

6th SINGAPORE BAHAI STUDIES ANNUAL CONFERENCE
“DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS”
Kent Vale Function Hall, Kent Vale, Block G,
101 Clementi Road (opp the NUS)
Singapore. 129787

Saturday, 14th April 2001
9.30 am to 6.00 pm

DIVINE QUALITIES OF SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE

Piya Tan

REASON FOR DIALOGUE

For me, the most wonderful thing today, right now, is that so many religions are here represented, gathered together in peace and sharing. This alone is a great achievement for us all gathered here if we contrast the harmony here with the suffering, injustice and ignorance there have been propagated in the name of religion (and continue to do so in some places even today). But man cannot live by bread or rice alone, he must have faith. Even if his rice has bits of sand in it, he has to feed himself, for he is ever hungry.

The title chosen by the Bahai Studies Conference is significant because many (and a growing number) of followers of the world religions do not regard their faith as a “religion” (i.e. a system of beliefs and worship) but as something encompassing every aspect of their lives as individuals and as a community, in short, as a culture or civilization. And there are many civilizations, many religions. Even within each there are diverse systems.

Not everyone, certainly not everyone of a single civilization, is religious. Indeed, there are systems, movements, groups and individuals that are totally non-religious or try to be so, such as the materialists, agnostics, atheists, and free-thinkers. Perhaps this is one reason why the cover letter to this Dialogue I received contains the term “epistemic systems” (which, to my understanding, attempt at a scientific study of knowledge).

Such a dialogue would not only keep us abreast of one another despite our differences, but in communicating, also learn from each other to be able to work better in a multireligious society, and to benefit the world at large. In short, dialogue with other civilizations, with other religions, can help us become better followers and members of our own civilization or religion.

DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

The Baha’i faith had a difficult and painful beginning. Many thousands were murdered and persecuted for their faith. For teaching a powerful new faith, Baha’ullah (Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri) himself was imprisoned in the notorious Black Pit in Iran, and then exiled to Turkey where he was put under house-arrest by the powerful who felt threatened by his spirituality.

Buddhists would see the suffering Baha’ullah as a Bodhisattva, as a person of great spiritual compassion and wisdom working under insuperable difficulties for the benefit of others. Suffering is nothing new in Buddhism. It is the beginning of Buddhism: that suffering is a universal fact. Indeed, the reflection on suffering is the beginning of religion and philosophy.

SUFFERING AS A LESSON

Suffering, the Buddha teaches, arises from our ignorance, or more specifically, from our greed, hatred and delusion (the three roots of evil). Conversely, suffering can also arise externally, caused by the ignorant, the greedy, the hateful and the deluded. In short, very often we have to suffer for what we believe in and for what we love. This suffering is greater where the spirituality is deeper. The shadow is darkest where the light is brightest!

Like the Bahais, Buddhists have a proverbial propensity for tolerance—tolerance in the sense that every moment of suffering, every episode of difficulty, is a lesson for spiritual development. That is, if we seek to understand the suffering, to accept it as a teacher. (How true it rings when a wise teacher tells his pupil, “Let this be a *lesson* to you!”)

Why tolerance? We are all like **the man pierced with a painful arrow**. To a speculative young man, the Buddha once said, imagine a man who is pierced with an arrow, thickly smeared with poison, and friends and relatives brings along a doctor. Would the doctor ask all kinds of questions like “what class did the person who shot the arrow come from?” or “what colour was the person?” or “what height was he?” or “what kind of bow was it?” or “what kind of arrow was it?” By the time all the answers are obtained, the victim would have died. Instead, the wise doctor would immediately pull the poisoned arrow out. Then the doctor might ask whatever questions he has.¹

What does this mean? Let me invoke the compassionate wisdom of a Dominican monk, Abbe **Dominique Pire** (1910-1969), the Nobel Prize winner for peace (1958), who said, “What matters is not the difference between believers and unbelievers, but between those who care and those who do not care.” (quoted by Erich Fromm, *On Being Human*, NY: Continuum, 1967:93). And this care must come as soon as possible, if not immediately, like running out of “a burning house” (to echo the urgency sounded in the Lotus Sutra).

MAN-CENTRED

The reason for this outlook is because, like the Bahai faith, Buddhism too is *man-centred*. Baha’ullah calls man “the noblest and most perfect of all created things”. In the Buddha’s Teaching, being human is over and again declared to be the best state for spiritual development and liberation.

