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The Lotus Sūtra as Good News: A Christian Reading¹

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CHRISTIAN READING OF NON-CHRISTIAN WORKS

For Christians, the good news (the gospel) is, first and most fundamentally, a set of events: God's loving creation of all things; his calling, or election, of a particular people to bear a covenanted relation with him; his incarnation, death, and resurrection; and the salvation of humanity wrought thereby. I'll call this the fundamental good news. Second, and derivatively, the good news is any witness to these events, any reflection or description or commendation of them in words or actions. Not all such witnesses are equally comprehensive and explicit. Some may present only a part of the fundamental good news: God's love, say, or some truths about the human condition that comport well with or are required by the fundamental good news. And such parts may be presented directly and explicitly; or largely implicitly, veiled by allusion and metaphor; or even entirely implicitly, present only in what is not said. I'll call all such witnesses, no matter the degree of their comprehensiveness and explicitness, examples of derivative good news.

For us Christians, the Bible is the paradigm or archetype of derivative good news. There, for us, is found the supremely authoritative literary record of God's acts for us and our responses to them. And in that literary record are the four gospels, which are also instances of derivative good news, but which bear the title 'gospel' or 'good news' (evangelism) and are derivative good news in an even more special sense than is the Bible as a whole. This is because they contain an explicit record of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whose presence in the world was, is, and will be the pivotal event in God's relations with human beings. The Bible as a whole is, for Christians, a work whose central topics are God's acts and God's relations to us, and it is uniquely authoritative on those topics. It is not itself the fundamental good news, nor the only witness to or literary presentation of the fundamental good news, nor a fully comprehensive and explicit witness to the fundamental good news; but it is uniquely authoritative for Christians as a witness and presentation to this fundamental good news. Christian understandings of the fundamental good news are therefore always formed in conversation with it, and are self-consciously constrained by what it says. It frames and constrains all other Christian instances of derivative good news, but is not itself framed or constrained

by them: this is its syntactic function in the formation of a properly Christian account of things.

This, obviously, is a specifically Christian view of what the good news is, of what the phrase 'good news/gospel' means. The claims made in the preceding paragraph are part of the grammar of Christian faith, enshrined in doctrine, liturgy, and practice. The gospel book may be lifted and kissed before being read to the community of the faithful; the sign of the cross may be made on forehead, lips, and heart before the gospel's words are read, to signify the purification of understanding, speech, and emotion required before the words of the good news can be heard, and to prepare for the sanctification of the person that is ideally consequent upon their hearing. Thinking and doing such things is part of what it means to be Christian, much as bowing upon meeting is part of what it means to be Japanese. I am a Christian, so this view of the good news is mine. It is the place from which I begin in thinking about the good news. To pretend otherwise would be disingenuous, or worse.

But this Christian view of what the good news is does not entail, nor even suggest, that derivative good news is found nowhere but in the Bible. The claim that God is related lovingly to all human persons is part of the grammar of Christian faith: the state of affairs it describes is part of the fundamental good news. It suggests that evidences of God's love ought to be everywhere. It means also (though not all Christians agree about this) that literary works composed by those who are not Christian must contain derivative good news, which is to say that they too must bear witness, at least implicitly, to God's love for us and to what God has done by way of showing that love. It is not possible for any literary work, Christian or otherwise, to be free of implicit witness to the good news. This is because all literary works are composed intentionally by human beings, and in the act of literary composition, even when the explicit content of the work composed is damnable or otherwise objectionable, there is necessarily an implicit witness to—because it is a partial recapitulation of—God's creative act, and so also God's redemptive love.

A further distinction is necessary at this point. What I've said so far means that all literary works are derivative good news. The category is therefore not analytically useful. To say that all literary works bear a certain property will not make it possible to distinguish some from others. And since we Christians (and others, so far as I can tell) have wished and do wish to make hierarchical distinctions among literary works according to the extent to which it's reasonable to call them examples of derivative good news (as I've said, for us, the Bible is derivative good news in a way that no other literary work is or can be, which judgment itself establishes a hierarchy), some criteria are needed to ground such hierarchical distinctions. The most obvious ones are truth, comprehensiveness, and explicitness. Literary works may be ordered hierarchically as instances of derivative good news according to the extent to which what they say about the fundamental good news is true, comprehensive, and explicit. Of course, it may often be difficult to assess the extent to which a particular work is any of these things. But we Christians do (or should) begin from the assumption that the Bible is more comprehensive, explicit, and true in what it says about the fundamental good news than any other work. We should also begin from the assumption

that the comprehensiveness, explicitness, and truth of any other literary work is an open question, awaiting answer by empirical study. It is from this position that Christians should approach the *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*, the *Discourse on the White Lotus of the Good Doctrine* (to give it a possible English rendering—hereinafter simply Lotus).²

It needs to be added (though this claim too is not uncontroversial among Christians) that even if it turns out to be the case that there is explicit good news (in the derivative sense) in non-Christian literary works, this can never mean for Christians that the works in which it is found can be placed on a par with or given the same authority as the Bible. This is because it is also part of the grammar of the Christian faith that only the Bible is, textually speaking, a *norma normans non normata*—a norm that norms but is itself not normed. To give any other literary work or works this status, or to allow that any other works could have this status, would be to abandon a central syntactical principle of the faith. As a result, no reading of a non-Christian work by Christians can be done with the thought that the work read might be explicit good news in just the sense that the Bible is. This is quite compatible with Christians doing such reading with the thought that what is read might be explicit *derivative* good news.

