Karl Rahner on Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions

Karl Rahner devoted considerable attention to the relation between Christianity and other religions. In his analysis of the subject, Rahner maintains the distinctiveness of Christianity, while maintaining that the other religions are capable of offering their adherents genuine salvation. Rahner argues that the grace of God can be found in other religions, and suggests that their members may be regarded as "anonymous Christians." See also 9.6.

1st Thesis: We must begin with the thesis which follows, because it certainly represents the basis in the Christian faith of the theological understanding of other religions. This thesis states that Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right. This proposition is self-evident and basic for Christianity's understanding of itself. There is no need here to prove it or to develop its meaning. After all, Christianity does not take valid and lawful religion to mean primarily that relationship of man to God which man himself institutes on his own authority. Valid and lawful religion does not mean man's own interpretation of human existence. It is not the reflection and objectification of the experience which man has of himself and by himself. Valid and lawful religion for Christianity is rather God's action on men, God's free self-revelation by communicating himself to man. It is God's relationship to men, freely instituted by God himself and revealed by God in this institution. This relationship of
God is basically the same for all men, because it rests on the Incarnation, death and resurrection of the one Word of God become flesh. Christianity is God's own-interpretation in his Word of this relationship of God to man founded in Christ by God himself. And so Christianity can recognize itself as the true and lawful religion for all men only where and when it enters with existential power and demanding force into the realm of another religion and - judging it by itself - puts it in question. Since the time of Christ's coming - even since he came in the flesh as the Word of God in absoluteness and reconciled, i.e. united the world with God by his death and resurrection, not merely theoretically but really - Christ and his continuing historical presence in the world (which we call "Church") is the religion which binds man to God. Already we must, however, make one point clear as regards this first thesis (which cannot be further developed and proved here). It is true that the Christian religion itself has its own pre-history which traces this religion back to the beginning of the history of humanity - even though it does this by many basic steps. It is also true that this fact of having a pre-history is of much greater importance, according to the evidence of the New Testament, for the theoretical and practical proof of the claim to absolute truth made by the Christian religion than our current fundamental theology is aware of. Nevertheless, the Christian religion as such has a beginning in history, it did not always exist but began at some point in time. It has not always and everywhere been the way of salvation for men - at least not in its historically tangible ecclesio-sociological constitution and in the reflex fruition of God's saving activity in and in view of Christ. As a historical quantity Christianity has, therefore, a temporal and spatial starting point in Jesus of Nazareth and in the saving event of the unique Cross and the empty tomb in Jerusalem. It follows from this, however, that this absolute religion - even when it begins to be this for practically all men - must come in a historical way to men, facing them as the only legitimate and demanding religion for them. It is therefore a question of whether this moment, when the existentially real demand is made by the absolute religion in its historically tangible form, takes place really at the same chronological moment for all men, or whether the occurrence of this moment has itself a history and thus is not chronologically simultaneous for all men, cultures and spaces of history.

2nd Thesis: Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God, elements, moreover, mixed up with human depravity which is the result of original sin and later aberrations. It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as a gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a lawful religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it. This thesis requires a more extensive explanation.

We must first of all note the point to which this evaluation of the non-Christian religions is valid. This is the point in time when the Christian religion becomes a historically real factor for those who are of this religion. Whether this point is the
same, theologically speaking, as the first Pentecost, or whether it is different in chronological time for individual peoples and religions, is something which even at this point will have to be left to a certain extent an open question. We have, however, chosen our formulation in such a way that it points more in the direction of the opinion which seems to us the more correct one in the matter although the *criteria* for a more exact determination of this moment in time must again be left an open question.

