

The cross and the lotus

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue



Christ et Buddha (1880), by Paul Ranson.

The fact that Benedict XVI ended his reign as pope through retirement rather than death makes it somewhat premature to write a retrospective on his time in office. As a great admirer of his, however, I want to comment on one aspect of his work—a global issue on which I think he was in error.

In 2006 Benedict delivered a lecture at Regensburg, Germany, in which he appeared to describe Islam as an evil religion that owed its success to violence and forced conversion. Muslims, naturally, were furious and demanded a retraction. Whatever we think about that furor, media reports ignored another point that Benedict really did make, one which is of far greater significance to Christians. Regensburg should have begun a searching debate about the foundations of Christian theology in a global age.

As he had often done before, Benedict stressed the Greek and Hellenistic roots of Christian thought, which were (he said) inseparable from European civilization. But this time he went still further in his insistence on the Greek component. When we are trying to understand such basic concepts as the incarnation or the Trinity, he suggested, we must always depend on Greek philosophical ideas and terminology, and we will continue to do so, no matter how far Christianity moves outside what was once its Euro-American heartland. Christianity must be read through the light of reason, and reason speaks Greek.

Through most of Western Christian history, such an approach elicited few challengers. Classical Greco-Roman culture obviously seemed to be the highest manifestation of human thought.

But for some centuries now, that Eurocentric view has become difficult to maintain. Christians have come into ever closer contact with Asia's great faiths and cultures—the worlds of Hindus and Buddhists, Confucians and Daoists. Perhaps 300 million Christians now live in Asia, and according to most projections, the continent will be playing a growing role in the global church. Deciding how Christianity fits into Asia's complex religious spectrum is an urgent necessity, political as well as intellectual.

These days, few churches regard those of other faiths as evil or diabolical, and most acknowledge the need for civility and dialogue. But this falls short of absorbing insights from other religions as a means of interpreting the basic theological narrative of Christianity.

In theory, if the Regensburg vision holds true, we have to imagine an intellectual raised among the extraordinarily rich literature and history of, say, Japanese Buddhism who then joins the Christian church, abandons every trace of that Buddhist background and takes a crash course in Hellenism. And theoretically, the same problem will still face a Japanese convert 500 years from now, even if Europe itself is by that time a completely Christian-free zone.

This insistence on European traditions is uncomfortable for Asian Christian thinkers, who struggle to rethink the faith in terms of local cultures. When Christians have tried to accommodate other faiths—as they have done sporadically since the 16th century—they run the risk of being condemned for syncretism and relativism, for polluting the faith with alien notions.

It is ironic that such multicultural approaches are dismissed as novel or merely “politically correct,” for in fact they are deeply rooted in the Christian past. Whenever we hear a modern-day critic denouncing a theologian for being too sympathetic to other faiths, a little historical context is in order. After all, Christian missions penetrated Asia at a very early date: Christians were certainly in India by the second century and in China no later than the sixth.

From early times too, churches interacted closely with local faiths and borrowed from their theological language and imagery. By the seventh century, Eastern Christians were presenting their ideas in the standard Buddhist format of the sutra. On China’s famous Nestorian stone, an eighth-century inscription summarizes the “luminous doctrine” of Christianity in terms that sound Daoist or Buddhist. Across India and China, we often find the Christian cross joined to the lotus, the symbol of Buddhist enlightenment—Christ’s triumph over sin is paired with the victory over ignorance and attachment.

Who were these bold Christian innovators on the far frontiers, those bearers of the lotus-cross? These followers of the Church of the East were direct descendants of the oldest congregations of Palestine and Syria, Christians who spoke a Semitic language akin to Aramaic. Like their apostolic predecessors, they followed Yeshua, not Jesus. No less than any European pope or pastor, they were authentic representatives of the mainstream Christian heritage. Yet they had no difficulty in preaching a Jesus who had never worn the robe of a Greek philosopher. Any future discussions with other faiths should acknowledge those ancient precedents.

Christianity is an Asian religion, and it has been so for many centuries.