

Reflections by Piya Tan

From Born Again to Not Again

Early this month (Aug 2009), Dr Jake Mitra of Perth, Australia, sent me three best-selling books by Bart D Ehrman, James A Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, USA. Ehrman is renowned for his contributions to the field of religious studies, focussing on New Testament interpretation and the history of ancient Christianity. In short, he is a leading expert in the Bible, especially the New Testament (in Greek).

But, by his own admission, his 30 years of born-again evangelism and Bible research led him to renounce Christianity and call himself a “happy agnostic” (2005:247). We begin to understand his life-change when we read his book, “God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer our Most Important Question -- Why We Suffer” (2008). This is a serious book where Ehrman turns from his usual historical-critical concerns to theological consideration of the problem of suffering: namely, if God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can suffering exist? (In April 2008, he was interviewed over this book in Berkeley:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trt1ZWR5PqQ>)

His “Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why” (2005) shows that the Bible, far from being a divinely perfect book, is full of evidence of human fallibility and ecclesiastical politics. Though himself trained in evangelical literalism, Ehrman confesses that his earlier faith in the inerrant inspiration of the Bible is misguided, given that the original texts have disappeared, and that the extant texts do not agree with one another.

In “Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)” (2009), Ehrman reveals not only that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and outright forgeries (many of the books attributed to the apostles were written by others living decades later), but that many fundamental stories and doctrines were later inventions by people trying to make sense of a disconnected collection of texts. The well known story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:12), for example, was not originally in the Bible (2005:63-65).¹

In the first two books, Ehrman writes passionately about theodicy, that is, a theological attempt to explain or justify suffering in the world. Informed Buddhists would identify such an experience as samvega (a sort of religious shock that causes Siddhartha, the future Buddha, to renounce the world).² This problem, says Ehrman, involves three assertions that all appear to be true, but if so, appears to contradict one another. The three assertions are:

God is all powerful.
God is all loving.
There is suffering.

Theologians accept the first two assertions, but want to deny the third. Ehrman says that “my goal is to help people think about suffering” (2008:18). No matter how well off, well educated, or well cared for, he says, “even we can experience professional disappointment, unexpected

¹ For Piya Tan’s article, see <http://pali.house.googlepages.com/Sinostonessuffering.pdf>.

² See Somanassa Sutta (It 2.1.10): <http://dharmafarer.googlepages.com/16.14SomanassaSit2.1.10piya.pdf>

unemployment and loss of income, the death of a child, failed health; we can get cancer, or heart disease, or AIDS; all of us will eventually suffer and die.” (2008:18)

Using internal biblical evidence, Ehrman shows how the Bible tries to explain suffering. One way, for example, is that God punishes his people for sinning (disobeying) Him (2008:27); another is that God tests them to see if they still have faith despite making them suffer (2008:164-172).

Reading Ehrman is very exciting for me, as déjà vu because of my own translating and study of the early Buddhist texts for most of my adult life. There are two possible paths when we become more intimately familiar with scripture. We could reinterpret it or keep silent on scriptural difficulties, or we could be honest and talk about them. Most of us, I’m sure, would benefit more from the latter.

In some ways, the Buddhist scriptures, especially the early Indian Buddhist texts, are not accessible to every Buddhist. Academic and Buddhist specialists may know such texts well enough, but most Buddhists cannot even remember a sutta title or reference, and tend to quote their favourite speaker rather than the Buddha. But this is beginning to change as we get better English translations of the early texts.

If a single volume like the Bible is rigged with various historical, literary and religious difficulties, what more can we say about the early Pali Canon which is said to be about 11 times more voluminous, and the Mahāyāna texts, which are very much larger. The Mahāyāna texts were written centuries after the Buddha, both in India and outside.

Much of the Mahāyāna texts deviate from the early Indian teachings. So diverse are their differences, both in text and tradition, that it is easier to regard the various Buddhist sects as separate “Buddhisms” (or operating systems) unto themselves. It would be useful and interesting to compare such later developments (whether they are in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan) with the earliest strata of the Buddha’s teachings, and to study them in a historical and critical manner to understand how and why they arose.

One great advantage for Buddhism is that, unlike Christianity which is book-based, it is truth-based. This truth is best discovered by way of a contemplative tradition that goes back right to the Buddha’s time. The inner stillness of Buddhist meditation is the best touchstone we have to authenticate any Buddhist teaching worth its salt. Buddhists may talk about texts, but they know the true answer lies in the still clarity of their minds, the true basis for outer goodness.

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