

From a Public Lecture

Luther and Nichiren—Reformers at Two Different Ends of the World

This is a translation of a lecture held at the SGI-Germany Culture Center in Munich on November 4, 2014.

Michael von Brück

1. Parallel Developments in History

THE theme “Luther and Nichiren—Reformers at two different ends of the world” is a little adventurous. Their points of departure could hardly be any more different: Central Europe and Japan, one in 1500 and the other around 1300. At this point in time, and even today, contact between these two cultures on opposite ends of the Eurasian continent was rare, and Japan, being an island kingdom, has always been inaccessible from the mainland. However historical developments did in fact occur that to us may appear to have taken place in a parallel manner when examining them from the perspective of a later period in time. I refer to what the great Japanese scholar and historian of philosophy, Nakamura Hajime, described as “Parallel Developments” in *A Comparative History of Ideas* (1975).

If we are to recognize such parallels, then immediately the question arises whether there are any laws to history, or if everything is but blind chance. Are there any patterns in which historical events unfold repeatedly that we can observe and study, and if we are lucky, can learn something from? Or is everything that happens coincidental and therefore unobservable?

This fundamental question is also the basis for our specific reflection on Luther and Nichiren. I do not think we can answer it, however do believe that it should be possible to suggest some corridors of understanding. I would like to deliver a challenging presentation and ask for your understanding, yet not your forgiveness since, after all, you invited me and have therefore embarked on an academic debate. So I ask for your understanding and to follow the arguments.

The Law of History and Human Freedom

When we look at Luther and Nichiren, we have to go beyond the text of the scriptures which they have left behind, in order to understand the spirit of the time, the historical background in which everything happened, that which connects these two founding figures, these two great reformers, as it says in the title.

First I would like to pose some basic questions. Human action in time and history is guided by the motivation to act. Motivations are influenced by expectations. An expectation, however, is something like an anticipated result in one's imagination to the extent that the action is executed to cause something to happen. Something beyond the current status is expected to happen. This insight is trivial, and it is culturally consistent, i.e., it relates to all human action regardless of cultural conditioning. However, we cannot predict what will actually happen to people in the future, since we do not know what the future holds as it is uncertain. Still, when human action that is based on expectations produces results, then that which will happen depends at least to a certain degree on human expectations and actions, that is, our motivations, which definitely do influence events.

If we ask the question whether there is progress, significance, or a goal in history, then we are thereby always asking about the potential impact of human action. Does man have the freedom to put something new into practice, something he perceives to be right, or does he not have this freedom? Is everything either random or determined? Determined either by the laws of the world, the laws of physics or of God or whomever? Or chance—on the basis of what conditions? Is there any progress? I mean this quite in the sense of pathos that this notion conveys in modernity, or rather since the age of Enlightenment.

The progress of history—we just need to look at our history—can be salvific. Just think about the historic events in autumn of 1989 in central Europe. History can however also result in disaster. Just think about the autumn of 1939 in central Europe. Man is exposed to these processes, but he also shapes them. Only when man becomes the subject, the actor of his own history, one can perhaps speak of a significance or a goal in history as that is when man creates history and thereby himself.

2. Apocalyptic Thought and Utopian Ideas

Let us look a little further into the European tradition. Since ancient times, European history has been dominated by two mythical conceptions of time: by apocalyptic thought and utopian ideas. The

Jewish apocalyptic myth was the expectation of the consummation of history by God at the end of time. In connection with Judaism, it is said that, after a downfall of what exists, a messianic kingdom of peace and justice under the rule of God would come down to Earth. This was not “progress” in the classical sense of the term, because the subject of this story was not man, but God. Through godly or unlawful conduct at best man could advance or delay these events that God “instigated.” Early Christianity was thoroughly shaped by these expectations of a coming New World.

Apocalyptic Thought and its Consequences in Early Christianity

Early Christianity lived with the feeling of an approaching end time. In his letters, Paul asks: Will this generation that is living now, first be transfigured close to the end of time, or will those who have already passed away be the first to rise from the dead?¹ So one was expecting the end of history in the immediate future, in the coming few years. However, early Christianity proved itself wrong and since then has existed in this peculiar tension of fulfillment (what was expected has already arrived with Jesus Christ) and remaining expectation (what has already come is still to be completed, namely the Second Coming of Christ that will deliver the new once and for all).

Since the second century AD in which the early Christians lived, this future expectation is ontologized or rather brought into Platonic philosophy, i.e., the hereafter that is expected is relocated to the present. The new quality of God’s new kingdom will not come in the future, but has already occurred, conveyed through the church, in the sacraments. Or, almost as a counter-program against this ecclesiastical administration of the sacraments, this ideal presence of the new is experienced in a spiritual form, as a transformation of consciousness, as a mystical revival that anyone, in principle, can now experience. It is in this way that two different life forms appear in view of this basic error of the non-fulfillment of the coming of Christ that characterize the Middle Ages, perhaps the whole of European history until today; on the one hand, the mediation of salvation through church, and on the other hand, the mystical participation in the immutable world beyond, a spiritual experience conveyed without any institution, or at least a reality that goes beyond everything institutional.

That is, if you will, the basic structure of apocalyptic thinking that has characterized all secular movements from the Enlightenment to Marxism, in other words, all movements of historical reform in this dynamic.

