

Jōdo-Shinshū and Christianity

Essentials of a talk given to Japanese Buddhists
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There is, as you probably know, much discussion about eventual similarities and differences between Christianity and Buddhism, and it has often been said that there is, in particular, much similarity between some Protestant forms of Christianity and Jōdo-Shinshū.

In fact, this may appear to be so to some people, but to my mind as a European grown up in a cultural background that was very widely influenced by Christianity, it appears that the differences are fundamentally far more important than the similarities.

Actually in this field there is much confusion and misunderstanding. Either by ignorance or by some distortion of understanding, many writers in the West are misrepresenting Buddhism in general, and Jōdo-Shinshū in particular.

Much confusion has arisen by taking a too narrow point of view and by interpreting peculiar Oriental conceptions according to topics and definitions originated in Western philosophy or Christian theology.

But through history and culture, there arose so many different conceptions of living and thinking, that every comparison is but possible with the utmost care.

These cultural and historical differences appear the most strongly in the field of religious life, which represents the deepest and most penetrating side of a culture.

Therefore, it may be important to make a necessarily concise survey of the principal and fundamental differences between Buddhism and Christianity.

Such a survey is not meant to create still more quarrels nor to facilitate arguing, but in order to deepen our own understanding of Buddhist teaching.

The first fact we have to consider is that Christian religion is dominated and conditioned by the idea of a God-Creator.

When we go into the concept of creation according to Christian teachings, the God-Creator did not only create heaven and earth, as it is told in the Bible, but he actually created for man

also the possibility to sin and hence, to be damned for eternity.

Created with this risk of committing sins, man undergoes a law issued by God. Whenever he fails, whenever by his weakness he is induced to sin, divine punishment is awaiting him. For this God, said to be a God of love, acts as a severe judge.

I have often asked myself how a God of Love and Wisdom could ever create for his children the risk of sin, judgment and punishment, - or how just a short span of life could determinate damnation for eternity!

To counteract the effect of sin, so the Christians generally say, God in his love decided to sacrifice his own son as a payment for sin.

Therefore he put Jesus Christ on the cross to suffer and die. In this way, such a divine but nevertheless bloody sacrifice is presented in the Christian mind as the remission of sin.

I cannot help thinking that this whole procedure is against the primal feeling of love, against human common sense and evermore that it is quite illogical and even revolting.

To whom did this God sacrifice his son? To himself! And how can a God who is said to be omniscient, omnipotent and full of love for his creation, first create for man the possibility of sin, - then let the weak human fall into sin, - then punish the sinner and have his divine son be killed as a payment to himself?

In Buddhism, we cannot share such a belief! We know that man is, according to causes and conditions, the creator of his own world.

The Buddha is not the creator of this world of suffering; he is Enlightenment itself and his nature is to have all being participate in this supreme Enlightenment.

The Buddha did not induce man into sin, suffering or punishment, but he is the Ultimate Compassionate Power intending to save mankind, i.e. each of us, from this world of pain, delusion and ignorance, and to lead us all towards the Pure Land. Namu Amida Butsu.

But the difference still is wider. The Christian God, they say, elects beforehand those he wishes to save.

Therefore he introduced distinctions and oppositions such as 'good' and 'evil': that is why Christianity is a religion mainly based on morality.

The teaching of Buddhism is not based on morality. The Buddha knows too well that man is weak, addicted to greed, hate, illusion and selfishness, and that but very few are capable of living a real moral life.

This deep knowledge of the real nature of man, we call it Buddha's Wisdom, - and Buddha's will to save us, weak and sinning beings, we call it his Great Compassion.

For that reason, we can state that Buddhism is not based on moral rules, i.e. on the opposition of good and evil, but that it is based on Wisdom and Compassion.

There are of course other important points of difference, be it i.e. on the philosophical level of the teaching. So the God-Creator is said to be the Absolute Being, whereas our Buddhist conception of the Buddha as Dharmakāya-Dharmatā (hosshō-hosshin) transcends every notion of Being and Non-Being.

Buddhahood is fundamentally the law and the working virtue of Enlightenment and Compassion.

Another fundamental difference is that Christianity as well as the other monotheistic religions, stated that man is composed of a mortal body and an immortal soul.

Buddhism has always denied the existence of such a soul. The teaching of impermanence and no-self is fundamentally excluding the existence of such a thing as a soul. Really, there is no Buddhist "soul" to be liberated.

But I should like to emphasize now the main differences regarding the conception of sin and the problem of good and evil.

