

BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The Buddhist Challenge To Christian Theology

Introduction

I have been a missionary in Japan for the last twenty years, and I am a student of philosophy and of Buddhism. That is my life and I am sure that you will not take it amiss if it is from there that I speak. As a non-theologian in this theological milieu I may, of course, be a disturbing presence, a bit like the proverbial dog in the bowling alley. And I may add that I *want* to be provocative today, and to take advantage of this interdisciplinary situation. So, I shall tend to state my convictions rather too strongly, and I shall be happy — even if you get angry with me and want to drive me out of this sanctuary of Thomistic learning (which, anyway, you will be too polite to do) — if something of what I say sets you investigating anew some long-established presuppositions. For, what is the good of an academic discipline, if it is not at the same time an adventure of ideas?

That “aggressivity” of mine may not be simply imputable to some perverse streak in my character. You see, living in the Japanese situation and in daily contact and dialog with Buddhists, I really feel very strongly about our topic today. And I may add that I also feel very strong because, in a sense, my discussion today

is nothing but a commentary on the words which Pope John-Paul II addressed to the peoples of Asia from Radio Veritas, in the hills barely outside this city:

"The Catholic Church accepts the truth and goodness found in these religions, and she sees reflections there of the truth of Christ, whom she proclaims as 'the Way and the Truth and the Life.' . . . The Church of Jesus Christ in this age experiences a profound need to enter into contact and dialog with all these religions . . . Ways must be developed to make this dialog become a reality everywhere, but especially in Asia, the continent that is the cradle of ancient cultures and religions."

I am aware, of course, that, from the Philippine situation, Buddhism may look too remote to become really real — somewhat like the millions starving in the Sahel region of far-off Africa. Basically, it must be a similar feeling of remoteness that still prevents most European theologians from taking Buddhism seriously. However, on this point at least, European models cannot serve us any longer. While Europe, after four centuries of outward drive, is evidently in the throes of withdrawal symptoms and much inclined to shut itself up in the ivory tower of its provincialism, you, on the contrary, are part of an "awakening Asia" — an Asia awakening to its own identity and importance in the world, an Asia reawakening to its old traditions.

I can also very well understand that "theologizing from the Philippine situation" may tend at first to draw you to a pure theology of social commitment and maybe of liberation. However, an Asian theology of liberation cannot be authentic if it does not grow out of the full Asian context. And this Asian context, in which the Philippines finds itself, is certainly a situation of wide-spread poverty, unequal distribution of wealth, and human exploitation; but, it is also peoples impregnated by millenia-old cultural traditions, among which Buddhism might be the most universal. To quote only one appraisal:

"Buddhism has been a determinative factor in the Asian personal and social consciousness for two thou-

sand years. It has contributed essentially to attitudes of life and death; ... appropriated responsibility for the maintenance of continuity at the crisis times of life (*rites de passage*); influenced decisively such great philosophies of life as Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism; continues to be in many Asian countries the major social institution outside of the family; and has been largely responsible for articulating both the ultimate and proximate goals of individuals and societies."¹

It must, I am aware, sound imprudent for a foreigner even to venture an opinion on this point, but I would nevertheless dare to surmise that the Pilipino identity will hinge in the future, together with a renewed and grateful fidelity to the gift of Christ, on a greater identification with the Asian context.

We can now have a closer look at the Buddhist challenge. I deem it advisable, however, to start from a very broad perspective and say a word first, I, on the motives of the interreligious dialog; II, on the costs and conditions of the dialog; III, on the challenge the dialog offers to theology. Only at the end I can become more specific and try to answer the question: Where does the Buddhist challenge strike exactly?

I

My first comment will be on the *motives of the dialog with Buddhism*. Why does the Church — Vatican II, the Popes since then, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences — want the dialogue with other religions?

It is important, I think, to be very clear about one point right from the beginning. Our question cannot be formulated, "What does the Church want to obtain from the dialog?" — as if the Church had cold-bloodedly decided on dialog as a strategem to further its own aims. In that case, the suspicions the Christian desire for dialog meets with in some milieus, especially in India and in Muslim countries could very well be justified: "Dia-

¹ Donald K. Swearer, *Buddhism in Transition*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970, pp. 31-32.

log is only the old arrogant mission attitude in disguise." Fortunately, nothing is farther from the truth. The real situation has been admirably captured in Pope John-Paul's words, "The Church *experiences a profound need* to enter into contact and dialog..." This rather means that, independently from considerations of gain and for reasons which are not perfectly clear to itself, the Church found itself unable not to change its traditional attitude towards the other religions. To hark back to Saint Peter, it is again a case of *non possumus non*.

