

“Buddha loves me, this I know...”

“Buddha loves me, this I know, for Amida tells me so...” Some Japanese Buddhists have actually adapted this beloved Christian song to their religion. Why not? Isn't love what it's all about?

Rev. Nancy Maeker, assistant to ELCA Bishop Peter Rogness, has adapted the Buddhist concept of “**mottainai**,” in her Advent 2005 sermons (*St. Paul Pioneer Press* 12/23/05). **Mottainai** is a compound word that means the negation (“nai”) of something with precious value (“mottai”). As she explains:

“The idea is that God’s love has been showered so extravagantly through the birth of Christ, the giving of everything and the giving of all. If we do not make use of that wonderful gift, it is mottainai; it is wasted.

“When a precious child of God does not have enough to eat and lives on the street, it is mottainai. When a child is not nurtured, it is mottainai. When immigrants come to this country with gifts and cultures but instead of experiencing hospitality, they experience harassment, it is mottainai.”

Maeker and her superior, Bishop Peter Rogness, are like two peas in a pod. As Rogness has said:

“Perhaps the time of claiming exclusive religious certainty that polarizes and vilifies is waning, finally, and a new movement stirs – a recognition that at the heart of our faith (and much to our surprise, we find it at the heart of virtually all faiths) is the simple claim that God is gently but surely guiding us to live lives of compassion and solidarity with all who live in the grip of poverty” (*Mpls Strib* 7/11/05).

What’s going on?

For the Christian grace and truth are in the cross alone – the cross of a particular first century Jew. Apart from the cross, all of life is ambiguous, even the best works of Christians and Buddhists, etc.

Both Maeker and Rogness misrepresent Christ. It’s completely inadequate to speak, as they do, of the cross as “love showered so extravagantly” and “God gently but surely guiding...” Rather, the cross is God’s No and God’s Yes. It is our damnation and our salvation. It exposes all our best ideas and best works as riddled with sin. It is an error to turn the terms “grace” and “love” into general ideas of divine grace and love. When this happens, the gospel is lost and Gnosticism slips into its place.

Mottainai is inextricably tied to Japanese Buddhism. Knowing the negation of the “precious value” – **mottainai** – comes by means of enlightenment through the path shown by Amida Buddha. Therefore it only means “negating grace” in a very different sense than in Christian usage. Many think if you take off the harsh husk of each religion, you find a common kernel shared by all. But this is an illusion. Buddhist and Christian concepts cannot be amalgamated except by those caught in **All-religions-are-the-sameism**.

The cross leads to the distinction between law and gospel – which leads to the two kingdoms. God’s kingdom comes by his power alone. In this fallen world, which is God’s left-hand kingdom, reason and the sword, not Buddhist or Christian enlightenment, are the proper tools for restraining evil. Real life cannot be reduced to simplistic axioms, like pacifism and hospitality.