally appeared in: Gnanaprakasam Patrick and E. Schuessler Fiorenza (eds), *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era: Essays in Honour of Professor Felix Wilfred*, (Delhi, ISPCCK, 2008), 185–198.
2. E.g., Anne Alden, *Religion in Dialogue with Modernity: A Constructive Contribution to a Christian Spirituality Informed by Buddhist Christian Encounters*, (Sweden: Lund University, 2004), 83–92, 179–81, where the Greek binomial is employed as the framework of such a comparative study.
3. Thomas Spidlik, *Prayer: Spirituality of the Christian East*, Volume 2 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 363–64.
4. Spidlik, *Prayer*, 364–65.
5. Spidlik, *Prayer*, 364–65, emphasis added.
6. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 189. *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. A translation and Commentary by George E Ganss, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992), 80. See also: Aloy Pieris, “Ignatian Exercises against a Buddhist Background,” *The Way: Supplement*, 68 (Summer 1990), 98–111; “Contemplation and the Ignatian Way of Being a Christian,” *Vagdevī, Journal of Religious Reflection*, NS, 2, (July 2007), 82–87.
7. For further elaboration of this question, see my trilogy on *saññā*; “Classification of Matter Assumed in the Abhidhammika Discourse on Insensate Humans (*visññī*) and Non-sentient Denizens (*asaññī*),” *Buddhist Studies*, 2008, 39–61; “A Third Look at *Saññā*: Some Further Clarifications,” *Buddhist Studies*, 2009, 73–89.