

SOME VIEWS ON CHRISTIANITY EXPRESSED BY THE BUDDHIST ABBOT
T'AI HSU

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In the reassessment of Buddhism which is taking place within the Buddhist world and in the consequent renewal of life which is to be found in that "religion" today, Chinese Buddhism has a share. In conversation with Chinese Buddhists, or in an examination of the many periodicals and books now in circulation, one cannot help but perceive a certain confidence and even, at times, a buoyancy among devotees.

Among the names of those who stood out as the leaders in the movement for reform in Chinese Buddhism is the Abbot T'ai Hsu (1890 - 1947). For three decades T'ai Hsu lectured, wrote, travelled and organized in an attempt to bring new life into Chinese Buddhism, to create more intimate ties between Chinese and Japanese Buddhists, and to further the advancement of Buddhism in the West. In connection with this last aim, T'ai Hsu visited Europe and America and, in addition to making contacts with interested Westerners, contributed towards the setting up of organizations through which relations between Western and Asian Buddhists could be maintained. A unique feature of this Buddhist reformer was his acquaintance with a certain amount of Western scientific philosophical and political writing through translations made into Chinese.

T'ai Hsu believed firmly in the need to take the Compassion and Wisdom of Buddhism into the world about him, and he has, consequently, many things to say regarding politics, education, social conditions and the like. Interesting as all these views are, it is, perhaps, of greater importance to us to take note of some of his observations on Christianity, since the views he expresses are undoubtedly still held by many Buddhists, and we may say by many other Chinese too.

The following, then, are extracts with comments, taken from some of T'ai Hsu's lectures which we feel reveal a number of his most significant thoughts. The translations are not always word for word, and paragraphs appearing together are not necessarily taken from the same lecture.

1. In all his judgements T'ai Hsu starts out, as is to be expected, from certain premises. Although something of an eclectic in his attitude to the various schools of Buddhism, he is generally regarded as a representative of the "mind only" (*wei hsin*) or "consciousness only" (*wei shih*) school. This simply means that in his definition of Ultimate Reality T'ai Hsu sides with those Buddhist thinkers who see the Ultimate in terms of an unlimited quiescent consciousness. This "mind" or "consciousness" is likened to a continent on which are to be found mountains and rivers, vegetation and animal life. All these surface phenomena stem from potentialities or "seeds" in the continent coming into existence and going out of existence in a beginningless and endless process of cause and effect. All phenomena, then, whether gods, men or the universe, are ultimately only mind. The mistake which living beings make is to regard phenomena, including the realms of the spirits and gods, as being real. It is when man rediscovers his *true* self or consciousness, which is essentially at one with Ultimate Reality, that release from the world of illusion and suffering can be obtained. Complete identity of subject and object is final Nirvana and Buddhahood.

In a lecture on the subject of cause and effect T'ai Hsu says: "In Brahmanism, Christianity and Islam it is said that the world and man were created by gods or a god. These are the so-called Brahma, the great self-existent Deva (Isvaradeva) and Shangti, etc, This is like the city-dweller who knows nothing of the processes of nature; desires to know the truth, but because the truth has not been made clear to him he produces opinions which lack foundation."

"All kinds of religions and philosophical and scientific hypotheses are based on the principle of cause and effect in the sphere of matter - matter being interpreted here as covering all "things"----- Christianity considers God, that "thing", as prime cause, and the creation of Heaven and Earth, man and things as numerous effects...." In this sense, Christianity is no different from other materialistic theories such as Marxism, except in so far as the latter elects to posit a different point of departure. On T'ai Hsu's premises, God is clearly in the same category as the phenomena which he is said to create.

In another passage T'ai Hsu says:" ... the one God is called Shangti. He is considered to be the only true God, all things being created by Him so that He is Lord of all things and directs and controls all things; His intention is to save all beings. The aim underlying this kind of religion is to produce an explanation of the existence of the world, how all things came to be. God is said to transcend the world and all phenomena. He causes those who believe in Him as the One True God and who worship Him morning and evening with sincere prayers, to go finally to a place of eternal joy But it is necessary to examine this One True God which is spoken of and to try to determine whether He is true or false. If He really exists, where did He come from? If it is said that the one true God is naturally existent or self-existent, one can say that the world and all things could also be self-existent. What need is there for a God to create them? Moreover, man is one of the created things. How is it then that some men are wise and some foolish, some good and some evil, some having wealth and honour, and some being poor and mean? If the one true God is most just and most fair, how is it that the people He has created are so unequally made? The fact is that whether such a one true God exists or not cannot be determined; the whole question is obscure and lacking in certainty. Like "turtles' hair" and "rabbits' horns" we are simply dealing with names and terms!"