Three Types of Utopian Ideas

The second term that I introduced earlier, was that of utopia. We said that European history is dynamic on the one hand as explained in the Jewish apocalyptic thinking just described, and then, on the other hand, by the expectation taken by Christians, utopia.

Utopias arise from the difference between expectations and reality. They occur in all cultures, at least in this very general form. They are therefore—unlike the apocalyptic—culture-specific, but anthropologically given, as when people perceive their current state as unsatisfactory. They envision a different and better world. The comparative is, if you will, the basic engine of any utopia. Things could be better—and one behaves accordingly.

I distinguish between three types of utopias. There are spatial utopias; one puts the salvific state in another place, i.e., beyond the mountains, behind the mountains near the seven dwarfs, behind Atlantis, in the land of milk and honey, in El Dorado, Shambhala, etc., as our proverb says: The grass is greener on the other side. The problem is that up to a hundred or two hundred years ago there were still white spaces on the map where one could place an ideal world. Today, however, Google Earth has surveyed the earth completely. Since there is no more space for utopias, you have to emigrate: ET - Extraterrestrials! Now we move utopias somewhere behind the stars into another solar system or, if we are wise, on comets, as these only return after many millions of years. There have been spatial utopias everywhere, but they have become obsolete today, although they are still present in science fiction films and books.

Temporal utopias are the second model. One shifts the ideal state either to the beginning of history, or to the end. In the beginning, there was paradise, Adam and Eve, before this ill-omened story about the snake and the apple intervened. In the apocalypse we already saw that the kingdom of God, which existed in the beginning of time and was spoiled by human sin, has now eventually returned. This eschatological fulfillment had long been expected. It has not yet been established. During striking marks in time, such as at the turn of the millennium, there have always been people who have said, “The end is nigh!” But that has not proven to be true. The problem is that we probably do not have that much time left, a thousand years or so, as by then we may have already destroyed the world. The temporal utopia has therefore become, so to speak, urgent. We must do something, we cannot just wait until it comes true or does not come true.

Now there is a third utopia, which I call consciousness utopia, i.e., the

transformation of human motivation by a spiritual experience, through a spiritual change. This is an age-old story that we already find in the Bible with the prophet Jeremiah in the 6th century BC.² According to him, it is no longer the written law, the Torah, that counts, but God who writes the law into people's hearts, meaning a change of spirit, because in Hebrew, heart means the same as spirit. The same hope is at the beginning of Jesus of Nazareth's message, as described in the oldest of the Gospels, the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1 verse 15: "Repent and believe the good news!" (Greek: "metanoete kai pisteuete en to euangeliō"). "Metanoete" is an imperative that means "turn your entire consciousness to." So this is an awareness utopia, a different experience. Through a completely altered consciousness, people behave differently (well) and use the potential, which was given to them through creation.

The dynamics of these three utopias have all played a part in Europe's history, but not just there. Awareness utopias move the transformation of the world in the consciousness of man. I have already mentioned Jeremiah. I mentioned Jesus. I could also mention the Buddha. I could mention Confucius. The appeal of such consciousness utopias is naturally growing in the face of evil in the world. In history—I am now only referring to Europe, these three utopias have brought about very peculiar expectations and patterns of action. They come together to create different apocalyptic and utopian models. I would like to illustrate this with a single example, that of the Renaissance since it is related to the first of our heroes of this evening: Luther.

3. Transformation of the Sense of Time in the Renaissance

The Renaissance is characterized by the fact that it pushes God back ever further. Man takes center stage as an active subject in history, as an actor in history. This is the combination of the self-awareness of the creative individual and quantifiable time. It is the time of the invention of modern clocks, which provide a measure of activity independent of nature. The abstract timing prepared in the Gothic period results in a uniformly structured and directional sense of purpose and time, which man, if he recognizes it, can now shape. The new relationship to the world in science and technology stems from this, which in turn revolutionizes business; activity through the use of structured time leads to social structuring and prosperity.

Thus, already in the Renaissance, a differentiation of social strata is connected with different values and timers: church, nobility, and guilds (incipient bourgeoisie) do not have the same share in this new, modern

way of life. In addition, the difference between town and country plays a major role, and that has repercussions to this day. The attitude to life is determined by self-motivation: we create it, we go ahead, we are even creators of our history. This is something new in the Renaissance and it continues to this day. One no longer dreams of a past in the ancient world, but experiences its creative impulses as energy that lets the present be transformed. For the Renaissance man, that which can be shaped or is shaped is more legitimate than that which was accumulated in the past; curiosity about what is currently possible is above the faithful repetition of that which was handed down through tradition. Each individual is himself the center of the world, and this new way of life expresses itself in the invention of perspective in painting. Everything is seen from the individual's point of view, the "me." This characterizes the new consciousness.

Six Factors that Formed European Uniqueness

Intellectual performance is no longer only found in commentaries to the authorities (Plato, Aristotle or the Bible); the new medium for self-realization is one's own signature, one's own book, individual responsibility through one's own experience and experimentation. Putting one's own opinion up for discussion is the new medium of self-realization. Before this, one commented on the masters of the past; now one's own philosophy is introduced. In research, evidence counts. The author of one of these great Renaissance philosophies, as Pico della Mirandola wrote, is placed in the "center of the world," by God so that he can now "make decisions about himself." It is no longer myth or tradition that dis-cover the secret of the world for man, but rather world-discovering man who creates his own myth!

