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Religions of the World Unite?

CHRISTIANITY AMONG THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD.

By Arnold Toynbee. Oxford University Press. 8/6.

BUDDHIST WISDOM BOOKS.

By Edward Conze. Allen & Unwin. 13/6.

THE CASE FOR REINCARNATION.

By Leslie D. Weatherhead. 1/3.

WITH the growing threat of atheistic Communism, and the more insidious inroads of a vague yet fundamental materialism, there have been many voices—from Aldous Huxley to ecumenical Christians, from Baron von Hugel to yet another journalist “shocked” by Christian divisions—raised in favour of a common spiritual front. Now the polymathic Professor Toynbee, master of the grand historical perspective, puts in his careful plea.

In a wide-ranging survey, he shows how, in the East especially (say to a gentle Confucian), the offence of the “blood-thirstiness” of the Cross is tremendous: and, on top of that, Christianity is stamped as the associate and justifier of gun-boat imperialism and economic exploitation. All over the world, the expansion of Christendom (Europe) has sent priests and missionaries hard on the heels of conquistadors, and sometimes the rôles have been combined. The gap between preaching and practice has been appalling, and it is not much use explaining to the bewildered victims the difference between a geographical Christendom and the spiritual reality of the one true Church.

Buddhism, on the other hand, though in theory its ideal of Nirvana is a selfish one, has often in practice been marked by the refusal of the Buddha’s disciples, following his own example, to accept the escape from the “world” which they have earned by their spiritual self-discipline. He, and they, set themselves no less a goal than the complete salvation of mankind, and are willing for this purpose indefinitely to postpone their final bliss. In any case, says Toynbee, all the great religions (including now Judaism, Hinduism, Mohammedanism) have something in common more urgently important than all their divergences—the conviction that the proper worship of mankind is not man (singly or collectively) but God. History has shown that the deification of man has always led to the most frightful inhumanity: and of course the latest variant, Communism, owes much to the distorted millennial Judaism of its founder, Karl Marx.

Professor Toynbee does not plead for a synthesis of faiths which would disembowel each of its vital guts of conviction: for him there are many avenues to the truth, and each has its validity (he does not accept the Christian paradox of a God of mercy and judgment as the last word: he sees it as an irreconcilable contradiction). But he does think that the world-faiths, while agreeing to differ in their several approaches to the Truth, should accept the historical fact that they have a mutual mission to combat the kind of materialistic fanaticism

which has produced Belsen and brain-washing and ethical chaos. He feels that in this twentieth century War of Religion there is little room for sectarian wastage.

Not long ago the reviewer, attending a lunch-hour service in a central London church, was surprised to find the young clergyman spend most of his address on an enthusiastic exposition of a facet of Zen Buddhism. He clearly would have agreed with Mr. Conze's preface which, instancing Billy Graham and M.R.A. (incidentally an example of a common "spiritual" front in action), suggests that "contemporary religious movements . . . intent on extreme simplification, take pride in discarding the intellectual content of religion". Zen, a late and rarefied development of Buddhism, is the kind to which Professor Toynebee refers, and to the translation and illumination of two of its central scriptures Mr. Conze's valuable little book is devoted. Reading this, it is not hard to see the strong attraction which this challengingly spiritual religion might have for a Christian, tired by the over-simplifications of bandied shibboleths. There are strong resemblances between Christian and Zen cosmogony. The four holy truths of Zen, round which the system of meditation is ranged, are (1) that individual or separate existence is inevitably bound up with suffering; (2) that suffering originates in craving, itself a sign of separation; (3) that suffering ceases when craving ceases; and (4) that the eight-fold path of Buddhism will dissolve this craving for material things and bring acceptance, resignation, atonement with the Absolute. Zen teaching avoids dogmatism almost (and deliberately) to vanishing point: in fact it teaches that the more precise the verbal definition, the more illusory is the object or emotion defined. The material world, split into its proliferating components, is a huge illusion, since nothing has any reality apart from the absolute and unconditioned, which is everywhere and yet nowhere, beyond intellect and yet demanding, for comprehension, the most strenuous intellectual effort.

Christians are familiar with the concept of emptying in order to be filled, but Zen comes back and back to the need for emptiness pure and simple: the aim is to reach the realm of Nirvana, where there is no action or reaction, just absorption. This state, achieved only after many lives of dedication, is compared, in its total annihilation of self, to a city which, after all the criminal gangs in it have been executed, has now itself been razed to the ground. The serious disciple, or bodhisattva, is constantly warned of the danger of clinging to "rafts" of doctrine—a raft, when it has helped you to your destination, must be abandoned, or it will only hamper. This is a vivid metaphor: how many Christians, for instance, are walking about immobilized by the superfluous weight of such rafts, even proud of their burdens? One suspects that the lean common-sense, the paradoxical subtlety, of Christ's teaching, has often been smothered by beefy dogmatics, and has many affinities with the sublime equivocations of Zen.

