

M Eliade & J Kitagawa, ed.
The History of Religions. Essays in Methodology.
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Ernst Benz, On Understanding Non-Christian Religions, 115-131

117 difficulties of translation, esp to Eastern languages

120 Our Western Christian thinking is qualified in its deepest philosophical and methodological ideas by a personalistic idea of God. This concept makes it particularly difficult to understand the fundamental disposition of Buddhism, which knows of no personalistic idea of God. The ~~unavoidable~~ traditional reaction, in Christian theology as well as Western philosophy, is to characterize Buddhist theology as "atheistic." It is difficult for a Westerner to comprehend the specifically Buddhist form of approach to the transcendent....

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It took constant effort and new trials on my part to realize that the basic difference between the two is not one of abstract theological concepts. It goes deeper than that, because this particular form of expression is attained by a certain training in meditation. It is here that the experience of the transcendent is cultivated and secured for the total life of Buddhism...

But the reverent silence of the Buddhism before the "emptiness" of the transcendent, beyond all dialectic of human concepts, is pregnant with its own beneficence.

Buddhist art was the most important help to me in overcoming this intellectual "scared-rabbit" attitude toward the theological "atheism" of Buddhism. I was especially impressed by the representations of Buddha himself in the various positions of meditation.

121 Hindu and Shinto polytheism

122 The battle waged against polytheistic practices by the Mosaic and Christian religions must be seen as a total emotional response which penetrates our attitudes more deeply than any intellectual affirmations.

.. but these gods (of classical antiquity) are for us at best only allegories.

In Asian lands, however, polytheism is encountered not as literary mythology, but as genuine religious belief and as living cultic practice. It appears in an overwhelming diversity and at the most varied levels of religious consciousness. As in the Hellenistic religions of late antiquity there occurred also in India a development toward monotheism.

This development is the result of a profound change in the religious consciousness of India. In Shintoism, however, this change has not yet occurred. Its 800,000 gods have hardly been put in hierarchical order, each god being a particular manifestation of the Numinous by itself.

123 .. it seems to be the case that one worships the divine in such form as it has emerged impressively and effectively in one's own life, whether it be as helper, as bringer of luck, as protector and savior, or as a power spreading horror and awakening fear. It is the experience of the numen praesens which is primary and decisive for cultic devotion.... Maninal Parekh.. writes of the devotees of the Rig-Veda epoch: "They invoke a god because they need something from him, and for the time being he fills all their horizon. Thus it happens that there is no god who is supreme in this pantheon."

123 .. the essence of Shintoism... is the devotion to the creative forces in the universe in the bodily, the cosmic, the ethical, the intellectual, and the aesthetic realms.... Decisive for this stage of the religious consciousness is the encounter with the self-realization of the transcendent in its individual form and expression of power. This encounter is the crucial factor, whether it occurs on a holy mountain or at a holy tree of fountain or in the meeting with an ethical hero. Correspondingly, the world of the gods is never finished... Living polytheism constantly creates new gods.... It is precisely from Shintoism that in recent times there have emerged in recent times not only new gods but also new religions. Living polytheism, therefore, is extraordinarily flexible and is open to systematization and a hierarchical organization. It is also capable of being accommodated to the various high-religions, as was the case in the monotheism of the E Vedas, and also in Buddhism. Only Judaism understood the idea of the unity of God in the exclusive sense...

124 .. Hinduism, like Buddhism and Shintoism, lacks one other distinction so fundamental for our Christian thinking: the belief in the basic essential difference between creation and Creator. For our Western Christian thought this absolute discontinuity between Creator and creation is normative, but it does not exist in Buddhism and Shintoism. The same central importance that the idea of absolute otherness of Creator and creation has for us, the idea of the unity of being has within Buddhist and Shinto thought. This idea of unity is connected not only with the particular method of direct religious experience, meditation and vision, but also has a bearing on logic and conceptualization even where they are wholly unrelated to religious experience as such.

It is baffling to the visitor from the West to note again and again how in the Eastern religions outstanding personalities are swiftly elevated to the rank of god, or recognized and worshiped as incarnations of certain divine attributes... Viewed from the idea of the unity of existence, this step is self-explanatory just as the impassable gulf between Creator and creation is self-evident to us.

