

THE ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS

CHAPTER TEN

This lesson continues our discussion of the many ways in which people today are seeking to find something to fill the void in their hearts. The new framework that man has created for himself, out of his pretended autonomy, leads logically to the conclusion that there cannot be any meaning or purpose in life (nothing that has ultimate significance). But man, being made in God's image (however much this may be denied), cannot cease to seek something ultimate.

The Religious "Leap"

We come, then, to another way in which people today are seeking to break out of the iron cage in which they feel enclosed. It is for this reason that there is a great wave of interest in Eastern religions—particularly among younger people—in our society. This is not really strange when we stop to realize that the Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) were developed by people who had lived for centuries in a similar spiritual predicament. They too exchanged the truth of God for a lie, because they did not want to retain the true God in their knowledge (Rom. 1:25, 28). It is too unpleasant for sinful man to acknowledge the true God as the one to whom he is responsible. So, long ago, in such sin darkened cultures it was assumed that the world was not created, and that it is not ruled over by a sovereign God. History was conceived by these cultures to be a circle rather than a line. A line has a beginning, and leads to an end. A circle has no beginning and no end. Thus the wheel of life—the never ending repetition, over and over again, of a meaningless existence—is the key to Eastern religions. Those who have lived for many centuries in this predicament have developed rather sophisticated ideas as to how man—autonomous man—can 'authenticate' himself (or, in other words, find or create some ultimate meaning). But how do they do this? Well, the answer is difficult because it cannot be expressed in words. We will illustrate this by quoting from a book entitled *Zen Existentialism: The Spiritual Decline of the West*. This book was written by Lit-sen Chang, who once was a teacher of Zen at Kiannan University in China. He is now a Christian and teaches at Gordon Conwell, a theological seminary in the U.S.A. Dr. Lit-sen observes that Western culture is in decline because it has rejected the old absolutes based on God's word, the Bible. Having thus shut out the light of divine truth, Western man has put himself in essentially the same position that people have long been in where the Bible was not known. The result is that Western thought is now coming closer to such ancient religious concepts as Zen (a type of Buddhism) long ago developed. Now we quote:

Zen's way of teaching is to demonstrate Reality rather than to talk about it, and to avoid formally religious terminology and conceptual statements.... So "Zen teaches nothing" as Suzuki asserted, "Whatever teachings there are in Zen they come out from one's own mind. Zen merely points the way...." Therefore, Zen masters do not always teach with their mouths, but with their actions. "They shout, strike, and push; and when questioned, they sometimes run away or pretend to be dumb...." For instance, "a monk called Hung Chou came to visit Ma Tsu, and asked: "What is the meaning of Bodhi Dharma's coming from the West?" Ma Tsu said: "Bow down to me first." As the monk was prostrating himself, Ma Tsu gave him a vigorous kick in the chest."

To put it in our own words, Zen is an experience. Somehow—no one can say how—we make a great leap, we transcend the "iron cage," and experience the ultimate. Again we quote Lit-sen:

The Zen school commonly describes its experience of Satori (Enlightenment, Wu, in Chinese) as "the bottom of the tub falling off." When that happens all of its contents are suddenly gone...all problems are suddenly solved, in the sense that all problems have ceased to be problems. Nothing is left, but to burst out into loud laughter. Then, as it is described, there is a source of certainty, a sense of airiness which comes from dropping the burden of self and its de sires.... There is a willingness to let things happen and a diminishing desire to control the universe.... The mind (Hein) becomes no mind (WuHsin), without thought of security or achievement or any purpose, much less ultimate goal.

It is, in other words, a kind of mental breakdown that leads to the crumbling of the edifice of logical thought. It is a leap out of the realm of content without meaning (the "real world," as seen in the cyclical

framework of Eastern thought) into the realm of meaning without content.

Now the remarkable thing is that much that passes for religion in the West today—and this includes much so called Christianity—is basically identical with what Dr. Lit-sen describes. It is, of course, realized rather generally that some have turned to Eastern religions. When the Beatles go to sit at the feet of some noted Swami, it makes the newspapers throughout the Western world. It is also news when an Eastern religious figure gives lectures to vast numbers of students at some of our great universities. But what is not often realized is that much popular religion that goes under the name of Christianity is not really different from this new framework escapism. Take the teaching of “Neo-Orthodox Christianity,” for example. This system of teaching is to the effect that (1) we must accept without question the fundamental assumptions and conclusions of modern scientific thought. Evolution is considered a fact, rather than mere theory. The Bible is said to be a fallible book, written by men who had a “pre-scientific” framework of thought. They did not really see and hear the things that they report to us in the Bible in the way that they describe them there. No, what they supposedly did was to experience some sort of divine-human encounter which took them out of this world, and then they used these forms (called myths) to try to express the meaning. (2) What we need today, then, is to de-mythologize the Bible. We need to realize, in other words, that they were making the great “leap” out of the world of content without meaning into the realm of meaning without content. When we realize this, they suggest, then we may have an encounter of our own. Thus—to them—Christianity is not something that happened in history, but rather something that happens in experience. It is with this in mind that Francis Schaeffer speaks of being “more afraid of the word ‘Jesus’ than almost any other word in the modern world.” “The word is used as a contentless banner, and our generation is invited to follow it.” The fact is, in other words, that multitudes who say that they have had “an experience with Jesus”—or, have taken “the Jesus trip”—really mean about the same thing that the Zen Buddhist means when he claims that he has found enlightenment: it is a would be escape from the iron cage of a mechanistic (and meaningless) universe, into the mystical realm of meaning (which can not be put into words because it is) without content.

