

EXPLORING BUDDHISM'S UNDERSTANDING ON SUFFERING

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Introduction

Buddhism, one of the most ancient religions of the world, dated back five centuries before Christ, has found itself blossoming in the contemporary world, especially in the West. One must wonder what Buddhism has to offer to educated and technologically informed Westerners. What do they find in Buddhism that traditional Western religions such as Christianity cannot offer? While the number of Buddhists is unquestionably increasing, the number of people who are influenced by some form of Buddhist philosophy is even greater. Reaching out to them with the truth of the gospel, the forgiveness of God and the grace of Christ is to become an important task for the church.

How can Christians witness to Buddhists? John 3:16, one of the most well-known verses in the Bible, would not be very helpful because “belief in a creator God has no part in the Buddhist religion.”¹ Trying to explain to them the sacred biblical text would not be effective either because devoted Buddhists would value their personal experience over any ancient literature or even ancient wisdom.² Next Christians might bring out unchanging truths foundational to their faith, and yet Buddhists who are taught of the illusoriness of life and impermanence of all things are not accustomed to committing themselves to anything, much less to a foreign religion named Christianity, which claims to possess eternal truths. As Lim and Spaulding point out in their work, “Truth for the Buddhist is existential more than propositional; it is what works.”³

How can Christians win a chance to present the gospel to Buddhists? What would be a starting point? Common wisdom suggests starting with something upon which both sides agree, at least to a certain degree. Among many alternatives, suffering would be an

¹ Jane Hope and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Buddha*, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 5.

³ David Lim and Steve Spaulding, *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, 75.

option. Unlike religions such as Scientology, which tout the idea that everything, including pain and suffering, is merely a product of the mind, both Buddhism and Christianity believe suffering is an undeniable fact of life. The Buddha, the Christ and their respective followers throughout history have affirmed it. Moreover, both religions claim to hold in their hands a solution to this universal problem of human beings. Which one is correct?

With the desire to share the gospel to Buddhists so they might have eternal life, the author of this paper proposes to explore the religion of Buddhism along the axis of suffering. In particular, it attempts to answer to the following questions from the Buddhist perspective: *1) What is suffering? 2) What causes suffering? 3) What can one do to stop suffering? 4) How can one walk on the path toward liberation from suffering?* The paper is designed to be both truthful and respectful. Upon completion, its prospective reader will hopefully go away with a clear understanding of suffering according to Buddhism.

This paper is the first of a two-part series. Having understood the Buddhist view on suffering, the next paper will compare and contrast it with the Christian view. Even though the two religions agree that suffering is a universal problem with humankind, their respective views and therefore their solutions to suffering are drastically different.

This two-part series is mission-oriented. Its objective is rather straightforward. If Christianity does hold the truth, as its followers have proclaimed, it should present a superior solution to the universal problem of suffering compared to Buddhism, both theoretically and practically, both doctrinally and therapeutically. Therefore, the author

hopes to conduct the comparison responsibly to assist the reader to make the right decision, not only for this life but also for the next.

This paper focuses on Buddhism's understanding of suffering. Having said that, it is not a comprehensive study of Buddhism. That is, it does not delve into every aspect of the religion and discuss all Buddhist doctrines extensively. It does not offer a survey on the development of the religion over time or space. Rather, it takes a deep dive into the aspect of suffering, which is in fact right at the heart of the religion. It is hoped that once a prospective reader finishes reading the paper, he or she will know how Buddhists perceive suffering and how they deal with it in their daily lives.

Reality Check for the Buddha

The Buddha affirmed that suffering was an undeniable fact of life. Having been confined within his cattle since the day he was born, one day Gautama, the real name of the Buddha, decided to make a trip to the world outside the walls of his cattle. Without any preparation, he encountered a very different world to the one he had been living so far. He saw an old man with very poor health. Then he ran into a permanently sick man who tried to prolong his life hopelessly. Then he saw the corpse of a dead man. All of a sudden, Gautama's rosy world was shattered beyond words. In his cattle, people were healthy as sickness was attended to quickly. People aged unnoticeably because they took care of themselves carefully. Gautama must have never seen a dead man as his parents must have tried to shield him from such an unpleasant experience. The world out there, however, was very different. Old age, sickness and death were facts of life. Suddenly, Gautama realized that no one, including himself and people living in his cattle, was transcendent to these bleak facts. Not knowing them did not exempt anyone from

