

## Tape 6: Buddhism and the Bishop of Woolwich

Mr Chairman and Friends,

As you've just heard this is the penultimate talk in a series, the second of the two series which we have had this year. And in the course of this series we have dealt with quite a wide variety of topics, and especially with Buddhism in relation to these topics.

Now this evening we come to what some of you might consider a rather strange topic, that is, as Mr Walsh has already told you, the topic of Buddhism and the Bishop of Woolwich. Now some of you may be wondering what could there possibly be in common between an Eastern religion like Buddhism and an Anglican Bishop like the Bishop of Woolwich, and you might therefore be wondering why this particular topic, this particular subject, has been included in this particular series.

Now, I'm afraid I must accept the responsibility for the inclusion of this topic in our series personally. And in order to make clear why I included this particular topic - Buddhism and the Bishop of Woolwich - I must take you, as it were, back with me to Kalimpong. As Mr Walsh has told you, I have spent in India upwards of twenty years, and in India my headquarters were situated at a place called Kalimpong up in the Himalayan foothills not very far from the more famous township of Darjeeling. Now, as you can imagine that little place of about 15,000 inhabitants situated within sight of Tibet, situated within sight of the magnificent snow ranges which interpose between India and Tibet. It's rather cut off from the outside world. It's a rather quiet little place. Or at least it was until quite recently, and not very many sounds from the outside world do penetrate there. But about three years ago, even in that far away place, even in this remote little township of Kalimpong, nestling among the hills at the foot of the mighty Himalayas, we heard echoes of a little debate - one might even say controversy - which was going on here in this country. In Kalimpong at our monastery I received from time to time different magazines and journals from this country, mainly of a religious nature. And I couldn't help noticing that in so many of them, about three years ago, there appeared references to a book which had then recently been published, called, *Honest to God*. I remember that one of the journals I was receiving regularly, it was in fact the weekly paper, was *The Enquirer*, which is one of the organs of the Unitarians. And they featured for many many months, as far as I remember, weekly articles and letters and discussions on this particular book. And other journals, other magazines, even the daily press apparently, gave quite a lot of coverage to this particular book and its ideas and the debate and the discussion which arose out of this publication.

So coming to understand, coming to know in this way, that this book had created quite a stir in England, and knowing also by that time that I would in all likelihood find myself back in England before very long, I made, as it were, a sort of mental note that one of things that I'm going to do when I get settled down a little in England, is to read this particular book.

So not very long after my arrival at the Hampstead Vihara, I happened to be browsing through our library and I found a rather battered, rather dog-eared copy of this particular book which had obviously been read by quite a large number of people frequenting our Vihara, our monastery. So being, as I may say, something of a bookworm whenever I see a book in which I'm interested one is to read it. There's no question of any delay. So that night itself I sat up quite late and I finished it at one sitting. And I must say that I found this little book by the Bishop of Woolwich, *Honest to God*, of very great interest indeed. And when I say that I found it of interest I don't

mean that I found it merely of academic or theoretical or intellectual interest, but something much more than that.

As I'm sure all of you know, in the course of the last century in the West generally, and in this country also, there has been a great growth, a great development, in the study of what we may call comparative religion. Now this study was confined at first to scholars, to university circles, and especially to the professional or the (aterlist). But gradually as the decades went by religious people, people who weren't interested in philology or philosophy technically, or in anthropology or sociology but in religion came to pay more and more attention to the various religions of the world other than their own. And this I feel was a very very significant development. When religious people, that is to say Christians, in this country, started giving serious consideration to the other great religions of the world, taking them not just as anthropological curiosities, not as something exotic, but as religions, as faiths, in which people believed and by which they lived and in which, therefore, there must be something of value, even though they might not choose to regard that something as being quite so valuable as what they found in their own religion.

Now I must say frankly that after my return to this country, after an interval of twenty years, I was quite pleasantly surprised by the degree of interest in non-Christian religions, including - perhaps I might even say especially - Buddhism, that there is among sincerely religious people, which means for the most part Christian people, in this country.

