Notes and Comments

BUDDHISM AND ATHEISM

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Is Buddhism atheistic? Yes and no. This ambiguous answer has a long history that seems to be approaching a dramatic climax in 1995; a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka is reported by media as demanding an apology from Pope John Paul II for his remarks on Buddhism on p. 86 of this best-selling Crossing the Threshold of Hope.” The Pope subsequently clarified his remarks by emphasizing his respect for Buddhists but this is reportedly rejected as “not enough.”

SCHOLARS IN DIALOGUE

Wojtyla is not the only scholar nor the first one to refer to Buddhism as “atheistic.” The quotation marks appearing in the English translation of Crossing can be traced to an on-going friendly dialogue in recent publications by and about Buddhist and Christian scholars including eminent writers like Raimundo Panikkar, Masao Abe, Bernard Lonergan, John Cobb, David Tracy, Jürgen Moltmann, Thomas Altizer, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Kitagawa and many others.2

From these readings, one gets a fluctuating impression that

the orthography of the English word "atheism" does not connote negativity as emphatically as might first appear. The term supposedly negates "theism" but this opposed term itself has many meanings in philosophical theory and very many more in actual behavior.

POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

The ungodly behavior of many people who profess belief in God can promote unbelief. Thus, Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam* spoke of some atheists as "men of great breadth of mind, impatient with the mediocrity and self-seeking which infects so much of modern society."³ Atheism can at times be a conscientious protest against such "mediocrity and self-seeking." Is this the case with modern Buddhists who have been exposed to Christian shortcomings especially in the "post-Christian" decades? If so, their atheistic posture may be more positive than negative. According to Lonergan, atheists "may love God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads."⁴

And yet, for all their faults, Christians are missioned to announce the Good News to all peoples, to share with all cultures their experience of contrition, faith, hope and love. Asian cultures must be reached by such sharing in all its theistic authenticity.

GOD OR MAMMON?

Authenticity is always precarious. According to a Sri Lankan Jesuit, Buddhists suspect that Christians undervalue detachment from Mammon, and that even their evangelizing activities are infiltrated by Mammon's "hidden agenda"⁵ or compromised with

global structures operating under Mammon’s influence.

Two perceptive paragraphs are worth quoting:

Take a non-theistic religion like Buddhism. Obviously it does not speak of a Liberator; but it does speak of a final and total liberation — nirvana. Using apophatic language, nirvana is defined in terms of what it is not: it is not acquisitive or accumulative (alobha), it is not hateful, vengeful or unforgiving (adosa), and it is not naive, heedless and unperceptive (amoha). Put in positive terms, the experience of this freedom is a combination of self-less love, forgiving love and wisdom. This experience had driven some Buddhist mystics, both male and female, to burst into ecstatic psalms of joy which now form part of Buddhist scriptures. . . .

If this liberating spirituality — a non-Christian version of the Sermon on the Mount — is gradually being extinguished it is precisely because of the wave of capitalistic techniculture that has begun to shake the religious foundation of our cultures. The market economy (which thrives on the quest for profit) and consumerism (which plays to our accumulative instinct) have enthroned Mammon where, once, the human person and the human community, as well as the earth on which we live, were the sole beneficiary.6

AUTHENTIC THEISM

Theistic authenticity may shine more clearly for Buddhists gifted with amoha if the ecstatic psalms of joy in their scriptures well up in contemplative harmony with the mysticism of St. John of the Cross. Mystics generally abandon efforts to objectify their experiences except when they are teaching their pupils. The expressions used vary from teacher to teacher and from pupil to pupil. What is expressed as “dukkha” in one pedagogical context may be expressed as “flame” in another. The mutual correspondence between contexts may be metaphorical or metonymic or somehow harmonious. Thus the Buddhist joy at being liberated from dukkha may be in harmony with the

(Readers need not blame the redactors of Redemptoris Missio for the existence of these “hidden agenda.”)
6. Ibid. 331.
Carmelite's experience at being purified in the "living flame of love." Buddhist mystics have a high regard for such harmony.

DYNAMIC HARMONY

Harmony was historically recorded on a grander scale when a Buddhist monk-architect, the venerable Mapolagama Wipulasiri, designed the altar on which Pope John Paul II celebrated the Eucharist at the beatification of Fr. Joseph Vaz. Living the humble life of a coolie, Vaz had worked for three decades in the seventeenth century for the upliftment of the destitute and the marginalized in Sri Lanka.

There is harmony in this dynamic combination of architectural, sacramental and societal symbols. Does not this harmony intone a psalm of hope? Is humanity at the threshold of theistic authenticity?

7. John Paul II, Crossing, 186.