Where We Do Stand

The Convocation Address to Begin the 187th Year

by Janet Gyatso

Where do I stand as a scholar of Buddhism? Where do I stand as an American woman scholar of Buddhism—born in Philadelphia; mother born in Russia; father's family from Lithuania; raised Jewish; deep affinity with Tibet; years of friendships with and indebtednesses to Tibetan Buddhist masters; and all with a Philadelphia cocksure, sarcastic skepticism about most everything? What is my stance when I am trying to be closest to the artistic impulses that I originally wanted to follow vocationally, when I am trying to write passionately, which is how I feel I must write even while constricted by a highly conservative and critical field of professional "Buddhology"—not to mention a hesitancy to impose personal feelings upon a foreign culture to which I do not belong? Where do I stand, and what is my stance, when I try to think in a way in which my field has not yet conceived of thinking, a way that I myself do not yet know, but toward which I feel myself surely propelled—that is, a way of inspiration? What is my stance when I teach students?

Questions like this have long obsessed me in my life, but they are questions that I have taught myself—perhaps out of necessity—to like, to think are good questions. As I enter into the space of thinking now not only about the stance of an individual, but also about an institution and, most of all, about the stance of a scholarly vocation, I find myself more determined than ever to make good on the radical Buddhist injunction to take my stand in emptiness. By this, Buddhists have always meant not pure nothingness but rather a self-conscious recognition of infinite changeability, of openness, and a place where the daunting feat of mustering confidence within what is provisional can be attempted. For some reason I have long been compelled by the idea that a solid stance on a ground of flux is the best place from which to contemplate fundamental matters.

And so it is Buddhist sentiment that has led me to begin my meditation today with the place where we are standing. And now I'm talking, literally, about the physical ground itself. I will start optimistically with the multiple possibilities that this fortuitous site of our convocation this year embodies—with the airiness and porousness of this tent, a structure that is flexible and easily movable (impermanent, if you will); and with the very rawness of the ground on which the tent is pitched. There is really a wonderful undecidability of this ground and this tent, and an openness, unmarked, open to the breeze, open to interpretation. Yet at the same time this place is the most real place in the world. It is our present, where we are now, our first and foremost starting point from which everything will follow. I want to juxtapose this image with another level of our concrete situation, the institutional level, which is the convocation of our cooperative venture at Harvard Divinity School this year. This our coming together, our being called together, to begin our vocation, our calling. And so I want to think about the ground on which we stand, and the orientation of our stance, when we face our common calling, the study religion.

CHRISTINE BOWER

Janet Gyatso, Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies, with Dean William Graham.

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It is appropriate to remark first upon the particular circumstances that have led us to this ground and tent this year, for it is the first time in living memory that the Divinity School has held its Convocation here. For many years prior to this, our Convocation was held in Memorial Church, in Harvard Yard, the church of Harvard University. But in response to a feeling on the part of some members of this community that Memorial Church, by virtue of its Christian identity, excluded non-Christians from the ceremony, it was decided this year that it would be better to hold the Divinity School's convocation in a neutral setting.

I don't know the details of how this dissatisfaction with Memorial Church dawned upon us. I was not part of the conversation or the decision itself. And to be sure, one could imagine lots of reasons to respond that indeed the Divinity School Convocation has been extremely *inclusive* in past years, that the very clear self-understanding of Memorial Church is that it invites the participation of all, and that the Christian symbols in the church do not in fact function to exclude. (The very fact that I, a Jewish professor of Buddhist studies, was asked to give the convocation address, and was asked a long time before the issue of venue emerged, is testimony to that inclusiveness.) But I really want to talk about the situation where we have landed rather than about what led up to it.

Actually, not unlike the malleable ground itself, there are a plethora of ways that this situation could be construed. There is a case for arguing that this is a good development, that our move out of a specifically Christian space represents our willingness to accommodate and validate the growing diversity of our student body, the growing diversity of our faculty, and the growing diversity of our curriculum itself. (Another illustration of this is the fact that in a few weeks from now, there will be another temporary structure on this ground, albeit for a very different purpose, the celebration of Succot.)

But there is also a case to make that this development is something to mourn, a break with a venerable tradition at the Divinity School; that it might signal an intolerance for other people's religious expression, or at least a discomfort anywhere except a neutral, faceless place, and that this neutrality and facelessness threatens to cast us out into a desert devoid of meaning altogether. In fact it appears that not only has our convocation been moved out of the church; there has also been a decision to make the service altogether nonreligious, whatever that means. Whatever it does mean, the decision goes significantly further than merely avoiding sectarian affiliation. So we need to think, too, about the distinction between neutralizing sectarian affiliation and eliminating "religion" altogether.

