

## CHAPTER 4

### POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN THE RELIGIONS

THAT there are points of resemblance between the religions is a fact which is generally acknowledged. These similarities may be of a formal and of a real nature. The question is whether these points of resemblance may be used as points of contact.

It is well known what a powerful role points of contact and associations of ideas play in everyday life. In education, in lectures and sermons, in poetry and prose, the possibility of dispensing with them is simply unthinkable.

What is meant by points of contact between the religions? Is it full resemblance, formally and really, both in form and content? This question does not touch the most significant aspect of the points of contact. What really matters is the fact that a certain agreement prevails in regard to the most central and fundamental issues, that there seems to exist a basic parallelism in trend and tendency. A great deal of confusion and deplorable controversy could be avoided if this were always kept in mind.

Speaking of religion, it will be seen that on psychological grounds it would be wholly impossible to get away from points of contact. In many instances the similarity and agreement between the religions are so apparent that there can be no room for doubt. When the Roman Empire in its time absorbed the entire Greek religion with its pantheon of gods and ideas, by simply giving them Latin names, it was, of course, because there were points of contact to be found everywhere.

To a lesser degree this holds true in the relationship of Chinese Buddhism to Taoism. As the weaker partner of the two, the latter absorbed not only the most prominent buddhas and gods of the former but also many of its ideas. This was done by giving new names and to some extent new contents also. Buddhism too adopted thoughts and theories from Taoism. These Taoist thoughts and theories were incorporated into the imposing system of religious ideas which Buddhism had brought from India, especially from the philosophy of Vedanta and Sankhya.<sup>1</sup> An interchange of terms and religious concepts

<sup>1</sup> Compare Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Lehre der Upanishaden und die Anfänge des Buddhismus*.

therefore took place in East Asia, and these terms and concepts were in the course of time and in different ways expanded, but never so as to obliterate the points of contact.

In some instances the historical connexions between words and concepts, rites and ceremonies, as they have crystallized themselves in the different religions, may be traced with a high degree of certainty. In many instances the probability of such an historical connexion is great although it is not possible to verify every detail.

But there are many more instances of remarkable similarities and agreements between the religions, where it is either wholly impossible or highly improbable that there has ever been any historical connexion.

There was a time in the study of the history of religion when students were prone to look for historical connexions everywhere, with the result that many artificial constructions were invented. This is no longer the case. The tendency to-day seems to be to go to the other extreme and to deny bluntly all historical connexions, even where such interdependence in the nature of the case is the only natural explanation.

On the other hand the fact is now more and more appreciated that people often arrive at very much the same religious results when they live in somewhat similar circumstances. Speaking generally this is no doubt true, and yet it must be remembered that deeper factors often break in and cause a total change as far as the results are concerned. Environment, heredity, race distinctions, customs and manners are all important factors to be reckoned with. In some cases, however, these are not the most important. What sometimes is even more decisive is a personal sense of calling, an inexplicable impact of the Holy Spirit, an election which the human mind cannot fathom.

Schleiermacher, in his *Reden über die Religion* and *Die Monolog*, pointed out as early as A.D. 1800 that the religious disposition is basically inherent in the structure of the human soul. It is something totally peculiar (*sui generis*), something which has its ground in man's pristine consciousness as a feeling of absolute dependence (*schlechthiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*).

The investigations of the last hundred years in both the higher and lower forms of religion have amply corroborated this. It is not only terror and fear which lie at the back of them; there is also an impulse to express trust and gratitude, dependence, reverence, and devotion towards life's great and constituent powers. It is this process which, in its more ideal form, produces the consciousness of the "holy".

There was a time when it was believed that as a necessity of natural law evolution would lead all religions surely and safely on to perfection. To-day it is realized that this was an illusion. In many cases progress has been interrupted, and there have been times of retrogression and even complete stagnation.

It can be proved, however, that strong and fixed laws are operative in the religious sphere all over the world. At different times and places there appear people who live a singularly disciplined religious life, people who are able to give their religious experiences names and articulation, and who therefore come to exercise a profound influence on mankind. These men are the sages, the prophets, and the saints. They have bequeathed to mankind terms and concepts, intimations and associations of ideas, which have stood as spiritual guideposts through the ages. When considering "points of contact between the religions" it is of course these ideas and associations of ideas which must be discussed.

Professor Saunders, of the Pacific School of Religion at Berkeley, one of the foremost experts of our time in the field of the history of religion, has pointed out this fundamental fact very clearly and vividly: "It is reasonable to believe that already at the dawn of history there was a certain recognition among the Indo-Arians before their dispersion of an eternal order in existence. We know that one of their major groups, the Indo-Iranians, developed the idea of such an order, which they called *Arta*. In the Vedic literature this became *Rita* and *Asha* in the Avesta of Zoroastrianism. Probably it was a twin conception of the Greek *Logos* and the Chinese *Tao*."<sup>1</sup>

Many of the leading students of the history of religion will agree with Professor Saunders, and not a few of them will even go further. It is well known that Buddhism adopted several of the leading ideas of the Vedic literature. *Rita* and *Tao* were often identified with the principal idea of Buddhism, viz. *Bodhitatatha* (Chinese *chen-ru*), by which the ground-plan and eternal rhythm of life are expressed.