Although it is stated that all things are created by one great personal (*you renko de*) God who is ruler and controller and who transcends mankind and all things, this kind of myth has, from ancient times and through many generations experienced changes parallel with man's growing understanding and development. The forms of these myths could not but respond to the tides of change and become altered. The result has been polytheism, monotheism and pantheism...."

On the subject of love and compassion T'ai Hsu maintains that there is considerable truth in the saying: "Universal Love (*po ai*) is the root from which springs murder..." All religions have within them compassion for, and a desire to save, mankind. Superficially, the *Jen* of Confucianism, the Love without distinction (*chien ai*) of Mohtzu and the Universal Love (*po ai*) of Christianity, appear to be the same as the compassion of Buddhism. On detailed examination, however, the compassion of these other religions embraces only a small portion of the totality of what is understood as compassion (in Buddhism)... The Love (*jen-ai*) of the world stems from a will to have others conform to one's own desires and plans.... The love of parents for their children is the result of all the labour taken in looking after them, in the same way as one may love a piece of art which one has worked to create, and, moreover, there is the hope that the children will one day repay all the kindness bestowed on them. Love is bestowed ultimately for self- gratification." Clearly T'ai Hsu regards Love as it is found in Christianity as being much closer to self-regarding love than to selfless compassion. In an attempted analysis of Western culture he emphasises the contribution made by Greek thought to the whole cultural complex, and on the basis of Plato's *Republic*, which appears to be his main source of information, he says: "From a study of Western culture we find that there is, in general, a great stress on wisdom and courage. but very little compassion. Eastern culture lays stress on compassion and pays less attention to wisdom and courage. Only Buddhism is equally great in wisdom and compassion; it is that Eastern culture which embodies the highest degree of compassion and the greatest subtleties of wisdom. Although In ancient times the West had the Universal

Love of Christianity, because of the incompatibility of its mythology with modern science, those who set out to destroy superstition no longer consider it worthy of mention. With faith in Christianity already lost. It will prove difficult to set up its authority once again. In the East, Confucianism and the teachings of Mencius contain much that is good, but because they speak in terms of imperial government, now hated and rejected, there is a mutual antagonism between those teachings and the present popularism (p'ingmin chuyi). None of the aforementioned religions can respond adequately to the thought and needs of present-day man. Only Buddhism has a compassion which is bestowed equally and without favour, and only Buddhism has a teaching which is intellectually satisfying. If the truth of Buddhism can be accepted by faith and become infused with the compassion of Buddha then mankind will have an opportunity for resurrection."

The foregoing comments lead naturally to the third aspect of T'ai Hsu's teaching which we would like to bring out, viz. the need to take Buddhism to the Western world. Like many of his fellow-Buddhists today, Tai Hsu tends to speak of culture zones with appropriate religions as expressive of these zones. In general he maintained that Christianity is the representative of the culture of the West and Buddhism of that of the East. He says: "In the past the tendency among men has been to think from the spiritual to the material world. If we make a general study of the globe, we discover that in former times mankind's tendency, whether in China, Japan or in the West, was to consider a culture founded on morality as the most precious and worthy achievement. Thus, during the Middle Ages in the West, Christianity was generally recognized as supreme. In China and Japan Duke Chou, Confucius, Mencius

and Hsuntzu exercised a great influence over a period of several thousand years, teaching the principles of government, the sacrifice of one's own life for the purpose of preserving one's integrity, and the willingness to give up life in order to uphold that which is right. Remnants of this attitude remain even today. Following this came a growing emphasis upon government and law, and the French revolution, which illustrates this tendency, had as its aim the winning of the right to set up laws and the right to take part in government so that a public constitution could be drafted and equal rights obtained in matters of government. Nowadays we know that it is economics which creates divisions in politics, and the point of contention is the way in which wealth shall be fairly distributed. We can see, then, that there has been a shift from periods based on morality to periods based on law and government, and finally a movement towards a period which is based on wealth and economics. It is clear that at the present time man's energy and thought is concentrated on material and economic problems. Because of a growth towards inequality in material possessions, the poor resent this lack of equality, and the wealthy go to extremes in their extravagance and desires. Neither side responds to the other....and the result is class warfare and murder.... But the future shows evidence of a return from a materialistic to a spiritual outlook.... The great philosopher, Hocking, in the West, has discussed the spiritual life, and advocates peace, disarmament and the cessation of wars. This is an indication of a revival of a culture based on spiritual values.... But it is only Buddhism which can now act as that spiritual basis.