The Bible is not, according to the grammar of the Christian faith, the only explicit verbal witness to the good news. There is also the preached word, which is typically based upon and ordered by and to the biblical text; and there is the *depositum fidei*—the literary record of what Christians have thought and said about the fundamental good news. Christians differ as to the relative weight to be given to each of these and as to the details of the proper construal of what they are. But they are largely at one on the view that it is in some sense proper to say that works in these two categories are derivative good news.

It follows from all these considerations that, for Christians, non-Christian literary works may contain explicit derivative good news, but need not do so. It follows also that such works may contain matter and argument that is, at the explicit level, irreconcilably opposed to the fundamental good news. It's also true (though here again I make a claim that is controversial among Christians) that non-Christian literary works may have something explicit to say about God and God's relation to us humans (about the fundamental good news) that has not yet been made explicit by any Christian. This is to say that Christians may have something to learn from a careful reading of non-Christian literary works about what is implied by Christianity, although it is not to say that there are any truths about God not implied or otherwise suggested by what is said explicitly in the Bible. All this means that some such truths may have been made explicit by non-Christians in their literary activity.³

Non-Christian literary works may also, it follows, be free from any tincture of good news, at least in the sense that what they explicitly say is either opposed to it or neutral to it. Technical works on Sanskrit phonology or on the political theory informing the Japanese constitution might be of the latter sort. Perhaps Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* or Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* are of the former sort. (I do not, of course, mean to equate these two in any other way.)

Christians should, then, read non-Christian literary works with all these possibilities in mind. We ought read them with eager attention and expectation, hoping to find in them some record of or witness to God's love for us and for those who composed them, and most especially (and most eagerly) with the thought that through reading them we might come explicitly to know more of the fundamental good news than we already do. We ought read them also with a wary eye to the possibility of their containing matter and argument that is opposed to this good news, and that should therefore be called into question by us. And we ought read them with the hope that they might contain matter of interest in some sphere of human inquiry that is explicitly neutral as to the content of the good news, but that is nonetheless of benefit to us.

If nothing is known in advance about the work read (except that it is not a Christian work), all these attitudes should inform the act of reading, modified as preliminary and provisional judgments are made about what sort of work is being read. But, of course, such reading without prior knowledge is the exception, not the norm; usually something is known about the nature and significance of what's read before reading begins. In some cases, Christians beginning to read might know that what we're about to read is a work that seems to function for a community other than ours in ways roughly analogous to the ways in which the Bible functions for us. Perhaps, that is to say, we might know that we're about to turn the pages of a book that is sacred to some community, that appears to be for it the paradigmatic witness to what it takes to be most important—or even that is, itself, precisely what is taken to be most important. Perhaps this applies to a Christian beginning to read the Qur'an, or to a Christian beginning to read the Lotus.⁴

In such a case it seems reasonable for Christians to assume (correctly) that we're reading or about to read a holy book, a witness of special importance to the fundamental good news. We should assume this (though always with a careful eye to the other possibilities I've mentioned) just because of our Christian beliefs. All people are children of God; our hearts yearn for God; we are unsatisfied with anything other than God; and people without an understanding of God will say of their lives, as Marlowe's Mephistopheles says to Faustus, "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it." It's likely, given this theological anthropology, that literary works that have given meaning to large communities of people over time and have been treated by them as holy will contain some explicit witness to the fundamental good news; for nothing but this can long satisfy people constituted as we humans are. Reverential attention, coupled with the breathless hope of learning something new about the good news, should therefore be the initial notes of a Christian reading of the Lotus. Whether these notes remain, or are modulated into others, will depend upon its particulars. These particulars may be in harmony with the good news as Christians understand it, and may add to or deepen this understanding. Insofar as they are and do, reverence, awe, and celebration will continue to be the principal attitudes and responses of Christians to the Lotus; and over time it might be baptized into the Christian account of things, and so might eventually become for Christians a Christian work. Insofar as they are not and do not, different attitudes and responses will be proper.

With these presuppositions in mind, I offer the following Christian reading of the Lotus—first of the shape and content of the work as a whole, and then, in more detail, of a particular theme in it.⁵ It should be obvious from all I've said so far that the reading offered is a Christian one: I'm looking for the good news. It isn't a Buddhist reading (much less a Rissho Koseikai one); neither is it the kind of reading that might be offered by a positivist historian or a buddhologist. What interest or use it might have for any of these people only they can say.

THE LOTUS AS A WHOLE

I'd read the Lotus through in English twice in my life before preparing to write this paper. Once was as an adolescent before I knew any Sanskrit and before I was a Christian. At that time, more than twenty years ago, I found the work mostly puzzling, a puzzlement perhaps not helped by the fact that I was reading it in Hendrik Kern's elegantly Victorian English. I read it again to prepare for a class several years later when I was studying both Buddhism and Sanskrit and had become a Christian, and this time I understood at least something of what was meant. Since then I've read sections of it several times in Sanskrit and in various English versions and have taught parts of it to both graduate and undergraduate students in various settings. This gives me a moderately good acquaintance with the particulars of the text in English and to a lesser extent in Sanskrit. I cannot read Chinese, so I have no acquaintance whatever with the work in that language. I have never read the Lotus as a Buddhist.