This new consciousness turns into a movement that penetrates art, literature, philosophy, arts and crafts, and social restructuring. All this begins in the northern Italian cities, but with tremendous speed encompasses almost all of central Europe at once. How is it possible that such a spiritual revolution could suddenly occur in the 15th century? It seems to me that many factors are interacting here and I wish to mention just several of them as they let us identify distinctive intercultural aspects unique to European development. I place emphasis on what was special here in Europe. I will quote only six of the eight or nine factors that I have compiled elsewhere.

1. Europe lives in an eccentric identity (Rémi Brague).³ One's own center of identity is outside, namely, in ancient Athens and in Hellenistic Judaism. Every European, in Bavarian schools until this day, has to learn

one of two foreign languages; Latin or Greek in order to establish their own identity. This contradiction of learning a foreign language in order to establish one's own identity is special. That which one owns, which we actually possess, turns into the other, increasingly entirely foreign and incomprehensible insofar as we no longer learn these languages.

2. One must therefore seek that which is one's own outside. This causes restlessness and movement in the European development, which—at least to this extent—is not found in other cultures, perhaps with one exception; the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang and others in the 6th/7th century made a pilgrimage to India to the “origins” of their identity, and the Japanese later followed, going not to India, but to China. The identity shifted, and that which is one's own identity is to be found in the appropriation of what at first was seen as strange or foreign. Buddhism did indeed originate in India, and almost became extinct there, something it has in common with Christianity, in that the place of origin for centuries was hardly visible. Then Buddhism spread to other cultures, which now refer to their origins located outside themselves. I think this unrest, this momentum created by this fractional identity or, as Rémi Brague calls it, “eccentric identity,” is the reason for this enormous momentum of European history.

3. From the Crusades to Columbus to the Renaissance and to the later imperial world constructions of Europeans—behind all these lie political and economic calculations, since economic interests are of course always involved, even when claimed to be religious, nostalgia for the origins of one's own identity, a return to the sources, which are interpreted as a future possibility of one's own creation.

4. The Renaissance marks the beginning of something we can perhaps call “freeing oneself from constraints of time pressure,” first as a vision, then as a social reality for ever broader layers. At the beginning of the 16th century, the time of the Reformation, Thomas Morus in his book *Utopia* dreams of a six-hour working day, and in Campanella's *The City of the Sun* from 1602, it is even reduced to four hours of working time. The remaining time is intended to serve the free formation of mind and body, rather than idleness. The freedom of one's own employment is therefore a prerequisite for the development of the individual genius! We are back in the Renaissance.

5. Individuality, power, fame, as well as ‘outsiderness’—just think of Leonardo da Vinci—are now at the highest levels. Petrarca complained less about the even running and passing of time, but sings rather about subjective time: I have time, I can fill it! It's about how one creates one's own time.

6. Linked to this is a dynamic time, which continues to this day. Despite the conservatism of the Reformation, this dynamic continues even with Luther and Calvin, because the individual is not liberated from religion but is indeed liberated internally. The Reformation conveys, so to speak, this “Renaissance feeling” from the few geniuses I mentioned to the masses, especially through the now-possible expectant education with the establishment of a general education and an emphasis on individual faith and conscience. For Calvin, the idea will be added that in history the Kingdom of God is always growing. In the Reformation period this is a completely new idea. His doctrine of predestination, Max Weber then commented, very likely contributed to the economic dynamics in Europe.

4. Crisis Awareness in 13th-century Japan and the Buddhist Response

So much for European history, the world in which Luther was active and of which he was a product. Let us now jump to Japan, the life-world of Nichiren. A completely different situation prevails there. We have a time lag. We are in the 13th century and Japan was then living in a mythical time. The ancestral mother of the Emperor, the prevailing Amaterasu, is the great figure that determines life, even though the de facto empire in the political life of the 13th century is weak. It is crushed by the contending provincial powers, and the regions grow strong—Kamakura against Kyoto, to name just one example. Military rulers take power, the imperial family retreats more or less back to an aesthetic world. The wealthy and powerful families, the Fujiwaras, the Hojos among others, set the tone (as in Europe the Fuggers of Augsburg during the time of the Reformation).

By this time, Buddhism had already been established long before in Japan, but was split into many schools—not initially in Japan, but already in China. It was divided into schools that taught completely contradicting doctrines. What is valid? What is the original teaching of the Buddha? People search for truth. And where do they search? They search at the sources, i.e., first in China. The Chinese, however, had discovered that all these are translations and that they must be returned to the original to find what is valid, to find the norm. So they make a pilgrimage, as already mentioned, to India and bring back Sanskrit Sutras only to discover that there, too, various sources already exist, which are quite contradictory; the Lotus Sutra, the Prajnaparamita Sutras, the Avatamsaka Sutra and all the rest of them. They are very

different. Additionally, the practices by the groups that have formed around them are even more different than the texts.

Shortly after the lifetime of the Buddha ends, we hear about the first attempts to organize the teachings and to ascertain how they can be ordered pedagogically employing a certain stringency. The most common answer is that in the beginning the Buddha preaches in simple terms and then, to crown his work, and after the disciples have matured through practice and study, he preaches the more complex truths. In China, it was especially Chih-I (538–597) in the Tendai tradition, who placed the sutras in a sequence of stages. He was the first to place the Lotus Sutra as the highest one, the most complex and not the Prajnaparamita literature or the Avatamsaka Sutra, as other schools did. How come? This is what we will follow up with through Nichiren as the Lotus Sutra is the highest one in this tradition, the ultimate of all sutras, but the regard for this sutra goes back a long time to the time before Nichiren in the Tendai school. The other sutras therefore have a preparatory value, that is, they lead to the Lotus Sutra.

