

Concordia Theological Monthly



SEPTEMBER

• 1951

BRIEF STUDIES

NO SOLA GRATIA WITHOUT SOLUS CHRISTUS

In our sermons we often state — and correctly so — that there are only two religions, the anthropocentric religion of work-righteousness and the Christocentric religion of salvation by grace through faith. The School of Comparative Religions has challenged this statement. Its advocates claim that the religious concepts expressed in the terms *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are present in some types of Buddhism, especially the idea that man's "salvation" is initiated exclusively by the deity. In discussing the terms χάρις, ἀγάπη, and ἔλεος in a dogmatics class the undersigned made the statement that the term χάρις is distinctly Christian and entirely foreign to every other religion. One of the students who had done considerable reading in the field of Oriental religions raised the question whether such a categorical statement was tenable in view of the fact that Mahayana Buddhism of China has a concept of "grace" which excludes man's works. Our immediate reply was that if the concept of grace occurs in this Chinese form of Buddhism, it must undoubtedly be a remnant of the Gospel which the Nestorian Christians brought to China in the early centuries. But after carefully checking the sources at our disposal (e. g., the article "Buddhism" in R. G. G. I., 1323 f.), we came to the conviction that the concept of grace in this Oriental type of Buddhism is, after all, fundamentally different from that of the Christian.

Paul Althaus in his *Dogmatics* * shows quite conclusively that *all* religions with the exception of the Christian religion teach self-salvation. He grants that not all teach the same form of salvation by works. In some religions man's attempt to save himself is very coarse, be that the religion of the pagans with their unbelievably cruel ascetic practices, or the ethical religions of the Law, which attempt to approach the deity by means of contemplation, virtue, mysticism. Althaus, however, shows that also the so-called "religions of grace," notably Bhakti and Mahayana Buddhism, are in the final analysis systems of self-salvation, although concepts like *sola gratia* and *sola fide* seem to play a large part. True, in these two Oriental religions man's salvation is viewed as being initiated by God through a mediator and "savior."

* *Die Christliche Wahrheit*, Vol. I, "Theologische Kritik der Religionen," pp. 164—175.

But as Althaus correctly points out, it is impossible to speak of the grace of God without being conscious of God's holy zeal and wrath. And just this is absent in these systems, and thus they actually deny the true nature of God, and their concept of the "gracious God" is a mere caricature. Likewise their idea of a mediator is not a historical person, but a mere figment of their own phantasy and without any historical foundation. In other words, these religions present a totally mutilated picture of God and trust in a self-invented savior. There can be no *sola gratia* nor *sola fide* without *solus Christus*. Only in the person and work of the incarnate Son of God can man find God's grace and through faith the reconciliation with God.

Althaus describes the two aforementioned Oriental systems in some detail, chiefly on the basis of Rudolph Otto's *Indiens Gnadenreligion und das Christentum*, 1930.

The Bhakti religion, like all Hindu religions, centers in the Oriental desire for the attainment of piety. However, Bhakti differs fundamentally from other Hindu systems in several important points. The deity is not viewed as an impersonal, cruel, and more or less capricious being, but as a loving person. The way of salvation is not that of works, as represented in Karma or Yoga or in a combination of the two, as is the case in practically every other Buddhist system.

Karma, the Sanskrit word for "act," is the theory that by an inexorable law of cause and effect in the moral sphere every good work will be rewarded and every evil work be punished. The "lords of the Karma" exercise absolute control over man's destiny according to one's evil and good deeds. Since it is unlikely that one lifetime is sufficient to purify the soul and prepare it for its unity with the cosmic soul, man must go through countless reincarnations. This "wheel of life" is under the control of the Buddha and is pictured in the most gruesome and frightening hues. The Hindu, unconscious of the wrongs done in a previous existence, must submit to the cruel infliction of punishments in a subsequent incarnation, and is never sure that he has reached the state where he is ready for Nirvana. Yoga, especially the Royal Yoga, prescribes extremely difficult physical and mental exercises which are said to produce a complete suspension of all physical and sensory activities. In this ecstatic condition, the result of controlled breathing, continence, bodily exercises, and extreme mental concentration, the devotee is totally absorbed in meditation upon the Supreme Being, and by means of such meditation claims to reach union with the deity. Nothing of this is found in the so-called "religions of grace."