Several intertwined themes come up again and again in the Lotus. One is that of path and goal. The Lotus teaches that there is only one of each, that all human persons have, ultimately and finally, one and the same goal, a shorthand label for which is 'Buddhahood' (*buddhatā* or *buddhatvam*), that there is just one way to get there, the *ekayāna* (ii–iii, v), and that all humans, without distinction, are able to follow this path and attain this goal (xi and passim). Connected with this teaching is the claim that Buddhas, awakened ones, are of great metaphysical significance (xv–xvi) and are the best possible guides and teachers for humans. They show this by telling us what our goal is and how best to approach it—and by doing so always in language and concepts appropriate to the persons they're addressing (iii, vii–viii). They show it also by knowing (and sometimes telling) who will become a Buddha and under what circumstances (iii, vi–ix). And running like a thread through the making and remaking of these claims about humans and the Buddha is a set of teachings about the Lotus itself: that it is a supremely efficacious instrument for leading its hearers to their proper goal, and that treatment of it as significant in this way is itself an activity that produces merit and helps those who do it on their way to the goal—and perhaps even suffices to permit them to reach it (i, x–xi, xiii, xvii–xxii, xxvi, xxviii). The third theme is dominant: the Lotus gives more words to a presentation of its own significance than to anything else, though to separate this theme from the others is finally artificial because the Lotus' significance consists in large part in the fact that it has been uttered by Buddhas and that it presents the correct teaching on the nature of humans and their proper goal. But nonetheless, an initial

reading leaves a strong impression that the Lotus is very interested in its own status, perhaps more interested in this than in anything else.

The Lotus is largely lacking in substantive discussion of just what constitutes awakening, or even of the qualities (other than being aware of its own significance) that promote (or hinder) attainment of it. It is in this sense a formal work, a work that says a good deal about *how* Buddhas teach but little about *what* they teach and a good deal about the importance of particular texts but little about what those texts contain. What Christians would call theological anthropology is scarcely to be found there; neither is there much metaphysics. Instead, there is a dramatization of a particular theory of religious pedagogy, the framework of a soteriology without much of its substance, some very good stories, and some breathtaking vignettes.

This is an extremely summary statement of the Lotus' content. It leaves a lot out (for instance, the function and significance of figures like Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī) and is obviously inadequate as a representation of the flavor and power of the work. But it permits, perhaps, some preliminary reflections from a Christian point of view. The first such reflection is that the Lotus' strong universalism appears formally to be entirely congruent with Christian universalism: I mean the view that there is something intrinsic to humans that provides each of us with at least one among the necessary conditions for reaching our proper goal; that each of us must reach it, if we do, in essentially the same way; and that the goal is essentially the same for us all. Contrapositively, this view holds that no human is in principle excluded from reaching the proper goal of all humans. There may, of course, be substantive differences between the Lotus' views of what that goal is and Christian views of the same matter; but they seem, at first blush, to agree in claiming and advocating the importance of a formal universalism. If this agreement turns out to stand up to closer study, then it will be an instance of agreement that Christians should welcome: God's revelation in Jesus implies universalism, and it seems that the Lotus teaches universalism to have been preached by the Buddha, and to be constitutive of Buddhism, properly understood.

It's worth noting that there's another formal similarity between what the Lotus has to say about this topic and what Christians have said. It is that the truth of universalism has been a topic for polemical debate among Buddhists as it also has among Christians. There are clear evidences of this polemic in the Lotus. When the topic of the *ekayāna* first arises in chapters ii–iii, it's very clear that it arises as a controverted question: Are there three vehicles or one, and if there's only one, how is this to be reconciled with the fact that some Buddhist works seem to teach three? (I assume that the *triyāna* teaching is opposed to universalism in the sense that it advocates different salvific paths for different people, even if it's consistent with the claim that all may attain Buddhahood, which for the Lotus is the goal of human life.) The parable of the burning house (iii/72ff.), perhaps the Lotus' most widely known illustrative story, makes the polemical point strongly: the benevolent father gives to each of his children an identical carriage, “drawn by oxen (*gorathaka*), endowed with the speed of the wind (*vatajavasampanna*).” That the point needs to be made so strongly is itself enough to show that it was controversial. The same is true of the other aspect

of the Lotus' universalism: the view that all humans can attain Buddhahood. Some Indian Buddhists did not think this to be correct, affirming instead that some beings (called, usually, *icchantika*) could, by virtue of their constitution, never leave samsara behind and become Buddhas.⁶ Formally similar debates have occurred in the history of Christianity, perhaps most obviously in arguments over predestination. Christians can thus recognize and embrace the polemical context within which the Lotus' views appear to have been formed. It is probably inevitable that the formulation and defense of a strongly universalistic view will be provoked by, and will provoke, opposed views in any religious community where it develops.