experiencing them. Everyone suffered from old age, sickness and death. Later, Gautama came to another profound realization that birth was also suffering. That completed the Buddhist version of samsara: birth, or more precisely – rebirth, old age, sickness and death. Every stage of this unbroken cycle was filled with suffering. Reality of suffering led Gautama to seek an answer to it. It is said that soon after the birth of his son, Gautama deserted his family to go to look for a solution to suffering.

Upon returning from enlightenment, Buddha spent the rest of his long life preaching about his Four Noble Truths: 1) *dukka*, the reality of suffering⁴, 2) *samudaya*, the arising or origin of *dukka*, 3) *nirodha*, the cessation of *dukka*, and 4) *magga*, the way leading to the cessation of *dukka*. In a world where life expectancy was only forty years, Buddha lived until he was about eighty years of age.

Buddhism is evangelistic in nature because its followers believe that the Hindu unbroken cycle of existence, which is filled with suffering, can be broken after all. Suffering can be stopped; beings can be liberated from painful existence. Just follow what the Buddha teaches, one may find his or her way out. Let us try to understand these four noble truths which establish the foundation of Buddhism.

Dukka – What is Suffering?

According to Buddhism, there are three aspects of suffering: ordinary suffering, suffering as produced by change and suffering as conditioned states.⁵ The first aspect of suffering

⁴ Rahula, a noted Buddhist scholar and practitioner of the religion himself, does not agree with the most popular translation of *dukka* usually seen in the press. In his opinion, translating *dukka* ‘The Noble Truth of Suffering’, or just ‘life is suffering’, which is often taken to mean life is nothing but suffering, is an inaccurate and superficial translation. In his opinion, Buddhism is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic in that it correctly describes life as it is. ‘Existence of suffering’ might be more acceptable in this perspective. See Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

encompasses most sufferings commonsense to ordinary human beings. They include birth, old age, sickness, death, grief, lamentation and distress. These are physical and mental suffering. Lack of personal fulfillment is also suffering. In Buddha's own words, "Being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation from what is liked is suffering, not to get what one wants is suffering."⁶

While old age, sickness and death can be thought of as universal suffering in the sense that all people will inevitably experience them at some point in their lives, the rest are somewhat *relative* and definitely *individual* to the sufferer. Take what Buddha says above as an example. Something which might be considered a source of great suffering to someone can be an unpleasant but nevertheless bearable one to someone else and a non-suffering at all to another. This sort of suffering is self-centered and therefore relative. If a suffering is relative, it can be reduced and even eliminated.

The second aspect of suffering includes pleasant things that are subject to change. A moment of happiness or a pleasant condition in life demonstrates suffering as produced by change. When the pleasant things are no more, suffering comes as a result. However, it is noteworthy that Buddhism loudly preaches the doctrine of impermanence, which essentially says that everything is impermanent and subject to change, including happiness and pleasant conditions. In essence, the doctrine of impermanence also rules out the existence of a permanent and unchanging God. Suffering is hovering at the door of every event of happiness. An upshot of this view is that happiness in this world, no matter how long it might last, invites suffering at the moment it disappears. Moreover, feeling happy about something or someone may mean attachment to the world, which

⁶ P. Mishra, *An End to Suffering*, 191.

leads to suffering. Buddhism promotes for detachment from and suggests against attachment to the world. No attachment, no suffering. But that would necessitate the removal of *all* involvements to the world. One should not love because the separation from the beloved is suffering.

The third and final aspect of suffering is much more profound philosophically. It refers to the existence of human beings. Existence is suffering with birth as its beginning. Comprehending the third aspect of suffering is prerequisite to unlocking the Buddhist concept of ultimate liberation.