Both Bahaism and Buddhism take man as the starting point in their spiritual quest. Both regard God as unknowable, even more so in the case of Bahaism. For the Bahais, God is, and has always been, the Creator.

Buddhists, too, accept the idea of a Creator, but this is the mind. This universe, Buddhists believe, is mind-created. However, Buddhists do not worship the mind, but seek to understand it and to liberate it.

HEAVEN AND HELL

Both our faiths teach about heaven and hell. For Bahais, **heaven and hell** are symbolic of the soul’s relationship to God. Nearness to God results in good deeds resulting in infinite joy, while distance from him leads to evil and suffering. Buddhists regard heaven and hell as happy states and suffering states that are both impermanent and immanent, that is to say, within our own being.

¹ Majjhima Nikaya 1:429 f.; cf. M 2:216. 2:258, 259 [The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Bhikkhu Ñanamoli, rev. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Boston: Wisdom, 1995.]

There is an ancient Indian parable, like any good parable, that has traveled across continents. This one peregrinated all the way to Japan. I will relate the Zen version in my own words. Once a samurai was meditating, and a curious young man comes along and asks him:

“Where is hell?”

The samurai remains silent, so the young man keeps on asking the question. Then the samurai gets up and brandishing his sword, chases off the young man:

“This is hell!” shouts the samurai.

The brave young man, somewhat careful and clever, still running, glances back, and then asks:

“Where is heaven?”

The samurai abruptly stops, and lowers his sword:

“This is heaven! Because I’m not going to kill you!”

As Zen Buddhist tradition goes, the young man probably became enlightened after that harrowing experience.

MANKIND IS ONE

For Buddhists, godliness has the four qualities of **love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity**. By love here is meant an unconditional attitude towards others as if we are their mother. Yes, the symbolism here is that of a “mother”, a feminine figure, since only she is capable of bearing and nurturing life.

If we regard others as our own children, then it is easy to regard the world as one community, which is a very important Bahai teaching. The Bahai faith, Shoghi Effendi declares, “proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind...” Furthermore, he also declares the following noble aspirations of Bahaism:

It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorces, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one’s government, extols any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind.

Any informed Buddhist can easily identify with such a global spirit, and we have a lot to learn from the Bahais here. However, it is only fair for me to remark that Buddhist social activism and social work are even now a common fabric of Western society, especially of the US. In Thailand, too, we have a number of well-known living social activists, like **Sulak Sivaraksa** (himself imprisoned a number of times for his stand), who echo such noble and universal sentiments of the Bahais.

ENGAGEMENT

I find it very interesting that Shoghi Effendi in his statement, “prohibits...asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism...” Historically, Buddhism began as an ascetic, mendicant and monastic system, mainly in response to the Indian society then. However, very few Buddhists today are ascetics, mendicants or monastics. Indeed it is one of many choices that Buddhists have as tools or “skillful means” in their spiritual quests.

In one of his books, Sulak Sivaraksa (the Siamese Buddhist activist) once related an instruction by a Siamese king to his son: “If you want to lead an easy and wealthy life, become a monk; if you want to help the people, be a good king.”²

Certainly in Singapore today, there is a growing movement towards the secularizing of Buddhism, meaning here that more lay Buddhists are giving more quality time to social and spiritual work, towards building an emotionally and spiritually more healthy and affluent Singapore.

I must, on the other hand, add that in response to this open spirit, there is a new generation of Sangha members who are “**engaged**” **Buddhists**, that is, those who are proactive in people-helping. Many members of the Buddhist monastic order here, for example, have started hospitals, free clinics and schools in Singapore and elsewhere.

There are the Ren Ci Buddhist Hospitals (two of them caring for those with chronic illnesses) run by Ven. Ming Yi, and a new one (under Ven. Kuan Yan) will begin operating later this year (2001). The Taiwanese nun, Ven. Zeng Yan also has her branch hospital called Chuzhi in Kreta Ayer, Singapore. I know of at least five Buddhist free clinics here. There are also a growing number of Buddhist workers involved in personal counselling, prison ministry and hospice work.

COMPASSION

Earlier I mention the four god-like virtues beginning with love. The second of these virtues is **compassion**. While love here refers to a selfless mother-like nurturing attitude towards others, compassion is a proactive response to the needs and failures of others. This response is, of course, rooted in selfless love.

