
CHRISTIANITY FROM A THAI BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt of a Thai Buddhist to explore the history of Christianity, and understand Christianity—a theistic religion—which many consider to be completely different from an ‘atheist’ religion like Buddhism. In order to comprehend Christianity from a Buddhist perspective, an understanding of the symbolism is needed. In this way we can appreciate the commonalities of the two religions and open a space for inter-religious dialogue.

The Catholic Church: Papacy and Politics

One way of considering Christianity is through its history. Christianity, like the other great religions, has a long history and has passed through many reforms, interpretations and divisions into different sects. One of the most prominent characteristics of Christianity, especially during the Middle Ages, was the institution of the church. Christian churches had taken their administrative pattern from the secular government of the Roman Empire. The popes in Rome, at one time, were the center of faith for all Christians in Europe, and has been the center for the Catholic churches even in the present time.

The Christian church has only gradually emerged since the end of the first century. At first, a simple organization was formed with a bishop as the supreme head, who was the supervisor of the services in the church. Below the bishop, there were ministers, priests and other faithful. Thus the hierarchy of the church was established into a religious institution.

Christianity gained its recognition as a legal religion and a state religion in the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great. The conversion of Emperor Constantine marked a crucial moment in the history of Christianity. Emperor Constantine took the Bishop of Rome, Sylvester I, as his theological advisor and regarded the Bishop of Rome's position as the orthodox one. The alliance of the Emperor and the Bishop of Rome contributed to the rise of power of the Roman bishop in the spiritual sector, and later on also in the political sector.

Christianity became the legal religion and the state religion of the Empire for several other reasons. The first was that Christianity adopted the form of its institutional church directly from the structure of the Roman government. Since the Roman Empire was united under one emperor, the Christian church as the Roman formal religion became united under one supreme bishop as well. There was a long struggle which led to the bishop of Rome gaining the supreme power. But gradually, the bishop of Rome-the capital of the Roman Empire-was recognized as the supreme bishop over the other bishops within the Empire.

Another reason for the bishop of Rome gaining power over Christian churches in the Roman Empire was the claim that the church of Rome was directly founded by both Paul and Peter. Support for this was a passage in Matthew 16 that held that Peter was the first bishop of Rome. Because of this biblical support, Rome came to be widely accepted among Christians as the authority in the Roman Empire. As the bishop of Rome gained the spiritual authority within the empire, he became known by his present name - the Pope.

One other aspect contributed to the power of the bishop of Rome. The dispute in the second century over the dating of the Easter celebration was controversial; the debate on the issue continued for several centuries.

Finally the church of Rome gained victory concerning this issue, and thus gained the supreme power of interpretation of any Christian traditions.

When the capital of the Roman Empire was shifted from Rome to Byzantium or Constantinople in 330 A.D., the Pope in Rome lost direct access to the emperor, but gained something else which was much more important. Being far from the secular central power of the emperors, the popes at Rome enjoyed more independent authority of their administration both in spirituality and in politics, and began to exercise their greater powers in almost every aspect.

In 1059, Pope Nicholas II issued a decree which made the election of the pope handled by the cardinals. The emperor at Byzantium would only be notified after the election. After the death of Pope Nicholas II, the cardinals elected the new pope, Alexander II, as prescribed by the decree. The Emperor, Henry IV, being discontented by the challenge of power from the popes at Rome, appointed a rival pope. There was a struggle of power between the emperor and the popes on this issue, but finally the popes won and gained freedom for their absolute spiritual authority.

Two more important popes should be mentioned here: Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) and Pope Innocent III (1198-1216). Pope Gregory VII was the one who determined to purify the corruption of the church and its clergymen. He also sought to reunite the Western and Eastern churches, but unsuccessfully. Pope Innocent III was another great pope who tried to match papal theory with papal action, authority and practice; Christianity was almost reunited under him. In short, the authority of the popes in the Medieval Ages was supreme.

The Reformation Era took place in Europe around the period of 1500-1650 A.D. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the first person who started the movement by challenging the authority of the Pope at Rome as the “true representative” of the teachings of Jesus or of the words of God. While the Pope and the churches appealed to the tradition, Luther and his new movement appealed to the Scripture as the basis of the authority of Christianity.

Since the Pope at Rome and the civil authority during that time were allied, Luther challenged not only the authority of the Pope but also the authority of the civil government. Luther was condemned by both the Pope and the civil administration. When he was condemned as a heretic, he simultaneously became an outlaw in the eyes of the imperial forces. Luther had to hide himself for a certain period of time during which he translated the Bible into the German language, making it accessible to the common people.