I must say at the same time that this surprise was all the more of a more surprise and all the more pleasant in as much as my encounters in India with what one might call the professional representatives of the various Christian churches in the form of the missionaries, had not been of the happiest nature! I feel now, after having had a certain amount of contact with various Christian bodies and individuals in this country in the course of the last seven or eight months, that the missionaries and the attitudes of the missionaries, especially towards other religions, are certainly not representative of the more advance religious thinking in this country today. I remember not so many years ago I went from Kalimpong to a place very near the Bhutan border called Padong - it's about sixteen miles from Kalimpong. As you notice proper names in this area all end in ong, so from Kalimpong I went to Padong, and there's a fair there, an annual fair to which the village people of that area brought their produce and there were prizes and exhibitions and things of that sort; so various Christian missionaries had quite literally set up their tents and were busy proclaiming the gospel and distributing tracts, and amongst other people they buttonholed me! So one of them said to me, 'Look here, we have to tell you plainly that your fate after death is going to be far worse, far more terrible, than that of other people. So I of course inquired why. So they said, or this particular person said, 'Well not only have you gone astray yourself in becoming a Buddhist, but you are leading also others astray. So your fate will be much worse than the fate of the others.

Now I must say that this sort of attitude I certainly haven't encountered in this country. And I've come to the conclusion that that sort of attitude is more or less out of date, and it would seem that those who go to places like India as missionaries, as propagators of the gospel are people who, one might say, almost can't fit in to the religious world and religious life of this country today. They are, as it were, anachronisms, so they leave this country

Since my return here, during this last seven or eight months I must say that my own contacts with Christians of various denominations have been extremely cordial, and especially I'd like to mention the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Quakers and the

Unitarians. Of course some people will tell you that the Quakers and Unitarians are not really Christians, at least they're not admitted to membership of the World Council of Churches, but we won't go into that today.

And I have been very gratified, very pleased to find, that amongst these various bodies - the Anglicans, the Methodists, Quakers, Unitarians, there are quite a number of people who are interested in Buddhism. I remember not so many weeks ago I spent a very pleasant weekend at a place, in fact it was at an old farmhouse near Maidstone in Kent, and there was a group of young Methodists staying there, and every evening we sat up very very late discussing Christianity, Buddhism, Methodism, Wesley, the Buddha, Zen, and so on and so forth, and I was surprised, and again pleasantly surprised to find, that one of these young men who was a lay preacher in the Methodist church had acquired not only quite a sound understanding of Zen but was extremely appreciative of it also, and felt, when I suggested to him that there was something even in John Wesley's own teaching and example faintly resonant of Zen. It hadn't occurred to him before but when I pointed out one or two resemblances and parallels he at once conceded that there was a very interesting resemblance.

So this, I feel, is a very, not only favourable but very pleasing situation in which we find in this country that there are many religious people, even members of churches, who are not only interested in Buddhism theoretically but who are willing to learn from Buddhism, even though without actually becoming Buddhists. Such being the situation it's only right and only natural I feel that there should be some Buddhists who are interested in following and understanding developments, modern developments, within the field of Christianity. Not so very long ago, you know, there were held in Rome two Vatican Councils, and it was very interesting to note what widespread interest they aroused, not only in Christian countries and Christian circles, but even in Muslim countries, in Buddhist countries, and in Hindu India. Not only interest, one might even say that the proceedings of these Councils were followed with sympathy all over the world by religious-minded people who knew about them. I must say though that personally I was rather disappointed at the outcome of these Councils and was rather reminded of the saying about the mountain being in labour and producing a mouse, but anyway that is neither here nor there.

So in such a situation I feel it's only natural that some Buddhists at least should be interested in the Bishop of Woolwich and in this very remarkable book of his, *Honest to God*. If we try to look at it broadly we can understand that in this book he is trying to come to grips with a problem which all religions have to face and all religious people have to face, though perhaps not to the same degree.