Whatever we might think about it, this *is* the situation in which we find ourselves now. So if we decide to imagine the salutary effects of reducing our grand convocation to a bare ritual on the lawn, how far can we go? In particular, what if we decide to take this very bareness as an icon of openness and newness? At the minimum, we could say that this is a chance to build into our working habits a recourse to freshness, a habit of frequent refreshment from square one—the bare ground.

It can hardly be entirely coincidental that the year of relocating its opening ritual to this bare ground is also a year in which Harvard Divinity School is in the process of re-conceiving itself, not only through its curriculum but also through the vision of its entire mission. Many of you here may not be aware that the faculty and administration have had a series of retreats over the last few years in which some quite groundbreaking questions have been raised and debated. I think we have begun to come to a consensus about some of the changes we want to usher through, although let me add right away

that what I will say now is only my particular take on where we are. In any event, we are still very much in the process of thinking through—and debating—the many interesting issues involved.

But it is not only to invite especially the students here to join us in this process of collective self-reflection that I have decided to air some of these matters here today. It is also to encourage us all to think together about the study of religion at any time and place, and about the kind of orientation that will best guide us into the future. In this, I want also to stress that the basic questions we are debating now about the nature of the academic study of religion at the Divinity School—and our stance toward what we study—are richly complex issues that do not lend themselves to final resolution, ever! And that is a good thing. It *should* be part of the excitement of every opening of the school year, and the welcoming of a new class, to remind ourselves of the fundamentally nondecideable issues that religion poses, and to valorize that fact, to build it into our way of writing, thinking, and reading—and teaching. In particular, as a teacher I aspire to model for students my own accommodation of debateability, my own continual rethinking and fostering of a way to think together in mutual responsiveness, as being at the very heart of where we stand when we study religion.

I think such principles as continual rethinking and learning how to think together, mutually, are especially germane for a divinity school that teaches about more than one religion. A key aspect of what we have been pondering together lately directly parallels the matter of our change in Convocation venue. One central issue before us at the moment is, indeed, the place of religious traditions other than Christianity in the HDS curriculum. For the last 20 years our basic curriculum has been divided into three sections, or areas: Area I focuses on the nature and interpretation of scripture, the Bible; Area II has courses in theology, ethics, and the sociology and history of Christianity; and Area III studies the religions of the world other than Christianity. Now to have Area III, which at present covers Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Meso-American religions, in the curriculum at all has been a bold move on the School's part, but of late there has been an increasing sense that we need to look again at what creating such a curricular area actually signifies. Think about it: What are we saying when we have one area that focuses on the study of language, scriptural interpretation, and historical-critical analyses; another in which we ponder how the resources of religion have been, and should be, brought to bear upon personal and social problems; and finally Area III, where we study the religions of the world? At the very least, we have to cry apples and oranges. Two sections are divided by types of problems and approaches in the study of religion, while the third section is distinguished by which religions are taught.

Clearly, the religion that is studied in the two areas that are distinguished by methods and problems is overarchingly Christianity. Yes, there is attention to its background in the Hebrew Scriptures along with its historical and cultural context, but the structure as a whole unquestionably serves to position Christianity as the paradigmatic religion at the Divinity School, and all the other religions of the world as the Others. And this observation has brought us to the rather radical realization that we need to get rid of Area III. By which I mean not to eliminate the religions studied there, but rather that they need to be integrated into the groupings of I and II. For Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism too have scriptures, and philological intricacies, and hermeneutical problems, and religious institutions, and ethics. We can even speak of something like Buddhist theology if we take the time to consider what that might mean in a specifically Buddhist context.

We are beginning to take seriously the notion that students concentrating on ethics, for example, might be just as well served by taking a course in, say, Hindu ethics as they would in taking Christian ethics—and that these courses should be positioned side by side. Or that a student interested in how political leadership can be grounded in religious scripture might gain as much from a course on Jewish apocalypticism, which studies how messages addressing crises drew on the Bible in late antiquity, as she would from a course on Chinese Buddhist messianic cults and how they drew upon the Lotus Sutra to create a compelling political message. At the very least, we would be able to say, no more apples and oranges; our entire curricular structure would be founded in approach or type of issue.