.. the common preference we attribute to theology, the doctrinal part of religion, when it comes to the interpretation of the forms of religious expression.

125 I myself was extremely surprised to find that in contemporary Buddhism, a much more central role is played by its liturgical and cultic elements... the exercise of meditation as a spiritual and ascetic discipline is accorded a tremendous importance in Buddhism.

Meditation in Buddhism is not the privilege of a few specialists, but a practice directly shared by the majority of Buddhist lay people. To this day it is assumed in Buddhist countries that before taking over an important position in government, administration, science, or elsewhere in the social or military life, men must have undergone some training in meditation. Today it is still common among educated Buddhists to spend their vacations as temporary novices in a monastery and to give themselves to meditation. In Hinduism, too, meditation still is very much alive and is practised in an astounding variety of forms and methods.

125 125 However, the whole vast area of the symbolic language of Eastern religions as well as of their liturgy and cults has hardly been noticed.... the symbolism of hands and fingers is very strongly developed ... in liturgical dances ... in the practice of meditation ... (126) an incredibly skilful and complicated system of expression which makes it possible to express through finger and hand symbols the whole content of the school's secret doctrine in one worship service.

126 ..Buddhism, which, in essence, is practised religion, practical meditation, symbolic representation, and cultic liturgical expression.

Western organized churches not model for understanding Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism.

126 Buddhism is, in fact, represented by a diversity of schools with their own temples and monasteries, and their own educational institutions and universities. These are not coordinated in any organizational fashion.

It would be equally misleading to apply to Eastern religions the idea that a person can be a member of only one religious community. This is a notion that stems specifically from confessional Christianity. It does not apply to Japan, nor to China, where in the life of the individual Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism mix and interpenetrate, as Shintoism and Buddhism do in Japan (89 million people, 135,000,000 adherents to different religions)

127 magic and sorcery

128 Observing the devotion of Hindus in their temples, they (visitors) ask, How is it possible for such variant and mutually exclusive opposites to exist side by side in Hinduism? Together with the highest spiritual and ethical form of monotheism and the most elevated form of asceticism and meditation, they are amazed to find primitive sorcery and magic as might be seen in African fetishism. The Hindu's answer to this question will always be that such things are not at all mutually exclusive opposites, but represent stages in the development of religious consciousness

130 It has been only in very recent times that Buddhism adopted an organized mission activity (as distinct from itinerant charismatic personalities)

130 .. we carry within ourselves the most essential condition for the understanding of other religions. In the structure of the human personality there is doubtless a tradition of earlier forms of religious experiences and of earlier stages of religious consciousness. Christian theology has succeeded in displacing most of these archaic ideas but has not been able to remove from our heritage those earlier stages of religious consciousness.

Somewhere in the bedrock layer of our religious awareness, the religious ~~experience~~ experience and various conceptual forms of our primitive forefathers live on. Somewhere in us also lies the heritage of the sibyl and of the (131) haruspex; in some hidden corner we still harken to Pan's flute and tremble at the sound of the sistrum. Our aversion to horse meat is probably due to Christian influence.. strong reminder of the sacred appetite with which our forefathers consumed the sacrificial horse

131 For myself I covet another intuition: a clear insight into the earlier stages of the religious consciousness of mankind. I should like to know the way in which man has passed through these stages up to the present and how they lie submerged in the depths of our humanity in some form that is now barred and veiled from us. This is not the desire to return to these stages. It is rather a wish to know the inner continuity and of meaning in the development of the varied forms and stages of religious consciousness. And this desire does not seem to me to be non-Christian. For if history is in a sense the history of salvation, this this history cannot have begun with Moses in 1250 B. C. The history of salvation is as old as the history of mankind, which we assume is some 6,000,000 years older than Moses. And if this is so, then the history of religions and the history of the development of the religious consciousness must be seen as coterminous with the history of salvation. If the revelation of Christ is really the fulfilment of time, then it must also be the fulfilment of the history of religions. Then also, the earlier stages of religion which mankind passed through stand in a meaningful and positive relation to this fulfilment of time and of the history of mankind. On this basis, one of the most important tasks of contemporary Christian scholarship would be to set forth a new theology of the history of religions. The way would then be open to a real "understanding" among the religions of the world, as Joachim Wach envisioned it.