

THE LORD OF PEACE

By MICHAEL BARNES

CHRISTIANS ought to be pacifists. And perhaps if we took the Sermon on the Mount more seriously we would be. 'Do not resist one who is evil'. Jesus said to his disciples: 'be reconciled with your brother. . . . Make friends quickly with your accuser. . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who hate you'. But if the peacemakers are blessed, they have often been pretty belligerent about it. The history of Christianity is not remarkable for the peaceful way in which its adherents preached the gospel. Our ecclesiology has often been imperialist, our missiology based on the model of conquest. The peace the Christ left as his special legacy to the Church we have on occasions tried to impose on people by force. Sadly, we have not always behaved as if the building of the Kingdom were primarily the work of God acting in the hearts of sinful men and women.

It is easy to blame it all on Constantine. True, he brought an end to the age of persecutions and established a new era of peace for the Church, but he did it by waging war: 'In this sign you shall conquer'. The problem, however, goes much deeper than the policy of the Holy Roman Emperors. Christianity, like its fellow semitic religions, Judaism and Islam, is basically prophetic. And prophets, in general, are not distinguished either for their gentleness or their magnanimity: as is shown all too obviously by the bellicose rumblings of the Paisleys and the Ayatollahs. Such fundamentalist self-assurance is the price one pays for a strongly monotheistic creed. Even the Old Testament prophets — and, of course, the Prophet Mohammed — believed that their sole function was to hear the word of God and obey. Eastern religions, on the other hand, do not betray the same confidence in man's ability to know the will of God. The Buddha, for instance, kept silent about the mystery of the Absolute. The assurance of the mystic is tempered by a healthy reticence which the hyper-active prophet might do well to imitate. The great buddhist Emperor, Aśoka, who is often spoken of in the same breath as Constantine, certainly thought so; and it may be that a brief examination of some of his ideals can provide a corrective to a Christianity which has, at times, been less than peaceful.

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At his accession, probably in the year 269 B.C., Aśoka was already ruler of most of north and peninsular India. Subsequently, he engaged in wars of expansion until the bloodshed involved in his conquest of the kingdom of Kalinga, in the east of the country, left him so appalled that he was converted to Buddhism. This was around the year 260. From then on he renounced all use of force, and devoted himself completely to the peaceful government of his Empire through buddhist principles of respect, tolerance and non-violence. Naturally the traditions about him have been worked up into a veritable mythology by partisan buddhist authors, always anxious for a bit of useful propaganda. According to some accounts, he was an odiously wicked man who was suddenly converted in a fit of remorse, lived for a time as a monk, the model of buddhist righteousness, preaching the Doctrine and zealously propagating every least item of the Buddha's teaching. Happily for the historian, Aśoka himself wanted to keep the record straight. All over the empire he set up edicts carved on pillars, on rocks and on cave-walls, which tell us about his achievements and beliefs, his intentions for his people and justification of his conduct. By any assessment he was a remarkable man, and, even if his connection with the official buddhist *Sangha*, the community of monks, was more tenuous than its supporters would have us believe, he was clearly influenced by the strength and clarity of buddhist morality. Through his edicts, and even in some of the legends, he comes across as a man of great vision, convinced that the best moral and religious principles can and should be applied to the practical realities of political government and social organization.¹

The edicts seem to indicate that his conversion to Buddhism took some time. He confesses to a certain lack of fervour at the beginning: 'for a year I did not make much progress', he says. At first he seems to have been more interested in what the different religious sects held in common, rather than in anything specifically Buddhist. Later it became clear that Buddhism and the principles taught by the Buddha were the perfect instrument for the task of unifying the empire. The value of a strong, united *Sangha* was that its membership cut across the highly stratified caste-system of traditional Brahmanism. Aśoka was no theorist. He thought in practical terms and sought out principles which suited his purpose, which emphasized social and civic responsibilities. Brahmanical teaching, on the other hand, insisted on privileges and priorities; an accident of birth, not merit or ability, dictated the organization of society. Aśoka saw

that nothing was more calculated to produce disharmony and injustice. His predecessors had ruled through a mixture of ruthless armed strength, good communications and efficient bureaucracy. Aśoka himself took a different line. In the awkward process of consolidation which followed his accession to the throne, his first priority had to be to give diverse political units a new and cohesive purpose. Buddhism, at its best, already had that cohesion. The Buddhist and other non-orthodox but pan-Indian groups, like the Jains and Ājīvikas, received his support, and provided an alternative philosophy of life.