Now what is that problem? That problem, I think we may say is the problem of how to restate traditionally received spiritual truths in such a way, in such a language, as will be meaningful to contemporary humanity. That's the problem. In the case of Christianity perhaps the problem is more acute than it is in at least some of the other religions, and therefore I feel that the case of the Bishop of Woolwich, the example he has given in writing this book is particularly interesting to all of us, including Buddhists, because we see him in this book in a very honest way, we might say even in a very manly way, in a very straight forward way, come to grips, or trying to come to grips with a problem with which Buddhists also, though perhaps not in the same degree are concerned. Now before going on to speak about the contents of this book I might say something in appreciation of the spirit in which it has been written. Almost my first impression on reading this book, even though I read through it on my first reading very rapidly, was that the writer of this book is an intensely sincere person, an intensely honest person. He cares very deeply about the religious, about the spiritual life. But at the same time he is not blind. He is not shutting his eyes to the facts of the

contemporary world. And he is intensely concerned that religion should be relevant to life here and now today. But he has at the same time courage to reject, or at least to be willing to reconsider, formulations which have become perhaps a trifle outworn or even out of date. So having, as he does seem to me to have, this sort of spirit, this sort of sincerity, this sort of honesty, I think it's only natural that even though he may not command always the agreement of Buddhists he certainly can command their sympathy and their respect.

Now let me come on to deal with some of the issues which he has raised in his book. I can't of course hope to deal with all of them - though a small book it's rather tightly packed, rather rich in ideas, but I propose to deal with just two or three major ideas which may be of greater interest to Buddhists, just two or three of the major issues.

Now the first of these major issues that we come to and in a way it's the most important so we might as well face it at once is the issue of God, God with a capital G of course. Now historically speaking, traditionally speaking, Christianity is a form of theism. That is to say Christianity accepts the existence of a personal god, a supreme being endowed with all the perfections who is a creator, and the governor of this universe. But we find that in modern times this particular belief, that is a theistic belief, belief in God to put it simply, is coming more and more under attack. There are many people in the world today, many people in this country today, even many people in the churches today, who are deeply and sincerely religious but who feel that the theistic idea, the traditional, the conventional idea, of God is not only completely unacceptable but even sometimes completely meaningless - it just doesn't mean anything to them at all. Now it's important to realise here that we are not only dealing with the non religious people but even with the religious ones. That even many of those who are deeply profoundly religious, who have a truly spiritual attitude towards life in this country and in the churches, find that the traditional theism of Christianity which has been with it from the beginning so far as we can see is unacceptable and even as I've said meaningless.

Now I feel that it is one of the greatest merits, if not **the** greatest merit, of the Bishop of Woolwich that he has had the courage to face up to this fact and to try to take it into consideration even to try to do something about it. But he's faced the facts, which must be very terrible facts for a Christian to have to face, that what was for hundreds of years the most cherished conception of the whole Christian church, all the churches in fact, the idea of God has suddenly, or so it seems to us at present, suddenly lost its significance, lost its meaning - become if not merely meaningless even to some extent ridiculous.

Now in the second chapter of his book *Honest to God* he deals with this question, the chapter is called '*The End of Theism*' and its cast in the interrogative. But though it's so cast in the course of this chapter it seems to me that the Bishop does not leave us very much in doubt that in his opinion traditional theism is finished.

He goes into this in considerable detail and I need not repeat all the different steps of his argument. He says that to begin with, at the beginning of the scientific period in modern thought, the conception of a God up there in heaven above the earth became unacceptable and was replaced, gradually, intensively, by the conception of a God as it were 'out there', beyond, someone transcendent, away from this world. Now these ideas of his are of course not original. He is quite obviously indebted, as he himself admits quite openly, to Tiddick(?) and also to Bonhoefer. But his originality consists, it seems to me, not in what he has said, because that has been said before, but in the fact that whereas before it was said, or written rather, in the pages of obscured and learned journals, in the exchange almost of confidences between professional

theologians and scholars, the Bishop has had the courage to drag, practically, the whole issue right out into the open almost, as it were, into the marketplace. Despite many changes which have taken place in the West and in the church in those churches which are, as we call them, episcopal, a Bishop still does command very great respect and even very great authority. And the fact that the Bishop of Woolwich, being a Bishop, shows publically to espouse these particular views, which he knew were very controversial, but which he espoused because he honestly believes in them and felt that they had to be made more public, that they are to be brought more emphatically to people's notice, that people had to give them serious consideration, that someone had to say it, it rather seems to me that the Bishop is not unlike the little boy in the well known fairy story, the story of the Emperor's clothes.