Like water finding its own level, the compassionate heart naturally seeks to bring the less fortunate to a more wholesome level conducive to spiritual development. Why is compassion vital in spiritual life, especially for Buddhists? This is because the human state is an imperfect state to begin with, that is, as long as humans have vital needs and unsatisfied wants.

This common ground of compassion is also the basis for spiritual dialogue, since it involves the putting aside of differences. Says the Buddha:

As for those things, my friend, on which we do not agree, let us leave them alone. As to those things that we do agree, let the wise put questions about them, ask for reasons as to them, talk them over with their teacher, with their fellow disciples.

(Dīgha Nikāya 1:163)³

² Personal communication from Sulaks Sivaraksa (International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Bangkok).

³ The Long Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Maurice Walshe, Boston: Wisdom, 1995.

ALTRUISTIC JOY

Now we come to an interesting aspect of the four god-like virtues, namely, **altruistic joy**, that is, rejoicing in the goodness and success of others. When a child is young, the mother would lovingly care for it, and with compassion protect it from harm and danger. When the child is more grown up and independent, and able to play by himself, the mother looks on with joy, altruistic joy, thinking, “Oh, how my child has grown!”

Even so, in spiritual dialogue, we must have this motherly altruistic joy to appreciate the goodness and success of other faiths. Of course, we must admit an ulterior motive in all this! (All religions also teach truthfulness.) We need to keep up with the progress and problems of other religions so that we are not out of touch with social realities or lose sight of new ways of looking at spirituality.

CROSS-INFLUENCES

In their apologetics and hermeneutics, the defence and propagation of their faith, not all religions would readily admit that at various times in their history they are influenced by other religions. And yet we find interesting parallels and coincidences in the lives of our spiritual founders and teachers (as in St. Luke’s Gospel account of Christ’s life and the life of the Buddha, and the Hindu adoption of the Buddha as an avatar). Ancient Buddhists have themselves transformed India’s rich store of folklore into the well-known Jataka stories, very similar to Aesop’s fables, to bring Buddhism down to level of the common people. (For a comprehensive idea of this, we only need to read such works as Hajime Nakamura’s *A Comparative History of Ideas* (2nd ed 1975).)

In ancient China, the success of Taoism and Buddhism presented a serious threat to Confucianism, whose pragmatism and primary concerns with political and ethical issues, failed to be a part of the lives of the common people as did the devotionism of Pure Land Buddhism and the magical panaceas of Taoism. It was to fill this gap in Confucianism that there arose a movement known in modern scholarship as Neo-Confucianism.

The major proponent of **Neo-Confucianism** was Chuxi (Chu Hsi), regarded as the most influential Chinese philosopher in the last 1000 years. Through his genius, for example, he incorporated Buddhist meditation (“quiet sitting”) into his system. His Neo-Confucianism long dominated Chinese intellectual life. It won political patronage in Korea and Japan, and deeply influenced the daily lives of these civilizations.

Neo-Confucianism was introduced into Japan in the mediaeval period, not by Confucianists, but by Zen Buddhists. It then became the state philosophy of the Tokugawa feudal regime (1603-1867), and profoundly influenced the thought and behaviour of the literati. Neo-Confucianism went on to contribute to the development of the Bushido (Code of the Warriors), which is a cultural root for contemporary Japan’s economic success.

ADAPTATION

In his 1994 Jordan Lectures, the Pali Text Society (London) President, Richard Gombrich, spoke on “How Buddhism Began”. In his very first lecture, he explained why in the record of the Buddha’s 45-year public ministry, there were apparent inconsistencies of expression and terminologies. He quoted T.W. Rhys Davids (founder of the Pali Text Society) as saying:

When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method he follows is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner.

(Introduction to *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part 1, 1899:206-7)⁴

We have scriptural evidence for **the Buddha's protean teaching method** for the sake of effective spiritual dialogue. For example, in the Discourse on the Great Final Decease (Maha Parinibbana Sutta), the Buddha says:

Now I call to mind, Ananda, how when I used to enter an assembly of many hundred kshatriyas (nobles)...brahmins...householders...wanderers...the heavenly hosts of the Guardian Kings...of the Heaven of the Thirty-three devas...of the Maras (Evil Ones), and of the Brahmas (High Gods), before I had seated myself there or talked to them..., I used to assume a colour like theirs, and (spoke) in a voice like theirs. Then with religious discourse I used to instruct and move them, and fill them with gladness. But they knew me not when I spoke, and would say: "Who is this who speaks thus? Is he a man or a god?"...

