A Tentative Comparison of Quakerism and Zen Buddhism

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Quakerism was declared as a movement back to original Christianity by George Fox (1624-1691) when England was under a religious revolution. Zen was also declared by Bodhi Dhama (?-534 ?) to return to the Buddha’s experience which is awakening of the Buddha-nature existing in man. In this respect, both seem to have the same foundation. Here I will present some basic elements which are common in both religions.

I. Group Mysticism

Religion is a pursuit of humanity. Therefore it cannot be accomplished through outward deed but by seeking into one’s self. There are various types of mysticism which achieve this human longing. “Quakerism represents a form of group mysticism. That is to say, Quaker mysticism is directed both toward God and toward the group. The vertical relation to God and horizontal relation to man are like two co-ordinates used to plot a curve.”

“Sōrin” 叡林, a technical term for Zen monastery, which means literally bush and wood originates from a Sanskrit word pīndavana and signifies a place where various people gather together to train each other through co-operative life and deepen their experience by exchanging Mondō 問答 or Zen dialogue, and Shōryō 商量 or Zen behavior as if diamonds are sharpened by wearing off each other. R. Barclay’s (1648-1690)

“As iron sharpeneth iron, the seeing of the faces one of another when both are inwardly gathered into the life, giveth occasion for the life secretly to rise and pass from vessel to vessel.”

shows the significance of group mysticism. H. Brinton says,

(2) R. Barclay “Apology” P. 383 Ed. 1765.
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"Since the Light of truth is not divided but exists whole in every man, the nearer men come to it, the nearer they come to one another." (3)

In this context, I can present a story from a Zen text as follows,

"Master Nan-ch’uan, at one time, saw monks from the two halls, eastern and western, were striving over a cat. He therefore took hold of it and said If any of you can speak a word of Zen, I will save the life of the cat; but if not, I will kill it. The congregation made no answer. He consequently killed it. In the evening Chiao-chou came back. Master explained the incident to Chiao-chou. Chou took off the shoes, put them on top of his head, and walked out of the room. Master said, ‘Had you been there at that time, I could have saved the cat.’"

Refusal to follow another and affirmation of one’s own experience are typical characteristics of Quakerism and Zen.

As T. Kelly (1893-1941) mentions,

"It is not enough to believe that Christ was born in Bethlehem. You must experience a Bethlehem, a birth of Christ in your Heart,” (5)

so Zen master Rinzai, Lin-chi (?-867) admonishes,

"You students, because of lack of belief, try to seek reality in the external world. But you would never get a vivid reality which the ancient Patriarch had, even if you might understand it literally.” (6)

On the gladness of rebirth, T. Kelly says,

"It can not be transferred to anyone else but it is certainty which is enough to convince oneself completely.” (7)

The very same recollections we see in a Zen text as follows,

"It is like a dumb man who got a dream. He can not tell it to anyone else but only recognizes it by himself.” (8)

The similarity of these explanations shows that they come from oneness which is pure awakening of reality.

II. Inner Light and Buddha-nature

As Zen has a number of designations for reality like “Busshō” 佛性 or Buddha-nature, “Mu” 無 or Nothingness, “Ichi mui no shin nin” 一無位真人 or A absolute man without title, “Ma sa gin” 麻三斤 or Three pounds of flax, “Teizen no hakujushi” 庭前柏樹子 or Kashiwa tree in the front yard, so George Fox put the various names for reality such as “Witness of God”, “the Bread of life”, “the Royal Seed”, “the Truth’s Voice”, etc.

According to Dr. Brinton’s interpretation, the variety of these designations shows that these religions have no consistent system of philosophy or theology into which a reality can be applied. In other words, reality is one whole, yet exists entirely in everything in the universe at once. Quaker writings explain this as follows,

“This Light was before time and is in time.”

“Friends never use the term ‘spark’ for inward Light as some Mystic have done, spark or sparkle might imply that the Light was divided, a part being in one person and part in another. There was but one Light.”

Zen poems show this synchronism as follows,

“A bamboo has joints high and low, A pine has no changing colour ancient and now.”

“In Nothingness, there is the uncountable, like flower, moon, and viewing tower......”

“In the dawn, there is no reflection of moon in the pond, but clouds covering mountain.”

III. Withdrawal and Return

“Withdrawal and return are both essential. Each without the other is inadequate. The negative way takes us back to the source of meaning and value; the positive way takes us forward to the embodiment of meaning and value in the routine of the life.”

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This is in accord with Zen thought as follows,

"One stands on the peak of a steep mountain and loses his way up; another stands in a street and loses his direction. Which is the superior?"

"One is on the way, yet not out of his home; another is out of his home, yet not on the way. Which is the more admirable?"

"The meditation in a movement is worth a million times more than it is in stillness."

"Emerging from a cave of non-self, to float up and down on the waves of the secular ocean; O Bodhisattva who saves sentient Being, the incarnations of his compassion are limitless."

As we can see from these illustrations, synchronism of inward experience and outward action is the crucial element of this type of mystical religion.

But here I have to point out, as a conclusion, a difference between Quakerism and Zen. In Quakerism one seems to be dependent on the will of God even after rebirth. On the contrary, in Zen, one can be free from any control and behave with absolute freedom as does the following man.

"His thatched cottage gate is closed, and even the wisest know him not. No glimpses of his inner life are to be caught; for he goes on his own way without following the steps of the ancient sages. Carrying a gourd he goes out into the market, leaning against a staff he comes home. He is found in company with wine-bibbers and butchers. He and they are all converted into Buddhas."

Because of this absolute freedom, however, Zen is apt to lose sincerity. On the contrary Quakerism seems to be unable to rise above the duality of traditional Christianity because of the lack of freedom of Zen.

(14) Rinzai roku: Jōdō. (15) Rinzai roku: Jōdō. (16) Old Zen saying
(17) Hakuin & Torei zenji’s Dokugo chu shingyo 白隠東嶽語注心經, Commentary and poems on Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra, On Bodhisattva. (18) Jyugyu no zu, 十牛圖, the ten oxherding pictures, Commentary on the tenth picture.

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