As you know, most of you I'm sure from your childhood memories, there is the story about the Emperor who engaged two people to weave him for his coronation new clothes, but they just bluffed him, they fooled him. They told him that these clothes were so marvellous, so wonderful that only the pure, only the virtuous could see them. So the Emperor himself and his ministers didn't like of course to admit that they weren't pure, weren't virtuous, so they pretended that they saw the clothes. So the result was that when the Emperor came to walk in his coronation procession he walked without any clothes at all. But everybody joined everywhere in the conspiracy, and at last only one little boy, the voice of a little boy, piped up and said, 'But daddy, he hasn't got any clothes!' So to my mind, without any disrespect that is exactly what the Bishop of Woolwich has done. People were thinking that they believed in God, that they accepted God, that God was the path of their creed, the old conventional traditional conception, but he has the courage, he has the honesty, he has, as it were, the childlike quality to get up and say 'but you know, we don't really believe in God, do we?' And the repercussions are of course continuing even now and the Bishop himself has made clear from time time to time.

So there's his originality so far as one can see. A lonely voice of truth within the church.

In his later book, that is *The New Reformation*, quite recently published, he's got an appendix headed '*Can a truly contemporary person not be an atheist?*' Now this seems a very startling sort of question for a bishop to ask. He not only asks it but he gives a quite definite answer and in the course of his answer he concedes, as far as I can see, that: in the first place God is intellectually superfluous; secondly that he's emotionally dispensable, and thirdly that he's morally intolerable. He concedes all this.

Now again for a Bishop to concede so much well what are we coming to?! A hundred years ago when poor Bishop Correnso(?) of Natal dared to state publically that he didn't think that the first five books of the Old Testament were really written by Moses - I forget whether he was actually excommunicated but there was certainly a lot of talk about it. He was declared practically a heretic. Well some people might like to excommunicate the poor Bishop of Woolwich and some people certainly think him a heretic. But whether one agrees with him or not one can certainly admire his courage.

Now the question arises where does all this lead? Where does it all tend? Now in effect, and I don't know, I'm not sure, whether this was in the Bishop's mind when he wrote his book, but so far as I can see it it all leads, it all tends in the direction of the idea of what we might call non-theistic religion. Even, paradoxical as it might sound, to non-theistic Christianity, that is Christianity without God, the possibility of which the Bishop himself seems to be quite aware of. And this is, of course, certainly, a very

startling and a very revolutionary idea. Not just religion without God but even Christianity without God. As I've said almost apparently a contradiction in terms.

Now though the Bishop seems to be quite aware of the direction in which he's moving - some people might even say drifting - he doesn't seem to be aware, not so far as these two books are concerned, that is *Honest to God* and *The New Reformation*, he doesn't seem to be aware of the fact that the idea that religion can be non-theistic, that there can be religion, religious life, spiritual life in their fullness without the idea of a personal god, a supreme being, a creator and governor of the universe, he doesn't seem to be aware that this is a very **ancient** idea, nothing new at all. In the West, in the Middle East also, at least since classical times, religion has necessarily been theistic, if you're religious you believe in God, if you believe in God you are religious - the two things were interchangeable. But in the East, especially in the Far East, this has certainly not been the case. We have to enlarge our horizons a little. We have to recognize the fact that in the East, especially the Far East, since ancient times there has been what we may call a whole family of non-theistic religions. Not just one - many of them. In ancient China Taoism, Confucianism - both teachings, very great spiritual teachings which say not one word about God. Then again in India, Jainism and it's (?) even than Buddhism, no mention of God. Then later on in India in Hinduism the Advaitvedanta, the non-dualistic Vedanta, gets along perfectly well without the idea of God. If God comes in at all it's just as a relative truth or way of concession, as it were, to the ignorance of people. Shangara says if there is a God it's just the absolute seen through the veil of ignorance. But above all in India, in the East generally, especially in the Far East we have an example, perhaps the most prominent example of non-theistic religion in Buddhism. We might even go so far as to say that Buddhism is almost the perfect example of a religion, of a spiritual way of life, a way of salvation, a way of Enlightenment which has been worked out fully in all its details, in all its ramifications - ethical, psychological, philosophical, metaphysical, artistic - without a single reference to the idea of God.