(Digha Nikaya 2:109, abridged)⁵

JESUITS IN CHINA

In the early days when the Christian powers of the West came to the East for "gospel, glory and gold", their missionaries adopted a similar protean approach. The most remarkable case was that of the Jesuit **Matteo Ricci** (1552-1610) who first entered China dressed in a Buddhist monk's robes. Then following the advice of Chinese friends he had made, he changed into the garb of a Confucian scholar to win entry into the higher levels of Chinese society.

Let me clarify here, quoting the famous Trappist monk and writer, Thomas Merton, that when Ricci dressed as a Confucian scholar, "this was not a Jesuitical disguise. The Jesuits wore the traditional robes of the Chinese scholar because they earned the right to do so just as seriously as any other Chinese scholar...by their knowledge of science and philosophy." (T. Merton, *Mystics & Zen Masters*, NY: Dell, 1961:81)

ACCOMMODATIONS

Having finally received permission to enter the Forbidden City, Beijing, in 1600, Ricci won imperial favour by his skill in regulating clocks and making maps. Being a man of extraordinary learning, he mastered the Chinese language, comprehended Chinese culture, and adapted Catholic rites for Chinese converts—a process known as "accommodation" by which he bent Christian dogma to conform to the Confucian world-view. The number of converts grew, even more were there who admired his scholarship and personality.

Then followed two other famous Jesuits who continued his successful missionizing of and dialogue with the Chinese. The first Chinese bishop was consecrated in 1685. In 1692 an imperial edict tolerating Christianity brought Franciscan and Dominican missions to China. They rejected the Jesuit "accommodations", particularly for funerals, ancestor-worship and titles for God, and the Chinese Rites Controversy raged from 1693 to 1705.

⁴ London: Pali Text Society, 1899, repr 1977 (since repr).

⁵ See *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, tr. Maurice Walshe, Boston: Wisdom, 1995.

The Jesuits obtained an imperial ruling upholding their view that Chinese rites had no heretical religious significance, but in 1704 (again in 1715 and 1742) the Holy See, taking “the safer and more conservative course in order to limit the spread of the controversy” (Merton 1961:88) ruled against the Jesuit practice. The Chinese Emperor thereupon expelled all the Christian priests who refused to accept “accommodations” and so official toleration of Christianity ended abruptly.

RE-EVALUATION

In his book, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton remarks that only in recent years (i.e. the middle of the last century) have we begun to appreciate the significance of Matteo Ricci’s entering Beijing “with his map of the world, his clock, his telescope, and his hydraulic machines.” In fact, Merton gives an impassioned vindication of the sad misunderstanding regarding “The Jesuits in China” in a whole chapter in the same book.

His writing is so important that I shall quote what I think is most relevant to us here, who are interested in spiritual dialogue, and above all, in tasting the true spirit of our own faiths. Of the true meaning and profound importance of Ricci’s “originality”, Merton writes:

He not only made an intelligent diagnosis of a totally unfamiliar condition, but also, by implication, diagnosed *his own* condition and that of Western Christian civilization as a whole. In confronting the culture, the philosophy, and the religion of China, he immediately took stock of Catholicism as he had known it in Italy, and in the light granted him by the Holy Spirit he distinguished what was essentially Christian and truly Catholic—that is, universal—from cultural and accidental accretions proper to a certain time and place. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he was able to sacrifice all that was secondary and accidental. Like a true missionary, he divested himself of all that belonged to his own country and his own race and adopted all that belonged to the good customs and attitudes of the land to which he had been sent. Far from being a shrewd “natural” tactic, this was a supernatural and Christian sacrifice, a stripping of himself in imitation of Christ, who “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant,” and of St. Paul becoming “all things to all men”.

(T. Merton, *Mystics & Zen Masters*, 1961:83)

LESSON

I have related this interesting episode of Church history in its dark moments, what is sometimes known as “**the shadow**”, because it is a classic case of what one contemporary psychotherapist calls “a heresy of orthodoxy” (M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1993:207). That is to say, the letter has killed the spirit. If not for its “shadow”, in this case, the external Western forms and sectarian rivalry, the Catholic Church of Ricci’s time would have successfully laid down the foundations for a more Christian China today!