Buddhists define suffering from an *experiential* viewpoint. Buddhism essentially states that if you do not feel that you are suffered, then you are not. As discussed above, this view point leads to relativity of suffering. Only against this important background can one understand the Buddhist understanding of suffering as well as their solution to it. Mishra, a Buddhist scholar proclaims, “Suffering was manmade.”⁷ With that understanding, we can now make sense out of the following statement from the Buddhist scholar Kenneth Ch’en, who said, “Suffering can be suppressed.”⁸ This is very interesting. Note that Ch’en says ‘suppressed’, not ‘resolved’. Is this a mind-control thing? It seems so. A question here is whether suppressed suffering can re-surface at a later time. What would the person do at that time? Suppress it again? And again? Probably the most succinct statement regarding the experientialism of Buddhism’s understanding of suffering is from Fernando, “Suffering is experiential not intellectual.”⁹

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism – The Light of Asia*, 33.

⁹ Antony Fernando and Leonard Swidler, *Buddhism made plain – An Introduction for Christians and Jews*, 23.

Buddhists also define suffering from an *individualistic* viewpoint. While it does not deny the universality of suffering, it is much more concerned with the suffering felt by *individual* human beings. It is what *one* feel as opposed to what other people might feel; it is what *one* has done as opposed to other people might have done; it is what *one* will do to get rid of suffering for *oneself* as opposed to what other people might help. To individuals, he basically says that your suffering is caused by you yourself and hence you are solely responsible for your own suffering, both for identifying its cause as well as arriving at its solution.

“Suffering can be transformed when we finally learn to change our minds.”¹⁰ Once again, this clearly demonstrates that Buddhism focuses on the mind and how it functions. A question here is what kind of suffering Buddhism attempts to solve. It seems to be psychological and emotional suffering. There is quite another kind of suffering, real suffering, naked suffering, as some Buddhist scholars have coined the term. Buddhism does not categorize those sufferings.

Samudaya – What Causes Suffering?

According to Buddhism, *the root cause of suffering is craving and fall views* which make people greedy, selfish and attached to impermanent things. Buddha looked within and found the source of suffering to be “desire, attachment, pride, jealousy and hatred... He [the Buddha] has analyzed the workings of these emotions and asserted that they arise from a craving for and an attachment to a self that has no true existence.”¹¹

¹⁰ R. Targ and J. J. Hurtak, *The End of Suffering – Fearless Living in Troubled Times*, xvii. In the book, Targ mentions the death of his daughter. He concedes that suffering resulted from such a loss is real, which he calls naked suffering. He does not deal with this kind of suffering. He cannot offer any remedy to people who face naked suffering.

¹¹ Mishra, 28.

The most dangerous false view is the view about the self. Everybody tends to believe that there is an autonomous self within himself. That self sets a particular individual apart from the crowd; it makes I am me and you are you. The autonomous self causes one to accumulate things for oneself but not for others. It also causes him to want to hold on to his own ideas and beliefs. According to Buddha, that is the biggest ignorance among all. Ignorance is twofold. First, *there is no autonomous, permanent self*. Buddhism advocates for the doctrine of insubstantiality of the self, which essentially says that there is no self within any human being.¹² Buddhism believes that there is no permanent self; that is, there is no ‘I’. Everyone is “only a combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies.”¹³ There are no permanent souls. When one dies, he either vanishes into thin air or takes a re-birth in some form of existence based on his karma reading.

Second, all things are so impermanent and therefore not worth attaching to. Buddhism teaches *the doctrine of impermanence*. “There is no permanent, unchanging substance, nothing passes from one moment to the next.”¹⁴ People are greedy and selfish because they believe the objects of their desire, which can be either as earthly as sense-pleasures, wealth and power or as virtuous as ideas and beliefs, are permanent or at least long lasting. Desire leads to attachment. Once one attains his desire, he wants to hold on to it, he wants more of it, and he does not want to share it with anyone else. Unsatisfied desires cause suffering; attachment to impermanent things also causes suffering.

¹² “The first of these [active misconceptions about the nature of reality] is a state of mind that focuses on one’s self and misconceives it to be truly or substantially existent – to imagine that within our impermanent bodies and minds there is some kind of permanent, autonomous self.” See Dalai Lama, *The Way to Freedom*, 122.