As to the "twin conception" in the West, *Logos*, it is a well-known fact that it came to have the greatest significance for the religious thought of the West. From being simply a term for reason and thought, it became in Stoicism the highest expression for wisdom and the world rhythm, until in the philosophy of Philo it was lifted up to the level of the divine and holy, and even vaguely connoted the personal.<sup>2</sup> Quite

<sup>1</sup> K. Saunders, *The Gospel for Asia*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Philo's expression, "The only-begotten son".

naturally he soon discovered the inner affinity between *Logos* and *Chokma* (wisdom), a term which the Jews sometimes employed to personify the sacred concept of wisdom. The Book of Proverbs says:

“I wisdom dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions. The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate. Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding; I have strength. By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth. I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me. Riches and honour are with me; yea, durable riches and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver. I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment: that I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures. The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: while as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: when he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: when he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways.”<sup>1</sup>

Compare this with Cleanthes' paeon to the *Logos*: “The universal *Logos* which pulsates through everything, mingling this life with the greater and smaller lights. To thee, the Highest Sovereign, does everything owe its birth. Behold, apart from thee nothing has been brought to completion, whether it be on the earth, in the waters or in the highest regions. Apart from thee everything is but the fools' foolishness and the blind uproar of sinners. Thou guidest and rulest everything so that it fitteth, and so that the predominant one mergeth with the eternal wisdom.”

<sup>1</sup> Prov. 8: 12-32.

It was very natural, therefore, that the *Logos* title was applied to Jesus in the Gospel according to John, which has such a marked universalistic outlook. The term was, as it were, providentially provided for this use, not that in its original form and connotation it corresponded in every detail to the mighty and cosmically coloured Christ-portrait of the Fourth Gospel, but that by virtue of its character and structure it was well fitted to become a word-vessel into which new and dynamic thoughts and ideas might be poured.

The *Logos* appellation was thereby raised to the highest level. The "twin idea" in East Asia, the *Tao* concept, has undergone a similar development. Its basic meaning of the "unutterable", the "word", was already in ancient times broadened to signify "reason" and "wisdom". It did not stop at this; as early as in the Book of History (*Shu-Ching*) it takes on a religious meaning. There are references to those who have a "*tao* heart", i.e. those whose heart is receptive for the thoughts and plans of Heaven.

It is in Taoism that the *Tao* concept reaches its highest development on Chinese soil. Here *Tao* becomes the transcendental and unutterable, signifying the divine reality which underlies existence as its norm, rhythm, and driving power. At the same time it connotes the immanent divine power which operates not only behind but also in the midst of existence. "The divine" and "divine power" have purposely been used as renderings for *Tao*, because Lao-Tzu, although approximating a personal connotation, never quite dares to take the full step. His *Tao*, which in many respects represents the most sublime in Chinese thought, is after all suspended in the air as it were, half-way between the personal conception of God and the abstract-metaphysical divinity conception. It is only in the Chinese translation of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John that *Tao* is raised to the personal and royal plane as the name of the Incarnate Word, which "became flesh and dwelt among us". And here it has indeed, in the providence of God, fulfilled its mission. Because of this a great host of cultured and religiously inclined people in East Asia have been brought into the Kingdom of God.

As Christ was introduced to these people under this sublime and highly indigenous appellation, it was felt as if He became organically woven together with all that is great, sacred, and precious in the Asiatic world of ideas. True, not even the Chinese *Tao* concept was, to begin with, a sufficient medium to express the whole fullness and glory of the New Testament *Logos* idea. But in this case it happened, as has happened so

many times where Christianity has been a living and powerful reality, little by little the word *Tao* became sanctified, expanded, and elevated, so that it could sustain the weight of the new and mighty content.

It is obviously impossible to point out every case where the justification and significance of the points of contact may be seen. The relationship between *Logos* and *Tao* explained above will have indicated in principle at least why and how points of contact must be used both in the higher and lower spheres of life.

A close study of the pulsating life of East Asia will convince anyone of the imperative necessity for the use of the same methods as those used by Paul in Athens. In the sanctuaries, cultures, literature, and everyday life of the Far East the wide-awake missionary will catch glimpses of "altars to the Unknown God", and he will not have read very far in the writings of Confucianism, original Taoism, and Buddhism before he discovers a profusion of sayings and concepts which point beyond themselves, and which, in an indirect and groping way, treat of the same great and fundamental problems of life upon which the New Testament has thrown full light.

