

from these ties, the more we become indifferent to what is in the world, and the more we are freed from suffering, from the evil that has its source in the world.

[NOTE: Again, we don't know who put those quotation marks around the term enlightenment. I'll ignore such issues from here on. The idea that **the** Buddha's enlightenment was the insight that the world is bad is incorrect. He had this insight before setting out on his quest, and his enlightenment was precisely the insight how the cycle-of-birth-and-death could be broken, and his subsequent performance of that very action. The ties that are to be broken are not those that "join us to external reality", but the ties of clinging to **both** our illusory notions of the "external" and "internal" worlds, and our attachment to the idea that there is a qualitative difference between the two. To cling to **anything**, even a notion of God or Good, is not to be free. Evil does not have "its source in the world", but in this incorrect view (avidya = ignorance) of the world to which we cling so desperately. Still, the pope is not doing too badly for someone whose main preoccupation is with his own tradition and whose opportunity to study other traditions in-depth has probably been quite limited. If he was a first-year student of mine, I'd probably pass him with a mark of about 55-60%]

Do we draw near to God in this way? This is not mentioned in the "enlightenment" conveyed by Buddha. Buddhism is in large measure an *"atheistic" system*. We do not free ourselves from evil through the good which comes from God; we liberate ourselves only through detachment from the world, which is bad. The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, a state of perfect indifference with regard to the world. *To save oneself* means above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming *indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil*. This is the culmination of the spiritual progress.

[NOTE: some of my objections to this paragraph are the same as those in the previous note and will not be repeated. A few points, though: (1) One may call Buddhism atheist if one likes, but B'ists themselves prefer to speak of their tradition as "non-theistic". ie it is not a question of negating a previous theism, but of seeing the world as it is, without presuppositions either of god or mechanism. But I imagine that from a conservative Catholic point of view such as the one held by JP II, this is so much semantic hair-splitting. (2) The pope here presents us with a definition of nirvana, which even the Buddha refrained from doing. All language, and all possible language, fails to

describe nirvana. If you must talk about it, you can only say what it is not. For instance, it is not suffering, yet this does not mean that it is happiness. It is not clinging, yet this does not imply indifference. I have myself had a very minor first taste of what nirvana could be, and I could never describe it without immediately contradicting myself. To describe nirvana is, to the B'ist, more or less what ascribing partners to God is to the Muslim, bar the legal implications - an utter impossibility. (3) However, the pope is certainly correct on one score - nirvana is NOT, in any Buddhist tradition, regarded as union with God - though it certainly is in certain forms of Hinduism by the way.]

At various times, attempts to link this method with the Christian mystics have been made - whether it is with those from northern Europe (Eckhart, Tauler, Suso, Ruysbroeck) or the later Spanish mystics (Saint teresa of Avila, Saint John of the Cross). But when Saint John of the Cross, in *The ascent of Mount Carmel* and in the *Dark night of the Soul*, speaks of the need for purification, for detachment from the world of the senses, he does not conceive of that detachment as an end in itself. "To arrive at what now you do not enjoy, you must go where you do not enjoy. To reach what you do not know, you must go where you do not know. To come into possession of what you do not have, you must go where now you have nothing" (Ascent of Mount Carmel 1.13.II). In Eastern Asia these classic texts of Saint John of the Cross have been, at times, interpreted as a confirmation of Eastern ascetic methods. But this Doctor of the Church does not merely propose detachment from the church. He proposes detachment from the world in order to unite oneself to that which is outside the world - by this I do not mean nirvana, but a personal God. Union with Him comes about not only through purification, but through love.

Carmelite mysticism begins at the point where the reflections of Buddha end, together with his instructions for the spiritual life. In the active and passive purification of the human soul, in those specific nights of the senses and the spirit, Saint John of the Cross sees, above all, the preparation for the human soul to be permeated with the living flame of love. And this is also the title of his major work - *the living flame of love*.