The post-factum diagnosis of this predicament is only in its initial stages, but one conclusion seems already ineluctable: If the great religions of the world, at present, are inclined to take an attitude of dialog, this is not due in the first place to religious developments or new theological insights. They are driven into each other's arms by the secular developments of the world: the growing together of their hitherto separate territories into the one "global village," the desperate need to mobilize all available spiritual resources against the process of de-humanization and the threat of cosmic destruction, and the world-wide wave of secularization in the midst of which religious message becomes all but inaudible.

What can be said, however, is, that in this secular situation the Church has discerned an invitation of the Spirit to go out into the unknown where the path is made by being trodden. Or, to go back to the famous motto of Vatican II, we could say that it is a question of "reading the signs of the times." You probably know the English historian, Toynbee's verdict on our times. Rendered freely, it reads as follows: A thousand years from now historians will characterize the twentieth century as the age of the encounter of East and West. Not in the sense of communism *versus* capitalism, but as the confrontation of Christianity and Buddhism.

In theological terms, we can add that nothing less is at stake than the Catholicity, the universality of Christianity — its significance as well as its realization in a world of religious plurality — and, with it, the coming true of that passionate and "impossible

dream" of our Lord: "That they may be one..." In principle, Christianity is universal and a bond of unity for mankind. It has become impossible, however, to escape the painful realization that, as a matter of historical fact, Christianity is 95% Western, and a potential factor of division in the world. To speak more generally, both Buddhism and Christianity find themselves strongly tied-up with the culture and the philosophy of one particular region of the globe, so that, as to Christianity, one can speak of a Latin or Greek captivity, and, in a very real sense, of a "failure of Christianity in Asia."

It is important to remark here that this particularity could scarcely be only a geographical one. No matter how providential this tie-up with the Greek, Latin, and Germanic cultures may have been in the past, given the influence of the spirit and religiosity of these peoples, it is hard to see how Christ's message could have escaped being interpreted and developed in a (valid, but all the same) one-sided way. From now on, a real exposure to Asian religiosity may be needed to redress a balance and to give neglected elements in Christ's message a new chance. To try out only one formulation, it looks very much as if the rather intellectualistic Western cultures have tended to take Christ and his message too exclusively as an objectively given reality, and to relatively neglect their "interiorization" as the divine drama meant to enfold and be lived in every faithful. Exposure to Eastern religiosity with its (no doubt equally one-sided) focus on the religious experience of the way-farer — an exposure which finds a beginning in the Buddhist-Christian dialog — will certainly tend to produce a shift in emphasis.

I would like to submit to your consideration and critique the core of my (as yet unripe) convictions on this point. Buddhism and Christianity do not have to "fight for the souls of Asia." Buddhism not only had a big place in God's plan of salvation in the past, but will continue to have it also in the future — a rôle this time not confined to Asia. I sincerely believe that Christianity in general, and especially in Asia, needs to be influenced by Buddhism, or at least by "Asian spirituality." But I am also convinced

that Asia, and Buddhism itself, needs a big injection of Christ's spirit. Here, a big providential role must await the only Catholic country in Asia, the Philippines.

II

The second point I would like to stress here is, that inter-religious dialog far from being an innocent and idyllic episode, is *a demanding and costly affair*. This can be expressed in different ways. It has been said, for example, that in the dialog not a single expression of the doctrine will stand as is, or that the dialog demands and/or effects a *metanoia*, a change of consciousness. Or again, it can be said that, in order for them to meet and converse, both partners must leave their respective "fortresses," i.e. their home-ground and universe of discourse.

All these expressions are, I believe, valid but would need, of course, further analysis and clarification. I cannot possibly provide this much-needed clarification here but, since the idea of "leaving one's fortress" rather intrigues me, I would like to take it as the starting-point of a few comments.

As you all know, in the paradigm of Abraham, true faith appears as, at God's call, leaving one's land and going out into the unknown. From there, I dare to see interfaith dialog as basically an act of faith. You probably want to tell me that I should not overlook the fundamental difference: Abraham was called away from the idols of his home-country, but there can be no question of God calling us away from the true religion. And I have to agree with you, of course, but we should not forget our all too human tendency of making idols out of the holiest things and of building a home away from the never-ending trek towards God. With due regard for the differences, living faith, then and now, appears to imply a leaving behind of one's idols.