Now this being so we can begin to appreciate the significance, even the importance to Buddhists of this phenomenon, as we may call it, of the Bishop of Woolwich. Perhaps those who are not Buddhists, those perhaps who are Christian, present may be able to understand now why the Bishop of Woolwich has almost a fascination for some Buddhists, because he represents to them a movement of ideas at least within the bosom of the church toward a non-theistic form of religion, religion without the personal god; and therefore he represents at the same time, to them, a movement, as it were of approximation, to Buddhism.

I don't know, I can't say, whether the good Bishop himself realises this - he might even be horrified to think of himself as a crypto-Buddhist. I don't even know whether he knows anything about Buddhism. In his first book *Honest to God*, there's no reference to the Buddha whatsoever or to Buddhism. He appears completely oblivious of the existence of all other religions. There's a rather unfortunate little quotation from Bonhoefer, who speaks of the followers of other religions worshipping various monstrous animal forms and so on, but I don't think the good Bishop takes that very seriously. And in his other book, the is *The New Reformation*, there's just one passing reference to the Buddha, and also I should add to Mohammed - not enough significance that the name of Mohammed is spelt wrongly! The name of the Buddha he's got right fortunately, but it's just a passing reference, the mere name is there. One can't come to understand from this what the Bishop feels about the Buddha or about Buddhism; and I think this is rather a pity.

I can't really help thinking that a knowledge of Buddhism, by which of course I mean an **understanding** of Buddhism, not just an acquaintance with the facts or the history

of Buddhism, and especially a knowledge of that very special form of Buddhism which we call Zen, would help the Bishop quite a lot in his religious quest and his spiritual life. Perhaps - I hope that this will be so - one day he will get around to studying Buddhism seriously. I shouldn't be at all surprised because it does seem to me that that he is, whether he knows it or not, heading in this direction.

Now Chapter Four of *Honest to God* is entitled *The Man for Others* - it's a rather striking title, and in this chapter the Bishop deals with Christ. Now obviously if you reject traditional theism the Bishop is faced with a problem as regards Christ. Traditionally Christ of course is regarded as God incarnate. One of the reasons - perhaps the main reason why the Quakers and the Unitarians are excluded from the World Council of Churches is the fact that they don't or they can't regard Christ quite in this way. So the question arises if there is no God, if the traditional conception of God is not valid then what is Christ? If he's not God incarnate, if he's not the second person of the Trinity then who or what is he? Now there's one thing about the Bishop's approach to this problem which I was very happy to note because it's rather Buddhistic, that the Bishop kept firmly to the middle way in this question. Now what do I mean by that? He's quite aware that the traditional conception of Christ as the incarnate second person of the Trinity must go. That's one extreme. But he doesn't go to the other extreme, as some liberal Christians do, of regarding Christ just as a very good man. He doesn't go to the extreme of thinking, as it were, well there are lots of good people in the world and Christ was just a bit better than most, perhaps a bit better than all of them, but essentially just a good man; he doesn't go to that humanistic extreme. So this, as I've said, is very interesting to Buddhists because Buddhists look at the Buddha in rather this sort of way, avoiding extremes. What do I mean by that? I've tried to make it clear in other lectures, in other places, but let me just briefly recapitulate for the purposes of this talk this evening.