The thesis itself is divided into two parts. It means first of all that it is *a priori* quite possible to suppose that there are supernatural, grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions. Let us first of all deal with this statement. It does not mean, of course, that all the elements of a polytheistic conception of the divine, and all the other religious, ethical and metaphysical aberrations contained in the non-Christian religions, are to be or may be treated as harmless either in theory or in practice. There have been constant protests against such elements throughout the history of Christianity and throughout the history of the Christian interpretation of the non-Christian religions, starting with the Epistle to the Romans and following on the Old Testament polemics against the religion of the “heathens.” Every one of these protests is still valid in what was really meant and expressed by them. Every such protest remains a part of the message which Christianity and the Church has to give to the peoples who profess such religions. Furthermore, we are not concerned here with an *a posteriori* history of religions. Consequently, we also cannot describe empirically what should not exist and what is opposed to God’s will in these non-Christian religions, nor can we represent these things in their many forms and degrees. We are here concerned with dogmatic theology and so can merely repeat the universal and unqualified verdict as to the unlawfulness of the non-Christian religions right from the moment when they came into real and historically powerful contact with Christianity (and at first only thus!). It is clear, however, that this condemnation does not mean to deny the very basic differences within the non-Christian religions especially since the *pious*, God-pleasing pagan was already a theme of the Old Testament, and especially since this God-pleasing pagan cannot simply be thought of as living absolutely outside the concrete socially constituted religion and constructing his own religion on his native foundations – just as St Paul in his speech on the Areopagus did not simply exclude a positive and basic view of the pagan religion. The decisive reason for the first part of our thesis is basically a theological consideration. This consideration (proceeding from certain more precise qualifications) rests ultimately on the fact that, if we wish to be Christians, we must profess belief in the universal and serious salvific purpose of God towards all men which is true even within the post-paradigmatic phase of salvation dominated by original sin. We know, to be sure, that this proposition of faith does not say anything certain about the *individual* salvation of man understood as something which has in fact been reached. But God desires the salvation of everyone. And this salvation willed by God is the salvation won by Christ.

3rd Thesis: If the second thesis is correct, then Christianity does not simply confront the member of an extra-Christian religion as a *mere* non-Christian but as someone
who can and must already be regarded in this or that respect as an anonymous Christian. It would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched in any way by God's grace and truth. If, however, he has experienced the grace of God - if, in certain circumstances, he has already accepted this grace as the ultimate, unfathomable entelechy of his existence by accepting the immeasurability of his dying existence as opening out into infinity - then he has already been given revelation in a true sense even before he has been affected by missionary preaching from without. For this grace, understood as the a priori horizon of all his spiritual acts, accompanies his consciousness subjectively, even though it is not known objectively. And the revelation which comes to him from without is not in such a case the proclamation of something as yet absolutely unknown, in the sense in which one tells a child here in Bavaria, for the first time in school, that there is a continent called Australia. Such a revelation is then the expression in objective concepts of something which this person has already attained or could already have attained in the depth of his rational existence. It is not possible here to prove more exactly that this fides implicita is something which dogmatically speaking can occur in a so-called pagan. We can do no more here than to state our thesis and to indicate the direction in which the proof of this thesis might be found. But if it is true that a person who becomes the object of the Church's missionary efforts is or may be already someone on the way towards his salvation, and someone who in certain circumstances finds it, without being reached by the proclamation of the Church's message - and if it is at the same time true that this salvation which reaches him in this way is Christ's salvation, since there is no other salvation - then it must be possible to be not only an anonymous theist but also an anonymous Christian.

4th Thesis: It is possibly too much to hope, on the one hand, that the religious pluralism which exists in the concrete situation of Christians will disappear in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, it is nevertheless absolutely permissible for the Christian himself to interpret this non-Christianity as Christianity of an anonymous kind which he does always still go out to meet as a missionary, seeing it as a world which is to be brought to the explicit consciousness of what already belongs to it as a divine offer or already pertains to it also over and above this as a divine gift of grace accepted unreflectedly and implicitly. If both these statements are true, then the Church will not so much regard herself today as the exclusive community of those who have a claim to salvation but rather as the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as a hidden reality even outside the visible Church. To begin with, however much we must always work, suffer and pray anew and indefatigably for the unification of the whole human race, in the one Church of Christ, we must nevertheless expect, for theological reasons and not merely by reason of a profane historical analysis, that the religious pluralism existing in the world and in our own historical sphere of existence will not disappear in the foreseeable future.
Comment

In the fifth volume of his *Theological Investigations* Rahner develops four theses, setting out the view, not merely that individual non-Christians may be saved, but that the non-Christian religious traditions in general may have access to the saving grace of God in Christ. While asserting that Christianity is the absolute religion, founded on the unique event of the self-revelation of God in Christ, Rahner allows that non-Christian religious traditions are valid and capable of mediating the saving grace of God, until the gospel is made known to their members. After the gospel has been proclaimed to the adherents of such non-Christian religious traditions, they are no longer legitimate, viewed from the standpoint of Christian theology. Note especially Rahner's suggestion that other religious traditions will not be displaced by Christianity. Religious pluralism will therefore, he argues, continue to be a feature of human existence.