One of the main reasons that we can even contemplate such a sea change is that the School is finally beginning to have enough faculty who actually teach religions other than Christianity. Appointments have recently been made in Meso-American religion, Hinduism, and Buddhism. And in terms of personal conviction, there is now a wide range of religious orientations among the faculty members themselves. To be sure there are still many holes in the HDS curriculum, as well as gaps in our faculty diversity—and most outstanding, although not actually relevant to what I am arguing here, but I want to say it anyway since it is so important, is our really pressing need for African-American Religious studies at the Divinity School, not to mention African American faculty members as such. But as I said, that's a different matter; what I want to explore right now are the implications of the larger shift we are contemplating.

One way of getting at that those implications is to tell you about something that for me was at first a confusing disconnect, and then an amusing irony. During my first year here I took it upon myself to ask that we discuss the status of Christianity at the Divinity School at our annual faculty retreat. When the retreat finally took place, however, I was taken aback as I listened to the discussion. I realized that many in the room understood me to be asking about the role of committed, confessional orientations in our study of religion—that is, by asking what the role of Christianity was at the Divinity School, I was asking what the role of people's personal beliefs were in their teaching. Whereas I had wanted us to compare our study of Christianity with our study of other religions, my reference to "Christianity" was taken instead to be synonymous with "our religion," the one to which we are personally committed, as distinct from the variety of historical, philological, sociological, literary, and philosophical subjects that we teach.

Now, I am not saying that it is a bad thing to ask about the role of personal commitments in teaching; I'm saying only that it is a different question than the one I was asking. Indeed this different question that people thought I was asking *is* the other big question facing Harvard Divinity School right now, although I dare say it is one that has been an issue since the School's inception: What role do one's commitments, experiences, and, especially, beliefs have to do with what, and how, one teaches? We might recall that a closely related question was at the heart of debates around the United States regarding the introduction of religious studies in liberal-arts institutions in the 1960s—really very recently, when you think about it. Although our Divinity School had been exploring such questions in its own way for many years before, the debates that emerged at that historical moment had a profound effect on the teaching of religion across the board in academic institutions.

At issue was academic objectivity: How can one study a religion's history objectively if one's sympathies lie with its fortunes and truths? How can one train students to recognize a variety of ways to understand a text if one is committed to one "true" interpretation? There was an accompanying fear in secular institutions that the teaching about religion was likely to be used to attract believers and to convert students. I put these ideas in the past tense, but these concerns have not been put to rest yet, even with the major successes of the academic field of religion and of the huge, thriving organization called the American Academy of Religion, and with the wonderful diversity of historical, sociological, literary critical, hermeneutical, philosophical, and other methodologies that now all fall under the rubric of religious studies. Religion departments are often still at pains to demonstrate their objectivity and critical orientation to their colleagues, even while out of the other side of their mouths they are having to explain to indignant students of religious conviction why the Bible should be studied from historical and critical perspectives rather than solely in terms of religious experience and truth.

Among nondenominational divinity schools within major research universities, HDS seems to be unique in wanting simultaneously to keep its training of ministers close to the heart of its mission *and* to foster all of the intellectual and critical questions proper to an objective and academic study of religion, *and* to want all of its students to have exposure in both approaches. This is a tall order, but it gives us a special opportunity, for we are positioned right at the edge—hopefully the cutting edge—of one of the most challenging sets of issues confronting not only the field of religion, but also many other academic fields struggling with the relationship between the researcher's personal identity and bias and their perceptions and conclusions (anthropology is another such field; so is physics; so are literature and history).

What I want to explore is not the frustration or the apparent tension, but rather the promise of such complexity. It is precisely the intellectual hybridity of Harvard Divinity School that puts it in an especially propitious position to explore fruitfully the undecideablilities of the stance of a scholar of religion—much more openly and daringly than is possible in a liberal arts religion department, for example, precisely because of our avowed links to ministerial training, whereas in a religion department the investments of individual scholars in their own work are frequently masked or denied, and the expression of the personal is discouraged or even disparaged. But we are also in a better position to take risks and break new ground than we would be in most denominational seminaries, with our commitment to the diversity of religious orientations, and our commitment to a critical academic orientation. It is just here, where we refuse to give up either of the two sides of our very complex mission, that we are called upon to confront the source and status of truth, the impact of multi-perspectivalism, the threat of nihilism, and the possibility of meaningfulness. In short, I think it is only in a world in which we fully recognize that there are many religious stances, even some noble human ones that have no religious affiliation at all, that we really are put face to face with—and really have the means to explore—the methodological questions I just was raising about the study of religion more generically And if what I just said is true, this means in turn that our quest to study religion well should have impact upon all of higher education at the university, for again, similar questions about truth, perspectivalism, nihilism, and meaning plague every humanities discipline, and every science, especially when they are being done well.