Nor does Bhakti, like the other Hindu religions, find the ultimate goal of human existence in Nirvana, the state in which the individual soul is so intimately united with the cosmic soul that it loses its own personal identity. On the contrary, the aim of Bhakti is the loving devotion—that is the meaning of Bhakti—to a personal deity. This religion seems to have originated in the second century before Christ, but never to have found general acceptance nor to have been passed on in its original purity. It probably reached its fullest development under Ramanuja, 1055—1137, a contemporary of Anselm. He teaches the personality of God and holds that the essence of piety consists in man's accepting the one God with the whole heart. Because of man's original fall and divinely pre-determined sinfulness no one is able by his own powers to love God truly and fully. Therefore man can obtain the new life and peace with God solely by grace through an elective act of the deity. Ramanuja states: "Das Herz dir loesen aus der Welt kann Buessung nicht, Versenkung nicht. Allein aus Gnaden Haris wird sie verleihen, ohne Grund." (Neither penance nor contemplation can free your heart from the entanglements of the world. This freedom comes alone by the grace of Hari, without any cause in thee.) The correlative of this "grace" is a sort of *sola fide*, a trust in the deity's willingness to bestow the ability to love the deity. Otto states that faith and love constitute the essence of the Bhakti religion; that such faith and love are exclusively the deity's work; that man must commit himself entirely to the deity's activity; that such faith is not really trust, but a sort of committal that the deity will do whatsoever is good for man. Because of the apparent exclusion of all human works Bhakti has been called "a religion of grace." It is interesting to note, as Althaus mentions, that there have been controversies among the adherents of Bhakti which show how seriously the adherents considered the exclusion of all human activity. One of the contending schools was designated as the cat way and the other as the monkey way. In time of danger the cat will take the kitten into its mouth, and thus the kitten is unable to do anything at all toward its own salvation. It is purely passive. The young monkey, however, in time of danger clings to its mother and is saved from danger through its own co-operation. Althaus finds in this an analogy to the controversy between monergism of the Gnesio-Lutherans and the synergism of Philippists during the Interimistic Controversies.

The Mahayana form of Buddhism has been established particularly in China and Japan. It is very difficult to trace the steps in the development of this type of Buddhism. No one seems to know how and when

it was transformed from an atheistic to a theistic religion, and from a religion of self-salvation to a religion of faith in a redemption through divine love. Central in Mahayana, like in Bhakti, is the thought that man can attain salvation only by an act of divinely redemptive love. Faith seems to be trust in the vow of Amida, who pledged that after he had become a divine Buddha he would not enter Nirvana unless he could at the same time also free the greatest of all sinners from the continuous and irretrievable process in reincarnations. Faith is described primarily as trust and confidence in the intercessory work of Amida, and manifests itself by invoking Amida's name. Amida has become, as it were, the highest Buddha because he has mercy especially on those who have no desire for salvation and who make no attempt to save themselves. In this respect Buddha-Amida differs from the Buddhas in all other forms of Buddhism. The central thought of Mahayana as a "religion of grace" is expressed in the maxim: "If the good enter life, how much more will sinners enter it." From this it is evident that Mahayana has no concept of the God of justice, of holiness, or even of grace through a substitutionary savior, but merely in a God of mercy who more or less arbitrarily overlooks man's sins.

It appears at first glance that both Bhakti and Mahayana teach a type of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. But a closer examination of these two systems shows that instead of having points of similarity to the Christian religion, they differ fundamentally and irrevocably from the Christian religion at their very heart and core. Otto points out correctly that in the Christian religion redemption is the reconciliation between God and man and the restoration of the fellowship between God and man through the forgiveness of sins; the Christian religion is therefore essentially the religion of reconciliation. The so-called religions of grace also mention sin and forgiveness, redemption, and devotion. In the Bhakti religion as well as in Mahayana there are many confessions of sins and petitions for forgiveness. But—and this is basic—in these Oriental religions redemption is the liberation from the enslaving and tyrannizing power of Karma, from the cruel "wheel of life" with its many reincarnations, from man's impotence against the cruel fate of life. The Christian religion is the message of redemption from man's guilt through the all-sufficient work of Christ. In the Oriental religions redemption is viewed chiefly as man's ex-trication from the dilemma of his human existence, but they fail to see that the problem of human existence is not the entanglement in Karma, or some other cruel power, but God's righteous judgment over man's sin. The basic error in the Oriental religions of grace

is the complete failure to understand the real cause of man's trouble, neither have they any concept of the holiness of God, of the need of divine reconciliation. When they speak of a "merciful God" they have in mind a god who looks with pity and compassion on man's mistakes. Their god is merely a sympathetic onlooker, a spectator. The God of the Christian revelation actually suffers in the place of man. The savior of the Oriental systems is at best an ascetic; the Savior of the Gospel is "stricken, smitten, and afflicted of God" because He has been made sin "for us."

This study shows how tenuous the line may become which separates some so-called Christian definitions of *grace* from paganism. The *gratia infusa* of the Roman Catholic Church and to an alarming degree in Liberal theology comes to mind, as well as the concept of "sovereign grace" in Calvinism. This study will furthermore remind the Christian preacher that he dare never be satisfied to speak of God's grace merely in broad, general terms. He will always make doubly sure that his hearers will understand that the New Testament concept of grace is *favor Dei propter Christum*. There can be no grace, there can be no faith, without Christ's person and Christ's redemptive work. And finally, all Christians will thank God that He has revealed to us what "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him,"
1 Cor. 2:9.

F. E. MAYER