

“Surrender”
as a Pervasive, Unifying Theme
in Philosophy of Religion

You Jeen Ha

REL 205 Philosophy of Religion

Professor Carol Zaleski

May 11, 2017

Abstract

Philosophy and religion, distinct disciplines of study in their own right, have coalesced into the subject that is “philosophy of religion.” Upon examination of pertinent academic literature, it becomes apparent that certain themes connect these two disciplines. Such themes connect not only philosophy and religion, but also Western and Eastern perspectives on how to attain a sense of salvation as well as discover an enlightening Truth. A critical comparison of Søren Kierkegaard’s work and Buddhist scriptures, along with a brief exploration of Socratic pedagogy and the Jamesian definition of religious experience, reveals such a theme to be “surrender.” Interpreted in this paper as *absolute renunciation of attachment to the material world*, “surrender” is mentioned in both texts and is approached in very similar ways by thinkers of both the Western and Eastern realms. Recognition of the philosophical and religious implications of “surrender” from a global perspective ultimately allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the theme as well as opens the door to further contemplation about human philosophies in general.

Philosophy of religion as a discipline of study presents a rather intriguing balance between philosophy and religion, two fields that are quite different in both theory and application. *Prima facie*, philosophy is grounded in *logos* which manifests as reason whereas religion is grounded in *ethos* which manifests as faith and practice. The former seems to appeal to rational thought, and the latter seems to appeal to passional inclinations.¹ Despite the apparent disparity, arguments presented in philosophy of religion connect the two subjects and require that the subjects be simultaneously taken into consideration. According to James Collins in *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion*, as cited by Linda Zagzebski, “we find [philosophy of religion as] a ‘study of religion...free from functional dependence upon any theology, sensitive to the full power of the skeptical challenge in its religious implications, and thoroughly philosophical nature’” (353).² Philosophy of religion, in essence, is sensitive to the full power of the skeptical challenge of religious ideas and foundations rather than a discipline merely *dependent upon* religious ideas and foundations.

Hence, I will argue that certain pervasive, enduring themes allow philosophy of religion to persist as a cohesive field.³ Such a theme is the concept of “surrender”: absolute renunciation of the material realm.⁴ “Surrender” as a central element of discussion can be seen in certain Western philosophical accounts, particularly in Socrates’ pedagogy and later in Søren Kierkegaard’s journal entries, as well as in Eastern religious accounts such as Buddhist scriptures. In these accounts, thinkers seek an Ultimate Truth, thereby endeavoring to attain an elevated status that

¹Bishop, J., “Arguments for Supra-Evidential Fideism,” 203.

² Zagzebski, L., “Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction,” 14.

³ Indeed, disagreements and differences within a discipline also allow the discipline – in this case, philosophy of religion – to persist as a cohesive field. Thematic similarities are not the only aspects of a discipline that allow the discipline to persist. However, for argument’s sake, I will focus on thematic similarities in order to show the global prevalence of a special concept and the concept’s connective power.

⁴ While I do concede that “surrender” is not always about renouncing material things, I will use “absolute renunciation of the material realm” as my perspective on “surrender.”

transcends conventional routine and is self-enlightening. Thus, I will mainly examine Kierkegaardian and Buddhist texts in juxtaposition in an attempt to reveal “surrender” as a thematic commonality that not only bridges contrasting cultural spheres, but also bridges philosophy and religion.

As a philosopher of religion, I will focus on the universal significance that “surrender” has in philosophy and religion. In order to adequately capture this significance, it is imperative to first recognize the contemporary divide between Western and Eastern philosophies. Scholars have debated which perspectives can be considered legitimate philosophy as many favor European schools of thought and dismiss non-European of thought as less valuable.⁵ As such, Eurocentrism dominates the academic field of philosophy and renders schools of thought such as Buddhist perspectives separate and nearly irrelevant. Yet, the presence of “surrender” in both Western and Eastern realms shows that a theme can manifest in the two realms independently and further underscores that the former realm is not more legitimate than the latter.⁶ The concept’s widespread relevance within such a schism, thus, reveals that both Western and Eastern philosophies are of equal standing with equally valuable philosophical content to contemplate and investigate.