Secondly, speaking of "fortresses," there is an association which it is hard not to make in this Thomistic milieu. I refer to the fact that Thomism has been known as *the* fortress of Catholic doctrine. If we now ask what can be meant by the fortress we

must leave for the sake of the dialog, it cannot simply mean: God, Christ, Christ's message, or the Church as the body of Christ; it could possibly mean Christianity insofar as it is a human construction, historically and sociologically conditioned; but it must certainly mean any "superstructure" imposed on Christ's message. And here I must say that the dialog necessarily implies the leaving behind, in a very real sense, of Thomism or, for that matter, any other theological system. Bishop Robinson, of *Honest to God* fame, uses strong language when he indicates as one condition of the dialog "a readiness to sit loose to almost everything in the superstructure of traditional doctrine — divine persons, two natures, impersonal humanity (in Christ) and the rest."²

In this regard, all religions are, of course, in the same boat, and Buddhists too, for example, find it hard to comply with these conditions. For, Buddhism, too, has "encapsulated" the core of its doctrine in very elaborate scholastic systems, expressed in an inner-circle language, often built on tacit presuppositions, and not seldom directed against definite adversaries; and Buddhists also feel rather naked and exposed without this carapace.

More, however, I must answer a pertinent objection raised "Do you mean to say that we must go into the dialog without a position of our own, that is, with an empty head?" Since the word, "empty," was used here, and in an apparently pejorative sense, I may first remark that, in Buddhism, "emptiness" functions as an extremely positive idea, and that "to empty one's head" is seen there as a very religious exercise and the greatest prerequisite for approaching the Absolute, whom we cannot reach by our man-made concepts. As you know, Christianity has something similar in the idea of a negative theology. And I happen to think that the religious value of the interfaith dialog is for a great part due to its being a might means of emptying our heads of many fixed ideas about God.

But, of course, although this is not irrelevant to the question, it is no direct answer to it either, since we are not speaking here

² John A. T. Robinson, *Truth is two-eyed*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979, p. 119 — The (in Christ) is added by me for clarification

of a dialog with God but of interfaith dialog as an encounter of two positions, of necessity mediated by concepts and words. On this level, it is clear that no dialog is obtained if either of the partners simply abandons his position. So, "leaving one's fortress" can only be conceived of as a "going out from one's position" in a delicate dialectical balance of the two meanings implied in that expression: *one* "to come from, originate in and continually refer back to;" and, *second*, "to step outside of." To the best of my knowledge, these dialectics have not been sufficiently clarified yet. But, provisionally, we might already say the following. One, a valid partner in the dialog cannot be a "ghost;" it must be clear where his home-ground is. Two, of the direction of the "stepping out" initially nothing can be said except that it is supposed to move toward the partner. However, this appears to mean, at the same time, a movement from the conceptual superstructures of one's religion towards the essential kerygma and, finally, the grounding experience of one's faith.

It may be helpful to add to these rather abstract elucubrations, the sketch I have in mind of the "ideal representative of a religion" in the interfaith dialog. We must be a real believer, deeply convinced of the validity of that particular religious path. He must be speaking out of the experience and practice of his religion, rather than out of a fool-proof theory. He should be a "middle-of-the-roader" as to the different interpretations his religion allows of. In other words, somebody with a sense of the history of his religion and its pendulum movements between opposite extremes, and thus aware of the merely provisional value and final untenability of these extreme positions. This would tend to disqualify, in Buddhism, for instance a radical adherent of the "mind-only" theory; and in Christianity, on the one hand a fundamentalist and, on the other, a liberal protestant inclined to reduce Christianity to mere humanism. On this point, I can happily state my conviction that, for a Christian, an open-ended Thomism is doubtless one of the best possible backgrounds to have.

Our ideal dialog partner should further, as already intimated, be keenly aware of the relativity of all the "superstructures" of his faith — their culture-boundedness and necessary one-sided-

ness; and of the inherent danger of their making the message more difficult to hear for people of a different background and culture. I see him as really "sticking" only to the central sources of his faith; the Bible message as transmitted in the tradition; the Christian praxis with its *lex orandi* and its saints; his own religious experience.