The teaching of the Buddha is called in *Pāli* the *Dhamma*, and this is the word which Aśoka used to define his hopes and intentions. A brief examination of some of the famous edicts may give us some idea of the debt he owes to Buddhism. In general, he urged moderation in the accumulation and spending of wealth, kindness towards prisoners, servants and slaves, respect for the wise and aged, and toleration and understanding between the members of different religious sects. He denounced the selfish pursuit of power and glory. As for himself, the only fame and glory he desired was that people should obey the way of *Dhamma*. 'Whatever efforts the Beloved of the Gods' — as he called himself — 'makes, it is all done with a view to the after-life, that all men may escape from evil inclinations. . . . But this is difficult for men, whether humble or highly placed, without extreme effort and without renouncing everything else'. Problems will arise, for all men are human, but the ideals of peace and justice can and must be pursued. In what is perhaps the most important edict of all, he speaks of conquest by *Dhamma* rather than by war and violence.

The Beloved of the Gods wishes that all beings should be unharmed, self-controlled, calm in mind and gentle. The Beloved of the Gods considers victory by *Dhamma* to be the foremost victory. . . . What is obtained by this is victory everywhere, and everywhere victory is present. This pleasure has been engraved so that any sons or grandsons that I may have should not think of gaining new conquests, and, in whatever victories they may gain, should be satisfied with patience and light punishment. They should only consider conquest by *Dhamma* to be a true conquest, and delight in *Dhamma* should be their whole delight, for this is of value both in this world and the next.

At the more practical level, he set up a system of social welfare, with medical centres for the poor and needy. He constructed a

network of roads, lined by shady trees, and ordered the digging of wells at regular intervals. He recognized the need for good communications if trade was to flourish, and his ideas were to spread widely. In the fourteenth year of his reign he introduced a special group of officials, known as the Superintendents of the *Dhamma*, whose duties were the practical supervision of the Emperor's plans. Their power was considerable. They could enter the homes of people of all classes, even of the royal family; religious communities too were subject to their decisions. Aśoka was interested in efficiency. Despite the vast size of his Empire he seems to have kept in touch even with the most far-flung outposts — either by personal visits or through his delegated ministers. Nor was his interest mere window-dressing, designed solely to impress. He visited the sick and the aged, bringing them special gifts, instructing them in the ideals of his teaching, continually checking on the duties of his local officials and keeping them up to the mark. In an edict directed to some city-magistrates he wrote:

You should strive to practise impartiality. But it cannot be practised by one possessing any of these faults — jealousy, shortness of temper, harshness, rashness, obstinacy, idleness or slackness. You should wish to avoid such faults. The root of all this is to be even-tempered and not rash in your work. He who is slack will not act, and in your official functions you must strive, act and work.

Certainly he was a paternalist. 'All men are my children', he wrote, 'and just as I desire for my children that they should attain welfare and happiness, both in this world and the next, so do I desire the same for all men'. He was also affected by an exaggerated sense of mission and duty, which at times seems to have verged on the obsessive. 'This is my principle: to protect through *Dhamma*, to administer affairs according to *Dhamma*, to please the people with *Dhamma*, to guard the Empire with *Dhamma*'. The conviction that he is right, and that only perseverance in *Dhamma* is needed in order to establish perfect social relationships, sometimes carries him away. 'It is hard to obtain happiness in this world and the next without extreme love of *Dhamma*, much vigilance, much obedience, much fear of sin and extreme energy. But through my instructions, care for *Dhamma* and love of *Dhamma* have grown from day to day, and will continue to grow'. The arrogance of the self-conscious social reformer infected his later years. His thinking becomes more abstract, less in touch with the sober realities; his belief in his own achievement seems invincible. But despite this rather unattractive

side to his character, Aśoka's record and reputation speak for themselves. The religion of the time stressed man's responsibility to the gods, to his family and to his caste — in that order. Aśoka added a further responsibility which was prior to, rather than supplemented, the rest: man's responsibility for other human beings. 'There is no better work than promoting the welfare of the whole world'. At all times he stressed the dignity of Man, a humanism which found expression primarily in the virtues of *ahimsā*, non-violence and responsible social behaviour.

Today Aśoka is one of India's most popular heroes, and a regular cult has grown up round the memory of his name and his *Dhamma*. A long, unbroken tradition is felt to exist, linking his teaching of *ahimsā* with the *Satyagraha*, 'holding on to truth', policy of Mahatma Gandhi, as if Aśoka's example set a trend in Indian politics which has continued for over two thousand years. But we should not forget that Aśoka's work and policy died with him. Perhaps the overbearing nature of his enthusiasm and authority caused a reaction, perhaps he expected too much from the dedication of his subordinates, perhaps his ideas were just too far ahead of their time. We do not know. But for centuries he was forgotten, an obscure name in the ancient records, until the edicts were discovered and deciphered, and interest in their author rekindled. There *is* a link between Aśoka and Gandhi, but it is not historical. Asoka's greatness lies in his courage and idealism, in the fact that he understood the religious culture to which he belonged and dared to put its deepest values into practice. That was precisely what Gandhi did. Neither created anything new; the deepest values were already there. It was the teaching of the Buddha which brought these values to the fore.

