

Problematics of Buddhist Christian Dialogue

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In every area of contemporary society dialogue is considered the way to solve all problems of human relations. Without doubt it is necessary to talk out our problems together in order to resolve important issues. No theology or philosophy of universal scope will be complete or truly convincing unless it deals accurately, and empathetically with alternative faiths. Religious thought must keep pace with developments in contemporary thinking and awareness. This is a challenge for all of us in a time when we are faced with innumerable obligations and demands.

Nevertheless, there is a tendency to think that simply by dialoguing, we have solved the problem of interfaith relations within society. Consequently, there is a lot of talk, with little actual resolution of the considerable ignorance and prejudice which exists in our communities. We must be aware of the requirements and the limitations of fruitful dialogue.

It is very important, however, that we be realistic and not engender too great expectations that interfaith dialogue will produce immediate results in society. We need only remember that ecumenical dialogue has proceeded slowly for decades among Protestant denominations and between Catholics and Protestants. The road has been difficult even with a common basis in scriptural and cultural traditions. It is even more difficult when there are cultural, social, linguistic and religious differences.

This qualification by no means lessens the need for dialogue among the religious traditions. Without going into detail, it is important for the various traditions to deal in concert with the problem of the collapse of meaning in American society. Peter Berger has called attention to the issue of modern pluralism and the process of secularization which signal "the weakening of

religious institutions and the weakening of religious symbols in human consciousness." There is widespread "uncertainty of identity and uncertainty of meanings" in America and other areas of the world.¹ In the context of uncertainty the ideal dialogue is a common search for truth.

This collapse of meaning has its ramifications in various areas such as strident religious dogmatism, the resort to empty nationalism, virulent racism, and the drug problem, which, complicated though it is, has its roots in the economic and social despair of large hosts of people for whom life and meaning are empty terms.

We must recognize that, despite triumphalism in many quarters, interfaith dialogue has proceeded and progressed since the World Parliament of Religion in 1893. We will soon be celebrating its centennial. While efforts at interfaith activity continued over the decades of this century, it has gradually broadened and deepened in recent years following the second world war and Vatican II. Up to the present the major foci of dialogue have been between Christians and Jews and Buddhists and Christians. It is clear that the political changes following WWII and the demise of western imperialism have made it necessary to deal with other peoples on a more equal basis, including their spiritual traditions.

Buddhist-Christian Dialogue has been inspired by statements of such noted people as Arnold Toynbee that the most significant development of this century is the encounter of Buddhism and Christianity at their deepest levels.² The urgency of the matter results from the wide attraction that non-western traditions have had among youth and the broad permeation of western society by the Zen and Tibetan traditions. There probably has never been such a deluge of religious movements since later Hellenistic times. Professor Tillich just

entered this arena at the latter end of his career, following a tour of Japan. Despite his short exposure, Dr. Tillich caught major issues that are basic to Buddhist-Christian dialogue. He states:

The discussions with Buddhists have shown me that the main points of difference are always: The different valuation of the individual person, of religious and social reformation, of the meaning of history, of interpersonal relations, of finitude and guilt. It is the contrast between the principle of identity and the principle of participation. It seems to me that, although the principles are exclusive, the actual life of both Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, and Buddhism especially in its monastic form, could receive elements from each other without losing their basic character.

While Dr. Tillich had insight and openness, it may appear that he was a bit optimistic in dealing with the complexity of such interaction.

While not wishing to be pessimistic concerning the nature and future of dialogue, we must be realistic as to what we can expect from such interaction. I speak from my own background in Christianity, as well as my experience and involvement with one segment of the Buddhist tradition.

There are a variety of problems confronting Buddhist-Christian dialogue which should be given serious consideration.

1. The people who participate in such dialogues are in many ways an elite group, usually representing the more liberal segment of their respective traditions. This means that the results of dialogue are usually confined to a coterie of scholars, publishing in journals largely concerned with scholarly research. While we may expect that such reflection will eventually reach the people and contribute to the transformation of society and the religious community to a broader perspective,

it presently does not seem to be happening.

2. The majority religious environment appears to be reactionary and fundamentalist. The attack on the First Amendment, flag issues, calls for a "Christian Nation", abortion issues, the political use of religion, etc., bespeak an environment virtually opposed to dialogue. Major liberal-oriented denominations have suffered considerable losses in membership over the last few years.

3. Buddhists who are primarily Asian in background are experiencing a rising tide of racism and bigotry. Their religions are viewed as curiosities and sometimes regarded as un-American. The ideal of American society is assimilation. Those who do not assimilate are regarded as suspect.

