

Sitting Between Two Rich Traditions

I consider myself to be a fortunate human being. Even though I come from a long tradition of family members wanting nothing to do with the organized Christian church, I was still able to build a faith erected on the grounds of two rich religious traditions, Christianity and certain teachings from Buddhism. My main faith is grounded in Christianity but my faith is enhanced and broadened through Buddhism.

Last week I received a newsletter from my good friend Rev. Shoken Winecoff. Shoken is the Abbot of Ryumonji Zen Monastery in northwest Iowa.

My Christian tradition began at the age of eleven when a friend of mine invited me to his church, Zion Evangelical and Reformed Church. My Buddhist tradition began when I was fifty- two years old in front of a post office in northeast Iowa. Coming out of the post office I saw this bald -headed man wearing a long robe and I walked up to him and said, “you just don’t look like one of us.” He smiled and our friendship has ever deepened.

When I first attended Zion, they had over five hundred twenty- nine members and the church was packed every Sunday. A large two story educational wing was built onto the church to educate all of their children. Zion began its rich history in 1852. Even before COVID-19, the congregation like many mainline churches struggles to fill a fourth of its pews.

My friend Shoken’s religion began around 483 B.C. but his monastery began twenty years ago where he was living in a granary building on a farm outside of town. Shoken smiles when he says his first parishioners were cows, and “they chanted the Heart Sutra with me.” Today his

forty- acre monastery has several new buildings all heated by an elaborate solar system and a large following.

I am a Christian but the God I follow and worship compels me to accept all people, and to let them follow the religion they are most comfortable with. Tearing down another faith, another religion just makes your faith that much smaller. We all see our God through different eyes, through different glasses. When we are open to other faiths our world can become a much better place in which to live.

I cherish the Christian experiences I learned from Zion but my interactions with other faiths just make my life much more richer. Max Muller so richly says, “the person who knows only one religion knows none.” When it comes to our faith there is no absolute truth for we are forever growing, alive and changed.

Christianity has the great stories of the patriarchs, the prophets, the Psalms, the Ten Commandments which talk about a new kind of community, the life and teachings of Jesus the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount and thousands of great teachers over the centuries.

I have witnessed in the Christian church a dumbing down. Too many of our preachers serve “chicken soup for the soul,” where only secular stories are served to “open the heart and rekindle the spirit.” A thorough study of the scriptures from the pulpit is a dying art. Our rich history has been converted into creeds, dogmas and finger pointing. Christian exclusiveness is dumb and ugly. Many people are searching for friendship, experiences and a loving teacher. These same people who are searching for a viable faith want something more than what the local church is serving.

The Buddhist stories from the past are alive and well. The four Noble Truths about suffering are among their basic teachings. At one time in

his past, my friend Shoken was a Roman Catholic priest. Shoken easily appreciates both religions. Rohr states, “there are many parallel quotes from Buddhism and Jesus in that they are coming from a similar level of consciousness.”

We Christians need to lighten up and loosen the grip on what we think the truth is. God is working in and through all of us, enjoy everyday, and be kind and love everyone. “Everydayness” can make for a better world. We Christians need to get back to some creative teaching about our Bible. It is hard to reach out to others when we do not even know and understand our basic stories and beliefs. We seem to have our “shalt not’s” down but we fail on the “thou shalt do’s” like being a good neighbor through love and kindness. In reality there is only one religion, a religion of love.

Let us not forget our rich traditions. For through knowing our traditions we become more enlightened today. The Buddha teaches “I am awake,” and Jesus last word was “stay awake.” Matthew 26:38 Jesus is not giving us a road map to eternity, but a road map on how to be a good neighbor to all.

Marcus Borg wrote “if the Buddha and Jesus were to meet neither would try to convert the other because they would recognize one another.” The texts of Buddhism talk about one truth and not many and Jesus talked about the “kingdom of God being within you.”

Sincerely;

Dennis Siebert