

COMMITTEE V
The Search for Global Ideology

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COMMENTS

by

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on

Masao Abe's

A BUDDHIST VIEW OF HUMAN SALVATION

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A response to Professor Masao Abe's paper:

A Buddhist view of Human Salvation

by Emilie Zum Brunn

To start with, I would like to underline the importance of the confrontation between Buddhism and Christianity in the search of a "unifying global philosophy". I found very helpful and illuminating Professor Abe's remarks concerning the vertical as well as the horizontal aspects of religion in general, and what in these aspects, especially in the first one, radically separates Buddhism from Christianity, or appears to separate them. If one seriously seeks the possibilities for uniting, it is methodologically sound not to hide the dissimilarities and difficulties.

Now, concerning this question of methodology, the elucidating of key words in both religions and philosophies seems to me of utmost importance. E.g. the word salvation which is used here all along indifferently for both creeds. Such a capital word should first, to my mind, be defined explicitly in its precise signification. It is, originally, Judeo-Christian, and we find a definition for it p. 3: "Human beings are finite and originally sinful, and can be saved not by their own acts, but only through pure faith in the self-sufficient love of God." And, p. 19. we find a

definition of Buddhist liberation: "In Buddhism, it is the self-awakening of the Dahrma which emancipates people from fundamental ignorance, an awakening which Hisamatsu describes as awakening to Formless Self." Perhaps we might find a clue to the unity of those doctrines as well as to their differences in the very confrontation of the notion of salvation and liberation? We have here, I venture to think, a case similar to that of Neoplatonism - though there has not taken place in the case of Buddhism the historical encounter between Christianity and its doctrine of salvation and the Neoplatonic doctrine of liberation. In the latter case, the similarity or kinship between both doctrines, though founded on different world-views, is shown to us by history itself. I mean by the fact that not only Christian theology, but as well Jewish and Sufist, could be expressed with the help of Neoplatonic philosophy. This was possible because Neoplatonism is essentially religious, emphasizing the Platonic view of the fall or turning away of the soul from its Principle and her return to it, and proposing adequate means or mediations fo make that return possible.

This proximity of Neoplatonism and the doctrine of salvation in the three religions of the Book is chiefly marked in mysticism. It has also been pointed out by comparatists concerning ^{the Christian relation to} Buddhism, e.g. by one of the authors mentioned by Professor Abe, Daizetsu Suzuki in

Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist.

However let us return to our text, and ask a few layman's questions. We are told p. 3 that "in Buddhism the transhuman divine reality is not the one God who is the ruler of the world and history but the Dharma, i.e. the law of dependent coorigination." The transhuman, divine and ultimate reality is further considered as nirvana and sunyata, called also "vast emptiness", and lastly, this ultimate reality is shown to be, in Hisamatsu's thought ^{and} experience, the Formless Self. This requires some elucidation for non Buddhists who are at a loss to understand if this total vacuity is really as completely estranged from Christian religious experience and thought as seems intimated here. This seems impossible for anyone who is familiar with Neoplatonism, the Greek Fathers and the tradition which leads to the Rheno-Flemish mystics and theologians. Suzuki himself, and nowadays other Japanese philosophers and zenists, such as Ueda, Tsujimura e.g. have recognized that a narrow parallel is to be instituted with Eckhart's experience of divine naught, beyond attributes and even beyond Oneness, where the soul progresses indefinitely from iht to niht, from something to nothingness. The question is to be asked, on a larger scale, concerning negative theology which has a long and rich history in the West. It may also be pointed out that in the theology of the Greek Fathers, contemplation is considered as infinite, i.e. indefinite in the Greek sense of the word, the soul

progressing endlessly in the knowledge and love of Ultimate Reality. Such similarities in worldviews which may seem strangers or even opposite to each other are worth while being looked into to see if there is a similarity in the aperception of the spiritual.

To come now to the second part of the paper, exposing Hisamatsu's notion of FAS, it is very interesting for the reader to learn about this "remarkable example of human salvation in contemporary Buddhism", especially by the accent put by him on the interrelatedness of the concerns for the true Self, the world and history. This certainly goes in the sense of many modern religious developments, and may thus lead towards greater unity of purpose. But though we learn about the modernisation of Zen, and the way it is being pulled out of its religious cave, it seems to me that there still is lacking the consideration of what unites Zen, and more generally Buddhism, with other religions in general and with Christianity in particular in a more fundamental way. How may its study contribute to the establishment of a unifying philosophy, or at least, to begin with, to a more universal dialogue? I know this represents a considerable task, as Buddhism in itself is a universe with huge continents - and there are also considerable variations inside Christianity. Therefore a vast and deep confrontation concerning key concepts and words, experiences, worldviews is needed to distinguish between what is fundamentally different and what expresses unifying thought and practise.

Emilie Zum Brunn

I received the paper much too late to be able to go deeper into the matter, to my regret.