Western materialistic culture moves steadily eastwards and enters China with its weapons, warships, aeroplanes and other murderous implements. Our whole country and society experiences a deep sense of insecurity. Yet the East has those spiritual qualities associated with a culture based on morality.... We who are placed in a world which has tumbled over and is in wild confusion ought to take our spiritual culture and proclaim it to the West. We should pour it into the minds of the golden-haired and blue-eyed people in order to save them from their evil and to release them from the poison within them. This great duty falls upon the youth of today."

In a lecture given in Amoy, T'ai Hsu said: "Amoy can be said to be the gateway of China. Today, in our communications with the West, China has two great doorways: one is Hong Kong and one is Amoy. Ever since the opening of Hong Kong strife and turbulence has sprung from the West. A materialistic culture has been imported into the country through this great Chinese doorway. Although a greater affluence has been brought to living standards, arms, steamships, trains, and all kinds of harmful and murderous implements have come to us through Hong Kong so that our people of the East have suffered all kinds of harm.... To remove all troublous and painful effects it is necessary to export from Amoy, this great gateway, our highest and most pacific moral culture that it may shine out and dispel the darkness of the West."

Comment

Although many of the statements of the preceding paragraphs clearly arise out of a partial knowledge of Christianity, it is incumbent upon us to try to see how much of the apparent misunderstanding can be traced back to our own presentation of the Faith.

As to T'ai Hsu's interpretation of the Christian conception of God, we may say that, apart from his basic premises, there is the misconception which can easily arise from the application of the Chinese word for "personal" (*jen-ko*) to God. Is it not possible that when he speaks of the Christian God as being a "personal" god, he is thinking *anthropomorphically*, and does not realize that when Christians refer to the attributes of God, they speak *analogically*?

Would it be unjustified to say that the ultimate reality apprehended by T'ai Hsu is closer to what Christians mean by God than his own definition of the object of Christian faith? We realize that there is the same danger of our misunderstanding T'ai Hsu's thought as he has misunderstood Christianity, and also of using terms to express Buddhist conceptions which Buddhists themselves would disallow; but is it not possible to say that the experience of the Ultimate which some Buddhists claim to have achieved is in fact the experience of that ontological relationship which must exist between man and God, the ground of his existence? This is not, of course, to say that Buddhists comprehend in its totality the significance and meaning of their "awakening". Buddhism is an attempt from the human side to explain the significance of an experience and to devise ways of nurturing it, whereas Christianity claims to be a statement from the source of reality as to its own nature, and as to the relationship of mankind and the whole universe to that source.

As to T'ai Hsu's views on Love and Compassion, if Ultimate Reality, as he conceives it, is greater than the God of Christianity, it is inevitable that any compassion flowing from it will be superior. If the Christian God is no more than a projection of the human mind or an anthropomorphic being, the love that he bestows will differ from human love only in degree and not in kind. It is, incidentally, exceedingly difficult to understand how a genuine compassion can proceed from a source which lacks any personal character.

In his criticisms of the West's dealings with the East, T'ai Hsu does not differ markedly from many non-Buddhist Chinese. It is interesting to note, however, that the blame is laid not on Christianity, the Universal Love of which is said to have had a mollifying influence on Europeans in the Middle Ages when it reigned supreme. The blame must be laid, according to T'ai Hsu, on the shoulders of modern materialistic sciences and philosophies. Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that religion for a Buddhist, and certainly for T'ai Hsu, involves a reversal of the principle of "Buddha in his universally impartial and equal attitude towards all beings", so that an I and Thou distinction is set up, first between the worshipper and the worshipped, and then between man and man, the ego being taken as a real entity. T'ai Hsu claims that it is this very inability to rise above the distinctions between I and Thou which causes religious people to say "I am right and you are wrong, thus creating conditions for warfare. The Crusades in Europe are used by T'ai Hsu as an illustration of the religious "predicament".

Many other points and problems could be referred to, but enough has been said to indicate some of the stumbling-blocks which are likely to be found in the mind of a Buddhist when he is faced with Christian claims.

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