

## RESPECT FOR THE BUDDHA

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Sermon by Sir Leslie Fielding, Lay Reader

“And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, saying know the Lord : for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, saith the Lord”. [Jeremiah 31 v 34]

The last time I was in this pulpit, I spoke about understanding Islam and the need to see what we have in common with that great Monotheistic faith, as well as being loyal to our own faith and realistic about where Christianity goes one way and Islam another. And next time, on Easter Day, at the end of Holy Week, I shall preach on that central mystery of the Christian Faith which is the Resurrection of Christ. But today, as a fitting spiritual exercise in Lent of discernment and human outreach, I will say something about that other great world religion, which is Buddhism.

The founder was an Indian prince turned ascetic, Siddharta Gautama, b 563 BC, who was much obsessed by the fragility of life – disease, decay, death. He left his palace in search of peace and enlightenment. He discovered and preached the path of self denial and detachment from this world, leading ultimately to the cessation of all cravings – even the craving not to crave – in the final state of Nirvana. Along the way, the escape from suffering was to be assisted by friendliness and compassion and non-violence.

Now for some criticism. In Buddhism, I miss the presence of the one true God. I do not find the idea of repeated rebirth credible, in an almost endless cycle of re-incarnation. I suspect a kind of selfishness in the search for individual perfection ; and an element of escapism in Buddhist attitudes to the real world. I would not swap the chance of heaven – of being with God and those who love him – for a Nirvana of pure personal extinction in perpetual peace.

Next, some praise. In my limited personal experience, Buddhism seems almost the opposite of contemporary Islam. The latter is good in theory, but less impressive in practice. With Buddhism, it seems the other way round.

Let me speak of Theravada Buddhism in Indo China in the 1960s. It was above all a gentle as well as a peaceful religion – no killing or forcible conversion or fanatical behaviour : in fact, the absolute obverse. Much good work was done in the name of Buddha in each village pagoda – education of the young, advice to the adult, charity to the needy, care for the sick. The habit of some young men (particularly future rulers and leaders) of shaving their heads and living as a monk for a space, before returning to the world, was also impressive. In Phnom Penh, I was lucky enough to have had a monk for a language tutor and I met and talked to others. In their ascetic life-style – indifference to worldly things and the values of the “acquisitive society” – Western materialism received a well-deserved rebuke. In my mind's eye, I can still see those holy men seated in saffron robes chanting a blessing. The

rhythmic drone of their compassionate Sutras lifted the spirit towards something which lay beyond space and time.

Yet they were almost all carried away by the genocide of Pol Pot, not many years later. Sometimes, in neighbouring Vietnam too, a monk's life could be less than tranquil. I can understand, although not condone, the death of a Buddhist monk in Saigon in 1966. The Government of South Vietnam at that time – non-Communist but moderately oppressive – had been breaking up peaceful political protests with bullets ; and had taken to ransacking a burning Buddhists temples in and around the capital. This monk had come up from the countryside, sat down silently and peacefully on the pavement for a minute or so, and then – dowsing himself with petrol – had burned himself to death. The photograph, with the billowing smoke and the shaven head shining in the flames, went round the world. Ultimately, the monk's self-sacrifice destroyed the Government.

What should we Christians make of all this? Many have written on the subject, and all of them with respect. Father Harry Williams, a monk in the Anglican community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, has written as follows in "Some Day I'll Find You" (his autobiography) :

"I see that if I had been fed by another religion, I should call the Christ Reality something else - the Buddha nature, for instance, especially with regard to the compassion shown by the Buddha when he refused Nirvana for himself in order to bring enlightenment to men. Many of the hymns addressed in the Japanese Buddhist tradition to Amida Buddha are in content identical to hymns addressed by Christians to Jesus".

Or take the well-know Cistercian writer, Robert Merton, visiting a Buddhist sanctuary in Sri Lanka, not long before his death :

"I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation, but [that which] has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything – without refutation – without establishing some other argument".

I know, from personal experience, a little of what gripped Merton when he wrote that.

Now to try to put Buddhism into perspective. Our Christian acceptance of the revelation of God in the man Jesus – the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension of the Son of God – is a commitment of hearts which rules out a closure of minds. We need to find time for openness also. The Divine Being impinges on human kind in many ways and in many guises, fully known only to God. Christianity is the world's largest religion – about a third of the population of the planet is Christian, where for example, only 5% is Buddhist. But the Christian Faith is not in vulgar competition with other religions. And Christianity is

the religion of God's love. The mission of the Church to the world has to be in conformity with that divine love. There should be no place, in the Church which Jesus founded, for arrogance, self-congratulation, fanaticism, coercion, selfishness. Continuous with the Church, there is a wider human community in search of God. A wider community where, in diverse ways, a reverence for God can find sincere human expression.

So, to other religions, we should address where possible our respect. When we enter their holy places, we leave our shoes behind us on the threshold and walk softly, without setting out deliberately to trample on other men's dreams, or damage the fabric which they have woven to the glory of the same God. Ubi caritas, et amor ; ibi Deus est. God and His Church are not conterminous. The Holy Spirit is also at work outside the Church. Wherever there is goodwill and goodness, there is the grace of God.

But the Church remains central to God's purposes. As we sang together in Psalm 34, just now : "O praise the Lord with me : and let us magnify his name together ... O taste and see, how gracious the Lord is : blessed is the man that trusteth in him". Therefore, in the True Faith, the commitment remains to Christ : to the Babe of Bethlehem, the Cross of Golgotha, the resurrected and ascended Lord of the Universe, the only redeemer of all peoples on earth, whether they know it or not.  
Thanks be to God.

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