Kierkegaardian texts develop the theme of “surrender,” drawing from both Christian and Socratic ideas. With a Christian focus as the underlying context, Kierkegaard begins speaking of relinquishment through a figure whom he refers to as the Knight of Infinite Resignation. This knight “renounce[es] the finite”⁷ that is the material world grounded in reality and consequently

⁵ In their *New York Times* Opinion Page “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” Professors Jay L. Garfield and Bryan W. Van Norden argue that academic institutions and the academic field of philosophy itself exclusively consider Eurocentric thought to be legitimate philosophy. “Many philosophers and many departments simply ignore arguments for greater diversity,” and the two professors wish to dismantle this prevalent act of ignoring and complaisance.

⁶ This does not mean that *because* one realm has a concept that the other has, said realm is legitimate. Rather, I am asserting that the same theme of “surrender” is present in *both* realms, so both realms have equal value in terms of philosophical content. Therefore, scholars cannot argue that one realm is actual philosophy and that the other is not.

⁷ Bretall, R., “Fear and Trembling” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 117.

enters a state of “peace and rest,”⁸ a state that one presumably is not in when possessing the finite. As such, “the knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation”⁹ as they leap forward despite not knowing the consequences and embrace an uplifting sense of liberty. They accept the uncertainty that comes with absolute renunciation and, in that acceptance, acquire freedom.

The Knight of Faith, whom Kierkegaard then introduces in order to make a claim about the nature of faith, “make[s] renunciation of everything” of his own volition and, in return, gains a self that is in “eternal consciousness” while “in blissful agreement with [his] love for the Eternal Being.”¹⁰ In essence, upon choosing to surrender, the Knight of Faith achieves an everlasting transcendence, rising above mere human existence. At the same time, however, this knight “believes the absurd” and “face the impossibility,” regardless.¹¹ By “renounc[ing] the temporal to gain the eternal” while also harboring faith in the absurd, the Knight of Faith exemplifies “a purely human courage” that is, as Kierkegaard himself puts it, “beyond human power” and exhibits an exceptional quality that consequently elevates his very being.¹² Kierkegaard’s usage of “purely” to modify “human courage” expresses that the Knight’s kind of courage is atypical and more non-human or, even, more fully human than human.¹³

Kierkegaard’s idea of complete renunciation, nevertheless, is not a new concept in Western philosophy. The Danish philosopher’s literature explicitly features Socratic pedagogy within

⁸ Bretall, R., “Fear and Trembling” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 125.

⁹ Not only do knights of infinity possess elevation as stated on page 121 in “Fear and Trembling” of the anthology, but they, as also mentioned on page 121, are dancers in that they engage in “the most difficult task” which is “leap[ing] into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture.”

¹⁰ Bretall, R., “Fear and Trembling” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 127.

¹¹ Bretall, R., “Fear and Trembling” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 126.

¹² Bretall, R., “Fear and Trembling,” in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 127.

¹³ The “human courage” that Kierkegaard speaks of is so colossal for the Knight of Faith that it is ineffably non-human and, in its ineffability, moves the Knight toward greater humanness and completion.

Plato's *Apology*.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Socrates viewed death as either annihilation or transcendence,¹⁵ and in both perspectives, he virtually acknowledged the inevitability of an absolute renunciation of the material world and optimistically accepted death. The concept of "surrender" that is embedded in Socrates' teaching, perhaps purposefully, is included in Kierkegaard's account of resignation.¹⁶

Eastern philosophy and religion, specifically Buddhism, delves into the concept of renunciation and "surrender" as well. Yet, rather than utilize the term "surrender" or "renunciation," "The Questions of King Milinda" in the anthology *Buddhist Scriptures* instead describe the concept as Nirvana by means of "cessation." As "cessation" is introduced, the scriptures contrast the "foolish," who choose to hold onto earthly attachments, from the "well-informed holy," who choose to renounce earthly attachments.¹⁷ The Buddhist understanding of cessation is similar to the Kierkegaardian account of infinite resignation and faith in the absurd. The Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith who both surrender the finite in pursuit of the infinite, from a

¹⁴ On pages 162-163 of *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, in the piece "Philosophical Fragments," Kierkegaard states that "Just as one who has begotten himself by the aid of the Socratic midwifery now forgets everything else in the world, and in a deeper sense owes no man anything, so the disciple who is born anew owes nothing to any man, but everything to his divine Teacher. [...] He will take no pleasure in remembering what Recollection brings to his mind." Here, he is referring to Socrates' mention of *anamnesis*, a reawakening and recollection of knowledge that is already existing, in his argumentation before his hemlock-induced death.