Most people think of Buddhism as a religion of mysticism and meditation. *Nirvāna* is to be acquired in a lonely flight from involvement in an unpleasant and painful world of reincarnation and rebirth. But just how much meditation the average buddhist layman, or even monk in the village monastery, does is open to doubt. We can be sure that Aśoka, a man of practical affairs, did not spend a great deal of time contemplating his navel. Yet he was certainly a Buddhist. In practice, not many Buddhists will seriously work for their own *Nirvāna* in this present life; the most that we might expect is for them to aim at a better rebirth, putting off the Ultimate Goal until more favourable circumstances prevail. Even the Buddha himself, Siddhattha Gotama, went through many rebirths before eventually entering into *Nirvāna*. *Nirvāna* may be the

eventual goal; for the vast majority of Buddhists it is not the immediate. Meditation is only one of many religious practices. Buddhism stresses morality, the first of the three trainings, as well as Concentration and Wisdom, the other two which are for the more advanced 'spiritual élite'. At the same time, even the Theravāda Buddhist has a rich devotional life, through which he hopes to share in the merit of the monks and those who have advanced further than he has along the Buddha's middle way. Buddhism involves a balance; it is not a religion of extremes, nor is it for extremists. To become a buddhist layman, as Aśoka did, one 'takes refuge' — as the formula has it — in the *Buddha*, and *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*, and agrees to abide by the five precepts of moral conduct; avoiding the taking of life, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies and drunkenness. These principles, and the attitude to life which lies behind them, are what Aśoka invoked to govern his Empire.

Most systematic accounts of buddhist morality are tedious in the extreme. The vast and complex expansions of the precepts which we find in the canonical texts and commentaries are remarkable — one feels — only for their length. Lists of virtues and ideals abound, from the 'ten duties of the King' to the 'thirty-eight blessings of life'.² It could all be dismissed as so much scholastic pendency, if it were not also so unashamedly Utopian. But here we need to pause and consider. Buddhists are very proud of the fact that they do not just preach high ethical ideals; they practise them as well. In some ways their conduct is less than perfectly altruistic; for without a careful attention to morality, the Buddhist knows that he cannot expect to attain to that purity of life and growth in merit which guarantees a good rebirth, let alone the ultimate of *Nirvāna*. Indian religion in general has a highly developed ethical code; but the sages insist that it is not just Utopian. It can be made to work — hence people like Aśoka and Gandhi. The clue to understanding this morality lies not in learning exhaustive lists, nor even in contrasting the values with those found in other religious traditions, but in recognizing the *form* in which they are expressed.

In the Old Testament, the ten commandments are specific rules or demands: 'Thou shalt not . . .', says Yahweh to his people. The precepts, on the other hand, are commitments in the first person: '*I undertake* the precept to abstain from taking life', and so on. There is in Buddhism no idea of a creator or redeemer God to guide, lead or dominate. Some of these functions are, in fact, taken over by the Buddha himself, especially in the later *Mahāyāna*. There we find a

religion of grace and devotion existing side by side with the older teaching. Nevertheless, the underlying religious attitude is the same: if you want to be a Buddhist you must commit yourself and, as the last recorded words of the Buddha have it, 'work out your own salvation with diligence'. It is worth nothing that the six perfections of the *Mahāyāna*, the qualities which should characterize the true seeker for enlightenment, are a combination of the original *Theravādin* 'three trainings': morality, meditation and wisdom, and generosity, patience and strength. For a lay-person, there is no structure in Buddhism which enforces these values. He must take them upon himself and have the courage and perseverance to keep to them.

At all levels and in all types of Buddhism, from the simple taking of the precepts, the way of the many, to the lonely hours of meditation practised by the few, these are the values and virtues which are most prized. These are what can make an ordinary person into a Buddha, an enlightened one. But no one can reach enlightenment without first having learnt detachment and self-acceptance; that means primarily dying to self — the same attitude which Jesus taught his disciples. 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me'. In the Sermon on the Mount we find many typically Buddhist values commended, particularly pacifism and non-violence. 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy"', but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. As is well known, these words much impressed Gandhi, whose whole life was spent preaching and living out the three great virtues of truth, non-violence and self-restraint.³ Gandhi, of course, was no Buddhist; he was a hindu reformer, and the many influences that worked on him throughout his long life, from Tolstoy to the Koran, as well as Christianity, revealed and clarified for him the riches of his own tradition. Hinduism, unlike the semitic religions of the West, is not an exclusive creed. For a Hindu, every religion teaches something of the truth. But they all do it imperfectly, and are in constant need of purification and reform. The fact that non-violence is, strictly speaking, a buddhist value, part of its critique of the old-fashioned Vedic sacrificial religion, would not have worried Gandhi. Here was Truth. The greatest values know no sectarian bounds.

