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Aspects of Early Christianity :

Implications for Christians and Buddhists

In his preface to the American edition of *A Life of Jesus*, Shusaku Endo explains that he wrote the Japanese *Life* “in order to make Jesus understandable in terms of the religious psychology” of the non-Christian Japanese.¹ In their Buddhism, Endo says, the Japanese would tend to be responsive to a religious leader who is more like a kindly maternal divinity than a stern paternal one, and hence the *Life* highlights in Jesus the love of one who shares our suffering and sympathizes with us.

Endo’s translator, Richard Schuchert, says there is indeed in the book an impression of “Jesus our brother,” a caring fellow-sufferer, as well as the image of God as mother. But Schuchert goes farther than Endo in answering the question, Why has Japan, which has adopted so much from the West, not adopted Christianity? Schuchert quotes the Christian scholar Joseph Kitagawa’s opinion:

In sharp contrast to Confucianism and Buddhism ... Christianity has tended to reject not only all the rival religious systems but also the values and meanings of the cultural and historical experience of the Japanese ... Christianity tends to make Japanese Christians *uprooted* — but not necessarily *liberated* — from their social and spiritual traditions and surroundings.² [Italics added by Schuchert]

Kitagawa’s statement carries us much farther, I think, toward an explanation of Christianity’s problem of acceptance in Japan — a problem of the Churches’ official intolerance of non-Christian countries’ beliefs and values — than does Endo’s emphasis on the trouble the Japanese have with Christianity’s austere and commanding creator Father. I do not gainsay

the value of Endo's depicting Jesus as primarily the loving and sharing helper and guide of all, especially the suffering, for that emphasis is clearly in the Gospels, and Westerners too should never cease to learn of it. (One can only guess what part is done by some professed but scandal-giving Christians in turning away non-Christians from learning of the true Jesus.)

Yet Endo would surely have his Japanese readers, after finishing *A Life of Jesus*, take up the Gospels themselves. Therein they will find not only the gentle and healing and forgiving Jesus, but the same Jesus denouncing Pharisees, condemning certain sinful towns and sinners to hell-fire, and commanding "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength . . . and thy neighbor as thyself. " ³ Indeed, in the Gospels Jesus is found reinforcing the commandments of the Father (" Thou shalt not commit adultery. " Matthew 5 : 27) and moreover enjoining even more-difficult obedience: " Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you. " (Matthew 5 : 44)

To further discomfit, perhaps, both Christian and non-Christian readers, there are a number of cryptic sayings and parables of Jesus. And certain texts receive quite different translations or interpretations by different Churches, according to which teaching the Church requires its members to accept. Even a point of punctuation can fix dogma. Some modern translations have Jesus say to the good thief crucified next to him, " Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise. " (Luke 23 : 43) Another translation insists the comma should come *after* " today, " followed by " thou shalt. " Church *A* may declare that passages *u*, *v* and *w* are to be understood literally while passages *x*, *y* and *z* must be taken metaphorically; Church *B* informs its faithful that just the opposite is true; yet

Church C says And so on.

Concerning the question of “Hell,” called “Hades” in the Greek New Testament and “Sheol” in the Hebrew Scriptures, not all Christian Churches teach that Hell is a place of eternal suffering after death. The Jehovah’s Witnesses Congregation, for example, uses linguistic and contextual analysis on these references (together with references to “Gehenna” in Old and New Testament) to make an interesting case that all these places indicate the grave, or fiery destruction of *dead* bodies (in “Gehenna”), and not “ an invisible region where human souls are tormented in literal fire. ” ⁴

Japanese readers of the Bible may be especially perplexed to come across references to reincarnation, the Buddhist doctrine of Samsara (in Japanese, “Shō - ji,” “ Birth - Death ” ; “ Rin - ne,” “ Wheel - turning ”). Whether or not Japanese nowadays accept the doctrine of Karma (Sanscrit, “ Deeds ”), on which reincarnation (re - birth) is based, they will likely understand it because of their religious traditions. Simply stated, Karma is a law of spirit through which one’s good deeds are rewarded by goodness and one’s evil deeds bring evil upon oneself. It is a law as seen in nature: like begets like, good for good and bad for bad. In the Christian Scriptures the most famous text that suggests Karma is “ Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. ” (Galatians 6 : 7) There is a corollary of it in Jesus’ words, “ whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. ” (Matthew 7 : 12) This law, As you sow you shall reap, is implied in other important texts, as when Jesus teaches us how to pray to the Father: “ Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. ” (emphasis added) (Matthew 6 : 12) .

There is also the well - known passage in Matthew 17 , when the disciples ask Jesus why it is said that Elias must come first, before the Son of man

has risen from the dead:

And Jesus answered and said unto them, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake to them of John the Baptist. (17:10-13)

That is, Elias had been reborn as John the Baptist.

