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Christianity and the Counter-Attack from the East

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THE startling challenge presented to us today by a revived Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam is evidence of something significant happening in the relations between Christianity and the great religions of Asia. A few years ago, students sometimes questioned the value of required courses in the non-Christian religions; today they are aware of the new challenge which these religions present to Christianity, and eager for guidance. It is true that some of the most provocative thinking on this matter has been done initially by people who are not Christian theologians. However, the Church is becoming increasingly aware of the problem; and the rank and file of Church people are looking more and more anxiously to the Church for guidance in how to think about the growing claims of other religions. What guidance are we to give?

Something significant had already happened when L. P. Jacks could remind us, thirty-two years ago, that the British state had several hundred million subjects in India alone "whose religious liberty it guarantees,"¹ so that the traditional title of the Head of the State, Defender of the Faith, had already lost much of its point. Dr. Jacks wrote long before India had achieved its independence. Today, as a Republic within the Commonwealth, she has a right to establish Hinduism as the state religion if she wants to, and to close her doors to Christianity. Pakistan has already established Islam as the state religion of the theocratic Muslim state and, quite within her rights, has required that some knowledge of Islam be taught to Muslim children in all schools, including Christian schools.² The Prime Minister of Burma has proposed that Buddhism be the official religion of that country.³ We support their right as members of the Commonwealth to do so. What then happens to the rallying call of a previous generation of Christians: "The evangelization of the world in this generation"? As Canadians and Christians, should we publicly be supporters of the right of such states to limit the spread of Christianity, but privately be supporters of projects to convert them to Christianity?

1. L. P. Jacks, "East and West," *Hibbert Journal*, July, 1928.

2. Cf. J. W. Sweetman, "Problems and Prospects in West Pakistan," *International Review of Missions*, July, 1954, p. 301.

3. Reported by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "World Church News" (28 May 1960).

This may sound to some like an academic question; but it is not an academic question to some of our churchpeople, and it is not an academic question to young Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in Asia. The latter are very sensitive about anything that suggests a belittling of their religions. A very suggestive incident, illustrating this feeling, occurred when Queen Elizabeth visited Ceylon in 1954. The columnist Janus, writing in *Time and Tide*, had said that though the Queen was regarded as an Anglican in England and a Presbyterian in Scotland, she could hardly be expected to consider herself a Buddhist in Ceylon. The Buddhists in Ceylon promptly asked why she should not, and threatened to boycott her visit because of this and other supposed slights to their religion.⁴ The incident may seem odd, but it is symptomatic of a serious situation. As a leader of one of the younger Churches has said, speaking of this problem of the Christian attitude to the non-Christian religions: "These questions may seem academic to some people; for us they are a matter of life and death."⁵

They are becoming much more than academic questions, also, for the ordinary member of our Churches, for two good reasons. In the first place he has an obscure but nagging feeling that the Church has let him down in some way. He attends meetings of UNESCO and related organizations, and notes that Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims are all accepted happily on a basis of equality in a brotherhood of people dedicated to the common task of relieving distress and promoting understanding. He feels, as P. D. Devanandan has said, that "we are entering an epoch in world history when religious differences are no longer regarded as fundamentally divisive."⁶ But when he turns to the Church he finds that it considers the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim unsuitable for inclusion in the brotherhood of the Church till they have given up some of the distinctive attitudes they prize. He cannot help wondering if the Church is lagging behind non-religious bodies in showing a Christian spirit. In the second place he is becoming increasingly aware of the claim made by both Buddhists and Hindus, to the effect that they provide the truly universal point of view in religion, and that they alone can provide a hope for world peace. Over against the Christian claim for the universality of Christ, he faces claims like that of Swami Akhilananda, that "it was Sri Ramakrishna who actually first demonstrated the full universality of religion."⁷ Over against the Christian claim that Christianity is the basis of peace, he finds Buddhists claiming that "Christianity has had its chance and has failed."⁸ Speaking about a world conference of Buddhists held in Ceylon in 1950, the Attorney-General of Burma claimed: "Buddhism alone can provide the way. . . . It was the

4. Cf. E. J. Jurji, "The Great Religions and International Affairs," *Theology Today*, July, 1955, p. 173.

5. Cf. R. H. L. Slater, "Christian Attitudes to Other Religions," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, October, 1956, p. 215.

6. P. D. Devanandan, "The Christian Attitude and Approach to Non-Christian Religions," *International Review of Missions*, April, 1952, p. 178.