Such internecine rivalry within and amongst faiths confuses their followers and keeps away potential converts. Indeed, thinking people who are dissatisfied with the rivalry of the more traditional religions, often find Baháism attractive.

Furthermore, if there is going to be any dialogue amongst our civilizations, we must try to rise above the letter of the dialogue as much as we can in order to taste the spirit of the guest civilizations. This is, of course, no small task, but it is not impossible. I shall now give a few remarkable examples of how this has happened between Catholic Christianity and Buddhism.

REVIVAL

In fact, the revival of Hinduism and Buddhism during the 19th century owed largely to the impact of the Christian missions on them. Then, especially after the Second World War onwards, the tide turned in the other direction with a growing popular Western interest in Oriental faiths, especially in the methods of spiritual training and meditation. This new encounter rejuvenated Western Christianity in interesting ways that sadly I cannot list here due to time constraint.

The 20th century can be said to be a “**century of apologies and apologetics**”, culminating with Vatican II (1962-65) which officially opened the Church doors to ecumenical dialogue, and being punctuated by the Pope himself apologizing for the past mistakes and painful atrocities that less spiritual Catholic conquistadors, missionaries and inquisitors had committed in the name of their faith. This examination of conscience is very healing and conciliatory. Such openness promotes a spirit of generosity that allows various faiths to grow healthily amongst one another.

Modern Buddhists, I must say, have benefitted significantly from this new religious glasnost. This generosity comes especially by way of the excellent scholarship of Christians who study (and even practise) Buddhism with an open mind. The famous Belgian Thomist, **Msgr. Etienne Lamotte**, has gained indisputable international authority by editing, translating and commenting on some of the most significant works of Mahayana Buddhism (such as the Surangama.samadhi Sutra and the Mahayana.sangraha). His magnum opus is the voluminous *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, des origines a l'ere Saka* (1958), translated as *History of Indian Buddhism, From the Origins to the Saka Era* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste de l'Universite Catholique de Louvain, 1988). For his erudite scholarship, he was awarded the title of “Expert in Buddhist Scriptures” a few weeks before his death.

Another famous Christian scholar of Buddhism is the Jesuit **Father Heinrich Dumoulin** (1944-), who is one of the world's foremost Zen scholars. He wrote on Zen for the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed. Mircea Eliade, with Charles J. Adams, 16 vols. NY: Macmillan, 1987). His magnum opus is the acclaimed two-volume *Zen Buddhism: A History* (1959 in German; vol. 1 India and China. 1963 English translation; NY: Macmillan, 1988 revised English translation).

I have already mentioned the famous Trappist monk, **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968). The Trappist Order is famous for its vow of silence. So for Father Merton, his experience of Zen meditation, besides making him an authority in that Buddhist tradition, has also enriched his own Christian roots. In fact, he has written 29 books, inspired by his quest for “trans-Christian ecumenism through religious experimentation” (Ency. Brit. 12:342h)⁶. Aghananda Bharati, in his Encyclopaedia Britannica article on “Monasticism”, remarks that it is of great significance that Thomas Merton was killed in an accident while in Bangkok—he was going to visit the Dalai Lama (Ency Brit id.). But death has not silenced Merton. For a man of spiritual silence, he has spoken volumes!

Since late last century, we are seeing a growing number of Christian scholars of religion whose open-minded scholarship, especially in comparative religion and religious dialogue, is so learned and truthful that they could be used as textbooks in any faith (that is equally open-minded, of course). Such scholars include illustrious names like **Hans Kung** (Germany) and **John Hick** (Britain), whose remarkable works can be found in the bookshops and libraries of Singapore,

⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 15th ed, Chicago, 1983. 30 vols.

BAHAI EVOLUTION

Let me now briefly address how Bahais view other religions. For Bahais, although God is unknowable, he has chosen to reveal himself through his messengers or “**manifestations**” (to use the Bahai term), among them Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab, who “are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe....”.

Many, if not all, the religions whose founders I have mentioned, often object to this Bahai doctrine, that is, being reinterpreted outside their context. However, if we understand the nature of religious language, then we would be more generous and equanimous at this level of the letter. For it is only the letter of the spirit that is being traded here: the spirit of the letter remains with those who have tasted it. Like the great ocean that has only one taste, the taste of salt, the Buddha declares that the Dharma (True Teaching) has only one taste, the taste of freedom. It is a very large ocean for all to swim or sail in.