Questions for Study

1. What does Rahner mean by the phrase “anonymous Christians”? What difficulties does it raise?

2. Set out, in your own words, how Rahner defends the view that non-Christian religions offer salvation through Christ.
John Hick on Complementary Pluralism

John Hick is the leading representative of a pluralist approach to the world's religions, seeing each as a distinctive and valid embodiment of "the infinite transcendent divine Reality." Note in particular the argument which leads to the conclusion that the religions "constitute different 'lenses' through which the divine Reality is differently perceived." See also 9.5; 9.6; 9.7.

Now it seems to many of us today that we need a Copernican revolution in our understanding of the religions. The traditional dogma has been that Christianity is the centre of the universe of faiths, with all the other religions seen as revolving at various removes around the revelation in Christ and being graded according to their nearness to or distance from it. But during the last hundred years or so we have been making new observations and have realized that there is deep devotion to God, true sainthood, and deep spiritual life within these other religions, and so we have created our epicycles of theory, such as the notions of anonymous Christianity and of implicit faith. But would it not be more realistic now to make the shift from Christianity at the centre to God at the centre, and to see both our own and the other great world religions as revolving around the same divine reality?

Indeed, if we are to understand the entire range of human awareness of the divine, including those enshrined in the Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist, as well as the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions, we shall need an even wider framework of thought. Such a framework can perhaps best be approached through a distinction which is found in one form or another within some strand of each of the great traditions. Its Christian form is the distinction between, on the one hand, God as he is in himself, in his infinite self-existing being, independently of and "before" creation, and on the other hand God in relation to and as experienced by his human creatures. In its Hindu form it is the distinction between Nirguna Brahman, i.e. the absolute Reality beyond the scope of human thought and language, and Saguna Brahman, i.e. Brahman humanly experienced as a personal God with describable characteristics. In Buddhism there is the distinction between the incarnate and the heavenly Buddhas.
(comprising the Nirmanakaya and the Sambhogakaya), and on the other hand the
infinite and eternal Dharmakaya or cosmic-Buddha-nature. Again, the Taoist Scrip-
tures begin by saying that “The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.”
Within Jewish mysticism (in the Zohar) there is the distinction between En Soph, as
the infinite divine ground, and the God of the Bible; and within Muslim mysticism
(for example, in Ibn Arabi) between Al Haqiq, the Real, and our concrete concep-
tions of God. Likewise, the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart distinguished between the
Godhead (deitas) and God (deus) in a way which closely parallels the Nirguna-Saguna
polarity in Hindu thought. And in the present century Paul Tillich has spoken of “the
God above the God of theism.” Contemporary process theology likewise distin-
iguishes between the eternal and temporal natures of God. In all these ways we have a distinc-
tion between the infinite transcendent divine Reality an sich, or in its/his/her-self,
and that same Reality as thought, imagined and experienced by finite human beings.

This distinction enables us to acknowledge both the one unlimited transcendent
divine Reality and also a plurality of varying human concepts, images, and experi-
ences of and response to that Reality. These different human awarenesses of and
response to the Real are formed by and reciprocally inform the religious traditions
of the earth. In them are reflected the different ways of thinking, feeling and expe-
riencing which have developed within the world-wide human family. Indeed these
cultural variations amount, on the large scale, to different ways of being human –
for example, the Chinese, the Indian, the African, the Semitic, the Graeco-Roman
way or ways, and the way of our contemporary technological Atlantic civilization.

We do not know at all fully why the life of our species has taken these various forms,
though geographical, climatic and economic factors have clearly played their parts.

However, given these various cultural ways of being human we can I think to
some extent understand how it is that they constitute different “lenses” through
which the divine Reality is differently perceived. For we know that all human aware-
ness involves an indispensable contribution by the perceiver. The mind is active in
perception, organizing the impacts of the environment in ways made possible both
by the inherent structure of consciousness and by the particular sets of concepts
embedded in particular consciousnesses. These concepts are the organizing and
recognitional capacities by which we interpret and give meaning to the data which
come to us from outside. And this general epistemological pattern, according to
which conscious experience arises out of the interpretative activity of the mind, also
applies to religious experience.

