

TRUTH, GOD, THE ONE GREAT THING

Three Talks

Ham Sok Hon

Many of our readers are familiar with the author of the following three talks. The Acorn has published English translations of his poems as well as his articles "We Must, but Cannot, Resort to Revolution" and "The Kingdom of Mind." Ham Sok Hon, a Korean Quaker, gave these talks — actually, Quaker testimonies — at three different Seoul meetings during 1984. The following translation contains a free rendering of a number of passages as well as omissions and a few editorial changes. The translator has taken this liberty in order to make the talks more accessible to English readers. An English translation of Ham's major work Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea was published by Friends World Committee for Consultation in 1985. — The Editors

Hold Onto Truth

Jesus said, "I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! . . . Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring strife." What was Jesus' meaning? By "fire" he must have meant that element that turns all things to ashes. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the world had indeed been set on fire?

To turn the world to ashes by fire means the complete denial of earthly existence. But men and women of modern times are fundamentally incapable of denying earthly existence. One thinks, "I must have a job; I must have a dwelling — how tiny it may be." This is common thinking, but it is mistaken. It is mistaken because it leads to the death of faith. Jesus' message is: That is the way of the world; you must not take that way but this way.

It's characteristic of the modern age to affirm this earthly existence unconditionally. This is true of Christianity, also. Must we not make a living, after all? Yes, we must. So Christians must also make a living. As we make a living, however, our faith loses its salt-like nature. There is no way we can make a living while keeping intact our salt-like nature.

We Christians ought to realize that we must remain a minority alienated from the world. This alienation could serve as a margin of safety which would keep us from contamination. But we complain about our alienation, instead, and demand, "Why do you alienate us? You must take us along with you."

[Some Christians dream of converting the entire world to their faith.] Cruel as it may sound, their design is to make this world theirs so that they may do whatever they want with it. But this is not what Jesus had in mind. He said: "My kingdom does not exist on this earth." It's now well established that Jesus brought revolution, and that he came to the world in order to make a revolution — especially a revolution in politics. But that's farfetched; it's preposterous.

"I have come to set fire to the earth." That means "I want this world to burn to ashes." That's why human existence must be transformed completely. [Everything that

ought to be burned must be burned.] Is there anything in this world — in modern civilization — that may not be burned to ashes?

Abstractly speaking, it may be good if we Christians work hard, create a Christian movement, and do everything — politics and what not? — all according to Christian faith. But all this is a fantasy. How can that be possible? The Christians can never make a majority; they will remain a minority to the very end. Suppose we seize the power to rule. But who can wield that power rightly? Can anyone govern according to the will of God — according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Can one be engaged in the business of government while maintaining his faith?

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus tells a Samaritan woman: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." We can see why Jesus says "worship in spirit." But why does he add "in truth"? Since God is spirit, I must meet him in spirit. If he is spirit, I must also be spiritual. This flesh is not real; this phenomenal existence is not real. Therefore, I must dismiss it. That's why Jesus says "worship in spirit." But we must live in this world. As we live here, we ought to live according to truth — "in truth." We ought to live according to what Morality dictates.

Some may say, "Wouldn't the world come to order if we Christians get actively involved [in social and political matters] and do everything according to the way we want?" But I don't believe that will happen. That's a wild fantasy. If you pursue this fantasy, you will inevitably end up compromising with this world. That's why those active participants in social movements — even those involved in church movements — can hardly escape that fate.

When we speak of livelihood, we cannot help speaking of modern living. Some may fancy that to live a Christian life is to make this modern living more efficient through Christian faith. But this is not what Jesus had in mind. As far as I know, it's fundamentally wrong to imagine that we can govern the world as we please. Instead, we ought to hold onto the seeds of truth, hoping that they will grow to triumph. But nobody knows when our triumph will

come; it's up to God. Therefore, as long as we live, we must continue to fight with this world. Our goal is to be a witness to truth.

Blessed Are Those Whose Minds Are Empty

The Lord's Prayer begins with "Our Father in heaven, Thy name be hallowed." I feel I finally grasped its meaning this morning. I have often thought about its meaning. But the meaning is quite simple, as I now think about it. In an earlier Korean translation of the Sermon on the Mount, the opening sentence reads: "Blessed are those whose minds are empty; the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Today we read: "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs." I think the older translation is better than the current one.