The Assertions of Zen and Amida Buddhism

There are other schools in 13th-century Japan. Most notably, there are two large schools alongside the Nichiren movement that teach something completely different. First, the Ch’an movement (Jap. Zen). These Buddhist groups have no central sutra at all as they reject the authority of the sutras. To them, these are just words. The inner experience is what matters most, and this can be gained without the study of texts. As radical as this may sound, this was the claim in Zen. However, to be sure, the “rhetoric of immediacy” (B. Faure) has been a claim that the Zen schools have relied on compared to other Buddhist traditions. In practice they also referred back to the tradition.⁴ The second school, and one that competes with the Nichiren movement, is Amida Buddhism, the Pure Land tradition. The Jodo-shu or Sanskrit Sukhāvati, an ancient Buddhist school, which depends on the vow of Amitabha (Amida) Buddha to enable people to be reborn in a better world where they can find a spiritual awakening more easily than in this chaotic world by placing faith in Amida. This is achieved through the power of Amida’s vow. The faith in Amida Buddha is what activates the power of this vow, and that defines this school.

Both, Amida Buddhism and Nichiren criticize Zen as being too elitist. Occasionally this is heard even today. I myself am a Zen teacher and sometimes hear that this school’s practice is too elitist since it is too difficult. For who can actually afford to sit silently for hours on a

cushion? This takes time and it hurts one's knees, buttocks, and sometimes the soul too. What matters, say both, the Amida Buddhists and the Nichiren school, is to reach ordinary people. And that is especially so in Mappo, during the age of the degeneration of the Buddha's law, diagnosed as a dark age.

Concepts of Time in Hinduism and Buddhism

And this is the reason why I have put forward the long introduction of European time and apocalyptic history. We are dealing with similar ideas in Buddhism. These go back to the well-known ancient Indian idea of the world ages of the yugas and kalpas. According to this idea, Four World Ages follow each other. They are characterized by increasing decadence, meaning it is precisely not the case that it goes upward as we have just seen in the history of Europe, but rather downward. This decadence for example is also physical, namely, the reduction of lifetime. The eras also consist of different lengths. In Hinduism, the first of these ages, the "Krita Yuga," is 1.728 million years long, the second, the "Treta Yuga," is 1.296 million years long, the third, the "Dvapara-Yuga," is only 864,000 years and the last, the negative age, the "Kali Yuga," is only 432,000 years long.⁵ These are mythical figures that have symbolic meaning, but I will not explain the background in detail here. These Four World Ages follow one another and together form a world-period (a kalpa). When this has passed, in principle, it starts all over again. This proposition is not quite right since, if something starts again, and the whole structure has already been there before, then it is not the same as if it had never been there before. Neither Hinduism nor Buddhism teaches the recurrence of the same.

The world process has no beginning in time. Through expansion and contraction, one universe after the other is created and destroyed again and again in a cyclic oscillation over immeasurable periods. Buddhism also mainly teaches this concept of time. Our present time, in any case, is physically and mentally weak and, especially in 13th-century Japan, one discovers the signs of this negative time in Japan's inner conflict; civil wars of the most hideous kind, a decline of spirituality in the monasteries, no more meditating, and people stop living according to the rules of decency. There is poverty in the world. Natural disasters occur and, politically of course, particularly tangible in Nichiren's time, is the invasion of the Mongols who, as was known, had already devastated the whole of central Asia and were now planning to also occupy Japan.

5. Nichiren's Buddhist Reformation

Due to this decadence and dark course of events of the almost imminent end of this Yuga, Nichiren comes and says: We need a very concentrated form of religion!⁶ Honen and Shinran (Amida Buddhism) also come and claim: We want a very concentrated form of religion, which is faith in Amida. And then enters the Zen master Dogen and other great Zen masters who at this time studied in China and came back to Japan, and say: We need a particularly concentrated form of religion, which is the practice of Zen. In the context of an oppressive and therefore urgent time, something occurs in Buddhism, which never happened before, at least not this acutely, namely, the confrontation of individual school-opinions which stand in direct opposition to one another as if to say: "Only my school sets the standards and can save people." Previously, diversity in Buddhism was largely (though not always) addressed with tolerance. One could accept different opinions and practices. One argued about what the faster or slower way was, but acknowledged that the others also went legitimate Buddhist ways. An exclusivity enters at this point, which, though not only dependent on the pressing time, is related to it.

The Symbol of the Sun—Renewal and Transformation in Life

I am now discussing Nichiren (1222–1282), whose name already suggests something, which is perhaps important for an understanding, for a taste we can get if we move back to the Japan of the 13th century.

Nichiren means "Sun Lotus." It is a solar symbolism associated with this monk's name. The symbolism of the sun is in all religions, but in Japan in a very special way, the symbolism of creative power. At Futamigaura beach in Japan, two rocks are wed to each other by ropes, symbolizing the mythical primordial pair, the Izanagi and Izanami, and people sit reverently on the beach and see this connection of renewal and transformation. This is what connects Nichiren with the name itself. But the daimoku, the title, "Nam-myoho-enge-kyo," he exclaimed while facing the sun at sunrise on May 26th, 1253.⁷ So the central practice of Nichiren-shu has something to do with the symbolism of the sun affiliated with this symbol of the strength of transformation in life.

