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SOTERIOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN WESLEYAN CHRISTIANS AND PURE LAND SECT BUDDHISM

1. Introduction

Even though Christianity and Buddhism are both universal religions, many significant dialogues have not been embarked upon in the past mainly because of the particularistic and judgmental attitude of many Christians toward all other non-Christian religions, especially Buddhism. As a result, many Christians became either ill-informed or totally ignorant of other religions. However, it is gratifying to note that as Christians all over the world began to have some unavoidable contact with these religions, they started receiving important spiritual challenges that demand serious and mutual understanding of these religions. For this mutual understanding, several dialogues have emerged both at the local and world-wide level.

The aim of this paper is to encourage "unending" dialogues and to give some concrete suggestions or examples of how to achieve a further fruitful dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. In this paper, I shall discuss what dialogue is, some obstacles to a fruitful dialogue, and a concrete example of the possibility of a meaningful dialogue between Christians and Buddhists. It must be remembered that throughout this paper, I will limit myself to Christianity according to Wesley's teaching and Pure Land Sect Buddhism according to Shinran.

2. Definition of Dialogue

According to a dictionary meaning, a dialogue is "a conversation between two or more persons" or "an exchange of ideas and opinions."¹

1. P.B. Gove, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of English Language*, Unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1966), p. 623.

However, when the word dialogue is used in an "ecumenical context," it is more than just "a conversation" or an exchange of ideas or opinions. It has "a specialized" and "a richer" meaning attached to it. It means the sharing of religious conviction for the purpose of mutual understanding that will eventually result in a peaceful co-existence among the world community of various religious faiths. It is essential to understand religious dialogue as defined above, because it will help to reduce several obstacles that have robbed the community of faith of the achievement of fruitful dialogue. These obstacles, which shall be discussed more fully below, range from attitude of total refusal to dialogue, suspicion, misunderstanding of religious symbols and concepts, to the actual lack of understanding of what dialogue really means.

3. Obstacles to Dialogue

I am sure that my well-informed readers will agree with me that to achieve a fruitful dialogue in the "ecumenical context" is not without some obstacles. The participants have encountered those obstacles and are still encountering them, despite this technological age, with improved system of communication. One of the major obstacles to do a meaningful dialogue is the total refusal of some of the religious leaders to participate in dialogue. Some not only refused themselves, they did not even allow their members to participate in dialogue with people of other religious faith. This attitude of refusal to dialogue characterized the early missionary activity and the explorers in Africa.²

Another obstacle is the ever present suspicion in the minds of these religious leaders. Both Buddhists and Christians are afraid that their members may be converted to another religion. The obstacles include the difficulty encountered in grasping the actual meaning of concepts and symbols used. As it is difficult for the Buddhists to understand Christian theological symbolism, so also it is equally difficult for the Christians to understand the real meaning of Buddhological symbolism. This indeed is a serious obstacle which requires many years of learning and attempted solution.

Another obstacle is the lack of understanding of what dialogue really means. Most of the time, people confused dialogue with debate,

2. The early missionaries and explorers did not take seriously the indigenous religion of Africa. No attempt was made to dialogue with the people of Africa in order to understand this traditional religion,

discussion and argument, thus seeking a victory. These obstacles are undeniable and for further dialogue to be fruitful, between Christians and other religious adherents, particularly Buddhists, the above mentioned obstacles need to be avoided as much as possible. As it is important to know the meaning of dialogue, so also it is equally important to know the reason for dialogue.

4. Reasons For Dialogue

A very legitimate question to ask is, if in the process of dialogue we encounter so many obstacles as mentioned above, why do we dialogue at all? In other words, what are the aims of dialogue? In my definition of dialogue, I have said briefly that it is sharing for the purpose of mutual understanding of each other's faiths. More than just a mutual understanding, our understanding of one another's convictions helps us not "to disfigure the image of our neighbours of different faiths and ideologies." I personally consider dialogue as a way of obeying one of the ten commandments, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour."³ If one refuses to dialogue and through ignorance says what people of other faiths did not say, such person bears false witness against his fellow being.

As we dialogue, we are actually expressing our love and concern to the people of other faiths. It is also a way of fulfilling the greatest commandment to love our God and our neighbours. On this basis, one can say that dialogue without love and concern is a fruitless exercise. Another aim of engaging in dialogue is to proclaim our faith in Christ in the spirit of love. It is an "authentic witness" of our conviction. In this process of dialogue, truth is proclaimed in love.