4. On the background of Asian problems in American society, dialogue is viewed by many as covert efforts at proselytism. With the stress on evangelism that permeates society and the perception of Christian exclusivism, Buddhists generally are reticent about entering into reciprocal relations with Christians. Even the relationship of the IBS with GTU has been questioned by some members who have their own memories of discrimination in our society.

5. There is a clear culture gap between virtually all Asian communities, particularly more recent arrivals, and the larger society. With group cohesion a major value in the native environment, it becomes more so in the foreign situation they have entered. The Chinese and Japanese have done this earlier, and now the South Asians must do the same in order to establish themselves firmly in the new environment.

However, maintaining group cohesion is complex when members of the group attain higher levels of education and achievement in society. It is often the case that the religious leadership cannot speak English or adequately understand the western culture enough to deal with the complex issues of an intercultural and interreligious nature. In addition, lay people in these traditions are not

generally well informed on the details of their belief system, since the tradition has largely been communal. Doctrinal understanding beyond the beliefs needed to satisfy their spiritual needs has not been required. The religious elite have always cared for such matters but now have difficulty communicating with the more highly educated or younger generations.

6. It is frequently pointed out that Christians are more interested in dialogue than Buddhists. Winston King in the preface to a discussion between Professors Abe, Cobb and Long, summarizes the situation of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in 1981. He indicates that the dialogue has largely been a monologue, with Christians questioning Buddhists; there is considerable Buddhist complacency and disinterest in Christianity. He traced this complacency in part to the attitude of the superiority of Voidness over God as a representation of ultimate reality. There is thus a two level discussion where Christians are concerned and Buddhists only superficially interested.³ King followed up the short preface with an essay "Dialogue Reconsidered," recounting some of his own experiences, and reviewing a variety of possible avenues of dialogue. He concludes the essay:

... To repeat myself: Buddhists on the whole seem largely uninterested in Christian doctrine and experience. I lament this, not for sectarian reasons, but because of the impoverishment of encounter and experience which will inevitably result if all the spiritual traffic is merely one way.⁴

It may be helpful to recall briefly at least the historical context of Buddhist Christian relations in Japan preceding the current efforts at dialogue. The confrontation of Buddhism and Christianity in the Meiji period (1868-1912) placed Buddhism at a great disadvantage due to nationalist reactions among Japanese who considered Buddhism as foreign and attacks from Christians

that it was heathen. Buddhism became defensive and more nationalistic, attempting to prove its Japaneseness and contribution to Japanese culture. Critical Buddhist scholarship which also emerged in this age undermined traditional modes of Buddhist beliefs, as well.

Serious discussion concerning Christianity and Buddhism could only take place in the atmosphere of freedom and equality in the postwar period. It has been growing in momentum and interest in Japan. Nevertheless, degrees of complacency arise from the contemporary success of Japan in the international scene and a rising national sentiment concerning the validity and value of Japanese culture, including Buddhism. Even Shintō religion shows more strength and is evidenced in the establishment of a new Shintō shrine in Stockton, California. There is more self-confidence with respect to traditional modes of thought.

There is, however, no question but that these comments by Professor King are in some measure still true. Part of the problem is due to the circumstances outlined above, but also due to the nature of Buddhist teaching itself. Buddhist teaching, like Hinduism, has generally been more relativistic in its outlook. There are specific theories such as *upaya* (tactful device) which holds that people more or less find themselves on the spiritual level that their karmic or cultural and social heritage place them. It is also pointed out in Buddhist symbolism that there are 84,000 dharma, suggesting that there is teaching to suit everyone. Buddhism incorporates other faiths as manifestations of the total embracing reality, be it the Eternal Śākyamuni of the *Lotus Sutra*, the Great Sun Buddha of the Esoteric tradition, or Amida Buddha as interpreted by Shinran. We can see it most readily in the principle that the three teachings are one in Chinese thought (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) and the theory of *Honjisuijaku* (Original Ground and Trace or Manifestation) in Japanese tradition in which the Shintō deities were

viewed as expressions of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Consequently, on the relative level there is no issue of right or wrong in some absolute fashion. Rather, such manifestations are correlated to time, place, spiritual level and need of the people involved, as we have noted above. Buddhism, therefore, has not been as disposed to position or explain itself in relation to other faiths in its historical context. Buddhism easily assumed its superiority to Confucianism and Taoism which were seen as thisworldly faiths, while Buddhism treated both worlds, this and the next.

In this regard, it should be noted, that in a sense, Buddhism is final since the ultimate truth one arrives at would be the truth of Voidness or Nirvana or realizing Buddha-nature. The reason is that these verbal symbols are essentially indefinable because they point to reality which lies beyond the realm of language and intellectual analysis as the ultimate goal of all spiritual experience from whatever sources.

Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana, holds to theories of two levels and three levels of truth. Therefore, on conventional levels disputes over terminologies are useless. In the estimation of this writer, the fundamental issue between Buddhism and other religions, particularly Christianity, lies in the realm of epistemology and the nature of consciousness, rather than in specific doctrinal comparisons.

Further, Buddhism, according to my perspective, cannot be discussed in the same fashion as one might discuss theology in the West. As perhaps an example, in Christianity one might discuss the existence of God. However, it is unthinkable to discuss the existence of Amida Buddha. Although scholars discuss at great length the meaning and significance of the principle of Anatman (non-soul of the Theravada tradition) or voidness (which underlies all of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy), for Buddhists it is not a question of the constitution of the Universe or a metaphysical reality. The concepts serve to underscore the

inconceivability and inexpressibility of whatever reality may be. Such concepts are designed not to make statements about reality but to focus one's attitudes and efforts to become free from the spiritual bondages that create our sufferings in this world. They have a functional role to play, in Buddhist terms as *upaya* (tactful devices) to guide a person along the path of spiritual evolution and ultimate enlightenment which itself is left undefined. However, its ideal expression on the level of behavior and attitude is that of non-attachment and egolessness. If these qualities could be achieved perfectly, one would have reached Nirvāṇa, a condition beyond expression but characterised as ultimate liberation.

When we consider Amida Buddha, which represents one of the highest ideals of spiritual realization and motivation, the intention of the symbolic expression, not taken as literal existence, aims to highlight the fact that our own salvation lies in the recognition of our interdependence we have with all other beings and within Nature itself. Amida is a mythic expression of the principle of interdependence. Other Power is not an "objective reality" except as it is Power through Others realized in the context of everyday life. As a devotional ideal and figure, it inspires inner awareness and deeper understanding of our interdependent reality.

Of course, some people in the tradition who have limited educational background and spiritual development will inevitably take such symbols literally. Buddhism understands this problem and accepts that there are various levels of insight through which Buddhist compassion and wisdom may be expressed so that hope for ultimate fulfillment can be available to all beings and not merely to an elect.

Buddhist educational philosophy involves a process of growth in insight and a deepening awareness of the central issues of human existence. Egoistic concerns for personal survival are affirmed at one level but are overcome as one

progresses on the path. In Mahayana teaching the ultimate goal of all religious endeavor is eventually to realize that I cannot be saved or liberated unless all others are liberated with me. When all beings become Buddha, final emancipation will be attained. In essence the only reality we can speak about is the depth of compassion and wisdom we experience in our lives and which we share with others in the spirit of interdependence.

7. Another aspect that makes dialogue difficult is the variety of forms of Buddhism, as well as the varieties of Christianity. Dialogue has generally been with Theravada and Zen Buddhists up till now with some entry of Shinshu Buddhism becoming more prominent. There has been some with Tibetan teachers, but none with the Nichiren, which is a very important Japanese form of Buddhism.

This variety makes it difficult to talk about Buddhism as a whole except with respect to some basic philosophical concepts and religious principles. However, these do not yield an understanding of specific traditions as they have taken shape or are active in the world.

There is a question how much a participant in dialogue should know about a tradition other than his/her own in order to get at real issues for that tradition. Buddhism is more complex here because there is no well defined body of literature that is regarded by all Buddhists to be authoritative for their religious lives. The Nichiren school will emphasize the *Lotus Sutra*; the Zen puts texts in a secondary position no matter what they are, and the Pure Land hold only to the Pure Land sutras. The Theravada have a body of literature such as the Pali texts which are authoritative, but only regarded by Mahayanists generally as an elementary expression of Buddhism according to their view of Buddhist history.

Donald Swearer has pointed out the variety of elements in a religious system such as texts, myths, symbols, rituals and religious actors. Religions express the "genius of a particular culture."

He states: "To understand a religion, even our own, calls for analytical skills, dramatic and poetic imagination, and perceptive awareness. More importantly, it necessitates that we understand any particular religious expression within its broader contexts in order to avoid risks of reductionism and blatant distortion; furthermore it provokes intellectual humility about the possibility of arriving at an exhaustive understanding of a religion."⁴

8. We should be clear what it means to understand another religion. As Swearer suggests, we should recognize that we can never fully understand another faith, just as we do not always understand people from our same tradition. We do not always understand ourselves interiorally. The term understanding is used loosely, but is really a more complex issue.