The wide range of the forms of human religious experience seems to be shaped by
one or other of two basic concepts: the concept of God, or of the Real as per-
sonal, which presides over the theistic religions, and the concept of the Absolute, or
of the Real as non-personal, which presides over the non-theistic religious hemi-
sphere. These basic concepts do not, however, enter, in these general and abstract
forms, into our actual religious experience. We do not experience the presence of
God in general, or the reality of the Absolute in general. Each concept takes the
range of specific concrete forms which are known in the actual thought and experi-
ence of the different religious traditions.
Thus the concept of deity is concretized as a range of divine \textit{persona}e, Yahweh, the Heavenly Father, Allah, Krishna, Shiva, etc. Each of these \textit{persona}e has arisen within human experience through the impact of the divine Reality upon some particular strand of human life. Thus Yahweh is the face of God turned towards and perceived by the Jewish people or, in more philosophical language, the concrete form in which the Jews have experienced the infinite divine Reality. As such, Yahweh exists essentially in relation to the Hebrews, the relationship being defined by the idea of covenant. He cannot be extracted from his role in Hebrew historic experience. He is part of the history of the Jews, and they are a part of his history. And as such Yahweh is a quite different divine \textit{persona} from Krishna, who is God's face turned towards and perceived by hundreds of millions of people within the Vaishnavite tradition of India. Krishna is related to a different strand of human history from Yahweh, and lives within a different world of religious thought and experience. And each of these divine \textit{persona}e, formed at the interface between the divine Reality and some particular human faith community, has inevitably been influenced by human imaginative construction and sinful human distortion as well as by the all-important impact of the transcendent Reality; there is an element of human projection as well as of divine revelation. How otherwise can we account for the ways in which the various divine \textit{persona}e have sometimes validated cruel massacres, savage punishments, ruthless persecutions, oppressive and dehumanizing political regimes? God, as imaged and understood by the masses of believers within any of the great traditions, must be partly a human construction in order, for example, for God the Father to have been on both sides of the conflict in Europe in the Second World War, and for Allah to have been on both sides of the recent Iraq-Iran conflict. But it does not follow that the divine \textit{persona}e are purely human projections. On the contrary, the theory that I am outlining is that they constitute the concrete forms in which the transcendent divine Reality is known to us. Each is the Real as perceived and experienced (and partly misperceived and misexperienced) from within a particular strand of the human story.

And essentially the same is to be said concerning the various \textit{impersona}e in terms of which the Real is known in the non-theistic religious traditions. Here the concept of the Absolute is made concrete as Brahman, Nirvana, the Dharma, the Dharmakaya, Sunyata, the Tao. And according as an individual's thoughts and practices are formed by the advaitic Hindu tradition, or the Theravada or Mahayana Buddhist tradition, he or she is likely to experience the Real in the distinctive way made possible by this conceptuality and meditational discipline.

But can the divine Reality possibly be such as to be authentically experienced by millions of people as a personal God, and also by millions of others as the impersonal Brahman or Tao or Sunyata? Perhaps there is a helpful analogy in the principle of complementarity in modern physics. Electromagnetic radiation, including light, is sometimes found to behave like waves and sometimes like particles. If we experiment upon it in one way we discover a wave-like radiation, whilst if we experiment upon it in another way we discover a procession of particles. The two observations have both had to be accepted as valid and hence as complementary. We have to say
that the electromagnetic reality is such that, in relation to human observation, it is wave-like or particle-like according to how the observer acts upon it. Analogously, it seems to be the case that when humans "experiment" with the Real in one kind of way – the way of theistic thought and worship – they find the Real to be personal and when other humans approach the Real in a different kind of way – the way for example of Buddhist or Hindu thought and meditation – they find the Real to be non-personal. This being so, we may well emulate the scientists in their realistic acceptance of the two sets of reports concerning the Real as complementary truths.

Such a theory has the merit that it does not lead us to play down the differences between the various forms of religious experience and thought. It does not generate any pressure to think that God the Father and Brahman, or Allah and the Dharmakaya, are phenomenologically, i.e. as experienced and described, identical; or that the human responses which they evoke, in spiritual practices, cultural forms, life-styles, types of society, etc., are the same. The theory – arrived at inductively by observation of the range of human religious experiences – is that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate from within the major variant cultural ways of being human. Such a theory, I would suggest, does justice both to the fascinating differences between the religious traditions and to their basic complementarity as different human responses to the one limitless divine Reality.

