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The Christian Task in a Renascent Ceylon

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In this article I wish to address myself to the problem of the theological approach to the revival of religion in Ceylon. It is commonplace phraseology to speak of the revolutionary Asian scene of this decade. It is also possible to adopt an indifferent attitude to the religious awakening which goes hand in hand with the deepening of a national consciousness characteristic of our day. The tremendous speed of events in the East has taken the unimaginative world by surprise, and those who were unmindful of the age-long national aspirations of the Asian people are confronted with the new situation as a reality to be reckoned with. A new chapter in the political and the religious history of the people of Ceylon has begun with its promise of immense possibilities for good, and at the same time posing a challenge to those who subscribe to a different ideology, different from that of the Buddhist. It will be detrimental to the purpose of the Church to treat these revolutionary changes as mere meaningless incidents in the drama of history. It is the duty of the Church to survey realistically the implications of the new situation and seek diligently to discern the will of God for our time. It may be that God is shaking us out of an erroneous view of the automatic growth and advancement of His Kingdom, and challenging us to greater loyalty and more faithful service. With this approach to the problem I wish to consider the exact nature and scope of the Buddhist revival in Ceylon and state what I consider to be a reasonable Christian apologetic demanded of the Church.

The fundamental basis of the political advancement and religious revival in the East is the twentieth century conception of human personality with its emphasis on the essential rights of man. This is obviously not the whole truth, rather it is one aspect of a certain paradox. On the one hand, the scientific view of nature, and the modern society, whose culture in many lands is mainly technological, have brought before men the immensity of the universe and have been responsible for the depersonalisation of man. The glorification and idealisation of the state has reduced man to almost a mere tool, whose interests and hopes must be surrendered for the well-being of the state. It is apparent how damaging and disastrous such a process could be. On the other hand, the struggle to uphold the true value of human personality and to recognise man's legitimate place in the world is the saving factor of our age. The conflict between these two ideologies is the cause of the tension in the world today. In the East the new emphasis on the rights of man, essentially the right of man to a free life with freedom to think and express himself and live as a citizen of a free

country, is the ideological basis of the new age. It is acclaimed as an opportune emphasis that to deny man his elementary rights would mean the denial of the means whereby and the sphere wherein the individual grows to maturity as a member of society, making his contribution to its total wellbeing. Either man's rights are recognised and he is given the opportunity to exercise them in a creative way, or he is branded as an insignificant tool in a comprehensive mechanism. It would have been the greatest tragedy in the history of the world if the Asian people had never awakened to the fact that only as free people enjoying and living up to the responsibilities of their legitimate rights they could ever realise their national hopes and aspirations. It is inspiring to observe the change of mental outlook in the lives of ordinary men in the streets of cities in India or Ceylon. They are free individuals, citizens of free and self-governing countries. A new sense of dignity, self-respect, and the value of human personality has enriched the life of our people. The political changes, revolutionary and sweeping as they are, have inspired new hope, a greater love for the country, and a spirit of sacrificial service.

In a country like Ceylon where the relation between the foreign ruler and the people was one of cordiality, the change does not appear so clearly marked. But one has only to penetrate a little deeper to recognise in the people a consciousness of their being free, responsible for the government of their country and the progress of their nation. This national consciousness with this change of outlook is not erected on the superficial edifice of political slogans, but is built on a worthy conception of man. If the individual is irreplaceable, and if 'society' and 'nation' are terms void of meaning apart from the individuals who comprise them, then the new emphasis on the true value of human personality is indeed the saving factor of our age.

I am not for a moment countenancing the possible abuse of rights and the dangers of elevating man into unwarranted heights of importance and grandeur, nor do I minimise the obvious disaster of a wrong conception of nationalism. But the recognition of the fact that the political changes in Ceylon, as in the East in general, have a religious and ethical basis is necessary for a proper evaluation of the present situation.

The Religious Revival

In Ceylon this awakening of the national consciousness with its emphasis on the rights of man is inextricably bound up with a religious revival. History bears out the fact that the culture, civilization and the political history of Ceylon should not be treated in isolation from its religion. Buddhism which is the religion of the people is not a thing apart but permeates every sphere of national life. Buddhism has provided the values which are conserved in the political and social life of the people. Today Buddhism in the sense of Buddhist activities, such as the building up and the enlarging of its institutions, increased publication of its religious literature, and the more systematic proclamation of its faith, is being revived with great vigour. If, however, this busy scene of religious activity is motivated by, and has gathered momentum at the impulse of political considerations, then it is destined to be short lived. But as we have suggested, if the religious revival has a more profound reason and seeks to meet some deeper spiritual need of the people, then it will continue to be the most dominant feature in the life of the country.