One of the first questions that we may encounter when we study more than one religious stance is this: How do we maintain in our school's mission the productive tension between critical objectivism and committed subjectivity if we have a seemingly relativistic view to one side of the formula—that is, to the subjectivity? By this I mean to say that if we provide a spectrum of traditional lenses through which to study religious ethics, say, or religion and politics, it appears we are suggesting somehow that all of those traditions have an equal purchase on truth. We must be suggesting that while ethics is indeed a critical human endeavor, we learn about it

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equally well, if differently, by studying Buddhist ethics and Jewish ethics, for example. That could be saying in turn that neither of those is absolutely true, and it smacks of a relativism—Buddhist ethics is only for those who are Buddhists, Jewish ethics are for Jews, and both ethics are merely the product of their particular historical and cultural circumstances. That might bring the scholar to take a stand outside of all of them, to say that ethics is a historical artifact, but it never touches a truth for all times or peoples.

That's the way that relativism, at least the pernicious sort, turns into nihilism and also an essentialism (i.e., to insist that Buddhist ethics is only for Buddhists, is to essentialize what it means to "be" a Buddhist), but I would like to suggest that there are other ways to view the liberal and pluralistic place in which our diversified curriculum is leading us to stand. Another way is, indeed, to recognize that every particular ethical system is relative to its time and place, but that ethical thinking wherever it arises is a lastingly rich and compelling activity in human experience, and, moreover, that the more I am exposed to ethics in all its varieties, the more nuanced and multiply ethical I am led to be. Using the same logic, then, let us say that religion is a lastingly rich and compelling activity in human experience, and the more I know about it in all of its varieties the more religious I am inspired to be.

Note in this that I have not posited any universal, tradition-free, generic, or perennial religion that is at the bottom of all its varieties. What I am experimenting with, however, is the idea of a passionate religiosity—or maybe I should say love of religion—that animates the mission of our School while not being associated with, or bound necessarily to, any one religion.

The question of how to study religion religiously while also remaining aware of its relativity and historical embeddedness is one of the places where I would like to leave this incoming class standing, or pondering—not with the answer but simply poised to ask the question. And there are so many ways to abide in that space; I can imagine a spectrum, from the historian who marvels with delight at the seemingly infinite variety of weirdness that religious humans have come up with, to the Jewish theologian who finds new depths of beauty in her own convictions by observing a Muslim man kneeling in prayer to God.

For one end of that spectrum—the one tending toward critical history—part of what I hope that our Divinity School will give us is a certain entitlement to be passionate about what we study and write. And I don't mean to say that passion is the privileged domain of religion, but simply that the study of religion has special resources to contribute. I want to go further than that, however. What is it about religion that inspires passion? Perhaps we could talk about the homologies drawn in many religious traditions between romantic, or even sexual, love, and love and devotion for God. Or perhaps we might just like it to be that the Divinity School is a place that not only tolerates but also encourages—in fact abides in comfort with—passion in one's academic work.

Or perhaps—and this is to move from being the critical historian to being the philosopher of religion—one might think in formalistic terms about what it is at the bottom of mundane existence that gives rise to religion. I have in mind, as an example, Martin Heidegger's meditation on the nature of thinking and his brilliant and provocative realization that to think is synonymous with having gratitude[1]—that, inspired by the etymological connections between "think" and "thank," he was led to ponder what it is that calls upon us to think, how what is thought-provoking is a gift, how both thinking and thanking are rooted in memory, a memory that is founded in keeping in mind, in concentration, and, in the end, in a kind of devoted abiding-with. And this idea that the act of thinking is in its very nature akin to a devoted gratitude for its being points to a provocative affinity between a most basic human activity and one of the most basic sentiments of religiosity.