¹³ Rahula, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

Buddhists believe that, “If we are suffering, we must learn to change our mind. The real source of our suffering is almost never external.”¹⁵

When one suffers, others cannot help but ask whose fault that may be. According to Buddhism, nothing happens without a cause, and nothing leaves behind no consequences. Everything is recorded and taken into account. That is the outworking of the theory of karma. Even though Buddhism criticizes the Hindu version of karma, its ethical system is built solidly upon the theory of karma.¹⁶

The karmic system holds that people are reaping what they have sown in previous lives and that for the current action they will reap in their next lives. As a result, every suffering can be simply explained by the karmic theory. It must be something the sufferer has done in the present life or a previous one! One must wonder what this view has to do with compassion. Sharon Stone, a famous Hollywood movie who is also a devout Buddhist, was scorned publicly and heavily by the worldwide Buddhist community for trying to be a Buddhist scholar. She accounted the recent earthquake in China to the oppression the Chinese government has done to the Tibet people. That was as unkind and political incorrect as Stone could possibly get. However, doctrinally speaking, one would not be so sure that she is very distant from what Buddhism teaches regarding the outworking of karma.

¹⁵ Everything can be defined in terms of experience. “Heaven and hell do indeed exist. Heaven is the experience that you have when you are experience peace, joy, and love. And that experience is available to you at any moment. Just like heaven, hell is also always available as the experience of fear, judgment, and resentment. You get to choose, at each moment, where you would like to reside.” See Targ, 25-30.

¹⁶ “The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the dead of justice or reward and punishment. Every volitional action produces its effects or results. If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice, or reward, or punishment met out by anybody or any power sitting in judgment on your action, but this is in virtue of its own nature, its own law... The effects of a volitional action may continue to manifest themselves even in a life after death.” See Rahula, 30.

Nirodha – What Can One Do to Stop Suffering?

Having realized the undeniable existence of suffering, having enlightened with the cause of suffering, the Buddha moved on to his third discovery: *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering. Given the background in which he understands suffering, which is *experiential* and *individualistic*, and its cause, which is craving and ignorance, he unsurprisingly claims that *suffering will cease at the moment craving and desire stops*.

Buddhism believes that craving and false views, which are the root cause of suffering as discussed previously, can be *resolved with the mind*. Once one understands the doctrine of impermanence and the doctrine of insubstantiality of the self, he will understand that there is no self to accumulate for and that things are so impermanent and ever-changing. This brings to two important decisions. First, it is foolish to spend life chasing after impermanent things.¹⁷ Second, these things are changing and disappearing quickly; they will not stay around for long and therefore one can not hold on to them anyway. All of this realization can be accomplished with the awareness of the mind, according to the teaching of Buddhism. Careful Buddhist scholars would not refer to the world as *the world*, but *the phenomenal world* because everything is perceived; nothing is permanent.

It is worth noting that Buddhism looks within to find the root cause for and the solution to suffering. “Suffering was manmade and thus eradicable.”¹⁸ This statement is logically tenable. If man can create it, man would be able to eradicate it. The foundational assumption here is in the first clause, “Suffering was manmade.” While it is true that man

¹⁷ “All objects of desire are impermanent.” See Society for Buddhist Understanding, *The Teaching of Buddha*, 48.

¹⁸ Mishra, 28.

has caused many sufferings for himself and the surrounding world due to selfishness, greed, pride and hatred, there are sufferings which are obviously not manmade. Tsunamis, earthquakes, avalanches and senseless automobile accidents are just a few examples of suffering that cannot be easily traced to a human fault. Buddhists would have to stretch their perspective a whole lot to land a plausible explanation to this kind of naked sufferings. Moreover, going back to man himself as the root cause for suffering, a question here is what causes man to crave or possess false views. Is it ignorance or imperfection or depravity? Once he understands the illusoriness of life, would he be able to escape from craving and attachment? Buddhists would then quickly add that awareness is just the first step toward Nirvana. One would have to walk on the Eight-Fold Path for himself. While Nirvana attainment is possible within a lifetime, many would take many lifetimes to achieve it.