What is the meaning of "Our Father in heaven, Thy name be hallowed"? Doesn't it mean "I want to make my mind empty"? To acknowledge God's existence is to say that there is nothing outside God — that is, to enter a state of vacuum. Though it may be easy to say so, isn't it immensely difficult to bring your mind into a condition of vacuum? When you make your mind truly empty — when you reach such a state — God will be there. That's exactly what the opening sentence of the Sermon on the Mount means. "Blessed are those whose minds are empty, the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Since your mind is empty, the kingdom of heaven must be yours. For the empty place is none other than the kingdom of heaven. All this is self-evident. But we don't realize it, because we approach [the kingdom of heaven] in such a way that it may be displayed objectively and may be explainable to others. Ultimately, the way to the kingdom of heaven is the practice of the mind.

In plain language, to realize the existence of God is to attain infinite wisdom and infinite power. When the mind reaches that state in which it is truly empty, one finds infinite power in oneself. But we grumble about our weakness and impotence because we are incapable of reaching that empty state of mind. Is it not immensely difficult to realize this state?

One Thing You Must Attend To

One passage in the Book of Mencius reads: "There is one thing you must attend to. Do not pursue it with expectation; do not let your mind forget it; and do not try to help it grow."¹ What does the opening sentence (*pi-yu-shih-yen*) mean? The "one thing you must attend to" is what the Buddhists call "the One Great Thing." It means Existence. The second phrase (*wu-cheng*) is controversial. But it is commonly understood as meaning: Don't delib-

erate on something in advance in order to find the way to obtain it. You must attend to the One Great Thing. But you shouldn't plan beforehand how to pursue it. At the same time, you "shouldn't forget it" (*wu-hsin-wang*). Nor should you try to "help it grow" (*chu-ch'ang*), by your own effort, through your artificial exertion.

Mencius tells us the story of a foolish man of Song. This man wanted his seedlings to grow fast but found them not growing. He could no longer wait and pulled them up to help them grow. Although this man did this out of his eagerness, that was wrong. For life there is the principle of life, so that everything grows following its season. We don't make things happen faster simply through our efforts. The moral of the story is that we shouldn't try to obtain anything out of our own wishes and greed.

The same idea is expressed in the Taoist phrase: "You don't help heaven by human hands." That is, you as a human being shouldn't try to help God in his work. We wish our country were democratic. But this is in God's hands; it depends on heaven. Don't attempt to assist God in his work, so that it may be realized sooner.²

As I was coming to the meeting this morning, I remembered an episode of Uchimura Kanzo, that famous Japanese Christian thinker who started the non-church movement. When World War I broke out, it is said, the news disturbed Uchimura's mind and shook his faith. This is a well-known story. If God exists, then why is it that all these Christian nations — England, Germany, France, Italy, etc. — go to war, killing human beings, each praying to its God for its victory? Does God truly exist or not? With this great doubt persisting in his mind, Uchimura was confronted with the great question whether or not he should keep his faith in Christianity.

I have already said many times: Why do today's believers so miserably lack the determination to save the world from its present course? Isn't the task of religion the salvation of humanity? I am, too, one of those believers. True, the world is never wanting in talking about its salvation. But who is seeking its salvation as the One Great Thing? Is the church serious enough about its task of salvation, so as to doubt the existence of God in earnestness? We see the evil practices of our governments, but we still pay taxes to them. Our lack of determination is altogether deplorable. I'm no exception.

There are indeed some zealous ones who try to carry out a sort of reform movement. But their enthusiasm does not spring from true faith. So one is at a loss as to what to do. What is then the true practice?

(Translated from Korean by Ha Poong Kim)

¹This English translation follows Ham's Korean translation of the original passage. Ham's rendering of the opening sentence departs radically from the traditional reading of it. Wing-Tsit Chan translates the entire passage as follows: "Always be doing something without expectation. Let the mind not forget its objective, but let there be no artificial effort to help it grow." (Translator's note)

²This may sound fatalistic. But Ham's view of history is far from fatalism. Human work contributes to historical process; in this respect, human beings are participants in history, just as all other beings are. What he rejects here is the kind of attitude that seeks to control the course of history by imposing human will upon it. This kind of attitude, prevalent especially among the politically-minded, comes from ignorance and illusion. And it inevitably leads to violence — violence to nature as well as to humanity. One ought to do simply what is right, leaving in God's hands whatever may come out of it. This is the humble way in which a finite being participates in history. The reader may recall here Gandhi's statement: "All that we know is that one should do one's duty and leave the results in the hands of God." Was Gandhi fatalistic? That he was not we know from his life itself. One may say the same of Ham. (Translator's note)