

Religions of the East and of the West Why Differences?

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Until several months ago many of us had only scant knowledge about South Viet Nam except that more than 15,000 United States troops were involved there in “a dirty, untidy, disagreeable war,” as the Secretary of State Dean Rusk once called it.

It was, therefore, with a shock that we saw for the first time last June the unforgettable news pictures of an old Buddhist monk burning himself alive on the street of Saigon in protest against discriminatory treatment of his fellow Buddhists by the government headed by the Catholic President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The western reporters emphasized the fact that when traditionally tolerant Buddhist felt compelled to use such an extreme means of protest, their grievances were indeed real and needed to be corrected immediately.

I was greatly interested in the reporters' description of Buddhists as traditionally tolerant. They are right. Buddhism has been traditionally and essentially a tolerant religion. In Buddhism there is no concept of a jealous God such as Yahweh of the Old Testament who ordered his people to massacre men and women, the old and the young, oxen and sheep, camels and asses of other people who worshiped a different god. (1 Sam. 15:3)

In the New Testament you find Paul writing to the Christians of Corinth that if one does not love Christ, God's curse be upon him. (1 Cor. 16:22) The disciples of Buddha have never felt such neurotic compulsions.

Last year I preached from the pulpit of my former church telling why I became a Unitarian and resigned from the Japanese Christian Fellowship. I made it clear that I had no intention of forcing my ideas on any one, and that they were free to continue their Christian Fellowship. Nevertheless, they proceeded to vote to dissolve it and the majority of them told me that they would follow me to All Souls Church.

But within a month word spread among them that Unitarianism was an evil religion, and suddenly I noticed our once warm friendship strained to almost the breaking point. It is obvious that such an idea was never originated from my former members. It was injected from the outside.

I regard this incident, along with the Viet Nam incident, still in the continuing tradition of Christianity. Christianity is traditionally and essentially an exclusive and intolerant religion.

There are other differences between religions of the East and West. Speaking in general terms, the religions of the West, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, believe in one single transcendent God. Although Buddhism is non-theistic, the eastern religions look to the casual observer to be more or less pantheistic.

In the West, the canons of the scriptures are closed. No book is added to, or subtracted from, the Bible. But in the East canons are never closed. The Tripitaka of Buddhism, for instance, is a voluminous one, because new writings are added to the collection at each new compilation.

I was intrigued to find out how such differences came to develop between religions of the East and of the West.

Religion is said to be man's ultimate concern for his existence. Man's ultimate concern is conditioned by his understanding of the external and internal environment in which he lives and moves and has his being. In other words, man's religion necessarily reflects his world view, and his understanding of the meaning of his existence in the context of this world view. Religion, whether

ancient or modern, primitive or advances, is man's reaction to his environment in search for the meaning of his existence.

I assume that religions of the East and the West began much the same way among ancient peoples of the East and the West. Ancient man, whether their habitations were in the East or the West, were primarily concerned with bare subsistence and their elementary physical needs. In their struggle for survival and in their reaction to their environment, they must have developed an attitude which we may call religion.

I also assume that ancient men, though inhabiting different parts of the earth, were much alike in their physical and mental capacities. They were more or less at the same level of evolutionary development.

Then why did differences come into being between the East and the West? The so called religion of the West originated in areas of the Near East. Except from the narrow banks of Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and the coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea, this region is largely taken up by arid desert which stretches from Mesopotamia to the Arabian Peninsula.

The so called religion of the East, represented by Hinduism and Buddhism, on the other hand, originated in the Indian subcontinent, which is mostly subtropical with abundant moisture brought by the monsoon, making vegetation grow rapidly and abundantly.

When we thus compare the places of the origin of religions of the East and of the West, it becomes immediately apparent that the climate produced different kinds of physical environment, and that ancient men who lived in differing environments reacted differently to their surroundings, formed different world views, and produced different kinds of religion.

I would like to acknowledge at this point my indebtedness for an insight on this question to the late Professor Tesuro Watsuji of the University of Tokyo who expounded his theory of the interrelationship of climates and cultures in his book entitled, *Fūdo* ("A Climate: a philosophical study," translated by Geoffrey Bownes, Tokyo, Government Printing Bureau, 1962).

The desert climate is extremely dry and hot. Life is usually impossible in the desert outside of the places where some water can be found in oases, or springs from rocks, or man-made wells.

Such a physical environment is hardly conducive to an idea that nature is friendly or a sense of oneness with nature as you will find in religions of the East.

In the desert, men have to constantly fight nature in order to sustain their lives. They wander from place to place seeking oases or springs. For in the desert men always feel as if they were facing death. They feel that they have to stand against nature to preserve life. It is not nature that produces life. It is men who produce life by digging wells, by enlarging oases, by pushing nature away, by multiplying their cattle. Men try to conquer nature and make it more hospitable for them to live. They get conscious of their separateness from nature. You will recall the familiar passage in the Bible.

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it." (Gen. 1:28)

Such an idea of man as the conqueror and manipulator of nature comes from the religion and culture that originated from the desert climate. Out of such an attitude toward nature also, have science, technology and industrialism develop so prominently in the West.