III

My third point could carry the title: "The dangers of leaving it to Jeeves." I guess that you are all familiar with the stories by the English humoristic writer, Woodhouse, about the manservant, Jeeves, whose master could not only safely leave the most intricate and delicate affairs to this omni-competent valet of his, but was well-advised to do so. Theologians, however, cannot afford to absent themselves from the interreligious dialog and leave this endeavor to whoever happens to get involved in it. This ought to be too evident to need any further mentioning. But, since I have the strongest misgivings that most(?) theologians, fully taken as they are by their inner-Church tasks and perspectives, did not get that message yet, I would like to "beat this dead horse" once more.

There may be a question of theological ethics here. Even in an age where the relationships of magisterium and theology are the subject of much heated debate, there can be little doubt where the duty of the theologians lies in a Church that calls for interfaith dialog. However, since speaking of somebody else's duties always smacks of an "holier than thou" attitude, I would prefer — if you allow me once more to have recourse to the overly strong language I promised you at the beginning — to say that nothing less is at stake than the *raison d'être*, or if you prefer relevance, itself of the theologians. Indeed, if and when our theologians fail to apply their considerable talents of reflection to such an important area of Christian practice and to such a glaring sign of the times, the question naturally arises (*vulgo dicto*) "why we pay them."

But, to come more directly to the dangers involved in any neglect of the interfaith dialog by the theologians, I would say

they are two-fold. There is, first, the danger of theology itself. It is the danger of stagnation consequent upon "splendid isolation." While the value of tradition and routine in any science is hard to overestimate, on the other hand, history appears to teach us that the vitality of the theological enterprise is culled at the frontiers, in the confrontation with contemporary reality, material and spiritual. I, for one, am convinced that one of the biggest chances for revitalization and further development of Christian theology today, lies precisely in the dialog with Buddhism.

Secondly, there is the danger to the interfaith dialog. In a rather sweeping statement, I would say that, as long as it lacks the participation of a sufficient number of Christianity's first-class theologians (and philosophers), the interfaith dialog is doomed to failure by lack of thoroughness. It is, indeed, no game for feeble minds, nor a game that can be won by brilliant amateurs alone. Without sufficient collaboration of *the* specialists, the danger is great of misplaced compromises or syncretisms, on the one hand, and of unnecessarily harsh oppositions, on the other.

Who, then, should be the carriers of the dialog? Besides the academic specialists in the history of religion, whose role we cannot go into here, I can think of four categories of people whose participation is indispensable to the right conduct of the dialog. First, there are the theologians, as people aware of the limits of possible interpretation of Christianity by their familiarity with Bible studies, the Church Fathers, and the history of Christian doctrine in general. Secondly, the "people on the spot," Christians living in the territory of the other religion, cannot be missed. For, only they can see the living reality (as opposed to the theory) of the other religion; only they, as people living within the universe of discourse of the other religion, are unable to forget that perspective whatever theological statement they make; and only they are near enough to discern the subtler trends stirring in the local religious world.

Thirdly, spiritual people (officially: monks and moniales) must be involved in the dialog, as living witnesses to the mystery behind the words and to the possibility that the fundamental institutions of different religions might be much more convergent

than the great differences in verbal expression would lead us to believe. Of the fourth group of people necessarily involved, the official representatives of the Church, I can only say that their role is delicate and that their presence should be discreet in direct proportion to their importance.

IV

I promised that, at the end, I would become a bit more specific about the Buddhist challenge, and try to give you an idea of where it strikes exactly. But you will realize that this is quite a task and that the few remaining lines hardly allow me to do it any sort of justice. Still, in an endeavor to live up to my promise, I shall try to summarize for you some insights which long years of dialog have nurtured in me, but you will have to forgive me if I cannot clarify or justify them sufficiently.

Romano Guardini, famous professor of "Catholic world-view" in pre-World War II Germany and a man of great intuitions, was probably the first Christian theologian to have a premonition of the vastness of the task before us, when — in the 1920's, I believe — he said that Buddhism was the last and biggest of the many challenges Christianity has had to face yet. As a man of wide erudition, Guardini knew very well the various great confrontations Christianity had lived through in the course of its history: Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Manicheism, etc. — but in Buddhism he sensed something qualitatively different, something of a higher spiritual quality, of a greater inner coherence and, at the same time, more radically different from Christianity than anything Christianity had ever faced before.

