



**The Retreat Society of the Bamboo Grove**

Themes for the season:

# A Buddhist-Christian Reflection for Advent and Christmastide

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## Themes for the Season

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### **‘Our Daily Bread’ and the Kingdom of God**

#### *A Buddhist-Christian Reflection for Advent and Christmastide*

*‘Those who seek kingdoms stop seeking the Kingdom of God... The ways of the new city are neither conservative nor evolutionary nor revolutionary. No sort of social development can bring us to the coming kingdom of divine-humanity... The new social order will not be created from elements of ‘the world’; it will be created, in the ‘worldly’ sense, out of nothing, from other sources which lie outside the world’s social evolution, out of Spirit rather than out of the world... for the earth is not only physical, but metaphysical; our earth belongs to another world, it belongs to eternity.’ - Nicholas Berdyaev*

The Church, we are told, has to be fully aware of the world and its needs. It has to do whatever is in its power to tackle problems such as poverty, social injustice and the abuse of human rights. Well, few would disagree with that!

The question, however, is how should Christians (or Buddhists or indeed any religious person) set about doing this? Of course the Church has to be aware that ‘the poor’ are always with her and that their suffering is an integral part of the Body of Christ. Indeed, Christ tells us that we shall be judged on the quality of our response to this suffering. Hunger, loneliness, thirst, alienation, and imprisonment – all have to be directly responded to. Of that there can be no question. But, is that the whole story? Does that represent a truly religious response to the needs of our world? Well, according to St Paul, it clearly does not. Paul warns us that we may give away everything that we have – including our bodies – for the sake of the world and still be found wanting. Genuine response, genuine charity or metta is of quite a different order. What then is the missing ingredient? What else can we do?

Christ’s answer to these questions is clear and unambiguous: ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you’. Responding to the world’s problems, in other words, can never be just a matter of addressing or dealing with things as they stand for ‘as they stand’ they are, from the spiritual point of view, merely symptoms. We must dig right down beyond these symptoms and uncover their root cause. That, of course, is a highly uncomfortable business for it means acknowledging that we ourselves are part, indeed a crucial part, of the underlying problem. It is much easier for us to project our problems onto external factors and that, according to modern depth psychologists at least, is what we have been doing ever since ‘leaving paradise’! [Cf. Erich Fromm’s argument that our ‘ideologies’ are in fact merely substitutes for a lost paradisiac pattern of instinctive (animal) behaviour and so serving to mitigate the suffering that individual consciousness inevitably brings.]



Let us try to illustrate this with a little parable. A group of people stand in front of a large mirror and do not like what they see. Indeed, the picture in the mirror – our world - arouses in them a spectrum of negative feelings, ranging from mild discontent to out-and-out disgust. Our spectators therefore decide to change the mirror – instead of a round mirror they will get hold of a square one. And this they do. But, alas, nothing essential has changed. The new mirror presents them with the same disheartening picture as the previous one. Irritation and anger now turn to rage and, in a fit of revolutionary fervour, the square mirror is smashed to pieces to be replaced, this time, by a huge oblong mirror. But, of course, it too confronts our spectators with exactly the same dreary image as its predecessors. End of parable!

Look not outside, said Christ, but to yourself! That is where essential change takes place; everything else – the removal and smashing of institutional or ideological mirrors – is more or less just a rearrangement of those proverbial ‘deckchairs’. And, where are we to look for our ‘self’? Again, Christ’s answer is unequivocal: ‘It is the Kingdom of God within you’. Our Lord is telling us that our individual lives, together with that of our larger socio-political world, are awry, not because of external factors but because of our own essential lack of inwardness, depth and awareness!

On this theme, as on so many others, Master Eckhart offers some startling words of warning:

‘Evil is accidental in its nature, it stands outside, draws and directs things outward, distracts from inner things, draws to what is other, smacks of otherness, of division, withdrawal or falling away.’

God, on the other hand, Eckhart reminds us, is incapable of recognising anything external. God sees, wills, knows, and does everything ‘solely in Himself, outside of Himself he does nothing’! Further, our inwardness and God’s inwardness are one and the same:

‘God’s ground and my ground are the same ground.’