There is always a link between cosmic events in such rituals, in this case the sun, the stars, and so on, with the life of the individual, with spiritual awakening, or as we say sometimes, with enlightenment. It is a cosmic and, at the same time, spiritual event. Spiritual growth—I take the European concept of progress—arises when both are in balance, the

design, the progress of people and the progress of the cosmos.

“Nichiren is One of the Great Religious Critics of Humanity”

But Nichiren now adds something that has not been or was not as strong a theme in the other Buddhist schools, for he says that religion must change the political world, and that it makes no sense otherwise. I can indulge myself in cosmic rituals and look at them with great aesthetic benefit and certainly have my mental immersions. I can sit on the meditation cushion and have deep spiritual experiences while outside people butcher each other in front of the Zen-do. But Nichiren comes and says that this will not do! Because if we think about the unity of all living beings meditatively, in our prayers, in our imagination, then we have to politically ensure that at least gradually this unity is realized. Nichiren is, as I see it, the first real political Buddhist.

He accuses the Amida Buddhists, with whom he otherwise has much in common, of failing to motivate their believers to take political action, although their spiritual practice of focusing on the name of Amida through recitation was perfectly acceptable. Buddhism must change the world. I want to recite some very nice ideas from the preface Werner Kohler wrote to Margareta von Borsig’s *“Life of the Lotus Flower.”* Werner Kohler was the first German theologian who engaged seriously with Nichiren Buddhism and seriously with the Soka Gakkai already in the 1960s. He writes about the Soka Gakkai, which emerged out of Nichiren Buddhism and tries to apply what Nichiren found in the 13th century to the present time:

“Religion leads in this case [with Nichiren and the entire Nichiren development] to a completely new lifestyle, which is reflected in dynamic interpersonal structures. Individuals are organized in smaller groups, which in turn belong to larger groups. All groups have their responsible leaders. These leaders are again organized hierarchically. Mass events at which its own ballet companies, theater groups, sports associations, schools and universities march, all belong to the appearance of this modern religion.”⁸

“Nichiren’s significance is that he recognized the political and educational consequences of Bodhisattvahood and developed these in theory and practice.” This is one of Kohler’s main propositions, which I will take up when I talk about Luther.

Consequently, religion is not only, as so often in history, a projection of and stabilizing moment in power relations. In other words, while it can serve to resist the forces of power, “religion can also suffer from the same ailments it attempts to resist.” It was this insight that makes

Nichiren, severely criticizing the religion of the time, one of the great religious critics of humanity.

Criticism of religion is not only found in connection with the name of Karl Marx, Feuerbach, or Mao Zedong, but also with Nichiren. With one major difference; Nichiren, Luther and other reformers, but also already the Israelite prophets who sharply attack the temple cult, are people who do not throw out the baby with the bathwater, but want rather to purify religion, the core, to bring forth the essence and fight all mismanagement in the area of religion.

Once again, Werner Kohler:

“We are talking about a man who, in the face of natural disasters, famine, mismanagement and the threat of war, stood up impatiently to fight and not to leave his fellow human beings alone.”

That of course angered his contemporaries, and not only them; just as Luther angered his contemporaries and not only them, just as the prophet Jeremiah and Isaiah angered all their contemporaries, and not only them. However, this is something very ‘un-Buddhist.’ One is Buddhist when one is completely calm and seated, and remains still even if the world were to come to an end. This was largely (but not always!) the Buddhist attitude through the centuries, and politically, Buddhism stabilizes the power relations as they are. The same can be examined in the history of Christianity and many other religions as well.

“Women’s Attainment of Buddhahood” as a Revolutionary Assertion

Nichiren is uncomfortable. He wrote the first major work, the *Rissho-ankoku-ron* [On Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land] (1260), in response to his great “experience” with the Lotus Sutra. What he wrote there is revolutionary. While it is all contained in the teachings of the Buddha, as he preached it and tried to live it, it was not enforced in the history of Buddhism, such as in the actual practice. All living things can become Buddhas; including the poor and above all—quite revolutionary—women! Shantideva, the great scholar thought to have lived in the 8th century was still praying intimately in his important text *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*: “May all women be reborn as men.”

That was a pious hope as only men could attain enlightenment. It would be a better world if all were reborn as men. No, women can attain Buddhahood as women—for Nichiren’s contemporaries, this was a revolution, and he takes this from the 12th chapter of the Lotus Sutra.

And now the disagreement with his colleagues occurs, with the reformers of the 13th-century Shinran and Honen. In his book, *Senchakushu* Honen declared that the practice of the Lotus Sutra was

superfluous. Only chanting the name of Amida should be accepted. Nichiren explains the practice of Amida Buddhism as completely unnecessary and that only the Lotus Sutra is acceptable. This is obviously a power struggle, and a competition between the schools arises, vying for influence. However, we find the same regarding Luther. In a historically extremely precarious situation, such radicalism is perhaps inevitable. However, we must be careful that we do not simply apply this to the present day and just continue copying this aggressive style of Nichiren only because it comes from him and we revere him. We need to understand it in context and in its time. Just as with Luther, Lutheran Christians should go to school and read his writing *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520), but please not only because it is from Luther, and do not repeat the slanderous things he wrote about the Jews because that was catastrophic.