I can only add that I believe Guardini's intuition to be entirely correct. But there should be no misunderstanding here. A challenge to be faced is not synonymous with an enemy to be slain. Of course, when there is no risk or danger involved, if our "position" is not threatened in the process, there can be no question of a challenge. But, as Christians who have Christ's promise that He will be with us till the end of time, we can see in every challenge, no matter how great, the refreshing adventure it promises, the new horizons it brings, and the opportunities it

affords for deeper penetration into Christ's message. The title of Robinson's already quoted book, *Truth is two-eyed*, suggests that, in the Western tradition, we have been seeing things, including God and Christ, with only one eye, and that the East, and in particular Buddhism, can provide us with a second eye and thereby rectify our perspective. Thus we can see Buddhism as a providential challenge: In it, the Spirit is challenging us to greater fidelity to Christ. But again, as you well know, there are no challenges more upsetting to our ego or more costly, in term of our "possessions," than precisely those of the Spirit.

For this challenge of Buddhism to have its beneficial effect, we must begin with taking its differences with Christianity seriously, and not smother them in the mantle of a false irenism ("we are brothers, so let us think only of what we have in common") or in the fog of a concordism at any price ("we must basically be saying the same"). I agree that, at first sight, these attitudes look good: not to let the instincts of the warm human heart be spoilt by divisive reasoning. But what they really come down to is this: this brother has nothing that I do not possess already, and where he differs from me he must be wrong. I believe that it is more Christian (because more humble) and more conducive to truth and lasting brotherhood, to start from the presupposition: the other can teach me many things I did not know and also reveal to me anew many valuable aspects of the Christian tradition which I have been overlooking with my one eye. Our feeling of brotherhood may, indeed, arise from what we have in common, but a brotherhood that cannot survive a shock of ideas is not worth bothering about.

The simplest way of getting acquainted with the Buddhist challenge might be to have a good hard look at the image the Buddhist mirror throws back at Christianity. So, let us examine some of the (negative) traits of that image, without prejudging the quality of the mirror. To a Buddhist, Christianity looks very *dogmatic*, in the sense of being preoccupied with a definite set of objective doctrines, without sufficient concern for their links with the inner life of man. Thereby, Christians seem to believe that they can catch ultimate truth in nice and final formulas, which it is enough to believe without necessarily walking the

path that could lead to an experience of the truth and healing of the soul.

More generally maybe, Christianity shows a lack of interiority. It is *externalist*: attaching all importance to the objective, the historical, even the material, and neglecting the real field where man's lot is determined: the subject, man's consciousness. Thereby it tends to be activist, devoting its energy to and expecting real results from a transformation of the outer world. It also appears to be *moralistic*: Putting much stress on rules of behavior and liable to identify the religious with the moral, while real religion is the spiritual life beyond good and evil. As a result of the above traits, Christianity is intolerant. It also has in its set-up many archaic and primitive traits: myths, a barbaric preoccupation with cruelty (the Cross, sacrifice...), prayer for earthly benefits. For all these reasons, its faith is continually at loggerheads with reason and science, and Western culture shows an opposition of theology and philosophy not to be found in the East.

So far the picture as we can draw it here. It is not very flattering and it is, of course, not the truth as such. However, each of these traits points at a real weakness in the Western embodiment of Christ's message, the opposite pole of which can be found in Buddhism. All together, it renders possible an examen of conscience more thorough than we were ever able to make before and, at the same time, gives invaluable hints as to the ways of overcoming these weaknesses and redressing a balance. I should now start making all this concrete, and I must content myself with simply indicating a few examples.

It is, for example, certainly true that we put far too much trust in words that tend to build up for us a definite objective reality, unconnected with our inner experience. When asked what we mean by the God in whom we believe, we are inclined to describe a being "up there," with words mostly borrowed, by the way, from pagan philosophers: eternal, immutable, substance... Do we ever pause to consider whether a denial of all these words would necessarily mean a denial of God? Also, an examination of conscience as to why Christianity, supposed to be a doctrine of love, could show so much cruelty and intolerance, is certainly

overdue. Have we really been believing in the loving Father of Jesus Christ, rather than in a despotic God? About the relationships of morality and religion much could be said, of course, but the Buddhist stand on this question should at least make us reflect whether we ever gave the spirit of Christ a real chance to influence the categories of our moral theology, and to sublimate them into a spirituality — something Christ certainly seems to aim at, for example in Matthew 5,21ss.

But this is enough for today. I have been “shooting my shotgun, both barrels at once,” but I want to end with a deepfelt word of thanks. Thank to the Lord, for having chosen me a Christian, for having given me a Thomist training, and for having made me meet with Buddhism.

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