

The following essay was written by Dr. Chic Kaw TAN, member of the Church of England General Synod, in response to the recent election of the Rev. Kevin Thew Forrester as Bishop of Northern Michigan. Rev. Forrester has claimed to be “walking the path of Christianity and Zen Buddhism.” Dr. Tan converted to Christianity from Buddhism at age 17.

Can one be Christian and Buddhist at the same time?

Introduction

The average Westerner finds the popular images of Buddhism and Eastern mysticism extremely appealing – the meditation which seems to promise a retreat from the stress and strains of life, the ‘quietness’ and apparent inner peace that appear to offer a refuge from the frenetic pace of life, and the seemingly inner spiritual depth and harmony that provide an anchor in the storms of life. Contrast these with the popular images of much of the approach to God and worship in the Western church. At one end of the spectrum, you have the cerebral, coldly formal, extremely wordy and ritualised worship; at the other end of the spectrum you have the extremely emotional and shallow worship which focuses on the experiential, the fleeting and the here and now. The task oriented and competitive nature of much of Western life seems to have been assimilated into the way we practise Christianity.

To the untaught Christian, Buddhism appears to be an antidote to the above. Does it not seem eminently sensible, and wise even, to incorporate the best elements of Buddhism into Christianity? This, however, is unfounded optimism and ultimately leads to a practice of Christianity that bears little resemblance to historic Christianity. Only in its terminology and outward forms will it be vaguely Christian; our Lord Jesus, however, would not recognise it, or his apostles.

Some key differences

There are a large number of schools of Buddhist thoughts; Zen (meaning ‘meditation’) Buddhism is the most popular manifestation of Buddhism in the West. Classic Buddhism, however, teaches a number of key concepts:

- Life is transitory, without substance (illusory) and filled with suffering. All life is, therefore, meaningless and without purpose.

- All human beings are trapped in the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (reincarnation).
- Every human action carries consequences, if not now, then in the next life; good deeds, therefore, bring about a better reincarnation than bad deeds. Yet, what is done is done and cannot be undone; you cannot be forgiven or released from it.
- This suffering is overcome by the 'eightfold path': right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation.
- Redemption is the complete departure from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth and release from self into nirvana, a state of nothingness and silence. Nirvana is the impersonal ultimate reality; whether or not this state is conscious is not defined

These teachings are glaringly and fundamentally different to the Christian gospel:

- There is no God in Buddhism. Christianity, however, presents a living, personal, holy and almighty God who created the world from nothingness (not into nothingness).
- In Buddhism, the world and human self are nothing but an illusion; the ultimate reality is the absolute emptiness of the great void. Contrast this with the physical reality of Jesus Christ, mankind and God's creation.
- The Christian concept of sin, as a violation of God's holy nature and laws, is non-existent in Buddhism; there is, therefore, no need of a Saviour. There is no final accountability to a holy God on the judgment Day. Karma, the cosmic Law of Cause and Effect, is the ultimate impersonal and merciless judge.
- Self-effort, with guidance and help from certain priests and teachers, is the key to salvation. Jesus' death on the Cross for our sins, providing the only means of reconciliation with God, is unnecessary and pointless to the Buddhist. There is no savior in Buddhism; the Buddha said he could not help anyone; he could only point the way.
- Buddhist meditation aims to achieve release from suffering and the endless cycle of death and rebirth; according to Buddha, meditation is only 'a raft with which one can reach the opposite shore: emptiness'. Christian meditation focuses on God and its aim is to achieve fullness and oneness with Christ, not emptiness without Christ.

- Heaven is the Christian's ultimate destiny; the Buddhist, however, aims for nirvana, a state of nothingness and emptiness. Nirvana is the state where there is neither being nor non-being. Hope, then, does not lie in God's mercy, love and grace; it lies in non-existence.

Can both Christianity and Buddhism be true?

Some will take the position that all truth is relative. Taking that to be true does mean that they have to believe that there are absolute truths! If they do not believe absolutely that 'all truth is relative', then we can safely ignore their assertions.