As I already said before, the Christian sin is a transgression of God's Law. This law is expressed in a series of rules. That which is in obedience to these rules, is called 'good'. That which is not in obedience, is called 'evil' and 'sin'.

God, such as some heavenly king, will reward those who are obedient to his will, and condemn to eternal punishment all those who failed to do so.

However, God can make exceptions. He can even pardon the sins committed. God can give remission of sin according to his kingly grace.

This grace is not a universal activity, but depends largely on a selection for every 'soul' separately and according to standards that are incomprehensible and depend only on individual application.

This problem can be summarized in two popular sayings extracted from the Bible: "God's ways are impenetrable" and "Many are called but few are elected".

Buddhism does not understand the idea of 'sin' in this sense. There is no Buddhist 'sin' conceived as a punishment on transgression of a divine law.

The Buddha considered such a point of view as rather fanciful. Therefore Buddhists should not believe that some God created the world, but that man himself is the continuous creator of his own world.

This creation by personal deeds, we Buddhists call it 'karma' (gō). But karma is not the activity of a divine will, but a natural, universal law dominating the stream of life.

In this sense, the deeds and actions done by body, speech and mind, are not just morally good or evil, but they are estimated in function of the religious goal of life, which is Enlightenment and Buddhahood.

Therefore we should not say that our deeds are morally good or evil, but that, on the religious level, they are either leading towards Enlightenment and for that reason "profitable, meritorious, favorable, efficient" - or that, on the contrary, they are taking us farther away from final liberation and therefore "inept, demeritorious, unfavorable, harmful, noxious, prejudicial (aku)".

Jōdo-Shinshū, which is the ultimate teaching of exclusively Other-Power, fully agrees with the general Buddhist statement of karma.

But Shinran Shōnin, following in this regard the views of Pure Land masters in India, China and Japan, realized that man in this Age of Decadent Teaching (mappō) is too weak, too ignorant and self-deluded, unable to liberate himself of these hindrances.

Really, how can man accomplish the meritorious karma that is strong enough to open for him the gates of Nirvana?

Man is deeply bound to this life of suffering, birth and death (shōji), by the many roots of greed, hate and delusion. In what way could he actually accumulate the inconceivable quantity and quality of merits, in order to free himself from samsara?

There might be in humanity some exceptions here or there, but most of us are just “bambu”. We are so busily concerned with only our personal problems and calculations (hakarai), that we cannot free ourselves even for one moment from our ego-orientated way of living and thinking.

There is however one consideration in this dark world of ours that opens our eyes to the infinite realm of light: man’s evil karma is so very small when compared to the inconceivably infinite super-karma realized for us by Amida.

Our evil karma, how gigantic it might be in human eyes, is smaller than the smallest drop of rain falling into the great ocean of Amida’s Compassion.

That evil karma of ours is totally embraced by Amida’s Compassionate Power and loses in it its own characteristics, just as a drop of rain falling into the ocean loses its raindrop characteristics.

Our small but evil karma loses - in the Great Ocean of Shinjin - its own bad taste and gets the taste of Compassion, Purity and Happiness.

Amida’s inconceivable karma is nothing else but the Power of the Compassionate Vow. This power transcends ‘good’ and ‘evil’, transcends samsāra and nirvāna.

Whereas man’s karma is only deed-and-result in the samsaric aspect of life, Amida’s virtue is boundless. That is why he is called the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life.

There is still another important difference between Christianity and Buddhism that is often misunderstood or neglected, but that for Jōdo-Shinshū followers is directly connected with the heart itself of Shinran Shōnin’s teaching.

Some Christians say that Shin Buddhism is a religion of salvation by faith, that people just need to have faith to be liberated from this world of birth-and-death.

I shall try to explain to you why, in my opinion, such a view is a wrong interpretation of Buddhism.

As you all know, Jōdo-Shinshū is a religion in which shinjin plays a very important part. Shinjin is, in fact, the goal of religious life.

In western languages, shinjin is generally translated, with a certain risk of confusion, as ‘faith’, but actually there is no correct word for translating ‘shinjin’, just because there is in Christianity no exact correspondent for this typical Buddhist term.

It is thus by such a misunderstanding that Christian missionaries came to call ‘shinjin’ faith, and to call Jōdo-Shinshū a religion of salvation by faith only.

Therefore they concluded that Jōdo-Shinshū is very similar to the Christian denomination of Protestantism, and that it would suffice to substitute Amida Buddha for the Christian God in order to obtain conversion.