It is of paramount importance that the missionary, while fearless and confident, should yet exercise wisdom, keen judgment, and tact in using these points of contact, so that the listener, psychologically speaking, will be able to grasp the truth. The question of the use of points of contact takes on special significance in the translation of the Scriptures into a new vernacular. Logically speaking the success of any translation depends on this one thing: that the new ideas and thoughts are attached to the proper and most suitable word-vessels which have been providentially prepared through the religious training of previous generations. In this respect there is indeed no choice; if non-Christian peoples are to be instructed in Christian truth at all, words and phrases in their own language must be found, and little by little "baptized" and renewed in such a way that they can convey the new content. These words and phrases, these "word-vessels", are of course at the outset far from perfect. Everything will depend on whether the Christ life is allowed to unfold itself in the hearts of men. Here neither the conservative nor the liberal attitude of mind will be of any avail. Wisdom, tact, and genius for language all have their value, but the one decisive factor is the Christ life in the soul.

One example from China may be cited. The vast majority of the religious terms used in the Christian Church in China

are borrowed from the classical *Shang Ti* religion of ancient China, from Taoism, and especially from Buddhism. The terms for God, heaven, angels, demons, conversion, and new birth are all adopted from the ancient non-Christian sphere of ideas. The pioneer missionaries and their Chinese collaborators demand our respect and gratitude for their painstaking work along this line. Few countries have such a heritage to draw from, and the treasures are far from exhausted. The Christian Mission to Buddhists, with which the author is connected, has had some small share in this. It has been an extraordinary experience to have witnessed the delight illuminating the faces of Chinese Church leaders when they have discovered some new and well-suited Chinese terms in our Church ritual.

What then is the essential thing when seeking for linguistic points of contact in the forming of the best possible language for liturgical use? The heart of the matter is to find words and concepts which clearly express holy anticipation, the words and terms which contain the sacred X, Y, and Z, the words which point beyond themselves and which therefore are providentially prepared by the Spirit of God.

Theoretically there are probably few Christians at home or on the mission fields who will maintain that there are no elements of truth in the non-Christian religions, and that it is therefore wrong to make use of points of contact. In practice, however, it is astonishing how many there are who are unsympathetic. Even that highly-honoured thinker and writer Dr. H. Kraemer affirmed in the presence of the author at the Madras Conference that it was legitimate to use the best in other religions as stepping-stones to an understanding of Christian truth, but that there were real points of contact he would not admit.<sup>1</sup>

The Church has just passed through a period when it has been difficult to get a hearing for the Johannine method of approach. This is due no doubt to the fact that trends of a distinct type have been much to the fore in the intellectual world. These trends have certainly been justified and significant as a reaction against the exaggerated subjectivism of earlier days. There is prevalent a salutary tendency to seek the strong deep tones of pristine Christianity. The heart of the Christian faith, the Incarnation of the Word in Christ, is again placed in the centre, and many of the rigid and artificial party lines between the different Christian groups are no longer upheld.

<sup>1</sup> Compare his book, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, p. 300, "Yet, although fundamentally speaking there is no point of contact", etc.

This change has been welcomed everywhere except in the case of people who, for extrinsic and tactical reasons, have struggled to uphold the old rigid boundaries. Something of the blessing of this new outlook was witnessed at the Madras Conference. During recent years there has been a certain tendency to over-emphasize cultural and social activities at the expense of the evangelistic and Church-building aspect of missionary work. A distinct change for the better has undoubtedly taken place in this respect.

There is always a danger, however, that a legitimate reaction may go to the opposite extreme, with the result that other vital interests suffer. Something of this kind has happened in recent years. The nihilistic view of man which Barthianism has brought in its wake, and the contempt it has shown for the thought that man was created in "God's image", have had a detrimental influence both inwardly and outwardly.

However, certain things seem to suggest that a more sympathetic attitude is emerging. What happened at the Madras Conference was an indication of this change. The author was co-opted as a member of the Conference for the express purpose of reporting from his experiences among the religious groups in China. His reports were received sympathetically, especially by representatives from America, England, India, Japan, and China, but less so from Continental representatives.<sup>1</sup>

Syncretism and compromises in mission work are a real danger which missionaries must continuously guard against. On the other hand it is equally certain that there is a great danger lest they neglect to make use of the sacred material which Christ through His Spirit has made available in the life of the peoples and in their historical heritage.

Even the first leader of the Church, the Apostle Peter, needed to gain a heavenly vision before he could put aside his prejudice and see things in their true perspective. Once having seen the vision he could exclaim: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the author's article, "The Johannine Approach", in *The Authority of Faith*, the first supplementary volume of the report series.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 10: 34, 35.