



Distant Neighbors

Paul F. Knitter

I have often found that interreligious dialogue becomes most interesting when it gets stuck, and that was my experience in Korea last month. I was in the country at the invitation of Zen Master Jinje and the Chogye Order of Korean Zen Buddhists. (Christian scholars, please note: Here was a call to dialogue that came from the Buddhist side!) But our conversations did not get stuck where we thought they might.

In the months before my visit, newspapers and television there were filled with reports of fundamentalist Korean Christians intruding on Buddhist temples in Seoul and Daegu. They performed “exorcisms” before statues of Buddha and processed around places of devotion called stupas in a ritual of reclaiming the land for Christ.

The journalists who reported on my trip expected the Buddhist monks and laypeople—especially at the desecrated Daegu temple—to give this foreign Christian visitor an earful about Christian extremists. The dialogue was bound to be heated, they assumed.

Not at all. Where the fundamentalist Christians had desecrated and denounced, the Buddhists embraced and engaged. In the face of such religious extremism, Master Jinje announced, dialogue is all the more urgent. On two public occasions, I expressed, in the name of many other Christians, my regret for the violence and asked for forgiveness. My hosts bowed in acceptance and gratitude.

So we agreed easily on the importance of forgiveness. But as our conversations went on, we got stuck when we began to explore the primary images by which our religions are known: the Buddha sitting in quiet contemplation under the Bodhi tree and the Christ in agony on the Cross. Here, I realized, we were dealing with *distinctive* and quite different truths that were discovered, or revealed, in the life and experience of Gautama and of Jesus.

The Buddhist monks admonished me that if I wanted to bring about real change in this world, I must spend time, lots of time, sit-

ting under a Bodhi tree and seeking enlightenment. It’s what Thich Nhat Hanh insists on when he reminds Christians that we have to be peace before we can *make* peace. As Master Jinje, with his warm Zen smile, told me: “Unless you have ‘the Correct Eye’ you cannot bring sentient beings to the land of happiness.” I’m not sure I fully understood what he was telling me. Yet I know I need to.

At the same time, I’m not sure that the Buddhists I spoke with really grasped what I described as an essential ingredient in what Jesus revealed about the Mystery he called God/Father. It is contained in the Cross. What I tried to explain to Master Jinje is described powerfully by Terry Eagleton in *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*:

If God is indeed in one sense utterly other, he is also made manifest in the tortured body of a reviled political criminal.... The ghastly good news of the gospel is that being done to death by the state for speaking up for love and justice is the status to which we must all aspire. The message of the New Testament is that if you don’t love you are dead, and if you do, they will kill you.... It is a message scandalous alike to the civilized liberal, the militant humanist, and the wide-eyed progressive.

Jesus calls us not only to love and have compassion for our neighbor—that the Buddhists would readily agree with—but also to confront the systemic powers that oppress our neighbor, and be ready to accept the uncomfortable or deadly consequences. I don’t think this was scandalous to Master Jinje. He just didn’t see the necessity of confronting systematic injustice. In his view, once you transform hearts, the systems will follow.

The relationship between personal and social transformation—and between individual and structural greed—is as complex as it is important. We Buddhists and Christians need to keep talking. I left Korea convinced that followers of the sitting Buddha and the crucified Christ have a lot to learn from each other. ■

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