I would like to use such a discovery of pious gratitude at the heart of all thinking as a model to explain to myself (surely a bundle of contradictions religiously if there ever was one) why, while I don't believe in a deity who is looking down upon me, or can make anything happen for or against me, why I still pray, fiercely, when I am hoping for something, maybe most in those moments when what I am wanting is beyond my power to effect and, in fact, is most unlikely ever to be fulfilled. An example would be when, in a Buddhist key, I pray that all people around the world be removed from their terrible suffering in war and plague, or when I pray that all the animals of our world who are suffering severe hardship and torture could be relieved of their agony. I wonder about this stance of prayer, which seems to have nothing to do with any ontological propositions. I think of the Divinity School as a place where I can wonder, professionally, about that stance.

And finally, we might imagine what the theologian-to-be, or even the minister-to-be, will take from this academic environment that will relate to her vocation. Does the deployment of critical historical methods temper homiletic fervor, or does it foster sensitivity and contemporary relevance? Does the identification of layers of the Bible as the products of particular historical circumstances—or even more challengingly, as adaptations of older, "pagan" traditions—undermine faith, or will it increase our appreciation of the multiple sources from which religiosity emerges? Does the recognition of similar styles of devotion, or claims of legitimacy in disparate religions, undermine the originality of revelation, or does the comparison make for a precise context in which to recognize the uniqueness within the similarity while, even more important yet, providing a set of bridges, or common spaces, in which to share religiosity with likeminded people from other parts of the world? Here I am indebted to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's insistence that we must be friends with the people whose religions we study, we must come to know, as he says, "those qualities of the believer's life that can become known only in that personal two-way relationship known as friendship," in which there is an implication that we have an ability to abide with other people's religion—not just to study it but also to inculcate ourselves in a common space so as to inhabit the questions of religion together.[2]

When I first came to HDS two years ago I harbored some question about what a Buddhologist would be doing in a divinity school, and even why the endowment of my chair had been accepted in the first place. Although I was aware of the very liberal and pluralistic orientation of HDS, it was still not clear to me how what I would be teaching would actually fit into a curriculum that, as just discussed, seemed thoroughly Christian-centric. The answer of course was Area III, but that only moved the question from "why Buddhist studies?" to "why a whole area of the curriculum devoted to non-Christian religion?" As I poked around for an answer, one of the main reasons that I heard was that knowledge of the other religions of the world were thought to be particularly necessary for our ministerial training program. In this day and age, with our globalizing society, it is essential for a minister in any denomination and any neighborhood to have a good idea of the religious backgrounds and heritage of all people around—so as best to comfort the sick, give solace to the grieving, to avoid insult or insensitivity to anyone, and to present one's message in ways that will be understandable to as many people as possible.

I am very happy to be in the position of educating Christian ministers in as much as they wish to learn about Buddhist ideas, customs, and literature. It is an honor to be in a position to explore the resources of Buddhism with members of different religious communities. But I have to say that if this were the only reason for having Area III in our curriculum it would represent an impoverished view of what the study of the non-Christian religions promises (again, Buddhism is just one example). My own vision of Area III at HDS is epitomized rather by a striking testimony I heard from an MDiv graduate of the School who is now the full-time minister at a Lutheran church. Tim Stein, pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in Cambridge, said during a recent panel here that the single most influential course that he took when he was a student at HDS was a class in Buddhist ethics. He didn't elaborate, but I know enough about his preaching and ministry to know that he has been deeply moved by what he learned from Buddhism during that semester. And notice I say "learned from" Buddhism, rather than "learned about," a key distinction for which we are indebted to Charles Hallisey.[3] This knowledge that Pastor Stein "learned from" did not shake his commitment as a Lutheran or tempt him to convert. Rather, he simply learned some things from the way of compassion that touched him, and that perhaps affected his understanding of himself and his ability to be empathetic with others, insights that would continue to inform his fully Lutheran ministry today.

It is probably our growing interest in this sort of cross-fertilization, the profound effects of learning "from" many forms of religion beyond the one with which we identify, that is the main reason why we are now in the process of figuring how to get rid of Area III. The idea is that when the study of non-Christian religions is integrated curricularly with the study of Christianity, students will still be able to concentrate on one or another specific religion, but there would be no separate curricular category for the "other" religions of the world. Rather, if this change comes to pass, we will be saying in our very curricular structure that what we study here most fundamentally is "religion"—or , if you like, from a more socio-historical perspective, "religions."