St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans tells of God speaking to Rebecca, about the not-yet-born children: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (Romans 9:13)

Perhaps the most interesting of the references to Karma and reincarnation in the New Testament is the event of the man born blind, whom Jesus cures. (John 9:1-41) The disciples question Jesus, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" The Jews believed that parents might be punished through their children, but the relevant point here is that the disciples believe that the man himself may have sinned *before* he was born, that is, in a previous incarnation. Jesus' answer is, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

Some say Jesus' words are an implicit denial of reincarnation, but surely that is not so, and his answer is at most ambiguous. Surely at this moment is Jesus' chance to reject reincarnation and Karma—if he does not accept such a belief: for even in his time many of Buddha's followers held to it, and it was to become a doctrine officially rejected by the 6th C. Christian Church. The usual interpretation is that the blind man is as he is so that Jesus, by curing him, will make the works of God manifest in him. But such an interpretation would better serve for Jesus' curing of many other persons, including the blind. It does not satisfy, I think, the disciples'

specific question, why this man was *born* blind.

Another interpretation may satisfy. In a Christian understanding of re-birth and Karma there must be belief in free will and in grace. An imperfect soul *chooses* to be reborn, for it was in the flesh that sins and weaknesses came, and it is there that they are best corrected. Yet quite likely some souls have already perfected themselves and hence, after a final incarnation, need not return. And some persons, regardless of the degree and nature of their sins, may be forgiven and cleansed in an instant — through grace. “ Love worketh no ill to his neighbor : therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. ” (Romans 13 : 10) Because of Jesus’ perfect redemption, Love transcends Karma. Such love in the Gospels is called by the Greek word “ Agape ”; it is Jesus – love. Jesus said, “ I and my Father are one. ” (John 10 : 30) And God, St. John tells us, is love. (1 John 4 : 16)

Thus we may believe that the born – blind man of John 9 chose to be reborn, yet not in Karma (necessity through sin), for so Jesus tells us. Then why is he reborn ? Why not for Love ? What are the “ works of God,” in Jesus’ explanation, but love ? Part of these works may be the living testimony to others in his cure, showing God’s love and power, for Jesus had said he did nothing but through the Father. And when the skeptical Pharisees asked the cured man what he thought of the one who had cured him, he gave verbal testimony, “ He is a prophet. ” (John 9 : 17) And again, “ If this man were not of God, he could do nothing. ” (9 : 33) To this the Pharisees answer angrily, revealing their own belief in Karma and their sinful pride in judging another : “ Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us ? ” (9 : 34) Jesus then identifies himself as the Son of God to the man, and the man reveals a final work of God : “ Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him. ” (9 : 38) The story ends

meaningfully with Jesus condemning the Pharisees ironically: “ If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth. ” (9 : 41) Unlike the “ blind man ” they are not humble and grateful and accepting of truth. Physical blindness is not necessarily Karma, and may be love. The Pharisees are spiritually blind through pride, and their sin remains.

Such an understanding of this story may help to remove one of the strongest objections, by Christians and perhaps also Buddhists, to a Christian interpretation and acceptance of reincarnation. We dare not judge anyone, whether blind or diseased or poor or however suffering, to be justly undergoing “ bad Karma. ” So to judge is of course repugnant to our common sense of sympathy, and to our feeling that “ time and chance ” (misfortune, Ecclesiastes 9 : 11) might befall any of us at any time. Moreover, there is Jesus’ warning, “ Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned. ” (Luke 6 : 37)

But if we accept that some souls in rebirth take on afflictions not for their own sake (in Karma) but rather in Love for others, to offer them opportunities to care and help, then we realize, as I believe Jesus did, that when we see suffering and humility we may be beholding not the effects of sin but the “ works of God. ”

Bound up with the mystery of suffering is the mystery of free will. These mysteries have troubled many sincere religious people of different faiths. A truly Christian and creative acceptance of reincarnation and Karma may help us in understanding.

Shusaku Endo asks, “ How were men and women to discover within the harsh reality of human life the genuine love of God ? ” Certainly they could see it and hear it through Jesus, who in himself, says Endo, gives the image of “ a mother who shares the suffering of her children and weeps with

them.” (*A Life . . .* , pp. 58, 80) But to *discover* such love? For that, not just an example, however god-like and inspired, is needed, but also one’s own struggle and search, out of sin and darkness and toward the Light of Wisdom, an arduous effort through lifetimes toward Love.