The Lotus' second main theme, that of the unmatched significance, both metaphysical and soteriological, of Buddhas (or, perhaps, of Buddhahood, of *buddhatā*) raises more questions for Christians. Formally, once again, there is no problem. It is part of the grammar of Christian faith to understand God as maximally great, unsurpassably wonderful, the only worship-worthy one, and to avoid placing anything or anyone on a par with God. This is the most fundamental point of the first commandment and the ceaseless emphasis by virtually all aspects of the tradition on the importance of avoiding idolatry. If the Lotus is making the same formal claim, we Christians should enthusiastically celebrate it. But the particulars may raise more difficulties: perhaps there is a different understanding of what makes for maximal greatness—which is to say that perhaps maximal greatness is specified and construed differently. If so, the differences will need to be explored and addressed, and this will be a complicated matter, requiring much back and forth between interlocutors.⁷ Or perhaps the Lotus makes or implies an exclusive claim about how what is maximally great or maximally salvifically significant may be known and related to. For example, perhaps it is suggested that such knowledge is obtainable only by Buddhists, or only by readers of the Lotus, or the like. Or perhaps it is suggested that such knowledge is had most fully, or to the best advantage, by Buddhists or users of the Lotus. In either case, the Christian reader will perceive a *prima facie* difficulty, for these are not claims that can be accepted by Christians. If they are indeed made or implied by the Lotus, they will have to be rejected by Christians as illegitimate, and it may also be the case that reasons will have to be offered for such a rejection. None of this will be easy.

Finally, on the third general theme of the Lotus (that of its own importance), even more questions are suggested for Christian readers. Does the Lotus present itself as being of supreme significance for all human persons as a witness to the fundamental good news? Does it even present its own promulgation as being the fundamental good news, as constituting or at least being the central event in that good news? Is its promulgation and continued use taken to be the axis around which the possibility of human understanding and appropriation of the fundamental good news turns? If any one of these claims is made or suggested by the Lotus, then Christians must object and will have to learn to read the Lotus in such a way that they do not find themselves making or endorsing these claims. But if the Lotus makes claims about itself less strong than these (perhaps that hearing or reading or chanting the Lotus is of great help in coming to realize the good news; or that the promulgation

of the Lotus and the proper use of it makes possible the attainment of human goods attainable in no other way), then Christians may assent and may even themselves become readers, hearers, and proclaimers of the Lotus.

Recall that, on the reading of the grammar of the Christian faith I'm giving, we Christians are not committed to the claim that all possible human goods are attainable as a direct result of attending to the instances of derivative good news known to us; neither are we committed to the claim that we already know all there is to know about the fundamental good news. It follows, then, that there may be human goods both unknown to us and unattainable by attending to our derivative good news (indeed, I should think there must be such goods—for instance, the good of being a careful composer of haiku or that of knowing how to prepare good sushi) and that some of these may be attainable by attending to the Lotus. It follows also that there may be things about the fundamental good news known to and proclaimed by the Lotus and as yet unknown to and unproclaimed by Christians. Should either turn out to be the case, we should rejoice and read with careful and loving attention.

I cannot, obviously, explore all these questions about the whole of the Lotus. Instead, I'll offer a Christian reading of and response to what the Lotus has to say about its own status and significance. Even here, I shall have to be selective and partial; and the chances of a misreading (or at least a reading that does not cohere with that offered by those for whom this is a sacred work) are great. What follows, then, is tentative and exploratory.

THE LOTUS ON ITSELF

The setting in which the Lotus is preached is described in the first chapter. The Buddha of our world and time, Gautama Śākyamuni, with an extraordinarily impressive retinue, gives off signs that portend some unusual event: he emits a radiance that illuminates a vast reach of the cosmos (to be exact, 18,000 Buddha-fields, *aṣṭadaśabuddhakṣetrasahasrāni*, i/6). The significance of what this portends is signaled in a preliminary way by Mañjuśrī telling Maitreya (both of them in Śākyamuni's retinue) that it has happened before. This is a standard literary device in Indian Buddhist works: to tell a story showing that a work is not new itself shows that the work is important, for to have been spoken before is already to be more significant than to be spoken only now, for the first time. And so Mañjuśrī tells Maitreya that he has heard the Lotus before, when, "incalculable, super-incalculable, hugely extensive, immeasurable, inconceivable, indefinable, unknowable cosmic ages in the past" a previous Buddha called Candrasūryapradīpa had spoken it. Immediately upon speaking it, Candrasūryapradīpa passed into final nirvana. The work was then preserved and taught for "eighty minor cosmic ages" (*aṣṭiṃ cāntarakalpa*, i/21) by one of Candrasūryapradīpa's followers, Varaprabhā; it produced innumerable good results for all who heard it. It is precisely this work, the Lotus (named as such several times in i), that Gautama Śākyamuni is now about to speak.

