

SPINOZA AND THE BUDDHA DHAMMA

By D. Amarasiri Weeratne

Benedict Spinoza (Baruch Despinoza) was not only a philosopher, but also a theologian and a scientist as well. Born in 1632 in Amsterdam of Dutch-Jewish parents, he was excommunicated by the Jewish synagogue in 1656 for his irregularities in ritual observances, and for a while earned his living by grinding optical lenses. His early death from phthisis was probably hastened, it is believed, by this occupation for he died in 1677 at the young age of 45. He was an impressive character, enjoying a wide reputation among men of letters, scientists and statesmen.

Spinoza devoted his time on research and directed his attention and concentration on authorship and correspondence. His widely-circulated books include the 'Ethics', which some critics consider to be the 'most widely misunderstood work of modern philosophy' and the 'Theological-Political Treatise' which received universal condemnation by all classes of authorities, civil and ecclesiastical.

Amarasiri Weeratne attempts here, in this article, to spell out the affinity between Spinosism and Buddhism by drawing certain parallels between the two philosophies, though he admits that the former 'falls short of the Buddha's doctrines as a scheme of salvation.' The writer feels very strongly that it was through the profound influence of Spinoza's philosophy that the West came to know and to accept the Buddha's teachings. His admiration of Spinoza is open, for he hails the seventeenth century philosopher as 'the morning star that heralded the dawn of the Buddha-Dharma in the west.'

Weeratne is a well-known writer from Sri Lanka. As has been said in the previous issue of the 'Voice of Buddhism', he has contributed articles to almost all known Buddhist magazines.

-Ed

Benedict Spinoza (1632 – 1677) was born in Amsterdam in a Jewish community that had become Christians to avoid persecution by the Spanish Inquisition, but had reverted back to the ancestral faith after the danger was over.

He was the author of one of the greatest metaphysical systems in the history of philosophy. To his contemporaries both Jews and Christians, his account of the

nature of God was the most shocking feature of his philosophy. According to Spinoza, God is a conscious and omniscient being, but has no free-will. He has no purposes. He acts according to the necessity of His own nature. God cannot therefore have any special care for man. The good man, although loves God, should not expect God to love him in return. In 1663 he published his epoch-making work on Cartesian philosophy and set forth a Pantheism which makes God the cause and substance of the universe. His 'Ethics' was not published till after his death. Spinoza is usually described as a Western philosopher. He is actually a puzzling figure, or as Schopenhauer described him 'an Eastern plant growing on Western soil'. He is a lone star in the philosophical firmament of the West. He strikes us as a purveyor of Vedanta philosophy. He would have been understood, appreciated and honoured had he been born and lived in India. His teaching was anathemised by the Jewish Rabbis and he was excommunicated as a heretic. He can be called the father of modern Bible criticism, and the founder of 'the-death-of-God-Theology'. He shattered the personal God-concept of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and taught that God was an impersonal force, without desire, without activity connected with creating, sustaining, and looking after his creation. He does not expect prayers from men. Hence his view of God can be described as Vedantic as opposed to the anthropomorphic God of the Bible. It is an irony of fate that the Jewish synagogue which excommunicated Spinoza was later partly conquered by his teachings. Today, 200 years after his death, Jewish life in the West is permeated with his spirit. Three of the modern reform movements in Judaism are directly traceable to his influence.

His magnum opus, 'Theological-Political Treatise', aroused the ire of the Christian theologians. They not only attacked, misrepresented and falsified his theory but also maligned his character as well. One of them wrote in 1702 "Spinoza seems to have been hired by Satan to develop Atheism". Some critics called him "son of hell", "dog", and "skunk". Even scholars of repute like Dayling of Leipzig University called Spinosism "impious doctrine".

These constant attacks on Spinoza were one of the causes of his later popularity. Because of this barrage men of dispassionate judgement took the trouble to study his writings. This brought him many admirers and followers among the intellectuals of Europe. In 1927 when the 250th anniversary of his death was observed throughout the western world, Russia, under Lenin, proclaimed Spinoza the official philosopher and patron saint of the U.S.S.R. Before him the place had been assigned to Emmanuel Kant. Therefore it came to pass that the philosophy of the lonely Jew of Amsterdam became the official creed of the Communist world. Christianity in Russia was replaced by Spinosism. Lenin, Bismark, the Iron Chancellor of Germany, and Hitler became admirers of Spinoza. Spinoza's preference for the aristocratically governed state as well as his dictum that the sphere of right is delimited by the sphere of might appealed

greatly to all dictators. Hence Bismark, Lenin and Hitler were all admirers of Spinoza. Nietschze and Hegel were eminent western philosophers who were followers of Spinoza too. Hegel was so much taken up with Spinoza's teaching that he said, "That which is rational bears the brand of Spinoza." The rediscovery of Spinoza by the Germans contributed to the shaping of the cultural destinies of the German people for almost 200 years. When the Jewish authorities asked Albert Einstein, "Do you believe in God"? With a view to taking punitive action against him for Atheism, his reply was, "I believe in the God of Spinoza".

