

VIEWS & REVIEWS

Buddhists and Christians meet

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FOR the past few years inter-religious dialogue has been going on in Japan in a friendly, if unobtrusive, way. Buddhists and Christians have met together in various parts of the country to exchange ideas with sincerity and candor. In these gatherings there has been no attempt to coerce or to proselytize or even to persuade; for each has tried to recognize the other's position with great respect, endeavouring to appreciate the values found in a belief that differs from his own. When we came together once in the mountains near Tokyo, many of the participants spoke of the eagerness with which they had awaited the meeting, not because of its academic pretensions but because of the atmosphere of friendship and union that they found so spiritually enriching. Indeed, one participant remarked to me that though quite different superficially we were closely united at heart, whereas the superficially united are sometimes deeply divided. This, I believe, is true. And I also believe that these rather informal meetings are the beginning of something great that cannot yet be seen. For this is the first time in history that orthodox Buddhism has met with orthodox Christianity in such a way. Until now it is the somewhat heterodox westerners who have met with Buddhism; and while this encounter has not been without value, the meeting of the two orthodox traditions is inevitably more significant and more far-reaching in its consequences. At a symposium in Kyoto not too long ago, a Japanese professor remarked good-humoredly that the enterprise on which we have embarked is fraught with danger for us all—cultural and religious danger. But we are prepared to face the danger, knowing that it will lead to something beautiful and good.

As a Christian I can state confidently that the influence of Buddhism on the future of Christianity will be great indeed. It is well known that Christian theology, far from being a static collection of dogmas, is something dynamic that changes under the impact of its environment while always remaining faithful to the original inspiration of its founder. It developed vastly and healthily in its encounter with Hellenism; and in our own day scientific evolution, existentialism and even Marxism have left their impact on the writings of Teilhard, Rahner and

Tillich. Who, then, can doubt about the future influence of Buddhism? And if Christian thought develops, the same is true of Buddhism. Here, too, we have no static system, as is clear to anyone who has met the thinkers of Kyoto—a group of philosophers developing rapidly under the influence of Christianity and Western thought. In short, two dynamic systems have come together: East and West have at last met at the deepest level of human communication. And in this brief article I would like to set down some of the issues that have been discussed together with their possible repercussions on both religions.

First of all, then, let me say that for me the great achievement of Gautama Buddha was to discover true wisdom in a state beyond all words, concepts and images—in a state beyond thought and in the total absence of desire. For me the most appealing aspect of the Buddha is his silence, and this is a silence that resounds through every corner of Asia and speaks of the ineffable mystery of existence. The Buddha himself refused to describe the state of Nirvana except in negative terms (and in this his followers are faithful to his teaching) but he did point to the way. Hence Buddhism today in its various forms points to the enlightenment, to the great awakening that has become so characteristic of the East. The silence of the Buddha is indeed a reminder to modern Christians that formulation of dogma and theological truths, however necessary it may be (and I believe it is necessary), is always imperfect and inadequate and only points to a realm of silence in which true wisdom is grasped. Words after speech pass into silence, said T. S. Eliot. And this great truth is particularly relevant in regard to the immense, mysterious being that Christians call God, about whom a few words may not be out of place.

It is well known that Western Christianity today faces a crisis of "atheism" that is a cause of great concern to believing Christians. The cry of Nietzsche that God is dead developed into a popular catch-word and then into the death-of-God theology that spread with great rapidity. Now it seems to me that the West has not rejected God; but many westerners have rejected the *concept* or *image* of God that was popular in the Occident for more than a millennium. If we ask why this happened, one factor in the complex phenomenon is certainly that the image of God in popular Christianity had become too anthropomorphic. The tendency to speak of God in vividly human terms is to some extent the legacy of the Bible, especially of the opening books of the Old Testament where God is one who is angry, who speaks to men, who is jealous and yet who loves. As the people of Israel developed and grew in spirit, the notion of God was purified. We read of the great being "in whom we live, move and are," and the Bible reaches a climax with the Johannine assertion that God is love. Furthermore, the Hebrews expressed their sense of the unknowability of God by the prohibition of images (for no man

hath seen God) and it is said that when the victorious Pompey strode into the Holy of Holies to see what was there, he found nothing (how close at last to Buddhism); for the empty room proclaimed the unknowability of Yahweh. Yet, granted all this, it can still be said that the Jews were a literary people, that their literature, rich in poetic imagery and vivid description, is little suited to abstract philosophy. Consequently the most profound teaching (as, for example, that God is a father) can be misleading if one thinks of a father "out there" to whom I can speak as to one quite distinct from myself. And that is why those branches of Christianity that put all their emphasis on a literal or fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible now find themselves with a notion of God that modern man finds scarcely tenable.