[NOTE: Well, what can one say? For a Catholic speaking to Catholics, no doubt this is quite correct. From a Buddhist point of view, on the other hand, the situation is reversed: theistic mysticism is just another form of clinging, another trap, if perhaps one of the last ones, to be sprung. However, here the Pope is blasting away at something of a strawman - those who extol the Spanish mystics tend to be the semi-Christian Buddhists (or semi-Buddhist Christians) referred to

above. Other Buddhists, DT Suzuki for example, like the German mystics much better, especially Eckhardt. The Spanish mystics were always much more explicitly theistic, I believe. I must admit that I have never heard of St JotC's "major work", but then, I am not a Catholic.]

Therefore, despite similar aspects, there is a fundamental difference. *Christian mysticism* from every period - beginning with the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church, to the great theologians of scholasticism (such as Saint Thomas Aquinas), to the northern European mystics, to the Carmelite mystics - is not born of a purely negative "enlightenment". It is not born of an awareness of the evil which exists in man's attachment to the world through the senses, the intellect and the spirit. Instead, Christian mysticism is born of the *Revelation of the living God*. This God opens himself to union with man, arousing in him the capacity to be united with Him, especially by means of the theological virtues - faith, hope and, above all, love.

[NOTE: The pope here really seems to confuse the "negative" descriptions of nirvana with a view of enlightenment itself as being somehow "negative". I do not believe that he means it in a pejorative sense: but how does he think that millions of people could have adopted Buddhism if they regarded the "salvation" it offers as "negative". There are millions of less-educated Buddhists, I suppose, who would describe nirvana in glowingly positive terms, though such people are more likely to focus their efforts on a happy rebirth (which is a quite respectable, if less-than-ultimate religious goal). But B'ist teachings make it quite clear that nirvana is not describable in terms of positive/negative, or any shade in-between. Nirvana is both prior to and beyond these oppositions, these labels. But he is quite correct when he points out that Christian (read Catholic) mysticism inescapably has to employ theistic concepts. Or maybe we should say "ought to employ" - whether it always has remains debatable.]

Christian mysticism in every age up to our own - including the mysticism of marvellous men of action like Vincent de Paul, John Bosco, Maximilian Kolbe - has built up and continues to build up Christianity in its most essential element. It also builds up the Church as a community of faith, hope and charity. It builds up civilization, particularly "Western civilisation", which is marked by a *positive approach to the world*, and which developed thanks to the achievements of science and technology, two branches of knowledge rooted both in the ancient Greek philosophical tradition and in Judeo-Christian Revelation. The truth about God the Creator of the world and about Christ the Redeemer is a powerful force which inspires a positive attitude towards creation and provides a constant impetus to strive for its transformation and perfection.

[NOTE: this, to me as a B'ist, is laughable. For the RCC, which has fought every scientific advance since before Galileo tooth and nail, to claim science and technology for its own is just ridiculous. "Its transformation and perfection"? With its current policies on family planning, all we may end up with is a world "transformed" into a seething mass of starving people, killing each other for a crust of bread. And how a religion that until very recently taught that "extra ecclesia nulla salus", that still teaches that people are inherently unable to effect salvation by their own power, even if this may help a bit after the divine effort has been given, can describe itself as "positive" is beyond me. Humorous aside: One little boy to another, "You are only miserable sinners, but **we** are **totally** depraved!" To me, it is Buddhism that can be called a positive message, for it teaches that, whether there is a creator or (more likely) not, there is a way out of impermanence that requires no outside intervention, that is within every human being's power.]

The Second Vatican Council has amply confirmed this truth. To indulge in a negative attitude toward the world, in the conviction that it is only a source of suffering for man and that he therefore must break away from it, is negative not only because it is unilateral, but also because it is fundamentally contrary to the development of the world, which the Creator has given and entrusted to man as his task.

[NOTE: Buddhism has never taught that the world "is only a source of suffering for man". Happiness is real enough. What B'ism does insist on is that happiness and suffering are both **impermanent**, that no state of bliss or perdition is going to last for ever. You may lead a thousand exemplary lives and take rebirth as the king of the gods, but when your good karma has run out, you die and return to a human or animal form to start the process all over again. This teaching may be interpreted literally or symbolically by the individual B'ist, as s/he wishes - it does not affect the essentials of the teaching. But, to return to the point, the world provides pleasures that are real enough - it is not "only a source of suffering for man".]

