

BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

By Anthony Fernando, Sri Lanka.

This extract from an excellent book by a Christian priest explains very succinctly the Buddhist attitude towards conversion. "The purpose of missionary work is not to bring people to a new institution or a new religion. It is rather to bring an individual from a state of mental childishness to a state of mental adulthood". A Malaysian Buddhist stated this in another way when he said that the aim of Buddhist missionary work is 'not to steal followers from other religions but to convert Buddhists to be become better Buddhists.' If this principle, as explained by Dr. Anthony Fernando, is followed by missionaries of other religions much of the unnecessary ill-will that exists between the proselytizing religions and the others will be removed. The reason why Dr. Fernando is so liberal in his thinking is that he has had the wisdom to study Buddhism in great depth. It is earnestly hoped that many of the missionaries who condemn other religions will emulate him in Malaysia. Dr. Fernando has a Doctorate in Theology from the Gregorian University, Rome and another Doctorate in Buddhist Studies from the University of Sri Lanka. He is currently lecturer in Christian Culture at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka.

Ed.

Not long ago it was maintained that a Christian's study of another religion would be harmful to his faith. Any religion outside Christianity was considered "pagan" and contact with "paganism" was carefully to be avoided.

That extreme view does not prevail any longer. But the old Christian unconcern for other religions and philosophies is not totally dead. For many the study of another religion even though not so harmful is not a necessity. At best, it is a good pastime for those who have a surplus of time on their hands.

But I like to think with Alfred North Whitehead that it is something very useful and even necessary. It is necessary for the progress and purification of Christianity itself. With reference to the Christian's study of Buddhism (and

vice versa) an observation made by Whitehead can really serve as an eye-opener here. In his book "Religion in the Making" he says:

"The decay of Christianity and Buddhism, as determinative influences in modern thought, is partly due to the fact that each religion has unduly sheltered itself from the other. The self-sufficient pedantry of learning and the confidence of ignorant zealots have combined to shut up each religion in its own forms of thought. Instead of looking to each other for deeper meanings, they have remained self-satisfied and unfertilized". (p140)

Since this exposition is primarily meant for Christians, I have followed in it an approach rather uncommon to many general books on Buddhism. Most books on Buddhism are concerned almost exclusively with what is contained in it or what the Buddha taught. The *what* of a religion is no doubt very important for an understanding of that religion. But the *what* alone is not sufficient.

To understand the thought of the Founder of a religion fully, one has also to discover *why* he taught such a doctrine. The aim that a particular religious Founder strived to attain is as important for the understanding of the religion as his teaching itself. It is because he had a particular aim that he taught one particular doctrine rather than another.

The existence of a *why* or aim behind the *what* or content of an assertion is not something that is exclusive to matters of religion. It is true in any field where a liberation of some form is implied. Medicine is a good case in point. A doctor's prescription, for example, has both a *what* and *why*. To a patient suffering, say, from an internal ulcer, one doctor (being a physician) could prescribe oral drugs, and another (being a surgeon) surgery. The *what* of those two prescriptions are far from being identical, but their *why* are. Both prescriptions have as their aim the curing of the sick man of his ulcer.

According to Buddhism, and in fact according to all religions of Indian origin, religious doctrines are necessarily only prescriptions aimed at bringing healing to an ailing person. Bereft of that liberational target, a religious doctrine has no value at all. From the point of view of those religions, the value of a doctrine is not so much in its veracity, as in its effectiveness. A religious doctrine is not so much to be accepted as to be applied.

That is why religions of Indian origin are hardly ever concerned with dogmas and dogmatic definitions. Even heresies are no problem to them. Heresies for them are only opinions. Sects too could exist among them, but those sects are not mutually exclusive. That particular trend is due to the fact that religions see a *why* beneath the *what* of any doctrine. The *why* furthermore, is for them the element that determines the *what*.

The fact that there is *why* beneath the *what* of every doctrine is not a matter that could be said to have caught the attention of Christians very much. Coming to the awareness of that fact may very likely be one of the first benefits that a Christian would gain from the study of Buddhism.

A Christian who is ready to accept that there is a *why* beneath the *what* of a religious teaching is sure to see Buddhism, and particularly the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, in a totally new light. There is not the least doubt that, judged exteriorly, Buddhism and Christianity are very different from each other. The *what* of their contents are almost irreconcilably different. But deep beneath their *what* is a *why* that to a great extent is identical. Anybody who digs deep enough as to discover the *why* of the two religions, comes to a place where he will see the two religions bound together by a strong *inner* affinity.

