
THE LURE OF THE GODLESS

THE APPEAL OF EASTERN SPIRITUAL ATHEISM TO THE WEST

by

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There have been during the last two and a half millennia a variety of words that the great spiritual teachers have used, albeit with constant misgivings, to label the extraordinary transformation that has occurred to them; but the commonest of these, to those brought up in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is God. These teachers, many of them the 'founders' of the great world religions, include Gautama Buddha, Mahavir, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and, in our own times, J. Krishnamurti, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Each has endeavoured to lead others towards their own transformation through their example; through codes of conduct and spiritual practices of prayer and meditation; and, in most but not all cases, through direct teaching. Some like Mahavir, the origin of Jainism, chose to avoid the problems of teaching by remaining silent. But most have elected to run the risks of being misinterpreted, and to talk about that which can only be experienced. The impossible challenge they have taken up, as Alan Watts put it, is to 'scrut the inscrutable, speak the unspeakable

and eff the ineffable'. And, in doing so, they have been forced to employ the language, idioms and concerns of the day as images and metaphors, protesting all the time that these are merely, as Zen Buddhism says, 'fingers pointing at the moon', which should not be mistaken for the moon itself. And knowing also that many of their listeners will not be able to retain this distinction, and will be trapped and led astray by their literal-mindedness and by the inclination to revere and hoard these teachings rather than crack them open and use them.

The different views of God that we have around us these days, are to be divided not so much into Eastern and Western as into Inner and Outer. Outer views are those in which God is incarcerated within a prison of metaphor-taken-as-fact, symbol-mistaken-for-reality, and ritual-for-its-own-sake - a prison of coral, the bars built up from the accumulated skeletons of once-useful images, and guarded by curators and bureaucrats who have no more feel for the **vitality** of religion than do their parishioners. Many people look at the religious

institutions that they grew up with, and at their officers, and find them unprepossessing, uninspiring and dessicated husks, and though Westerners may find themselves particularly disappointed with Christianity and Judaism, the same lack of energy and relevance may also be felt in the ritualised forms of Islam, Hinduism, Shintoism and even Buddhism.

Christianity in particular seems to have suffered by becoming enchanted with its own imagery - and this has been exaggerated by the selective editing of Jesus's teaching during the first two centuries after his death by the early priesthood. It was a dangerous risk to personalise God and point to it with the metaphorical fingers of Father, Mother and Monarchy. (In the earliest records of Jesus's teaching, now translated from the Aramaic and old Slavonic, his metaphor was not just paternal but parental: the image of Heavenly Father, with which we are all familiar, was equally balanced with the Earthly Mother, who seems to have been systematically censored in the subsequent rewritings of the Gospels). It appears that Jesus was trying to convey ideas like 'unity', 'origin', 'mutuality' and 'love' through the use of his family metaphor; yet rapidly people became so fascinated with the finger that they forgot to look where it was pointing. For example in the Aramaic Gospel of the Essenes, Jesus says:

And so love your true brothers, as your Heavenly Father and your Earthly Mother love them. And then your Heavenly Father shall

give you his holy spirit, and your Earthly Mother shall give you her holy body. And then shall the Sons of Men like true brothers give love to one another, the love which they received from their Heavenly Father and from their Earthly Mother; and they shall all become comforters one of another. And then shall disappear from the earth all evil and sorrow, and there shall be love and joy upon earth. And then shall the earth be like the heavens, and the kingdom of God shall come. (Szekely, 1977)

The 'heart' of this passage, and of hundreds like it in the records of Jesus's ministry, concerns the very personal matter of relationships, our depending on 'opening up' to sources of goodwill and fellow-feeling that are beyond our own narrow identifications with body and mind, on the global implications of this expanding sense of 'family', and on the practical possibility of such a change. But if we take the language too literally, we are led to construe God not as the experience of deep kinship (and the sense of care, selflessness and at-home-ness that are the natural concomitants of this experience), but as an entity (or team of entities, perhaps) that is real and separate from us, whose creatures we are and in whose charge we remain. God becomes a vaguely person-like projection: external, controlling, creating and usually male. Having missed the point, we are left with a fuzzy conceptual surrogate in which all we can do is believe, and which comes to symbolise not the potential for liberation but the necessity for obedience. The story gets even

more tangled when we are taught to accept that the instrument by which we are to increase our love for each other is Will - a gift from God which, however, like a cheap Christmas toy, is inherently faulty and which is occasionally (when we are 'good') serviced by the manufacturer with a lubricating dollop of Grace. And by the time people had done their literal worst with analogies like 'the Kingdom of God', and Jesus found himself involved in ludicrous conversations such as the famous 'Render unto Caesar', he must have wondered seriously about the wisdom of opening his mouth in the first place.