7. Cf. Swami Akhilananda, *The Hindu View of Christ* (New York, 1959).

8. A. J. Eastman, "The Sixth Buddhist Council," *International Review of Missions*, July, 1954, p. 281.

unanimous belief of all those people present there that Buddhism is the only ideology which can give peace to the world.”⁹ The Sixth Great Council of Buddhism, held near Rangoon from 1954–56, was “the first step in offering Buddhism to the world as its only hope for peace.”¹⁰ The Christian has an uneasy conscience about the seeming failure of Christianity to prevent our world from getting into its present disastrous predicament, and cannot help wondering if there is some truth in these claims. Because of his democratic tradition and his belief in the inviolable right of each individual to practice and profess his own faith in his own way, the western Christian cannot help being impressed by the apparent tolerance of men like Sir S. Radhakrishnan, “the Ambassador-General of Indian Culture,”¹¹ and by the claims of men like the Prime Minister of Burma, who expressed the Buddhist view as follows: “People may profess any religion they like, but if their moral conduct is such as is in conformity with the principle of Buddha’s teachings, or in other words, they lead the Buddhist way of life, then there will be everlasting peace in the world. . . .”¹²

Faced with claims like these, the individual Christian has a right to look to the Church for guidance. Will the Church be able to give him the guidance he needs, until it has given much thoughtful study to the problem? The situation we face is a new situation in the modern history of the Church, as Kraemer points out:

For the first time since the Constantine victory in A.D. 312 and its consequences, the Christian Church is heading toward a real and spiritual encounter with the great non-Christian religions. . . . Up till now the other [than Islam] great non-Christian religions and the Christian Church have, so to say, only met in passing. Notwithstanding brilliant individual efforts, a real meeting in openness and fairness has never yet taken place. The great meeting of the Christian Church as a whole with the great religions . . . is still awaiting us.¹³

In attempting to grapple with the problem, the theologian faces serious difficulties, as the current literature on the subject amply demonstrates. The subject matter is peculiarly elusive. Time and again the theologian grasps at a precise statement, only to find that he is clutching shadows. The claims of the different religions seem often to be on different planes, their statements not strictly commensurable. Discussions of the relations between Christianity and non-Christian religions easily lapse into generalities which are either unfair or futile. Yet the effort to clarify these relationships must continue. The difficulty of the task is more than matched by the urgency of the need.

Arnold Toynbee suggests that, in order to make effective progress in the comparative study of Christianity and other faiths, we may have to avoid

9. Quoted by A. C. Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (New York, 1958), p. 289.

10. A. J. Eastman, *art. cit.*, p. 284.

11. W. Perston, “Christian Theology and Vedanta,” *International Review of Missions*, April, 1955, p. 153.

12. Quoted by Bouquet, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

13. H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, 1956), p. 20.

general comparisons of belief and practice, concentrating instead on specific problems in the human situation.¹⁴ This method may help to sort out the intricate interrelationships into recognizable patterns, and to isolate a few significant issues where similarities and differences can be more clearly seen.

"A time of genuine religious conversations is beginning," says Martin Buber, on the basis, "not of an identical content of faith which is alleged to be found in all religions, but of the situation, of anguish and expectation."¹⁵ "Of anguish and expectation"; perhaps this situation—more particularly, the anguish of frustrated expectation—will provide a useful initial problem on which to base comparisons. "Among all the enemies of the human race perhaps the worst are fear, frustration and resentment."¹⁶ If we deal initially with frustration, we are therefore dealing with a problem of importance.

What have the major religions to say about frustration? They are all deeply concerned about it—naturally so, says Toynbee, since the great religions "appeared at a moment when mankind had received surprising and humiliating setbacks in its endeavours."¹⁷ Let us take a very quick look at some of the major religions from this standpoint.

