



STATEMENT DW-250

VIEWPOINT

Academic Incest

by J. Isamu Yamamoto

Not long ago an editor of a highly respected evangelical periodical phoned me to check on a comparative religions chart he was including in his magazine. He wanted to run the chart's data on Buddhism past me. After his first question, I immediately knew that this chart needed some work. He said that the Lotus Sutra was listed as the scripture of Buddhism. I told him that a few Buddhist schools, such as Nichiren Buddhism, consider the Lotus Sutra authoritative, but that the Pali Canon would be a more accurate listing. After I corrected several more inaccuracies under Buddhism, I asked him what he had listed for Hindu scripture. He said it was the Bhagavad Gita, which is a sacred poem taken from the Hindu epic Mahabharata, but I said the Vedas and Upanishads would be more appropriate.

At this point this editor realized that the chart contained many problems. So he invited me to come to his office to make all necessary corrections. Since I am a freelance writer and editor, I knew this would take time out of my working schedule. I told him I would be happy to make any corrections over the phone for free, but that if I had to travel to his office, I would have to charge a modest hourly rate. I also indicated that the work would probably take no more than an hour. He thought for a moment before he said he would have to seek approval from the managing editor, with whom, incidentally, I had worked years before.

At first the managing editor and I had a friendly chat about what we were currently doing. He had just returned from Europe, where he had been doing research for the magazine. He then told me that he didn't have any money in his budget to pay me to work on the chart. I half-jokingly and half-seriously remarked that his periodical had just spent hundreds of dollars on his trip and that the chart's accuracy should be of high priority. Nevertheless, he said they were two different budgets, and he preferred to just go with the chart as it was.

In my 20 years of research on Far Eastern religions, I have frequently been dismayed at evangelical scholarship when it comes to its written discussions of Buddhism and Hinduism. I have usually found, particularly with the most popular treatments, that books and articles on these religions offer the same erroneous generalizations. It is evident that the writers do not study primary sources and erudite secondary sources but read and copy what other evangelicals have written and have also copied. I call this "academic incest"; it is the worst kind of scholarship.

Indeed, the information on Buddhism and Hinduism in the magazine's chart could have been lifted from most evangelical materials on the subject. If too much time, money, or energy is required to do an adequate job in explaining these religions, then a careless disregard for what other people believe and practice prevails. Consequently, misconceptions about Buddhists and Hindus continue to spread among Christians who seek genuine understanding.

The impact of this poor scholarship on evangelism among Buddhists and Hindus can be devastating. Christians can be deeply discouraged, and their friends or neighbors can become exceedingly annoyed, with the result that the gospel remains unheard.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

If we are to intelligently present the good news about Jesus Christ to people of other religions (not just Buddhism and Hinduism), then we, as Christian teachers, need to do a better job of teaching. The Bible is serious about the responsibility and accountability of those who give instruction in God's Word. I believe that includes a careful examination not only of the Bible but also of other doctrines. Any time we teach, we must be accurate and informative in all that we instruct. To do otherwise is to fail in carrying out Christ's mandate to proclaim the gospel to all peoples of the world.

If Christian writers are truly sincere in wanting to reach out to Buddhists and Hindus — and any other religion — they will strive to be academically responsible in what they convey to their readers.