The early Christian writers, however, recognized this problem; they saw the need for a philosophy; and for this they turned to Hellenism. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius and the rest quickly found in Neoplatonism a philosophy that comes to express the unknowability of God in terms familiar to the Buddhist—nothingness, emptiness, darkness and so on. In this way they brought to the fore in metaphysical language a way of thinking found in embryonic form throughout the literary pages of the Bible. For them Moses climbing the mountain to meet God in the cloud represents the mystic meeting God in darkness, emptiness and nothingness—this is the cloud of unknowing. Thus is born the "theologia negativa" which, stressing that we can know more about what God is *not* than about what he is, influences the whole mystical stream now associated with the Rhineland mystics and Saint John of the Cross. Yet the "theologia negativa" though it represents a strong current in western Christian tradition played little part in popular Christianity and some Christians (among them the great Karl Barth) looked on mysticism with suspicion as a Neoplatonic contamination in the pure stream of Christian thought. This attitude was, I believe, unfortunate for Christianity.

What I want to say here, however, is that the encounter with Buddhism is bringing the "theologia negativa" to the fore and enriching it with new life. In the Buddhist-Christian discussions, the names of Dionysius, Eckhart, John of the Cross and the rest turn up with astonishing frequency, indicating that these mystics speak a language that the Buddhist understands, or (more correctly) they maintain a silence that the Buddhist appreciates. These were men who knew that in the presence of the Divinity the most learned words are like the stammering of infants. Hence the theology they composed grows and develops in the encounter with Buddhism, which helps Christians purify their notion of God and speak a language that modern man accepts. Nor is this to deny the positive content of the Christian notion of God which speaks so vividly in the pages of Holy Scrip-

ture. If Buddhism helps the Christian to regain a sense of the immense unknowability of the supreme being, Christianity may help the Buddhist to clarify the positive element in his notion of "nothingness". That there is a positive element in Oriental nothingness (which is no pure negation) has been stated time and again by noted Buddhist scholars; and surely the time has come to elaborate this aspect of Buddhist thought.

A second point of great significance in our dialogue is the whole question of "personality" and "the self" in Buddhism and Christianity. And here it must be confessed that Buddhism has been misunderstood by not a few thinkers in the West. How often have we heard that the Buddhist non-self condition (*anatta* or *muga*) is pessimistic, pantheistic, monistic and self-annihilating, in sharp contrast with a Western philosophy that esteems the individual and creates the necessary framework for democracy and freedom. Thus, it is said, the West builds personality while the East destroys it.

But all these clichés must be rethought. In particular, it is necessary to examine more closely the Eastern "non-self". And in order to do this we must remember the distinction (insisted upon by Jung) between the empirical ego and the self. I myself believe that this is illustrated well by an old Irish proverb stating that there are three selves: the self seen by oneself, the self seen by others, and the self seen by God. The first two, the proverb suggests, are to a large extent illusory; for we like to build up an image of ourselves, to think well of ourselves, to appear great in the eyes of others. And one wonders if the West, under the cloak of "personality", has not simply busied itself in building up this empirical ego, thus glorifying a form of selfishness. That such a danger is a stark reality is proved by the constant insistence of Christian writers (beginning with the authors of the Bible) that there is a self that must die if man is to live. Attacks on this "self" are most marked in the mystics; and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to take but one example, inveighs against "the thought and feeling of self" in words that seem no less radical than those of Buddhism:

