

The Pure of Heart Will See God

Colossians 3:1-11

If you and I had driven up to New Hartford this past Wednesday evening, we could have attended the weekly Dharma study at the Dae Yen Sa International Buddhist Temple and Meditation Center, nestled in the woods adjacent to the Nepaug State Forest. It's a beautiful, peaceful location, perfect for quiet renewal and reflection, as one might assume, especially on a pleasant summer evening. The particular passage of Buddha's teachings they were citing for this past week's study addressed the matter of impurity—the desires within human beings that bring about undue stresses and suffering.

In many ways, this would have been perfect as it is Buddhism 101, since the vast majority of recognized teachings in all of its branches and traditions focus on their central tenets that recognize human suffering and its origin. These tenets include the Four Noble Truths, which are: 1. the knowledge or recognition of *Dukkha*, which is universal sorrow and suffering; 2. the origin of *Dukkha*, which is rooted in insatiable craving or desire for sensual gratification; 3. the need to eliminate *Dukkha*, or suffering, by overcoming and ending craving and transcending desire; and 4. the way to end suffering and sorrow by following the eightfold path of enlightenment called "The Way," through morality, spiritual meditation and concentration, wisdom, right-relationships, and a life of pure and selfless motives.

The description of this past Wednesday's study reflects Buddhism's basic religious perspective:

From impermanence to impurity. This chapter identifies five kinds of impurity: desire for material wealth, desire for sex, desire for fame, desire

for food, desire for sleep. It is important to note that on their own, these qualities are not inherently wrong. For example, when the body is tired and needs sleep, one should simply sleep to rest the mind and body. However, impurity is the condition of a craving and grasping mind which will go to extremes to attain and preserve these qualities. We have all been “hooked” in one way or another by the powerful energy of unchecked desires, and we know from direct experience the cycle of suffering it can bring about.

In this human form we have the capacity to wake up—to shift our focus from self-centeredness to selflessness—for the benefit of all beings.

What I find interesting is, you might have heard the same message (albeit using slightly different language and religious sources) at a Baptist prayer meeting, or a Torah study in a synagogue, or in an imam’s sermon at Friday evening prayers at the local mosque, or in any number of religious houses of worship or settings, where the teachings of each tradition emphasize the disciplines and practices of personal morality and purity of heart. In effect, as different as we seem in our beliefs, the more we are alike in our values.

The similarity in spiritual emphases among the world’s religions has been recognized for centuries by moral philosophers all the way to cultural anthropologists, but it’s not gained widespread or mainstream acceptance, largely due to most people’s ignorance of what other traditions teach and value. This ignorance of others typifies the religious, cultural, and political tribalism that has characterized human civilizations down through the ages, especially when dominant religions have marginalized, if not outlawed, their rivals. Throughout history, proselytizing religions, like Christianity and Islam, have largely sought to dominate, rather than assimilate into, existing cultures—at times even manipulating people through forced conversions and imposing their laws and customs upon a differently-believing world. That’s the historical record. With few

exceptions, acceptance of and respect for other religions has been negligible, mainly because each has claimed to be the only legitimate path to God. Even though the religious pluralism of our times would have been heaven-like for the nineteenth-century Unitarians and Universalists of New England, religious conservatives today, in both Christianity and Islam, still reject and demonize each another with as much venom and zeal as the Crusaders and Jihadists of history. Thus, we experience an ongoing tension between welcoming other traditions into our culture and feeling threatened by them.

For most, it's easier to presume that their own religious tradition is good enough, or even uniquely true and authoritative, when it comes to the things of God, rather than be bothered with being conversant with multiple religious traditions and open to the prospect of many ultimate truths. Besides, if your faith has always claimed superiority over others, what happens when it isn't? If everyone can be right, then who is in a position to define what is wrong?

However, suppose the inter-religious debate isn't intended to be about who's right and who's wrong (as it has largely been)! Instead, what if it's about *what* is right and *what* is wrong! What if the value of religion isn't even as much about the original messengers and their particular role, relationship with, and representation of the divine, but rather about the messages themselves and what each messenger brought to their particular context? In other words, what if our respective faiths aren't as much about who Jesus, or Muhammad, or Buddha, or Moses, or anyone else was as a unique revealer of God (as tradition tells us), but instead it was *what they were proclaiming* that

was revealing of God! For what we might find is, they are all very similar in terms of their teachings, even though they were living in and responding to remarkably different contexts. What if we transcend the rivalry over which tradition is authoritative and superior, in order to listen to each other as to how to address the common concerns over suffering, injustice, hubris, violence, and greed in human civilization and, particularly, the impact upon its most vulnerable members?

Not only is this a fruitful starting point for inter-religious conversation, it's also not a departure from or a refutation of our faith whatsoever. To our best knowledge, Jesus never proclaimed the Gospel to be about himself personally; it was a calling for the Realm of God—about what God wanted to take place in human society. He wasn't unique in doing this; he followed in the tradition of prophets and ratified the teachings of his predecessors, such as Moses. It wasn't their theology and beliefs he was challenging; instead, it was the lack of integrity and mercy he saw in the religious practices and laws, as well as the injustices he witnessed in his world.

Jesus wasn't unique in this regard. This seems to be the message repeated by other great religious figures throughout history. Across the millennia and around the globe, the messages of selflessness, right-relationships, integrity, pure motives, humility, justice, mercy, and love are universal more than they are peculiar to any religious tradition. In that regard, Buddha's prophetic teachings to his followers may be no less authoritative and effective in constraining the great sins of humanity than were Jesus,' or Muhammad's, or Moses', or Confucius', or any of the other moral

voices in the world's great religious traditions. When we are able to appreciate and embrace the similarities in their messages, then we are in a better position to cite and debate the distinctions and potential conflicts in the various traditions, which is critical in discerning what is universally true from that which is not.