The Concentration of Buddhist Essentials

I would like now to present an excerpt from Nichiren's writings:

There is no true happiness for human beings other than chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. The sutra reads, ". . . where living beings enjoy themselves at ease." How could this passage mean anything but the boundless joy of the Law? Surely you are included among the "living beings." "Where" means Jambudvīpa, and Japan lies within Jambudvīpa. Could "enjoy themselves at ease" mean anything but that both our bodies and minds, lives and environments, are entities of three thousand realms in a single moment of life and Buddhas of limitless joy? There is no true happiness other than upholding faith in the Lotus Sutra. This is what is meant by "peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences." "Though worldly troubles may arise, never let them disturb you. No one can avoid problems, not even sages or worthies."

Three thousand realms in a single moment of life is an image, which expresses that the whole world is one. If this is so, according to Nichiren's determination, then it must also be political, socially, in dealing with those in power. That is what Nichiren says here and calls for. And that is where Nichiren is quite practical:

"Drink sake only at home with your wife, and chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo. Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life, and continue chanting Nam-

myoho-enge-kyo, no matter what happens. How could this be anything other than the boundless joy of the Law? Strengthen your power of faith more than ever.”¹⁰

This reduction of religion to a very significant core is perhaps the other characteristic in addition to its intolerance, a certain aggressiveness that he has. He justified this reduction as follows: Man is a whole body but the essence of man is reflected in the face and that is only one sixth of the whole, but because the way the face is, you can already connect it to the whole body, and the face can again be reduced to its gaze, the eyes. We look another in the eye and know immediately if they are sleeping, awake, skeptical or open-minded. His eyes are a *pars pro toto*—the part stands for the whole. And Nichiren says that, likewise, the whole of the Lotus Sutra is contained in its title, and he says it is enough to recite the title, you do not need to read the entire Lotus Sutra.¹¹ Of course, you read it anyway, and yes, of course, Nichiren also read it and attached importance to interpreting it; this can be read in all his letters. But in his rhetoric, he says the title alone is sufficient. Why? Because what matters is to bundle and condense the spirit, the energy, the power that lies in this sutra so that it permeates our whole life in all its activities. This recitation of Nam-myoho-enge-kyo is what Paul means when he writes “pray without ceasing.”¹²

But how can I pray without ceasing if I have scattered thoughts in my head? That cannot be done. Distraction leads to problems in everyday life, and therefore to disasters, if one thinks for example of road traffic. But if consciousness is quite aware of only one formula, only one thought, when everything is concentrated, then one can cope with all tasks in life with this concentrated mind. Incidentally, this is no different in Zen. We see then that this rhetoric of demarcation, which stems from the political situation of the time, is not entirely justified if one looks at it in practice.

6. The Five “Solae” of Luther’s Reformation

Now let us turn to Luther (1483–1546). Martin Luther’s main thesis is the *solus/sola*. He has five *solae*, which in Latin are: *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*. This means: by grace alone, through faith alone, scripture alone, in Christ alone, and glory to God alone. Luther is also about going against the corruption of the church. This is how the whole story began in 1517. It’s about going against selling indulgences, where one would buy salvation with money.

His struggle is also about the struggle against the central dictatorship of the Pope or the Emperor or both, (rarely, but sometimes they were in alliance), and it also goes against the enemy from the outside (these were the Turks, who were approaching Vienna at the time). And it is about concentrating on the essentials, concentrating on the spiritual power that belongs to the people, which is translated as “grace,” which can be enjoyed by those who open themselves to this divine presence, which can only be judged by the scriptures, and not by any other customs. And in the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, in turn, many contradictions can be found, and if this is the case, then one should accept Christ’s interpretation as the only criterion.

Again, we see this reduction to a single formula, given the difficulties in the world and especially in view of the fact that you want to reach ordinary people, the non-educated. Indeed, only those who spoke Latin could read the Bible, and they were few. There was no Bible in German. Of course there were previous attempts to make the Bible accessible to common people (*Biblia pauperum*) but that was done through image stories using stained glass windows in the cathedrals, for example.¹³ Again we find the practice of a simple formula, and that constitutes, in my opinion, the core of this whole Reformation movement.

Man, Connected to “Love” While Being “Free”

The revolutionary and central idea is what Luther called the priesthood of all believers. We have just heard that Nichiren emphasized the Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood of all living beings, even those of women, and that for Luther, the priesthood of all believers also means that this refers to everyone not just a specific group, not just men, not only ordained priests, but that all people share the same position in relation to God. This was revolutionary, since if everyone has the same immediate access to the divine, then there really is no need for an institution to convey this. Its only purpose—and that was this recognition—is to convey religious self-responsibility. This is what the Reformers did to establish schools. The institution is there to pass on the tradition so that it remains unadulterated, while individuals can and should absorb it to the extent possible. This is the requirement, or we could say the condition for the development of autonomous, individual, self-confident people—even in religion. It is the condition for the freedom of man.

I would like to quote the beginning of what is perhaps Luther’s most famous writing, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, one of the main reformatory writings:

“A Christian man is the freest lord of all, and subject to none.”

This first sentence was an incredible provocation for which one usually would be sentenced to death. And even today in most parts of the world this sentence is an outrageous statement that would be prosecuted. However, now follows the sentence:

“A Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”

This is contradictory, and in this dialectical contradiction Luther develops his anthropology. I read out two paragraphs, but one really needs the whole scripture to explain it:

“They are both the statements of Paul himself, who says: ‘Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all’ (1 Cor. ix. 19), and: ‘Owe no man anything, but to love one another’ (Rom. xiii. 8).”