Buddhism

Although the stories of Gautama's early life are known to have been put down in writing only several hundred years after his death, and although many improbable accretions have crept in, the main outlines of the story are simple and are generally accepted. He was born into the family of a ruler whose kingdom lay on the borders of India and Nepal. A wise man foretold that he would become either a great religious ascetic or a great ruler. The king asked what the things were that would drive the boy into religious asceticism, hoping to guard the boy against them. The sage replied that it would happen when he saw a decrepit old man, a man whose body was foul with sores, a dead body, and a shaven-headed, ash-smeared mendicant. To protect the boy from ever seeing these, he was brought up in the seclusion of the court, in pampered and protected luxury, with all signs of disease and death carefully excluded. When as a young man he was at last allowed to ride out publicly, troops were sent ahead through the city to remove all people showing signs of old age, disease, death, or religious asceticism. In spite of these precautions, when Gautama rode through the city, he did see the four traditional Buddhist messengers of disaster: a decrepit old man, a man whose body was foul with sores, a dead man, and a shaven-haired ascetic. Shocked to the depths of his soul by these evidences of the tragic end to which the promise of life must come, the young man renounced his comfort, wealth, and title, joined a group of ascetics, and set out on his pilgrimage to find peace of mind. He found it at last in the enlightenment which came to him as he sat under the Bo tree. The promise

14. Cf. A. J. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions of the World* (London, 1958).

15. M. Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York, 1947), p. 7.

16. S. Neill, *A Genuinely Human Existence* (New York, 1959), p. 190.

17. Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

on which the whole enlightenment is based is that men universally suffer on account of the frustration of desire.

Hinduism

The Bhagavadgita is the best-loved part of Hindu religious literature. It "has become the most popular, widely memorized, authoritative statement of the basic guiding principles of Indian religious life."¹⁸ The story starts when Arjuna rides out in the early morning, on his chariot, between the two armies which face each other on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Every avenue of action open to him leads to suffering and tragedy. As he looks at the ranks of the enemy he sees that they are filled with his own relatives and friends. If he leads his army into battle, brother will die at the hands of brother and friend at the hands of friend. No matter which side wins, the only certain outcome will be suffering, tragedy, and sorrow. If he refuses to lead his army into battle, his own family and followers will face inescapable persecution and death. What is he to do? Has life nothing to offer, in the end, but a tragic dilemma in which hope turns to despair and love is crowned with sorrow? The driver of his chariot is Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. Arjuna turns to him for help. The Bhagavadgita is the advice Krishna gives Arjuna on how to escape the inevitable frustrations and sorrows of life.

Islam

To understand the concern of Islam with the problem of frustration, one need only remember that the Muslim calendar begins from the failure of Mohammed's mission in Mecca and his flight to Medina, not from the date of the first revelation. Nor can there be any doubt about the reality of the frustration which Mohammed faced at this time. He left Mecca as a genuine fugitive—taking steps to confuse his enemies, hiding in a cave till the danger of capture had passed—and not as a general conducting a strategic retreat as a temporary tactical device. One must remember also the great concern of Islam with death and the Last Days, when the frustration of all human ambitions will stand revealed in the fierce light of the will of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the sole arbiter of human destiny.

Christianity

Christianity, like Islam, has to be understood in terms of the historic events out of which it arose. In a journal like this, it is sufficient merely to mention the centrality for Christianity of the tragedy of the Cross, the way in which the shame of the Cross became the boast of the Gospel, the way in which Christ insisted that a cross must be a normal part of a Christian's life, and the way in which the meaning of life was altered by Christ's victory over the final frustration of death. One premise of the Gospel is the inevitable frustration of man's efforts to achieve salvation by his own resources.

Cursory comments like these are sufficient to show that Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are like Christianity at least in this, that they all speak to a

18. H. Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (New York, 1951), p. 380.

common predicament of man, which has frustration as one of its inescapable features. Here is a situation about which genuine religious conversations between them may at least begin, though any progress in conversation is bound to lead into more subtle and significant questions. One must go on to ask questions like these: What kinds of frustration is each religion primarily concerned with? In what areas of life is the most significant frustration to be found? What is responsible for producing this frustration? What are the specific remedies proposed for frustration?

When one goes on to consider specific questions like these, the subtle interweaving of similarities and dissimilarities becomes more difficult to disentangle. It is in the process of disentangling them, however, that the most helpful insights will be gained. Early Buddhism, for instance, is concerned with the immediate frustrations which everyone must endure in the course of normal daily life, rather than with death or with a judgment beyond death, while Islam is concerned with the frustrations made clear at the last judgment, rather than with those of daily life. Zen Buddhism is concerned with frustrations inherent in the nature of understanding; the Judaic-Christian tradition is concerned more with frustrations in the accomplishment of purpose. Or consider the matter of responsibility for frustration. In early Buddhism, and in much modern Buddhism, the responsibility for frustration lies squarely on the nature of man; in Hinduism it is due to the operation of an eternal law before which even the gods are well-nigh helpless; in Islam it is due solely to the inscrutable will of the merciful and compassionate Allah; and would we be far wrong in suggesting that, in Christianity, it is not due to any of these, but to the continuing encounter between Almighty God and men whom he has created with the capacity to disobey him?