Apart from the superficial view that only a Buddhist could be a true patriot—to which the lie has been given by many a Christian example of patriotism—which is an oft-heard slogan of irresponsible propagandists, it is necessary to inquire whether the people have discovered a new message in their faith which is more relevant to the present situation. Has their faith confronted them with the real spiritual and moral issues and provided the answer to their age old religious aspirations? Have they unearthed from some hidden sources a new philosophy of life which takes into account man in the contemporary world, or a more satisfying interpretation of the universe and the meaning and purpose of human existence? Evidently there is no revival and application of an ancient dogma, nor are the people concerned about any profound interest in the philosophical fundamentals of the Buddhist faith. The new challenge that proceeds from the Buddhist leaders is the challenge of the ethics of their faith. The discipline of ethics is preached as the factor which is conducive to healthy society and robust national life. Sir S. Radhakrishnan in his famous volumes on Indian philosophy has characterised Buddhism as an 'Ethical Idealism'. Today we see in Ceylon an attempt to revive the ethics of the Buddha. The religious quest and the religious ideal are identified with moral perfection. This appeal for a higher standard of moral conduct finds a willing response from the ordinary Buddhist who is not primarily concerned with a higher end, although in the depths of his own being the inescapable spiritual yearning finds an echo in his desire for *Moksha* or *Nirvana*. Every student of religion acknowledges, no doubt, that good ethics are in a measure capable of producing goodness of character. This possibility is true of Buddhism. The Buddhist ethic with its essential requirement of self-discipline lays down in its 'Eight Fold Path' the principles which should govern man's behaviour in the complex social relationships he finds himself in. It traces the cause of all evil to desire or selfishness, and the elaborate ethical discipline advocated in the teachings of Buddha is aimed at the annihilation of the root cause, desire, which enslaves man to himself and to the unreality of the empirical world.

We are confronted with a man-made system which does not recognise the transmundane reality and, therefore, seeks not to order life in terms of the claims and demands of that Reality. We question the validity of the claim of such a system which in the guise of religion professes to give a solution to the most profound spiritual issues of life.

Here we take note of the counter-challenge that although in the experience of an average Buddhist ethics take precedence over the religious needs and problems, the ethics of Buddhism are not an end in themselves, but the path leading to the religious goal. The purpose of the ethical discipline advocated in the 'Eight Fold Path' is to remove suffering which for the Buddhist is at the very core of life. So, then, the good life or the ethically disciplined life is not the fruit of the religious life but the primary requisite or qualification for deliverance from the recurring existence or *Samsara*.

By way of contrast, let us look at the Christian conception of the good life. Beauty of character is not the means to salvation, but the essential and natural expression of the new relationship of man with God. It is the gift of God and not the reward of man's labour. It is necessary to remind our non-Christian brethren that the Christian faith is supremely concerned with man in his relationship with other men in society. The

ethic of Jesus is unsurpassing not in the mere content of it, for we find parallels to it in other religions, but in the truth that man is made capable of responding to its demands. In other words ethical discipline presupposes a definite spiritual experience, a particular temper of mind and spirit which enables man to order his life in terms of the ethical demands of his faith. We would be arguing in a circle if we ask whether 'right conduct, right speech, right concentration and right meditation' are the means to perfection of character or whether they are the expression of a life that has found the secret of goodness. It is the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ that man who is enslaved in selfishness and sin is redeemed by Christ, and, henceforth, the good life is brought within his grasp. Nothing is as far from the Christian teaching as the thought that God requires goodness of character in order to make His work of redemption effective in the life of the individual. Jesus said, 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.'

Buddhism and Democratic Principles

I began this discussion with the assumption that the key-note of the political and religious crisis is the new emphasis on the rights of man to a free life, and that the Buddhist revival preaches the need for a higher standard of moral conduct as the guarantee of a healthy national life. It is unfair, however, to consider Buddhist ethics apart from the fundamental tenets of Buddhist philosophy. Consideration of space will not allow me to make a critical survey of the major articles of the Buddhist Faith, to enquire whether the beliefs implied by the Faith are conducive to wholesome ethics. Could the thought of a society of free individuals who are inspired by lofty national aspirations be reconciled with the philosophical tenets of Buddhism? Is there not a contradiction at the heart of Buddhism? We need to consider only the doctrine of Karma to illustrate the contradiction. Karma is the inexorable law of cause and effect applied to the realm of morals. The whole purpose of all the religious observances and ethical discipline is to discover a way of escape from the iron grip of Karma. It is true that in a sense the doctrine does not imply the total negation of the individual's self-determination, for a man is himself the author of his Karma. It is the sum-total of his volitional acts of deliberate choice that determine his Karma. While this is true there is a necessary link between the past of one, unknown to him, and his present, and between his present and his future. The past determines the present and the present determines the future and not even God can deliver one from this determinism. So, with the utmost concession one can make to the doctrine of Karma, Karma does not make a man a free being.

Similarly the Buddhist doctrines of causation and impermanence do not warrant the modern emphasis on the dignity of man. If according to the doctrine of *Anatta* or non-ego, man is nothing but a meaningless process of becoming, it is intellectually an absurdity to propound a theory of personality on such a basis. A philosophy of self-consciousness which denies abiding self-hood is a logical contradiction, which may well prove a psychological disaster. It was Sankara who first pointed out the logical and metaphysical inconsistency between the doctrine of Causation which implies permanence and the theory of Universal Impermanence.

