

coming to terms with "GOD"

By Jonathan Landaw

Buddhism has sometimes been called a religion for atheists, and with good reason. It is one of only a few major spiritual traditions of the world – Jainism, whose founder was a contemporary of Shakyamuni Buddha, being another – that is not centered upon belief in a Supreme Deity.

It might be argued that the very absence of "God" and the unfortunate connotations that have come to adhere to this term is what has allowed Buddhism to appeal to so many Westerners in this secular age. Speaking personally, this absence definitely contributed greatly to my own initial interest in Buddhism, and I am certain my experiences in this regard are hardly unique.

My antipathy towards the word "God" began at a very early age. My father, who was the main intellectual influence during my upbringing, dismissed religion as superstitious bunk. He viewed it in much the same way that Marx did, as an opiate to lull the masses into complacency with their miserable lot in life. And certainly my own admittedly limited exposure to a few popular forms of belief did little to modify or contradict this predominantly dismissive attitude towards God and towards religion as I knew it.

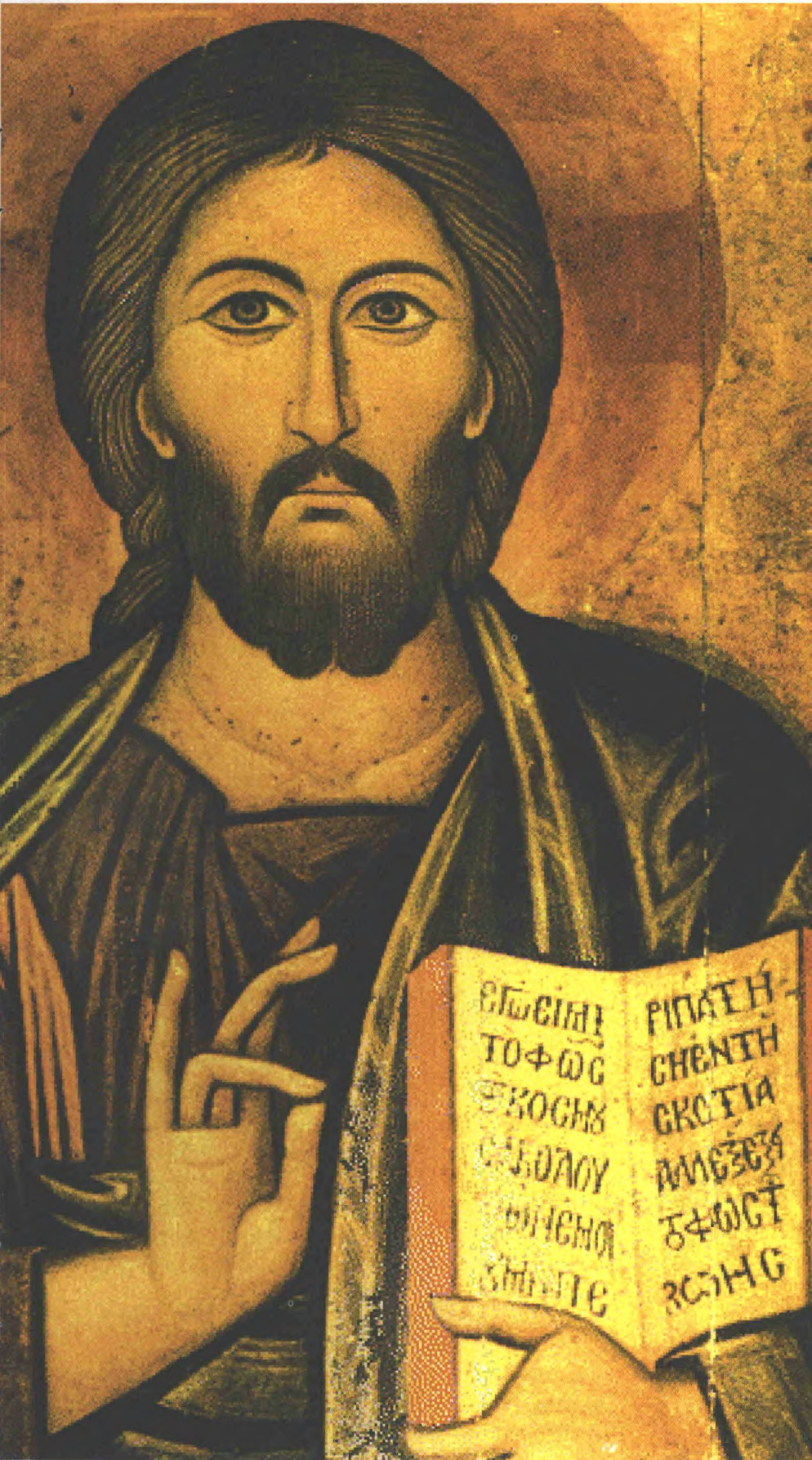
In fact, the observed behavior of those who professed to believe in a Supreme Being only increased my aversion. There were people I knew who prayed to God for aid in winning a football match; this I found simply ridiculous. That others prayed for victory in war (especially in the innumerable "religious" wars that have stained history), I found downright repulsive. It was unthinkable to me that a just and loving Creator of the Universe would have any interest in playing partisan politics with its inhabitants. So if being religious meant that I had to believe in something as preposterous as a God who helped certain of his (her? its?) creatures inflict suffering on others, then I wanted no part of it.