There can be no dialogue or comparison of religions that does not take into account the intentionality, interiority, integrality and interactive character of a faith. Every major religious faith seeks some form of liberation, emancipation, freedom, or resolution of the human problem, however defined. They all work in some way to neutralize, if not abolish, the limitations of finite existence. No faith intends to foster indifference, passivity or ignorance in the face of the evils threatening life. Salvation is always a response to an "evil" condition.

The *Intentionality* of a faith indicates what its supreme goal is and the values and methods which will lead to that goal. It is, in a way, its self-understanding. For Theravada Buddhism it is termed Nirvana, not a negative goal, despite the use of a negative word form. In Mahayana tradition it is called attaining Buddhahood, emphasizing the soteriological elements of wisdom and compassion by which the Buddha saves all beings. It suggests becoming part of the salvific process and is altruistic.

The *Interiority* of a faith presents a

paradox for comparison since the observer must always be outside. This is not to prevent comparison and questioning, but to recognize that we frequently deal with caricatures of the faith we are comparing. From the outside Karma and Predestination may appear to have invidious religious and social consequences. However, as they are appropriated in interior faith, they qualify human attitudes and understanding. Karma, as an interior realization, allows me to understand my limits and keeps my expectations realistic. Predestination makes me aware that what I may be able to achieve has a basis in a wider spiritual realm. Neither teaching, in offering a context for human action, was meant to negate freedom or to encourage passivity socially, though we must recognize that political forces have so used them. They are meant in their deepest meaning to provide a background or basis for spiritual freedom.

Integrity alerts us to the danger of merely seeing one doctrine in terms of another in the comparison of systems. There is a tendency to use the teaching of a faith as a foil to highlight the uniqueness or adequacy of one's own faith. Systems are a totality, and they guide attitudes and behavior as a whole. There is frequently a contrast between the problems raised by partial comparisons and what can sometimes be observed in the religious lives of people immersed in the totality of their faith.

I would call attention here to a review of Harvey Cox's text *Many Mansions* in which the particularity of religious faith is highlighted, since it is the particularity of a faith that gives it its meaning for the believer. Dialogue must provide a forum to discuss differences openly and not merely seek for a bland commonality.⁶

The *Interactive* aspect of a faith highlights the historical character of religion or a social-personal level. We must take seriously the historical diversity in a faith and the personal diversities among its interpreters. In the comparison of religions and dialogue the issue becomes

what model of religion will we compare? Whose interpretation shall we employ from among the historical diversity of a tradition? Is it enough to say that the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path, Twelve Link Chain or Voidness speak for Buddhism in view of the proliferation of additional teachings and practices over the ages?

If we look at the case of Buddhism, we have a 2,500 year old tradition that has spanned several cultures, Southeast Asia, South Asia, China, Tibet, Korea, Mongolia, Japan and now the West. During this long period distinctive forms of Buddhism with varying emphases have developed, many of them now converging in the West. While there are unifying strands of thought and practice that indicate that one is dealing with Buddhism, it is the significant variations and applications of those unifying features which must also be considered and understood.

The question, however, for Buddhists is whether one may be inspired on any level to seek more deeply and ultimately come to the truth. Naturally, dialogue would be a function to aid this growth, and in the tradition there are texts written in the form of dialogue as question and answer, for example, the *Questions of King Milinda* and various collections of Zen *mondo*.

There is no question about the significance and importance of dialogue between religious faiths. In this essay we have discussed the historical, social and philosophical issues and problems involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogue and the reasons that Buddhists have sometimes appeared reluctant to engage in such efforts.

Confronting these issues in a positive manner will contribute to the effectiveness of dialogue for religious understanding and for developing a broad common front to meet the challenges to faith in contemporary society. We have, therefore, suggested the requirements for productive dialogue.

While these reflections are by no means exhaustive, we hope that they will encourage

meaningful dialogue by stimulating all of us to deeper study of the issues and sensitize us to the conditions which establish fruitful dialogue.

1. Peter Berger, "The Pluralist Situation," *Buddhist Christian Studies*, vol. 1 (1981), pp. 32-3.

2. Joseph J. Spae, *Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin*, no. 67 (July-August, 1977), p. 16.

3. Winston King, ed., preface to "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Past, Present and Future," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 1 (1981), p. 12.

4. Winston King, "Dialogue Reconsidered," *Buddhist Christian Studies*, vol. 2 (1982), p. 11.

5. Donald Swearer, "A Framework for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *Buddhist Christian Studies*, vol. 1 (1981), p. 9.

6. P. Pratap Kumar, review of Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with other Faiths*, in *Bulletin of the Center for the Study of World Religions*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 67-74.