An opening of this sort raises interesting questions about the proper bounds of the Lotus. It suggests that the Lotus consists of the words to be spoken by Śākyā-

muni. After all, Mañjuśrī and Maitreya speak of it in the first chapter as though it has yet to begin. And yet this first chapter, elements of which I've just summarized, is itself treated as part of the Lotus, so far as I can tell, by all later users of the work. A similar difficulty is that the descriptions given of the Lotus in the first chapter seem to make it coextensive with words spoken by Candrasūryapradīpa: "Moreover, at the time of that Blessed One's [i.e., Candrasūryapradīpa] teaching there was a bodhisattva called Varaprabha who himself had a retinue of 800. And the Blessed One [Candrasūryapradīpa], after leaving his state of concentration, taught this doctrinal discourse called the Lotus for the benefit of Varaprabha. He spoke for sixty minor cosmic ages until it was finished, sitting in one place with unmoving body and unwavering mind."⁸

And yet, many of the words in ii–xxvi are presented not as *buddhavacana* in this narrow sense (the direct utterance of some Buddha), but rather as narrative connectors or as words spoken by others (non-Buddhas). Do these words (they may comprise as much as 15 percent of what we call the Lotus) belong to the Lotus? In terms of the Lotus' self-understanding, it seems that they ought not; in terms of its use, it seems that they must. This will have to remain an unresolved question, though I shall return to it. For exegetical purposes in what follows, I shall treat all the words contained in Kern and Nanjio's edition of the Sanskrit text as belonging to the Lotus.

What about the status of the Lotus in comparison to other sutras, other collections of *buddhavacana*? The Lotus does not appear to bear an entirely consistent witness on this. In at least one place it implies that it is not unique, that there are other works of the same kind (*evamrūpa*, ii/44). This seems to mean works that have the same effect, and perhaps that have the same content, present the same doctrine, for the context is polemical: the Buddha is explaining to Śāriputra that when there is no Buddha present (when the Buddha of a particular world-realm has entered final nirvana), people who recite, understand, and promulgate works "like this" (i.e., like the Lotus) will be hard to find. And this suggests at least that the Lotus is not alone among texts in presenting something that Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas find difficult to understand and accept.

But this is a comment made in passing, in a context where the topic explicitly under discussion is not the Lotus' status and significance in comparison to other sutras. When this is the explicit topic, the Lotus always attributes to itself a unique status, typically claiming for itself preeminence among all sutras. In the tenth chapter, for instance, Śākyamuni says: "The doctrinal discourses I have preached or am preaching or will preach are many. Among them all, it is precisely this doctrinal discourse that is the most difficult to understand and to believe. It is the secret inner doctrine of the Tathāgata."⁹

Compare this to the following: "Mañjuśrī, this doctrinal teaching is supreme among those given by the Tathāgata; it is the final doctrinal discourse given by the Tathāgata; and among all such discourses it is the most profound and provokes more resistance in the world than any other."¹⁰

The Lotus is, moreover, according to its self-understanding, comprehensive as well as unexcelled. That is, its words say everything that can be said about the *bud-*

dhadharma, about the secrets, powers, and profundities of the Buddha (xx/391). The Lotus comprehends and exhausts the good qualities of the Buddha and all matters that have to do with the attainment of awakening; but its own good qualities and merits cannot be comprehended or exhausted, not even if there were endless cosmic ages available to list them (xx/390–391).

More striking still, the Lotus consistently and frequently elevates itself above even the Buddhas. This is most often claimed when the topic addressed is that of the benefits of hearing (memorizing, reciting, copying, and so forth) the Lotus. The Lotus accepts that its audience already understands the Buddhas to be a *mahāpunyakṣetra*, a great field of merit, and that doing such things as behaving toward them with reverence, listening carefully to their words, and enshrining the relics of their bodies will have numerous positive effects. It accepts also that Buddhas are generally understood as being an *anuttarapunyakṣetra*, an unexcelled field of merit, a merit-producing object of strictly maximal efficacy. But then it says that the Lotus should be treated with the same degree and kind of reverence given to the Buddha himself: those who grasp, recite, explain, retain, write, memorize, or closely examine even one verse of it, treating the manuscript upon which it is written with the same reverence they would give to the Buddha himself, reap endless and vast benefits (x/225). Further, those who do these things will themselves be treated with the reverence due the Buddha (x/226). The dignity of being so treated is transferred, as it were, from the manuscript that contains the words of the Lotus to those who treat it with reverence. More striking still, reviling and cursing the Buddha is said to be less vile as an offense than reviling those who read and recite the Lotus (x/227). Detailed instructions are also given about the treatment of manuscripts of the Lotus: they are to be placed in stupas, memorial mounds traditionally used to house the physical relics of the Buddha's body (*tathāgataśarīra*); and (very strikingly) where this is done, there is no need to treat the Buddha's relics in this way because the manuscript of the Lotus represents the most important part (*ekadhana*) of the Buddha's body (x/231; the same point is made at length at xvi/337–340).

To say things of this sort is to trump the accepted view of the Buddha's maximal merit-producing efficacy and to replace it with the view that the Lotus, and only the Lotus, bears such efficacy. It is hard to imagine, given the context and assumptions of the work, a more elevated claim. It is almost as if a Christian were to claim that Christians ought treat the text of the Bible as they had hitherto been accustomed to treat the second person of the Trinity.