The Buddha obviously isn't an incarnation of God because in Buddhism there is no god, but at the same time he's not just an ordinary man. Some scholars, writing about the Buddha, sometimes say that the Buddha was just an ordinary human being, but that isn't quite correct. In fact it's not at all correct. The Buddha we can see in Buddhism as an Enlightened human being, and by Enlightened we mean a human being who has become fully, perfectly assimilated to Reality. To put it in very popular language, rather imprecise language which Buddhists might possibly take me up on, the Buddha is a human being who has become one with Reality. With Reality of course in the spiritual, in the transcendent sense. So we don't say that on the one hand the Buddha is God, nor on the other that he is merely man, but an Enlightened man, a man become one with Reality, so that the two are interfused. You can't see which is the human being, which is the reality, which is the Reality, which is the human being. So that neither are sort of supernaturalistic assessment of the Buddha or a purely humanistic one, and it seems to me that the Bishop of Woolwich is as it were working his way, almost struggling towards, a similar conception of Christ. He can't regard him, apparently, as God incarnate, but at the same time he doesn't want to regard him just as a very good man, a great ethical teacher. At the same time he takes over Bonhoeffer's idea, as the title of the chapter indicates of Christ as what Bonhoeffer calls 'the man for others'. And the Bishop makes the same point that Bonhoeffer has made apparently that transcendence, the sort of metaphysical dimension of Reality, is experienced in concern for others. That in concern for others you transcend yourself and in that self-transcending, in your concern for others, there is a participation in Absolute Reality.

Now this conception is of course a very noble one. The idea of living for others. But of course even if one regards Christ as the man for others it doesn't make him unique as the Bishop apparently would still like to think. After all there have lived in the

world many others who no less than Christ himself lived for others. One can think of so many of them - no need to mention names. The Bishop of course doesn't say that he might of said that Christ of course died for others but this very conception of dying for others in the traditional way is really part of the dogmatic structure that the Bishop is trying to abandon. After all we can even say that Socrates died for others. We can say that the Vietnamese Buddhist monks who set themselves on fire a couple of years ago died for others. We can say that even quite secular heroes and heroines like for instance Edith Cavell died for others. So this idea of living for others or even dying for others isn't sufficient to establish the uniqueness of Christ. It seems to me that the Bishop here perhaps wants to have his cake and eat it too!

To me in this connection, in this context of someone who lives for others or someone who is a man for others the Buddhist idea of compassion and of the Bodhisattva, the one who in the popular version of the teaching renounces his own salvation, his own nirvana, in order to dedicate himself to the salvation and the well-being of others really expresses the truth which I feel the Bishop is trying to work his way towards much more clearly and much more adequately. In Buddhism compassion is not just a mere emotion, it's not just the feeling of pity - compassion is the way in which one acts, it is what one manifests when one has a deep and true realisation of non-selfhood. Which means that in Buddhism compassion is regarded as the flower of wisdom. Wisdom being understood as an experience of the truth of non-self and of non-duality, what we call sunyata, the voidness which is of course not just emptiness, Reality itself. So only if one has this sort of experience can one really live for others in the deepest and truest sense, but to this metaphysical, this deeply spiritual level, the Bishop doesn't actually penetrate. He seems to think of living for others more in terms of social service and so on which to the Buddhist is comparatively superficial.

Now if, as the Bishop has done, one throws overboard traditional theism, one has difficulties not only in restating one's Christianity but in so many other ways also. Suppose there is no personal God, no supreme being, then what become of prayer? Prayer is surely praying to God. What becomes of worship? Worship is of course worship of God. If there's no God then what function does the church serve? What do you go to do every Sunday morning or every Sunday evening if there's no God?

