

## **RESPECT FOR THE BUDDHA**

**T**HERE is much for which Catholics can be thankful in the history of their religion in Ceylon. They have for instance helped in the growth of the educational system, in the general development of the country and the better understanding of human rights.

However, one respect in which Catholics and perhaps Christians in general have been sadly lacking in the past is in a sense of tolerance towards other religions, as for example, towards Buddhism in this country. While Buddhism claims that in its missionary expansion it has followed principles of tolerance and non violence, Catholics cannot lay claims to such a record of history or even to a doctrine of that nature.

The truth of the matter is that we came to this country with the conquering armies of the Portuguese who tried to extirpate what they believed was paganism and implant the religion of Christ instead. They went further and so linked up Christianity with their power and their cultural traits that they thought that not only Buddhism but even the culture of the people of this country had in some way to be supplanted by theirs. During the Portuguese period the Buddhists in Ceylon suffered much at the hands of these foreign Christian rulers.

In later periods the Catholics were not so linked to the colonial powers; they were persecuted by the Dutch. Under the British, the Christians including Catholics, had definite advantages specially due to the subsidies for educational work and the general ethos of the regime.

Throughout these periods Catholics continued their rather uncompromising attitude of spiritual superiority and regarded Buddhism as a false religion which had to be supplanted by Catholicism.

### **Christians and Respect for the Buddha**

We are fortunate that at last in our generation we can try to undo the damage of such unfortunate relationships by more humane and more authentically spiritual approaches. Naturally in the process of building understanding among religious groups we should neither dilute our faith nor be opportunistic in our attitudes towards persons of other religions. The plain fact is that the Christians of today have the advantage of outage - to be able to recognize better the fact and value of the plurality of religions in the country and the world.

Christians now have a greater realization of the immense spiritual treasures of the great world religions. They recognize that all these religions share in some way in the truth about man's ultimate destiny and happiness both here and hereafter. We have come to see better that truth can have many aspects and be understood by different peoples in different ways — even though the truth in itself must be one.

For the Catholics Vatican II has consolidated these gains very succinctly in the document on the relations with other religions:

"Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changing world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways", comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy among these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the one she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14, 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in Whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

The Church, therefore exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men." (*Art 2*).

### **Inadequate elaboration of thought and practice**

However, there was no detailed elaboration of what our attitudes towards these religions could be, as was done in the decree on Ecumenism concerning inter-Christian relations. Theological thought had not been elaborated concerning the role of those religions according to God's salvific plan. Only the very broad outlines were dealt with in the Council decree.

In the case of inter-Christian Ecumenism there had been a considerable amount of work — both research and active cooperation — that had gone on for several decades prior to the Council. The head of Pope John's Secretariat for Christian Unity, Cardinal Bea, was an eminent scholar, and an ardent and powerful apostle of Christian unity. The Popes John and Paul were also positively engaged in this endeavour and did not fight shy of publicly accepting a share of responsibility for the division among Christians; each of them expressed regret for the past faults of the Catholics and invited all Christians to forgive each others past insults and injuries and to work keenly towards unity without giving up dedication to the truth.

In the relations with other religions there was no such elaboration of thought and practice. The establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for other Religions was a result of the Council discussions, rather than a cause of the decree. Unfortunately this Secretariat has not yet had the same impact as the Secretariat on Christian Unity.

Hence we find after Vatican II, there is still no accepted theological perspective on the attitude of Catholics, towards other religions. Certainly the atmosphere is much better and the broad minimum proposed by Vatican II is generally accepted within the Church.

### **Two trends**

There have been two broad trends since Vatican II in the development of Catholic thinking on this issue. Some, specially those who are in constant contact with persons of other religions have tended to develop the thinking further. They have worked in the direction of understanding the salvific role of these religions themselves in the plan of God in Jesus Christ. This has had an impact on ecclesiology itself, e.g. in the concepts of the anonymous Christians and the invisible Church.

The other trend, put forward specially by some in Western countries, has expressed alarm at the reduction of missionary vocations from the West and the number of conversions in some countries of the East. They contend that there has been an exaggerated optimism about the possibility of salvation and the non-Christian religions themselves leading to a loss of confidence in the Church's evangelizing mission. These would tend to emphasize the transcendent value of Christianity and to regard the other religions as merely preparing the way for it. Some of them are very considerate to the persons belonging to these religions but do not regard the religions themselves as a term of our dialogue.

It is our contention that we cannot dialogue in any depth with persons of other religions while abstracting from their allegiance to those religions. We cannot understand these persons, their culture and their countries if we do not try to understand and appreciate the religions themselves, and not merely the religions as such but also the persons who have been leading lights of these religions. In particular we cannot understand and appreciate Buddhists, if we do not understand and appreciate Buddhism and specially Gautama the Buddha himself. We must therefore have a satisfactory view of the role of the Buddha in our world vision and in our Christian thinking. If we neglect him or ignore him we do so at the risk of not understanding the persons with whom we intend to dialogue. This is one of the aspects of the crisis of the Christian missionary effort in Asian countries.

