

Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: Buddhist Reflections in Honour of St John of Patmos

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Twenty years ago, when I began to teach at Amherst College in the USA, I taught a freshman seminar called 'Apocalypse or Awakening'. We read the frightening literature on the four horsemen of the apocalypse, on population explosion and megadeath, on pollution and new plagues, on exploitive resource depletion and world famine, and on thermonuclear holocaust and war. It became clear that the overcoming of these grave dangers to all life on earth depended primarily on the mass awakening of a new awareness in a great majority of human beings of all nations.

As we looked through various philosophical, psychological and religious writings it soon became apparent that the question of changing awareness is very much an educational problem. I have been especially excited about this meeting as it seems to me an effort by the leaders of major religious institutions to reach out to co-operate with the leaders of the new world religion called secular humanism, especially the scientists, and address the issue of changing awareness and education. If this can become a long-term working partnership, then scientists will be helped by developing a new respect for the power and importance of spiritual insight into the nature of reality, and religious people will be helped to unify their spiritual practice with broader knowledge of the cosmos and more effective social action.

The Apocalypse of John is both currently and universally relevant for the positive reason that it vividly shows us the New Jerusalem, New Heaven and New Earth, which opens for us a vista of a life when God can no longer be isolated from his creation, when the dualistic split of sacred and profane has been overcome, and where the Christ as Living Love, All-powerful Goodness, and All-knowing Wisdom is interwoven with the lives of all beings. Some might think this itself is a fantasy - but we need this vision vitally, like a daily medicine, in order to keep our hope alive in the midst of all the difficulties. Our greatest enemy now, as in St John's time, the major weapon of the Beast that hammers at us constantly through the media, is hopelessness, despair and cynicism.

We need the medicine of Revelation 21 and 22. We should try to visualise the mandala city and palace, the exalting architecture of the sacred, majestic square city of twelve thousand furlongs width and height, made of jasper, sapphire, translucent gold, with a twelve-fold precious foundation made of the love of the Apostles...we should contemplate this often to learn to feel comfortable with the supposedly impossible, to keep the energy of our inspiration.

The Revelation is also well chosen for another reason. There is a powerful movement of Christian fundamentalism spreading from the US that reads this Revelation as justifying the destruction of the environment. These pious, well-intentioned though rigidly self-righteous people are totally caught up in the imagery of God's destruction of the old world, of Babylon, and have fantasised themselves as those who are earning the New Jerusalem by serving as the horsemen of the apocalypse, assisting in the purificative acts of destruction. They feel justified in a massive defence budget, to make war on whomsoever they choose to demonise. Lindsay's *Late Great Planet Earth* (more than 15 million copies sold) and many other popular books and television mass preachers reinforce this theology of destruction. These Christians consider humanists, scientists, environmentalists, family planning people, women's empowerment activists, welfare advocates - and on and on - as the minions of Satan, the workers of the Beast. Humanist scholars cannot effectively respond to these fundamentalists. They can only be re-educated by leaders of the Christian Churches who must present a clear and persistent critique of the theology of ecocide, and a ringing affirmation that the vision of St John calls for a radical reform of the soul and of society.

I hereby pray for a new Declaration of Patmos in this vein, that it be widely circulated, and that a focused and systematic effort be made to have its main outlines endorsed by leaders of all Christian denominations, including the more moderate evangelicals. I pledge that similar, parallel, and mutually reinforcing efforts will be made within Buddhism in the Buddhist parts of the globe, especially in the last runaway materialist

communist nation of China, which is posed to inflict ecocatastrophe on a massive scale, yet where, if the hearts of a new generation of leaders could soften, Buddhist teachers such as HH the Dalai Lama and his many colleagues in other world religions could be of so much help in restoring the spiritual hope of that huge mass of spiritually and emotionally devastated people. The other world religions - with special intensity of appeal to the leaders of Islam - should be invited and stimulated to work in similar ways in the realism of their own religions, and the humanists must exert themselves to critique materialistic nihilism and revive a greed-restraining, life-affirming spiritual humanism. Perhaps a series of Patmos conferences, hosted by the Orthodox, with the leaders of other denominations and religions in dialogue with environmentalists, is in order, from now until the millennium of the common era.

Let me turn now to a Buddhist undertaking of the Apocalypse. In the Holy Teaching of Vimalkirti, a sacred scripture of Mahayana Buddhism that purports to come from Shakyamuni Buddha's time of ca. 500 BCE but by auspicious coincidence emerges as a text in India around the time of Jesus, the theme of Apocalypse and purification is dominant. At the beginning of the Scripture, the Buddha is asked, 'How does the Bodhisattva (a spiritual person who has embarked on the heroic evolutionary path of becoming a perfect Buddha in order to save all beings from suffering) purify and beautify the Buddhaverse?' The Buddhist concept is that a person who becomes perfect in wisdom and compassion transforms and perfects his or her environment which includes other sentient beings at the same time as he or she transforms her own body, mind, and spirit. Thus a Buddhaverse is a universe as perceived by an enlightened being.