To see a religion in terms of its *why* is naturally to see it in terms of its primary function, or better, its mission. If there is an affinity between Christianity and Buddhism with regard to their mission, then an important question is bound to arise with regard to the fulfillment of that mission, or in other words, with regard to missionary work. What is the responsibility of the Christian missionary who comes to realize that there could be an affinity between his work and that of the Buddhist missionary, for as would be very clear by now, both Buddhism and Christianity are missionary religions?

This is a question that could not be sidetracked at the end of a study of Buddhism. It may further not be safe to leave such a question unexplored, specially because Christianity itself at this moment is passing through a stage of uncertainty as to the relevance of its own missionary role. There are many Christians today who are beginning to ask if missionary work or the making of converts could serve any purpose in contemporary society.

Strange as it may sound, the study of Buddhism, instead of undermining the position of the Christian could rather enhance it, by bringing him to a new

realization of the contemporary relevance of his mission. For that, of course, he has first to understand in its correct sense the reality implied by convert-work. Missionary work could naturally not serve any valid purpose in the modern world if it is taken in the misconstrued sense of converting or bringing people from one religion to another. The purpose of missionary work is not to bring people to a new institution or a new religion. It is rather to bring an individual from a state of mental childishness to a state of mental adulthood. An adult is one who faces life realistically, and strives constantly to achieve that ideal humanhood for which life is designed. The work of the missionary is thus the work of helping people to be adults, technically called in Buddhism *Arahats* and in Christianity *Saints*.

If missionary work is seen in that perspective, its importance and its relevance to modern society become self-evident. If the goal of missionary work is personality-transformation then there has probably been no era in the history of mankind in which it was more urgently needed than today. Purely from the side of the world's population there has never been such a great number needing education in personality upliftment.

But for a missionary work of that type to be effective, the missionary, be he Buddhist or Christian, has to be equipped with an enlarged vision. He can no longer afford to be insular in his approach to religious truths. He cannot claim to have the total monopoly over the truth of an individual's path to spiritual nobility. He must be prepared to admit that if he has his own techniques for personality-upliftment, then others too may have theirs.

Therefore a Christian need not have to compete with the Buddhist. He could rather collaborate with him. Missionary work or the work of educating human beings to adulthood is a task that Christians and Buddhists can labour at hand in hand. Even the very extensiveness of the task in the contemporary world would justify such a collaboration.

The modern Christian missionary should not be taken aback, if as a result of such collaboration, he would one day come across individuals who, after successfully benefitting from the techniques of both religions, would want to consider themselves Buddhist-Christians or Christian-Buddhists. It is quite possible that as forms of personality-upliftment the two systems have elements that are complementary to each other. It could well be that modern man needs both a peace of mind, and a self-fulfilment achieved through an active commitment to society's development; both a sense of self-

dependence, and a sense of relationship; both a life of self-control and a correctly oriented emotional life.

The likelihood of individuals profiting from both systems is thus not an impossibility. If such a development takes place, neither the Buddhist nor the Christian has a right to object to it, for the Buddha is not the exclusive monopoly of the Buddhists, or Christ of the Christians.

Such an eventuality will not disturb a Christian who has understood religion and its function in the way that Christ understood it. For Christ, religion was not an end in itself. This is a point that is often overlooked, but which a modern Christian missionary will do well to remember. Man and his growth to full "humanhood" were more important to Christ than the religious system or the institution. That is why he opposed the attitude of Jewish priests who tried to enslave man by religion. That is what he boldly insinuated when he declared: "The Sabbath is for man and not man for the Sabbath". The Sabbath or the weekly observance of the holy day was in the popular Jewish mind the most binding practice of Judaism. It was symbolic of the entire Jewish legal system. It represented what a Jew understood by religion. So, by that statement, Christ implied that religion should serve man, and not enslave him. Man, and not religion, was what was important to Christ.

The Buddha expressed the same idea when he compared religion to a raft which carries a man from one shore to another. Once the shore is reached, he said, the traveller should not carry the raft on his head!

Thus for both the Buddha and Christ, what mattered in reality was the mission of the religion, and not religion as such. If that was the view of the Founders of the two religions, would it be right for their followers to accept another? And finally, in case there is an affinity between the two religions with regard to their mission, would it not be more in keeping with the desires of the two Founders that their missionaries collaborate in the execution of this vital mission?