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PACIFIC COAST THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP  
What is Essential in the Christian Religion?

HINDUISM, BUDDHISM AND THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION COMPARED

By

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The age-long power exercised by Hinduism and Buddhism over vast populations, their philosophical profundity, and their evolutionary adaptability to human nature must impress every sensitive, open-minded Christian man. It would not be strange if he were to ask himself whether, after all, those systems of faith and life may not be so well suited to the Asiatic peoples that even to offer them the Christian religion may be an impertinence. It is with a view of supplying a partial answer to such honest questioning that this paper has been written.

No matter how cursorily we compare Hinduism and Buddhism with Christianity we shall be confronted with most of the crucial questions in the realm of religion. At the very least, we shall have to touch upon the following questions: 1. How far does each religion authenticate itself as a veritable Way of Life, a dependable guide to man's relations with the divine and with his fellows? This will involve consideration of how far they embody a revelation of the divine to man. 2. How far is each of these faiths ethnic or universal? 3. What degree of capacity for self-criticism and reform has each of them shown? 4. What light do they throw upon the relative advantages of a religion rooted in history as compared with a religion rooted in the minds of men? 5. What evidence does each of them afford as to the nature of the central reality of the universe?

Greatly daring, let us take flying shots at these stupendous questions, in short, essay a critique of human thought in thirty minutes.

1. Natural and Revealed Religions, so-called.

Putting my conclusion first, let me say that I believe that any Christian who explores Hinduism and Buddhism with open mind is likely to emerge with the thrilling conviction that the Father-God has not left himself without a witness in them. In fact, he may go still farther, as I do, and conclude that the most reasonable way to account for the recurring outbursts of truth and reform in their checkered history is to assume that the Universal Spirit has everywhere and always been pressing to disclose Himself and the Way of Life for all men, but that He has found men more or less receptive or resistant media for his disclosures.

By way of evidence for this conclusion, let us take a birdseye view of the stream of Hindu and Buddhist development. In so doing we shall also be able to get light toward answering several other of our five questions. The stream is not only long; it winds and turns upon itself; it threads through tangled thickets of superstition and becomes turbid with debris sucked from the banks; it plunges into gorges where the sun can hardly penetrate; but at times it flows straight and

calm, and drops some of the debris, almost as though it had returned to the fountains where it rose. Wonder and disgust, hope and disappointment alternately move the heart of the explorer.

The stream may be divided into five stages, each of which we shall survey in turn.

1. The first stage was the prehistoric faith brought by the Aryan invaders, at least two thousand years before Christ. To judge by their hymns, in the Rigveda, the earliest literary expression of a somewhat advanced form of religious experience, there was a joyous worship of sun, moon, and other elements of nature, and the presentation of food and drink for the gods. With this was linked ancestor worship, which came to hold a place almost as important as the worship of the gods. The dominant trend was distinctly polytheistic, but there were outcroppings of a noble monism, centering around Indra as Governor, or Varuna as Compassionate Protector; but monotheism never displaced the many gods, as it did in the evolution of the Hebrews. The things they did not believe in deserve to be especially noted, for they were the forefathers of the very Brahmins who gradually formulated Hinduism. They did not believe in Karma, in the transmigration of souls, in caste, in asceticism, or in the illusory nature of man and the world. They believed that every man died but once, and was capable of immortality. In fact, they seem more akin to the Greeks than to their Hindu successors.

2. A second stage of the stream seems to have plunged over a great cliff, for from about 800 before Christ, the sharply contrasting elements which have ever since characterized Hinduism begin to appear. The clear dashing brook of the Aryans has become the deep, sombre river of the Hindus. The pain and futility of life have displaced the buoyant vigor of the early Aryans. Nearly all our knowledge of ancient history would argue for a series of gradual changes from the one to the other. But in this case there are no decisive records or remains of any kind to support such an assumption. The only foreshadowing of essential Hinduism in the Rigveda is a specific reference (in 10. 92. 10) to the four main castes, with the Brahmins at the apex, as the ordained priests and rulers of the people.

