

How Religions Learn

Religions often copy from one another. Those who are more adept at such copying succeed as dominant faiths or religions of considerable wealth and influence. In fact, a comparative study of religions is an examination of how religions influenced one another in their quest to collect followers or assert themselves.

In our times of democracy, open learning and secularism, no organized religion would, in their wisdom, use forceful methods of conversion. Indeed, mainly because history has painfully and significantly separated the church from the state, spiritual faith from secular power, that major religions must today humbly, and with good sense, resort to ecumenism amongst their own estranged sectarians, and to dialogue with other faiths that they once denigrated. A religion heals best in a love mode, but hurts most in a power mode.

How can a religion accept others without contradicting itself? There are two ways: one is the “supremacy doctrine” and the other is the “reality vision.” The supremacy doctrine is seen, for example, in the Catholic Church’s skillful use of the evangelist John’s opening statement, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹ “Word” is translated from the Greek “logos.”

For the Church, this means that everything is “under God.” Thus, it makes sense for them to be open with other religions, such as Buddhism, which after all are a part of God’s grand plan. Moreover, Buddhism, despite its relative lack of organization, is now a global faith through “reverse evangelism,” that is, people are naturally attracted to its teachings of self-reliance, inner peace and universal spirituality, without the necessity of being religious, attracted to it as secular religion or non-religious spirituality.

The Buddhists, on the other hand, welcome such peaceful openness, because such was the ambience in which Buddhism arose in India. It was an ambience that inspired and encouraged deep and diverse spirituality.

Christian missionary zeal went hand in hand with western colonialism. Conversions were most rampant where people did not have strong spiritual roots, but were driven more by material wants and political tides. Nations with strong religious roots (such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand) remained effectively untouched by such evangelism.

Some of the evangelical efforts made by the colonial missionaries are worth examining. Space allows only one example, that of Adoniram Judson’s translation of the Christian Bible into Burmese (1834), where he renders John 1:1 (read in English) as “In the beginning was the Dharma, and the Dharma was with God, and the Dharma was God.”

¹ The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

The Latin Vulgate reads this line as “In principio erat verbum.” Here, “verbum” means “word.” But in 1519, the famous humanist theologian Erasmus of Rotterdam tried to correct “verbum” (yes, the gospel word itself) to “sermo,” meaning “speech.” Erasmus was inspired by the Church fathers, and felt that God should be something more active than merely a “word.” But the Church remained unimpressed.

The Buddhists, too, are unimpressed with Judson’s translation for two reasons. Firstly, they know that they are being fished with their own bait, as it were. More importantly, they know that “Dharma” is everything to everyone: it is a word with the most senses (like “thing” in English). So Judson’s translation backfired.

The point is that the Burmese have no word for “Word,” as envisioned by those Christians (just as the Chinese do not have a proper word for “sin,” because they happily lack such a cultural or emotional experience, until they learn it from the missionaries!). If other religions prosper on account of planting and growing concepts and dogmas, Buddhism liberates us by teaching us to *free* ourselves from concepts and dogmas, so that we directly and fully experience life by rejoicing in true reality.

The true strength of Buddhism, therefore, is not in the word, spoken or printed. The true strength of Buddhism is the silent spirit of the joyful heart, that is, meditation. It is a teaching that seeks not to convert others, but to convert oneself to true peace and clarity, and to unconditionally love themselves and others. In fact, meditation is such an effective spiritual tool that other religions see it as an expedient for their own purposes, too.

In 2001, the monk Santikaro, a pupil of the famed Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, was in Singapore, on invitation, to teach meditation in Damien Hall at the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, and two other Convents. This is not surprising as Catholicism once had a strong contemplative tradition, and now felt a need to recharge itself, as it were, learning from whomever and whatever that could recharge its spirituality. Buddhist teachers, of course, joyfully minister to this “third field” of spiritual cultivation as the occasion arises. (The first field is that of the monastics, and the second, the lay followers.)

The Dharma or truth is indeed found in all true religions, especially those that teach us to be responsible for our actions, and that there is a higher purpose in life other than worldly works and joys. Every religion, too, is unique each in their own way (otherwise, they would not need to exist). What is unique about Buddhism is its “reality vision”: what prevents us from understanding Godhood, salvation or awakening is our own selfhood, which we need to totally let go of. We need to be empty of the self so that we can be filled with the awakening spirit.

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