According to Spinoza a satisfactory philosophy should have the following requirements:-

1. It must be intelligible, devoid of dogmas and inexplicable mysteries.
2. It must be consistent with the findings of science. Its teaching should not be discredited by the findings of science.
3. It must explain the main facts of life satisfactorily e.g. the problem of evil and suffering.
4. It must provide a worthy object of worship.

Hence it would be seen that a deep religious factor was a motive of his philosophy. Hitherto, in the West, philosophy was divorced from religion. Spinoza broke off from this tradition and brought philosophy in line with the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, where philosophy and religion are inseparably tied up with each other.

Now it would be seen that in terms of the four requirements stipulated by Spinoza, Buddhism would be the ideal religion as well as the ideal philosophy, because

1. Buddhism is intelligible, rational and has no mysteries and dogmas.
2. Buddhism is consistent with the principles of science. Its fundamentals have not been discredited by the findings of science.
3. It is the best rational solution to the problem of suffering; without its teachings of Karma and Rebirth the problem of suffering becomes an inexplicable mystery.
4. Buddhism provides a worthy object of worship in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. These are not mythical gods whose existence cannot be proved or verified.

Like Spinoza, the Buddha was an intellectualist and a determinist in that he taught that our fate is determined by our Karma which we accumulate. Like Spinoza, the Buddha explains that desire is the origin of life and its activities. The Brahma referred to by the Buddha is the prototype of Spinoza's God. Spinosism, like Buddhism, is a philosophy deeply ingrained in religion. The triumphs of Spinoza were due to this principle that he had in common with Buddhism. "The rise, triumph and victory of Spinosism in Europe are reminiscent of the power of Buddhism because both are religiosity rather than philosophy." What Buddha termed Nirvana Spinoza called the 'natural principle'. The Buddha described Nirvana in the famous text in the Udana, beginning with "There is, O bhikkus an unborn, an unconditioned, uncreated if not for which a release to the born, conditioned and created will not be possible...". This is the highest reality which Spinoza speaks of. Unfortunately the person who translated his work into Latin called this principle 'Deus' which means 'God'. Westerners knew nothing better and could not think of anything better at the time. Therefore Spinoza came to be called a believer in a God who is not a person but a principle. So Spinoza's reference to God reminds us of the Buddha's reference to Nirvana – the highest reality, which is not a person. The ethics of Spinoza is calculated to a purpose as in the case of Buddhism. The attraction of Buddhism to the intellectuals of the West is due to its rationality. Spinoza's appeal and charm is due precisely to the same reason. Spinosism has been called the "most complete and hard-headed of rationalist metaphysics."

The attraction of Spinoza is due largely to the fact that he expresses an intensely religious attitude entirely devoid of dogma. In this his affinity to the Buddha-Dhamma is clear and well-marked. Spinoza's criticism and rejection of the Jehovah of the Old Testament is reminiscent of the Buddha's criticism and rejection of Brahma in the Suttas. Spinoza's acceptance of the truth of suffering and the fact, that he demonstrated that the existence of evil is incompatible with the belief in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God, makes him a Buddhist, or one who comes close to the Buddhist way of thinking.

It was the philosophy of Spinoza which paved the way for Buddhism in the West. He did the spade work of reputation of the personal God – a concept held so sacrosanct by the religious men in the West. He stated that a good God cannot create a world where there is evil. He taught that morals should be geared to the attainment of or salvation from suffering. He taught the truths of Anicca and Dukkha i.e. the fleeting and unsatisfactoriness of all existence. He taught that we must seek our salvation by our own efforts and not rely on a vicarious saviour. Spinoza's great emphasis was not upon the scepticism about popular religion but upon the need to preserve the freedom of inquiry and investigation. In this we find him a re-echo of the famous Kalama Sutta of the

Buddha. Of course it must be admitted that Spinoza's philosophy falls short of the Buddha's doctrines as a scheme of salvation, but as far as it goes, it is a highly commendable and satisfactory philosophy from the Buddhist point of view. Spinoza's influence on Western philosophers who came after him paved the way for a favourable reception to the teachings of the Buddha in the West. Therefore he can be called the morning star that heralded the dawn of the Buddha-Dharma in the West.

We know from the inscriptions of King Asoka, the Mahavamsa and the writings of Clement of Alexandria that Buddhism had spread to Asia Minor and to Alexandria in Egypt. The impact of the Buddha-Dharma on religious life in these lands is seen in the rise of sects and religious orders like the Essenes, Gnostics, Macheans, Simonists etc. These sects passed on their Buddhist traditions to some Christian sects. Some of the Christian sects that absorbed too much of the Buddhist influence was, however, branded as heretics by the Catholic Church and was subsequently wiped out by the Inquisition. Thus, a favourable reception of the Dharma in the West was principally due to the groundwork prepared by Spinoza.