Putting this another way, we could say that we have to follow the example of Mary, our Mother, and learn to keep all the riches and complexities of the world ‘in our heart’. For, as St Exupery’s Little Fox puts it: ‘what is essential can be seen only with the eyes of the heart’. Without depth there is no vision. And, it is this in-depth ‘seeing’, alone, that enables us to respond to the world in a proper, i.e. adequate fashion.

The art of seeing in this way – and it is an art and not a mere counsel of perfection – is what Buddhists call ‘mindfulness’ and it results, whether suddenly or gradually, in that dramatic shift of consciousness which the Gospel calls conversion (*metanoia*) and Zen *satori*.

Now, the great German writer, Goethe, once said that ‘because truth is so often denied *in fact* we must go on repeating it *in words*’ and it is the task of the Church, in many ways its major task, to continue ‘pointing to the moon’. Its job is to go on reminding us of the eternal parameters of Christ’s teaching and, like any good instructor, it must be prepared to transcend itself, even to the point of redundancy. The eternal parameters – the moon – centre entirely on this matter of *metanoia* and Christ presents them to us in a thousand different ways but always indirectly - in parable, in metaphor, in paradox and, above all, in his own life.

Our choice, as ever, is between ‘finger’ and ‘moon’, between ‘busy-ness’ and ‘Our Father’s business’, between ‘worldly kingdoms’ and ‘God’s Kingdom’, between *avidya* (*ignorance*) and *bodhi* (*spiritual awareness*), between *samsaric* suffering and enlightenment. The Gospel often presents this choice in



terms similar to those of certain contemporary philosophers. I am thinking, for example, of Gabriel Marcel's distinction between two modes of living – the mode of 'having' and the mode of 'being'. Isn't that precisely the distinction Christ himself made when speaking to 'the rich young man'? 'You must', he told the young man, 'sell all that you have' if you are to be healed, to become whole (perfect), as your Heavenly Father desires. In other words, for that young man to grow and develop, he had to be 'born again'. Born into a realm of *being*, rather than *having*, a realm that is far closer to that of 'the sparrows and lilies of the field' than that of those countless men and women who – 'for ever with us' – busily strive to 'gain the whole world' even when, as with the rich young man, this striving is done in the name of the Law or Dharma. Only those who are reborn to that more natural, more immediate realm – where we are united with our archetypal selves – are free to follow Christ in the Way of Truth and Life. To the 'worldly wise', those dealing in 'wars and rumours of wars', such Life is no life at all but sheer poverty and abject nonsense. Yet, as Lau Tzu told us long ago, in words reminiscent of the Gospel:

'When a wise man hears the Tao, he follows it. When one of average mind hears it, he holds to it a while and presently loses it. When a foolish man hears it, he only laughs at it. If it were not held in derision by such men, it could not rightly be called Tao [Way]!'

It is interesting to note, however, that 'the rich young man' does not exactly fit any of Lao Tzu's three categories. He undoubtedly heard 'the Tao' – the Word – for, far from laughing, 'he turned sadly away'. And, though Christ 'loved him', for he was upright, sincere and truly seeking 'a more abundant life', he did not call him back in order to water-down what he had said or to explain that the young man had somehow 'got it wrong'. No. Christ let him go, for he knew the young man needed time. However, if the young man kept faith with what he had heard and allowed the Word to go on reverberating in his heart, then one day quite suddenly he would realise that, despite himself, he had become one with the Tao, 'a wise man' readily and willingly following the Way!

Simone Weil, closely echoing the above words of Master Eckhart, writes in no less startling terms:

'Creation is an act of love and it is perpetual. At each moment our existence is God's love for us. But God can only love himself. His love for us is love for himself through us. Thus, he who gives us our being loves in us the acceptance of not being. Our existence is made up only of his waiting for our acceptance not to exist. He is perpetually begging from us that existence which he gives. He gives it to us in order to beg it from us.'

If in this way, we 'lose our life' then we become one with Christ who is 'the bread of Life' and, so, in the remarkable words of St Thomas Aquinas, we finally become creatures 'capable of the universe'. Such a person is, in Buddhist terms, a Bodhisattva, someone living not out of 'the little mind' of egocentricity but out of Buddha Nature, the 'Great Mind', which is the Mind of Christ, rooted in those apophatic depths where life is one.