We believe that it can be shown that the rapid increase in the number of people who are caught up in the Pentecostal (or charismatic) movement, arises from this same cause. Many historic Protestant denominations have accepted the new framework. The dogma of evolution is simply assumed to be true, and the Bible no longer considered the inerrant record of things that really happened in history. It is little wonder, therefore, that many people feel themselves to be trapped in this cage even within the visible Church, and have therefore been attracted by a movement that claims to have the secret needed to experience “the great leap.” Here is the way Frank Barlemann describes his own experience of speaking in tongues.

I had not the slightest difficulty in speaking in “tongues.” And yet I can understand how some may have such difficulties. They are not fully yielded to God. With me the battle had been long and drawn out. I had already worn myself out.... I never sought “tongues.” My natural mind resisted the idea. This phenomena [sic] necessarily violates human reason. It means abandonment of this faculty for the time. And this is generally the last point to yield. The human mind is held in abeyance fully in the exercise.... There is a gulf to cross, between reason and revelation. But this principle in experience is just that which leads to the “Pentecostal” Baptism.... We must come “naked” into this experience. All of self is gone.

Here again the parallel is striking. It is experience that matters. And it is not something that we can communicate to others in words. It “happens” when we take this “leap” out of the ordinary way of rational contact with the real world, in order to experience the transcendent order. The experience comes when one ceases to *think*, as it were, and begins to *feel*. The ultimate, in other words, comes from within. It is just so with Eastern religions. And however piously disguised, it is the autonomous man who thus finds the ultimate answer outside of himself.

Other Answers

It is not our intention to suggest that the occult, drugs, Eastern religions, or various types of “contentless Christianity” are the only false answers being given today to the problem. Many people seek the answer in other ways. There are those, for example, who continue to believe that science itself will eventually be able to create a new order that satisfies the deepest needs of men. There are even some who speak of the hope that science can give men new absolutes, and that it can even—eventually—perfect a method of preserving human life so that man can escape death. Others, in sharp reaction against the many failures of modern science (now seen as a threat to life because of hydrogen bombs, destruction of the environment by chemicals, etc.), have opted for a return to nature. So today we have communes in which people attempt to live close to nature, with as little as

possible that is not “of nature” to support and maintain life. The hope is that in this way they will discover the meaning of life. Then there is the perennial attraction of love. Not a few have thought that perhaps in the intensity of romantic love something ultimate—some final order experience—may be attained. And others—and the number may be by far the greatest—simply live from day to day with the radio turned up loud so they will not have to think about the fact that for them, too, life seems to be without meaning or purpose. One of the symptoms of the “iron cage” that we have been describing in this series of lessons is the fact that many people cannot endure even a few moments of silence.

In the next—and final—portion of this study, we will attempt to show why it is that the historic Christian faith (and it alone) is the answer. It is the answer because it deals with factual, historical data. It is concerned with the concrete realm of reality—providing content which has meaning of such importance that the whole of reality is thereby shown to be other than what modern man has assumed. But for this chapter it will suffice to emphasize just one main point. Modern man is what the Bible says he is—not what modern science says he is—and because this is so, modern man constantly tries to escape from the iron cage in which he has imprisoned himself. A famous modern philosopher described the universe as a place having this sign on it: “No Exit!” But there is an exit—an exit from the imaginary universe of apostate man—into the real world of the living God who sent Jesus Christ into history to save His people from their sins. As Jesus truly said, men must know the truth in order to be free (John 8:32).

Questions:

1. Why has there been an upsurge of interest in Eastern religions in our society?
2. Why did Eastern religions come to see history as a circle rather than as a line.
3. What is there in the new framework thinking of the West that leads to this same conclusion?
4. Why has the West declined, according to Lit-sen Chang?
5. Why does Zen shun “conceptual terminology”?
6. Why do all problems cease to be problems to an “enlightened” Zen Buddhist?
7. Can you find—in the quoted material—words or phrases which show (1) that the real world is, to the Zen adherent, content without meaning, and (2) that the “enlightenment” is meaning without content?
8. How is Neo-Orthodoxy akin to Zen?
9. In what way are some church denominations responsible for the misuse of the word Jesus?
10. How is Pentecostalism similar to Eastern religions?
11. In the quotation from Frank Barleumann, underline words or phrases that a Zen Buddhist could borrow to express “enlightenment.”
12. What are some other ways modern men seek to escape the “iron cage”?
13. Why is Christianity the only real answer?

Projects:

1. Find an example, not discussed in the lesson, of modern man’s attempt to leap out of the world of content without meaning. Present this to the class.
2. Bring an article from a Christian periodical to class having an account of personal experience. Be prepared to show that it is, or is not, false escapism of the new framework type.