This is the bond that is the bondage.

Now love is by its own nature dutiful and obedient to the beloved object. Thus even Christ, though Lord of all things, was yet made of a woman; made under the law. So freedom and devotion, freedom and servitude are two sides of the same coin. I will not go into detail here, but I highly recommend studying this work, or at least the records that I have extracted for further reflection. It is still exciting and a dialectical unity.

Luther and the Jewish Question

Luther’s radicalism intensified during his doubt-filled time. He is outlawed; anyone who finds him could kill him. He escapes to Wartburg with the help of his princes and wise councilors, particularly through the help of the chancellor and Luther’s friend, Gregor von Brück and others, to counter potential plots against him, to live undiscovered and to translate his Bible. Luther stands out because of his radicalism. He did not care for the somewhat quieter tones, those seeking harmony and those aimed at an attempt toward unification as carried out by Melanchthon,¹⁴ Justus Jonas,¹⁵ Gregor von Brück and others at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530. He sat at Coburg and wanted to be radical because he wanted to reduce everything to one, to the essential one. Quite dramatically, this radicalism then turns to anti-Judaism, which can be found both in Luther’s early and late phases. In the beginning, he tries to appeal to the good sense of the Jews; he wants to proselytize them. He takes them seriously as people, as a partner. But that changes by the 1530s. The

Jews are expelled from Bohemia. There are certain migration pressures, Luther sees the Reformation threatened and demands on his part that the Jews be expelled from Protestant territories, that their property be confiscated, and so forth.

All this we come to learn later in history. Increasingly, and that is something that sounds so terrible in the rhetoric, Jews—like the Roma—are already considered to be the accomplices of the Turks around 1530. The external military threat becomes an opportunity that radicalized the matter within the rhetoric and Luther's actual political effect.

Shortly before 1546, that is to say, shortly before his death, he writes that the Jews should be either baptized or driven away. This is connected with the fact that Luther's apocalyptic faith is getting stronger. Again, we see a psychologically similar situation as that in 13th-century Japan. One must consider the signs point to a civil war between Protestants and Catholics due to the failure of the great attempt to reach an agreement at the Diet in Augsburg in 1530. There are still a few meetings, such as Regensburg, which also fail. There is power, money, monastery, and property at stake. All signs point to war and Luther wonders: Was it necessary? Did I act correctly? In his belief, he was convinced that he had the correct interpretation and that the interpretation of the biblical message and the papists were wrong. But is the political consequence, the division of Germany and Europe, really right? Can that be? Luther has doubts, and like all doubters, shifts the matter to the outside. Here it is above all the Jews who are now coated with an unparalleled scatology that he includes in one of his books, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, in 1543. So here, too, we find a radicalization in light of the circumstances.

7. Nichiren and Luther Developed Four Kinds of Innovation

I conclude with a certain summation and synopsis. In Nichiren, we find a struggle against other Buddhist schools. In Luther, we find a struggle against all who do not acknowledge his central idea, the justification of man by faith alone. In both, we find the reduction of all religion to a spiritually simple formula. With Luther, *sola gratia*, by grace alone, and with Nichiren, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*. I present another short quote from Nichiren:

“You asked whether one can attain Buddhahood only by chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, and this is the most important question of all. This is the heart of the entire sutra and the substance of its eight volumes.”¹⁶

He then goes on using the eye and the face as representations of the body and continues:¹⁷

“Everything has its essential point, and the heart of the Lotus Sutra is its title, or the daimoku, of Nam-myoho-rence-kyo. Truly, if you chant this in the morning and evening, you are correctly reading the entire Lotus Sutra. Chanting daimoku twice is the same as reading the entire sutra twice, one hundred daimoku equal one hundred readings of the sutra, and one thousand daimoku, one thousand readings of the sutra. Thus, if you ceaselessly chant daimoku, you will be continually reading the Lotus Sutra.”¹⁸

In short, a reduction to the essentials, so that individuals can practice it in difficult situations. Luther’s *sola gratia* is similar.

What is the core, the result of the reformatory actions of these two religious critics? First, we are dealing with a liturgical, a cultic revolution. Luther changed the principle or the basic act, the ordinance on which the whole church, the whole of Christianity was built in the European Occident, namely, mass. Before Luther, in the medieval church, mass was considered a sacrifice that man offered to God. Luther turns this upside down by saying that we celebrate the sacrifice that God has offered to the people, and you will only become righteous through faith alone and not because you take it upon yourself to sacrifice yourself. With that, man is independent of the institution. A revolution of this kind can be sensed in a somewhat different way again by Nichiren’s reduction, the way he traces everything back to the Gohonzon.

The second revolution is a religious-social revolution; Luther’s priesthood of all believers and Nichiren’s Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood of all people.

The third revolution I would call a psychological revolution: what we may call bounded freedom, a freedom, which is bound by and with love. This means that I am free, but I am free to act and this act binds me in the sense of love, that is the connection with everyone and everything, not just those to whom I am devoted to emotionally anyway, that is, my friends or relatives, but all living beings, including those to whom I am not emotionally attached. This is what in Christianity was called the love of enemies. That is what in the Eastern religions, not only in Buddhism, is called love and compassion towards all living beings, including opponents.