By 600 B.C. all the dominant characteristics of Hinduism through the ages stood out. Heading the list is karma, which is unique with Hinduism. Karma is commonly called the doctrine of retribution, that is, the good and evil done by each person in this life are exactly recompensed with an equivalent amount of happiness or misery in a subsequent life. But the problem is how to end the chain of cause and effect, for the new actions in each new existence create a new karma to be balanced in the next existence. It is a self-winding clock, as Deussen has observed. Ultimately, two solutions for this dilemma were found; the one being to strive through many lives to amass more good than evil deeds, the other being to evade karma, as it were, by inaction. But there was no assurance that either of these devices would be successful. Without any immediate hope of deliverance from the endless round of debit and credit, karma's doctrine of the enduring nature of the soul brought not joy but hopelessness to the heart.

The second belief was the transitoriness and illusory nature of all things. There is no theory of progress such as has characterized the peoples reared under the influence of Christianity. On the contrary, Hindu philosophy holds that the world has been degenerating through four

long stages, and that we are now in the midst of the fourth stage, after which will come chaos, to be followed by another and another cycle of four stages and chaos, ad infinitum.

Caste is fixed by a man's past life, which in turn was determined by karma. Hence according to Hinduism, social status is an exact index of one's moral state. But since one can earn good karma only by being strictly faithful to the rules of one's caste, it is impossible for a good Hindu to rise from one caste to the next. The result is social statics. Nor can any outside power whatsoever change a man's karma or his caste. It is therefore useless, according to orthodox Hinduism, to help improve the conditions of any man. Hinduism sanctifies and perpetuates the status quo.

Even the gods have no control over karma. It is inescapable fate, resistless and relentless. No mediator can intervene. Forgiveness is ruled out. Only by persistent good actions continued through innumerable rebirths, fulfilling endless rules and rites, can the victim hope to be reborn into a higher Hindu family. Then by renouncing the world, and becoming a monk, that is, by inaction, he can win emancipation. On the other hand, the priest, the class of Brahmins, was exalted almost into divinity.

The gods are not only impotent, the highest of them, Brahman, is conceived as being above morality, passionless and motionless, unknowable and therefore neither to be worshipped or feared, the epitome of all negation.

3. A third stage of the Hindu-Buddhist stream was initiated by the appearance of Gautama Prince Siddhartha, commonly called the Buddha, about 560 B.C. He was at the same time one of the boldest protestants and noblest saints in history. I need not recount his abandonment of family and royal station, his arduous search after deliverance, and his attainment of enlightenment and salvation under the bo tree at Budhgaya. He spent a long life of instructing disciples and ministering to his suffering fellows. In his temperament, Gautama was a combination of Saint Francis and Socrates. He commands affection as well as admiration. In him were blended seriousness and humor, courage and tact, imagination and reasoning power, serenity and sadness.

What did Gautama proclaim that was distinctive and what did he keep that was old? In other words, what are the identities and differences between original Buddhism and the Hinduism out of which it sprang like a biological sport? One can discover at least five emphases which they shared, namely: 1) World- and life-negation, or renunciation, as Schweitzer calls it; 2) transmigration and the cyclical nature of the universe; 3) karma, or rigid ethical cause and effect; 4) the illusory character of the whole world of sense and time; and 5) the unknowable nature of any central Reality in the universe.

The new principles enunciated by Gautama were 1) release through knowledge and right living, to be achieved by meditation and self-discipline; 2) the futility of priest, prayer, ritual and sacrifice; 3) the displacement of the endless hair-splitting speculations of Hinduism by the simplicity of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, a purely ethical realism. To many of his contemporaries, harassed by the exacting rules and the hopeless outlook of Hinduism, this teaching must have come as a veritable gospel of deliverance. Gautama, like the stoics, attempted to substitute a system of morality for a religion. He failed partly because his Eightfold Path was

an agnostic rationalism, and left unsatisfied the deep longings of the mass of men for a sympathetic being or beings strong to lift and save and protect. To them the way of self-salvation was almost as arduous as the tortuous cycles of Hinduism.

One of the most striking characteristics of Gautama was his indifference to the classic literature of Hinduism, the inspired writings which a millenium of aspiration and speculation had produced. He hardly ever refers to them, and the canon which most nearly reflects his teachings, "the Pali Tripitaka, contains no hymn from the Rigveda, no meditation from the Aranyakas, no glowing passage from the Upanishads," as Farquhar says. What a contrast to the inclusion by Christians of the entire Jewish Scriptures in the Bible!

4. Now we come to a fourth stage of the stream, that amazing period when the simple ethical agnosticism of Gautama was transformed into the rank polytheistic, ritualistic religion of salvation by faith which we know as Northern Buddhism. This was not, however, a complete break with either original Buddhism or with Hinduism; for the five emphases which even Gautama accepted or unconsciously carried along from Hinduism, are also found in all the forms of Northern Buddhism.