But just what effects are to be expected from paying attention to the Lotus? A good deal is said about this as well. Consider the following: “. . . to the extent that bodhisattvas or great beings do not hear, apprehend, enter into, become absorbed in, or think deeply about this discourse on dharma, they are far from complete unexcelled awakening . . . but when they do hear, apprehend, learn, teach, enter into, study, think deeply about, and cultivate this doctrinal discourse they are close to complete unexcelled awakening. . . . Why? Because this doctrinal discourse is the supreme interpreter of hidden meaning; it has been described by Buddhas, Tathāgatas, and Arhats as the locus of the secrets of doctrine; and it is the cause of the per-

fection of bodhisattvas and great beings.”¹¹ Here it’s said that bearing a certain set of attitudinal and practical relations to the Lotus is both a necessary condition (“to the extent that bodhisattvas do not . . .”) for attaining the goal that all human persons ought to attain, and a sufficient condition for attaining that goal (“when they do . . .”). At least this is the case if the phrase *ayaṃ dharmaparyāya* (“this doctrinal discourse”) is meant to denote the Lotus—and the context strongly suggests that it is. This text-place, then, appears to suggest that the promulgation and hearing of the Lotus precisely is the fundamental good news: that this is what the Lotus says about itself and intends its readers to understand about its own status.

That being in an appropriate relation to the Lotus is a sufficient condition for approaching final awakening is said very frequently. Hearing even one verse of it and responding with joy suffices to ensure that the listener will reach awakening at some time in the future (x/224 and *passim*). The extract just discussed strongly suggests that being in such a relation is also a necessary condition, and this is confirmed by the following passage.

In the seventh chapter, Śākyamuni tells the story of the Tathāgata Mahābhijñānānābhībhū, who lived an incalculably long time in the past. This Buddha also spoke the Lotus, after much entreaty, and the Lotus is in that chapter characterized as a very extensive discourse (*sūtrāntaṃ mahāvaipulyaṃ*) known to all Buddhas and taught to bodhisattvas (*bodhisattvāvavādaṃ sarvabuddhaparigrahaṃ*, vii/181). Śākyamuni was himself one of the sixteen *śramaṇera* to whom the Lotus was then taught, and as a result himself awakened to Buddhahood. Once again, the efficacy of the Lotus is emphasized in the context of a polemic against those who think that there is more than one way to attain Buddhahood. There are, says Śākyamuni, those who will attain (what they take to be) final nirvana (vii/186); but this will not actually be final nirvana. Such beings will have an opportunity at the point when they think they have already entered final nirvana to hear the Lotus (vii/186) and as a result to enter the one buddha-vehicle and to reach unexcelled complete awakening. This episode is most naturally read to say that hearing the Lotus is at least a necessary condition for reaching *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, which is a strong claim indeed.

The good effects of hearing the Lotus are not limited to the attainment of *pariṇiṣṭi* (perfection) or *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* (complete unexcelled awakening). They include various mundane benefits. For instance, hearers of the Lotus get, according to the eighteenth chapter, senses capable of making marvelously fine discriminations: their ears can hear the voices of all living creatures, including “whatever sounds there are, inner or outer, in a great trichilocosm” (*yāvantaḥ kecit trisāhasramahāsāhasrāyāṃ lokadhātāu sāntarabahiḥ śabdā niścaraṇti*, xviii/357). It is similar for the other senses. There are also strictly intellectual effects. Hearers of the Lotus will find that everything they say is in accord with the teachings of the Lotus, even when they are speaking not about *buddhadharma* but rather about technical or mundane matters (*laukika, lokavyavahārika*, xviii/372), topics treated in non-Buddhist works. What they have absorbed from their hearing of the Lotus will permeate and shape everything else they say and think. And, hearers of the Lotus are protected by having heard it from slander, gossip, and other kinds of harsh or unfair

criticism; those who offer such criticism will suffer for it (xix, xxvii). Further, hearing the Lotus is a cure for sickness and may stave off death (xxii/421). It can, most generally, act as a panacea: whatever difficulties or needs you have can be met by it (xxii and passim).

In brief: the Lotus claims of itself that it is more worthy of reverence than any other text and, indeed, than anything else at all; that bearing the proper relations to it, attitudinal and cognitive, is at least necessary for the attainment of complete unexcelled awakening and may also suffice for such attainment; and that bearing the proper relations to it will also have many incidental mundane benefits.

So much is clear enough. But it still remains very unclear, as I've already noted, just what the term *Lotus* denotes, which is to say that it remains unclear just what possesses the elevated properties I've just discussed. Just what is it the hearing of which is sufficient (and perhaps also necessary) for the attainment of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*? Just what is it that is preeminent among the Buddha's teachings? There are three possibilities.

The first is that the Lotus is some particular set of words in some particular language: perhaps the Sanskrit text I've read; or perhaps the Chinese text produced by Kumārajīva; or perhaps Burton Watson's Englishing of Kumārajīva.

The second is that the Lotus is not any particular body of words, but rather any collection of words (in any language) that makes a particular set of claims (perhaps the claims made by the Sanskrit edited by Kern and Nanjio; or those made by Kumārajīva's Chinese; or both, if these are the same). If this possibility is followed, it is not the case that any particular text has all the properties discussed above. Instead, a particular set of claims has those properties. And it follows from this that the term *Lotus* can be applied with equal appropriateness to a summary or paraphrase of what Kern and Nanjio's Sanskrit text says in legal brief form, to an ornate restatement of it in English iambic pentameters, to a representation of it in braille or semaphore, and so on. The words would not have to remain constant; all that would have to remain constant is the propositional content—what is said.