The idea of God evolved by men in the desert climate was necessarily conditioned by their reaction to this kind of physical environment. As men felt their separateness from nature, so they conceived their God as totally apart from men, fearful and forbidding. It seems natural that the idea of the wholly other, transcendental God is embedded in the religions of the West.

Yet, this God is given the attribute of human personality. God of the western religion is a personalized God. Why? Because to men in the desert climate nature is devoid of life, and they would never make God out of nature. But life is on the side of men, and God had to be one possessing human personality.

In the desert no individual can expect to survive alone. Men must live together in a group out of sheer necessity for survival. This group was usually formed on the basis of tribes. Defeat of a tribe means death to its members. An attack on one member was regarded as a threat to the entire tribe. Welfare of individuals depends on security of the entire group.

In the desert life this group consciousness was bound to become group exclusiveness. In a desert where the margin of life was small, tribes often had to fight bloody wars against each other under their own tribal god over a particularly favorable land. I believe a characteristic of the western religion, namely, exclusiveness and intolerance, owe its tradition to this origin.

The western religion is generally regarded as an ethical religion in contrast to generally a mystical type of the eastern religion. I believe this characteristic also owes its tradition to the tribal living in the desert environment.

“He has showed you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

In the desert, the tribal-living men had to abide by rules that the group enforced on the members in order to insure their survival and perpetuation. There is no question that the dietary laws which Jewish people still observe owe their origin to practices in the desert. But the tribal life in the desert, necessitated also practice of the fair play and mutual help among the tribesmen. The strong did not exploit the weak, but took care of the weak. This sense of fair play and mutual help, was known as *mishpatim* or justice which Old Testament prophets expounded to their people even long after they ceased to be nomadic people. And to this day one of the chief characteristics of western religion is its ethical flavor.

If religion of the West in its origin was influenced by the desert climate, as we observed, we will notice that religion on the East was influenced by the monsoon climate which affected the physical environment of India where Hinduism and Buddhism originated.

The monsoon climate by its very nature is opposite that of the desert. While the desert climate is characterized by the lack of water, the monsoon climate is characterized by its excess. Dr. Watsuji likened the monsoon to a vehicle of the sun which carries the waters of the ocean to the land.

Heat and moisture make the land rich with fauna and flora, while men in the desert climate find it difficult to feel that nature is friendly to them, men in the monsoon climate find it very benevolent. Not only do they get a sense of oneness with nature and a sense of essential unity of man and nature. This is understandable, because they find living things all around them.

Perhaps this attitude toward nature is one of the basic characteristics of the eastern people, and I believe it serves as a key to understanding of their cultures and religions. The Japanese, who live in the northern edge of the monsoon climate area, also show in their religion and culture this sense of oneness with nature. They build, for instance, their houses and garden in such a way that when they remove paper screens, they obtain a feeling that the room and garden are one.

In the desert climate as we have observed, men fight nature in order to survive. Their attitude toward nature is that toward an opponent. They try to conquer and make nature livable for men. Such an attitude is basically alien to the eastern people. They try to adapt themselves to nature instead of changing it. Perhaps this is the reason why science and technology never developed in the East until western technology was introduced.

Perhaps it was also due to the effect of the monsoon climate that Buddhism came to teach Nirvana, an idea of salvation by extinction of desire. For nothing is more oppressive and unbearable than the combined effect of high temperature and high humidity. It makes people passive, inactive, submissive and resigned, and makes them long for release from life.

Earlier we observed why the western religion came to have the transcendental and wholly other yet personalized God. For western man God is remote, fearful, and unapproachable. Something or

some one is necessary to bridge the distance between God and man. Such an idea is alien in the eastern religion. To the eastern men God is everywhere, so to speak, because they have a sense of essential oneness with nature. What corresponds to God of the western religion is, in Hinduism for instance, "the ultimate reality behind and beyond all the things that men find to be 'real' from experiencing them through the sense." (Ross, Floyd H. and Tynette Hills, The great religions by which Men Live, A Premier Book, 1956, p.27) This is called Brahman, namely, to become one with the ultimate reality. Religion of the East bears therefore a mystical character.

Such a religion basically takes an inclusive and tolerant attitude towards all religions.

We have briefly observed differences in some of the basic characteristics of religions of the East and West, and found that differences in climate in places where these religions originated had much to do with the emergence of these differences.

These religions have had long histories of development, and their customs, traditions and teachings have helped perpetuate their characteristics to this date.

But we live in an age in which climate exerts much less influence on our thinking. Irrigation is changing the desert into a rich farm land. Air conditioning can make living easier, even in the monsoon season.

If religion is man's ultimate concern about the meaning of this existence, it has to be based on the understanding of his external and internal environment. Pre-scientific ancient men understood this primarily by their senses only. Therefore the influence of the climate on their environment understandably influenced to a great extent their reaction to the world, out of which they formed their world view. Traditional religions of the East and West, are largely based on these world views of ancient men.

But modern men form their world view on the basis of the scientific understating of their physical and psychical environment. Since this scientific understanding is shared alike by men of the East and West, I would think that modern men, regardless of climate differences would some day arrive at a similar understanding of the meaning of their existence, provided they nourish a critical attitude toward traditional religions which. After all, are based on the largely outmoded world views of ancient peoples.