Any dialogue without the above objectives is not worth calling a dialogue in an ecumenical context. Taking into consideration the meaning and purpose of dialogue (above), below are examples of other crucial points for a meaningful dialogue between Wesleyan Christians and Shinran Buddhists on the subject of salvation.

5. Salvation According to Wesley and Shinran

This selection is concerned about concrete examples of the possibility of having a meaningful dialogue between Christians according to Wesley

3. *Ex.* 20:16.

and Pure Land Sect Buddhism according to Shinran, despite the problems involved. More attention will be given to the point of similarities than the point of differences because of this writer's opinion that points of similarity should be more emphasized and should be the starting point in any dialogue between Christianity and other religions before gradually moving to the point of divergences.

In discussing the similarity between Shinran's Pure Land Sect Buddhism and Wesley's Christianity on salvation, it will be very appropriate to discuss first of all what salvation or *Nirvana* is according to Wesley and Shinran.

According to Shinran, this salvation is an enjoyment of "a rebirth in Pure Land" by people who listen and have faith in Amida. It is a land of purity and happiness where there is no sorrow or pain. Yejitsu Okusa described this salvation according to Shinran saying:

There stands Amida pointing to his Land of Purity and Happiness (*Śukhavati*) where our worldly sufferings and tribulations are no more. In this land there always smiles the spring of peace. No pain, no sin, but all beauty, goodness and joy. Those born there enjoy a happiness that knows no ending; they are endowed not only with infinite wisdom and liberty, but with pure love and compassion which has the power to save all beings from the world of pain. All this happiness enjoyed by those who are in Pure Land is the outcome of Amida's love and will to save.⁴

According to Shinran, this salvation can be realized now on earth when one has faith in Amida Buddha. Alfred Bloom described Shinran's gospel of salvation by saying:

Our study of the status of the believer in the present life indicates that Shinran gave a far reaching re-interpretation of the way of salvation through faith in Amida Buddha. While he continued to maintain that the final realization of enlightenment took place upon birth in the Pure Land after death, he focussed attention on the spiritual nature of the present existence. This was the sphere in which salvation became assured and certain.⁵

4. Yejitsu Okusa, *Principal Teachings of the True Sect Pure Land* (Tokyo: Asakusa Hongwanji, 1910), p. 55.

5. Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1965), p. 68.

It is equally interesting to note that this salvation according to Wesley is nothing but salvation from the suffering from the guilt of past sin. It is a deliverance from condemnation and fear. This salvation is peace with God through faith. John Wesley has this to say about this salvation when he preached at St. Mary's Oxford, before the University, June 18, 1738.

What salvation it is which is through this faith . . . Ye are saved (to comprise all in one word) from sin. This is the salvation which is through faith . . . First from the guilt of all past sin . . . And being saved from guilt they are saved from fear. Thus, have they "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." They rejoice in hope of the glory of God.⁶

To Wesley, this salvation is also a salvation now in this world. He said in the same sermon,

And first, whatsoever else it implies, it is a present salvation. It is something attainable, yea, actually attained on earth by those who are partakers in this faith.⁷

The similarity of salvation in Wesley's and Shinran's teaching is not only in the description of the salvation. They are identical in that they both teach that one has to accept his own sinfulness and helplessness.

What is the nature of this sinfulness according to Shinran? It means that all beings are in "passion-ridden" condition. It was believed that this was the "degenerate age of Karma." This is often described as being "sinful," or "Karma-bound." All beings found themselves in the degenerate age. Shinran identified himself to this type of "degenerate age and being doomed to hell." He, therefore changed his surname to "Gutoku," which means "foolish, bald-headed old man."⁸ He thus lamented:

I am false and untrue,
And without the least purity of mind
We men in our outward forms display wisdom,

6. John Wesley, *Selection from John Wesley*, Compiled by H. Welch (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n. d.), pp. 20-21.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

8. Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace*, p. 29.

goodness and purity

Since greed, anger, evil and deceit are frequent

We are filled with naught but flattery.⁹

Wesley also taught that we are all sinners saved by grace alone. He agreed with Romans 3:23 which says, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Sin, according to Wesley, is not just "passion-ridden" but a complete rejection of God's purpose. Sin includes "evil thoughts, murder, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."¹⁰