Now the Bishop is aware of all these difficulties but he doesn't go into them very deeply. He certainly doesn't consider the possibility - at least he doesn't seriously consider the possibility - of meditation. If there's any real defect in his book I think it's this. He doesn't quite, it seems to me, see the connection between non-theistic religion and meditation. Prayer, worship and theism go naturally together almost hand in hand one might say, and in the same way with non-theistic religion there goes concentration, meditation, mind development, whatever term one might like to use. So when he comes to the practical things, the religious life, what the religious life consists of or what it consists in, the Bishop becomes a bit vague and he tends to reduce, apparently, the religious life or the other-regarding life as I said a little while ago, to various forms of social service.

Now I don't want to give the impression that I'm criticising the Bishop of Woolwich. I think he himself, his ideas and his book, have all of them introduced a very important, a very necessary, catalyst as it were into the Church of England and through the Church of England into the whole Christian religion, at least in this country. And I for one as a Buddhist can only hope that that little catalyst, that little seed, will do its work. In fact Christianity will gradually become non-theistic, not only in principle but also in practice.



Now it's my own view, my own personal opinion, that if that happens then what results or what is produced will cease to be Christianity in any recognisable sense. Because traditionally, historically, Christianity is a theistic religion, and if it becomes non-theistic, if you get as it were a non-theistic Christianity emerging, well that will be much more like Buddhism than it will be like the historical, traditional, theistic Christianity.

Now we are all of us in certain respects very conservative. When I say conservative I don't mean politically conservative though one might say that of course in Hampstead, but at least psychologically conservative. We don't like change. We don't like change where deep rooted assumptions of our religious life generally are concerned, and it seems to me that the Bishop of Woolwich quite naturally and even quite rightly and quite properly had got, even though he's an almost revolutionary thinker or populariser, a sort of emotional attachment to the tradition to which he belongs. So sometimes it seems as though he's going right the way forward and then it seems he sort of pulls himself back a bit and hesitates. So this is only natural. This sort of thing happens to all of us when we're reaching out towards something new, towards a fresh interpretation of our religious and our spiritual life and experience.

But it seems to me that if he pushes on, if he follows to its logical conclusion the course upon which he has embarked or the line of thought which he has initiated or popularised it will be very difficult for him not to come to a position very closely approximating to that of Buddhism, or even to Buddhism itself.

Now human beings are not logical, they're not rational, and it would be very irrational to expect anyone to behave rationally! Certainly in religious and spiritual matters perhaps we shouldn't behave rationally. So I don't have any great expectations of ever having a knock on my door from the Bishop of Woolwich and the request to admit him into the fold of Buddhism. I don't see that coming. Logically it ought but, as I've said people are not logical. But certainly I think it's inevitable that the good Bishop will come, in the course of years, closer and closer to Buddhism, whether he knows it or whether he doesn't and I'm quite sure that if he comes to know something about Buddhism and if he comes into contact with Buddhists I'm quite sure that he will be quite delighted to recognise some resemblance between his present views and the views have been those of Buddhism for thousands of years. I think this perhaps is all to the good. Buddhists are not very anxious to make converts. They are always happy, naturally, when someone joins them in their own quest for truth and reality, but they also see that people have to go on their own paths individually and that ultimately the choice is one's own. One might persuade, one might put forward points of view but one can do no more than that, so I'm quite sure that whatever happens - whether the good Bishop goes on gaily as a Bishop in the Church of England or whether he takes any other step, whether he comes to know about Buddhism or whether he doesn't, or in a way he retracts all that he's ever said which he might possibly do, a Buddhist certainly will have towards him great goodwill for his very courageous attempt to break through convention and tradition and to come nearer to a position which they feel is Buddhistic. Indeed they perhaps when religion generally is rather on the defensive it's not a bad thing that religious people in various, in different religions, should find themselves approximating more and more. Buddhists of course are very loyal to their own principles and one of the most important of those principles is of course that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. We don't make any concession on that and if we find people in other religions, even in Christianity, coming to hold that view within the limits even of their own religion then we are very happy about that. Because we feel that they will have come thereby closer, nearer, to the truth, to Enlightenment.

So having heard this talk you might, I hope, in fact feel that there's not so great a disparity between Buddhism and the Bishop of Woolwich as you might at first have supposed.

Transcribed May 2004