And therefore break down all knowing and feeling of all manner of creatures, but most busily of thyself. For on the knowing and the feeling of thyself hangeth the knowing and the feeling of all other creatures; for in comparison with it, all other creatures be lightly forgotten. For, if thou wilt busily set thee to the proof, thou shalt find, when thou hast forgotten all other creatures and their works—yea! and also thine own works—that there shall remain yet after, betwixt thee and thy God, a naked knowing and a feeling of thine own being: the which knowing

and feeling must always be destroyed, ere the time be that thou mayest feel verily the perfection of this prayer.¹

And in yet another remarkable passage, the author writes of the sorrow of one who knows that he *is*. "All men have matter of sorrow; but most especially he feeleth matter of sorrow that knoweth and feeleth that he *is*. All other sorrows in comparison with this be but as it were game to earnest. For he may make sorrow earnestly that knoweth and feeleth not only what he is but that he *is*. And whoso felt never this sorrow, let him make sorrow; for he hath never felt perfect sorrow."² Yet the author is aware that this way of thinking may be misunderstood; it may be taken as an attempt to annihilate oneself and so he goes on:

And yet in all this sorrow he desireth not to un-be; for that were devil's sadness and despite unto God. But he liketh right well to be; and he giveth full heartily thanks unto God for the worthiness and the gift of his being, although he desireth unceasingly for to lack the knowing and the feeling of his being.³

And so, in this author, the thought and feeling of one's own being or one's own existence are completely destroyed; the highest point of mysticism is reached not in the experience that "I know and love God", not in any I-Thou experience, but in the experience that "God lives in me". For him this is a Trinitarian experience in which he is divested of self and clothed with Christ—within him the Son offers himself to the Father. It should be noted, moreover, that this author is no heterodox mystic but a completely orthodox writer and theologian of the Dionysian school.

Coming now to Buddhism one is struck by the parallel way of thinking. Though the Zen master encourages his disciple to identify himself with all that is (even with the rain pattering on the roof), I believe that he too "desireth not to un-be . . . but he liketh right well to be; and he giveth full heartily thanks . . . for the worthiness and gift of his being. . . ." It is sometimes said that in Zen the small self ("shōga") is destroyed in favor of the big self ("taiga") and one may ask if this small self is not the empirical ego attacked by Christian spiritual writers. This at all events seems to have been the idea of Merton. Speaking of the self

¹ See *The Mysticism of 'The Cloud of Unknowing'* by William Johnston (New York, 1967) p. 190.

² *Ibid.* p. 190.

³ *Ibid.* p. 214.

that is denied by Buddhism he rejects any theory of a self-annihilating pantheism. "It is not as if the 'individual' were a hard, substantial core from which desires proceed, but rather that desires themselves form a kind of knot of psychic energies which seeks to remain firmly tied as an autonomous 'self'." This knot is certainly real in the empirical sense of the word—no question about that. But this does not mean that one can draw conclusions such as: "The reality of the knot is an ultimate value to be preserved at all costs" or "It is better for the knot to remain tied than for it to be untied". Buddhism 'brackets' all these value judgments by the basic assumption that in the end all the knots will be untied anyway. Hence it denies any special value to the limited and transitory experience of 'self' which is constituted by the little knot of desires tied for us by our heredity and our moral history (karma). It urges us to dissolve this limited subjectivity—this 'consciousness of our self, our desires, our happiness or unhappiness'—into a *pure consciousness* which is limited by no desire, no project, and no finite aim.⁴ In this way Merton defends the non-self condition from the charge of self-annihilation. As for his interpretation of satori itself, this is strikingly similar to the experience of *The Cloud*. "Zen insight", he writes, "is not *our* awareness, but Being's awareness of itself in us . . . it is a recognition that the whole world is aware of itself in me."⁵

If these interpretations are correct, it becomes clear how much Buddhism and Christianity can learn from one another. Christianity, first of all, can learn to develop its doctrine of unselfishness. Taking a cue from Buddhism it can see further into the words of its founder that he who would save his life must lose it. Buddhism reminds Christians of the great danger of individualism, of building up oneself to the detriment of society: it teaches basic humility and unselfishness. And how much we all need these virtues! From Christian personalism, on the other hand, Buddhism can learn to develop its notion of "the big self". Here Christian ideas of "man made in the image of God" can surely be of the greatest service.