The message is remarkably like Revelation in the central respect that the universe as encountered by perfect love is already a perfect place where all may unfold their own highest potential and make their own loving contributions. Love has the power to transform the world, it is the strong force of the atoms of the world - only here it is the collective infinite love of all infinite beings, not conceptually separated as the love of a single, unique creator God. The Scripture states that the Buddhas allow the world to seem full of challenges simply to educate beings, especially in the cultivation of compassion, which requires proximity to suffering to grow. The superiority of such a Buddhaverse to an eternal heaven realm is much discussed, as the 'best of all possible worlds' paradoxes are wrestled with. At the end of the Scripture, Vimalakirti, a Buddha in the embodiment of a lay religious from another Buddhaverse, picks up his home universe, the Abhirati Buddhaverse of Akshobhya, miniaturises it and shows it to the assembly as a sign of hope for them. It is very similar to our naturalistic earth, but the big difference is that the Buddha is visible to all, all of the time, and the giant stairways descending from the lower heavens to the earth are accessible all the time, so the gods can come to earth for a stroll or to hear the teachings, and the humans and other animals can visit the heavens for pleasure, rest and inspiration.

In my reading of the Apocalypse, a key point of Revelation is that the New Heaven and New Earth are not withheld from all beings cruelly or whimsically by God/Christ. How could omnipotence and omniscience together produce cruelty? It is impossible. Thus the whole drama of struggle between Christ and the Beast, good and evil, and the tremendous killing, destruction and affliction, must have a pedagogic purpose.

What the crisis and purification drama teaches is that the New World is created by the soul's self-transformation and self-purification. The fundamental sin is that of self-obsession, the self-absolutisation that lies at the root of selfish grasping of pleasure, property, pride and political power through domination of others. The 'mark of the Beast' is the self-addiction of individual self-centeredness, articulated as the delusion of pride of self-absolutisation, the addiction of greed, the explosion of hatred, the poison of envy, and all the attendant vices.

'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord ...' (14:13) says the voice from heaven before John sees the angels stick their sickles down to reap the earth and pour their seven vials full of plagues that express the wrath of God. Such death and destruction is a cleansing of the ugly crust of sin, breaking the deadly shell of egotism, smashing the prison of self-centeredness, liberating from the slavery of self-addiction. John's vision affirms Jesus' great saying, 'He who saves his life shall lose it, but he who loses his life in Christ, he shall have life everlasting.'

If we wish to save the environment then the bottom line, in this Buddhist reading, is that we must analyse ourselves to find out in what ways we are living in the distortion of self-deification and thereby inevitably

depleting, overpopulating, polluting, and destroying the environment, the world. Who destroys the world? We do. How do we save it? We 'die in the Lord', that is kill off our own petty tyrannical ego-habit, give it up and so entrust ourselves to love, give in to our relationality with others, open ourselves through the truth of the ultimate selflessness of our soul to the good and the beautiful, even if our habitual self-addiction makes it look to us like a cold, dark void.

Isn't this the profound core of life itself, not only of Christianity and all human religions? It is the mystery of how happiness is found by surrendering the selfish desire for it, how love is released by self-forgetting, how life can only really blossom into boundlessness when it incorporates the actuality of death.

This message of Revelation presents us with a clear challenge: 'Purify your own soul and you cannot fail to purify your environment!' Greed, hate and delusion are the Beast, the enemy, and the battlefield whereon we can meet and defeat them is in our own heart.

A final plea: in working out new declarations for mobilising St John's message for today's victims of the environmental crisis, please make heroic hermeneutical efforts to reinterpret all forms of dualism that can anchor lethal exclusivisms: the split between humans and other animals, who can sometimes be thought to lack souls and therefore not to deserve the same fundamental consideration as other humans; the split between soul and body which can be shown to eventuate in malconsideration and mistreatment of women; the split between God and His Creation, which has demonstrably led to a destructive contempt and exploitive license with nature; even the split between the saved and the damned, which leads to lethal hatred of followers of other religions.

HH the Dalai Lama of Tibet always says that it is now too late in history for leaders or members of world religions to compete with each other for power and members - this only adds to the sources of conflict that abound in the world and proves right those who consider that religion itself is part of the problem. It is time for leaders or members of world religions to join in valuing the quality of the spirit, awareness, and action of individuals, rather than the denominational affiliation and to mobilise all their spiritual and inner scientific resources and co-operate together to help the secularists to cope with the terrible crises of our times, to stop the wars, share the wealth, preserve the environment, and further the material and spiritual welfare of all beings.