

GOD CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

A Philosophical-Christian Dialog with Buddhism*

by Francisco Pérez Ruiz SJ

It has been said that "the more deeply a person probes into his own religious faith, the more he is able to understand the religious faith of others from the inside" and "conversely, the more a person explores religious convictions other than his own, the more he deepens his understanding of his own religion". It would be, of course, a mistake to conclude from it that there is no fundamental difference between one religion and the others. There are surely profound differences, but it is nevertheless true what the quotation above says. Only we have to add, to be honest, that this mutual understanding is not necessary an easy task.

As a contribution to this difficult task we will try to summarize here our own reflections after reading a handy exposition of the fundamentals of the Buddhist Sect *Jōdo Shinshū* (The New Religion of the True Land). As it is well known, *Jōdo Shinshū* is a typically Japanese branch of Buddhism. Founded by SHINRAN in the XIII century, it is now one of the three largest Buddhist sects in this country. The book we are considering now is by FUGEN DAIEN, professor in the Buddhist University Ryūkoku, who has attempted to give us the personal fruit of a long life of study.

The first basic problem which appears in dealing with the question of God is clearly that of his fundamental relations with the world of our experience. Are God and the world in the last analysis one, or must we end by admitting their radical distinction? Are absolute and relative finally identical, or is it necessary to recognize in a total manner that the Absolute is really Absolute and that relative beings are really relative, not merely on the surface but in the total profundity of their being?

FUGEN is clearly aware of the fundamental importance of this problem, and hence he deals with it at length. His own position is clearly indicated in general lines, between two extremes which seem to him inadmissible: the position of those who end up by dissolving the relations between "mortals" and the Absolute in a real monistic identity, and the position of those who exaggerate transcendence to such a degree that it renders logically impossible or at least positively unintelligible the relation between creatures, specifically man, and God, and the possibility of true salvation. In both extremes he finds values which are to be safeguarded, but in both he also finds insuperable difficulties.

Hence he believes that the solution is to be sought in a position which synthesizes the values of each of the extremes and avoids their defects. Such, it seems to him, is the position of *Shinshū*: engendered within Buddhism, it has recognized its obligation to overcome its monistic tendencies and insist vigorously on the misery of mortals and on the absolute character of *Nyorai*. This position seems to FUGEN to be not at all an easy one. On the contrary, he finds in it many grave difficulties which others are not aware of, but at the same time a special value, in that these difficulties are the birth-pangs of a higher religion.

* For a more complete discussion of this topic see *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* XXV/10 (Nov. 1971) 601—608; XXV/11 (Dec. 1971) 631—638; XXVI/1 (Jan.—Febr. 1972) 70—80.

As is to be seen from this, we are presented with a nuanced position which strains to safeguard the true relativity of relative beings and the true absolute character of the Absolute. All those who have gone into these problems a little can, without much difficulty, appreciate that this position is not an easy one. The danger of ending up in some relativization of the Absolute, with its consequent negation as Absolute, or identifying relative beings with it, with their consequent negation as relative, is one which incessantly stalks all thought which seriously faces up to the radical problems of existence.

FUGEN has tried to clarify his own position confronting it with Christian thought. In this connection he speaks of the well-known dispute between BARTH and BRUNNER and finds unacceptable a Christianity which would exaggerate the transcendence of God in such a way that all continuity of whatever kind between God and the creatures would be destroyed. On the other hand, he finds himself in agreement with an opinion such as that of BRUNNER, which both affirms discontinuity and at the same time recognizes some form of continuity.

It would, of course, be somewhat precipitous to conclude without further ado that there is no radical difference between the thought of FUGEN and our own. Still, we can be glad to observe the fundamental agreement on the starting point and the consequent existence of a common ground for dialogue. But let us see what he has to say on the other position and the reasons he sees for abandoning it. This may perhaps aid us in determining more closely the range of our dialogue.