Endo touches on the idea of reincarnation only once, and seems to believe it had a “ grip on the imagination of the Jews of that time ” as only “ the metaphor of a dead man’s second coming. ” (*A Life . . .* , p. 162) Although it is not necessary to Endo’s purpose to discuss reincarnation in his book, it is surprising that in his frequent references to John the Baptist and the Essene religious sect, this question does not come up. For the Essenes believed in reincarnation and pacifism, and it is likely that Jesus was influenced by their thought, at least through his studies with John the Baptist. Of G. Vermes’ book, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, the scholar Schuyler Brown remarks, “ Though without any direct connection with early Christianity, this Essene library provides numerous contemporary parallels to New Testament thought. ”⁵ It would be surprising if Jesus did not know the Essene doctrines. Of Jesus’ many years between the age of twelve and the start of his ministry, Scripture says only that “ he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. ” (Luke 2 : 52) Surely Jesus studied more than only the old Hebrew texts.

To Endo’s question, “ On the supposition that Jesus did have some personal contact with the Essenes, why does the Bible avoid any mention of it ? ” (*A Life . . .* , p. 22) perhaps Brown gives the answer :

the fact that the formation of the [New Testament] canon was part of a tendency toward . . . orthodoxy cautions us against assuming that it represents the full spectrum of belief and practice during the first century of the Christian movement.⁶

And Brown goes further: “ The recent discovery of the Nag Hammadi

library with its large number of Gnostic writings has given us a new realization of how varied the forms of early Christianity actually were.”⁷

Elaine Pagels gives excerpts from the Gnostic works, which parallel some of Jesus’ teachings; and some of the works are believed to be older than the gospels of the New Testament. Pagels states, “Some scholars have suggested that if the names were changed, the ‘living Buddha’ could say what the [Gnostic] *Gospel of Thomas* attributes to the living Jesus. Could Hindu or Buddhist tradition have influenced gnosticism ? ” And it is Pagels’ opinion that “ we may have to recognize that early Christianity is far more diverse than nearly anyone expected before the Nag Hammadi discoveries.”⁸

A reading of Pagels also suggests that maternal qualities of God, which Endo finds in Jesus, may derive from Gnostic influence. In one of the writings, Jesus speaks of “ my Mother, the Spirit.”⁹

Of course, the Gnostic writings were condemned by early orthodox Christians. Whether the Gnostics deserved to be called heretics, modern students of Christianity can now judge for themselves. As Pagels says, “ According to tradition, a heretic is one who deviates from the true faith. But what defines that ‘ true faith ’ ? Who calls it that, and for what reasons ? ”¹⁰

A similar question might be asked of those in Christian Churches today who think of the teaching of reincarnation and Karma as heresy. An answer is suggested when we consider that a Church that wishes to control its members will find it far easier to do that if it promises them a heaven or hell after one lifetime than if it allows them to believe that if they don’t follow the Truth well enough now they will need more time or times to make their own heaven or hell. For “ the kingdom of God is within you. ” (Luke 17 : 21)

In his book *Reincarnation* Hans Stefan Santesson writes,

The Gospels we know are not the Gospels the Fathers of the Church knew and taught and were ready to defend with their lives. Our “ orthodox ” versions of the Old and the New Testaments . . . date back no further than to the sixth century , to the Fifth Ecumenical Congress of Constantinople. The exclusion from the Christian creed of the teaching of the pre-existence of the soul and , by implication, of Reincarnation , dates back to this Congress.¹¹

But finally a belief in reincarnation is supported less by scholarship and testimony than by personal faith. The Biblical Golden Rule, “ Do to others as you want them to do to you , ” is written in our heart perhaps even if it were not in our memory. We desire kindness, and it comes in the full sense of the word , in not only love but justice. For “ As we do to others it is done to us . ” Yet there is mercy, too , and forgiveness and grace.

Moreover , there is our yearning, not only for goodness but much more, even perfection. And we are called to this by one whose claim to Truth we feel he proved : “ Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. ” (Matthew 5 : 48) We do not expect to gain perfection overnight.

In the darkness of our ignorance, fear and cruelty, it is still the remembered glory of our race that this our brief home from time to time, a speck in the universe, has been visited by highly evolved souls, the very Light of Love , a Christ and a Buddha, and that this light, however diminished, has never died and cannot die, and must one day become fresh and final in each of us and all together. For Jesus promises, “ I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. ” (John 16 : 22)

— James E. Kulas

Notes :

1. *A Life of Jesus*, tr. R. A. Schuchert, S. J., Tokyo, 1979, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 4 – 5, for the ideas of the entire paragraph.
3. *Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version*, New York, 1982, Mark (12 : 30 – 1). Quotations from the Scriptures are from this translation.
4. *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, New York, 1971, pp. 1355 – 6.
5. *The Origins of Christianity*, Oxford, 1984, p. 155.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Gnostic Gospels*, New York, 1982, pp. 16, 19.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
11. *Reincarnation*, London, 1969, p. 105.