

CHRISTIANITY IN THE LIGHT OF ASIAN NONDUALITY

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The Asian contemplative traditions attract Christians today by their depth, simplicity and experiential power, and in doing so invite Christianity back to the unity and fullness of its own internal 'East'. Here is monasticism, 'blessed simplicity' and contemplative interiority. Here is rediscovered the original unity and apophatic transparency of the Christ-event. This 'East' is also the place of solitude and emptiness, the wilderness of Exodus and the burning bush and the revelation of the Name, 'I am.' This is the place of Jesus' baptism, where the words are heard over the waters, 'You are...'. It is the place of Christian baptism or 'illumination,' the birth of the new person in God. Asian 'nonduality' catalyzes the rediscovery of the pole of unitive identity in Christianity. This, in turn, is the core of a new Christian wisdom.

Here, at the internal eastern pole of Christianity, we find the principle which most deeply characterizes the three great traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. At the heart of each of these religions is nonduality. In polar contrast to the religions of the Word (Israel, Christianity and Islam), I would like to think of these three Asian religions as the spiritual traditions of the unitive Absolute - that is, of nondual reality, of the ineffable One, the source of all beings which is at once transcendent and immanent. While the three traditions of the West have prioritized relationship, the three Eastern traditions have deepened the dimension of identity. This unitive Absolute, or principle of identity (not to be equated with the western philosophical term), is the supreme metaphysical and spiritual archetype which, confronting the divine Word from the East, exercises a profound tidal attraction upon Christian spirituality and thought today. This unitive Absolute is the heart of what has been called the 'perennial philosophy'.

In the dialogue between Christianity and the Asian traditions today, this principle of nonduality - with its corollary, the nondual self - emerges as a central point not only of resonance but also of contrast. A number of Christians have embraced the personal realization of 'nonduality' as a valid expression of the goal of spiritual life. There has also been some examination of nonduality as a theological reality in Christianity, particularly in the Johannine writings of the New Testament. It is quite possible that nonduality will emerge as the theological principle of a rebirth of sapiential Christianity ('wisdom Christianity') in our time.

The unitive principle emerges in the New Testament both in the 'vertical' dimension of identity and in the 'horizontal' dimension of human relationship. It is present in the "I and the Father are one" and the "I am" of Jesus in John's Gospel. It is present in the koinonia, or communion, of the new, baptized, believers, which is a participation in the One which is God. (cf Jn 17:20-23) What is new as Christian spirituality rediscovers the nondual center today, under the influence of the Asian traditions, is the purity and autonomy with which the principle emerges. The unitive principle, standing free in its purity - detached from the second principle which is the Word, and then illumining the Word from within - becomes a hermeneutic eye which opens up each sector of Christian theology - long divided into nearly distinct kingdoms - to the central Mystery, itself newly open and luminous. From the God 'up there' and 'out there' of a dualistic western Christian tradition, we move to a conception of God become one with humanity in Christ: the central theological principle of divinization re-emerges.

When we look at Trinity and world together, unfocussing our Western eyes through Eastern lenses, we may suddenly glimpse what happened in Jesus Christ, in his cross and resurrection. In the 'fusion' which takes place in the body of the crucified Christ is the power of the cross. The nonduality here, comprehending heaven and earth, God and the universe, God and all humanity, is not the nonduality of the beginning (focus of the Asian traditions), but the nonduality of the end. In the cross of Jesus (that is, in his death and resurrection), God (or Trinity) and the Cosmos become one. This new unity is the 'body of Christ.' At this point, the Asian traditions today bring forward a further contribution: the mandala - a quasi-universal symbol of wholeness, of the unity of all reality. The 'mystery of the cross' - Trinity and creation become one - naturally expresses itself in a mandalic figure.

Adopting an Asian 'nondual' perspective, we regard the person as a whole; this whole person is often called the Self. To contemplate the human person in this unitive way in a Christian context - the new person - leads us immediately to baptismal initiation. It is here that the total person is reborn in the Holy Spirit, according

to the New Testament revelation. The 'new person' is a newly unitive person, participating in the divine One. Equivalent to the awakening or enlightenment event in Buddhism is the initiatory event in Christianity (known as photismos, illumination): a personal appropriation and experience of the Christ-event.

Purity of heart, from our interpretive perspective, is a characterization of this 'new self' of the baptized Christian, under the aspect of interiority. We are considering heart as the center of the person, where body, psyche, mind and spirit are present together. The heart is both the center of human awareness, experience and decision in this world, and the place of unitive realization. Purity of heart, as it appears in Cassian's first Conference, is equivalent to the integral state of the new, unitive self. Purity of heart is an expression for the self-awareness of the person as unified at its center, as participating in the unity which is God. Purity of heart and contemplation are two aspects of the same 'new person.' Baptismal rebirth and illumination is the primordial Christian contemplative experience, as an experience of nonduality, of the 'nondual self.' Subsequent contemplative experience is to be understood in the same way.

Nonduality, in the Christian context, pursues a distinctive course which may be summed up in the word 'incarnation.' This may be traced in the Incarnation proper - when 'the Word became flesh' in Jesus Christ. It may also be traced in the life pattern of the individual disciple. Finally, I believe that a progressive incarnation of the divine Unity, or nonduality, may be discerned in the history of the western world since the beginning of Christianity.

Christian faith corresponds to this incarnation of the divine Unity. First it is an affirmation of assumption of humanity into the divine One in Jesus Christ; then it is an affirmation of the same Unity as one's true identity. The unitive illumination of baptism disappears into this life of faith as the seed disappears into the ground, to bring forth its fruit.

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