Finally, all this theory cannot fail to have repercussions on the practical interior life of Buddhists and Christians. Already one hears of a Christian Zen practised here and there in Japan and showing signs of developing into something deep and powerful. Though the masters might be reluctant to accord the title "Zen" to this Christian practice they have shown unfailing kindness and courtesy to Christians who have sought their advice; and for this Christianity must be deeply grateful. Let me here add a word about this so-called Christian Zen.

⁴ *Mystics and Zen Masters* by Thomas Merton (New York, 1967) p. 240.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 18.

It must be confessed that some Christians have not taken easily to Zen. One reason for this may be their deeply-rooted conviction that prayer consists in dialogue with a personal God—and, obviously enough, there cannot be dialogue in Zen, which is “meditation without an object”. How, then, can a Christian Zen be possible?

From the Christian view-point there is much to be said for this objection, since it is based on the words of Jesus himself, “Thus shalt thou pray, ‘Our Father . . .’” At the same time, one should be wary (as I have already mentioned) of taking the fatherhood of God too simply. Reflecting on the “*theologia negativa*” one can easily envisage a prayer of total silence before the tremendous mystery of existence and its source. This is the prayer of one who is stunned into silence by the realization that words are well-nigh useless and ideas imperfect; this is the prayer of complete union without an *object*—for it should also be recalled that, in theological accuracy, God is not an object (in the sense that a gap exists between him and man) but a *relation*. Moreover, while the phrase “prayer without an object” is not (as far as I know) found in the Christian tradition, the mystics have always recognized “prayer without a subject”. This is the prayer of one who has forgotten himself in total preoccupation with God: “I” am gone, and only God remains. Here again one can recall the advice of the pious author of *The Cloud* to “strip, spoil, and utterly unclithe thyself of all manner of feeling of thyself, that thou mayest be able to be clothed with the gracious feeling of God himself.” In short, one should not be disturbed at finding a prayer of complete silence in Christianity.

And yet, I myself believe that in Christian prayer silence is not the end. When the silence, the purification and the slumbering of sense are over, the word rises up in the heart and calls out: “Abba, Father”. If this is so, Christian Zen, while sharing much, would culminate differently from Buddhist Zen (if I may be pardoned for these words). I base this partly on Gregory of Nyssa. Deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, Gregory speaks of his journey in silence away from all creatures; it is a journey that is topical for modern, space-age man:

Then I would leave behind the earth altogether and traverse all the middle air; I would reach the beautiful ether, come to the stars and behold all their orderly array. But not even there would I stop short, but, passing beyond them, would become a stranger to all that moves and changes, and apprehend the stable Nature, the immovable Power which exists in its own right, guiding and keeping in being all things, for all depend on the ineffable will of the Divine Wisdom. So first my mind must become detached from everything subject to flux and change and

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tranquilly rest in motionless repose, so as to be rendered akin to Him who is perfectly unchangeable; and then it may address Him by this most familiar name and say: Father.⁶

Here the word "Father" is no simple utterance; it is something that issues from the depth of one's being when detached from all things, one rests tranquilly in motionless spiritual repose. Such an experience may seem a thousand miles from the non-dualism of Zen; but there are still similarities—not only in the silencing of the faculties, the deep repose, the detachment and the integration, but also in the non-self condition in which the word "Father" rises up in the heart. For, reading Gregory and the mystics in depth, one sees that this cry does not issue from the empirical ego (which has been lost). It is the cry of Christ to his father, the Son offering himself to the Father in Trinitarian love, the Son who is within as in the Pauline, "I live, now not I but Christ liveth in me."

Much more could be said about the dialogue, in which both sides are mutually enriched. There is no question of either side hastily abandoning its position in order to compromise; while welcoming similarities we make no attempt to conceal differences. But all the time one thing is clear; namely that both Buddhists and Christians defend the dignity and worth of man in an age torn by anguish, alienation and fear. Both religions are at one in asserting the greatness of man, in whom there is a "cosmic" element, a divine spark, a tremendous worth. United on this basic point we can do great service to modern society.

⁶ *St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Lord's Prayer*, translated and annotated by Hilda C. Graef (London 1954) p. 37.