As discussed previously, the Buddhist understanding of suffering is rather *individualistic*. That also has a lot to do with their solution to suffering. Buddhism believes that everyone is responsible for liberating himself from suffering. “The Buddha often said that he offered his teachings in the manner of a physician, who had diagnosed the condition of the patient and then prescribed the method of cure.”¹⁹ It should be noted that *the best the Buddha can do is to prescribe the method of cure*. The patient is to take the prescription to somewhere else for the medication. In this situation, the patient is also the curer. He must save himself. The Buddha says, “One is one’s own refuge, who else could be the refuge?”²⁰ His way of life is that one must taste and see for oneself what is true or false. In this regard, the Buddha is viewed as a savior. “If the Buddha is to be

¹⁹ Ch’en, 31.

²⁰ Dhammaratana, K., *Dhammapada*, XII, 4.

called a ‘savior’ at all, it is only in the sense that he discovered and showed the Path to Liberation, Nirvana. But we must tread the Path ourselves.”²¹

Why then the Buddha is so important to Buddhism and his followers? He proves that the path to liberation does exist. He has tried and achieved it. It is a great hope compared to Hinduism. Cessation to suffering is possible. What a revolutionary finding! What is the possibility of Nirvana? The Buddha and Buddhist scholars affirm its possibility. Mishra says, “Human individuals could achieve liberation, nirvana, by freeing themselves from greed, hatred and delusion.”²²

In assessing the deity of the Buddha, Rahula says, “The Buddha was not only a human being; he claims no inspiration from any god or external power either. He attributed all his realization, attainments to human endeavor and human intelligence.”²³ This is very important to keep in mind. This explains when his disciples asked him about salvation, Buddha said he would show them the way but they would have to go through it for themselves. Each is responsible for his own salvation. What the Buddha has accomplished is to have found the path to liberation. Now it is up to his followers and people of the next generations to go through it.

In Buddhist scriptures, the extinction of craving is defined as *Nirvana*. Nirvana is *a personal experience instead of a physical reality*. Buddhists do not believe in sustainable physical reality anyway. Remember that according to Buddhism, physical existence is suffering, and birth is the starting point of that process. Therefore breaking the cycle of rebirths into nothingness is in fact the ultimate goal of Buddhism. *Non-*

²¹ Rahula, 2.

²² Mishra, 43.

²³ Rahula, 1.

existence is actually the ultimate goal of the whole philosophy. While it might not make sense to a lot of people, it is true to Buddhists. Rebirth presupposes a thirst for existence. Once a person achieves the cessation of craving and desire, there is no more longing for continuity, there will not be another life for that person.

Magga – How Can One Walk on the Path toward Liberation from Suffering?

Having known nirodha – the cessation of suffering, one would like to know how to attain it in order to be liberated from suffering. Buddha suggested the Eight-Fold Path to his followers. It is the responsibility of everybody to walk his own path in order to liberate himself. The Eight-Fold Path will lead Buddhist practitioners to the cessation of suffering. There are three aspects of the Eight-Fold Path: ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom.²⁴ Ethical conduct is based on love and compassion for others. It includes three areas: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. Mental discipline includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right concentration. It aims at suppressing evil and unwholesome states of the mind of the individual and promoting goodness which is already there in the mind. Wisdom includes Right Thought and Right Understanding. Right Thought refers to the thoughts of detachment and the ability to recognize and debunk false views. Right Understanding refers to the real understanding of things as they are and the ability to recognize the impermanent nature of all things.

No one can walk the Eight-Fold Path on behalf of others. Even Buddha walked his own path and found enlightenment and ultimately Nirvana for himself. He came back and preached about his enlightenment and showed people the path. Believing in Buddha does not exempt anyone from walking his own path.

²⁴ Rahula, 46.

What is waiting for Buddhists at the end of their individual Eight-fold Paths, assuming they have walked it successfully? That is the breaking away the cycle of samsara. The Buddha himself said, “Destroyed is rebirth for me; consumed is my striving; done is what had to be done; I will not be born into another existence.”²⁵ This is why Buddhists do not normally talk about salvation, which usually presupposes a savior. Instead they like to tout the vision of liberation from suffering, from life and ultimately from physical existence.