We read in *Gaudium et Spes*: "therefore, the world which [the Council] has in mind is the world of men, of the entire human family considered in the context of all realities; the world which is the theatre of human history and which bears the marks of humanity's struggles, its defeats and its victories; the world which the Christians believe has been created and is sustained by the Creator's love, a world enslaved by sin but liberated by the crucified and

resurrected Christ in order to defeat evil, and destined, *according to the divine plan, to be transformed and to reach its fulfillment (Gaudium et Spes 2)*.

[NOTE: These words are clearly addresses to a specifically Catholic audience and do not necessarily have authority to anyone else, particularly Buddhists I suppose. I shall therefore refrain from commenting, except to note that (1) to restrict reality to humanity is quite myopic in Buddhist eyes and (2) I do not really see how this follows from the preceding discussion of "positive" and "negative".

These words indicate how between Christianity and the religions of the Far East, in particular Buddhism, there is an essentially different way of perceiving the world. For Christians, the world is God's creation, redeemed by Christ. It is in the world that man meets God. Therefore he does not need to attain such an absolute detachment in order to find himself in the mystery of his deepest self. For Christianity, it does not make sense to speak of the world as a "radical" evil, since at the beginning of the world we find God the Creator who loves His Creation, a God who "gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life (Jn 3:16)

[NOTE: As they say in Missouri, "show me". by the way, in B'ism it makes no sense to speak of the world as a "radical evil" either. It simply is what it is, with its pains and pleasures. It is **we** who insist on calling it "good" or "evil". Reality is quite neutral, quite unconcerned with the petty affairs of homo sapiens. Any meaning in the world was put there by **us**, "negative" or "positive", and what we have done we can undo. But I would agree with the pope that there **is** an essential difference between the worldviews of Christianity and Buddhism: it is just that i don't think the pope has pointed out just what it is.]

For this reason it is not inappropriate to *caution* those Christians who enthusiastically *welcome certain ideas originating in the religious traditions of the Far East* - for example, techniques and methods of meditation and ascetical practice. In

some quarters these have become fashionable, and are accepted rather uncritically. First one should know one's own spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly. Here we need to recall, if only in passing the brief but important document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "on certain aspects of Christian meditation" (10/15/1989). Here we find a clear answer to the question "whether and how (Christian

prayer) can be enriched by methods of meditation originating in different religions and cultures" (n3).

[NOTE: for those who are unaware of it, the "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" is what used to be called the Roman Inquisition. Its methods have changed a lot since Galileo et al, of course, but its function is still to maintain the purity of Catholic doctrine. As for the question of "whether it is right to set (ones `own spiritual heritage') aside lightly", well, this goes right back to the question whether one can be both a Christian and a Buddhist simultaneously. I would say that this is not easy: either one of the two would have to be distorted beyond recognition. I imagine the Pope would agree.]

A separate issue is the *return of ancient gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age*. We cannot delude ourselves that this will lead to a renewal of religion. It is only a new way of practicing gnosticism - that attitude of the spirit that, in the name of a profound knowledge of God, results in distorting His Word and replacing it with purely human words. Gnosticism never completely abandoned the realm of Christianity. Instead, it has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of a philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian.

[NOTE: This may not be as separate an issue as the pope maintains. One of the most influential forms of Gnosticism in the ancient world, Manichaeism, was clearly influenced by Buddhism. Moreover, Buddhists strive to develop prajna or jnana, insight into reality. "Jnana" is a Sanskrit word that is etymologically closely related to the Greek word "gnosis"]

CONCLUSION =====

Personally, I believe that the Sri Lankan Buddhists overreacted by boycotting the pope's visit. I do not believe that anywhere in this chapter he uses "negative" in the sense of "bad" or "evil". Also I see no defamatory intent in the way he uses "atheist". His knowledge of B'ism is not that of an academic specialist in the subject, or even a well-read Buddhist layperson, but he is speaking as a Catholic Christian to other Catholic Christians and the chapter should be read in this context. What he says is as far as I can see accurate enough from within a (Catholic) Christian paradigm, and it gives us an interesting view of how one

influential Christian views Buddhism. For the Buddhist view of Christianity, keep watching this conference!

In short, I believe that the Sri Lankan affair was very much a storm in a teacup. One may surely, in this century anyway, agree to differ on theological matters and yet attend interreligious meetings to discuss matters of common concern?

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