¹⁵ Plato, "Apology" in *The Last Days of Socrates*, section 40c.

¹⁶ Similarities can be identified between Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century literature and William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). James' *Varieties* actually enhances humans' quest for Kierkegaard's characterization of "the eternal"; a resemblance of James' understanding of the *conversion experience* from the *Varieties* can be detected in the Kierkegaardian account. James views conversion as when "religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy" (196). Similar to Kierkegaard's interpretation, James' perception is that there is a shift in focus and the converted is directed toward an ultimate purpose or Truth.

¹⁷ On page 155 of *Buddhist Scriptures* selected and translated by Edward Conze, in the section "The Questions of King Milinda" of the third chapter "Wisdom" within part two "Doctrines," emancipation and Nirvana are discussed. The following excerpt describes the concept of cessation:

"All the foolish common people take delight in the senses and their objects, are impressed by them, are attached to them. In that way, they are carried away by the flood, and are not set free from birth, old age, and death, from grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair – they are, I say, not set free from suffering. But the well-informed holy disciples do not take delight in the senses and their objects, are not impressed by them, are not attached to them, and in consequence their craving ceases... that is to say to the cessation of all this mass of ill. It is thus that cessation is Nirvana."

Buddhist perspective, can be interpreted as “the well-informed holy” who surrender earthly attachment in pursuit of detachment and a higher purpose or Ultimate Truth as well as a sense of freedom. Moreover, they determine Nirvana as “absolute Ease” and speak of favoring the eternal over the temporal,¹⁸ evoking familiar characterizations of the renunciation that Kierkegaard of Western philosophy speaks of.¹⁹

The manner in which “The Questions of King Milinda” present the concept of surrender is not merely based on principle, but also on logical argumentation. By using analogy as does Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo*,²⁰ the text compares Nirvana to a lotus, water, medicine, space, the wishing jewel, and a mountain peak.²¹ These metaphorical explanations are incorporated in the overall argumentation regarding Nirvana that becomes evident when the text uses the methodology of question-and-answer. When the king questions Nagasena if Nirvana is cessation, he inquires as would a devil’s advocate, provoking Nagasena to respond and prove his questioning specious with adequate reasoning.²² Once Nagasena provides his responses, the king affirms them with praise, usually exclaiming, “Very good, Nagasena!”²³ Hence, the provocative questioning that is fundamental to philosophy is ingrained in both Western and Buddhist schools of thought.

Not only do Buddhists develop tenets entrenched in renunciation, but they also put these tenets into religious practice through lifestyles such as monastic asceticism.²⁴ According to a

¹⁸ On page 224 of the *Buddhist Scriptures*, in the first chapter “The Bliss of the Heavens” of part three “Other Worlds and Future Times,” it is said that “Paradise is only temporary, that it gives no real freedom, holds out no security, cannot be trusted and gives no lasting satisfaction! It is better therefore to strive for final release.” Kierkegaard also mentions a quest for the eternal over the temporal.

¹⁹ Again, Kierkegaard understands surrender and absolute resignation to lead to a state of “peace and rest.”

²⁰ Socrates employs the analogy “to the effect that we human beings are prisoners in a kind of a guard-house, and that no one has any business running away and trying to free himself...” in order to explain the concept of self and personhood in the *Phaedo*. The analogy is a device he uses in his logical argumentation as he attempts to teach his disciples.

²¹ Conze, E. (Trans.), “Wisdom” in the *Buddhist Scriptures*, 157.