This shift is indeed a sea change. Not only for what will surely still be our Christian majority here, but just as much for those of us working in the other religions that are being so integrated. The best example I can give you of that again draws on my own field and experience, an interesting reading group in which faculty and doctoral students in Buddhism from across the board at Harvard participated last year. We chose as our last reading for the year an anthology of essays entitled *Buddhist Theology*, and we asked ourselves what the editors were trying to do with that collection, and what the provocative title could mean.

In fact the American field of Buddhist Studies has been suffering from the lack anywhere in the United States of something like a divinity school, or even a theology department, to promote Buddhist theological thinking. With the exception of a couple of small Buddhist seminaries that are struggling because of their very invisibility, Buddhist studies has virtually always been taught in the United States in liberal-arts religious studies programs. And here the curious irony obtains that while there is frequently a desire on the part of departments to hire committed Buddhists to teach Buddhism, it is also widely felt that, in terms of teaching and writing, there is no room for confessional or normative Buddhist studies in the academy.

Something like Buddhist theology would represent a move to write about Buddhism from the inside, and this has a host of problems. Most crucially, the large majority of Buddhologists in the United States represent themselves as *not* Buddhist, and the few that are Buddhists are recent converts. To do Buddhist theology without a community from which one comes and for whom one speaks does not make much sense. Actually there is indeed a growing American Buddhist community, but it is largely unconnected to academia, and it sorely lacks the intellectuals and visionaries it needs to address the slew of difficult issues facing contemporary religion.

The likely place that community could turn to, academic Buddhology, suffers under a strong sense of its limitations, of being restricted to studying Buddhism "objectively." Indeed many of us—and I can attest there was some trace of this in my own case—feel considerable apprehension, especially with respect to getting tenure, that being a committed Buddhist would actually undermine our standing in the field.

Now this should make little sense in a world in which virtually all of academia has already rejected the ideal of objectivity—the idea that we should eliminate subjectivity from academic work. That is now agreed to be impossible. Nonetheless in Buddhist studies the ideal of doing just that, eliminating all subjectivity in one's work, still exerts a powerful force, such that in both the United States and Europe, people in Buddhist studies are trained to speak only about what the tradition "itself" says, what a text "itself" says—as if we could ever get at that free of our own framings, as if the tradition itself knew exactly what it was saying and was consistent all the time, as if the text itself was fully self-conscious in every word it recorded. I think that such expectations have left my field bankrupt of ideas, frightened to learn anything "from" the wealth of materials that we study, too intimidated to appropriate anything whatsoever for fear of sounding like a new-age entrepreneur, and too removed from the spirit and vitality of the traditions we study to venture anything original about intentions or mentalities or tensions whatsoever, save to jump at a chance to prove a Buddhist wrong, to expose myths, or simply and safely to edit a new text. And even that, I can tell you, is not safe.

I think you know what I am going to say: I am hoping that Buddhist studies, and indeed the study of all of the Area III religions, at Harvard Divinity School will be newly freed to find some intermediate place to stand, between extreme philological conservatism and extreme new-agey fundamentalism. A place where this field can find room for voice and originality in its scholarship. A place for a Western Buddhologist to stand when assessing Buddhist tradition from a critical—for example, a feminist—perspective. Such places have been cleared for Christian scholars and intellectuals across the board in the United States, and members of our faculty here have contributed critically in that clearing; Buddhologists can learn from them.

We also need a place from which to write—and perhaps this idea is closest to my own heart—in ways that will be exciting and inspiring not only to other Buddhologists but also to scholars of English literature, historians of medieval Christianity, historians of the subaltern collective in South Asia, scholars of American religion. A place where we can begin not only to talk about Buddhism not only as a set of unique, historically specific traditions, but also to recognize that we are often exploring issues about institutions, and writing practices, and disciplines, and ethics that are not uniquely Buddhist at all, and have as much to say to scholars of European religion as Foucault has to say to scholars of Buddhism.

Finally I want HDS to be a place where Buddhist theology—whatever that might come to mean—is informed closely by historical scholarship but also is brilliant in a thousand ways on how Buddhist intellectual and literary history can contribute to real-life pastoral contexts. And that leads me to my last point, about the still-vexed place of ministerial studies at HDS.

Just as scholars should get guidance and ideas on how to do critical Buddhist feminism and critical Buddhist theology at HDS, the School should also be an ideal place for training Buddhist ministers. As in the case of the many Christian denominations served here, of course such Buddhist ministers in training—and I have in my mind some of the young, vital leaders of the Zen centers around San Francisco—would probably need extra training in the specifics of their tradition, from their own sectarian resources. But the more critical point is this: So many of the situations and issues they will face as leaders in those Zen communities are not unique to Buddhism at all, and are really quite the same as those faced by liberal Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities across the country.