We have seen before that such an argument has no value whatsoever, because of the fact that the God-conception in Christianity is something completely different from what the Buddha is.

But you need understand that most people in the West ignore the true nature of Buddhahood. They often think that the Buddha is just a kind of god and that salvation in Buddhism is similar to its concept in Christianity.

Now you see where the main point of difference resides: for Christians, and chiefly for those of a Protestant denomination, 'faith' is a means made available to humans by divine grace and by which they can possibly win eternal life for their soul.

But for the Shin Buddhist, 'shinjin' is not a means; it is the goal itself.

Moreover, it is not the follower who has to develop 'faith' in his mind; he just has to receive 'shinjin' that is made available to him by Amida's Vow-Power.

For that reason, there can in Jōdo-Shinshū actually be no occurrence of a working like the Christian divine grace that is largely selective.

The activity of Amida's Compassionate Vow-Power is not a divine or royal grace, but it is the non-personalizing virtue of Buddhahood as Expediency (hōben-hosshin). This virtue is absolute, universal, as light shining brightly for all beings without exception.

Grace, as described by Christian faith, is some personal, somewhat whimsical individualizing selection, depending on the goodwill of the divinity. But Vow-Power is a natural, over-all activity, indifferent to preferences and even to meritorious attainments.

Amida's Compassion is working on all beings to illuminate them with shinjin. This is a decisive feature of Buddhahood, exposed to us through Shinran Shōnin. It cannot be confounded with any form of Christian faith of grace.

For most Christians, their conception of faith is a way leading to the fulfillment they call eternal life. This is a paradise described as a recompense for the believing soul, but this recompense is but an eternal personal satisfaction in which the fate of other beings is left unconcerned.

But Buddhist nirvana, to which shinjin is very akin, is not some paradise, but is Enlightenment. This leads us to still another difference.

Christian paradise is a very personal affair; it is said to be static perpetual state of happiness, in which the soul in beatitude is completely cut away from the sufferings of this world.

This is not the way Buddhist look at the happy state of Pure Land. Indeed: how can one be happy while all other beings still are suffering in the world of illusions?

The Pure land is not a fleeing away from the universe of pain and delusion, but it means to take participation in the saving activity of Amida Buddha.

Shinran Shōnin exposed to us a very important view that struck me as a westerner more in particular: it is the notion of gensō-ekō, the returning into the saha-world.

This is the grand role assigned to the being of shinjin: not to enjoy for himself a happiness of immobility, but to take an actual participation in the salvation work of Amida's Vow-Power, in order to save all other beings after being saved oneself.

In Christianity, although there is much talk about divine love, there is not such a universal, non-distinctive conception of salvation for and through all beings!

This, believe me, is one of the many splendors of Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhism!

Amida's Vow-Power is not limited by distinctions between "this" and "that", nor even by the apparent duality of samsara and nirvana.

That is the reason why we must turn our mind to Namu Amida Butsu, just as a child in hopeless need will turn to father and mother.

Really, Amida is for us father and mother; and just as father and mother will care for *all* their children, and even more for the most unhappy among them, so Amida will save us, just as we are and without making any differences or preferences.

What we are incapable to manage by ourselves, Amida will do: it is Amida who will put an end to our suffering, to our sins, to our ignorance and selfishness.

He'll do for us what we are incapable of doing by ourselves. And in return, what is he asking from us? Nothing!

Amida asks nothing, he just calls us.

So large, so wide, so deep and so great is Amida's Compassionate Vow, that he does not ask us to do something special. We just have to hear, to hear his Name.

As a token of his Vow-Power, he gives us his Name Namu Amida Butsu.

And Namu Amida Butsu arises in us naturally, as some wonderful heavenly flower, and so it comes to our lips.

And our lips are saying Namu Amida Butsu just as every part of being and of our life is pervaded by the same and unique Namu Amida Butsu.

In fact, the whole world is pervaded by the light that knows no limits nor obstructions.

You must hear in and around yourself the Name. Hear how Amida vocalizes in you the Nembutsu!

Then your heart will turn toward the Name and shinjin will be realized.

This is Amida's sole objective. Therefore we must in our minds as well as in our daily life, express our gratitude towards him.

And our gratitude expresses itself in that Namu Amida Butsu. His saving Compassionate Vow-Power and our humble expression of gratitude meet and intermingle in the Nembutsu.

That is why we are all one with the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. For that reason we are never alone in life!

Namu Amida Butsu