The third is rather more arcane, but it is perhaps the most interesting of the three. Perhaps the term *Lotus* denotes something not available to us, something to which Kern and Nanjio's text points but which is not found in it. There are many indications of this possibility in Kern and Nanjio's text (as also in Kumārajīva and Hurvitz and the rest). Much is said about how wonderful and important and earth-shattering the Lotus is; the Buddha is constantly pleaded with to preach it; the assembly discusses it, expects it, praises it, promises to preserve and copy and recite and teach it; but it is not clear that it is ever given. Consider: in the first chapter the setting is described and the promulgation of the Lotus is awaited. In the second, Śāriputra pleads with the Buddha to explain more fully his methods of teaching, and the Buddha does so—but it is not clear that what he says constitutes any part of the Lotus, or is anything other than prolegomena to it. Then, at the beginning of the third, the Buddha again speaks as though he is about to utter the Lotus (thus implying that the words of chapters i–ii are not the Lotus) but tells stories (of the burning house, among others) that seem not to be the Lotus, but rather to be about what

the teachings of the Lotus (not yet given) are like. And at the beginning of the fourth, those who have heard these stories (Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahāmaudgalyāyana) rejoice at having heard them, tell some of their own, and have these stories approved by the Buddha in the fifth chapter. And so it goes. It is as though the speaking of the Lotus is constantly deferred, constantly pointed to by the words of the text we have, but never given. On this view, the words of the text we have are a sign pointing to and promising something that is never provided.

A TENTATIVE AND PARTIAL CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

I don't think it possible to decide on exegetical grounds which of these views of what the term *Lotus* denotes is correct. A case can be made for each. But I do think it quite clear which of the three is most useful and appropriate for Christians to take up in reading and making use of the Lotus. It is the third: that the term *Lotus*, which, as Kern and Nanjio's text says, indicates something the hearing of which ensures the attainment of the goal that all humans should want and are intended for, also indicates something that is absent from the words collected between the covers of their edition. Recall what was said at the beginning of this essay. For Christians, the fundamental good news is not textual; it is, rather, a set of events: God's loving creation of all things; his calling, or election, of a particular people to bear a covenanted relation with him; his incarnation, death, and resurrection; and the salvation of humanity wrought thereby. Texts, insofar as they can be understood as good news, are always so derivatively, in terms of their presentation or commendation of these events. Therefore, a text that carefully and artfully (even if paradoxically) points beyond itself when it wants to indicate what is of unsurpassable importance for us humans, is doing just what (for Christians) texts ought to do.

We Christians can learn (I have learned) from the multilayered and subtle manner in which the Lotus points beyond itself; we can learn also (I have learned) from the Lotus' ceaseless emphasis upon the principally instrumental value of texts, and upon the need for the use of a hermeneutic in reading and hearing them that is dependent upon and an outgrowth of a properly developed view of the way things are. When Christians read any text (including the Lotus and including the Bible), we read it in light of our convictions about God's nature and intentions for us. We read it, that is to say, in light of what we know to be the truth, and we construe what it says as relating in some way to this truth. We deploy, that is, a hermeneutic of precisely the same formal kind as the one the Lotus advocates, and we can learn from the Lotus how to do this better than we might otherwise have been able to do.

What I'm advocating here is a version of what Christians have traditionally called 'despoiling the Egyptians.' This means taking from those who are not Christian (Egyptians) what is of help to the Gospel, rejoicing when truth is found and can be used—but always baptizing it, placing it under the name of and at the service of Jesus Christ. There is much to be rejoiced at by Christians in the Lotus, much that can properly be understood as derivative good news, much that can be baptized. In Acts 17, Luke represents Paul as explaining which God the Athenians were worship-

ing when they dedicated an altar to an unknown god. That altar was a half-understood sign pointing to the triune God—or so Paul construed it, reading it as a Christian. It is one of the tasks of Christians in reading the Lotus to identify that to which the Lotus points, that which is not present in it but to which it attributes maximal importance. And such identification is always and necessarily, for Christians, in terms of the triune God who creates, redeems, and sustains the world. Only in this way can the Lotus be baptized. So what the Lotus calls the *dharmānigūḍhasthāna* (the locus of the secrets of doctrine), the *parinīṣpattihetu* (the cause of perfection), and the *tathāgatasyādhyātmikadharmarāhasya* (the secret inner doctrine of the Tathāgata) must be read by Christians precisely as the fundamental good news about God's love for the world made fully manifest in Jesus Christ.

This is of course not what Buddhist readers of the Lotus would say is indicated by the text (even if they agreed, which they might well not, with my claim that what is designated by the term *Lotus* is not present in the text). Niwano Nikkyo, for example, writes that the topic and content of the Lotus (he is glossing the word *dharmā* in the Lotus' title) is "all things that exist in the universe and all events that occur in the world . . . the one truth that penetrates all things."¹² This is a formal identification of the secret inner doctrine of the Tathāgata with which Christians can agree. Whether there are differences in its substantive specification is a topic beyond the scope of this essay.

NOTES

1. A preliminary version of this paper was prepared during Lent, 1997, and presented at a conference on the Lotus Sūtra organized and sponsored by the Rissho Koseikai in Bandaiso, Japan, in July 1997. I'm grateful to the Rissho Koseikai for their invitation to Japan, and for the improvements I've been able to make to this paper as a result of the discussion it received there. I'm grateful also to Jonathan Gold for his helpful comments.