Buddhism in general, FUGEN tells us, is considered as one of those doctrines which hold monistic homogeneity and continuity. That "all mortals possess the nature of Buddha" is a fundamental principle of Mahayana Buddhism. Further explanations divide into two currents, but both these coincide in admitting, without the slightest discussion, that all possess the nature of Buddha in its fundamental form (though the manner of conceiving this form is diverse) and that all the rest is only the removal of impediments to its development and manifestation.

From this conception there follows a consequence which FUGEN cannot in any way admit: liberation or salvation would not be a gift purely derived from the mercy of the Other (*zettai tariki*) but simply the fruit of one's own effort (*jiriki*) in removing the impediments and thus allowing the manifestation of what one is in reality.

Historically, FUGEN tells us, SHINRAN became convinced through his own experience that in this way there was no possibility of salvation precisely because all progress in purification reveals more clearly the depths to which evil is ingrained in the heart of man. This experience of one's own evil and the strong consciousness of the absolute character of *Nyorai* are the decisive arguments with which he presents us against any kind of monistic Buddhism.

If we prescind from details into which we cannot now enter, it is clear that the twofold anti-monistic argument attacks the contrary position in its most vulnerable point. If taken seriously, the profound experience of one's own misery makes impossible any kind of definitive identification of one's own being, subjected to misery and evil, with the Absolute.

In order to express his own position FUGEN speaks of discontinuous continuity and of heterogeneous homogeneity, what certainly seems paradoxical, but it seems to us that these expressions may have a true sense which in the last analysis would coincide with the radical paradox of the *analogy of being*. We too admit the infinite distance and radical heterogeneity between beings and

Being, and in spite of this we feel ourselves obliged to admit at the same time the total *analogous* community binding beings to Being.

The real difficulty inherent in this equilibrium is a natural consequence of the very nature of things, but it would seem that it is further increased in the case of FUGEN by an express desire to preserve a pantheistic aspect along with the theistic one. This desire is very understandable when one considers the opposite danger, which is very real, that the eradication of the error may also mean the eradication of the truth which it contained, and perhaps it is more understandable in this present case because of a fear of being branded anti-Buddhist. Nevertheless, though the desire may be understandable, it must also be understood that it brings with it dangers of ending up by attempting to combine elements which are really incompatible.

Prescinding from other questions which we cannot consider here, let us see what FUGEN has to tell us of the Absolute in itself and of its relations with the world. His first affirmation seems to contain a clear polemical anti-Christian meaning. We quote him textually: "Amida-Buddha is not the creator of the universe, but the fontal reality of the world." The meaning of the words would seem to be clear, but before deciding whether they imply a real negation of the Christian concept of creation it is necessary to examine his manner of conceiving this fontal reality and his reasons for denying to it the character of creator of the universe.

According to him, the One from which absolutely everything proceeds is the Absolute Being which transcends all human thought and all human expression. This being, however, is not a reality separated from beings, but one which contains, without exception, all the distinct beings (*dharmas*), though not in their fixed forms. If it did not contain them, it would cause being to emerge from nothing and hence could not be the fundamental reality of all beings; if it contained them in their fixed forms, it could not be the origin of all beings. It is present in all, it fills all, and nothing can exist apart from it. All proceeds from it, and all exists in it. Since it is beyond the order of cause and effect it can be the origin of causes and effects. Since it does not contain in any concrete manner form, color, etc., it can produce these; hence we must say of it that it is color without color, form without form, etc., that is to say, it goes beyond the concrete determinations, containing them in a higher manner. Finally, it is the life which causes all living things to live, and the wisdom which causes all thinking things to think.

It would seem that all these statements can be interpreted correctly from within a Christian philosophical position, though in some of them there remains a certain ambiguity which would also allow a pantheistic interpretation incompatible with creation. At any rate, since the pantheistic interpretation is not the only possible and since it would, moreover, imply that homogeneity between mortals and Absolute against which FUGEN continually argues in his polemic with other Buddhist sects, it seems to us that there is no necessity to read this pantheistic interpretation in the statements or to consider them as real negations of the concept of creation. But it will be here useful to insist on some points which are often source of confusion.