Others will take the 'pragmatic' approach that it doesn't really matter whether two things are compatible; what is important is what works. This is precisely where the orthodox Christian must insist on the uniqueness of Christ. The reason the God of the Bible is fundamentally opposed to other religions is because they do not work! God's intolerance of other religions is not based on spite and pride but on both truth and compassion.

The truth is that there isn't another way to salvation or reconciliation with Him; He has truthfully and lovingly told us so! He is holy and '...too pure to look on evil' (Hab. 1:13). We cannot, therefore, approach God in any way we desire; Cain made that error in the early days of human history. We do not choose the grounds of reconciliation with Him or dictate the terms. Jesus Himself declared that He is the way, the truth and the life, and no one can come to the Father except through Him. If that is true then other ways cannot also be true.

If there was another way to peace with God, why did God the Father, in love and compassion, send His Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins? If other ways in fact work, then God the Father has made a catastrophic error in sending Jesus to a horrendously painful and unnecessary death. If God can make a mistake of such enormous scale, then He is not worthy of belief. Again, if other ways do work, then Jesus was deluded (to think His death was necessary to save mankind), stupid (to die so unnecessarily), mad (thinking of Himself as the Son of God and Saviour) or bad (leading millions and millions of Christians astray)!

That is not to doubt the sincerity of the adherents of other religions, or that other faiths do contain some universal, self-evident truths, or that their beliefs may enable them to somewhat cope with this often cruel world. Christians do

not have the right to compel others to embrace their beliefs or to belittle other religionists' worth as human beings made in the image of God. But any way that excludes Christ's saving grace cannot work for the simple reason that none of us is capable of living in accordance with his own chosen moral and spiritual standards, let alone God's. God judges us in accordance with His own holy nature and laws; who among us can save himself and face the all-knowing and holy God with any degree of confidence?

Every genuine Christian respects the adherents of other faiths, and seeks to love them as his neighbour. We have, however, to make a decision on Christ's claim to be God and to be 'the way, the truth, and the life.' As C. S. Lewis aptly put it, 'A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.... let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

The man who would be bishop

And so to the bishop-to-be who claims to be Christian and Buddhist. In light of the above, integrity would demand that he chooses one or the other. God has decreed that we must not bow down before other gods. Every 'free' human being has the right to choose, but call the choice by its right name. It is most disrespectful to both devout Buddhists and Christians to call oneself both at the same time; it shows a shallow understanding of the fundamentals of both religions. I was once a Buddhist but I am now a Christian; I was never both. Indeed, I now understand I cannot be both.

Some might insist that it is only the mechanics of meditation that is adopted and not the theology or worldview of Buddhism. To say that is to miss the entire point of Buddhist meditation. According to theologian Martin Goldsmith, 'meditation is the basic Zen means towards that realisation of the Buddha-nature which lies in each of us. While it remains that we do not exist, the Buddha nature in us does (according to Zen Buddhism).' Mr. Forrester understands that and therefore makes no dishonest or deceitful pretensions about being a Christian who merely utilises the meditative aspects to advance his understanding of Christ and His way.

Yet, no one who reads Mr. Forrester's search for spiritual depth and meaning in his life can do so without feeling empathy for him. In the corner of our hearts we may even secretly admire his audacity. Western Christianity has lost so much of its awe, reverence, and mystery of God; the 'into church and out of church' and then leaving it all behind for another week, does not satisfy. The pursuit after personal significance and transient joy has led Christians to seek the outward expression, rather than the inward expression, of our faith in Christ. We have forgotten how to be quiet and alone with God; the 'quiet time' is anything but. One can be extremely orthodox in theology and yet be extremely dry spiritually.

Notwithstanding, Christ-less Christianity, ungrounded in Biblical truths, will neither lead to God nor to truth. We ought to be very circumspect how we choose; when we choose a path that excludes God, or includes Him only in the condescending margins of our lives, we get exactly that. We, in choosing little ingredients from here and there in the supermarket of faiths and philosophies, only find that we have chosen to be our own god. The essence of hell is that God lets us be. Again, as C. S. Lewis put it, 'God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.'