

**SETTIMANA CONCLUSIVA DELL'ANNO CENTENARIO
DEL PONTIFICIO ISTITUTO BIBLICO
[3-8 maggio 2010]**

WITNESSING TO DEI VERBUM IN THE CONTEXT OF BUDDHISM

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Korean Buddhism, together with Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, belongs to the Mahayana tradition, where the study of the scriptures and the practice of Zen are considered important. To have a convenient approach to the subject given to me I will start with a short account of my personal relation with Buddhism.

I grew up in a family with a strong Buddhist background. Not only were the families of both my parents Buddhists, I myself liked Buddhism also. It seemed to me more attractive to move toward the divinity which is already in me instead of focusing on human sinfulness, and to reach perfection by myself instead of relying on somebody else.

My first doubts about Buddhism came when I began to study in the university. In the chemistry class I learned about the micro-world constituting matter, and in physics I studied about the macro-world constituting the universe. Now how wondrous it was that the principles of these two extremely different worlds both of whose dimensions exceed my imagination were the same! It struck me. This most astonishing discovery led me to presume that there must be a certain will behind the making of this world. And at the same time it made me also doubt about what Buddhists said, namely, with the doctrine of the cycle of rebirth, the creation came from combination of the four elements of earth, water, fire and wind. But for the time being I neglected these thoughts.

About two years later, I was enthusiastic in reading the Buddhist scriptures. My knowledge about Buddhism seemed to get deeper. But one day I felt as if I stood before a door which I could never open. It meant that the enlightenment and deliverance do not belong to human intelligence, but to a different dimension. Self-salvation (as taught by Buddhism) seemed to be impossible. For my perfection the guidance of some super-human being should be needed! This was well in accordance with the words of my grandmother, who had studied in depth the Buddhist scriptures all through her life. She said, "Buddhism is not a religion but a great philosophy which explores in depth the real conditions of human life." This meant to acknowledge deeply the limitations of human beings. She also told me that enlightenment and deliverance cannot be attained by anybody who wishes, but are possible only after assembling good karma during hundreds and thousands of years.

So then there was Christianity, a religion offering salvation. But when I looked at the society around me being full of injustice and misery, I was convinced that the redemption work of Jesus had failed, and I could not assent to the claim that the Bible contained the truth. So I studied other religions, but could not find satisfying answers either. In my last semester in the university I registered for a Bible course. In

the first lecture we were introduced to the historical critical method. It was so new that gave a shock to me. The Bible is not to be read simply as the letters show. To know its true meaning one has to take in account the historical background and the culture of the time in which each part was written! So I made up my mind to 'study' the Holy Scripture to find out the truth there.

I learned catechism, but even when the course was over there still remained a wall between me and the truth. So I refused to be baptized. But some time after I was so surprised by a discovery: I found myself talking with someone, calling "Lord"! Different from the Buddhism which I had known, here there was an encounter with other person, and this person was more than a human. He was God! God and I were entering into a relation! I did not feel yet that I had completely touched the truth, but I thought that this was a religion valuable to invest my life. So I received baptism. Four years later I entered the convent and ten years later I was sent to Rome. The study in the *Biblicum* helped me to get a deeper understanding of the Scripture and made my faith stronger. And of course, it also helped me a lot to teach students after I returned home.

I think, the beginning of the Catholic faith in Korea is similar to my own experience. At the end of the 18th century some Confucian scholars¹ read and studied Christian books which entered through China. They became convinced that this was the truth, and one of them went to Beijing and was baptized there. Then he baptized his companions. For about 50 years they lived the Catholic faith by themselves without a missionary or priest, spreading the faith courageously up to death. This was possible only because they have realized that the Bible was the Incarnated Word and experienced a personal encounter with God. In consequence the Church lived on in spite of hundred years of persecution with many martyrs.

Today, too, there are many people in Korea who seek for the truth in this way. The study of Holy Scripture is very much alive. Many books are published about the Bible and there are schools or programs for Bible study in most cities. But these are mostly aimed to strengthen the faith of Catholic believers. Non-Catholics, especially Buddhists hardly participate in them. I guess that this is for the following reasons.

Firstly, the points of departure of Buddhism and Christianity are extremely different from each other. Buddhism is a religion which claims self-redemption. So it is difficult for them to acknowledge a separation between God and human beings. As a consequence it is difficult to accept that the Bible is the Word of God incarnated in Jesus Christ.²

Secondly, there has been no publication on Buddhists' part, showing an attempt to understand the Bible in a deeper and more positive way, even if there are some Buddhist monks who honor the Bible as a Great Code and quote its contents in their sermons or compare common points with their Sutra. This is perhaps due to the great energy they spend to research and propagate their own scriptures, which are so huge

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and profound. In fact since 1950 the Buddhists have striven to regain quickly their vitality and to compete in the missionary activity with Christians.³

Therefore, it is not easy to explain to Buddhists the unique character of our Scriptures. And this may be the reason that at present the dialogue between the two religions occurs mostly in realms of common actions for the preservation of nature, for justice and peace, or by sharing about the monastic way of life.

In conclusion, I believe that in order to successfully announce the Good News in the Buddhist context, the following points have to be taken into account.

First of all, Buddhists will take interest in our Holy Scripture and recognize its value as far as the life of Christians becomes similar to that of Jesus the Incarnated Truth. The image a religion projects is very important to them.

Secondly, an authentic and pure interpretation of the Holy Scripture is needed. At the same time, the attitude of researching and propagating it is very important, too. The spirit of conquest frequently found in history, superiority and supreme-intellectualism have to be done away with. Only when we show the spirit of humility and serving which is found in Jesus, we can communicate the truth contained in the Bible in a right way.

Thirdly, the uniqueness of our Holy Scripture will be recognized and understood only when we show a deep respect for the Buddhist scriptures and the Buddhist believers. In fact, sincere encounter between Christians and Buddhists could open them a way to a personal encounter with the Incarnated God in the Bible.⁴

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- 2) An astonishing fact is that Buddhists who know their doctrine well hardly convert to Catholicism, whilst many Christians who even acknowledge the special character of the Bible and studied it a lot, convert to Buddhism, unless they had an experience of personal encounter with Jesus. We can see sometimes even catholic monks, nuns and ex-seminarians becoming Buddhist monks or nuns.
- 3) Because Buddhism is deeply embedded in Korean culture, it makes Koreans feel at home. In addition, Professor Kil Huisong, a born Christian and one of the best known Buddhist scholars in Korea, argues that people being tired of Christianity come to Buddhism with following reasons: Buddhism does not bear the burden of a dark history like the European Church; there is no need to defend God; everybody can realize himself with his Buddha nature; rebirth instead of a single life; not much insistence on dogma or institution; wide acceptance of many things; resacralization of the world and Nature.

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