Both Wesley and Shinran taught that this salvation is through faith. What is this faith? According to Wesley, this faith is "a faith in Christ." This faith is "a divine evidence and conviction not only that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself,' but that Christ loved me and gave himself for me."¹¹ It cannot be seen either by eyes or any other external senses. It is the belief in the heart and a confession by mouth that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Faith is a gift. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8). According to Shinran, faith is a total reliance upon Amida Buddha leaving one's "egotism, pride or despair."¹² This faith is the "absence of doubt in Buddha's Vows." Like Wesley, Shinran regarded faith as a gift from Amida Buddha and it is the achievement of "Buddha nature." It is not of works. Three elements are essential in this faith, (1) sincerity of Mind, (2) Truthfulness and (3) a Desire for rebirth into the Pure Land.¹³ This faith also includes the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha. Salvation is therefore based on this type of faith alone and nothing else. "He who lives in faith is equal to Tathagata, the Buddha. Great faith is Buddha Nature. This at once is Tathagata."¹⁴ This faith is further analyzed in *Kyogyoshinsho*.

We clearly know that 'Shinshin' is itself the mind which has the seed of true sincerity. Therefore, doubts are never mixed in. 'Shingyo' is itself the mind filled with fine sincerity...

9. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

10. R.W. Burtner and E. Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), p. 122.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

12. Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace*, p. 57.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

'Yokusho' is the mind that knows and realizes the joy of the Vow . . . therefore, doubt never mixes in. Truly we know that since doubt does not interfere, it is called faith.¹⁵

It is crystal clear that in both Wesley and Shinran the condition for salvation is identical; faith in Christ (Wesley) and in Amida Buddha's Vow (Shinran). Both depend on external power.

It is also important to note that in both Wesley's and Shinran's teachings this salvation is universal. It is for everybody, no matter how sinful people are. If only one can recognize his own futility or inability to save himself and then has faith in Christ and Amida Buddha respectively, he will be saved. Amida Buddha has vowed to save all sentient beings. Shinran urges his people to forsake "the way of works, good deeds, purifying exercises and turn in faith to Amida Buddha."¹⁶ Shinran further declared, "Even the good can be born into the Pure Land. Why not the evil?"¹⁷ From the viewpoint of Shinran, the most sinful person is the best "guest of salvation." The sinners which other Buddhists have rejected are the most welcome into the Pure Land.

John Wesley was so concerned for the lost souls that he went about preaching and teaching. He chose the entire world as his "Parish." He believed the saying of Jesus, "I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners."¹⁸ Jesus continued, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."¹⁹

To Wesley and Shinran, the grace is not limited. It is for all, Wesley said in his sermon which he preached in Bristol, "The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is free in all, and free for all . . ."²⁰ Likewise, the grace and love of Amida is free in all and free for all. It requires faith in Amida Buddha.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

17. F. Masutani, *A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity* (Kita-ku, Japan: Young East Asso. Press, 1957), p. 115.

18. Mt. 9: 12-13.

19. Lk. 15: 11.

20. John Wesley, *Selection from Wesley*, Compiled by H. Welch, p. 30.

What is the relation of faith to work in Shinran's and Wesley's teachings? According to Shinran, work is not the requirement to be born to the Pure Land, yet it is an expression of our faith. It is indeed a gratitude to the grace which Amida Buddha has given to all. They are almost inseparable. But once a person reaches a rebirth, there is an urge to show a gratitude by reciting the name of Amida Buddha. This gratitude became an obligation. Bloom writes concerning Shinran's teaching:

Although Shinran declared that faith and practice were inseparable, it is faith that renders the recitation meaningful. The practice is essentially the expression of faith. The urge to repeat the name is contingent on the arising of faith.²¹

Bloom then quoted Shinran from *Tannisho*:

In the moment that we believe that we gain rebirth (in the Pure Land), being saved through the mystery of the vow of Amida Buddha, and there arises in our minds the thought to recite (say) the name of (Nembutsu), we are then given the blessing of the acceptance and no-rejection of (Amida Buddha).²²

John Wesley also believed that works is not the requirement for salvation but faith. Yet after one has been saved, and he has the opportunity to do good works, it is obligatory. It becomes a duty to express your faith by your works. Wesley said:

Yet another is their advance in holiness; holiness of heart, and holiness of conversation—the latter naturally resulting from the former; for a good tree will bring forth good fruit. And all inward holiness is the immediate fruit of the faith that worketh by love.²³

The doctrine of salvation in both Shinran and Wesley's teachings are functions of their respective doctrine of ultimate reality.