Now you might think this is a strange message to hear from the pulpit, particularly in light of our text for today from Colossians. And for one very good reason! What often separates Christianity from other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam, is what the Apostle Paul, in particular, does theologically with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul's theology is what often creates an obstacle to most Jews and Muslims, along with others.

Paul, as we know, viewed Jesus' death as the atonement for human sin and the resurrection as a confirmation that God is saving and delivering us from our annihilation and extinction at death. Instead of no life after death, Jesus' atonement makes it possible to experience eternal life. What we have to recognize is, Paul's message was fairly unusual and innovative at the time. This was a belief developed within parts of the emerging church—particularly Pauline—in the decades following Jesus' life and times. But Jesus himself may never have imagined his role and purpose in this way!

The other thing we must reckon with is that what Paul sought to do with this interpretation is likely quite different than what the church and other powers that be have done with it in subsequent generations and down through the ages. As I interpret it, Paul's intent (living in the Roman world) was to create an equal playing field for Jews and Gentiles by eliminating the spiritual obstacles

established in religious authority, customs, identity, and practices as the only way to know God, while advancing the moral conscience and character of people. Namely, that it wasn't Jews (and Gentiles who became Jews through conversion) who would be saved by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; rather, it was the pure of heart who will see and reflect God, regardless of their racial, religious, and cultural identity.

In other words, for Paul a specific religion (namely, Judaism in his context) no longer was the unique medium through which people came under the influence of God's Spirit. Instead, with Jesus' death and resurrection, a new era began for the human race—Jew and Gentile alike. God's grace was extended to all. A specific religion proclaiming to serve as the unique gateway to God's grace no longer held true; instead, anyone who came before God with a humble heart and pure motives could receive the Holy Spirit, which then allowed them to fulfill the intent of the moral law.

Thus, as I see it, the ultimate emphasis for Paul was not that everyone agree with him in his beliefs about who Jesus was and what Paul claimed God had accomplished in his death and resurrection, but that they simply turn from their ignorant and immoral ways and live a pure and humble life—his theological interpretation being an *objective* truth that enables people to be embraced by the divine, regardless of their beliefs or customs. For Paul, God has acted in such a universal, all-encompassing way that “Christ is all and in all.”

Let me say that again: for the Apostle Paul, it didn't actually matter if everyone bought into his theology about the atonement—that, for him, was an objective fact, outside of human consideration—

a divine act that eliminated the ultimate gatekeeping role of institutionalized religion of any form. What mattered was that everyone now had the equal opportunity to find divine grace, favor, and inspiration through a pure and humble heart—a transformed life that would place people in right relationships with God and with their neighbors—the ultimate *telos*, or hope and purpose, of spirituality. The value of Christ’s work was universal, not specific to a particular community of believers!

This was precisely why, to the Colossians, Paul wasn’t trying to convince them of his theology; instead he was imploring them to live a life worthy of the calling they had received! To Christians today he would say, don’t worry about getting your theology figured out; don’t focus on converting others to your own (or your church’s) set of beliefs. Instead, concentrate on ridding your lives of everything that contaminates them with selfishness, anger, arrogance, greed, lust, and all the other vices and harmful characteristics of human life. Evangelism, then, is humbly giving witness to the grace and inspiration God brings to your life; it’s not to be manipulative, coercive, or agenda driven! Live a pure life that is renewed in spirit with all of the virtues like kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness, generosity, self-control, mercy, love, and peace. Embrace that spirit with others who share that same desire for a pure heart, regardless of their background, tradition, or status in life. For it’s not your identity that ultimately matters (“Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free...”); that is not what will make your life good and worthy before God; rather, it’s the pure of heart who will see God.

How Paul theologically arrived at this place might be debated, to be sure; but for the most part, his theology was remarkably liberating—even though it was only meant to be a bridge to his ultimate goal—i.e., that human beings, across the cultural and religious divide, would find the spiritual depth, beauty, moral character and harmony in life that would reflect their Creator’s intentions. That was the realm of God—the beloved community of Christ—the Way, the Truth and the Life.

To me, that sounds much like what Buddha said five hundred years earlier:

Those who are pure in heart and single in purpose are able to understand the most supreme Way. ...Those who have passions are never able to perceive the Way; for it is like stirring up clear water with hands; people may come there wishing to find a reflection of their faces, which, however, they will never see. A mind troubled and vexed with the passions is impure, and on that account it never sees the Way.

Or what Muhammad preached to his followers over five hundred years later:

They will enter the Garden of Bliss who have a true, pure, and merciful heart.

It is what is taught in Hinduism:

The man who is pure of heart
Is bound to fulfill himself
In whatever way he is taught.

A worldly man seeks all his life,
But is still bewildered.

Detached from the senses,
You are free.

Attached, you are bound.

When this is understood,
You may live as you please.

And in Taosim:

I have heard from my teacher that those who have cunning implements are cunning in their dealings, and that those who are cunning in their dealings have cunning in their hearts, and that those who have cunning in their hearts cannot be pure and incorrupt, and that those who are not pure and incorrupt are restless in spirit, and that those who are restless in spirit are not vehicles for Tao (which means, The Way).

And, of course, it's true to the heart of Jesus:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

It's a universal message; as it's true for one, it is true for all. It's a hope intended to heal the world of all that undermines its peace and harmony of relations—all the harm of human sin. Ultimately, across the world's spectrum of religions, that's the noblest truth of all.

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4 August 2013