This complementarity is connected with the fact that the great world traditions are fundamentally alike in exhibiting a soteriological structure. That is to say, they are all concerned with salvation/liberation/enlightenment/fulfilment. Each begins by declaring that our ordinary human life is profoundly lacking and distorted. It is a "fallen" life, immersed in the unreality of maya, or pervaded by dukkha, sorrow and unsatisfactoriness. But each then declares that there is another Reality, already there and already open to us, in relation to or in identity with which we can find a limitless better existence. And each proceeds to point out a path of life which leads to this salvation/liberation. Thus they are all concerned to bring about the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness. Salvation/liberation occurs through a total self-giving in faith to God as he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ; or by the total self-surrender to God which is islam; or by transcending self-centredness and experiencing an underlying unity with Brahman; or by discovering the unreality of self and its desires and thus experiencing nirvana, or by becoming part of the flow of life which in its emptiness-fulness (sunyata) is found to be itself nirvana. Along each path the great transition is from the sin or error or self-enclosed existence to the liberation and bliss of Reality-centredness.

Comment

In this passage Hick suggests that the aspect of God's nature of central importance to the question of other faiths is his universal saving will. If God wishes everyone to
be saved, it is inconceivable that the divine self-revelation should be effected in such a way that only a small portion of humanity could be saved. Hick thus draws the conclusion that it is necessary to recognize that all religions lead to the same God. Christians have no special access to God, who is universally available through all religious traditions. Note especially his emphasis upon what he believes to be the common soteriological structure of the world's religions.

Questions for Study

1. Set out, in your own words, Hick's argument for the common structure of all religions. What points does he hope to make by doing this? And how successful do you judge him to be in this matter?
2. "This complementarity is connected with the fact that the great world traditions are fundamentally alike in exhibiting a soteriological structure." Locate this statement within the passage. What does Hick mean by this? And what conclusions does he draw from it?

C. S. Song on the Cross and the Lotus

The Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song here reflects on the relation of Christianity and Buddhism, using the imagery of the cross and the lotus as a stimulus to his reflection. Note in particular the comparison between Jesus and the Buddha. See also 9.5.

The question we must now ask is: what has the cross to do with the lotus? As early as the third century, Tertullian raised this question in relation to Jerusalem and Athens: what has Jerusalem to do with Athens? His answer was negative. Jerusalem - the city of the holy temple, the place where Jesus was crucified, the symbol of salvation revealed to the world in Christ in Tertullian's mind - had nothing to do with Athens. Athens stood for reason whereas Jerusalem was the embodiment of the sacred. Athens was a "secular" city in contrast to Jerusalem, a "holy" city. Furthermore, with its many gods and shrines Athens was a center of paganism in the ancient Mediterranean world. There St Paul had delivered his famous sermon on the unknown God before the Court of Areopagus. "Men of Athens," he declared:

I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous. For as I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other
Thus it was Paul who in his missionary zeal sought to penetrate the depth of Greek spirituality which had blossomed into art, literature, and philosophy on the one hand and worship of any conceivable deity on the other. Paul's effort in Athens was a dramatic demonstration of the fact that Jerusalem had much to do with Athens. It can even be said to have foreshadowed the Hellenization of Christianity by leaps and bounds in the subsequent history of the development of Christian thought in the West. Tertullian’s verdict was wrong. The history of Christian thought was in a true sense a history of how Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato and Aristotle, became integrated into the mainstream of Christian faith. As has been pointed out, through the whole history of Christianity in the West there runs the dynamic of the Gospel's course from the Jew to the Greek, from the Greek to the barbarian.

However that may be, the cross and the lotus seem to have little in common, at first sight at any rate. The lotus springs from the surface of the water. When the wind blows and the water moves, the lotus also moves. It seems in perfect harmony with nature around it. In short, it gives the appearance of being at peace with itself. In contrast, the cross strikes out powerfully, painfully, and defiantly from the earth. It penetrates space and is incongruous with nature. The lotus appeals to our aesthetic feelings, whereas the cross is revolting to the eyes of the beholder. The lotus is soft in texture and graceful in shape, while the cross is hard and harsh. The lotus moves with nature, whereas the cross stands ruggedly and tragically out of the barren earth. The lotus distinguishes itself in gentleness, while the cross is the epitome of human brutality. The lotus beckons and the cross repels. Indeed, what has the cross to do with the lotus? They represent two entirely different spiritualities which seem to be totally incompatible. They seem to have nothing in common.

