

The Empty Cross of the Church of the Light: Between Buddhism and Christianity

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My paper discusses the empty cross of the Church of the Light (1988) by Tadao Ando in the context of the religious dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity. In interpreting the cultural significance of the cross, what is of utmost importance is its interpretations presented by leading scholars of Zen Buddhism. For instance, Shinichi Hisamatsu (1889-1980), a member of the Kyoto Philosophical School, claimed that, unlike Jesus who suffered on the cross, the image of the Buddha even after mortification was not bloody, but lofty. Hisamatsu illustrated his point with Liang K'ai's Sakyamuni Descending the Mountain. Hisamatsu saw the lean body of the Buddha after enlightenment as well-seasoned and drained of any sensuousness. This desiccated body of Buddha as indicating spiritual maturity marked a great contrast with the body of Jesus that was torn on the cross. A further intriguing interpretation of the cross came with Daisetsu T. Suzuki (1870-1966), the most influential scholar in modern Zen Buddhism. Suzuki asserted that the cross was "the symbol of cruelty or of inhumanity." The crucifixion, or the death in the suspended upright posture, was too much for him to bear, as it evoked a body of excruciating suffering and of bloody persecution. According to Suzuki, Buddhist idea of death was different. Even if there is death involved, claimed Suzuki, "the Buddhist idea of death is rest and peace, not agony." In this regard, the Buddha's horizontal posture in his deathbed is "a great contrast to Christ on the cross."

What is interesting in reference to these interpretations of the body and the cross by Buddhist scholars is the prescription of the sacred Protestant space made by Paul Tillich (1886-1965). Tillich, who was not only a contemporary of Hisamatsu and Suzuki but also their intellectual interlocutor, claimed that the retrograded status of the twentieth century Protestant architecture must be overcome by churches that are "stylistically contemporary" and that respects the spirit of Protestantism—"the religion of the ear, rather than that of eye." Behind this prescription was his criticism of stylistic imitation of the churches of the past centuries. Intriguing in his ideas about new Protestant architecture, however, is his comments on the design of the cross. First, he claimed that the use of clear glass for the front wall in a church—a trend of the twentieth century Christian architecture—should be avoided. According to Tillich, the use of clear glass was principally correct in that God's presence is also in nature. However, in the reality of man still under the sin, man is not able to see the presence of God in nature and comes to be distracted by the outside scenery. With this dissuasion of the use of clear glass came a rejection of the cross that stands at the outside, while

being enveloped by nature.

The second point Tillich presents regarding the design of the cross is further intriguing particularly in the context of the interpretation of the cross by the two Japanese Buddhist scholars. He claimed that the design of the cross should be “simple” and “non-naturalistic.” He recommended avoiding attaching the crucified body of Jesus to the cross. If that has to happen, claimed Tillich, the crucified body should be abstractly expressive, rather than literally showing the body under torture. This prescription on the design of the cross in the manner of deemphasizing crucifixion responds to Protestantism’s “innate disapproval of figurative representation.” However, I believe Tillich’s point can also be understood from a different perspective that considers Tillich’s series of conversation with Hisamatsu and Suzuki about the converging and diverging points between Buddhism and Christianity. Tillich’s prescription of simple and non-naturalistic cross without an addition of a realistically portrayed body of Jesus under crucifixion is to a certain degree a response to the Buddhists’ characterization of the cross as the symbol of inhumanity and cruelty. Tillich sought to save the cross from the Buddhists’ accusation by presenting a cross distinctive from the one Suzuki had in mind —probably a Baroque cross with an elaborate depiction of the broken and bloody body of Jesus.

The inter-religious context described up to now provides a fascinating background for the apprehension of the cultural significance of the cross of the Church of the Light. My paper situates within this context the cross of the church and its characteristics such as its emptiness, or the lack of any materialistic substantiality, its integration with the phenomenal light, and its status of “in-between” between the inside and the outside. My paper discusses how the cross with these characteristics responds to the claims made by the Buddhists’ scholars and the Protestant theologian. It illuminates the cross’ status of in-between and its emptiness filled with light as not deemphasizing Jesus’ suffering on the cross to entertain the wish of Zen Buddhism, but as focusing on the glory of the resurrected Jesus that comes after the persecution, a fact not fully attended to by Zen Buddhism. In this course of action, the transformation is mutual: as much as Protestantism transforms itself to appear meaningful in the foreign land, so does Zen Buddhism. The content of this mutual transformation is the last part of my paper.