Aversion to such words as "God," "religion" and "belief" did not mean, however, that I turned away from spiritual values altogether. Quite the contrary. I always sensed that there had to be something profoundly important at the root of religion, however twisted and distorted it might have become over the centuries. Behind the universal compulsion to believe in something greater, more powerful and more significant than the individual self and its limited concerns must lie something of true value and significance. But I had only the vaguest of clues – usually drawn from the world of art and literature – about what this "something," this transcendent reality, might be.

One of my first small epiphanies in this regard came upon reading what was probably the first book on Buddhism that I had ever seen: Edwin Burt's *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, published in 1955 (when I was eleven years old). The second piece in this collection had the unpromising title *Questions Not Tending to Edification* but it made a huge impression on me. In it I read for the first time Buddha's emphatic remarks that belief in various dogmas "profits not, nor has [anything] to do with the fundamentals of religion." Just a few words, and perhaps not even very accurately rendered, since I assume that "religion" here is an attempt to translate "Dharma." Nevertheless their impact was enormous: here was someone declaring that "true religion" was not a matter of belief, but of verifiable experience. It made me very curious what else this eminently reasonable voice had to say on this subject.

Eventually, when I met the Mahayana teachings on wisdom, compassion and the fundamentally pure nature of consciousness, I felt I found what I had always been looking for. Here at last was a spiritual tradition that did not have as its foundation a God I couldn't believe in, yet was imbued with all the spiritual values I cherished. And one of the unexpected





side effects of my exposure to this spiritual tradition was a growing respect for the God-centered religions I had previously dismissed. I began to appreciate that humanity's universal quest for spiritual meaning cannot be measured by the terms we use to express it. If, as the Buddhist teachings themselves state, the ultimate nature of things cannot be captured in words anyway, then who is to say that the "God" of Saint Francis or Rumi or Gandhi points to a reality any less profound than that experienced by the most advanced Buddhist practitioner? To assume that someone's use of a particular term is a sign of his or her spiritual immaturity is not just a symptom of unsupportable arrogance; it prevents those of us who harbor such arrogance from being inspired by some of the greatest spiritual geniuses the human race has produced. And in these critical times, we can use all the inspiration we can get.

Some years ago I saw a documentary in which various Christian practitioners in England related what it was like to meet and receive gospel teachings from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. One nun, obviously profoundly moved by the experience, smiled and said, "His eyes spoke God to me." What more needs to be said? ●

Jonathan Landaw has taught English as a Second Language with the Peace Corps in Iran and worked as English editor for the Translation Bureau of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, producing numerous texts under the guidance of Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey. As a student of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche since the mid-1970s, he has edited numerous works for Wisdom Publications, including *Wisdom Energy* and *Introduction to Tantra*. He is also the author of *Prince Siddhartha*, a biography of Buddha for children, and *Images of Enlightenment*, published by Snow Lion in 1993. As an instructor of Buddhist meditation, he has taught in numerous Dharma centers throughout the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Born in England, he currently lives in Capitola, California with his wife and three children.