Let me elaborate on this thorny issue using Bahai terminology. The messengers or “manifestations” are viewed as occupying two “stations”, or occurring in two aspects, The first is “the station of pure abstraction and essential unity”, in which one may speak of the oneness of the messengers of God because all are manifestations of his will and exponents of his word. This is not syncretism because the other station is “the station of distinction.... In this respect, each manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission....” As such, the Bahais argue, while the essence of all religions is one, each has specific features that answer the special needs of a given time and place and to the level of civilization in which the manifestation appears.

This is not exactly a new idea. Even within the Buddhist tradition itself, especially in ancient China, a number of efforts were made to classify the numerous, apparently contradicting, doctrines and discourses of Buddhism into an hierarchical system (call *pan chiao*), each level applying to its corresponding time and audience, and yet each level is unique and complete in its own way.

EQUANIMITY

The last of the four godly virtues on which framework this paper rests is **equanimity**. In symbolic language, we call this the “mirror-like mind” that reflects what is before it, looking at things just the way they are, and seeing ourselves as an irrevocable part of this universal network of life and light, all interconnected with a common destiny. That destiny, or purpose of life if you like, is to grow, and there is only one kind of real growth, that is, spiritual growth.

All spiritual truths are somehow, at some level, interconnected. All religions share some parallel (even identical) doctrines, and the personal experiences of their saints often ineffably coincide. How can we, for example, discriminate between the ecstasy of St. Theresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross, with Muhammad’s divine experiences, or with the joyful state of a Hindu yogi, or with the dhyanic bliss of a Buddhist meditator. For only one who has tasted salt knows the taste. If not, then we only need to read such works as Hajime Nakamura’s *A Comparative History of Ideas* (2nd ed. London: KPI, 1986) to relish scholarly examples of the amazing parallels and tangents of spirituality.

On a higher level, equanimity is an even-minded heart in the face of any crisis or situation. It is to surrender oneself to a higher will, whether one calls it God, the Holy Spirit or Bodhicitta (the will to enlightenment). We all have some goodness in our lives, be it divine grace or good deeds sown in the past. If we make no conscious effort to harbour evil, then good will follow in due course.

GETHSAMANE

I know of a Christian who was asked what for him was the most spiritually significant event in the Bible. He answered that it was the passion of Christ in the Garden of Gethsamane on the night before the crucifixion. Judas had already betrayed him to the Romans. While his disciples lay asleep, Christ was alone in agonizing prayer.

Christ could have fled into the night and escaped crucifixion but he chose to stand his ground (just as the Buddha resolved not to rise from under the Bodhi tree until he had gained enlightenment). If Christ had fled, we would not have remembered him. There would have been no Christianity. If the Buddha had walked away from the Bodhi tree, we would have had no Buddhism today.

The lesson here is very significant: in our moment of greatest spiritual crisis (or any real crisis for that matter), **we are essentially alone**. Muhammad was alone in the desert cave when an angel of God declared, “Iqra!” to him. The Buddha was all alone under the Bodhi tree, forsaken by his erstwhile attendants, the Five Monks. These remarkable giants all stood their ground until they have gained spiritual insight. So were born the great world religions.

Indeed, the questions of life, death, and the beyond are too complex and profound for any one religion to pride itself with all the correct answers. Often we need to refer to different faiths like perusing valuable volumes in a spiritual library before their pages are faded or lost, or their language forgotten.

Furthermore, no religion can stand alone, not for long anyway before it is weighed down by worldly ways. We need rejuvenating voices of truth to remind us that there are other ways of looking at the same mountain and that any faith works just as well for those who believe. In this global society, we may have the power to destroy the “idols” of others, but our own idols remain insidiously in our religious shadows waiting to turn upon ourselves.

We have long passed the Axial Age (800-200 BC) when the great religions began to arise. We are now heading towards greater discovery that our different faiths share many common spiritual genes that makes us all siblings in the spirit. I shall not dwell on this point as this is a basic Bahai tenet: they can speak better on this matter.

The highest spiritual act for us on earth is to give of ourselves with love, compassion, joy and equanimity, to transcend our limitations, to surrender the limiting ways of the world, to walk humbly with our God, to bow deeply before the Buddha. Only when our heart and hand are open, can we receive the highest gift.

Peace in heaven and on earth!

Ω