

Buddha and the Cross

In our prayer or meditation room, we have a cross and a Buddha statue. Many people are surprised. I will explain here, from the Christian point of view, why a cross and a Buddha statue can stand side by side on our altar.

Christian teaching about the one God

The Christian teaching about God says that God loves all people and reveals Himself to them in a personal way. All people have equal access to God. This teaching is not an ownership of Christianity; it is not about our Christian God; it is about the nature of the one only God, who is the same God for all. It means God is like this not only for Christians but for all people, even if it is the way only Christians describe Him. It is what we believe as Christians.

God reveals Himself to all people

If it is true that God reveals Himself to all people, all main religions in their essence lead to God; it means they are a true expression of who God is and of the way to find Him. Yet all religions are not the same; they are like different languages, like different points of view. Their diversity echoes the diversity of people and cultures, in order for each one to find their way. Different religions present different images of God, because the nature of God is complex, beyond our representations. Diversity means complementariness.

Christ and other religions

Christianity describes Christ as an integral part of the Godhead, as one of the three persons of the Trinity. It means, Christ is part of God as well as the Holy Spirit. Christ and the Holy Spirit are not Christian properties; they are parts of the nature of God, as Christianity describes Him, that it has called by the names of “Christ” and “the Holy Spirit”. As they are part of the nature of God, they have to be present in a way or another in other religions, if Christianity is right in this description of God. The fact that they are not called by other religions with the names Christianity gives them, is irrelevant.

Religions as descriptions and ways to God

Religions are the different forms of teaching (revelation and human experience) about the nature of God and the way to Him. They are not God in Himself, but only our talk about Him, enabling the means to bring us nearer to Him. They are like fingers which show the direction to the Holy. A Chinese saying puts it this way: “when the finger shows the moon, the fool looks at the finger”. This is true also about religion. We have the tendency to confuse teaching with spirituality, which encompasses our living and personal relationship with God. We can say that religion is the teaching and the form, and spirituality is our own personal path.

God is beyond any representation

God cannot be described. Orthodox theology makes the distinction between cataphatic and apophatic theologies: the first tries to say it all, the second avoids saying too much, because no description can be satisfying. As Berdaiev says, the representations we have of God are never corresponding with who/what God truly is; these representations are more like idols (!) than like the true unfathomable image of God. God is beyond any representation and description.

Our own religion and other religions

We are used to our own religion which we know from the inside. We have made it personal in our own heart. It is our own life. The religion of others seems to us strange and incomplete, because we do not know it from the inside. We cannot judge what it means for the people who practise it. We cannot compare our own home with the house of other people in far countries (the igloo, the African hut), because they are not on the same level for us. It would be like comparing our own children with the African children we see on TV; we know that they are all creatures of God and we can try to learn to love them in the same way God loves them, but we will never be truly able to do so. Our children are the dear beings we know so well with whom we have created a link of the heart and flesh; they are parts of ourselves. African children cannot compete with them. This metaphor shows that we cannot compare religions. If there is such a variety of ways, God knows why and it must have a meaning. He is in charge.

We are born in a context

Religions are like the soil in which we grow. We cannot be nowhere; we have to find our own path (our own tradition) as we have to be rooted in soil somewhere. We were born where we were. For most of us, the place of birth means the choice of a given tradition: Christianity in Europe, Hinduism or Islam in India, Buddhism in Asia, Islam in the Near East, Taoism or Shintoism in Japan, etc. This diversity and this apparent absence of choice mean that all religions lead to God, despite the many differences. I cannot imagine God tricking some people into false religions. When religion is side-tracked or disfigured, it is because of the way we manipulate it (our own).

Spiritual maturity in diversity

Personally, I feel a deeper bond with the Dalai Lama or with Ramana Maharshi (although I do not know them personally) than with many people in my parish. I learned so much from other religions which helped me to discover more deeply the meaning of Christianity. In each religion there are advanced mature people and more primitive people who practise it as a simple formal ritual or superstition.