But Northern Buddhism, whether in Tibet, China, Korea, or Japan, has continued to reject, like Gautama, some of the central features of Hinduism, which to them seem like cancerous growths, - and we should agree with them. They rejected caste, child-widowhood, self-immolation of a wife at the death of her husband, and the immuring of women. It is certainly a matter of profound gratification that these dreadful institutions were not perpetuated outside of India. Most of all would caste have cursed the Northern peoples. In passing, it is interesting to speculate why caste ever originated, and why it did not spread to the north. The most likely theory is that it was a rationalization of the hierarchical system set up by the proud and able Aryan conquerors of India. Once given caste, then the highly speculative genius of the Indian mind could readily hit upon the doctrines of karma and transmigration in order to explain the strange differences in social status, fortune, and natural endowment among men.

5. A fifth and last stage of the stream is the outburst of reform and creative enthusiasm which occurred in both India and Japan during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Is it not a strange coincidence that the thirteenth century in Europe also is known as one of the most creative epochs in occidental history? The movement inside Buddhism was a reaction from the mazes of ritual and penance and esoteric discipline, to the simple and universally available grace of the divine beings.

In India this movement found expression in Bhakti, or devotion-adoration, and in Japan in the Amida sects founded by Honen and Shinran. All these reformers and seers sought to free the masses from the intolerable burdens imposed by the scribes and Pharisees and make salvation as free and easy as breathing. The result was to inject a note of joy into Buddhism, which was reminiscent of the sunny gladness of the Rigveda hymns and of the serenity of Gautama. Bhakti Hinduism and Amida Buddhism are so different from the dominant earlier forms of both faiths as almost to constitute a new religion. And they both have vitality today, presenting pragmatic evidence of the psychological validity of the doctrine of salvation by grace.

From the viewpoint of the convinced Christian, it is important to note that Bhakti in India and the Amida faith in Japan today constitute probably the strongest rivals to Christianity. Even though neither the personal Deity, Ishvara, of the Bhakti devotee, nor the Amida Buddha of Shinran are in any way grounded in a historical embodiment, yet they have become so real and have evoked such exultant relief from the pressure of guilt that they fill much the same place as the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ fills for the Christian. They introduced into Buddhism more clearly than ever before the sense of sin, although it sprang, not from conviction of offense against the will of God, but from a sense of impotence to win deliverance and peace. Their chief ethical difference from Christianity lies in their absence of emphasis on a holy life and on service to society. They seem satisfied to give deliverance and require no active working out of salvation either for one's self or for others. There is no hint of a Kingdom of God on earth to be wrought out by the cooperation of the redeemed with their Redeemer God.

Two other vital differences between Christianity and both Bhakti and the Amida faith should be mentioned, namely: they have no touchstone of good and evil such as Christianity has in the teaching of Jesus about God as holy and righteous; and they have no embodiment of the faith comparable to Jesus himself. In India, Ramanuja of the thirteenth century was a great theologian and his follower of three centuries later, Ramananda, was a bold reformer. In Japan, Honen and Shinran were in many ways noble men. But none of these men was great or good enough to give birth to the New Testament. None of them was able to implant the drive for righteousness and brotherhood which ultimately abolished slavery and emancipated woman. Ramananda tried bravely to abolish caste, and Kabir, the forerunner of the reforming Sikh religion, roundly condemned caste. But for centuries past, caste has prevailed in every Hindu sect that has ever disowned it.

After this summary review of the long stream of Hindu-Buddhist thought and life, we are ready to come back to the question with which we started: How far have these religions authenticated themselves as revelations of the divine to man, and as dependable ways of life? The evidence is undeniably impressive in support of the assumption that the Great Spirit has from time to time burst like the sun through the clouds as men have groped after the light. Over long periods the light has been but dim and flickering, but at times it has become clear and strong. Is it unreasonable to compare this process to that which took place in the west of Asia when the light of God burst upon men in the Hebrew prophets and then shone in cloudless brilliance in Jesus Christ? The difference in degree is great, but did not all the light proceed from the Father of Lights? His Spirit of truth and reconciliation brooded over man in India, China and Japan just as truly as in Judea or Greece. In Christ we behold united the revelation of the divine to man and the discovery of the divine by man to a degree which has been equalled in no other person. In Gautama and Ramanuja and Shinran the lens seems to have been clouded or cracked enough to prevent the light from shining through undimmed and undistorted. But may we not believe that in them all the Great Spirit of truth and love was striving to make himself more fully known?