Part of the problem is our misunderstanding of what the spiritual teachers are up to. They are not telling us The Truth: to do so would not help. As William Blake perceived, 'the truth believ'd is a lie'. What they are trying to do is to help, not teach. As Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh said in one of his lectures in Poona, we behave towards spiritual teachings like an ill person ransacking the files of a dead doctor for a prescription. Jesus and Buddha were writing prescriptions two thousand years ago for people with different symptoms and different belief systems in very different cultures from people of today. And what we urgently need are not lecturers in the history of medicine, but more good doctors of the spirit.

Preeminently amongst the Eastern religions, Buddhism attracts because its Innerview is least obscured, and because it most obviously functions as a Spiritual Medical School, concerned focally with the promotion of health, the

training of 'health educators' and offering a deep, yet clear and unmysterious analysis of the illness and its cure - the Four Noble Truths. Although Bhagwan does not align himself with any particular religion, yet his approach, even some of his more emetic prescriptions, fall squarely within the Inner view of the Eastern spiritual traditions. Whenever it is found - in mystical Christianity, Sufism, Kabbalah, Taoism or Zen - this view is distinguished by these characteristics. It is positive it stresses the availability of transformation, of the 'kingdom of God', to every living person in their own lifetime. It is **practical**: it offers methods and techniques for getting there, rather than the Outer view's more typical and ineffective mixture of exhortation and chastisement (the Sunday morning pep talk and ticking-off). It is **pragmatic**: it is ruthlessly concerned with efficacy rather than dogma. Belief is beside the point if it does not support the process of liberation. It is **personal**: it has little time for grand fantasies, and a lot for the murky details of everyday life as potential tutors and sources of insight. It is **psychological**: it is concerned with inner reality, not outward projections. Or rather it is concerned to show us where our outer projections are in fact products of our inner reality. Like psychotherapy, the religion of the Inner view involves a literally painstaking review of our own taken-for-granted premises about the purpose and nature of life. Specifically, we are promised a face-to-face meeting with God - with our godliness and the godlines of the world - if we but burst the bubble of

some core illusions concerning our own identity. And finally it is **perceptual**: the Inner view sees that our separation from God is not actual but apparent. Transformation is not really the achieving of anything new, but seeing clearly for the first time what has always been the case: a matter of motes and beams. The Outer view talks of 'evil' and 'original sin' and holds people individually accountable for the hurt they cause. The Inner view speaks optimistically of a central immaculate nature - our 'original face' - that is merely obscured by the lies we have been led to believe, and 'through which we look at ourselves and others. There is no denying that individually and collectively people do some dreadful things, but the Outer and Inner views differ on "How come?", and what to do about it.

It is interesting to look at the asymmetry between the two views. From the Outer, at least in its most ossified forms, it is very hard to see through to the Inner. Indeed custodians of the Outer often defend with an energy that is as intense as it is irrational, the literal and absolute truth of their canons. Having come to accept myths about virgin birth, resurrection and arks of animals as historical fact, I suppose it is difficult to substitute a symbolic interpretation later without feeling that one has been duped (and therefore is a dupe). But seen from the Inner, the Outer takes on a new significance and lustre, like a

stained glass window suddenly illuminated from behind. The myths and stories of the Testaments become enriched and the more resonant with meaning for being seen as projections and fables, contrary to the curators' fear that if they lose veracity, there will be nothing left at all.

Teachers in the Eastern spiritual traditions, from Buddha to Bhagwan, appeal because they give access to the Inner, and do not require any belief in unlikely beings or events. Buddha himself was perhaps smarter than Jesus in refusing to be drawn in to any conceptual discussions about 'God' at all, and thereby avoiding the perils of misinterpretation. Bhagwan has sometimes used the language of God, but always makes it transparently clear that he is speaking poetically or metaphorically. One of his recurring themes has been of God as a creator - but, he asks, of what sort? An author? A potter? An assembly-line worker? A manufacturer of faulty clockwork cars? In the Outer view, it is inevitable that some such image, in which there is a clear distinction between the producer and the product, will be implied. Perhaps we will be less misled, says Bhagwan, if we see God rather as a dancer, as the Hindus do. Now the product is none other than the producer: the creation is the creator 'happening' - and happening with energy, skill and grace. The idea of the world as God's dance is perhaps as close as the Inner view would like to come to using the term at all.

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