A budding Zen priest would learn enormously from Peter Gomes on how to preach with wit and passion, would know so much more about how to guide a new American Buddhism by studying the urban religion of Italian Americans with Robert Orsi, would have insights about how Zen developed in East Asia by studying the syncretic origins of Gnosticism with Karen King, would acquire a new intelligence about the basis of contemplation by taking Sarah Coakley's course on Christian spirituality and mysticism, would get ideas about how to encourage a feminist revamping of Zen institutions through an education in the history of feminist biblical interpretations from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, would learn about the art of self-revelation from Leila Ahmed.

I think the reason a Zen master in America would be such a better Zen master in America if she had a Master of Divinity degree from HDS is that Zen Buddhism in America is in many ways more about the America part than the Zen Buddhism part. And I say this not only from a recognition that Buddhism in modernity is a new Buddhism, and not only in light of a post-Orientalist critique of Western projections of Buddhism, which are so far from what Buddhism was historically. I say it also from the perspective of the very conditions for religion today in the Zen center and the Reform synagogue and the progressive Episcopalian Church. We are all looking at the status of celibacy, the role of women, and the nature of gender in religion in America; we are all affected by the need for racial and economic justice; we are all facing the problem of faith in the nuclear age. As Peter Steinfels has suggested forcefully in his blunt new book, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, if a religion fails to respond with intelligence and ingenuity to the axial shifts in culture going on today, it is going to die a fast death.[4]

But more than calling for relevance, I want us never to forget that this American religion, like Emerson's—and our—still "new yet unapproachable America,"[5] is just in the making. We are participating right now in the making of it at the Divinity School, just as we are making what the study of that religion should be, and discerning how a divinity school should take leadership in the new century. With Emerson, I am obsessed with that shining image just beyond the horizon. I am impatient to be there already. Yet I learn from him that I will never be there. And perhaps I can now say—not only for myself, but also for Harvard Divinity School—that to learn that the place where we stand is a shifting and ever new place is a good thing, a good place to start to feel at home. ◆

Notes

[1] Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*? Translated by J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

[2] "Comparative Religion: Whither—and Why?" p. 39 n. 18, in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, edited by Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959, pp. 31-58. He goes on to say in the next sentence, "This is peculiarly true of religious faith, but applies in some measure to all human discourse."

[3] It was Hallisey's Buddhist Ethics class that Tim Stein was referring to. Hallisey has elaborated his distinction between "learning about" and "learning from" further in his essay "In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement: Some Reflections on the Work of Gurulugomi," in *Religion and Practical Reason*, edited by David Tracy and Frank Reynolds. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 121-162, regarding the difference between treating something as an object for analysis, and adopting it as a tool of analysis (p. 136).

[4] *A People Adrift : The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.

[5] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Essays: Second Series*, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 259.

In the Beginning of Creation Was Consciousness

The Dudleian Lecture for 2002-03

by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

My lecture title may sound somewhat strange, but I chose it on purpose. I believe that we are, at the present moment, at the cusp of the curve of life—what the French call *course de vie*—of the paradigm that has dominated Western civilization since the Renaissance. And this transformation has at its heart the question of consciousness. This change began about 50 years ago, right on this campus, with Thomas Kuhn, a major American philosopher of science and an old friend, and a few others, including myself, who were grappling with this question of paradigm shifts. He and I did not exactly agree on what the shift was or what we meant by paradigm, but we both felt that a major change was afoot. Of course, these things do not happen quickly, as he himself pointed out in his important writings. It takes some time. But I do believe that the most important questions that face present-day civilizations involve not only solutions within the present parameters within which people think, but also those parameters themselves—that is, the paradigm within which human beings carry out their intellectual and also practical activities.

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So, I speak about "in the beginning was consciousness." In fact, the original title I had thought up for my lecture was "In the Beginning *Is* Consciousness"—because "in the beginning" does not simply refer to a past time; it involves a principal reality here and now. Let me begin by quoting from several of the sacred scriptures of the world. In the Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu sacred scriptures, we read, "When alone is the dawn beaming over all this, it is the one that severally becomes all this." The one is Sat, Chit, and Ananda—that is, the three states of being, blessedness, bliss, and, of course, consciousness, Chit.

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