2. On the question of whether Christians can or should assert the possibility of the presence of good news outside the Christian tradition see Schubert Ogden's *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), Joseph A. DiNoia's *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), and my "Modalizing the Theology of Religion," *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993), 382–389, which offers an analysis of both books. More recently, see S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995). All these works, in different ways and with some disagreements among themselves, argue for a version of the modal claim that there may be explicit good news found outside the Christian tradition.

3. This is not an uncontroversial claim. The Catholic Church, for example, does not explicitly endorse it, claiming only (in, e.g., *Nostra Aetate* and *Redemptoris Missio*) that there is truth in non-Christian religious communities and texts and that the Church recognizes and appreciates it, but not that there is truth therein not already known to the Church. Even a very recent consultative document from the International Theological Commission, "Christianity and the World Religions," *Origins* 27/10 (14 August 1997), 149–166, makes no advance in this respect on the position already stated at the Second Vatican Council. But neither does the Church explicitly deny or reject the position suggested here.

4. It does seem, for instance, that the Rissho Koseikai view of the Lotus is such that we Christians ought assume, in reading it, that we are reading a work that functions for mem-

bers of that community in ways importantly analogous to the Bible's function for us. See, for example, Niwano Nikkyo, *Buddhism for Today: A Modern Interpretation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1980), xviii and passim.

5. My reading is based principally upon the Sanskrit original of the work as available to me in the edition by Hendrik Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, Bibliotheca Buddhica vol. 10 (St. Petersburg: Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1912). Translations are my own, made from this version, though I've consulted and benefited from the following English versions: Hendrik Kern, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, or the Lotus of the True Law*, translated from the Sanskrit (New York: Dover, 1963; first published as vol. 21 of the Sacred Books of the East, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1884); Leon Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, translated from Kumārajīva's Chinese version (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, translated from Kumārajīva's Chinese version (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Tamura Yoshirō et al., *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Tokyo: Kosei, 1975). I cite the Lotus by chapter (in roman numerals) followed by the page of the Kern/Nanjio edition: xv/223, e.g. The enumeration of chapters in the Sanskrit version is not the same as in the Kumārajīva version, and not all the material comes in the same order; information on the relations between these versions is in Hurvitz, xxiv–xxv, and Tamura, xvi–xvii.

6. On the *icchantika* see Pralhad Pradhan, ed., *Abhidharmasamuccaya of Asaṅga* (Santiniketan: Visvabharati, 1950), 35; Sylvain Lévi, ed., *Mahāyāna-Sūtrālamkāra*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études no. 159 (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1907), 12–13. A useful discussion of the concept is Robert E. Buswell Jr., "The Path to Perdition: The Wholesome Roots and Their Eradication," in Robert E. Buswell Jr., and Robert M. Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Mārga and its Transformations in Buddhist Thought*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism vol. 7 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 107–134.

7. I've tried to explore some of the matters raised by this question in my *On Being Buddha* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), though not with direct reference to the Lotus.

8. tena khalu punar ajita samayena tasya bhagavataḥ śāsane varaprabho nāma bodhisattvo 'bhūt/ tasyāṣṭau śātāny antevāsinām abhūvan/ sa ca bhagavaṃs tataḥ samādher vyutthāya taṃ varaprabhaṃ bodhisattvaṃ ārabhya saddharmapuṇḍarīkaṃ nāma dharmaparyāyaṃ samprakāśayāmāsa/ yāvat paripūrṇaṃ śaṣṭyantarakalpān bhāṣitavan ekāsane niṣanno 'sampravedhamānena kāyenāniṅjamānena cittaena/ i/20–21; cf. i/27–28.

9. bahavo hi mayā . . . dharmaparyāyā bhāṣitā bhāṣāmi bhāṣiṣye ca/ sarveśāṃ ca teṣāṃ . . . dharmaparyāyānāṃ eva dharmaparyāyaḥ sarvalokavipratyanikaḥ sarvalokaśraddhaniyaḥ/ tathāgatasyāpy etad . . . adhyātmikadharmarahasyam, x/230.

10. eṣā hi mañjuśrīḥ tathāgatānāṃ paramā dharmadeśanāyaṃ paścimas tathāgatānāṃ dharmaparyāyaḥ sarveśāṃ dharmaparyāyānāṃ ayaṃ dharmaparyāyaḥ sarvagambhīraḥ sarvalokavipratyanikaḥ/ xiii/291.

11. . . . dūre te bodhisattvā mahāsattvā bhavanty anuttarāyaṃ samyaksambodhau yāvan nemaṃ dharmaparyāyaṃ śṛṅhvanti nodghṛṅvanti nāvataranti nāvagāhante na cintayanti/ yadā khalu punar . . . imaṃ dharmaparyāyaṃ śṛṅhvanty udghṛṅvanti dhārayanti vācayanti avataranti svādhyāyanti cintayanti bhāvayanti tadā te 'bhyāṣibhūtā bhaviṣyanti anuttarāyaṃ samyaksambodhau/ . . . tat kasya hetoh/ paramasandhābhāṣitavivarāṇo hy ayaṃ dharmaparyāyas tathāgatair arhadbhīh samyaksambuddhair dharmanigūḍhasthānam ākhyātaṃ bodhisattvānaṃ mahāsattvānāṃ pariniṣpattihetoh/ x/233.

12. Niwano, *Buddhism for Today*, 23.