Idols and fetishism

Each representation of God is a form of idol, because it triggers us to adore the image of God more than God Himself in His mystery. When Abhishiktananda says: “how do you know that God has no trunk (in reference to Ganesh, the god with an elephant head)? If you do, you are the one who has a precise representation of God and adores an idol; more than the Hindus

do!” I like this challenge because it forces us to clean the board of our representations. God remains a mystery, invisible, impossible to translate into images. This is one of the great teachings of meditation for me. This is why the 2nd commandment forbids any image of God. There are always more idols in our life than we think.

Rituals are symbols, not representations

Each religion has its own rituals, which are experiential means to become closer to God. They are only means and supports for our imagination and fervour. The danger is that they become idols or fetishes. What is a cross, an icon, a statue, an image of Jesus? It can be a support for our prayer as it can also, at the opposite end, become the fetish we adore. The limit between these two ways is thin and fragile.

Buddha and the Cross

Our Buddha and our Cross at DCH are both nothing else but pieces of wood. They become the supports of what we project onto them. Of course they are related to a tradition, to a Story (crucifixion and resurrection / meditation and enlightenment). In the practice of meditation we learn to go to the core, beyond the representations; we learn to live in the emptiness, beyond representations. Yet these objects remain symbolic helps for our prayer. In which way do they help? I can understand that the Cross talks more to Christians than the Buddha. It is more difficult for me to understand how the Buddha can have a negative charge, because it does not say anything against our Christian faith. If it does, then it is good to ask what it is. The question is: in which way does the wooden object of the cross help me to pray and in which way does the Buddha become an obstacle? What do I load onto these two wooden objects? This is a difficult question because it touches many very different aspects of our beliefs. For me, in my practice of prayer and meditation, both objects have a positive and a negative content, but the positive is far more important. Buddha is a good image of, and an inspiration for, what we try to do when we sit. It could be also a photo of someone I find inspiring (for instance Gandhi or Martin Luther King).

What others see

Of course it is another question to ask how other people perceive it. Do we have to hide these items or do we trust people to understand? We are testimonies of our own path which is rich of our own experience. Of course we have to avoid becoming stumbling blocks for others, but we can hope to be understood. For this reason we have to make it understandable. Many people ask questions. It is creative and challenging for all. Many others can be shocked. People are responsible for their response. We care what people understand from what we do; we try to be clear and explicit. Yet we have also to be faithful to our path. I believe that our open heart to other religions is a great help for many people, certainly not for the most traditionalists! I believe that there is a great urgency in this form of opening of the Church; if it does not open, it will die. It is a question of life and death. Follows who can! Life has no pity; yet we have to go on this path with all the compassion and the care we can practise. It will never be enough! Yet the urgency of Truth is pushing us to become “signs of contradiction” (as they used to say in Taizé: “struggle with a reconciled heart”).

Us and the others

What is at stake is the way we tend to see “us” as distinct from “the others” because we believe we “have” the Truth. The fact that we have part to the Truth or we are deeply moved by the understanding we have of God (our faith) does not mean that others are wrong. I believe, the Church today is suffering deeply from this fundamental division between “us” and “the others”. In Christ there are no “others”, no Greeks and no Jews, no slaves and no free (wo)men. Jesus sat always with the marginal, because he was never “inside”, but stood always on the threshold to welcome the ones who felt rejected. In this way he challenged the Pharisees. He would today challenge us (our present Church) in the same way. For me the living Church is the whole Creation with all its living beings, as the living body of Christ which unites all people. There are no boundaries. We are all similar (brothers and sisters) in our search of the Divine. The theologian James Alison describes what he calls the “intelligence of the victim”. He makes us aware that, unless we take clearly side with the weak, the marginal, the rejected, the so-called “other”, we become victimizers. In the same way, the refusal of the older son, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, to accept the welcoming of the “outer one” by the Father shows well our basic tendency: despite the fact that we are very aware how far we are from being perfect, we have tendency to believe that we are “inside” while the others are struggling. Maybe we have experiences of the “inside” but these are only glimpses; we are still on the way. All of us - 8 billion people – not counting the other creatures! Did I say: the “other” creatures?!

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