But the contrast between the cross and the lotus may be deceptive. Essentially, they are two different answers to some basic questions about life and death. They seek to unravel problems and difficulties that beset us in our earthly pilgrimage. They also try to point to the fulfillment of human destiny in the eternal and blissful presence of the divine. They are not primarily concerned with a metaphysical solution to these very important problems, but with practical, day-to-day struggles in the harsh reality of society. Neither the cross nor the lotus, fundamentally speaking, is a system of thought, a set of rituals, or an institution of devotion. Originally they sprang out of the midst of the daily life of the people. They are religions of the people, but theologians – both in Christianity and Buddhism – have taken them away from the people and turned them into theological systems and religious principles bearing little relationship to the genuine fears and aspirations of the people. It is thus not surprising that the cross and the lotus do not intersect in their theological systems or ecclesiastical structures. In fact, these systems and structures only pull the two spiritualities further apart. The place for the cross and the lotus to intersect and intercommunicate is the people – the people who have to fight both spiritual
and physical fears, the people who have to live and die without knowing why. Then and only then can the cross and the lotus begin to intercommunicate; they can then begin to point to the mystery that surrounds human destiny. Thus intercommunication and inter-communion of different spiritualities should begin with the people, and with the ways in which they try to cope with the problems of life and the world in sociopolitical and religious terms.

This can be illustrated, first of all, by the way Jesus and Buddha tried to communicate their message through stories and parables. Jesus gave the following reason for using parables to his disciples: “It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven; but to those others it has not been granted” (Matthew 13: 11). Then he went on to explain the meaning of the parable of the sower. An abstruse mystery should not remain the monopoly of a few. Jesus mingled with the crowd and took pains to communicate the message of the Gospel to them. He definitely broke away from the religious elitism of his day and brought religion back to the people. In a sense he was the leader of a new religious movement around which the farmers and workers, the illiterate and the oppressed, could gather. He thus posed a threat to the official religion consolidated on hierarchical structures of religious orders and teachings not readily accessible or intelligible to outsiders.

In the rise of Buddhism in India we also see something of a religious reformation that returned religion from a religious elite to the people in the street. The religious and social situation of India at the time of Buddha in the sixth century BC was similar to that of the Jewish community in Palestine during the life of Jesus. “At the time of the Buddha,” writes Kenneth Ch’en, “the dominant position in Indian society was held by the brahmans. They held the key to knowledge, and the power that went with that knowledge.” Brahmanism, like Judaism in Jesus’ day, was the privilege of the religious leaders and the burden of the masses. As a reformer who ended up by founding a new religion, Buddha repudiated the brahmanical claims that the Vedas were the sole and infallible source of religious truth. He also rejected correct performance of the rituals as means of salvation, and he disapproved of the Upanishadic emphasis on intellectual means to attain emancipation. He also protested against the iniquities of the caste system, especially the high pretensions of the brahman class, and welcomed among his followers members from not only the four castes but also from among the outcasts. Buddha was thus the first in the history of India to revolt against the caste system as the chief misfortune of Indian society.

It is therefore not surprising that Buddha tried to communicate a message of emancipation from the suffering of the world in plain language. We can hear him saying something like this:

I have taught the truth which is excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle, and excellent in the end; it is glorious in its spirit and glorious in its letter. But simple as it is, the people cannot understand it. I must speak to them in their own language. I must adapt my thoughts to their thoughts. They are like unto children and love to hear tales. Therefore, I will tell them stories to explain the glory of the dharma. If they
cannot grasp the truth in the abstract arguments by which I have reached it, they may nevertheless come to understand it, if it is illustrated in parables.

It is clear from this that Buddha fully grasped the dynamics of people in religion. As Buddhism spread to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, it became a religion of the people that created popular culture and cultivated a sense of solidarity among ordinary men and women in all walks of life. To be sure, the teachings of Buddha in their high and lofty forms never filtered down to the people unadulterated. But what is important is that Buddha brought to common men and women a sense of well-being, security, and above all a sense of destiny.

