



Where Does God Fit In?

BRAD WARNER says that the concept of God can be helpful to Buddhists. Catholic thinker SUSAN J. STABILE, formerly a Buddhist nun, thinks not.

THERE IS NO GOD AND HE IS ALWAYS WITH YOU

By Brad Warner

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I STOPPED BELIEVING IN GOD long before I became a Buddhist. So God wasn't very relevant to me during the twenty years I practiced Buddhism. It wasn't that I spent time thinking or arguing about the existence or the nonexistence of God (the way many of today's atheists do). It's just that God had no place in my life or practice.

Since my return to Christianity in 2001, God has been the center of my life. I see everything I am and everything I do as flowing from my relationship with God, and everything that exists as infused with the presence of God. I can also look back at

my years as a Buddhist and see where God was present in my life, even though I failed to acknowledge that presence at the time and would have denied it if questioned about it.

Given my current view of God as central to my life and all of human existence, the question is, was I missing something when I was a Buddhist? Is there room for belief in God in Buddhism, particularly a God that might be helpful on the Buddhist path?

In *There Is No God and He Is Always with You: A Search for God in Odd Places*, Brad Warner talks about why he believes in God and what God means to him as a Zen Buddhist practitioner. As he recognizes, one of the difficulties with such questions is that the answers depend on what you mean by God, as well as what you mean by belief and by Buddhism.

For Warner, there is a God that does not exist and a God that exists. “Whatever you think of as God does not exist,” he writes. Whatever idea you have of God is an imaginary construct. But, he says, “there is something powerful and ineffable that is the ultimate ground of all being and nonbeing and it created you.” For Warner, that “ineffable substratum of reality” is “just another way of saying God.”

Catholic theologian Michael Himes says something very similar, suggesting that the word *God* is “a bit of shorthand, a stand-in which functions in Christian theology almost as x functions in algebra.” Just as in algebra x is the stand-in for the thing one doesn’t know, God “is the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists.”

Warner is quite right that people who believe in God have all sorts of false notions about who and what God is (although I think some of his characterizations of Christian beliefs are inaccurate for significant numbers of Christians). He is also right that we can only know God by direct experience—that we cannot answer the question of God’s existence through reasoned analysis. I still remember my frustration with a college theology course in which we studied different “proofs” for the existence of God. I thought then, as I do now, that such proofs are utterly unnecessary for someone who already believes in God, and utterly unpersuasive for anyone who doesn’t.

We know God exists by experiencing God. The strength of my own conviction of this truth owes much to my years as a Buddhist. It was not until after returning to Christianity that I learned that this emphasis on experience—and on experiencing God in this lifetime—is very much a part of the Catholic tradition (as anyone familiar with Ignatian Spirituality, the

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teachings of Karl Ranher, or the writings of the Christian mystics knows).

The difference between Warner’s view of the God that exists and the Christian view is that Warner believes there is nothing we can say about this God—that attempting to say anything other than that God is the “ground of being,” or is our direct experience of life, creates a God that does not exist. I agree that God transcends any attributes we can give God. But rather than say, as Warner does, that placing attributes on something inherently places a limit on it, I think it is more accurate to say that any description we give of God is incomplete. As Michael Himes

says, all we can aspire to is the “least wrong way” to talk about God. Because God is Mystery, we use images and metaphors to express our understanding of God and our relationship to God. There is nothing wrong with images and metaphors—even those that make God sound like a person—so long as we remember that is what they are and don’t start believing that God is (to use one of Warner’s examples of the God that doesn’t exist) a white man with a beard in the sky.