In two aspects of their treatment of frustration, the religions we have been considering show considerable agreement. Both of them have to do with the human factor in the situation. They speak almost with one voice in saying that the chief root of frustration lies in human egoism, however much they may differ, both among themselves and within themselves, about the particular forms this egoism takes. On this point they each talk a language which all can understand. They show remarkable agreement also in maintaining that the way to overcome frustration, as far as human effort can go, is by practising self-denial. Frustration cannot be escaped, but must be overcome, and the only way of overcoming involuntary frustration is to adopt a voluntary program of planned self-denials. So far the religions which we are considering are agreed; differences come with respect to the kind of program to be adopted, and its aim.

It was said above that the major religions could at least understand each other when speaking about the means of overcoming frustration, "so far as human effort can go." How far is this? It is at this point that the most significant differences appear; and the differences between the major religions are complicated by considerable differences within some religions,

notably Buddhism and Hinduism. Early Buddhism and much modern Buddhism maintain that human effort can do what is necessary; Islam maintains that human effort can do no more than keep one in the theocratic community of obedience which has special grounds for hope in the ultimate mercy of Allah. One form of Hinduism also says that human effort can do all that is necessary, provided that it operates strictly within the appropriate Dharma, while another form of Hinduism comes quite close to the Christian position in its insistence upon the need to rely wholly on the grace of God—though even here the differences in the total patterns of associated ideas are so great that Rudolf Otto, after his visit to India, was led to alter his earlier statements about their similarity.¹⁹ The concept of the *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism, with its magnificent ideal of sacrifice, probably comes closer than does any other religious insight to the Christian concept of the sacrifice of Christ, though even here significant differences appear. The voluntary sacrifice of the *bodhisattva*, with its wonderful sense of compassion for others, though an instance of an eternal principle, is basically a personal achievement, setting up an ideal for men to copy; in Christian thought, on the contrary, the sacrifice of Christ is something undertaken by God in which human initiative has no effective part, and which man cannot hope to copy as it is a once-for-all action undertaken by God. In this assurance of God's initiative, Christianity finds its major answer to man's frustration.

Even a brief and superficial examination of one particular problem, such as we have tried to make, does help to bring into sharper focus some of the similarities and differences between the major religions. To this extent, at least, Toynbee seems to be right in saying that it will be of value to concentrate on specific features of the human situation. But, however we undertake it, there can be no serious question about the need for a renewed study of the problems presented to Christianity by the renewed counter-attack from the East. The literatures of the revived non-Christian religions are becoming available in readily accessible form to the ordinary Christian. The man, who had assumed his Christianity much as he had assumed his citizenship, because he had been born in a country isolated from the influences of other religions, in a particular geographic area, and because he had been born into a family which had transmitted to him responsibilities in a Christian community, is increasingly going to demand the right as a mature individual to choose the religion he wishes. The encounter with non-Christian faiths is ceasing to be a distant problem on the missionary frontiers and is becoming a local concern of every Christian community. Arnold Toynbee in his great *Study of History* has argued that it is the disturbed periods of history that are the really creative periods, and Kraemer has pointed out that the one previous period when Christianity met in direct encounter with aggressive non-Christian faiths, in the first few centuries of the Christian era, was the period of the great formulation of Christian belief.

19. I refer to statements made at the Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council.

If then, as Toynbee again seems to suggest,²⁰ the encounter between Christianity and the revived non-Christian religions is to be one of the most crucial features of the last half of the twentieth century, as the encounter of Christianity and science was of the first half, we should prepare for it with expectation rather than apprehension. "One feels that the real encounter between Christianity and these ancient faiths is just coming," said Dr. E. H. Johnson of the Board of Overseas Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, after a recent visit to Asia, "and the Christian Church will need to prepare for it by deeper understanding and appreciation of the strengths as well as the weaknesses of these re-invigorated faiths."²¹ It may require some resorting and reformulating of contemporary Christian thought. But prepare for it we must.

20. E.g., in "Religion and the Rise of Western Culture," *Hibbert Journal*, October, 1950, p. 3.

21. Quoted in the Student Christian Movement Graduate Register *Newsletter* (1960, no. 1).