The fourth revolution, the political revolution, is in fact founded as a

new Samgha, or in the West, a new church. It is a new institution that should withstand the pressure of the end time that both Luther and Nichiren sense. But this culminates in a community of believers, and not in isolating individuals. In light of the persecutions, the images of the end time, and the political pressure of a new Samgha, it is a new community.

Creating Political Reality from Spiritual Experience

I would like to conclude with a phrase that I formulated only as a question, namely, the problematic of both. Luther ends, as already stated, with this attitude toward the Jews not only completely unacceptable to us, but also to his contemporaries. Nichiren ends with an exclusivity over other Buddhist schools, which was unacceptable not only to us from today's perspective, but already many of his contemporaries: so exclusivism and absolutism. Maybe that is the danger in times of tyranny, when the discourse of peaceful confrontation becomes impossible.

If we want to look at the political situation in 13th-century Japan, and want to evaluate the rhetoric, then perhaps we must compare it with the rhetoric that prevails in some dictatorships. For example, if the professing church had stood up against Nazism, and theologians like Karl Barth had propagated an exclusivist rhetoric, an exclusivist interpretation. Accordingly, only this gospel should be accepted and everything else is void or related to the devil. This rhetoric implies an absolutism in order to confront the pressure of political tyranny. When we read Nichiren and others such as Karl Barth we can learn something from this problematic trend that can undoubtedly be found in Nichiren as in Luther, namely, that in times of tyranny, indeed very clear and unambiguous action and probably even exclusivist actions may be necessary. However, this cannot be transferred to a time in which people can hold dialogue and learn together in the discourse of friendly acceptance.

And this shared learning is, if you will, the conclusion: The reading of Nichiren, the reading of Luther, can inspire us to create a political reality from spiritual experience. This is as necessary today as it was in Nichiren's 13th century or in Luther's 16th century. I want to encourage us all to continue working in this direction.

Notes

¹ “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians. 15: 51–53, English Standard Version).

² “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33, ESV).

³ French philosopher born in 1947, specializing mainly in medieval and Arabic philosophy.

⁴ Bernard Faure, Professor at Columbia University Department of Religion. Mainly engaged in the study of Japanese Buddhism, wrote *The Rhetoric of Immediacy—Zen Cultural Critique of Chan / Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, 1991) as his main work.

⁵ Also referred to as the “Satya Yuga.”

⁶ Yuga is a Hindu concept described as the current cycle of time. In this case, Shoho, Zoho, and Mappo (Buddhist time periods defined as the Former, Middle, and Latter Day of the Law, respectively), though different concepts, are superimposed.

⁷ Nichiren Buddhism Establishment Day is expressed in the Gregorian calendar as the current solar calendar. The 28th day of April in the fifth year of the Ken-cho era in the Japanese calendar.

⁸ Presumed reference to the cultural festivals organized by Soka Gakkai.

⁹ *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* Volume I (WND-1), Tokyo: Soka Gakkai, 1999, p. 681.

¹⁰ WND-1, p. 681.

¹¹ “The spirit within one’s body of five or six feet may appear in just one’s face, which is only a foot long, and the spirit within one’s face may appear in just one’s eyes, which are only an inch across. Included within the two characters representing Japan is all that is within the country’s sixty-six provinces: the people and the animals, the rice paddies and the other fields, those of high and low status, the nobles and the commoners, the seven kinds of treasures and all the other precious gems. Similarly, included within the title, or daimoku, of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the entire sutra consisting of all eight volumes, twenty-eight chapters, and 69,384 characters, without the omission of a single character” (WND-1, p. 922).

¹² 1 Thessalonians 5:17, ESV.

¹³ Biblia pauperum is Latin for Paupers’ Bible.

¹⁴ German humanist and professor at Wittenberg University. Although at first sympathetic to Luther, ideological differences between the two became increasingly pronounced.

¹⁵ German lawyer, humanist, and Lutheran theologian. He aided the Reformation as a translator.

¹⁶ WND-1, p. 922.

¹⁷ Note 11 is incorporated herein by reference.

¹⁸ WND-1, p. 923.

Author Biography

Michael von Brück is a German theologian and eminent professor of religious studies. He works in the field of comparative religious philosophy, especially within Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, and on the hermeneutics of interreligious dialogue. He studied in Germany and later in India and Japan. Until his retirement at the end of the summer semester in 2014, he served as head of the Interfaculty Program of Religious Studies and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. He was the founder and editor of the journal *Dialogue of Religions*. He has written numerous books on Buddhism and its relation to Christianity, which are regarded as standard works. These include; *Grundzüge einer modernen Anthropologie* (with Günter Rager, 2012), *Leben in der Kraft der Rituale. Religion und Spiritualität in Indien* (with Regina von Brück, 2011), *Religion—Segen oder Fluch der Menschheit?* (2008), *Ewiges Leben oder Wiedergeburt? Sterben, Tod und Jenseitshoffnung in europäischen und asiatischen Kulturen* (2007), *Einführung in den Buddhismus* (2007), *Bhagavad Gita. Der Gesang des Erhabenen* (2004), *Wie Zen mein Christsein verändert* (with Willigis Jäger, 2004), *Wie können wir leben? Religion und Spiritualität in einer Welt ohne Maß* (2002), *Buddhismus und Christentum. Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog* (with Whalen Lai, 1997), *Die Welt des tibetischen Buddhismus* (with Regina von Brück, 1996), *Weisheit der Leere. Sutra-Texte des indischen Mahayana-Buddhismus* (1989).