A passing reference to the other major tenet of Buddhist thought, i.e., the doctrine of Universal Suffering could serve as a further illustration. If suffering is the very stuff of life, and if it is the greatest evil in the world, how could man escape the dismal mental and spiritual atmosphere to plan for a better world? Such a view of life is pessimistic to the extreme and in no way could make man eager to work for a better society and national life. Beauty of nature, the coloured sunsets, and the starry heavens, the painted flowers and the fragrant woods have been a perennial source of inspiration and joy to all men. These have often pointed man to the goodness and wisdom of a benevolent Creator. The Buddhist philosopher, however, is so overwhelmed and obsessed by the fact of pain and suffering in the world that he equates this phenomenon with the underlying principle of the universe. He has no word of appreciation for the beauty and sweetness of human love, the joy and peace of the home and the delights of friendship and fellowship. A world bereft of these values would indeed be a horrid world to live in.

The Christian Approach to the Problem

The Christian apologetic has to be addressed to a people who in the first flush of their enthusiasm for religious and political revival are upholding indirectly a doctrine of man which is foreign to their Faith. Christian theology takes a very realistic view of the total situation and does not baffle man with contradictions. There is no Christian theological tenet which negates the true spiritual longings of the human heart. The Christian faith is the gospel of the redeeming love of God which liberates man enslaved in sin and sets him free to enjoy the glorious liberty that belongs to the children of God. Christian theology does not minimise the awfulness of sin; rather no other faith takes such a realistic view of the power of sin as is abundantly illustrated in the cross of Christ. It also recognises that man unaided by God is at the mercy of the consequences of his own wickedness. The Christian doctrine of Grace is the answer to the Buddhist doctrine of Karma. It is the testimony of Christians down the centuries that God in Christ has made available for all who put their trust in Him the limitless resources of His Grace. Man redeemed from his enslaving self-centredness is made a free being who can realise his personality in obedience to the will of God. Thus man in the context of his new circumstance experiences freedom to walk in the paths of righteousness. The beauty of character which issues from his new relationship with God is the wonderful gift of God. The new discipline is undertaken cheerfully because the Christian believes that on the Cross Christ dealt the final blow to the worst manifestation of sin. The Resurrection of our Lord is the supreme demonstration in history that sin is a defeated enemy and that man, therefore, is called to live in a world where Christ has conquered. It is the Christian doctrine of man that opens up before us the tremendous possibilities of the regenerate life.

In our approach to the contemporary Buddhist awakening, intellectual honesty and fairness of judgment demand that we should be appreciative of the good motives which inspire our brethren. The spirit that condemns other Faiths as superstitious, betrays ignorance of the glimpses of truth vouchsafed to the seers of old. To discard them as destructive forces or to brand them as blind guides is to deny their influence for good. On the

other hand, the unwarranted liberalism which is ever ready to accommodate and compromise betrays doubt in the absolute nature of the Christian faith and the uniqueness of Christ. In a situation where an ancient faith, so integral to the life of the people, threatens to sweep across the country with a new challenge, it is the task of the Church to point men and women to what God has accomplished in Christ for them. The Church, conscious of its tremendous responsibility to proclaim and bear witness to the life-affirming and ennobling Gospel of Christ, should seek reverently to lift up Christ before men. The present situation calls for a Christian apologetic, a fresh statement of the fundamentals of the faith which in itself would be the message that Christ came to impart Life and more abundant Life.



A Christian is prepared to submit to an idea which may cost him his all; but one thing he knows it must not cost him—a final denial of Christian love. The very love which prepares him to submit to the costing idea, forbids him to sacrifice love as part of the cost. He tries all things; he holds fast to that which is good. He surrenders all things, but he cannot surrender the love which made him willing to surrender.—John Middleton Murray: *The Price of Leadership*. S.C.M. Press. p. 149.



To crave always for the old is mere sentiment. To follow ever after the new is the mark of light and unstable minds, as Julius Caesar observed rather pointedly long ago. The Christian faith is not primarily interested either in the old or the new, but in something that will hold good always, the truth. The Christian faith arose because of the belief that not merely had Jesus Christ taught the truth, but that in the words used by the fourth Evangelist, he was Truth.—Sabapathy Kulandran: *The Message and the Silence of the American Pulpit*. The Pilgrim Press. p. 179.



And another mystic says human nature is like a stable inhabited by the ox of passion and the ass of prejudice; animals which take up a lot of room and which I suppose most of us are feeding on the quiet. And it is there between them, pushing them out, that Christ must be born and in their very manger He must be laid and they will be the first to fall on their knees before Him. Sometimes Christians seem far nearer to those animals than to Christ in His simple poverty, self-abandoned to God.—Evelyn Underhill: *Light of Christ*. Longmans, Green & Co. p. 41.