The Christian concept of creation *ex nihilo* does not at all signify that God produces from nothing something which he himself is absolutely devoid of. On the contrary, the Christian concept of creation supposes as a fundamental principle that God possesses in himself all the perfections of creatures, though not in the limited, relative and imperfect form in which these exist in the

creatures themselves. God possesses all, absolutely all, of these perfections, in an eminent manner which we can only express analogically, simultaneously affirming the perfections and denying that imperfection with which they are realized in creatures. Hence, creation *ex nihilo* is not simply the equivalent of causing being to emerge from nothing. Being can have no foundation other than being. Those beings which come to be (creatures) have as the origin and foundation of their existence the Necessary and Eternal Being (Creator) and hence do not simply emerge from nothing. The expression *ex nihilo* merely signifies the absolute and total nature of God's causality, which does not suppose even the material upon which it might work its creative effect but which simply produces the totality of being in his creatures. Hence when we hear FUGEN assert that if the Absolute did not contain all beings this would imply the production of being from nothing, we find it impossible to imagine that these words could be a real refutation of the Christian concept of creation.

The second point on which we should like to insist is that in Christian thought the affirmation of the transcendence of God in no way implies the negation of his immanence. God is not a distant God, lost in a transcendence infinitely removed from the world. There is of course that transcendence and qualitatively infinite difference which impedes a consideration of God simply as *one being among others*, even though the most excellent; but this transcendent God is intimately present in all his creatures, nothing exists separated from him, he fills all, and all exist in him. The transcendence of God, far from being an obstacle to his immanence, is rather its condition. God can be truly immanent in each being precisely because he transcends them, he is beyond them all.

In the third place, we have to say something on the relation between creation and causality because it is one of the difficulties which FUGEN finds in the Christian doctrine which, according to him, prescind from causality and has being emerge from nothing and creates all beings. Anyone who has some idea of the fundamental role played by the law of causal connection in Buddhist thought will easily understand the great importance of this objection. But it cannot be said at all that the Christian concept of creation prescind from the law of causality or that it simply holds the production of being from nothing. The opposite is rather true: the concept of creation is the ultimate consequence of causality carried through to its logical conclusion. Creation does not signify that creatures begin to be without cause, but rather the opposite, that is, their existence depends on the causality of the First Cause which is cause by antonomasia, since its causality is not limited to some aspect of the effect, as in the case of intramundane causes, but extends to the totality of the effect under its positive aspects. All that there is in creatures is an effect of the causality of the Creator, and to consider the being of creatures as the fruit of nothing (or produced without cause) would be to allow oneself to be deceived by the sound of some words (*ex nihilo*) which do not possess that meaning.

For Buddhism, all things are subject to the power of *karma*, and this means that every effect depends on a direct cause (*in*) and on a series of conditions and of indirect causes (*en*). This doctrine seems to make more complicated the problem of causality. FUGEN insists with vigor that all is subjected to this law and he expressly opposes it, not only to the Christian doctrine of creation, but also to that of Providence. But we are convinced that most of what he says admits of a correct interpretation without the consequent necessity of denying either creation or providence, for it is false to assert that providence governs the world prescind from the law. On the contrary, in our Christian way of

conceiving creation and providence, a fundamental point is that God creates *an order* of beings whose laws are a participation in and a manifestation of his eternal and infinite wisdom.

We think that the real problem with Fugen is the radical problem of the *freedom* of creation. We have not been able to find it clearly posed in FUGEN who would even seem to deny it by implication. Nevertheless it seems to us that it is only in the recognition of the freedom of the creative act that it is possible to recognize the ultimate basis of that profound heterogeneity and discontinuity between mortals and the Absolute of which FUGEN speaks so much. Between God, who exists necessarily and with absolute independence from all, and the creatures, who are the fruit of his creative freedom, there exists, along with the profound bond of the total causality of God and the total dependence of creatures, the radical and infinite difference between the Necessary and the Contingent. Discontinuous continuity and homogeneous heterogeneity here find their ultimate explanation and grounding. We are convinced that the whole thought of *Shinshû*, as it is exposed for us by FUGEN, is directed towards this solution, even though it does not manage to arrive at it.