### **The Buddha**

To the peoples of Asia and specially in predominantly Buddhist countries like Ceylon, Gautama the Buddha is the greatest and noblest person in human history. He has been responsible for the shaping of the history, culture, (art, architecture, literature) and the moral and spiritual personality of these peoples. Their whole perspective of life has been deeply influenced by the spiritual experience and teaching of the Buddha. During a hundred generations the character of these peoples has been moulded by the spiritual message of the Buddha: a message which is one of universal love, kindness and tolerance.

We in our countries are indeed debtors to the Buddha for thanks to him the principles of justice, fairplay, unselfishness, non-violence and peace have been ingrained in

our people and in our culture. The Buddha is undoubtedly one of the greatest benefactors of mankind.

### **Honour where honour is due**

It is one of our obligations, maintained by Christianity too, to give honour to those whom honour is due. In this we must take a perspective of world history and that of our own countries. Few men have achieved as great an impact for good as the Buddha in the whole of human history; and no man has done more for Ceylon than he has through his doctrine and example.

Hence in justice we in Ceylon, whatever be our religious convictions, owe him respect and honour. This does not mean to deify him, and neither do Buddhists really regard him as God in the Christian sense of the term. Not to recognize privately and in public his contribution to our lives through successive generations is a value blindness that can do harm principally to us. He is more worthy of praise than some of the persons whom we commemorate during the liturgical year, even though their existence has meant hardly anything to us—and in some cases even their very existence has been questioned, e.g., St. Philomena, St. Christopher and St. Valentine.

We should not be miserly in giving credit to the Buddha, as if what we give him is taken away from God or Christ. On the contrary. Christ is God to us in the sense that everything good comes from him ultimately. Hence according to our perspective. God must surely have been in communion with the Buddha who has done such an immense good to humanity. We can truly honour God by also recognizing those whom God sends to show a valuable path for a given people.

### **Reparation**

A very special reason why we must now consider these issues very seriously is the record of our past attitudes and the debt of repentance and reparation that we owe to the Buddhists of our country for the way in which we have been thinking of and dealing with their religion — its beliefs, its leaders, its shrines, libraries and its customs. Our Christian rulers of the past and our Christian forefathers did not a little damage to the Buddhist religion in Ceylon as the books of history bear witness.

It is true that Christians too, then and now, have been the recipients of certain attacks by others; but then we were the intruders into a situation in which Buddhism prevailed. In any case the doctrine of Christ demands that we be generous to others irrespective of any harm done to us (so does also the teaching of the Buddha) and this is our part of the obligation in this mutual rapprochement of the two religious groups. We should not consider it an indignity to admit our past mistakes, and to reconsider our attitudes which led to such situations.

Penitence or conversion (metanoia) is an essential characteristic of our Christian message. We must practice not only in our individual lives but also in our group relationships. Nor should we think that the past is past and can be so easily forgotten. Our

people have suffered much indignity at the hand's of Christian rulers and it is only a genuine regret for the past that can bring about a conscious and authentic reconciliation based on mutual understanding and respect.

In order to be able to do all this we must rethink our theology concerning the Church and other religions. We must understand that the improvement of relations among religious groups is itself a phase of our mission, specially when there has been a period in which group aversions have been engendered and formented. Such a growth in mutual understanding is a partial realization of the plan of God for human harmony and brotherhood on earth.

Further, even our mission to bear witness to the teachings of Christ can be fulfilled in our country only through an understanding of the present beliefs and attitudes of the people. We could thereby try to show how the teaching of Christ complements that of the Buddha, how the one need not contradict the good that is in the other. It was in this way that "early Christianity dealt with Platonism or medieval Christians with Aristotelianism. If we do not recognize the values of the Buddha we shall be denying ourselves the main spiritual point of contact with many of our countrymen.

It may be said that all these things are unacceptable to the traditional Catholics of *simple faith*: that they will be scandalized and confused; that they will not know to distinguish between the honouring of the Buddha as a religious leader and the worship of God. There is some truth in this. The question however is: can we therefore afford to have things as they are and thus permit this religious ignorance to continue to the detriment of inter-religious understanding? Have not the teachers of Christianity been responsible for this narrow faith of our simple followers? If so should we not find ways and means of educating them to respect and appreciate God's gifts wherever they may be found; for otherwise we will be involved in the vicious circle of ignorance breeding misunderstanding and vice versa.

As St. Paul exhorts us we must learn to rejoice with those who rejoice and to be sad with those who are sad. Vesak is an eminent occasion for us to rejoice with fellow Buddhists in the birth, death and enlightenment of Asia's greatest religious sage. Can we not sincerely encourage our faithful to join in the happiness of their Buddhist countrymen and to help in making Vesak a true spiritual height in the year?

These are said not in order to dilute Christianity, but to deepen it into a fuller understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ. We have everything to gain by giving sincere respect to the Buddha; whereas if we ignore him and his teachings we will fail to commune with our people in some of their deepest spiritual and cultural experiences. We would also have failed to recognize the work of Christ in them through the Buddha.

**Source : 'Quest' - Volume 32/34 - 1969**