Dr. Weatherhead's pamphlet is the substance of a lecture given before the City Temple Literary Society. A copy can be obtained from M. C. Peto, "St. Audries," Speldhurst, Near Tunbridge Wells, Kent. The doctrine of re-incarnation is believed by many of our

fellow-beings—to start with, by 150 million Buddhists and 230 million Hindus—and some problems do find some sort of solution if it is accepted: problems such as the staggering inequality of human opportunity, the appearance of infant prodigies, the strange certainty experienced by some that “they have been here before”. To the question, “Is a belief in re-incarnation compatible with Christian orthodoxy?” Dr. Weatherhead replies that, though Our Lord never directly taught it, He seems to have accepted it as part of the mental furniture of the time. Matthew xi. 14, Mark ix. 11, and Matthew xvi. 13 are cited in support, and John ix. 2 is considered as evidence that the idea of reincarnation was common, and that Jesus never repudiated it.

Would not the knowledge that good and evil, suffering and happiness, depend not just on one short life-span, but on a great series of cause and effect, make the terrible inequalities of life on earth more intelligible and tolerable—and vindicate God’s justice? Bernard Shaw, in his *Back to Methuselah*, protested against the folly of human intelligence being cut short just at the point when it was getting somewhere: he looked forward to the time when science would enable us to live for 300 years or more, as in the days of the Biblical patriarchs. And re-incarnation offers the hope that, as Swedenborg also believed, the individual and collective sum of human spiritual achievement is not ‘wasted’, but that a preparatory life on one plane continues until we are fit to begin life on another.

What of Christ’s promise to the dying thief? Dr. Weatherhead suggests that this certainty of being with Him in paradise can be reconciled with a belief in re-incarnation. The desire to “return” may come after a process of spiritual advance with Him, at the end of which a conscious decision is made to “come back” because *only so* can further advance be made or more succour given to the Creation which still groaneth and travaileth together. In other words, hundreds or thousands of years might intervene between one incarnation and the next. Fear of the loss of personal identity is frequently one reason for a rejection of reincarnation—yet why should we be afraid of absorption into what the Buddhist, groping, calls the great ocean or symphony of Eternity? Such are some of the questions thrown up in this characteristically breezy bit of speculation, which blows blandly over huge stretches of mysterious territory.

Those with time and energy are recommended to seek the light of this wisdom from the East. They may find that their sense of God’s revelation in Christ is expanded: and, too, they may come away with a new intellectual respect for those of other faiths which can only be fruitful in that humility which Christ loved and taught.

D. J. MITCHELL.

Wanted—Writers for Asia

“THE central problem of providing more and better literature for the Church overseas is to find more writers,” said the Rev. James Sutton of Malaya, at a recent meeting of the United Society for Christian Literature.

Mr. Sutton is working in Malaya as a specialist in Christian literature, chiefly among the Chinese speaking people. He reports that in Malaya there is not one single Chinese or Tamil speaking writer to contribute original MSS. for Christian purposes.

Mr. Sutton is making a special plea during his furlough in Britain to mission organizations to invest resources in the support of men and women who have the vocation for Christian literature. With the rise in the standard of education together with all the enthusiasm for independent national life, the Christian Church is in danger of being bypassed without an adequate supply of books in south-east Asia.

Mr. Sutton claims that a new look is needed at the whole problem of Christian literature in relation to the people on the field who could be writers. He also says that the Christian bookroom is as much a part of the essential equipment of the Christian Church as a building to worship in, a school to teach in, and a clinic to be healed in. He appeals to the Church to put the provision of literature alongside education and medical work.

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

TO THE EDITOR.

From:

The Bishop of Birmingham.
Fr. Trevor Huddleston, C.R.
Rev. Dr. Donald Soper.
Rev. Reginald Sorensen, M.P.

Dear Sir,

During the week of September 28th/October 4th, the International Friendship League is sponsoring throughout Britain a “People to People” week.

To be a stranger in a foreign country can be a very lonely experience. The aim of the People to People Week is to provide opportunities for the general public to join in acts of goodwill towards overseas visitors and exiles in our country.

Many national organizations, including the National Council of Social Service, the British Council, the United Nations Association, East and West Friendship Council, will be associated with the Week.

A special programme of international activities is being arranged throughout Britain and it is hoped that civic heads will officially sponsor the Week in their town.

In addition to special international programmes which will be arranged, the emphasis of the Week will be on individual hospitality—week-end, overnight, invitations to meals, coffee evenings, visits, etc., provided by British families.

Clergy and ministers might like to seize on People to People Week to urge in their parish magazine, and nearer the date, in sermons, the tremendous opportunity that now exists for ordinary families to play a part in world understanding by getting to know people of overseas origin living around them.

Further details of the week can be obtained from the League's Office.

We wholeheartedly commend to you the idea of this week of international friendship throughout Britain.

Yours, etc.,

Signed :

LEONARD BIRMINGHAM.
TREVOR HUDDLESTON, C.R.
DONALD O. SOPER.
REGINALD SORENSEN.

Vice-Presidents.

FRESHMEN IN UNIVERSITIES

The Editor is glad to pass on a request that if any reader knows of freshmen or women going to Universities in the coming term, the names should be sent up at once to the Universities Secretary, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 39 Bedford Square, London, W.C.1. In this way, they will be contacted as soon as they go up. There is no doubt that such contact can be of the greatest help to men and women at the start of their University career.