It would be wrong, therefore, to look at the Sermon on the Mount and to pick out this or that virtue as being the 'essence' of Jesus's message. Parallels are to be found in other religions, particularly in

Hinduism and Buddhism. Jesus's message is universal. As the Zen master replied to the enterprising monk who had just read him the Beatitudes, 'whoever spoke thus is not far from enlightenment'. If we are looking for points of comparison there are plenty; but the Sermon is the centre of the Gospel message not because of *what* is said, but because of *who* is saying it. Jesus is the authoritative figure, the new Moses, proclaiming the New Law which replaces the old authority, 'you have heard that it was said . . .', with a new authority: 'But *I* say you. . .'. This is what is meant by the statement, 'Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them'. The old is not declared redundant, nor is a new set of values introduced to replace those which are somehow out of date. The Sermon is about the life of the Kingdom and about Jesus's invitation to some very ordinary people to 'die to self', to rise to the challenge of replacing a self-centred concern for the letter with a God-centred concern for the Spirit of Truth. When Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes, gone are the magisterial 'Thou shalt nots' of the Ten Commandments, which seek to dominate by force. Those who have real authority do not have to impose it; an invitation is enough. Jesus's promise to his disciples was that, as long as they lived with him, the values which he preached — purity of heart, peace and non-violence, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, values which expect more than a grudging minimum — were not impossible utopian ideals. Nor are they to any Christian who accepts the ultimate authority of the Spirit of Christ. Perhaps in the end this is what 'dying to self' really means: accepting that our authority, our desire to control our lives, must give way to another authority, that of God himself.

Of course, the *Hīnayāna* Buddhist of Aśoka's day would not quite have it like that. For him there was no God, no ultimate authority who imposes values. Neither was there a Christ-figure who invited faith and who formed the focus of religious devotion; for the Buddha himself had made it perfectly clear that his followers should 'dwell making yourselves your island, making yourselves your refuge, and not anyone else as your refuge'. Nevertheless, Christianity and Buddhism are at one in insisting that the greatest of all virtues is contained in the phrase 'dying to self'. Only by renouncing all egotism and desire is true conversion or enlightenment to be found. There are, of course, all sorts of problems — largely unanswerable questions — connected with Aśoka's espousal of Buddhism. As with

Constantine's involvement with Christianity, we may wonder where the political ended and the religious began. In the end, he failed. Perhaps he overreached himself; more likely he fell into the *Hīnayāna* trap of dealing with only one half of man. Early Buddhism appealed very deliberately to the spiritual élite, the ascetical *virtuosi*; but its arid doctrine of becoming 'like islands' was not an encouraging prospect for ordinary folk. Eventually it was left to the *Mahāyāna*, (which, interestingly enough, was in its early stages of development at the time of Aśoka) with its appeal to the virtue of compassion and the religion of grace and faith, to correct the balance. But, when all is said and done, Aśoka did try to put into practice what he rightly discerned to be at the heart of his own, and indeed all religious traditions. It would be cynical to dismiss him as a starry-eyed Utopian. After his conversion to Buddhism, he devoted some thirty years to ruling his Kingdom according to the principles of fairness, tolerance and non-violence. During all that time there was no war. He was genuinely a man of humanity and peace.

After his death, of course, he was forgotten, dismissed by some as a domineering paternalist, by others as a pragmatist with an eye for useful political advantage. Probably he was both these things; but he was also a prophet in his own country, proclaiming moral values and implementing policies which today we take for granted. His Empire can have been no more perfect than any other attempt to make the Kingdom a reality on Earth. But that is not the point. Failure in itself is unimportant. As long as we remain human beings, there is bound to be a gap between knowledge and practice, between what we know we should be doing and our ability actually to do it. St Paul was only too well aware of the problem; but he never ceased exhorting his friends to keep acting as people totally committed to the virtues and values of the Kingdom. Those who live in Christ will never die. Despite our weakness and our failure, his grace is enough for us. Peace is God's gift, a sharing in his life. It cannot be earned or demanded as a right or privilege. All we can do is make room for it, by learning continually to die to self. Who knows but that, in the end, a Buddhist came closer to the ideal than many Christians?

NOTES

¹ Translations from the edicts of Aśoka are taken from *Aśoka and the decline of the Mauryas*, by Romila Thapar (Oxford University Press, 1961), Appendix V, pp 250-66.

² For the morality of the *Theravāda* school, cf *Buddhist Ethics*, by H. Saddhatissa (London, 1970).

³ Cf Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of my experiments with Truth* (Ahmadabad, 1969).