## II. The Ethnic and the Universal Religions

Since about a century ago, a few reformers, deeply impregnated by Christian ideas, have valiantly striven to break the bonds which have made Hinduism an ethnic or nationalistic faith. For them it has been liberalized and has acquired certain accents of universality. But for all the rest Hinduism remains bound, hand and foot to caste, and the social system and culture built around caste. The entire network of customs, economic, social and religious, connected with caste is rivetted upon every Hindu believer. He did not choose to be a Hindu, he was born one. Brave efforts have repeatedly been made to break its shackles, especially since Christianity and western thought began to undermine the whole Hindu cosmology. But the shackles have hardly been bent. Gautama struck resounding blows against caste, but he only made dents in its armor. The inertia of centuries and the vested interests of the upper castes defied attack. Caste and its whole brood of ethnic inhibitions has been impervious even to the gospel of grace for all, through Ishvara.

The purer forms of Northern Buddhism have broken the ethnic bonds. The Amida and Zen sects are not limited by race or caste or any other social impediment. In them the individual, regardless of race or status, can become a full believer. If this be true, then the careless generalization made by some scholars, like Hendrik Kraemer, that all the religions of India and China are ethnic, falls to the ground. Buddhism was an international religion five centuries before Christ. It is true that even Amida and Zen Buddhism are closely interwoven with the culture and social system of Japan and China, but by no means inseparably so. Japanese or Chinese born and bred in the Occident and Americans nurtured amid Christian surroundings can equally enter Buddhism, for it, like Christianity, is essentially an individual and potentially universal faith. It is, however, important to stress the fact that Christianity alone possesses the rationale for the individualism which makes it a universal religion by virtue of Jesus' teaching that every man is a child of God. The whole New Testament proclaims this principle with a clarity and persuasiveness which can not be paralleled in any Buddhist sutra. This is a priceless asset.

## III. Self-criticism and Reform.

All three religions have exhibited some capacity for self-criticism and reform. Enough of the history of Hinduism and Buddhism have been sketched to show how reformers arose, at times, in quick succession. But Hindu and Buddhist reformers have labored under one terrific handicap, because they possessed no generally accepted, concise and clear canon of orthodox doctrine. The Hindu does not lack sacred books, far from it. He is swamped by them. Think of the tens of thousands of pages in the vedas, the long epic poems, the Upanishads, the Laws of Manu, and so on. The various divergent schools of thought are each based on one or another of the sacred texts.

The Buddhists are in no better case. The sacred canon of Northern Buddhism contains 1662 works, in some 5000 volumes, which are 7000 times as long as the New Testament. The Southern Buddhists are the least burdened, for their canon is only about twice as long as the Bible. Christianity has at times been cursed by bibliolatry, but many of the Hindu and Buddhist reformers, like Nichiren of Japan, have staked their whole case on one sutra, with the result that their followers have become fanatical defenders of it. The danger of bibliolatry in Christian-

ity has been minimized by the fact that Christ himself in the sermon of the Mount showed how to save the kernel and discard the shell of the sacred writings, and St. Paul enjoined Christians to prove all things, and hold fast only that which was good, and in no case to let the letter kill the spirit.

#### IV. The Religion of Event and of Idea.

Buddhism and Christianity possess an incalculable advantage, I believe, over Hinduism, because they had historic founding personalities, who not only formulated the doctrine, but demonstrated it. Hinduism has had its prophets and sages, but no founder. Even if Hinduism did have some founder, it would be logically forced to minimize his significance, because it denies the reality of all personality, and denounces existence as the root of all misery. The very multiplicity and contradictory character of the sacred books of Hinduism, and still more, their speculative character, do not beget the solid assurance which a Buddhist or a Christian can have by reference to the character and teaching of a concrete founder.