It is also true from the above discussion that Shinran and Wesley's teachings about salvation are identical in three broad ways: (1) that we are all sinful and incapable of salvation by ourselves, (2) the foolish

21. Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace*, p. 72.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

23. R.W. Burtner and E. Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley's Theology*, p. 226.

and the evil or the sinners are most welcome through faith to have salvation and (3) salvation is an outside work-divine.

No wonder some missionaries at their first glance to the similarity between Christianity and the Pure Land Sect Buddhism, quickly and mistakenly conclude that it was a form of Lutheranism.²⁴ That must also be the reason why Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* described this Pure Land Buddhism as "the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity."²⁵

Even though there are many similarities between Shinran's and Wesley's teachings, it will be very erroneous to say that they are both essentially the same. There are a lot of differences but as I have said earlier in my paper that emphasis should be put on similarities in Christian and Buddhist dialogue; only a few of these differences will be discussed here.

One of the essential differences is the nature of Amida Buddha and God. According to Wesley's teaching, God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is from the beginning the Creator of the whole universe. He is One God in three persons of the Trinity. Wesley writes: "The eternal, almighty, all-wise, all-gracious God is the Creator of heaven and the earth."²⁶

In Shinran's teaching, Amida is not God and God is not Amida. He is neither the creator nor eternal. He was a king, moved by Buddha's message, accepted it and struggled to reach Buddhahood or enlightenment. Amida Buddha is explained in Sukhavativyuha Sutra to be:

A king who moved by a sermon of a Buddha, left his throne, and became a wanderer dedicated to achieve Buddhahood. At some stage in his career he made a series of famous vows, the eighteenth of which reads: 'If after my obtaining Buddhahood, all beings in the ten quarters, who desire in sincerity and faith to be

24. Geffre/Dhavamony, *Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 81.

25. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, Part 2, Translated by G.T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark; New York: Charles Scribner's, 1936), p. 340.

26. R.W. Burtner and E. Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley's Theology*, p. 55.

born into my country, should not be born thereto by only adoring me ten times, may I not attain the highest enlightenment.²⁷

The major difference is not only in the concept of God but also in the concept of a Mediator in Christianity. According to Wesley, Christ is regarded as the only Mediator, the Son of God through whom we can reach God. Wesley writes:

We could not rejoice that there is a God, were there not a Mediator also; one who stands between God and men, to reconcile man to God, and to transact the whole affairs of our salvation.²⁸

But there is no idea of a mediator in Shinran's teaching.

6. Conclusion

After the descriptive approach to dialogue between Christians and Buddhists, I do not like to conclude this paper without giving some useful guidelines that will help achieve a fruitful dialogue.

First, dialogue between Buddhists and Christians should take place between people who understand their respective religions and are committed to their religious convictions. Second, there should be an attitude of openness and commitment. This presupposes an openness to criticism. Third, the best way to start a dialogue between different religions is to begin from the common acceptable facts which seem familiar to both religions. Then, the dialogue can proceed to the differences as described above. Fourth, each side should not strive for victory or "conversion" in the traditional sense. This may lead to hostility and arguments. Fifth, each participant must be willing to learn from one another instead of having an attitude of condemnation.

The crucial question at this point is, after keeping all these suggested guidelines, what difference does it make? What does one achieve with this type of dialogue? One undeniable result is that the participants will learn to appreciate and respect other people's religion. This type of dialogue will surely create a community of love and peace. This type of dialogue will no doubt promote a spirit of tolerance rather than an attitude of "come ye outism," which is prevalent among the conservative theologians. Finally, I think that you will agree with me that it will help us not to misunderstand and disfigure one another's religions - thus preventing "bearing false witness against our brother."

27. F. Masutani. *A Comparative Study of Buddhism and Christianity*, p. 122.

28. R. Burtner, Chiles, *A Compend of Wesley Theology*, p. 78.