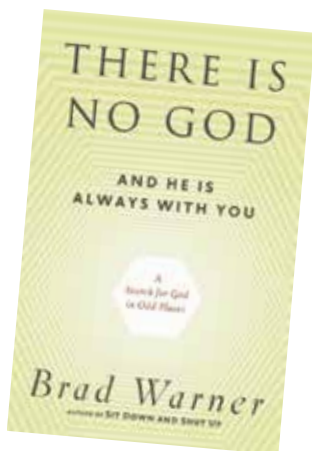
There are ways to talk about God that are helpful for a Christian. I am less certain there is anything we can say about the God that is the ground of our being that is helpful for a Buddhist. In this I think Warner does a better job of explaining the God that is not helpful to Buddhists (or to many Christians for that matter), such as God as ultimate arbiter of moral behavior, or God who makes certain cities more sacred than others than in explaining why his (or any) understanding of God is meaningful for a Buddhist.

The central aim of Buddhist practice is the elimination of suffering. Based on his experience, the Buddha taught the path to elimination of suffering—the abandonment of craving and attachment. And whether you call the state at the end of suffering “enlightenment” or “God,” attaining it is the product of our individual practice.

For a Christian, the state sought is realization of our full and complete union with God—a realization we can get tastes of in this lifetime, but won’t experience fully until death. The important difference is that, to attain “salvation,” Christians believe individual effort is necessary but not sufficient. The first of the Beatitudes taught by Jesus, poverty of spirit, is all about recognizing our need for the grace of God to supplement our own efforts. There is an enormous difference between believing I am the sole agent of own salvation (or enlightenment) and believing in my need for God’s grace.

If God has no role in the elimination of suffering and is merely a way of expressing ultimate reality, it is difficult to see of what consequence it is whether we label this state “the elimination of suffering,” “enlightenment,” or “God.” What does it matter whether a Buddhist speaks of glimpsing enlightenment or, as Warner describes his religious experiences, “encountering a glimpse of God”? Warner suggests that “we need a word that’s bigger than *enlightenment*, that’s bigger than *satori*... a word that points to something grander,” but why he thinks that is not clear to me.

If God has no role in the attainment of enlightenment/union with God, then is there any role for God for a Buddhist? Is God anything other than the label a Buddhist might give to ultimate reality or the elimination of suffering?



Warner uses the term *faith*, a word we tend to associate with God, as something useful for a Buddhist practitioner. At a basic level, a Buddhist practitioner needs to have “faith that if we continue the practice long enough and sincerely enough” Buddhist truths will make sense. But this faith does not demand God.

Warner also says that God “created you.” This is interesting to me, since I was taught by my Tibetan Buddhist teachers that there is no creator God—that mind has existed from beginningless time. Creation of living beings is not possible, the Dalai Lama once explained, because everything that exists depends on causes that have no beginning and stretch back to infinity.

But even here, Warner makes clear he means something very different from a Christian conception of what it means to say God creates the world and human beings. I think Warner’s conception of God’s creation may not be very different from the Tibetan expression of beginningless time. That is, he believes that the law of cause and effect is absolute, which includes the fact that God cannot alter the law of cause and effect by supernatural force. (It is for this reason Warner does not believe in God performing miracles.) So, for him, the “real concrete experience of life right at this place and right at this moment is God.”

While a Christian could easily agree that the concrete expression of life is God, God is also more than that. In a Christian sense, God always was and could have continued to be without the creation of the world and human beings. But God created the world by design out of love. (And, in this, I think Michael Himes is correct that the least wrong way to talk about God is to say that God is love.) So, while Warner is incorrect in saying that “most religions” view God as operating in a universe from a position somewhere removed from it, it is the case that God is both within and without from a Christian perspective.

When all is said and done, I’m not sure there is a unique and helpful role for God in Buddhism. It may be that Buddhism provides a perspective that helps identify incorrect conceptions of God that others have (something Warner does a very good job of), although I’m not optimistic that this will actually succeed in getting people to stop arguing about their incorrect conceptions. And it may be that a Buddhist can be as comfortable as a Christian in using God as the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists. Thus, a Buddhist might say, “I believe in God” as simply a shorthand acknowledgement that “there is a real spiritual dimension to this world,” that there is “something in my real experience” beyond the merely material. But I’m not convinced by Warner that there is a way to talk about God that would have been especially useful to me when I was a Buddhist practitioner, which is perhaps why the Buddha never thought the existence or nonexistence of God mattered very much. ♦