In this way a religious faith can become alive and genuine if it casts aside ecclesiastical pretensions and formidable theological systems and touches the lives and hearts of the people. As previously mentioned, both Jesus and Buddha labored to bring the light of a new faith into the lives of the people. They were close to the people, used popular language, and told stories and parables that came right out of the everyday experiences of the people. No wonder that we find in the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law the story of the lost son that bears a remarkable resemblance to the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15: 22.

According to the Buddhist story of the lost son, a young man left his father and went to another city where he became extremely poor. He was reduced to begging for his food. In contrast, his father grew rich and moved to a big estate where he lived in great luxury. But all the time he grieved over his lost son and said to himself:

I am old and well advanced in years, and though I have great possessions I have no son. Alas! that time should do its work upon me, and that all this wealth should perish unused. ... It would be bliss indeed if my son might enjoy all my wealth.

One day the son wandered into his father's land, and the drama of the reunion of the father and son gradually unfolded:

Then the poor man, in search of food and clothing, came to the rich man's home. And the rich man was sitting in great pomp at the gate of his house, surrounded by a large throng of attendants. ... When he saw him the poor man was terrified ... for he thought that he had happened on a king or on some high officer of state, and had no business there. ... So he quickly ran away. But the rich man ... recognized his son as soon as he saw him and he was full of joy ... and thought: "This is wonderful! I have found him who shall enjoy my riches. He of whom I thought of constantly has come back, now that I am old and full of years." Then, longing for his son, he sent swift messengers, telling them to go and fetch him quickly.

The story goes on to describe how the father, who lived in a highly class-conscious society, was not able to disclose his identity to his own son and take him back into his household. The poor man had to go away without realizing that he had been in his own father's house. The father then contrived to have his son hired to work in his own household as a servant. Every day he watched with compassion as his son
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cleared away a refuse heap. Then one day the rich man came down, took off his wreath and jewels and rich clothes, put on dirty garments, covered his body with dust, and, taking a basket in his hand, went up to his son. And he greeted him at a distance and said, “Take this basket and clear away the dust at once!” By this means he managed to speak to his son.

In this way, the old man made every attempt to make his son feel at home but did not reveal his own identity. In the meantime, the son proved to be a frugal, honest, and industrious man. Finally, knowing that his end was near, the old man

sent for the poor man again, presented him before a gathering of his relatives, and, in the presence of the king, his officers, and the people of town and country, he said: “Listen, gentlemen! This is my son, whom I begot. . . . To him I leave all my family revenues, and my private wealth he shall have as his own.”

Consequently, through the father’s painful and patient effort the son was reinstated in society and accepted into his father’s blessing.

It goes without saying that the ethos of this Buddhist story is quite different from that of the biblical story of the prodigal son. It is Asian through and through in its emphasis on class distinctions that affect even family relations, on accumulation of wealth as a moral and social virtue, and on inheritance as a chief factor affecting the father-son relationship. These are the elements that are part and parcel of a traditional Asian society. For the people in the street such social factors provide a background against which a religious truth can be apprehended. There is in this story no reference to the son’s repentance, no mention of the elder son’s protest against the father’s treatment of the lost son. Despite all these differences in ethos and details, the story points up the father’s compassion for his son, the expression of which is very Asian in its reserve and its respect for social conventions. It stresses the acceptance of the son by the father through a ceremony in accordance with the father’s social status. The resemblance of the Buddhist story of the lost son to the biblical story of the prodigal son may be accidental. But it is evidence of the fact that deep in people’s spirituality is a reflection of God’s love and compassion for the world. Jesus Christ, we must admit, is not merely a reflection of God’s love. He is the embodiment of that love. In any case, the father’s compassion for the son in the Buddhist story may be seen as a reflection, however imperfect, of God’s passionate love in the parable of the prodigal son.

Comment

This passage represents a serious and significant attempt to relate Christianity and Buddhism by exploring their values, as well as their beliefs. Song avoids the confident over-generalizations which are typical of some writers in this field, and instead offers an interesting set of comparisons which merit further attention.
Questions for Study

1. Set out clearly, in your own words, the point that Song is making through his comparison of "parables" in Buddhism and Christianity.

2. "The lotus beckons and the cross repels." Locate this statement within the text. What does Song mean by this? And how does he move on from here to achieve some kind of reconciliation between the two?