During this time the printing press was invented. Luther's writings were printed and distributed; these gained him a widespread recognition. The emphasis of Luther and the later Protestants on Scripture was a great impetus for the expansion of literacy and book-publishing. On the other hand, the expansion of literacy and book-publishing supported the reformation movement with the emphasis on the authority of Scripture.

In 1521, Luther publicly denounced the Popes and the councils. This event marked a crucial moment in the history of Christianity. It split Christianity into two main sects, i.e., Catholic and Protestant. Luther's emphasis on Scripture brought a new difficulty into Christianity: whose interpretation of the Bible was the correct and authoritative one. It seemed that there was no easy answer to this question.

In 1526 the German peasants revolted against the oppression of the noble overlords. Luther took the side of the nobility and condemned the rebellious peasants. By doing that, Luther gained support from the nobility and lost his popularity among the peasants and their leaders. From the peasant point of view, Luther lacked consistency in his reading of Scripture. This event brought up the question of whose authority of the interpretation of the Bible should be recognized.

Another example of the difficulty of Biblical interpretation was when Luther and Zwingli, another prominent reformer from Zurich, Switzerland, disagreed over the meaning of Holy Communion. While Luther took the Holy Communion literally, Zwingli interpreted it in a symbolic way. For Zwingli, the bread and wine was not the real flesh and blood of Jesus, but just the symbol which reminded people to strictly

follow his doctrine. The disagreement between Luther and Zwingli created the probability that honest people reading the same words might come to significantly different beliefs as a result of different ways of interpretation. Now each individual person was in a sense, alone before God, since no absolute confidence could be placed in an authoritative church nor in an authoritative interpretation of Scripture.

In the later years of the Reformation Era, the Renaissance movement arose in emerging universities. Philosophical and scientific thinking were developing in Europe. Many great thinkers-including Descartes, Hume, Locke, Leibniz, etc.-proclaimed that rationality was the capacity of human beings to find the truths of nature, of society, and of religion. All religious knowledge was subjected to the critiques of logic and reason.

Challenged by philosophical and scientific critiques, Christianity placed an emphasis on experience rather than reason. Two developments were important: Pietism and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1729-1804). In the pietistic movement, house meetings were instituted so that people could pray together, read the Bible and exchange their experience. The pietistic movement appealed to the will and emotion of people.

The philosophy of Kant tells us how limited human knowledge is. Human beings only know that which is located in time and space. Human beings simply are not equipped to know such things as the existence of God. By showing the limits of reason and knowledge, Kant had made room for faith. After the Renaissance, Christianity has expanded to America, Africa, Asia, and many other parts of the world, and become one of the world's great religions.

Symbolism

Many would suggest that a good way of classifying the great religions of the world would be to consider them either as theistic or atheistic religions. Christianity would belong to the first group, while religions like Buddhism would belong to the second group.

But in my opinion, the understanding of reality was expressed in different ways in different cultures and different times. In one time and one culture, it was expressed in religious language, in another time, in scientific language. Most religious understandings of the world are symbolic. By approaching things symbolically, we can appreciate commonalities and open room for dialogue.

The story of Jesus is a good example of symbolic language. Jesus was born from the womb of Mary, the Virgin. The story of the Virgin Birth could be interpreted in many ways. But one way of interpreting this is that Christ, as the symbol of the life of the human being, came directly from God, the creator of all things. Life, as a gift from God, is pure by its own nature. It is God who gives bodily life to all human beings through their parents. But our spirits come directly from God.

The story of the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples one day before he died on the cross, which later on has become one of the most important ceremonies in Christianity, it involves eating and drinking the bread and the wine, symbolizing the body and blood of Christ. This can also be interpreted in many ways. One liberal way of interpreting this is that the flesh and blood represents the teachings and the spirit of Jesus. One must internalize the teachings of Jesus to be a true Christian.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is also another good example of the symbolic language in religion. One way of interpreting is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a symbol of the death of impurity and the birth of purity of life in human being. The Human being needs to die to his or her life of bodily desires before he or she could be reborn into a new and spiritually pure life. In order to enter the Kingdom of God, human beings need a resurrection so that they die to the worldly life and are born anew in the spiritual life.

The story of Jesus is extraordinary when it is compared to other of world's great teachers. Jesus was probably the only prophet who sacrificed his life to save people and establish his teachings into the world.

The conception of the Trinity in Christianity, i.e., God, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, could also be interpreted in a symbolic way. God, as the primary source of nature and as the great law of nature, creates everything including sentient and non-sentient beings. Jesus, the Son of God, was the person who found the great law of nature and spoke to the people in terms of theistic language. The Holy Spirit could be interpreted as the essence of human nature to be found by a human being when he has true faith and wisdom through the teachings of Jesus.

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