²² Conze, E. (Trans.), “Wisdom” in the *Buddhist Scriptures*, 156-157.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ On page ix of Mohan Wijayaratina’s *Buddhist Monastic Life according to the texts of the Theravāda tradition*, translated by Claude Grangier and Steven Collins, it is said that “the monastic tradition of Buddhism is probably the

scholarly study of said lifestyle, “the tradition of asceticism and the idea that release could only be attained by the individual monk, seems to have reached its culmination in the time of the Buddha” when “numerous groups of ascetics appeared.”²⁵ For a Buddhist practicing asceticism, “escape from rebirth and salvation could only be obtained by renunciation of the ordinary societal ties.”²⁶ Buddha’s instruction “exemplified the main traits of the Indian ascetic contemplative tradition: a stress on renunciation, entrance upon religious life, and solitary meditation as important aids to the attainment of insight”²⁷ or, rather, the Ultimate Truth. Surrender in the form of an abandonment of society is essential in the “search for final release” from *samsara*, which is “based on the belief that life formed an endless chain of existence from which deliverance was necessary.”²⁸ Ultimately, a Buddhist engaging in monastic asceticism strives to attain a “sense of freedom from worldly cares and ties”²⁹ and, thus, access an awareness that transcends the material world.

Evidently, “surrender” as a concept holds significant weight in both Western and Eastern philosophical and religious accounts. Kierkegaardian and Jamesian texts are both grounded in philosophy and religion as Kierkegaard emphasizes Christian faith in his philosophical argumentation while James documents different kinds of religious experiences. On the other hand, Buddhism incorporate both philosophy and religion, utilizing logical reasoning to explain Buddhist ideals such as Nirvana as well as achieving said ideals through religious practice. From

oldest in the world, and has certainly been the most widespread, both geographically and culturally.” Hence, Buddhist renunciation holds substantial significance in the global scheme of philosophical thought as well as practice.

²⁵ On page 6 Ria Kloppenborg’s *The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature)*, it is said that Buddhist monastic asceticism is a volitional journey of surrender that one personally decides to undertake.

²⁶ On page 6 Ria Kloppenborg’s *The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature)*, the cycle of *samsara* is described, and renunciation would allow for one’s departure from said cycle.

²⁷ Kloppenborg, R., “The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature),” 6.

²⁸ Kloppenborg, R., “The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature),” 5.

²⁹ Kloppenborg, R., “The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature),” 5.

this juxtaposition, one can certainly observe that “surrender” is a common and, thus, unifying theme that not only bridges both Western and Eastern perspectives, but also bridges philosophy and religion. Such a unifying effect even soothes the rupture between Western and Eastern philosophies in the current debate regarding which ideologies are examples of legitimate philosophy.

Upon examining Kierkegaardian and Buddhist texts in juxtaposition, I hope to have revealed “surrender” as a thematic commonality that bridges not only contrasting cultural spheres, but also philosophy and religion. “Surrender,” the absolute renunciation of attachment to the material realm, is seen in Søren Kierkegaard’s journal entries, Socrates’ pedagogy, and Jamesean literature as well as in Buddhist scriptures. In these accounts, thinkers seek an Ultimate Truth, thereby endeavoring to attain an elevated status that goes beyond conventional routine and is self-enlightening. Therefore, an investigation of renunciation and its global prevalence illustrates how edifying concepts are embedded in the discipline that is philosophy of religion, thereby creating space for further contemplation about human philosophies and practices.

Works Cited

- Bishop, John. *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*. Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Bretall, Robert. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946.
- Conze, Edward, ed. *Buddhist Scriptures*. London: Penguin Group, 1959.
- Garfield, Jay L., and Bryan W. Van Norden. "If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is." *The New York Times*. May 11, 2016. Accessed May 1, 2017.
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html?_r=0.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002.
- Kloppenborg, Ria. *The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic A Study of the Concept of the Paccekabuddha in Pali Canonical and Commentarial Literature*. Kandi; Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1983. 2006. Accessed May 5, 2017.
<https://www.bps.lk/olib/wh/wh305.pdf>.
- Plato. *The Last Days of Socrates*. Translated by Christopher Rowe. 1st ed. London: Penguin Classics, 2010.
- Wijayaratina, Mohan. *Buddhist Monastic Life according to the texts of the Theravāda tradition*. Translated by Claude Grangier and Steven Collins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Accessed May 2, 2017.
<http://elibrary.ibc.ac.th/files/private/Buddhist%20%20Monastic%20Life.pdf>.
- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus. *Philosophy of Religion: An Historical Introduction*. Fundamentals of Philosophy. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.