Conclusion

Suffering is real and therefore undeniable. It is caused by craving and delusions. To liberate himself from suffering, man needs to be awakened to the truth that there is no self to crave for and that everything is so impermanent that accumulation and attachment to anything is practically in vain. Suffering is largely manmade and therefore can be eradicated if the sufferer follows the teaching of the Buddha. The key to liberation involves understanding which meditation is able to provide and discipline which the Eight-Fold Path prescribed by the Buddha will guide. Liberation might require multiple lifetimes to reach Nirvana. That is succinctly what Buddhism teaches.

It is true that Buddhism has a lot of wisdom to contribute the knowledge base of mankind. All should be brought to a realization that suffering is real. Like it or not, everyone will have to go through birth, old age, sickness and death. A lot of sufferings in the world would have been avoided if man stops and examines the motive of his actions: Is that greed? Is that ego? Is that delusional? Nolan Jacobson, a Western Buddhist scholar boldly claims that, “Buddhist perspectives and methods of self-correction find themselves

²⁵ Pali text: Vinaya of the Mulasarvastivadins.

suddenly at home [in America].”²⁶ Why is that? First Buddhist fundamental doctrines such as the doctrines of impermanence and insubstantiality of the self make some sense to a certain extent. Second liberation from suffering by means of self correction sounds plausible, given the availability of an infinite number of lives until one achieves Nirvana.

What kind of suffering Buddhism attempts to resolve? In other words, does the Buddhist understanding of suffering encompass all kinds of suffering? How about natural disasters? How about senseless acts of violence? How about loneliness? How about the lack of inner peace after one has achieved everything he has ever wanted? How about the void in every human heart? As mentioned previously, Buddhists look inward to try to make sense of suffering, to identify its causes, to arrive at its solution and finally to derive a path to secure that solution. The Buddhist definition of suffering is totally *experiential* and utterly *individualistic*. It does not address the kind of suffering which does not seem to relate to human experience and emotion. Examples include the following but not limited to: earthquake, tsunami and diseases. Strictly and doctrinally speaking, according to Buddhist teaching, this kind of suffering may not be suffering at all.

Suffering is *individualistic* and therefore needs to be worked out individually. Compassion is called for but it is ultimately the responsibility of individuals to find a path to liberation for themselves. As one weathers his own suffering, there is no one to blame but himself. It must be what he has done in a previous life. Practically, Buddhism calls for compassion just because everyone is somehow related to one another given the infinite cycle of rebirths.

²⁶ Nolan Jacobson, *Understanding Buddhism*, 23.

Is self-correction and mind control sufficient in liberating people from suffering? If one does not feel suffering, does that mean that suffering is not there? Would the knowledge of other people's suffering lessen one own's suffering? That effect is contained largely to emotional and psychological suffering. If my leg is amputated, knowing that I am definitely not the first amputee in the world would not take my physical pain away.

Buddhism does not have an answer to the kind of suffering that its practitioners call naked suffering. While the karmic law is often used to explain individual suffering, Buddhism is largely quiet about natural catastrophes such as tsunamis, earthquakes and famines. While Buddhists are often praised for their compassion around the world, their underlying motive is still individualistic. Good work is done to work off individual bad karma. Even though contemporary Buddhism encourages their followers to pay attention to the suffering of surrounding people, the ultimate goal is ultimately to diminish their own suffering.²⁷

In the next paper, I will compare and contrast Buddhism and Christianity on the aspects of suffering discussed in the current work. *I will look at the Christian understanding of suffering, its position on the cause of suffering and finally its solution to suffering.* Then I will attempt to build a bridge for Buddhists to walk from their world of fear and self-correction to grace of Christ. No one puts it more succinctly than Streeter

²⁷ "You are not the only person who suffers. Your sisters and your brothers also suffer. The moment you see the suffering in them, you stop blaming them, and you stop the suffering in you. If you suffer and if you believe that your suffering is created by the people around you, you have to look again. Most of your suffering comes from the lack of understanding of yourself and others." See Hanh Nhat Thich, *Going Home – Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, 36.

that, “As enlightened as he was, Gautama was still a man. As ordinary as Christ appears to be, he is God.”²⁸

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²⁸ Streeter, *The Buddha and the Christ*, 67.

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