Gautama and Jesus were, to be sure, alike founders; but have they had, and do they now have, equal value? Gautama embodied his doctrines to a remarkably high degree; but at the same time, he discounted the significance of his own life and person in advance by his repeated assertions that the self was unreal, that matter and life itself were evil, that the extinction of desire, thought and action were the chief end of man. Obviously, he thereby made all history, including his own life, of no essential value. For Gautama, the goal of the long struggle was individual absorption or extinction. For Jesus, the goal of history was the reign of the will of the loving, righteous Father-God, not only throughout earthly society, but also in heaven, that is, throughout the eternities of the spiritual universe. Gautama's stoical agnosticism and his gospel of negation left the heart of man still hungering for an answer to the riddle of the universe and the purpose of individual life. He thus paved the way for the flood of speculation about the universe and human nature and duty which compose the 5000 volumes in the Northern Buddhist canon. Furthermore, his elimination of faith in any superior beings to serve as the norms of right and wrong, and to rescue frail human nature, left the door wide open for the prolific polytheism, eudaemonism, polydaemonism, and magic of Northern Buddhism. The contrast presented by Jesus to Gautama in all these respects is arresting. For nearly every denial of Gautama, Jesus made an affirmation; and he staked his life on its truth. Gautama declared that he could save no one else, but that every man must by severe meditation and discipline gain the suppression of desire which is redemption. In a sense, his was an excessively self-centered gospel. The pity and kindly ministry toward the suffering which he practiced and taught were simply palliatives of the evil without and soothers of the humane conscience within.

Gautama never claimed that he was an incarnation of the divine, but simply that he was one existence in the endless chain of reincarnations, which afflicted all men, and which could only be broken by his mode of self-discipline. Jesus, on the contrary, clearly implied, and his disciples confidently asserted, that he was in a unique sense an embodiment of the character of the unseen Father-God, that God was like him and that he was like God, and that all men could and should become like their Heavenly Father, though whether just to the degree that he had become, he did not make explicit beyond debate. Further-

more, these historical facts are generally acknowledged: Jesus, living in Palestine at a definite date, told about the most completely good and adorable, yet rational, Supreme Being ever conceived on earth. Jesus embodied, in a normal society, the characteristics of that Being, the Father-God, to a degree never equalled, and he attributed his success in that embodiment to spiritual identity with the Father-God. Finally, he declared that loyalty to the will of the Father-God would make any man his own brother. On the basis of such facts, it seems not unreasonable to accept his statements and to act upon them. Some such faith is the minimum accepted by all Christians. By acting upon that faith they acquire a standard of right and wrong, and a strong motivation for cleaving to the right as God gives them to see it. It is no wonder that the doctrine of the Incarnation has become the cornerstone of Christian thought.

#### V. The One and the Many.

The Hindu sceptic might grant that the inductive derivation of God's character and man's duty from the historic life and teaching of Jesus furnishes a better basis than does Hinduism for the moral and spiritual needs of the modern man; but at the same time he might object that it leaves unsolved the problem of suffering and the relation of the non-human part of the universe both to God and to man. The Hindu philosophers have made a plausible case for a plural universe, controlled by a hierarchy of superhuman beings, at whose head is Brahman. Brahman is both personal and impersonal, both willing and passive, neither good nor evil, the vast motionless reservoir of being and non-being, a logical impossibility, but the nearest approximation to the ultimate of which the human mind is capable. Below Brahman, the Great It, are the deities of creation, salvation and inspiration, who are always accessible and ready to help men and other parts of creation. As H.G. Wells has tried to convince us, there may be something more than fancy to this hypothesis. But the Christian thinker might reply: Acceptance of such elaborate speculations, unsupported by the least historical evidence, is far more difficult than the conception of only one Father-God, Creator, Sustainer and Savior of the universe and of man, which has been authenticated by the historic Jesus. This conception, furthermore, is more closely in accord than the Hindu conception, with the long trend of thought from multiplicity to unity, from polytheism to monism. If it be objected that there is also a strong modern trend toward pantheism in the West, which is not unlike some forms of Hindu thought, it may be answered that this occidental pantheism is qualified by Jesus' teaching and the whole course of Christian thought to the effect that the Father-God is both immanent and transcendent, permeating the universe by His Spirit, and an independent Other who dominates all. This conception does not solve the problem of evil, nor for that matter does the Hindu conception; but it supplies an hypothesis which does not conflict with what we know of the universe through natural science. It also gives a firm basis for faith in a personal - and more than personal - Father, who is strong to save, who unifies our personalities, and impels us to cooperate with him in establishing righteousness and love among men.

If my own experience is at all typical, then a sympathetic study of these non-Christian faiths will engender a discriminating appreciation of the riches of insight and experience they enshrine, but at the same time, will strengthen the desire to share with their followers the richly satisfying ideas and experiences of the Hebrew-Christian heritage, which find in our Lord Christ at once their demonstration and their dynamic.